

Reconstructing the Falklands War

Matthew Theodorakis
Third Year Undergraduate,
Monash University

April 2012 marked the thirtieth anniversary of the Falkland Islands War. The conflict was fought between Argentina and Britain in 1982, over control of the Falkland Islands, located in the South Pacific. For Britain, constructing this conflict in history has been a complex task, and two principal narratives may be said to exist regarding it. The first casts the conflict as a triumph of British values and willpower, achieved by a determined and thoroughly professional military. The second is more sombre, and lays bare the brutality of the war, exposing the effusive rhetoric on which it was justified and details the enduring impacts it has had for those involved in it.

This article offers an alternative way of interpreting the Falklands War that moves beyond simplistic and incomplete narratives offered by official sources, and some historians, to one which places greater emphasis on the empirical accounts and experiences of individuals involved in the conflict. In particular, this article draws on oral and written records from individuals who were directly involved in the conflict, in addition to other more ancillary documentary sources. In shifting the focus of the historical enquiry from official sources to empirical ones, this article will be structured around three main subjects. Firstly, the ways in which the Thatcher Government sought to frame the conflict; secondly the extent to which the realities of the War, as communicated by eyewitnesses, challenge the official interpretation of the conflict; and thirdly, the enduring consequences it has had for the British personnel involved.

There has been a range of scholarship on this conflict and many historians have focused on the political and geopolitical lessons of it. Typically, these discussions address the Argentinian and British claims to sovereignty, the course of diplomacy, and the factors motivating military intervention. Such analyses are undertaken in works by scholars including Peter Calvert, David Welch and Daniel Gibran.¹ In these volumes, the evidence of those who were directly involved in the conflict has been largely overlooked. Others, which utilise more of this material, such as Kevin Foster's *Fighting Fictions*, focus on the way the conflict became an important constituent of British

¹ Peter Calvert, *The Falklands Crisis: The Rights and Wrongs* (London: Frances Pinter, 1982); David A. Welch, 'Remember the Falklands? Missed Lessons of a Misunderstood War,' *International Journal*, Vol. 52, No. 3, (1997), 483-507; Daniel K. Gibran, *The Falklands War: Britain Versus the Past in the South Atlantic* (Jefferson: McFarland, 1998).

national culture and identity during the nineteen-eighties and nineties.² Many military histories of the war also incorporate first-hand accounts; however the interests of these writers, such as Gordon Smith, lie primarily in the strategies and nature of the fighting itself, and consequently do not attempt to analyse the significance of the War in any broader context.³ Thus, eyewitness accounts constitute fairly minor parts of the historical discourse on the Falklands War. Indeed, even more expansive works on the conflict are deficient in the use of empirical evidence. In the preface to his important *Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, Lawrence Freeman acknowledges the sources he used to write the volume, including government reports and interviews with ranking officials, but makes no reference to accounts of the combatants.⁴ Similarly, Robert Reginald and Jeffery Elliot's book, *Tempest in a Teapot*, structures what they call 'the Official British Position' around an interview with one high-ranking diplomat named Marrack Goulding.⁵ Indeed, many of the major works on the conflict overwhelmingly lack the voices of eyewitnesses, especially those of more marginal participants. This is particularly significant at a time when sources such as oral testimony are granted an important place in telling modern histories.⁶ This is not to suggest that eyewitness accounts are entirely disregarded by historians. However, it is by incorporating this important source of information into an historical narrative that this article will attempt to convey a different understanding of the Falklands War, one which presents the conflict in a more nuanced manner – contradicting, to some extent, the notion that the Falklands War was the unequivocal victory that official sources portray.

From the outset, the British government depicted the Falklands War as being integral to British honour. This conception of the conflict was originally based on a narrow range of information, derived in the main from official government sources, and from media releases, some of which were censored by British authorities during the course of the War.⁷ We should therefore be wary of relying on the official line as representing fact. Here, it is important to consider what motivated the British response to Argentina's invasion of the islands on 2 April 1982.⁸ The invasion was viewed as an attack upon British sovereign territory.⁹ Argentina's annexation of the Islands was predicated on the assumption by its ruling military junta, led by General Leopoldo Galtieri, that they were justified in reclaiming what they rightfully believed to be Argentinean territory, and that Britain would not be willing to go to war to repulse them.¹⁰ However, to have surrendered the Falklands with a whimper could have done irreparable damage to Britain's international image and morale.¹¹

² Kevin Foster, *Fighting Fictions: War, Narrative, and National Identity* (London: Pluto Press, 1999), 155.

