



The  
*Richard Bollitho*  
Newsletter

Issue II



*The Bolitho Newsletter* is published and  
copyrighted by Highseas Authors Ltd.  
This issue was originally released in 1972.

## *Contents*

### *PART ONE*

Being in All Respects Ready for Sea

### *PART TWO*

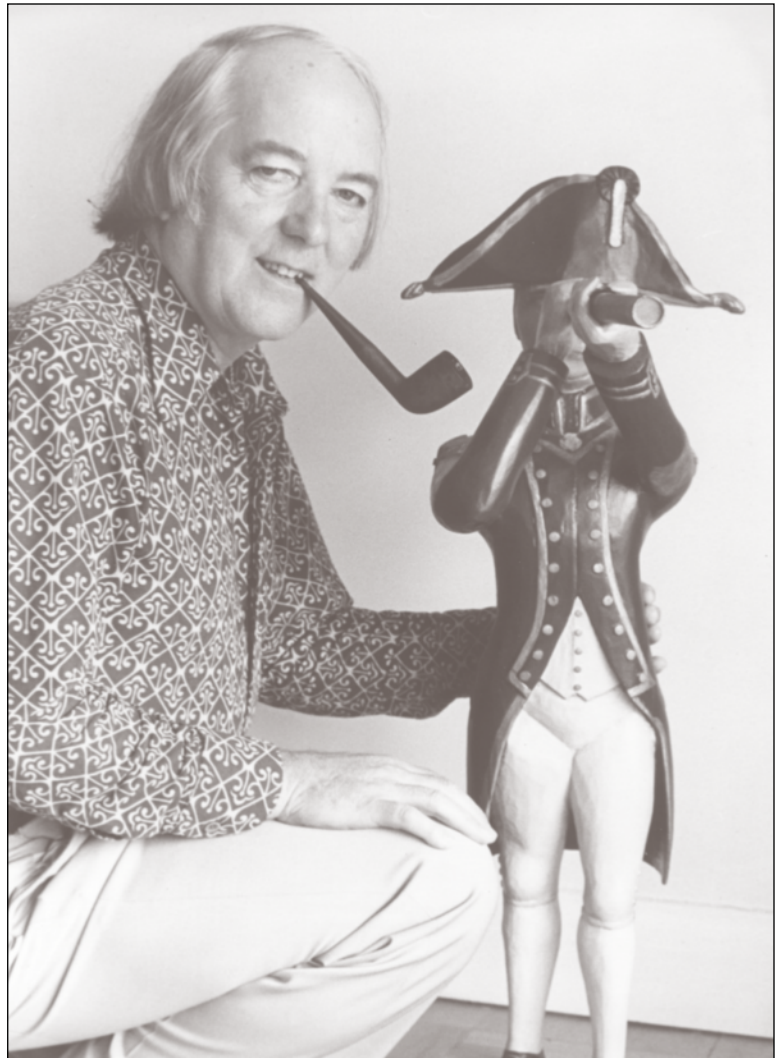
Prepare for Battle

### *PART THREE*

Sloop of War

### *PART FOUR*

Sail Plan



Douglas Reeman / Alexander Kent (circa 1970s) with the  
Little Admiral who still watches over the author's home.

## Part One

### *Being in All Respects Ready for Sea*

In the 18th century, and particularly in time of war, the business of fitting-out, storing and crewing a King's ship provided many a headache for those concerned. Captains newly appointed to their commands used every skill, each hard-earned lesson of seamanship and cunning to ensure that once clear of land they would be able to cope with any demand or challenge thrown their way. Between the wars ships were too often laid up in ports and estuaries and allowed to fall into disrepair and suffer their most dangerous enemy, rot. Before any vessel could safely go about her affairs her captain had to be certain that the miles of rigging and cordage would withstand a full gale as well as the more obvious hazards of an enemy broadside. More to the point, he had to calculate how many extra replacements he could cram into his hull so that he would not be made to run for port after his first setback. Spare spars, timber for repairing boats and fittings, huge areas of canvas so that he could repair and, if necessary, make new sails with minimum delay. Powder and shot for a variety of ordnance, all had to be carefully stowed throughout the ship, with a careful watch kept on the stability and balance in order that sailing qualities would not be impaired.

