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Q.E.D. II

Es el relato del Capitán de uno de los buques logísticos durante el conflicto de Malvinas.

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THE NAVAL REVIEW

Q.E.D. — II

In to San Carlos

MY first sight of the Task Force, one bright morning, brought a large lump to the throat, and immense feelings of both pride and security, after an unescorted passage thus far. I was duly challenged by someone, and replied, feeling rather pleased with myself to be answered by a cheery 'good morning'. I asked for intentions, and was told that we would be 'going in' to San Carlos that night. I could barely contain myself — and felt a bit like a schoolboy on a treat. We also worked exclusively in Zulu time, so it got daylight around lunchtime, and stayed light into the early evening. It meant that the first air raids of the day would not arrive until at about 1700, which was really quite civilised enabling all the routine work to be done and everybody fed before Match of the Day started.

After an uneventful overnight passage escorted by *Brilliant* and *Minerva*, we duly arrived in San Carlos early the following morning. It was very dark, and peaceful, and after anchoring — at which the Master showed himself to be a slick operator, overtaking most of the column who were nudging into their berths, to find his own — a landing craft came alongside. I was getting no answer on any UHF frequency, so I went onboard and quizzed the Colour Sergeant on what was going on. In the midst of our conversation the radio crackled and the first air raid of the day was announced. To my chagrin, my knees started to shake involuntarily, although fortunately I don't think it showed, and I admit that I was encouraged by those Royal Marines, who had already seen it all before, and took absolutely no notice! Ten days later that landing craft, F4, was lost, and all those people were killed.

I had told the Army Air Corps, who had four aircraft embarked, that they were to disembark at 0800, and was horrified to discover at 0745 that they were nowhere near ready to go, thereby fouling the deck. I think that I probably became a rather nasty individual that day, simply trying to instil some urgency into the malaise which seemed to afflict them all. It took a couple of hours to get them away, and thereafter the deck was in virtually constant use,

and was happily incident free. We clocked up our thousandth deck landing in about four weeks, and the event was suitably, if quietly, marked. Yes, the off-licence even had some of that too. Notwithstanding their false start, 656 Squadron Army Air Corps, 'Teeny-Weeny Airways' to their friends — were a good bunch, who suffered a number of casualties, flew very successfully in some appalling conditions, and some of their best pilots were junior NCOs. It was one of these aircraft that became the victim of a 'blue on blue' engagement west of Port Stanley some weeks later.

The process of amphibious operations is one of patience and not a little frustration. The 'damp moat' around a ship is something with which the Royal Marines are acquainted, but to the Army it posed a whole new dimension, especially when landing craft were in short supply, something to which it was evident that the Brigade staff had paid no attention whatsoever. As I mentioned earlier, I was also visited by the very charming DQ to enquire what stores I had. I in turn asked him what he wanted first, and he didn't know, so I decided that, in the absence of any instructions, I would unload it in the order that it had been stowed. During the succeeding days and weeks I was continually visited by small bands of soldiers looking for missing bits and pieces. However, the Welsh Guards never did find their mortar base plates, without which these weapons are almost useless.

COMAW was embarked in *Fearless*, and on calling that afternoon I was put in the picture as to what was intended in campaign terms. I went over armed with a firearm — it seemed seamanlike or something similar — and was given the opportunity to point out that, ignoring Army machine guns which I was likely to have to give up, it was precisely 50% of the entire ship's armament. I later managed to obtain a little more — from the SAS in exchange for two boxes of arctic socks — of which they seemed to have a serious need after not a little walking, and which seemed to be to be a generous exchange on their part.

TRALA

We stayed in San Carlos for two or three days at

a time before once again going out to a waiting area, east of the islands, called the Tug, Recovery and Logistic Loitering Area, or TRALA. We made three trips in and out, all but one without incident. The TRALA was theoretically out of range, but an attack by an enemy Hercules on *British Wye* well to the east of us, and the discovery of some Argentine drop tanks floating in the water, made one think. My main alarm, in what were really rather dull relaxing days, patrolling our allotted box of water, came early one morning, just as I was about to secure from dawn action stations — an exercise I went through every day, if only to make sure that everybody was up and accounted for.

The First Mate suddenly drew my attention to a small radar contact at about four or five miles and as soon as I saw it I realised that we had a potential problem. The contact was in an unallocated area of the TRALA — in other words no-one should have been there, and the more I watched it the more it showed all the characteristics of a periscope. I was also acutely aware from conversations in *Fearless* that the submarine threat remained as yet unseen and undetected, and was very conscious of the field day that could be had amongst us easy pickings. The bridge watchkeepers had become bored with my exhortations about radical, frequent and irregular alterations of course and speed, but here was, or so it appeared, the reason. Our three letter challenge went unacknowledged, as did simple AAAA's. The search light showed nothing and the range was now half a mile closing fast, with the contact on a steady bearing. I had transmitted the relevant signal on tactical UHF and all hell was breaking loose, but the only ship in the vicinity before the wretched thing got wind of the fact that he had been spotted and dived, was us.

