



The  
*Richard Boultho*  
Newsletter

Issue XXII



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Douglas Reeman / Alexander Kent  
Photo by Kimberley Reeman

## Part One

### *The Way Ahead*

Trafalgar was a proud memory, but the field of Waterloo was still littered with the debris of Napoleon's defeat when the Royal Navy reeled under the wind of change. The greatest fleet England had ever known, the *sure shield*, was being cut to the bone. There was soon hardly an estuary or anchorage around our coasts which was not the final haven for many of those same ships which had fought and survived so many years of war. Some with famous names, which had faced the thundering broadsides at St. Vincent, the Glorious First of June, and Copenhagen, were laid up as hulks and floating prisons, or destined for oblivion in a breaker's yard.

And what of their people, many of whom had grown from boyhood to seasoned Jacks, volunteers and pressed men alike? Suddenly discharged into a world they hardly recognized, abandoned by the only life they really understood. The seaports were full of the grim reminders of war, men crippled, limbless, blinded, left on the beach like many of those forgotten ships. For those who stayed with the dwindling fleet, the lucky ones, as many



'Man of War' by English marine artist  
Geoffrey Huband

considered them, there were new problems to overcome. At the close of hostilities there were some two hundred admirals and eight hundred and fifty captains on the Navy List. A captain might serve thirty years in that rank, and there was hardly a flag officer under the age of sixty. Promotion was at a standstill, but young blood was always needed by the navy, and by a country which depended on the oceans' lifelines for trade and security. Despite the perils and rigours of life at sea in a King's ship, there were many boys, some very young, who were prepared to take up the challenge in their

determination to become sea officers. The midshipman, so aptly named, stood somewhere between the forecandle and the quarterdeck, neither one thing nor the other. In the original black-and-white film of *Mutiny on the Bounty*, Charles Laughton, playing the part of a much maligned William Bligh, coldly described the midshipman as ‘the lowest form of animal life in the Navy.’

That film rarely approached historical accuracy, so we do not know if Bligh did make such a crushing remark, but there were plenty who thought as much.

It was a demanding life for the young hopeful, and it began the very moment he set foot aboard his first man-of-war, a towering ship of the line, or perhaps a dashing frigate. So much to learn and discover: miles of cordage, standing and running rigging, first salt-hardened canvas high above the decks in all weathers, along the seasoned hands who regarded the would-be officer with amusement or resentment.

This was an apprentice system, so that a midshipman’s eventual skill and well-being depended on those entrusted with, and interested enough, in his progress. The sailing master with his world of charts and calculations, teaching the ‘young gentlemen’ to use a sextant; spotting the sun with other midshipman, committing to heart the rules of speed, time and distance, making the first small cross on a chart to mark the ship’s position. And of course gunnery, the ‘handling of the great guns’ as the old Jacks termed it. The speed with which each gun crew could aim, shoot,

reload and fire again was the measure of survival, the final solution to an argument conducted in the King’s name.

Some midshipmen were born to the life, coming from old naval families, or sponsored by friends with influence, or officers who knew them. Encouraged, chased or bullied, the midshipman grew up fast, always with an eye on the figure who walked alone on his own quarterdeck, beyond reach. The captain.

Despite the work and the drills, the brutal humour of the lower deck, and the kindness too, the real strength of any ship’s company, after the years of learning, the blunders and the triumphs, there was a sense of belonging, of confidence. Nevertheless, the signal to attend the examination for lieutenant, with his captain’s recommendation, was usually met with surprise by the midshipman, and no little anxiety.

The Board consisted of a captain and two other officers, and convened aboard the senior ship of the squadron. In peacetime often three captains would examine each candidate, enough to put any midshipman into a state of nerves. Some spoke of the experience afterwards as if it were a dream, questions and answers lost in a daze.

And then it was over, nods of approval, handshakes from all three officers of the Board, and the wish for ‘a speedy promotion’. The latter was a sign of the times, with promotion almost at a standstill. Passing the examination for lieutenant and actually receiving a commission were often far apart. Some midshipmen waited years to take that

first momentous step. Some never received the coveted piece of parchment at all.

But for the fortunate one, the transformation was complete. He was now a lieutenant, a King's officer, and held the King's commission.

