



The
Richard Bollito
Newsletter

Issue XIII



The Bolitho Newsletter is published and
copyrighted by Highseas Authors Ltd.
This issue was originally released in 1988.

Contents

PART ONE

Twenty Years with Richard Bolitho

PART TWO

Jack Had a term for it . . .

PART THREE

I give you a sentiment
by Kim Reeman

PART FOUR

‘With All Despatch’

PART FIVE

‘In Danger’s Hour’



Douglas Reeman / Alexander Kent
with the Richard Bolitho figurine

Part One

Twenty Years with Richard Bolitho

Richard Bolitho is so much a part of my everyday life that I find it difficult to believe that the first of eighteen books about his adventures was published twenty years ago.

As I have said in the past, I never feel that I created Bolitho, rather that he was always there, waiting to make his entrance. I had already been a professional novelist for ten years under my own name when Bolitho's first book, *To Glory We Steer*, was published. But it goes back much further than that. To my long and lasting love of the old sailing navy, of Nelson and the sailors he inspired as no other leader has done.

Apart from a very distant relative, I was the first in my family to enter the navy. Before me there had been a long line of soldiers, redcoats, sappers and the infantry, in more campaigns than even Bolitho. And yet my yearning for the sea never once wavered, and I can recall my regular trips to Portsmouth and other naval ports to visit the ships or watch the grand reviews in the Solent or Weymouth Bay. And my favourite was the *Victory*, so perhaps Bolitho was even then walking at my side – or in those days more likely holding my hand.

On the rare occasions when I passed through Portsmouth during the war, to join a ship, or to dash home on leave 'away from it all', I hardly dared to look towards the old *Victory* in case she



'With All Despatch' by English marine artist
Geoffrey Huband

had become as much a victim as the many ships I had seen blasted to pieces at sea. Portsmouth was very badly bombed and her scars are still painfully clear to any one who knew the city before. *Victory* had become a symbol, as much under the hail of bombs as she had in the line at Trafalgar.

I do not recall when I knew I wanted to become a writer; even starting the first-ever book is now a bit hazy in memory. But over the years, bits and pieces seem to gather although I told myself I was more than satisfied with earning my living with my contemporary sea stories.

It fell to an American to suggest that I should take the plunge into the eighteenth century, a man called Walter J. Minton who was my New York publisher. Always a dynamic person to work with,

and one who was well aware of my love of history, although far from easy and often very demanding. But I know now that he understood the publishing world like few others, so that when he made his suggestion about an historical series there never seemed any doubt about it!

Choosing a name for my character – or did I even do that? Years earlier I had sailed my own boat to the little port of Gorey in the Channel Islands. I had already visited Jersey and after the strain and drabness of the war it seemed like heaven to me.

I was assisted with my moorings when I eventually tied up in Gorey by a fine man who later introduced himself as Captain Richard Bolitho. The name inserted itself into the pattern. It seemed right.

I was unsure about the reception of my series, how many stories should I plan for, where to begin, what ship, where bound?

Eventually I chose a time in Bolitho's life when he was a very young captain in his first frigate.

Since then, so many sea-miles, so many disappointments and triumphs too have I shared with Richard Bolitho. He now has friends all around the world in many languages, and through him I share those friendships.

Some time ago I was doing a trans-Canada tour for my publisher, a gruelling affair of one-night stands, lectures, radio interviews and TV appearances. A young Canadian girl, herself a writer, came to hear me speak at the Harbourfront in Toronto, her home town, because she was one of Bolitho's far-off friends and readers.

I know that Our Dick had a hand in that meeting. Kim and I were married in Toronto in 1985, and when? On Bolitho's birthday. Of course.

Part Two

Jack had a term for it . . .

In past newsletters I have mentioned some of the naval terms which although still in daily use have lost some of their original meanings, born in the age of sail.

Men recruited into the King's ships, be they volunteers or victims of the Press Gang, had to familiarize themselves with every aspect and working part of the vessel around them. To make this easier to understand many of the nautical terms were like parts of the human body, i.e. the *eyes* or *waist* of a ship, the *head* or the *stays*, the cradle and the *apron*. These are just a tiny collection.

Swinging the lead. Still in use for anyone who avoids hard work. In fact a leadsman was always a prime seaman, able to heave out his lead-and-line and identify the depths of water by day or night, with nothing but the *marks* on the line to tell him the fathoms below the keel. Because of this skilled work the leadsman was spared the heavier chores of reefing and furling sails and the other toils which were a sailor's lot. The army's version was *dodging the column*. Skirmishers and scouts who covered the advance of their comrades on the march were allowed to leave their packs and heavy equipment with the baggage train, so that it would not hamper their movements, while the main bulk

of troops carried everything on their backs. So although the outflung scouts were in constant danger of ambush, their freedom was wryly regarded as ‘getting away with it’.

Sky-scrappers came into a sailor’s jargon long before the miracle of high buildings. They referred to sails set above most of the others, like *sky-sails*, usually light triangular ones.