At about somewhere around five cables — which doesn't take long at 16 knots — I said to the Master that I was going to give 'it' a burst of tracer over the top just in case it was something other than we thought, and that might provoke a reaction. I also looked him straight in the face and asked if he was happy to ram. I had decided that if he refused our relationship might just come under strain, and I was not relishing the prospect of having to elbow him

out of the way. However, 'Watch this' he said, and nudged the auto helm slightly to port to keep the bearing steady — the target was crossing our course at right angles at about 4 knots, so we had the maximum profile to aim at, but we still could not see anything.

I was literally pressing the intercom button to tell the machine gunners on the bridge roof to give our friend a burst of tracer when simultaneously lights came on and a voice on VHF — probably audible in Buenos Aires for all I knew — said 'Ship on my port bow this is Tug *Irishman* where am I'. We went hard aport and full astern, and missed her by not very much. *Irishman* was not fitted with SatNav which we luckily were, and was some 100 miles from her patrol area. We caught our breath and sorted ourselves out.

Phosphorus

Much has been written and said about the debacle at Bluff Cove. Frankly in overall terms it was a tragic incident which had little or no effect upon the campaign as a whole; however the following postscript may not be generally known. As I mentioned earlier, amongst my cargo I had some 200 tons of phosphorus smoke grenades, which despite my best efforts had remained onboard for some time after our arrival in TEZ, and I had made three trips in and out with it. When I embarked it in Southampton the RAOC Ammunition Technical Officer, a long in the tooth Captain who clearly knew his stuff and who supervised embarkation of the entire explosive cargo, took me aside and told me just how nasty the stuff was. In sum his words amounted to 'don't worry about the HE, you won't know a thing about it (I knew that bit!), but for heaven's sake watch that phosphorus — you will die a horrid death if that goes up'. It was stowed on the upper vehicle deck next to a large port through which it could be ditched if required, but amounted in volume to a haystack about three metres high and about eight metres square at the base, so was no 'push over' if it came to ditching it. Calling on the Commodore after my third run in to San Carlos, I mentioned my concern about it — as well as my surprise that nobody from 5 Brigade seemed to have missed it, or indeed lots of other things that I still had and which

had not been claimed. The news that I still had that particular item was greeted with surprise verging on horror, and efforts were immediately set in train to disembark it that day. My main concern was to get it ashore into an open space. At this moment however, the Brigade staff, having been alerted to its presence, which they seemed to have forgotten, decided that it was required on the south of the island to support 5 Brigade's advance — or at least that of their headquarters — and it was duly transferred to *Sir Galahad* who sailed, late after delays with the embarkation of 16 Field Ambulance, towards dusk that day. I watched her pass us after she had weighed; the rest needs little telling and the phosphorus burns amongst the Welsh Guards bear witness to a sad train of events. The following day I saw enemy aircraft racing behind the hills to the west of San Carlos and moments later also saw *Plymouth* entering San Carlos pouring smoke, whilst the helo control frequency, always a useful pair of ears, gave an indication of what had just occurred as a result of the raid of Bluff Cove. It was a few moments later when, piecing together what had happened and to whom, I remembered the phosphorus. The television pictures showed how well it burns, and there but for the Grace of God . . .

After the Surrender

Life was not all ice cream and biscuits — like all other wars this one had long periods of tedium interspersed with infrequent moments of high drama. This was particularly so after the Argentine surrender, when lacking any intentions as to what was required of us, I asked *Intrepid*, *Fearless* having sailed, to seek guidance on my behalf as no-one seemed to want to talk to us. None was forthcoming, and it was also far from clear whose Opcon, if anybody's, I was under. We sat in San Carlos disembarking stores, and reembarking stores, without, or so it seemed, any plan. We also briefly embarked some PoWs who seemed glad of some warmth and shelter, together with the facilities to clean themselves up. These were the 'special category' prisoners — aircrew and special forces — who were being kept back until the Argentine government ceased its bellicose gestures. However the fall of Galtieri and his accomplices negated this requirement, and the PoWs

departed shortly thereafter. Every time there is a television documentary, the familiar faces reappear, and I actually enjoyed their company, particularly that of an Air Force Major named Tomba, who acted as interpreter and 'OC PoWs'. Despite the protestations of his minder — a Royal Marine major who rejoiced in the title of POWOW — he enjoyed a civilised chat and the odd 'wet' in my cabin. I remember having great trouble persuading the sentry that I was quite safe on my own, and did not need him to sit with his musket, outside my door, whilst Major Tomba and I put the world to rights.

One day 5 Brigade's entire senior staff paid me a visit, and told me within earshot of every Tom, Dick and Harry that they planned to send us home the following week. I questioned their authority to do so, albeit tactfully, and was politely invited to do as I was told. Immediately afterwards, I sought guidance from COMAW, and was not surprised to be informed that what I had been told by 5 Brigade was incorrect.

