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FALKLAND OPERATIONS

II

Fighting by the Rules

Commander Christopher Craig, D.S.C., Royal Navy

HMS *Alacrity*, a type 21 general-purpose frigate, sailed from the United Kingdom on 5 April 1982 and accompanied the two carriers, HMS *Hermes* and HMS *Invincible*, throughout their passage south. We were subject to the first Argentine Mirage attack on 1 May, partook in the Total Exclusion Zone (TEZ) operations, were involved in a variety of naval gunfire support missions and clandestine operations, ran a number of night transport convoys into San Carlos water after the amphibious landing on 21 May, and had the dubious privilege of being present in the carrier battle group during each of the Exocet attacks. We departed the TEZ just before the fall of Port Stanley. Throughout this period I was, as Commanding Officer, privy to the evolution of the Rules of Engagement and quite naturally held a deep and vested interest in the rules—rules that were necessary to ensure our survivability, to police the TEZ effectively, and yet afforded us the necessary freedom to be militarily effective in pursuit of our aims.

The Royal Navy's Use of Exclusion Zones. From the outset, we in the task force saw the United Kingdom's position as being rooted in a "self defensive" posture under the UN Charter's Article 51. Everything we undertook—deploying the task force, establishing the Maritime Exclusion Zone (MEZ) and Total Exclusion Zone (TEZ), and effecting a landing—were predicated upon this basic assumption. I believe this has been our national standpoint throughout.

The declaration of the MEZ on 7 April became effective on the 12th. At this stage we had a nuclear-powered attack submarine on station. This MEZ became the Total Exclusion Zone on 30 April. For it to be effective, it was necessary that our carrier air assets, our "police" force, should be within 200 nm of Port Stanley. We had of course given due notice to the world as early as

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23 April that any approach by Argentine units which could amount to a threat to any of our forces would be dealt with appropriately; the scope of this warning was not restricted to the Exclusion Zone.

This leads us to an emotive issue—the sinking of the Argentine cruiser *General Belgrano*. The clear perception of the Commander Task Group, Rear Adm. John Woodward, was that the *Belgrano* formed the southern arm of a three-pronged surface attack force. This threat, coupled with the facts that the *Belgrano* was less than 12 hours steaming from the task force and that darkness was coming on, warranted her being attacked under the terms of the last warning. Her sinking, as you know, had a devastating deterrent impact upon the Argentine surface fleet. Subsequent action led to the loss of the *Sheffield*; after which we reiterated our intentions by warning Argentina that her surface and air units outside their 12-mile territorial limits could well be “in play.” With this background let us take a closer look at the Rules of Engagement (ROE): rules that were staffed and transmitted on the traditional basis that we would observe accepted international law at all times.

Minimum force to ensure survivability was very much the keynote of early operations; hence, anticipatory self defense had to be addressed. Our national ROE publication was our primary source document with the addition of some new rules with specific South Atlantic relevance. The Ministry of Defence produced a library of the rules most likely to be used and, hence, comprehensive pre-briefing of decision makers was possible.

A clear statement of the ROE politico-military environment always accompanied basic rules at any stage. This writer cannot overly *stress* the importance to the on scene commanders for having this overall perspective to guide their interpretation of the basic rules. Although the staffing and production of the rules were a notable success, the end product could not help but be complex. Identification criteria were established, as were the critical threat ranges of enemy units so as to deal appropriately with hostile intent when the situation warranted.

In the ships of the task force, total familiarity with the rules by the command team involved much care and thoroughness, and extended to the Commander Task Group “quizzing” his commanding officers on their familiarity with the rules extant. It clearly demonstrated the degree that the military bent to political reality and to the constraints of international law, as it always *must*. I believe it also ensured that we had no engagements between our own units—firm identification criteria curbed too ready a trigger-finger!

The following are some of the areas which posed the greatest problems:

- How to deal with the shadower, particularly if it were a Boeing 707 or a trawler.
- Resupply merchantmen and in particular the place of the naval auxiliary in this generic title.

- The safety of civilians adjacent to naval gunfire support targets 10 miles away on a darkened island at night.
- Unidentified air contacts by night or in low visibility.

At this point it would be useful to describe actions in which my ship took part which required clear, unambiguous rules and, yet, where something less than unbridled aggressive action was called for.

On the afternoon of 1 May, we carried out the first, and almost the last, day bombardment of Port Stanley airport. A bombing and strafing attack from three Mirages convinced us all that night bombardments might be a more palatable and enduring prospect for the future. On that day and, thereafter, our targets were clearly delineated and all of the 8,000 shells from HM ships were directed solely onto military targets with safety zones between them and adjacent civil areas. The accuracy of our systems allowed us considerable confidence. Indeed, to my knowledge only two dwellings were damaged by naval gunfire, and then only in the final stages of the advance upon Stanley. Clearly if we had been allowed unrestricted engagements of key military targets, such as radar sites that had been placed near the population centers, we would have been more effective. But it was never considered nor could it be. Similarly, the frustration at being unable to “soften up” the heavy troop concentration at Fox Bay, Goose Green, and other places, was tempered by a clear awareness of the plight of the adjacent Falklanders. Nevertheless, we did ensure that the jockeys of the Port Stanley racecourse were confronted with somewhat uneven going for many months ahead—the Argentinians having placed considerable military presence on the racecourse.

