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OPEN LETTERS FROM THE FALKLANDS – 1982

Es un relato humorístico de lo que sucedía a nivel doméstico en los buques británicos durante el conflicto de Malvinas.

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THE NAVAL REVIEW

Open Letters from the Falklands, 1982

I

RIGHT, its Saturday 10 April and we are having our first break since leaving Portsmouth on Monday. So, I'll try and tell you just where its at. Our peacetime lives are long forgotten. We go at everything with determination and resolve and never take 'no' for an answer. We know we are capable of great things, we have a reason, so its just a matter of good thinking, planning, and effort. Our greatest asset to achieve these things is being out of sight of land. Leaving the harbour was gruelling, heart-breaking (there were few dry eyes or firm voices on the bridge), and sorrowful. That is all behind us. Mind you the shock is still felt. The 'strategists' all said we would have a period of tension slowly escalating towards conflict. We got no notice — which is bloody naughty. To go from a peacetime Navy to a wartime Fleet in two and half days is slightly un-nerving. Anyway, whats it like? Here goes.

We sleep fully dressed on top of our bunks and not between the sheets. So, when Action Stations sounds all we need do is arise, pick-up gasmask and life-jacket and briskly walk to our action duty. That is the rule. However, you know me — must be comfortable. I hang my No. 8 shirt on the door knob, fill the pockets with essentials (baccy, pipe, pipe-knife, lighter, handkerchief, comb, bar of nutty, orange/apple, pen, pencil, rubber, and wallet); I leave my shoes in such a position that my swinging legs land in them first time, every time, and I do them up when I get to the Island; I use a sarong as a sort of sheet and so apart from wearing trousers, socks, and vest it is nearly normal! We have Action Stations every day at dawn and dusk; and every now and then just to keep us on our toes. You'll be wondering how groggy 'ol me in the morning ever gets to his station before lunchtime?! The secret is to say to yourself precisely what you are going to do when the alarm rings — ie, I am going to get out of bed, put on shoes then shirt, strap pillows into bunk, stow bunk, pick up gasmask and lifejacket, turn out lights on leaving cabin, and do up shirt buttons on the way to work. I've never been late yet! The cabin, by the way, is bare. No books, towels, chairs, dressing gown

on hook, or cushions on bunk. All stowed as they are a fire hazard. Laundry. One bundle per man per week. Officers are allowed to send 3 white shirts, 1 pair No. 8s (working clothes), 1 sheet, 1 pillow case, and 1 towel. Therefore my cabin is festooned in nicks, socks, and handkerchiefs which have to be stowed damp/wet when action is sounded — I note they smell a bit if kept too long in a drawer in such a condition.

Food. Bad news. We are under 'portion control' to conserve stocks. That means we get what is considered to be sufficient but which actually means I'm still hungry afterwards!! The result is that one thinks about it — food, fool! The NAAFI for the first time in 12 years have been honoured with my custom. I'm back into Walnut Whirls and Bounty Bars (the ones with dark chocolate — more aftertaste) and I see they have recently acquired a shelf full of Treets. One is also forced to lean towards dishonesty — yesterday I took an orange on the way into lunch AND an apple on the way out and no one noticed!!

Routine. Basically the whole ships company is in what we call Defence Watches. That means it is split 50–50, working 6 hours on and 6 off. Again, theory. My team manage it but myself and the Fleet Chief have to keep the information flow going so we work, generally, from 0800 to midnight and then split the rest! So, on average we get 4 hours a piece. Actually, it is enough. Sleep, for me, in the normal sense, doesn't exist. I lay me down and think of everything and nothing and the next thing I know I'm being dragged out by either my alarm or the ship's. And its enough. One gets a bit jaded every now and then but there is so much to do, and it is exciting and therefore energy-producing, that it is comparatively easy to keep going. And there are moments of relaxation, and a lot of laughter sometimes so don't think that it is all awful.

