

## 12 » SAN CARLOS

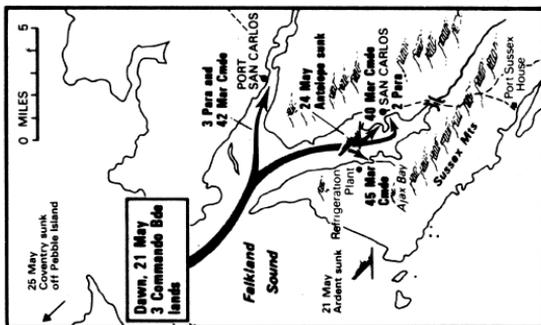
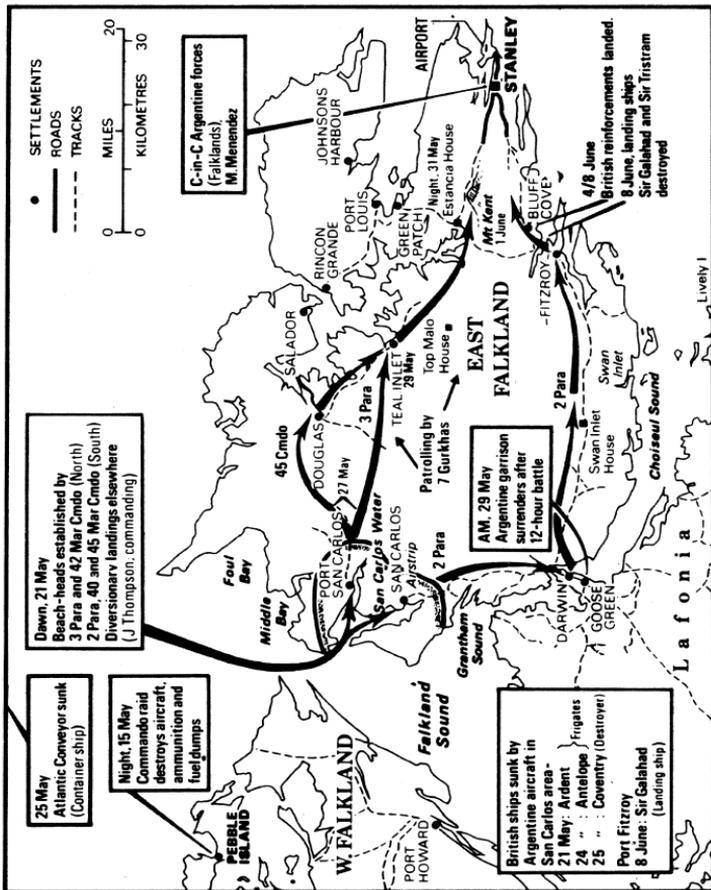
So all day long the noise of battle roll'd  
Among the mountains by the winter sea.

Tennyson, *The Idylls of the King*

As Argentine descriptions since the war have it, a young army lieutenant in a position within sight of San Carlos was the first to call his headquarters on the morning of 21 May and report that he was watching two British ships unloading troops. The staff were disbelieving. A prewar naval study had concluded that San Carlos was an 'impossible' site for a successful landing. Through 20 May, as reports had come in to General Menendez's operations room of British ship movements, the suggestion that they were heading for San Carlos was dismissed as a diversion. It was the navy which decided to pursue the lieutenant's intercepted signal, and sent a Fleet Air Arm pilot in a solitary Aeromacchi to take a look. At about 10 a.m. the Argentinian spotted a British helicopter flying along a ridge above San Carlos, and swung in to attack it. Then, as he crossed the hilltop, he saw laid out before him what looked to him to be '... the entire English fleet ...'

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Such British warships as were not already closed up went to action stations an hour before dawn on 21 May. As the light grew, from their Bofors mountings and flight decks and bridges men gazed curiously at the low, brown and yellow hills rising from the shore; the anchorage, dominated by the huge white bulk of *Canberra*; the



hundreds of marines and paratroopers clearly visible among the tussock grass, hacking at their trenches and defensive positions. Many of the civilian crew of *Canberra*, men and women, wandered on to the promenade decks and chatted excitedly in little knots beneath the lifeboats. Thousands of people seeing San Carlos for the first time decided that it looked very like Pembrokeshire or the north of Scotland, with its little clusters of white-walled, red-roofed houses beside the shore. 'Not unlike summer holidays in the Western Isles,' wrote an officer on *Broadsword*. 'Just like UK, isn't it?' mused a young marine captain of 40 Commando as he dug his trench with the incompetent assistance of Max Hastings.

A beautiful clear, crisp day was unfolding, with the sea steel-blue and only lightly choppy. On the flight decks of the assault ships, crews rapidly unlocked the rotors of the first Sea Kings, which roared away to begin the most urgent task of the day: transferring the twelve Rapier launchers with their generators, trackers and crews to the hilltop sites selected by the computer at Malvern. Landing craft started to shuttle between ship and shore, kicking up fierce bow wakes in their haste. High above, seldom visible to the naked eye, the Sea Harriers waited. 'We had no idea what to expect,' said Lieutenant Commander Andy Auld, the quiet, immensely experienced thirty-seven-year-old Scot who commanded 800 Squadron. Far below, vehicles to provide essential radio communications were already scrambling up the beaches. In San Carlos settlement, between the houses, the British army's beloved paraffin pressure-cookers were already roaring. Children from the settlements watched in awed fascination as the helicopters clattered overhead, and bewildered geese flew hither and thither in search of silence. In the kennels, the sheepdogs barked incessantly. The Falklanders, in their quiet way eager to give any help they could to the landing force, drove their tractors and trailers to and from the beaches and jetties carrying loads of bergens, ammunition, engineer equipment. Spasmodic explosions signalled only guns and mortars firing a few rounds to 'bed in'. As the sun came out, a glow of achievement, even

contentment, overtook thousands of men both on the shore and at sea.

But the first mishap of the day was already in the making. 3 Para's landing at Port San Carlos had slipped badly behind schedule. They waded ashore in daylight at 7 a.m., fuming with impatience, to be met by an SBS reception party who reported that there were no enemy in the area. Moments later, the leading platoons spotted a large party of Argentinians, forty-two in all, retreating rapidly eastwards from the settlement. 3 Para's CO, Hew Pike, at once ordered his mortars and sustained-fire machine-gun platoon to engage them. Some desultory British fire followed. But the enemy was already too distant, and too obviously bent on flight, for Pike to consider sending riflemen in pursuit. Falklanders in the settlement reported that the troops had arrived from Fanning Head the previous day, and had been sleeping in the woolsheds. In their retreat they had abandoned much of their equipment, including clothing and decorations looted from Major Mike Norman's marines when Stanley fell seven weeks earlier.

Thus far, Pike had flashed only his landing signal 'Indian Hemp' to *Fearless*. Brigade should still have been awaiting his signal 'Lost Sheep' to announce the settlement cleared and secure. But, to the Paras' dismay, they now glimpsed a Sea King with an underslung load flying sedately around the hill towards the Argentinians. At this opening moment of the battle, there was a theory that armed light helicopters could usefully escort cargo aircraft. Two Gazelles were therefore accompanying the Sea King. Pike and his men were not linked to the helicopter radio net, and were unable to warn the pilots. Impotent, they watched the brief tragedy that followed. The big helicopter seemed to see the enemy first; it shed its load and ducked hastily below the horizon. Small-arms fire from the ground hit a Gazelle a few minutes later. It crashed into the sea just off Port San Carlos Jetty. The second Gazelle lifted rapidly forward, apparently in pursuit of the Argentinians. It too was hit within seconds, and crashed into the sea. The Argentinians enraged the British by firing upon the crews even as they struggled in the

water. Three of the four men were killed. The fourth was badly wounded. The Argentinians made good their escape.

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Now, for the first time, the enemy's air force made its appearance. Two pairs of Pucara ground-attack aircraft approached the long files of 2 Para, still struggling up Sussex Mountain, at around 1,000 feet. The first aircraft exploded abruptly. Among the equipment of the SAS party returning from their diversionary raid on Goose Green was the superb American Stinger ground-to-air hand-held missile. It was a Stinger that had destroyed the first Pucara, while a missile from the ships brought down the second. The following pair made one rocket pass from the east against 2 Para's B Company, and escaped without inflicting casualties. Meanwhile, a single Aeromacchi – almost certainly the first Fleet Air Arm reconnaissance aircraft flying from Port Stanley – attacked the RFA supply ship *Fort Austin* at the mouth of the anchorage. The bombs fell wide. *Fort Austin* retreated hastily to a safer haven, re-anchoring among the assault ships deep in the bay. But, that morning, all except two of the warships defending the amphibious landing force were deployed in Falkland Sound, west and north-west of San Carlos Water. The submarine threat still loomed large in the minds of Admiral Woodward and Commodore Clapp. Nor had they yet seen what the Argentine air force could do to ships in open water.

