Editorial
The Falklands War: Lessons Learned and Not Learned

Admiral of the Fleet Sir Henry Leach died in April this year. He was First Sea Lord in the early 1980s during the 1982 Falklands War and at the time of Britain’s controversial defence cuts that threatened to undermine the Royal Navy’s global capability. His role in that war was much more important than generally recognized, and his contribution deserves more recognition especially because it still holds lessons that we can apply today.

Most accounts of the Falklands War focus on the deployment of the task force, the encounters with the Argentine naval and air forces, and the bold amphibious assault to recapture the islands. Unfortunately, the brief but intense political discussion in London that set the British joint operation in motion is often overlooked. As historians often proclaim, battles are the real stuff of naval history, and so the political prelude to battle all too often falls into the shadows.

The political backdrop to the Falklands War has two parts: first, the bureaucratic mismanagement of the unique situation of the Falkland Islands; and, second, the 1981 defence cuts. From a military point of view, the pre-war situation was a familiar one; the defence budget was not large enough to meet the demands for new equipment, and new money was not available. In this case, the Royal Navy bore the brunt of the defence cuts because it was deemed to be of a lower strategic priority than the army and air force commitments to NATO.

The decision not to replace the carrier Ark Royal and to pay off the light aircraft carriers and some of the amphibious support ships severely curtailed the navy’s ability to operate outside the NATO area. It also meant that Britain’s ability to defend its remote territories, such as the Falkland Islands, was limited. To many this was dangerously myopic strategic thinking but public dissent was not tolerated politically, and so Admiral Leach had to work from within. The 1982 invasion of the Falkland Islands and the government’s initial reaction were seen by the critics of the 1981 defence cuts as proof of the wrong-headedness of the policy.

In late April 1982, as the Falkland crisis (as it then was) unfolded and an Argentine invasion of the islands seemed inevitable, a distinctly gloomy mood prevailed in London. The first response to intelligence that the Argentines intended to invade the islands was a mix of diplomatic bluff and tokenism. The Antarctic patrol vessel Endurance would remain in the south Atlantic and be re-supplied and three nuclear-powered submarines would deploy to the area at maximum speed. This was a purely political decision made without Leach’s input. A couple of days later, by chance rather than by invitation, Leach became part of the follow-on meeting where options for a more comprehensive response were discussed. Initially, the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, the Defence Minister, John Nott, and a couple of junior Ministers planned to review an options paper prepared by Nott’s military staff. But this was not be. Leach saw the paper written for Nott, which advocated not taking decisive military action, and went to the House of Commons to advise Nott that it was a bad option. To Leach’s surprise he soon found himself in a meeting with the Prime Minister where he wasted no time in advising her that a naval task force could be sailed in 48 hours. He did not go behind his Minister’s back, he stepped out in front of him boldly.

Admiral Leach held strong convictions. He believed that there was no point in having a navy if the government was not prepared to...
use it. He was also convinced that Britain’s interests were best served by having an effective and versatile navy. And he believed that Britain had an obligation to defend the citizens of all British territory no matter where located. To Leach, not recapturing the islands was simply unthinkable, regardless of the risks. Thatcher agreed quickly; they were of the same mindset on the need to take back the islands. As she later explained, “John [Nott] gave the MOD’s [Ministry of Defence] view that the Falklands could not be retaken once they were seized. This was terrible, and totally unacceptable. I could not believe it: these were our people, our islands. I said instantly: ‘if they invaded, we have got to get them back.’” And Leach had the authority to prepare and send the task force. The defeatist attitude that previously prevailed in the Ministry of Defence vanished overnight and the task force was made ready for the south Atlantic.

Unfortunately, many of the details of the war have faded from memory – far too many in fact because some valuable lessons from that experience still have the potential to guide future naval operations. Theorists are still not quite sure what to make of the Falklands War. Some dismiss it as just a minor engagement while others see it as an example of Sir Julian Corbett’s classic thinking on the importance of being able to gain and hold control (command) of a specific ocean area to achieve a strategic objective. Perhaps a more realistic assessment is that the war is a good example of Sir James Cable’s more contemporary views on the political utility of navies. According to Cable:

Maritime conflict is easier to limit and control than it is on land or in the air. It also inflicts less collateral damage. Warships, even if with more difficulty and at greater distance than formerly, can pose a threat and sustain it without a single warlike act. They can deploy on the high seas without commitment, wait, gain time for diplomacy. If prospects look poor, warships are easier to withdraw. Warships allow choice, naval force is a flexible instrument.2

With Admiral Leach’s firm convictions and James Cable’s wise philosophy in mind, some lasting lessons from the Falklands War come to mind.

1. Effective and flexible naval forces cannot be bought off the shelf when needed. They have to be in place and ready for use at short notice to meet those criteria.

2. Those who advocate a navy comprised of lower-capability or niche forces, for whatever reason, do the country a great disservice because they deny politicians the ability to make a flexible naval first response to a crisis.

3. Because the life-span of a warship is now 30 to 35 years and a warship takes 10-15 years to design and build, decisions on new fleet concepts made today need to ensure that the operational concepts used will remain valid for the next 50 years.

4. Admirals, and generals too, need to be absolutely honest when asked what their forces can and cannot do. They should not hesitate to tell politicians the truth and should not try to tell their political masters what they want to hear. Sound military advice should transcend partisan politics but needs to be given in a way that is not oblivious of the political issues.

Admiral of the Fleet Sir Henry Leach was an un-sung hero of the Falklands War. His commitment to his navy and ensuring its continuing utility will stand the test of time as guidance for those charged with the care and maintenance of navies. He should also be remembered for his courage in providing sound military advice in an adverse political situation. Had that advice not been given and the Falkland Islands not been recaptured, as some Ministers advocated, Britain’s standing in the world might have been very different.

Notes

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