



The
Richard Boultho
Newsletter

Issue V



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Douglas Reeman / Alexander Kent in the Solent

Part One

The Specialists

It is a fair comment to say that an eighteenth century ship-of-war was designed and built as a floating gun platform. The functions of her company, apart from the daily division of work, was to take her wherever she might be needed, and serve those guns to the best of their ability.

In the Navy it was often said, and with some justification, that the strength of any ship was to be found in her specialists, that elite of skilled and experienced men, warrant officers and their mates, who stood between the captain and his lieutenants and the great mass of seamen and marines.

The senior warrant officer in any man-of-war was the sailing master. His experience over the years of service made him stand out above the rest. To the master fell the everyday responsibility of sailing the ship, watching over her course, and under the direction of the captain, taking her to any known place in the world. Assisted by the master's mates, who in turn hoped to qualify as master or even lieutenant, he supervised the navigation, the set of every sail, the training of helmsmen, and as an extra, and sometimes wearing task, the instruction of the 'young gentlemen', as midshipmen were so named, in the mysteries of charts and seamanship.

Another important member of the specialists, but too often less experienced, was the ship's surgeon. Originally appointed by the Sick and Hurt Office, he was required to guard the ship's company's health under what were would call appalling conditions. Surgeons of the time were a mixed bunch. Some took to the sea with a genuine interest in improving their skills in a wider range of work than they would find ashore. For quite



'Passage to Mutiny'
by English marine artist Geoffrey Huband

apart from the savage demands of battle, the daily rate of illness and injury amongst the seamen was impressive. Falls from aloft, broken bones and ruptures were commonplace. Injuries in heavy weather while fighting frozen canvas on some dizzily swaying mast or yard were many and varied.

And of course when a sea fight was in progress the surgeon was tried almost beyond any man's resources. Deep in the ship's hull, usually on the orlop deck below the waterline, where the only light was that of lanterns, he worked with saw and knife, without anaesthetics or proper drugs, while his wretched victims were spread-eagled and held firm by his mates on a table of sea-chests. How anyone survived such surgery, or 'butchery' as it was described, is a miracle. Yet many did, with nothing to sustain them but a desperate swallow of rum or brandy beforehand, and with luck, unconsciousness at the first touch of the knife.

Nelson, rarely at a loss for words, found the right

comment to make after his failed attack on Teneriffe. He instructed his surgeon to 'warm the blade' before he amputated his arm, as he believed it would ease the pain.

Surgeons usually listed their treatments of wounds according to the weapon which had created them.

Solid shot and grape, canister and chain shot caused terrible havoc in the confined space of a gun-deck. But at close quarters and grappled to an enemy, the work of boarding axe and cutlass, pike and sword were no less fearful.

The over-eagerness of gun captains and their crews was no help either. For a first broadside, guns were often double-shotted for the maximum effect. But as the battle grew, men became too dazed and shocked to concentrate on what they were doing. The British carronade, the 'Smasher', which was introduced in 1779, was a well-known culprit. One surgeon reported that carronades were invariably overloaded, 'nearly always with two shots, sometimes with three'. HMS *Albion* was twice set on fire by her own carronades, and many men were bodily crushed by the weapon's massive recoil.

But because men expected no relief from suffering, they often survived what would kill anyone today.

The French admiral, de Brueys, at the Battle of the Nile, was a gallant example. When a shot carried off both legs he had himself seated on his quarterdeck in an armchair with a tourniquet on each stump, where he directed the battle until the final destruction of his flagship *L'Orient*.

Height also had its problems. Stenhouse, surgeon of the *Glasgow*, reported on the problems of seamen who had been wounded aloft getting themselves to the deck for treatment. He spoke of the captain of the foretop who had one leg carried away by a cannon ball, except

for a strip of tissue by which it was attached. He seized a rope to lower himself to the deck, but halfway down discovered his torn limb had become entangled amongst the rigging. He was obliged to pull himself up again to disengage his limb with the assistance of the sound one. He survived.

Wood and metal splinters, gangrene and fever took a heavy toll, but from those same poorly trained surgeons came much of the knowledge we accept without a qualm.

