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HMS COVENTRY IN THE FALKLANDS CONFLICT – A PERSONAL STORY

Es el relato del Capitán David Hart Dyke, Comandante de la Coventry durante el conflicto de Malvinas.

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HMS *Coventry* in the Falklands Conflict — A Personal Story

THIS is a personal story of my time in command of HMS *Coventry* during the Falklands war. It is to me, at least, a story of brave men and a gallant ship which, like her predecessor in the Second World War, went down fighting in action against bomber aircraft.

In the battle zone

On 1 May HMS *Coventry*, with her sister ships *Sheffield* and *Glasgow*, formed an advanced air defence screen to protect our two carriers and entered the total exclusion zone around the Falkland Islands. *Coventry* remained in this battle zone under constant air, surface, and submarine threat until she was sunk in action against enemy bomber aircraft on 25 May.

From this first day in the war zone *Coventry* was fully involved in the air battle. Our task was to control the Sea Harriers and to guide them into action against the incoming air raids. Our long-range radar could see the threat developing at considerable distances and so we could position the Harriers in the right place so as to engage the enemy at the first opportunity. On 1 May the air battle went decisively in our favour. Seven aircraft were shot down by the Harriers and we suffered no losses. This victory on the first tense day of war was a very significant one indeed. Ever afterwards the enemy had the greatest respect for our Harriers; if they had not had this respect we would never have defeated their very strong air force.

Apart from the Sea Harriers, the only other offensive weapon system in the Task Force that could take the action to the Argentinian air force were the three Type 42 destroyers' Sea Dart missiles. Therefore, *Coventry* was sent on offensive missions to the enemy's front line and beyond to try to intercept their aircraft, particularly those that attempted to bring in supplies to their army on the Falklands. This we did,

with Harriers in support as well, and on two occasions whilst close to shore we also carried out some night bombardment with our 4.5 inch gun against enemy installations near Stanley airfield. After *Sheffield* was sunk on 4 May and *Glasgow* put out of action by bomb damage a week later, it left only *Coventry* to do all the front line work. And this we did — by day and night.

On our first mission close to the enemy's south coast we shot down two Skyhawk fighters escorting a supplying Hercules aircraft. We achieved this with one missile fired at its maximum range. An hour or two later we shot down a troop-carrying helicopter with another missile at a range of thirteen miles. After this action the Argentinians were forced to land supplies on a grass strip on the west Falklands. This successful action with Sea Dart missiles was the first ever in Royal Navy history.

We achieved another first in Naval history a few days before this engagement when in the early hours of 3 May my Lynx helicopter armed with two Sea Skua missiles detected two enemy ships heading for Stanley — presumably with supplies for the army ashore. The helicopter scored two direct hits with its missiles and totally destroyed one of the targets. The explosion as the vessel blew up was seen thirty miles away by other ships in the Task Force. The second vessel was later severely damaged by a Lynx helicopter and its missiles from *Glasgow*. This was the first surface action of the war.

A second surface action took place a day or two later when *Coventry* and *Glasgow* formed up in very poor visibility to take on two small fast-moving radar contacts assessed as fast patrol boats. Both ships fired twenty or thirty rounds of 4.5 inch shell and destroyed the targets. Later we discovered we had been engaging a group of albatross; but this was a very real action and in war any contact which is not a

the steeply sloping deck to the starboard side and saw the ship's company abandoning ship. It was quite remarkably orderly and calm, looking just like a peacetime exercise. I am still trying to discover who gave the order to abandon ship. Perhaps no one did. People just very sensibly got on and did it. It was the only thing to do.

All the starboard side liferafts were in the water and people were helping each other to put on their lifejackets and 'once only' suits. Someone helped me with mine because it was then I realised I had been burnt. Some flesh was hanging off my right hand. But it did not worry me at all, nor did it hurt very much. There were more important things to worry about — like surviving! When I had watched everyone jump into the sea and get into their liferafts I walked down the ship's side, jumped the last two feet into the water and swam to a liferaft. My war was over.

In dangerous times emotions are heightened but at the same time they are bravely and cheerfully controlled and prevented from breaking the surface — but only just. You are at war. You remember your training. You value your ship and your friends highly. You value highly the person you work for; you trust him. You are united in a common purpose with its common dangers and you give your best. This was the key to our success in battle and also to our survival on our last day when we had to abandon ship.

Prayer in action

Not long before we were sunk a Petty Officer came to me on the bridge and showed me a prayer which he always kept on him. It was given to him by his mother when he first joined the Navy and meant a great deal to him, especially now. Rather tearfully he gave it to me and asked me to read it at our church service on Sunday. It was an ancient prayer to St Joseph discovered in the first century AD which had been used by military leaders in medieval times before going into battle. Written on the back was the story which

said that if the prayer was kept on the person or read aloud then the person who kept it or those that heard it would not be killed in battle, nor drowned, nor harmed if captured by the enemy. I read it in church. A day or two later the prayer appeared on my desk in my cabin typed on a card. Nothing was said but I knew who had left it there and why. So I carried it on my person for the rest of the war. After being hit and when I came to swim to a liferaft I was hauled out of the water to safety by a sailor in that liferaft who said: 'There you are, it worked.' It was the same Petty Officer who gave me the prayer.

