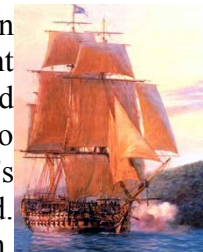


Nelson's Corsican Campaign of 1794

The bi-centenary of the Admiral Lord Nelson's famous victory and death at the Battle of Trafalgar is celebrated on 21 October 2005 – a festive day. But how is it that his Corsican campaign in 1794 is linked with this great event?

The loss of sight in his right eye at the Siege of Calvi was at the origin of Nelson's ability to claim at the Battle of Copenhagen in 1801, having been ordered by the Commander in Chief leave off action, "I have only one eye, I have a right to be blind sometimes... I really do not see the signal!". He disobeyed orders (not for the first time in his life) and went on to a resounding victory. It restored a career that had had its ups and downs and he returned to London the complete hero. Perhaps he would have limped home in failure had he not been able to use his lack of sight as a reason for disobeying his superior. Maybe even the course of British history would have been quite different, but for a shard of Corsican granite.

However, in 1794, under Lord Hood, the then Captain Nelson aboard HMS *Agememnon* served in the Mediterranean fleet sent to Corsica by King George III to help the Corsicans rid the island of the French (and to establish a secure base for the British who had been kicked out of Toulon!). Pasquale Paoli, Corsica's patriot had been battling for years for the freedom of the island. He had sought British help in clearing the island of the French, who had taken over from the Genoese. The French, though, had only really secured the citadel towns on the coast. The interior was in the hands of the Corsicans.



The attack on Corsica started on the 7th of February 1794.



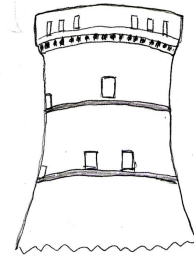
The first assault of the British fleet was upon the ex-Genoese tower of Murtella (the Corsican word for bilberry), guarding the western point of the Bay of St Florent. The tower was manned by only a midshipman and 36 men and took several days to subdue, despite the superior fire power of the British. Admiralty reports of the event led to the construction of 74 so-called Martello (anglicisation of *murtella*) towers at 600 yard intervals along the south coast of England from Folkestone to Eastbourne. The C-in-C, Admiral Sir John Jervis, wrote that he hoped "to see such works erected on every part of the (English) coast likely for an enemy to make a descent on."

It is ironic that Napoleon was to be kept at bay by the British with the use of a Corsican defensive measure. If you are interested to know more about Martello towers, visit an excellent site by Peter Hibbs: www.martello-towers.co.uk. Nearly 90 towers were built in Corsica in the sixteenth century and if you want to see where they are, you can [download a map](#). If you'd like to see more towers, visit [Tours de Corse](#). Murtella had to be secured before an assault could be made

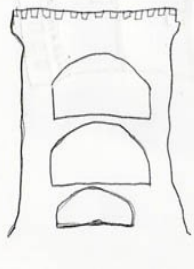
upon St Florent. In the picture above by Jennifer Phillips, you can see the tower destroyed by the British bombardment in 1796 to prevent its re-use by the French, but even that proved a tough job.



In the picture on the left, taken from the sea, you can get an impression of what it was like originally. The construction of this as well as other towers involved interior vaulting, which was what gave them such strength. Admiral [Andrea Doria](#) knew what he was doing as he had it built (1553-1555).



As successive defenders took over the tower, they added more and more powerful weaponry, but so did their aggressors. The towers of Corsica are mostly remotely located and so they had to withstand long periods without revictualling. In my scrappy drawing (right), the space at the bottom was a cistern for the storage of fresh water.



The next target was the redoubt at Fornali, now the site of a lighthouse, that had to be taken before the assault on St Florent; this was a nasty scap. The town was not sacked, but the flour mill and store were set ablaze and the defenders had to give way. The British fleet took the French frigate *Minerve* in the process, before moving on to the more formidable task of taking Bastia and its more imposing citadel. St Florent remained a British base for the next 18 months.

The army under General Dundas and Lt Col Moore had gone over the pass of Teghime and tried to take the city from the landward side, but were repulsed. Ironically, it was the French who were the ones who had opened up the pass in 1770. Interesting to note that in September/October 1943 French and Moroccan troops crossed by the same route on their way to removing the Germans from Bastia and Corsica – the first part of France (as it had become again) to be liberated – not without huge efforts by the 'Maquisards', the US and British forces.

It was at this point that Nelson and Moore joined forces. The real attack was to be from the sea. Nelson took charge of landing naval stores and ships' guns to support the army. It took from April 11th till the 22nd to get a surrender, the use of naval guns having been decisive in allowing less than 1000 English to subdue 4500 French under arms.



