



The
Richard Bolitho
Newsletter

Issue X



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from Douglas Reeman*



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

Part One

Alexander Kent

As a boy at prep school Alexander Kent took every opportunity to attend the naval reviews of the thirties, but usually managed to find his attention returning again and again to the earlier days of sail, and was often found exploring Nelson's old flagship *Victory* at Portsmouth.

At the outbreak of the war, and in spite of belonging to an army family, he joined the navy without any hesitation, and served in the Battle of the Atlantic as well as in the campaigns in the Mediterranean and Normandy.

After the war, while establishing himself as a full-time writer and self-taught naval historian, he became more determined to write authentic stories of the period which remained closest to his heart – of the ships and men who by choice or enforcement lived, served and died in them.

He takes every opportunity to visit the scenes of this naval heritage and to collect and examine relics of a time which for him is still very much alive. He is a governor of the frigate *Foudroyant*, which, laying at anchor at Portsmouth, is the oldest



'Success to the Brave' by English marine artist
Chris Mayger

British warship afloat.

Part Two

Naval Customs

In the days of sail it was customary for officers and seamen to uncover their heads and face aft when they stepped aboard. The ensign is flown from aft, and it is widely accepted even today as a sign of authority.

It is generally believed that the custom is much

older than this and comes from the days when a shrine or crucifix was carried aft on the poop.

Piping on Board

For a senior officer or important visitor to arrive on board a tall-sided ship-of-the-line, it was often necessary to hoist him up bodily in a boatswain's chair. The instructions to the seamen at the tackles were given on a boatswain's silver 'call', just as other routine orders were piped between decks much as they are today. It became a mark of respect to a flag officer or captain, a form of salute.

Firing Salutes

This very old custom was originally carried out with shotted guns, the salute being returned gun for gun by the shore battery or fortress of the foreign port to prove that the visiting ship was unarmed and her mission was a peaceful one.

Salutes are now fired on Royal birthdays and other State occasions as instructed.

People of rank are always entitled to gun salutes, the maximum being that of twenty-one guns. It was even laid down in 1935 that His Holiness the Pope is entitled to twenty-one guns if he is in a port or city being visited by a British warship.

Drinking Toasts

The monarch's health is always drunk sitting down. It is said that William IV while serving at

sea often bumped his head on the deckhead beams when responding to the Royal Toast and changed the custom accordingly. Another version is that George IV, when he was Regent, dined aboard a man-of-war and said, 'Gentlemen, pray be seated, your loyalty is beyond suspicion.'

A less charitable explanation originated on the lower deck where it was said that the officers were too unsteady to stand when the Toast was called!

Part Three

To Grips with the Enemy

It was Horatio Nelson who proclaimed that 'in my view no captain can do very wrong if he places his ship alongside that of an enemy.'

As a strategist and naval tactician Nelson was unsurpassed, his particular yardstick being that the Fighting Instructions should never be a substitute for a captain's own initiative.

But this is hindsight. It is when we picture the actual moment when two or more vessels meeting at sea that we can grasp the true difficulties of any captain.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Britain and France fought for mastery of the oceans, both navies were plagued by poor communications. Quite apart from the skill and daring needed for the captain of a man-of-war to engage an enemy with the maximum advantage on his side, he had the additional problem of not knowing how his adversary would react. Many

ships were out of contact with the land and superior authority for months on end. When a captain had last heard something definite he might have been at war. And yet in the meantime peace could have been declared so that he would be attacking a ship no longer a foe.

It was useless to declare himself ignorant of the facts. A court-martial rarely took the side of an officer who miscalculated the situation as he saw it.

As the first report of a sail on the horizon was passed to him the captain had to consider all these problems before he tried to engage. Friend or enemy? Neutral or in complete ignorance of the state of affairs between nations?

The admiral in command of a fleet or squadron had few such uncertainties. He would be kept in contact with higher authority by speedy frigates and courier brigs. Once he decided to attack, it was largely a matter of his individual captains joining the fight as soon as possible.

