



The  
*Richard Bolitho*  
Newsletter

Issue III



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Douglas Reeman / Alexander Kent

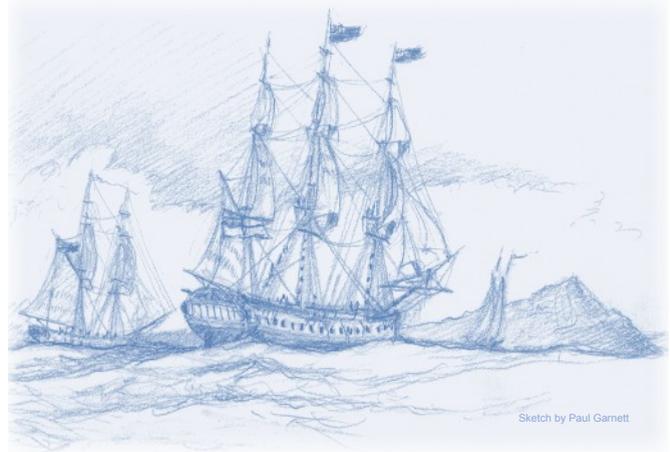
## Part One

### *The Fleet in Being*

Whatever any individual captain might think about his own particular problems of manning his ship, having the vessel, large or small, ready at any given time to fight enemy or weather with equal skill, the overall responsibility lay very much at the admiral's elbow. To present a well-handled fleet or squadron, with each captain willing and eager to obey the signals from the flagship, was one thing. To know where and how to place those much needed ships in time of war was something else entirely.

Communications, the ability to take despatches to the other ends of the earth where they could be interpreted and seen in reality against any current situation, were of paramount importance. A fast courier vessel might sail with all speed from England for some vague rendezvous with a squadron in the Caribbean, her young commander very conscious of the vital information he was carrying. The moment his sails had dipped below the horizon some new situation might arise, and his written despatches would become instantly useless. But weeks, perhaps months later, when the admiral or commodore of the isolated squadron or fleet received those same despatches, he would be expected to act on them as he saw fit, even though events in England had overridden them.

With all the blessings of hindsight we can only marvel that more mistakes did not occur because of a slow passage or the inability of some captain to make contact with his superior officer. As it was, there were several occasions when vigorous action was taken against some ship or ships only for the Navy to be informed later that those same 'enemies' had signed a



peace treaty some months before the guns began to fire. The reverse, too, was not unknown.

Any admiral was well aware of this state of affairs as he climbed slowly up the ladder of promotion and authority, and the ships and men under his command grew accordingly.

Much of his ability to use his ships to best advantage depended on the time it took to get them from one area to another, to ensure there was some point in quitting his present position and not be faced with a wild goose chase.

Knowing his individual captains, the condition and efficiency of each ship under his flag, and a large portion of luck, all were part of an admiral's mystique. Even Nelson, who was well known for his risks in the face of his superiors, must have been very conscious of the chance he was taking when he sailed his fleet all the way from the Mediterranean across the Atlantic to Trinidad in search of the French squadrons, only to discover the enemy nowhere in sight. Back again across the Atlantic with little more than an idea and Nelson's own supreme self-confidence and at last a close action

with the French. It must have mystified many of Nelson's contemporaries and irritated some of his superiors who wished him taken down a peg, even at the expense of a victory. Only Nelson would have fully appreciated how narrow was the margin of success. Had he misjudged the enemy's movements on the second occasion, it is very likely that another admiral would have commanded the fleet at Trafalgar.

An admiral would be constantly reminded of the importance of spreading the load of his ships. Not too thinly so that any single force might be overwhelmed by an enemy. But again he must not pack them in such a formidable force that vast sea areas were left unguarded. This concern for overall coverage governed more than anything else the style and design of the ships of war of the period.

Ships were rated according to size and firepower. At the top of the scale were the ships-of-the-line, powerful, heavily manned vessels which could sail in the line of battle, take massive punishment if need be at incredibly close range. Speed and agility had to be put aside in their design. Stout oak timbers, every type of gun from the deadly thirty-two pounder to the squat carronade, or 'Smasher' as it was aptly nicknamed, and a full complement of seaman and marines to work the armament and fight hand-to-hand when at last they had grappled with an enemy.

