

C22-69C

SECRETARY OF STATE, MR JOHN NOTT INTRODUCED:

LIEUTENANT GENERAL SIR RICHARD TRANT -  
COMMANDER IN CHIEF AIRMAIL FIELDHOUSE'S MILITARY DEPUTY

Gentlemen, the capture of Port Stanley.

Well I guess it started when after the gruelling epic march from Port San Carlos, the 3rd Commando Brigade established itself on Mount Kent with 42 Commando seizing that hill. But before that, for several days, men of the Special Air Services Regiment had already been on Mount Kent patrolling, pinpointing the enemy and harassing his positions. As 42 Commando took up a position on Mount Kent artillery batteries were flown in by Royal Navy support helicopters to the rear, ammunition was dumped and eventually 45 Commando moved on to Mount Challenger. The 3rd Battalion of the Parachute Regiment moved into a position just to the West of Mount Longdon. Shortly afterwards on the right flank on the southern route the 5th Infantry Brigade made a daring move and established itself just to the North East of Bluff Cove, the 2nd Battalion of the Parachute Regiment, the 2nd Battalion of the Scots Guards, the 1st Battalion of the Welsh Guards and the 1st/7th Gurka Rifles. And so the scene was set for what we might call phase one of the attack on the Port Stanley position.

On the night of 11/12 June, that is to say Friday/Saturday night last, a three pronged attack was carried out on Mount Longdon in the North, the feature known as 2 Sisters in the centre and Mount Harriet on the right in the South. This attack was a silent attack and it was infantry business. Stealth, good navigation and surprise, these are the things which made that attack so very successful. That it was a surprise there is no doubt and the fact that the enemy did not know at that stage just exactly what sort of shape our forces were when they stood before Port Stanley was a very main feature for surprise being achieved. On the left the 3rd Battalion of the Parachute Regiment had a stiff fight to get on top of Mount Longdon and down the hill on the other side, and in the centre 45 Commando seized 2 Sisters and on the right 42 Commando Mount Harriet. After fierce fighting all those objectives were taken by dawn that day the 12th June. Sadly we didn't get away without casualties, 25 killed and 62 wounded in action, a very substantial number of enemy were killed and some 1,800 prisoners were taken in this Brigade attack.

We now move on to phase two during the day of 12 June last Saturday, the opportunity was taken to what we call in military terms "consolidation". After a night attack, inevitably, there is a great deal of muddle on the ground and it takes time and in the hours of daylight to sort things out. This is what went on on Saturday morning and on Saturday night/Sunday morning. Both Brigades, 3 Commando and 5 Infantry patrolled vigorously against the enemy positions they then confronted and the aim of those patrols to pinpoint those positions in depth and the routes forward to them for the attack which was due to start shortly.

On Sunday itself, time was spent looking at the enemy in detail from forward positions on the hills which had been seized during the previous attack, so that when troops went forward on the night Sunday/Monday, navigation would be as easy as possible. During Sunday the enemy was constantly harassed by mortar fire and by the artillery of the 29th Commando Regiment and the 4th Field Regiment. Two nights ago 2nd Para passed through the 3rd Para and seized what we know as Wireless Ridge. The 2nd Battalion of the Scots Guards assaulted Tumbledown Mountain and then the 1st 7th Gurka Rifles were put to Mount William and by the mid-morning it was quite plain that the enemy were retreating from Mount William, Sapper Hill and down through Moody Brook towards Port Stanley in very considerable disarray. And they were followed up very smartly by 2 Para moving towards Port Stanley itself, by the Welsh Guards which had two companies of 40 Commando under Command which went on the Sapper Hill and seized that, and by 45 Commando who moved behind the Welsh Guards ready to exploit further to the East as the opportunity arose. And it was at this point that we began to get reports that the enemy were throwing down their weapons and surrender was in the air. The Commander Land Forces, Major General Moore, ordered "cease fire unless you are shot at", and by the middle of the afternoon it was plain the Argentinians were ready to talk. And that evening, in a blizzard, General Moore flew into Port Stanley, to the race course, in a helicopter, and shortly afterwards took the surrender from General Menendez and that was at about 9.00 in the evening.

Now I think the figures of the enemy that General Moore and his troops were up against will be of some interest to you. We now know that in the Port Stanley area there were some 11,000 troops and in the Falkland Islands as a whole the total enemy strength was over 16,000. And in capturing Port Stanley our own people fought at odds of 2 to 1 against. And if you remember that classically speaking, to carry out attack the Commander would like to have 3 of his own troops to every troop of the enemy, that is a very considerable feat indeed.

