



The
Richard Bollitho
Newsletter

Issue I



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Douglas Reeman / Alexander Kent

Part One

Living with Richard Bolitho

Alexander Kent Writing ...

I still do not really believe that I created the character of Richard Bolitho. It seems almost as if he was with me for many years, waiting patiently for the right moment to emerge and assert himself.

I have always been fascinated by the sea, and ever since boyhood I have gathered and hoarded information about it, perhaps without knowing, for the very purpose of putting my discoveries and dreams into words. And of all the periods in our naval heritage I find the era of sail to be the most fascinating. The ships, and the men who from choice or enforcement served them, the fantastic deeds of seamanship and survival, have given to me an interest which continues to grow with each new situation. Part of the fascination must come from the fact that it was a very exciting time in our history. Also, with the passing of sail we saw an end of true self-reliance at sea, a time when every captain had to depend on his own resources, often when he had been so long away from superior advice and guidance, that he had little but his personal skill and initiative to sustain him.

In our own century such independence has been reduced to a minimum. In World War I the German commerce raiders prowled the oceans in search of Allied merchantmen, and to a smaller extent the submarine commanders in both world wars had some of the same freedom. But today, with the coming of the communications satellite, long-range radar and nuclear power, no captain is free for long to act without consultation with some far-off authority or intelligence. With the forces



of destruction so great this curb is very necessary if we are to survive our own resourcefulness.

But in Bolitho's time a ship was not merely a weapon. It was also a way of life for the teeming world within the hull. Crammed together in all conceivable conditions, yet divided by the varying demands of status and discipline, the men who served the King's ships were beyond the wider influences of politics and grand strategy. When they were required to give battle, which was often, they fought for each other, for those who shared the daily hardships, and to avenge old comrades. In actions of indescribable violence, usually at only a few yards range, these men could still cheer as they sailed into battle, knowing that there was no time left for doubts or hopes, and that they had only each other's skill, or lack of it, to aid them.

To reveal the life and times of Richard Bolitho I have had to continue and increase my span of research. Yet at no occasion have I been bored or disappointed by my findings. It involves gunnery and seamanship, the business of turning a ship in a gale or having to describe a peaceful scene in harbour. Distance sailed, the food

and drink consumed, weather and the sea's face, all have to be painted into an overall background so that the reader can discover each incident for himself through the eyes of Bolitho rather than mine.

I have tried to make him a man of his times, and not a modern man in fancy dress.

Fortunately I am not alone in my research. So great is the interest in this period of time that the fact Bolitho represents a British sea officer seems almost secondary. I receive letters from all over the world, from very varying countries where Bolitho's exploits have been translated. Pictures and relics, suggestions and queries have poured in from every hand. Although I have been a writer for some years I have never known such a thing before. It is both gratifying and moving, and like being given some special responsibility. Because of all this I have of course made many friends throughout the world, most of whom I have not met, but whose contact and interest make my work so much more enjoyable. Sometimes I feel like Bolitho's private secretary.

As I write of his life, both forward and back in time, a small mountain of research and information continues to pile up. Once I have decided on the general background for a new story the characters and their own situations start to emerge. The ship for each particular book is of course very important. I have to know her at sea and at anchor. How she will look from the land, or to a frightened man brought aboard by a pressgang. I must have the very feel of her, so that I can almost smell the tar or the bilge deep in her hull. Then and only then can I hope to bring her alive for the reader.

The characteristics often tend to take over from me once the work has begun. Men I have decided will be strong sometimes emerge as weaklings. Others destined for great things have been known to die in the first chapters. In a recent story, *Enemy in Sight!*, Bolitho's

young wife died under very tragic circumstances. I had several letters complaining about this, and one made a clever and helpful suggestion for bringing her back to life in the next book. Alas, the next book was already finished. Her fate was decided. But I found it impossible to explain to those who questioned the deed just why such a tragedy had really occurred. Would anyone ever believe me if I said that she, like certain other characters, had taken over from me, so that I could do nothing but report what had come about?