As might be expected, the victualling of warships was a constant worry. Salt pork and beef in the cask and iron-hard biscuits provided the basic diet, and it fell to the ship's cook to use his imagination and limited resources to make any kind of variation.



Detail from 'Sloop of War', an original oil painting by English marine artist Geoffrey Huband.

Burgoo or skillygolee was one such dish, and consisted of oatmeal gruel, crushed toasted biscuits and lumps of boiled meat found to be useless for anything else. A midshipman's favourite was ship's rat carefully fattened on the best biscuit or bread crumbs. It was said to be quite as good as rabbit.

Drinking water had to be stowed in huge casks, and if not carefully checked could become a ready breeding ground for disease, as water barrels were usually quick to go rancid. Because of this, and the difficulty of obtaining a regular supply of fresh water, the daily issue of alcohol was fairly generous, especially by today's standards. A gallon of beer or a pint of strong wine per day while stocks lasted, changing to a half pint of brandy or rum when they were disposed of. Drink was frequently used as payment and barter

between decks, especially in vessels with bad and miserly captains who refused to pay their people until the end of a commission, if then. It was also responsible for much drunkenness, even in ships renowned for their strict discipline. Punishment books show more men flogged for various aspects of drunkenness than anything else.

But by far the biggest difficulty which faced any captain at the start of a new commission was men. Men to crew his ship. Men to set and reef sails under all conditions, to load and fire the guns and to get to close grips with any of the King's enemies. Men to steer and splice, to pull an oar and to find breath to cheer when all hell was crashing round their ears in battle.

The size of his ship made little difference. Be she a lofty three-decker, a first-rate of a hundred guns, or a small, rakish frigate, the problem was proportionate and depressing to many a hopeful captain.

Of course, a lot would depend on the captain himself. If he had previously made his name as a brave and resourceful commander it was likely that he would attract volunteers to his call. For it was not necessarily him humanity towards a ship's company which would bring him the men he required. Harsh discipline was taken for granted in times when hanging and depor-tation for minor crimes were commonplace. But his successes would mark him down as a captain likely to become rich from prize-money, which in turn would be shared amongst his men.

A captain who had the reputation for senseless brutality, or one who kept his company on a starvation diet, would find the task of recruiting impossible. Some volunteers came to a particular ship because they knew her captain only by name. This was common in West country ships which often carried a good

proportion of Cornish tin miners, farm workers and the like who were prepared to risk their change of calling merely because a captain was one of their own.

To commission a ship in any major port could be a severe handicap. Many local sailors would be exempt from naval service, being watermen or employed in the fishing fleet. Others crewed the great ships of the East India Company or manned the countless small craft which were needed to keep life moving on rivers and coastal waters. And they were, of course, the very men whom a captain would want most. These were trained and experienced seamen, and not the usual collection of labourers and unemployed landmen. Recruiting parties visited outlying villages and hamlets, setting up their temporary headquarters at an inn or ale house in the hopes that some likely hands could be obtained. A captain was expected to supply his recruiting officer with suitable handbills and posters, many of which were printed in glowing and colourful terms in order to attract volunteers. They were nailed on trees and notice boards, and it often fell to more literate members of the community to read them aloud, so that the choice of wording was all important. The expense of providing such posters had to be met by the captain, and when his weary shore-party returned with perhaps only two or three suitable men he would find himself wondering about his own popularity, or lack of it.

Many captains had to resort to the services of the pressgang to make up the bulk of their numbers. Once again, the seasoned sailor was quick to grasp the dangers of this system, and rarely moved about at night lest he be caught by the dreaded press. But the officers who took their small parties ashore in search of hands soon became equally cunning in their methods. They were aided by boarding house crimps, who sold information as to the whereabouts and suitability of

available men. After that it was not too difficult to separate the seamen from the untrained. A sailor's hands became so ingrained with tar after working at sea in shrouds and rigging that a quick inspection was all that was required. Tattoos on their arms, once proudly gained in some foreign port, were a bad handicap when under the eye of a King's officer.