The next objective was Calvi, a tougher nut to crack. Nelson was clear (from the illustration by [Alex Lochrie](#), who served in the French Foreign Legion in Calvi) that a frontal assault from

the sea was impossible, since three sides had (and still have) steep high walls and the land access was by a narrow isthmus, rather than by the car park and its subterranean sewage works of today! Nelson decided to sail on past the unsuspecting French looking down from the heights of the citadel and round the Revellata peninsula to the south. The French commander, General Casabianca must have assumed that the risk was past.



However, Nelson was looking for a secure landing out of sight of the citadel. This he found at the perilous Porto Agro, which was just wide enough for his boats and their oars to pass. The landing had very steep sides, as you can see from my photograph. Worse, the mountain leading up to the vantage point above the citadel was thickly covered with stunted trees (in those days) and strewn with boulders. Unloading men, stores and

guns began on 18th June.

There were storms and other vicissitudes to deal with. They had to stand off and then start again; it was slow work, with only one boat landing at a time. This was a very difficult terrain over which to drag the ship's guns, shot, powder and the rest of the military impedimenta that had to be dragged up to the col of Notre Dame de la Serra that overlooks the town. But the vantage point, once achieved, gave the invaders a really dominant view of the target, as you can see from a picture I took on the spot. Of course, there were none of the houses lying in between; in those days all habitation was within the citadel walls. In fact, there were some 2000 people within in 1794.



The work of seamen and the soldiers, newly under the command of General Stuart, was very hard and men died like flies of what was called 'Calvi fever' – the heat and malaria. Sickness took more men than the battle that ensued. The seige was a tough job, too. The citadel was protected by two forts – Mozello and a smaller one at San Francescu monatery. There is nothing left of either today. There is rubble on the Pointe St François (and the remains of Italian bunkers from WWII) and Mozello was replaced by two nineteenth century French forts, Charlet & Maillebois. The assault of the citadel could not commence until the 4th July and the bombardment was opened by the Royal Louis battery.



The French had yet another forward battery to the east at the *Mulinu Agescu* mill, now known by the locals as *la Batterie des Anglais* because of its capture by the English forces. It protected the citadel from that direction as it has a commanding view over the plain and had to be destroyed if the ultimate attack on the citadel was not to

be put at risk. It too still lies in ruins, as you can see in the picture I took 200 years after the event!

The fighting continued. Nelson wrote on the 8th, "The enemy...kept up a constant heavy fire of shot and shells on our battery...they destroyed two of our guns...one shell burst in the centre of our battery...but wonderful not a man was hurt." The British kept up the hammering of the enemy and by the following night were firing a ten-inch howitzer on them every three minutes to prevent them working. They also landed shells on Port Vaccaja between the citadel and the Revellata. Nelson thought that eventually they could place more guns there...nowadays, it's a favourite bathing place with the locals! By the way, Nelson's log of the time is at the Monmouth Museum in Wales, whose curator generously gave me access to it.



He was not so lucky on the 12th. He'd been watching the battle from the top of a huge rock overlooking the town, just as a shell cracked the granite and shards hit his right eye. He was somewhat dismissive of the injury inflicted, writing to Lord Hood that day, "I got a little hurt this morning: not much as you may judge by my writing." It interests me to note that whatever

people say, the handwriting in his log hardly alters the following day and he makes no mention of the incident. Given the importance of his right eye to British (and French) history, perhaps much folklore has crept into the story.



Corsican friends of my generation were often told to go and look for Nelson's eye if they were being obstreporous in class. On a recent visit to the rock where the incident occurred with the naval historian Lawrence Phillips and our wives, Jennifer and Jori Lynn, I found the actual eye, as you can see in this picture I took. The rock is on private property and not normally accessible, but the Calvi *Syndicat*



d'Initiative (precursor of the municipal tourist office, attached a plaque, as you can see in the picture, pierced by rifle shot holes, as are many signs in Corsica. The plaque reads *Içi Nelson dirigeant le fue d'une batterie contre Calvi perdit un oeil 12 juillet 1794.*

Whatever the truth of the story, it's clear that Nelson made good use of the injury. He wrote three weeks later that his eye was "as far recovered as to be able to distinguish light from darkness, but as to all purpose of use it is gone." Thus seven years later, at the Battle of Copenhagen, he smiled at his flag captain, Thomas Foley and made the famous remark about the right to blindness.