The anchorage suffered two air-raid warnings that failed to materialise. Then, two hours after first light, a second Aeromacchi came in over Fanning Head, heading for the Leander frigate *Argonaut* so low above the waves that the ship's flight commander momentarily believed that it had plunged into the sea. The aircraft loosed four rockets amidst a belated barrage of light automatic fire from the frigate, and broke away. The rockets missed. But cannon fire hit the master at arms in the chest, wounded two other sailors aft, and smashed a large hole in the ship's 965 surveillance radar array. Like so many crews that morning, the men of *Argonaut* were shocked by their first brutal contact with the enemy. 'It was such

a beautiful day – bloody gorgeous,’ said PO Taff Jones, a chatty Wiltshireman nineteen years in the Royal Navy, and now standing among the bren gunners on the open gun direction position above the bridge. ‘We didn’t see the Aeromacchi until it was right on us. Everybody was a bit shaken – seeing the wounded taken below and all that . . .’ Captain Kit Layman, a tough, grey-haired forty-four-year-old whose father had served with the Royal Navy in both world wars, and whose grandfather was a veteran of Jutland and the Boxer Rebellion, was at his usual action station in the operations room, and knew little of the attack until it was over. ‘It made me realise that this was no place to fight the battle – I had to be where I could see what was going on.’ Layman, like most captains from that day forth, moved to his bridge and stayed there through all that followed.

And now the Argentine air force began in earnest. ‘All hell was let loose,’ wrote an officer on *Broadsword*. ‘The air was filled with attacking aircraft, mainly Mirage and Skyhawk, and the battle raged for over six hours.’ All along the shoreline, officers’ whistle blasts and shouts of ‘Take cover! Take cover!’ sent men running to their guns and trenches. In the lounges of *Canberra*, 42 Commando lay prone on the decks among the crew while their machine-gunners and Blowpipe operators manned their weapons on the upper decks, flatly refusing to be relieved when their watch was up. As the first enemy aircraft raced 50 feet above the sea to attack, the Royal Navy began to fight its biggest action since the end of the Second World War.

Within an hour of the first waves of aircraft attacking, it became evident that it was the ships, not the men ashore, who were the targets. Marines and paras poured thousands of rounds of rifle and machine-gun fire into the sky from their positions. The Blues and Royals’ Scimitars and Scorpions sought to engage passing aircraft from the hillside below San Carlos settlement. The SAS Stinger expert had died in the helicopter crash on 19 May, but the trooper who fired at the Pucara was so impressed by his own success that he now took up position on a headland and fired five

more missiles at incoming Skyhawks, only to be dismayed by a succession of misses. Disappointment also came to the men manning the British army's principal infantry anti-aircraft weapon, the hand-held Blowpipe missile, of which dozens were fired in vain that day. Blowpipe was wholly ineffective against a crossing, rather than approaching, target.

But the landing force was merely the spectator of all that happened that day. It was the crews of the ships who fought the battle. They stood in their helmets and anti-flash capes, trousers tucked into their thick white stockings, manning Bofors guns and GPMGs, bren guns, rifles, even 66 mm anti-tank rocket launchers on the upper decks. Most were very young – the two seamen beside PO Jones on the *Argonaut's* GDP were both seventeen, six months in the navy. Yet it was apparent from the start that the outcome of the struggle would depend largely on their efforts. In the operations rooms below decks, men hunched over radar screens controlling millions of pounds' worth of weapons technology, but radar detection was almost totally useless close inshore, surrounded by hills, against an enemy who became visible only seconds before attacking and was gone seconds later. Everything hung upon the physical skills and energy of the men on the decks firing their weapons. It was not merely the enemy's aircraft destroyed that mattered. The aim of the pilots was critically deflected by the tracer, missile trails, flares and exploding shells crowding the sky before and around them, sometimes with fatal results.

*Antrim* fired her Sea Slugs seconds before she was hit aft on the port side around her hangar by bombs and rockets. The bombs failed to explode, but one passed through her Sea Slug magazine, crippling all her anti-aircraft missile systems. Men on neighbouring ships watched fascinated as water spouts erupted around her. With increasing horror, they saw more bombs spilling into the water around *Norland*, the LSLs, worst of all, *Canberra*. It seemed impossible that the vast white target, her machine-guns almost constantly in action, could escape damage. Her senior naval officer, Captain

Chris Burne, won enormous respect that day for the unshakeable humour and courage with which he met the attacks and kept up a running commentary to the thousands of frightened men and women below decks. It was a performance in the great tradition of eccentric naval officers at moments of crisis.

The British were awed by the courage of the Argentine pilots, flying suicidally low to attack, then vanishing amid flushes of pursuing Sea Cat, Blowpipe, Rapier, racing across the sky behind them. Alone among the enemy's three services, the air force seemed highly motivated and utterly committed to the battle. 'We should have been able to work out that any nation which produces first-class Formula One racing drivers is also likely to turn out some pretty good pilots,' said *Arrow's* doctor sardonically between attacks. *Brilliant* was hit by Mirages whose cannon shells sent shrapnel bouncing around the inside of her hangar, injuring several crewmen. More men manning rifles and machine-guns on the upper decks were wounded in a second attack on the starboard side. Ball, the missile aimer on the forward Sea Wolf system, at last gained a solution on an incoming Mirage on his television screen, and tracked his missile to explode beneath the aircraft's port wing, an astonishing feat of camera guidance. But Commodore Clapp and his staff on *Fearless* were coming unhappily to terms with the limitations of Sea Wolf. Close inshore, ground clutter was providing a fatal handicap to its tracking radar. 'We had not understood how badly clutter would affect Sea Wolf inshore,' admitted Clapp later. Everything would hinge upon the visually aimed weapons – and the Harriers.

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Throughout the battles of the week that followed, many of the most vital actions were fought far out of sight of the British in the anchorage. Only seldom did they glimpse a Harrier diving in hot pursuit of enemy Skyhawks and Mirages, the Argentinians hastily jettisoning their bombs and flitting away over the hills. From the start, the British established three air patrol positions:

one north of the islands; a second over West Falkland; a third over the southern end of Falkland Sound. At first light each day, a pair of Harriers took station at each of these locations, to vector on to attacking aircraft either by visual sighting or by radar direction from one of the ships, most often *Brilliant* on the first day. Early on the morning of the 21st, the southern patrol had scored a sharp success by spotting and destroying a Chinook and a Puma helicopter with cannon fire. For the rest of the day, the British carriers were launching a pair of aircraft every twenty minutes, relieving each other on station, or launching probes far out to sea in search of possible Argentine surface ships moving to attack the beach-head.

In the first days, while they broke up and turned back several waves of Argentine aircraft out at sea, most of the Harrier kills were made against enemy aircraft leaving San Carlos after attacks. The CO of 899 Squadron and his senior pilot, Lieutenant Commander Mike Blissett, were chasing two Skyhawks out of the anchorage when suddenly they spotted a new wave approaching, and broke off to attack the more critical threat. They shot down four A4s. Two hours later, Lieutenant Clive Morell and Flight Lieutenant John Leery – who was to become one of the most successful pilots of the war – shot down one each, the first with a Sidewinder, the second at a range of 100 yards with cannon. The Harriers claimed one further aircraft that day, and sent surviving Argentine pilots homewards with a profound respect for the British fighter. Throughout the war, whenever a British pilot heard the hum in his headset – the ‘aural tone’ indicating that enemy aircraft were within his ‘missile look angle’ – its destruction was a near-certainty. He fired, and listened for the ‘chirping’ that showed his missile had locked on. Then he had only to watch the smoke trail of the AIM9L Sidewinder snake erratically across the sky, and the blinding ball of light as the Mirage or Skyhawk exploded. In every case in which a Sidewinder locked on, the enemy aircraft was destroyed. Of twenty-seven fired in the entire war, twenty-four hit their targets. The technology was working superbly. At high level,

a Mirage could dramatically outperform a Sea Harrier, and the British pilots had great respect for the manoeuvrability of the Skyhawk. But the Argentinians' knowledge of British air defence, above all Sea Dart, drove them to come in low. There were never dogfights in the conventional sense, in which the Argentinians sought to engage in combat. They were too short of fuel for that. The Harriers' 'viffing' technique of sudden deceleration, of which so much was made during speculation in the press about air combat, was never relevant. There was merely a struggle between the intercepting Harrier, with its superb acceleration, and the enemy aircraft twisting and dodging to escape. As the Sidewinder fired, there was no shock, merely a soft 'whoosh'. If the enemy used his afterburner to increase his speed, he merely provided a brighter target for the homing missile and ensured his own collapse from lack of fuel before he reached home. Air combat, from beginning to end, was an entirely one-sided affair, the enemy's inability to dogfight perhaps flattering the performance of the Sea Harrier a little. 'Combat was exactly as we had imagined, as we had been briefed, as we had trained,' said Andy Auld. 'I felt as if I had done it all before except firing the missile – and except that all the normal peacetime restrictions on low flying had gone out of the window.'

The British faced a serious problem in locating attacking aircraft with sufficient speed. The submarines – reinforced by *Valiant* on 16 May – together with intelligence teams operating on the Argentine mainland, reported the enemy's takeoffs, and their aircraft could be tracked for most of their flight, flying at around 19,000 feet to conserve fuel. But, at least 50 miles from the Falklands, the Skyhawks and Mirages dipped to sea level – low enough to come home with wings streaked with salt – and vanished from British radar surveillance. This was where the fleet's lack of airborne early warning became critical. The Argentine aircraft only appeared as they weaved between the hills or swung among the inlets on their final approach, often seconds before they bombed. Again and again, the British failed to pick up an

attack wave until the final moments. Again and again, with the Sea Harriers capable of remaining on station for only twenty minutes, enemy aircraft broke through while the CAP was engaged elsewhere. The air groups from *Hermes* and *Invincible* were doing all that could conceivably be asked of them; they performed better than any naval officer had thought possible. But they were few. That first day alone, they faced twelve separate incoming attacks involving a total of seventy-two aircraft. It is not remarkable that so many broke through, and were only intercepted on their homeward runs.

