THE BATTLE OF NAVARINO

2027 marks the bi-centennial celebrations of the Battle of Navarino. This year the event, known as Navarinia, was marked by a 4-day festival of commemorative ceremonies, cultural events and exhibitions, culminating on 20th October in a spectacular re-enactment of the naval battle in the bay and along the Pylos waterfront.

Next year's Navarinia, celebrating a battle which contributed greatly to Greek independence from Ottoman rule - an independence movement which, by 1825, was floundering – promises to be extraordinary. What a tremendous opportunity to visit a beautiful part of the Peloponnese and immerse yourself in its history.

The Ottoman Turks had conquered the Hellenic-controlled Byzantine Empire during the 15th century, with the fall of Constantinople occurring on May 29th 1453 when the city was conquered by Sultan Mehmed II (this date was according to the Julian calendar – Greece didn't adopt the Gregorian calendar until March 1st 1923, a transition which was effected by skipping 13 days to align itself with the rest of Europe). In 1821 Greek nationalists revolted against Ottoman rule, aiming to liberate ethnic Greeks after 4 centuries of occupation. The revolt continued but, by 1825, a stalemate had developed whereby the Greeks were unable to completely drive the Ottomans from the country while the Ottomans were unable to definitively crush the rebellion. Then the stalemate was broken by Sultan Mahmoud II, who managed to persuade his viceroy in Egypt, Muhammad Ali Pasha, to deploy his western -trained and -equipped army and navy against the Greeks. In return, the Sultan promised to grant the rebel heartland, the Peloponnese, as a hereditary fiefdom to Ali's eldest son, Ibrahim. In February 1825 Ibrahim Pasha led an expeditionary force of 16,000 men into the Peloponnese: the western part was soon overrun but the eastern Peloponnese, including Nafplio where the rebel government was based, was not taken.

The Greek forces remained defiant and appointed experienced philhellenic British officers as heads of their army (Major Sir Richard Church) and navy (Lord Cochrane). However, by this time both the land and sea forces were considerably inferior to those of the Ottoman and Egyptian alliance: in 1827 Greek regular troops numbered fewer than 5,000 compared to the 25,000 Ottomans in central Greece and 15,000 Egyptians in the Peloponnese. Matters weren't helped by the fact that the provisional Greek government was virtually bankrupt, and that many of the key fortresses on what little territory they still controlled were in Egyptian hands. While resisting valiantly, such a depleted treasury and so few combatants meant that it was only a matter of time before capitulation became the only possible outcome. Rescue came from a 'coalition of the willing', a most unlikely decision by the 3 Great Powers of the day – Great Britain, France and Russia – to intervene jointly in the conflict.

The decision had been unlikely on many fronts, primarily because from the inception of the Greek revolt until 1926 Anglo-Austrian diplomacy had been aimed at ensuring the non-intervention of the other great powers in the struggle and with the objective of stalling Russian military support of the Greeks, thereby allowing the Ottomans time to defeat the rebellion. It wasn't particularly that the western powers wanted the Ottomans to extend their occupation of Greece, nor was it that they didn't want Greece to become a sovereign nation: the rationale was that, should the decaying Ottoman Empire fall then the Russians, with their expansionist ambitions in the region, would fill the void and establish hegemony in the Eastern Mediterranean. There was support in Orthodox Russia for their co-religionists in Greece and, despite official British interest in maintaining the status quo, ie keeping Russia quiet, British public opinion strongly supported the Greeks in their fight for independence.

The Ottomans had not been able to suppress the revolt for many years and, by the time they were actually making some progress, something happened which ultimately made non-intervention untenable. In December 1825 Tsar Alexander I died and his younger brother, Nicholas I, succeeded to the Russian throne. The new Tsar was both more decisive and more nationalistic than his brother, and these traits persuaded the British government that, as it was felt that the Russians would come to the aid of the Greeks anyway, they had better get in on the act as partners. Therefore, fearing unilateral Russian intervention, it was deemed diplomatically appropriate to bind Russia to the French and British by treaty. Britain, France and Russia signed the Treaty of London on 6th July 1827. The treaty called for an immediate armistice between the Greeks and the Ottomans, in effect demanding a halt to Ottoman military operations in Greece – at just the time when the Ottomans were on the verge of defeating the rebels. Allied mediation was proposed in the negotiation of a final settlement following the armistice and one objective of this was that the Ottomans would grant Greece a degree of autonomy – strangely, the allies saw this settlement as one which would allow Greece to remain under Ottoman suzerainty.

