

Information sheet no 114

Operation Corporate – Falklands 1982

Background:

Sovereignty of the Falkland Islands or Islas Malvinas has been disputed between the United Kingdom and Argentina since 1833. The contemporary Falkland Islanders consider themselves to be British and have British citizenship.

The British first landed on the Falklands Islands in 1690 and named them after Viscount Falkland, then First Lord of the Admiralty. They were claimed for Britain in 1765 as a base for passage around Cape Horn. Spain then claimed Argentina and the Falkland Islands, under provisions in the Treaty of Utrecht which settled the limits of the Spanish Empire in the Americas. When Argentina became independent of Spain in 1813, the Falkland Islands were part of her settled territories. In January 1833 the British reclaimed the isles. The Argentineans protested and made several diplomatic and strategic attempts to regain the Malvinas but the Islands have remained in British hands ever since.

In the spring of 1982 President Leopoldo Galtieri, head of the military government of Argentina, wanted to distract the Argentine public from economic and human rights concerns about the regime. A successful re-taking of the Falklands would have achieved this aim.

The Falklands Conflict:

On 2 April 1982, Argentina attacked Government House in Port Stanley as the first part of Operation Azul (Blue), followed immediately by the invasion of South Georgia on 3 April 1982. In Britain, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher ordered a Task Force to be assembled under Admiral Sandy Woodward to sail 8,000 miles and re-occupy the islands. The British task force sailed from Britain on 5 April 1982 as Operation Corporate. On 12 April, a 200-nautical mile maritime exclusion zone was placed around the Falkland Islands.

The first British attack took place on 1 May. A British RAF Vulcan bomber flew over nine hours from the Ascension Islands off the coast of Africa towards Port Stanley. The plan of Operation Black Buck was to drop 1,000-pound bombs over Stanley airfield and put it out of action. The attack itself was ineffective as only one bomb directly hit the runway and was repaired within 24 hours. Despite the lack of actual success, the operation had been the longest non-stop military flight in history.

On the 2 May 1982 the Argentine light cruiser *General Belgrano* was torpedoed by the nuclear submarine HMS *Conqueror* with the loss of 323 Argentines. The aim of sinking the cruiser was to keep the Argentine navy out of the conflict and the Navy were successful in this. It became one of the controversial issues of the conflict as the ship was claimed to be outside of the total exclusion zone and sailing away from the conflict area at a time when diplomatic peace talks in Peru were being pursued.

On 4 May, the British Task Force suffered the loss of HMS *Sheffield* from an Exocet missile.

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The British initiated their land assault on 21 May 1982 in Port San Carlos, a bay located between the two Falkland Islands. The assault was preceded by a series of raids on Port Louis, Fox Bay and Goose Green distracting the attention of the Argentines from where the real invasion was going to take place.

The Royal Navy came under heavy attack during the initial phases of the landings, losing HMSs *Ardent*, *Antelope* and *Coventry* within four days. Additionally, a merchant container ship, *Atlantic Conveyor*, carrying Chinook helicopters was also sunk. In total, the Royal Navy lost 4 ships along with the RFA *HMS Galahad* and an LCU from HMS *Fearless*.

After the overland advance, Argentine troops finally hoisted the White Flag in the Falklands capital, Port Stanley on the 14 June 1982. A formal end to the hostilities was announced on 20 June 1982.

The Casualties:

In total 907 people were killed during the 74 days of the conflict

United Kingdom: -

Military personnel:

255 including: Royal Navy 86; Royal Marines 27; Royal Fleet Auxiliary 4; Merchant Navy 8; Hong Kong Chinese laundrymen 6.

Civilians (Falkland Island residents):

3 women killed by friendly fire.

Argentina:-

649 including 341 in the Argentine Navy (Armada de la República Argentina) (including 323 in ARA General Belgrano and 4 naval aviators)

The Aftermath:

Prior to the conflict, the Royal Navy was due to undergo cuts of up to a fifth of the fleet of under the 1981 Defence Review, presided over by the then Defence Secretary, John Nott. These cuts included HMS *Hermes* and HMS *Endurance*, both participants in the conflict.

After the conflict the severity of the cuts were scaled back but while HMS *Endurance* was retained, 11 of the ships that saw action were decommissioned within 10 years along with the naval base at Chatham that closed in 1983.

UK Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher went on to win a landslide election in June 1983, based on the patriotic "Falklands Factor" and remained Prime Minister until 22 November 1990, the longest serving British Prime Minister since Lord Salisbury at the end of the nineteenth century.



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In Argentina, President Galtieri was removed from power within days of the surrender. He was arrested in late 1983 and charged in a military court with human rights violations and with mismanagement of the Falklands war. He was cleared of the civil rights charges in December 1985 but found guilty of mishandling the war in May 1986 and sentenced to prison. After an appeal, the original sentence was confirmed in November 1988. Galtieri spent five years in prison before receiving President Carlos Menem's pardon in 1991. Leopoldo Galtieri died 12 January 2003.

The sinking of the *General Belgrano* remained the most controversial event of the Falklands War for many years afterwards. At the time Admiral Woodward had concluded, from the information available, that the *Belgrano* and her escorts were engaging in a pincer movement against the Task Force and agreed that the British should be able to attack any Argentine naval vessel if considered a threat to British forces in the Falklands. The Argentine Defence Ministry, in a report in 1994, concluded that the sinking was 'a legal act of war'. The captain of *General Belgrano*, Héctor Bonzo, who survived the sinking of his ship, said in interview "It was absolutely not a war crime. It was an act of war, lamentably legal," ... "Since Apr. 30, I had had orders to shoot, and if the submarine had surfaced, I would have shot it till it sank."

Nearly thirty years on, Argentina still claims territorial rights to the Falkland Islands.