



The
Richard Bollitho
Newsletter

Issue VI



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Contents

PART ONE

Publishing Alexander Kent

by his editor, Gerald Austin

PART TWO

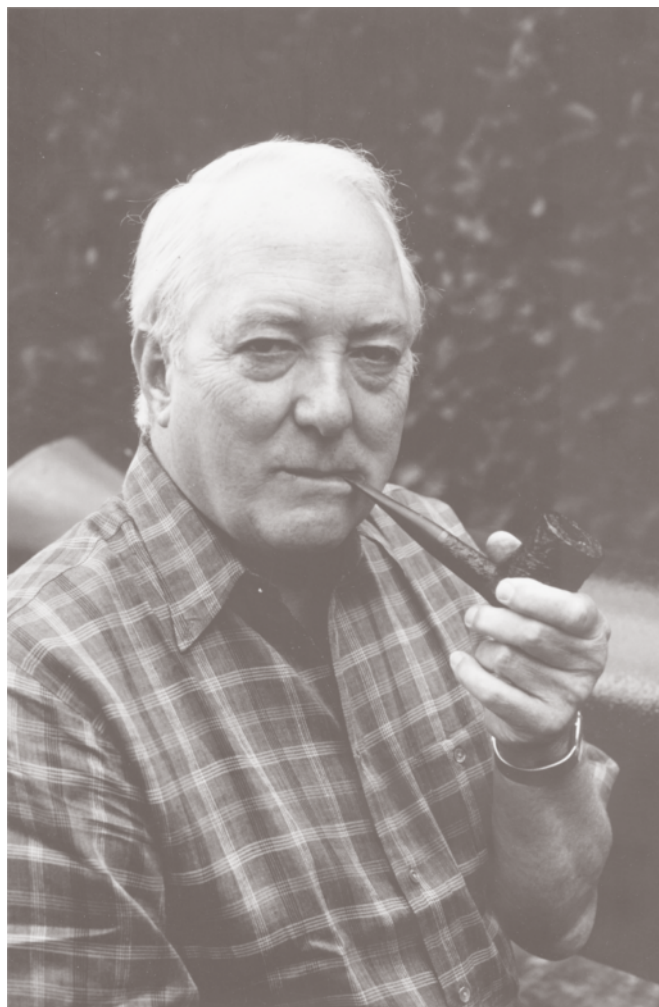
The Regiment of the Sea

PART THREE

In Gallant Company

PART FOUR

Author's Note



Douglas Reeman / Alexander Kent
(Photo by Kimberley Reeman)

Part One

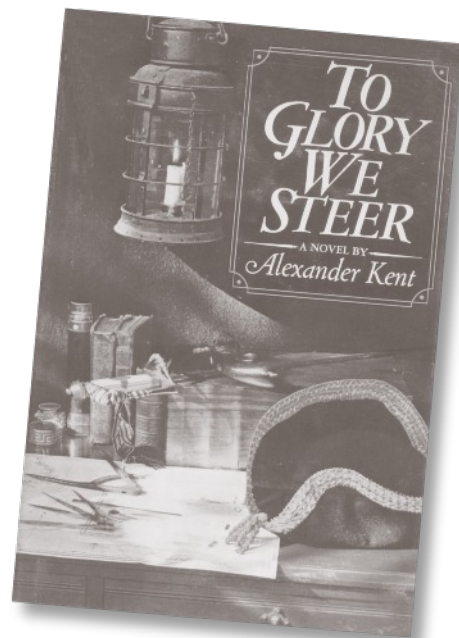
Publishing Alexander Kent

by his editor, Gerald Austin

It was 1967 that Alexander Kent came to Hutchinson with the idea for a new series of historical sea-stories which his American publisher was keen for him to write. It should be explained here that Alexander Kent was already a well-established author under his own name of Douglas Reeman. His Reeman novels were highly successful on both sides of the Atlantic, and I had known him well since I had read his first Reeman story in manuscript almost ten years previously.

The attractions of his new project were obvious at the outset. It was clear that Alexander Kent had already given a great deal of thought to the creation of a central character for the series and had done a great deal of research into the eighteenth-century navy. Decidedly what he – and his publishers – did not want was to initiate a character who would be regarded as any sort of copy of C. S. Forester's *Hornblower*. Preliminary discussions with Alexander Kent showed that this problem was much in his mind – and when the first Alexander Kent novel appeared in April 1968 no comparisons were made in the publisher's blurb on the jacket between Richard Bolitho and *Hornblower*. This did not, however, deter reviewers from saying that Bolitho was the best thing to happen to the sea story since *Hornblower*!

