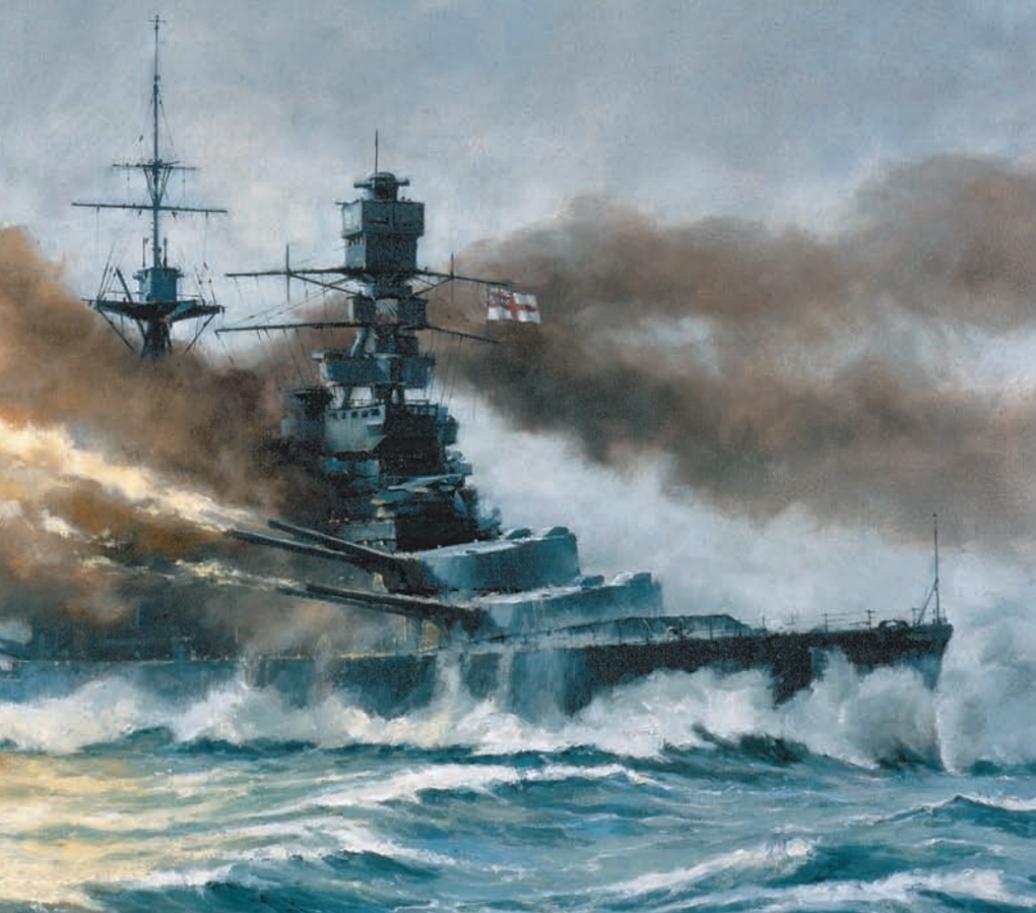


AUTHOR OF THE RICHARD BOLITHO/ALEXANDER KENT NOVELS

# DOUGLAS REEMAN

## Battlecruiser



## **Battlecruiser**

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# Battlecruiser

DOUGLAS REEMAN

MODERN NAVAL FICTION LIBRARY

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*For you, Kim, with love.*  
*"Save thou my rose; in it thou art my all."*

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Escort the brave  
Whose hearts, unsatisfied  
With the kind stairs and tender hearths of love,  
Are loyal to the cunning of the waves,  
The sparse rule of the tide.

Fly over these,  
Humble and brave, who sail  
And trim the ships with very life. Their lives  
Delineate the seas.  
Patrol their deathless trail.

JOHN PUDNEY

Flight Lieutenant, Royal Air Force 1942



## | Prologue

IN PEACE OR WAR, the launch of a great ship is like no other experience, and to have been a part of it, to have shared the creation from idea to blueprint, and then to follow it over the months to this moment, must be unique.

