

Death of the 42s

Type 42 Destroyers in the Falklands and Lessons for the Joint Force in the Twenty-first Century

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The 1982 Falklands War is the most recent case study of what a modern naval campaign may look like. Today in the Western Pacific, the challenges that the United States and its allies face from the People's Republic of China are far beyond the scope of the showdown in the South Atlantic between the British and Argentines. The modern contest the United States is met with includes thousands of miles across four oceans, dozens of countries, and diverse geographic areas that places the combat area beyond a single conflict zone. New technologies such as precision guided weapons, cyber warfare and space operations set up a complex multidimensional space that impacts the political climate and deterrence responses across the globe. The Falklands—or, as the islands are known in Buenos Aires, the “Malvinas”—provides future war fighters with a snippet of what expeditionary sea-based combat may entail. Vital lessons we can draw from the war over the South Atlantic archipelago will assist company and

field grade officers across all the joint force in developing an understanding of how difficult conducting such a campaign could be in the near future.

To Action Stations!

One key lesson to draw from the Falklands Campaign is the importance of understanding how effective land-based strike aircraft can be used against an expeditionary naval task force that does not possess the inherent right to air supremacy. Obtaining air parity is not enough to limit strikes against logistic vessels, amphibious assault ships, and most importantly your aircraft carriers. It is fair to say that neither the British nor Argentines were fully prepared for the war that they would find themselves involved. By 1982 the Royal Navy was on the chopping block. Defense Secretary Jon Knot was poised to cut the Royal Navy significantly, taking away significant amphibious capabilities. The aircraft carriers of the fleet also found themselves in the crosshairs of the budget process.¹ The fleet was focused on fulfilling its NATO obligations of antisubmarine warfare and anti-aircraft roles for a showdown against the Soviet Union. It was assumed within the Ministry of Defense (MOD) that the British would not fight their next large-scale conflict alone; the expectation was for the United States as well as other NATO allies to assist in the battle. In 1982, however, The Royal Navy was going to war alone and the task force would sail with nearly every combat vessel available, including three of the new Type 42 Destroyers. The Type 42 Destroyer was a modern fleet area air-defense platform that was manned by 253 officers and sailors. Although developed in the 1960s in 1982 three of these start-of-the-art destroyers would sail with the task force. The Type 42s that were assigned to the task force include the HMS *Sheffield*, HMS *Glasgow*, and HMS *Coventry*, which were all among the most modern destroyers in the world. HMS *Exeter* and HMS *Cardiff* would join the fight later because of the loss of all three original Type 42s in combat. The Type 42s processed an impressive array of weaponry consisting of one GWS-30 launcher for Sea Dart surface-to-air missiles (SAM), one Mark 8 4.45-inch (113mm) gun, two Oerlikon/BMARC 20mm/L70 KBA guns, and two triple torpedo tubes. The flight deck consisted of one hangar and landing platform for one Westland Lynx antisubmarine-warfare helicopter.² These air-defense destroyers were tasked with protecting the carriers HMS *Hermes* and HMS *Invincible* from Argentine air attack. It was hoped that their Sea Dart missiles and on-board radars would be able to act as an early warning picket for the task force. The Royal Navy was unable to project large numbers of carrier aircraft for combat air patrols (CAP) and relied on less than 30 sea and Royal Air Force (RAF) Harriers flown by ad hoc formations of air crews.³ The naval air component of the task force was severely outnumbered by the Argentine Air Force and Navy who pos-

sessed capable strike and fighter aircraft that were within range from the Argentine mainland. It was vital that the Type 42s and other surface ships of the task force be able to detect and track incoming raids as soon as possible to vector the limited number of Harriers to intercept the incoming Argentine strikers. It was a truly odd match up. Argentina could deploy French built Mirage III fighters, Israeli Mirage Delta Dagger fighter-bombers, and American A-4 Skyhawk fighter-bombers armed with everything from 20-30mm cannons and Mark 82 snake eye bombs to air-launched Exocet antiship missiles.⁴ Some 500lb bombs carried by the Argentine strikers were even made in Great Britain. The Argentine Navy also possessed a significant fleet with a British-built aircraft carrier the ARA *Veinticinco de Mayo*, a Colossus-class aircraft carrier formerly known as HMS *Venerable* (R 63).⁵ Buenos Aires even deployed two Type 42 Destroyers of their own, ARA *Hercules* and ARA *Santisima Trinidad* were bought by Argentina and built in Great Britain. This contest provided a unique glimpse into what modern combat between western equipped powers would look like. The experience of the Royal Navy's Type 42 community would be hit hard during this war and the crews knew that they would be in the very thick of the firing line as they sailed south. By the end of this war, of the three Type 42 destroyers initially sent with the task force, two were sunk and the other was so badly damaged that it was forced to remove itself from the campaign.