Hidden within the agreement was a clause which said that, should the Ottomans not accept this armistice within one month, each signatory would dispatch a consul to Nafplio, so granting the de facto recognition of the rebel government. This same clause authorised the signatories to instruct their naval commanders in the Mediterranean to 'take all measures that circumstances may suggest' to enforce the allies demands if the Ottomans failed to comply with the one month deadline – it also stipulated that allied commanders should not take sides in the conflict. In this respect, the British choice of naval commander could not have been worse: Vice-Admiral Sir Edward Codrington, a naval veteran of 44 years, a hero for his role in the Battle of Trafalgar, and an active supporter of the Greek cause was appointed the British naval commander-in-chief. For a task which required great tact, the appointment of someone who not only lacked diplomatic finesse but actively despised it was a strange move – his orders were to

enforce and impose an armistice on both sides, and to block the flow of reinforcements and supplies from Asia Minor and Egypt to Ottoman forces in Greece, with force only being used as a last resort. On 29th August the Ottomans formally rejected the stipulations laid down by the Treaty of London. Allied representatives were dispatched to Nafplio and, on the 2nd September, the Greek provisional government accepted the armistice.

Navarino Bay is a large natural harbour on the Messinian peninsula. It is approximately 5km long between the headlands and about 3km wide. Sheltered from the open sea by a long, narrow islet, Sphacteria, there are 2 entrances to the bay, one either side of the islet. The northern entrance is narrow and shallow, thanks to a sandbank – only 100m wide and just 1m deep in places, it is impassable to large boats. The southern entrance is much wider and was, at that time, guarded by the Ottoman-held New Navarino fortress (Pylos): during the Greek insurgency the bay was used by the Ottoman navy as its main operational base in the Peloponnese. On 5th August 1827 a large Ottoman-Egyptian fleet, having been warned by the French and British to stay away from Greece, set sail from Alexandria and joined other Ottoman units at Navarino, arriving on September 8th. In response, Codrington moved his fleet to Navarino. Although talks later the same month between Codrington and Ibrahim Pasha elicited no promise that the Ottomans would cease offensive operations, Pasha did commit to a ceasefire until further instructions could be received from the Sultan: Codrington withdrew to the British-controlled island of Zakynthos but left one frigate off Navarino to keep an eye on the Ottomans.

The Ottomans soon violated the arrangements: Ibrahim was outraged that, while he was expected to observe a ceasefire, Codrington was allowing the Greeks to continue military operations on his vessels unimpeded. Lord Cochrane and the Greek navy were on the offensive at the entrance to the strategically vital Gulf of Corinth, while Major Sir Richard Church and the Greek army laid siege to the Ottoman-held port of Patras. Cochrane then organised a revolt behind Ottoman lines in Epirus, while Frank Abney Hastings, a former British naval officer now serving with the Greeks, used a steam-powered warship, the Karteria, to launch a daring raid at Itea on the northern shore of the Gulf of Corinth which sunk 9 Ottoman gunboats. The problem with all these raids was that, not only weren't they actually being ordered by the Greek provisional government but were also, in some cases, distinctly contradictory to the orders being issued. Codrington made an attempt to haul the British officers back into line, but generally this had no effect.

Having protested to Codrington about the almost vigilantism of the British officers and their Greek forces, which had about the same effect as Codrington's trying to reign them in previously – ie no effect whatsoever – Ibrahim Pasha dispatched a naval squadron to reinforce the Patras garrison on 1st October. This squadron was intercepted by Codrington's squadron at the entrance to the gulf and forced to return to Navarino,

Another attempt was made on the night of 3rd/4th October – this time with Ibrahim leading the squadron – and on this occasion the Ottomans manage to slip past the British, but strong headwinds forced the squadron to shelter in the lee of Cape Pappas (Cape Araxos, the north-westernmost point of the Peloponnese which separates the Gulf of Patras from the Ionian. It is situated 30km west of Patras, close to the village of Akrotirio Araxou) and wait out the storm. While they were waiting Codrington managed to catch up with the Ottoman squadron, warning shots were fired and Ibrahim turned back to Navarino.