For the many men who helped to build this particular ship, it is a time for pride and satisfaction. Day by day, they have seen her grow and take shape until she dominates all around her, just as she has ruled their working lives. Unlike the days of unemployment and depression, when the completion of such a ship would represent loss of work until another order could be won and another keel laid down, this slipway will not be empty for very long.

And here on Clydebank, you can feel the excitement on every side. Even in neighbouring yards, men have stopped work to watch this great ship, bedecked with flags, built for war but as yet without weapons, her bridges and superstructure strangely bare and unfinished. But some will say that she already has a character of her own.

Sailors have always been prone to claim that different ships have different characters. Happy ships, where the line between wardroom and messdeck is flexible, ready to adapt, and others where the opposite is equally obvious. Men under punishment, with lists of defaulters as further proof of the discontent which can harm any ship. And those other, rogue ships, with their unexplained accidents and breakdowns, and the inevitable aftermath of recriminations from on high, usually leading to a court-martial.

But now there is a hush, as if some one has raised a signal. The figures on the platform, dwarfed by the towering grey stem that rises high above them, come to life. A small girl

curtsies and presents a bouquet to the woman in white, an admiral's wife, who is to perform the final honour. She is well supported by senior naval officers and dockyard officials, one of whom takes her hand and places it gently on the lever; another takes the bouquet from her. For a few moments she stares up at those great, graceful bows, the empty hawse pipes like eyes.

Below her, the band of the Royal Marines raise their instruments, waiting for the first stroke of the baton.

Her voice is strong, loud even, on the improvised speakers.  
*"I name this ship . . ."*

Her voice is completely drowned by the thunder of cheering, the crash of drums as the band breaks into *Rule, Britannia*.  
*"God bless her . . ."*

There is one stark moment when some of the yard engineers glance at one another with alarm, until, with something like a sigh, the great ship begins to move, so slowly at first; and then, with the chain cables holding her under control in a rising cloud of rust, she touches the Clyde for the first time.

*"And all who sail in her!"*

In war, a ship can fall victim to mine or torpedo, shellfire or dive-bomber, impartial killers without conscience or memory. Or they can live on, to end their days in some breaker's yard, suffering the indignity and the contempt after years of loyal service. But this ship is a machine, a weapon, only as good or as bad as those who will command her. A ship has no soul, and can have no say in her own destiny. Or can she?

# 1 | Back from the Dead

THE JOURNEY from the railway station to the church in the one and only taxi seemed to pass within a minute. Huddled in a heavy coat and scarf, the driver occasionally glanced at the passenger reflected in the mirror, a stranger now in his naval uniform, but one who had grown up in this small Surrey town. Like all those other boys, like the driver's own son, who was now driving a tank in the Western Desert.

For something to say, he called over his shoulder, "Might still make it, sir. They could have been delayed."

Captain Guy Sherbrooke turned up the collar of his raincoat and said something vague in agreement. The weather was cold despite the bright, clear sky, but it was not that. He was used to it, or should be, he thought. He glanced at the passing houses, and a pub with some soldiers standing outside, waiting for the doors to open. It was unreal, coming back like this; he should have known that it would be. The raincoat felt stiff and unfamiliar, like the rest of his clothing, all new. Like the cap that lay on the seat beside him, its peak bearing gold oak leaves. A captain. The dream . . . that was all it had been, in those days.

He should not have come. He had been offered an excuse at Waterloo station. The train was delayed; there had been a derailment; local slow trains were held up to make way for others more important. A familiar story. He had gone into the station buffet and had a cup of stale coffee. A drink, a proper drink, had been what he had really wanted.

He smiled unconsciously, a young man again. It would hardly do to arrive at a funeral smelling of gin. He turned to gaze at the great, green sprawl of Sandown Park racecourse,

where his grandfather had taken him as a child to watch the jockeys urging their mounts around the last bend before the post. Only a memory now. This was the second day of January, 1943, another year of war. Sandown Park was no longer witness to the raucous bookmakers and jostling punters, the tipsters and the pickpockets. It was part of the army for the duration: stones painted white, sentries on the gates, lines of khaki stamping up and down in a cloud of dust, the home of a training battalion of the Welsh Guards.