Now you may ask what are we doing right now? General Moore's troops are now clearing the battlefield, restoring order in the community and about to take the surrender in West Falkland. He is conducting a census of civilians to find out who is where and to relocate those who have been displaced. The local supplies of food, water and medical stores are being closely looked into as a matter of extreme urgency, and a check is being done on the damage done to civilian property. In short, the Services, all 3 Services in Falkland Islands have for the time being taken over the job of local government. And we also have some 15,000 prisoners, all of whom are in extremely poor condition, to look after.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q. Can you characterise further the nature of the operation considering that British troops were outnumbered 2 to 1?

A. Yes. I think that one can say with all honesty that the difference in the numbers of troops involved was made up for in the quality of your Army.

Q. If the Argentines had had a better strategy could they have held on for longer?

A. I'm sure they could have done. But I have no doubt that in the end the result would have been the same. Certainly the tactics employed by the Argentinian Army were not what you could call particularly professional and one might have expected a very much rougher passage from Port San Carlos to the approaches to Port Stanley. And it was somewhat surprising that this did not really happen until we arrived more or less on the line of Mount Kent - Mount Challenger.

Q. Looking at this operation as a whole, what do you feel are the political and military lessons to be learnt?

A. Secretary of State. I think that it will be important to have a mature study made of all the lessons. And I am looking myself to an analysis that will take us into the autumn, we need to send people, scientists, weapon experts and others down there to study how all the weapon systems worked, what the problems were, whether we have the right weapon systems and really it would be foolish, I think, to rush into it. There are some obvious points which come out straight away, vital part played by civilian assets; the adaptability and flexibility that were shown. Clearly it would have been a help to us to have had an airborne early warning system - one of the points widely named. There are a whole host of different matters we will learn as we go along. Clearly the debates in the House of Commons which we will be having in the next 2 or 3 weeks will be about this and I look forward to them and I would like to hear what Members of Parliament have to say and what their feelings are so that over the next few months we must all study it and see what adjustments we need to make to our policy. I am not going to try to hold firm to everything we have previously announced. We must learn the lessons of this affair and put them to good use, but we mustn't rush into any premature judgements - I think you will agree with that General wouldn't you?

General Trant - Certainly.

Q. How soon do you hope to get the first Argentine prisoners off the Island?

A. Secretary of State. I'll make one political point and then I'll ask the General if he wants to add to it. We have to be quite clear first that the Argentinians are prepared to cease all hostilities from the mainland and that is the first clarification we require and as you know through the Swiss we are seeking that at the present time. So far as the means we use to repatriate the prisoners that to some extent depends on the reply we receive from the Argentinians. But our present thinking is that if we can secure safe passage for our ships we would use our ships to pick up the Argentine prisoners and take them under an agreement with the Argentinians back direct to Argentinian ports. That is the general plan but it depends entirely on the response we receive from Argentina in the next few hours. Would you like to add any detail to that.

General Trant. Thank you Secretary of State. Yes. The logistic problem of removing 15,000 plus prisoners from the Falkland Islands to the mainland of South America wherever that might be is a very very considerable logistic problem.

Of course, we have got ships in the area, but certainly not enough to move 15,000 people all in one go. And so it is certainly going to take time. And in the meantime, I can tell you that those people are living in very very difficult circumstances which we are doing our very best to make easy for them in humanitarian terms. Food is no great problem, the real problem is keeping them warm and above all giving them some form of accommodation and that accommodation simply does not exist and it does not exist not only for the Argentinian prisoners of war, it does not exist for our own people who are bivouacked out on the very bad terrain of those Islands.

Secretary of State. Can I just add one point, as you realise we had planned for this and as the Prime Minister said in her statement there were four and a half thousand tents on the Atlantic Conveyor and of course we lost those and so that has been a very great blow to us that we lost that temporary accommodation that we were planning to have in by now, or it would have come in at this point. This is one of the problems we face, but as the General says, all the reports are that the Argentinian prisoners are not in good condition and the weather is very bad and there is a very considerable humanitarian problem which the General is doing his utmost to deal with.

Q. (Not audible)

A. Secretary of State. We would welcome help from our allies and friends if it was available.

Q. How is it that we underestimated by half the number of Argentinians on the Falkland Islands. Were they air transporting in over the last few weeks thousands more troops?

A. General Trant. No I think there is no reason to suppose that in the last few days or couple of weeks that large numbers of Argentinian troops were brought into the Islands, there may have been a few relatively few which came in over the last two weeks. No, I think that the majority of those people were there all along. You may say well why didn't we know that there were that number there? Simply because we weren't given a copy of the Argentinian order of battle when we started this contest and throughout the time we have been trying to put two and two together and make a decent four out of it. That there were more there is surprising, but not that surprising.

