



The
Richard Boulton
Newsletter

Issue VIII



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This issue was originally released in 1979.

Contents

PART ONE

A Ship Shall Be Judged

PART TWO

A Great Believer in Fate

by Derek Shuff

PART THREE

Stand Into Danger

PART FOUR

Anthony Valentine reads

'Richard Bolitho – Midshipman'



Douglas Reeman / Alexander Kent
with *Cutty Sark* in the background.

Part One

A Ship Shall Be Judged

In the eighteenth century it was generally accepted that a ship of war was judged by her boats. The ship herself, anchored offshore or tacking sedately past some harbour or headland, remained a thing of mystery, a creature of power and beauty which viewed from a distance concealed her private world of packed humanity and rigid discipline. But her boats were always in evidence, and their busy comings and goings, the skills of their crews and coxswains, were ready meat for criticism and gossip.

Senior officers of flag rank were known to gauge a captain's ability by the appearance and performance of his boats in harbour or with the fleet. Equally many captains were quick to ensure that their own boats did nothing to bring discredit upon themselves. Unlike the officers, the ordinary sailors possessed no uniform of a regulation pattern – that was to come much later. Uniformity of a sort was encouraged by the issue of slop clothing from the purser's store: usually white trousers, red checkered shirts and little else. Less considerate or miserly captains kept their men in the clothing they were wearing when first brought aboard, pressed or volunteers until it was changed into rags when an issue of slop clothing was eventually allowed.

But this would never do for a boat's crew, especially that of an admiral's barge or captain's



'Stand Into Danger' by English marine artist
Geoffrey Huband

gig. A captain had to fit out his special boats' crews at his own expense and often used his imagination accordingly. Smart jackets, matching neckerchiefs and tarred hats, while the captain's personal coxswain might wear a uniform of the highest quality. In the nineteenth century the captain of HMS *Blazer*, sloop-of-war, dressed his gig's crew in blue and white striped jackets, from which the latter-day garment took its name.

There was also the story of the oarsman in the captain's gig who unhappily sustained a black eye. His captain had each of the crew paint on a matching black eye so as to retain the perfect uniformity!

Ships rarely went alongside in harbour unless to carry out difficult repairs, to replace masts or to load new artillery, so most of the routine work was

performed by the boats. Their tasks were as varied as the different classes of boat.

The larger boats were the launches and cutters, heavy enough to carry stores or to move parties of seamen and marines from ship to shore required. The ship's launch was double banked, that is to say it had two oarsmen seated on each thwart with an oar on either gunwale. Passengers could be on either gunwale. Passengers could be more easily carried by seating them between the oarsmen without impeding the stroke. Also, if the passengers were newly pressed hands, they stood less chance of escaping before they came alongside their new home.

Single-banked boats like the majority of the cutters, pinnaces, gigs and jolly boats were maids-of-all-work. Because of their agility they were used for attacking other vessels or cutting-out a ship anchored in some enemy port. Big ships-of-the-line usually carried a heavy barge, double-banked, and with the smartest possible crew, for the exclusive use of the admiral and his staff. Woe betide any other boat foolish enough to cross the path of an admiral's barge and so force her to lose way.

Boats were used for carrying signals, for pulling the officer-of-the-guard around an anchored fleet or squadron and so prevent any enemy from infiltrating the defences. The guardboat was also watchful for the dubious transactions carried on between sailors and local traders.

At sea, a ship could often be becalmed with not even a breeze to liven her sails. Heat, impatience

and boredom were a breeding-ground for discontent. Captains were quick to turn out their boats to tow their commands bodily, in the hopes of a favourable wind. It also insured that the ship retained steerage-way, and almost as important, everyone was too weary to find the time to grumble.

A ship could be moved for short distances, or 'kedged', by using her boats to lay out an anchor and then haul the vessel up to it by using the capstan. Another anchor would then be carried ahead, dropped to the sea-bed, and the whole operation repeated until the captain was content with his ship's position.

Although in a sea battle some boats would be used to move amongst the ships to search for survivors they were never accepted as a means for saving life. They were there to work and to fight.

A cutting-out expedition was often the only method of slipping past an enemy's defences, to capture a vessel before sailing her out of harbour as a hard-earned prize. The difficulties are not to be ignored. Under cover of darkness, sometimes with only the vaguest intelligence as to where the intended prize was anchored, the strain on each man must have been terrible. A long pull with muffled oars, each moment inviting a sudden challenge and the bang of muskets and swivels, and then, all at once, there is the enemy vessel, standing over the boats like a spectre. The next few minutes were all that counted. One way or the other.

