

Major (later Brigadier) Tony Welch wrote in the Distant Voices series:

Much has been written about the Royal Navy, Royal Marines, Army and RAF fighting units involved in the Falkands Conflict but less about the amazing logistic gamble taken to conduct a war at the end of an eight-thousand-mile supply line. This article looks at the conflict from a logicians' point of view and relates how ingenuity and hard work kept the British forces going forward to eventual victory over terrific odds. (This illustration is by Joan Wanklyn of Ajax Bay)

On 19th March 1982, Argentine scrap-metal workers illegally landed at Leith Harbour, South Georgia, and raised the Argentine flag. Later Argentinian forces occupied the Falkland Islands. These moves led to a brief, but hard-fought conflict on South Georgia and the Falkland Islands, a British colony in the South Atlantic. During the 10-week conflict, a total of 649 Argentine and 255 British military personnel, and three Falkland Islanders lost their lives.
As the crisis unfolded 3 Commando Brigade Royal Marines (RM) was put on alert and preparations were made for the possibility of deployment to the South Atlantic. The Commando Logistic Regiment RM slipped into a well-rehearsed routine for deployment. The various ordnance and ammunition depots swung into action and nothing was too much trouble for them. The MOD began to line up shipping, including STUFT (ships taken up from trade), including the Canberra and a multitude of cargo ships. The workers in Portsmouth dockyard, who had received redundancy notices only weeks before, toiled around the clock to convert cargo ships into troop carriers and even collected money to provide television sets and video-tape players for the accommodation spaces they had created.
The Ordnance Squadron of the Regiment juggled plans for loading stock on an ever-changing list of ships and decided who would make up the small but essential team on each ship to handle the distribution and eventual issuing of combat supplies. They were making it up as they went along, because nothing like this had ever been attempted before. There was an 8,000-mile line of communication and if they got it wrong, there would be little opportunity to correct the mistakes. Lines of military trucks carrying stores clogged the west-bound road to Plymouth docks, while going the other way, were lines of trucks heading east towards Southampton and Portsmouth, loaded with stores for the ships berthed there.
Then the government moved forward the departure date. In response to the Argentinians taking Port Stanley, the capital of the Falklands, the Task Force set sail for the South Atlantic between 4th and 9th April 1982. As officer commanding the Ordnance Squadron, I drove to Portsmouth

to board the Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA) Sir Lancelot, along with the headquarters of the Commando Logistic Regiment RM. We sailed towards Ascension Island as we continued to revise our plans.

At Ascension, we transferred to RFA Sir Galahad. We finalised our strategies for the support of 3 Commando Brigade once it had established a beachhead in the Falklands. The plan was to use two landing ships logistics (LSLs), the RFAs Sir Galahad and Sir Percival, to carry two days of combat supplies , each backed up by a further four days' supply in RFA Stromness and some 16 days of ammunition for the Brigade in the P&O car ferry, MV Elk. The LSLs would lie close inshore and provide direct support to the troops on land. Once empty, they would replenish from Stromness and Elk, sheltering in the relative safety of the 200-mile total exclusion zone (TEZ) patrolled by the Royal Navy, and only coming inshore under the cover of darkness. A frantic period of cross-decking stores and ammunition then took place at Ascension so that we had the right configuration of supplies in the right ships. We even practised moving ammunition, by hand, up from the LSLs' tank decks to the helicopter pad, but we still did not know where or when the landing would take place.

It was finally decided that we would land on the far west of the East Falklands island at a place called San Carlos Water. Having joined up with the other ships of the Task Force, we sailed into San Carlos at around 03.00 hours on 21st May 1982. There was complete darkness, save for one pinpoint of light from an open scuttle on one of the ships in the small convoy. Daylight came and the unloading of the ships began, with curious seagulls flying close to us, totally intrigued by this intrusion into their previously quiet lives.
It did not take long for the Argentinians to discover us and the first causalities were taken. The pilot of our on-board helicopter, Lieutenant Richard Nunn RM, was shot down by a PucarÃ¡ and killed. He was awarded a posthumous Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC). Richard lived close to me in Plymouth and his empty space at the dinner table that night spoke volumes, echoing the images of Second World War fighter stations as portrayed in numerous films.
The Argentinean air force had arrived in large numbers and the shipping crowded into the narrow stretch of water sounded foghorns to signal the impending attacks, whilst the guns mounted on the decks opened fire. The aircraft, PucarÃ¡, Skyhawks and the French-built Super Ã‰tendards, came in fast and very low. RFA Sir Galahad took 13 separate attacks that first day and was finally hit by a bomb that penetrated the hull, careered through an accommodation space and into the tank deck containing 300 tons of ammunition. It failed to explode and was later defused. Had it exploded, much of the Commando Logistic Regiment RM would have been wiped out and the Task Force would have been stranded without the means to fight until relief had arrived from the UK, many weeks' sailing time away.

