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A PERSONAL VIEW OF THE FALKLANDS CAMPAIGN

Es el relato de un tripulante (pseudónimo "Canopus") posiblemente de la Argonaut, durante el conflicto de Malvinas.

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THE NAVAL REVIEW

A Personal View of the Falklands Campaign

IT WAS mid-April, and the main elements of the Task Force had sailed. My ship was working-up at Portland, being admirably assisted by the FOST staff, but feeling distinctly edgy. It's no fun watching everyone else going off to war.

So it was a great relief for more than one reason when, in the middle of one of Portland's famous damage control exercises, we received the expected signal ordering us to drop everything and prepare to sail south, taking charge of a small group that was assembling in Devonport. That gave us a four-day period which included a weekend, and in that time the following things happened:

- (a) three new weapon systems installed;
- (b) two new sensors acquired, fitted, and set to work;
- (c) four communications equipments installed, one of them extremely large;
- (d) much ammunition and many stores embarked; trophies and pay ledgers landed;
- (e) all defects put right, all outstanding stores demands met, all complement deficiencies made up;
- (f) one day's leave each watch.

Those who are familiar with the scrimping and saving the Fleet has suffered under recently, and the elephantine process by which ships normally acquire new equipment, will appreciate that the support services were moving pretty fast. I hope historians of the future will give them due credit for their part in the Fleet's prompt departure.

The long passage south was undertaken in company with a remarkable variety of ships under red, white, and blue ensigns. We were conscious that we had only achieved half a work-up, and that on passage facilities like targets were few, but there was no lack of motivation to make up for it. Progress seemed to be good and morale high.

In the early hours of 21 May we were one of six escorts that had the privilege of

escorting the fourteen amphibious ships into Falkland Sound for a landing on the beaches of San Carlos. Our first task was to carry out an anti-submarine sweep of the approaches while the troops were being off-loaded in the dark; they used the eight LCUs of *Fearless* and *Intrepid*, and landed at four beaches round San Carlos. Our ASW sweep proved negative, and when dawn broke calm and clear, and no one seemed to have hit a mine, it became certain that air defence was going to be our major concern.

An AAW affair

So it became for us an AAW affair, with the frigates and destroyers trying to hold the ring while the off-load of stores and equipment continued — a process which seems to take rather a long time. But our AAW systems are heavily dependent on radar, and in that completely land-locked environment radar acquisitions were virtually impossible. So it was back to basics, and our Gun Director Visual (a Petty Officer Missileman called Jones) became one of the most important men on board and rose to the occasion admirably.

Almost continuous air attacks lasted throughout the daylight hours of D-Day. We were attacked early by bombs which skipped along the water like ducks-and-drakes, some of them bouncing over the superstructure and one going between the masts.

'How close was that one, Petty Officer Jones?'

'No problem, sir. It just parted me flippin' 'air.'

We had a battery of seventeen small arms of various descriptions, and it was a pretty sight seeing them all blazing away. We got one aircraft with Seacat at this stage, but it was also claimed by *Plymouth*, and later we agreed amicably to share it with them — you will understand why shortly. The aircraft would come from all directions, flying very low over the hills.

'How are you doing up there, Petty Officer Jones?'

'It's that them Argies, sir. They're going to cause a flippin' accident one day.'

Our first accident came from an Aeromacchi which attacked with gunfire and rockets. It caused slight damage to aerials and upper deck fittings, and blew a large hole in our 965 radar. Three men were seriously wounded in this attack, including the Master-at-Arms, who had been manning a machine gun, and they were evacuated by helicopter to *Canberra* for emergency surgery. The 965 radar thereafter seemed to work rather better than before.

There was a brief lull in the afternoon and we realised that although three escorts had been damaged and one sunk the amphibious shipping was so far unscathed. But if a slight feeling that we were not doing too badly crossed the Captain's mind he soon had other things to think about. At 17.30 a wave of six A4 Skyhawks came over the hill, and it quickly became extremely clear that we were going to receive the undivided attention of all six of them. Although we got one and discouraged some others, two of their 1,000 pound bombs went home. They did not explode but they caused quite a lot of damage.

