

SIGNAL OFFICER —FLAG-LIEUTENANT

By Comdr. HILARY MEAD

As Trafalgar Day comes round there is always a crop of bloomers in speeches and in the Press on the ever popular subject of Nelson's "historic" signal. The 150th anniversary this year was no exception in that respect. The most usual mistakes are to give the wording of the message incorrectly, or to assert that a certain one rating was *the man* who hoisted the signal, as though it could possibly have been done single-handed. It was part of the duties of the quartermasters and their mates to handle the colours and signal flags among their other duties of seamanship such as heaving the lead, heaving the log and being responsible for binnacle, wheel and tiller. It seems unlikely that *the man*, who incidentally was rated as "landman," would have had the necessary ability. Other errors are that Lieutenant John Pasco was the signals officer or the flag-lieutenant; he was neither. It is usual to speak of a signals officer in the army, but in the Navy in the past he was never anything but the signal officer. The mistake about the flag-lieutenant was started by a reputable author about fifty years ago, and subsequent writers cannot altogether be blamed for following his lead.

In 1805 the usual complement of a 1st-rate line-of-battleship contained eight lieutenants, but in the flagship of a commander-in-chief there was one added for signal duties. Hence the *Victory* had nine. All the lieutenants of a flagship received sixpence a day extra pay, and this has been supposed to be on account of their having to be rather better dressed than their opposite numbers in a private ship, and

on account of the flagship's wardroom probably keeping a better table. This extra sixpence was known as the perquisite of flagship lieutenants, and possibly the name flag-lieutenant originated here in the same way that the captain of the flagship was known as the flag-captain. This appendage of "flag" did not mean that the officer had anything to do with bunting; one can see how absurd such an idea might be when it is observed that in the United States the admiral's secretary was called the flag-secretary, but he did not devote his time to writing out signals.

The official appointment of flag-lieutenants did not enter the Navy List till 1814 when they were assigned to commanders-in-chief at Home Ports as personal assistants. How then did John Pasco come to be the signal officer?

In view of the fact that signalling in the fleet had been much neglected in past years it is rather surprising that it should have been so important in 1805 that a lieutenant had been told off specially to supervise signals in the flagship, and moreover that in the *Victory* he should have been the senior of the nine. This brings us to another curious arrangement in the *Victory*, namely that the officer who carried out the duties of "First Lieutenant" was actually the fifth in seniority, and whereas Pasco was Number One in fact, he had been side-tracked into being the signal officer instead. If Lord Nelson had survived the battle of Trafalgar he would have been certain to see Pasco promoted; as it turned out it was John Quilliam, the acting executive officer who was automatically advanced in rank in common with the first lieutenants of all ships that took part.

The signal officer was the only one among the lieutenants who had any claim to being a specialist. Gunnery was the monopoly of the gunner, navigation was handled by the master, so that there was no lieutenant (G) or (N) in the *Victory*. One might consider that the art of signalling hardly justified a specialist officer in 1805; yet Pasco even had an assistant in the person of a junior lieutenant named George Browne who used to understudy Pasco when he was sick or ashore. The requirements of signalling were met by no more than three books, the "Signal-Book for the Ships of War," the "Night Signals and Instructions for the conduct of Ships of War," and the semi-official Popham's "Telegraphic Signals or Marine Vocabulary." There were besides pendant boards and boards showing the vanes to be worn by the several ships. Then of course a knowledge was required of the various signals made by guns, "false fires" and rockets.

One reason why Pasco could not have been regarded as Lord Nelson's flag-lieutenant is that he did not mess at the admiral's table. As far as is known the flag-captain, Thomas Masterman Hardy, and the admiral's "public" secretary, Mr John Scott messed aft, and in all probability also Dr. Scott, generally known as Nelson's chaplain and private secretary. In some of the larger fleets it was usual to have a "First Captain" in the flagship, who was the equivalent of a chief-of-staff. For instance,

at the battles of the "First of June" and St. Vincent there was a First Captain in the commander-in-chief's flagship, but at the battle of Trafalgar, in the *Victory*, neither a First Captain nor a flag-lieutenant were members of Lord Nelson's staff and mess. Pasco, in his role of signal officer, was nevertheless very much attached to his chief, and remained with him on deck until both were shot down. When the signals were finished he would be busy with his telescope reporting developments.

How, in the course of time, did the signal officer come to be the admiral's personal assistant, rather than any other man in contact with him, such as one of the secretarial staff? In his famous "Sailor's Word-Book" of 1867, Admiral Smyth remarks, "It may be observed that signal officers became subsequently the elite of the Navy; *signal officer* being then a proud term of distinction." Perhaps an admiral was influenced by this sort of recommendation, but the association seems to have been earlier even than the time of Trafalgar, to judge from the following incident. In the year 1798 there was a well known monumental fracas between Rear-Admiral Sir John Orde and Admiral the Earl of St. Vincent during which Orde had the amazing temerity to address some violent protests to his extremely tough commander-in-chief. It is recorded that one of his letters was "delivered to Lieutenant Mellish who gave it to Lieutenant Moore, signal officer of the *Ville de Paris* (the C.-in-C.'s flagship), by whom it was presented to Lord St. Vincent," who read it and said, "There is no answer, Sir, no answer!" Even at that date the signal officer was acting as a kind of personal assistant. He would naturally be on deck busy with his telescope, ready to report to the admiral whatever was going on, and so the rear-admiral's note passed through his hands.

Later on when the appointment of a flag-lieutenant was introduced, if there were no selected signal officer in the ship, he doubled the parts, and the personal assistant became the person to deal with signals from and to the admiral so as to obviate ratings having access to the august presence. In many years of writing I have come to learn that it does not pay to be too dogmatic; I was certain that there was no flag-lieutenant before 1814, so was seriously taken aback to find in an Admiralty minute of 14th December, 1805, orders to "Appoint Sublieutenant Augustus Parkyns on board of the *Savage* Flag Lieutenant to Vice-Admiral Sir John Borlass Warren to be discharged from the *Savage* directly and to join the *Foudroyant* without delay." This proves that the flag-lieutenant was in existence 150 years ago.