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# When Deterrence Fails: The Nasty Little War for the Falkland Islands

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by

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**T**he business of drawing lessons from the recent Falkland Islands war became somewhat suspect at an early point. This is because, even before the war reached its conclusion, people started drawing whatever lessons they wanted, and pointed to the Falklands war to prove that whatever they already believed was certainly true. If one already believed, for example, that big carriers were what the Navy needed then the Falkland Islands case *proved* it needed big carriers. If one believed that the Navy should have small carriers then the Falkland Islands *proved* that it needed small carriers. If one believed that the Navy needed no carriers at all, then it *proved* that it needed no carriers at all. With a start like that, people quickly started saying that we might not be able to draw any lessons at all from the Falkland Islands. It was a unique war, too far away, with a set of circumstances that probably would never be repeated, so we ought to stop saying that the Falkland case proved *anything*. That is an unfair rap.

There are some broad things that can be drawn from the events of that war. There are some things that can be learned about how nations can misperceive the intentions of others; about the realization that war is a realistic prospect in a modern era; and about how this war came about and was fought. The things that the British as well as the Argentines had and did not have, and the way they used them, should provide us with useful thoughts: thoughts about the correct relationships among naval tasks such as ASW, AAW, and amphibious operations, and about how forces can be employed effectively in the pursuit of national objectives.

## What Happened

It's helpful, before moving to lessons, to be sure we base as much as we can on the facts. So I want to spend a little time on the chronology. We can do that in four steps. The background that led to the Argentines moving onto the Falkland Islands in the first place; the immediate reaction of the British and how they went on to build up and employ their forces; the British

preparations between the period of 6 May and 21 May to undertake military operations; and, the war as it was actually fought around and then on the Falkland Islands.

## Origins

To understand the origins of the Falkland war, it is helpful to go back 150 years and understand that to the Argentines those islands rightfully belonged to them. They think that as the islands originally belonged to Spain and therefore passed to Argentina when it achieved nationhood, proper ownership of the Falkland Islands was theirs by right. The British, therefore, in Argentine eyes, were more or less holding the Falkland Islands in trust until the Argentines were ready, able, and willing to take them over. But the British had held undisputed possession of the islands since 1833. That condition continued until 1965 when the United Nations, in Resolution 2065, invited the British and the Argentines to open a series of negotiations leading eventually to an actual passing of sovereignty of the islands.

In the course of the next 17 years only a few small agreements were reached. Argentina could have communications facilities, air transportation, and a role in supplying oil to the Falkland Islands. Other than that, not much else happened. True, the tempo of negotiations had picked up in the last five years. There were negotiations in 1977, in 1980, and another set in 1981 and in the earliest part of 1982. They finally broke down, with no particular agreement, on 26 February 1982. We should couple this nearly static condition with the frustrations that the Argentines were experiencing when to them, all they were doing was negotiating for what properly was theirs; with the fact that a new political regime came to power under General Galtieri in December 1981; with the staggering economic burden that Argentines were carrying; with the very heavy interest the Argentines have in the Antarctic (the Antarctic Treaty expires in less than 10 years); and with the long-running Beagle Channel dispute with Chile.

We can see how, if one were looking at this through Argentine eyes, something had to happen. Moreover, if anything was going to happen, Argentina was going to have to make it happen.

## The Crisis

By February 1982 the Argentine leaders thought the time to solve the Falklands issue was ripe not only according to their own political, economic and geographic aspirations and hopes, but also because they believed Britain was basically in agreement. The British, thought the Argentines, were not going to negotiate the islands away, but they were willing to let them pass by default if Argentina moved swiftly and cleanly so as not to embarrass the United Kingdom. So the Argentines started running some "tests" of British resolve. There was action against South Georgia Island in the early part of

March, with insufficient British reaction. This, considered in parallel with such things as the public announcement of the planned reduction of Britain's conventional naval forces in exchange for purchasing the Trident-class SSBN, and the announcement in 1981 of the forthcoming removal of the HMS *Endurance* (which was the only station ship the Royal Navy kept in South Atlantic waters), made it quite clear to the Argentines that there might not, in fact, be any British reaction should they move in an overt way to take over the Falkland Islands.

