

**“IT SHOULD NEVER HAVE HAPPENED”:
LOOKING BACK AT THE 1982 FALKLANDS WAR WITH PAUL ROGERS**

Introduction by Sean Howard, *Cape Breton Spectator*

In April 1982, Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands, a small British territory in the resource-rich waters of the South Atlantic. The brief but brutal war that followed changed Britain and Argentina in important and enduring ways, and in April 2022 I had the honour of assessing its legacy with Paul Rogers, Emeritus Professor of Peace Studies at Bradford University’s Department of Peace Studies and International Relations.

Interview

- 1. In 1984, Clive Ponting, a 38-year-old high-ranking civil servant at the Ministry of Defence, leaked documents to a Labour MP, Tam Dalyell, exposing the deliberate misleading of Parliament regarding the sinking of the Argentinian cruise *Belgrano*, with the loss of over 300 lives, on May 2, 1982: an attack now widely seen as deliberately scuppering hopes of a peace settlement on offer from Peru. The UK government initially claimed the *Belgrano* posed an active threat and was sailing towards British forces: after Ponting’s act, Parliament and public learnt that the *Belgrano* was torpedoed as it sailed *not towards but away from* the UK Task Force. Ponting was charged under the Official Secrets Act and seemed certain to face a long prison sentence. In February 1985, one of the most prominent trials of the 20th century ended with one of the most sensational verdicts: Not Guilty. Paul played an important part in defending Ponting, and it was with the trial and verdict that I opened my interview.**

I remember the news of the acquittal precisely. I happen to have left work early that day and heard it when driving on the M62 motorway, let out a roar of surprise and had to concentrate intensely on my driving. In the several months between Clive’s arrest and trial I’d provided background research for his case and spent a day with him going over various details. Given the way the trial was run, especially the attitude of the judge, the expectation was of a guilty verdict, and government supporters labelled the result “perverse”. I later learned that some close observers of the proceedings suspected that members of the jury may have been antagonised by the judge’s obvious assumption of guilt.

In wider political circles, by the time of the trial the Thatcher government was comfortably into its second term, the Labour opposition was in disarray and the transition of the UK economy to a more clearly neoliberal model was well under way. Even so, what the verdict did do was to cast a pall over the Falklands policy and offer some support to those people who thought the war was a mistake. Also, by that time, it was becoming obvious that a full-scale military airbase would have to be built on the Falklands, that there would have to be some kind of guard ship, initially a frigate or destroyer, a flight of modern interceptors, transport aircraft, helicopters and all the support staff, workshops, accommodation and the rest, all in addition to a permanent fully-equipped and supported army garrison. “Fortress Falklands” would last as long as there were no

negotiations, many millions of pounds a year to protect the life-styles of 1,800 Falkland Islanders and the well-being of half a million sheep. Forty years later that is where we still are.

- 2. In the House of Commons on December 21, 1982, Tam Dalyell told the Prime Minister that “the sinking of the *Belgrano*, when the right honourable Lady knew what she did about peace proposals, was an evil decision of an order that it would not have occurred to me to attribute to any other politician of any party since I have been in the House.” In the fever-pitch House of Commons debate on February 18, 1985, a week after Ponting’s acquittal, Michael Heseltine adduced this quote as ‘proof’ Dalyell was motivated by his opposition to the war and hatred of the PM. You, too, faced similar charges of bias; how did and do you respond to the charge, and would you go as far as Dalyell in describing the decision to sink the *Belgrano* as “evil,” even perhaps as a war crime?**

There was a fair bit of criticism and a regular columnist of the regional daily newspaper, the *Yorkshire Post*, called me “Dr Death”, but the strongest rebuttal always lay in accurate research and analysis. Although work on defence, disarmament and related matters formed only a small part of the Department’s research and teaching, it is that element that it was very well known for throughout the 1980s. At the time of the war, there was some graffiti on campus saying “they used to hang traitors, now they give them degrees in peace studies” and in right-wing political circles the Bradford peace studies centre was known as “appeasement studies”, one member of the House of Lords calling it “a rest home for urban guerillas”.

Peace Studies was the only British university department to be subject to external scrutiny in the 1980s when the then funding body, the University Grants Committee, was put under intense pressure to undertake an investigation. Bradford’s Vice-Chancellor [John West] – a former weapons engineer – decided, to his credit, that he would only agree to such an extraordinary move if the staff all agreed. We certainly did and welcomed the two investigators, providing reading lists, exam papers and all the other evidence they needed. They reported, much to the government’s annoyance, that the department was in a good state and doing fine academic work. Looking back on it, I’ve no doubt that the effect of the intense critical scrutiny greatly increased the competence of our work.

