

Britannia Scorns to Yield

It was a nineteenth-century showdown in twentieth-century battle dress. Passing Admiral Neison's flagship, Victory, last week, a British armada set sail for the stormiest waters at the farthest reaches of the South Atlantic. The carrier Invincible led the way. The destroyer Brilliant was there, and so were the frigate Alacrity, the assault ship Fearless and the landing ship Sir Galahad. Left astern were the crowds waving little Union Jacks and the wives weeping on the pier. And for a while the stirring spectacle overwhelmed an unsettling reality: that the diminished British fleet, much of it salvaged from mothballs and the selling block, was heading for a very uncertain moment in history with Argentina's tin-pot navy. The prize was the Falkland Islands, a windy, woolly last colony that Britons have been trying to forget for a generation.

In the world's least expected crisis, two unlikely but deadly serious combatants squared off for a duel of honor. Argentina provided the slap two weeks ago, sending 4,000 troops to claim the Falklands and capturing the islands' 1,800 British subjects. Taken off guard, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher responded sharply, demanding that Argentina withdraw all its troops before diplomats could take over, freezing more than \$1.4 billion in Argentine assets held by British banks and launching a multi-ship task force southward at a clip that could put the bulk of the fleet within combat range by early next week. Defense Secretary John Nott declared a 200-nautical-mile war zone around the Falklands and warned that after midnight Easter Sunday Argentine ships in the zone might be blasted out of the water—presumably by British nuclear submarines. Conjuring up memories of Hitler, Thatcher said that her generation had learned a long time ago the risks of "not stopping a dictator."

Argentina stuck to its guns. The military government of President Leopoldo Galtieri announced its own "theater of operations" around the islands and kept a creaking carrier task force on alert. Major air bases prepared for action, and from the Patagonian city of Comodoro Rivadavia big C-130 transports took off at twenty-minute intervals to deliver troops and equipment to the Falklands. Argentines flocked to recruiting offices, practiced for air raids and rallied around the generally unpopular Galtieri regime. "If the Argentine people are attacked by military, naval, land or air means," Galtieri vowed, "the Argentine nation in arms, with all the means at its disposal, will present battle."

Both Galtieri and Thatcher were betting their own political futures on the outcome. Ronald Reagan found himself caught between America's closest ally and a right-wing dictatorship that he has cultivated with care. "We're friends of both," the President said lamely, though the United States joined the U.N. Security Council majority demanding an Argentine withdrawal. Secretary of State Alexander Haig set off on a peace mission between London and Buenos Aires. After six hours of talks in London Haig emerged "impressed by [Thatcher's] firm determination." In Buenos Aires, Galtieri organized a mass rally to impress Haig with Argentina's own determination, but later he reportedly offered a first step toward compromise: if Britain called off its fleet and acknowledged Argentine sovereignty over the Falklands, Argentina would withdraw its occupation force and negotiate on an arrangement acceptable to the British. Haig spent almost eleven hours in talks with the Argentinians—and then flew back to London with their proposals.

In the Falklands themselves, the storm of international brinkmanship swirled around the lives of island shepherds accustomed to sublime isolation and obscurity. Fiercely British in custom for 149 years, the local "kelpers," named after the productive beds of seaweed off their shores, suddenly had to adjust to Spanish-language radio, Argentine law and an inflation-wracked peso worth 11,575 per dollar. Stanley, their pretty little capital of wood-frame houses and picket fences, could turn to tinder in any bombardment. "If there is a fight on this island," said Jim Burgess, a retired sea captain, "there will be nothing to come back to."

Audience: Britain's armada was equipped for every possibility from blockading the Falklands to razing Stanley. The main battle fleet steamed out of Portsmouth led by the Invincible and her sister carrier, the Hermes, each bristling with Sea King helicopters and Sea Harrier "jump jets" on display for the British television audience—and for the Argentines. The fleet included fifteen major warships, and among its flight crew was the Queen's second son, Prince Andrew, a helicopter pilot. Another, less conspicuous flotilla left Gibraltar, apparently to rendezvous with the main force near Britain's Ascension Island, 4,500 miles northwest of the Falklands. At sea the British sailors and marines drilled—and on orders shaved off their beards so that their gas masks would fit more snugly.

As the British fleet churned south at 12 knots, the Argentines had time to prepare. According to U.S. intelligence reports, the Argentines plan to deploy a 7,000-man force on the Falklands, backed by aircraft, tanks and heavy artillery. By the time the British task force arrives, the Argentines believe they will have enough firepower to hold off 21,000 Royal Marines, let alone the 4,300 apparently en route. The Argentines were busy lengthening the airstrip at Stanley from 4,300 feet to 13,000 feet to accommodate ten Mirage-5 fighter bombers and five Super Etendard fighters. The Argentines could use even more time. U.S. experts estimate that when the British arrive, the Stanley runway probably will have been extended to only about 6,000 feet. Argentina's fighters can take off from the short runway, but they will need a longer stretch of tarmac before they can hit the skies with a full load of guns, missiles and bombs.