He looked ahead and saw the familiar church spire; you could even see it from Kingston Hill on a fine day, they said. There had been some bombing around here, but not much, unlike the cities he had seen where hardly a building remained undamaged.

The taxi turned into the narrow road by the church, and stopped. The driver, who sported a moustache like the Old Bill character of the Great War, turned in his open seat and said, "We were all sorry to hear about your ship, sir . . . losing her like that. Tim Evans, the postman's son, was on board."

"I know." Would it always be like this? "He was a nice lad."

*Was.* So many had died that day, in that bitter sea that robbed a man of his breath, his very will.

The driver watched him thoughtfully. A youthful, clean-cut face, with little to show of what he must have suffered. But the steadiness of his eyes and the tightness of the jaw made a lie of it. The driver had been a sapper in that other war, in Flanders, no less a graveyard than this one on the other side of the old stone wall.

Sherbrooke knew what he was thinking, and was moved by it. Air raids, rationing . . . it was bad enough for the civilian populace without those hated telegrams. *We regret to inform you that your husband, father, son . . .* And yet this old taxi driver was always at the station, whenever he had managed to get away for a spot of leave.

Now there was nowhere to call home. Perhaps it was just as well: a new start. No doubts or misgivings. *Just do it.*

He got out of the taxi and glanced across at the church. The doors were opening; he imagined he could hear the organ. He was too late. He should have stayed away.

He reached into his pocket: even that felt different, alien, like a stranger's garment. The old driver shook his head.

"No, sir, not this time." He looked grimly at the church. "'Sides, I brought *him* from the station this last time."

Then he smiled. "I'll be seeing you, sir. Just like the song says!" He swung away from the kerb. Back to the station.

Sherbrooke straightened his cap and pushed open the gate.

The coffin was being carried around the church, the mourners following in small, separate groups. Several naval officers were among them, one walking with a stick, a tall, unsmiling Wren close beside him. He was obviously feeling the cold, despite the heavy greatcoat with its gold vice-admiral's rank markings. It was hard to imagine him as a captain in that great ship, in that vanished world of the peacetime Mediterranean fleet. Sherbrooke could not accept it. *Dead men's shoes* . . . not yet.

The man being buried today was Captain Charles Cavendish; he had been a lieutenant with Sherbrooke in those far-off days. A quiet, private funeral, with only a White Ensign draped over the coffin as a token of respect. The coroner's verdict had been "death by misadventure." Cavendish had been a brave and respected officer, who had commanded one of Britain's most famous ships. His death had been a sad one, even pointless, following a few days of leave, while the ship was in the Firth of Forth for work to be carried out on board. He had been found sitting in his beloved Armstrong-Siddeley car, his pride and joy, bought when he had married Jane. Another flash of memory pierced Sherbrooke. They had all been there, smiling, happy to be part of it, their swords drawn to form an arch over the bridal couple: Cavendish, tall and rather serious, even as a lieutenant, and the lovely Jane, who could win a man's heart as she could freeze another, with a mere glance.

The older people were looking at one another warily, seeking comfort, clearly ill at ease. The naval officers were here to show their respect to Captain Charles Cavendish, D.S.O. and Bar, who had died alone in his car, with the engine running and the garage door closed.

The local police sergeant had explained that it had been a very windy day, that the door had probably been blown shut; there could be no other explanation. Jane had been in London and had known nothing about her husband's unexpected leave. Otherwise . . .

That same sergeant was here now, erect and unsmiling. He was well acquainted with the family, and had been known to drop in for a glass when the captain was at home.

Sherbrooke turned his head, and saw her looking directly at him. As the vicar opened his book and began to read, his breath hanging in the clear air like steam, she gave the merest nod. Even in this setting she stood out, as she always had, tall, slender, striking. She appeared calm, very contained, her fingers holding her black coat tightly shut, the diamond naval crown brooch glittering in the hard sunlight.

