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RFA SIR GALAHAD
THE DEMISE OF A GALLANT KNIGHT

Es el relato del Capitán P. J. Roberts de lo actuado por el RFA Sir Galahad durante el conflicto de Malvinas.

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THE
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REVIEW

RFA Sir Galahad — The Demise of a Gallant Knight

I WRITE this article almost a year after RFA *Sir Galahad* was bombed and set on fire by Argentine aircraft at Port Pleasant off Fitzroy Settlement, Falkland Islands, with such tragic loss of life and horrendous injuries. A lot has been written in that time, together with much speculation both on television, newspapers and in books, concerning the events leading up to this tragedy, when not only 42 Welsh Guards and 3 RAMC, but more pertinently to me three of my Engineer Officers and two of my Chinese crew, were killed and so many others were badly burned.

Little has been written of the loss of my officers and crew or of the desperate injuries they sustained. I feel it would be nice if their sacrifices could be recognised. There was a general lack of factual press reporting of the whole incident. The press refer to it as the 'Bluff Cove Tragedy'; perhaps it sounds nicer than 'Fitzroy'! They refer to *Sir Galahad* as HMS not RFA (nothing is more disconcerting than to see yourself on television news with the caption: 'Captain Philip Roberts of HMS *Sir Galahad*').

The Embarkation

On 2 April 1982 I received the signal with the magic words 'Operation Corporate'. At first I thought it was some paper exercise that I and the Radio Officer had forgotten about, but no, it was for real (and how). The Falklands war had begun. We proceeded at best speed to Plymouth, arriving on 3 April. Our cargo ex-Norwegian exercises was quickly offloaded and fantastic efforts were made by the Dockyard to backload with ammunition, rations, rigid raider boats, petrol, land rovers, waterproofing kits and a whole host of ancillary stores. This was completed by the evening of 4 April. On the morning of 5 April we embarked some 350 Royal Marines of 40 Commando, HQ and

Signals, 59 Commando, No. 1 Raiding Squadron plus three Gazelles and their crews from 3 Commando Brigade Air Squadron. Ten Royal Corps of Transport soldiers were embarked as part of the ship's company to act as stevedores. Three Royal Navy signalmen were also embarked.

My ship's officers were frantically storing up with every conceivable item that we thought we might need over the next ninety days. Every available space was crammed to capacity, as were the main fridges.

The sailing

Sir Galahad proudly set sail from Plymouth at 1500 on 6 April with the Royal Marines lining the ship's side, Gazelles ranged on the flight deck, battle ensign flying. We all felt very honoured to be setting off to do our utmost for Queen and country.

The passage south

On the passage south to Ascension we prepared ourselves for war by exercising our NBCD teams, action stations, working up our Gazelles (only the Flight Commander had previously done any deck landings; all the other pilots were new to the game). As far as possible, we tried to integrate the Royal Marines into the day to day running of the ship; the OC Troops attended my daily Heads of Departments meetings where a lot of problems were ironed out. LSLs had not originally been built to embark so many troops for such a long period. There were few facilities for relieving the boredom and making life easier in very cramped dormitories. There was very little upper deck space left, due to deck cargo, for physical training; even the flight deck was overcrowded with three Gazelles. I have to admire the spirit of the Royal Marines. They remained unremittingly cheerful throughout the journey south. I received very few moans or complaints from them; they were all

desperately keen to get down there and get on with the job.

At Ascension we spent ten days frantically cross-decking Royal Marines and our cargo. By now it had been decided which LSL would be doing what at the landing. This meant considerable reshuffling of the cargo which had been hurriedly loaded at Plymouth and at the other ports where our sister ships had been loaded. We did get a Bofors, 6 GMPGs and a Blowpipe Missile launcher fitted here, together with crews to fire them. We were also allocated sandbags which after a great deal of hassle we managed to fill and place on the upper bridge deck as protection for the GPMG crews.

In our role as logistic support ship we sailed from Ascension loaded with WMR and a mixed array of vehicles and with the following embarked: Commando Logistic Regiment, HQ and Sigs, elements of the Field Dressing Station. We knew of the very large Argentinian Air Force yet to be neutralized and also of the many Exocet missiles they were capable of deploying against us.

