

Looking back 25 years - a naval perspective

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As a young Surgeon Lieutenant, being sent to sea as Squadron MO and deploying to the West Indies in HMS Plymouth was to be the highlight of GDMO time. However, all was not to turn out quite as expected. Nobody anticipated sailing to war as we left Rosyth in mid March 1982. In fact we were to participate in major fleet exercises off Gibraltar, replenish and head off across the Atlantic to a five-month tour of Caribbean islands, Florida and Belize.

How quickly life can change! We were not to see Gibraltar again for some months and by 1 April were heading south with a Task Group. Rumours abounded: would we be the Ascension Island guard ship or the fleet mail ship – after all we were a 21 year old frigate – a fine old lady, but somewhat dated compared with those shiny Type 21, 22 and 42 ships. Life on board changed quickly, although we all had a secret hope that a diplomatic solution to the crisis (and invasion by 2 April) would result and allow us to proceed on our Caribbean tour. Firstly, food was rationed to allow a 70-day reserve (in effect the choices reduced and the quantity was more portioned), and then we began to train hard with fire, NBCD, damage control and first aid exercises. Little did we know how important all of these were going to be.

The balmy tropical weather at Ascension saw us in shorts rapidly loading war levels of stores and ammunition, before detaching south in the van of the Force heading for S Georgia. We embarked D Sqn 22 SAS and a Naval Gunnery Spotter (NGS), the wardroom lost anything precious and was now full of medical stores and F Ident 107's and 106's were issued to the medical staff. One of the senior rates said that he knew we were really going to war when the medical staff began issuing individual morphine autojets – items normally kept very securely under lock and key and mustered regularly!

On 14 April, we rendezvoused with the red-hulled HMS Endurance who had been hiding around S Georgia. The task group ships lined the side to cheer her in quite an emotional meeting, and I think her ship's company were quite glad to be once again in company with grey warships. As the weather cooled, we neared the danger area and the MO's from HMS Antrim, Plymouth, Endurance, 45 Cdo and RFA Tidespring met to discuss the medical plan for action. Tidespring with a surgical team on board was to be the Role 2 facility and Antrim with her larger sickbay to be the main receiving facility. Blood donors were identified and bled to produce a small pool for the group as we assessed that we were far enough away from action to allow them to recuperate.

By the 19 April we were at action stations, concerned about the submarine threat, and beginning to see icebergs and getting used to the southern ocean long swell and high winds. Two days later we were off S Georgia. SAS insertions to the Fortuna Glacier were hampered by weather and helicopter crashes, but

suddenly on 25 April we were in action with helicopters firing on a surfaced Argentinean submarine. At 14:15 we opened fire on S Georgia – the long-awaited war had begun in earnest.

S Georgia capitulated with only one casualty – a submariner who lost a leg when his boat was hit. Lt Cdr Astiz surrendered the garrison at Leith in Plymouth's wardroom and the Union Jack and White Ensign were once again flying on sovereign British territory.

The next period was taken up by joining the main Task Force, hearing of Vulcan raids on Stanley airfield, being elated that the threat from the General Belgrano was neutralised yet devastated that HMS Sheffield was hit, burned out and abandoned to sink. Finally there were preparations for the landings. Life at sea had settled into a pattern and having been blooded at S Georgia, the ship was fully prepared and ready. When the mist allowed, the sight of the Task Force in convoy – warships, RFA's and civilian Ships Taken Up From Trade (STUFT) was impressive.

D Day was 21 May. We crept in poor visibility towards the N Falkland coast. HMS Antrim opened fire on Fanning Head about 01:00 and in what was now a clear, starry night we could see the flashes of the fall of her shot. By dawn the first waves of Commandos and Paras were ashore and we were in San Carlos protecting the huge white liner Canberra, while offering NGS support to the landings. The first Argentinian planes appeared about 08:45, but it was during the afternoon that the ships in the sound came under most intense attack. Having circled Canberra with all guns blazing, as her protection, we were sent to tow the immobilised HMS Argonaut into the relative safety of San Carlos, bringing their battle-weary crew some sustenance, support and power (we were later to bury their dead at sea in the solemn, highly emotional but very traditional naval manner). Later that night, once again on patrol in the Sound, we watched HMS Ardent blaze like a large Guy Fawkes beacon as ammunition exploded. This was true war – unpleasant and hard, but we were steeled to it.

San Carlos Water was to be our daytime anchorage and we came to be comfortable there – we knew the direction of air attack and besides out at sea there was the worrying potential for Exocet attack! Night-time sorties to land Special Forces combined with gunnery serials on Argentinean positions and convoy duties for STUFT entering and leaving San Carlos. We were able to follow the battle for Goose Green and the land advance to ring Stanley closely. Air raids had become routine and all was going well. However, on 8 June we were ordered to fire on an Argentinian lookout post on Mt Rosalie overlooking San Carlos from W Falkland. A raid attacked us just before 17:00 causing damage to the funnel, turret, after PO's mess and mortar handling room. A fire broke out when a depth charge exploded and fires raged in the after portion of the ship engulfing the junior rates' dining hall and the PO's mess. The sickbay had to be evacuated forwards to the wardroom, and there we dealt with 5 casualties, including severe smoke inhalation and a major penetrating injury to the temporal lobe. All the casualties were evacuated to the Red & Green Life

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Machine at Ajax Bay, where I was later to see the host of burns casualties from the attack on RFA's Sir Galahad and Sir Tristram the same day.

Contemporaneous photographs, seen subsequently, make our plight look worse than it seemed aboard. We had survived battle damage, including a major fire aboard, but power, weapons and propulsion were all intact. Superficially we looked very battered and required patching up at anchor before sailing for repairs at Stena Seaspread where we met with HMS Glamorgan licking her more serious wounds from an Exocet hit. Suffice to say, we were sufficiently patched up to be back on the gun line by 14 June and to hear of the surrender in Stanley. The next 48 hours were stormy at sea and we rode this uncomfortably – accommodation and messing being limited by our internal

damage. We were honoured to be the first frigate to enter the inner Stanley harbour from Berkeley Sound and to be able to see Stanley itself for the first time.

Our return via Ascension Island and Gibraltar was uneventful, but allowed a period of de-stressing, tidying of the ship as far as possible and a return to more relaxed cruising. Our welcome back at Rosyth was overwhelming, arriving under the Forth Bridges to the strains of a piper and the Band of the Royal Marines, and of course to the masses of families and friends. It had been an unexpected, short and intense war from which many lessons were learnt, and from which we were lucky to return relatively unscathed.

...and yes I did return to the Caribbean later that year with another ship of the Squadron!



HMS Plymouth following Argentine air strikes