



The  
*Richard Boultho*  
Newsletter

Issue XV



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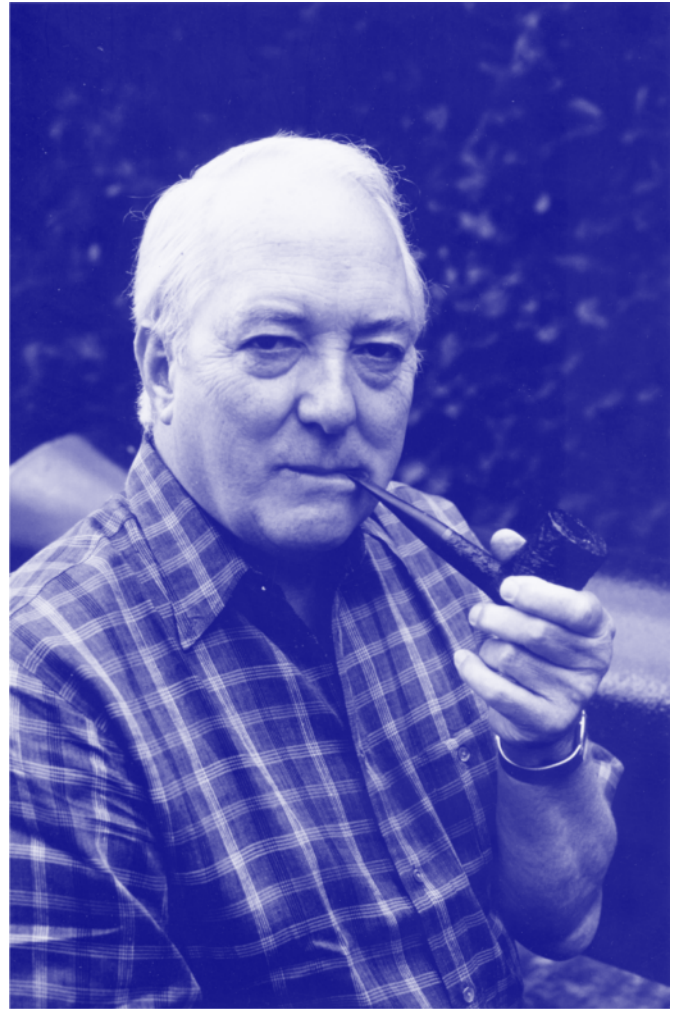
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Douglas Reeman / Alexander Kent  
Photo by Kimberley Reeman

## Part One

### *For Those in Peril*

In the great days of sail when the distant oceans were the hunting-ground of every kind of predator from enemy warship to pirate, from slaver to privateer, the danger of shipwreck was very real. Sailing in company with even one other vessel gave heart to men about to navigate their way to the other side of the world, but alone, with only their own resources to sustain them, they were greatly at risk.

Every day the log would be streamed to try and discover how many miles they had made good, and the time and watches made by turning the glass even when an otherwise accurate chronometer was carried on board. For in long-distance navigation often out of sight of any land, there was always the possibility of false calculations, or over-confidence in the daily fixes taken with a sextant, which could leave much to doubt.

Even the condition of a ship's hull, if she were too long denied a proper docking or careening, made a difference to her speed and performance. One of Nelson's staunchest ships for instance, the



In the great age of sail, shipwreck was a constant threat.

two-decker *Superb*, had not been in port for over four years. The weed on her ravaged hull became so long that accurate calculations were out of the question.

But in the vast area of the oceans often the biggest danger lay in incomplete charts, where only hazy surveys had been carried out. Some of the old charts show empty spaces which today are recorded to the nearest mile and fathom.

Good seamen had their eyes and their wits to guard them. The shadow beneath a sea otherwise as calm as a millpond could be the beginning of a

deadly reef; and it took a keen-eyed lookout to warn the watch below his perch of the nearness of disaster, so that the vessel could be put about in time.

And when land was sighted, after perhaps months at sea, there was still danger in an unknown bay or lagoon: the anchors ready to let go, sails shortened to the limit to allow only for steerage-way, and each man very aware that an isolated tooth of reef could take out the keel with the ease of a shark snapping at a drowning victim.

