The Richard Bolitho Newsletter

Issue XIV

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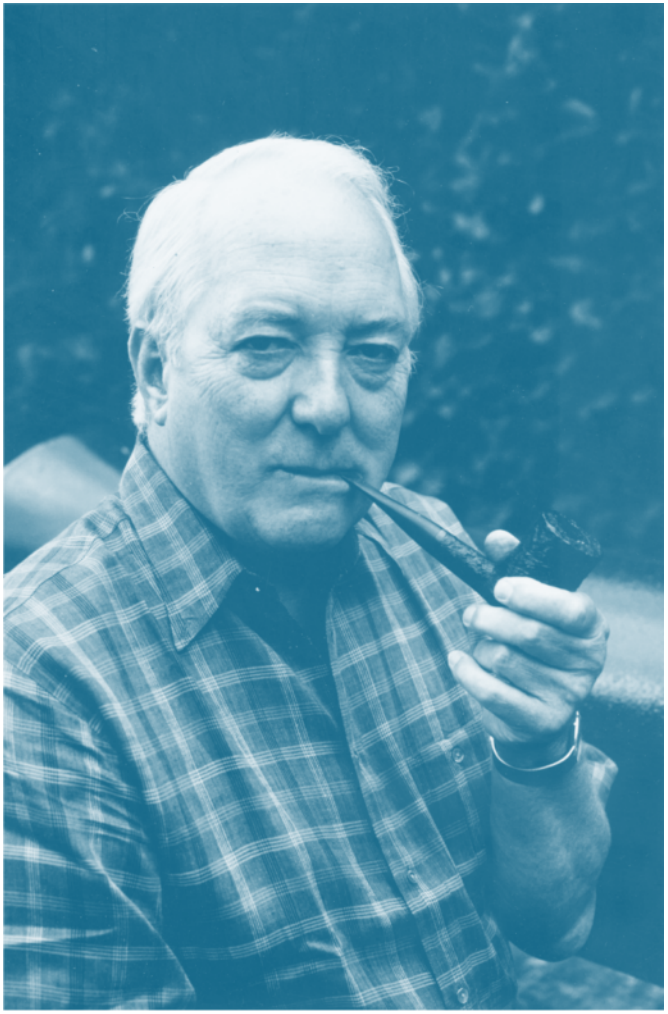


Douglas Reeman / Alexander Kent
Photo by Kimberley Reeman

Part One
Articles of War

'Articles of War are certain regulations for the betterment of the navy, and may be altered at the pleasure of the King. They are printed and hung up in the most public place in every ship of the Royal Navy and are ordered to be read aloud at least every month to the ship's company.'

'The Only Victor' by English marine artist Geoffrey Huband

This was how the opening instruction of the Act of Parliament was worded, and what was to become the unwavering guidance in the fleet, and all ships, whether in company or sailing alone, perhaps thousands of miles from any senior authority.

Passed in 1749, the Articles, and there were some thirty-six of them, were intended to support every commander and sea officer, whether he be in charge of a tiny armed transport like the ill-fated *Bounty* or the flagship of some powerful and distinguished admiral.

Ships sailing alone were always at risk, and not necessarily from the King's enemies. The merest hint of dissension between decks, let alone the dreaded suggestion of mutiny, made the Articles of War a captain's first line of defence, hence the need to read them aloud to his company every month as a reminder of the consequences.

'If any officer, mariner, soldier, or other person in the fleet shall strike any of his superior officers, draw, or offer to draw, or lift up any weapon against him, being in the execution of his office, on any pretext whatsoever, every such person being convicted of any such offence by the sentence of a court-martial, shall suffer death . . .'

Just as they were read by a captain when a man was brought aft for punishment: a flogging at the gangway, and the relevant charge underlined.

Lieutenant William Bligh of the *Bounty*, probably the most maligned and slandered sea

officer of all time, especially in the fictional assassination of Hollywood, was a fine seaman, and his punishment-book is neither savage nor unfair as is so often proclaimed. Another captain, Hugh Pigot of the frigate *Hermione*, was such a sadist as to actually enjoy the degrading spectacle of a flogging, and he caused his ship to explode in the bloodiest mutiny in British naval history. It happened in 1797, the time of the other great uprisings at Spithead and the Nore against foul conditions and brutal discipline, which shocked a nation in daily fear of a French invasion.

Conversely, the same Articles which were intended to protect the navy's far-flung authority and the men who acted in the King's name, could also turn around and destroy them.

'Every flag officer, captain, and commander in the fleet, who, upon signal or order of fight, or sight of any ship or ships which it may be his duty to engage, or who, upon likelihood of engagement, shall not make the necessary preparations for fight, and shall not in his own person, and according to his place, encourage the inferior officers and men to fight courageously, shall suffer death, or such punishment as from the nature of the degree of the offence a court-martial shall deem him to deserve . . .'