What I found personally interesting is that while right-wing politicians might be intensely critical and dismissive, the military were more than willing to engage. My first invitation to lecture at a defence college was to the RAF Staff College, in 1982, and for the past thirty years I’ve been an honorary fellow at the Joint Service Command and Staff College.

More generally, when the Cold War ended, Peace Studies academics were able to adapt to the changed world security environment a lot easier than most international relations specialists because they were already concerned with a much wider range of security issues. These including conflict prevention, conflict resolution, peace-keeping, and peacebuilding, as well as major issues such as socioeconomic marginalisation, environmental limits and gender and conflict.

3. On March 29, Sky News reported ([Falklands War veterans still suffering as the conflict fades from the public's memory | UK News | Sky News](#)) that the Falklands War “risks being forgotten” in the UK, “with a quarter of young people having never heard of it, according to a Help for Heroes survey.” The survey “found that only 4% of the 2,100 adults polled could answer a series of questions correctly. Half of those aged 18-34 said they did not know when the war was fought, and one in 10 of that age group believed the UK invaded the islands, leading to the war, while a similar number thought the Falklands are in the English Channel.” As the report notes, the concern of ‘Help the Heroes’ is that such amnesia may add to the neglect of “many of the veterans who are still struggling with physical or mental wounds.” How do you think the War *should* be remembered, and do you believe it still holds lessons for the British public, and politicians, after so much time and change?

It should be remembered as a war that should never have happened: the UK should have negotiated. That was highly unlikely, though, as the Thatcher government would most likely not have survived. Also, as Britain was still hanging on to its delusion of post-imperial grandeur (and still is), it was not surprising that it was easy to get public support. The US negotiator, [Secretary of State] Al Haig, apparently likened the war to “two bald men fighting over a comb”. Six years after the Brexit decision, with all the political and economic problems that persist, the Johnson government is actually now aiming to present the UK as a world leader in hard security, with its Trident missiles, two aircraft carriers and the rest. Even though we are forty years on, the Falklands War still has its value as Britain fighting against the odds, so any attempts to criticise the conduct of the war are not welcome.

4. In an *open Democracy* article marking the 20th anniversary of the war – ‘The Belgrano Precedent: War in the Service of Politics?’ ([The Belgrano precedent: war in the service of politics? | openDemocracy](#)) – you wrote that the Falklands have “ended up as a veritable Fortress,” costing “billions of pounds to establish and maintain. To this day, Britain maintains a considerable garrison to protect less than two thousand islanders, and a long-term diplomatic settlement seems years away.” Indeed, as recently as June 24 last year the UNGA’s Special Committee on Decolonization adopted ([Special Committee on Decolonization Approves 18 Draft Resolutions, as It Concludes 2021 Substantive Session | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases \(un.org\)](#)) a resolution (introduced by Chile) “requesting that the Governments of Argentina and the United Kingdom resume negotiations as soon as possible to reach a peaceful resolution of their sovereignty dispute”; reasoning that “the way to end the special and particular colonial situation of the South Atlantic archipelago is through a peaceful and negotiated settlement between the two Member States”; and regretting that “the implementation of” numerous “General Assembly resolutions” on the Falklands/Malvinas issue have “yet to be implemented.” Why do you believe the issue still remains essentially untouchable for British Governments? Do you suspect that the ongoing militarization of the Falklands is meant to signal that the UK will never relinquish its grip on the territory? And what do you believe a reasonable and realistic settlement would look like?

Britain cannot come to terms with a post-imperial role in the world and it will take a very strong government to seek a settlement. Many options would be open, and the importance of symbolism would have to be recognised. A long-term (99-year) leasing arrangement with numerous safeguards for islanders would be a possible way forward. Meanwhile we maintain a substantial base including state-of-the art military forces with all the support they require, costing many millions of pounds a year. In a post-Brexit world, though, and especially with the current government, Fortress Falklands is here to stay.

- 5. You kindly alerted me to the recent declassification of documents, succinctly labelled ‘Top Secret Atomic,’ revealing that the weapons deployed with the British Task Force included 31 nuclear depth charges. According to Richard Norton-Taylor ([UK deployed 31 nuclear weapons during Falklands war \(declassifieduk.org\)](#)), the long-time *Guardian* defence correspondent who played a critical role in publicising the *Belgrano* scandal ([Tam Dalyell · Getting it right · LRB 18 July 1985](#)), the documents show “that the presence of the nuclear weapons caused panic among officials in London when they realised the damage, both physical and political, they could have caused.” Given that the UK was legally pledged not to use nuclear weapons against any Latin American or Caribbean party to the 1967 Treaty of Tlatelolco – establishing the region, including the Falklands, as a nuclear-weapon-free zone – why was such an extraordinarily dangerous risk taken? In the February 1985 Commons debate, Dalyell stated that “she who ordered the sinking” of the *Belgrano* “is also she who has her finger on nuclear weapons. As long as she remains our Head of Government, what happens at a moment of national humiliation and defeat is a matter of lasting importance.” But would even Mrs. Thatcher have ‘gone nuclear’ against a non-nuclear state?**