## Part Two

### *A Sailor's Odyssey*

*by Kim Reeman*

**D**ouglas, does it feel like forty-five years since your first book, *A Prayer for the Ship*, was published?

No, it doesn't at all, mainly because there were no gaps between the books. I was always finishing one and thinking about the next one. It feels very wrong when I'm not writing.

*Tell me about that first publication day. It was Monday, June 9, 1958, right? What did you do?*

I got very excited about it. I think the first person I told was the postman.

*Any celebrations?*

Mostly just the people in the boatyard at Kingston, where I was having some work done on the *Guardian* . . . actually, I was doing most of it myself. People who knew I'd written the book . . . And I went to work that day, too. I went to the bookshop in Battersea and they hadn't heard

anything about it. It was a very local celebration, then the next day I went up and saw the publishers and we had a proper celebration, a very in-house affair. It was like a dream, really.

*You've seen a lot of changes in the publishing world.*

Yes, mostly caused by takeovers, and the fact that when I started I dealt with the same people over the next three or four books, which was a great comfort. My life had changed but they were always there, my publisher, my editor, and the lady who handled the contracts.

*So how has it changed?*

It's very big and in many ways impersonal. Certain people stand out from the crowd, with whom you work closely, editorial and publicity for example, but it's when you look at the notepaper that you realize how many companies they own. Fortunately it has no affect on my writing of the books.

*Has your method of working changed?*

No. Writing as Alexander Kent, the same characters appear or are mentioned, so you have to keep records . . . the perfect filing system, which is called a shambles.

One thing has not changed, and that is that research remains all-important, visiting the loca-

tion, talking to people, because today people have been everywhere. The details have to be right. The books are now published in twenty languages, but I still find I don't make any allowances for the language difference or the cultural thing . . . I don't, for example, write a Bolitho novel and worry about how somebody in Poland is going to view it. The Germans and the Japanese don't seem to mind, so I suppose the writing has some universal quality that translates well. And I feel much closer to many readers than I might have done in the past because of the website. I think a lot more people feel more comfortable leaving an e-mail message for me than writing a letter, and the fact that they feel free to do that is very touching.

*Do you enjoy your work as much as you ever did?*

Yes, I do, when I can do it! I think it gets harder, but I don't know why. I'm always looking for something different, I suppose.

*In forty-five years, you have never had a rejection notice, and never had a book remaindered. That's a staggering achievement. And you never have any shortage of ideas, nor have you had writer's block, although books and characters have resisted you when they wanted to be written a different way*

I think it's because there are never any gaps. I'm always thinking of another one on the horizon. The characters take on a life of their own, and at least half a dozen times in my career certain characters

have decided of their own accord that they want to go their own way, in directions I had never imagined. Usually I don't fight it. I don't want to be in total control, nor would I want to be. That denies a book life.

*Would you have done anything different in those forty-five years?*

I did change *Rendezvous – South Atlantic* for the Americans, because they wanted a happy ending. I thought my original ending was much better. I wouldn't do that now, though, for anybody. One of my favourite books, even so. I can't think of anything else offhand . . . I'd like to see films made of some of my books, but unfortunately that hasn't happened yet.

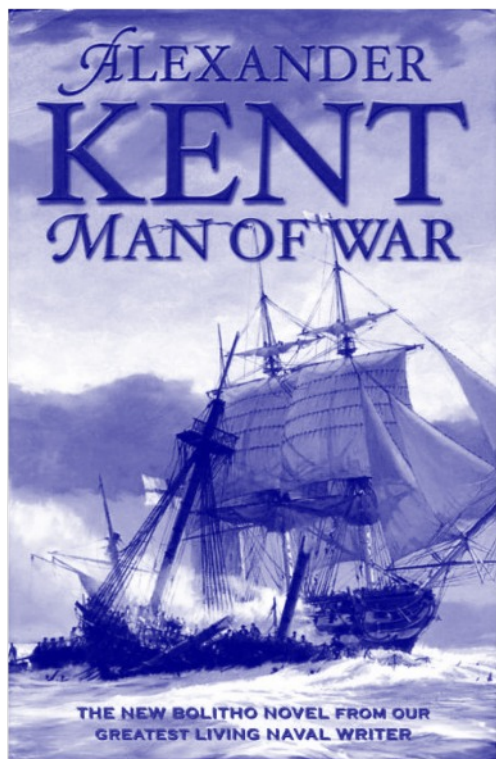
*What have you in mind for the future? What do you want to do, apart from answer the burning question, 'Whatever happened to Martyn Dancer?'*

I just want to go on and keep getting ideas and building stories around them. I want to keep meeting people in the book business, the people who actually sell the books for me – we've seen how important that is in the last few tours, and they never get any credit for it.