Another innovation was the ship's lead-and-line, which could be hurled from the forechains by an experienced seaman, and which by a succession of 'marks' told the leadsman the depth of water and even the nature of the bottom. The lead weighed fourteen pounds, and when fully extended touched bottom at twenty fathoms. The depths were marked by pieces of bunting in various colours, with strips of leather at the shallowest and most risky soundings. There was also an aperture in the foot of the lead which was often 'armed' with tallow. When he examined the tallow a well-trained leadsman could tell the condition of the sea-bed: sand, loose stones or nothing at all, which usually meant danger, a rocky bottom which invited collision and where no anchor would hold fast.

But if the worst happened and a ship ran aground or smashed into an uncharted reef, the



HMS *Bounty* mutineers send Captain William Bligh on an epic journey.

measures for survival were equally crude. Open boats, if they could be cleared away in time, carried only the basic rations: drinking water in a barricoe, ship's biscuits, too often rock-hard with age, and little else. Few sailors could swim, and without proper directions would be lost almost immediately.

Few lived to match the epic journey of the much-maligned William Bligh of the *Bounty*. Unarmed but for a couple of cutlasses and in an unseaworthy boat – chosen by the mutineers for that reason – and with virtually no proper food, Bligh not only lived but delivered his men to safety. They touched upon unknown islands where they scavenged in rock-pools for shellfish. They



caught sea-birds if any were foolish enough to fly within reach of oars or boathooks, and Bligh rationed every morsel. Apart from one man who was caught by hostile natives on an island and hacked to pieces before their eyes, not a single life was lost. With oars and a scrap of sail Bligh got them all to safety. Forty-one days and 3,618 miles – a feat of survival which is still unchallenged.

The words of the familiar naval hymn, ‘For those in peril on the sea . . .’ can still rouse that old feeling of danger, and of hope . . .

## Part Two

### *Letters*

*by Kim Reeman*

*‘When I buy a new Bolitho book, I arm myself with an adequate supply of whisky and (regrettably) cigarettes, and relax on a rocking-chair installed in the garage – my wife has banned smoking indoors – and settle down for a proper read. By the received wisdom of present-day medical knowledge no doubt I am doing everything wrong, but I am certainly enjoying the error of my ways. Thank you for writing such good books and contributing to my pleasure.’*

*– C. A. Coen,  
Cambridgeshire, England*

The letters come from all over the world, from men, women and children of many nationalities

and every walk of life: servicemen and women past and present, Japanese and Italian schoolgirls, a US Marine Corps captain in the desert at the height of the Gulf War, a rabbi in Jerusalem, a missionary in Taiwan, doctors, postal and office workers, the Coastguard, admirals and ratings, noblemen and former U-Boat commanders. Young Germans write, asking endless questions about Bolitho’s England and then, inevitably, the war, in a moving and sometimes painful attempt to understand their past.

*‘While I read the book I was very shocked. I’ve never thought that human beings were capable of these horrible actions.’*

*– Christoph Lohmann (15),  
Bad Bentheim, Germany*

*‘It is good to hear something about Hitler from someone who is not German. Here it is nearly impossible to speak objectively about that time. I have found no one who knows the answer to my questions.’*

*– Elke Feils,  
Koerperich, Germany*

There are letters, to Douglas Reeman and to Alexander Kent, that fill files and boxes in the house. Each one is answered personally, and regarded as a vital link between the author and his readers in what is undoubtedly one of the loneliest professions. Almost every correspondent writes with utter sincerity. Many write shyly, as though

their letters were an imposition. Some offer story ideas, photos or mementoes, some send books to be signed; some share their experiences of war, or ask for information on their surnames, which might have been taken from the Army or Navy lists of the late eighteenth century and appeared in a Bolitho novel. Some write whimsically, some poignantly, of their pleasure in discovering or rediscovering the series, and those qualities in Richard Bolitho's character which many find inspirational.

*'Is it wrong to try to act like the man Richard Bolitho is to me?'*

— Jonathan Brisson,  
B.A., Vermont, USA.