After long denying the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons (Sea Harrier-delivered free fall bombs and helicopter-delivered anti-submarine depth bombs), the government eventually admitted that both aircraft carriers and two anti-submarine frigates were nuclear armed when they set out. The government has claimed that those on the frigates were transferred to fleet auxiliaries with their deep magazines (the carriers had such magazines) and they also suggest that all the ships were kept away from the zone covered by the treaty.

More worrying is that there were repeated suggestions that a Polaris missile submarine was diverted from its usual North Atlantic/Arctic patrol zone to the mid-Atlantic to bring the missiles with range of Argentina, possibly to threaten escalation if Britain was losing the war. That is strongly denied but there is circumstantial evidence available to support the claim. It is worth remembering that the UK, both individually and as a member of NATO does not abide by a no-first-use policy.

- 6. In one of the more obvious failures of nuclear ‘deterrence’, British nuclear weapons failed to deter Argentina from invading the Falklands. Despite this, the patriotic fervour of the time seemed to confirm, for many, that Britain ‘needed’ the Bomb for reasons of both security and status. Indeed, this ‘common sense’ was quite soon accepted by a Labour Party which was officially unilateralist in 1982. Do you think**

that if the war had not happened (or if peace had not been scuppered), the nuclear debate in Britain may have taken a different trajectory?

Probably not, I'm afraid, nuclear possession was and is seen as a necessary part of big-power status. Apparently being able to kill 20 million people in a couple of hours is a sign of great power status and not the posture of a rogue state. It is a strange world, all part of the delusion of greatness. I remember, back in my student days, a friend from Ghana telling me of a joke he picked up back home. Question: 'Why was it that the sun never set on the British Empire?' Answer: 'Because God didn't trust the British in the dark.'

- 7. The war led to (or at least hastened) the downfall of the Argentinian dictatorship. In Britain, the Ponting case led, as early as 1989, to a new, improved (though still flawed) Official Secrets Act. Are there any other 'pluses' you can think of, and what 'minuses' (political, social, military) would you set against them? Finally, do you think that the war continues to radiate in the background of British politics, subliminally influencing debates, for example, over Brexit and 'Global Britain'?**

No other pluses. On the minus side it certainly supported UK self-perception of a great power status stemming from military force. While now receding into history, the war still affects British perception of self, especially for people over 50.

"To Persevere with New Thinking": Peace Education v. Militarism

- 8. Just seven years after the Falklands War, the Berlin Wall fell, and the path seemed open to a new European – and global – era of cooperation, democracy, development, and disarmament. In retrospect, was such optimism (which I certainly shared) naïve and misguided, or was such a project essentially sabotaged and sidelined by NATO expansion, the 'war on terror,' and other resurgent militarisms? Of course, many things had to go wrong to deliver us to the Doorstep of Doomsday we're at today (in respect to both the climate crisis and nuclear threat) but do you think one of those things was the chronic failure, in the UK and elsewhere, to invest in and prioritize peace education, at all levels of the curricula?**

Optimism at the end of the Cold War was reasonable given the great dangers (and many 'near misses') of those years. My own optimism waned having followed the 1990-1 Iraq War with all its violence and parade of new weaponry closely. There was also the overarching issue of a world of environmental limits to growth combined with a global economic system rooted in unsustainable growth. Geoff and Kath Tansey and I co-edited a book on this theme, *A World Divided: Militarism and Development after the Cold War*, in 1994 which explored a new world disorder and how to respond to it. Last year, 27 years later, the publishers decided to re-publish it as an e-book (<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9781003111825/world-divided-geoff-tansey-kath-tansey-paul-rogers>) with a new preface, because of current relevance!

By the end of the 1990s 'turbocapitalism' was the order of the day, and then came the shock of 9/11 and the desperate need of the west to regain control of a suddenly insecure world. Many things might have made a difference, especially with the failure of four wars to

achieve their aims (Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and now against ISIS) and a much stronger element of peace education in our society would certainly have helped. Now things are in reverse as we head back to ever increasing military budgets in the wake of Ukraine, but we have no choice but to persevere with new thinking. The work of the recently started *Alternative Security Review* in the UK (<https://rethinkingsecurity.org.uk/find-out-more/alternative-security-review/>), and similar groups elsewhere, are indicators of good work in progress but the task is huge.