*Do you know what happened to Martyn Dancer?*

No, I don't. I'm waiting to find out, like everybody else!





## Part Three

### *Man of War*

*Man of War*, which was first published on 5 June 2003, is the twenty-sixth title in the Bolitho series.

Antigua, 1817, and every harbour and estuary is filled with ghostly ships, the famous and the legendary now redundant in the aftermath of war. In this uneasy peace, Adam Bolitho is fortunate to

be offered the seventy-four gun *Athena*, and as flag captain to Vice-Admiral Sir Graham Bethune once more follows his destiny to the Caribbean.

But in these haunted waters where Richard Bolitho and his ‘band of brothers’ once fought a familiar enemy, the quarry is now a renegade foe who flies no colours and offers no quarter, and whose traffic in human life is sanctioned by flawed treaties and men of influence. And here, when *Athena*’s guns speak, a day of terrible retribution will dawn for the innocent and the damned.

## Part Four

### *Boat Ahoy*

It was generally accepted in the Royal Navy that a ship could be judged by the appearance and behaviour of her boats and their crews, and in a busy anchorage or naval port the officer or coxswain of any boat would be very aware of many critical eyes watching with approval or otherwise, particularly when passing close to a ship flying an admiral’s flag.

When one boat with an officer aboard closed with another carrying an officer superior in rank, respect was paid by tossing the oars, or, in the case of boats fitted with crutches, by laying upon the oars until the great man was safely past.

In poor visibility or during the night watches, the officer or coxswain in charge of a boat had to be prepared to respond immediately if challenged whenever passing a moored ship. Any failure would result in a severe reprimand, or, in time of

war, a charge of canister shot!

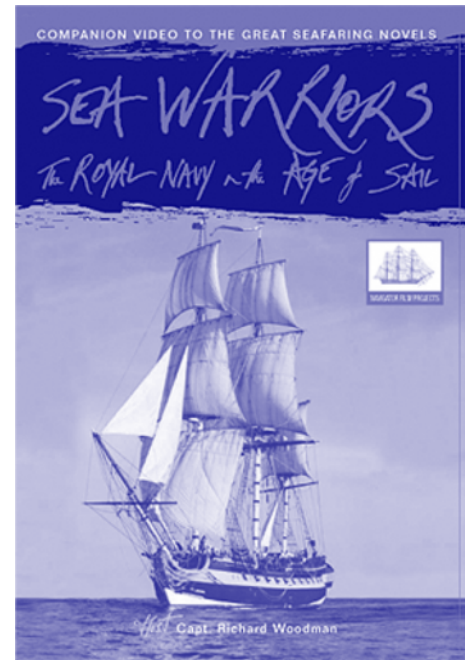
## Part Five

### *Douglas Reeman in New Tall Ships Documentary Film by Chip Richie*

A new film documentary, *Sea Warriors – the Royal Navy in the Age of Sail*, by Richie Productions, features interviews with Douglas Reeman. The video is an excellent counterpart to the great seafaring novels of Alexander Kent, C. S. Forester, Patrick O'Brian and others. It gives a factual account of what life was like in Nelson's navy, making it instantly relatable to the novels we all love to read. The re-enactments aboard HMS *Trincomalee* and the *Endeavour*, along with the original art and graphics used in the film, make it a must-see.

'What I have seen to date is quite fascinating,' states Douglas Reeman. 'Chip's passion for his subject and his craft is obvious. I especially appreciated the scenes near Falmouth, which of course was Richard Bolitho's home.'

The documentary film is hosted by author/historian Richard Woodman (Nathaniel Drinkwater



novels) and was shot on location throughout the United Kingdom, as well as on board HM Bark *Endeavour*. There are interviews with Colin White aboard HMS *Victory* in Portsmouth, with Robert Gardiner in the mold loft in Chatham, and others. In addition, author Julian Stockwin (Thomas Kydd novels) discusses the life of the common seaman.

The film was launched in autumn 2003.

