

## International Journal of Naval History

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December 2007

Volume 6 Number 3

Nicholas Blake, **Steering to Glory: A Day in the Life of a Ship of the Line**, London : Chatham Publishing, 2005. 288 pp.

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Published in the year of the bi-centenary of the Battle of Trafalgar *Steering to Glory* is a different approach to usual study of life aboard a sailing man of war during the Napoleonic Wars. As opposed to writing about a particular historical vessel or vessels the author uses a fictitious ship (a ubiquitous 74-gun ship of the line called the *Splendid*) and follows its progress through a so called typical day onboard in the Mediterranean in the summer of 1810. This is done, to use the authors own words "... in detail, deck by deck and watch by watch..." to show "... how it all fitted together – or occasionally failed to."

The author starts by setting the context of *Splendid* both in terms of the Napoleonic war, the navy and the 74-gun ship as a ship-type, before starting the narrative of a day onboard. The *Splendids*' "day" starts at midnight with the "Middle Watch" and continues through the watches for 24 hours. This is opposed to the real "first watch" of a ship which ran from 8pm until midnight. The book follows a formulaic narrative; a theme or activity is introduced for each part of the vessel during each period of time, such as washing the decks, and this is then explained or described, sometimes quoting directly from historical sources. Whether or not this would have been the true routine or how often an activity took place onboard a real ship is not stated. Instead we have a narrative of activities presented without context and sometimes seemingly unrelated. An enormous

number of subjects are covered in this fictitious day, more than would be expected for a real sailing man of war.

To do this the author uses as an outline the real day of the *Conqueror*, also a 74-gun ship, and fleshes this out with detail from other sources. The historical material comes from a variety of printed and primary sources including: letters, courts martial records, diaries and ship's logs. The book is well referenced with an extensive notes section, accompanied by endnotes and extensive appendices where further historical information can be found if wanted. It is when perusing these notes that the reader will find out that the author is truly writing a fiction from history. In the book we are told of an incident concerning the sabotaging of a gun tackle (pp 40-41), a real incident onboard other ships during this period but altered "to be appropriate for a 74" (p.226 n.9). It is to the author's credit though that these sources can be followed up.

It is however unfortunate that this can not be said for the black and white illustrations which appear throughout the text. These have obviously been derived from historical sources, if not one single source, but these remain unreferenced. Further to this some are illegible (p.25) whilst others appear unassociated with the text (p.21, p.178).

This is an interesting book for the general reader and reader wishing to get a feel for life on board a man of war, but it is as the author admits a fictitious narrative that finds its academic worth is in the foot notes and end notes. The book sits somewhere between Nicholas Rodger *Wooden Wall* and *Hornblower*.



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