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THE ROLE OF THE NAVAL CHAPLAINS IN THE FALKLAND ISLANDS TASK FORCE

Es el relato del Reverendo J. P, Hudson, Capellán de la Task Force de la Royal Navy durante el conflicto de Malvinas.

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IF THE SHIP has a good time you'll enjoy yourself, but if the ship sinks you'll probably go down with her,' said Archdeacon Christopher Prior to me at the end of my interview in 1967, some ten months before I joined the Royal Navy. Sound common sense from one priest coming to the end of a long and distinguished career in the Naval Service to another about to embark on the great adventure of being a Naval Chaplain. Over the years the truth of these words has been illustrated time and time again both ashore and afloat. For, as an integral part of life on board, the Chaplain, through his priestly ministry of Word and Sacrament and his complementary pastoral ministry as friend and adviser to all on board, shares the good times and the bad; the triumphs and the failures of individuals and those that occur in the corporate life of any ship.

But up until April of last year one had only appreciated the truth behind the first part of the advice; any reference to sinking had been understood purely in the figurative sense. However by 14 June 1982, the day the Argentines surrendered at Port Stanley, Archdeacon Prior's warning had become literal fact; ships had indeed been damaged or sunk, and many friends lost or injured. After nearly fourteen years as a Chaplain in peacetime enjoying the good time, I had suddenly and unexpectedly been brought face to face with the stark realities of war, with all its attendant triumphs and tragedies, heroism and horror. For whether with the Assault Ships in San Carlos, or out at sea with the Carrier Group, or indeed ashore sharing the hardships with their Royal Marine Commando Units, the Chaplains ministered to the frightened, the injured, the dying, and the dead; to the leaders and to those who followed, experiencing all the fears and uncertainties for the future that those terrible days held. The majority of incidents and examples I

shall use below are from my own experiences, but they serve merely to illustrate what we were about, and are for the most part common to all the Chaplains in the Task Force as we went about our priestly business.

HMS *Fearless* sails

The highly emotional farewells from the various ports of departure were salutary reminders to us of all the reality of our situation, although the early days of the voyage south were spent sorting out the problems of serious overcrowding and providing suitable accommodation for the various Staffs, each with their own duties to perform and their different sets of priorities. An early casualty of this reorganisation was the Chapel, but a DTS portacabin was made available on 04 deck, which apart from occasional occupation as a radio shack remained primarily the chapel and the quiet room throughout the campaign.

Pastorally these early days were very busy. The memory of tear-stained families was still very real, and many people came along looking for answers to military and political questions that we were unable to provide. 'It won't come to a shooting match, will it?' or 'They're bound to sort it out in the United Nations, aren't they?' One had to be honest and say, 'I don't know'. Eventually the spirit throughout the Task Force became that of hoping for the best while planning and training for the worst. As things turned out this was exactly right. Another way in which this time of uncertainty and anxiety manifested itself was in the number of people, particularly Senior Rates, who came along asking for advice on making a will. Eventually I drew a large stock of will forms from the ship's office, and, as well as directing many to the Supply Officers for specialist financial advice, witnessed about twenty-five wills,

which were then sent to their next-of-kin when we landed mail at Ascension Island. It is significant to note at this stage, that of the six men later killed in LUC F4, only two of the four married men who died left a will. All the others died intestate, despite all the advice and help offered throughout their Service careers.

We crossed the Equator on Friday 16 April, and prepared to pay our respects to King Neptune. The job of organising the Crossing the Line Ceremony had fallen to me, and with lots of willing help, a highly successful and hilariously funny hour or so was spent blooding the uninitiated amidst all the preparations for war. Needless to say there was a special ducking reserved for the organiser, when towards the end of the festivities his Royal Marine Bears turned and savaged him.