A much maligned man in any ship was the purser. It was hard to be popular, as anyone responsible for food and stores in any service will certainly appreciate. Most ships were many months at sea, and when on foreign service the purser's problems were very real. In home waters he had to deal with the masters of the victualling yards, many of whom were dishonest. They knew that no purser could inspect every single cask of meat, which was salted as tough as timber anyway. So they often got rid of rotten pork or beef, knowing that the foul casks might not be broached for months, even years. In fact, some salted meat became so hard that sailors carved it into tiny and delicate snuff boxes, which can now be seen in some maritime museums.

Fresh fruit was obtained whenever possible to prevent the spread of scurvy, another curse among sailors. Clothing, simple equipment such as knives and needles, shoes and lamp-wicks, all came out of the purser's ledgers. He was responsible to his captain, and was well aware of what would happen if the ship ran short of supplies because she was detained by adverse winds or took longer to reach port than calculated.

The daily work of the ship was sub-divided around the needs of her masts and spars, rigging and fabric, and of course her firepower.

The gunners and his mates were held responsible for

every piece of artillery equipment, the magazine and powder rooms, and the care and maintenance of same under all conditions.

As a ship 'lived off her own fat' she naturally changed her layout of weight and displacement on every passage. For whereas her powder and shot might remain unused, she would devour tons of food and water, spare timber and canvas, as a matter of course.

The gunner, with the guidance of the first lieutenant, was required to adjust the trim of his ship. Sometimes by moving iron shot from one locker to another, or by taking away a heavy cannon and replacing it with a 'quaker', or wooden gun, which would still deceive anyone who did not draw too close.

The gunner watched over the filling of charges and the selection of gun crews. When a ship was at sea for long periods he had to ensure that the gun captains took real care of their weapons. One method of keeping a gun's bore rust-free was to have a muzzle and touch-hole plugged after a cannon ball and half a gallon of oil had been inserted. As the ship rolled the ball would move from breech to muzzle, so keeping a film of oil all over.

In battle it must have been hard not to think of the great store of gunpowder all around him in his magazine as he worked in almost complete darkness directing the making and issue of charges to the powder monkeys, and wearing his familiar felt slippers to prevent himself from striking the one, fatal spark.

To all various trades and rates of the lower deck, the boatswain was probably the most familiar warrant officer. A highly skilled and professional sailor, he needed to be everywhere. He had to watch over each job done by the ship's company to keep the vessel seaworthy and able to face the worst gale.

Miles of rigging, standing and running, had to be



English Sailmakers, Circa 1815

repaired or replaced. In most cases it was made up from spare cordage carried aboard. Spars and the hull's fabric, boats and even the care and appearance of each mess came under his watchful eye.

But of course he had a good team to assist him. The carpenter, who with his crew was expected to repair even the worst damage within hours or days after a battle or a great storm. His crew could build and replace pulling boats, make tables and chairs, caulk decks, and daily inspect the lower hull for signs of wear, or a ship's worst enemy, rot. Today he would compare quite well with a ship's engineer, ready to repair anything with what he had available. Whenever a ship touched land, no matter how primitive or frugal, the carpenter would be one of the first ashore. Looking for suitable trees to be cut and formed into spars or timbers.

The sailmaker aided both carpenter and boatswain. With his assistants he would patch torn canvas, eke out his supplies, and use the scraps for making awnings, hammocks or shrouds for the dead. He was usually a good tailor, too.

The midshipmen, working for the reward of a commission, would try to learn something of everything, without drawing wrath from their superiors or scorn from the warrant ranks they would one day command.

And there were many others who worked for the main bulk of the ship's company. The cooper, whose skill was making casks of every size and shape for storing anything from water to salt beef. The master-at-arms, next to the purser usually the most unpopular man aboard because of his work in supervising discipline and punishment with the aid of his ship's corporal. From captain's clerk to sergeant of marines, from cook to quartermaster, they were the specialists. The hard backbone of any man-of-war.

Part Two

Against Authority

Throughout the history of ships and the men who served them, and particularly in the turbulent years of the eighteenth century, even a hint of mutiny lurked like a threat in most captain's minds.

The dictionary coldly describes mutiny as *an open revolt against constituted authority*. But the pictures conjured up of individual cases are as different and as mixed as their causes.

