# AN ISLAND SOMEWHERE

OUR lives were about to be turned upside down by events taking place 8,000 miles away in the icy waters off an island nobody had even heard of.

Everybody was in a fairly jovial mood at the time because we were about to go on Easter block leave for a fortnight. It was a particularly happy time for me, as I was taking Carole home to Dalton to meet my Mam and dad.

They never did meet get to her, sadly.

The initial warning was given at 10.45hrs, Friday 2nd April 1982, two hours before we were officially off on leave, which left us all well hacked-off. No-one was going anywhere: guys in other units who had actually gone home had been called as soon as they got there and ordered to do an about-turn and set off back to camp. It was a ball-ache but it was all part and parcel of being a professional soldier: the Army owned us, and that was that.

The mood improved once we found out what the crack was. Some Argentineans had apparently invaded an island somewhere off the coast of Scotland, and we all got very excited about the thought of going up there and giving the cheeky bastards a good kicking. The buzz carried on even after some bright spark took the time to look at a map.

We started the huge task of preparing the whole Battery for the real McCoy. It was something we trained for, but somehow - in my day, at least - didn't quite think you'd ever do. I'd always been a fairly keen soldier underneath it all, and now I upped my focus still further, really getting stuck in. As T Bty were part of the Army's Ace Mobile Force, we were on standby to be sent to any trouble spots around the world on very short notice. That meant we had first dibs on any working equipment, so all our duff bits of kit, and we had a lot of them, were exchanged with our sister Battery, 58 Eyres. They were left with virtually nothing that worked. Good job no-one told the Soviets that. Faulty kit doesn't matter too much if you're on exercise, as nobody's really going to get hurt. I wish I had a pound

for the times I've heard, 'Ah well, we'll be going home tomorrow, lads… we live to play another day.' But war is different: you usually only get one chance, and I shudder to think what would have happened if 58 Bty had been needed for an operational tour after we left. This woeful lack of equipment really was a sad state of affairs, and one which hasn't improved, given all the stories of lads being deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan with no body armour and dodgy rounds that don't fit their weapons.

Unbelievably, given that the Army is as bureaucratic and lethargic as any major government institution, we were ready to go and kick some Latin American arses by 1800 hrs on Saturday 3rd April 1982.

I gave Carole a quick phone call, a minute or two, tops. She would probably have appreciated a little more effort on my part but I was full of nervous excitement about the prospect of going to war and relationships were not high on my list of priorities.

And then we were on the road. It took us sixteen hours on a shagged-out old Army bus to get from Kirton to the docks in Plymouth, but we loved every minute. We felt like heroes already, as news had leaked out to the media by now and Joe Public had a good idea where we were going. All the way down, motorists were beeping their horns and Union Jacks appeared from everywhere to wave us on our way. It made me feel really proud for once in my life: we all got quite carried away by the patriotism of the people, and all the flag waving and cheering, and I had a lump in my throat all the way down there. But, like most people, if I'd had to put my wages on it I'd have said it would all turn out to be a false alarm, and that as soon as we arrived in Plymouth the Argies would bottle it and sod off home for a corned beef buttie.

The ship in which we were going to sail half way around the world was a grey, flat-bottomed old rust bucket called the RFA (Royal Fleet Auxiliary) *Sir Geraint*. (The RFA is a civilian-manned fleet owned by the MOD whose main task is to resupply the warships of the Royal Navy at sea so they can remain operational while away from base, but it also provides secure sea transport for Army units and their equipment.) The *Sir Geraint* reminded me of the sort of old-fashioned tub you saw on the telly when the US Marines were about to invade some Pacific island crawling with

Japs. She didn't exactly fill me with confidence but as it turned out she was a trusty old thing and was one of the very few that didn't take a direct hit. Mind you, I almost missed the boat altogether. On the last day of shore leave in Plymouth, I was nearly run over by a taxi whilst looking for a barbers. I had to look smart for my last session in the local hostelries of Union Street. I had many a free pint bought for me that night by the many back-slappers and armchair warriors, and I was grateful for every one.