Ascension Island provided little relief for the Chaplains in the Carrier Group as they were soon on their way South to face the combined threat of appalling weather and the first raids by the Argentine Air Force. But for those of us with the Assault Force the three weeks spent in Ascension Island proved a busy and rewarding time. SS *Canberra* provided the conference centre as well as the run ashore as we attended meetings along with many of the doctors to be briefed on casualty procedures and burial of the dead. A few problems arose in this field as the Royal Marine way was somewhat different to that of the Royal Navy. Eventually however a directive was received from Commander-in-Chief Fleet, and the differences resolved. Mail had become our life-line and the service was excellent. Although our families knew we were safe, and because of the speed with which their letters were answered, probably still at Ascension Island, there was still a great deal of anxiety and worry at the way the protracted negotiations were going.

It is war

The sinking of the *Belgrano*, followed quickly by the loss of HMS *Sheffield* proved once and for all that the gloves

were off; people were dying down there; it was war. It was a very subdued ship's company that left Ascension Island on 7 May, and from then on Action Station drills were practised with a keenness and zeal that would have delighted the work-up teams at Portland. Everyone knew instinctively that thorough training could well mean the difference between death and survival, as was indeed to prove the case so often, ashore and afloat, in the near future. On Sunday 9 May I was again able to make use of the ship's CCTV system to record a short meditation for screening that evening. In it I tried to balance the fear and uncertainty we all faced together, with the fact that it was together we faced them, and that in this, under God, was our great strength. I believe it was well received and it certainly gave me the opportunity to clarify in words many of the thoughts and fears that were passing through my mind.

Not every ship carried a Chaplain, while others like HMS *Fearless* were more than well catered for — a *surplice* one might say. It was our practice to ensure that as many ships as possible were visited during the weeks at Ascension Island and on the passage south to the Falkland Islands. The Chaplains serving with the Royal Marines took responsibility for the LSLs, while those of us in the Assault Ships covered the larger RFAs, a number of STUFT ships, and the attendant frigates.

One such visit will long remain in my memory. At 09.30 on Tuesday 11 May, I was winched down from a Sea King helicopter on to the flight deck of HMS *Ardent*. Her Captain, Commander Alan West, DSC, RN, was an old friend from Hong Kong days, and I spent a most enjoyable day walking round the ship chatting to people — a fact that now seems all the more poignant bearing in mind her fate. We celebrated the Eucharist together twice that day; once just before lunch with sixteen communicants, and again during the afternoon with a further eight — rather sad statistics, as these were to be the last celebrations on board before she was attacked and sunk. Indeed my last memory

of her Flight Comander, Lieutenant Commander, John Sephton, DSC, RN, a friend from Portland, and his Observer, was a cheerful wave as they lifted off from HMS *Fearless's* flight deck, having flown me home later that evening. Ten days later they were both dead.

Ascension Day, 20 May, found us crossing the TEZ, on the final leg of our journey, in thick fog. It went through my mind at the time that the clouds which had received the Lord were now providing us with the essential cover we needed to reach our destination safely. Having embarked forty Royal Marine Commandos from SS *Canberra*, the ship was crammed to bursting point with earnest brave young faces, confident in their own ability, their training, and their proud tradition, but with just a hint of trepidation at the unknown. As the day went by the tension mounted as men prepared themselves and their equipment, going over the final details of their orders again and again. At 21.00 I celebrated the Eucharist in Brigadier Thompson's cabin — it being about the only available space on board. People packed into this small area, some going ashore, some staying behind, but everyone facing perhaps the most critical night of their lives. As I made my final round of the ship before the unit embarked in the LCUs, each company presented me with their loose change, some £60 in all, which was later sent to a children's home in Portsmouth.

The days that followed the landings have been recorded for posterity by the BBC camera crew that accompanied us. Bomb Alley was an unforgettable experience, terrifying and yet strangely exhilarating as we watched ships being hit and aircraft blown out of the sky as they bravely flew through the curtain of steel put up by the ships in San Carlos and the missile batteries ashore. It was during this time, too, that one began to understand what true bravery meant as men, some of them very young indeed, stayed at their posts and got on with their job. Whether fighting the ship from the upper deck or sitting waiting below, it

was the single-minded determination of these men that kept the ships there day after day. For during those savage, utterly decisive few days, the Argentine Air Force battered itself so severely against our forces and took such heavy losses that they wasted their initial advantages of numbers and choice of target and effectively lost the battle for control of the skies over the Falkland Islands.