*'Despite the brutal miseries of the time, you have produced a splendid person in Richard Bolitho, and showed how the man's humanity taught his staff to emulate him, by his fair and generous behaviour ...'*

— Mrs. Margaret Lowe,  
Berkshire, England

*'It was like greeting old friends: a very moving experience ... The chivalry, the honour, and most of all, the friendship. It was all there as I vividly recalled it.'*

— Steven Wasserman,  
Toronto, Canada

The oldest reader we know is 104; one of the youngest was a schoolboy of 9 when he fell in with Richard Bolitho some time ago. Many who write to Douglas have become close friends, and one, a very gifted South African lady, even cast Bolitho's horoscope and predicted events in his life with uncanny accuracy – some ten years before the books were written!

Many readers ask the same questions. When will the third midshipman book be written? (It's scheduled for 1992.) What is the origin and correct pronunciation of Bolitho's surname? ('Bolitho', pronounced Bo-LYE-tho, was originally a Portuguese name, and is still common in Cornwall). When will the third book in the Royal Marines series appear? (*The Horizon*, set during the First World War, will be published in 1992.) And finally, will the book ending Richard Bolitho's life ever be written?

I asked Douglas this the other evening and he gave me the usual light-hearted answer: 'I always tell people that anybody born in 1756 would of course have died at some time, and I decided when off the top of my head – on the telephone as a matter of fact, when I was discussing the bookmark with the publisher. I would only do it for one reason: to stop someone else writing a sequel.' Then he became serious and quite thoughtful, and said, 'But I could never actually do it. He's a friend. I would know him if he walked through that door in modern dress – I would know who he was. He gave me an entirely new life, and it became my world.'

And mine. I was among those who wrote to the author, for the four years following our first meeting in Toronto in June 1980. Letters begun in professional admiration progressed to friendship and deepened, through dark personal circumstances, into love. I still have his letters. He still has mine, and many of yours. They are treasured, and we thank you for them.

## Part Three

### *Ride the Wind*

**I**n the past I have written of the great heritage given our day-to-day language by the sea and the sailormen of long ago.

Over centuries many of the old naval terms and expressions have lost most, if not all of their original meanings. ‘First-rate’, the largest type of warship in the line of battle, of 100 guns or more, is now used to express excellence, whereas ‘third-rate’ suggests the opposite, and is often derogatory. In fact, the third-rate of 74 guns was the most frequent and often most valiant participant in any 18th/19th century sea-fight.

The list is endless: ‘gone by the board’, ‘taken aback’, ‘pushing the boat out’, ‘the gilt on the gingerbread’, all originally the language of the sea, and now just memories.

I was asked quite recently to list some of the old sailing terms which were once in daily use on the deck of a man-of-war. For if the sea was an enemy, the wind could be just as merciless to any unwary

officer or seaman.

From a three-masted ship of the line with her towering pyramids of sails to the swift and agile frigates, sloops, and even the topsail cutter with her solitary mast which could outmanoeuvre all the others, every piece of canvas had to be understood, the miles of standing and running rigging familiar in bright sunshine or the pitch-darkness of a screaming gale. From the deck or far above it, the quality of every sail and the limits of a ship's endurance was part of every seaman's life. There were no schools or training barracks for any one: it all had to be studied and learned by example, with not a few kicks to hurry the process. A twelve year-old midshipman shared the same rigours and dangers as a frightened landsman hauled aboard by the press gang. Leadership, iron-hard discipline and time, when it was granted, did the rest. The men at the helm, the lieutenants who stood the watches at sea, relaxed their vigilance only at their peril.

And aloof from them all, but more conscious even than they of the dangers to his ship and company, every vessel's captain knew that a sudden shift of wind and weather could spell disgrace and disaster not only at sea, but at his own court-martial.

So here is a short list of the many hundreds of sailing terms in common usage in Bolitho's time, but lesser known today:

**ABACK:** The position of the sails when they press against the mast.

**A-BOX:** When the yards are braced in opposite directions.

**ABOUT:** On the other tack.

**A-LEE:** Position of the helm when placed in the opposite direction from that in which the wind is blowing. To leeward.

