



The  
*Richard Bollitho*  
Newsletter

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Douglas Reeman / Alexander Kent  
with *Cutty Sark* in the background.

## Part One

### *The Fighting Ship*

The square-rigged fighting ship of the 18th century and early 19th century has often been described as the most beautiful thing ever created by man. But in her day she was seen very differently by those who served, commanded and depended on her.

To the citizen ashore the occasional sighting of a man-of-war making sail, dropping anchor, or tacking gracefully around a headland before heading out to sea represented security, pride and a sure defence against the country's enemies, and in those troubled times there were many.

To government planners and the strategists at the Admiralty a fighting ship was a floating gun platform which had to be in the right place at the right time to be of any use. Theirs was a different war from that faced by the men who served in the King's ships, an endless struggle to maintain the balance of weapons, supplies and, above all, competent captains to take command.

To the trained seaman and marine the fighting



'A Tradition of Victory' by English marine artist  
Chris Mayger

ship was something familiar, demanding and hard, but one which could be mastered and used to good advantage with a certain amount of luck. In the frightened eyes of a man dragged from his home street or tavern by the press gang a ship-of-war with its towering and mysterious web of rigging and shrouds, spars and canvas might be seen as a nightmare.

And what of each captain, be he the junior commander of a brig or the godlike figure in charge of a ship-of-the-line, did he have any

qualms at the trust invested in his skills and experience?

We only have to consider the complete self-reliance needed to sustain a fighting ship from day to day to answer that question. For whether the vessel was attached to a squadron or fleet and under the direct orders of an admiral, or making her lonely passage across the breadth of some great ocean, each captain knew that he must use his resources to the best of his ability, to make the hull, masts, sails and weapons respond as one whenever required. In those days there were no training depots ashore for either officers or seamen. Only the Corps of marines had their separate bases and divisions where they could be taught the additional rudiments of being a soldier and sailor too.

Men who volunteered for service in the King's ships, or were pressed into it by force and necessity, had to learn the hard way, from the deck upwards. A ship might touch land for a matter of hours only before putting to sea again with newly-recruited hands barely able to believe what was happening to them. The experienced seamen had to be spread amongst the untrained ones, ropes and halliards thrust into their hands until they learned what each piece meant, how it played its vital part to make the ship work and live. On the dizzily swaying yards above the deck, and groping frantically for hand and toe holds while the wind did all it could to hurl them to their deaths, the lessons had to be forced home with little thought of sentiment. Every sailor knew that his security

depended on the whole company working as a team. One false move, a brace or halliard parting in a full gale, and a life could be lost to no purpose.

The master's mates and petty officers were too conscious of their first lieutenant's watchful eye to hesitate in using a fist or rope's end if they thought it would hasten the process of learning.

The officers too learned by example until they knew and understood the miles of rigging and cordage, the stress and use of each sail, and how to stand a watch with the best of them. The youthful officers usually began their careers around the age of twelve and even less; the midshipmen, or 'young gentlemen' as they were nicknamed, soon discovered it was a far step from gunroom to quarterdeck.

Strangely remote from the packed humanity around them, the ship's specialists, the real strength in any fighting ship, saw their floating home as work rather than duty. The boatswain was mainly involved with the care and maintenance of all the vessel's rigging and day to day seamanship. The carpenter with his crew knew he was expected to repair anything once the ship was away from land and other friendly craft. From putting storm and battle damage to rights to constructing new boats from the fragments of old ones, the carpenter was fully employed. Like the sailmaker, whose work was concerned with anything from stitching up rent canvas to sewing hammocks around dead seamen. He was not averse to putting his needle and palm to the other skill of making clothing for the sailors.

And all the while, as the ship held on her set course, and the men worked, trained and drilled, the vessel's real worth lay waiting with the patience of the sea itself. The guns, which were part of every man's daily life, were her purpose for being, and her company there to serve them. Powerful three-decker or lithe frigate, her value lay in her armament and the ability to use it and emerge as a victor.

To each captain the sense of responsibility was a heavy one. For no matter how his gun crews were drilled until their movements were automatic and timed to the second, he never really knew what they would be called upon to face. When sailing without company and confronted by a foreign vessel there was always an additional worry for the captain, especially when he had been away from his home port or squadron for any length of time. Was the vessel he was approaching still an enemy? Or had a peace treaty been signed while he was on passage? To a patrolling frigate captain almost any alien sail was an enemy. A scouting corvette from some French fleet, a privateer or pirate, smuggler or renegade, each represented danger if treated unwarily.

In a fleet at sea a captain's problem was different in respect. At least he did not have to worry about the identity or intentions of approaching ships. That was the admiral's problem, the Flag would decide.