Experience: On paper, a battle for the Falklands appears to pit British naval superiority against Argentine air superiority. The British and Argentine navies can deploy roughly similar numbers of warships around the Falklands. But British officers and sailors are more experienced. In addition, the British vessels were commissioned in the 1970s, while most of Argentina's are of World War II vintage. Argentina's main ships are the carrier Veinticinco de Mayo, launched by the British in 1943, and the cruiser General Belgrano, launched by the United States in 1938. According to U.S. intelligence, the Veinticinco de Mayo had already broken down and limped back to port last week. The frigate Guerrero was reported disabled somewhere between the Falklands and the South Georgia islands.

British submarines are particularly worrisome to the Argentines. The nuclear-powered Superb was reported in the vicinity of the Argentine naval base and grain port at Bahia Blanca. Two of the Argentines' four Guppy-class diesel submarines gave futile chase to what they thought was the Superb; the British submarine can run silent and deep for weeks, while the Guppies must surface for air frequently. The Argentines may have been chasing shadows. A U.S. intelligence report concluded last week that no British submarines would arrive off Argentina until the weekend. There is little doubt that once Britain's subs take up position they can easily cut the sea lanes between Argentina and the Falklands. Washington analysts estimate

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that the British could deploy four submarines in the area, each one nuclear-powered but probably not nuclear-armed. The question was whether Britain would permit unrestricted submarine warfare, a course no nation has taken since World War II.

If the sea lanes are cut, Argentina will have to resupply the Falklands with its seven aging C-130s. In an air war the Argentines seem to hold the edge. Each of the two British carriers probably is crammed with twice the normal complement of five Sea Harrier FRSMK 1 jump jets, able to take off and land almost vertically. In combat each of the twenty Sea Harriers is a match for one of Argentina's 82 old A-4 Skyhawks. But the Harrier's flight radius of 288 miles is far less than the 700-mile radius of the A-4s. The Argentines have positioned A-4s within combat range at their Río Gallegos air base and aboard the Veinticinco de Mayo as well as on the Stanley airstrip. The Argentines also have nine Canberra bombers, five Etendards and 21 Mirages, some configured as interceptors and others for surface attack.

"Suicidal": Except for numbers, however, Argentina's air arsenal has some distinct liabilities. The A-4s at its backbone are for the most part poorly maintained, according to U.S. officials. Those that fly are not equipped with stand-off weapons and thus must divebomb into the teeth of British missile batteries. "That's going to be suicidal," says a Pentagon expert. The Argentines may have trouble simply finding their quarry on the broad ocean: only one P-2 reconnaissance plane is available to their southern zone. According to one U.S. intelligence report, the Soviet Union, a major Argentine trading partner, has offered intelligence on the British fleet, supplied by Soviet satellites, by 35 Soviet merchant ships in the area, and by BEAR long-range reconnaissance aircraft flying out of Angola and Cuba.

The Argentines can only guess how vigorously the British intend to press the battle. In a brief, intense war, U.S. military experts familiar with both forces believe that Britain would win. Rickety and perhaps broken down, the Veinticinco de Mayo is a sitting duck for British submarines. Short of attacking the carrier directly, the subs could screen the vessel away from the Argentine force, firing green flares to warn the captain that the ship is in British sights. Or the British could sink Argentina's lone tanker, forcing the carrier to choose between returning to port or running out of fuel. Without the Veinticinco de Mayo and

the air cover it provides, the British could bomb the runway at Stanley and put a stranglehold on the Falklands. "They literally could sail right into port," says retired U.S. Rear Adm. Clarence Hill.

Simple military superiority does not give Britain carte blanche in the Falklands. Such vagaries as the weather could ruin the British mission: as winter storms and heavy seas increase in the South Atlantic, Britain's small carriers may have to curtail operations. The longer the Argentines can hold out, the more the British will feel the pinch of the long supply line to Ascension. The British could keep up a full-strength blockade of the Falklands for only two months, estimates Col. Jonathan Alford of London's International Institute for Strategic Studies. Even if they retake the Falklands, the British must maintain a sizable occupation force to hold on to their colony. "They've got to be prepared to accept losses and an extended effort," says retired U.S. Adm. Thomas Moorer. "They won't go down there, go ashore, raise the British flag and go back to London."