Indeed, *To Glory We Steer*, the first Bolitho novel had a most friendly reception from critics; the *Sunday Times* reviewer calling it 'one of the best stories about wooden-wall action ever written'. Since those early days, every book in the Bolitho series has been welcomed with equal enthusiasm – and today



Alexander Kent, with ten books behind him and the eleventh in production, has achieved an international reputation second to no living novelist writing in this genre. His books have vast sales in hardcovers, in paperback and book club editions; and they are regularly translated into six European languages.

What is it like working with Alexander Kent as his editor? First of all, it is enormously enjoyable – for the author has never lost his own sense of enjoyment in discussing and writing each new story, and this is something which he communicates to those who work with him. He is the complete professional in his approach to his books; the historical backgrounds against which he brings his fictional characters to life are fully documented and he keeps meticulous records of the ships' companies he creates for his books.

The original synopsis for each novel which he talks over with his editor is – as he would be the first to admit – likely to be very brief, sketching out only the period, settings, main characters and theme of the story, but the completed script can be relied upon to measure up to the standard which he has set himself. His typescripts are always delivered on time and seldom, if ever, require any editorial revision – both vital factors if a publisher is to plan his programme and fix his production schedules.

One of the most interesting sidelights on the Bolitho books is the stream of letters and telephone calls Alexander Kent's publishers receive asking for information about past, current and future titles. Children select Bolitho stories for school projects and stern, neatly-written letters arrive in the office asking for jackets and biographical material. Regular mailing lists for Bolitho newsletters are maintained by both author and publisher.

The presentation and promotion of each Bolitho novel is just as carefully discussed, initially with the author and then with the heads of the various departments within the publishing house: art, design, production, sales, marketing and publicity. An early priority is the jacket, thus bringing in another important member of the team: Chris Mayger, the maritime painter whose work has become so strongly identified with Alexander Kent's novels. It is frequently necessary to commission the jacket before the story is actually finished and the author then provides a short brief for the artist. In the case of *In Gallant Company*, Alexander Kent wrote the closing scenes with Chris Mayger's jacket rough in front of him to ensure that his final text conformed with the incident shown in the rough.

Another noted artist who is closely involved with



'In Gallant Company'
by English marine artist Geoffrey Huband

Alexander Kent's books is Val Biro, designer of the now-familiar Bolitho device (see cover) which in recent years has been used for advertising, in newsletters and announcement lists, and on jackets. This device was prepared in consultation with the author – and two years ago Biro tackled the unusual task of 'aging down' his creation to show Bolitho as a sixteen-year-old midshipman for Alexander Kent's first Bolitho story written for younger readers. Val Biro has also contributed specially commissioned endpapers to several books in the series.

It was a conscious decision when the Bolitho series was conceived that the books would not be written in chronological order, as the author felt that by moving about in time he could better maintain the freshness and variety of his plots. To date, the published stories take Bolitho from midshipman in 1772 to squadron commodore in 1798, and there is already speculation about how he will die in 1815. The Bolitho bookmark,

giving the dates of his birth and death, states uncompromisingly that he is 'killed in action'.

The author refuses to be drawn about this, saying that he hopes there will be many more books before he writes the final volume – a hope which is wholeheartedly shared by his editor.

Part Two

The Regiment of the Sea

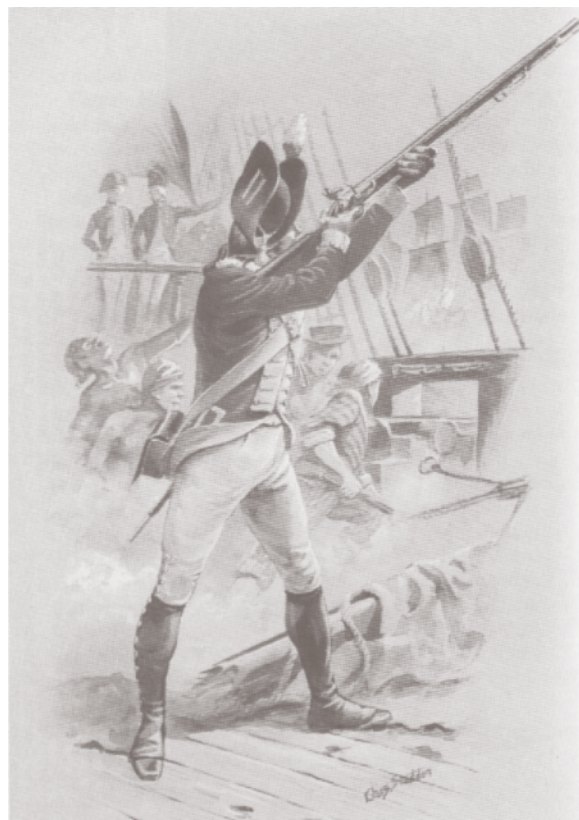
Even today in the modern nuclear Navy the marines are something of a mystery to many people who cannot understand the presence of apparent soldiers in serving carriers and frigates.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the Corps really came into its own as a major fighting force with, but not of, the Navy, the contrast must have been all the more apparent.

