



The
Richard Boltho
Newsletter

Issue XI



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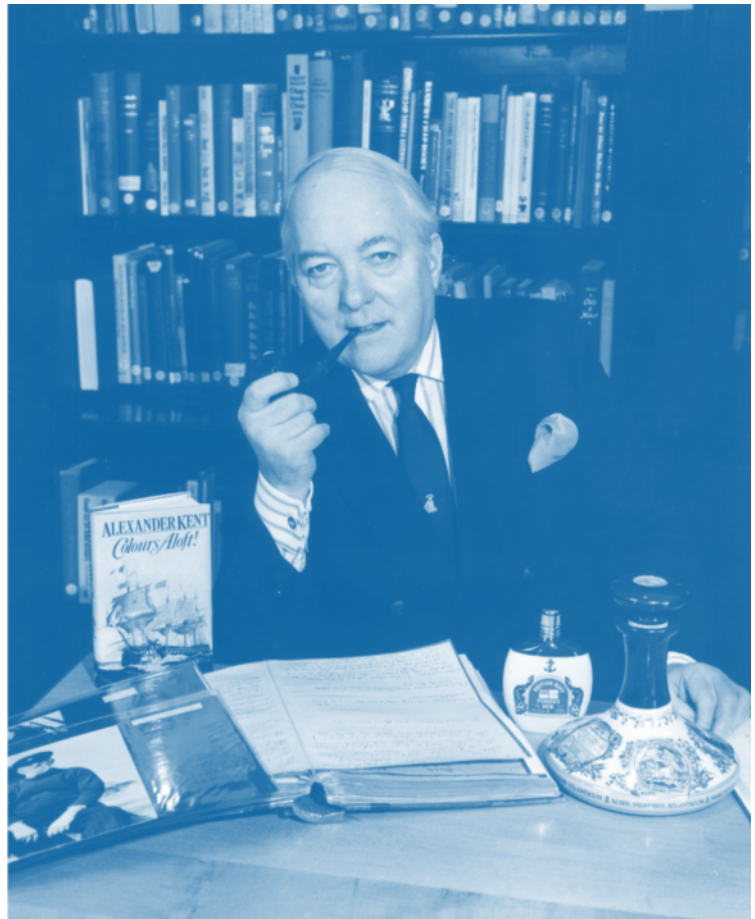
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Douglas Reeman / Alexander Kent after
the launch of *Colours Aloft!* In 1986.

Part One

Naval Customs

Every day aboard HM Ships Colours are hoisted in the forenoon. In larger vessels a Colour Guard and Royal Marines band will be provided to show the proper mark of respect. In all ships officers and ratings will face aft and salute as the White Ensign is hoisted to mark the beginning of a new day. The custom of mounting a guard for the Colours dates from 1797 when Earl St. Vincent introduced it, following the naval mutinies of that year.

Similar marks of respect are shown when the Colours are lowered at sunset, 'Putting the Queen to bed' as it is irreverently termed.

Crossing the Line Celebrations

The details of these celebrations are fairly well known to most people today, especially with the ever-growing popularity of ocean-cruising. Fewer probably realise that they are carrying on very old and extremely serious religious rites.

The Carthaginians sacrificed to their gods on crossing the limits of navigation which to them



'Colours Aloft' by English marine artist
Geoffrey Huband

were the Gibraltar Straits. In 1675 every one passing through these same straits was expected to pay a dollar or be ducked from the yardarm.

Paying a fine or undergoing some sort of test came much earlier with the Norsemen, who expected every one to pass the most demanding test before being accepted as a fully-fledged seaman.

Today the Equator remains to mark the toll-gateway to Neptune's kingdom. The ceremony may be fun for the spectator, uncomfortable for the victim, but it is nevertheless a lasting part of sea-lore.

Passing the Wine

Many old naval customs have grown from the need to entertain as well as the need to sustain the weeks and months at sea. In wardroom and messdeck alike where social life rubbed shoulders with eating and sleeping, casual routine became firm tradition.

In a wardroom, officers always the decanters of port and sherry from right to left when they may if they wish to charge their glasses, especially for the Loyal Toast to the Sovereign. It is not commonly known that the Sovereign's health may also be drunk in water. No one may smoke before the President of the mess calls for the Loyal Toast, just as no weapon may be carried or unsheathed in the mess without the penalty of a fine being ordered.

Splice the Main-Brace

This custom implied an extra tot of rum over and above the daily issue for a particularly demanding or arduous task of seamanship. The order to Splice the Main-Brace was also given by the Sovereign after an inspection of the Fleet, or for a Royal birthday.

In times of war the daily tot, often unofficially left neat after a particularly unpleasant battle, was a great comforter, and the daily pipe 'Up Spirits' brought a ready grin.

Today, special events are still marked by the custom, but only rarely. In 1970, on Black Tot Day as it was unofficially called, the daily rum issue

was stopped. It was said that the modern sailor, a more sophisticated fellow than his wooden-wall counterpart had outgrown the custom. It was also suggested that the high-tech equipment and the need for instant readiness if required made the heady tot of Nelson's blood redundant.