HMS *Sheffield*

On 4 May 1982, two French built Super Etendard strike aircraft of the Argentine Navy, refueled from KC-130s, dropped to low altitude and skimmed the water of the South Atlantic to avoid the search radars of the British picket destroyers defending the task force. The Argentines, having possessed Type 42s of their own, knew the weaknesses in the search radars onboard the ships. These radars had been designed to target, track, and destroy high-flying Soviet bombers and were not tested or intended to track low-flying cruise missiles or small strike aircraft at low altitude. The capabilities of the French-built Exocet air-launched antiship missile fired from Argentine naval strike aircraft had been well-known, and the Type 42s were chess pieces that had to present themselves to the enemy regardless of the risk. Argentine Navy P-2 Neptune reconnaissance aircraft had spotted all three of the Type 42s and passed their location to the Super Etendards. They flew 30 meters above the water, shutting their radars on and off to limit the risk of detection while maintaining contact with the enemy. One of these "heads-up" radar scans was detected by HMS *Glasgow* at 1056 hours. The two Super Etendards then pulled up to 300 meters and launched their missiles. HMS *Glasgow* detected the two incoming missiles and called her ship's company to

action stations while popping chaff decoys into the air to confuse the seeker heads of the Exocets. HMS *Sheffield* had not taken the same precautions as HMS *Glasgow*, and she had not been called to action stations during the strike, informed by the air warning controllers on HMS *Invincible* that the incoming missile was a false warning. The only recognition of an attack was a visual confirmation by the bridge crew. The Exocet impacted amidships and exploded inside, while the other missile did not find a target. Twenty sailors died and a further 24 were wounded. The destroyer would sink under tow on 10 May.⁶ The Type 42s had been utilized as passive radar detection for the vitally important carriers, but at a cost. The Type 42s were a critical asset that could not be thrown away lightly, but the lack of airborne early warning aircraft capable of reaching the area of operations forced the task force to use the 42s despite their understood risk of attack. The failure of HMS *Sheffield* to maintain combat alert inside the combat zone is also a key lesson for a future near-peer conflict in which information gathering and dissemination will be much faster than in 1982. HMS *Sheffield* was the first of the 42s to be hit and the first British warship since the World War II to sink due to combat action.

HMS *Glasgow*

HMS *Glasgow* was the second of the Type 42s to be hit by the Argentines. After the sinking of the HMS *Sheffield* by land-based strike aircraft, a new doctrine was developed to offer better mutual support. Type 22 Frigates were paired with Type 42s under the ad hoc nickname of the “Type 64 Combo.”⁷ This pairing allowed for the shorter-range weapons systems on board the Type 22 Frigates to provide closer-range air defense for the Type 42s, which would launch their longer-range SAMs against incoming Argentine air raids. On 12 May, HMS *Brilliant* (Type 22) and HMS *Glasgow* (Type 42) engaged the Skyhawks of the Argentine Air Force. These 64 combos were intended to lure aircraft away from other ships of the task force. In the first Skyhawk-42/22 battle, four A-4s flew in low to bomb HMS *Glasgow* and HMS *Brilliant*. HMS *Glasgow*’s Sea Dart system suffered a malfunction and could not launch, and its 4.5-inch battery had jammed after shore bombardment. The only defenses capable of meeting the attacking Skyhawks were light machine guns strapped to HMS *Glasgow*’s decks and HMS *Brilliant*’s Sea Wolf SAMs. HMS *Brilliant* fired two SAMs that shot down Argentine lieutenants Mario Nivoli and Jorge Ibarlucea. A third missile forced Lieutenant Manuel Bustos into such a dramatic evasive action that he crashed his Skyhawk into the water. The fourth A-4, piloted by Lieutenant Alfredo Vazquez, escaped from the engagement alive but was unable to see outside of his canopy due to salt from the seawater covering his cockpit windows. He crashed at Río

Gallegos Air Base. The second flight of Skyhawks attacking the group had also been lucky. The Sea Dart system was still down, and HMS *Brilliant's* Sea Wolf system, which had been designed to hit straight flying missiles, could not successfully lock onto the maneuvering A-4s. The second run against the ships managed to hit HMS *Glasgow* with a 1,000-pound bomb, passing into the engine room slightly above the water line and passing out of the other side of the ship. HMS *Glasgow's* fuel tanks were ruptured and its gas turbine intakes and high-pressure airlines damaged. Her propulsion system was also heavily damaged. After minor repairs, HMS *Glasgow* limped back to Britain, playing no further role in the conflict.⁸