While not faring so well on the sea, the Ottomans' scorched-earth policy on land continued unabated. The burning fields and villages were clearly visible to the crews of the allied ships standing offshore, and a landing party reported that the population of Messinia was close to starvation. On October 13th Codrington's squadron was joined off Navarino Bay by a French squadron commanded by Henri de Rigney and a Russian squadron under Lodewijk van Heiden, a former Dutch naval officer and by now an admiral in the Russian navy. By the 18th October, after all attempts to contact Ibrahim Pasha had failed, it was decided that the allied ships would enter Navarino Bay and anchor up facing the Ottoman/Egyptian fleet. The rationale for this decision was firstly that, with winter approaching, it would have been impractical to have maintained an effective blockade of Navarino and also that the civilian population had to be safeguarded. The manoeuvre was highly provocative: Codrington claimed that there was no intention of engaging in battle, it was merely a show of force to persuade the Ottomans to respect the armistice and to stop its atrocities against civilians.

At this time, the allies' navies were still basically employing the same technology used during the Napoleonic wars – sailing ships with un-armoured wooden hulls and muzzle-loading smooth-bore cannon. Although steam-propulsion, ironclad hulls, rifled guns and explosive shells had all been invented by 1827, their introduction had not been met favourably by the naval hierarchy. There had been some improvements however, as ships with triple gun decks, such as HMS Victory, had been phased out having been found to be far too unstable and too difficult to manoeuvre. In addition, gun calibres had been upgraded to 24- or 32- pounders. The French ships were no better, and de Rigney was apparently so appalled by the 3 ships of the line provided for his use that he opted to keep his flag on the Sirène, a modern frigate.

Overall, the Allies had 22 ships and 1,258 guns against the Ottomans' 78 ships (excluding smaller boats and fireships) and 2,180 guns, although the Allies had the advantage with respect to the type of ships, gun calibres and the quality and discipline of the crews. Allied gun crews were able to fire more powerful, more frequent and more accurate cannonades compared to the Ottoman crews. In addition, the Allies had a superiority in front-line combat vessels: 10 ships of the line compared to the Ottomans' 3. A ship of the line was a large, square-rigged wooden warship built to fight in a single

end-to-end formation (the line of battle): the ships were arranged in a long column so that each vessel could point its broadside cannons at the enemy fleet simultaneously without hitting ships of their own fleet, and only the largest and most heavily-armed vessels were strong enough to take a position in this line. The ships typically carried between 60 to 100+ heavy cannons (the usual array was 74) mounted across 2 or 3 gun decks, and these vessels displaced 1,200 – 2,000 tons and required a crew of 600 – 800 men to manage the sails and work the heavy artillery.

This superiority was only partially offset by the 7 double-deck frigates in the Ottoman fleet compared to only 1 Allied vessel of this type. The great majority of the Ottoman/Egyptian fleet were smaller vessels, corvettes and brigs, which had less fire-power than the Allied ships of the line and, because their decks were lower, they could relatively easily have their masts destroyed by raking fire. The Ottomans had smaller-calibre guns (often those discarded by the Allies when they were upgrading their own arsenals) and one important reason for the Allied naval superiority was that their professional crews had gained extensive combat experience during the Napoleonic Wars, which had ended only 12 years previously. In contrast, the only experience the Ottoman crews had had was against the Greek revolutionary naval forces which, although gallant and committed, were 4th division vs Premier League in their skill-set – in some cases Ottoman crew members had been press-ganged and, after the battle, some had been found shackled to their posts.

The Egyptian contingent in the Ottoman fleet were better-equipped and more professional, having been trained by a team of French officers under the overall command of Captain Letellier: these officers advised the nominal Egyptian captains of each vessel, until Admiral de Rigney persuaded them to withdraw so as to avoid the possibility of fighting against their fellow countrymen, which deprived the Egyptians of experienced commanders.

