The Richard Bolitho Newsletter

Issue IV

Contents

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Part One
Between Decks

During the closing years of the eighteenth century, when the war against France and her allies had reached a new height, there was still little change in the general appearance and equipment of the fleet. The heavy units in any squadron, the great three-deckers or first-rates, and the more prevalent seventy-fours, made up the line of battle whenever required. Faster, more manoeuvrable ships, ranging from frigates to sloops and brigs, were as much if not more in demand than ever. With vast sea distances to patrol, and a communications system to the ends of the earth, any captain, no matter how junior, was expected to perform feats of navigation which in today's world of radar and space satellites seem incredible.

Weapons, too, varied little from those which had made the pace in the last great confrontation of the American Revolution and the battles against the combined fleets of France and Spain. The short-ranged but deadly carronade which had first made its appearance in 1779 had barely changed, and no new weapons of any real significance had been invented. The heaviest, and by far the most popular weapon, was the thirty-two pounder, or 'long nine' as it was nicknamed, being nine feet in length, was used in most of the lower batteries of ships-of-the-line. It had a crew of fifteen men, and at close range could penetrate three feet of solid oak. As the extreme reach of such cannon was only one and a half miles, rapid fire was generally found to be more important than individual accuracy. A fully skilled crew could fire three rounds every two minutes, despite all the demands of manhandling three tons of wood and metal under the most desperate

Circumstances.

Above deck the sail plan had barely altered from the time when Admiral Rodney had won the Battle of the Saintes in 1782 and thereby restored some of the nation's pride after the setbacks of the American Revolution.

It was generally held throughout the fleet during the Napoleonic Wars that the French ships were better built and more able to withstand punishment during close action. A view further enforced by the several heavy ships seized as prizes from the enemy and put into service in our own squadrons. Nevertheless, the British continued to win battles, usually against odds, and while much of the enemy's naval strength stayed bottled up by continuous blockade in all weathers, our own men became expert, perhaps because of their forced times at sea.

But as year followed year, and the growing might of France probed from the Atlantic to the Eastern Mediterranean, another thing which had changed little, and which brought anxiety to politician and sea officer alike, was the shortage of men to serve the fleet. First-

rate or bomb-ketch, frigate or schooner, the need to preserve a full complement, to work the sails and complicated rigging, to manage and fire the guns, and when required to fight at arm's length with cutlass and boarding pike, was paramount.

Providing their hulls could be protected from rot, and as free of weed and growth as possible in the various conditions faced, ships lived a long time. They needed stores and fresh water, powder and shot, canvas and hemp, but apart from the chain pumps to keep even the leakiest bilge clear of water, they were free of mechanical breakdown and the need for refit and regular overhaul in a dockyard unlike ships in succeeding centuries.

Because of this they spent lengthy periods at sea, many on commissions in all parts of the world. Somebody who had volunteered as a ship's boy, a mere child of twelve or so, could find himself a seasoned able seaman before he saw his home again. A man snatched up by the dreaded press-gangs, or taken from the hulks or Assize courts to serve his country rather than face prison or worse, would discover that no matter what his trade or calling might have been, a sailor he had become.

To the casual onlooker a ship of the line breaking from its anchorage and beating out to sea, or one just visible hull-down on the horizon with all sails set and beautiful in the sun's path, was something rather special, but beyond that, completely unknown. She represented security and pride, and at any sort of distance held a touch of romance which is never far from any seafaring nation. Little thought was given for the harsh discipline, the backbreaking drills required to make men overcome their fear of heights, to work above the deck in the shrouds and on the vibrating yards. Or for the times when these same men had to stand by their guns and watch the oncoming menace of an enemy, when but for this same rigid discipline they might turn and run.

The sailor had long been a figure of romance and mystery. Few ordinary folk, apart from the military, travelled more than a dozen or so miles from their villages and farms. The sight of a homecoming ship, her company tanned, swaggering seamen in their blue coats and brass buttons, their pigtails and tattoos, was enough to get the hearts beating, the ale flowing. In seaports and harbours it was common to catch sight of an officer in cocked hat and white breeches, with sword on hip and probably a lady on his arm. Nothing then to show the inner problems of the fleet's greatest need.