It was often said that if a senior officer acted with dash and skill while carrying out an attack in the defence of vessels under his command, others, namely the Admiralty, would take the credit. If he made a wrong decision, or failed to act to the letter of these same articles, he alone would take the blame with a court-martial and all its grim consequences as the end result. Even today, the Articles of War retain much of their original content, so that unlike civil law an accused officer must prove his innocence, rather than have the prosecutor establish his guilt.

The drama, the long drawn-out ceremony of a court-martial must remain unrivaled in tension and despair. From the boom of the warning gun as the court-martial jack breaks to the wind, it is a man's career, his reputation, and in many cases his very life which is on trial. The moment of truth as the accused is marched in with his escort for the verdict – will his sword, laid upon the court's table throughout the proceedings, be pointed towards him? If so, there is no hope left. If on the other hand the hilt is nearest to him, what Herrick would call 'Lady Luck' has triumphed.

Even the highest ranks were not so secure that they could not suffer the same fate. As a result of failing to take Minorca from the French in 1756, Admiral the Honourable John Byng was severely criticised both by the lords of Admiralty and by the King himself. He was court-martialled, and condemned to death. The following year, showing great fortitude on board HMS *Monarque* in Portsmouth where he took charge of his own firing-squad, Byng made his last signal to them and was shot dead.

His execution and the interpretation of the Articles which found him guilty were to act like an icy hand on the shoulder of many a senior commander for a long time to come.

Part Two

Crossroads

by Kim Reeman

Douglas once said, ‘I am a great believer in Fate,’ and as surely as fate brought us together, so we are powerfully aware that it also introduced us to Geoffrey Huband.

We were in Cornwall in the spring of 1985. I took Douglas to Mousehole, where, although he had lived for some time in the Duchy, he had never been. While walking in its steep, narrow streets our attention was caught by a painting in the window of a gallery. A frigate and a cutter on a calm sea, suffused with the tranquil light of sunset or sunrise. Every detail was perfect: authentic, and unlike many maritime paintings, technically accurate. We bought it, and Douglas, impressed not only by the talent it demonstrated but by the familiar ‘feel’ and spirit of the ships of the period – Richard Bolitho’s period – wrote asking the artist if he would consider doing jacket paintings for the Bolitho novels. Our relationship with Geoffrey Huband had begun, or perhaps it had long been ordained.

Geoffrey believes so. ‘I often reflect on the circumstances of providence or fate that caused our paths to meet, a path that began for me many years ago when I bought my first Reeman story, HMS *Saracen*. Subsequently I read many others, but whether Kent or Reeman I always had the same feeling, that I was envious of the opportunity to illustrate such exciting and authentic stories.’

Geoffrey Huband

Geoffrey Huband was born in Worcestershire in 1945, and studied at Stourbridge College of Art and Victoria College, Manchester University. On leaving college he taught, but in 1970 he moved to Cornwall to paint full-time, and found in its rugged, maritime beauty the inspiration for paintings which are now commissioned internationally. His nostalgic oil vignettes of village life are very much in the ‘pleine air’ tradition of the Newlyn School he admires; he chooses pure watercolour as the medium for his splendid paintings of ships and the sea.

‘Visually I am intrigued by the abstracted qualities of maritime painting. The solidity of hulls, the apparent delicacy of masts and spars, the fragile beauty of sails billowing or revealing the form of the masts as they are blown aback. I

enjoyed the ordered tracery of rigging seen as a bold statement against the bright sky . . . My interest in maritime painting is excited as much by the physical appearance of ships as it is by the romance that time and history have endowed upon the subject. I am interested in ships for their beauty as well as for their functional qualities, and I am fascinated by the ingenuity that has been displayed in their construction and development since earliest times. The focus of my interest centres, I think, between 1700-1800, a period I regard as the peak of achievement in the combination of function and beauty in ships as well as architecture. The fact that this was also a time of intense scientific discovery, political change and international strife offers further possibilities of material for exciting historical paintings.'

In January 1988, while planning the preliminary sketches for *With All Despatch*, Geoffrey was struck by a car and seriously injured as he was cycling near his home in Cornwall. For a time his life seemed in danger; certainly his career hung in the balance as he struggled to overcome his injuries and regain the use of his right hand. But this remarkable man, in an act of sheer determination, not only managed to produce the prize-winning entry in an Armada 400 art competition, but while in hospital with his arm in a series of slings and pulleys prepared faultless sketches for *With All Despatch*. Within weeks, supported by his wife Jacqueline and their two children, he submitted the final painting.

We salute their faith and their courage.

Part Three

Pipe All Hands!

When I touched on this subject in a previous newsletter it was because of questions I had received from readers both here and overseas. It seems that my brief mention under the heading of Naval Customs only scraped the surface, so for the benefit of newer followers of the Richard Bolitho series I will endeavour to enlarge slightly on it.