During the American War of Independence the marines were needed everywhere. Not for the first time in her long history, England was forced into fighting on several fronts at once, and while America struggled to free herself from the Crown, England faced the combined might of France, Spain and Holland, to say nothing of the growing strength of the rebels.

Many of the troops employed on the American mainland were British only in purpose and uniform. Their background was often foreign, their strength recruited from Germany and elsewhere, men who could barely understand the orders of their commanders in the field.

So as the British fleet struggled to maintain trade and supply routes around the world, and sought out enemies of every size and power, the marines were used for more purposes than Charles II had ever envisaged when



A Royal Marine takes aim . . .

he granted the formation of the Lord High Admiral's Regiment in 1664.

Landing parties and shore patrols, guarding trouble spots from the Caribbean to the East Indies, they never forgot their primary duty, to their own ship.

The Corps, they were not given the title of Royal Marines until 1802, were recruited and trained in three separate divisions, Plymouth, Portsmouth and Nore. Once aboard ship, and they were carried in almost every class of rated vessel from three-decker, ship of

the line to fourth and fifth rate frigates, they were held apart from the great mass of the company.

By the average seaman a marine was regarded with a mixture of amusement and tolerance. While the marines went about their own affairs, drilling and training at their weapons, the seamen worked the ship, aloft or below, and in every sort of weather.

Because their training was largely military, the marines' part in handling the ship was minimal. When required they would move aft to the mizzen mast, the least complicated in any square-rigged ship as far as sail plan and rigging was concerned, and work with the rest of the afterguard. That title too represented something else to the rest of the ship's company. The marines, through their officers and N.C.O.'s, stood between the quarterdeck and forecastle in a loyal red block. If a hint of mutiny lingered in the air, or some hot-headed lower deck lawyer thought the moment was ripe to rouse some protest against a captain's authority, there was always the scarlet-coated marine, the *bullock*, to make a change of heart more acceptable.

But in battle, which was often in those troubled times, the marines really emerged as a vital part of the Service, and earned the respect and no little awe of all who served alongside them.

As the young marine drummer boys beat to quarters and the ship prepared to fight whatever enemy had been sighted on the horizon, the red coats fanned out throughout the vessel like parts of an intricate pattern.

They climbed aloft to the three fighting tops, on fore, main and mizzen, where their best marksmen or sharpshooters made ready to fire on the enemy's quarterdeck and mark down as many of her officers as possible in the shortest time. Some of their companions manned the deadly swivel guns, which at the right moment would rake the other vessel's decks with a

murderous hail. These weapons were nervously nicknamed 'daisy-cutters', and badly handled could kill as many friends as enemies.

Once cleared for action a ship of the line, with one deck above the other, was open from forward to aft. But provided an enemy was prevented from crossing her stern and pouring a full broadside through the poop and smashing down guns and crews from end to end, the men who worked the heavier weapons on the middle or lower decks were protected by the massive hull timbers. On the upper deck, and particularly aft where the bulk of marines took up their stations, there was no such protection. On quarterdeck and poop alike the marines got what cover they could from the bulwarks and the packed piles of hammocks in the nettings.

It was at close quarters, with an enemy almost alongside, that the true value of drills and tough discipline came to the fore. With the sergeant calling out the timing, or beating it on the deck with a half-pike, the marines went through the lethal business of aiming, loading and firing their long muskets through the smoke and din of battle. No matter what was happening above them they were never expected to break. As old friends fell dying they closed the ranks, as the cannon roared and the spars and severed rigging crashed amongst them they aimed and fired, reloaded and stood up to the nettings for the next fusillade. A less admirable job was that of hatchway sentry. At every hatch and companion a marine was posted to prevent terrified men from running below in the midst of a battle. It is easy today to understand the fears of men, many facing gun-fire for the first time, being driven from their stations by the sounds and sights around them. We can imagine their terror changing to hatred at the sight of a red coat and levelled bayonet, but did anyone ever consider that sentry's feelings as he

stood alone, a red target for every enemy marksman?

When the two ships eventually ground together, and the grapnels were thrown across to hold them fast until a victory was settled one way or the other, the gory business of hand to hand fighting began. There again, there was a marked contrast between the seamen and marines.

While the former, led and urged on by their lieutenants and midshipman, hacked and slashed their way across the narrow strip of water and through the boarding nets to leap on to the enemy's deck, the marines stayed as a unit. As cutlasses and hangers rang and clanged, and the air was rent by curses and screams, the marines would cross to the other ship and form a tight square, sorting and dividing the enemy's defences so that their companions from the main boarding party could quell them into submission. If on the other hand the tide of battle turned against them and a retreat was sounded, the marines would be the last to leave, not out of pride, but to allow the seamen to work their ship free of the enemy's embrace to fight another day.