For a maritime nation growing yearly in strength and importance, the need to improve trade and open up better sea routes became paramount. The design of hull and sail plans gave wider scope and greater range to merchant adventurers. To protect their rich cargoes, the Navy also had to put its ships to sea for longer periods of time.

The daily lot of the common seaman was hard.



Bounty Mutiny

Everything aboard a ship-of-war had to be maintained and replaced by the men who manned her. Perverse winds or foul weather meant back-breaking work, high in the rigging, fisting and fighting rebellious canvas without any mechanical aids at all.

In peacetime the Navy's ships were manned by every nationality you could imagine. Urgent orders had to be passed by simple means such as the boatswain's call, and often a sharp cut from his starter.

In the fierce climate of the Tropics the work became even more demanding. A vessel might drift for days under a merciless sun. Then, almost without warning, would come rain so heavy that it could knock a man from the yards and turn the sailor's world into a nightmare. He would eventually stumble below, soaked to the skin, only to find his bedding and spare clothing sodden from the water which had run through the deck seams, too shrunken by the previous heat to restrain it.

And then, another shift of wind and it was the cry for all hands on deck to reef or re-trim the yards.

If work was hard, discipline had to be harsher. But

against this, it must be remembered that we are speaking of a time when law and order ashore was maintained with equal, if not greater severity. Deportation, imprisonment in the hulks and finally an agonising end on the hangman's rope were too commonplace for comment, except by those directly involved.

And aboard ship, especially one out of company and miles from other authority, the opportunity for both tyrant and rebel was all the more tempting.

Captains were as varied as the men they commanded. It was not merely a case of being kind or cruel. A captain needed only to be practical to be a just one. There was no sense in flogging men until they were incapacitated or completely broken. While they were ill they could not work, and so both ship and captain were at a loss. Likewise, it was utterly pointless to ignore the needs of sick men, or the perils of bad food and bodily discomfort.

It is ironic that one of the most maligned men in naval history, William Bligh of the *Bounty*, was quick to seize every method, and to invent a few of his own, to improve the lot of his men by diet and by the simple expedient of airing messes and damp clothes to avoid unnecessary illness.

But the *Bounty* mutiny was a perfect example of what could cause an uprising aboard a small ship hundreds of miles from home or help.

It is strange to think that Captain Cook, who was as confirmed a flogger the Navy ever had, got nothing but praise, whereas Bligh was condemned out of hand.

The mutiny broke out in April, 1789, and the facts of what happened, as well as Bligh's incredible voyage in an open boat across three thousand six hundred and eighteen miles of hostile ocean with his loyal men, are fairly well known.

But what of the causes? It was not the flogging, as so often claimed by sensational film makers. The recorded punishments on that unhappy voyage were minimal, and by the standard of the day, fair.

Bligh was said to have a quick temper and a foul tongue. Think of it as then, and not against today's ideas of discipline.

The voyage took place between wars, when the Navy was run down to its lowest limits, Seaports and towns were filled with unemployed and often starving sailors. Officers daily thronged the corridors of the Admiralty seeking ships, any ship, and at any junior rank or appointment. It applied equally to discharged soldiers, men who had fought long and hard campaigns during the American Revolution, against the French, the Spanish and even the Dutch. But the sailors seemed to feel it more, for despite the rigours of a life at sea, it gave a freedom, a sense of movement which was denied those left ashore.

The *Bounty* had a fair number of such men. Imagine their feelings when their little ship dropped anchor in Tahiti. After the hunger and bad times in Europe, the sights of the laughing girls, the friendly villagers and lush surroundings must have made them believe they had found Paradise.

If Bligh's temper gave the mutineers their opportunity, I am certain that Tahiti offered them the cause. Under such circumstances, I do not think even a Nelson or a Keppel would have had any better luck.

But that mutiny, small though it was, still holds a firm place in our hearts. It was certainly overshadowed just a few weeks later by an uprising which was to rock the world, but it was never forgotten.

During the night of 14 July 1789, Louis XVI, King of France, was at Versailles. He was awakened by the Duke of Rochefoucauld-Liancourt who had brought the

news from Paris.