And so as the ship gathered her stores and took on the appearance of a proper man-of-war, so too did her company begin to gather within her hull. Volunteers and pressed men, seamen transferred from other ships or taken off incoming vessels, they were willing or otherwise being merged into one living unit. Occasionally a captain might be lucky enough to be in the vicinity of an Assize Court where he could obtain men who might otherwise face more hazardous and uncertain futures in the convict colonies of Botany Bay. To use these methods might seem unfair and in some cases savage. But without proper census or conscription there was no better way known of crewing the ships required to fight against a powerful enemy.

When the moment finally came for the ship to weight anchor and clear the land, our captain must have watched his new company with mixed feelings. In those days there were no training depots, no safe places where bewildered and unskilled men could be broken in gently to the sea's ways.

As each ship had to depend on her own resources, so too did her company have to rely on each other, on the skills and knowledge of the professional men who might have to place ropes in their hands, like teachers with simple children, until they grasped the meaning and use of every piece of rigging. It was often said that any man, once he had been at sea for a few months, could go aloft in total darkness and never make a mistake.

Being in all respects ready for sea might have been a formal acknowledgement on a piece of paper, but to the captain who placed his signature below it, it represented far more. And as he watched his ship beat clear of the shore, and saw the sails thunder and harden to the first wind, he must have marvelled at the authority invested in him. For upon him everything depended. To reach his proper destination and make a landfall. To control his officers and marines, his seamen and every living soul under his command. Next to God he was the supreme being in their lives. He could advise and punish, reward and flog, as his mind directed. But at no time could he forget that his was the final responsibility. Recognition for success could so easily change to blame for failure, and unlike his other officers he could share his doubts with no one.

Ready for sea? He had to be ready for everything.

## Part Two

### *Prepare for Battle!*

Until the Napoleonic Wars, little had been done to encourage admirals or individual captains to deviate from the laid down instructions for fighting a sea battle. It was expected that a fleet would approach the enemy in three squadrons with the main one under the admiral's overall command in the centre. Once the position and course of the enemy force had been located by the small, faster vessels, frigates and sloops, it was up to the admiral to arrange his squadrons to best advantage. Everything depended on the wind and the time available for preparation. Sometimes the opposing fleets sailed on long parallel lines, or they approached each other on a converging tack, the



admiral trying his utmost to take the wind-gage at the moment of contact. This meant keeping to windward of the enemy, which had a double advantage. Firstly, the gun-crews would be unhampered by their own smoke, which would blow downwind and further help to blind the enemy. Not less important, if an enemy ship should have spars or canvass shot away in the first exchange of fire, she might slew downwind and expose her unprotected stern to a full and murderous broadside, which, if well timed, could sweep through her decks from stern to bows, turning the inner hull into a bloody and demoralised shambles.

In these slow and terrible embraces each fleet could suffer fearful losses in men and ships. It was not unknown for the victorious fleet or squadron to be so battered as to be incapable of capturing prizes or pursuing stragglers, and with hardly enough men and sails to reach safety.

Nevertheless, the more hidebound still frowned on unorthodox methods which were later perfected by men such as Hood and Nelson. In 1782, during the War of Independence, Admiral Rodney dumbfounded his critics by breaking the French line to secure his victory at the Battle of the Saintes, but found little support for his tactics. It was still generally believed that if a captain laid his ship beside an enemy and battered her into submission it was enough for any man. It is true to say that British gunnery far outmatched all other, no matter under what colours an enemy sailed. Being so long at sea and in all conditions, the British sailor had plenty of time to practise. For to the ordinary Jack Tar the gun was part of his daily life. His mess was between a pair of guns, he ate and slept by them, saw them at every waking moment.

