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Some perspectives on the 1982 Falklands War informed by discussions with Argentine air force and navy officers



a presentation to the Institute on 28 January 2014 by

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In the 1982 war between Britain and Argentina over the Falkland Islands, Argentine Air Force and Navy pilots acquitted themselves well against British warships – 54 airmen were killed. Mr Dunne has discussed the war with several Argentine Air Force and Navy participants. Informed by those discussions, here he shares some of his own perspectives on the conflict.

Key words: Falklands War; Malvinas Conflict; Argentine Air Force; Argentine Navy; *Belgrano*; *Sheffield*; *Antelope*; *Invincible*; San Carlos Water; Bluff Cove.

“The histories of Wars are always written by the victors and the stories of the losing parties belong to the shrinking circle of those that were there.”
SS-Colonel Joachim Peiper, WWII

The men who fought Argentina’s air conflict over the Malvinas were handicapped by the fact that Argentina, unlike the British, had had no 20th-century air conflict experience. Although Argentine aircraft had previously been involved in suppressing left-wing insurgencies in remote parts of the country, lessons learned from those operations contributed very little to any understanding of modern air-to-air or air-to-ground combat. Argentina’s air force – *Fuerza Aérea Argentina* (FAA) – nevertheless was rated as the best in South America, because Argentina had trained its military aviators, domestically and abroad, for modern air operations.

The territorial dispute between Chile and Argentina over the Beagle Channel was the impetus for the orientation of the FAA’s aerial doctrine leading up to the Malvinas Conflict; and was a constant distraction throughout the conflict as Chile weighed in with help for the British.

Because of this focus, land-based aircrews were well-trained when it came to flying short-range strike missions into Chile and providing air support for infantry on the ground. For the conflict over the skies of *Las Islas Malvinas*, the larger distances separating mainland Argentina’s airbases from the disputed islands (roughly 500 to 650 km), coupled with the limited combat radius of its aircraft, proved problematic. These factors resulted in the FAA being unable to properly support a maritime expeditionary operation in its own ‘backyard’ (Corum 2002).

For the Malvinas Conflict, Brigadier General Ernesto Crespo was appointed to head a combined force of Air Force and Navy aircraft under the title *Fuerza Aérea Sur* (FAS) and

given three weeks to get pilots trained in the anti-shiping role. He told the Junta to expect 50 per cent losses – and subsequently lost 49 per cent! He was able to field an impressive array of aircraft for his Malvinas operations, but he and his staff were seriously hampered by the distance of his air bases from the islands. On paper, they were within range, but in practice the FAS pilots only had between one and two minutes to acquire and attack targets. They had no chance to use their afterburners to escape from the subsonic British Harriers; aerial ‘dog fights’ were never an option; and they had no ‘electronic aids’ to help them acquire and ‘hold’ targets for their anti-shiping role. Unguided ‘iron’ bombs and visual target acquisition were the order of the day.

Crespo and his staff are acknowledged to have done a magnificent job with the assets at their disposal. Air refuelling by FAA KC130s worked very well. There was, however, a serious flaw in their tactics, in that they concentrated on hitting ‘prime targets’, like the British destroyers and frigates, instead of concentrating on the Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA) ships engaged in amphibious operations.

They also had a key advantage whenever they did attack amphibious landing forces because of the direct contact attacking pilots had with Argentine observation posts stationed around likely landing areas like Bluff Cove.

The most serious error committed by the Argentineans was that they did not upgrade Stanley’s air field to support A-4 Skyhawk operations, despite having the time, the means and the assets to do so. Even though they could only have created the required infrastructure to support two or three strikes against the British Task force, such a move could have spelt disaster for the British.

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The other big problem that the FAS suffered from was their use of outdated Matra R530 'Magic' air-to-air missiles. A generation older than the British Sidewinders, they were useless for air combat over the Malvinas. Nevertheless, A-4s stationed on Stanley could have caused havoc before the second wave of British ships (and their Harriers) arrived.