³ Gordon Smith, *Battle Atlas of the Falklands War 1982: by Land, Sea and Air*, (Penarth: Naval-History, 2006).

⁴ Lawrence Freeman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign Vol 1: Origins of the Falklands War*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), xiii-xiv.

⁵ Robert Reginald and Jeffery Elliot, *Tempest in a Teapot: the Falkland Islands War* (San Bernardino: Borgo Press, 1983), 98-99.

⁶ Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson, 'Critical Developments: Introduction,' in *Oral History Reader*, ed. by Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson, (London: Routledge, 1998), 1.

⁷ Reginald and Elliot, *Tempest in a Teapot*, 5.

⁸ John Arquilla and Maria Moyano Rasmussen, 'The Origins of the South Atlantic War,' *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 4, (2001), 744.

⁹ Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, *United Kingdom Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 21, 3 April 1982, accessed 5 December 2012, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1982/apr/03/falkland-islands>, column 633.

¹⁰ Welch, 'Remember the Falklands?', 484. Eric Grove, "'Always the Unexpected': The Falklands/Malvinas war of 1982,' in *Naval Power and Expeditionary Wars: Peripheral Campaigns and New Theatres of Naval Warfare*, ed. by Bruce A. Elleman and S.C.M Paine, (London: Routledge, 2011), 165.

¹¹ Kurt Taylor Gaubatz, *Elections and War: The Electoral Incentive in the Democratic Politics of War and Peace*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 117-18.

The Thatcher Government chose to annul these concerns by framing the war so that it emphasised and qualified British honour and values, and thus justified the decision to fight. As Margaret Thatcher herself claimed, in going to war '[w]e were defending our honour as a nation'.¹² Stating the case more eloquently, in a parliamentary debate on 14 April, Lord Chalfont expressed hope that the British response in the Falklands would show 'that this is still a country to be reckoned with... simply because it has behaved with courage and compassion and, most importantly of all, with honour'.¹³ Apart from being rather pompous, these statements camouflaged the pressing concerns that failure could entail, most poignantly stated to the Prime Minister by First Sea Lord Sir Henry Leach. He claimed that if Britain allowed Argentina to succeed, 'in another few months we shall be living in a different country whose word counts for little'.¹⁴ Historian Eric Grove persuasively suggests that doing nothing would have constituted a political and geopolitical catastrophe for Thatcher, and that she consequently took his lordship's warning to heart.¹⁵ Furthermore, Thatcher, in her own accounts, suggested that much of the world already viewed Britain as lacking the willpower to defend its interests.¹⁶ She also asserted that Britain had an obligation to protect the Falkland Islanders themselves, whose 'way of life is British' and whose 'allegiance is to the Crown'.¹⁷ Thatcher stated that this loyal body of people had had their freedom abrogated by the Argentineans, and had lost their rights 'to live in peace, to choose their own way of life and to determine their own allegiance'.¹⁸ With such statements in mind, historian Daniel Gibran astutely concludes that the conflict was explicable on the grounds of national dignity and honour, more so than it was in terms of strategic concerns.¹⁹ It became a question of great importance that Britain was seen by both its population, and the world at large, to be taking resolute action to safeguard its interests.

In addition, official narratives of the Falklands War have spoken in superlative terms of the resolve, professionalism and bravery of the British soldiers in the defence of the Islands. Thatcher herself went as far as to call the Task Force 'the most professional and disciplined of forces'.²⁰ While such a proposition is corroborated by some accounts of the war, accepting this view at face value is to simplify the way the conflict progressed and the way it was experienced by many. Kevin Foster argues that much of the conflict quickly became the stuff of myth.²¹ Indeed, the divergence between the lived experiences of the Task Force, and the idealised principles of the Thatcher Government, shows another narrative begin to emerge during the departure from Britain in early April 1982. For example, the Task Force left amid great pomp. Robert Fox, a journalist who followed a paratrooper contingent throughout the war, stated that the '[t]he whole scene of the departure...resembled a newsreel of forty years before'.²² This was presumably not a coincidence. Historian James Aulich asserts that Thatcher's brand of conservatism derived strength from a narrow interpretation of

12 Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: Harper Collins, 1993), 173.

13 Lord Chalfont, *United Kingdom Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 429, 14 April 1982, accessed 5 December 2012, http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1982/apr/14/the-falkland-islands#column_313, column 313.

14 Sir Henry Leach, *Endure No Makeshifts: Some Naval Recollections*, (London: Leo Cooper, 1993), 221.

15 Grove, "Always the Unexpected", 160.

16 Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, 173.