The bravery of the crew

When we were fighting for our lives in our last action and subsequently when being rescued from the water there were many brave deeds done by many of our sailors. A young officer directing the close-range guns from the very exposed position of the bridge wings did not take cover when the enemy aircraft were closing at eye level and straffing the ship with cannon fire. He stood there for all to see and ordered the guns crew to stay at their posts and engage the enemy until he gave the order to stop. This order was not questioned by the very young sailors manning the guns and they kept firing despite their totally exposed position. At least one aircraft was hit and two were turned away as a result of the barrage of fire. They remained at their posts even after the ship was listing steeply to port in case of another air attack. Eventually they were ordered to join the rest of the ship's company in abandoning ship.

Between decks two Chief Petty Officers, separately and on their own initiative, revisited smoke-filled compartments when everyone else was on the upper deck and the ship was listing dangerously over to port; they ensured anyone still alive was got out of the ship. One found a senior rating unconscious, his clothes on fire and slumped over a hatch above the engine room. He got him to the upper deck and saved his life.

The other Chief Petty Officer managed to get two very frightened young men who were trapped in a compartment to climb past a large hole in the deck through which intense heat and flame was flaring. He saw them safely to the upper deck and saved their lives. This Chief Petty Officer then continued his search, despite the rapid listing of the ship, totally alone, and by wriggling along on his stomach to keep below the layers of suffocating smoke looked into several spaces for survivors before saving himself and swimming to a liferaft.

A rating in the engine room hearing a large thump looked round to see a bomb which had come into the ship a few feet from where he was standing. He did not run but went to a telephone close to where he was and reported this fact to damage control headquarters; he described the bomb, the whereabouts of the hole in the side and the nature of damage to the machinery. The bomb then blew up as he was still taking. Miraculously he was shielded from the blast by a bit of machinery and walked out unharmed. Others were killed outright.

The liferaft that I was in was sucked in against the overhanging port side of the ship and was punctured by the sharp nose of a Sea Dart missile which was still in the launcher. About thirty-five men, some badly burnt, ended up back in the water when the liferaft sunk underneath them. The injured, who were unable to swim were held up above the sea by their courageous colleagues until some helicopters arrived and were able to lift them to safety. One helicopter actually landed on the ship's side to pick up people who had had to scramble back on board; by this time the ship was burning red hot inside. These men were all rescued.

Reflections

It was, of course, terrible to have lost my ship and some of my people, and you don't get over that. But it is made easier to bear when you have seen your officers and men, many very young, regardless of the dangers

being cheerful, fearless and totally dedicated to the ship and cause for which they were fighting; moreover, being utterly loyal to me — even after the traumatic and frightening experience of being sunk in action. Their loyalty and concern for me made me feel immensely humble and it intensified my very high regard and respect for them. This was, as you can imagine, infinitely heartening to a Captain who had just lost his ship. So, too, were the 200 or more letters that I have received from all over the country since being back: all without exception praised what we achieved, greatly sympathised for those who were lost and expressed whole-hearted belief in the cause and very great pride in what the country was doing.

I can never forget the brave people in my ship who fought so well. Nor can I forget those nineteen equally brave men who lost their lives and who also contributed so much to the battle. They did more than their best continuously for at least four weeks of intensive and dangerous operations and they somehow preserved their humour and remained alert and efficient throughout. It was an unforgettable privilege — and a rare experience for someone of my generation — to have led such professional and brave men in action. They will always remain my heroes and I shall always have very proud memories of a gallant ship. In only four weeks of war we had shot down at least five fighter bombers, a helicopter and sunk a patrol vessel. Furthermore, our control of Sea Harriers accounted for several more enemy aircraft.

The City of Coventry presented my ship when she first commissioned with three large medieval nails from the bombed Cathedral which were formed into the shape of a cross and mounted on a wooden plynth. This cross was always kept in a prominent place in the ship in a display cabinet. When it came to prepare the ship for action all trophies such as this were taken down and secured in a safe place. However, at the particular request of a young and rather frightened Petty Officer,

I let this cross remain defiantly where it was. It had, I think, become a symbol of hope and survival for him, and no doubt to many others as well at this time. But tragically, like the medieval Cathedral, our cross did not survive — *but* many of us did. A few days after the ship was sunk one of my officers wrote this short poem:

In the Cathedral Three Great Nails once held
Hearts of Oak until in war they were felled

In cruciform they found new life
To guide mens' hearts in peace and strife
Now they mark the watery grave
Of a ship and her men giving all to save.

Our Nation, our Navy, has a priceless inheritance which has given us men of great quality who have fought so well down the ages and no less so than in the South Atlantic in 1982.

DAVID HART DYKE