Q. We have had several conflicting reports about the conditions of the surrender. Did General Menendez surrender on his own accord or did he do so after consulting with his own Government. And if so can we assume for all practical purposes that the undeclared war is over now?

A. Secretary of State. Well, he did consult with his own Government, we understand, before offering a surrender of all the forces on West and East Falklands. We believe that he did.

Q. Did he go to Buenos Aires as far as you know?

A. Secretary of State. This was a report that was circulating last night. We do not believe it has any basis in fact. Is that correct?

General Trant. I know no reason to suppose that General Menendez has left the Falkland Islands in the last several weeks.

Q. Have the Argentines surrendered all their arms as far as you know?

A. General Trant. They have and a very considerable quantity of military booty has been taken.

Q. Now that you have secured 15,000 Argentine prisoners and liberated we hope 1,800 Falkland Islanders can you tell me what steps the Government might take towards obtaining the release of 3 British journalists, including 2 of my colleagues, of the Observer.

A. Secretary of State. I am sure that now, if we get a helpful and favourable response from the Argentinian Government about the ending of hostilities, and we would of course like to return relations to normal as soon as we reasonably can. I am sure we would within that approach wish to do everything we can to secure the release of the 3 journalists. I may say 2 of them have travelled with me on trips around the world, and I know Ian Mather well, he's travelled with me a great deal, so I'm very conscious of his position.

Q. Can you be slightly more specific about the numbers of troops actually involved in the final attack, you say about 2:1 but presumably all the troops who landed at San Carlos weren't actually involved in the final attack. Can you be more specific about the actual numbers as opposed to the units?

A. General Trant. I think you wouldn't expect all the troops in that area to take part in the very final assault. A number would be securing the position from which the assault took place. During the course of the phases which I described earlier on, the numbers which took place was close to 6,000 that's to say about half the numbers they were confronting in that particular phase of the repossession of the islands.

Q. Can you give us some idea of Argentine casualties both dead and wounded?

A. General Trant. During the course of the battle for Port Stanley I really can't tell you because we don't know and I think it will be a day or two before we really get an accurate assessment of those, but they were quite considerable by all accounts.

Q. Can you be a little more specific on quite considerable?

A. General Trant. Not very because if I could give you the number I would give it to you. I truly don't have that number. I think it runs into hundreds.

Q. (Not audible)

A. General Trant. I can give you a final figure during the course of phase 1 as I think I mentioned earlier on, that is to say the battle for Mount Longdon, 2 sisters and Mount Harriet, the number we lost, very sadly, 25 killed, 62 wounded and in subsequent fighting in the battle for Wireless Ridge, Tumbledown Mountain and Mount William some 6 killed and 17 wounded. That is sadly not the end to the story there may be more reports to come in, but they are coming in now. Where we know who has been killed or who has been wounded the next of kin are being told just as fast as possible.

Secretary of State. I think we must exercise a little caution on the later figures because we may be hearing more, and as you know it is very difficult arriving at a final figure very quickly.

Q. Can you comment upon the report that General Menendez has asked to be sent to a neutral country as opposed to returning to Argentina.

A. Secretary of State. I've had no report of that although I've seen it mentioned in the newspapers.

General Trant. I've heard nothing at all other than what I've read in the newspapers too.

Q. Do you have any set plans which you can disclose at present for the long term or medium term garrisoning of the Falklands. In other words, what's going to happen now to the British troops, do you know when they are going to come back, how many are going to come back, and how many are going to stay.

A. Secretary of State. I think that the extent of the garrison will very much depend on whether hostilities are now brought to a conclusion. The number of people the kind of equipment we would need to keep there, is entirely dependent on the assumptions that you make about the state of relations or hostilities with Argentina. So it's very difficult to make a judgement at the present time, but we have had for many weeks contingency plans available for this, and in due course we'll be able to give you, when the position is clearer, a better idea of what is mind.

Q. Can we take it that as soon as is practicable the troops who were engaged in these operations will be replaced as opposed to leaving an element of them behind. In other words will the medium term garrison be fresh troops?

A. Secretary of State. We're very conscious of the need to give a rest and a relief to all those people who have been down there. The Royal Navy have been down there now for 9 weeks, and there is already a programme to turn the ships over, bring people home, were very conscious of that. So far as the army is concerned, 5 Brigade, of course, went down there as a reserve and it's likely I think, that the Commando's and the Parachute Regiment will be relieved before 5 Brigade. Would that be correct General?