One entered the ship just above the waterline at the bulkhead between boiler room and engine room. It smashed a number of steam pipes in both compartments, and as we were at Full Ahead a large amount of steam was released. Unfortunately it also knocked off a blower, with the result that one of the boilers exploded. Several small fires and flooding contributed to extensive machinery damage.

The other bomb hit us port side forward five feet *below* the waterline. It passed through two fuel tanks and into the magazine where it created mayhem among the ammunition, and holed the starboard side too. Two Seacat missiles and probably some other explosives cooked off, and the blast vented up through the hoist and blew the door off on the upper deck; it also lifted

the deck of the forward mess about four feet, causing fires and destroying cable runs. In the forward magazine the two loading numbers were killed instantly, but the fires and explosions there seem to have been extinguished by the in-rush of diesel oil from the fuel tanks.

The ship had no steering and still quite a lot of way on, and the grey mass of Fanning Head seemed to be getting bigger and bigger. Fortunately the Foc's'le Officer appeared like the genie of the lamp and, being a quick-thinking fellow, let go an anchor which held in the kelp. So I returned to the Operations Room to continue the damage control exercise that had been interrupted five weeks before at Portland.

The damage and casualties might have been much worse, and one could take comfort from the fact that during the last raid, since only two bombs had hit us, ten of them must have missed. We still had some electrical power and were able to keep most weapons and radars going, and thus continue to contribute to the AAW battle. But we felt a bit vulnerable, immobilised off Fanning Head with three hours of daylight left. Fortunately my good friend Captain Pentreath in the *Plymouth* came over and supported us, and together we fired at a few more raids, but the opposition was flagging after a busy day in which we had been attacked by over seventy aircraft.

That night *Plymouth* towed us into the relative safety of San Carlos with a good deal of difficulty and skill. We had by this time had a total power failure, and were groping around with pusser's torches in an eerie silence. One of my abiding memories is of the extraordinary way people started whispering to each other as in a cathedral. Fortunately we had restored some electrical power by daybreak, and managed, while under air attack, to get another tow from three very game LCUs led by Major Southby-Tailyour of the Royal Marines.

Bomb disposal

We spent the next eight days in 'Bomb Alley' while the off-load continued. Our

improved 965 radar was for most of the time the only long-range radar present, and was much in demand. We were at Action Stations from dawn to dusk, firing at anything that remotely resembled an enemy aircraft, and adding two Mirages and another Skyhawk to our score. After dark we tried to repair damage, make ourselves seaworthy, and get rid of the bombs. During this time the unfortunate *Antelope* sank after a bomb had exploded while being defused.

Our after bomb had something rather rude written in Spanish on the side, but gave no problems to a highly competent team from the Royal Engineers who defused it for us. The forward one was much more precarious, being in a flooded magazine that had suffered extensive damage, and being buried under a confused heap of broken Seacat missiles and other ammunition, some of which had exploded and the rest of which looked unfriendly. The small piece of the bomb that was actually visible at this stage had 'Handle with Care' neatly stencilled on the side.

It was quickly decided by Lieutenant Commander Dutton of the Fleet Clearance Diving Team that there was no question of attempting to defuse this bomb; it had to be hoisted outboard in an armed condition in its present attitude. We then had problem after problem in repairing the underwater damage in difficult sea conditions, pumping out, clearing the magazine sufficiently, and cutting an access route through two decks and the ship's side. A major setback occurred while we were cutting the magazine deckhead during an air raid — the thing suddenly caught fire. The fire spread with amazing rapidity through all the diesel-soaked compartments in the vicinity, and during the next hour I found there was plenty of time to get frightened. When the fire was finally beaten we had suffered a lot more damage, but most weapon systems were still working sturdily, and the fight went on.