Ships were rated according to their size and

firepower, i.e., a First Rate was a three-decker of a hundred guns or more, and at the other end of the scale, a Sixth Rate was the smallest type of frigate, single-decked, mounting 20-24 guns. These latter were known as post-ships, being the smallest to be commanded by a post-captain, one of over three years seniority.

In the 18th century, the most popular gun by far was the long thirty-two pounder, the heaviest and most accurate in the fleet. Mounted only in ships-of-the-line, which were expected to withstand the tremendous battering of the line of battle where ranges were often less than twenty yards, it could, when properly handled, hurl its massive ball some three thousand yards. At short range one such ball could pierce three feet of solid oak.

Normally a gun such as this would have a crew of fifteen men, some of whom would be required to man a twin weapon on the opposite side of the deck, although it was rare for a ship to engage both sides at once.

The rest of the ship's artillery was made up of similar but smaller weapons which fired a variety of shots which ranged from the ordinary solid ball to the more complex types of shot such as chain, bar and langridge, which was used mainly for dismasting another vessel or so tearing her sails and rigging to fragments as to render her helpless.

For the deadly business of close action grape shot and cannister were employed. These charges of packed balls would explode and scythe outwards on impact, and were used to shoot down officers and men on exposed decks, or to batter away a ship's defenders prior to boarding her.

When two ships eventually came together in battle, and the heavier guns were forced to remain silent for fear of setting friend and foe alight in one great pyre,

the action became even more terrible. Hand-to-hand, armed with cutlasses and boarding pikes, axes and clubs, the embattled ships fought back and forth until at last one was forced to submit.

It was hardly surprising that casualties were heavy. But it was almost as bad preparing for battle as it was to face actual combat. It might take all day before the two fleets drew close enough to engage. From the moment that a frigate, the 'Eyes of the Fleet,' had topped the horizon with the signal Enemy in Sight hoisted to her yards, there was nothing on anyone's mind but the prospect and certainty of battle. As the seamen swarmed aloft to rig chains on the yards to prevent them from falling on the gun crews below, while they spread nets across the upper decks to protect men from falling débris and enemy boarders alike, many must have glanced at the horizon for the first glimpse of a sail.

Decks had to be sanded to give better grip to the gun crews, hammocks stowed in the nettings to guard against flying wood splinters and pistol balls, and below decks the screens which divided mess from mess, officer from seaman, were torn down to transform the ship into one long double battery of guns.

The older hands would be the more worried. They had lived through other battles in other ships, and knew the odds on survival and death. The new recruits and pressed men would watch the slow-spreading might of the enemy's ships along the horizon more with awe than real understanding.

Nearer and nearer, and the tension is unbearable. Marines parade on the poop and high in the fighting tops the best marksmen prepare to shoot down enemy officers when near enough to aim their muskets. The captain paces the quarterdeck apparently unruffled, but his mind grappling with a dozen doubts and anxieties

at once.

Below decks the other gun crews wait, watching their open ports for a first sign of a target. It is almost dark between decks, but the light which filters through each gun port is sufficient to show the red paint on timbers and bulwarks, which it is hoped will disguise the horror of an enemy broadside if it bursts into this quiet place. The officer in charge of the gun deck rubs his chin, the sound making his messenger, a thirteen-year-old midshipman, swallow with alarm.

Below, deeper still in the hull, the surgeon ponders with his assistants, the loblolly boys who wait to drag the wounded to their makeshift table of sea chests and start their own sort of work. No anaesthetic here. Just a strap between the teeth, a full swallow of rum and brandy, and the grisly business begins.

Suddenly, in a flash it is here. All around, above and below, the jarring roar of cannon fire, the squeal of trucks as the guns are run out again and again, the sounds of falling spars and of shots slamming hard into the hull. It is a world of smoke and terrible din, of powder-blackened bodies and staring eyes, mouths calling out orders which deafened ears can no longer hear.