Then the gaunt-looking undertaker and his team moved away, as though following the steps of a well-rehearsed dance. The coffin was gone. People were gathering round to offer condolences, some doubtless wondering what had really happened. The vice-admiral joined Sherbrooke, and poked at the loose gravel with his stick.

"People think this is an affectation, dammit. I can assure you it isn't!" Then he dropped his voice. "I'm glad you accepted command, Sherbrooke. Keeps it in the family, so to speak."

Sherbrooke smiled, something he had not done much of late. He knew what the vice-admiral meant; he had been retired soon after his promotion to flag rank, *put out to graze*, as he himself described it. But he had never forgotten those days, when he had been the captain. There had been four lieutenants in the wardroom during a carefree commission, when life had seemed always to be sunny and easy in retro-

spect. John Broadwood, killed eighteen months ago in command of a destroyer on the Atlantic run. Charles Cavendish. Sherbrooke dragged his mind back to the present as the men with spades moved toward the grave. And there was Vincent Stagg, now a rear-admiral, the youngest since Nelson, one newspaper had trumpeted. *And me.*

He had reached her without realizing he had moved. Her hand was soft, but strong, and like ice.

"It was nice of you to come. I thought about you a lot when you lost your ship. We all did." She smiled at somebody who was trying to get near, but her eyes were without warmth. "Is it true you're taking Charles's ship?" She studied him thoughtfully. "I'm glad for you. No sense in brooding." She looked away. "When do you take command?"

"Right away," he said.

She released his hand, and smiled. "Good luck, Guy. You could use it."

She moved through the crowd of mourners, and the vice-admiral said, "Coming up to the house, Sherbrooke?" He recognized the doubt, the sense of loss. "Just for a few minutes, eh? Spam sandwiches and sherry. God, I've been to a few recently!" He touched his arm. "I can run you up to town afterwards, get things started for you. Might be a drop of Scotch in it, too. Do you good!" His stick slipped from his hand and the Wren stooped down to retrieve it for him. The vice-admiral sighed. "Everybody's so bloody young! If only . . ." He glanced at the tall, unsmiling Wren. "Eh, Joyce? If only."

She said patiently, "That's right, sir." But she was looking past him at the captain in the new, uncreased raincoat. Afterwards, Sherbrooke thought she had been thinking of someone else, and perhaps, what might have been.

They walked slowly across the village green toward the larger houses on the hill. Jane had money of her own, plenty of it. He found himself glancing at the garage beside the house as he approached the double doors.

They had just watched a secret being buried.

He recalled her voice, so cool and assured. *No sense in brooding.*

Suddenly, he was glad to be leaving.

The naval operations and signals distribution sections at Leith were situated in a dispirited-looking building that faced out over the great Firth of Forth. The stiff wind, across the water and the many moored warships, cut like a knife, and made any sort of outdoor work a misery.

Inside the operations room, it was almost humid by comparison, the broad windows misty with condensation.

The duty operations officer got up from his desk and moved to the nearest one. Old for his rank, and put on the beach between the wars, he had come to accept this day-to-day work on the fringe of what he considered the real war. He wiped the glass with his sleeve and saw the moisture running down the criss-cross of sticky paper which, allegedly, offered protection against bomb-blast, should any enemy aircraft be reckless enough to attempt a raid. These days, there were so many warships here at any given time that their combined anti-aircraft fire would deter anybody in his right mind.

He half-listened to the endless clatter of typewriters and teleprinters in the adjoining offices: signals, codes, instructions, orders, the demands of a fleet at war.

It would be Twelfth Night tomorrow. He glanced at the tattered Christmas decorations hung above the framed portrait of Winston Churchill, and the fake holly beside the operations board. He peered harder at the blurred outline of the Forth Bridge, that vital link, which must have offered such a tempting target in the first months of war.

He told himself often enough that he was lucky to be doing something useful, important even, that his age and experience carried a lot of weight with his team of Wrens, most of whom were young enough to be his daughters. But occasionally that sense of satisfaction at being *back*, being a part of it again, was not enough.