17 Thatcher, *United Kingdom Parliamentary Debates*, 3 April 1982, column 638.

18 *Ibid.*

19 Gibran, *The Falklands War*, 7.

20 Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, 234.

21 Foster, *Fighting Fictions*, 3.

22 Robert Fox, *Eyewitness Falklands: A Personal Account of the Falklands Campaign*, (London: Methuen, 1982), 1.

Britain's past, making the effusive departure an event intended to tap strength from the same reserve of nostalgic patriotism.²³ Furthermore, it could be argued that such an assessment may be true of the war as a whole.²⁴

However, examination of eyewitness evidence suggests that the sponsored jingoism of the Thatcher Government did not capture the war for everyone. Lou Armour, a Royal Marine present in Stanley when the Argentineans invaded on 2 April, stated in an interview for Peter Kosminsky's documentary *The Untold Story*, that it was not 'the old patriotic fervour which had caught the country' which stirred him to return.²⁵ Others, such as Sam Bishop, an officer aboard the HMS *Antelope* did not bargain on going at all: 'I didn't join for war...but I thought I've got to go'.²⁶ Many had joined the military never expecting to do any fighting, while others believed that dispatching the Task Force was little more than sabre-rattling, and that no actual fighting would take place.²⁷ As the Task Force sailed further south, the jingoism of home remained behind. As Armour put it, 'as we got nearer the whole "for queen and country" was going out the window'.²⁸ Thus, the government constructed a narrative around the need for resolute action and a display of staunch willpower in the protection of British interests in the Falkland Islands.

Furthermore, a more in-depth examination of first-hand accounts exposes a more sombre side to the conflict than official sources permit. The reality of it was that serious mistakes were made, and that the British forces may not have been the professionals they were touted to be, nor was the fighting wholly heroic. One event in particular may be said to exemplify this: the attack on the HMS *Sir Galahad*. Stubborn immovability and error is attributed by some as leading to this horrific assault on the *Galahad*.²⁹ Major Ewan Southby-Tailyour, an amphibious landing expert, claimed that the commanding officer on the *Galahad* refused to heed his warning to offload a contingent of Welsh Guards, in spite of the fact that the shore was a mere 'twenty minutes away in the landing craft,' and their objective destination only a six mile journey from where they were anchored.³⁰ The *Galahad* was anchored in a narrow inlet, exposed to air attack.³¹ Consequently, the ship was hit on 9 June, killing forty-nine and injuring 115.³² The disaster was brought into sharper relief by the fact that thirty-nine of the dead were Welsh Guards, one of the most recognizable symbols in the British military.³³ In her 1993 book, Thatcher devotes a single seemingly evasive paragraph to the incident, highlighting the 'heroism of the helicopter pilots' who evacuated the ship.³⁴ This is understandable as in many ways it is a difficult event to reconcile with the patriotic rhetoric that

23 James Aulich, 'Introduction,' in *Framing the Falklands War: Nationhood, Culture and Identity*, ed. by James Aulich (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992), 1-12.

24 Peter Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900-2000*, (London: Penguin, 2004), 375.

25 Lou Armour, cited in Michael Bilton and Peter Kosminsky, *Speaking Out: Untold Stories from the Falklands War*, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1989), 234.

26 Sam Bishop, in *The Falklands War: The Untold Story*, produced by Michael Bilton and Peter Kosminsky (Brookvale, NSW: Castle Vision, 1990).

27 Patrick Bishop and John Witherow, *The Winter War: The Falklands* (London: Quartet Books, 1982) 32.

28 Lou Armour, in *Ibid.*

29 Ewan Southby-Tailyour, in Bilton and Kosminsky, *Speaking Out*, 157. Bishop and Witherow, *The Winter War*, 113.

30 Southby-Tailyour, in Bilton and Kosminsky, *Speaking Out*, 157; Lawrence Freeman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign, Vol 2: War and Diplomacy* (Routledge: Abingdon, 2005), 603.