Sea fights play a large part in these stories, and again a great deal of planning must be done before they can be described. Wind and sea, the bearing and course of every ship has to be watched as closely as if I was actually standing at Bolitho's elbow. Curiously enough my own experience in the last war has been helpful. For some of my service was in motor torpedo boats, where if the speed and manoeuvrability were vastly superior to a ponderous ship of the line, the hazards were much the same. Being constructed of wood, the danger and fear of flying splinters was very real. The short ranges in clashes with the enemy were little more than in the eighteenth century.

It seemed natural that Bolitho should be a Cornishman. Or perhaps that too had already been decided. But Cornwall has long been the home of many resourceful and independent sailors. For centuries the people have lived by and off the sea, and it is difficult to move about there for long without a sight of water or a distant horizon.

To challenge the Armada or to catch fish, to go with Nelson to the Nile or drive the famous Falmouth packet ships to the ends of the earth, men have always been found in that country when the call was made. Even William Bligh, whose great achievements are too often wrongfully overcast by the *Bounty* mutiny, was a Cor-

nishman, sent off to sea at the tender age of seven years and nine months. In those hard times you had to start young. There were miles of rigging to be understood and mastered, for every ship had to be used like a well-tuned instrument if she was to survive her first storm. So adept did professional seamen become that they could find their way around the deck or aloft to the swaying yards in a completely strange ship after a few moments aboard.

In Richard Bolitho I have tried to show a man of action, a man of imagination, yet one capable of offering pity and love. They are perhaps his greatest qualities, which are the best in all men.

Part Two

A Special Sort of Man

Richard Bolitho was born in 1756 and lived out his early boyhood in the grey stone house below Pendennis Castle in Falmouth with his elder brother and two sisters. Like the generations before him he grew to love the fine old house, which like the family name had become part of his heritage. Built originally by his great great grandfather Julius who died aboard his ship in 1646 for the Royalist cause while trying to break the Roundhead blockade on Pendennis Castle, it had changed little over the years. It was a focal point for the people in and around the district, a place much discussed as was the seafaring family who owned it. Naturally enough the house was rarely occupied by the head of the family in any generation as he would be at sea, but his exploits were a regular topic of conversation and discussion, as if he was always present in person.

Like those who had gone before him, the young

Richard was sent to sea in a King's ship at the age of twelve, a midshipman in a two-decker, to learn his trade and suffer the privations he had previously only heard about. Going to sea was as natural as one might expect for a member of the Bolitho family. As a child he had explored the many coves and inlets of his native coast, joining the fishermen in their offshore fishing boats or making his own way in anything which was available. In those carefree times he saw the navy as a passing ship, a beautiful creature under full sail which seemed to beckon him from afar, or the sight of a sea officer in the town, resplendent in blue and gold, an unreachable being who wanted for nothing. His own father was almost as remote. Coming and going over the years, sitting by the great fireplace or walking with his sons along the wall by the house recounting his experiences in distant places, his ships and his seamen.

Richard Bolitho was soon to learn that life aboard a King's ship held far more than adventure and enjoyment. Harsh discipline, overcrowded conditions and the back-breaking work entailed in learning everything from seamanship and navigation to fattening rats with biscuit crumbs to eke out the sparse rations were very different from his boyhood dreams. But as he found his feet and made his way more confidently up the ladder of promotion he never once doubted his profession. Perhaps because he had never expected anything else. It was part of him, like the sea, and the house in Falmouth.