Men

For this and other reasons, the world between decks of a large fighting ship, a seventy-four for instance, became as much like an overcrowded town as it did a home for those more used to better things.

It was possible for men to work with older hands, to take their places when eventually they were discharges because of age or health, or when they were killed or crippled in action.

In every ship between decks there was a backbone of professional men without whom the vessel would be as helpless as if she had been denied a keel.

A man-o'-war had to depend on the inner resources for everything. Every sail, and there were many, had to be replaced or repaired, the scraps saved for anything from patches to spare hammocks.

The sailmaker and his mates were always busy, for no ship was spared losses from storm-force gales which ripped canvas from yards even before the breathless watch below could be called to reef and so to save the

sailmaker more hard work.

The same sailmaker had many other talents. He could make clothing for the seamen, rough, wide-legged trousers and jackets, for which they paid in rum or tobacco. He could be called aft, to the great cabin, and be expected to produce a canvas carpet for his captain's quarters, the finished article picked out in black and white squares to give the austere deck a look of home.

Likewise the cooper. With his own band of mates he had to fight a constant battle against rotting or rancid casks, repairing and replacing with whatever wood came his way. He was well aware that it was prudent to stay a friend of the ship's carpenter who with the boatswain were two of the most important warrant officers in any vessel. The carpenter had to service the hull, attend to leaks which were caused more by stress of weather than by cannon shot, plug holes after a fight, and keep an eye on every piece of gear from spars to boats, gangways to cabin furniture.

The boatswain, responsible for rigging and sails, anchors and cables, was the key man between seamen and quarterdeck, twixt company and first lieutenant, who in turn was answerable to the captain.

A lifeline of inter-dependence, a chain of command.

Master's mates, midshipmen and petty officers. Marine sergeants and corporals, quartermasters and boatswain's mates, all seemed very aloof and remote to the newly joined men, and upon their skill, their patience, or lack of them, could depend the whole ship’s company.

In spite of the demanding conditions in civilian life ashore, to many of those going into a King’s ship, be they volunteers or pressed men, their new world must have seemed confusing and not a little terrifying.

Guns made up the staff of any fighting ship. Sail drill, and the endless work on rigging and canvas, splicing and sewing, tarring and caulking were all vital. But their real purpose was to carry a floating platform to anywhere in the world as their lordships demanded, and once there to use these weapons with authority.

This one hard fact was never allowed to escape the ship's company. The bulk of the seamen had their messes between each pair of guns, so that when they lowered their tables from the deckhead and consumed their spartan meals of salt beef or pork, iron-hard biscuit and a mug of rum or wine, the guns were there with them. When they turned out of their hammocks, and each man was allowed only twenty inches between his and the next one, the black-tethered muzzles were an ever-present reminder of their function.

To make or reef sails in all weathers, to work the guns, to steer and splice, none was achieved without some pain and hardship, and yet the ordinary ‘jack’ was still able to amuse himself. Hornpipes during the evenings, fishing and competition between messes in intricate rope and scrimshaw work filled in much of their off-watch hours. The more artistic made delicate snuff boxes from scraps of wood, and some which are still on display in maritime museums were created from chunks of salt beef from casks so old that the surface of the shot-hard meat gleams like polished mahogany.

Apart from the hard core of seasoned warrant officers and their mates, there were others who stood out from the mass which made up the ship’s company. Men like the captain’s personal coxswain and the members of his barge crew were such as these. Surprisingly enough, they were seen more often by visitors and casual onlookers than the bulk of the company, and in the eyes of their captain often came to represent not only his ship but his own standard of efficiency.

It was common for a captain to purchase, even

design a uniform for his barge crew, and to supply special buttons and other adornments for his coxswain and personal servant. It was a saying in the Navy until recent years that a ship could be judged by the smartness and turnout of her boats' crews.