HMS *Coventry*

HMS *Coventry* would be the second and final Type 42 to sink because of determined Argentine Air Force attack. The ship was posted to the islands, drawing Argentine strike packages away from the landing of No. 3 Commando Brigade in San Carlos Water by the amphibious force. The *Coventry* was accompanied by HMS *Broadsword*, a Type 22 frigate armed with the short-range Sea Wolf SAM system. The HMS *Coventry* and HMS *Broadsword* were paired in the Type 64 Combo to provide the two antiaircraft ships with mutual support when fending off air attacks. HMS *Coventry* had begun her war with a series of successful operations against the Argentine Air Force. She had managed to be the first ship to fire a Sea Dart SAM in anger and successfully downed several enemy aircraft. Her Lynx helicopter had also destroyed an Argentine patrol craft with an air-launched missile. As the last Type 42 in the Task Force by 25 May, HMS *Coventry* presented a key threat to Argentina's ability to strike British supply and logistics ships unloading troops and supplies to West Falkland. The 25th of May was Argentina's National Day, and it was understood by all in the task force that spirits would be high among the Argentine strike crews to display a significant show of force. After a strike on HMS *Plymouth* (Type 12 Frigate) and HMS *Arrow* (Type 21 Frigate) in San Carlos Water, HMS *Coventry* tracked a return flight of A-4Cs, shooting down Captain Jorge García's Skyhawk and heavily damaging Alfredez Isaac's as well. The Skyhawk's strike on the HMS *Plymouth* and HMS *Arrow* was unsuccessful due to their inability to drop their bombs when all their release mechanisms failed. Later that afternoon, Argentine air commanders were very aware of HMS *Coventry's* presence. "Vulcan" (2 A-4Bs) and "Zeus" (2 A-4Bs) flights, led by Captain Pablo Carballo, were launched to specifically target the Type 64 Combo of HMS *Coventry* and HMS *Broadsword*. The two flights approached low over the islands and hugged the ocean below. The Sea Dart could not lock on, and HMS *Broadsword's* Sea Wolf system malfunctioned as the first

Skyhawk run lined up on her. Riding the waves from 3–5 meters, the two A-4s took heavy small arms and anti-aircraft fire from the two ships. It is believed that HMS *Broadsword's* Sea Wolf was confused in its attempt to lock onto the low-flying Skyhawks due to the massive amounts of 4.5-inch gunfire from HMS *Coventry*. Three of the bombs missed, with one bomb ricocheting off the sea and into HMS *Broadsword's* flight deck, destroying the Lynx helicopter. “Zeus” flight then turned into the attack at 355 degrees. Again, both ship’s missile defenses failed to acquire the Skyhawks, and three out of the four bombs struck HMS *Coventry*.⁹ Nineteen men died, and only 30 minutes after being hit, HMS *Coventry* slipped into the sea.¹⁰

Conclusion

The story of the Type 42s and the land-based strike aircraft sent to sink them presents professionals with a case study that illustrates the realities of modern air and sea combat. No matter in which branch one may reside, the Falklands War clearly defines the problem the joint force faces in the Western Pacific today: No matter what technology we can deploy or assumptions of when, where, or who we will fight, one common denominator remains certain. If you can be seen, you can be hit, and if you can be hit, you can be destroyed. This principle directly relates to the technological advancements that the People’s Republic of China, United States, and Russia are employing. Low-observable technology as well as cyberwarfare follow this principle. If the adversary can see our low-observable aircraft, then they can be hit and the advanced technology that we produced is no longer useful against the adversary. In cyberwarfare, if a computer system can be “seen,” a node identified, or a link obtained, the system can be “hit” as well. Additionally, within the realm of professional military studies, the Falklands is predominantly analyzed by the United States Marine Corps, since the campaign represents expeditionary naval warfare and logistics. The British fought this war on the knife’s edge of defeat, and the Argentines possessed considerable advantages against the task force—advantages that failed to materialize due to pure luck or junta political prioritization. The British conducted this war with a level of skill and professionalism that is unparalleled in modern war. Americans have rarely experienced a lack of materiel, logistic, and fire superiority that the United Kingdom confronted in 1982. Therefore, all branches have several learning points to take away from the Falklands War, and the joint force must strive to have a greater understanding of how all domains interlock to create a recipe for victory—or defeat. Today, the Western Pacific presents war planners with a dilemma we have not experienced since the NATO–Warsaw Pact confrontation in Central Europe. In modern conflict the next battle will be a new era, nothing that world has seen previously, since

the conflict spans more than a small operating area, but potentially the world on all subsurface, surface, space, and airspace domains. World War III has yet to be fought, but today we no longer face massive tank armies clashing along a conventional and nuclear front. Instead, we face a multi-domain and hybrid environment over a politically vague island thousands of miles away from our shores that may decide the fate of the Great Powers.

It's war. It's like a game of chess . . . you've got to give up some pieces to get a checkmate in the end. I was one of those pieces.

—CAPT David Hart Dyke, Royal Navy, HMS *Coventry*

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Notes

1. Rowland White, *Harrier 809: Britain's Legendary Jump Jet and the Untold Story of the Falklands War* (London: Bantam Press, 2020).

2. “Sheffield (Type 42) class guided missile destroyer,” *Seaforces-Online*, 2021, <https://www.seaforces.org/>.

3. White, Rowland, “Harrier 809: Britain's Legendary Jump Jet and the Untold Story of the Falklands War” (Bantam Press, 2 April 2020).

4. Edward Hampshire and Graham Turner, *The Falklands Naval Campaign 1982: War in the South Atlantic*, (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing 2021).

5. White, “Harrier 809.”

6. Hampshire and Turner, *The Falklands Naval Campaign 1982*.

7. James Buchan, “HMS Coventry (D118) Sea of Fire” *YouTube*, 17 January 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/>.

8. Hampshire and Turner, *The Falklands Naval Campaign 1982*.

9. “Sheffield (Type 42) class guided missile destroyer,” *Seaforces-Online*.

10. Hampshire and Turner, *The Falklands Naval Campaign 1982*.