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The Falklands War: Closer Fought Than Commonly Understood

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Close Run Thing

Twenty five years ago, this week, over three days of a desperately fought battle for control of the skies over the Falklands, the Argentine Air Force sank four British ships – HMS Ardent, HMS Antelope, HMS Coventry and the MV Atlantic Conveyor – in San Carlos Waters. The British Task Force eventually won the air-war by a whisper and managed to establish a beachhead at San Carlos.

After the battle for the Falklands was over, Admiral John ‘Sandy’ Woodward, commander of the 1982 British taskforce admitted that the conflict was ‘a lot closer run than many would care to believe’. As a Royal Navy commander, Woodward was very conscious of the role that a jingoistic British media had played during the war in highlighting the successes of Britain’s Royal Marine Commandos, Parachute Regiment, Scots Guards and Gurkhas – all elite units of the British Army - in the ground phase of the war. Gritty accounts written by some of the 29 journalists ‘embedded’ with the taskforce contemporaneously described the desperate infantry battles at Goose Green, Darwin, Mount Kent, Mount Longdon, Two Sisters, Mount Tumbledown and Port Stanley as heroic, classic old-style infantry engagements. These battles, whose names are etched permanently into the British Army’s collective martial psyche, are often portrayed as the decisive elements of Margaret Thatcher’s Falklands war.

British victory in the Falklands however was essentially decided by a narrow air superiority enjoyed by the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force. It was also far from assured and the deployment of the taskforce – to a remote archipelago 8,000 miles from Britain – was at all times fraught and problematic. The vulnerability of the British taskforce is in part revealed in the casualty statistics for the conflict. In a relatively short military engagement – 72 days in all – the British lost 255 soldiers and sailors in action with a further 777 seriously wounded. The Argentines lost over 650 troops in action with many hundreds more wounded. Compared to the war in Iraq - where the British Army has lost just 136 personnel in four years - the British attrition rate in the Falklands was high.

Most of the casualties inflicted on the British during the Falklands campaign were as a result of attacks on the taskforce from the Fuerza Aerea Argentina (FAA) – Argentina’s Air Force. Whilst the island’s ground defences were weak and poorly deployed – consisting of a static force of approximately 10,000 poorly trained conscripts – the Air Force was relatively well equipped with a range of sophisticated fighter and fighter bomber aircraft. These included French Super Etendard fighters, Israeli manufactured Mirage III Interceptors, US made A-4 Skyhawk fighter bombers and Argentine IA-58 Pucara attack aircraft.

Though outclassed by the British Taskforce complement of Royal Navy Sea Harrier Jets and RAF Harrier jump jets – equipped with state-of-the-art US-manufactured Sidewinder missiles – the FAA repeatedly penetrated the Royal Navy’s formidable screen of anti-aircraft missile systems and fighter defences.

During the most critical phase of the conflict, as the British taskforce sought to establish a beachhead at Port San Carlos during mid-May the Argentine Air Force engaged in

extraordinary bravery and tactical ingenuity to breach a substantial phalanx of British Rapier, Sea-Wolf and Sea-Dart anti-aircraft missile systems designed to protect the 65 vessels of the taskforce.

General Ernesto Crespo, the commander of the Argentine Air Force unit attacking the British, formed a special unit of unarmed executive Lear-jets called the 'Fenix Squadron' which would fly in formation and at high altitude from the Argentine mainland towards the British fleet. When detected on British radar, the taskforce would scramble its Harrier jets to meet the threat. Once the ruse was underway, the Argentine Lear-jets would break formation and race back for the safety of Argentine air-space. Meanwhile, squadrons of Argentine attack aircraft would deploy at low altitude from a different attack vector, flying at just 100 feet above sea level for over one hundred nautical miles – in order to avoid detection by taskforce radar systems – to suddenly appear over the taskforce at San Carlos Water or 'Bomb Alley' as it would become known by British personnel.

During this critical phase of the Falklands campaign, the Argentine Air Force repeatedly attacked the British taskforce and sustained heavy losses. Over 50% of General Crespo's aircraft and aircrews fell casualty to this concerted attempt to scupper this most crucial phase of the British invasion plan. The Argentine effort almost succeeded.

Equipped with just five Super Etendard aircraft and an arsenal consisting of just five air-launched Exocet missiles, the Argentines launched their first missile attacks at the British taskforce on the 05th of May. Two missiles were launched at HMS Sheffield. One went astray and one hit the target, sinking the British destroyer. Forced to flee the area immediately after launching the attack – beyond visual sight of the British destroyer - the Argentine Junta had no idea whether their Exocets had hit the target and had no vital Bomb Damage Assessment (BDA) data in order to plan future missions.

However, British media reporting of the event unwittingly provided Argentine forces with ample print and photo coverage of the bomb damage, vital intelligence unavailable by any other means – thus confirming the viability of the weapon. Further attacks by air-launched Exocet missiles crippled the MV Atlantic Conveyor at the height of attempts to establish the British beachhead on the 25th of May. The sinking of this key logistics vessel would have a profound impact on the way in which ground forces would conduct their infantry assaults later in the campaign.

Other bombing raids on the British fleet during early May also yielded vital intelligence to the Argentine Air Force. On the 12th of May, bombing from the low altitude necessary to avoid radar detection, an Argentine Skyhawk dropped a 1000lb bomb on to HMS Glasgow. However, the bomb failed to detonate as the fuse setting failed to take into account the low altitude and short time of flight of the bomb. The fact that the bomb had not armed itself fully by the time it had struck the vessel was reported in the British media. This reportage and subsequent British media reports on a further 12 unexploded bombs striking – and in some cases bouncing off British ships - ensured that the Argentine authorities adjusted their fuse settings accordingly. HMS Ardent, HMS

Antelope and HMS Coventry were all sunk towards the end of May by Argentine aircraft deploying 1000lb bombs with improving degrees of success.

As a result of the loss of vital transport and other supplies on the MV Atlantic Conveyor, British ground troops had to march on foot or 'yomp' from one engagement to the next on the Falklands. There were many shortages of ammunition and supplies – even paper. Many British soldiers had all of their paper and writing materials confiscated in the field by desperate commanders who were forced to formulate, transmit and copy all orders in handwritten form for the duration of the campaign. Other equipment, such as computer assisted targeting systems for British artillery support was also lost. Many units had to resort to pen and paper calculations and school-based trigonometry in order to calculate data for their close artillery support at vital moments in the ground battles. As a direct result of the ingenuity of the Argentine air assaults on the taskforce, the infantry battles fought on Falklands soil were brutal, primitive affairs, fought on foot and often with forms of bayonet and hand to hand fighting not experienced by British troops since the First World War.

In terms of media relations, lessons learned by the British military during the Falklands war were incorporated into the British Army's 'Green Book' which set out the fledgling parameters for war reporting and embedding in the subsequent Gulf War and recent invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. The Falklands war was hard fought by both sides. In political terms Margaret Thatcher emerged a clear victor and was subsequently re-elected for another term of office. In contemplating the military and political lessons of the Falklands, the British government will no doubt be painfully conscious that successful media relations and news management ought also to be accompanied by swift, clear and unambiguous military victories.

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