In the eighteenth century, this was even more so, and while most of the ships' companies dressed in rough issue clothing from the purser's store, or purchased cloth from their meagre pay and had it made up by the ubiquitous sailmaker, the various barge crews presented a fine spectacle as they vied with each other to ply back and forth between ships and shore.

It is true to say that after the first year or so of war the Navy was forced more and more to use the press-gangs for recruitment.

There were, during those times, many who were exempt from service, and as in all wars, there were those who abused their rank or privilege to avoid risking their own skins.

Any captain in search of fresh hands would find his way blocked by many such exemptions. Seamen of the East India Company, licensed watermen, and those who ferried stores up the winding canals, the very sort who would have been welcomed with open arms in any King's ship were amongst those so protected.

Harassed lieutenants sent ashore in search of men would rarely dare to return empty-handed. To make up their number they would sometimes seize a man too old, or a child so young that the party of sailors would be chased by an irate populace back to the safety of their longboat.

Boarding house crimps were another source. A whisper to an officer of the press-gang, a quick handful of coins, and the seafarers, imagining themselves quite safe in a lodging house or inn, would awake to the cry, 'Stand, in the King's name!'

Unfair, brutal, it possibly was. But there was no proper census, no real way of spreading just recruitment around the land and in towns far from the sea and its needs.

Because many ships originally commissioned in Plymouth or Portsmouth, at the Nore or in Scottish seaports, their companies brought their own traditions and superstitions with them and gave separate characters and personalities to their floating homes. Even as late as the last war there was real competition between Pompey ships and those from Guz (Portsmouth and Devonport). Many of the traditions, too, came from ones originally quite detached from maritime life. Even the custom of Crossing the Line Ceremony, shared today amongst passengers of cruise liners, and which is said to have originated with the Carthaginians when they sacrificed to their gods on passing 'the limits of navigation', may have begun much earlier as religious rites for a safe harvest ashore.

Men torn from the arms of their loved ones by the press, never knowing how their families were going to fend for themselves, or whether they would ever meet again. Others who faced deportation or the degrading existence of a debtors' prison. Criminals, and those hiding from some attempted felony, old seamen who had sworn never to return to any ship but had found that the land had rejected them. The boys from villages and farms, urged on by the local girls to show their daring. Volunteers who had lost friends in the war, or who hoped to make their way in a naval career. Country folk and townsmen, fishermen and ostlers. Once crammed inside the great oak hull they had to be of one company, no matter how rough the union might be.

Some were taken by force, others followed the drum of a recruiting party or 'listened' round-eyed to a poster which a captain had had printed at his own expense to

invite volunteers to his command. Unfortunately much depended on the man who read the proud words to the crowd. Most of the lower orders could not read or write, so a badly delivered oration could deprive a captain of quite a few hands.

And there were those who went to their beds peacefully, or fell into a drunken sleep in some alehouse or inn. These unfortunates might awake sick and dazed in a ship already standing out to sea, their heads half cracked by a cudgel.

However they came, no matter what they hoped to gain or avoid, they became part of the ship. And when at last the drums rolled and they hurried grim-faced to quarters, to tear down screens and run out their guns, they knew the full meaning of being one company.

As the guns roared and hurled themselves inboard on their tackles, and the crews yelled for more powder and shot in a world of earsplitting noise and choking gunsmoke, they stood together and did their best. Men fell and died, others were dragged wounded to the surgeon on the orlop deck below.

But the firing went on until the enemy's flag had struck and above the din came the cheers. From ordinary men who had suddenly become British seamen.

Part Two

A Decisive Year

After five long years of war 1798 opened on a note of uncertainty, and yet left neither Britain nor her main enemy, France, in doubt that it was to be one of vital importance.

