

The Falklands War : Naval Perspective*

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War at sea leapfrogged into the micro chip league with the induction of electronic warfare, satellite communications, and missile ripostes. The sinking of the Israeli destroyer *Eilat* by a Styx missile launched by Egypt, the missile attack by Indian missile boats off Karachi in 1971, the Falkland conflict of 1982 and the Desert Storm which swept Iraq in 1991 are the steep climbs up the ladder of technological warfare.

Admiral Woodward, the Task Group Commander who recaptured the Falklands brings into realistic focus the naval perspective which together with Lawrence Freedman's 'Signals of War' and General Sir Julian Thompson's coverage of the land campaign comprises an informative triumvirate of the Falklands campaign albeit from the victor's point of view.

Sandy Woodward and Patrick Robinson who have been the author of several best sellers have put together a gripping story of war at sea which will hold the attention of both sailors and non-sailors even a decade after re-hoisting the Union Jack in Port Stanley. The tastefully got up book published by Harper Collins contains no new revelations but nonetheless spells out several pertinent lessons which are of particular interest to navies structured on the Royal Navy pattern and operating in a similar Parliamentary style of government compounded by a free and at times critical press.

To start with, the British Command structure continued to be nebulous and remained in the shadow of the Big Ben. More so with the Royal Navy which was in the throes of severe cuts including the sale of their aircraft carriers which was being pursued by the incumbent Secretary for Defence, John Nott, whom the author describes as one 'who possessed the cold heart of a career banker not offset by the cool brain of a military historian, much less any knowledge of things maritime.' In addition, the War Cabinet and the Prime Minister, with an eye on the elections, were impatient for results which in a way led to the goof ups at Goose Green and Bluff Cove.

Rear Admiral Woodward, the Task Group Commander was himself answerable to the C-in-C Fleet (Admiral Sir John Fieldhouse) and his Flag Officer Submarines (Admiral Sir Peter Herbert) who were headquartered at

* *One Hundred Days: The memoirs of the Falkland Battle Group Commander* by Admiral Sandy Woodward (London, Harper Collins 1992) p. 360, £ 18.00.

Northwood which is just outside London. The First Sea Lord (Admiral Sir Henry Leach) was the cushion between the political bosses in Westminster and the professional gladiators at sea. The Chief of Defence Staff (Admiral of the Fleet Sir Terrence Lewin) was yet another tri-service coordinator who had a pivotal position in the emerging ball game. The British who invariably preferred unwritten laws were comfortable in this amorphous command and control structure with an inbuilt flexibility which was visible since the days of Drake, Frobisher and Nelson. Above all, the entire nation rallied round the Crown and St. George to recapture the Falklands which was 8000 miles from the U.K. and 430 miles from Argentina.

The British line of battle consisted of a forward picket line of 3 guided missile destroyers (Sheffield, Coventry and Glasgow) with Sea Dart and Sea Wolf missiles in view of the absence of early warning aircraft. The next picket line were 5 frigates with Sea Slug and Seacat missiles which were regularly detached to bombard the shore defences every night. And further east were the 2 small aircraft carriers (Hermes and Invincible) with a total of 24 Sea Harriers and 2 Squadrons of Seaking helicopters for anti-submarine and commando operations (Junglies). And on the edge of the self inflicted Exclusion Zones were positioned the 3 nuclear submarines (Conqueror, Splendid and Spartan) but under direct control of the C-in-C Fleet in UK. So much so, that the pernicky journalists on board even accused the Naval Commander of cowardice and nicknamed the battle group as the 'Simonstown patrol' as being closer to South Africa than South America! But Sandy Woodward was determined not to risk his vital floating airfields particularly as he had insufficient aircover and just enough ammunition to complete the amphibious operations before the rapidly approaching wintry fogs and darkness fore closed this option. But in effect, it was Rear Admiral Woodward communicating with his C-in-C via satellite which allowed him to get-on with his job without undue interference - an Anglo Saxon characteristic in spite of Margaret Thatcher's pompous forward which albeit will boost sales.

