

GUILDHALL BANQUET – 8 JUNE 2022

Master, Wardens, Representative Lord Mayor, Sheriff, Aldermen,
Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Perhaps I can now give you all a whiff of cordite up your noses and sketch a picture of what it was like to be involved in what was an action packed few weeks down south. Of course, it wasn't meant to be like that - in March 1982 we were destined to participate in a big naval exercise ending up in Gibraltar called Exercise SPRINGTRAIN. After that we were programmed to sail to the West Indies for what we thought would be an enjoyable and fairly relaxing deployment where our main armament would be suntan lotion. So it came as a tremendous jolt to find ourselves storing ship ready for war, including a full complement of high explosive shells. It really did require a big mental shift by everyone on board and, although we started to train in earnest as we headed south under an outstanding Captain, I think few of us really believed that we would actually be going to war and that, at some stage, there would be a diplomatic solution. The prospect of our trip to the West Indies was still very much alive.

But, of course, this was not to be, and our first taste of action was in the recapture of South Georgia where skilful use of our 4.5 inch guns essentially walking the shells along the beach caused the Argentinian troops to run away. The Argentinians subsequently surrendered and we had the dubious pleasure of bringing on board to sign the surrender document the infamous Captain Alfredo Astiz, a man who had previously been involved in torture and worse in Argentina.

As always, in war as well as in peace, there are amusing moments alongside the serious stuff. One such incident occurred when we were about to insert a number of SAS soldiers into South Georgia. Our Supply Officer, Ken Napier, the person responsible for feeding the ship's company, had a word with one of the SAS saying that he liked venison and understood that there were lots of reindeer on South Georgia. A day or so later the Officer of the Watch on the bridge

spotted our helicopter returning from the island with an underslung load. On closer inspection, the said underslung load proved to be a hapless reindeer! So, the ship's company were able to have a bonus diet and the Supply Officer was very happy because free venison helped him to balance the books.

In sharp contrast to this amusing episode, the news of the sinking of HMS SHEFFIELD was a cathartic moment for all of us. A Royal Navy ship actually being sunk quite honestly seemed unbelievable, but that was probably the moment when we finally and firmly adjusted our minds that this was a serious conflict. And so it was. On the day of the landings, a beautiful calm, bright and blue day, the peace was shattered with the scream of jet engines as wave after wave of Argentinian air force bomber aircraft pressed home determined attacks. Far off, we could see HMS ARDENT being pummelled, eventually sinking. Early on, HMS ARGONAUT was disabled by bombs which lodged in her for'd missile magazine and we spent the day doing our best to protect her, eventually lashing her alongside us when darkness fell and dragging her into San Carlos Water, the bay which soon became known as Bomb Alley. Two of ARGONAUT's sailors had been killed and we took them out to sea and buried them, a very poignant occasion and a stark reminder that war has very unpleasant consequences.

Yet, even the daily mass raids by the Argentinian aircraft on the warships in San Carlos Water had some lighthearted moments. As an aircraft screamed low over the water with everyone's guns and missiles trying to knock it down, there was cheering like at a football match and then a tremendous 'whurrrr' as the aircraft got away behind a hill. By golly, those Argentinian pilots were amazingly courageous.

So, the normal routine by day was to be at Action Stations in San Carlos Water, while at night we either convoyed merchant ships in and out, or bombarded Argentinian locations ashore or inserted Special Forces ashore. In many ways, what was happening was quite exciting, particularly for those actually able to watch what was going on outside, but I think special mention should be made for those

people who were a few decks down when all they could hear was lots of noise and sometimes violent ship movements, and they were no doubt wondering what was happening. One particular incident comes to mind - one of our damage control parties who patrolled round the ship checking that all was well reported to me that the door clips on one of the missile magazines kept being found loose. Clips on doors and hatches throughout the ship needed to be on tight to ensure, amongst other things, watertight integrity. I therefore went down to speak to the Leading Seaman who was inside the magazine and said to him; "I understand that the clips on the door keep being found loose and wondered why." He, a Scottish sailor replied; "Well sir, if anything comes in through the side, I'll be able to get out a bit quicker", to which I said to him; "Listen sunshine, if anything comes in through the side, you won't have to worry about getting out." And to give him his due, those clips remained on tight for the rest of the conflict.

Talking of individuals, Master, perhaps I can for a moment highlight your Clerk, Mark Leaning who, as a young Sub-Lieutenant, had the hazardous task of taking one of our small outboard dinghies to rescue an SAS raiding party in a place called Fox Bay which had been identified by Argentinian troops and come under sustained fire, but were unable to withdraw because their own boat had broken down. Mark towed their boat back to PLYMOUTH under extremely difficult conditions, and it was then a race against time for the Captain to get the ship to the relative safety of San Carlos Water before daylight when the Argentinian Air Force would have relished the prospect of finding a warship in open water.

Having said that, that's exactly what happened on the 8th of June this very day 40 years ago. It was the day when the Royal Fleet Auxiliary SIR GALAHAD was bombed, a horrible incident with which many of you will be familiar. But it was also the day when we in PLYMOUTH were ordered to proceed into Falkland Sound, the strait which divides East and West Falkland in order to bombard an Argentinian observation post on West Falkland. While engaging the target, five Argentinian bombers suddenly appeared and immediately headed for

us. The Captain ordered 'full ahead', an emergency engine order, hoping to evade the bombs which were aimed at us. Two of the aircraft were shot down and I remember the thump when there was an explosion down aft. Besides dropping their bombs, the aircraft also raked us with a large number of cannon shells. A huge fire started, producing vast palls of thick acrid smoke which filled the ship. The firefighting teams, young sailors in their late teens or early twenties, were magnificent and managed to extinguish the fires, but the inside of the ship ended up being a real mess. It's probably the first and last time that, when everything was under control, we subsequently ate hot dogs covered in soot! Perhaps the most remarkable thing about this extraordinary incident was that no one was killed. Five people were injured but none particularly seriously. Though badly damaged, PLYMOUTH was patched up by a heavy repair ship and was back, together with the other warships, off Port Stanley waiting for the ground troops' final assault. However, we suddenly got news that white flags were appearing which meant it was all over. There was no sense of triumphalism in the ship, instead very much a feeling of immense relief and the thought that we would be able to go home.

As a postscript, I must tell you about a small incident which occurred once we had been released from theatre and were heading away from the Falklands and towards Ascension Island. All the officers were sitting down to dinner in the wardroom during a rather bumpy passage and, suddenly, the ship rolled heavily which caused all the plates, crockery and glasses to crash on to the deck, making us all burst into laughter. All that is except for our valiant Supply Officer - remember, the venison man from South Georgia. Bearing in mind the damage and major loss of equipment which had occurred on June 8, we were somewhat taken aback when Ken sternly told us that what had just happened was probably about two months' worth of our breakages allowance. Funny thing war!

May I now invite you to stand and drink a toast to: "The Task Force of 1982 and everyone who supported it."