Militarily speaking, Britain had done little but reinforce her overseas possessions and garrisons and dig deep into the nation's treasury to equip and man her army at home. It was generally accepted that this was to be the war which would settle things once and for all, but, unlike previous conflicts, there was the added horror of a peoples' revolution, the beheading of a king and his queen and all the bloodshed of the Terror which followed.

As was too often the case, our own Navy was taken for granted. The fleet which stood astride the 'Moat', as the English Channel was trustingly named, was more than a match for any insolent, would-be invader. Especially a French invader.

Indeed, there was much to back up this belief. The victories against the King's enemies at sea were numerous and inspiring. Howe's triumph over the French in 1794, the Glorious First of June, and Jervis' splendid victory at St. Vincent in 1797, quite apart from single ship and frigate actions, added to the belief that the Navy would stop anything which an enemy might attempt.

The experts knew well enough that a war could not be won by staying put behind the fleet and the island's natural defences, any more than by blockading the enemy's ports and patrolling the trade routes in search of valuable convoys and essential war supplies. They were necessary tactics, part of the larger pattern, but none was final.

Perhaps the British ability to beat enemy ships at sea, often to win against impressive odds, gave both Parliament and public an over-confidence which within the fleet was seen as criminal neglect.

For the ships which made up the relentless blockade on every major enemy port were in a sad way. Between the wars many had lain idle, rotting even, while the harbours and fishing villages around our coasts were thronged with men who had been cast aside

by an ungrateful nation. A nation whose own security had been saved by the very same veterans.

Tacking up and down in all conditions, the weatherbeaten ships kept watch over every important anchorage. Brest and Cherbourg, Lorient and Nantes, it made no difference as far as the ships' companies were concerned. They existed on foul food and in discomfort which would kill many men today. Wearing ship, tacking back and forth across French estuaries and inlets, knowing all the while that their enemies lay protected and unreached by weather under the guns of their shore batteries.

There were some senior officers within the fleet who either did not appreciate the value of their men, or who were such tyrants they did not care. The newer breed of sea officer had yet to assert himself, and most were so concerned with their part in the war that they did not fully appreciate what was happening where it was least expected, in England.

In 1797 two mutinies broke out in the fleet. The first at Spithead and a few smaller commands, rocked the nation to its heels. Admiral Howe, ‘Black Dick’ as he was affectionately known on the lower deck, was quick to se the trend of events and acted accordingly.

A seaman’s pay was a mere pittance, and what he did actually earn could be lost in mysterious debts and payments to his purser. His living standards and conditions of service were abysmal, and there were plenty of officers willing to give testimony to the fact. Others saw the seamen’s plea for justice as wilful rebellion and demanded hangings by the hundred, and enough savage punishment to deter anyone in the future.

Lord Howe did his best for the seamen, and after the removal of a few known martinets from authority the men returned to duty.

Elsewhere, however, the lesson of Spithead had been studied, and when the next and far greater mutiny broke out at the Nore, the country was appalled by its completeness. Professional agitators and lower deck lawyers found ready ground for their speeches and revolutionary disruption.

The Medway was blockaded and guns trained on nearby towns. The army marched to guard the approaches, and admirals hurried back and forth between London and the mutineers’ councils in an effort to seek a compromise.

At sea, Duncan defeated the Dutch at the Battle of Camperdown, and elsewhere the blockade continued. Across the Channel the French watched the unrest in their enemy’s fleet and tried to plan for a quick invasion.

But the British ability, need even, for compromise brought the mutiny to an uneasy end. Some of the leaders were hanged, others flogged. A few officers were taken from their ships, and better conditions promised for the future. The ordinary British seaman had shaken the nation from King to farm worker with his brief display of independence and power.

And so, at the beginning of 1798, both main antagonists stood facing each other once again.

Napoleon Bonaparte was just twenty-nine, and although under the control of the Directory, he was seen as a man of individual talent and superior military ability.

Unlike many of his countrymen, he had little respect for the British Navy, a fault for which he was to pay dearly.

As a soldier he had much to back up his confidence, and that of his proud army.

