The Richard Bolitho Newsletter

Issue XIX

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This issue was originally released in 1997.

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Douglas Reeman / Alexander Kent
Photo by Kimberley Reeman

Part One

In Search of a Story

When my publishers told me that as part of the celebration of my forty years as an author they were going to reprint my first ever book, *A Prayer for the Ship*, I found it difficult to believe. To say that the forty years have flashed past would be untrue. There have been so many words, so many books; and most writers will tell you that there is rarely a time when you can sit back and indulge in complacency. I am often asked, especially by aspiring writers, 'How can you begin? Where should I start?' On such occasions I realize just how uncertain and chancy it can be. It certainly was for me.

I thought I had lived a fairly full life. I had served in the Royal Navy in wartime, and later became a police officer in London's East End, where I was with the CID. Some old friends from 'the job' still maintain that it was the police training that really taught me how to write. Day, date, time, place; what better way to begin a book? So maybe they are right. Then, with the outbreak of the Korean War, I was back in the navy again. The fact was, I never wanted to leave it in the first place, although coming as I did from a long line of soldiers, I suppose my affinity for the sea is sometimes hard to understand. But when I hung up my naval uniform, there was still no hint of a new course to authorship. I sold marine engines, I worked with underprivileged children, I was even a yacht skipper, and eventually I bought my own boat.

Rightly perhaps, it was aboard my own boat that I first entertained the idea of writing. I was working hard – I think I was cutting out some rotten wood – and listening to the radio at the same time. It was someone reading a book. I only wish now that I could remember its title.

Hacking away at the offending timber, I said, 'I could do better than that!'

A friend asked, 'Then why don't you?'

The usual answer. 'I don't own a typewriter. And anyway . . .'

After that, things moved quickly. The friend obtained a very old 'sit-up-and-beg' machine so heavy that it practically made the boat list, for the modest price of four pounds. I had no more excuses.

I have gone through a lot of typewriters since then, but that old faithful sits, sleeping now, in my loft. I shall never get rid of it. I wrote a short story, a humorous one, and it was accepted by a magazine: there were plenty of them in those days for would-be writers to cut their teeth on. Then I wrote a second short story, which was rejected by everybody until I offered it to a magazine that claimed to print only fact. I lied a little bit, and it was published. I didn't feel too badly about the deception when I discovered that most of the other 'true stories' were also imaginary!

With the money I earned, I bought a small portable typewriter, and when I was taking a break from my job I would sit in the back of a car and

work on my first book. It was typed on the reverse of London County Council nit notices; my boat left me a bit short of spare cash for good quality paper.

For my subject, I chose something I knew: the war at sea in small craft, the navy's Light Coastal Forces, motor torpedo boats, and motor gunboats. Young men, most of us very young, and a fast-moving war often fought at close range, in the Channel and the North Sea.

I told quite a number of people what I was doing. In retrospect, I think that may have been a mistake. I got plenty of advice, mostly from friends who knew even less about the writing business than I did.

It was not a long book, and it was, I suppose, simply told, but when I took out the final pieces of carbon paper (does anybody remember them?) I was proud of it, nervous of what might happen, and more than apprehensive about it being rejected.

On to choosing a publisher. I selected three, something I was later to realize was not the right thing to do. I sent a copy of the manuscript to each, and held my breath. The first publisher I selected because they published the works of Nevil Shute. I have met many writers, but he was the one I have always admired more than any other. The second publisher I chose because he liked cats, and had written a good deal about them. And the third publisher I picked because they had published a novel about minesweeping, called *Proud Waters*, by Ewart Brookes, the best description of that dangerous form of warfare I have ever read. I thought that if they had published his book, they might consider mine. It wasn't much of a yard-stick, but it was all I had.

Weeks became months, three months to be exact, and I had heard nothing. What to do? Telephone, and risk angering some overworked editor? Write, and ask if the manuscript had been received? I did neither of those things. I sat tight, while my 'friends' either consoled or pitied me.

And then, when all seemed lost, the letter arrived. The publisher who had produced *Proud Waters* was quite keen to see me. To say that I was nervous on that day is an understatement.

Every one was friendly, and when I eventually met the publisher we talked about almost every-thing but writing. When he finally did come to 'the work', as they call it, he told me that he liked it. He did not say that it was the finest thing that he had ever read, or that it might be another *Cruel Sea*. Instead, he asked gently, 'And what are you writing now?'

I felt crushed, and had to reply, 'Nothing. This is it!'

He and his chief editor exchanged smiles. They had seen and heard it all, I imagine.

The publisher then said, 'I'll tell you what. I'll give you a contract for this book, and the next two you write are for us.'