A prolonged naval commitment in the South Atlantic would stretch Britain's conventional fleet just when it is scheduled for deeper cuts to make room in Thatcher's budget for Trident nuclear missiles. The Carrier Invincible is up for sale to Australia. The Hermes is destined for the scrap heap. Five hundred sailors in the flotilla have received their walking papers.

Target: The political restraints on London are also formidable. The government can hardly permit a rescue mission that ends up by wiping out Stanley and the kelpers. Instead, the British may storm the sparsely populated South Georgia islands, a Falklands dependency 800 miles to the east, as a safer target on which to plant the Union Jack and establish a staging area for negotiations. The British must also consider the risks of thrashing Argentina too soundly. Peru already has offered Argentina military support, and most other Latin American nations at least rhetorically support Argentina's stand. If Britain strikes too hard, says one London military analyst, "suddenly the Argentines would have friends they haven't had in 25 years."

Mettle For all the inherent dangers, Margaret Thatcher was committed to reclaim the Falklands. The British mettle toughened when the deposed governor of the colony, former Spitfire pilot Rex Hunt, and his Royal Marines returned to England with tales of their last stand against 50-to-1 odds. The Argentines, who fired only warning shots at the British, concede that four Argentines died in battle. But the British marines claimed a higher body count. They said they had fired 6,450 small-arms rounds and thirteen anti-tank missiles at the advancing enemy, blowing up an Argentine armored car and hitting a naval corvette. Then the last six marines, cold and hungry, surrendered from a hiding place in a cave. Governor Hunt surrendered to Argentine Gen. Oswaldo Jorge García without pleas-

ures. "It is very ungentlemanly not to shake hands," García said. Hunt replied: "It's very uncivilized of you to invade our country."

Thatcher's own career rode on the fate of the Falklands. Second-guessers in and out of the Tory camp demanded to know how her government had been caught off guard by Argentina of all countries, a prime British espionage target for years. A British surveillance station on Ascension monitors naval communications in the South Atlantic. As a NATO ally Britain also has access to U.S. intelligence information, including data from listening posts in the Panama Canal Zone and from White Cloud satellites. Full of political dissidents, Argentina is a hotbed of human spies as well. And President Galtieri had made no particular secret of his own designs: the right-wing populist was quoted as guaranteeing that the Falklands, a British colony for 149 years, would never celebrate its 150th anniversary.

Fallout: After the debacle, Fleet Street headlined Britain's SURRENDER—and in one poll eight out of ten Britons blamed Thatcher for the loss of the Falklands. The fallout struck quickly at the heart of Thatcher's Administration when Lord Carrington, her Foreign Secretary, took the blame for misreading the signals from Argentina and resigned along with two junior ministers. "I have been responsible for the conduct of that policy, and I think it right that I should resign," Carrington wrote Thatcher, adding that the invasion of the Falklands "has been a humiliating affront to this country."

When the opposition benches also greeted Thatcher with hearty new cries of "Resign" and "Get out," the Prime Minister responded with a defiant "No," adding: "Now is the time for strength and resolution." She refused Nott's proffered resignation as well, and the Defense Secretary emerged as the government's point man in the crisis. Edging close to a declaration of war against Argentina, Nott announced a 200 nautical-mile "maritime exclusion zone" designed to "deny the Argentine forces on the Falklands means of reinforcement and resupply from the mainland." The next day Nott declared that Britain would not hesitate to shoot first. At Britain's urging, France, West Germany and other European countries cut off arms shipments to Argentina. The Common Market also responded by imposing a complete ban on Argentine imports and arms sales. Ordinary Britons and the House of Commons restaurant helped out by boycotting Argentina's major export to their country: corned beef.

The Argentines didn't seem to listen—

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and went about methodically setting up house on the Malvinas, as they call the Falklands. The islands' new governor, Brig. Gen. Mario Benjamin Menéndez, was installed in Puerto de las Islas Malvinas, as Stanley was renamed. Menéndez speaks no English, but he assured the kelpers through an interpreter that he had "clear instructions to respect in all forms possible [their] way of life." Nonetheless, kelpers were ordered to remain indoors or risk a fifteen-day jail sentence. An "inconsiderate" act toward the Argentine military was worth 30 days. An "irreverent act" toward Argentina's "patriotic symbols" would earn 60 days in jail. Islanders accustomed to driving on the left side of the road had to contend with Argentine tanks and armored cars that insisted on bearing to the right. And the Falklands' postal stamps—the latest featuring the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana—were declared invalid.