He had watched the Royalist coup fail in Toulon, even though it was backed by British sea-power under

Lord Hood, and he had used his own exertions to make the victory final. He had organised a devastating campaign against the Austrian forces in Italy, and had forced the Treaty of Campo Formio in 1797. The Ancient Republic of Venice had been wiped out in favour of Austria, and in exchange Austria had handed her Dutch interests to France. France had taken the islands of the Adriatic, while throughout the Mediterranean she had made her name feared, so that even those who wished to favour Britain were afraid to do so.

Napoleon could see only one effective enemy in the whole of Europe: Britain.

With his usual stamina and sense of timing, Napoleon set about preparing for the next stage of his campaign. He was a land animal, and used the French fleet as transport for his army rather than as a weapon. Again, it was to act against him.

While he made visits to the Channel ports, just to give spies and agents the impression he was still considering a sea invasion of England's south coast, the preparations at Toulon and neighboring ports gathered momentum.

By the spring the French had mustered a force of some thirty-five thousand men, three-hundred transports, and a fleet to protect them under Admiral de Brueys, the best officer in their navy. With all the necessary stores and weapons, horse, fodder and equipment, this great colossus poised on the edge of the Mediterranean and awaited the signal.

Even by today's standards it was impressive, especially as Napoleon's gaze was firmly fixed on Egypt, which to him meant one thing, the gateway to India and the East Indies, and all the trade and possessions France had lost in the previous war.

The British, on the other hand, were uncertain as to the French intentions. Denied of bases, our fleet had not penetrated the Mediterranean in strength for months, and apart from rumour, knew little of Bonaparte's movements.

It was decided to send a British squadron to investigate, and Jervis, now the Earl of St. Vincent because of his great victory, chose a young rear admiral, Horatio Nelson, for the task.

To break out of Toulon and seize Malta, and possibly the Kingdom of Sicily. To steer west and force the Strait of Gilbraltar and join up with the combined fleets of France and Spain and thence onto England. Ireland, too, was considered, as the French had already attempted an invasion of that unhappy island earlier in the war.

And of course there was Egypt.

But what a decision for a fleet commander. Nelson was thirty-nine at the time, and still suffering badly from the loss of his arm the previous year at Teneriffe. But his strength came from the men about him, his Band of Brothers as he called them, young captains who had grown to know and respect his qualities of leadership and accept his tantrums when things did not go to his liking with a kind of love.

Many of these captains were to distinguish themselves later, and had already blazed a trail of endurance and courage which had done much to restore the Navy's morale. Men like Saumarez and Foley, Berry and Troubridge, and of course not forgetting the one who was perhaps to be the best remembered, Captain Thomas Hardy, who walked the deck with Nelson at Trafalgar seven years later.

Nelson was beset by misfortune at the start, mostly from perverse and savage weather. His own flagship was dismasted, his frigates, due to a misunderstanding, quit the squadron and returned to Gibraltar, and to top it

all, the French fleet sailed from Toulon. The very gales which had driven the British away and dismasted their flagship were favourable to de Brueys and his armada, which within days had vanished into the Mediterranean as if it had never been.

It was a terrible dilemma for Nelson. To sail west on the understanding that the enemy was indeed making for the Atlantic? To steer for the eastern Mediterranean and thereby allow the French to escape and attack England in strength? Or to do nothing?

Meanwhile, the elusive French fleet sailed on towards Egypt, joining with other vessels which had been sheltering in the Greek islands and awaiting the moment to attack.

After one abortive cruise along the Egyptian coast, and discovering Alexandria to be empty of French shipping, Nelson returned fretting to Sicily. Unbeknown to him, he had passed the French fleet in the night, and when at last he received information of the enemy's movements to the south-east, Bonaparte's army was already ashore, his ships anchored outside Alexandria in Aboukir Bay.

De Brueys had no doubt that the British would eventually arrive. He took no chances. His fleet was superior in size and quality to the one which Nelson commanded, and contained the largest man-o'-war in the world at that time, de Bruey's massive one hundred and twenty gun flagship, L'Orient. He anchored his ships in one long line, and to further reinforce it had each linked to the next by stout cables. He then waited to see what would happen.

