

## Revenge unbidden

by Pete Claisse

The fleet sailed through the night in silence punctuated only by the sounding of the solitary signal gun from the flagship, marking the hour. In the thickening sea-mist distant shapes of flags and sails were scarcely seen by watchmen sheltering from the cold. The collision came from nowhere, catching the crews at their lowest, disorientated and seeming leaderless. At least that was the verdict of the court-marshal a month later on the dusty Caribbean island.

“Lieutenant Carter, we find you guilty of gross negligence in the command of your ship by failing to keep it on a true bearing and causing a collision at sea.” The admiral was looking him directly in the eye, daring him to reply. “In view of the extreme circumstances you will remain in command of the Kestrel but a severe reprimand will be placed on your record.” His eyes told the story of his son, too drunk to take his first command, leaving it to this upstart from the family of a fisherman, who dared to hold his gaze.

“Captain Burrows.” He continued, addressing the other man but still watching Carter for the slightest reaction. “We accept your assurance and that of your first officer as gentlemen. We find that you acted correctly in all matters and kept the Orion on station in the fleet until impacted by the Kestrel.”

Back on his crippled ship, Carter could feel his men watching him. They knew he had been at the binnacle every second before the great ship of the line had careered at them out of the gloom. They couldn't understand why he had said nothing and let their reputations be damned along with his. He ignored their looks and drove them ever harder to get their 30 guns ready for action. The broken hull timbers would offer scant protection for his gunners and a storm or a misjudged tack would leave the gun deck awash, but he said nothing.

The Spanish fleet was sighted at dawn and they sailed within the hour. Clearing the headland under full sail the capital ships were soon engaged with the Kestrel and the other frigates holding the ends of the line. Carter felt the deck shake as his port side guns fired high in the air to get maximum range to harass the enemy reserves behind their line. Suddenly the signal came from the flagship “move forward and engage”. He looked at it for a moment not believing. Passing his telescope to his first officer he asked for confirmation.

They moved into a maelstrom of fire. Two enemy ships stood in reserve, they were old but massive, looming over them with eighty guns each. Their crews called out abuse after the first broadside. The shots tore across the deck. Carter looked up from the helm to see the damage just as the wheel dissolved into a shower of splinters in front of him. A few seconds later the fore mast was crashing to the deck and the ship lay helpless unable to bring even her few guns to bear. They waited for the next broadside which would be fired lower to

tear their hull apart but it never came. Out-gunned and seeing his line begin to falter the Spanish admiral had signalled to withdraw.

Watching the tow line released from the Kestrel back in the harbour the admiral was heard to remark "not much fight in her, not like the Orion that really fought today."

The celebration dinner was held on a headland, away from the swamps and mosquitos by the harbour, and commanding a fine view of the fleet at anchor. The ships carried flags and bunting and all but skeleton crews were gathered at long trestles for the feast. Even the Kestrel had raised a flag on one of its surviving masts but the appalling damage was visible even at the distance. The captured Spanish ship looked relatively undamaged and Carter saw its captain sitting next to the admiral; and wondered why he had ordered the colours struck.

Pigs had been found and roasted and wine from the flagship was served to the officers and local brews to the men. The conversation at the officers' table was brisk as tales of the battle were told and embellished. No mention was made of the Kestrel and nobody spoke to Carter. Suddenly the Spanish captain asked why the frigate had been sent forward. There was a moment's silence before laughter started and rolled back and forth along the table. No answer was given. The Spaniard found he had to laugh as well but Carter could not.

If the admiral had ever actually intended to relieve Carter of his command, he either forgot or decided the Kestrel was too badly damaged for anybody else. Carter thus found himself organising the repairs as best he could.

The mate climbed out of the cutter exasperated. "They've got piles of nails there, they're using them to build all sorts of sheds and houses but they haven't got any for us."

"So use trunnels". Carter replied "there's all sorts of wood on this island including bamboo. Timber fastenings work for the Chinese so they can work for us."

"They'll laugh at us. Call us a Junk." The man replied. But he was already on his way back to the cutter.

"Good." Carter replied. "Let them".

The long sunny days were being interrupted by high clouds passing quickly across. The admiral called the masters to his ship.

"There are hurricane's coming." He said. Stating what they all already knew. "This harbour kept the fleet safe twice in the eighties so we shall keep the capital ships at anchor. But we need scouts to see what the Spanish are doing. Do I have volunteers to become our eyes and ears? I sailed through a hurricane myself in my younger days, any good sea captain can."

But there were no volunteers. Carter waited for the inevitable.

Before leaving, he was heard to remark that hurricanes came from many directions and a secure anchorage in one might not be safe in the next. Captain Burrows laughed, ushering him through the door with wishes for a pleasant voyage.

The Kestrel sailed with her new fore mast still not fully stripped of bark. The crews from across the harbour looked on, some laughing but some troubled. A few even noticed that Carter had deliberately had the sails set loose. As soon as they were over the horizon they were tightened and the new gun ports and hatches secured with their timber fastenings.

The first officer approached him at the helm. "You could turn back to the South." He said. "I have the word of every crew member that nothing would be said."

"We have orders." Carter almost shouted. "We are to proceed west and to find the Spanish fleet and even to engage it if circumstances permit. We must never, never disobey orders."

Just as the wind was freshening they sighted a mast on the horizon. The first officer passed the telescope to Carter. "Do we change course?" he asked.

"What do the orders say?" Carter replied. "Read them out."

He took the copy from his breast pocket and read "To proceed west until we sight the Spanish fleet."

"Can you see a fleet?" Carter asked.

"No, but there could be more over the horizon."

"No, it is not a fleet." Carter insisted. "And is it Spanish?" He passed the telescope back. The French flag was now visible.

"And what if we disobey orders and engage or turn back to give warning?"

Several of the crew were now watching them. He sent them back to their stations for the storm. Some were quietly smiling despite the danger.

All the sail but a single storm jib was taken in and a sea-anchor deployed to keep them into the wind. The men were sent below except the captain and one helmsman and they were both secure with life lines. Between decks a single lantern hung from a beam illuminating the crowd of men surrounded by the creaking hull timbers. The ship rose on each wave and as it came down water would spurt through the hastily caulked joints. They watched the planks bend and heave, grinding against each other. Holding on to gun carriages to stop themselves being thrown across the deck they watched to see signs of the hidden fastenings weakening with the strain.

Even from the deck Carter could see the oak hull timbers bend as the waves hit. The shock would drive through the ship from the bow before shaking free at the stern seconds later.

But the suppleness let it work with the storm rather than fighting against it and a day later they pumped the bilges dry and set full sail.

For days they sailed South of Hispanola, searching for the fleet at Spanish towns before bearing north to harbours on the Cuban coast to complete their orders to the letter before they returned.

The Kestrel now flew before the wind, her mission complete, her rig in good order, her harbour just over the horizon. But the first they saw of it was the smoke, and as they sped on the full horror came into sight. Whole ships had been driven across the beach into the swamp while others lay smouldering against the jetties, reduced to bare keels and ribs where their magazines had exploded.

Launching the cutter they were soon ashore to hear the tale of the fleet wrecked by the storm and then bombarded by the French and Spanish with the marines only just managing to hold off a landing party.

“Both the Admiral and Captain Burrows perished with their ships.” The officer reported. “You are now the senior officer present.”

Carter soon had teams working on ships that could be salvaged, cutting new planks in the forest and raising cannon from the sandy sea bed.

Climbing up to the two simple graves on the headland his first officer talked of sweet revenge.

“No, never”. Carter replied sharply. “I did not seek it.”