Although our battle stations were all inside the ship, we gravitated to the upper deck both because it seemed safer and because we wanted to see what was happening. I stood at the

stern rail above the ramp to the tank deck, where the unloading of the combat supplies was taking place. Next to me was Jacko Jackson, a RM lieutenant. An Ã‰tendard came in very low and Jacko opened fire at it with his pistol. Suddenly, the aircraft swerved to the left and crashed into the sea. Jacko blew into the barrel of his pistol and said, "I claim that one." It later transpired that the jet had been hit by the curtain of fire put up by the ships in San Carlos Water. However, this did not stop Jacko repeating his claim when, after the war, the Argentinian pilot was interviewed by a British newspaper and his photo showed a dent in his flying helmet, which Jacko swore was made by his bullet.

The decision had been made to establish the Brigade Maintenance Area (BAA) at Ajax Bay. It had a good beach, but with a frontage of only about 600 yards. Into this cramped area had to fit a Field Hospital, 45 Commando Echelon, a satellite communications station, the headquarters of the Logistic Regiment, the Workshop, Transport and Ordnance Squadrons and hundreds of tons of stores and ammunition. There was very little space, particularly as part of the area was covered with stone runs, rivers of granite boulders that cascaded down the mountainsides. The bombing of Sir Galahad had, however, underlined the vulnerability of the ships in San Carlos Water and the need to protect the precious combat supplies. In his book on the Falklands War , Max Hastings, who was a war correspondent during the campaign, wrote:
One of the most important and most painful lessons of the war is that peacetime exercises do not test logistics to the full, do not reveal men's utter vulnerability to supply problems on the battlefield.

The Argentinian air force kept up the attacks on the Task Force. At sea, ship after ship was hit. In all, the Task Force lost six of its fleet including HMS Sheffield, Ardent, Antelope and Coventry. In addition, the SS Atlantic Conveyor, a roll-on/roll-off container ship carrying helicopters and combat supplies for the Task Force, was struck by two Exocet missiles launched by an Ã‰tendard fighter. A major fire broke out, causing ammunition to explode, killing 12 crewmen. Of the one Lynx, six Wessex and five Chinook helicopters on board, only one Chinook survived, having left the ship a few days earlier. The sinking of the Atlantic Conveyor was a blow to us, as we had not only lost vital material but also the major part of our airlift for moving ammunition and supplies forward to the troops. Atlantic Conveyor was to sink on 28th May while being towed towards San Carlos and where she lies, north of Pebble Island in Falkland Sound, is protected by the Military Remains Act.
A casuality of the conflict, HMS Antelope, holds significance for me. She was protecting the entrance to San Carlos when, on the 23rd May, a 1,000-lb bomb penetrated her starboard side but did not explode. More Skyhawks attacked, another bomb hit the ship which, again, did not explode. Then one of the Skyhawks was racked by gunfire from Antelope and crashed into the ship's mast. Antelope sailed into the relative protection of San Carlos Water and while bomb disposal personnel were defusing the two bombs, one of them exploded. The crew was ordered to abandon the ship and just minutes later, the magazines blew up.
I was crossing San Carlos Water, returning from a briefing at the brigade headquarters in the Royal Marine landing craft F7, when Antelope exploded. We heaved to and searched the water

for survivors. The ship burnt fiercely and quickly, its aluminium hull melting and spitting flames. We found no one in the water but could not get past the ship because of the fierce heat. Then Antelope began to sink, being held up only by her anchor chain. Finally, we reached Ajax Bay and Antelope broke her back and sank the following day.
After much hard work, we got a system of resupply working. We organised a landing craft delivery service to units close enough to be resupplied from the water, nicknaming it the 'milk run'. We used whatever helicopters we could to fly fuel, rations and ammunition to more remote or inaccessible units. We discovered that the Rapier anti-aircraft missile system was particularly fuel thirsty. Rapier was deployed by T Battery of the 12th Regiment Royal Artillery, which joined 3 Commando Brigade as part of the Task Force. There were many siting problems which prevented the Rapier from operating efficiently. Although not particularly effective, its presence did act as a deterrent. The system was known to be fragile before the conflict and this was exacerbated by the sinking of the MV Atlantic Conveyor with almost all the Rapier spares on board. The Rapier sites were on the high ground around San Carlos Water and it was a 24-hour daily task to resupply them. All of this was made more difficult by the amount of fuel the fire units consumed.

