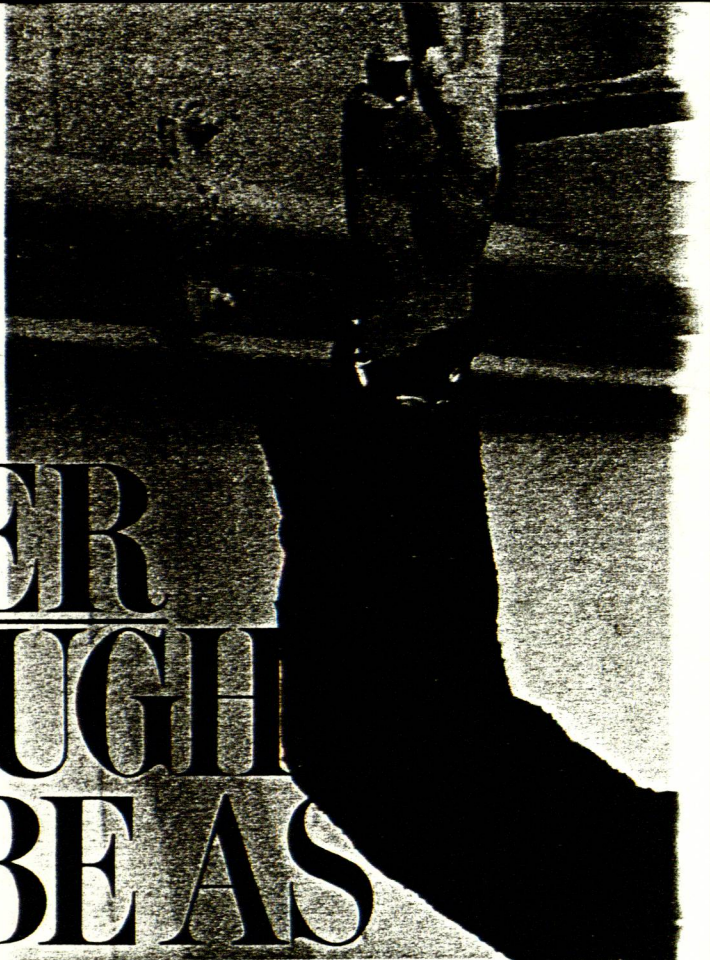


Thatcher, with Captain Lynn Middleton on board HMS Hermes, shows her delight at Britain's victory. Only hours later, there are words of comfort for the soldiers injured in terrorist bomb attacks in London



# WHATEVER I GO THROUGH NOW, CAN'T BE AS 'ERRIBLE'

*'Every time the phone rings, every time the door opens, you wonder . . .'*

*The strain of the Falklands will entirely disappear. As Douglas Keay reports, Mrs. Thatcher still comes close to tears as she speaks of the war and the loss of life. In a very moving moment told him: 'You look at the sun and wonder how can it shine. I used to go outside to the garden at Chequers and think, isn't it strange how ordinary life goes on?'*



**T**HE hubble and bubble of the House of Commons had ceased for the summer recess. Down on the coast families played cricket on holiday beaches in the humid August air. Others—widows, grieving girlfriends, mothers and children—were still trying to put together the shattered pieces of their lives. In an elegant room at No. 10 Downing Street, with the windows open and a gentle breeze billowing the net curtains, Margaret Thatcher sat quietly reflecting on the agony and the triumph of the Falkland Islands Conflict. "I think one of the days that I shall always remember



# 'agony and the loneliness' of the Falklands Crisis



was Saturday, June 12, the Queen's official birthday, when the Trooping the Colour ceremony takes place right outside these windows on Horse Guards Parade.

"It's a tradition that all the Commonwealth High Commissioners and their families come here as guests on that day. We have a stand for them to watch the parade. The children stay inside and look out from the windows. They're given chocolate biscuits and Coca-Cola, and run in and out of the rooms and have a marvellous time.

"Though I couldn't tell anyone, I knew on the Friday night that our troops were poised to take the first set of hills in the attack on Port (Please turn to next page)

After the much criticised Falklands service at St.