In spite of their many handicaps, the FAS airmen fought bravely and won the admiration of air forces around the world. Many lessons were learnt leading to revision of air warfare curricula in several countries. The British admired the FAA's spirited conduct in the face of an effective air defence network. Rear Admiral Sandy Woodward, the British Task Force commander, said: "The Argentine Air Force fought extremely well and we felt a great admiration for what they did" (Woodward 1992).



*Pilots of 5 Grupo, Armada Argentina (Argentine Navy).
[Photo: Captain A. Arganaraz, FAA Public Relations]*

Air Conflict Commences

On 1 May, the air conflict started in earnest. Brigadier Crespo started proceedings with a strike by 36 aircraft – Canberras, Mirage IIIs, Daggers and A-4 Skyhawks. A flight of Daggers from Grupo 6 came upon HM Ships *Alacrity*, *Glamorgan*, *Exeter* and *Arrow* which were firing on Argentine positions around Stanley. Damage to the ships was light but the FAS airmen, engaged in a steep learning curve, were 'getting their eye in'.

British Sea Harriers of 801 Squadron were quick to respond and three FAS aircraft were shot down. The British AIM-L9 Sidewinder air-to-air missiles immediately proved their superiority over the Argentine Matra 'Magic' air-to-air missiles which were at least one generation behind the Sidewinders. Dagger pilot Captain Jose Ardiles of 6 Grupo was killed. Canberra crew 1st Lieutenants Mario Gonzales and Eduardo Di Albanez of 2 Grupo bailed out but were not recovered. Mirage pilot, Major Gustavo Cuerva of 8 Grupo, was shot down and captured after bailing out.

That night, Britain commenced its Black Buck raids on the airfield at Stanley. The bombing was accurate but did not stop the Argentines from using the airfield. However, the fact that Britain was quite capable of mounting air raids on the Argentine mainland was not lost on them!

ARA *Belgrano* and HMS *Sheffield* are Sunk

On 2 May, the Argentine Navy Flag Ship, ARA *Belgrano*, was sunk in controversial circumstances. *Belgrano* had been first spotted on 1 May by an RAF Canberra PR9 operating clandestinely out of an air base in southern Chile. The British announced to the United Nations Security Council that they had extended their 200-mile (330 km) Exclusion Zone (EZ)

to include the whole of the South Atlantic and that all enemy ships found outside the EZ would be fired upon.

Wing Commander Sydney Edwards, RAF, was also keeping an eye on events around the Malvinas from his base in Punta Arenas. He was 'embedded' there with the Chilean Air Force at their long range radar facility – a crucial aid for the British in the coming month or two.

The *Belgrano* sinking resulted in Argentina ordering two Exocet-armed Argentine Type 42 Sheffield-class guided-missile destroyers back to port. The event also reminded Argentineans on the mainland that Britain's nuclear submarines were 'on station'.

On 4 May, though, the British received a huge wake-up call when HMS *Sheffield* was sunk. Navy airmen, Lieutenant Commander Colombo and Lieutenant Bedacarratz carried out the attack. Colombo's Missile 'got lost' while Bedacarratz's missile found its target with devastating result. The incident gave the British a severe case of 'Exocetitis'. Bedacarratz, while proud of his achievement, was nevertheless deeply affected by the loss of life on *Sheffield*.



*Argentine Exocet-armed Super Etendard fighter aircraft on their way to attack HMS *Sheffield* in San Carlos Water led by Lieutenant Commander Bedacarratz who launched the missile that hit the *Sheffield*.*

[Photo: Captain A. Arganaraz, FAA Public Relations]

Indeed, the Argentinean pilots, while they were keen to do all the damage they could to their opponents, naively hoped it would all happen without anyone actually getting killed. They were long-time admirers of the Royal Air Force. They were also long-term major trading partners and there was a substantial English population living in Argentina. English schools in Buenos Aires were preferred options for children of Argentina's wealthy and senior military families. Many of them had English family links. It could be said that they were true Anglophiles. Their service over the Malvinas had nothing to do with killing more Britons; rather it was the regaining of land they truly believed was theirs. Royal Navy Harrier pilot, Lieutenant Nicholas Taylor, was shot down on 4 May and was buried by Argentina with full military honours.