So, on 30 April, in company with four other LSLs, RFA *Pearleaf*, and our escort HMS *Antelope* we set sail from Ascension Island in the direction of South Georgia. Commander Nick Tobin, CO of *Antelope*, referred to us as his Chinese Navy (all the ships he escorted were manned by Hong Kong Chinese crews — approximately three hundred in all), and through his good leadership and particularly his strict EMCON policy we achieved our passage south without detection. He also very bravely allowed us our first Gunex firing at star shells he put up. A lot of Bofors ammo was put up by the five LSLs, some of it landing remarkably close to him!

Nearer South Georgia, HMS *Antrim* and HMS *Plymouth* took over duties as escorts, by which time we were getting down into the roaring forties and were receiving our first real taste of bad weather.

On 19 May we rendezvoused with *Fearless* and the rest of the amphibious group close to HMS *Hermes* and her carrier

task force. It was on my way by helo to *Fearless* that I was able to get a bird's eye view of this tremendous force of ships. The D-Day plan was that the landing would be at San Carlos in the early hours of 21 May. *Sir Galahad* was required to anchor in San Carlos with the rest of the LSLs, *Canberra*, *Norland*, *Europic Ferry* and *Stromness*.

San Carlos

One hour before dawn, the LSL group approached the northern entrance to the Falkland Sound. We were in the last of four groups; *Fearless* and *Intrepid* had gone in ahead and inserted landing craft to secure the beachhead. The first sign of any activity was tracer flickering across the headland at Fanning Head. We anchored in our assigned anchorage just after launching our three Gazelles which had been tasked in reconnaissance duties in support of 2 Para. As the sun rose over the hills at San Carlos it could have been spring on a Scottish Loch. However, this peaceful scene did not last for long. A Pucara flew in and out of the hills and we fired our first shots in anger. The sound of that gunfire was surprisingly exhilarating. However, our confidence was shortlived — one of our Gazelles returned with very sad news that the other two Gazelles had been shot down, both pilots and a crewman killed. Our first reactions were of shock and anger but at the same time it put into perspective our reasons for being there and gave us a greater sense of purpose to rid these islands of their unwanted invaders.

Apart from offloading ambulances and men of the Field Dressing Station to Ajax Bay, no further cargo was discharged on D-Day.

It was not too long before all the ships in San Carlos came under heavy air attack from A4 Skyhawks and Mirage, bombs landing within a quarter of a mile. These air attacks continued all day and we were all relieved when night time came as we had been told that the Argentinians did not fly at night. This proved true of their fighters. The only threat that we had to contend with was of underwater swimmers; we dropped scare charges to counteract this.

On 22 and 23 May we were subjected to air attacks during daylight, and at first light on 24 May we shifted anchorage to within half a mile of Ajax Bay in order to speed the discharge of cargo which was scheduled to start that day. We passed very close to the dying throes of HMS *Antelope*, our old friend who had escorted us to and from Ascension on the way down — a very sad sight. Not long after we had anchored there were several heavy air raids. It was during one of these raids that we were hit by a 1000 lb bomb which ricocheted off the water close to the bridge and passed through the ship's side, tore its way through four steel bulkheads and came to rest in a battery charging room only some sixty feet from where three hundred tons of ammo lay. Fortunately, it failed to explode; otherwise neither I nor any of my crew would be alive today.

I sent for the bomb disposal squad and evacuated all personnel to the after end of the ship. After about an hour the bomb disposal team arrived and after they had examined it they advised me that the bomb was in a very critical condition and the slightest vibration would set it off. I decided to evacuate the ship until such time as the bomb could be made safe. The embarked force were evacuated first by lifeboat to *Fearless*. As they were mustered at the lifeboats, another air attack followed and we were strafed by cannon, sustaining about twenty hits resulting in three injuries. In the same attack, several Argentine aircraft were shot down and each was followed by a tremendous cheer from the Royal Marines waiting to board their lifeboats. It sounded like Cup Final day at Wembley — it did our morale good which was starting to flag at this stage. We all eventually got off and dispersed to various ships round San Carlos water, most of us, including myself, ending up on RFA *Stromness* where we were made very welcome.

On the evening of 25 May, after a day of very heavy air attacks, my Chief and Second Engineer Officers, together with a small team including an Electrical Officer

and two RCT crane drivers, returned to *Sir Galahad* to provide services for the bomb disposal squad from HMS *Intrepid*. The bomb was removed from the ship in the early hours of 26 May by an extremely brave bunch of men.