Our leader, GBH, left us at Plymouth so he could sail south on *HMS Fearless* to co-ordinate our role in the bigger picture of things with the other senior officers. We were now part of 3rd Commando Brigade and would be cruising down with 79 Bty of 29 Commando Regt, RA, a key element of 3 Commando Brigade. These boys were all Commando-qualified and trained in Arctic warfare, helicopter and amphibious assault and, in many cases, parachute assault too. They were also very fine gunners. They knew us as 'crap hats', shortened to just 'hat'. If you don't wear a red (Parachute Regiment) or green (Royal Marines) beret in the British armed forces you are known as a crap hat (unless you wear the beige-coloured one of the SAS). But we hats do have our moments, as we'll see later on.

The long process of loading all the stores on board began. It won't surprise you to read that the only thing we ever seemed to load was boxes of lager, like a line of khaki-clad alcoholic ants filling their nest. Well, it was going to be a long journey.

We finally set sail on Tuesday 6th April 1982.

Later, when I came back home, I remember watching TV pictures of the Paras sailing off into the horizon on the luxury liner, Canberra, with thousands of people waving and women flashing their boobs. The Scots Guards went in style, too, on the QE2. Our departure was rather more low-key: it was just getting dark when we slipped quietly away, with about 10 dock workers standing watching us, their hands in their pockets, probably thinking 'I wonder where all those dozy pillocks are off to?'

Some of the lads started throwing coins to them; I don't know if it's some sort of naval tradition but I remember thinking it should have been the other way around.

Still, who gave a toss? I wasn't really going to war, was I?

As we didn't think it would end up in a live-firing exercise, we were looking forward to a little cruise. But it wasn't exactly five star stuff: in fact, it was horribly cramped on board, with two-fully equipped Batteries vying for what little space there was. The *Sir Geraint* could carry 340 troops comfortably but there were well over 500 lads and crew aboard, together with all our stores. There were about 50 men per mess deck and practically no space at all for personal items, apart from essentials like your washing and shaving gear, your PT kit and a change of uniform, and a few jazz mags. It wasn't much fun. The only privacy you got was when you hung your green Army towel down from the bunk above at night. By the way, it's not true about sending you blind, but you do end up with a sore wrist.

It was important to stop boredom setting in, because we all know what the Devil does with idle hands, so a training programme was quickly worked out. As T Bty were not trained to fight in Arctic conditions, and since it was going to be bloody cold where we were headed, we relied on our Commando buddies of 79 Bty to bring us up to date. They taught us how to dig a snow hole, which isn't as easy as it sounds, and the basic signs of hypothermia and how to treat it. They tried to teach us Morse code - the old dot-dot dash-dash malarkey - which gives you some idea of how tedious it got. In return, we were able to help them with aircraft recognition, part of the anti-aircraft gunner's trade. In theory, our Rapiers physically couldn't engage friendly planes and choppers because of the automatic IFF (Identification Friend or Foe) system. In practice, it is obviously very important to be able to identify aircraft visually too. It's probably a lot more sophisticated now but back then our IFF system worked by interrogating approaching aircraft with radio signals, which were sequences of coded numbers. If the target was 'friendly' it would recognise the code and send back the correct friendly response, and the missiles would relax. If the response didn't arrive the system would assume it was a 'foe' and it would be engaged.

However, the equipment wasn't foolproof by any means, and the opportunities for blue-on-blue (friendly fire) incidents were ever-present, so it was vitally important that we were able to recognise everything in the air with the naked eye so as to

minimise the risk. In the past, as part of BAOR, we had all learned to identify Soviet aircraft, which were all known to us by NATO code-names (fighters like Fishbeds, Floggers, Fitters, helicopters like Hind, Hip and Halo). But the Argies would be trying to kill us in aircraft that would previously have been friendlies: the French Mirage and its Dagger variant, the American A4 Sky Hawk, their own Pucara (they had nearly 150 of these) and the Italian Aermacchi MB339. Their main helicopter was the US Jet Ranger and they were also potentially going to be transporting men and materiel in the C130 Hercules and Chinook choppers, both of which were used by our own armed forces too. The potential for shit and fan colliding with each other in a catastrophic way was obvious, so a lot of homework had to be done. As they say: know your enemy.