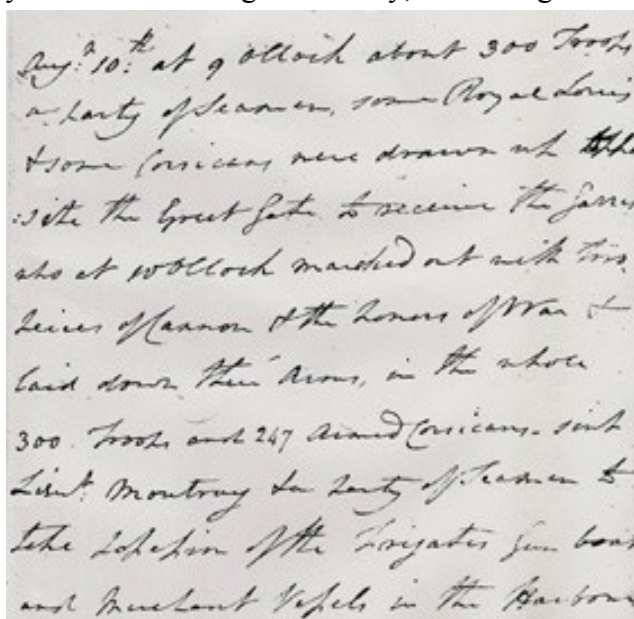
Eye or no eye, the battle for the citadel of Calvi raged on relentlessly, with both sides continuing to suffer more loss from illness than injury. However, it was not until 10th August that surrender finally came after 51 days of siege. It was not without Casabianca first defiantly sending a message to Genral Stuart quoting "Semper Fidelis", the inscription over the citadel entrance that was originally spoken by the Genoese-friendly Corsicans (that they would always be faithful to Genoa).



Very large chunks were bitten from the fabric of the citadel. It is interesting that more than 200 years later, you can still see the holes blown in the citadel, much as I remember post-war bomb damage in London. Of course, some of the building has been rebuilt or replaced, but the birthplace of Christopher Columbus destroyed by Nelson, remains a bomb site to this day! Here is a photograph that I took the other day of one of Nelson's cannonballs still protruding from high in the wall of the citadel.

However, Casabianca did submit, but only after the British had promised that they might leave Calvi with full battle honours. The French troops ultimately marched out of the citadel and took ship for Toulon.

Here's the entry from Nelson's log for the day, describing the surrender:



courtesy, Curator Monmouth Museum

The irony was that though the British had suffered only 90 battle casualties, their number had been reduced to 400, where the enemy could still muster 700. Casabianca had misjudged his beseigers' strength and might have been able to raise the siege in a few more days.

During this time, diplomatic discussions were in full swing and at the Cunsulta (general assembly) of 8 June in Corte there was an enthusiastic vote for a union with Britain. On the 19th Pasquale Paoli tendered the Crown of Corsica to His Majesty the King of Great Britain, as represented by Sir Gilbert Elliott. With the

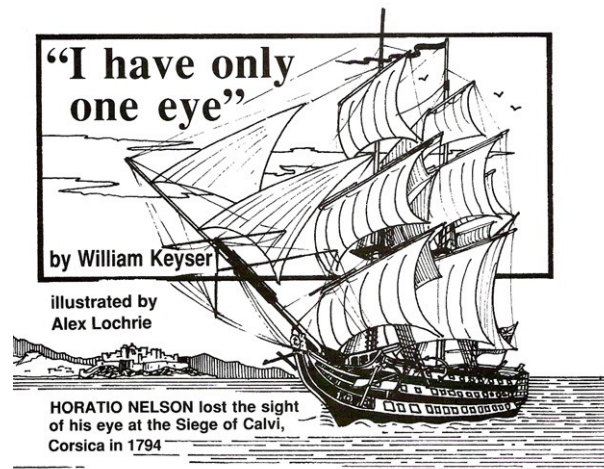
fall of Calvi, Corsica was in British hands and remained so as the Anglo-Corsican kingdom until 1796, but that's another story. In passing, though it's interesting to note that Elliott later requested to be able to raise a Corsican Corps of 1500 men to augment the British garrison, it having been estimated that a force of 4000 troops were needed for Corsica's defence. In WWII the Germans and Italians had 80,000 men and were still unable to hold the island!

"England expects that every man will do his duty" was the signal that went from Lord Nelson's HMS Victory to the British fleet lined up in battle formation of Cape Trafalgar on the fateful day of 21 October, 1805. Lieutenant Pasco, who was doing the signalling, was also commanded to issue the order for close action.



Soon thereafter Nelson destroyed the Spanish and French fleets, but died himself...and the rest is history! Earlier in his life, he'd said, "My character and good name are in my own keeping. Life with disgrace is dreadful. A glorious death is to be envied."

Will Keyser
September 2005



This is a story of the seige of Calvi, based on fact, that Will Keyser wrote to celebrate the 200th anniversary in 1994. It is illustrated by his friend Alex Lochrie and you can get a copy by asking Wil by email will@worksavvy.ws, sending me your postal address and using Pay Pal to send \$18 to cover the cost.

Thanks to Lawrie Phillips for help with the history.