Work. I can't say too much but believe me every department is working balls out either by choice (the pilots for combat practice) or by necessity (load has risen 8-fold in my department). By the time we get to the Ascensions (half-way point) we will all be up

to speed and ready for the big push. Mail/Telegrams. Mail will be very irregular. I will get stuff off at Ascension — get some too!!! After that, goodness knows. I can't send telegrams but you can. Every now and then please send something. I know its one way but I'm afraid it can't be helped. A reminder of telegram address — HMS HERMES/ADMIRALTYRADIO - thats all you need. (The only people allowed to send telegrams are the pressmen onboard!) I would be most interested to hear your impressions of the reports from Hermes.

Staff. The lads are doing OK and working well. Its only now one realises just how young most of them are. But they seem either unaffected or unaware of what we are about. Probably just as well. Its the oldies who appear concerned most.

The thing that worries me most is what the devil do we do if we run out of bog paper!!! I've started taking more than I need and hiding the extras in my boot locker! The weather has started to improve and should be tropical by Wednesday. Just as well I kept my gear onboard although I notice I left my sandals at home, dammit. Mind you, we wont be long in hot climes. I understand that it is bloody cold down south so I'm glad I've got plenty of warm stuff. I note we cross the Line next Thursday and will have the usual Ceremony which will, at last, be something the press can film freely. Chaps with beards have had to shave off (forms a bad seal when wearing a gas mask) and so the Commander has allowed a Mexican mustache competition to take place. I started but on the first day the wind blew it off, on the second I shaved off in error, and on the third the Captain said bridge watchkeepers were not allowed as he thought the Admiral (who joins us soon) would disapprove! Can't think of anything else to say. let me know of any details you would like to know about. Tomorrow, Sunday, I'll write letters.

II

The well dressed officer and gentleman leaps into bed in a blue romper suit these days. They come in two shades, one blue the other white, and are normally used for dirty work. However, being loose fitting they are less restricting than

the outdoor clothes hitherto mentioned. Depending on weather conditions the buttons which stretch from neck to as far as possible may be done up or left undone depending upon the freedom of movement desired. The ensemble can be enhanced by other garments which are, in this case, threat dependent. For instance, if there is a wee submarine in the area then one turns-in wearing long-johns, tee-shirt, and thick woolly socks. Should the threat be from aeroplanes then, of course, one would wear one's anti-flash hood neatly tucked into the top of the romper suit to give a cravat-like appearance. (It should be noted that after excessive wear anti-flash hoods, particularly the part that covers the mouth and nose tend to stink a bit but this is an environmental problem and cannot be avoided.). The whole appearance is neatly finished by the wearing of evening gloves; these come free with the hood, and although they do tend to pinch a bit around the elbow are an essential part of the Complete Officer's Outfit. During the day play-time wear is permitted and although not as elegant as night attire is extremely functional (see following page).

As an aside on clothing — I've worked out how to avoid having so much damp laundry lying around — easy really — I don't change so often!