Landing parties too often used the boats as a

gateway for retreat if things went wrong as well as a means of attack.

The heavier craft like the launches and cutters had reinforced stem-posts upon which they could mount quite sizeable pieces of armament. The deadly swivel guns, nicknamed 'daisy-cutters' by the sailors, could carve a bloody path through any unwary defenders with their closely packed canister shot, while the bell-mouthed musketoon, loaded with musket balls and any scraps of jagged metal, could be equally devastating.

But, as always, the final work fell upon the boats' crews and the men who led them. Cutlass and pike, boarding axe and hanger were the stuff of close-action long after the pistols and muskets had fallen silent.

A ship's midshipmen, the 'young gentlemen', learned their skills of boat handling and leadership in this fashion. Youngsters, aged anything from twelve years and occasionally less, had to knuckle down to the backbreaking work at sea and in harbour. At any time of the day or night the call would come for the duty boat, and some shivering midshipman was expected to get his craft away and control his crew, most of whom were old enough to be his father.

In time of war ships at anchor were very aware of their vulnerability. Even the guardboat on her endless journey around the sleeping ships could not be expected to see and deal with a solitary intruder. Sentries on the ship's gangways were often quick to shoot first and ask questions afterwards. Because of this, a whole series of

simple challenges and replies for boats' crews and gangway staffs was introduced.

A sentry or lookout would call, 'Boat ahoy?' If the approaching boat carried no less a person than the admiral returning to his flagship the shouted reply would be, 'Flag!' This would be followed by the name of the flagship in question. A captain's coxswain would acknowledge the challenge by calling the name of his ship, i.e. '*Destiny!*' It would tell the officer-of-the-watch that his lord and master was returning on board better than any fanfare.

The reply 'Aye! Aye!' stated that wardroom officers were coming aboard, while 'No! No!' identified the boat's passengers as gunroom officers and lesser fry. And if the boat was not coming alongside at all, the coxswain would merely reply 'Passing!'

There was a ritual for entering and leaving boats. Even to this day, the senior officers enter a boat last, and leave it first. By this arrangement a captain was not made to kick his heels while he waited for his subordinates to join him. Less charitable because a ship-of-war was often freshly tarred and painted before she entered port, her captain was merely making sure that his juniors would climb down first and so clear the way for him.

Once out to sea, the boats were hoisted on to skid-beams which ran athwart-ships across the upper deck. The smaller ones were lodged inside the bigger boats to make neat tiers which could be quickly cleared away and hoisted out for lowering.

There were also davits of a sort, thick pieces of timber which extended from either quarter of the vessel's poop. From these, the quarter boats were slung in readiness for sudden emergencies like man-overboard or the need to carry a despatch to another ship.

The boat tiers, although rarely moved at sea, had to be overhauled and repaired by hand. Weather damage and ordinary wear-and-tear were the responsibility of the first lieutenant's team of experts, and it was not unknown for the best boats to be built on board from salvaged scraps of timber by the ship's carpenter.

The young and inexperienced men often looked at the boats and gained some comfort from their presence. If the ship was struck by some awful disaster like fire or typhoon, the boats were always there – and if the worst came to the worst they would carry some of the men to safety. The older and battle-hardened sailors knew differently. For when the drums rolled and beat to quarters, and seamen and marines rushed to prepare their ship to fight, the boats were swiftly hoisted outboard and left to drift to a sea-anchor far astern, to be recovered by the victors, whoever they might turn out to be.

It made good sense, for the boats would have added to the risk of flying splinters when the ships were joined in battle. But it could not have been easy to explain that to a young sailor about to endure his first sea fight.

So as youthful midshipmen learned the complications of bringing their boats alongside

under their captain's pitiless scrutiny, while they groped through fog or pitch darkness to find the whereabouts of a landing-stage, something was being bred into them.

And when junior lieutenants took charge of a spine-chilling raid into an enemy's harbour, or commanded the admiral's personal barge, that something was already a force to be reckoned with. It was pride.

The boat coming alongside to the chains, oars tossed like white bones, coxswain standing by the tiller, hat in hand, each piece of tackle gleaming, then you could say, "She must come from a fine ship. You can always judge a man-o'-war by her boats . . ."

Part Two

A Great Believer in Fate

by Derek Shuff

Over the past few years many readers of the Richard Bolitho stories have become increasingly aware that Alexander Kent has a parallel career as a bestselling author writing under his own name of Douglas Reeman. The following profile by Derek Shuff of the author (in both identities) appeared in the Daily Mail on 24 September 1979:

Douglas Reeman treasures his £4 typewriter, the first one he ever used.