Care of friend and foe

Casualties were inevitable, and sick bays, regimental aid posts, and the field hospital set up at Ajax Bay were soon busy receiving the wounded, irrespective of nationality. Sailors from ships damaged or sunk; an Argentine pilot shot down over San Carlos; soldiers and marines, no longer a threat to one another, were tended and cared for according to their needs. There were usually two Chaplains on duty at Ajax Bay, and another up at Teal Inlet. The Chaplains with the Commando Units spent most of their time based on their regimental aid post, working alongside the Unit Medical Officer and his staff, often in great danger as together they cared for the wounded and dying. From time to time, usually after a major engagement, the hospital ship SS *Uganda* would sail into Falkland Sound or some other suitable spot to take off as many of the wounded and injured as possible, some needing further specialist surgery on board and others to recover from their injuries away from the dangers and the limited facilities of Ajax Bay and Teal Inlet.

Death is a subject that most people spend their adult life trying to avoid with the result that, of those who went south to war, very few had any first-hand experience of death other than through family bereavement. Funerals, too, were occasions that concerned families or friends and were conducted with quiet dignity in a churchyard or crematorium. But not any more — there are no illusions left. For death came very quickly to the Task Force. Many had died at sea and in the air long before anyone had set foot on East

Falkland. And once ashore and going forward, the deaths continued, not strangers any more, or unknown names in a casualty list, but colleagues, people our own age, friends, brothers. For the Chaplains, too, these were harrowing days as we tried to minister to the bereaved while sharing the pain and loss that each death brought. For they were our friends too.

Of the many funeral services conducted in the South Atlantic, some were televised and became public property. The majority however were private in that a small group of men at sea or on a lonely hillside were gathered together to perform their last duty to a fallen comrade. Almost every Chaplain was involved in such an occasion, and by way of illustration I record two incidents from my diary written at the time.

The first is somewhat unusual as it refers not to our own dead but to Argentine soldiers who died at Darwin and Goose Green. On Thursday 3 June I flew to Goose Green — another terrifying trip at over 100 m.p.h. at zero feet — with Captain Brian Seage, Royal Marines, to try to arrange the collection and burial of Argentine soldiers killed almost a week earlier. We found that some attempt had been made to collect them together in rows but nothing at all to effect either their identification or burial. Through the good offices of Mr Brook Hardcastle, the Falkland Island Company Manager, we were able to select a site for the mass grave about a mile north west of Darwin and also to arrange for a digger to excavate the site. Then, with the help of Mr Eric Goss, the farm manager at Goose Green, and the 2IC of the 7 Gurkha Rifles, who, again, I knew from Hong Kong, we managed to obtain the use of a tractor and driver, a flat trailer, four Gurkha guards, and a working party from the Argentine POWs under guard in the sheep-shearing pen. While all this was being set up, I was taken by Mr Goss to the grave of Lieutenant Nick Taylor, RN, who had been shot down in his Sea Harrier and killed while attacking the airfield at Goose Green earlier in the campaign. I had been

especially asked to look for it by his friends in 846 NAS, who had heard a rumour, totally untrue as it turned out, that his body had been dumped in the sea. To their great credit, the Argentines had given him a proper Christian burial with full military honours. We then began the gruesome business of collecting the dead from Goose Green. Despite efforts to place them in two or three sheltered areas there were still some lying out in the open. As there were no body bags available, after recording their Service details, we wrapped them in ponchos, laid them on the trailer, and transported them some 3½ miles along the farm track to the agreed site, where we laid them ready for burial. It took the rest of that day to clear those we knew of in Goose Green and we spent the night with the Goss family who made us most welcome. It was fascinating to hear at first hand what things had been like during the occupation. Somehow it gave the whole thing a different perspective to be there on the spot and to meet people who had experienced it all.

