The Falklands War revisited

In 1982 Britain was as racked by doubt and division. But a short conflict on the other side of the world changed everything

By Nicholas Shakespeare

Across an Angry Sea: The SAS in the Falklands War
Cedric Delves

Hurst, 256pp, £20

Our Boys: The Story of a Paratrooper
Helen Parr

Allen Lane, 416pp, £20

The end of empire came with a successful defence of empire. The Argentine dictatorship never imagined for a moment that the British would react militarily to their seizure of a small group of islands 8,000 miles away, the inhospitable habitat for 1,763 resolutely British flag-wavers who had survived there, against considerable odds, for 149 years.

But war changes everything. When the conflict ended – "two bald men fighting over a comb," as the writer Jorge Luis Borges repeated to me in 1983, one year afterwards – both nations would emerge altered. Argentina became a democracy, if a desperately imperfect one. Following a period of self-defeat, Great Britain seemed to rediscover its prefix; it had defended a profound principle against huge odds, in an anachronistic military campaign that invoked glorious moments in its past, resulting in a victory that was instrumental in persuading President Gorbachev, as he afterwards admitted, that Russia could not win the Cold War. There was life in the old dog.

A Drake-like skirmish at the tip of Britain's tail would wag a previously weak and unpopular Margaret Thatcher back into power ("She spoke like Queen Elizabeth I… She looked like Queen Elizabeth I," said one of her diplomats, David Goodall), with a mandate to drive through a radical programme in the teeth of her enemies at home. It would make the nation, once again, for a while, a global power, a bulldog. "We showed the world, and perhaps more importantly ourselves, that we still had what it took," writes Lieutenant General Sir Cedric Delves, commander of the SAS squadron that raised the first Union Jack over Government House in Port Stanley on 14 June 1982.

Four decades on, we are at a similar moment of self-doubt and division. Short of Mrs May deciding at the last moment to send a fleet to defend, say, Gibraltar, our evacuation is under way, and uncomfortably reminiscent of Dunkirk.

Observing our botched retreat from the European Union, it is hard not to think of the *Great Britain*, the largest passenger ship in the world when Isambard Kingdom Brunel built her in 1843, but which spent many years rusting in the shallow waters of a Falkland Islands cove. In 1970 – shortly after the fuse was lit that resulted in the conflict – her battered hulk was towed back in an epic voyage to the boatyard in Bristol where she had been built, to be patched up and refloated as a museum.

Borges wrote that all writers create their own precursors. Perhaps all nations do, too. Brexiteers might argue that they're upholding the same right to self-determination for which Britain went to sea on 5 April 1982, but for those who perceive withdrawal from Europe as making England even more little, the *Great Britain* is a dreadful portent.

Two new books on the conflict have stirred these thoughts, spooling me back to Buenos Aires in the mid-1970s, when my father was at the British embassy and had special responsibility for the Falkland Islands – or Las Malvinas, as Argentina ▶

▶ calls them – and I was working as a cowhand on the plains west of the capital.

I can date the precise moment that the Argentine claim penetrated my adolescent self-absorption. One humid night in Hortensia, a man challenged me to a knife fight. He'd heard about the English "peone a caballo" working on the nearby estancia, and when he spied the gringo eating in the corner, the injustice of the Falklands rose in his gorge. He shambled up to where I sat and, jerking his knife, drunkenly ordered me outside: "Las Malvinas son nuestras!" (In stark horror I stammered "No habla español, no habla español" – until the bar owner seized the man's wrist and packed him through the tethered horses out on to the mud street.)

Either on this or on another occasion, I sketched a map of South America and asked my aggrieved challenger to mark on it the disputed islands. After some hovering, a finger pointed to where Easter Island roughly lies, off the west coast of Chile, in another ocean altogether.

Argentina's spurious claim, which included assertions of sovereignty over sizeable chunks of Chile and Brazil, was based on the right of succession to the Spanish Viceroyalty of La Plata. But Spain (in 1767) was the last of the three powers to land on the Falkland Islands (dismissed by Dr Johnson as a bleak and uninhabited "Magellanic rock"), after Britain (1690) and France (1764). And in 1859, when Spain at last recognised Argentina, it was Argentina without the Falklands. The modern state of Argentina dates from 1862. Maps made in 1833, the year that the British ejected 25 Argentine soldiers, then in mid-mutiny, do not even include Patagonia, which was developed from the 1870s onwards by pioneers such as Thomas Bridges, who came from… the Falklands.

Like the Shakespeare authorship question, Argentina's claim to the Falklands is a posthumous controversy. It did not take popular hold until a century later, when, in the words of one of the invasion's chief architects, Admiral Emilio Massera, the relatively modern idea that "the Malvinas are a piece of our soul", was used by successive Perónist governments to divert attention from their appalling record, and then increasingly, in Massera and the military junta's case, from crimes against humanity.