After a dull few days, it was time for another scare, this time of a different nature. The Argentine minefield off Stanley was well documented and marked on every chart. We duly steamed clear of its perimeter and anchored in our allocated berth, only to receive, the following morning, an amendment to the co-ordinates which showed that we had in fact steamed through a fair chunk of it. We were not alone, but nobody hit a mine, which was remarkable.

Port Stanley was a shambles — what else could it be. Soldiers, miserable groups of PoWs, piles of surrendered Argentine weapons gently rusting in the rain, and human excrement left by the occupiers, littered the streets. It did not take long however for things to improve, and before 3 Brigade left in *Canberra*, and 5 Brigade's relief was in sight, a degree of order had come about, although we sailors with our 'all of one company' approach stood aghast at the internecine warfare practised amongst elements of the Army at all levels. In addition we counted the ever growing population of the RAF, who we re-christened Penguins — something to do with large numbers and only one in a million being able to fly. As an enormous boost mail started to arrive on a

regular basis, although the first Hercules into Stanley carried, not the much awaited mail, but an RAF staff car. The arrival of a dozen QARNNC nurses increased the rate of hospital patient visits out of all recognition, and for a short time Stanley Post Office became the philatelic capital of the western world. On a personal note, I attended perhaps the most unusual mess dinner that I have ever been to, when General Moore was dined out. We sat at trestle tables covered in green Army blankets, with candles mounted in silver foil cake cases, courtesy of Mr Kipling. After three courses, including Upland Goose — very good too — and some highly acceptable if well travelled claret — the Gurkha pipers did their thing, which brought a lump to many throats.

Talking of rations and matters gastronomic, *Contender Bezan*, now RFA *Argus*, was loaded with I suspect, the entire national stock of 'compo'. It comes, so I was reliably informed, in set menus A to F, and it was loaded in layers by menu. The ship is I suppose 200 metres long. Menu A was therefore, approximately, 200 metres long x (say) 32 metres broad x (say, assuming six menus and a ship of average proportions) 3 metres deep. The ETA of menu F, stowed at the bottom, was therefore estimated at the time to be mid 1984, and I am sure that some people will never ever want to see another Chicken Supreme.

Despite these light-hearted interludes, tragedy was never far away, and I lost a Royal Marine corporal in a needless drowning accident in Port William in mid July. Of several letters I wrote at that time, that one was the most difficult.

The intentions for my ship were still unclear, despite my questioning of the STUFT cell at Northwood. A plan for the return of the merchant ships to owners was published, but strangely I was omitted without explanation, and my questions to Northwood went unanswered. Morale tottered, but every day seemed to bring fresh hope, as one by one ships both grey and of other colours, disappeared northward in high spirits.

Static Store Stanley

One afternoon the Radio Officer showed me a signal, not addressed to us, but between two Army authorities, which referred to us as the

'Static Store Stanley'. It became clear that we were to remain in that role in Stanley for an elongated period, something I had not been told, and the news was just that to many others, including the new SNOFI, too. I was now beginning to get a serious morale problem amongst the Merchant Navy personnel, who were it must be said, short sea people for whom a week away from home was unusual. However, their not unreasonable disquiet was made worse by the lack of decision, which I found difficulty in justifying, and which did not reflect well upon us, noting especially that all the warships and RFAs had either been relieved or knew their relief dates, and all the other STUFT were in the same happy position. However the opening up of private radphone calls, for which I had been pleading for some time, eased things a little, if only temporarily. My subsequent call home proved to be the first my wife had heard from me for two months, and indeed the first news of me from any source — a problem to which I alluded at the outset. Whilst this elongated period of limbo continued, I sometimes used to walk back to the jetty in almost uncontrolled rage at the way things were being handled, or rather, the reverse. It seemed extraordinary that despite even the best efforts and assistance of the Naval authorities in Stanley, nothing was forthcoming. I was getting heartily fed up with being told to call back next week, and stories of how many other problems they had.

A month after the surrender, my rantings on the phone to Northwood about lack of intentions, particularly for the people, were still producing no action, despite our new static role, and having discussed things with SNOFI, I was on the point of ringing the Chief of Staff personally, and with the benefit of hindsight and experience, I should have done so earlier. However, after some argument and not a little plain speaking on my part, on an open telephone line, I eventually managed to persuade them to get cracking on a plan to relieve the Merchant Navy crew with other personnel from the Company. I was surprised that they had to be prompted into this, as they put together a most workable plan within 48 hours, which did the trick. The ship's movements were now restricted to twice weekly jaunt into Port William to water

from the duty tanker, to which I actually began to look forward as an event of the week, I also set in train the run down of my own team, getting my married men home first, and eventually running things down to such a level where I too could take one way ride to Stanley airfield, and armed with a good book and some ear defenders, drone my way to Ascension Island and home with the job done. England never looked greener.

Q.E.D.

When I eventually returned to my desk in Portsmouth after some leave — the appointer was very generous — I found the same packs that I had put away that Friday in far away April, still in my filing cabinet and unactioned and dusty. Six weeks later I was reappointed to a busy desk in the MoD. Q.E.D.

TROTTER