On 26 March, the Argentine armada put to sea. It was not clear what the ships' destination was. (In fact their announced destination was not the Falkland Islands.) No matter. For whatever reason, information about the fleet's departure for sea did not reach the political policy-making levels of the British Government until the day before the invasion actually took place. Only on 1 April was it known within the highest levels of the British Government that the Argentine task force was almost certain to attempt to seize the Falkland Islands. On the morning of 2 April that was exactly what took place. That same Thursday morning in London the Prime Minister got the word that the Argentines had landed on the Falkland Islands. But it was not clear in London that control had actually passed to Argentina until late on that night.

### British Reaction

The very next day, 3 April, the order went from the British Government to the Royal Navy and to all affected parts of the government to "Man and support the fleet." Two days later, on Monday, 5 April, the order went out: "Send the force." The first units left the same day. That's four days from the first warning that there was, in fact, a serious incident going on 8,000 miles away in a hostile climate. The Royal Navy, despite no warning, despite attention to other areas of the world, despite planning assumptions that focused on a Nato war, was able to leave with some semblance of order and to arrive and eventually to do the job.

During the time that the task force was moving southward, there were eleven days in which many attempted to undertake diplomacy to settle the controversy between Britain and Argentina. This was highlighted by the travels of Secretary of State Alexander Haig. His mission fell apart on 19 April because it was quite clear that the two sides would not settle. What the two sides wanted was entirely different. Argentina wanted direct control and sovereignty over the islands; the British wanted the Argentines off the islands before they would even talk about it. On 25 April, the British made their first overt military move. They landed the Royal Marines on South Georgia and retook that island. On 30 April, the United States publicly backed the United Kingdom.

On 1 May, the bombardment of the Falkland Islands themselves,

particularly the airstrip at Stanley, was undertaken by the British. But the first real use of fire since the takeover of the Falklands began with the sinking of the *General Belgrano* on 2 May. In the main, this was the beginning and the end of ASW operations in the war. Thereafter, the *non*-movement of Argentina's naval forces, because of the threat of British SSNs, was a major characteristic of the war. Considerable attention was paid to the "missing" Argentine submarines, but according to most reports they never threatened the Royal Navy forces directly. Two days later, HMS *Sheffield* was hit by an Exocet missile.

By the time the final UN effort to put together some sort of a peace initiative fell apart in mid-May, the British were set militarily to retake the islands. On 20 May, one of those clear and unequivocal statements that mark British political orders to their military forces took place. From London to Rear Admiral J.F. Woodward, the officer in tactical command of the task force, went the order: "Retake the Falkland Islands." His move to execute that order began shortly. The first British force started going ashore at Port San Carlos in the northwest part of East Falkland Island on 21 May. Within thirteen hours, 5,000 British troops were ashore without loss of life. All their supporting equipment was ashore in three days, by which time they had already started moving well off the beaches and up toward the mountains surrounding Port Stanley. In six days they moved half way across the island. In a remarkable set of military maneuvers, the British took Goose Green and Darwin on 28 May. This in turn provided a base for Harriers with which to strike directly at Argentine forces in and around Stanley and its airstrip. Once Goose Green and Darwin and the associated airstrip had fallen, it was virtually impossible for Argentina to hold onto Stanley. Four days later Mt. Kent, the mountain ten miles just to the west of Stanley, fell to the British. At that point it was just a matter of time, and within two weeks the Argentine forces capitulated.

### Why the War Happened

Insights about strategy and planning from this experience can best be arranged around three main questions. Why did this war happen at all? What insights can we draw from it for military planning? What operational aspects of the war are important for us?

The war broke out for one main reason: nations perceive each other in terms of stereotypes and wishful thinking about what it is they *want* to happen. The British tended to see the Argentines as macho and blustery, and yet they expected them to be indefinitely patient and long-suffering about lack of progress in the Falklands negotiations. Surely the Argentines would never dare challenge militarily British sovereignty. The Argentines, on the other hand, saw Britain as *willing* to give up the islands. They took every event, no matter what Britain did, whether it was about Nato, East-West

relations, or withdrawing the *Endurance*, to reinforce their impression that all that Great Britain was trying to do was to signal to Argentina to please take the islands off their hands.