As far as the Allies were concerned, the most dangerous weapons that the Ottomans possessed were their fireships. These had long been deployed by the Greek insurgents to devastating effect, and the Ottomans had learned their usefulness the hard way. The fireships were posted on the wings of the Ottoman formation and could, if effectively deployed, cause havoc among the Allied ships concentrated in enclosed waters with no mechanism for escape. The Ottomans also had shore batteries on either side of the main entrance to the bay, in Navarino fort, and on the southern tip of Sphacteria which could have easily stopped the Allied vessels entering the bay: Codrington was either confident that the Ottomans would not start shooting, or perhaps hoped they might in which case he would have a good excuse to destroy their fleet.

Letellier’s defensive plan was for the Ottoman/Egyptian fleet to be anchored in a horseshoe formation, in 3 lines, extending from Navarino fort to the southern tip of

Sphacteria where the Ottomans' had their shore battery. The front line comprised the ships of the line and large frigates, the second row was made up of the remaining frigates and larger corvettes, while the remaining smaller vessels were in the 3rd line – the idea being that the smaller vessels could fire through the gaps in the forward lines whilst being protected by the larger vessels in front of them. On the ends of the horseshoe there were corvettes, and the all-important fireships which could be towed into position under the protection of the corvettes and shore batteries.

The Allied plan was to anchor in the free water inside the crescent. The British would take up a position facing the centre of the Ottoman lines while the French and Russians would face the Ottoman left and right wings respectively. The French position had been specifically determined so that they would face the Egyptian fleet: as this had been trained by the French, the supposition was that the Egyptians might be reluctant to fight head on with their closest European ally. As a tactic, one might have come to the conclusion that Codrington's strategy posed an unacceptable risk – had it have failed, the Allied fleet would have become trapped. But, Codrington and the Allied commanders appeared to be absolutely confident that their tactics were justified.

At 13:30 on 20th October 1827 Codrington signalled to the Allied fleet 'prepare for action' and Allied crews were ordered to stand to their guns. The captains were ordered to open fire only if attacked, but the crews were to leave the gun-ports half open in readiness. At 2pm the Allied warships began sailing into the bay through the southern entrance: there was no attempt by the Ottoman corvettes or shore batteries to prevent their entrance, although Codrington received a launch carrying a message from Ibrahim Pasha which stated that he had had not given the Allies permission to enter the bay and demanded that they withdraw. Dismissing this, Codrington just responded that should the Ottomans open fire, their fleet would be destroyed.

As his flagship dropped anchor in the middle of the Ottoman line Codrington ordered a brass band to play on deck to emphasize his peaceful intentions (or perhaps to make the Ottomans wonder what on earth he was up to). While the Allied vessels manoeuvred into position, trumpets along the Ottoman lines sounded action stations and the Ottoman crews scrambled to meet the intrusion of the Allied ships. At this point fighting broke out at the entrance to the bay and the following sequence of events led to a general engagement, before the Allies could complete their deployment. As it happened, this was probably lucky because those ships not yet at anchor were able to manoeuvre more quickly. However, those ships already at anchor had very little scope for manoeuvre, the only movement possible being to change the ships' orientation by hauling on the springs of the anchor chains. Basically the ships blasted each other at very close range. By 4pm all three Ottoman ships of the line and most of the large frigates in the forward line had been rendered useless, which left the smaller vessels in the 2nd and 3rd lines at the mercy of the Allies ships of the line which all remained operational. Codrington had tried twice

to order a ceasefire but his signals were either not seen because of the thick smoke or ignored in the heat of battle. Within the following 2 hours virtually the entire Ottoman fleet had been destroyed, despite the bravery of the vessels' crews, which had been praised by Codrington in his dispatches. Three quarters of the Ottoman fleet had been sunk - many of the ships, which had been dismasted but were still afloat, had been either blown up or set on fire by their own crews to avoid having them fall into Allied hands. These actions contributed to the already sickening Ottoman and Egyptian casualty figures as many men were trapped in the burning or exploding vessels. The number of Ottoman casualties provided to Codrington by Letellier were approximately 3,000 dead 1,109 wounded. Of the entire Ottoman/Egyptian fleet of 78 vessels only 8 remained seaworthy. In contrast, Allied casualties were listed as 181 killed and 480 wounded. Several Allied ships had been severely damaged but the 3 British ships of the line survived, although all of them had to be sent back to the UK for repairs: however, not a single Allied vessel had been sunk.

