



RNIOA Article 25 [12/01/2025]

A Conscript's Diary

Surg Cdr (D) Neil Harkness RN BChD MSc

In 1982 I was serving as a Surgeon Commander (D) on board the aircraft carrier HMS *Invincible* when Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands. Most of the ship's company were enjoying the Easter leave period when we were immediately recalled to the ship and three days later set sail on the 26-day journey south.



HMS Invincible heading South in 1982.

Source: RNIOA Gallery

Much of January and February had been spent in the north of Scotland and then in arctic Norway so we were contemplating an interesting spring deployment to the Mediterranean with an opportunity to get some sun on our backs after a long cold winter. That was not to be.

The Invasion

Argentina deployed a comprehensive invasion force which landed and spread throughout the islands. Many of the soldiers were well trained professional men but a significant number were young conscripts who were inexperienced and ill-equipped for the role they were ultimately called upon to play. Falklands Islands' weather is notoriously inclement, and as April is part of their winter, living conditions for the invaders were far from pleasant. Gale-force winds often blow over the flat terrain and are generally accompanied by driving rain, sleet or snow. It was a miserable place to survive for weeks on end with so little shelter.

The Battle for Mount Tumbledown

Following the British troops' landing at San Carlos on 21 May 1982 the various groups fanned out across East Falkland and were assigned specific targets to engage prior to reaching their ultimate goal of Port Stanley. One such force was 2nd Battalion Scots Guards who were tasked with securing Mount Tumbledown - a rocky outcrop some four miles to the west of the capital. The mountain was held by the Argentine 5th Marine Infantry Brigade, a very proficient force of professional soldiers accompanied by a contingent of young conscripts. The engagement commenced at 20:30 hours on 13 June and lasted well into the next day.

It was a difficult battle for the invaders were well dug in and generally concealed by the granite outcrops which are a dominant feature of the mountain. Eventually around 8.15 am next day, and well after dawn, Tumbledown was in the Scots Guards' hands. It all came at a cost however, for eight men were killed together with a Royal Engineer. The Argentine losses amounted to 30 men.



Mount Tumbledown. Source: Neil Harkness

A Chance Discovery

The war ended shortly after this epic battle as British forces advanced into Stanley. HMS *Invincible* had operated some distance east of the islands during hostilities but came closer in after the ceasefire. Having learned of the Scots Guards' heroic battle the Captain asked their Colonel if he would like the two units to form a liaison so that soldiers could spend a few days on the ship having a shower, a decent bed and a few cans of beer. The proposal was embraced by the Guards and some of the soldiers were welcomed on board. In return the Colonel offered the Captain and three senior officers a guided tour of their battle route from the base of the mountain up to the summit.



Our arrival at the mountain. Source: Neil Harkness

We flew in from the ship a few days later and were greeted by a Warrant Officer who was to be our guide. The scene that greeted us was quite chastening for the ground was littered with the panoply of war from weapons and ammunition to personal effects much of it booby trapped. Amongst the debris my eyes alighted upon on small black notebook which appeared in remarkably good condition bearing in mind that the ground was frozen.

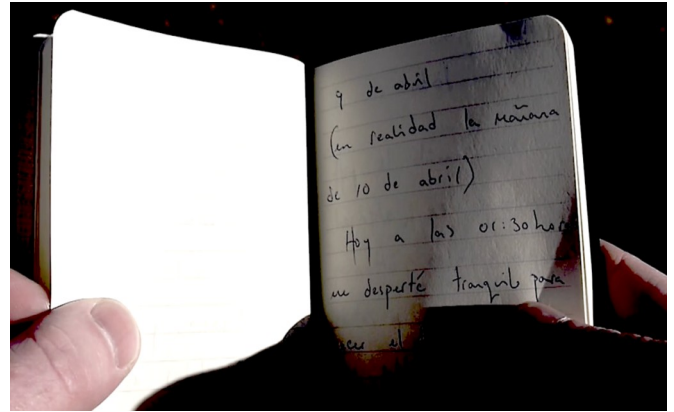
It transpired on opening it that this was the diary of an Argentine conscript who had arrived on Mount Tumbledown on 8 April 1982. He had made entries every day until mid May after which the pages were blank. I was intrigued as to why this was the case. Perhaps he had become bored with the repetitive nature of his life on the mountain or maybe he'd been injured or even killed by the shelling which the Royal Navy undertook prior to the battle.