The crew of the *Geraint* were mainly Hong Kong Chinese, and there wasn't much these little fellows couldn't do. They cooked the meals, ran the laundry, would operate the anti-aircraft guns and fight fires if we were hit and they even cut our hair. Not with clippers, mind you, but the old way, with scissors and a cutthroat.

The Chinese are very proud and loyal people, much like the Gurkhas, and you couldn't help liking them, but not everyone treated them with maximum respect. One morning, early in the trip, we were lined up for breakfast when one of our lads shouted over, 'What's this shite, then?'

This is a phrase heard every day in Army cookhouses round the world.

The difference is, our slop-jockeys were used to being insulted and relished giving it back to you in spades; the Chinese were not so well-rounded. The gentleman behind the counter made his feelings quite clear by chasing the terrified squaddie around the ship with a meat cleaver until he cornered the lad in the heads (the naval word for 'bogs'), where he locked himself in and refused to come out again until the coast was clear. After that there was a lot more 'please' and 'thank you' flying around.

One afternoon, we had to move a load of sacks of potatoes from above decks down to the galley. Some of the bags burst open and there were lots of loose spuds rolling about. I picked one of the biggest I could find and threw it as hard as I could at the back of the

head of a Chinese sailor, quickly looking at the floor as if I hadn't seen anything. The sailor let out a scream and shot round, looking accusingly at Scouse, who frantically pleaded his innocence while we all fell about wetting ourselves and slipping around in the crushed-up potato.

Once we'd sailed away from UK waters, we could go up on deck. I had broken something of a seafaring tradition in our family by joining the Army. My Dad had wanted to me to join the Navy, as his father had been a ship's Captain on the old SS White Star Line. As a fifteen-year-old schoolboy, I had visited *HMS Leander* when it came to Barrow. It was enjoyable enough looking around, and a matelot doing his recruitment bit had walked over and asked me if I was joining the Navy when I left school.

My mind was already made up. 'No,' I said, proudly. 'I'm joining the Army.'

He looked at me in disgust and said, 'You don't want to do that, son, they'll send you to Northern Ireland. People will be shooting at you, and all sorts. Join a nice, safe profession and see the world.'

Tell that to the lads on the *Sheffield*, the *Coventry* and the *Antelope*, mate.

Anyway, my granddad would have been proud of me now. I probably spent more time at sea than some sailors do and I even got to grips with the lingo. There's the heads, of course, and then the floor is the 'deck', the walls are 'bulkheads', the back is the 'stern' and left and right are port and starboard. I also quickly became acquainted with the tedious monotony of life at sea. Every day was the same. Join the queue for the heads, wash and shave, stow your maggot (sleeping bag) and clean the mess deck ready for the Captain's rounds, where the Captain of the ship inspects and makes sure everything is ship shape. You were herded from port to starboard, fore to aft, where everyone was trying to get their little bit of deck nice and shiny for the skipper.

Topside there was nothing to see for miles and miles: just water, and the odd seabird, and then the horizon curving away to nothing. It felt very lonely: we were in our own little cocoon, our own small boat sailing down with no-one to keep us company. We had no idea of the scale of the task force steaming down with us, just out of sight beyond the curvature of the earth.

As this was still the very early stage of 'Operation Corporate', we were all still in a fairly happy and relaxed state of mind; this was just a show of strength by Maggie Thatcher, a bit of sabre-rattling. The Argies were just bluffing and would bottle it and withdraw to the mainland before we got halfway down there. Even better, with no pubs to spend our cash in, it was a good way of saving some beer money before we turned round for home and started our Easter leave again.

The further we went, the worse the weather; the seas became mountainous and the inevitable epidemic of seasickness broke out. I think we were in the Bay of Biscay when it really kicked in. Seasickness sounds like a minor inconvenience but anyone who has suffered it badly will know what I mean when I say I just wanted to curl up and die. Sadly, we had a war to train for, so we were given some injections that seemed to make it even worse and just got on with it (puking up everywhere, I mean).