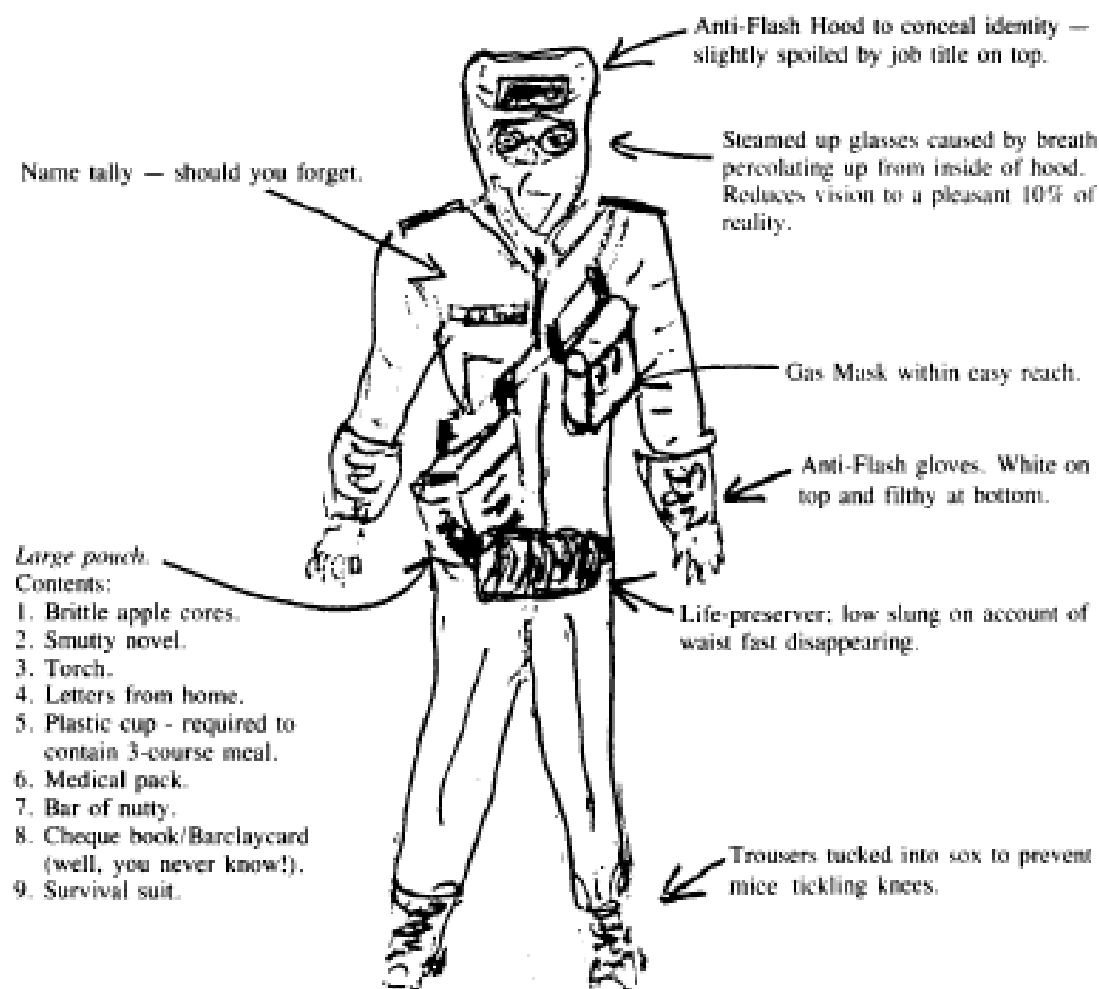
Life goes apace with its normal highs and lows neatly expressed by 'the fortunes of war'. *Sheffield* was a bad day but out of every disaster comes some good. There have been an enormous number of 'lessons learnt' and we feel more secure as a result. Its a pity that the price was so high. One lesson we have learnt has been the need to keep all doors and hatches shut with at least 2 clips on each. As you know, you can't walk more than 30 feet in a warship without coming across a hatchway either up, down, or along. So, life is frightfully boring and tiresome. Going places means forever stopping and opening doors, having taken clips off, then closing and re-clipping. Up and down hatches are worse because of the size of the hole (small) and the contortions required to close and clip-up. Mind you, sometimes one gets a real treat — like being in the middle of three people going in the same direction as you — the first takes off clips and opens door allowing you to make

a graceful entrance, whilst the third in line has to close the door and put on the clips. Real bliss! Talking about going places reminds me that I have become extremely superstitious — I always follow the same routes, never deviate even if it is quicker; always fold my clothes and things in a particular place and manner; and I never walk under ladders! I've actually got thousands more but mostly they are in the subconscious. I suppose its a sign of the times.