We had carried fuel in the Task Force ships but because peacetime regulations had not been lifted (along with peacetime accounting requirements), we had less than we needed until the reinforcements from 5 Brigade arrived. The fuel problem was not helped by the fact that the Commando Ordnance Squadron had deployed without its petroleum Platoon as, in 1975, it had been made a Reserve Army unit to save money. Restrictions on sending the reserve forces to war had also not been lifted. This meant that I had to make ad hoc arrangements to ensure that fuel was available and distributed quickly. I also had to make sure that it was not adulterated as we were refuelling Harrier jets and helicopters around the clock. Members of an ordnance company deployed with elements of the Parachute Regiment were given hasty instructions by Sergeant Taranaki from my Squadron, who had petroleum expertise, and then took on the role of refuelling the Harriers and utility helicopters.

Closer to Ajax Bay, Private Potter from the Commando Ordnance Squadron received 10 minutes' instruction from Taranaki and singlehandedly ran the Brigade's fuel point at San Carlos, almost without sleep, until the arrival of 5 Infantry Brigade on 1st June. Potter was awarded a mention in dispatches clasp to his Falklands medal for his efforts, which were particularly notable as his time in the army had run out on the day we landed at San Carlos.

An amusing incident marked the arrival of the Harriers. We were having a CO's evening briefing when an RAF officer walked into the tent. He introduced himself as one of the Harrier pilots and said he had been sent over to us from the brigade headquarters to enquire if we had transport to take him to the nearest hotel. There was a moment of stunned silence and then someone said, "Sorry, we don't have transport to spare but if you would like to walk in that direction, you

will eventually reach Port Stanley." The truth dawned on him and he left looking embarrassed. Sometimes Royal Marines can be very cruel.

The attack on Goose Green took place and we flew ammunition forward to the battlefield on whatever helicopter was available, with them returning with casualties, who were transferred to the field hospital, co-located with us at Ajax Bay. The Medical Squadron of the Commando Logistic Regiment combined with the Parachute Regiment's Field Ambulance to form the Red and Green Life Machine, whose proud boast was that everyone, British and Argentinian, who arrived at the hospital alive left it alive. As officer commanding the Commando Medical Squadron, Commander Rick Jolly RN, administered the medical facility. The hospital was set up in an old refrigeration plant situated next to the ammunition dumps, as it was the only roofed building available of the size required. Therefore, due to its position near warlike stores and units, a red cross was painted on the building to highlight the fact it was a hospital. The conditions in the building were poor but, despite the dirt, inadequate lighting, air attacks and the presence of two unexploded bombs in the roof, only three of the 580 British soldiers and marines wounded in action were to die of their wounds and none whilst under the care of the Ajax Bay medical staff.
Ajax Bay was attacked daily but, amazingly, few of the bombs dropped exploded. It seems that the Argentinians were flying so low that the primers did not have time to engage before the bombs hit the ground. Unfortunately, this fact was reported by the media and the Argentinians adjusted the bomb mechanisms to compensate for the low release. One bomb exploded outside my command post, inside a brick shed that had originally housed a generator. Although the blast blew those of us in the shed off our feet, no one was hurt.

Sadly, we lost one member of the regiment, Marine Colin Davison, when a bomb hit the side of the hospital building. Marine Davison was the Regiment's only fatality but one of my marines was injured in the same attack and eventually returned to Plymouth to recover in Derriford Hospital.

The 5th Infantry Brigade arrived with 81 Ordnance Company, under command of Major Robin Smith, who immediately got to work relieving our overstretched and exhausted men. We began to push forward, setting up a forward maintenance area (FMA) at Teal Inlet and a forward distribution point at Estancia House, under the shadow of Mount Kent. To the south, 5 Brigade's forward units had reached Fitzroy and the supply chain was stretched over 60 miles using LSLs and helicopters to move supplies forward.