On 11 May the *Alacrity* undertook the first and only complete transit of Falkland Sound by an HM ship before the landings. We were detached from the carrier battle group at midday on 10 May and were to reconnoiter the southern harbors of both East and West Falklands—before attempting overnight, the first penetration of Falkland Sound. The mission was primarily to counter any Argentine resupply efforts, but the verified absence of mines would be most relevant to plans for the forthcoming landing. The ship made the 100-mile transit to the Falklands silently, at 25 knots, relying upon satellite navigation to skirt just south of shore radar detection range. Late in the afternoon, our Lynx flew a two-hour sortie during which the crew reconnoitered the rocky natural harbors south of the two main islands, whilst the ship continued westward almost to the longitude of Weddell Island to the extreme west of East Falkland. Both ship and aircraft were grateful for the thick overcast and the one-half mile visibility in fog which denied the Argentine Air Force an attack opportunity.

Shortly before midnight the ship entered the narrow southern strait of Falkland Sound, still grateful for the cover afforded by continuous rain and a

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100-foot cloud base. At this time there was intense speculation as to whether the Argentines had mined the Sound! Accordingly, we planned our transit at slow speed, in a totally quiet condition and without benefit of our echo sounder. Our anxiety at the possibility of mines was matched by uncertainty over Argentine artillery positions—the narrows of the channel often being little more than two miles across.

After one hour of transit the Lynx was launched to reconnoiter Fox Bay to the south and to act as a diversion. Flying conditions were appalling. At 0035 a moving radar contact was detected in the channel 6 miles ahead of us, proceeding north at a similar speed, 10 kts. I gradually increased speed to close the gap in the hope of identifying the contact in the open waters to the north of Swan Island where there would be room to maneuver and to evade shore fire. When the distance had closed to 4.8 miles we saw the vessel alter sharply to port, then increase speed and change her heading to gain cover of North Swan Island two miles away.

I fired a starshell in the hope of identifying the stranger, without success. Hence, I commenced fire at the vessel at 0112. The first dozen rounds were equipped with airburst fuzing so as to deter the vessel from further flight rather than to attempt to sink her. After two minutes I checked fire to assess the effect. But the quarry continued towards shelter, steering evasively. I then recommenced fire at 0117 with contact fuzing. We saw a number of hits, three of them sizable, even through the soaking gloom. Once more I checked fire, but still the ship continued toward shelter. Again I recommenced fire and, after about forty rounds, there was a large orange flash which rose up into the cloud base—two minutes later the radar contact faded from the screen. The vessel destroyed was later established to be the Argentine naval transport *Islas de los Estados*, which was carrying, according to information obtained from captured Argentines later, 325,000 liters of aviation fuel and some military vehicles.

Life jacket lights were sighted close inshore, some five miles south of the Argentine garrison at Port Howard, hence out of navigable waters and beyond my assistance. *Alacrity* recovered her helicopter, completed her transit at high speed in order to deny Argentine forces any chance to retaliate, and finally passed through the northern channel at 0300. There were no mines along our track!

The lesson here was that I had the rules which gave me the operational flexibility to engage a militarily important target. I had the required identification criteria to engage a valid target before he could escape.

So what are the key “messages” to be learned that would be instructive regarding Exclusion Zones and Rules of Engagement?

Exclusion Zones.

● The exclusion zone can greatly simplify the military commander's

task—especially against submarine and air threats—particularly if the criteria which are deemed to demonstrate hostile intent by intruders are clearly defined.

- Declaration of the zone *must* be early enough to allow the potential foe to respond as you wish—always allowing for the difficulties of strategic communications, particularly with his subsurface units.

- The benefits of exclusion zones will clearly hinge upon:

- (1) Adequate “police” force levels.
- (2) The presence and density of neutrals.
- (3) The complexities of identification criteria required.
- (4) The potential for escalation that their enforcement will generate.

Rules of Engagement.

- In a world where the stakes of escalation become ever higher, the necessity for clear and comprehensive rules is plain.

- Briefing staffs ashore must anticipate the distant military needs whilst their counterparts afloat harness and present their ROE requests with clarity, thoroughness, and an awareness of the political issues involved.

- It is necessary to think through most thoroughly the problem of the innocent intruder or the fleeting submarine contact.

- Educating both the politician and the military man is essential both for the compilation and the transmission of rules, as well as for the swift and responsible interpretation required “in the field.”

I believe that for the Royal Navy in the South Atlantic, both the Exclusion Zones and Rules of Engagement worked well. I never felt my survival to be threatened by too rigid rules, nor was my flexibility of operation unduly impaired, and yet my freedom of action was always tied firmly to the political requirements. Equally important, I believe that throughout the campaign we conducted ourselves within the bounds of international law, and with due awareness and concern to our international reputation for a civilized code of conduct.