The ship is still very overcrowded with people and stores. Many of the extra chaps are Army. Well, not actually Army, sort of Special Army. They have special skills I'm told — the sort one usually finds in HM Prisons or on the scaffold! We think they are terrific and they are going to spoil many an ARGYs day I fear. They sleep in the flat where the sproggs slept com-

missioning day. The other day I accidentally kicked one of their haversacks and spent the next 20 mins apologising to it. (Well, you can't be too careful!)

Today we Store Ship. I can just imagine all those Walnut Whirls waiting for me; and the fruit, bound to be tons of fruit; salad and fresh veg would be nice too. Portion control got out of hand. Not only were we getting too little of everything, the caterer was using it as an excuse to try out hitherto unheard of menus. The final straw was the day we had saffron rice (all yellow and yucky) with bits of squid hidden in the folds (I'm told its called piella or something), two rock hard baked potatoes, and cauliflower! The poor chap was nearly lynched but he did take the point and since then things have improved markedly. Lunch today was fish-pie, potatoes,



green beans and sweetcorn (we appear to have a sweetcorn mine onboard because it appears at nearly every meal except breakfast and it doesn't make that cos the miners are having a kip I suspect!)

Six on, 6 off watchkeeping routine became unbearable owing to lack of continuous sleep. We now work 8 on and 8 off which is wonderful as one gets a period of at least 7 hours continuous sleep in 48 hours. Most refreshing. The next major event is to try for some fresh air and take a look at daylight!

Must go.

III

Hi, ya'll, just a quick starter on the subject of security. I don't know who Clare dists this to but please remember it is private and should not be discussed outside family groups. Not that I intend giving you classified information deliberately, its just that any bits of 'life' down here could, when considered with other snippets, provide the enemy with useful information. The enemy in this case can range from your local cub reporter to the BBC. It is proven that our national leaders, press, and broadcasting organisations have in the last few weeks given away gratuitous intelligence to the ARGs. The results are very clear here in the form of casualty figures. One day you'll get the full picture but in the meantime remain 'mum', please.

After two months of this lot there are certain things that the mind naturally seems to focus on. For instance, I have been fully dressed for over 60 days!! Even going to the shower overalls are worn. Quick dash under the spray, high speed dry-off and back to being covered up. So, I wanna go naked. Anywhere, anyhow, with just a smile! Heaven must be something like having a good old scratch without having to work through 4 or 5 layers of clothing!! What else — ah, nutty! A Walnut Whirl has become an unobtainable dream. (No, don't send any — they melt on the Equator!!). It looks like someone forgot to send Naafi stores to us, or fresh fruit. Ships seem to be topped with ammo and equipment stores for some reason!! Actually, food has improved of late. The portions are quite reasonable and we all appear to be putting on weight again. The sweetcorn

mine continues to churn out a ton a day. Wine stocks are fast depleting — only Sauterne available at dinner these days — one glass per man per day! War is hell. When the opportunity for tying one on occurs I reckon all we'll have left is Ribena! Mind you a sniff of Grouse would make me high right now.

Mail has been quite good this end — we get some every ten days or so. That is because of so many ships, including QE2, being sent down here. Unfortunately not so many get sent home. I gather the situation is improving but it must be very frustrating at your end not getting mail for over a month. By the way thanks for all your efforts on the writing scene, a real pleasure to receive the mammoth efforts in hand to get replies off. Free airmail helps only we've run out of forms!! Dhobeying is a problem again — the Chinese laundrymen have deserted — left last week — the 'burn-bum' got a bit much for them, and, of course, they have taken casualties in other ships. So, we have taken over. I provide one lad who is so young he has been designated No. 14 Boy; No. 1 Boy is a gruff old Chief Stoker from Guzz aged 45! The service is very good and because they have run out of starch it is now possible to put a shirt on without the danger of breaking an arm. My cabin continues to be festooned in nicks, vests, sox, and handkerchiefs. Clare's idea of getting most of the water out by squeezing in a towel works fine except now I have wet towels hanging up too! Have had a major success in washing my jumper which was beginning to smell offensive to me so goodness knows what others thought. It is on its fifth day of drying but is still the right shape and is not too crinkly from insufficient rinsing! Need blue wool to repair 4 holes Clare, and please send a darning needle just in case.

