

The aim of achieving surprise had been achieved and, although still in its infancy, the beachhead had been established virtually unopposed by land or air. 2 Gazelle helicopters were, however, subsequently shot down by enemy ground fire. During the afternoon of 21 May, the anticipated Argentinian air raids began. The warships in the Falkland Sound fought gallantly and took the brunt of the attack in protecting the landing ships. Around 15 aircraft were shot down by Harriers, and by ships' and ground weapons. One R.A.F. Harrier was lost and three of the supporting warships were hit. H.M.S. ANTRIM was struck aft by a bomb which failed to explode: H.M.S. ARGONAUT was hit by 2 bombs which again did not explode but killed 2 of her Ship's Company and inflicted sufficient damage to deprive her of steaming capability. H.M.S. ARDENT was less fortunate; she was repeatedly hit aft by bombs which exploded. The damage sustained subsequently led to her sinking, 22 of her Ships' Company lost their lives; 177 were saved. The ships in San Carlos Water were largely unscathed and after a hectic day unloading, S.S. CANBERRA was sailed after dark.

Consolidation

The following day, the build up and reinforcement of the beachhead continued. The Argentinian air raids did not. However, on 23 May, the Argentinians again launched heavy air attacks and more ships were hit, including H.M.S. ANTELOPE. One of the bombs entered her forward, killing one of her Ship's Company instantly, although it did not explode. Subsequent efforts to defuse it failed and the resulting explosion killed one of the disposal team and seriously injured the other. The fires generated by the explosion raged out of control and the ship was abandoned. She later sank but the rest of the Ship's Company survived. A Sea Harrier was also lost when it exploded shortly after take off from H.M.S. HERMES, killing the pilot. But, on this day the Argentinians lost at least ten more attacking aircraft.

The build up of men and material continued. The Royal Engineers had worked tirelessly to improve the access over the beaches and by the end of the third day, 24 May, 5,500 men had been put together with 5,000 tons of ammunition and stores. The supporting role of M.V. ELK deserves particular mention. Throughout this period she ferried large amounts of ammunition to the landing areas sometimes at considerable but necessary risk from air attacks. She was quite literally a floating bomb, sometimes carrying as much as 2,500 tons of ammunition onboard.

25 May was Argentina's National Day and a major effort by her Air Force was anticipated. At first, fears appeared to be groundless; only one raid penetrated to the Falkland Sound area where it inflicted no damage but one of the aircraft was shot down by a Sea Dart missile. Seven more aircraft were also shot down by two Sea Dart missiles of H.M.S. COVENTRY, two by Seacat missiles fired by H.M.S. YARMOUTH, and three by Rapier missiles fired from ashore. In mid afternoon, however, the advanced air defence elements of the Task Group were targets for a very determined low level air attack. H.M.S. BROADSWORD suffered superficial damage and H.M.S. COVENTRY was hit by several bombs which exploded in or near the machinery spaces. She capsized shortly after the attack with the loss of 19 of her Ship's Company. On this day, too, S.S. ATLANTIC CONVEYOR with a cargo of helicopters, support equipment and stores which included materiel needed to establish a forward airstrip for helicopters and Harriers, was in company with the main force to the east of the Falklands en route for San Carlos. One hour before sunset the force received a brief warning of an attack by Argentinian aircraft armed with Exocet missiles. Ships took appropriate counter measures, but S.S. ATLANTIC CONVEYOR was hit and set on fire. The fires spread rapidly and one hour after the attack she was abandoned. 3 Naval ratings and 9 Merchant Navy officers and men, including her Master, Captain I. NORTH, D.S.C., were killed.

The Argentine Air Force, despite their losses, persisted with their attacks in the San Carlos area but, by now, the presence of Rapier and Blowpipe missile systems ashore, and effective small arms fire brought to bear from ships and shore, were a potential counter. Similarly, attacks continued against units at sea. On 30 May, the carrier group having moved closer to the Falkland Islands to cover the approach of 5th Infantry Brigade troop ships, was attacked by Super Etendards and Skyhawks. A number of Exocet missiles were launched but were evaded and exploded harmlessly. Three of the Skyhawks were shot down, 2 by Sea Dart missiles, the third by 4.5 inch gunfire.

The Breakout

On 26/27 May, 3 Commando Brigade Royal Marines began to break out from the beachhead. The overall plan was to close up to the Port Stanley area as quickly as possible. There was however a significant Argentinian presence at Darwin and Goose Green. Although not on the direct route to Port Stanley, these troops posed a threat to the flank and to the beachhead. It was therefore decided that it was essential to neutralise the Argentinian presence there before the advance on Stanley could be fully developed.

Late on 26 May, 2nd Battalion The Parachute Regiment started its move south. At dawn on 27 May, 45 Commando Royal Marines and 3rd Battalion The Parachute Regiment started to advance along the northern route from the beachhead, east towards Douglas Settlement and Teal Inlet respectively. Throughout 27 May, while the other two battalions continued their advances, 2nd Battalion The Parachute Regiment laid up at Camilla Creek House 5 miles north of the Argentinian position, while an artillery troop of 3 light guns was flown forward to support the attack which began at 0200 on 28 May.