Stromness had to sail at short notice on the night of 25/26 May for South Georgia to meet the *QE2*. I had agreed with COMAW that my Chinese crew remain in *Stromness* until the bomb had been disposed of, but all officers, RCT ranks, RN signalmen and ship's air defence team would spend the night in *Fearless* and move back to *Sir Galahad* when it was safe to do so.

With the bomb safely disposed of, we transferred from *Fearless*. By this time, the Chief Engineer Officer had restored all services and the first thing we did was to shift to a more sheltered anchorage out of the main bomb runway. With the help of RN Shipwrights we patched up the hole in the ship's side with one-eighth of an inch steel plate and backed this up with some classic Phoenix damage control shoring. This was a very difficult time for my officers; not only were they having to do their own duties but all the duties of the absent Chinese. The Purser was doing sterling stuff in the galley. He even put up the crew from HMS *Argonaut* for bed and breakfast while her bombs were being defused. Likewise, the Deck and Engineering Officers worked extremely hard and I never heard any of them complain. The RCT lads were invaluable during this period.

By 30 May we were ready to sail from San Carlos to proceed to the carrier group to get back our Chinese who by now were embarked in *Sir Tristram*. We had only discharged approximately one hundred tons of ammunition in this time, plus all the vehicles stowed on the upper deck. The ship by this time was like the proverbial tip. We felt rather relieved to sail out of San Carlos that evening and hopefully to restore order if not some decent food, and above all to get out of the firing line for a day or two.

Licking our wounds

On 31 May our Chinese crew were returned by helicopter in atrocious weather conditions. They surprisingly were all very pleased to be back and straight away set-to to clean up the ship and within an hour had provided us all with a hot meal.

On 1 June we RASed fuel with RFA *Olva*, and restored sanity to the Chief Engineer Officer by getting a fresh supply of cigars. I have never seen someone enjoy a smoke so much before. I decided that it was time I restored my own sanity and sent for my steward. He provided us both with a beautiful gin and tonic with ice and lemon served on a silver tray complete with a bowl of peanuts. Much to the amusement of all on the bridge, we both enjoyed those drinks. They were a happy relief after so much tension.

Back to the Grind

On the night of 1/2 June we proceeded back to San Carlos slightly perturbed as to whether our one-eighth of an inch patch would hold out at full speed into a Force 8 gale. However, only a slight amount of water seeped through and all was well.

We completed loading for Teal Inlet on 2 June and sailed that night for the carrier group, spending all day on 3 June trying to regain our allotted station within the task group.

At first light on 4 June we negotiated the winding passage into Teal Inlet and anchored a mile off the settlement. When daylight came it all looked rather peaceful and we could see the mountains that overlooked Port Stanley quite clearly. It was at Teal that we finally discharged our cargo of ammo and stores that we had loaded a long time ago in Plymouth. On 4 and 5 June we fuelled about 95 helicopters; they were queuing up like cars at an M1 filling station!

On 6 June after passing all our excess avcat to *Sir Percivale* we sailed for San Carlos, arriving at first light. The weather in San Carlos was foul, blowing gale 8 or 9, so no cargo was loaded on the 6th.

Our last run

On the morning of 7 June, I was briefed on our next mission. The plan was to embark 352 Welsh Guards, complete with first line stores, 30 G Coy SAS and 30 RAMC of 16 Field Ambulance together with their stores and vehicles. At dusk on 7 June we were to sail San Carlos down the Falkland Sound and Eagle Passage to Bluff Cove, arriving there three and a half hours before sunrise. The Welsh Guards would be disembarked and we were to sail Bluff Cove and arrive off Fitzroy Settlement at first light on the 8th. Here we were to disembark 16 Field Ambulance and sail Fitzroy later that evening. The passages into both Bluff Cove and Fitzroy were rather tricky especially at night, the channel into Port Pleasant being only four hundred feet wide with a bold dog leg.

Throughout 7 June we loaded stores and ammunition of the Welsh Guards and RAMC plus Rapier Batteries and a Sea King helicopter. We finally completed loading in the early hours of 8 June and because of the delay in loading in the early hours of 8 June and because of the delay in loading we did not have sufficient time to get to Bluff Cove before daylight. This necessitated sailing direct for Fitzroy Settlement.

At 0200 GMT 8 June we weighed anchor in San Carlos and proceeded down the Falkland Sound at our very best speed. It was a clear moonlit night; the coastline of West Falklands was clearly visible. We carried all the Welsh Guards in the tank deck.