Paul's Cathedral, Mrs. Thatcher says: "It was a great comfort for those who were bereaved"





## MARGARET THATCHER

Continued from previous page

Stanley, and I was waiting for news. "At eight o'clock on Saturday morning the duty clerk came upstairs and handed me a piece of paper. I almost seized it, thinking 'Ah, they've started the attack and it's going all right.' But it was a message that HMS Glamorgan had been hit. They thought by an Exocet. Possibly launched from land. Expecting good news, you get a piece of thoroughly bad news. It was some time before we knew she had got away, though with some loss of life.

"I went downstairs to watch with the others the Trooping the Colour. It poured with rain. We got soaked. But somehow, just somehow, it was rather right that it was not a Trooping carried out in brilliant sunshine. After it was over I received the news that the assault had taken place. And had been successful."

Margaret Thatcher, now not only Britain's first woman Prime Minister but also its first woman war leader, talks of the three months of the Falklands crisis at times in an almost far-off way, as if she is trying to focus clearly in hindsight on what for her, as well as for the country, were momentous, frantic, sometimes gruesome moments.

Her voice rises when she speaks of national pride and the courage of the men and women who sailed 8,000 miles to rescue the islands from the Argentines, and falls away almost to a whisper as she reflects on the loss of human life, the injuries, and the agonising decisions she herself had to make.

For long periods of our conversation her eyes were misted over, but then, abruptly, she would sit up, straighten up, and change the subject. Throughout the Falklands campaign the strain imposed on her must have been colossal. A leader needs to be resolute but also to *feel*. At the same time you cannot always show your feelings. She recalls:

"You agonise within. Your job is to keep up morale, and the moment you go out of the door or see other people your job is to keep up the morale in spite of the tragedy. There's no-one else to look to except your own few who are intimately with you. There are not many people you can show your innermost feelings to. You need your own family desperately. Yes, it's very lonely."

I hesitated, then asked if she had ever reached the point of actual tears. "Some of the times were terrible," she said. "Oh yes, you can't help it. They just come. But you pull yourself together very quickly. You have to."

When the Falklands crisis arrived—"out of the blue"—Margaret Thatcher thought: "This is the worst week I'm ever going to live through." She had no idea the ordeal would last for months.

"If anyone had told me at the beginning that we should send

27,000 men and over 100 ships I wouldn't have believed it. Not since World War II had we had to undertake such a big operation, though don't forget the Malaysian campaign, and don't forget Northern Ireland *ever*. More have died in the Security Forces there than in the whole Falklands war.

"In those 37 years we had gone from being a great Imperial power to being a Commonwealth, much more loosely knit and parts of it non-aligned. So we had to prove to ourselves again that we could do it, and this time we did it in a way more alone than ever before.

"You ask if the national pride that was so evident at the time of the Falklands campaign can be maintained. I think it will be. Because it's always there in the hearts of our people. I've always known and felt it was there.

"You see, what the Falklands proved was that we could still do it, and do it superbly. There was a feeling of colossal pride, of relief that we could still do the things for which we were renowned. And that feeling will stay with us for a very long time."

### 'We were desperately worried about the Canberra'

Just a few weeks ago Mrs. Thatcher cheered members of the Townswomen's Guild with these words: "If you want something said, ask a man. If you want something done, ask a woman." During the Falklands crisis, she will freely admit, it wasn't exactly like that.

"You can't run the details of a campaign round a table at No. 10 Downing Street. You can run the general principles—what are called the Rules of Engagement to which your commanders have to work—but my job was, first, to see that they had enough of what they would need at 8,000 miles distance. And that meant we had to calculate that we might have losses. So we had to over-provide.

"Secondly we had to see that every single decision that the military needed taken was taken on time, without any delay.

"Thirdly, that before we embarked upon any particular operation we had the military assessment that there was a very good chance of success, and that it was planned to be as sparing as possible of loss of life and wounding.

"Everyone was at risk. We were always worried about the vulnerability of the supply lines especially. The Argentine aircraft carrier had only to come out. She was in easy reach of our supply ships. We were desperately worried about the Canberra.

"At the same time we knew that if we lost a ship there were other ships coming down to take their place. But if you lose men you instantly think of their families because their lives have fallen apart. One lived with the agony of the soldiers in the troopships."