Characteristically, Nelson's first reaction at being told the French were at Alexandria was one of happiness. The doubt and frustration were over. He knew well enough of the danger and the great odds against his ships attacking a prepared and anchored

Battle of the Nile, 1798

enemy.

He remarked, unabashed, 'By this time tomorrow I shall have gained a Peerage or Westminster Abbey.'

The action began at half-past six, just prior to sunset. It raged all through the night, the fierceness of the battle only faltering when the giant L'Orient took fire and exploded, the sound of the blast being heard many miles away.

Near five o'clock in the morning the firing ceased, some of the gun crews so dazed and exhausted they could hardly stand and fight.

Of all the French fleet which had joined in the battle the previous evening only two had survived destruction or capture, and they had slipped out to sea, the British ships too crippled to give chase.

The whole Bay of Aboukir was covered with dead bodies, mangled, wounded and scorched.

'Victory,' said Nelson, 'is not a name strong enough for such a scene.'

But victory it was. The French army was marooned, and Bonaparte's hopes of an Indian Empire smashed. He had lost his fleet and some five thousand men, nearly six times as many as his enemy.

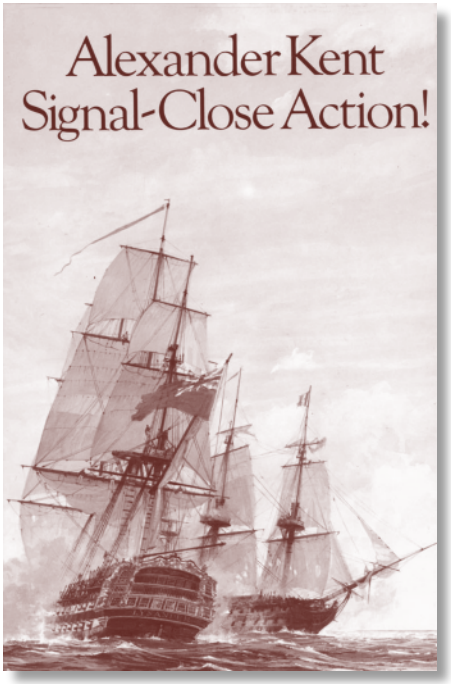
The Mediterranean was an English lake again, Egypt and Malta became ours.

The Battle of the Nile taught several lessons. That properly led, and treated with the humanity they deserved, the Navy could still surprise even its most ardent believers.

Later to be overshadowed by Trafalgar, the Nile was Nelson's greatest fight, and his example was to encourage one more step to make the life of a seaman something free of fear and to give it back its pride.

Part Three

Signal – Close Action!



In January 1798 as Richard Bolitho hoists his broad pendant for the first time as commodore of a small squadron, he realises from the start that his new command is not an easy one.

His orders are to take all steps to discover the French intentions in the Mediterranean and report back to his admiral. The enemy are said to be on the move again, but to where? West to the Atlantic, or to seize Malta and the Kingdom of Sicily? Or further to the south-east, to the making of a French dream and the capture of Egypt?

In Toulon and neighboring ports a French armada is almost ready, poised to break past the British patrols at the first right moment. It is a heavy responsibility for the commodore, and one which will cost his country dearly should he make a wrong decision.

But he discovers that there is much more to hoisting his own flag than the planning of strategy. Within his small squadron there are men no less dangerous than the enemy. He is unable to show favour even to old and dear friends, and is forced more and more on to his own resources.

He has to use everything at his disposal to seek out the information he needs. From daring exploits on hostile territory to facing bloody broadsides in open water where his broad pennant rallies the little squadron but also invites constant attack from the enemy.

It is a far greater step from captain to commanding the destinies of several ships and their companies than he had ever imagined, and no easier to decide who lives and dies merely because he flies his flag above the end result.

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