The following morning at first light we continued with our task, and, after removing the charred remains of those killed in the ammunition dump explosion, went to Darwin to supervise the digging of the grave and to continue the work there. Later that morning I was driven by Mr. Goss all round the battle area, as far as Camilla Creek, visiting all the remote farms, checking on damage, and still looking for those killed in fighting. We found a few lying in the tussock grass and, after recording the spot, reported back for the tractor and trailer to collect them later. We collected about forty bodies in all and they were duly laid to rest.

Without a doubt this was the most unpleasant task I have ever had to undertake in my whole ministry, and one I hope I never have to repeat. But on reflection it was probably the most significant experience of my time in the South Atlantic, because in the spiritual sense it cost me a lot, and this I believe is at the heart of the Christian faith and of our Christian priesthood. I didn't want the job;

the very memory of it still sickens me; but it was there and it had to be done, since no one had got round to doing anything about it.

A very private and moving ceremony took place in the early hours of 25 May. At dusk the previous evening an LCVP from HMS *Fearless* went to HMS *Argonaut* to collect the bodies of two young sailors killed during the initial raids on 21 May. Wrapped in canvas, they were lowered from their ship into the LCVP, and covered with the Union Flag. Six of their shipmates led by Lieutenant Commander Peter Eberle, RN, escorted them and with due ceremony we were piped away. As one of them was a Roman Catholic we went first to HMS *Intrepid* to collect Father John Ryan, MBE RN, and then on to HMS *Plymouth* which was acting as convoy escort that night and who would convey them to their final resting place. At 01.00 on a pitch black night, with just the faint red glow of a Pusser's torch by which to read the Service, we committed them to the sea. 'God grant that they may find peace out of war in their silent resting place.' Matthew Stuart, HMS *Argonaut*, killed in action on his eighteenth birthday. That was not an easy duty but the quiet support of Captain David *Pentreath*, DSO RN, and his ship's company, who seemingly turned out to a man, made it an unforgettable one.

Reconciliation

No article on the role of the Chaplains would be complete without a section on reconciliation because as priests this is what we are about, reconciling man to God, man to himself, and to his brother. In the heat of battle it is so easy to forget that the aircraft blown to pieces by a missile contained a man, or that the position destroyed by a 4.5 shell contained human beings. This is all part of the lunacy of war. And yet, for those involved in the conflict, reconciliation

began when the first wounded Argentine was cared for by a British doctor, or the first prisoner fed and sheltered, the first cigarette offered and accepted. Once the enemy ceased to be a threat it was perfectly natural to treat him like a human being again. In particular one couldn't help but be impressed by the way the prisoners were treated. A mixture of firmness and rough kindness which brooked no nonsense but which spoke volumes for the basic decency and sense of humour that is still the hallmark of the British serviceman. Although Chaplains of all denominations had dealings with the prisoners, our Roman Catholic colleagues were able to get closest to them and must take most of the credit for the real progress that was made in breaking down the barriers of fear and misunderstanding that existed. Indeed there can be no finer vehicle for reconciliation than the Blessed Sacrament which throughout had been our life-line and was now the visible expression of a unity that transcended nationality and human failure.

So once more I return to Archdeacon Prior's words. The ship didn't sink although a lot of people tried to sink her and failed. Furthermore, despite some quite ghastly memories, I would be less than honest if I denied the times during the Falkland conflict that I thoroughly enjoyed. Perhaps the Archbishop of Canterbury illustrated this dilemma when he spoke of war not only in terms of victory and national pride, in which we all shared and rejoiced; but also in terms of failure, of pain, and of tragic loss, again something that touched each and every one of us, from the greatest to the least. Sadly, these concepts are not contradictory but complementary, for the lesson of history is that one is never possible without the other.

The Revd J. P. HUDSON