One of the better accounts is *The Razor's Edge* (2006) by Hugh Bicheno – our spook in Buenos Aires when my family was there, and, with his bilingual Spanish, a rare British authority on the Argentine position. In his "unofficial history of the Falklands War", Bicheno places blame for the invasion on "the urgent collective need" of Argentina's armed forces to expiate their guilt during the "Dirty War": that brief but "deranged" period, between 1976 and 1983, when up to 30,000 Argentine students and activists were kidnapped, tortured and disposed of by seemingly upstanding Catholic officers. "Now we are governed by gentlemen," Borges had also repeated to me, in the weeks following General Jorge Videla's military coup of March 1976, which had removed Isabel Perón (a former cabaret dancer and the third wife of Juan Perón, whom she succeeded as president following his death in 1974). No one at the time was aware that Videla and his two cohorts Massera and Orlando Agosti were not gentlemen at all, but the sponsors of state inquisitors "who adopted the infant children of parents they had murdered".

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At the beginning of the same year, 1976, our ambassador was withdrawn and my father became chargé d'affaires. He had grown up when Britain's empire stretched from Tilbury to Tientsin, and in 1936, aged five, had sailed to China ("Throughout the long journey we never once set foot on foreign soil. At every port, the Union Flag was proudly flying and Royal Navy gunboats lay at anchor in the harbour"). Forty years on, the Falklands were – as described by Helen Parr in *Our Boys: The Story of a Paratrooper* – a last "loose hem" of that empire.

On his arrival in Buenos Aires my father had flown to Port Stanley, on the weekly flight organised by the Argentine air force. He took photographs of walruses and penguins on the beaches, and delivered a stern message to the governor that might have been Wodehousean if the implications weren't so serious: "I had to tell him not to throw his secrets down the loo at Government House, as he had been doing, because they were washing up on the shores of Port Stanley harbour."

Now appointed head of mission, in charge of the embassy, my father had to deal with the new military government's cranking up of pressure to hand over the islands. His recollections remain clear to this day.

"I can remember a number of random events which showed they were going to be much more difficult," he told me. In February 1976, Massera ordered a destroyer to open fire on the British research vessel *Shackleton* in Falklands waters. The *Shackleton* "disappeared, thank goodness, into a bank of fog which rolled down, and went into Port Stanley. I was instructed to go and protest, which I did. Nothing happened." He was compelled to lodge another formal complaint after it was discovered that Argentina had set up a temporary settlement on Southern Thule, which was then claimed and still is as British territory: "There was no question of apology."

In this regard, if no other, the leftist Montonero insurgents were allied with the increasingly belligerent dictatorship. "The only thing the terrorists and the junta agreed on was that the Falkland Islands weren't British." Following a bomb attack on the British ambassador's residence in Buenos Aires during a reception – "the one fatality was an Argentine policeman whose helmet hung in the tree for days after" – the Foreign Office decided that my father should have an SAS bodyguard. Four men were flown out. We knew them by their nicknames only: Topper, Lofty, Paddy, Charles.

"There was an extraordinary incident a few days after the military coup," my father recalled. "I had to go to the Foreign Ministry, and went in the embassy's armour-plated Ford Falcon with the usual car of SAS bodyguards behind. The streets were filled with rather frightened young soldiers who didn't know about guns. We were stopped at a military checkpoint, and when they discovered the car behind had four heavily

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armed civilians we were strip-searched, all the weapons taken away, and we were directed out under gunpoint, lined against the wall and told to face it. Topper and Lofty, who were meant to protect me, were pushed up as if they were going to be shot.

"I turned around against the order of troops with guns pointing at us, and I said: 'I want to speak to an officer, I am the British chargé d'affaires. I am on my way to see your foreign minister, and I shall demand an apology.' Eventually, an officer was produced and we were allowed to go back into the car, minus our weapons, which wouldn't have been of much use."

In those jittery days, it was a crime to be young. On my way to read Kipling to Borges, in his small flat in Avenida Maipú, my long hair attracted the notice of two blue-uniformed policemen. They backed me against a wall. Days earlier, a friend of mine, Andrew Cooper, had gone missing, bundled, he told me on his release, into a green Ford Falcon with polarised windows, no number plates and, where the back seat should have been, an empty cavity into which he was thrust in an excruciating position and driven off to an interrogation cell in Villa Devoto.

"Papers," demanded one of the policemen. I patted one pocket and the next and then the next. In their dark lenses, in a foreshadowing of films I hadn't yet seen, I could make out my slack face. Finally satisfied that I wasn't a Montonero *terruco*, they handed back my diplomatic pass.