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Late on that morning of 21 May, the crippled *Antrim* steamed slowly into the shelter of San Carlos Water. *Fearless* directed *Argonaut* to take her place at the mouth of the bay. A Wessex carrying a naval doctor from *Canberra* closed in to take off *Argonaut*'s casualties from the first attack, and the frigate began to steam into the wind to enable the helicopter to winch men from her deck – it was too heavy to land. Suddenly, from the south, came a wave of Skyhawks. The Wessex sheared off and set down ashore. *Argonaut* fired her Sea Cat and at once hit a single aircraft, which crashed into Fanning Harbour. Then six Skyhawks released their bombs almost on top of them. Incredibly, these hit the water and bounced over the ship. Every man on the upper decks was deluged with water. The astounded Taff Jones watched a black object hurtling over his head – ‘almost parted me hair’. He glimpsed a seventeen-year-old seaman who was caught emerging from the messdecks with a teapot and a handful of plastic mugs attempt simultaneously to hurl himself up a ladder, rescue the teapot, and save a cascade of mugs failing around the deck. ‘I shall remember that sight as long as I live,’ said Captain Layman, watching from his bridge the pairs of Skyhawks coming in. In all, ten bombs fell in the sea around *Argonaut*, the massive splashes momentarily blinding the guns’ crews. Two entered the ship. One penetrated the boiler room just above the waterline, struck the bulkhead, caused

a boiler to explode, ruptured the steam pipes, and filled the machinery spaces with superheated steam. The ship had been at full speed. Now, she went dead in the water. Astonishingly, the ten men in her machinery spaces escaped alive. The second bomb hit forward below the waterline, passed through a fuel tank into the Sea Cat magazine and caused at least three missiles to explode without detonating itself. The two magazine handlers were killed instantly; the magazine flooded with escaping fuel oil. As the door of the Sea Cat hoist blew off just forward of the bridge, dense white smoke began to spew up from below. The ship was still heading for the shore, all steering gone, and the telegraph dead. Captain Layman sent a man forward to drop an anchor from the fo'c'sle, and began to receive his damage-control reports. 'It took longer than one might think to find out what had happened to the ship,' he said. There was a major fire forward in the messdeck above the magazine – bedding and aluminium lockers had ignited. One of the stokers, Hathaway, worked his way into the area with breathing apparatus, and within twenty minutes had controlled this fire. *Yarmouth's* Wasp helicopter saw *Argonaut's* plight, and on the pilot's initiative landed on the frigate's flight deck and began to take off wounded. The ship's auxiliary diesel generators were still supplying power to the key weapons systems, and they quickly rigged emergency leads to keep the forward Sea Cat operational. Layman signalled *Fearless*: 'We can float and fight, but not steam.' As the light began to fade, *Plymouth* moved out of San Carlos Bay and began to circle the crippled ship to protect her from further air attacks. When darkness came at last, *Plymouth* closed in and began to tow *Argonaut* into the relative safety of San Carlos, still nursing two unexploded bombs.

But, even as *Argonaut* was fighting to save herself, the last air attack of the day fell on *Ardent*, the 3,250-ton Type 21 frigate which had been carrying out naval gunfire support in the southernmost position of the naval screen. Two 1,000-pound bombs struck aft, severing all her vital systems and slashing her wide open for the next stick that followed, setting the entire after part of the ship on

fire, killing twenty-four men and wounding thirty. Despite a gallant defence during which the NAAFI canteen manager continued to fire a GP machine-gun after all the main armament had been put out of action, there was never the slightest possibility of saving *Ardent*. Helicopters closed in around the ship and began pulling survivors from the water, evacuating the bulk of her 200 remaining men from the fo'c'sle where they had clustered in their 'once-only' survival suits. *Yarmouth* hastened to her side and completed the rescue with much of the ship already engulfed in flames and black smoke. Her captain, Commander Alan West, freely confessed to his own tears and those of some of his men as he gave the order to abandon her. But no ship of her size in any war could have hoped to survive punishment of that kind.

As darkness fell, wounded men were still being carried aboard *Canberra* and taken to the ship's operating theatres. 42 Commando had been sent ashore during the afternoon to join 3 Para around Port San Carlos. Although some stores remained aboard, the liner's role was now predominantly to provide medical support. Many of her crew had been exhilarated by her survival through the attacks of the day. But most were deeply shocked by an experience that they had never remotely envisaged when they sailed from Southampton. It is still not clear whether the Argentinians hoped to sink *Canberra* and missed – as it appeared to some of those on her decks – or whether, as the enemy's airmen claim, they had been specifically ordered to avoid her. In any event, she had had a fortunate day. Aboard *Fearless*, 3 Commando Brigade's staff were above all relieved that their own landing had been achieved without loss, and their build-up of stores and equipment had not attracted direct attack. This operation had begun slowly, because of the delay imposed on the helicopters by the need to seek cover below the horizon during air attacks. But there had been no evidence whatever of any attempt by Argentine ground forces to mount a counter-attack, or to concentrate men by helicopter for a thrust against the beach-head. Over 4,000 men were now ashore. The British were comforted, for any sound military commander must

have been aware that the landing force would be at its most vulnerable during its first hours ashore. If General Menendez lacked the will or the means to exploit the military situation when the British were weakest, it seemed reasonable to hope that all the SAS reports about the indolence and incompetence of the enemy were justified.

It was clear that all the fears for the future of the task force must lie with the ships at sea, which had suffered such crippling damage to defend the beach-head. One frigate had been sunk, and four damaged. 'By the end of the day,' a senior marine officer wrote in his diary, 'the Argentinians had definitely cracked open the defence provided by our underarmed escorts. Had daylight lasted and had the enemy persisted with his attacks, he could have got in among our Landing Ships with possibly disastrous consequences.' A naval officer on *Fearless* said, 'Some people were very depressed that evening. Some of us had not appreciated until quite late on how much damage had been done to us. We thought we had given quite a good account of ourselves. Now we had to have a rethink.' Andy Auld and the other Harrier pilots on *Hermes* had done all that could have been asked of them, yet that night they were gloomily saying, 'We aren't shooting down enough.' The sheer weight of the Argentine air force had swamped the British defences. It was inevitable that the enemy would keep coming. What if their bombs began to explode?

That night, as Admiral Woodward talked by telephone to Commodore Clapp, and later took his usual hour-long nightly call to Admiral Hallifax, the chief of staff at Northwood, a number of important assessments and decisions were made. First, mercifully, the Argentinians had allowed themselves to be deflected from attacking the vital storeships and had gone instead for the escorts, probably because these were the first ships they saw in the few seconds left to them for target acquisition after crossing the hills. Woodward considered it a great tribute to the British missile systems, above all Sea Dart, that fear of them was forcing the enemy to fly so low that pilots had little aiming room and their

bombs were not gaining sufficient time in flight to arm themselves. But it seemed vital to reduce the risk to the key supply ships by withdrawing all but two or three being immediately unloaded. It also seemed suicidal to keep warships out in Falkland Sound – they must all pull back into the shelter of San Carlos Bay itself.

Perhaps the most serious discussion concerned the performance of the Rapier missile batteries. At sea, immense faith had been placed in Rapier's ability to protect the landing force once it was established. Yet, after immense effort by the Sea Kings – shifting their ungainly loads as best they could between air attacks – Rapier had been established ashore only to discover that up to eight of its launchers were unserviceable at any one time on that first day. The long exposure to salt at sea had proved damaging to sensitive electronics. The difficulty of moving spare parts from the ships was acute. Unexpected snags were emerging, such as a tendency for the alloy pins retaining the missiles on their slides to snap, dumping the projectiles on the peat. It was almost a year since the operators had their last live-firing exercise, and it was taking time for them to refine the art of visual tracking on the battlefield, especially against targets passing below them. On 21 May, Rapier scored three hits, with ten missiles launched. But this was nowhere near providing the universal panacea against air attack that some optimists had expected. Admiral Woodward signalled testily from *Hermes*: 'I am sure that the Rapier detachments are doing all that they can. However, their performance yesterday was totally unsatisfactory. Put a bomb under them before they get one on top of them.' The message further exacerbated the land force's irritation with FOFI. It seemed an astonishing inversion of all the hopes of the task force that the admiral was now counting so heavily upon Rapier to defend his ships from air attack.

But the senior commanders of the task force – the Chief of Defence Staff in Whitehall, Sir John Fieldhouse at Northwood and Admiral Woodward on *Hermes* – retired to bed that night cheered by the conviction that, if the British had suffered a frightening day, the enemy had endured a far worse one. They estimated that

the enemy had lost twenty aircraft. This claim was later reduced to sixteen, but no air force of its size could continue to accept such casualties on a daily basis. Frigates were one commodity with which the task force was plentifully supplied. The lost and damaged ships could be replaced in the line. Meanwhile, after the desperate tension of the past forty-eight hours, when the entire future of the operation hung in the balance, the great triumph of the landing had been secured. From now on, it was a matter of keeping their nerve and pressing on. 'I never thought we should lose,' said Julian Thompson, 'because I knew the political will was there.' But it was a time of acute tension.