So quietly said, in that rather untidy office in Great Portland Street. I walked out of the building and said aloud, 'My God. I'm a writer!'

And the following year, 1958, *A Prayer for the Ship* was published. It has been republished many

times since then, with different jackets, and in sixteen languages around the world.

But that was then, this is now. And it changed everything.

I wrote to both of the other publishers and received kind and encouraging letters in return. Publishing is a small world. William Heinemann Limited was Nevil Shute's publisher, my first choice. It is my publisher today.

Sometimes, when the going gets rough, I say to my Canadian wife, Kim, who is also a writer, 'There must be an easier way of making a living!' The mood soon passes, because in fact there isn't. In what other profession or job would you meet so many interesting and helpful people? My first publisher once told me that the most important attribute of a good writer was to be a good listener. I did not really understand, but I do now.

Travel, research, meeting the characters who come into your mind to speak the words and lead the way through each story, this makes everything worthwhile.

Ten years after *A Prayer for the Ship* came the first in a new series about Richard Bolitho, which was entitled *To Glory We Steer*, and written under the pseudonym Alexander Kent.

And so for me this particular Newsletter means a lot. A fortieth and thirtieth anniversary rolled into one, with so many faces, letters, and special moments to mark every mile of the way. I have sat in bookshops from Caracas to Singapore, from Hamburg to Tahiti, and I am touched by such memories.

But for me, that day in Great Portland Street must still take pride of place. Happy Anniversary!

Part Two

The Way Ahead

by Kim Reeman

Douglas, this is the book you said you would never write. What happened to change your mind?

I just felt that I owed it to Richard, to show more of his family, how his family – what he has of it – progresses, and his friends, and what influence he might have had on the navy. And for a very personal reason. I didn't want any one writing his interpretation of it at a later date, something that I abhor.

Some people in the trade have already mentioned the eventual death of Richard, which has been no secret since the beginning of the series in 1968. But again, I disagree completely with this business of, 'he, the author, is killing him off.' It doesn't happen that way; it is what Bolitho has always called fate. In spite of the tragedy, common enough in any sort of warfare, I found the story a compelling one to write.

Did you plan the actual moment?

I don't know what I thought about the actual moment. I wasn't really expecting it. I knew the

inevitability of it. As often happens, as I've seen for myself, these things tend to happen without any dramatics, and with a very abrupt suddenness. The immediate reaction of those around Bolitho, and those who are to hear of it, as fast as news can travel on the prevailing wind, were much as I would have expected of the individuals, and of the men.

Were you depressed?

I felt a great sense of loss, but not depression. It was like being shown the way. As Bolitho has done for so many.

He knew didn't he?

He knew, yes. His last words to Allday show that.

He knew that this was to be his last action.

Yes.

Like Nelson.

Yes, like Nelson. Nelson definitely knew, which was very apparent from his last letter to Emma Hamilton.

What happens next? Is this the end?

By no means is this the end. In fact, I'm looking forward to the next part of this series very much. It is a challenge to me, and to young Adam Bolitho, who must, inevitably, come out from Bolitho's shadow. A new viewpoint, and a new navy.

Part Three
Chain of Command

As mentioned in the previous Newsletter, communications at sea were difficult and often unreliable. Within the ordered and disciplined world of a fleet or squadron, the importance of signals between ships, especially in the prelude to battle, was paramount. The man whose flag of command flew over any force relied absolutely on a rapid exchange of signals, the briefer, the better. From the line of battle to the smaller rated frigates, 'the eyes of the fleet', immediate understanding and swift response could mean the difference between victory and bloody failure.

Of necessity, admiral was a remote and often lonely appointment, but one so important that any serious misunderstanding in the heat of battle could not only wreck a campaign but bring ruin and disgrace to that same man, although to his gun crews and hard-worked seamen he might always appear invulnerable and beyond reach.

In every flagship there were two offices who could provide the vital link between the admiral and his long chain of command. The flag captain not only commanded the ship but was responsible for exercises and manoeuvres of the squadron

under sail, forging them into a single weapon which he considered competent enough to follow the flag, if necessary to the cannon's mouth. It was often said that to be appointed a flag captain was the shortest route to promotion, or to a court-martial. Hardy, who was one of his flag captains, was slow and careful, a necessary anchor for his admiral's mercurial and unorthodox mind. On the other hand, Edward Berry, Nelson's flag captain at the Nile, rarely saw eye to eye with his admiral. I suspect they were very much alike in many ways, and they were good friends, often a disadvantage in such circumstances.

Directly involved with his admiral and with the communications between all captains under his command, the flag lieutenant was often closer than any one to him.