He remembered the small escort destroyer, which had nearly failed to make it back to base. He had watched her creep in, her bows so low in the water that her forecastle was almost awash. By luck or by mischance, the destroyer, a veteran from the Great War like so many, had confronted a U-Boat, surfaced, and about to attack a slow-moving convoy.

The operations officer had pictured the confrontation, as if he himself had been there: the sudden realization, the U-Boat, taken by surprise and unable to dive, opening fire with her heavy machine-guns in a last attempt to stave off the inevitable. There had been small bundles laid out on the destroyer's listing deck that day, each covered with a flag: there was always a price to be paid. But the destroyer had kept going, and had rammed the submarine at full speed, driving it down, until only an oil slick and the remains of her deck party were left to mark the spot. The Admiralty was far from keen on escorts ramming U-Boats. Even if successful, it meant that the ship involved would be in dock for months, at a time when every escort was worth her tonnage in gold.

But the cheers that day from every ship in the anchorage must have made each man in her company feel like a giant, and he had been surprised that he could still be so moved. So envious.

"Tea, sir?" He turned and looked at his personal Wren, a petty officer writer who had been with him for four months. It was a long time in the service these days. He wondered what she would say if he asked her out for a quiet meal in Edinburgh, for a Twelfth Night celebration. Probably make some excuse, and then ask for a transfer.

She smiled to herself. She knew exactly what he was thinking, or could make a good guess.

She said, "The battlecruiser's new captain is due today, sir. I wonder what he'll be like."

He looked at her. How different from the time he had found her crying in that very chair, the telegram gripped in one hand. Her fiancé had been killed in some godforsaken place in North

Africa. Was she over it? So many such telegrams . . . thousands, probably millions.

He considered her remark, and replied, "I know something of him. It was just before you joined us here at Leith. He's Captain Guy Sherbrooke—young for his rank. He was in command of the cruiser *Pyrrhus*, Leander class, like the *Achilles* and *Ajax* of River Plate fame. Smart ships, small by today's standards, of course. Six six-inch guns as main armament." Without looking, he knew she was sitting down in the chair, listening, as she had that day when he had found her with the telegram. "She was part of the escort for a convoy to North Russia—that damnable place. The Admiralty had been expecting trouble, even with *Bismarck* sunk and only *Scharnhorst* as an immediate threat, and they had ordered heavier units to stand by off Iceland, just in case."

"I remember, sir. I read about it in the papers. Three German cruisers came out of Norway and went for the convoy. But the *Scharnhorst* never appeared."

He touched the cup on his desk. The tea was cold. "The convoy was ordered to disperse, not 'scatter,' as some might have had it. *Pyrrhus* placed herself between the convoy and the enemy." He added with sudden bitterness, "But the heavy units never arrived, and Captain Sherbrooke's challenge was in vain. *Pyrrhus* managed to maul one of them, but she was hopelessly outgunned. Swamped."

"But the convoy was left alone, sir?"

He did not hear her. "I remember seeing *Pyrrhus* at a fleet review before the war. I couldn't keep away, even then. She had a ship's company of four hundred and fifty. They picked up eight of them. One was Sherbrooke. You don't last long in the Arctic in September."

"And now he's here, sir."

"And now he's here." A small Wren hovered at the door with a signal-pad in her hands.

The operations officer was glad of the interruption. He was only speculating, in any case. Nobody knew for certain what

had happened that day. He wiped the window again. He could not see the ship from here, but he had already watched her at her anchorage, surrounded by barges and lighters, boats coming and going like servants. She was there: he could feel her. A ship so well known in peace and war, part of the legend, a symbol of all the navy stood for.

Her previous captain, Cavendish, had died suddenly, not on his bridge but at home. An accident, the report had stated. Cavendish would have known the truth. He had been in command of that great ship out there when *Pyrrhus* had gone down, guns blazing, in seas as high as this building. Now Sherbrooke was taking his place. In command of a legend . . . the ship which had left his *Pyrrhus* to perish.

The Wren petty officer came back and said, "Nothing important, sir." She saw his face, and exclaimed, "What is it, sir?"