While the commanders debated the tactics of the morrow, on the crippled ships men worked through the night to repair the damage. *Argonaut* was being towed into the anchorage behind *Plymouth*, with her crew labouring below decks to pump out her flooded spaces and get her machinery back into action. Suddenly, without warning, her lighting and all auxiliary power failed. An extraordinary silence fell upon the ship. With difficulty she completed her tow and dropped an anchor. Working by torchlight, engine-room staff examined her diesels. It was revealed that one bomb had fractured a fuel tank, the sea had spilled in, and the auxiliary engines had become polluted with salt. Patiently, a team led by Fleet Chief Artificer Uren began to strip down and clean them. Others worked on temporary repairs to the holes in the ship's side, 'stuffing them with mattresses and other good World War II stuff like that,' as Kit Layman said cheerfully. Without the constant hum of generators and ventilators with which they lived by day and night every moment of their lives, 'people went around whispering as if they were in a cathedral. It was a bit of a low point. Everybody was absolutely whacked after being at action stations for seventy-two hours.' The diving officer, a young sub-lieutenant named Peter Morgan, undertook the appalling task of lowering himself into the forward magazine flooded with diesel oil where lay the bodies of the magazine handlers – and the unexploded bomb that had killed them. Thirty minutes later he

surfaced, to report that it lay directly above several live Sea Cat missiles.

Auxiliary power was restored to the ship just before first light. The crew were exhausted, and acutely aware that their most dangerous problems were still unresolved. Layman considered that *Argonaut* still lay too far out in the anchorage – ‘we knew that they would be coming again’ – and requested a tow deeper into the bay. After a prolonged delay at last three landing craft commanded by a breezy Ewen Southby-Taily our appeared alongside. With Layman directing operations by waving his arms from the top of his bridge, the LCUs pulled *Argonaut* slowly up the channel, until she dropped anchor between the assault ships. Shortly afterwards, a matter-of-fact pair of Royal Engineers clambered up the ship’s side and asked to be taken to the bombs. Warrant Officer John Phillips and Staff Sergeant Jim Prescott set to work with their rocket wrench, and within an hour had set off a controlled explosion to defuse the weapon in the boiler room. ‘Sounds all right,’ they said, as the ship’s company waited tensely for the outcome on the upper decks. The bomb aft indeed proved safe to remove. The forward bomb, however, was impossibly situated for the bomb-disposal men to work upon. The only hope was for the ship to patch the external hole below the waterline, pump out the magazine, then extricate the weapon as it lay. The captain thanked the engineers, who moved on to other business as routinely as they had arrived. *Argonaut* embarked upon a saga that continued all that week, repairing her damage, while on the decks above her gun crews manned their weapons through all the attacks that followed. As Layman had informed CoMAW, she could not steam. But the tough old steel ship could ‘float and fight’. She was called upon to work very hard to do both.

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That Saturday morning was again bright and clear. In the anchorage, the men stood by their weapons, waiting expectantly while the shuttle of helicopters and landing craft continued, listening

intently for the tannoy call 'Air-raid warning red'. A Sea Harrier from *Hermes* spotted the wake of an enemy patrol craft to the south, attacked with cannon and watched the desperate crew run themselves aground on the shore. Two C-130s made a run over West Falkland escorted by six Mirages, but the British were unable to engage them. As the day wore on, the tension began to relax. Thick cloud lay over the Argentine home bases. It also seemed evident that they were licking their wounds after the formidable pounding of the previous day. The British, trying a new tactic reflecting their persistent faith in Sea Wolf and Sea Dart, had posted a '22-42 Combo' of *Broadsword* and *Coventry* as 'a major missile trap', in the admiral's words, out to the north-west. They were seeking to catch Skyhawks and Mirages at long range. Sea Wolf could provide protection against low-level attack. But that Saturday the two ships waited in vain. As darkness fell, the Argentinians had failed to appear.

Under cover of night the British began some vital redeployments. *Glamorgan* steamed in to take the place of the damaged *Antrim* in the escort screen. To the vast relief of most of those at sea and ashore, *Brilliant* escorted out of the bay the Great White Whale *Canberra* and a string of supply ships. There were protests from some commanding officers that stores remained aboard the liner, but none of these were vital. The loss of *Canberra*, or even serious damage to her, would be a disastrous blow to British prestige, out of all proportion to the military advantage of keeping her in San Carlos. The surgical-support teams were now established ashore, in the disused refrigeration plant at Ajax Bay. Commodore Clapp and Admiral Woodward had agreed to reduce to an absolute minimum the unloading of store ships in the anchorage during daylight. This was a serious blow to 3 Commando Brigade, all of whose planning was based upon the assumption that the brigade's logistics support would remain afloat, readily available in San Carlos. Instead, the build-up began of a vast brigade maintenance area at Ajax Bay, into which stores were shuttled as quickly as they could be landed by mexefloat pontoon. Each night, a convoy of

supply ships sailed into the anchorage and offloaded for a few hours, only to set forth again long before dawn for the safety of the open sea, east beyond the battle group. It was a procedure which drastically delayed the build-up ashore, and caused deep dismay among the staff of 3 Commando Brigade, who felt that once again the Royal Navy had imposed a critical decision upon them with little consultation. But the navy's arguments are very easy to understand, and the naval staff considered that the land force compounded the problems greatly by indecision about their own needs and priorities.

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For a brief moment on Sunday morning, yet another bright and beautiful day, some of the men in the anchorage began to believe that the enemy's air force had abandoned its offensive. The day began well for the British. Harriers caught one Huey and two Puma helicopters, destroying all three, *Antelope's* Lynx crippled an enemy freighter with a Sea Skua missile. *Brilliant* and *Yarmouth* trapped and forced aground the Argentine supply ship *Monsunen*. Then the Skyhawks and Mirages resumed their attacks on the warships. 'All were frightening,' wrote an officer on *Broadsword*, 'but some seemed comical in retrospect. Sea Cat chased three Mirages, and just when some seemed to be gaining, they ran out of steam and fell in the water like something from a *Tom and Jerry* cartoon. Other missiles and bofors fire hit the hillside in pursuit of one jet, scattering a herd of cows who left a trail of dust . . .' 45 Commando, dug in above Ajax Bay, cursed the gunners whose overshoots hammered in around the marine positions.

It was lunchtime when *Antelope's* Lynx, returning from a check on the ship she had attacked that morning and had now found sinking, suddenly spotted four Skyhawks moving north up Falkland Sound. They disappeared behind Fanning Head and split into two pairs. The first came in low from the east as the ship's guns opened fire; they seemed to flinch from the barrage and turned away. *Antelope's* pursuing Sea Cat smashed into one aircraft. At that

moment, the other Skyhawks attacked from the north. The first aircraft screamed over *Antelope* and made for *Broadsword*. A bomb hit the big frigate aft. Again it failed to explode. The second aircraft met *Antelope's* barrage as it approached. Hit in the wing by 20 mm Oerlikon fire it almost plunged into the side of the ship, pulled up sharply and smashed into the after mast at 400 m.p.h. The men on deck heard a sharp crack. The Skyhawk disintegrated, and its ruins fell into the sea on the port side. Simultaneously, the ship reeled under the impact of an incoming bomb, which penetrated aft on the starboard side. A few moments later, yet another Skyhawk closed on the port quarter and hit *Antelope* with a second 1,000-pounder below the bridge, once again failing to explode, but ploughing into the petty officers' mess, where it killed a steward and wounded two sickberth attendants.

*Antelope* manoeuvred successfully to dodge the next wave of attacks, then closed in on *Broadsword* to seek shelter while she examined her own damage. At 2.30 p.m. she limped up San Carlos Water alongside the crippled *Argonaut*, and prepared to deal with her bombs. Staff Sergeant Prescott and Warrant Officer Phillips flew to tackle the second frigate's difficulties. Most of the ship's company were evacuated to the fo'c'sle, leaving only skeleton crews manning the armament. For more than an hour, they wrestled with the bomb delivered by the first Skyhawk. The crew shivered in the icy northerly wind, and eventually were ordered to move aft, to the shelter of the flight deck. A broadcast from the bridge announced that the bomb-disposal team would try a new method of defusing the bomb. Prescott and Phillips detonated a small charge, then walked forward to inspect the results. As they approached, the bomb exploded. Prescott seemed to be hit by a door blown free by blast, which killed him immediately. Phillips suffered a badly injured arm, but escaped to the upper decks with two of *Antelope's* crew who had accompanied the soldiers. Fire-fighting teams were already at work. A huge blaze was spreading outwards from the heart of the ship, billowing smoke and cascading sparks in the breeze. With great courage, every landing-craft

coxswain in the anchorage closed in on the crippled ship and began to take off survivors. The captain, Nick Tobin, was rescued by an LCVF which closed in forward, where he had scrambled down with four others who had remained alongside him on the bridge. A few minutes after the evacuation was completed, the anchorage was shaken by a series of explosions in the magazines which produced some of the most dramatic photographs of the war taken from neighbouring ships, their crews watching sombrely in the darkness. The next morning, her back broken, the frigate settled slowly into the water, her bow and stern disappearing last, leaving only a handful of life rafts and sailors' caps bobbing silently on the water. It was a spectacle that thousands of men ashore and afloat had witnessed from beginning to end. They had never seen a ship sink before. It was an experience that drove into each of them how bitter and how costly the struggle for the Falklands had now become.