Operation Fenix

On 6 May, Crespo launched Operation Fenix. Learjet and Boeing 707 reconnaissance sorties and probing missions were flown over the Malvinas. Learjets would also be used later for drawing defending Harriers away from low-altitude attacking aircraft.

RAF Harrier pilot, Wing Commander Peter Squires, fired two Sidewinders at a prowling B707, flown by Major Walter

Barbero. The missiles obligingly flew into the 'hot end' of both starboard engines on the Boeing. Barbero managed to nurse his stricken plane back to base on his two good port engines. Both men went on to become chiefs of their respective Air Forces and became friends when Air Chief Marshal Squires went to Buenos Aires 20 years after the conflict.

Bad weather caused big problems for both sides throughout most of the conflict. Two Grupo 6 Skyhawk pilots, Lieutenants Jorge Farias and Jorge Casco, were lost in bad weather. Weather caused at least a third of all FAS attacking missions to be aborted. Neither side had all-weather capable aircraft. Two Sea Harriers dispatched from HMS *Invincible* in bad weather were never seen or heard from again.

On 12 May, HMS *Brilliant* was attacked by A-4s of 5 Grupo. Two attackers were shot down and two more aircraft were lost. A Mirage III flown by Lieutenant Fausto Gavazzi was damaged by British anti-aircraft fire and the pilot opted for a crash landing at Stanley. On his approach, he was shot down and killed by Argentine anti-aircraft fire controlled by a gunner who needed a refresher course in aircraft recognition. Another pilot, Lieutenant Mario Nivoli, was killed when his aircraft ran into the water spout thrown up by a bomb launched by the aircraft ahead of him.

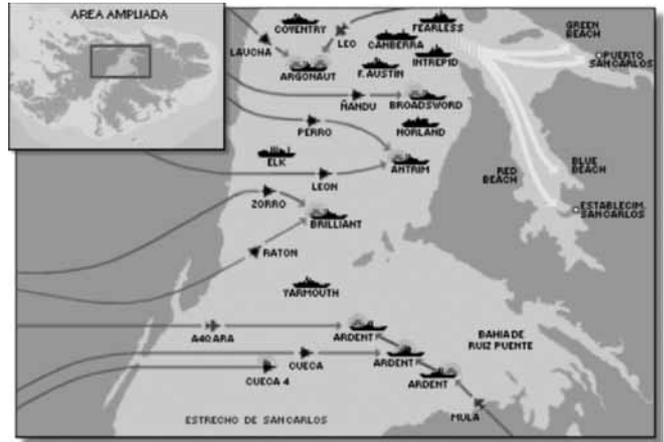
On 17 May, a second British convoy reached the area of operations. RFA Ships *Atlantic Conveyor*, *Pearleaf* and *Tidespring* arrive with vital Harrier and heavy-lift helicopters. The British were preparing for the land battle for Stanley and on 20 May all was ready for the necessary amphibious landings to take place under the supervision of Commodore Michael Clapp, commander of the amphibious task force, and the experienced Major Ewen Southby-Tailyour.

San Carlos Water

On 20 May, the British launched Operation Sutton which would entail an overland march by 3rd Battalion, The Parachute Regiment, and 45 Commando, Royal Marines – both infantry battalions – to Port Stanley, the Falklands capital, after an amphibious landing in San Carlos Water. The Argentineans were surprised. They had considered that a San Carlos landing would be most unlikely and initially thought that the British were merely staging a diversion.

Brigadier Julian Thompson, Commander 3rd Commando Brigade, and Commodore Michael Clapp, commander of the amphibious task force, clashed with Rear Admiral Sandy Woodward, commander of the naval task force, over protection of the San Carlos landings by Sea Harriers. Naturally, Woodward wanted to keep his carriers as far from harm's way as possible, which meant that the Sea Harriers' available loiter time over the fleet they were protecting in San Carlos Water was limited. Clapp and Thompson wanted the Sea Harriers close enough that they could respond to incoming Argentine aircraft before they attacked rather than during or after attacks, particularly since the Army's Rapier surface-to-air missile was proving to be a disappointment as a close defence anti-aircraft weapon.