Two lessons come readily to mind here. We tend to signal all the time with our military forces. So we need to state clearly our intentions, because as we move military forces, nations around the world are going to make assessments about what each move means to them. And they will do so—unless told otherwise—based on what they *want* to believe. So we have to be precise in our statements, and parallel things that we do with our forces with messages we want to convey. A second lesson is that wars seem to come often just because of such miscalculations. These lead, in turn, to a narrowing series of options which as they become overlaid with pressures of time, can drive countries to take positions from which they cannot turn back. We need to spare them such miscalculations, and be very frank and direct in declaring our intentions in the world, and note the signals the movement of our military forces are meant to convey.

### Military Planning Lessons

In terms of military planning there are four interesting observations. These can be grouped around realistic military planning for unexpected contingencies; the importance of navies in world affairs; the search for strategic leverage (often spoken of recently as “horizontal escalation”) in war; and, finally, that increasingly important aspect of war—public relations.

It is interesting to look at what was included in British planning and guidance before the Falkland Islands conflict. The guidance given to the British military even before the Trident decision was that they should not plan on operations without allies. They need not plan on operations without friendly shore bases for air support. They could assume administrative landings in the future. But in the Falklands all of this was erroneous. Wishing those problems away in peacetime analyses is convenient. But actual contingencies seldom are so convenient. We would do well, in view of the way the Falkland Islands case came about and played out, to review our own planning assumptions rigorously and see how well they might hold up against unexpected contingencies.

*The Role of Naval Power.* Whatever part the naval task force eventually played in hostilities, it is worth noting that prompt movement of the task force, within three days of the Argentine landing, was in a real sense a *down payment* for the British on the right to be interested and to take military operations at some future point should political efforts to resolve the crisis not be successful. “Without naval forces,” as Lord Hill-Norton said at a very early point in the war, “there would have been no military options at all available to the British.”

It is safe to go on from there and say in the absence of a British naval force the Argentine takeover would have been an irreversible *fait accompli*. The British could have done nothing without a fleet; the Argentine action would have been the beginning and the end of it. Only with naval forces could the United Kingdom attempt even a diplomatic solution with any hope of success. For either side, in terms of the actual conflict, control of the seas around the Falkland Islands was the first prerequisite. For the British it became a continuing prerequisite to further battles for control of the air; for operations against the land; and for the amphibious operations at Port San Carlos. The British really could not have done anything until they controlled the waters around the Falkland Islands. Clearly the fundamental requirement for a country operating far from its own shores is sea power, and this may be the most important lesson of the events of the Falkland Islands last spring.

But, as much can be said about the importance of the navy to the retaking of the Falkland Islands, it also must be admitted that naval forces alone would not have been enough to complete the job. Even with winning the sea battle, and the battle for control of the air, the Falkland Islands probably would *not* have fallen without British operations ashore. Maintaining forces on station at that distance costing on the order of one million pounds a day, with winter weather coming on, with the fact that the British probably could not have kept replacing inevitable attrition losses and combat spaces indefinitely, and with international opinion beginning to turn against the British, control of the land was important to ensure the battle at sea *stayed* won. Therefore, more than the navy standing offshore was needed. The British had to go in and win the battle ashore within a reasonable period of time. Amphibious operations and a combined arms assault were indispensable to achieving their objectives.

*Horizontal Escalation?* Almost all the fighting about the Falklands was done on or around the Falkland Islands, although the main coast of Argentina was only 400 miles away. That may seem reasonable, but some theoretical strategies currently receiving attention suggest that it would have been to Britain's advantage to have made diversionary attacks or otherwise put pressure directly against Argentina to tie down Argentine forces or make them pay a price. But had the British chosen such a course, it would have been irrelevant to the objective as they themselves defined it—the Falkland Islands and the forces on those islands. Escalating horizontally would have clouded the issue considerably in world opinion; and might have made Britain seem the aggressor. This suggests that retaliatory actions taken in war should be both relevant and immediate to the precipitant cause of hostilities, and contribute in a direct way to achieving the objective.

