



Exocet Falklands: The Untold Story of Special Forces Operations

By Ewen Southby-Tailyour

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Reviewed by SFC (Retired) John C. Simpson

The Falklands War began on 2 April of 1982 with amphibious landings by Argentinian forces on the Falkland Islands which had been under British rule since 1883. The military junta then governing Argentina assumed that the British would be unwilling to protect some islands in the South Atlantic and that with the occupation the British would be driven to the negotiating table for a final resolution. They hadn't counted on Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, however, as she established a War Cabinet on 6 April for the express purpose of retaking the Falkland Islands by force. The conflict later ended on 14 June of that same year with the British victorious over the invaders.

Since then, there has been a great deal of analysis in regard to lessons learned from this conflict ranging from how vulnerable surface ships are from both air-launched guided missiles or torpedoes from submarines to how in an age of air mobility and mechanized warfare British paratroopers still had to march 21 kilometers and the Royal Marine Commandos (carrying 80-pound loads) had to be able march 90 kilometers just to get to their battlefields. And that's nowhere near a comprehensive list.

As anyone who studies military history will tell you though, the full story of a war is seldom known in the immediate aftermath. There is, however, a "sweet spot" in the research where useful information is finally declassified and surviving participants can be interviewed for their firsthand accounts. This all brings us to the subject of this review, *Exocet Falklands*, an outstanding book that definitely benefited from the release of previously classified material as well as firsthand interviews with personnel from both sides of the conflict that were conducted by the author.

The result is a very readable book with a narrative that weaves together three parallel story lines: the Argentinian effort to do what British intelligence believed impossible and mount Exocet missiles onto their aircraft without technical assistance from French factory technicians; the events behind the planning and mistakes over Operation Mikado; and the comedy of errors that was Operation Plum Duff. This is then followed by details of the "hitherto unknown" (according to the author) — Operation Kettledrum.

Operation Mikado was supposed to be an airfield assault using multiple C-130 transports loaded with special air commandos to destroy the only Argentine aircraft capable of carrying French Exocet anti-ship missiles. It was actually inspired by the successful hostage rescue at Entebbe, Uganda, by Israeli Defense Forces on 4 July 1976. Plum Duff was a reconnaissance patrol in support of Mikado involving an eight-man SAS element that was to approach the target airfield and provide final eyes on target prior to the raid. Kettledrum was a proposed mission for the Special Boat Squadron (SBS) to perform an attack on the mainland at Puerto Deseado in order to destroy any aircraft that they might find.

The lessons to be learned from the planning mistakes documented here are worth the price of the book alone in my opinion. Mikado was never executed, but prior to its cancellation saw the voluntary termination of a senior NCO from the SAS in protest of being assigned a "suicide mission" and the relief of his squadron commander for a perceived failure to maintain morale. It's from studying Plum Duff, however, that we learn the most valuable lessons in the conduct of a long-range reconnaissance patrol. This mission was full of errors practically from the beginning with the team being too large for a recon patrol but too small for a combat patrol.

One error in the planning of Plum Duff that hit home for me was using "you never know" as a substitute for proper contingency planning. Without going into too much detail, the patrol that was only intended to place surveillance on the target airfield was ordered to be ready to destroy the aircraft on the ground if possible. This meant food and cold weather clothing were replaced with explosive charges and detonators. This left each man with four days rations and inadequate clothing for the autumn weather. This would impact the mission after the patrol was dropped off by the helicopter across the Chilean border instead of the planned 45 kilometers from the airfield, which led to them trying to walk more than 160 kilometers.

The author has included two things of extreme value in this book: a 10-page timeline at the beginning and a 12-page epilogue at the end that analyzes the events and decisions made by the British military. I'll leave you with what I personally found to be one of the most useful quotes in the whole text that reinforces the constant need to train the whole spectrum of the skill set and not just the "high-speed, low-drag" things. It was from an SAS corporal who was in B Squadron at the time it was standing by for Operation Mikado:

"We trained and worked as infantry sections for the first time since I joined the Regiment... most of my sergeants didn't have a clue about infantry battle-drills... They couldn't give section or platoon orders and would be dangerous to have around in a fire-fight. I for one wouldn't have followed some of my own sergeants... War was bringing out the worst as well as the best in the SAS. (emphasis added)"

Now, I don't know if you're a notetaker, highlighter, or underliner when reading a book of this type. Myself, I used color-coded adhesive flags to mark the locations of items I found with a particularly useful lesson. This is that kind of book. I think you'll enjoy reading it, and you just might learn something as well. I highly recommend this book.