



The  
*Richard Boultho*  
Newsletter  
Issue XVII



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Douglas Reeman / Alexander Kent  
Photo by Kimberley Reeman

## Part One

*Alexander Kent*

*Dear Friend,*

*How else could I address somebody who is reading this, the latest Richard Bolitho newsletter, Number XVII? In 1968 when the first story, To Glory We Steer, was published, it was a time of great excitement and high hopes for something I had contemplated for a long time, even when I was writing my other books under my own name, Douglas Reeman. Looking back, it seems as if it had already been decided. Fate, as Richard Bolitho himself often claims, was too strong to resist. Richard's life has become entwined with mine, and with the lives of so many of his friends and readers, who follow his exploits in all the languages in which the novels appear around the world.*

*Some of Bolitho's readers I am fortunate enough to have met, either at literary functions or in our local bookshop. Young and old, male and female – what better company could Bolitho ask for? Or for that matter, the author also.*

*With our thanks,  
Alexander Kent*



HMS Hyperion (center) and a British cutter (left of center)  
by English marine artist Geoffrey Huband

## Part Two

*Sea Change*

‘The day of the leviathans sailing slowly to a costly and terrible embrace is over. We’ll not see another Trafalgar, I am certain of it.’ An extract from Sir Richard Bolitho’s speech to the lords of Admiralty on the shortcomings of the line of battle.

All through our great naval heritage there have

been many instances of new tactics and weapons outstripping the minds of those in high command, and their natural resentment and resistance to change of any kind. The frigates, fifth and sixth rates, had long been the desire of every young naval officer, and to command one was perhaps the most coveted gift. Many fine admirals began their career as frigate captains: the very name of such rakish vessels brings respect and honour to these men. Light, speedy and manoeuvrable, faster than anything bigger and bigger than anything faster, they became so successful that even when faced with unfavourable odds frigates were expected to win the day. But too often their scope was limited: they were confined to carrying despatches from admirals to other squadrons, or to keeping watch over blockaded enemy ships while the heavier men-of-war stood more comfortably out to sea. 'The eyes of the fleet', as they were often termed, only came into their own when young frigate captains were temporarily free of the fleet's apron-strings, and were able to seek out and fight the enemy wherever he could be found.

But the line of battle? To dismiss it, and the outdated Fighting Instructions which laid down the rigid laws of engagement, was like blasphemy, and although in the end the true value of the frigate was accepted, if not welcomed, the line-of-battle mentality was to endure for another hundred and thirty years. Throughout the Victorian age, when iron and steel had all but replaced English oak, and even to the outbreak of the First World War, the proud grey lines of battleships and battle-cruisers

were still the symbol of sea-power and might. In that same war, only one major fleet engagement was fought: at Jutland in 1916, to an unsatisfactory conclusion. But did these facts change things? Not very much, for at the start of World War II the fleet's worth was still measured by its capital ships. The building of fast escorts for our heavily-mailed convoys would have been of much greater value, as would the construction of aircraft-carriers and submarines; the latter nearly turning the tables on us in both world wars when German U-Boats reaped a ready harvest in the Atlantic alone.

It should be no surprise, then, to learn that as far back as 1800 an inventor, Robert Fulton, who with his fellow American David Bushnell had designed some of the first crude submarines, came to England to demonstrate and attempt to develop his latest craft. It had already been rejected by no less than Napoleon Bonaparte after he had tried to blow up one of the British blockading squadrons outside Brest. As a last resort, Fulton visited England, the old enemy, and was fortunate enough to be given an interview with the young and progressive prime minister, William Pitt, but also the chance to demonstrate his submarine, *Nautilus*, with which he blew up a moored brig off Falmer.

But then, as more recently, the full weight of authority went against him. Lord St. Vincent, at that time the First Lord of the Admiralty, thundered, 'Pitt was the greatest fool that ever existed to encourage a mode of warfare which those who commanded the sea did not want, and which, if successful, would at once deprive them of

it.' Had Nelson been in charge of the Admiralty, I think Fulton's new invention would have appealed to his lively and imaginative mind.

It seems, with hindsight, that things rarely change! When the War of 1812 erupted between Britain and the United States, no immediate challenge to the fleet was foreseen. The Americans had long been aware that, even with a faster building programme, their yards had no hope of producing enough line-of-battle ships to face the squadrons of the King's navy. Some seventy-fours, the backbone of any British squadron, had indeed been laid down by the Americans, but changing circumstances caused them to be completed instead as large and powerful frigates. Rated as forty-four gun ships, they were in fact pierced for an additional ten heavy guns, and the stoutness of their timbers and their gunports, which were higher above the waterline than any similar vessels of our own, made them equal in power to smaller ships of the line, but they retained the speed and agility of any other frigate.