On the upper deck the daylight is gone in the smoke, and it is painful to breathe. Men are falling and dying, and above the choking fog the enemy's flag seems right alongside. The helm is shot away, a lieutenant is carried below, dead or badly wounded, nobody knows or cares. On his pitted deck, our captain walks back and forth like a man in a trance, while the planking spurts splinters to mark where the enemy's sharpshooters are trying to cut him down.

And then it is done. The enemy's flag dips into the smoke. No one knows what has happened along the line of battle, it is beyond our small, cringing world of

noise and smell.

A hand reaches out to touch an old friend. The captain looks at a seaman and forces a grin.

The enemy has struck. To us. It is enough. It has to be so.

## Part Three

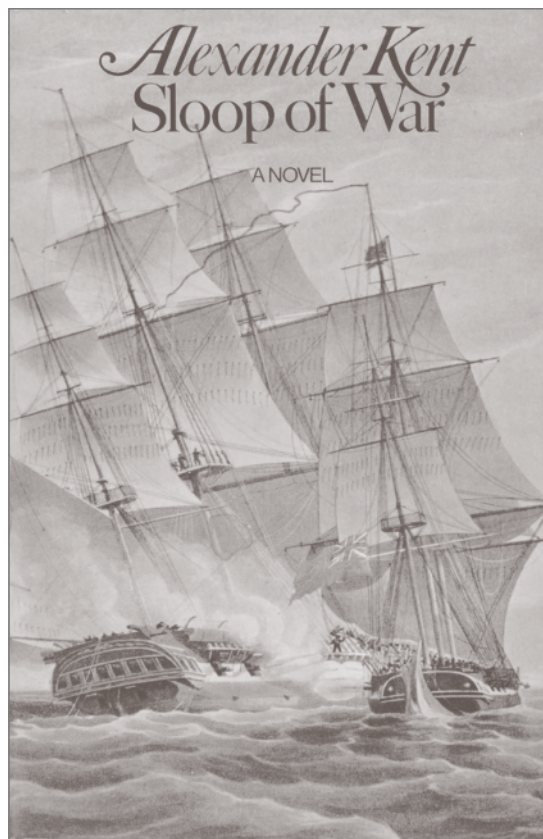
### *Sloop of War*

Here, we turn and look back in time to 1778, when the young Richard Bolitho takes his first decisive step in his career to a command of his own.

In the eighteen gun Sparrow, sloop of war, he sees everything he has yearned for and dreamed of during his years as a subordinate officer. Freedom from higher authority so that he can exercise his ideas and skills, the opportunity to cut away the apron strings of fleet and squadron to explore his own ability.

But if 1778 represents a challenge to Bolitho it offers a real threat to his country. The War of Independence is already changing from a rebellion to a full-scale conflict in which the British Army is hard put to keep a foothold on the American mainland. The bitter military defeat at Saratoga last year has raised doubts about the efficiency of strategy, the competence of high command. And now the French are here to exploit their old enemy's misfortunes. With ships and men to back up Washington's soldiers and privateers they hope to recover their previously lost lands from the British once and for all.

Sparrow is a small, intimate world where every victory is shared, each setback deeply felt. Bolitho soon learns that captains too must obey, even when the orders are wrong, but he also begins to understand the true meaning of command, the responsibility of it, the



pride of holding it.