31 Southby-Tailyour, in Bilton and Kosminsky, *Speaking Out*, 157.

32 Freeman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, Vol. 2, 607.

33 *Ibid.*

34 Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, 233.

underlay the war. The final attack on Stanley was at this point in the offing, and the fighting was to end just five days after the incident.³⁵

In addition, stubborn adherence to the official version of events has meant that the truth about casualties has been overlooked. After a prolonged legal enquiry, Winifred Cockton was informed that her son, Simon, and three other military personnel had not been killed when their helicopter was lost in bad weather, nor as later stated by the Ministry of Defence, due to Argentinian efforts, but by anti-aircraft rockets launched by a Royal Navy ship.³⁶ Mrs Cockton was adamant that these 'lies and deception by the Ministry of Defence' were intentional.³⁷ Historian John Taylor argues that few bereaved families following the conflict wished to question the official cause of death of their loved ones as, understandably, they preferred to believe that they had died the heroes that the country perceived them to be.³⁸ In regard to the case of Simon Cockton, Taylor concludes that his family did seek the truth and thus 'stripped away the patriotic rhetoric, exposing the waste' in his death.³⁹ Again, such a case does not have a place in the official version of events; and, tellingly, the true circumstances surrounding Cockton's death did not emerge until seven years after the end of the war. Death by enemy efforts is one thing, but being killed by one's own forces is neither a professional nor a heroic end.

Further complicating the narrative is the fact that many in the British forces saw the Argentinians as being a subject of pity rather than of loathing. At the very least, there is ambiguity in the ways that individual participants viewed their opponents, which seems at odds with the ostensibly zealous manner in which the war was portrayed by some sources. The idea of teaching 'the Argies' a lesson, emblazoned across the front page of *The Sun* on 4 May in the infamous title 'Gotcha', was not shared by the Task Force.⁴⁰ Robert Fox states that 'many of our company were appalled' by the news of the 272 deaths that accompanied the torpedoing of the Argentinian flagship, the *General Belgrano*.⁴¹ *The Sun's* 'garish headlines of "Gotcha"... received no applause'.⁴² As journalists Patrick Bishop and John Witherow observed in their account of the conflict, the torpedoing of the *Belgrano* outside British territorial waters, while it was moving away from the Falklands, had left a 'sour memory' among the British, for they felt they had 'made the rules and [then] broken them'.⁴³ Many of the veterans also pitied the Argentinian soldiers, most of whom were young, and, as Lieutenant Alastair Mitchell pointed out 'weren't volunteers'.⁴⁴ Indeed, after three weeks of fighting, the final assault on the Falklands capital of Stanley was a solemn affair, fought against a poorly prepared force of conscripts, many still in adolescence.⁴⁵ Not surprisingly, some British soldiers were not

35 Arquilla and Rasmussen, 'The origins of the South Atlantic War', 775.

36 'Royal Navy vessel shot down British airmen by accident- Falklands War', *The Times*, 20 October 1988. Mr Stanley, *United Kingdom Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 99, 12 June 1986, accessed 5 December 2012 <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/written-answers/1986/jun/12/lance-corporal-simon-cockton>, column 290W.

37 'Royal Navy vessel shot down British airmen', *The Times*, 20 October 1988.

38 John Taylor, 'Touched with Glory: Heroes and Human Interest in the News', in *Framing the Falklands War*, 13-32.

39 *Ibid.*

40 'Gotcha: our lads sink gunboat and hole cruiser', *The Sun*, 4 May 1982.

41 Fox, *Eyewitness Falklands*, 48. Mike Rossiter, *The Dramatic Hunt for the Argentine Warship: Sink the Belgrano* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2007), 318.

42 Fox, *Eyewitness Falklands*, 48.

43 Bishop and Witherow, *The Winter War*, 66

44 Alastair Mitchell, in Bilton and Kosminsky, *Untold Stories*, 210.

45 Duncan Anderson, *The Falklands War 1982*, (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2002), 71.

able to maintain a dispassionate façade indefinitely. During his detailing to the burial of the Argentinian dead, Lou Armour came to the sobering conclusion that '[s]uddenly they weren't the enemy any more' and that any one of the deceased 'could have been me lying there'.⁴⁶ Indeed, the official narrative of the war seems to ignore the human capacity for compassion, and for error. It may be that it is only possible to redress this deficiency by drawing on the types of eyewitness testimony used in this article, as official sources may place a favourable gloss on the war, which hides its realities and affects the historical reliability of the official narrative. Indeed, remorse and mistake would seem to have no place in the heroic story of the Falklands and so it is little wonder that such sentiments were not incorporated into the saga of the war.

