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Full war pension for dependents
Falklands Medal.

STATEMENT BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE - 24TH MAY 1982

Mr Speaker,

Pension for Lieutenant Davies
wounded in action

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Seven weeks ago when Argentinian forces invaded the Falkland Islands, my rt honourable Friend the Prime Minister stated that the Falkland Islands remained British territory, that no aggression and no invasion could alter that simple fact, and that it was the Government's objective to see that the Islanders were freed from occupation.

On the night of Thursday 20th May Her Majesty's forces re-established a secure base on the Falkland Islands and the Union Flag is today flying over the settlement of San Carlos in East Falkland - where it will remain. The whole House will have been delighted to see the expressions of delight on the faces of the Islanders and their children - published widely yesterday.

The amphibious landing was the culmination of a long period of planning by the Force Commander and of preparation by the Royal Marine Commanders, members of the Parachute Regiment and supporting arms during their six weeks voyage into the South Atlantic. Whilst they sailed south, the Government worked unremittingly to persuade Argentina to withdraw peacefully and honourably from the Falkland Islands. But the government met only with Argentine intransigence.

Last week it became clear that the only possible course left open to us was the re-possession of the Falkland Islands by military means. In this the Government has been encouraged - as I think has the country as a whole - that Her Majesty's Opposition and the other main political parties in the House have supported us.

Certainly I believe that our Servicemen have been greatly encouraged by the support that they have received from right honourable and honourable Members of this House.

Mr Speaker - I will not go over all the details of the amphibious landing; the approach by the Task Force under the cover of darkness, widespread raids on Argentine military targets, the entry into Falkland Sound and the disembarkment into landing craft leading to assault in the San Carlos area, but I think I can say that it was an exploit which captured the imagination of our people.

Argentinian forces did not interfere to any significant extent with the landing itself. The amphibious ships involved in the first stages of the operation were able to withdraw without incident to safer waters to the East of the Falkland Islands and I must here pay tribute to the men and women of the merchant marine for their heroism and skill in these dangerous operations; their role is a vital one.

The landing itself was complemented by attacks in other parts of the Falklands including the airfield at Goose Green and bombardment of military installations south of Port Stanley. Carrier based RAF Harriers launched attacks against Argentine defences at Port Stanley airfield. These operations were an essential part of the overall plan. I deeply regret, however, that in the course of these operations 3 Royal Marines were killed when their Gazelle helicopters were shot down and that 1 RAF Harrier pilot is missing. And as we have announced, 21 men were tragically lost when a Royal Navy Sea King ditched in the sea shortly before the operations began.

To protect the landing operation the Royal Navy maintained a gun-line of destroyers and frigates in the Falkland Sound. Other warships provided close protection for our amphibious forces; overhead, Sea Harriers from our Carriers provided continuous combat air patrols. The waves of Argentine air attacks had to run the gauntlet of these air defences. The Sea Harriers shot down 8 of their aircraft and total Argentine losses that day are estimated at 14 Mirages and Sky Hawks, 2 Pucaros and 4 helicopters. These losses represent more than a third of their combat aircraft taking part that day.

During these continuous air attacks the Royal Navy fought with great skill and bravery. Nevertheless those Argentine aircraft which had penetrated our air defence screen inflicted damage on 5 of our ships. Of these, the Type 21 frigate HMS ARDENT was severely damaged but despite the efforts of her crew to control the damage she sank in the course of Friday night. 22 of her crew died and 17 were injured. The injured are now receiving full medical attention in hospital ships of the Fleet.

Since that action the Task Force has been reinforced by the arrival of more, highly capable, warships, more than compensating for those damaged or lost in action so far.

The following day, Saturday, saw a lull in the fighting. Although the weather was good the Argentine airforce launched only one attack by 2 Skyhawks on our ships which was not pressed home. Yesterday the Argentine airforce resumed their attacks on ships of the Task Force in San Carlos Water. The aircraft were engaged by missiles from ships, by shore based Rapier batteries and by the combat air patrols of Sea Harriers. 6 Mirage aircraft and 1 Skyhawk are known to have been shot down - one aircraft more than was first announced - and there have been unconfirmed reports of a further 1 Mirage and 2 Skyhawks also shot down. Yesterday's events involved the loss of two-thirds of the Argentine aircraft taking part.

In the meantime, action to make the blockade effective has continued. Sea Harriers from the Task Force yesterday destroyed 2 Argentine helicopters and caused serious damage to another. Task Force action also resulted in the beaching of a ship used by the Argentines to ferry troops and ammunition around the Islands. With the loss of re-supply ships and 6 helicopters the Argentine Commander has lost all but a very limited capability to supply his forces and move them around the Islands.

Mr Speaker, I regret to confirm that in yesterday's action, the frigate, HMS ANTELOPE, sustained severe damage. Our latest information - and this is based on preliminary reports - is that one of her ships company was killed and 7 others were wounded. I must also inform the House, with great regret, of the loss of one of our Sea Harrier's last night. This aircraft met with an accident shortly after launching from one of our carriers and the pilot was killed. This accident was not as a result of Argentine action and the cause has yet to be established. Next of kin have been informed.

Mr Speaker - the intensive fighting of the last few days has produced tragic loss of life on our side, and the House will join with me in conveying the deep sympathy of the whole nation to the relatives and friends of those killed and injured.

We all feel deeply too for the constant concern and worry of the families and friends of our Servicemen. They are showing great patience and understanding in very difficult circumstances.

Names of casualties will not be released until the next-of-kin have been informed although to counter the false propaganda coming out of Argentina we have had to give some general information on the progress of military action as soon as it is confirmed.

Mr Speaker - Our forces are now established on the Falkland Islands with all the necessary supplies, together with their heavy equipment and air defence missiles. They have mobility with a large number of helicopters at their disposal - and their spirits are high.

But I must emphasise that our men still face formidable problems in difficult terrain with a hostile climate. We must expect fresh attacks upon them, and there can be no question of pressing the Force Commander to move forward prematurely - the judgement about the next tactical moves must be his - and his alone.

But, one thing is certain, the days of the occupying Argentine garrison are numbered and it will not be long before the Falkland Islanders once again have their democratic rights restored.