A term which has remained firmly in the past is *Loblolly Boy*, the nickname given to the surgeon’s assistants, men who had the grisly task of holding a wounded sailor bodily on the table while he endured the knife or saw of an operation without anaesthetics. *Loblolly* was much the same as *burgoo*, a thick oatmeal gruel or porridge, which was a popular cure-all offered by ships’ surgeons to their patients.

Pushing the boat out. Common enough today when it is someone’s round of drinks in a pub. But the term owes its origin to Horatio Nelson. After losing his arm, the little admiral installed a beautifully-made silver *boat* mounted on wheels which could contain two decanters of either madeira or claret. When entertaining his captains he was then able to push the wine around the table more easily. The boat is now in the Nelson Collection at Lloyd’s of London.

Show a leg! Show a leg! Always familiar and unwelcome aboard men-of-war when the boatswain’s mates rouse the hands to lash up and stow their hammocks at the start of a new day. In the 18th/19th century navy, and especially during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, ships were at sea longer than they were allowed in harbour.

On the rare occasions they found time to rest in port, it was not unusual for captains to permit sailors’ wives or ‘ladies of the town’ to share the gundecks with their menfolk. The women were not expected to turn out when the hands were called. To prevent any misunderstanding a shapely leg was dangled from the occupied hammock as proof of the occupant’s identity.

Jack Tar always had the right *feel* for his own language!

Part Three

I give you a sentiment,
by Kim Reeman

Throughout the winter of 1957 a young man in a shabby sports jacket sat in Richmond Park, in the back seat of a Fiat 500, balancing a typewriter on his knees and watched with interest by the deer. He was an ex-RNVR, ex-East End policeman, ex-CID detective and now a children’s welfare officer in Battersea and Wandsworth: and he was writing the fictionalized story of ‘his war’ on the backs of London County Council nit notices. He wrote the story without notes from his personal experience, and more for his own satisfaction than out of any hope of publication. When it was finished he submitted it to three publishers. Months passed, and eventually the manuscript, *A Prayer for the Ship*, was accepted. It was published in 1958, and was the beginning of a remarkable career.

Ten years later, ten books later, having

established himself as one of the foremost modern sea-story writers of his time, Douglas returned to an earlier love, the ships and men of Nelson's day, and embarked on a new and challenging phase: a series of novels featuring one man and spanning that splendid, stirring era. For this series, he chose the pseudonym of Alexander Kent, the name of a childhood friend and fellow naval officer who had been killed in the early years of the war. In June of 1968 *To Glory We Steer* was published, and its solitary, sensitive, compassionate hero, Richard Bolitho, was introduced to an ever-growing readership.

That was twenty years ago; and thirty years have passed since those grey winter afternoons in Richmond Park. The exploits of Richard Bolitho are featured in eighteen novels, the lives and deaths of other men, equally heroic, in twenty-eight Reeman books. There are others waiting to be written, for the mind and imagination which produces these memorable stories is ever active, ever fruitful.

And what of the man? What is he like, as a person, as an individual? He gives himself and his own great talent little credit: every book is still approached with apprehension and nervousness. There is no formula, no easy technique after thirty years. Every book is lived as it is written, an experience as emotionally draining for the writer as it is for the reader. These are books to cherish, and to share, and they reflect virtues which are perhaps regarded as old-fashioned in a modern world: the qualities of honour, courage, love of country, comradeship, a consciousness of duty, humility,

sensitivity, and compassion. These are qualities found in characters like Richard Bolitho: Douglas would be the first to deny it, but they originate in him.

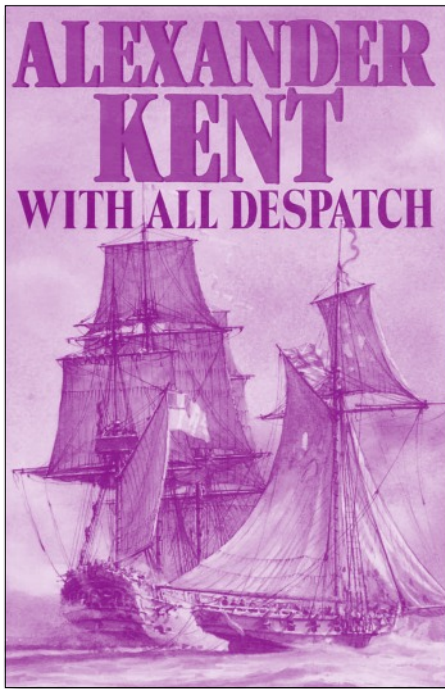
He is a man of great personal charm and humour, sometimes easily hurt: a man passionately committed to accuracy and attention to historical detail, and perpetually, and rather endearingly surprised by the affection and interest of his readers. He has many times been compared to Forester, which is unfortunate and unfair - it should be recalled that Forester, who will always be remembered for Hornblower, had nothing but contempt for his creation. For Douglas, Richard Bolitho is a shadowy, constant presence, inspiration and companion, an independent force, and regarded sometimes with almost superstitious awe. He has often said that he regards himself as Bolitho's secretary only - as one chosen to tell his story, which for twenty years has illuminated a dark past, inspired, enlightened, educated, but above all, entertained.