It was during the American War of Independence that he was to distinguish himself for the first time and gain a command of his own at the age of twenty-two. In command of the sloop *Sparrow* and later the frigate *Phalarope* he fought many battles with his country's enemies, at a time when the tide of war was going badly. Outwardly he seemed to symbolise the new type of

officer who was emerging to replace the more hide-bound and those who cared little for the men they commanded. He refused to believe that written orders were an unbending substitute for initiative, or that the rigid acceptance of old fighting methods could never be challenged. But inwardly he had other more personal problems to overcome. His brother Hugh had deserted the navy after killing an officer in a duel. Worse, he had entered the American service and taken command of a privateer against his own country. This disgrace was to break their father's heart, and he died while Bolitho was still in the West Indies. When he saw his father for the last time he gave him the family sword, which appears so many times in the portraits at the house in Falmouth. It too seemed to be part of the man and the legend. First worn by Bolitho's great grandfather David, who was killed fighting pirates off the African coast, it was already much used and tarnished. Straight-bladed and lighter than more recent designs, it still had the edge of a razor, and Bolitho knew that when he finally parted with it it would be because his hand was devoid of life.

Throughout his tempestuous career he was to meet countless faces, see many ships, and in the navy's confined world it was inevitable that some personalities would appear again and again, for better or worse as the situation decreed. And some would remain close to him.

Thomas Herrick, once his first lieutenant in *Phalarope*, was one such man. Son of a poor clerk, without influence or family background, he was to prove himself and earn the respect of all who knew him. He looked upon Bolitho with an affection which amounted to love, and would die for him if need be.

Another was John Allday, Bolitho's personal coxswain. He was perhaps even closer as he was rarely

beyond call and always at his master's side when the danger was the greatest. Allday was more than content with his role and had been at sea for as long as he could recall. Only once had he left it to become a shepherd and then by a stroke of fate he was seized by the press-gang and sent to Bolitho's ship. A strange way for a relationship to start let alone prosper, but Bolitho seemed to have this influence, although he was not aware of it. An old sailing master once said of him, "He is a special sort of man," but it went far deeper. He despised those who abused authority or gained it by influence or noble birth. And in a calling where the demands of duty and discipline were necessarily severe he retained a sense of humanity towards those who depended on him, and tried to ensure that they did not suffer for no good purpose. Needless to say some of his methods and ideals were not approved by certain of his superiors, and he was to suffer setbacks because of their resentment and envy.

And at one point it seemed as if despair would destroy him. The death of his young wife and their unborn child while he was away at sea could not have hit harder, nor could he have felt the loss so bitterly. He was to pin many of his hopes on Adam Pascoe, the illegitimate son of his dead brother Hugh, but nursed another dread in his heart that one day the boy might turn against him. For he had withheld the real truth of Hugh's last years alive, knowing it would have destroyed any hope the boy still had of making his own way.

But as usual he had to contain his personal doubts and misgivings in order to fulfil his duty and purpose in the service he loved so dearly. As the war with France and her allies mounted and spread he was rarely absent from the line of battle. Responsibility, the talent for strategy and command left him little time for much

else. And all the while, back in Falmouth, the great stone house waited, empty but for his loyal steward Ferguson and the servants. Waited perhaps for the inevitable, to see who would finally return to be the next, or the last, of the Bolithos.