On the tactical scene you'll know of progress ashore. The Army have been very enthusiastic and keen. The terrain is awful — open and bogs galore (that word again! Thanks for contributions — but mums beware — if Playschool are using that stuff on your little darlings bum its no wonder there is no skin left! I'm now using it as an abrasive cloth to scour my pipe bowl!) The Scots and Gurkhas landed today so what with the swirl of the pipes and the glint from the kukris I really can't see the ARGs holding out much longer. (I know I

wouldn't). Locals at Darwin and Goose Green were overjoyed to see the Paras and I understand provided the traditional cuppa in good order. A push on Port Stanley is in progress and the next few days will be crucial for us all. Our job has remained the same — we are the airfield (along with *Invincible*) (we have both been 'sunk' twice according to the ARGs) and provide both air patrol, and ground support planes throughout the day. Our losses have been bearable, and, considering that we are outnumbered 10 to 1 are doing well. The Harrier has proved to be a very good low-level fighter — its main failing being lack of endurance and speed. But it turns on a postage stamp thereby presenting many more attack chances. The flight deck is humming and heaving 24 hours a day. The ground crews preparing and marshalling aircraft working in absolutely appalling conditions. In the open with icy 40 knot winds, soaked through, stinking of aviation fuel, and surrounded by the sound of screaming jets is one helluva way to make a living. But they are a tough lot and never fail to come up with the goods, and always appear cheerful. My cabin, as you know, is aft and directly beneath a landing spot. During my 8 off I have the unique experience of having, at regular intervals, a force equal to that which is exerted by the PO Tower, exerted on my ceiling. At first I found it rather annoying but now its sort of taken on a different feeling — you know — a sort of heady pressure, light at first, then a gentle vibration and movement, followed by an increase in all, rising to a crescendo that quickens the pulse forcing the blood to race, the brow to perspire, the breath to quicken, and then . . . enough of that! Take it from me, its noisy. The pilots, of course, are the mainstay of the whole operation. They are undoubtedly The Few and their task is awesome but, again, they are well led and confident and barring very bad luck have a good survivability rate. As far as I'm concerned they can have all the medals in the world when this thing is over. When that will be no one knows. We press on day in, day out. However, our efficiency must drop as the weeks go by and so I would guess that plans must (!) be afoot for a break of some sort — just out of zone would do. Somewhere away from threat, where we could revitalise the

old brain cells for a week would be most welcome. We shall just have to wait and see. Ok, enough for now. Hope next edition will be whilst taking tea in Port Stanley!

Remember, Security.

IV

Gave blood today for the Boys at the Front. Hope you do the same when the call comes. They need it. For both sides. Brown Jobs are pressing on well with today being the second part of the major offensive against Port Stanley. This time the pipes and drums of the Scots were heard and the dark flash of the Gurkhas kukris. I understand that the main objectives are in our hands and that a hurried push may be ordered on the town itself; seems a good scheme as it'll prevent Argy regrouping and resupply. We wait on the periphery and send in combat air patrols, ground attack aircraft, supplies, and good cheer. Outside of the Arg aircraft range we are able to concentrate on picking up the supply vessels from UK, transferring their cargoes around the fleet, and then escort them into the landing area ashore. At night we close in and provide strong air support against the night bombing runs by the baddies against our troops on the ground. So, all in all, we seem to fill the day!