I think the first thing that made us concentrate our minds a little was when a sergeant came round dishing out Army wills for us to fill in one afternoon. I don't know what our Mam would have done with all my worldly possessions (which amounted to one carrier bag-full of non-green kit), but she would have got them anyway. Filling in the form brought it home to me that I could actually be going to war here; in a month or two, people I hadn't even met might be trying to kill me, and they might even succeed. It gave a lot of the other guys a few moments' thought, too, but the general consensus was that it was fine: it was why we signed on the dotted line.

We were trying hard to keep morale up, something which is important to all soldiers but is even more so for units like ours. A Rapier Battery has its own peculiar role within the Royal Artillery. Conventional gun Batteries consist of six guns, all grouped together in close proximity in order that they can concentrate their fire and blow the hell out of the bad guys before our infantry can close and take a given piece of ground. Unlike the guns, Rapiers are essentially defensive weapons and so are air-lifted to protect a variety of potential targets, such as ground troops, ammo dumps, HQs and bridges. You can find yourself some distance, even miles, from the other eleven fire units in your Battery. This means a smaller group of blokes who mix together more of the time; each system was

manned by seven men, a Sergeant, a Bombardier, a Lance-Bombardier and four Gunners and we would be in each other's pockets all day, every day. We really had to get along with each other, to trust each other with our lives, even if we hated each other's guts, in order to stay alive and get the job done. Assuming the Argentineans stood fast, where we were going, there wouldn't be an umpire saying 'You lie down, you're dead' as they do on exercise. The parade-ground bullshit was out of the window. Our detachment got on OK, as it happened. We weren't particularly close back in the barracks, but we all pulled together and worked as a team during the journey South.

One thing that did worry us during the voyage was the bashing around the Rapiers had taken when they were brought aboard. They'd been loaded with all the loving care you associate with normal Army loading - ie none - and now, to add insult to injury, they were down below in the Tank Deck, jigging around and getting nicely damp in the salt air. At least one of the launchers was damaged whilst being loaded, which was not a good start. It sounds ridiculous: we were on our way to fight a war, and the kit ought to have been be able to take a bit of punishment. But Rapier was never designed to travel 8,000 miles across the rolling Atlantic in a flat-bottomed boat. It was designed to travel on the roads and fields of western Europe, a Land Rover towing the launcher, followed by a second Land Rover, known as a detachment support vehicle, carrying the rest of the equipment, tracker and crew. It was a notoriously sensitive bit of kit, with lots of things that could go wrong, and this treatment was a major concern. The motion of the ship wasn't our only worry. Unlike home, the Falklands wasn't known for its miles of tarmac, gentle meadow and well-made Teutonic forest tracks. It was basically a craggy hill jutting up out of the waves and we would be relying on Sea King helicopters to lug us around. That meant more jolting and bashing for the Rapiers.

Mind you, the truth was that nobody really knew how the equipment would work in a combat situation anyway. A field gun can be fired every day, whereas - missiles being expensive things - Rapier Regiments were limited to live-firing once a year, at Benbecula in the Outer Hebrides. It didn't get much more exciting than a day up there: you aimed at a long, metal cylinder known as a

'Rushton' which was towed behind a Canberra bomber. It was extremely hard to actually get a hit; the target was only about 10 feet long, much smaller than an aircraft, and it was a couple of miles away and travelling at around 400 knots. If you did manage to hit the bloody thing, which was either a total fluke or meant you were the direct descendant of William Tell (I never did), you got a tee shirt and a crate of beer. On the plus side, at least it didn't fire back. The rest of the time, we had used a simulator, practising tracking and engaging targets on film footage. This was OK, but to be honest some of today's modern arcade games are a lot more realistic and they take more skill, too.

This lack of proper practice was ridiculous, really. Each missile cost something like fifteen grand and it was simply a matter of saving money. But if you weigh that against the cost of losing a ship or a fighter to an enemy aircraft missed by a guy who's never been trained properly, it sounds like a false economy to me. (The craziest thing of all was that it was possible for a Rapier operator never to live-fire. You could sign up for as few as three years, which meant three opportunities. You only had to be otherwise engaged at the relevant times and that was your chance gone. In fact, there was a lad in our Battery who, once posted from depot, didn't even fire a rifle. He was very much into sport, and spent his career playing football, cricket and hockey, which must have been nice for him. I believe he is now a PT instructor in the Birmingham area.) All that said, even live firing had a crucial missing element - fear. The only real way to judge how a Rapier operator will react when he's crapping in his combats would be to put a loaded gun to his head and threaten to blow it off if he didn't hit the target, and I couldn't see that being introduced any day soon, not even by the old Scots Drill Sergeant Major from Bramcote.