The idea for the invasion was concocted a year later, in 1977, by Massera [and some of his fellow Montonero prisoners], and given a further boost when Nicanor Costa Méndez returned in 1981 as foreign minister. Significantly, during his previous stint in that job, Costa Méndez had in 1968 signed a memorandum with the then British foreign secretary Michael Stewart, stating that the UK government would "recognise Argentina's sovereignty over the islands" when it could be shown to be "in the best interests of the inhabitants".

As with Brexit, inconvenient facts were brushed aside or deliberately misrepresented in the formulation of British policy,

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which until 1982 was to hand over the islands – perceived by the Foreign Office as, in one islander's phrase, "just an absolute pain in the arse" – to an incontestably barbaric regime. When the Foreign Office minister Nicholas Ridley told a public meeting in Port Stanley in November 1980 that the islanders could expect no help from Britain if they were invaded – because "we do not have the capability" – the message to the junta couldn't have been plainer.

A few weeks after Ridley's visit, I arrived in the Falklands to research a BBC documentary on the British in Argentina. I listened to the islands' self-appointed laureate Des Peck serenade me with his lullaby, "Hang down your head Nicholas Riddle-leigh" (sung to the tune of "Hang down your head Tom Dooley"). I talked to the commanding officer of the 43 marines who comprised the defence force – marginally more formidable than the Chelsea Pensioners sent out in 1849, from whom many islanders descended. I inspected the governor's official car – a cherry-red London taxi – and interviewed an old whaler, Cecil Bertrand, who supported the Falkland Islands' claims to Patagonia, where he had grown up in the 1930s.

One of my fellow visitors in the four-roomed Malvina Guest House was a well-dressed Argentine civilian. He turned out to be General Videla's interpreter. This dark-haired, brilliantined individual occupied his days with a long-lensed camera taking "wildlife photos" of the surrounding beaches, as my father had done, but with a somewhat more sinister purpose – which manifested itself later, on 2 April 1982.

My father was in Lisbon – chargé d'affaires once again – when he learned of the Argentine invasion. "I had a formal instruction from the Foreign Office to call on the Portuguese foreign minister and invoke the Treaty of Windsor of 1386 regarding the right of our planes to land in the Azores for refuelling on their way to the Falklands. I thought we'd get a dusty answer because Portugal had invoked the treaty when Nehru invaded Goa 20 years before, and we'd weaselled out of it, saying we couldn't use the treaty against a member of the British Commonwealth." In fact the Portuguese agreed, though they paid for it when the offices of TAP, the national airline, in Buenos Aires were sacked by an angry mob.

Portugal wasn't alone in coming to Britain's aid. America made up for its obstruction over Suez by providing its most up-to-date material and technology, including shoulder-fired Stinger missiles. The EU offered immediate diplomatic support. And according to a reliable, although not widely known report from Chile – then in a bitter border dispute with Argentina over three islands in the Beagle Channel – General Pinochet made a secret agreement to bomb Argentine airfields in the event that "things went badly for us"; hence Mrs Thatcher's subsequent unswerving loyalty to him.

As the British task force was assembled and started to set sail, the British government appealed to anyone who had been to the Falklands in recent years and taken photographs of the coast to let it have these pictures, which it promised to return. My father assembled a little batch showing several empty beaches with walruses and ▶

colonies of penguins – "since the photos showed the hinterland, they were of some use to a landing force" – and he gave them to his defence attaché to send to the MoD. I have an imperishable memory of my father presenting a slide-show in our dining room in Lisbon even as the first troops from the task force waded ashore, and the panic mounting on his face as he realised that he may have mixed up the slides and very possibly mislabelled them. "Oh, no. I've written down Darwin here. But I don't think it is. I have a feeling this is Goose Green…"

Cedric Delves was the SAS officer who in 1976 came to Buenos Aires to train my father's bodyguards. Six years on, with 100mph gales whipping ice crystals into his face, he helicoptered his men into

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"one of the most inhospitable environments on the planet". His frank and vivid narrative of D Squadron's operations in South Georgia, on Pebble Island and in the bogs and hills north of Darwin, brings to life the calculations behind Delves's arithmetic, that war is "nine parts the management of cock-up".

The odds were stacked in Argentina's favour: an occupying force with 240 modern jets and eight Exocet missiles confronted an exposed armada of 65 ships and 15,000 men that had sailed from the opposite end of the word. What is surprising is that the cock-up wasn't greater. The chiefs of staff were braced for 900 fatalities: in the event, Britain lost 255 men, with 123 coming from the army.