‘But this is a revolt,’ said the King.

‘No, sire,’ said the Duke, ‘it is revolution.’

In England the news was received with mixed feelings. Some were pleased to see their old enemy torn apart by the Terror. Others knew it could so easily spread, even across the Channel. Almost everybody knew it would mean eventual war.

Run down, ill equipped and undermanned, the British Navy had never been in such a sorry state.

Once more the cry was for ships and more ships, and once again the recruiting parties explored villages and hamlets far inland, while in seaports and along the great rivers the nights rang to the feet of the dreaded press-gangs.

There was a sense of great urgency, and it was hardly surprising that ships were sent to the various fleets and squadrons with barely enough trained hands to work them out of harbour.

And yet, despite their shortcomings, their successes were impressive. In the first few years the Navy won several victories, including the Glorious First of June, and the Battle of Cape St. Vincent in 1797 where the young Commodore Nelson was to distinguish himself by boarding and taking the *San Nicolas*, 84 guns, and then using her decks as a bridge to take possession of the giant *San Josef* of 112 guns.

But the work of convoy and blockade in all weathers and conditions placed a heavy strain on every man in the fleet. While their French adversaries waited in harbour, dashing out only occasionally for a hit-and-run attack, the British were made to endure everything which sea and weather could throw at them.

Many captains were quick to do their best for their people with what small resources they could find. But others still believed that relentless discipline, the misuse

of power, could and would prevail.

In the same year as Nelson’s novel attack on two ships at once, the impossible became a reality, and at Portsmouth and Spithead the fleet mutinied.

Delegates were elected, and while a stunned nation waited to see what would happen, and whether the French would take advantage of the lowered shield to invade England, Admiral Lord Howe, affectionately known throughout the fleet as Black Dick, hurried to Portsmouth to negotiate.

Howe met the delegates and examined their charges and their demands. He granted a pay rise, and when told of the cruelty of certain officers he ousted a hundred of them, with the approval and support of Pitt, the Prime Minister.

Nevertheless, the main bulk of the fleet stayed firm and unmoving for a month, and as the mutiny broke up, and order and discipline were restored, an even greater one broke out in the Nore.

The demands of the mutineers were much the same, but this time the atmosphere was more militant and the eventual reprisal more severe, with thirty-six hangings and hundreds flogged or exiled.

Fortunately, a new breed of sea officer had begun to emerge, as can often happen in time of war. Nelson, Collingwood, Saumarez and Troubridge were just a few who were destined to change history, not merely for a nation, but for the men who made victory possible.

The lessons learned at Spithead and the Nore were to be remembered. The mutineers’ cause had built up over the years. Bad food, cruel discipline and the tyranny of a handful of captains joined to become the spark to the powder-keg.

What is hard to understand even today is the over-confidence and complacency of some such tyrants.

By curious coincidence the worst and bloodiest

mutiny ever to break out aboard a British man-of-war took place just weeks after the events at the Nore, and at the other end of the world.

It was the classic example with all the ingredients for mutiny. Captain Hugh Pigot, the young officer commanding H. M. Frigate *Hermione*, had already been removed from his previous command for brutality of the highest order. His punishment book was always full, and he even had a midshipman humiliated and then flogged in front of the ship's company when he refused to kneel on the deck before him.

I will not dwell on the terrible deeds which began Pigot's murder and continued with the rampage of killing and drunkenness, and the exchange by the mutineers of the *Hermione* with the Spanish authorities at La Guaira for their own freedom.

I was in Venezuela a few years ago completing some research, and while at La Guaira I had no difficulty in picturing the solitary frigate, her cabin and decks still stained with the blood of guilty and innocent alike, as she anchored and prepared to parley with the startled Spanish governor.

The rest of the tale reads like a maritime detective story. For despite the vast sea areas and difficulties of communication, many of the mutineers were finally rounded up and executed. Some had even returned to hide in the Navy under false identities, to the only life they had ever really understood.

Even the *Hermione* was recaptured by a daring cutting-out attack by the frigate *Success*. That was surely the last piece of irony, the final judgement on a tyrant. For the *Success* was the ship originally commanded by Pigot, the one from which he was removed for brutal misuse of his authority.