Haggling: From the start of the Falklands furor, Argentina and Britain had both turned to the United States as a go-between. But Haig launched his shuttle mission only after the requisite Washington haggling. The trouble began on invasion night, when Reagan telephoned Galtieri and suggested Vice President George Bush "or someone like that" as a mediator. The perceived snub rankled Haig, according to State Department sources. To pre-empt the President and head off Bush, Haig privately offered himself as an intermediary to the British and Argentine ambassadors and to Argentine Foreign Minister Nicanor Costa Méndez. The ploy worked. At a White House meeting six days after the Argentine invasion, Reagan was handed a cable from Thatcher requesting Haig's mediation—and the President gave his Secretary of State the assignment. "Haig had a deep anxiety to go," said a ruffled White House staffer. "He wants to be Henry Kissinger. He very much wanted to go."

Hong Kong: After preliminary talks in Washington, Haig concluded that neither Argentina nor Britain really wanted war. The Argentines, apparently surprised by the strength of the British reaction, were especially eager for a compromise. British diplomats in Washington also expressed interest in some kind of plan providing for British "administration" of the Falklands under Argentine "sovereignty." A similar solution resolved Britain's dispute with China over Hong Kong, and Britain and Argentina also agreed on the formula last year—until the kelpers vetoed the deal in order to remain perpetual British subjects. As an alternative, some diplomats advocated an "Andorra solution" similar to the arrangement by which

France and Spain share sovereignty over that Pyrenees nation. Haig also conceived a plan under which Canada, the United States and two Latin American countries might administer the Falklands while Britain and Argentina tried to negotiate a permanent solution. But the domestic political stakes were enormous for both Thatcher and Galtieri. Neither was prepared to give even the appearance of backing down. "One of the two governments in this thing has to fall," said a U.S. official.

On his arrival in London Haig insisted that he had come as a listener and messenger. "I don't have any American-approved solution in my kit bag," he said. He apparently left without any solutions, either. If anything, the British stand had stiffened. Thatcher and her new Foreign Secretary, Francis Pym, adamantly refused to negotiate until Argentine troops pulled out of the Falklands. They also refused to concede Argentine sovereignty over the Falklands in return for continued British control. And they listened only when Haig argued that the Royal Navy should not take the aggressive step of sinking Argentine ships without warning.

Argentina stood just as adamantly against giving up the Malvinas as long as Britain claimed them. On his arrival in Buenos Aires, Haig said that the Reagan Administration's new entente with Argentina provided a "good basis" for a negotiated solution. But he offended some of his hosts by citing the U.N. resolution calling for Argentina's withdrawal and by labeling the nation a "hemispheric partner" rather than a U.S. friend. In talks with Haig, the Argentines floated their compromise offer for a troop withdrawal and negotiations if the British held back their fleet and recognized Argentine sovereignty over the islands—two major concessions. On principle, Argentina rejected the Hong Kong and Andorra solutions. "That might have been acceptable five or ten years ago," an Argentine official said. "But after seventeen years of negotiations, it's not."

Any hostilities could seriously isolate the United States in its own hemisphere. "If an Argentine ship goes down, forget it, then all of Latin America will coalesce around Argentina," said a White House aide. The Administration worried that the Latin nations might try to use the 1947 Rio Treaty against Britain. It provides for united efforts to repulse outside intervention in the Americas. The United States can hardly ally itself against Britain; but to reject a Rio Treaty bid would do serious harm to U.S. relations in its own hemisphere. Washing-

ton also fears that other old boundary disagreements around the world will revive. A militant new Argentina could press its claim on Chile for sovereignty over islands in the Beagle Channel dividing the two nations. Venezuela could move on Guyana. "The Guatemalans are licking their chops, wondering if this is the time to take Belize," said one U.S. official. At Gibraltar, Britain and Spain postponed negotiations over future control of the rock.

Dinner: More disturbing was the way Argentina's invasion of the Falklands had cast doubt on a key premise of Reagan's policy: that by emphasizing common interests with non-communist "authoritarian" regimes like South Africa, Guatemala and Argentina, the United States can better combat "totalitarian" communism—and moderate the excesses of friendly dictators. The Administration suffered some embarrassment when an author of the policy, U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, attended a dinner party in her honor given

by the Argentine ambassador in Washington—on the very day Argentine commandos stormed into Stanley. "It's a bit difficult to understand the notion that authoritarian regimes are all right," said Britain's ambassador to Washington, Sir Nicholas Henderson. "Authoritarian regimes by this example have shown themselves to be exactly what they are—militaristic, impulsive and aggressive." It will now take an abundance of good sense to keep those impulses from leading to war.

STEVEN STRASSER with TONY CLIFTON, SETH MYDANS and RON HENKOFF in London, RICHARD SANDZA in Buenos Aires, HOLGER JENSEN in Concordia, RIVADAVIA and DAVID C. MARTIN and JOHN WALCOTT in Washington

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