*Public Relations Aspects.* There are two things to say about public relations.

One is that early on who seems to be winning is very important in modern day

wars. The British, by taking South Georgia Island quickly, efficiently, and at an early point, may finally have convinced the Americans that they were serious and likely to be successful. American support followed shortly thereafter. Then, the sinking of the cruiser *General Belgrano* on 2 May provided an early signal to the Argentines that they were not going to be able to maintain forces at sea in the face of British opposition. These two events signalled to the Argentines and to the world that the British were superior. For the first time, people started thinking that a British force operating 8,000 miles away from home really might realize military success at the end of the line.

There is a counterpoint however. There may also have been a perception that although the British might succeed, they might do so too well. There was the modern British nuclear submarine sinking a pre-World War II cruiser. Some actually thought the British may have been bullies, and be going too far, and this might have offset the bandwagon effect cited earlier. Ironically, then, the sinking of HMS *Sheffield* only two days later may have been a bit of a blessing in disguise, indicating that naval losses were going to take place on both sides. Certainly, it reminded people that in war, everybody is vulnerable, and both sides were going to have to shoot early, well, and often. The point is, the first blow struck, whether on land or at sea, may have a disproportionate impact on the political context within which the war is going to be fought.

Tight control of the media was a British practice. Had the war gone on much longer, and had there been photographs of bleeding, dying men wired back home, public support for the continuing war effort might have flagged considerably. Control of the media rankled members of the British press, but nevertheless they accepted it in part because the period over which this control had to be imposed was relatively short. This does suggest that there is an alternative to the Vietnam media model for reporting a war, providing the military gets the job done quickly.

### Operational Aspects

Regarding the operational aspects, three seem to stand out. One is the sinking of the *General Belgrano*, a second is the amphibious landing at Port San Carlos, and the third is the relationships among the battles that took place on and over the seas.

The *General Belgrano* was sunk by a Mark 8 designed in 1926, not a modern Tigerfish torpedo. Why? Probably not that the Tigerfish was not working, but that the Mark 8 was a cheaper, higher powered, and simpler. It was all that was needed to do the job. We may not always need only the most sophisticated weapons all the time. There are many cases where there is a need for a choice of weapons. Beyond that it is difficult to draw many lessons. Certainly an old, loud, non-ASW capable surface ship is no match for a fast,



quiet submarine. And, though they maintained continuous vigilance, the British never had trouble with the two unaccounted-for Argentine Type 209 submarines. But we ought not to draw any false conclusions. ASW is still tough. Ask the Swedes.

There is one other point that needs to be made about this issue. The sinking of the *General Belgrano* basically ended the operations of the Argentine armada in the war. Wherever the British submarines may have been from there on, the Argentine fleet stayed in port to avoid almost sure destruction. Reinforcing this legitimate concern of theirs may have been the timing of US support of Great Britain. Coincidence or not, the inference of a relationship between US satellite reconnaissance and British SSNs was clearly too much for an aging fleet inefficient in ASW. End of any Argentine hopes of blockading the islands.

*The Amphibious Operation at Port San Carlos.* Even with control of the sea, the landing at Port San Carlos was still extremely difficult. It was the only time up to that point when Britain could have lost it all. To go ashore under what was, at best, marginal air superiority, an extraordinary cover and deception plan was essential. Knowledge of where the Argentines had and had not mined was also vital. Surprise and speed were essential and most of all the British had to go in with audacity. The British invasion was successful because they had practiced such landings in hostile climates, and because they had thought through the problems of this landing thoroughly, executed an excellent cover and deception plan, made good use of local topography, and used meteorological and hydrological data to their advantage. But above all they moved quickly to and then beyond the beach. They did not slow down or wait for things to catch up. It was said about that landing that "Every hard earned lesson about the dangers of operating off hostile shores without air superiority had been ignored by Admiral Woodward in undertaking the operation. He did so simply because there was no alternative." Sometimes, even without clear air superiority, you have to go in and do the job. And to do so successfully under less than ideal conditions requires careful planning, speed of execution, and sheer audacity.