The frigates have a different sort of day. They are dashing, cocky, stylish little things. At night they steam in to the coast avoiding minefields and submarines to bombard enemy positions. At dawn they rush out to us for protection, refuel, and reammo; and a very short rest before beginning the cycle all over again. Most of them have suffered damage but they wear their scars like medals. The long-range missile vessels are sleek and superior. They sit 'up-threat' (ie nearest the expected direction of any enemy attack) with guns and missiles at immediate notice. So far they have only had moderate success but are, I am pleased to say, getting very much better! Close to us are the missile defence ships. These are very fast anti-missile carriers who have been magnificent in that they take the sting out of nearly every attack. We like them, a lot. The submarines, long, black, and obscene, are never seen. But we know they are there. So do the enemy and their mere presence in a vast expanse of ocean has kept the Argy navy bottled up in harbour ever since the *Belgrano* sinking.

Next in view are the great lumbering supply ships. Trundling around in the wrong area, wrong direction, with the wrong cargo going to the wrong place at quite the wrong moment. But they are so keen to do it! They appear over the horizon, full of piss and importance, so we fuss them, guide, cajool, kick, swear, and steer them to our pumpover area, our small ship transfer area, the warship fuelling area, the ammunition area, the landing area, and sometimes we just say 'what the hell are you doing here — you should be in South Georgia!'

The Merchant Navy really are doing a grand job. Once we have drained them dry we then filled them up with survivors and mail and send them back from whence they came. Then, there are the aircraft carriers with us being the sort of Queen Bee. We carry the Admiral. We are 'the Flag' (She, who must be obeyed!!). Without us there is no protection for the silly FIs so you can imagine how we are viewed! We are also the mail distribution centre so are of inestimable value to most. From us come the orders, the ideas, the actions, the kicks, the laurels and crowns. We are always asked, never told. We rule the roost. We are also popular with the Argies!

STOP PRESS! White flags seen flying in Port Stanley! Good news. Oh bother, I'll miss the Rape and Pillage bit being out here. (Actually, all I want is a Walnut Whirl and an American Express Card — and I don't think there are many of those in Port Stanley at the moment). I suppose now the tricky 'surrender' talks between the Generals will start. No doubt we will be demanding unconditional surrender whilst the other chap will be asking for a free-ride back to Argyl and for him and the Mess silver! I think we ought to agree to that but forget to give him his trousers! No doubt the boss in BA will not be very pleased with developments on account of it not being part of his grand design so I suppose we ought to remain fairly alert for an angry reaction. Today, overall, has been a good day when I think about it — the main highlight being that I managed to sneak

an apple AND a duff at lunch time (we are allowed one or the other). Add to that the pleasure of having an orange last Tuesday and one is getting close to having a terrific month!! Nearly forgot to mention the biggest coup of the week — have obtained 7 (yes Seven) packets of Gold Block tobacco! Got it off this bloke in *Bristol* (who have recently joined) after some pretty hard bargaining. Ended up with me having to offer up, and have accepted, all the women under 35 in our clan, a desk-top computer, and a copy of *Penthouse* magazine. Given gladly! (Its quite astounding what we chaps will do for a Good Smoke!)

MORE STOP PRESS! Maggie T has been talking to the Admiral not 10 minutes ago on my satellite telephone! Will have to get a brass tally made immediately 'Maggie spoke here' or words to that effect. I gather she said something like jolly well done and things. All makes it worthwhile doesn't it? If I'd known she was going to call I would have asked the Admiral to ask her to send out some Walnut Whirls whilst the going was good. Looks like we are in for a lumpy night; wind is up and the stern is corkscrewing. Weather, so far, has been quite good; the nights have been cold but the days have been clear and fine. Which reminds me, if you haven't got a Thermal Vest you really must get one soonest. They are marvellous and every good home should have one. I take mine absolutely everywhere. It tends to get a little furnace-like when I dash up ladders inside the ship but I'm able to stride out onto the Signal Deck to visit the chaps without being struck by a great lump of the shivers. Looking forward to the arrival of the cargo ship *St Edmund* the day after tomorrow. It has over 1,000 bags of mail onboard! Apparently about 100 are for us — we usually get 20 or so — so we can look forward to a good read. Its now got very busy here so will have to stop. Will update you on how the negotiations went 'as seen from here' next time. . . .

R.