On 8th June, I went forward with Ivar Hellberg, the commanding officer of the Logistic Regiment, to look at the feasibility of moving the logistic base from Ajax Bay to Fitzroy. As I

arrived I saw RFA Sir Galahad sitting in the bay carrying elements of the Welsh Guards and 400 tons of ammunition. She was joined by RFA Sir Tristram, which was also moving 5th Infantry Brigade supplies forward. Rapier was being set up and the headquarters of 5 Infantry Brigade was establishing itself in a shearing shed. It was broad daylight and two Argentinian aircraft appeared and immediately attacked the two LSLs. Sir Tristram was crippled and Sir Galahad was ablaze within minutes.
I was in the shearing shed when they came in. I vaguely heard a radio communication warning of incoming aircraft but there was no reaction to the message, so I continued with my conversation. There was an enormous explosion and we all threw ourselves to the floor. I said to the 5 Infantry Brigade officer lying next to me, "Have you been attacked before?" He replied, "No, this is the first time." Clearly, they were unprepared. Over the weeks in Ajax Bay, we had become so attuned to attacks that we could immediately tell the difference between the engines of the various aircraft and could identify whether an aircraft was one of ours or the enemy.

I ran outside to see Sir Galahad burning. Already the helicopter which had flown Ivar and me in from Ajax Bay was hovering over the bow of the ship and winching up the people crowded on the deck trying to escape the flames. Others had jumped into the sea in their bright orange immersion suits and other helicopters were using their rotor blade downdrafts to push those in the water towards the shore. Lifeboats were being launched. On shore, the medics were setting up a makeshift casualty clearing station to receive the people coming ashore. All were wet and many horribly burnt. Ivar and I walked among the carnage and offered help wherever we could. Ivar became annoyed by the media crew filming the scene and took one of them to task over it. He decided that he should go back to San Carlos to report what had happened to the Brigade Commander, Brigadier Julian Thompson.
I then saw Major Ewan Southby-Tailyor, the commander of the Royal Marine Landing Craft Unit. He had tried very hard during the day to persuade the Welsh Guards to get off Sir Galahad but to no avail. They were most reluctant to leave and a Guards officer had stated that they would only disembark once they had had orders from 5th Infantry Brigade or from their Battalion. Ewan, a highly-experienced officer and an old Falklands hand who had charted all the bays and inlets around the islands, become more and more frustrated by the lack of urgency. Finally, the orders to disembark came through and the Guards began to organise themselves, but then the Argentinian aircraft attacked.
After the LSLs were hit, there were more air raids, this time targeting the troops ashore. As Ewan explains in his book, Reasons in Writing; A Commando's View of the Falklands War :

During the later air raids, I walked with Tony Welch across the settlement green. As the subsequent raids developed, we knelt, rather nonchalantly, but awkwardly, with cold-stiff knees under a convenient and rusting old wagon. Each time the tracer and blowpipe missiles died down, and the aircraft had roared and jinked beyond the hills to the south west, we stood ... and continued our conversation. During a longer than usual pause, Tony casually lifted the lid of the 'water bowser'. It was full of the settlements' emergency fuel. We chose another refuge, while trying to analyse the events of that morning and where we had gone wrong. I blamed myself for

not insisting with even greater vigour that the men be removed from the ship. While Tony was kind enough to tell me that I could have done no more, I was not so sure. I am still not sure."

The bombing of RFA Sir Galahad was, perhaps, the most devastating news received back in London during the entire campaign. Forty-eight soldiers and crewmen were killed in the explosions and subsequent fire. Her captain, Philip Roberts, waited until the last minute to abandon ship. He was subsequently awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) for his leadership and courage. Chiu Yiu-Nam, a seaman, was awarded the George Medal for rescuing 10 men trapped by a fire in the depths of the ship. The main part of the evacuation of the injured and wounded was carried out by the ship's Royal Marine detachment. The Royal Marines organised the launching of life rafts from the bow of the ship, whilst at the same time marshalling helicopters for personnel to be winched clear. The actions of these marines undoubtedly saved lives and they, along with Phil Roberts, were the last to abandon ship. After the end of the conflict, RFA Sir Galahad was towed out to sea and sunk by the Royal Navy. As with the site of the Atlantic Conveyor's sinking, Sir Galahad's resting place is an official war grave.

The intermittent unserviceability of Rapier at Fitzroy was one of many factors that contributed to the bombing of Sir Galahad. The Rapier system was difficult to maintain and frequently erratic. Whilst Ewan and I sheltered under the fuel bowser, we watched a Rapier missile go rogue, turn on itself and head back at the settlement corkscrewing as it flew past us. A year and half after the conflict, I attended an exercise on Salisbury Plain and asked what difficulties had been experienced. I was told that the excessive fuel consumption of the Rapier units had overstretched the logistics system. It seems we seldom learn from our mistakes.