Meanwhile great things had been happening in the machinery spaces: one of the boilers had been restored to life, and the

crafty tiffies had repaired enough pipework to steam at slow speed. The hole in the side had also been patched, but this did not meet with the approval of one very young stoker who said he had enjoyed being able to see out for a change.

After some further excitements we lifted the remaining bomb outboard, and gently lowered it, still armed, into the water on a wire — the end of a week-long bomb disposal operation brilliantly undertaken by Lieutenant Commander Dutton. It then seemed to be a good idea to shift both, but because of a cruel mischance and my own stupidity the wire became entangled in the screws and we started winding the damned thing up again. Our Diving Officer cleared it with great sang-froid.

After some more alarms and excursions we got to sea, and patched ourselves up a little more with the help of the *Stena Seaspread*, a requisitioned oil-rig repair ship. We then joined the battle group for two days before being detached for home, and we returned to the sort of welcome normally reserved for royalty — a moving and memorable homecoming.

Falklands fallacies

I was astonished on our return at the amount of interest the public and the media had been taking in the campaign. I would imagine that everyone returning from the south has been questioned by people both inside and outside the Service, and the degree of concern and understanding has been most heartening. But there seems to me to be a number of misconceptions which have gained currency, and what follows is my own private unclassified view of some 'Falklands fallacies' that people have buttonholed me about.

Unfair to the Belgrano?

Of all the misconceptions about the war, the most widespread seems to be that the sinking of the *Belgrano*, outside the *Exclusion Zone*, was unsporting, discreditable, even perfidious. I have heard naval officers voice this point of view, although none who were actually in the

Task Force. The following Government release dated 24 April is worth quoting in full and reading carefully:

On Friday 23 April at 1720 Buenos Aires time the Swiss conveyed to the Argentine Government the following communication from HMG:

'In announcing the establishment of a Maritime Exclusion Zone around the Falkland Islands, HMG made it clear that this measure was without prejudice to the right of the UK to take whatever additional measures may be needed in the exercise of its rights of self-defence under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. In this connection HMG now wishes to make clear that any approach on the part of Argentine warships, including submarines, naval auxiliaries or military aircraft which could amount to a threat to interfere with the mission of British Forces in the South Atlantic will encounter the appropriate response. All Argentine aircraft, including civil aircraft engaging in surveillance of these British Forces will be regarded as hostile and are liable to be dealt with accordingly.'

The president of the Security Council of the United Nations was subsequently informed that this message had been delivered.

At the risk of stating the obvious, note that this statement specifically warns the Argentines and the rest of the world that hostilities would *not* be confined to the Exclusion Zone. Note also that it says nothing about British rules of engagement, which were of course highly classified and completely flexible.

On 2 May the *Belgrano* and her two Exocet-armed escorts, with *Conqueror* in the trail, were in position 5527S 6125W, and her movements and those of the other ships gave every indication that she was heading for the Burdwood Bank. The least depth is 24 fathoms, which is far less than the minimum depth at which it is prudent for an SSN to trail at speed. A glance at the chart shows that *Conqueror* was in danger of losing this powerful enemy SAG, which was posing a rapidly increasing threat to the Battle Group to the east. It was therefore promptly decided to attack the *Belgrano* — and in my view any other decision would have been criminally irresponsible. The actual heading of the *Belgrano* when she was hit, which was 280, is not particularly

significant; as every seaman knows ships zigzag, create diversions, and carry out all sorts of manoeuvres independent of their PIM, and their intentions must be deduced from past movement, not heading. Her position with respect to the *Exclusion Zone* was, in the light of the statement quoted above, entirely irrelevant.

I cannot understand why this Government statement was not given greater prominence in the Press after the sinking, when a good deal of uninformed opinion was floating about. It still is.

Surface ships were very vulnerable to air attack

Certainly we lost four frigates/destroyers and two merchant ships/RFAs to air attack; total six. Certainly every captain I have talked to would have liked more close-range weapons.