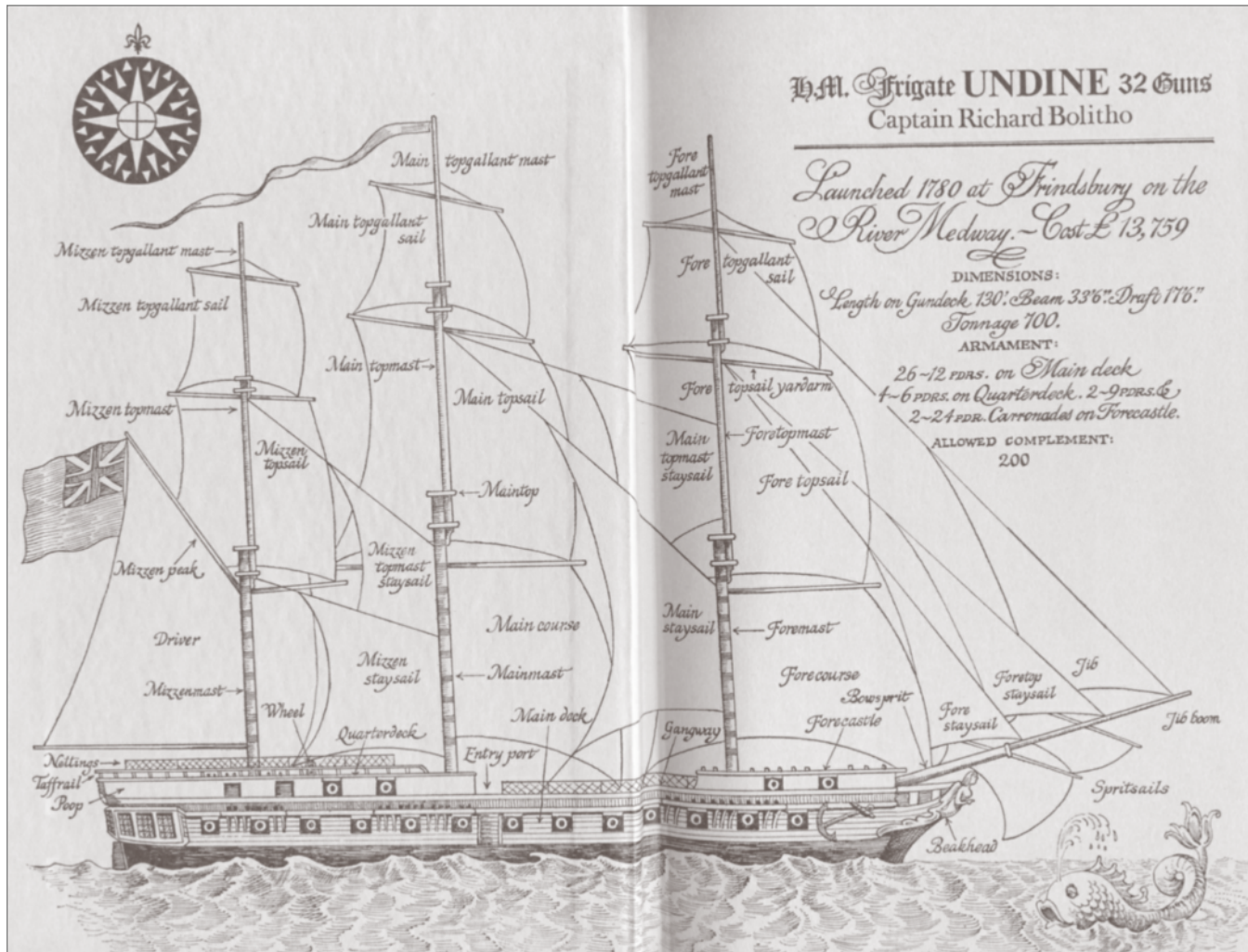
Against the background of swift sea-fights and wearying convoy duty, the glimpses of another life of influence and power in New York, he sees the inevitable before many who are more experienced. At the battle of the Chesapeake he also sees the cost which has to be paid for hidebound ideas and rigid tactics.

It is the turning point for Bolitho and for the Navy. And for *Sparrow*, sloop of war.



## Part Four

### *Sail Plan*



Sail plan end papers from the first UK edition of *Command a King's Ship* ...



**The Bolitho novels are available online  
from the following book dealers ...**

***United Kingdom***

Hatchards in London ([www.hatchards.co.uk](http://www.hatchards.co.uk))  
The Book Depository in the UK ([www.bookdepository.co.uk](http://www.bookdepository.co.uk))  
Amazon UK ([www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk))

***United States***

McBooks Press in the US ([www.mcbooks.com](http://www.mcbooks.com))  
Amazon ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com))  
Barnes & Noble ([www.barnesandnoble.com](http://www.barnesandnoble.com))