One of the remarkable features concerning the marine's daily life was the way he managed to keep up the standard and smartness of his kit, and all in the cramped confines of his mess.

Apart from his weapons, he had to look after his red coat and white breeches, cross-belts and gaiters, so that at all times he would stand out as what he was. Keeping watch over the captain's quarters, attending to the irksome duties of ship's police, all went to form part of his everyday routine.

There was little change in the uniform until 1802, when the title of Royal Marines was given to the Corps. Then the silver buttons and facings changed over to gold, and the 'round hat' of glazed leather had

completely replaced the old style cocked hat.

At the Battle of Trafalgar the Royal Marines were praised for their stubborn gallantry, not least by their French adversaries. On board the flagship, HMS *Victory*, Captain Adair of the marines had already fallen when a French marksman felled Vice-Admiral Nelson. The marines had suffered terrible losses throughout the battle, so it was somehow fitting that under Captain Hardy's orders it was they who carried the little admiral below.

There have been countless stories told of their deeds and achievements, so many exploits to add to their battle honours that it is impossible to know where their legend begins.

I think that Rudyard Kipling summed them up better than most in his lines:

*There isn't a job on top o' the earth the beggar
don't know, or do,*

*You can leave 'im at night on a bald man's 'ead
to paddle 'is own canoe;*

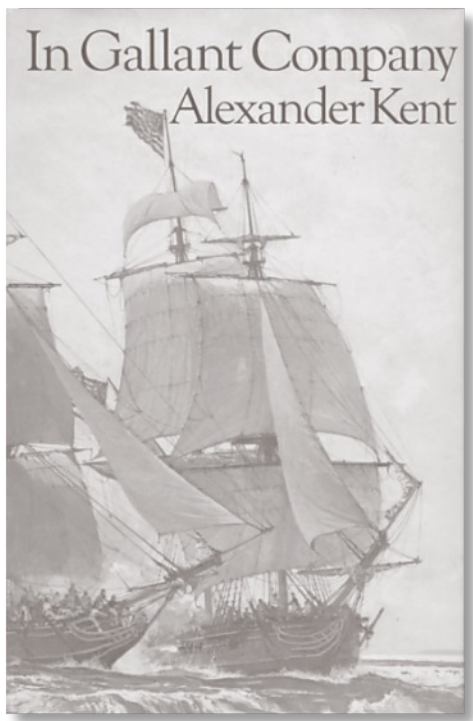
*'E's a sort of bloomin' cosmopolouse – soldier an'
sailor too.*

Part Three

In Gallant Company

The story is set in 1777 when the revolution in the American colony has erupted into a full scale war. In sequence the events take place immediately before those covered by *Sloop of War*.

The Navy's main role is to prevent all available means of military supplies from reaching Washington's armies, and to seek out and destroy the fast-growing fleet of American and French privateers.



Lieutenant Richard Bolitho, as a junior officer in the eighty-gun ship of the line *Trojan*, is often bewildered by the swift-changing events. Yesterday's traitors have become patriots, old ideals are daily being trampled underfoot. But under a stern and determined captain he has little opportunity for uncertainty.

The life of a lieutenant is a busy one, with duties ranging from working the ship in a full gale to enduring the bitter resentment of citizens ashore while carrying out patrols and searching for deserters. And in a time of shortages and sudden death even a lieutenant can find himself faced with tasks and decisions more usually given to officers of greater seniority and experience. As the *Trojan* goes about her affairs, sailing from one

troubled coast-line to another, Richard Bolitho and his companions are tested to the limit.

From New York to the Caribbean, from the deafening thunder of the gun-decks to savage hand to hand fighting within the enemy's own territory, Bolitho longs for the day when he will live or die by his own decisions, and perhaps gain a command of his own.

Part Four

Author's Note

Writing demands a great deal of research, but a series like the Richard Bolitho stories requires research and a lot more besides.

Every year my wife and I travel as much as possible, to seek new locations, to keep our records up to date and to watch out for possible stories.

I am always impressed by the interest shown in the Richard Bolitho series by a wide field of readers. Much of our travel is done by sea, for obvious reasons, and I have gathered a great deal of material just by listening to sailors, naval and merchant, just as I have from other people, some of whom have never set foot in a ship.

This year I had the good fortune to do a tour of Australia and New Zealand, with very pleasant stop-overs in Singapore and Tahiti for good measure, and again I was impressed and not a little moved by the kindness shown to me as Bolitho's creator.

People came to the various signing sessions and appearances in many towns throughout Australia and New Zealand, and brought naval relics, old charts, letters and other items to show me. Others just came to talk, to offer ideas for new stories, to tell me of things they had seen and done. These are the true rewards for writing and the encouragement to continue.