With the passing of sail much of the seaman's old hardship was removed. New inventions too, like long-

range wireless, helped to break down distances and allow authority to keep an eye on even the most isolated outpost.

But the word mutiny is still relevant, and as recently as 1931 at Invergordon, when the fleet 'downed tools' because of threatened cuts to their already poor pay, we have seen what leadership and indifferent treatment can cause.

It was once explained to me, 'Orders must be obeyed without question. But respect has to be *earned* by the one who gives them.'

Part Three

Passage to Mutiny

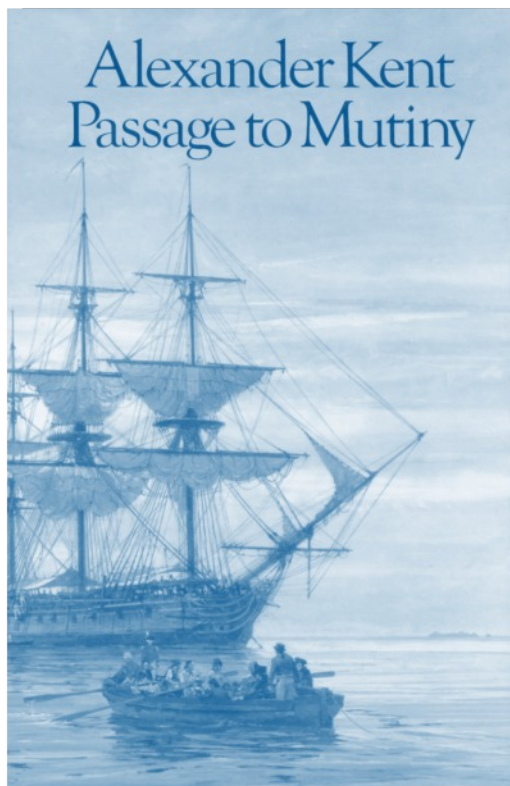
It is October, 1789, when Captain Richard Bolitho, in command of the thirty-six gun frigate *Tempest*, arrives in Sydney, capital of the infant colony of New South Wales. The ship has been in commission for two years, and has been constantly employed on isolated patrols, hunting out pirates and endeavoring to protect the great spread of trade and its vulnerable supply routes.

Bolitho has been fretting for orders which will send him home to England, or to some more active role where he will be part of things again.

But it is not to be. After the American Revolution the Navy was allowed to run down, and as always, frigates are in constant demand.

His new orders send him to the outwardly idyllic islands of the Great South Sea where one more trading concession has been claimed for the Crown.

It is a place of temptation and no little danger. *Tempest's* company is made up of the sweepings from many ports and several nationalities, and Bolitho knows



it will be hard to make them risk their lives for ideals of which they know little and have no respect for. The vast sea areas and distances make communications almost impossible, and while *Tempest* fights through raging storms or suffers becalmed beneath a blazing sun, the first rumours of mutiny and revolution begin to filter through.

From the convict slums of New South Wales, to the sensuous temptations of the islands, Bolitho represents his country's authority, unaware until almost too late of

the sweeping revolution in far off France, and the consequences it will bring to him and his companions.

And there is a more personal involvement which becomes important enough for him to risk his career, the rediscovery of a woman's love which he had thought beyond reach.

Thomas Herrick, *Tempest*'s first lieutenant, is torn between loyalty and a need to speak out as he sees the dangers mounting for his best friend. John Allday, the captain's coxswain, has no such doubts, and his firm faith has never been more needed when tragedy strikes.

Above all, this is a story of a ship and her company, and the will to survive.

Part Four

Author's Note

Since Newsletter No. IV, I am pleased to be able to report the formation of the first branch of the Richard Bolitho Association.

Based in Vancouver, it was formed last year, and has already gathered many members. Entirely self-supporting, *The Pacific Coast Squadron* of the Association, as it is titled, has its own newsletter and arranges meetings and social gatherings where interests of ships and maritime history usually predominate.

When I visited Vancouver last year during one of my research trips, I had the great pleasure of being entertained by the newly formed branch, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank them again for their impressive hospitality and to congratulate them on their initiative.