The most powerful of these three great ships was the first-rate, a three-decked vessel of a hundred guns or more. A second-rate mounted ninety cannon or more, and together these two types of ship were generally used as flagships by the admirals who commanded their destinies.

By the mid-18th century the little fourth-rate, a two-decker of sixty guns plus, had almost ceased to exist. It was considered too weak to face the cruel battering in

the line of battle, but too slow to work with smaller vessels elsewhere. And so, until the end of the days of the sailing Navy, the two-decker third-rate, known affectionately as the seventy-four because of the number of guns she carried, became the backbone of the fleet. Any admiral was grateful to have these fine, reliable and well-designed ships under his control, and most of the great sea battles of the period were fought by them.

The men who commanded such ships as a seventy-four could be expected to perform miracles, should their admirals request them. Within their stout timbered hulls they carried another world, around which the need for efficiency and skill in battle were almost incidental. For there lived a teeming mass of men, of all backgrounds and ages. Deck by deck, mess by mess, the cramped conditions of the ship-of-the-line made it impossible to be alone except within one's mind. It was once written that the only two men who were always alone in a seventy-four were the unfortunate prisoner locked in his tiny cell below the waterline, and the captain who fretted and worried beyond the privacy of his cabin bulkhead. But the other six hundred-odd souls had to manage as best they could. And like all other ships of that time, they had to depend entirely upon their own resources once they had quit the land. Weather and sea took a heavy toll of cordage and canvas, and even without firing a shot in anger the losses in life and limb were considerable.

There were no such luxuries as training depots, and men were plucked from their trades ashore and thrust without fuss or favor into the everyday business of running a ship of war. It is not surprising that many such men failed to live very long. A fall from a swaying yard, high above the deck in pitch darkness, meant a mercifully quick death one way or the other. For even if

a man missed the ship or some jutting spar on his fall, it was unlikely he could swim and he would soon be swallowed by the sea. Shortening sail in bitter conditions brought many such accidents. Canvas, half-frozen perhaps in an Atlantic squall, had to be fisted and punched by men working side by side on those vibrating yards, their only support being the foot-ropes below each spar. Ruptures were only too common, broken fingers more so.

A good captain took care to see that the new hands were selected as much as possible in keeping with their original jobs ashore. A poacher or light-footed thatcher would soon learn to work aloft if properly instructed. Whereas an awkward farm worker who had done little more than lead a horse or dig in a field would be more safely employed on deck. Bad or indifferent captains soon paid the price for their stupidity, and it was eventually noticed by their admiral whenever he watched the performance of his ships. Every young lieutenant watched his captain and dreamed of his first command. Most captains cast a glance at their flagship and pictured themselves with flag-rank in the not too distant future. Admirals had nowhere to go, except down, and were often harsh with captains who threatened the fleet's efficiency, and by so doing, the admiral's own security.

To keep contact with his far-flung ships and squadrons, and retain an intelligent link with the power of Admiralty, a flag officer depended on the speed and agility of his frigates. They were classed as fifth and sixth-rates. The former were of twenty-eight to thirty-eight guns, sometimes more, single-decked, and with all the grace and feline beauty of a square-rigged ship. The latter were the lowest rated vessels, of twenty to twenty-four guns, and known as post-ships, being the smallest to be commanded by post-captains. It is

interesting to note that the latter's opposite number in the French fleet was called a corvette, a name later to be included in the Royal Navy in World War Two, when these sturdy little escort ships served with great distinction in the Battle of the Atlantic.

Every admiral complained of a shortage of frigates. They were in constant demand, and every ambitious young officer hoped to command one. Unlike his admiral, the young frigate captain saw his ship as something very personal. Once free of the fleet's apron strings, any such captain had the real chance of striking an individual blow for his country, and also of drawing attention to himself far more quickly than he could ever do in company with other ships, or worse, serving aboard a heavier man-of-war. Quite apart from self-advancement and catching the eye of his superior officer, any successful frigate captain had the real chance of becoming rich on prize-money. A frigate, especially a fifth rate, could outshoot and outpace almost any other vessel afloat other than a ship-of-the-line, and many a stealthy blockade-runner, her holds crammed with valuable stores and war supplies, was made to strike her colours to a well-handled frigate. Prize-money was shared amongst the ship's company and those of other vessels taking even a remote part in the action, but on such isolated occasions the lion's share went to the captain. It is understandable, therefore, that frigate captains were loath to spend too much time in company with the ships-of-the-line, massive, ponderous vessels which rarely made good more than five knots average, when they could be more profitably employed elsewhere.

