

Extension of the Exclusion Zone

On 23 April the Argentine Government was warned that any approach on the part of Argentine warships, including submarines, naval auxiliaries or military aircraft, which could amount to a threat to interfere with British forces would encounter the appropriate response. Moreover all Argentine aircraft engaging in surveillance of these forces would be regarded as hostile.

The threat posed by the three nuclear submarines had effectively stopped Argentinian reinforcement of the Islands by sea since 12 April but, with the added aim of stopping resupply by air, a Total Exclusion Zone was declared by the Government on 30 April on the arrival of the carrier force. This Zone applied not only to Argentinian warships and naval auxiliaries but also to all other ships and aircraft attempting to support the illegal occupation of the Islands.

The difficulties of maintaining a total blockade are considerable. It is now known that one Argentinian resupply ship arrived in the Islands and the Argentinian Air Force managed to maintain a limited air bridge until shortly before the final surrender. Nevertheless, politically the establishment of the Total Exclusion Zone was consistent with the Government's efforts to ensure the peaceful withdrawal of the Argentinian forces, while militarily it inhibited the Argentinian ability to reinforce and resupply their forces and limited their movement.

Additional measures were also considered appropriate. Accordingly, on 7 May the Government informed the Argentinian Government that any of their warships or military aircraft found more than 12 miles from their own coast would be treated as hostile and the appropriate action taken. This move was necessary because of the threat posed by their carrier-borne aircraft and the ease with which hostile forces could approach the Task Force, under the cover of bad weather, from mainland bases within 450 miles of the Falkland Islands, a significant factor for a force without the benefit of Airborne Early Warning.

Although not an exclusion zone, on 10 May a 100 nautical mile radius Terminal Control Area around Ascension Island was instituted and formally notified to the appropriate international authorities: this measure called for prior notification of flights to and from the island and of overflights, thus aiding the air defence organisation as well as the control of air traffic.

The Intensification of Operations

Early on 1 May an R.A.F. Vulcan flying from Ascension Island opened the action against the Argentinian forces on the Falklands with a night bombing attack of Port Stanley airfield which cratered the runway. The 16 hour sortie was supported by Victor Tankers and Nimrod aircraft and was the first of five Vulcan missions directed against the airfield and adjacent radar installations.

Later the same morning Sea Harriers attacked the runway at Port Stanley and also the airstrip at Goose Green. That night Port Stanley airfield was subjected to Naval Gunfire bombardment by H.M. Ships GLAMORGAN, ARROW and ALACRITY. This was to be the pattern for the next few weeks, with raids on the airfields at Port Stanley and elsewhere by Harriers and night bombardments by units of the Fleet. These attacks were designed to deny the use of the airfields to the Argentinian forces and to erode their readiness, morale and state of alertness. At the beginning of May, the first of many S.A.S. and S.B.S. reconnaissance patrols landed on the Falklands. These, and those that followed, were variously landed by helicopter, small boats from surface ships and the submarine, H.M.S. ONYX. During the next 3 weeks, these patrols were able to gather vital intelligence in preparation for the main landing. Throughout the period, in extremely harsh conditions, they remained undetected.

On 2 May the Argentinian cruiser, the GENERAL BELGRANO, with two destroyers, was detected south of the Falklands by H.M.S. CONQUEROR. The enemy force was in a position where it posed a serious threat to a number of our ships engaged in operations off the Falklands while other Argentinian surface units were poised to the north. It was a threat that could not be ignored and therefore H.M.S. CONQUEROR was ordered to attack the GENERAL BELGRANO with torpedoes. Two struck the cruiser which sank some hours later. For over two hours Argentinian destroyers carried out several unsuccessful depth charge attacks against H.M.S. CONQUEROR and then retired. Later they returned to rescue survivors. Throughout the campaign, the cost in human lives was my constant concern and in consequence, I ordered H.M.S. CONQUEROR not to attack ships involved in rescue operations. The sinking of GENERAL BELGRANO was a clear demonstration of the capability of a nuclear powered submarine and proved to have a major salutary effect on the conduct of future Argentinian operations. After this attack, Argentinian naval surface forces remained within 12 nautical miles of their coast for the remainder of the campaign. The nuclear powered submarine's effectiveness was not confined to the removal of this threat; for additionally they patrolled off the coast of mainland Argentina and provided invaluable intelligence to our forces in the T.E.Z. of aircraft movement and likely air attacks.

Later on 3 May, a Sea King helicopter was fired on by an Argentinian patrol craft. Lynx helicopters armed with Sea Skua missiles subsequently attacked the craft which was hit, blew up and sank. A second patrol craft was also attacked and damaged by helicopter fired missiles.

These successes were marred on 4 May by the loss of H.M.S. SHEFFIELD. While stationed about 60 miles from the south east coast of the Falkland Islands on Anti Air Picket Duty, she was attacked by 2 Exocet missiles released by 2 Super Etendard aircraft. One missile struck her on the starboard side and entered amidships. After 4½ hours during which her Ship's Company fought fierce fires whilst engulfed in thick black