General Trant. I do insist that the hostilities are only just ended and we have all these matters under consideration. I don't think I can really say more at the moment.

Q. Can you tell us something about the garrison that was on the Falklands Islands prior to the Argentinian invasion, what is your view of the strength of that garrison now in retrospect?

A. Secretary of State. Clearly in retrospect it was too small to defend the Falkland Islands.

Q. Now that the fighting has stopped how soon will we be able to get the combat footage film, I understand that the problem in the past was that for security reasons you couldn't microwave the film back. Will that now be lifted and will we get pictures soon.

Secretary of State. I have to ask the BBC and ITV who would be regarded by you as having a more objective view of the problems perhaps than the MOD. I don't have any idea where we stand on solving the technical problems about getting television film down. I understand we still have this difficulty, but as soon as we reasonably can, we would like to have a facility on the islands which would enable television film to come straight back.

(Not audible)

Secretary of State. I realize that we can pick film up, that doesn't require any great technical expertise, but we must make sure before an aeroplane comes in to pick up film-which is obviously the better that General Moore is aware of its arrival and otherwise you won't get your film but were very aware

of the need to pick up film there but that's a different point to the one I think that we were being asked.

Q. A couple of technical questions if I may? On the number of prisoners over 16,000 you say. Does that include those taken in the earlier assaults on Darwin and Goose Green and so forth. That is the total number of prisoners taken from beginning to end? Also, is the town basically intact?

A. General Trant. That is right. The figure 16,000 is the total, just over 16,000 in total from beginning to end. As for the town, as far as I am aware, it is intact. There were no reports of fighting on the edge of it or through it. Whether there's some minor damage to the odd building on the outskirts I really couldn't tell you, but I would be surprised if there was.

Q. You have no indication of damage from the shelling and so forth over the weeks?

A. General Trant. None at all.

Q. Another question with respect to the Atlantic Conveyor. Now that you've told us as much as 4500 tents having been lost can you now tell us what else was lost on that ship?

A. Secretary of State. It was mainly supplies for the longer term, there was a fair amount of equipment on board for the airfield. One of the most urgent things was to get the airfield in operation, the airfield lengthened, and there was a fair amount of equipment for that. Replacement equipment is on the way. There was the tentage and there were, as I think was widely reported, some helicopters on board, but we had a fair number of helicopters on the island in general but I think it is true to say that you can never have enough. Is that a fair comment?

General Trant. That's absolutely true and we did lose a number of helicopters on that ship, and of course with the distances involved its going to take a time to replace them on the spot.

Q. You asked for AWACS from the United States? Did you get AWACS, and if you didn't get them and had have had them would it have made a difference? Would it have saved lives?

A. Secretary of State. We didn't ask for AWACS, it was always understood with the United States that they would provide material support, but not go beyond that. We didn't ask for it, it was always understood that AWACS would not be available, apart from anything else what would it have operated from? It would have needed some kind of base to work from. It is a unique part of the world in that it could not be further away given that the South American neighbours were in opposition to us in this conflict. It could not have been a more difficult place from that view. Way outside the reach of land based air until we got air-flight refuelling on Hercules, Harriers, Nimrods and the speed if I may say so with which the RAF has equipped the aircraft with air-flight refuelling has been quite remarkable. I don't know if you're aware, but the Hercules aircraft have been doing 24 hour flights, they've been in the air for 24 hours at a time, which must, I think must be almost a record for the length of time for a military aircraft to be in the air at one time. I know that the American aircraft over the Indian Ocean maybe do the same, but it is remarkable.

Q. If you had some sort of advanced early warning, was there any thought given to it. Presumably because you didn't have it you had to do other things.

A. Secretary of State. In retrospect it would have been very helpful to have some kind of helicopter-borne AEW or may be a vertical take of type AEW, or even

if we had been 3 years down our programme a Nimrod AEW with airflight refuelling operating from Ascension, although to keep it constantly air-borne at those ranges with the airflight refuelling required it would have created major logistic problems. I think one must recognise that our defence planning ever since the war has been geared to a NATO role. We have kept an out-of-area capability, and this has shown that we are capable of responding to out-of-area, but the planning has been based on being within reach of land based AEW.

Q. Why weren't helicopters with AEW available then?

A. Secretary of State. You can ask why didn't we have 100 different things that we would liked to have. We do spend more on defence in this country than any other nation in NATO with the single exception of the United States.

Q. It was not a second thought, that it simply was not available, it wasn't that someone forgot about it. You simply did not have it.