From a day or so out of Plymouth, the stink of sweat filled the *Sir Geraint* all day long. Ships can only carry a limited amount of fresh water, and with several hundred squaddies on board it had to be rationed. This meant standing in the shower, turning the water on, getting slightly wet, turning the water off, soaping, turning the water back on for five seconds and rinsing. What I would have given to sit in the bottom with the shower full on, supping a bottle of chilled Newcy Brown, (or 'Dog', as it is known in Cumbria).

At night, everyone congregated in the canteen and we all queued up to buy our rations of five cans of beer. It used to amaze me how some people could get blind drunk on five cans; however, where there's a thirsty squaddie, there's a way (usually a way involving theft or bribery). There was a good atmosphere, with lots of card games going on. We invented a horse-racing game, too. Tables were joined together and a cloth racecourse track was laid out. There were several wooden horses a punter could bid for. Four or five horses were placed at the start and then a die would be rolled. If the die came up seven, then the chosen horse would move along seven places, and so on until one horse eventually won. Vast quantities of money were won and lost on this game every night.

On the whole, things were good-humoured, considering that hats and cabbage heads were mixing together with lots of booze swilling around to help things develop. It would have been a different tale if it had been Paras and Commandos sharing the same boat: light the blue touch paper, stand back and wait for the riot.

There was one serious incident, when two huge RA Commandos had a row with a Sergeant Major and thought it would be a good idea to throw him in the sea to find out if he could swim back to Britain. They were arrested and charged with mutiny and eventually flown back to the UK to sit out the rest of the war in the MCTC (the Military Corrective Training Centre, or jail, in Colchester).

Just to get us really frustrated, we were shown porno films most nights. I'd sit with my legs crossed, bladder busting, waiting for the end, to avoid the jeers of 'Oi, wanker, where are you going, you dirty bastard?' Some nights, I'd sit watching the films, can of beer in hand, and my own personal barber, who had his own shop in Hong Kong, giving me a skinhead.

By now, we'd been at sea several weeks and as we headed towards the equator the weather was getting warm; when you could get up on deck, and if you could put everything out of your mind, it did begin to feel like a cruise in the sunshine. Sunbathing was the order of the day, but you had to be careful not to get burned; your body belonged to the Army and you weren't allowed to damage it. If we did, you were fined several days' pay, depending on the severity of the burn. If several of you got burned on your backs you were made to leap-frog over one another as a deterrent.

Walkmans and tapes were like gold dust, as were radios, which helped us to keep up to date with the news and football results on the BBC World Service. It wasn't exactly encouraged: the officers didn't really want us to know too much about the outside world, or what was going on back home; the idea was to keep our minds firmly set on the task ahead and avoid homesickness.

We were looking forward to stopping at our halfway point, the Ascension Islands. This is a British territory 1,000 miles from the west coast of Africa, some 4,250 miles from the UK and around 3,800 miles from Port Stanley. Having never heard of the place before, and being a Standard Issue 19-year-old lad, I had conjured up images of white sands and palm trees, the local female natives waiting to greet us, swaying gently in their grass skirts and flower garlands, and beckoning to us seductively.

I was to be sadly disappointed. There wasn't a woman in sight and, far from being a tropical paradise, the island was a barren lump of volcanic rock in the middle of nowhere. It's basically a mountain which ascends around 3,000ft into the sky - hence the name. It was an ugly, depressing place; apparently, NASA tested the moon buggy there due to the similarity of its terrain with that of the moon.

The high point of our visit was standing on deck watching shoals of piranha-like fish eating the contents of our heads as it was flushed out into the sea. We took it in turns: 'This time, you go to the bog, and I'll watch.' If pushed, the average soldier could find pointless amusement on the inside of a ping-pong ball.