But the Argentine Air Force lost 117 aircraft of all types, attributed as follows:

- (a) 29 destroyed by surface ships;
- (b) 26 destroyed by aircraft operating from surface ships;
- (c) 34 destroyed by land-based missiles which had been transported by surface ships;
- (d) 31 destroyed on the ground by naval gunfire support, or by special forces landed from surface ships.

Six to 117 is not bad odds. Vulnerability is relative.

The Argentine Air Force flew brilliantly and bravely?

To keep flying at all with such losses was courageous, and deserves our profound respect. However there are aspects of their anti-ship tactics that deserve scrutiny.

Since bombs must be safe for the aircraft that carry them, both on the aircraft and when they explode, there is a proper height and dive angle for delivering them. Below that height and at less than that dive angle the fuses are designed to safeguard the aircraft by not arming the bombs.

The only reason for flying lower than that minimum height and dive angle would

be for the pilots to gain self-protection by going below the acquisition capabilities of the ships' AAW systems. This is not difficult to do — all pilots enjoy low flying — but it would necessarily result in unexploded bombs.

Seven ships were hit by bombs that failed to explode. Only two ships with a self-defence capability (*Ardent* and *Coventry*) were hit by bombs properly delivered.

The other interesting effect of flying too low was that the aircraft were in general unable to select targets. Therefore they took the first ship they came upon, and because we had got the stationing about right this was usually an escort on the screen. The amphibious ships went unmolested until after the main landings had been completed.

The Fleet was lucky?

This has usually been said about unexploded bombs, and the above arguments are relevant. I suppose it all depends what you mean by luck. It seems to me perfectly reasonable to describe a particular instance of a close shave by bomb or bullet as *lucky*, but misleading to use the same word to describe a general trend by which the Fleet avoided more serious damage. If the Argentine Air Force had flown higher we would certainly have destroyed more of them. It was a tactical decision of theirs to fly low, with predictable tactical consequences.

Incidentally, with respect to unexploded bombs, the Press were determined to quote several captains as claiming their ships were the luckiest afloat. Although at least one captain took a certain amount of trouble not to claim any such thing for the above reasons, he was quoted as saying it just the same.

Argentine aircraft were at the limit of their endurance?

This has often been stated in the Press, and repeated by Professor Ranft in the October *Naval Review*. The amount of time each aircraft type can spend over a given target varies with a number of factors, and in

precise terms is classified, but as a rough approximation Argentine Mirages could have spent about half an hour over San Carlos with two bombs and no air-to-air refuelling; A4 Skyhawks could have spent very much longer. The fact that, so far as we know, they always made *one* hurried pass and scuttled away was because they were scared stiff of what they called 'the Black Death' — the Sea Harrier.

Aluminium ships were fire traps?

Although the two Type 21s which were lost (*Ardent* and *Antelope*) were of a class that has a good deal of aluminium in the structure, this was not a significant factor in the explosions and uncontrollable fires which caused their loss. This is not to say that our ships should not be made less combustible. The use of plastics, wood, panelling of all kinds, and aluminium all needs to be reduced. The most important combustible is probably plastic panelling which gives off a foul toxic smoke, making firefighting difficult. I would rather have no plastics than no aluminium.

The campaign has no relevance to the North Atlantic?

I'm not so sure. Imagine a Soviet adventure into north Norway, and a Task Force with troops embarked despatched to a fjord to pre-empt or contain them. Land-locked waters, poor radar acquisitions for *both* sides, inhospitable climate, few but friendly natives — there are many similarities. Of course the opposition's order of battle would be quite different, but there may be relevant lessons to be learned all the same.

Many lessons to be learned

This is not at all a fallacy, because of course there are many things that we can now improve on in the light of experience, and one must not let a successful outcome to a campaign give rise to complacency and self-congratulation. But the phrase 'lessons learned', which is now being very widely used, leaves open the implication that a lot went wrong. In my opinion it was pretty surprising how much went right.

CANOPUS