But the strain on the ships' companies could be terrible. If the wind was light it sometimes took hours or all day for two enemy fleets to draw near

enough to each other to join battle. To a new and barely trained seaman as he stood at his gun with his companions it must have been awesome to see the enemy sails spreading out on either side until they hid the horizon. So slow to embrace, so deadly, yet strangely magnificent. On such occasions routine aboard the fighting ship continued. Sails were trimmed, meals issued, tots of spirits consumed. Perhaps the marine fifers would play lively jigs to keep the hands occupied and stop them from staring too long at the approaching menace. The older seamen knew what was coming and envied the raw hands their ignorance.

At the order to clear the ship for action the real transformation took place. Their floating home with its tiny individual messes separated by the great guns they were soon to serve in battle was exposed for what it was. Screens were torn down, furniture, chests and unnecessary clutter carried below the waterline where they would be safe until afterwards. The ship's boats were usually dropped astern, loosely moored to a buoy so that they could be retrieved. Again that word, *afterwards*. If there was to be one.

A ship-of-war was cleared from bow to stern so that there was nothing to impede the cannon which fired through their ports on either side. Ship's boys sanded the decks to give each crew a better foothold. The boatswain's party rigged chain slings and nets above the gun decks to protect the men there from falling spars and blocks. In his heavily protected magazine the gunner checked his charges, his feet safely covered in felt slippers as a





A British Royal Navy midshipman



A private of the British Royal Marines, circa 1815

guard against sparks. Hammocks were tightly packed in the nettings around the gangways and quarterdeck, protection against musket balls and wood splinters, the latter as lethal as any lead shot.

The enemy is a little nearer now, but only an occasional hoist of bunting from the flagship and a curt acknowledgement from each vessel in the line of battle betrays any obvious reaction.

The marines are in position behind the nettings, muskets ready, their sergeant and corporals ready

to call the time to reload and fire when the pace quickens. Above the deck in the fighting tops other marines train their swivel guns and wait for the order to load.

The captain is aft at the quarterdeck rail with his first lieutenant, the other key members of his team nearby, the sailing master with his mates and helmsmen by the great wheel, the youthful midshipmen in charge of the signalling party, the marine officer in his scarlet coat making a splash

of colour against the blue jackets and checkered shirts of the seamen.

If the captain is troubled by the efficiency of his gun crews he must not show it now. It is too late for doubts. Only discipline, and what a famous American once term 'the surly British pluck', will have any value now.

It is nearly time. The men at each gun glance quickly across the deck to the opposite side. There stands another gun with a depleted crew. That too they must serve if they are engaged on both sides at once.

### ***'Load!'***

It is almost a relief after the waiting. The charges are thrust home down every black muzzle, followed by a wad, a round shining ball, and a further wad to ensure the shot stays put if the ship rolls.

The port lids are opened as one, and at the order '*Run out!*' every gun is hauled to the open port, its progress checked and guide by handspikes and tackles. Each gun-captain peers along his barrel and trigger lines tighten.

On quarterdeck and forecastle other weapons are prepared for that first bombardment. Carronades and swivels, all now loaded and primed. After the first two or three aimed broadsides, the pace will slacken, the timing falter as the range shortens.

A whistle shrills and all at once the deck is crushed to a confined world of smoke and noise, the crash and roar of cannon fire, the squeal of gun

trucks as they are sponged out and reloaded and hauled back to the waiting ports.

So devastating is the effect of close action that vessels are often damaged severely within minutes, their rigging shot away by langridge and chain-shot, their steering useless, until they drift like hulks within the bedlam of battle. But even dismasted they are still fighting ships until the enemy strikes or the combat turns against you.

Grapnels soar above the smoke, men fall unheard or unheeded in the hail of canister-shot and grape. Muskets seek out individual targets on the enemy's poop, but the old hands grit their teeth and look to their friends as the real moment of truth arrives.

Swords are discarded by most of the lieutenants and curved hangers have replaced them. Cutlasses are snatched up from between the smoking guns, pikes seized from racks around the masts. Dirks, clubs and boarding axes are the tools now.

With a wild cry the first boarders leap toward the other ship. Many fall between the hulls, but the clash of steel on steel, the screams and curses beyond the smoke are proof that the footing has been gained on the enemy's deck. Through the chaos go the marines, boarding the other vessel in a scarlet bridge, the bayonets glittering, the harsh discipline and regular drills taking charge and holding them together as they divide the enemy's resistance with no quarter given or expected.

Then it is over. The new men stare dazedly at what they have survived. The older hands breathe deeply and seek out new friends. The specialists

prepare to clean up the debris and the filth of battle.

One of the King's enemies has been beaten. The price of victory may be high. But it is the lot of the fighting ship, the one that the citizen ashore will never see.

## Part Two

### *Invasion*

In 1801, after eight years of war, the British people were still living under a constant threat of invasion from across the Channel. On a clear day and aided by a telescope from the cliffs of Dover it was possible to see the great tented camps of Napoleon's Grand Army. In Boulogne and most of the neighbouring ports and inlets the scouting frigates of the Royal Navy had reported a growing assembly of invasion craft.