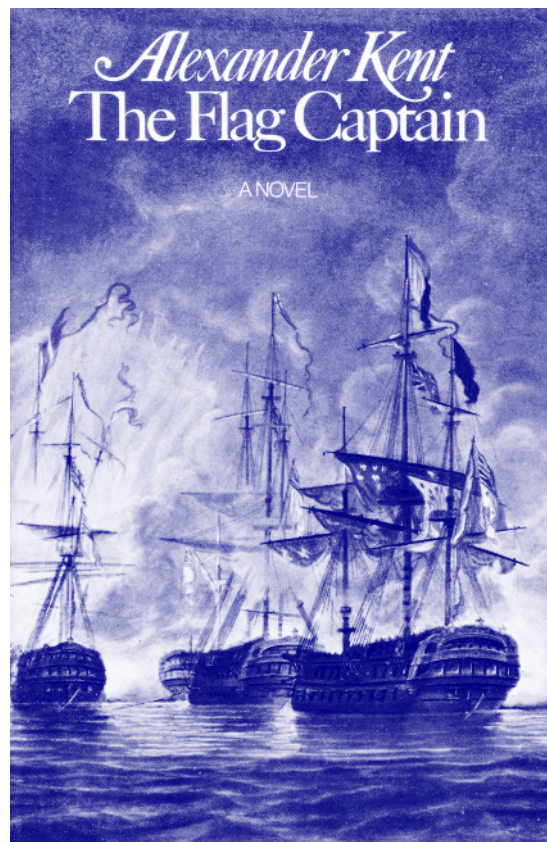
Part Three

The Flag Captain

In the Spring of 1797 when Richard Bolitho returns to England after two years' exhaustive blockade duty he expects to find the country alive with optimism and fresh hope for the future. Earlier in the year Sir John Jervis had won a great victory over a combined Franco-Spanish fleet off St. Vincent, so that the enemy's proposed invasion across the Channel had received a severe setback. The battle of Cape St. Vincent had demonstrated the navy's superb fighting quality, whereas the cooperation between the French and their ally had been disastrous.

Due to the original threat of invasion, the British had withdrawn all their naval forces from the Mediterranean and had brought every ship to the defence of the homeland. Now that the immediate danger is lessened, if not removed completely, it is decided once more to return in some strength to that area. Bonaparte's brilliant victories in Italy, his complete mastery of the war on land makes it seem likely that he will shift his attentions elsewhere, having failed to invade England and seen his plans to create an uprising in Ireland come to nothing.

Many now believe that the French will move to Egypt, and burst open the gate to India. To test the enemy's strength and secure intelligence of his movements, a small self-reliant squadron is formed, with Bolitho's *Euryalus* as flagship.



To Bolitho's dismay he discovers that instead of growing optimism at what may prove to be the turning-point in the war, he finds the country rocked with confusion and horror at the news of a mutiny within the fleet at Spithead. He is torn between the sense of duty and the need to prepare his command for sea, and his sincere belief in the seamen's cause which he knows to be a just one. Worse, there are rumors of an even greater threat of mutiny at the Nore, and he realises that unless he can get the small squadron under sail, it too will

become entangled.

Unfortunately, his new admiral, Sir Lucius Broughton, has already been personally involved in the Spithead affair, and he is in no mood to show leniency to anyone, no matter how just his case might appear. Under no circumstances does he intend his squadron to be reached by mutiny, and he is quick to show his interpretation of justice.

In the blazing heat of the Mediterranean, while the squadron repulses attacks and attempts to secure a base on the African mainland, Bolitho is called upon again and again to stand between his admiral and the mysterious civilian advisor Sir Hugo Draffen, a man of undoubted authority and influence, Draffen appears to have ambitions other than helping the squadron and is swift to use his power when an opportunity offers itself.

Apart from his demanding duties as flag captain and the affairs of the ships in company, Bolitho has his own command to consider. For within her massive hull there are still some who are brooding over the mutiny and see in their admiral's mistrust and rigidity the very

representation of its cause. In spite of the enemy's tightening embrace and the conflict within the squadron, Bolitho is convinced that the part they must play is vital both for their own survival and the future of their country's ambitions.

He is very aware of his ship's influence on his own reactions. For she is a French prize, the 100-gun former flagship of Admiral Lequiller defeated by him, and on the deck of which he saw his brother die in battle.

Can a ship change allegiance by an alteration of name and flag? When called to a final challenge will he be able to overcome those memories and disappointments and offer his men the leadership and trust they so desperately need?

This is not only a turning-point for England but also for the flag captain. The stepping stone to higher command where he can invest his strategy and the understanding of close action to best advantage. Facing each bloody broadside or dealing with intrigue and treachery from within, he learns the full meaning of leadership and the cost to those who seek it.

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