Admirals, on the other hand, had a greater experience and wider vision of affairs, and knew the vital need of such ships for carrying despatches to other stations, prowling close inshore to spy on enemy harbours, and –

almost the most important function – searching for and shadowing a hostile fleet until contact could be made with the pursuing admiral. It was the little frigate *Euralyus* which was to bring the news that the ‘French were out’ to Nelson, and to raise the final curtain on Trafalgar.

But if you served in a great ship-of-the-line as a young and fairly untried lieutenant, how was it possible even to draw the merest glance which would set you on the road to any real promotion, let alone command of a frigate?

Once again, luck could figure quite considerably in this field. If a captain was fortunate in capturing several prizes, he would need to send them back to safe ports, and for this he would require skeleton crews. Just enough men to control the captured vessel’s own company and prevent their retaking the ship, and not so many that it would cripple his own command by a severe shortage should he then be attacked.

It was common for the task of prize-master to be given to a very junior officer. Sometimes it might be an officer who had taken a prominent part in taking the prize in the first place. If an officer could not be spared, a master’s mate perhaps would be appointed. For him it would mean almost certain promotion to commissioned rank once he had sailed his charge beneath the guns of a friendly fortress.

A captain might now wish his own senior and experienced lieutenants to be sent away as prize-masters. For one thing, it would seriously impair the chain of command and general efficiency of his ship. For another, there would be nobody to assume command should he fall in battle or die of fever before joining other vessels. It is fair to say that his senior lieutenants would not be all that keen to take charge of prizes when there was a real possibility of promotion

within their own hull. The captain’s death would bring a temporary command, but if properly handled would also indicate the lieutenant’s ability better than any written report. Likewise, the next lieutenant in line for advancement would step into the shoes of his senior, and so on.

For these and other reasons it was often the case that a very junior lieutenant was appointed prize-master. Not perhaps because he was the best for the job, but more for the reason he would be the least missed aboard his own ship!

The laugh often went their way, however. Several such prize-masters used their brief authority to capture other smaller prizes on passage to home or base, or carried out little ventures of their own invention into enemy waters.

Once back under the eye of some port admiral there was every chance of a first real step towards that cherished frigate.

There were several other classes of vessel, much in demand, but unrated like those previously mentioned. Of all these latter, the sloop-of-war was the most popular. Like small frigates, square-rigged, and with their fourteen to eighteen guns mounted on a single deck, they were indeed maids of all work. Many of them had been bought from the merchant service and were sturdily built, although unable to carry more than the lightest cannon. But the sloops which had been specially constructed for the Navy were veritable miniature fortresses. Fast and manoeuvrable, they even mounted some of the heaviest naval cannon as bow-chasers, so that they could pursue a heavier prey and cripple her at leisure with these powerful weapons while still having the agility to keep close astern of the enemy and avoid any sort of retaliation. During the American Revolution they did invaluable work

escorting troop transports, supply ships and the like en route for the British forces on the mainland. They were used with equal vigour amongst the teeming islands of the Caribbean for winking out privateers and pirates of a dozen nations. Carrying despatches, taking senior officers on unexpected visits to squadrons and harbours, keeping contact between the blockading forces during the Revolutionary Wars, and many years later, long after the proud sea battles under sail had dimmed in memory, they continued to do great service against the Black Ivory trade, that odious and profitable traffic in slaves from Africa.

And there were many other types of vessel, almost too numerous for this one small section.

Brigs and bomb-vessels, fireships and armed cutters, they all made up the nerve ends and sinews which led eventually via the sloops and frigates to those weather-beaten ships-of-the-line, and whichever admiral had hoisted his flag above them. No matter what sort of ship, how new or old, graceful or merely practical, all went to make an essential contribution to the fleet in being.