He turned his back on the streaming window and the choppy waters of the Firth.

He said bluntly, "I wonder if you could spare an evening for dinner in the city? Nothing fancy."

She said, "I'm sorry, sir. I'm tied up for the next few runs ashore." Then she smiled. "I'd love to. Really."

The operations officer beamed. "I'll cadge some transport. Rank hath its privileges!"

Then he turned again, and stared across the busy anchorage. He still could not see her through the haze and drizzle. But the ship was there. Waiting.

Captain Guy Sherbrooke stepped down from the staff car and turned toward the Firth. He heard the operations officer giving instructions to the driver about something, and wished he could have been alone for these last free moments. Taking command, even joining a ship for the first time, was always a testing business. All the way from London, changing trains, holding onto solitude even in crowded compartments, he had thought about it. This was very different from all the other

times. At the Admiralty they had tried to make light of it, for his sake; it had only made it worse, in some ways.

His new company would be much more worried about what their new captain would be like. *Think of it that way.* The old vice-admiral at the funeral had also said as much. "She's a fine ship, a great ship. I'd give my whole life to command her all over again."

During the journey he had found himself recalling the funeral and the aftermath, the sandwiches and the sherry, and the first nervous laughter as the tension had begun to wear thin. What had he really expected?

And why could he not accept that nothing would ever be the same? *Pyrrhus* was gone. All the faces, the weaknesses, and the rough camaraderie which made any ship were no more. *Eight survivors.*

He had passed the journey north going through his notes, putting names to people who would soon become an everyday part of his life. Whenever he had glanced up from his papers, a ruddy-faced brigadier had tried to force him into conversation about the war. What the navy, "the blue jobs" as he called them, really thought about it, while he took occasional sips from a silver flask which certainly did not contain tea. He had not offered it to Sherbrooke. He felt his mouth relax into a thin smile. *Just as well. I'd probably have told him!*

The operations officer was speaking again. He had seen the glances passing between him and the Wren petty officer: like the old vice-admiral and his Wren driver, wanting to be the man he once was.

Sherbrooke turned towards him. He was doing his best: they all were. *It's me.* "What is it?"

The operations officer replied, "Nothing, sir. Just a young chap joining the ships. Asking about boats. I told him to report to . . ."

"I'll take him."

He caught sight of a young lieutenant with a pile of ill-assorted luggage and an instrument case, a banjo, by the look

of it. His stripes were wavy: another R.N.V.R. officer, hostilities only, who overnight had become the largest part of the navy.

But there was something different about this one, a gold-laced letter "A" in the curl of his upper stripe, and when he responded to the operations officer's reluctant offer, Sherbrooke saw the pilot's wings on his left sleeve.

"Great! Thanks!" He stared, obviously dismayed as he saw the oak leaves around the peak of Sherbrooke's cap. "Gee, I'm sorry, sir! I didn't realize!" He added helplessly, "I'm joining the *Reliant*, you see."

Sherbrooke nodded, momentarily off-balance. The easy use of her name. Had he really been avoiding it?

Then he smiled. "So am I, as it happens."

The lieutenant slipped the raincoat off his shoulder and saluted.

"Rayner, sir. R.C.N.V.R."

Sherbrooke returned his salute, and glanced at the word *Canada* on the lieutenant's shoulder. It was a different navy now: errand boys and bank clerks, brick-layers and bus conductors. A miracle which had been performed without any one noticing, or so it sometimes seemed to him.

The operations officer looked up from his watch. "The launch is coming, sir."

Sherbrooke shivered again, but not because of the cold. "Right on time."

The operations officer sounded relieved. His part was almost over. "She would be on time, sir. In *that* ship."

Sherbrooke barely heard him. He was feeling in his pockets, half expecting to find his pipe there, but that had gone too, probably when they had cut his frozen clothing from his body. All the time, he had been trying to hold onto the other man, hearing his voice. *Help me. Somebody help me.* And another voice, a stranger's. "No use, Captain. He's gone."

"Excuse me, sir."

"*What?*" He swung on the Canadian almost blindly. "What is it?"