Did the Prime Minister ever have a doubt that possibly the most momentous mistake had

been made in deciding to send the Task Force.

"Of course, as in any wartime situation, you always think 'My goodness, shall I be able to do it?' You always had the worry when ships were being sunk that if you had much more of this it would affect your capability to retake the Islands. As it was, we knew we had enough ships.

"But the real problem was, after we'd decided we could make a landing, the time factor, with winter coming on, and how many people were we going to lose. How hard were the other side going to fight? You didn't know until you'd had some battles."

And all the time that the struggle was continuing 8,000 miles away, ordinary life at home still went on. Rail strikes still threatened. The problems of the millions of unemployed did not go away. Even everyday things like what to wear, and what and when to eat—unimportant though they seemed—had to be attended to.

A woman's clothes are noticed more than a man's are. Mrs. Thatcher deliberately chose to wear dark, subdued colours throughout the crisis. She grabbed meals when she could. "We have two marvellous people who come to the flat," (the Thatchers' private apartments above No. 10) "in the mornings, and at the weekends we just organised so that there was always something in the fridge.

"If ever I was asked what I'd like it was bacon and egg. It's quite one of the best meals. Or poached eggs on toast. In the cafeteria at the House of Commons, where I ate quite often, I never needed to order. They just called out 'Buck Rarebit' as soon as they saw me. The one thing you never want during circumstances such as the Falklands is a heavy meal. It slows you down."

In the evenings Mrs. Thatcher would sometimes watch TV coverage of the war, and some of what she saw made her very angry.

Even before the attacks on Goose Green and Port Darwin had been launched she saw alternative tactics being discussed on the screen. "You can imagine the agony, the absolute agony I felt. One wanted to plead, *please* don't you realise there are men down there. Don't you realise the enemy may not have thought of what you are suggesting."

Couldn't you order it to stop happening, I asked.

"No, I could not. We live in a free country. You can only ask for it to stop. And the answer these people gave was that the Argentines themselves would have thought of what was being suggested. But I always thought: the Argentines have not fought a war for over 100 years. There must be some things they don't think of which we who are more skilled will have thought of. And I *knew* when that attack was going in to Goose Green. The most stressful days were those where one knew what was about to happen but could say nothing, could only

carry on as normally as possible." One such day was May 21, the day of the Task Force invasion. Mrs. Thatcher obviously knew of the plans, but with a time difference of four hours between London and Port Stanley the day had begun for her while it was still night in San Carlos Water.

"I assumed the landing was taking place, but when there's something big going on you never want to worry about your communication line back from the front. You must let the men get on with it. Don't fuss them. Their main job is to do the task efficiently. We who are waiting must wait."

### 'How I got through that day I don't know'

Accordingly, after a meeting with her War Cabinet, Mrs. Thatcher went about attending the engagements on her calendar as normal. At 12.15 she arrived at Whetstone, in north west London, to open Phase Two of a warehouse development. There was a Royal Marine band playing, and as she listened she thought of the bandmen's comrades, Marine Commandos, probably at that moment clambering down nets into landing craft. She made a short speech in which, without being able to reveal the depth of its meaning, she referred to the Falklands as being "only a heartbeat away." ("There were many times when one wished one was down there oneself," she told me.)

After a buffet lunch Mrs. Thatcher went on to her next engagement, at 3.30, presenting training award certificates. At 4.30 she held her constituency "surgery," listening to everyday people's everyday problems.

Between these engagements her chauffeur would whisk her back to her office to hear the latest news as it came through on the "hot" line—"They knew the word I used and I would know the word they used," for mission achieved. At 8.30, by this time knowing that the landings had been successful, she joined in a cocktail party for constituency workers. At 9.30 she gave a comment to television: "They are anxious hours, and there will be anxious days."

"How I got through that day I don't know, but I did," she says.

What helped her to remain so calm? "The fact that you have to. It's like when you have a family crisis. Someone has to stay in control and keep going.

"The thing about that landing was that it was done without the loss of a man or a ship. We put the Canberra in because she could take so many troops. But you can imagine the agony—how could they miss the Canberra! The Harriers and their pilots were marvellous. We lost some, but do you realise we didn't lose a single one in air to air combat?"