The Argentine order of battle was more direct with General Galtieri, the head of the military junta planning and controlling operations in concert with his colleague Admiral Anaya. Rear Admiral Gualter Allara, the Fleet Commander was embarked on the aircraft carrier, Vientecincos de Mayo with her complement of Skyhawks and Super Etendards with Exocet missiles. The escorts were coincidentally 3 British built guided missile destroyers (Santissiano, Trinidad and Hercules) which clearly demonstrated the erstwhile close commercial links between Britain and Argentina especially in the defence and transportation fields. In the South West, about 200-miles apart were the light cruiser, Belgrano (former U.S. Phoenix), 2 destroyers and a tanker and 4 submarines of which 2 were deployed at sea. The Navy was strongly supported

by the Argentine Air Force with an inventory of 200 aircraft including Skyhawks, Super Etendards, Mirage, Machhi 339, Canberras, Pucara turbo prop and helicopters operating both from the mainland as also from the airstrips in the Falklands. It was this force which was mainly responsible for the heavy British losses at sea.

The arrival of the British task force in the South Atlantic was heralded by one RAF Vulcan aircraft operating from Ascension and refuelled by 10 mid air tankers bombing the Port Stanley air strip as a curtain riser to a war drama being enacted in the South Atlantic for an island which perhaps had more emotional than economic or demographic rationale. It is to the credit of the quality and maintenance of British warships that there were few major breakdowns at sea which is a constant bane of Third World navies who continue to buy and not build warships. The U.S. assistance was in the form of staging facilities at Ascension Island, supply of Sidewinder air to air missiles and the availability of satellite intelligence.

Another lesson was the quality of British sea captains whose climb up the promotion ladder was through professional strainers in the form of 'perisher' and command exams' which were not obstructed by the seniority syndrome nor by court cases or back door pressures. Further, Commanders whether they be aviators, submariners or surface specialists had equal claim to command at sea based purely on their professional merit. The result was that 11 out of 16 commanding officers who took part in the Falkland conflict were in course of time promoted to Flag Rank. Be it so, it would have been difficult to predict the result had there been sufficient wind for the Argentine carriers to launch aircraft when within striking range of the exposed British forces or if they had acquired more Exocet missiles.

The exchange ratio was indeed heavy with the R.N. losing 4 major warships, 1 large merchant ship, 1 LST and 5 Sea Harriers, 9 Seakings and an assortment of 17 helicopters and another 5 major warships heavily damaged.

The Args lost 1 cruiser, 1 submarine, 1 auxiliary vessel and 70 aircraft before their land forces surrendered. The loss of their cruiser to torpedoes fired by an atomic powered submarine on the orders of the Task Group Commander merits elucidation. Admiral Woodward closely observing the movement of enemy forces on his operational chart, rightly decided that Belgrano 'will have to go' irrespective of her position, course or a speed. Appreciating that it will have to be approved by London which will take some time and may allow the cruiser to sail out of range, he directly ordered Conqueror to sink the cruiser which required a change in the rules of engagement. This swift action tilted the balance at sea and enabled the British Task force to impose sea control around the Falklands.

The author has vividly captured the loneliness of sea command particularly when required to make instant and unpalatable decisions. His remark when his former command Sheffield was sunk by an Exocet missile - 'Do something? No leave it be' - perhaps sums up the dilemma of a sailor shepherding his ships in dangerous waters to achieve success with minimum losses. The book will be a best seller particularly in the U.K. where a sailor hero brings back memories of a Nelson, Fisher, Jellico, Cunningham and now Woodward.

But the memoirs are in a manner a lesson to some of our own historians who have unfortunately a tendency to write for each other or for their sponsors without having the privilege or experience to portray action on the high seas which enabled maritime historians such as Morrison and Roskill or novelists like Conrad and Alistair McLean and our own home grown writers - Admiral Kohli and Commodore Ranjit Rai to bring home to countless readers the trials and tribulations at sea without contravening the archaic Official Secrets Act.

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