'This was the time that we were at our lowest ebb,' said the principal weapons officer of a destroyer. 'We wondered how long we could keep going. We put on a brave front for the sailors, but we were deeply shaken by the speed and futility of the ship's going down. There seemed a possibility of stalemate. How much more of this could we take?' From *Hermes*, Admiral Woodward conducted an urgent tactical discussion with his captains, by secure telephone. Seven enemy aircraft were believed to have been destroyed that day, but still it was not enough. Captain Black of *Invincible* and Captain Coward of *Brilliant* urged the admiral to bring his carriers closer inshore, perhaps to within 50 miles, to increase the Harriers' endurance on CAP. Four pairs of aircraft could be kept on station instead of two or three. For the rest of the war, the location of the carriers would be a deeply vexed issue within the task force, with many naval and marine officers in San Carlos arguing that they should have operated at much shorter range. Woodward pondered the issue very carefully indeed. He remained totally convinced that the safety of *Hermes* and *Invincible* must be his first priority. If one or both carriers were lost, disaster faced the fleet. The Argentinians

had now given far too convincing evidence of their determination and striking power to increase the risk to the battle group. David Hart-Dyke of *Coventry* proposed taking his ship much further west towards the Argentine mainland, to give *Sea Dart* a real chance against the incoming enemy aircraft. No, said Woodward, this risk also was too serious. If anything went wrong, the destroyer would be too far from possible rescue. The '22-42 Combo' would be deployed once again north of West Falkland.

On 24 May, *Broadsword* and *Coventry* lay on station, yet in vain. The waves of enemy aircraft that swept towards San Carlos gave them no chance of firing. *Coventry* did achieve a solution against a patrolling enemy Boeing 707 reconnaissance aircraft. But, to her crew's disappointment, the *Sea Dart* flash doors refused to open. By the time they had been forced into motion with a hammer, the aircraft was out of range.

At 9.15 a.m. on the 24th, Skyhawks hit the landing ships *Sir Galahad* and *Sir Lancelot* with one and two bombs respectively. None of the three exploded. The ships were half unloaded, and no vital stores remained aboard them, but their loss would have severely affected the flexibility of the landing force. The largely civilian crews evacuated them, with indecent haste in the view of some naval officers. But they could be salvaged if and when their bombs had been dealt with. It was another sharp shock to the men deployed around the bay.

This was the day, however, on which the defenders at last began to believe that they were gaining the measure of the air attacks. *Rapier*, after its initial difficulties, was coming of age. Its triumphant crews, perched behind their camouflaged trackers high on the hilltops, claimed three enemy aircraft. *Fearless's* Bofors claimed two more, the Harriers a final three out of only twelve which attacked. Andy Auld and Lieutenant David Smith were vectored by *Broadsword* onto a formation of four Mirage Vs approaching north of Pebble Island. When the Mirages spotted the Harriers, as usual they jettisoned their bombs and fuel tanks and wheeled for home. The British fighters dived to gain vital speed

against the faster Argentine jets – like almost every engagement of the war, this one took place below 500 feet. Auld manoeuvred hard behind the fleeing aircraft until he heard his ‘aural tone’ and fired two missiles. He was turning to try for a gun kill on a third aircraft, and had just radioed to Smith, ‘I can’t reach this one, what about you?’ when Smith’s Sidewinder flashed past his shoulder. Two of the enemy aircraft exploded, the third fell out of the sky after losing its tail and part of a fin. Auld called to *Broadsword*’s radar operator to check his screen: ‘Check your six o’clock – we have just splashed three Mirages.’ ‘Super,’ *Broadsword* radioed back. ‘That makes eight today so far.’ ‘Well, that’s it for today,’ called Smith. ‘We might as well go home.’ Auld thought, ‘Yes, he could just be right, because they can’t go on taking this rate of loss much longer.’

The pilots were tired, appallingly tired, after six hours a day in their cockpits. ‘Dear Harrier Pilot,’ wrote a lady in Scunthorpe who sent a fruit cake to the *Hermes* air group, ‘I hope you are still alive to read this . . .’ They had lost not a single aircraft in air-to-air combat, but the previous night a pilot had plunged into the sea five miles ahead of the carrier during a night launch. Four aircraft in all were lost in accidents, against three from ground fire. When the pilots climbed from their aircraft at nightfall, they were often too exhausted even to hear the commander’s evening broadcast on the events of the day. They lived in their own private world of alerts, takeoffs, patrols, landings, with an occasional can of beer if they were not rostered for night alert, and otherwise only sleep and morning briefings two hours before dawn, followed by take off again. ‘You tended to switch off the bad things, because you couldn’t let thinking about them affect your flying,’ said Lieutenant Commander David Braithwaite, flying with 809 Squadron from *Invincible*. ‘One was conscious only of being cold, and of being tired. Initially everybody was a bit frightened, but then even that wears off. That’s when you’ve got to be careful.’ The maintenance crews achieved an astonishing 80 per cent serviceability, even with each Harrier averaging six ninety-minute sorties a day. The British

possessed only a handful of pilots, but among them were some of the most experienced fliers in the Fleet Air Arm. These men tended to become the highest scorers, the most effective in combat, partly because of their ability and partly also – as Andy Auld admitted wryly – ‘because we learned to know when and where there was likely to be something happening, and the senior pilots made sure that they took those patrols’.

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Throughout the war, the Argentinians were immensely hampered by the poor coordination of their own forces. The responsible air force commander, Brigadier Ernesto Crespo, was not officially informed by the navy or army of the British landing at San Carlos on 21 May until 10 a.m., two hours after the other services became aware of it. He dispatched his early sorties that day on his own initiative, based upon sketchy reports of some form of British operation taking place in the bay. Rear Admiral Juan Jose Lombardo, based in Porto Belgrano, was intended to exercise the same sort of overall direction of Argentine land, sea and air operations around the Falklands as Sir John Fieldhouse was providing for the British. But, as the war situation worsened, inter-service cooperation deteriorated. The army and air force became increasingly reluctant to accept direction of the war effort from a naval officer, when the navy’s ships lay impotent in their ports. The navy appears to have mounted its Super Etendard and other air strikes against the British fleet without consulting or informing the air force of its operations. The navy claimed after the war that it was an obsession with prestige targets that persuaded the air force pilots to attack British warships rather than the much more important transports, although the air force in turn blames the poor intelligence it was receiving, and the need to attack the first visible target after coming in sight of San Carlos.

The greatest tactical fear of the British – that the Argentinians might begin sending escorts with their bombing aircraft – never materialised. Even a handful of escorts deflecting the Harriers’

attention might have made a marked impact upon the enemy sortie rate against San Carlos. But the Argentinians, with only two Hercules C-130 tanker aircraft, had no resources to spare for escort duties. Their air force commanders, appalled by their losses, were already bringing aircraft home away from their own bases, to prevent them from understanding the full scale of the losses. Some aircraft with fuel cells damaged by small arms were staggering back only by flying the last miles coupled to a tanker aircraft. After the war, Argentine sources claimed that only eighty-one of the air force's 223 combat aircraft possessed the range and air-to-air refuelling capacity to fly against San Carlos from the mainland – the Mirage IIIs, Mirage Vs, Canberras and certain marks of Skyhawk. Of these aircraft, they admitted the loss of 41 per cent of the first-line fighters, thirty-four aircraft, significantly fewer than the British claimed. In addition, Aeromacchi and Pucara aircraft were still operating from Port Stanley and Goose Green. It was a measure of the ineffectiveness of the British air blockade that, between 1 May and 14 June, the Argentinians flew 435 tons of cargo to the Falklands, and claim to have evacuated 264 wounded men. The strike aircraft operating from the mainland claim to have planned 505 combat sorties during this period, of which 445 were attempted, and 302 completed. The Argentinians made no secret of their dismay at the ferocity of the British defences around the anchorage and, as the days went by, the Harriers turned back more and more waves before they even approached the islands. The determination of the enemy's pilots seemed to be visibly ebbing away. Although the British were not aware of it at the time, the tide of battle was turning.

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In the anchorage, the British situation was causing deep concern. While the enemy's air attacks continued, the logistics build-up was progressing with painful slowness. One of the most important and most painful lessons of the war is that even the most realistic peacetime exercises do not test logistics to the full, do not reveal

men's utter vulnerability to supply problems on the battlefield. Moving ships only in darkness was drastically reducing the expected flow of stores. The 'floating logistics concept' agreed at Ascension Island had been abandoned in the face of the air threat. Ships containing urgently needed equipment were discovered to be far out at sea, and could be brought in with the night convoy only after complex signal discussion with the battle group. The navy was dismayed to discover, for instance, that the vital Rapier generators ran on petrol, and there was a chronic fuel shortage in the anchorage. The difficulties were once again provoking tensions between *Hermes* and the commando brigade. Many naval officers were demanding privately or openly to know what the landing force was doing. Why had it not moved from the bridgehead? Why was the navy expected to endure daily punishment while the campaign ashore did not advance?