As well as resupplying us and providing an opportunity for maintenance, the idea was that we would do a bit of a mini-rehearsal - beach landings and invasion-type things. The Rapier crews were looking forward to some live firing of our missiles, which would have been a valuable exercise, a chance to feel solid ground beneath your feet and get your eye back in. But for whatever reason - we were never told why - this didn't happen. Instead, we had to make do with practising limited fly-offs, getting used to working with the choppers who would be lifting the kit. One useful thing we learned from this was that we could stow the optical trackers in the back of one-ton Land Rovers whilst in transit, which meant tracker and Rover went in one lift instead of two, saving valuable time. Unfortunately, we worked this out only after we'd heaved and

sweated them up from the hold to the stern helicopter pad.

We were on our way almost before we had stopped but no-one was all that disappointed when we set back off on our life on the ocean wave. The politicians, safe in their oak-panelled offices in London, were keen that we continued our progress and got to grips with the Argies as quickly as possible, and we felt the same way.

The atmosphere aboard ship changed now, though. As we entered May, the tension on board was increasing every day. The mess deck seemed to get smaller; we were getting sick of living like sardines, and arguments broke out over trivial things. There was a noticeable step-up of training. We ran around the deck of the boat for mile after bloody mile of monotonous sameness, and sweated buckets in PT sessions on the helicopter pad in the blazing sun under the unforgiving gaze of our PTIs (Physical Training Instructors). We went over weapons skills, first aid and aircraft recognition again and again and again. We covered the rules of the Geneva Convention - how to treat prisoners and what to do if we were captured… the old name, rank and number routine. We did this with the usual squaddie sense of humour: 'I'm going to tell them my Regiment as well. They'll probably have worn the sheep out by now, and we'll be next if we don't.'

At the back of my mind, a lingering feeling, that maybe this was all headed for proper fisticuffs after all, was getting stronger and stronger. And as we chugged slowly south, plenty of the other guys seemed to be thinking the same thing. By now, South Georgia had been re-taken from the scrap metal merchants and the Argentine Marines and two Vulcan bombers had dropped a total of nine tons of explosives on the runway at Port Stanley, the Falklands' capital and now the main Argentinean base. They caused only limited damage and the Argies continued to use the runway right up to the end of the war. (The mission sounds a bit like a failure: all that way from England - the world's longest-ever bombing mission at the time - and they miss. The truth was it was a strategic success, because it made the Argies sit up and take notice; if we could hit them there, we could hit them on their mainland. They withdrew their fighters from the airfield to protect their home bases and this was to reduce the effectiveness of their air force during the conflict.)

At 1600 hrs on the 2nd May came one of the major incidents of the war, when *HMS Conqueror*, a Royal Navy submarine, attacked the Argentine flagship, *General Belgrano*. The *Conqueror* fired a pair of torpedoes into the ageing battleship and sank her, killing 300 sailors in the process and leaving a further 700-odd survivors in the freezing South Atlantic waters, where a number of them died from their injuries or exposure before most were picked up.

To some people, this was a very controversial engagement - infamously celebrated by *The Sun* with the headline ‘Gotcha!’ Maggie had imposed a 200-mile total exclusion zone around the Falklands and authorised the Royal Navy to destroy Argentinean ships found within that area. But the *Belgrano* was 38 miles outside the zone when it was torpedoed without warning, and many people have criticised the action. My own view is that it was justified. If you don’t want your warships sunk, don’t invade other people’s territory - something, similarly, which happened without warning. It was a terrible tragedy for the guys who died and their families, of course, but that’s war. Additionally, it also almost certainly shortened the conflict considerably, and saved hundreds of lives in the process: the Argentine navy was recalled to port after the sinking and played virtually no part in proceedings from that point on. An aggressive, committed enemy fleet would certainly have posed major problems to the Task Force, and might even have won Argentina the war.

At the time, none of this even entered my head amid all the cheering and celebrating going on around me as news broke. But I did realise that any doubts we had had about fighting a war had now gone.

Much worse was to come, and very shortly.