*Relationship of Sea and Air Battles.* Which brings us back to the discussion of the relationship of the sea and air battles. The battle for control of the seas—ASW and ASUW—had to be won first. SSNs could do that. But the only force that could achieve air superiority for the British had to be sea-based air. There was no alternative. There was no way they could achieve air superiority, and therefore probably no way they could have landed the amphibious force and moved on ultimately to take the Falklands, unless they brought their own air power with them. Of course, they were running an extraordinarily high risk every hour of every day. The loss of even one of the

two carriers they had might have done in their effort. It was high risk. But this risk has to be run all the time that one operates in a hostile environment at sea. In war, ships sink. The loss rates in the Falkland Islands war suggest our losses may be higher than we prefer to expect. But that does not mean we should reduce our commitment to sea-based air. What it does say is that missiles are so deadly that we cannot afford to make very many mistakes at sea, leave our learning to take place after the war starts, or take half-measures in building defense capabilities into our ships.

## Logistics

But all of this—ASW operations, amphibious operations, and air operations—is overlaid throughout this campaign by the dominant role played by logistics. Operating 8,000 miles from home, bringing everything essentially “on their backs,” having only one en route base (one which was not designed for combat support of a fleet at sea), the British nevertheless succeeded mainly because their logistics system outmatched that of the Argentines at every point. When it became clear that one brigade was not going to be enough against a determined British effort, the Argentine logistic system could not cope with a need to supply a second brigade, *even though one was sent to the islands*. In contrast, the British accepted losses of planes and equipment in combat, endured heavy sea conditions, suffered predictable wear and tear and utilization rates of material, and yet were able to crank-up and then sustain their logistics effort for as long as it took to do the job. Argentine weapons that worked did so with some devastating results. But British weapons worked more often. Maintenance, support, know-how, and morale, all played a major part in the ultimate British success. And controlling all of that was a command system that allowed the sort of rapid, flexible decision-making needed to bring the right combination of forces to bear at the right place and time.

## Why the British Succeeded

In conclusion there are eight reasons why the British were successful in this case, and in large part these will be keys to victory in any military endeavor. The first was the naval power they were able to bring to bear, allowing them political as well as military options. Second was their firm adherence to clear direct objectives. There was no “turning of the screws,” no incremental creep of what would constitute a satisfactory conclusion once military success became apparent. And towards that objective there was going to be a political solution or there was going to be a military solution, but, whichever, it was going to be a clear solution. Third, there were clear orders given throughout from the political leadership to the military authorities. “Man and support the fleet.” “Send the force.” “Retake the Falkland Islands.”

Within these clear orders the commander on the scene could plan and

execute his operations. The fourth reason was speed: speed of political decisions once the need was clear; speed of military operations once the political order had been given; speed of execution once the military orders had been given. Fifth was mobility, both afloat and ashore. This provided flexible options which allowed British strategy to continue to evolve as the operation progressed, taking always the best course, always the proper sequence. Logistics and training have already been mentioned, but warrant mention again. Finally there was the sheer willingness of the British to take risks. That is a necessary part of war.

## Conclusions

Let me conclude with three thoughts. If war comes, we have to be ready. Then, once ready, we should go, go quickly, and keep going to keep the other side off balance. Secondly, disputes *can* be settled by force, however illogical and however undesirable that may seem. It happens to democratic countries, and it happens in this modern day and age. But in support of the principle that aggression will not pay, our military forces may some day have to be used and we have to be ready to undertake the effort quickly and successfully. Finally, though we cannot predict or stop all uses of force, we can deter most. The price of being able to do that—the price of deterrence—is political will, credible military capabilities, and constant vigilance. But if in those terms the cost of deterrence is high, we would do well to review the case of the Falkland Islands, where 870 dead soldiers and sailors, 139 destroyed airplanes, 10 ships at the bottom of the South Atlantic, and untold treasuries of the two countries bear witness that to do less for deterrence costs much much more in the long run.

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