Each day, Thompson passed long stretches at the satellite terminal at Ajax Bay. After waiting sometimes hours for a connection, he talked to Northwood. Every call brought the same questions. What was he doing? When would he move? Thompson had understood that he was merely to defend the bridgehead until Major General Moore and 5 Brigade arrived. But new imperatives were rapidly taking over. Overwhelming public attention in Britain was focused upon the air-sea battle in which the Royal Navy was suffering so badly. The war cabinet and Northwood were becoming increasingly impatient for evidence of British movement, British achievement, to justify the lost ships and lives. They also considered it essential to establish British dominance over the Argentinians without delay. 'Unfair pressure from UK,' a brigade staff officer wrote in his diary on the 25th. 'They don't appreciate the pressure of the air threat and tend to dismiss it. The navy's argument is that they have suffered enough and it's now our turn.' Thompson explained patiently to Northwood each day that his helicopters were totally committed moving rations, casualties, ammunition, guns. There were insufficient movement assets to put even a single battalion on the road to Port Stanley. 'Yet I am

convinced that we shall be ordered to press on regardless,' wrote the staff officer. Nor were Northwood alone in their concern. Many marines and paras were weary of lingering idle around the anchorage, watching others fight a battle of attrition, the very battle that Woodward had hoped to win before the landing force came ashore. 'It seemed to me that we ought to get on and get into contact with the enemy,' said a marine CO. 'It was a bad thing psychologically not to be in contact – bad to leave the Argentinians entirely alone except for a few Harrier strikes.'

At his brigade headquarters in the gorse beside the San Carlos settlement manager's house, where children played among the camouflaged tents and parked Volvos, Thompson called his COs to an 'O' Group on the 24th. As they sipped soup from thermoses, he urged them to curb their natural impatience. The offloading of the ships must progress further before helicopters would be available to move men. For the time being, SBS and SAS reconnaissance operations were to have priority on available helicopters – it was critical to know more about enemy deployments. Meanwhile, he told his officers: Look east, prepare for the move towards Port Stanley. The SAS would reinforce the vital high ground of Mount Kent as soon as possible, and major units would follow them. Nothing was said about Goose Green. Unhappy but totally aware of their brigadier's predicament, the COs dispersed to their helicopters and returned to their units, debating what they could find for their men to do to keep them busy.

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It was a strange battle, that week in San Carlos Water, concentrated both in time and space so that it developed a routine of its own. In each twenty-four hours, there were sixteen of darkness, during which the men ashore could do little but sleep and talk. The rigorous blackout made it impossible to cook, read or work. In Port San Carlos, many of the landing force had moved into the settlement buildings and were living in relative comfort. But for the men at Ajax Bay, San Carlos settlement and on Sussex

Mountain, there were no refinements. They slept in the bitter cold and damp of their trenches, with only spasmodic chances of a night in a shearing shed to dry their clothing. At dawn each day, after the ritual of 'Stand to', when men manned their weapons until the light had cleared, the smoke of hundreds of tiny hexamine cookers curled over the company positions as men brewed their tea and oatmeal with apple flakes. Each unit dispatched patrols and manned observation positions overlooking its own area by day and night. One afternoon, 40 Commando captured an Argentine naval lieutenant commander among rocks high above San Carlos. It seemed almost certain that he had been providing intelligence for the air striking force. Such an incident was a welcome break in the usual monotony of digging to improve positions, manning the radio nets, moving rations and ammunition. 'It was comical in a way, after the first day when we realised they weren't going for us,' said a twenty-year-old from Nottingham named Kevin Priestley, of 45 Commando. 'When the attacks came in, we shouted to each other, and sometimes you'd get the whole commando jumping with excitement. We'd look at our watches and say, "Time for the aerobatics to start."' News picked up on the net or from World Service was passed eagerly from man to man by word of mouth between positions. An occasional bottle of whisky or carton of cigarettes 'rassed' from one of the storeships was deeply prized. No man much minded the discomfort and cold in themselves; the growing frustration and boredom grew from the feeling that the landing force, through all these days, was only an impotent spectator of the great drama unfolding below in the anchorage and offshore. They cheered passionately as enemy aircraft exploded, and cursed aloud when they saw ships struck. They fired their rifles and machine-guns and Blowpipes whenever an attacker came within miles, to the dismay of the logistics staff, desperate to husband ammunition.

Until the very end of the war, most men continued to feel a sense of fantasy about events: the spectacle of a British warship burning before their eyes was too close to television war films and

too far from anything that they themselves had ever experienced to seem real. Only once throughout the air battle did the men around San Carlos face direct attack. At last light one evening, without warning, two Skyhawks burst over San Carlos settlement at very low level. In slow motion, men watched in horror as parachute-retarded bombs floated gently down towards 40 Commando's position. Yet only two men were killed by direct hits, and three wounded, demonstrating the effectiveness of deeply dug entrenchments and the weakness of bombs in the soft Falklands peat.

Meanwhile, across the water at Ajax Bay, three more Skyhawks dropped twelve bombs on the brigade maintenance area, killing six men, wounding twenty-seven, and starting a major fire in 45 Commando's heavy-weapons ammunition dump. For hours in the darkness, men laboured to move the wounded from beneath wreckage to the main dressing station, which itself harboured two unexploded bombs, while mortar and Milan rounds burst into the bay, and small-arms ammunition crackled and popped through the night. Brigadier Thompson visited the area, profoundly alarmed. The entire brigade's operations had been planned on the assumption of keeping its logistics afloat. The air assault had forced them instead to create huge dumps at Ajax Bay. But these now seemed appallingly vulnerable to attack. Where else could they go? Thompson asked himself desperately. The answer was nowhere. It was fortunate for the land force that the enemy never attacked Ajax again after inflicting that one, deadly fright.

It was a paradox that, for the ships' crews, life for many hours in each twenty-four seemed incomparably more comfortable and secure than for those ashore. Drinking gin in a warm ward-room amongst a throng of officers before an invariably excellent Royal Naval dinner, men talked earnestly about the events of the day and weighed the odds for the morrow. In the privacy of their cabins, exhausted captains interviewed a seemingly endless procession of department chiefs about their machinery, ammunition, supply states. Could they put to sea tomorrow night for a

replenishment-at-sea operation and still be back on station in time for dawn action stations? What news was there of Able Seaman Smith or Jones, lying wounded at Ajax Bay or aboard the hospital ship *Uganda*? Could something be done to strengthen the port Bofors mounting or was it more urgent to deal with the troublesome condenser aft, where kelp was clogging the intakes? Senior officers afloat had far less sleep than their counterparts ashore, because lights blazed and men worked as steadily through the hours of darkness as those of daylight. At intervals through the night, even those in their bunks were awakened by the steamhammer 'clang!' against the hull as 'scare charges' were exploded in the water to deter enemy frogmen. The crews operated at defence watches – six hours on and six off – for the entire war, with action stations routines in addition. The signals staffs were among the most overstrained of all. On the command ship *Fearless* well over 100,000 signals – a million copies in all – were passed before the war ended. One officer calculated that there had been over 5,000 calls to the bridge in the same period.

Long before dawn, men woke and breakfasted so that every chair and loose fitting could be lashed down, all galley operations shut down before action stations. On many ships, once action stations had become a routine, the crew was roused by a calm tannoy pipe rather than a dramatic hooter. A pipe wore less hardly on the nerves. Even in darkness, most men scarcely bothered to remove their white anti-flash capes, but relaxed and ate with them pushed down on their necks. At dawn, they merely pulled them over their heads and donned their gloves. Then the captains made a routine daily broadcast to their ships' companies. 'Good morning,' Jeremy Larken of *Fearless* began a characteristic report. All over the ship, more than a thousand men, many of whom never saw the light of natural day, strained to catch his voice over the hum of vents and air conditioners, the roar of machinery and the constant traffic of transmissions, telephones, hurrying figures. 'It's quite a murky day, although not as murky as we should like to see it. I wanted to warn both the ship's company and our visitors what

a tremendous amount of noise a bomb makes when it explodes in the water. It's liable to make the ventilation system go "splutter putt", caulking fall from the deckheads and so on. I'm simply lining you up so that, if you hear a very big bang, you needn't feel the world is coming to an end . . .'

In the wardroom, a crowd of pilots clustered around the loudspeaker. The second officer of an evacuated LSL tinkled tunelessly for a moment at the piano. Captain Larken moved on to describe the deployments for the day: '... *Broadsword* is leading the band, with *Plymouth* as goalkeeper. *Rapier* is in good form and bright eyed, so let us all hope for a good day . . .'

As the dawn came up over the battlefield, a yellow dinghy drifted alone over the last resting place of *Antelope*. The upperworks of every warship resembled sets for some cinema epic of the Battle of the Atlantic, with young men muffled in gauntlets, balaclavas and helmets huddled behind sheet steel and sandbags over their machine-guns. 'Everybody moans about modern youth,' said the captain of *Arrow* one morning. 'They should come and see some of these lads.' He pointed to his seventeen- and eighteen-year-old Oerlikon gunners on the bridge wings. They were only proving for the thousandth time in history that even the very young, when they find great responsibilities thrust upon them, almost invariably respond marvellously well. At this moment in British history, it cheered many men very deeply to see the teenagers performing their duty so finely. Among the younger men, as always it was loyalty to their comrades and to their ships and units that dominated their thoughts and behaviour in action.