At dusk the guns fell silent in Navarino Bay, and news of the Allied victory spread around the country. In every village church bells rang out into the night and people flocked to the village squares to share the news that the Ottoman fleet had been destroyed – to a maritime country like Greece, the fact that Greek ships would no longer meet any resistance or come to harm was pivotal. The country was saved and celebrations lasted for days, with huge bonfires being lit on the mountain tops of the Peloponnese and Mount Parnassos in central Greece. Celebrations even reached those parts of the country still under Ottoman control, which the demoralised Ottoman garrisons made little or no effort to suppress.

Despite the celebrations, the Sultan still had around 40,000 troops stationed in central and southern Greece, entrenched in fortresses and, unless the Ottomans could be compelled to accept the Treaty of London, the liberation of Greece was not yet inevitable. Russia then declared war on the Ottomans in April 1828, so starting the 11th Russo-Turkish War (1828-9). 100,000 Russian troops swept aside the Ottoman forces in the Romanian Principalities, crossed the Danube, and laid siege to Silistra, Varna and Shumla, the key Ottoman-held fortresses in Rumelia (Bulgaria). In August 1828 Ali Pasha agreed to the withdrawal of his forces from the Peloponnese – Ibrahim refused to comply with his father's evacuation orders, but the arrival of French troops persuaded him to change his mind. The French landed in Navarino Bay at the end of August to begin their Morea expedition, and were given a jubilant reception by the Greeks. The Egyptians finally left in October 1828, a year after the naval battle, following which the French mopped up the remaining Ottoman garrisons in the Peloponnese by the end of the year, having met only token resistance. In the subsequent months Greek forces regained control of central Greece.

In September 1829, with the Russian army camped just 40 miles from his palace, the Ottoman Sultan was forced to capitulate. By the Treaty of Adrianople, the Sultan acceded to a long list of Russian demands, one of which was the acceptance of Greek autonomy as defined in the Treaty of London which, however, still implied Ottoman suzerainty. However, the Greeks refused to accept anything other than full independence. Finally, at the London Protocol of 1830, the suzerainty issue was dropped and Greek independence was assured: later the Sultan was forced by the Allied powers to sign the Treaty of Constantinople (1832) formally recognizing the new Kingdom of Greece as an independent state.

The Battle of Navarino was the last major naval battle in history to be fought entirely with sailing ships. There are a number of memorials to the battle around Navarino Bay: Pylos' main square is called 'Three Admirals Square' and in the centre of this is a 3-sided marble monument depicting the profiles of Codrington, van Heiden and Rigney. Memorials to those who fell during the battle can be found on islets within the bay: Helonaki islet (British), Pylos islet (French) and Sphacteria island (Russian). The latter memorial is probably the most impressive, being a small wooden chapel in the Russian Orthodox style. Also on Sphacteria there is a memorial to Santarosa: Santorre Annibale di Rossi de Pomarolo, Count of Santa Rosa, was an Italian insurgent and leader in Italy's fight for reunification (Risorgimento). He went to Greece to take part in the Greek War of Independence and was asked by the Greek provisional government to change his name to Derossi to de-emphasize any connections with his previous revolutionary actions and so avoid the rage of the Great Powers. He was killed on May 8th, 1825, during the Battle of Sphacteria when he was caught in a cave on the island and refused to surrender.

The Battle is commemorated each year on 20th October, and the ceremonies are hosted by the Mayor of Pylos. The Russian, French and British governments send representatives to the ceremonies and the Russians also send a warship complete with full crew. 2027 marks the bicentennial of this battle – a battle which paved the way to Greek independence, which celebrates the bravery and commitment of those who fought and died in this struggle, and which acknowledges the rights of this wonderful country to achieve existance as an independent state.