Two of the first to be built were the *United States* and the *Constitution*, and the next, the *President*, was described as the most beautiful and the fastest ship in the United States Navy. These and other frigates soon made themselves known, and woke up the complacent minds in the far-off Admiralty. The *Constitution* fought and captured the British frigate *Guerriere* after two hours' action, and later that year took HM frigate *Java*. Another of our frigates, the *Macedonian*, again in the first year of the war, fell to the guns of the

United States after a short but savage fight, in which the *Macedonian* had one hundred and four casualties, half her total company, while losses to the American were comparatively light.

In the following year, 1813, the score was slightly evened by the frigate *Shannon*'s victory over the American frigate *Chesapeake*. The latter was lying in Boston when the *Shannon*, commanded by the dashing and distinguished officer Philip Vere Bowes Broke, hove-to offshore. It was said that Captain Broke was grieving for the loss of so many of his contemporaries, and he was known to be eager to meet Captain Lawrence of the *Chesapeake*. He sent a challenge into Boston in the best tradition of chivalry, requesting that Lawrence should come out and 'try the fortunes of their respective flags, ship to ship.'

Broke's long interest in and understanding of the importance of gunnery and teamwork (he had even invented and fitted sights to his guns) soon paid off. After a fierce engagement, during which the *Chesapeake*'s gallant captain and first lieutenant were mortally wounded, Broke drove alongside and boarded his enemy. When the Stars and Stripes were hauled down, it was found that the whole battle had taken just fifteen minutes. That one victory did more to give the Royal Navy back its confidence than an entire fleet of first-rates.

And, as Bolitho predicted, after Trafalgar there were indeed no more great sea-battles, with ponderous ships clawing towards one another for the terrible and bloody embrace of close-action. The frigate was finally accepted as an independent



fighting ship. Perhaps Nelson even had a hand in that, when he proclaimed, ‘No captain can do very wrong if he places his ship alongside that of an enemy.’

## Part Three

### *A Conversation with the Author*

*by Kim Reeman*

**D**ouglas, what is the question interviewers ask you most often?

There are two. The one I always get asked at dinner parties is, ‘Do you use a word processor?’ The other one, usually asked by radio interviewers who haven’t read my books, is, ‘Do your books glorify war?’

*So, for the record ...*

For the record, no, I don’t use a word processor. I don’t own a computer. I don’t want to. I have an electronic typewriter and I compose directly on that. It’s the way I’ve always done it, and I don’t want technology coming between me and the work.

*Describe your working day.*

I answer all the mail in the mornings, and do the odd thing that needs to be done, then we have lunch – usually a sandwich – and I start work

about half past two. I read over the previous day’s work and correct it and then I go on with the next piece. Occasionally I rewrite a scene or the end of a chapter if I’m not satisfied with it, but not very often. I work until about half past five, then I knock off work and light the fire and have my sundowner. If it’s nice weather I sit outside on the terrace and have a pipe of tobacco. I get very keyed up when I’m working . . . sometimes I feel quite shattered after finishing a particularly difficult piece, and I’ve been known to wake up in the middle of the night and start thinking about the next piece. Or worrying . . . I’m a great worrier.

*What do you worry about?*

Everything. The job – people not holding up their ends of it. I do my part. I don’t see why other people can’t do theirs.

*What do you dislike most?*

Incompetence. Vulgarity. Disloyalty, particularly.

*What about being asked if your books glorify war?*

Well, that usually just shows ignorance, and I try to be polite about it. As for the question – I usually don’t talk about it, except to you – but I’ve never forgotten it, although I wouldn’t have missed it for the world. I was in the North Sea for eleven hours one November night, until the Air Sea Rescue picked us up. I’ve seen men, or what was left of

them, burning on the bridge. I've been blown up twice, I've been sunk, I've been burned, I've lost friends, I lost my favourite brother. Although there are qualities of the human spirit that war brings out, fine qualities, noble qualities even, and I try to show them, I have never written to glorify war. There wasn't much glory about it. You fight for each other, for the ship, and to stay alive, because someone's trying to kill you. The death or glory stuff comes later. You don't think about king and country. You just do it because you're there, it's your job to do it.

*Are you bitter?*

I sometimes look around like poor Tyacke and say, 'And for what?'

*What about the current wave of reconciliation visits to Germany and Japan?*

I don't really appreciate members of the Royal Family apologising for what was done out of necessity fifty years ago. It was war, and there's no point in attempting to apply a 1990's mentality to the events of that time. We were at war.

Do you have any feelings about Europe?

One of the local policemen told me a story about a farm around here with a sign on the gate that read, 'The EEC [European Economic Community] stops here.' I feel that way. I'm not a European, I'm an

Englishman, and I resent losing my British passport and having to carry an EC one. I resent having to come through the EC channel at the airport. I also resent Brussels dictating what everyone should do and think. We've been trading with each other for a thousand years – if we can't do that without being told how to do it there's something wrong somewhere.