It was difficult to solve the conundrum so the diary was put in a drawer and forgotten about until a strange turn of events.



The diary lying amongst the debris of war.

Source: Neil Harkness



An entry for 9 April 1982. Source: Neil Harkness

Selective Translation of Diary Entries

1 May:

It's 0305 hours. I have got together my 11 soldiers and our equipment. We're manning the anti-aircraft gun, ready to confront air attacks that our radar tells us will happen at about 0655 hours. They attacked the aircraft pan firing 6 guided missiles, but the Argentinian Air Force didn't let them get through and we shot down 2 of their [Harrier] aircraft. We were firing high powered 35mm ammunition as well as smaller ammunition. This was the hardest attack so far. Afterwards at about 1233 hours, a [British] warship bombarded the aircraft pan. As it continued the Argentinian Air Force went to the warship's position and Mirages from the Escuadrilla [Argentine Aviation Squadron] and another squadron of Pucarás successfully attacked the warship.

6 May:

At about 1246 hours I was on sentry duty. I felt an explosion and at that moment naval aircraft started to attack our position. I switched off our equipment and went to shelter in a trench with my soldiers, and waited to see what happened. At this time I thought about my mother and asked that she bless me and remember me. I could hear the bombs falling only about 70-80 metres from our position; however, we managed to survive this bombardment. Right at the end of the bombardment one bomb fell between our

two anti-aircraft guns and that really shocked me. At that moment, I said to myself that St Miguel and God had not forgotten me. That's how it all happened but I never stopped being strong. I have the strength to carry on. This is how my military career has started - with my head held high and with a lot of courage.

A Family Connection Led to a Journey of Rediscovery

During the summer of 2014 one of my sons announced his intention to get married. Shortly before the wedding his fiancée revealed that they had decided to honeymoon in Argentina as members of her father's family had a ranch in the north west of the country. It transpired that her great grandfather emigrated there in the late 1800s and started a sugar plantation which was subsequently requisitioned by the state in 1952.

Her grandfather then bought a large ranch with the proceeds which some of her cousins now run. With this connection in mind I dusted off the diary and asked if she could find somebody over there who could research the owner. They made tentative enquiries in Buenos Aires but found that the Malvinas War is still a very sensitive topic so decided not to pursue it.

However, when they subsequently visited her relatives a friend of the family agreed to take the matter up. She researched the conscript's name and amazingly found out that he was still alive and working for the Argentine Ministry of Defence in the city of Mar del Plata some 240 miles south east of Buenos Aires.

Reuniting the Diary

The contact made the journey south and personally reunited the former marine recruit with his diary some 30 years after he wrote it. He was understandably very emotional for it brought back so many vivid memories of the bleak inhospitable terrain which sapped both stamina and morale let alone the fierce battle which accounted for so many of his comrades' lives.

I have subsequently corresponded with one of his daughters who confirmed that her father suffered immensely as a result of the battle and of the naval gunfire which preceded it. The latter disrupted their camp and the ensuing chaos caused him to mislay the diary some time before the end of the conflict.

Postscript by the RNIOA

We are extremely grateful to Neil Harkness for submitting this fascinating and poignant article, with encouragement and support from our Senior Instructor Officer (SIO) Cdr Mike Channon RN and the whole editing team.

Receiving and publishing articles from our friends and RNIOA associates enriches the website and widens interest for our colleagues and readers.

Wartime diaries are much-treasured records of those who were engaged in armed conflicts and can become the primary source of historical biographies and autobiographies.

Career Summary of Neil Harkness



A nostalgic return visit to HMS Belfast in 2012 at the Port of London. Source: Neil Harkness

Surgeon Cdr (D) Harkness RN joined the Royal Navy on a cadetship scheme in 1966 while a student at Leeds University. His first appointment after qualifying was to HMS *Belfast* (Reserve Fleet) where he was tasked with treating the Royal Yacht crew. Thereafter he served in HMS *Pembroke*, HMS *Fearless* and RNEC Manadon before attending a 12-month MSc course at London University (1974-75). On completion he was appointed to HMS *Drake* (1975-79) and HMS *Nelson* (1979-81) where he was promoted to Surgeon Commander (D) in 1979.

He clearly enjoyed being at sea for he then began the first of two appointments to HMS *Invincible* in 1981-84 and 1990-94. Neil's other shore-based appointments included CTC Lympstone, HMS *Raleigh* and HMS *Osprey* before completing his career in HMS *Tamar* Hong Kong in 1995-96.