These days only two words are ever typed on it - 'The End'. And that means another novel is

finished by the British author described as the best writer about the sea since C. S. Forester.

Two books a year earn him more than £100,000 from sales . . . a far cry from his pay as a plain clothes London policeman and a social worker.

‘It was around the mid-1950’s I heard a play over the radio. I boasted to my girlfriend that I could have done better. “So why don’t you?” she challenged me.

‘She didn’t just stop there. She bought me an old typewriter for £4, and I sat down and wrote my first story about the sea. It was called *Welcome Aboard*.

‘*The Navy* published it and paid me three guineas.’

‘I was so excited I took everyone out to dinner. And dinner cost me ten guineas.’

Postman

The next story was rejected . . . until he lied. Yes, it was a true naval story, he told the publisher. That brought in the ten guineas. For that meal!

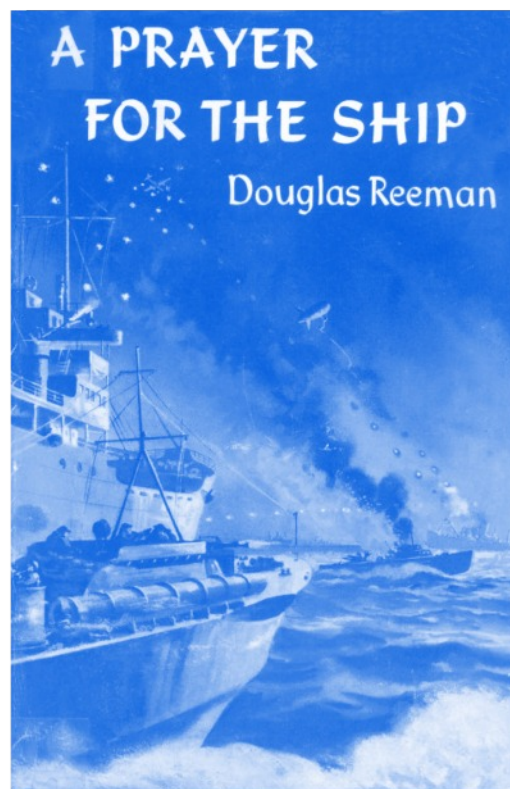
Encouraged by his girlfriend – and the postman, the milkman and the local shopkeepers – Reeman started on his first book.

Hutchinson, the publishers, kept him waiting for three months.

‘I nearly went frantic. Then I got called into their London offices,’ he said.

They wanted to publish it and they asked what he was writing next.

‘When I told them that I wasn’t, they said “This



will never do.” And they told me to get cracking on another with the promise of a contract.’

‘So my first book, *A Prayer for the Ship*, was published. I got an advance of about £100 but that book has made many thousands of pounds for me since.

‘I used to go around to all the bookshops and ask, “Have you heard of this wonderful new book by Douglas Reeman?” And they’d say, “Who?”

‘I was working for the London County council

at the time. It wasn't very well paid, but I got by.'

'When the first couple of books were in print, my girlfriend – Winifred – had some money put by. So we decided to pool what money we had, get married to enable me to concentrate on my writing.'

They bought a boat, an elderly 25-ton motor yacht and Reeman set about writing his third book about the sea – *Send A Gunboat*.

'It was the one that really cracked it for me,' he said. 'The Americans became interested and that changed everything almost overnight.' That was in 1960.

Books like *Dive in the Sun*, *The Hostile Shore*, *The Last Raider*, *With Blood and Iron* and *HMS Saracen* got Reeman noticed. And an increasing readership.

Then, in 1968, two new names were created by Reeman for his ever-increasing army of readers – Alexander Kent was the first, Richard Bolitho the second.

Kent was the pseudonym adopted by Reeman for a different style of writing and the story, set in the eighteenth century, was the first of his historic novels, *To Glory We Steer*.

Richard Bolitho is the hero of these stories.

Tucked safely away in his luxurious Surrey home, Reeman has a file on Bolitho – where he was born, his antecedents, interests, voyages, any detail brought into the books that makes Bolitho rather more than a figment of Douglas Reeman's imagination.

After twelve books Bolitho is very much alive –

with a background that almost proves it.

Cannon

'The Bolitho books trigger people off. It encourages an interest in relics, parchments, old plans or charts, uniforms and, of course, old ships: I get sent all sorts of things as presents,' he said.

'One gentleman sent me a cannon ball. Another sent me a little cannon. Others have sent charts, buttons and such things.

'As a result of Bolitho I have got friends all over the world. Most of them I have never met, but I correspond.'