## Part Two

### *The Language of the Sea*

For hundreds of years this island of ours has above all else shown itself to be entirely dependent upon the sea. Upon the availability of sea lanes for trade and colonial advancement, for the comings and goings of countless necessities which we too often take for granted, and in times of war for survival itself. In the past we have often had cause to bless the barrier presented by the English Channel, the 'moat', when misfortune or lack of preparedness have left us no other

defence. Such faith did Lord St. Vincent have during the Napoleonic Wars that he was quoted as saying of the enemy, 'I did not say they could not come. I only said they could not come by sea.' A dry statement from one who had done so much to dominate the oceans with our Navy.

From every port and estuary, down through the years, this country has seen craft of all kinds set sail. Brigs and stately clippers, the fast-driven packets and coastal fishing vessels, men-of-war and ships of peace, so it is hardly surprising that the language of everyday usage is still filled with memories of sail. For men went to sea early in life, some as mere children. It took time, hardship and not a little cursing to discover, let alone master all the complex workings of a deepwater sailing ship. Miles of rigging, braces, stays, halliards and shrouds, each having a set purpose, each needing constant care and inspection. The vessel's hull itself, with all the havoc which could be created by rot, grounding and collision. And, not least, by the guns by which such men lived, and often died. They were as natural as the sight of the sea's face each dawn, or the sounds of wind booming in canvass overhead.

We often say, not enough room to swing a cat. This was an expression of scorn by captains of large ships for their more cramped colleagues. Their boatswains had not even the space to wield their cat o' nine tails. The gilt on the gingerbread in those days referred to the fine gilding on the carvings around a ship's stern. A mark of her captain's wealth, and therefore his success at taking prizes. A good ship to volunteer for. Gingerbread painted in cheap dockyard yellow too often meant the vessel had a less eager commander. Taken aback or all aback described the plight of a ship trying to tack across the wind and failing to pay off in either direction. It was as much a surprise for her captain then

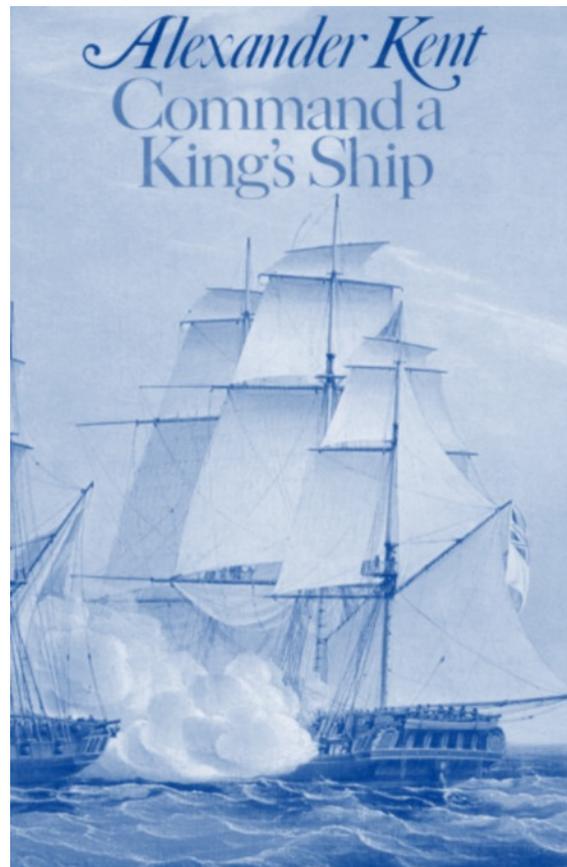
as the expression implies today. There are many old sailing terms in regular usage. Take the wind out of his sails, by and large, and even the slang for drunkenness, three sheets to the wind, were first heard on one deck or another. Gone by the board, lost over the side, first rate already mentioned in this newsletter, and not least, show a leg, the cry of a boatswain's mate in harbour when he was trying to determine if a seaman was slumbering in his hammock or if, as was likely, a woman of the town was still aboard, have all found their firm places in our language. There are hundreds of terms, many obvious, some less so. It is the language of the sea. From whence we came. Upon which we depend.