*You've travelled ever since you were a child, when your father's regiment was sent to Singapore. What's your favourite place in the world?*

It used to be Tahiti, but Tahiti isn't quite what it was. I'd have to say Hong Kong. I love it I feel at peace there, I like everything about it. I feel very badly about what's going to happen there, but there's nothing anybody can do about it. I particularly dislike newspaper columnists who pontificate about how we're betraying Hong Kong. When I was there researching *Sunset* we went out on a Royal Navy gunboat, and as we were heading up the coast toward Communist waters the captain leaned on one of his little popguns and looked out over the sea towards the New Territories and said to me, "I know a hundred thousand Chinese could come over that border any day, and there's not a damned thing anyone can do to stop them. I could make a gesture, but it wouldn't be appreciated." The place is indefensible, and that's that. It cannot be held, as we found out to our cost in the Second World War. And what are we going to do, fight a million Chinese? What would the newspapers have

to say about that?

*You used to be a great reader. Who were your early influences?*

H. E. Bates, Elleston Trevor, Simon Harvester, Nevil Shute. Ewart Brooks to a certain extent. *Midshipman Easy*, which has been ruthlessly copied by a lot of other authors, is to me the most authentic of all because it has all the correct orders of the period. And *Treasure Island*, which for me is the greatest sea story of all time. All the books share qualities of authenticity, the authors knew what they were talking about and they didn't write to impress, they just told what happened. I don't read very much now because I'm always writing. I don't have the time, and I'm always afraid that subconsciously something might stay in my mind.

*How do you relax?*

Music, swimming, seeing a good film if there's one on, travelling in the Far East. I'm not a very social person, I don't entertain a lot, I don't like to be 'entertained.' I like a very quiet, private life, going to a couple of good restaurants, doing what we like to do.

*How has Richard Bolitho changed over the years, and what qualities do you share with him?*

I think he's grown into his responsibilities very well, although he has enemies and has lost friends

along the way . . . otherwise he's developed very much as he wanted to. I had nothing to do with it. When he was a captain he thought less of the consequences – now he's less apt to throw lives away to no good purpose. Someone in, I think it was *Success to the Brave*, accused him of having a death wish, but once he got back his old *Hyperion* and sailed into English Harbour something began again in his life that had never really ended, and he had something to live for again. Qualities I share with him? He always cares for his men, for their welfare, in a time when that was not commonplace, and I was always interested in the welfare of my men although they were always a lot older than me. And, like me, Bolitho has found great happiness with a younger woman. We have that in common.

*Will you ever write the final book?*

No. Bolitho changed my life, and has brought me a lot of happiness. There are gaps in his life, other stories to tell, and I could never go back and do that if I wrote the last book. He's been a good friend to me over the years.

*You've written more than fifty books, twenty-two of them Bolitho novels. When you look back at them, what do you hope you've achieved?*

A sense of what it was like, a sense of how much we owe to these men. I always wanted Bolitho to be a man of his times, not simply a model in fancy



dress.

according to the day of the week.

*Do you think about retiring?*

No. Not as long as I keep enjoying what I do, and I have stories to tell and people enjoy reading them. That, I think, is everything.

**Part Four**

*Sweethearts and Wives*

The drinking of toasts, sentiments, was always looked upon and cherished as a tradition of great importance, and has continued in the Royal Navy to a lesser extent even to the present.

It is well to remember the discomfort endured aboard those weather-beaten ships in the days of sail: weeks and months at sea in all weathers, with no heating permitted other than the galley stove because of the obvious risk of fire. In conditions that were often cold and damp, it was impossible to enjoy the comfort of dry clothing so that at the end of each long the most important event, to the officers at least, was the evening meal, dinner or supper, according to the day of the week. Some of the meals were described as barely edible, so that the true value of wine and certain spirits became apparent: a necessity, rather than a luxury.

Toasts were called at irregular intervals to celebrate birthdays and promotions, but there was also a more rigid schedule which was observed

Naval Toasts	
Monday Night	Our ships at sea.
Tuesday Night	Our men.
Wednesday Night	Ourselves. (With some tongue in cheek, as it was rightly assumed that no one else would care.
Thursday Night	Confusion to our enemies <i>or</i> A bloody war <i>or, more selectively</i> , Death to the French!
Friday Night	A willing foe and enough sea room.
Saturday Night	Sweethearts and wives. (with the rejoinder, 'May they never meet!')
Sunday Night	Absent friends (also to include those fallen in battle).

## Part Five

### *For My Country's Freedom*

**I**t is March 1811, and in this, the twenty-second Richard Bolitho novel, Alexander Kent's sensitive and compassionate hero is recalled to duty after only two and a half months' peace in Cornwall with his beloved Catherine.

Promoted Admiral, his choice of flagship and flag captain shock the Admiralty, but Bolitho, poignantly aware of his own vulnerability, surrounds himself only with those men he can trust completely: the faithful Allday, the withdrawn and intelligent Avery, and James Tyacke, who must confront the sternest test of his loyalty with great personal courage.

When diplomacy fails the cannon must speak, and Bolitho, patrolling the troubled waters from Antigua north to Halifax, knows that when war with America comes he must fight an enemy not foreign but familiar, for the freedom to leave the sea forever.