Moreover, for many individual British soldiers, the Falklands War was the genesis of personal challenges, of mental and physical injury, and of societal and government neglect. For these people, the high ideals of the Thatcher Government discussed above meant little as they, like the conflict itself, faded from recent memory, leaving only the impression of complete victory. Yet, the effects of the war have continued. By the twentieth anniversary of the war, more Falkland veterans had committed suicide than the total number of British soldiers killed in the fighting itself.⁴⁷ Initially, there seems to have been a conception among many soldiers that the British public and government had misunderstood and misrepresented the conflict. Bishop and Witherow describe, not long after the event, that the victory seemed to 'herald a renaissance in national spirit', manifested most clearly in the effusive homecoming celebrations.⁴⁸ However, according to Julian Thompson the Task Force was returning to 'a world which was full of people who didn't know what we'd gone through' and who 'were perhaps revelling in the fact of victory for the wrong reasons'.⁴⁹ It is important to note that the passage of time may have influenced the apparent divergence between the statements of Bishop and Witherow, and Thompson, who spoke approximately five years after the conflict. Regardless, it can be said with some confidence that as time went on, many increasingly saw little worth celebrating about the conflict. Chris Keeble, the second in command at the ferocious battle of Goose Green, viewed the expedition as 'one of tragedy', marked by 'savage gutter fight', making the huge reception that awaited the Task Force at Portsmouth seem an eminently bombastic affair.⁵⁰

Indeed, far from being the unconditional victory that the conflict was trumpeted to be, the reality was that many British personnel returned physically or mentally changed from the experience, and this is borne out in first-hand accounts of it. For Sergeant Peter Naya, the conflict 'was so traumatic that it hurt to talk about it'.⁵¹ He and other soldiers responded by 'bottle[ing] it up', adding that '[t] here are certain things I will never tell'.⁵² And yet, post-combat stress expert, Major Roy Brook, noted in his recent book that initially few instances of war-related psychiatric illnesses were reported among Falklands veterans.⁵³ The general view in 1982 was that the soldiers had returned, on the whole, in good spirits and as heroes and therefore the British public and authorities turned

46 Armour, in *Ibid.*, 238.

47 'Falkland veterans', suicides outstrip war casualties', *The Scotsman*, January 14, 2002.

48 Bishop and Witherow, *The Winter War*, 152.

49 Julian Thompson, in *The Untold Story*.

50 Chris Keeble, in *Ibid.*

51 Sergeant Peter Naya in Max Arthur, *Above All, Courage: The Falklands Front Line: First-hand Accounts* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1985), 113.

52 *Ibid.*

53 Roy Brook, *The Stress of Combat: Caring Strategies Towards Ex-Service Men and Women* (Eastbourne, Sussex Academic Press, 2010), 170.

their minds from the question of their mental welfare.⁵⁴ However, within five years, Brook notes that over half of the soldiers who returned showed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, while twenty-two percent were fully diagnosable.⁵⁵ Furthermore, oral testimony suggests that many veterans returned with reduced prospects in life. David Grimshaw, a Welsh Guard who lost his leg in the attack on the *Galahad* stated that '[a]t the time of the Falklands people [said] "This man's a hero". But people forget so quickly'.⁵⁶ For Grimshaw employment and other opportunities remained elusive: he 'was promised so much and given very little'.⁵⁷ This story is echoed by that of another soldier, Chris White, who was diagnosed with condition called acute battle reaction, but was given a 'complete one-hundred-per-cent-clear bill of health' by a military doctor.⁵⁸ Furthermore, it would be incorrect to think of these concerns as belonging in the past. Robert Clarke, a gunner aboard the *Galahad* during the bombing, in an interview concerning the recent thirtieth anniversary of the war, stated that 'even after 30 years...I can picture it now, it never goes away'.⁵⁹ And so, while the Falklands War may be remembered as an exposé of British triumphalism, for many individuals, a more sombre reality underlies the conflict. This constitutes an important part of the historical narrative, as without it any history of the conflict would be abridged, and would fail to take account of a body of source material that presents an overwhelmingly different conception of the war.

Focussing on empirical source material affords an insight into the alternative narrative of the conflict that is largely at odds with the more grandiose official narrative. Indeed, by integrating eyewitness accounts into the history of the Falklands War a narrative that challenges the simplicity of official accounts emerges. It would seem that the broader history of the Falklands War must allow for this competing interpretation, or else risk being incomplete.

54 *Ibid.*

55 *Ibid.*

56 David Grimshaw, in Bilton and Kosminsky, *Untold Stories*, 172.

57 *Ibid.*, 171.

58 Chris White, in *Ibid.*, 166.

59 'The Chron speaks to three veterans of the Falklands War on its 30th anniversary', *The Northampton Chronicle & Echo*, 2 April 2012, <http://www.northamptonchron.co.uk/news/features/the-chron-speaks-to-three-veterans-of-the-falklands-war-on-its-30th-anniversary-1-3690952>, accessed, 29 April 2012.