Neither reason was accepted with much enthusiasm.

Part Two

A Toast to Richard Bolitho

It is now nineteen years since I completed my research and wrote the first of the Richard Bolitho series, *To Glory We Steer*. When it was published the following year, 1968, and it was so well received I actually believed I had created a character who would soon be sharing his adventures with readers of all ages around the world. In retrospect I now realise that he, Richard Bolitho, that shy and heroic man, had really discovered me.

In the years which have followed I have also realised that my research into the eighteenth/nineteenth century navy has never stopped, that with the first book I had merely been 'scratching the edges' of those days of sail and of the self-dependent sailorman.

As I searched through museums and visited harbours, stayed at locations in places as mixed as Falmouth and Senegal to collect material and ideas, I soon became aware that I was not alone.

Letters began to arrive from readers, and as my series progressed suggestions, old well-thumbed articles on sea-lore and actual events made me open a new filing system just for Richard Bolitho and his times.

There have been gifts too, many of them, which have left me both astonished and moved. Like the lady who sent me a neatly written diary of one of her ancestors who had been a lieutenant in a ship-of-the-line. A remarkable little book which listed all the lieutenant's division of seamen, with a sketch of the foremast of the ship, numbered to show where each sailor would be working aloft. Turn the diary over and read from the back, and you discover a selection of jokes, songs and conjuring tricks which must have kept the wardroom in stitches. Some of the jokes were very blue even by today's standards! Such a precious memento, yet this reader gave it to me because of Bolitho.

An older lady sent me a copy of the original *Times* which announced Nelson's death at Trafalgar, because, she wrote, 'Bolitho would appreciate it more than most.'

I have often wondered at the attraction of the man. In these islands a love of the sea, its heritage of ships and sailors found today even in our language, is quite understandable. But now Bolitho's stories are read and translated into fourteen languages in countries with cultures that vary from Finland to Japan. How do they see the man and share his hopes and his disappointments? To me, of course, he is real. I would know him on

a street, or standing by some harbour wall watching the ships at anchor. Many people have different ideas of how he should look, and in their minds can see him clearly in their own way.

When I was building his family background, photographing the house in Cornwall which was to become his home, and gathering details of his first-described command and her company, I sometimes saw him. In hindsight it was as if he was watching me, waiting for the right moment to make his entrance and stamp his mold, which would carry him through the series with me.

I have been asked on occasions if he resembles any real-life hero. There might be one. Perhaps more like a brother than the man himself. If you look at the portrait of Captain Augustus Keppel as he was when he commanded the Torbay at Quiberon Bay you may see it. The same guarded independence, the tenacity and the compassion. Those qualities are mentioned in letters to me, enough to make me believe that our visions of Bolitho are much the same.

Quite recently I decided it would be nice to have a limited number of figurines created for those readers who have made Bolitho so much a part of their lives. The task is not yet completed, but what a flood I am getting from people everywhere! I have an uneasy feeling that Bolitho will be the hardest critic of the finished figurine, with Allday a close second.

As I travel around doing research and promotion for the series I am struck by the different kinds of readers. Old sea-buffs who could never be fooled

by careless research, youngsters who are given Bolitho as a project at school. In many schools Bolitho is compulsory reading. A head teacher explained once that fiction is still the best way to get them interested in history. People are often surprised when I tell them that fifty percent of the mail I receive is from women. They write to ask about technical details, about the days of sail and linger on a time when gallantry and courtesy even to the enemy were the rule rather than the exception. The early *Richard Bolitho Newsletters* were produced to deal with some of the technicalities in sailing and naval matters and have since become a regular feature.

Bolitho's home in Falmouth has become as real as the man. Portraits of his ancestors, the outdated family sword which he still prefers to any regulation pattern, are all a part of him. Like many sea-officers of his day Bolitho was dismayed by the introduction of a regulation sword during the American Revolution. The five-ball sword, as it was called because of the arrangement on hilt and knuckle-bow, was inferior to family blades which officers handed down from generation to generation. I smile when I think of the portraits in the Bolitho house. I once mentioned that a certain picture hung at the foot of the stairs where Bolitho was regarding it with some trepidation as he considered his next voyage. After the book was published I had a testy letter from a fan who claimed that the portrait had been moved from its proper position since the previous book! Even telling him that the housekeeper had been spring-



Douglas and Kimberley Reeman on their wedding day in October 1985.

cleaning would not placate him.

And what of Alexander Kent, if not the creator then at least Bolitho's diarist? I can only say that my life changed completely after he arrived to share it. I had been a professional writer for ten years prior to *To Glory We Steer!*, and yet I was stunned by the effect of his adventures.

Bolitho has been kind to me, and just a few months ago in Toronto, her home in Canada, I was married to Kim, who once came to hear me give a talk. Because she loved Bolitho.

It seemed only right we were married on

Bolitho's birthday, and as the sunlight shone through the great windows of St. James' Cathedral we could feel him there, watching.