At first light we negotiated the very narrow entrance to Port Pleasant and anchored off Fitzroy Settlement about 3 cables to the east of RFA *Sir Tristram*, who was still unloading ammo and stores. The weather was bright and sunny with good visibility — the hills and landmarks around Port Stanley looked very close. *Sir Tristram* had filled both the Mexefloat and one LCU to capacity with ammunition. So the Welsh Guards had to wait on board until these assets had proceeded to shore, discharged and returned to the ship. The Welsh Guards

were anxious to be landed at Bluff Cove where they had originally been ordered to, not Fitzroy. They had been told that the bridge at Fitzroy over to Bluff Cove had been blown and was not yet repaired. So it was that only a handful of RAMC managed to get ashore, and none of the Welsh Guards, by 1715 when the OOW observed two very low flying aircraft approaching the ship fast on the starboard beam. He immediately piped 'Action Stations' and at the same time I entered the wheelhouse. We both hit the deck behind the chart table. The ship shuddered with the explosions. Seconds later two more aircraft flew low over the ship and again we felt explosions. All ventilation was crash stopped, fire alarm bells were ringing furiously on the bridge panel. Smoke immediately started to appear through the chartroom door which had been blown open by the force of the explosions. My immediate reaction was to rush out to the bridge wings to assess the damage. On the starboard side there were flames and an enormous amount of black smoke coming out of the accommodation and engine room vent fans, and it was much the same on the port side. On looking forward, flames and smoke were shooting out of the after hatch. I tried phoning the engine room by sound powered telephone but there was no reply. It became immediately apparent to me that fires were burning out of control in many places and that the ship could not be saved. Instinctively, I grabbed the ship's broadcast system microphone, not knowing if it was working, and made the pipe 'Abandon Ship, Abandon Ship'. I learnt later that this pipe had been heard in most parts of the ship. I felt it very important that the after accommodation be evacuated as quickly as possible.

No. 4 lifeboat was swung out over the side and had to be lowered shortly afterwards because it was being enveloped in smoke. I proceeded forward to supervise the launching of liferafts. By this time, helicopters were already arriving to take off the wounded; the Mexefloat and LCU were also quickly on the scene as were two lifeboats from

Sir Tristram. By 1750 all the non-seriously injured personnel and ship's crew had been evacuated from the ship. By this time the whole of the bridge front was burning furiously and smoke billowing high into the sky. Loud explosions, flames and shrapnel were erupting from the after hatch.

All the remaining injured had been evacuated to the forecabin and were being cared for by 16 Field Ambulance medics before being winched into a Sea King. The evacuation of the badly wounded was a slow and painful operation. The pilots of the helicopters showed great courage and determination, hovering close to the deck despite the loud explosions and debris which was being blown into the air. It was very fortuitous that our foremast had been lowered in order to increase our arc of fire. This enabled the helos to hover four or five feet above the deck, so speeding up the evacuation of the very badly burned Welsh Guards.

At 1815 the last of the wounded had been lifted off. I bundled my Chief Engineer Officer who had also been wounded up into the helo and then hooked myself on — I was the last to leave my ship. It was a desperately sad moment for me. A well ordered, happy and disciplined ship one moment and a burning inferno the next, and obviously at that time I did not know which or how many of my officers or crew had been killed or injured.

The full story was, of course, well recorded by the BBC camera team and reported on by Brian Hanrahan. For me and probably my officers, crew and all those troops that we were carrying at the time, and the relatives of those who were killed, it was one of those sad moments of timing because the media use those pictures as their theme for the whole of the Falklands war, showing them time and time again. It certainly is disturbing for me to see them as it must be for others who were there.

The aftermath

Because the *Sir Galahad* survivors had been dispersed to several ships and to Ajax Bay Hospital, it made it difficult to compile a

definite list of survivors for several days. The eventual outcome was of course tragic in extreme — fifty killed and many wounded. The wounded were placed on board *Uganda* and the remaining RFA survivors took passage firstly in *Atlantic Conveyor* and then *British Test* to Ascension Island. From Ascension we were flown to Brize Norton to a very warm but sober welcome.

Sir Galahad was a very happy ship and I am proud to have commanded her and her

magnificent team of officers and men. The number of awards and decorations only add weight to the tremendous efforts they contributed to the success of the Falklands Campaign (2 George Medals, 2 Queen's Gallantry Medals, 2 Queen's Commendations for Brave Conduct, and 2 Mentions in Despatches). A tragic end to a gallant knight.

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