It is a joy and a privilege to share his life, and these special stories.

Part Four

'With All Despatch'

In 1792 with the explosion of war against Revolutionary France only months away, Captain Richard Bolitho is forced to choose between accepting a shore-based appointment at the Nore and the Medway ports or find himself



discharged – ‘on the beach’.

It is a difficult time for Bolitho, and yet both fate and instinct dictate that he is at the very cross-roads of his tempestuous career as a sea officer.

He is still suffering the cruel after-effects of a fever caught in the Great South Sea, and haunted by the memory of the woman he had loved there, only to watch her buried in the deep after their voyage in an open boat.

He is told to report to his superior at the Nore and give his full attention to recruiting seamen for the fleet, which has been allowed to run down and rot between the wars, and where morale is at its

lowest. He is soon aware of the blatant activities of the smuggling gangs, the notorious Brotherhood which for years have flouted the law, often with the connivance of the authorities employed to restrain them.

From his youth in Cornwall Bolitho knows that the mystery and romance of smuggling are part of a myth. In reality, it is a brutal and pitiless trade, where intimidation of the innocent is normal practice, and murder too routine to discuss with safety.

Many of the smuggling vessels are better manned and more heavily armed than the revenue cutters and small naval vessels sent to seek them out, and often local landowners, some of them magistrates, turn a blind eye on captured offenders, if only to maintain their own supplies of brandy and other contraband.

Across the narrows of the English Channel the Terror spawned by revolution rages on. The King of France is in jail awaiting the mercy or the fury of the mob: while he lives, some believe there is hope that the tide of madness can be stemmed.

Despite the dangers and the gathering clouds of war the smuggling gangs ply their trade with contempt for those sent against them. They attack customs posts to retrieve contraband or free their comrades otherwise bound for the gibbet . . . in this same century William Pitt sent a small army into Deal to burn the smuggling luggers and seize the culprits. A pitched resulted, with only the discipline of both dragoons and foot soldiers able to carry the day. When war finally broke out, Pitt changed his tune and said of the Brotherhood,

‘These men are my eyes, for without them I am blind to the intelligence of the enemy.’

With such collusion and corruption in high places, and with three speedy topsail cutters under his command, Captain Richard Bolitho sets about crushing the activities of the gangs, and in doing so recovers many deserters who had fled the navy for supposedly richer pickings in ‘the Trade’.

With Allday at his side, and against all odds, he is ready when the new orders reach him from the Admiralty - to proceed on a secret mission ‘With all despatch –’.

For Bolitho, those familiar words are a lifeline.

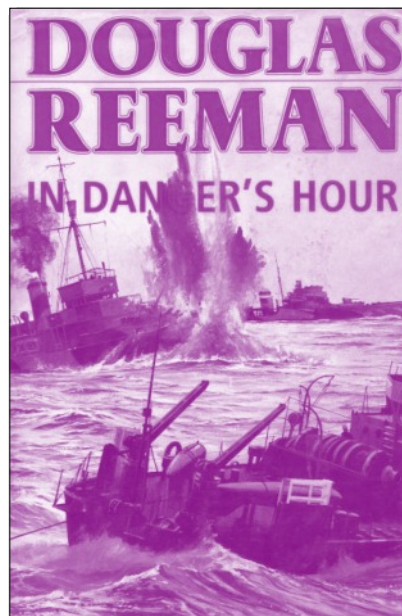
Part Five

Douglas Reeman

In Danger's Hour

Minesweeping . . . a war without glory, where death lurked beneath the sea or floated from the sky. A war without mercy or discrimination. The men who fought this lonely battle did so knowing it was an essential one. Every day, in every kind of weather, the sea-lanes had to be cleared to allow convoys to enter and leave a country under siege. The ships faced danger from the air, E-boats, even submarines, but mainly their fight was against an unseen enemy - an endless, deadly battle with the mine.

In Danger's Hour is the story of one such ship, the fleet minesweeper HMS *Rob Roy* during those desperate fourteen months from February 1943 to



D-Day in June 1944. It is also the story of her captain, Lieutenant-Commander Ian Ransome - a veteran of this ruthless warfare at the age of twenty-eight - and of the eighty men in her company: their fears and ambitions their strengths and weaknesses. When the order comes to leave the English Channel for the Mediterranean, Ransome knows the battle-scarred *Rob Roy* has a vital role to play, and the courage of seasoned veteran and newcomer alike is tested to the full. Faced with the awesome burden of command, Ransome must fight a private war of his own to hide his secret griefs and longings; must steer his ship through one last epic battle before he can return home to the woman he loves.