When I write any other kind of book I am left drained, with a sense of loss at the end of it. But with Richard Bolitho I always have the feeling, the sure knowledge that he will be back again soon to share his life with ours.

There is a moment of pleasure when a new story is on the bookstalls, of pride too when the fleet sailed for the Falklands in 1982. Hundreds of Bolitho books went with those ships; perhaps some of his ideals survived the war's bitterness.

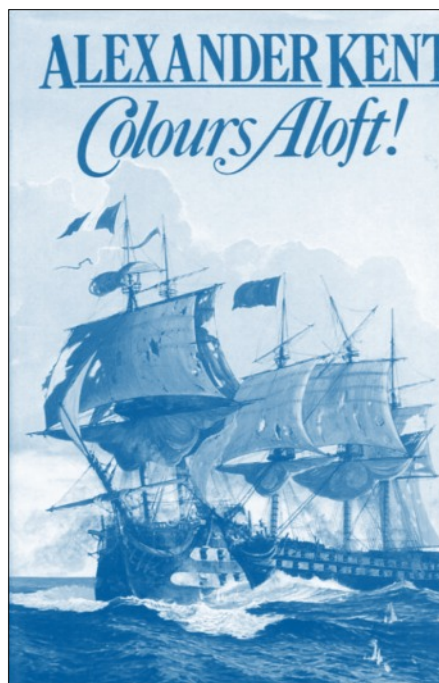
Nelson in his prayer, which he composed on the eve of Trafalgar, put it very well – 'May humanity after victory be the predominate feature in the British fleet'.

Bolitho would approve, an' that's no error as Allday would say. It is almost time to begin thinking and planning the next story. As Kim and I collect the names for the next ship's company from a quiet Cornish village church on the edge of the sea, in the stillness of the Trafalgar cemetery at Gibraltar, or from the files gathered over the years, I am grateful that Richard Bolitho of Falmouth chose me.

Part Three

Colours Aloft!

In September of 1803, when Sir Richard Bolitho, Vice Admiral of the Red, hoists the flag above



the seventy-four gun *Argonaute* at Spithead, he quits the land with both eagerness and foreboding. His flagship, a French prize seized from an old enemy, is fully manned, her captain a loyal friend. But his orders rest uneasily on his shoulders even though his knighthood, and the fact that next to Nelson he is the youngest admiral on the Navy List should tell him his true worth to the country he loves.

He is leaving England, troubled by a strange coolness which has arisen between him and his beautiful wife Belinda, embittered too by the nation's unpreparedness while France is even

stronger than before the brief Peace of Amiens.

In the Mediterranean, a sea well-known to Bolitho in other ships, he is soon aware that in a great war small episodes and sharp clashes of close-action can still merge into a personal vendetta. His old enemy, *Argonaute's* original commander, seems to know his every move and intention, while Bolitho's own past makes him vulnerable to attack where less quarter can be expected than from a sweeping broadside.

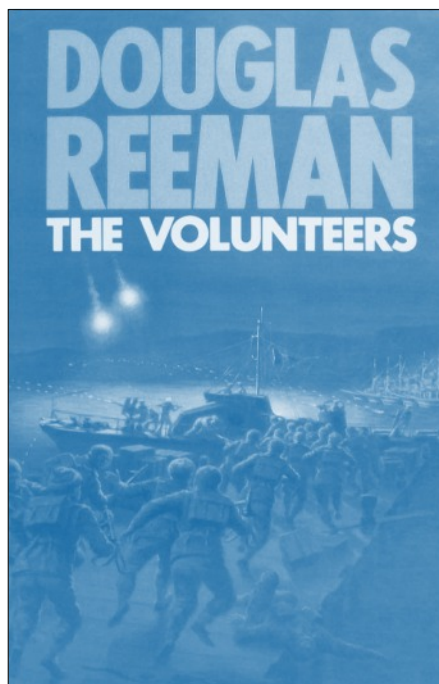
The qualities of loyalty and leadership, and the haunting companionship of a lost love sustain him even on the threshold of defeat.

Part Four

The Volunteers

Followers of Richard Bolitho will know that Alexander Kent has written many bestselling modern sea stories under his own name, Douglas Reeman. In *The Volunteers* he turns to the story of the men and women who served in the Royal Navy's Special Operations units, and who were as varied as the methods they used against the enemy in the Second World War.

Carrying out lightning raids on hostile coasts and shipping, they became a navy within a navy, each of them hand-picked for individual skills, all of them courageous in their own individual ways. Nobody knew for certain if their small but deadly operations made a real impression on the conduct



of the war, but they did their hazardous duty anyway, living often beyond hope, sometimes beyond mercy.

This is a story about a handful of such people, their fears and their loves, of the resilience and vulnerability of youth at war at the time of the Sicilian and Italian invasions in 1943 and of D-Day in 1944. Some of them fought an endless fight against fear and doubt, some of them rejoiced in the demands of combat, many did not survive.

Perhaps they had little in common except that they were all volunteers.