'I think morale is becoming better rather than worse,' said the surgeon lieutenant on *Arrow* on the morning of the 25th. 'People are becoming angry, getting more aggressive towards the enemy.' A fleet chief petty officer, at his action station in damage control, said, 'It's all been theory since 1945. Now it's the real thing, and mistakes will be made, lessons learned, the same as last time. The lads were a bit shaken up by the losses. It's not the ships - they can be replaced. It's the men.' Then the first red alert of the day

was sounded, and the captain broadcast to the ship's company: 'Remember, lads, when they come, give them hell.' War is full of clichés, because only clichés can match the drama of the moment.

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25 May is Argentina's National Day. The British knew from the beginning that the enemy would exert himself to the utmost to do justice to the occasion. But, as the waves of enemy aircraft came in, the defences responded with formidable effect. Two Mirages being chased from Falkland Sound by Harriers were shot down by Sea Dart missiles fired from *Coventry*, lying forward on picket with *Broadsword*. *Coventry* later shot down a third aircraft, Rapier claimed one, and *Yarmouth* another. The morale of the men in the anchorage soared.

Now the Argentinians delivered one of the most crippling double blows of the entire campaign. At 2 p.m. at her usual station north of Pebble Island, the crew of *Coventry* were in high spirits after the destruction of three enemy aircraft, a satisfying achievement for Sea Dart. Her captain, the elegant and energetic David Hart-Dyke, debated whether to move from the area after his success to avoid the risk of being targeted for direct attack, but decided against doing so. He and his men were elated by the morning's kills, and were looking for more. An air-raid warning came through, and he sent the crew to action stations once again. *Coventry*, with the escorting *Broadsword* half a mile astern, was running at 12 knots on her Tyne cruising engines, and beginning to work up to high speed. For a brief moment Sea Dart achieved a solution on the attackers, only to lose it again. 'Where the hell are they, then?' asked Hart-Dyke, on his high seat in the operations room, peering intently at the radar screen in front of him. 'I can't see them.' Then two Skyhawks streaked from the contours of Pebble Island and came at deck level for the ships. Every automatic weapon on the destroyer was in action as the Skyhawks opened fire with cannon. The aircraft seemed to flinch from *Coventry*'s fire, and swung aside towards *Broadsword*.

On the frigate, *Sea Wolf* was switched on. Its computer examined the two approaching targets, almost indistinguishably close together, sought to decide which to attack, and found the decision electronically too difficult. The missile system switched itself off. *Broadsword's* crew flattened themselves on her deck, while her guns kept firing. In an agony of expectation, they waited for the inevitable bomb. Then there was a loud 'Clang!' aft. A single bomb had entered the starboard side of the ship and bounced out through the flight deck, destroying the *Lynx* helicopter but failing to explode.

*Sea Wolf* now gained a solution on the second pair of *Skyhawks* closing in. But, to the aimer's dismay, as he prepared to fire, *Coventry* swung across *Broadsword's* bow. Hart-Dyke had ordered a sharp starboard turn to present the smallest possible target to the incoming aircraft, and was expecting *Broadsword* to manoeuvre to avoid him. *Sea Wolf* was unable to fire.

*Sea Dart* achieved a solution, fired, and missed. *Coventry's* 4.5 gun was firing continuously, and all her automatic weapons that would bear were in action. The *Skyhawks* bombed fine on the destroyer's port bow. Of the four 1,000-pound bombs that fell, one landed astern and the others smashed into the port side, tore deep into the ship and exploded, wounding her mortally. Hart-Dyke recovered from a brief moment of unconsciousness to find himself surrounded by black smoke and wreckage. One bomb had exploded immediately aft and below the operations room, killing nine men in the forward engine room immediately, and causing havoc in the areas above. 'All I could see around me were people on fire, like candles burning,' said Hart-Dyke. His own face was badly burned, and flesh was hanging loose from his hands. For a moment he sought in vain for an escape route through the port side, only to find it completely vanished. He found himself behind a queue of men stumbling in search of an exit. He thought of his home, his children, his wife. Then he staggered through the starboard door and up a twisted, ruined ladder to his bridge. There were flames and thick smoke everywhere. He somehow made his

way out on to the port bridge wing, and fell on his hands and knees to breathe more easily. He asked if the main broadcast was still operational. It was not. He ordered his warfare officer, Lieutenant Commander O'Connell, 'Get the ship moving fast to the east.' 'Aye, aye, sir,' said the obedient O'Connell. He vanished to follow his captain's bidding, when Hart-Dyke achieved a moment of clarity and thought: That's a ridiculous order. The ship was already listing heavily to port, and all power had gone.

With difficulty, the captain clambered up the starboard side and saw his men already abandoning ship, helping each other to put on 'once-only' suits, quietly making their way into the liferafts. There was no shouting, no screaming. Hart-Dyke walked down the steeply tilting side of his ship and stepped into the water. During the passage south, a petty officer had approached him one day and offered him a card bearing a prayer of St Joseph that he assured the captain would bring him safely home again if only he carried it. Now, blackened and burned, he was pulled over the side of a liferaft by the same Petty Officer Burke, who declared with satisfaction, 'You see, sir, it works.' But, to their dismay, they found the raft being sucked against the ship, brushing against the 4.5 gun, its barrel still hot, and finally puncturing itself against the tip of a Sea Dart missile on the launcher. Hart-Dyke found himself back in the water, while many men scrambled on to the hull of the destroyer and clung to its sinking upperworks. Then helicopters began to appear overhead. Every available Sea King and Wessex had been vectored to *Coventry's* position from San Carlos. Some crewmen were soon winching themselves into the water to rescue wounded men. One aircraft landed on *Coventry's* red-hot hull to pick up men. Some of Hart-Dyke's men helped him aboard a Wessex, which landed him on *Broadsword*. There were 283 survivors in all. Nineteen men had died. In the bath of the captain's cabin aboard the frigate – the comfort, even luxury of the 22s' living accommodation was a standing naval joke – Hart-Dyke suddenly realised how desperately cold he was. His feet were blue. The frigate's crew stripped and bathed all the survivors before they

were transferred to the supply ship *Fort Austin* for eventual repatriation to Britain. The ships in the San Carlos anchorage seemed to be carrying many survivors that week, too many. The loss of *Coventry*, the third of the Type 42 air-defence ships to be put out of action, was a bitter blow, not least because of the further doubts that it cast upon the efficiency of the fleet's missile systems. The cold was creating intense difficulty for the aimers, who found themselves unable to track missiles whose tail glow was obscured by a cloud of condensation. Both *Sea Dart* and *Sea Wolf* were achieving kills. But they seemed unable to provide decisively effective protection for themselves, far less for the task force. And the Argentinians had still not finished for the day.

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Admiral Woodward had always believed that the Argentinians would choose this occasion to launch a renewed Exocet attack on the carrier task group, and he was perfectly correct. The Argentinians rightly judged that the weight of British defensive power around the battle group was concentrated on its western flank, closest to the mainland. On 25 May, when two Super Etendards of the second attack squadron took off from Rio Gallegos searching for the vital targets – *Invincible* and *Hermes* – they flew north, refuelling in mid-air from other Etendards. This was a vital mission, for the aircraft carried two of only three air-launched Exocets remaining to the Argentinians. It seems that their desperate efforts to purchase more missiles in the course of the war failed; they were even unable to find extra fuel drop-tanks, of which they were chronically short. 110 miles north-north-east of the Falklands the Etendards turned south. They rapidly located the battle group on radar, 70 miles northeast of the islands.

The enemy was still more than 30 miles to the north when the Type 21 frigate *Ambuscade* detected an attack on her 992 radar, and immediately alerted the fleet. The fate of one missile has never been determined, but several men on *Ambuscade*'s bridge saw the smoke trail of a second Exocet boring in, the red glow of its

exhaust clearly visible. The ship opened fire with its 4.5 gun, Oerlikons, GPMGs. Above all, every British warship fired chaff radar decoy. A Lynx helicopter is also believed to have been operating an active decoy. But the 13,000-ton container ship *Atlantic Conveyor*, perhaps 2 miles to starboard of *Ambuscade*, possessed no chaff. The missile veered sharply in mid-air from a course towards the warships – including *Invincible* – and struck *Conveyor* below the superstructure on the port side. After the explosion, a huge fire quickly took hold. *Ambuscade* lowered her sea boat, and with three other frigates closed in to begin taking off survivors. The container ship's vital cargo of Harriers had been transferred to the carriers a week earlier. But she also carried ten Wessex and four giant Chinook helicopters, together with the tentage for the entire landing force. One Chinook's rotors were bolted into place and by exceptional good fortune the aircraft was already airborne. *Conveyor* was scheduled to enter San Carlos with the night's convoy to fly off the remainder. But, within an hour of the Exocet strike, the ship's helicopters, upon which all the British plans for their breakout from the beach-head hinged, were blazing ruins. Scores of sailors and RAF technicians leaped overboard into their liferafts. One of the last to leave the ship was the master, a splendidly colourful veteran seaman named Ian North, the much-loved bearded 'Captain Birdseye'. He swam to one liferaft in his orange 'once-only' suit, and found it already overcrowded. He disappeared into the failing light, swimming towards the next, and was never seen again. Eleven other men died. The loss of the Chinooks, capable of lifting eighty men each, was a crippling blow to British strategic plans for the campaign, another bitter shock for the Royal Navy. Thenceforth, Woodward's carriers were seldom closer than 200 miles to San Carlos. The Harriers' CAP endurance had been shortened yet again.