The solitary ship, however, had to gauge the wind and use it with the same skill and experience as any of her cannon. With luck the captain would hold the wind-gage to give himself time to run down on the enemy or slip away if he was proved wrong in his estimation of the other ships' intentions. By staying up to windward he could take his time, for there was a lot to do before he committed himself and his company to a bloody battle at close quarters.

The ship would be cleared for action, the jerking clatter of the young marine drummer boys

beating the hands to quarters making many a heart miss a stroke while all the time the strange sail grew larger and more menacing.

Chain-slings would be rigged to the yards so that the gun crews could be protected against falling spars and severed rigging. With decks sanded to prevent the men from slipping in spray or blood, all eyes would be turned aft to the lonely figure of the captain. It might be his first encounter, and the older hands would be looking to him to gauge their own chances of prize money or sudden death.

If he had miscalculated, the captain might lose face with his men. At the next occasion he might fail to rouse the backing of his company when it was most needed.

He would likely send an experienced lieutenant or warrant officer aloft where, from his dizzying perch high above the deck, he might see or recognize something about the newcomer which would warn of real danger or allay their fears until the next time.

And all the time he would try to hold his ship upwind from the other vessel, constantly trimming the yards and sails so as to hold the advantage without giving the other captain too many clues as to his final intentions.

If a captain did not stay to windward or was hopelessly outmanoeuvred from the first sighting, he would attempt to hold a converging tack in the hopes that he might dismast his adversary, or cut her rigging so severely that that he could grapple her without too much loss and damage to himself.

The leeward ship would lie over and have that one advantage of her broadside's elevation and greater range.

The other ship is identified. An enemy. Our captain has to close his mind to the possibility of an armistice he knows nothing about. No further room for speculation.

Likewise the ship's company, from hardened gunner's mate to lowly midshipman, all know there is no turning back. Either the enemy's flag will triumph or there will be prize money to share before the day is out.

The guns are loaded, double-shotted for that first all-important broadside. When action is joined the training and discipline will keep the gun crews at their trade, but few broadsides are ever as well-aimed and telling as the first.

The large sails, the courses, are furled into their yards. It gives the officers on deck a clearer view of an enemy, and also lessens the chance of one of them being set alight by a blazing wad from the enemy's gunfire. With so much tophammer of tarred rigging, spars and canvas, any vessel can be transformed into a blazing pyre in minutes.

The captain peers aloft at the masthead pendant. To gain the best advantage it is better to have the wind slightly on the quarter. Enough to run down on the enemy, not too much to claw upwind if the first encounter goes against us.

The order is piped to run out the guns, and with the ship heeling slightly to leeward it is made easy for the crews. The muzzles poke through the open ports like black snouts. Each gun captain is peering

along his barrel, looking for the enemy, trying to estimate the fall of shot.

As the order to fire is shouted from aft, the air splits open to the deafening crash of cannon fire, the smoke billows downwind to blot out the other ship in a dense barrier.

But the captain is not watching the gun crews as they sponge out their weapons and try to reload before their enemy's iron comes scything through the rigging or hammers into the hull; his eyes are on the other ship's yards above the smoke. Is she turning towards us? Is she trying to haul away and run with the wind rather than face a close encounter?

The smoke writhes and lifts in the crash of the enemy's reply. Canvas and rigging fall, unheeded by the sweating gun crews. Here and there a man falls, to be dragged below for the surgeon's attention.

Our sails are casting shadows over the enemy's gangway, he is paying off down wind, perhaps his rudder shot away, or the afterguard cut down in that first murderous broadside. Our sails have taken the wind out of his, our ship is a barrier against any power which could hold him on the same tack. In the flash of gunfire we see the glass of his stern windows as the hull continues to drop downwind. It is almost over. One full broadside through the enemy's unprotected stern will finish the battle.

His colours are already dipping in submission, our men stare at one another with glee and disbelief.

By the quarterdeck rail the captain gives nothing away.

He knows better than anyone it could have been his own ship, and that the next time the wind may not be so kind to him.