**ALL IN THE WIND:** When too close to the wind so that the sails shake.

**ATHWARTSHIPS:** At right angles to the keel.

**AVAST:** To hold fast. Hence the term: avast hauling.

**A-WEATHER:** When the helm is placed in the direction the wind blows.

**BEAR UP:** To keep further away from the wind.

**BEATING:** Tacking towards the direction of the wind.

**BROACH TO:** Coming suddenly up into the wind.

**BY THE WIND:** Is sailing as close to the wind as possible.

**CLAW TO WINDWARD:** Beating gradually to windward. To claw off a lee shore.

**CLOSE-HAULED:** Sailing close to the wind.

**DOG VANE:** A small vane made of feathers or bunting attached to the weather shroud to show the direction of the wind.

**FLAT ABACK:** When the wind takes the sails well on the wrong side.

**FLY UP IN THE WIND:** When a vessel comes up quickly head to wind.

**FULL AND BYE:** Sailing close to the wind but keeping all sails full.

**GO ABOUT:** To tack.

**GRIPE:** To carry too much weather helm.

**HELM'S A-LEE ...** The helm put right over leeward.

**HOVE TO:** Remaining stationary.

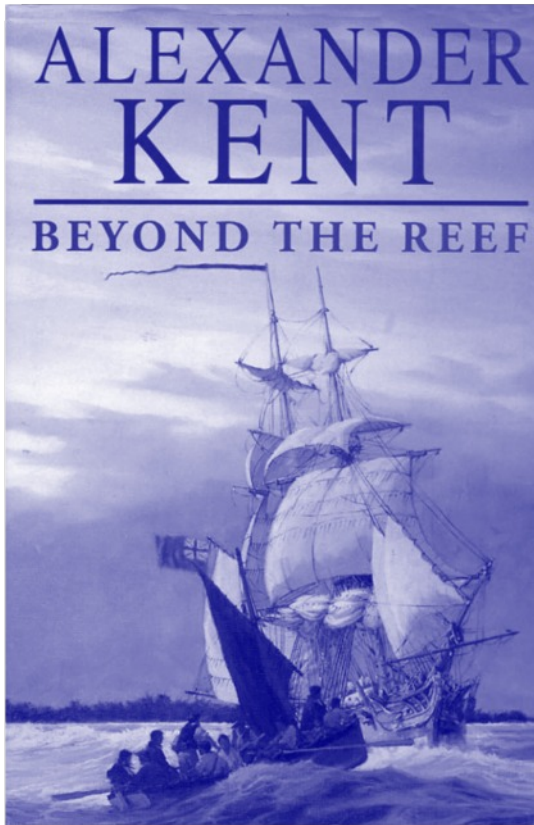
**IRONS:** A vessel is said to be in irons when up in the wind but will not pay off on either tack.

**LUFF:** To bring a vessel close to the wind.

**SHIVER:** To luff up so far as to cause the sails to shiver.

**SLACK IN STAYS:** Slow in tacking.





VEER: Wind is said to veer when it shifts with the hands of a watch, and to ‘back’ when it shifts against the hands of a watch. (It is the reverse way in the Southern Hemisphere.) Also to pay or ease out cable.

YAW: When a ship does not answer a straight and steady course and the head ‘yaws’ from one side to the other.

## Part Four

### *Beyond the Reef*

March, 1808, and war spreads in Europe as Napoleon holds Portugal and threatens his old ally, Spain. The Royal Navy's blockade of enemy ports continues, and a new anti-slavery bill further stretches the hard-pressed fleet's resources, as more ships are required elsewhere to suppress that profitable trade.

Estranged from his wife and child, and plagued by the fear of blindness, Vice-Admiral Sir Richard Bolitho is ordered once more to the Cape of Good Hope, to establish a permanent naval force there following the success of his previous mission. He leaves behind the contempt of society and the bitter memories of a friendship betrayed, and with the mistress he will not forsake takes passage on the ill-fated *Golden Plover*. With them are others eager to quit the land: Valentine Keen, for whom command at the Cape is both promotion and an escape from his own troubled marriage, the faithful Allday, and young Stephen Jenour, who finds in this dangerous voyage a passage to maturity.

When shipwreck and disaster overtake *Golden Plover*, a hundred-mile reef of the coast of Africa becomes a powerful symbol of crisis and survival, claiming alike the innocent and the damned. Beyond the reef little remains, only raw courage and reckless hope, and the certainty that for those in peril and for those at home life has changed irrevocably.