In the 18th and 19th century navy, communications within the complex world of a fighting ship were as vital as any in a nuclear submarine. In the old 'wooden-walls' with their overcrowded decks, towering masts and complicated criss-cross of rigging, the need for swift response to orders from aft was often critical. Officers shouting through their speaking-trumpets frequently went unheard in the din of wind and booming canvas, so that the chain of command might lose all meaning in the bustle of making or reefing sail.

The term pipe was an extension to other forms of passing orders, like the trumpet or the bugle, or the dramatic rattle of drums when 'beating to quarters' on sighting an enemy. It was conveyed by a boatswain's call, or small silver whistle which carried shrilly from deck to deck, to earn it the respected nickname of Spithead Nightingale. It is claimed that the boatswain's call in one form or another was in use at sea as far back as the Crusades in 1248, although more as a mark of rank

and respect. But it was put to proper work as a boatswain's call certainly as far back as the mid-seventeenth century.

In today's navy it is still used, although more to precede a spoken command over a ship's broadcasting system or to announce some part of the daily routine. I can well recall my early-morning gloom when roused by the twittering call and the cry to all hands to 'Lash up and stow!' That was when warships still carried hammocks for those lucky enough to find spare hooks from which to sling them! A rude awakening indeed!

In the old sailing navy they served another purpose, because with many of a ship's company pressed into service from foreign merchantmen or even enemy vessels which had been beaten in battle, the language barrier was very real. The lively calls had an ability to translate even the most difficult order, from hoisting boats inboard to their tier, to swaying up embarrassed guests or senior officers in a boatswain's chair, rather than risk losing them over the side as they attempted to board a ship while under way.

The latter formed the basis of piping the side, still in use as a salute and mark of respect for an admiral or commanding officer when he enters or leaves a ship.

But whereas today the actual pipes number only twelve, there were many more in the era of the square-riggers; some variations were even created by a particular boatswain, perhaps to suit the needs of his own ship.

The call itself has changed only a little in appearance over the centuries, although in Bolitho's time it was somewhat smaller. The parts were named just as thoughtfully as any ship's tackle or armament (see diagram) and it marked the authority of the man who carried and used it.

From 'Hands aloft to reef topsails!' To 'All hands lay aft to witness punishment!' the Spithead Nightingale was and is a part of our maritime tradition.

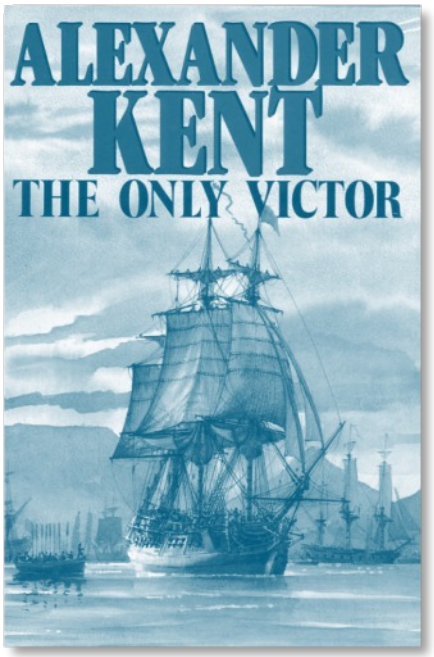
Part Four
The Only Victor

The Only Victor by Alexander Kent is the 19th Richard Bolitho novel, and follows chronologically *Honour This Day*.

In February 1806 the frigate carrying Vice Admiral Sir Richard Bolitho drops anchor off the shores of southern Africa. It is only four months since the resounding victory over the combined Franco-Spanish fleet at Trafalgar, and the death of England's greatest naval hero.

Bolitho's instructions are to assist in hastening the campaign in Africa, where an expeditionary force is attempting to recapture Cape Town from the Dutch. Outside Europe few have yet heard of the battle of Trafalgar and Bolitho's news is met with both optimism and disappointment as he reminds the senior officers that despite the victory, Napoleon's final defeat is by no means assured.

Bolitho is still brooding over the loss of his own flagship, the old *Hyperion*; and at home his



continuing personal troubles are brightened only by his love for Catherine, Lady Somervell, while they defy the scandal their relationship arouses in London society.

Even after his return from Cape Town there is little peace. A secret mission to Denmark almost ends in disaster, and the resulting damage to his injured eye only adds to his determination to fight back, and win.

When diplomacy fails, international events once more dictate Bolitho's fate. The French are using every pressure on Scandinavia to close their ports to British trade; and the Danish fleet, vital to both France and England with their depleted squadrons, becomes the richest prize of all.

But the men who follow Bolitho's flag into battle are to discover, not for the first time, that death is the only victor.