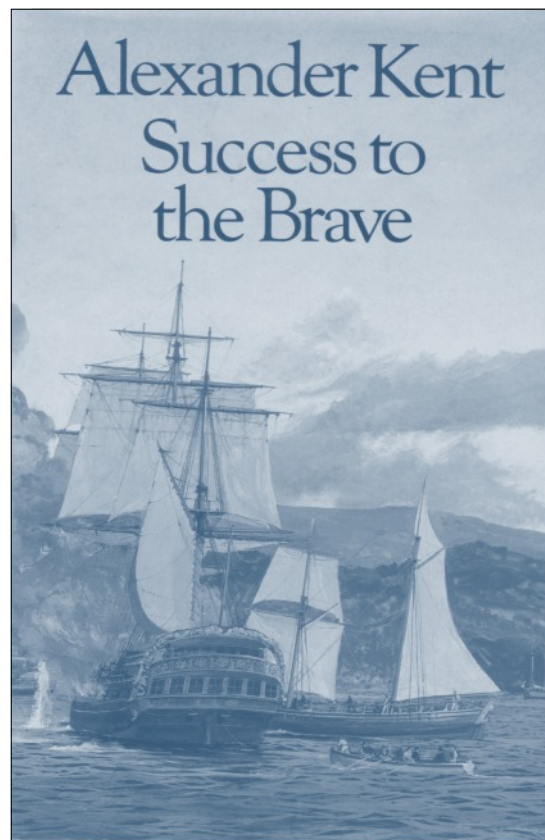
Part Four

Success to the Brave

Acclaimed as ‘one of our foremost writers of naval fiction’ (*Sunday Times*), Alexander Kent has gone from strength to strength since his first Richard Bolitho novel appeared fifteen years ago. Fine storytelling, careful attention to historical background and sweeping scenes of naval action account for the world-wide success of his books. *Success to the Brave* is the fifteenth Richard Bolitho story and chronologically it follows the events covered by *A Tradition of Victory*.

In the spring of 1802 Richard Bolitho is summoned to the Admiralty in London and given his orders for a difficult and, to him, distasteful task. Even an advanced promotion to vice-admiral to make him one of the youngest ever appointed does not compensate for his sudden and thankless mission. Bolitho and his wife are expecting their first child, and for once he is loath to quit the land for the demands of duty.

The Peace of Amiens, signed a few weeks earlier, is already showing signs of strain as the old enemies wrangle over the return of colonial possessions won and lost during the war. In the



little sixty-four-gun *Achates* Bolitho sails west for Boston, and thence to the Caribbean where he must hand over the island of San Felipe to the French.

Bolitho discovers that to be a man of diplomacy is not enough, and as threat and counter-threat weave a web of intrigue around his lonely command he balances success against the danger to his men who must follow him even to the cannon's mouth.

Part Five

*A new seafaring family saga
from Douglas Reeman*

Followers of Richard Bolitho will know that Alexander Kent has written many bestselling modern sea stories under his own name, Douglas Reeman, and he has now embarked on a dramatic new saga following successive generations of the seafaring Blackwood family through 150 years' service in the Royal Marines. The first novel in the series, *Badge of Glory*, was published in 1982 and the second, *The First to Land*, will appear in 1984.

Badge of Glory opens in 1850 in that period of change that marked the coming of the steam age. It is peacetime, and the world's mightiest navy has settled into a routine of tradition and ceremony, broken only by the occasional campaign overseas. Returning to his ship HMS *Audacious* at Spithead after a brief period of leave at the family home in Hampshire, Philip Blackwood is ready for action and excitement. When the squadron's new admiral receives orders to sail to West Africa and stamp out the remaining strongholds of slavery, Blackwood realizes he is about to get all the action he needs.

In the scorching African sun, while defending a forgotten fort with a handful of men against hundreds of savage tribesmen, or rescuing the

woman he loves from a terrifying ordeal at the hands of brutal slavers, and in the chill and desolation of the Crimea, where his part in seizing a Russian redoubt leaves him severely wounded, Blackwood brings distinction to the 'badge of glory' he wears.

