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"We have ceased to be a nation in retreat": the Falklands war 1982

By Jeremy A. Crang

Empire's last call. In 1982 the British government fought a short but fierce colonial war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands – a little known British dependent territory in the South Atlantic 8,000 miles from the United Kingdom and 300 miles from the Argentine coast. To many neutrals it seemed the most unlikely of conflicts – "like two bald men fighting over a comb" remarked Jorge Luis Borges – but for Margaret Thatcher it represented the greatest crisis of her premiership. "The fate of the country was not at stake in the Falklands", notes Lawrence Freedman, "but the fate of the government was".



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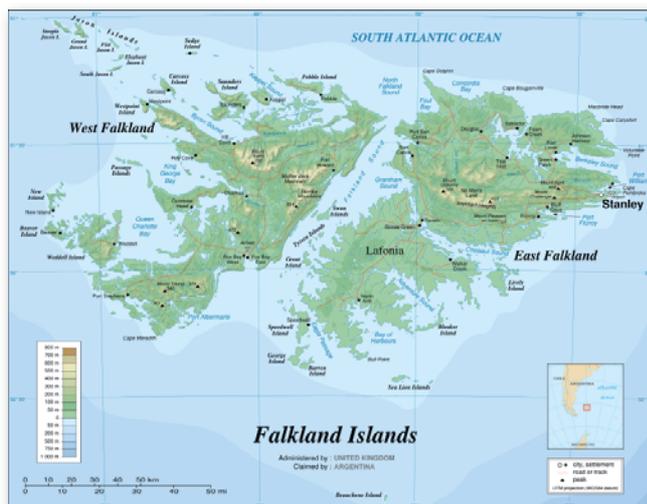
the US Secretary of State, shuttled between Britain and Argentina in the hope of bringing about a peaceful settlement. Neither side would back down and at the end of April the US sided with Britain. On 2 May hostilities began in earnest. A British nuclear submarine patrolling south of the Falklands sunk the Argentine cruiser, the General Belgrano, with the loss of over 300 lives.

On 21 May British troops landed at San Carlos on East Falkland. After consolidating the beachhead, during which time the Argentine air force mounted repeated attacks on the Royal Navy warships guarding the landing zone, the advance inland began. Having secured Goose Green, the British troops moved into position around Port Stanley and on the nights of 11-12 and 13-14 June fought a series of battles for the high ground to the west of the capital: Mount Longdon, Two Sisters, Mount Harriet, Mount Tumbledown and Wireless Ridge.

These actions involved advancing up rocky outcrops and attacking well-defended Argentine positions in bitter close-quarter fighting. Some of the Argentines put up determined resistance, but the professionalism of the British troops – in particular the elite units of the Royal Marines and the Parachute Regiment – won the day.

On 14 June the Argentine garrison surrendered and Port Stanley was liberated. In total, 649 Argentine and 253 British personnel were killed during the campaign.

Most commentators agree that the Falklands war represented a turning point for Mrs Thatcher. If the British government had failed to recover the islands, she might well have been forced to resign. As it was, the war gave her a tremendous political boost. Before the crisis the Conservative government was deeply unpopular and languishing in the opinion polls. But the Prime Minister's resolute leadership during the conflict, and the opportunity it gave her to create a sense of national renewal – "we have", she claimed, "ceased to be a nation in retreat"



A case for war. 1,800 inhabitants (1982), 12,000 square kilometres - reasserted under British rule in 1833: the Falkland Islands. © wikipedia/public domain

– contributed to a substantial surge in support which saw the Conservatives returned with a huge majority in the 1983 general election. Indeed, in the view of her biographer, John Campbell, the events in the South Atlantic "defined her premiership and set her on a pedestal of electoral invincibility from which she was not toppled for another eight years".

"In his New Year's message to the Falkland islanders in December 2007 Gordon Brown declared that 'I have no doubts about the UK's sovereignty over the Falkland Islands and undertake to uphold your security and everything you have worked so hard to achieve over the past twenty-five years'."

The Falklands question lingers on. Although Britain re-established diplomatic relations with Argentina in 1990, and the ban on Argentine visitors to the islanders was lifted in 1999, a solution to the sovereignty dispute seems as far off as ever. Argentina continues to assert its

Britain and Argentina had been in dispute over the sovereignty of the Falkland Islands since the mid-nineteenth century. But in the early 1980s matters came to a head. The British maintained that they had a strong historic title to the Falklands; that they had peacefully occupied the islands for 150 years; and that the 1,800 inhabitants – the overwhelming majority of whom were of British stock – fervently desired to remain under British administration. In contrast, the Argentines contended that Spain had a better historic claim on the Falklands than Britain and they had inherited this right of ownership on independence; that the British occupation of the islands in 1833 was "illegal"; and that their geographical proximity to the South American mainland made them logically part of Argentina.

On 2 April 1982 General Leopoldo Galtieri's junta, frustrated by continuing British intransigence over the Falklands question, and facing mounting domestic unrest, launched a military invasion of the islands. Within hours the small Royal Marines garrison had been overrun. In Buenos Aires thousands of jubilant Argentines celebrated the repatriation of the "Islas Malvinas".



Lady not for turning. The Falklands War resulted in a surge in support for Margaret Thatcher's government. © wikipedia/public domain

Mrs Thatcher, stung by this national humiliation, outraged that British territory had been seized in this fashion, and appalled at the prospect of the islanders being forced to live under an Argentine military dictatorship, immediately dispatched a naval task force to the South Atlantic. In the meantime, diplomatic efforts were made to resolve the crisis. General Alexander Haig,

claims on the islands. Britain is adamant that they will remain under the crown. In his New Year's message to the Falkland islanders in December 2007 Gordon Brown declared that "I have no doubts about the UK's sovereignty over the Falkland Islands and undertake to uphold your security and everything you have worked so hard to achieve over the past twenty-five years". Meanwhile, those who fought in 1982 continue to bear the mental, as well as the physical, scars of the conflict. The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy claims that as many as 300 traumatised British veterans have committed suicide since the war: more than those who lost their lives during the campaign itself.

- Further reading**
- J. Campbell, Margaret Thatcher, vol 2, *The Iron Lady* (2003)
 - L. Freedman, *Britain and the Falklands War* (1988)
 - L. Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, 2 vols (2005)
 - M. Hastings and S. Jenkins, *The Battle for the Falklands* (1983)
 - M. Middlebrook, *The Falklands War* (2001)