The final battles of the conflict were fought, and the Argentinian forces surrendered to the British commander on the 14th June 1982. We entered Port Stanley and readied ourselves to return home. Work still had to be done but at least we could clean ourselves up, eat proper food and relax a little. We discovered the Argentinian supplies, including their ration packs. The packs contained miniature bottles of whisky, named The Breeder's Choice with a picture of a large bull on the label. These were quickly drunk. Fresh food, including steak, was available but most of us developed upset stomachs, which became known as Galtieri's Revenge . This was not good, given the limited facilities in Port Stanley. We noted from the excess of human excrement in the town that the Argentinians had suffered from the same problem.

We took time to find out a little more about the Argentinians. One of the prisoners of war was Argentinian Navy Captain Barry Hussey, who had been second-in-command of the Argentinian forces on the Falklands. We invited him to dinner on board one of the merchant ships, hosted

by the captain in his cabin. Barry Hussey arrived, looking a little apprehensive, but after several gin and tonics, he relaxed and we enjoyed a good dinner. He was forthcoming in his remarks and noted that his daughter was at boarding school in London. He said he was very impressed by the way that she had encountered no animosity and there was even concern from her fellow pupils about her father's safety. He felt no hatred for us and remarked that we were all simply doing our government's bidding. The evening demonstrated the brotherhood of arms and underlined that yesterday's enemy can often be tomorrow's friend.

The logistic support to British forces during the Falklands War was to find a small place in the history of military achievement. In his definitive book , US Army Major General Kenneth L Privratsky, suggests that the Falklands operation was a military gamble of the highest order for the British. Had the logistic plan failed, victory would have been impossible and national humiliation inevitable. There would have been no food for the troops, no ammunition for the guns and no medical care for the wounded. I had met Ken at Fort Lee, Virginia, whilst I was working at the British Army Staff College in 1988 and briefed him on the operation and the Commando Logistic Regiment RM's part in the conflict. From that brief came his fascination with the subject and some years later his book.

Back in 1982, the time came for us to return home. We had the pick of transportation, with the Medical Squadron having the first choice. Rick Jolly elected to travel in style in Canberra. We embarked in RFA Sir Percival and sailed to Ascension Island before flying by RAF VC10 to RAF Brize Norton and home.

Tony Welch is a former British Army and Royal Marine Brigadier who served in the Falklands Conflict 1982 as the officer commanding the Ordnance Squadron of the Commando Logistic Regiment Royal Marines. He later commanded the Regiment and the Falkland Islands Logistic Battalion before serving in Gulf War One as a senior staff officer and in the Balkans, Africa, the Pacific and Libya for the United Nations, EU and British Government.

Contributions to the Distant Voices series (including obituaries) are welcome. Email robin.ashby@ukdf.org.uk

COMMENTS FROM READERS

1.Ã‚Â Tony Welch commanded my Ordnance Squadron in the Falklands. The Rapier was rubbish as was Blowpipe. I think Rapier might have performed better had we had Blindfire. They did not get a single hit!! Our Rapier post was manned by an RAF team, which my RSM took a personal interest in. Initially they expected us to dig their trenches for them.

2.Ã‚Â It was a close run thing because the French sold Argies Exocet which they launched from French built fighters, 2 DDs 2 FFs and two crucial logistic ships were sunk by Exocets and 1000 lb bombs

After finishing WDC my next job in 1981 was Deputy Weapons Officer on HMS Invincible â€“ a great job on a brand new ship. When I resigned 12/1980, someone else of course got my job. I thought a lot about the guy who was given my job on HMS Invincible - I prayed for his safety every night. It would have been tough if he had been injured or worse. John Woodhead was killed on Sheffield â€“ I taught him at Manadon. As carriers, the Invincibles were pretty useless with only very short range Harriers which were hardly brilliant fighters. We called the Invincible Class "see through carriers".

Oct 21 1982, the Brit Navy held their annual Trafalgar night dinner in Washington DC. The guests of honour were all the US Navy and Government Servants who went 6 extra miles to help the Royal Navy. Many of the guests were quite low level. We introduced every one and explained what they had done in the way of getting the RN more torpedoes, AIM â€“ Sidewinders, chaff etc. It was a moving and magical evening.

We only found out many years later that SecNav John Lehman said that he would have given the RN a replacement carrier if we lost one of ours. That would have been a logistical challenge.

3.Ã‚Â A great read. How you guys won that engagement was a miracle. True grit on the part of all the troops. God bless them all.