Napoleon often claimed it would take him two days, maybe less, to invade England and force her into submission once his army had been ferried across the Channel. His mounting fleet of invasion craft ranged from gunboats to agile transport barges for artillery and cavalry alike. There was some justification for Napoleon's optimism, except for one glaring obstacle, the English Channel. Despite all his experience as a master strategist and tactician, and despite the fact that he was himself born in a seaport, Napoleon was intimidated by that placid strip of water. The crushing British naval victories at St. Vincent, the Nile and

Copenhagen left him no doubt as to what would happen if his invasion armada was attacked in mid-channel.

A volunteer militia was raised to protect the shores and villages of Britain's south coast, a 19th century forerunner of the Home Guard of the 1940's, and to give this untried force a strength it did not otherwise possess, Horatio Nelson, the hero of Copenhagen, was ordered to take command. As usual, a static war of wait-and-see was not the little admiral's style. He organized patrols to harass and attack the moored invasion craft in a fashion which would have done credit to Drake himself.

Still the soldier to his fingertips, Napoleon continued to dream and plan for the invasion he was doomed never to launch. He even designed a medal for his conquering troops to mark the occasion.

After several daring raids on French ports it was generally accepted that the best way to kill the chances for an invasion was to continue what the British fleet had been doing so successfully for eight long years. That was to keep the enemy bottled up in their ports and only attack them if and when they attempted to move out.

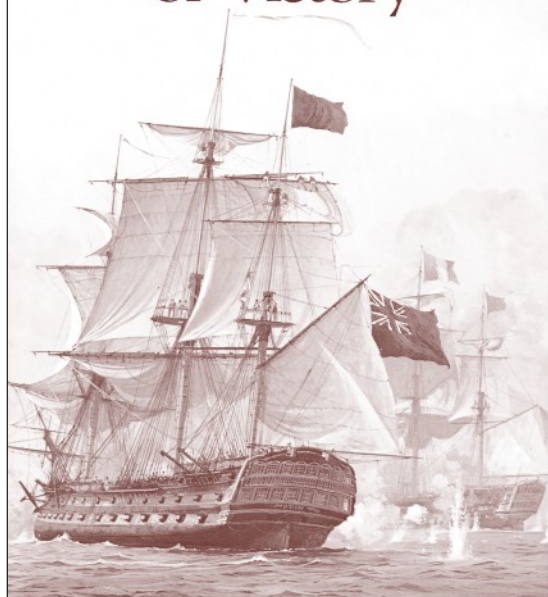
The English Channel and the ever-vigilant presence of those weather-beaten ships was enough to force a stalemate which led to the short-lived Peace of Amiens.

By 1803 the old enemies were at war again, but that brief respite had given the Navy the desperately needed breathing-space to refit and prepare for the decisive rendezvous at Trafalgar.



# Alexander Kent

## A Tradition of Victory



### Part Three

#### *A Tradition of Victory*

**R**ichard Bolitho is now acclaimed throughout the world as the most popular hero in historical naval fiction created by a living writer. This fourteenth Bolitho novel has the epic scenes

of action, the powerful characterization and the authentic period detail that have made Alexander Kent a bestseller wherever sea stories are read.

After eight years of war between Britain and France there is at last a rumour of peace. But the old enemies are well aware that any settlement will only be a breathing space in which to recover from their terrible losses. To obtain the best terms the French muster a show of strength from Biscay to the Channel ports. At the British Admiralty there are some who see a daring opportunity to even the score at any negotiation table - and who better to undertake it than the young Rear Admiral Bolitho?

In June 1801 Bolitho's small squadron is still repairing the scars of battle earned at Copenhagen - and as he receives his orders from London Bolitho is, for the first time in his life, torn between the demands of duty and his real desire to marry. When the squadron sails it is joined by an additional ship, a frigate with many memories from the past. But where Bolitho's flag leads so his captains must follow, if necessary to the brink of disaster - for theirs is a tradition of victory.

### Part Four

#### *Douglas Reeman*

**F**or me at least one of the great pleasures in creating each new book is the research which precedes it. On these occasions I am able to meet those who share my maritime interests and are willing to help in any way they can to produce

whatever material I need. Writing is essentially a lonely profession, so that these breaks into the living world of ships and the sea are very welcome.

People sometimes ask me when I am going to write a book about so-and-so, or why I don't give more attention to places not yet visited or described. It is all a tremendous spur to the writer. Over the years one theme has prevailed like a bright thread through many of my stories, the

exploits of the Royal Marines. And so, after many months of research and the co-operation and enthusiasm of the Corps to support it, I am about to write the first book in a saga of the Regiment of the Sea.

It will be entirely separate from the Richard Bolitho series, although I do of course hope for some help from Alexander Kent!