The Argentineans quickly recovered from the shock of the British landings and mounted a maximum effort air attack on the British ships in the San Carlos area on 21 May. High speed, low ingress attacks got the attacking aircraft through the vaunted British '22/42 Trap' to inflict heavy damage on British ships. Most hits on attacking aircraft were made on departing aircraft which had already delivered their ordnance.



Argentine map of FAS attacks on the British Task Force in San Carlos Water on 21 May 1982. It shows the positions of British ships and indicates those hit by Argentine air strikes.

[Map: Captain A. Arganaraz, FAA Public Relations]

HMS *Antrim*, *Argonaut*, *Ardent*, *Brilliant* and *Broadsword* all took hits. Fourteen unexploded bombs saved the British from disaster. Contrary to popular opinion that the fuses had failed to arm because 'they didn't have time to do so because of high speed ingress', in fact they did arm. The fuse-arming propeller, however, failed to drop away from the Type 78 tail pistol causing the bomb to sit in an armed state, waiting for a sudden shock or action by a bomb disposal person to set it off.

HMS *Ardent* was hit by several bombs which failed to explode before she was finally put out of action by a strike with Retarding Tail 500lb Mk-82 bombs delivered by A-4 Skyhawks flown by Captain Alberto Filipi and Lieutenants Arca and Marquez. Sea Harriers caught up with the trio and shot two down, killing Marquez, while Filipi ejected safely. The third A-4 was damaged and Arca bailed out to be picked up by Army pilot, Captain Jorge 'Picho' Svendsen, in his Iroquois helicopter. Both men were later decorated with the Valour in Combat Medal.

Filipi's Escape

Captain Filipi, the downed Skyhawk pilot, was 'taken into custody' by a sheep station manager in an event that has become legendary among FAS veterans. Filipi managed to scramble ashore and found a sheltered spot to light a fire and dry his clothes, when along came a sheep, which he duly butchered and roasted for dinner. He hung the sheep's pelt over a nearby fence and was enjoying his meal when the sheep station manager showed up. With shotgun in hand, he found the downed airman and took Filipi prisoner. The farmer, a New Zealander named Tony Blake, told Filipi: "If you give me any trouble, I'll hand you over to the British. If you don't give me any trouble, you can come and stay at my house." Filipi took option 2 and wound up staying with the Blakes for four days, after which he elected to "... rejoin my friends and return to the conflict". Blake called the Argentineans at Stanley to come and get him. The Argentineans duly collected their man, who departed with a toy truck for Filipi's little son and Lyn Blake's scone recipe for his wife. Thirty years later, the Filipis and Blakes remain close friends.

This was not the only case of friendships being created between former enemies in the Malvinas Conflict and there have been a number of visits by former high-ranking British officers to Argentina as guests of the Argentine Air Force – Air Chief Marshal Peter Squires, RAF, being the most prominent.

Further British Fleet Casualties

On 23 May, HMS *Antelope* was destroyed when an attempt was made to disarm an unexploded bomb that had hit her. The sight of her aluminium superstructure burning fiercely prior to the bomb on board detonating was something that few expected and alarmed the British public. It made any efforts to save the ship practically impossible. Two FAS pilots were killed in the attack – Lieutenants Hector Volpini and Luciano Guadanigni, the latter after he ran into *Antelope's* mast.

On 24 and 25 May, the FAS really got serious with their anti-shipping strikes. The British suffered disastrous damage to ships in San Carlos Water. RFA Ships *Sir Lancelot*, *Sir Galahad*, *Sir Bedivere* and HMS *Fearless* were hit in a Dagger, Mirage III strike in which two aircraft and pilots were lost. Worse was to come on the 25th, Argentina's Independence Day. HMS *Coventry* was sunk, *Atlantic Conveyor*, with her valuable cargo of heavy-lift helicopters was fatally damaged and HMS *Broadsword* was badly damaged. British ground forces lost their vital heavy-lift Chinook helicopters. Hard foot-slogging on limited rations would result for British ground forces in their advance on Stanley. Two Grupo 5 Skyhawks were shot down, though, and both pilots, Captains Hugo Palaver and Jorge Garcia, were killed.