'It is interesting that half of those who write to me about the Bolitho books are women. Whereas with the Reeman books, they are mostly men.'

With sales in excess of twelve million books, Reeman no longer has to write for money. He could retire now, at 54, and live on the royalties.

Tales

He lives well, too: 'I love driving my Rolls and now that I can afford it I spoil myself by travelling,' he said.

'Winifred and I have been to Alaska, Canada, America, Venezuela, Caribbean islands, Barbados, Australia, New Zealand, all over Europe. But my favourite place is Tahiti. It's a place I have always wanted to visit. I wasn't disappointed.'

'Money is no longer a great motivation for what I

do. I like having money but I see so little of it.'

He'll be seeing a bit more soon though – from his latest Reeman adventure, *A Ship Must Die* (published April 1979). And millions of readers will be waiting for more sea tales.

Douglas Reeman is a great believer in fate. It has certainly been kind to him; he has good reason to have faith in it . . . and that £4 type-writer which started him off.

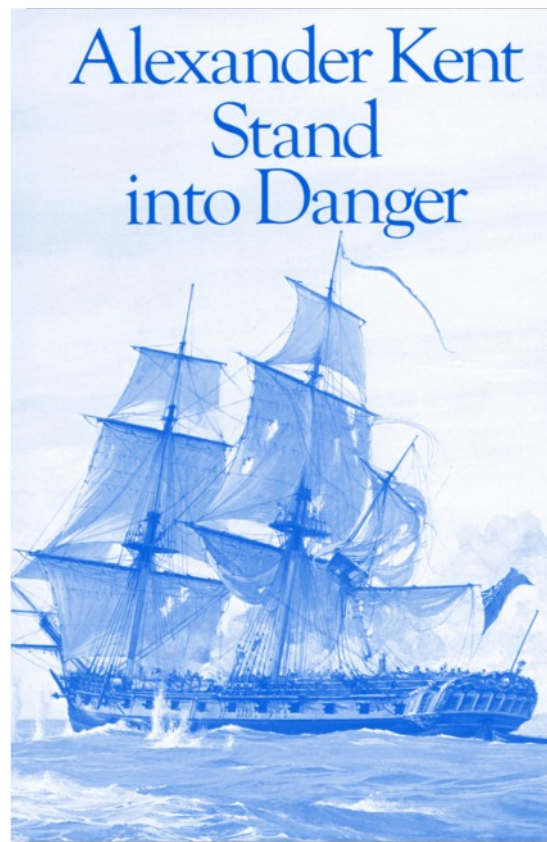
Part Three

Stand Into Danger

Now acknowledged to be the greatest living writer of eighteenth century naval fiction, Alexander Kent has created in Richard Bolitho a character who has countless admirers throughout the world. His twelve previous novels have covered episodes in Bolitho's career between the years 1772 and 1801 and have seen him rise from midshipman, aged sixteen, on *Gorgon* to rear-admiral in command of his own squadron at the Battle of Copenhagen.

Stand into Danger has Bolitho at an early but vitally important stage in his life. The year is 1774 and Bolitho is a newly appointed third lieutenant joining the 28-gun frigate *Destiny* at Plymouth. It is a far step from midshipman's berth to wardroom – and at a time when most of the fleet is laid up Bolitho is considered fortunate.

Bolitho's promotion is tinged by personal sadness, but his new captain soon points out that



Bolitho's loyalty is to him, the ship and His Britannic Majesty – in that order. Despatched on a secret mission far south to Rio and then to the Caribbean, *Destiny* and her company face the hazards of conspiracy, treason and piracy – and as the little ship sails on, Bolitho has to learn amid broadside battles at sea and the clash of swords in hand-to-hand actions how to accept his responsibilities as a King's officer.

Part Four

Anthony Valentine reads

Richard Bolitho – Midshipman'

It's October 1772. Richard Bolitho, a midshipman of four years standing is waiting in Portsmouth to join his new ship, the 74-gun *Gorgon*. Her captain has been ordered to the west coast of Africa to 'show the flag'.

Gorgon's ship's company soon find out that the enemy they encounter is just as ruthless and skilful as any who challenge the navy's authority. In this, chronologically, the first book about Richard

Bolitho, the listener is introduced to the life and times of the men in Nelson's Navy. As in his subsequent books, Alexander Kent captures the excitement and detail of the times, and gives us a thrilling story for the young of all ages.

Anthony Valentine, who is particularly well-known for his television portrayal of Raffles and his performance in 'Colditz', brings the whole story to life.

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Abridgement for recording purposes: Sam Curtis
For Music for Pleasure Limited
Produced by Graham Goodwin
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