## Part Three

### *Command a King's Ship*

In March, 1784 His Majesty's Frigate *Undine* of thirty-two guns weighed anchor at Spithead to begin a voyage to India and far beyond.

Like most of his ship's company, Captain Richard Bolitho was glad to be leaving the land. Despite all the difficulties of preparing his new command for sea and a long and demanding passage, the vague wording of his orders, the fact that many of his company were little better than rogues, he had become sickened by the immediate aftermath of war. England, like much of Europe, was reeling from the cost and the ravages of war. And whereas the rich and powerful had changed their lives very little, the streets and seaports were thronged with the tattered remnants from a dozen hard campaigns. Men who had fought with honour begged for bread in the streets of London. Ships which had become legends in the line of battle rotted in every estuary and inlet.



To Bolitho the *Undine* meant more than a mere command. She was an escape from disillusionment, a challenge and a new hope. Her company was ill matched and the sweepings from prison-hulks and the debtor's jail. But Bolitho had his own brand of faith, and he was accompanied by his firm friends, Thomas Herrick and John Allday. He was soon to need both of them more than ever before.

For he was to learn that signatures on proud

documents did not necessarily mean a lasting peace, and as his ship spread her sails beneath blazing sun and raging storms alike he was made to use all the skill and determination which had given him his first command during the war. As the old enemies manoeuvred for advantages under the guise of lasting peace, the real truth and the thunder of the guns were never far from he only King's ship available, and from the man who commanded her.

## Part Four

### *Richard Bolitho: A Life*

1756 born in Falmouth, son of James Bolitho  
 1768 entered the King's service as a midshipman on *Manxman* (80)  
 1772 Midshipman *Gorgon* (74) (*Richard Bolitho – Midshipman and Midshipman Bolitho and the Avenger*)  
 1774 promoted Lieutenant *Destiny* (28); Rio and the Caribbean (*Stand Into Danger*)  
 1775-77 Lieutenant *Trojan* (80) during the American Revolution; Later appointed prizemaster (*In Gallant Company*)  
 1778 promoted Commander *Sparrow* (18); Battle of the Chesapeake (*Sloop of War*)  
 1780 Birth of Adam, illegitimate son of Hugh Bolitho and Kerenza Pascoe  
 1782 promoted Captain *Phalarope* (32); West Indies; Battle of Saintes (*To Glory We Steer*)  
 1784 Captain *Undine* (32); India and East Indies (*Command a King's Ship*)  
 1787 Captain *Tempest* (36); Great South Sea; Tahiti; Suffered serious fever (*Passage to Mutiny*)

1792 Captain, the Nore; Recruiting (*With All Despatch*)  
 1793 Captain *Hyperion* (74); Mediterranean; Bay of Biscay; West Indies (*Form Line of Battle! and Enemy in Sight!*)  
 1795 promoted Flag Captain *Euryalus* (100); Involved in the Great Mutiny; Mediterranean; Promoted Commodore (*The Flag Captain*)  
 1798 Battle of the Nile (*Signal - Close Action!*)  
 1800 promoted Rear-Admiral; Baltic (*The Inshore Squadron*)  
 1801 Biscay; Prisoner of war (*A Tradition of Victory*)  
 1802 promoted Vice-Admiral; West Indies (*Success to the Brave*)  
 1803 Mediterranean (*Colours Aloft*)  
 1805 Battle of Trafalgar (*Honour This Day*)  
 1806-07 Good Hope; Second Battle of Copenhagen (*The Only Victor*)  
 1808 Shipwrecked off Africa (*Beyond the Reef*)  
 1809-10 Mauritius campaign (*The Darkening Sea*)  
 1812 promoted Admiral; Second American War (*For My Country's Freedom*)  
 1814 defense of Canada; Second American War (*Cross of St George*)  
 1815 killed in action (*Sword of Honour*)

### Author's Note

*During my travels around this country and abroad, giving talks and doing research for the next Bolitho stories, time and time again I have been questioned about the possibility of forming a Richard Bolitho Association. Your views on this are of course great value to me, and I would be glad to hear any ideas you may have.*



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