"It was the most marvellous landing. I think one of the most marvellous in history. And after

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## MARGARET THATCHER

Continued from page 10

that, the colossal attack began." At weekends Mrs. Thatcher would often go down to Chequers, the country house in Buckinghamshire that is the official country retreat of Prime Ministers. It holds a special place in her heart.

"Each room has a different meaning and remembrance. This is where such and such a decision was made, or where I heard certain news. And, of course, Winston Churchill was at Chequers quite a bit in wartime too, and he found a certain peace there. No, peace is not quite the right word. It's something special.

"I used to go outside sometimes and think, someone must have come out here in wartime too and looked around. And thought, isn't it strange, ordinary life goes on.

"You see, when you've had these terrible worries when you know of all the families who are having these worries, you're really rather surprised that ordinary life goes on.

"The flowers grow. The garden looks the same. Of course it does. The sun shines. You think, how can it shine? You know intellectually it does. But someone has had terrible news that day. Yet life goes on. They still have to cut the hay. Everything looks lovely, and yet somehow you feel you ought not to enjoy it because there are terrible things happening, and in a way it

heightens the poignancy. You think of what's happened to someone who will go out on that same morning and see those same beautiful things. And it won't still their sad hearts because they will never see spring the same way again."

Had she herself been changed by the experience of the Falklands? She paused before replying. "It puts your other worries in perspective. And always will. It makes you very impatient when people magnify small worries into big ones."

Did she feel a sense of anticlimax perhaps?

"No, none at all. When it was all over there was a tremendous sense of relief. A feeling that whatever problems I have to go through now, at least I won't have to go through that terrible period when every time the phone rings, every time the door opens, you wonder. And when bad news comes you wonder how much more there will be.

"Of course, I was wrong. It didn't stop. Because it was not long after the Falklands that there were those two terrible terrorist attacks in London. And there are still people in the Falklands risking their lives.

"One of the worst moments came when John Nott, the Defence Secretary, came into my room in the House of Commons and said: 'I'm afraid I've had news.' HMS Coventry had been sunk. Later that night, when I got back to No. 10, I was told that the

Atlantic Conveyor had been hit, and there was a rumour that the Invincible had been hit too. That wasn't true, but we weren't always able to confirm quickly."

And the highest moment? "That was when, after the desperate worry about how we were going to take Port Stanley, we learned that the Argentines had retreated, thrown down their equipment, and the white flag had gone up.

"You ask if we needed something like the Falklands to restore national pride. I would hate to say that, because the thought that one needs a war-like situation to revive one's national pride—no. I hope we never have to do it again."

I said from reports it seemed the Falklanders themselves were having doubts about the future.

### 'I know I must recharge the batteries'

"Look," said the Prime Minister, "you must understand this: we have never been invaded since 1066. We don't know what it's like to be occupied. The Falklanders' lives were rent asunder. Their businesses were torn from under, their houses desecrated. If it's taking a little bewilderment, a little time, to come back to normal then I think we should be a little understanding."

In history Margaret Thatcher will largely be credited or blamed for leading us into the Battle for the Falklands, but already the

sniping has begun. The sound of criticism grows. She smiled. She expects it. "Do you remember, after the last war, all sorts of commentators got at the decisions of the generals. I don't know why as a nation we have to do this terrible debunking, especially when it's by people who didn't know the agony of taking a knife-edge decision. I'm afraid it just happens. It will go on. Somehow, in the end, people get things into perspective."

Mrs. Thatcher recalled a service she attended at her church near Chequers. The clergyman had said his congregation should not only remember the sacrifice that had been made, and the bereavement, but what it had all been for. "So that the things we take for granted we may still continue to have. May we never take them for granted again."

The Prime Minister was going on holiday a day or two after I interviewed her. She must be very tired. "No, I'm *not* tired," she insisted. "But I know I've got to go on holiday because the last few months may have taken more out of me than one realises. I know I must recharge the batteries."

When she took her holiday, in Switzerland, would she spend her time walking in the valleys or on the mountains? I knew the answer before she spoke—"The mountains, of course." But then she added: "Mountains are always higher than you are, and are there after you've gone." ►THE END

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