Delves is candid about his own cluster of failures ("gang fuck" in SAS-speak). He writes of the horror when 20 of his men die in a helicopter accident, the SAS's biggest loss since 1945; and when he discovers he is shelling his own troops. On the plus side, he witnesses one of his soldiers down a Pucara aircraft with a tail-chasing missile, "the first ever operational firing of the Stinger".

Pitted against "an enemy difficult to dislike", Delves is unable to curb his disgust on discovering that one or two of "the Argies" actually aren't "playing cricket" – this after capturing a sniper called Flores who is armed with illegal hollow-point bullets (Delves has less to say about reports of ears being taken as trophies from Argentine corpses). Flores – "a criminal shit, no better than a gangster" – stands, in Delves's chauvinist disdain, for the junta that had tasked him with invading Mount Kent using expanding rounds outlawed by the Geneva Convention, and whose members, in a suppressed Argentine inquiry after the war, were recommended for court martial and execution, but ended up being pardoned by President Menem.

In Delves's reckoning, a combination of moral toughness, discipline and the conviction that a terrible wrong was being put right enabled the British to win against these odds. That, and the support of the locals. In a parody of a Catholic crusade, Argentine officers had distributed a flyer to the 99 per cent Protestant population on behalf of the Junta: "PEOPLE OF THE MALVINAS. You have been liberated from the illegal colonial government. Join us in giving thanks to the Blessed Virgin Mary."

It swiftly dawned on Argentina's ill-trained and brainwashed conscripts that islanders such as Des Peck and Cecil Bertrand didn't want to have anything to do with them, and the British troops were reclaiming their own. One shocked Argentine soldier realised: "They were coming back to take what belonged to them." As Helen Parr writes in her thought-provoking study of the paratroopers who fought in the Falklands: "This land was British land, reclaimed with British blood."

Parr is the "unmilitary niece" of a 19-year-old private in the 2nd Battalion, the Parachute Regiment, Dave Parr, who was killed by friendly fire on the day of the Argentine surrender, 14 June 1982. Her measured and touching investigation into the young men who joined the Paras – their background, training, expectations, and the impact on them of this short, brutal campaign – makes for a riveting anatomy of Great Britain in the 1970s and 1980s.

She finds that the Falklands War marked "a turning point of sorts", not only in the nation's relationship with its armed forces – in a 2004 survey, the Army enjoyed more public trust than any institution except the judiciary – but in its relationship both to Britain's disunited self and to its last vestiges of empire.

The 74-day conflict signalled "the end of the era defined by total war", with its close, often hand-to-hand combat more reminiscent of Kitchener's 1898 expedition up the Nile to destroy the Dervishes. Dave Parr's commanding officer Lieutenant-Colonel Herbert "H" Jones won a posthumous Victoria Cross after charging at the enemy with a cry of, "Come on A Company, get your skirts off!" Dave Brown, with C Company 2 Para, told the author: "The famous last words we heard from the company commander were 'fix bayonets'. I thought, 'Battle of Waterloo job here.'"

Parr notes two other shifts. The first was the recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), with more Paras reported to have committed suicide in the aftermath of the war than had died during it. The second was the repatriation of bodies "for the first time in Britain's military history".

My father's ambassador in Buenos Aires, Donald Hopson, had died *en poste* in 1975. He lies in Chacarita cemetery: a gallant former officer, who had served with the Commandos and won the Military Cross, he wanted to be buried where he fell. This was the case also for Herbert "H" Jones, who is buried in San Carlos. But in a departure from tradition, many bodies were brought home, including Dave Parr's. His reburial in Aldershot meant that Parr did not become a Rupert Brooke figure, lying in a corner of a foreign field that was forever England.

For some of the survivors, an England without those foreign corners felt like an amputated place, prey to the twitch of phantom limbs. Jim Peters of the Scots Guards was diagnosed with PTSD 30 years after the war, and advised to go back to Mount Tumbledown near Port Stanley and relive his experience. His reaction on his return, as documented by Parr, is worth quoting. It makes me think how charged and complex is our relationship to those fields beyond our shores with which we have enjoyed deep associations – whether it be to a loose hem of empire or to continental Europe – and to ask if what Peters felt is what many of us are predestined to go on feeling long after we retrench from the EU.

The rocks were as they had appeared in his dreams. "I was being haunted, I had to be there. Weird. That's what it felt like, it felt like going home. The amount of times I went home on leave, and you can't wait to see the lights of your city, from your train as it's coming across the bridge. That's what it felt like, I thought."

Never more alive than when he was about to die, his time on Tumbledown was a primal experience that sent Peters in some ways back to childhood. His home was a place where he had been most vulnerable. ●