It was only with hindsight – and of no comfort to the fleet that night – that Woodward and his crews could perceive 25 May as the turning point of the war at sea. From then on, with the sole exception of 8 June, the Argentine air force made only brief hit-

and-run raids upon the British ships. One third of its fighter strength had been destroyed, and many of its best pilots lost. Like the German invaders of Crete in 1941, who were on the verge of abandoning their attack until they suddenly realised that it was the British who were broken and retreating, the task force slowly perceived that, however grievous its own wounds, those that it had inflicted on the enemy were even more crippling. The British had accepted their share of both good and ill fortune: on the day of their approach to San Carlos, the weather gave them a priceless advantage. In the week that followed, however, it was extraordinarily clear for the South Atlantic in winter. The enemy's pilots benefited accordingly. If those vital first days had been heavily overcast, the British might have achieved their victory in the Falklands at a fraction of its eventual cost. But they also enjoyed the luck of the enemy's bombs failing to explode. It was perfectly true that it was the threat of Sea Dart that caused the pilots to fly too low. But only a very modest improvement in Argentina's technical capability would have been needed to fuse their bombs so that they exploded on impact. The Argentinians were furious to learn later that the bombs' American manufacturers had a manual on such improvements which was denied them under the US embargo; they regarded such information as normal after-sales service.

The British won the battle for San Carlos – which was the decisive struggle of the war, the last moment at which the entire campaign might have foundered – thanks to the courage of their captains and crews, and overwhelmingly to the achievements of the Sea Harriers. The Harriers accounted for thirty-one – and the most reliable thirty-one – of the total 109 enemy aircraft claimed destroyed at the end of the war. In addition, the Harriers made an enormous contribution by breaking up and turning back enemy attacks before they had been pressed home. It is difficult, however, to regard the armament with which the Royal Navy sought to defend their own ships as anything but inadequate. Sea Dart claimed eight kills, Sea Wolf five and Sea Cat six by the end of the

war. Yet the failures and inadequacies of each system were directly responsible for the crippling of *Glasgow* and the loss of *Coventry*, and indirectly for many other losses. No defensive system in war can be perfect, but that with which the British sailed into battle in the South Atlantic was almost fatally fallible. 'We have moved too quickly and too completely into the missile age,' as a senior captain said ruefully after the battle of San Carlos. It had been a very, very close-run thing.

While the events of that week opened a further gap in the relationship between the men in San Carlos Water and Admiral Woodward – dispatching his abrasive signals from the distant operations room of *Hermes* – it is difficult for his critics to fault his handling of resources. The technical shortcomings of the Royal Navy were no responsibility of Admiral Woodward. In the situation in which he found himself by 25 May, his decision to refuse any hazard to his carriers may be unromantic, but was clearly correct. The hostility and scepticism that he generated were caused by the gulf between his earlier bombastic confidence and his later caution in action, together with his knack of upsetting those who did not know him well. At the end of the day, however, it was his task force that successfully asserted their command of the sea around the Falklands in the face of the Argentine navy and air force. For this, he is richly entitled to his share of the credit, of which so much also goes to his men. It was only the ship designers of the Royal Navy who, for all the excuses made for them by the heads of their service, can have derived little satisfaction from the battle for San Carlos.

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But all these reflections are the product of hindsight. On 25 May, in San Carlos, far from basking in a victory, the British were nursing a deep sense of dismay. Above all, that day signalled the collapse of London's patience with the slow progress of the build-up in the beach-head.

To those who admired Brigadier Julian Thompson and his

conduct of operations in the Falklands, it would come as a shock when the war was over to learn that a faction in London – both politicians and service chiefs – spoke less than warmly of him. They appeared to believe that, from 21 to 25 May, he allowed his forces to idle in the beach-head while desperate pressures were mounting on the British from outside. First, the government was increasingly alarmed by the risk that the United Nations would abruptly make an irresistible demand for a ceasefire, which would leave the British controlling only their beach-head around San Carlos. While the directors of the war were unanimous in explaining this later, at the time they told neither Thompson nor Woodward of the reasons for their sudden urge for movement. Second, and equally critical, was the imperative of public expectation following the task force's continuing losses. Some British commanders, including Woodward, spoke warmly after the war about the lack of 'back-seat driving' during the campaign. Yet Thompson was exposed to relentless pressure to move from the moment of the landing at San Carlos. Once again, it may be argued that a relatively junior officer was being asked to accept huge responsibilities: in this case, for possible disaster to the land force that could follow a decision to move too soon. Throughout the campaign, if there were important British weaknesses, they were in the area of command and control, of communication and understanding between the disparate elements of the task force at sea and ashore. For all the marvels of modern technology there were remarkable lapses of liaison. Inter-service confidence, both in Britain and the South Atlantic, became very strained indeed. Important intelligence in the possession of the Chiefs of Staff in London never reached Thompson in the South Atlantic. If the chiefs of staff in London had always expected 3 Commando Brigade to advance from the beach-head immediately after landing, none of those at San Carlos seemed aware of their intention until after the event. Claims in London that Jeremy Moore had always emphasised the importance of fighting a quick battle to establish ascendancy over the enemy may be well founded, but the realities on the spot made

this immensely difficult. Contrary to the Whitehall view, there is no reason to suppose that, had Moore been at San Carlos from 21 to 25 May, he could have done any more or any better with the resources at his disposal. One chief of staff described this period later as 'the worst of the war – waiting desperately for us to do something'. Yet there is no senior officer who served ashore in the first days after landing who believes that Thompson could have moved before he did.

The world now knows that the Argentinians never counterattacked the beach-head, never attacked the advancing British march across East Falklands, never even sent fighting patrols to dislocate operations at San Carlos. But all these risks were very real at the time. Indeed they would have been automatic initiatives for any energetic and competent army. There was also serious concern about the Argentinians' Pucara ground-attack aircraft. Thompson would not have been forgiven had he suffered a serious setback because he underestimated the enemy's power to cause him mischief, as other officers were to do two weeks later when *Galahad* anchored at Fitzroy. So serious were his supply problems in that first week that, at one point, the main dressing room station was down to a day's supply of anaesthetics, and brigade was having immense difficulty maintaining the flow of rations to the units around the anchorage. There is no doubt that part of the problem stemmed from poor organisation of helicopter movements, which was still in the hands of a grossly overstretched naval staff. Much more to blame was the fact that a small force at the end of an immensely long line of communication was waging a war with a dangerous minimum of equipment and resources. But, in the wake of the Royal Navy's disturbing losses in the first days following the landing, there was a period of acute agitation at Northwood and in Whitehall. Under enormous public and diplomatic pressure, Thompson's difficulties were forgotten. The government strove to produce some evidence of British success.

Thompson was at his headquarters working on revised and much more modest plans for an advance without the three Chi-

nook helicopters, each with the lifting power of five Sea Kings, that had been lost on *Atlantic Conveyor*. Suddenly he found himself summoned to the satellite terminal at Ajax Bay. It was Northwood who now told the brigadier exactly what he was to do. The command in Britain considered it essential that the landing force should engage the Argentinians at the first opportunity. The obvious choice was to send a force to Goose Green, the enemy base only 13 miles south of San Carlos. Thompson said that he regarded Goose Green as strategically irrelevant: once Stanley fell, Goose Green must go also, which was scarcely true the other way around. He had planned to leave a small force masking any possible Argentine sally from Goose Green, which anyway seemed unlikely from the enemy's performance to date, and concentrate on moving forward to Mount Kent, the vital ground for a push on Stanley. He could press on towards Kent with part of his force, by all means, said General Dick Trant – now Fieldhouse's deputy at Northwood, with General Moore incommunicado aboard *QE2* – but to Goose Green a British force must go. Indeed, in a ruthless conversation between Northwood and San Carlos, it was suggested if Thompson remained reluctant to march his force immediately, another commander would be found who was not.

After four days of almost unbroken bad news, London needed a tangible victory. If ever there was a politicians' battle, then Goose Green was to be it. At no notice, Thompson summoned his commanding officers. 2 Para was to carry out a 'raid' on Darwin–Goose Green. Meanwhile, 45 Commando and 3 Para were to begin the breakout from the beach-head on foot – 'yomping', in marine parlance. Since the lack of helicopters made it impossible to fly men towards Port Stanley, they would walk – across the frost-baked peat and marshes of East Falkland in winter. The unit commanders were astonished. One at least refused to believe that it could be done. It was the nemesis of all their hopes for a swift helicopter leapfrog across the island. There was a deep fear that the units that marched would exhaust themselves long before they had even reached a battlefield.

Hew Pike had committed 3 Para to a programme of intensive patrolling when he heard on the 24th that there was unlikely to be a rapid breakout. Now, his unit was caught off balance, with many men wet and tired. But they took great pride in their claims to be able to accomplish anything. At 1 p.m. on the afternoon of 27 May, 3 Para set out for Teal Inlet, bearing their enormous loads, and setting a cracking pace across the rolling, broken country.

'We have to fight and win three victories,' Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Whitehead of 45 Commando wrote in his diary. 'Against the enemy; against the appalling terrain and weather; and against our own logistic inadequacies.' Then, at first light of 27 May, his men boarded landing craft to be taken up San Carlos Water to Port San Carlos. There, carrying an average of 120 pounds a man, the marines began their historic march across the island. While they were doing so, 2 Para went to Goose Green.