Ships, particularly the larger men-of-war, depended on clear and precise signals when manoeuvring in close company. Whether these signals were acted upon instantly or obeyed in succession allowing for the wind and the possible presence of an enemy, had to be kept uppermost in any admiral's mind. His aide, no matter how junior, had to be prepared to challenge any decision which he might consider a waste of valuable time or difficult for the ships furthest away from the Flag to interpret.

Pasco, *Victory's* flag lieutenant at Trafalgar, understood his admiral very well. With the Franco-Spanish fleet approaching in all its terrible splendour, and the English sailors forced to contain their nerves and endure casualties from the first, long-ranging shots, Nelson was determined to make a signal which would inspire every man in his fleet. That signal is so famous that most schoolchildren know it by heart . . . or did. Nelson wanted, 'England confides that . . .', but Lieutenant Pasco, who was using the original Home Popham's Telegraph Code, substituted 'expects', as he considered that the word 'confides' would have to be spelled out letter by letter, and would take too long. Luckily for Mr. Pasco and for history, the little admiral agreed.

To order ships under his admiral's command to alter course, to make more sail, or even to anchor, the flag lieutenant could usually manage with single or paired flags. This was the fastest way to signal instructions to the fleet even up until the Second World War. I have seen destroyers turning as one in response to the dip of a single flag, when semaphore or light would have taken far longer.

In fiction as in real life, and I find them difficult to separate, those closest to Richard Bolitho have become well known, as individual people rather than as parts of the chain of command.

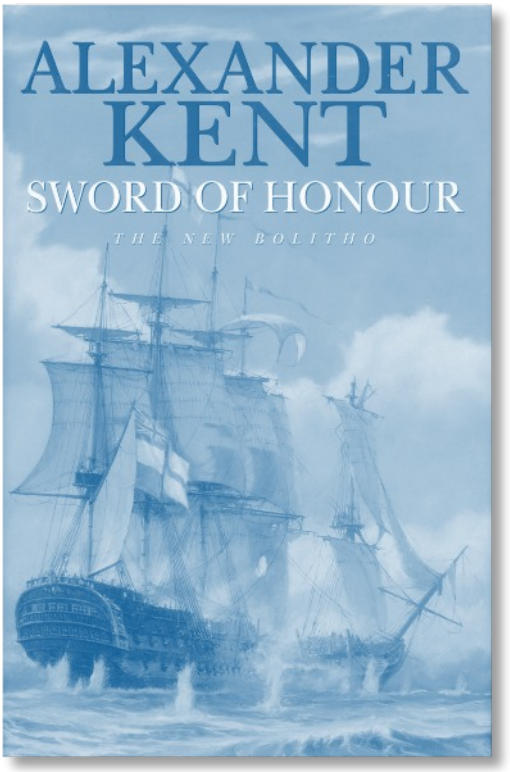
His flag captains have been several and varied. Who can forget Thomas Herrick's stubborn and sometimes maddening refusal to bend the rules? Equally, we must not overlook his compassion when he carried the news of Cheney's death to Bolitho. The loyal and eager Inch, and Keen, who matures from midshipman to flag rank in Bolitho's shadow, and with his example to follow. Captain James Tyacke, who finds the strength to rise above a terrible disfigurement, because of Bolitho, and

for Bolitho. And his words after a bitter and hard-won victory, ‘And for what?’ It rings so true with people like me, who still wonder ‘why?’

And finally Adam Bolitho, who has served as both flag captain and flag lieutenant, and will perhaps carry the weight of all that he has seen, and learned from his beloved uncle. A frigate captain above all else, and one who has known the importance of communications at sea, when even a slight delay or a misunderstanding can lead to a court-martial or worse. Given time, he will learn, like Bolitho, that enemies can be forged in envy as much as in war.

There is nothing in the *Fleet Signal Book* for that. He will stand alone. He is quite alone.

Part Four
Sword of Honour



In March of 1814, Sir Richard Bolitho returns to England from several months’ rigorous patrolling off the North American coast. The bitter and inconclusive war with the United States has not yet ended, but the news of Napoleon’s defeat and abdication has stunned a navy and a nation bled by years of European conflict. *Victory* has been the impossible dream, and now, for Bolitho, a vision of the future and a more personal peace seems attainable.

He remains, however, an admiral of England, and an unsympathetic Admiralty dispatches him to Malta. Perhaps this appointment is a compliment, perhaps a malicious ploy to keep him from the woman he loves and the freedom for which he craves. He cannot know, but the voice of duty speaks more insistently even than the voice of the heart, and in this familiar sea where glory and tragedy have touched his life, Bolitho must confront the future, the renaissance of a hated tyrant, and the fulfillment of destiny.