A. Secretary of State. We simply did not have a carrier based AEW capability.

Q. Some of your Naval officials have for sometime suggested that you should have a carrier based AEW. Do you think that the experience now will mean that politicians might listen to the military experts a little bit more?

A. Secretary of State. I don't know whether you pay taxes in this country. I can think of all sorts of things that all 3 Services need very badly which we simply cannot afford to pay for. In answer to your question, yes we have been working very very hard on an AEW system which could operate from our carriers, and I hope that we will have something available within a reasonably short period of time.

Q. Can you tell us the fate of the Sir Galahad and Sir Tristram?

A. Secretary of State. I have not got an up-to-date report - General can you help on this?

General Trant. I think the state of both of these ships is certainly not good, and I know that the naval experts are assessing now what might be done for them as regards salvage. I have to admit I am no expert on ships.

Q. Are they afloat?

A. General Trant. They are not at the bottom of the sea.

Q. Can you clarify what it is you have asked the Argentines now to say, and is it the case that if they don't say it you are going to hold prisoners hostage?

A. Secretary of State. We have sent a message through the Swiss to the Argentine Government asking their agreement to the ending of all hostilities between our 2 countries. We are awaiting a reply to that and we have also suggested a number of other things. I hope that they will feel it is a constructive message. I do not think I am in a position to reveal the full contents of it, we must await their reply. I cannot go beyond that at the moment, this is a communication through the Swiss to the Argentinians, we've not yet had a reply to it, but the fundamental basis of it is we would like to repatriate their prisoners as soon as we reasonably can, we would like to do it in British ships, we require a safe passage for the British ships, and on the understanding we can have an end to hostilities between the 2 countries. We would like to move ahead with that as soon as possible.



Q. What confidence would you have in an assertion by the Junta that hostilities were going to cease? What confidence would you have in their words?

A. Secretary of State. If they give us a firm assurance that hostilities are at an end as far as they are concerned we will accept that assurance.

Q. Are you planning to visit the Falklands yourself, and if so when?

A. Secretary of State. There are so many people who are now planning to visit the Falklands, no doubt including yourself. Although you haven't yet put this to me. I think we must allow General Moore to get to solve the immediate problems there before we start swamping him with visitors from the United Kingdom and elsewhere. May I just say one thing. I am anxious that as soon as matters are settled - some of the immense problems which he faces with the prisoners, with the civilian population, with immediate reconstruction of housing, water and all the things the Prime Minister referred to, then I think we would want to make arrangements to try and enable people to go and talk to the islanders. I would be keen on that because I would like the world to know what is happening, and what the islanders feel, and I'd like that to be evident to the world as soon as possible. In the next few days while this confusion still persists we cannot have people using their own initiative and popping in and out of the islands. That would be an impossible situation. I must make it clear we cannot help until General Moore is ready to receive some people to visit it. In the meantime, there are a number of correspondents there, my officials have been keeping a count of the words that have come back - we have had 1 million words back and I think nearly 600 despatches from the Falkland Islands, and for the time being until matters settle down these despatches will need to be syndicated until we can make arrangements for others to go.

Q. Where are the prisoners being held at the moment - are they all in one location or several locations?

A. General Trant. The vast majority of them are being held in the area of Port Stanley town and towards the airport. There are some others in the area of Port San Carlos, but relatively few. A few on board ships and they are the lucky ones.

Q. Are the prisoners in any sense held hostage unless you get agreement from the Argentinians to cease hostilities?

A. Secretary of State. Whilst hostilities still exist they are prisoners of war and we will continue to operate under the Geneva Convention. Under the Geneva Convention prisoners of war need not be returned until the end of hostilities. That is the position.

Q. Can you give us some idea whether you are going to sharpen up Ministry procedures. It took you 2 weeks to fit Sidewinder on to RAF Harriers, but it took you 2 years to fit this same missile onto one Hawk in a crash air defence improvement programme.

A. Secretary of State. Well a combination of (a) urgency on the part of everybody who's worked to make this a success, and the enthusiasm and spirit and dedication of all civilian people working throughout industry, in the dockyards has been unparalleled. That has been the first and most important issue. We have got things out of the factories and out of the dockyards faster than we have ever done it before, and that is because people have felt committed to the operation. On the second part of it, it comes down to a question of cash. If we have the cash we can do a lot more, in the end we can fit more Sidewinders

more quickly to more aircraft. If the British tax-payer will be prepared to pay the bill, and on this operation, quite rightly, we have put no cash limit on it, we have spent everthing that has been necessary to achieve our objectives, that has been rather a different set of circumstances to normal peacetime that we rightly have to deal with.