The British, by now, were starting to feel the strain of fighting such a determined and professional Air Force. The British media were having trouble 'gilding the lily' in their communiqués. Rear Admiral 'Sandy' Woodward later commented: "Their persistence and bravery presented me with a severe tactical problem ... We were on the cliff edge of our capability. Frankly, if the Argies were to just breathe on us, we would have fallen over! ... It was a much closer run thing than the British public were being told at the time ... we were on our last legs!"

The Attack on HMS *Invincible*

On 30 May, Argentina decided to strike a major blow at the British Task Force by sinking, or at least seriously damaging, the aircraft carrier, HMS *Invincible*. A force of FAA Skyhawks and Navy Super Etandards, the latter carrying Exocet air-to-air missiles, took part. The Argentineans claimed hits on *Invincible*, but the British refuted this and in the intervening 30 years, no new information has come to light. In 2001, I spoke to Brigadier Horacio Gonzales about the event. The veteran Malvinas pilot was a major flying one of the attacking A-4s. He simply said to me: "We hit the bloody thing!" Gonzales and his fellow pilots were certain, and claimed, in good faith, that they had hit the carrier.

In the following few days leading up to the end of hostilities, a number of FAS aircraft were shot down by British Sea Dart and Sidewinder missiles. They included a C-130, five A-4 Skyhawks and a Learjet.

The Final Air Raid – Bluff Cove

The final 'big raid' by the FAA was carried out on 8 June against the RFA ships anchored in Bluff Cove with Brigadier Tony Wilson's 5th Brigade on board. For the British, it was a dreadful, unnecessary disaster. A breakdown in command, right under the noses of Argentine observation posts in hills overlooking the Cove, led to a devastating attack on the near

defenceless RFA ships. Fifty-four men were killed and a great many men were badly burnt.

The fighting spirit and aggressiveness of the Argentine pilots had been underestimated. Considering the terrain surrounding the landing force, the firepower available to it and the inadequate tactics and weapons foisted upon the Argentine pilots by their superiors, anyone who witnessed the attacks could not fail to be impressed by the panache, skill and bloody-minded determination with which the Air Force and Navy pilots pressed home their attacks

Conclusion

The pain for both sides was now drawing to a conclusion. The British were on the verge of retaking Stanley; and the commander of the Argentine garrison in Stanley, General Mario Menéndez, had learnt that hard-line Argentinean troops were planning to start "murdering the Kelpers". A small group of Regulars, who were veterans of the Junta's brutal war against their own people, were threatening to turn the conflict into something very ugly. Menéndez, not a Junta member, told the Argentine President, General Leopoldo Galtieri, that such action was completely unacceptable and that they should surrender before things got out of hand; to which Galtieri agreed. Of the Argentines, 9800 men laid down their arms; and 991 young men had lost their lives, 54 of whom were Argentine airmen. The British prime minister saved her job – the Argentine president lost his.

The British were lucky to have won. Fourteen unexploded bombs could have made all the difference if just half of them had exploded. Marshal of the Royal Air Force Lord Craig commented:

"Six better fuzes and we would have lost!"

The Malvinas Conflict in the air had been a war fought between 'gentlemen' who admired and respected one another.

The Author: Michael Dunne was raised in an orphanage and developed a fascination for mathematics, physics, chess and classical music. He worked for several years on the design of hulls for 12-metre yachts. He progressed to a 30-year career in advertising and marketing, before retiring to become a restaurateur and chef. He also served for several years in the New Zealand Territorial Army (army reserve). He has had a long interest in the 1982 Falklands War and, over a period of some two decades, had high-level contact with members of the Argentine Air Force, enabling him to gain insight into the 'Malvinas Conflict' from an Argentine perspective. [Photo of Mr Dunne: Colonel J. M. Hutchison, MC]

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