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The Special Air Service in the Falklands War: A Critical Reassessment

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ABSTRACT
This article reassesses the contribution of the Special Air Service (SAS) in the 1982 Falklands War. Drawing mainly on primary sources, Argentine as well as British, it demonstrates that while the SAS performed valuable roles, particularly in intelligence gathering, their contribution elsewhere and especially in several direct actions was less impressive. It argues that this resulted from the difficulties the SAS experienced in working alongside conventional forces whose operations they little understood and whose ethos they did not share. The article thus serves as a corrective to celebratory accounts promoted since the war, not least by the SAS itself.

Introduction

Joint operations between special and conventional forces often produce tensions and friction, even when they yield positive results.[1] Meanwhile, recent trends toward the self-promotion and commodification of special forces have been argued to have impacted the internal ethos and effectiveness of those forces.[2] The Special Air Service (SAS) played a much-noted role in Britain's victory in its short 1982 war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands. The SAS contribution came primarily through intelligence gathering, but also through direct action against Argentine forces. Despite these achievements, however, aspects of SAS operations in the war caused irritation among other British forces, for reasons that went beyond simple inter-service rivalry. Some SAS actions were poorly planned, with significant consequences; more than once,

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[1]For a recent review of the U.S. experience, which highlights many of the issues discussed in the present article, see Anna M. Gielas, 'Quarrelsome Siblings – The Relationship Between Special Operations and Conventional Forces', *Journal of Strategic Security* 17:1 (2024), pp. 58-75.

[2]Forrest Crowell, 'Navy Seals Gone Wild: Publicity, Fame, and the Loss of the Quiet Professional, Masters Dissertation, Monterey, Naval Postgraduate School, 2015.

disaster was only narrowly averted. These and related features have fuelled a significant critical literature on the SAS since the conflict, while a slew of recently published diaries and memoirs have shed new light on this topic. Many of these are by former members of the SAS, including a 2018 memoir by one of the squadron commanders.[3] The time is ripe, then, for a reassessment of the role of the SAS in the Falklands War. To this end, the present article draws heavily on British primary sources, and of equal importance, Argentine ones – the latter under-used and often revealing a different picture to British views. The resulting reassessment highlights three areas in particular: SAS independent communications with each other and their home base; over-confidence within the SAS, both among its own members and other actors; and the dangerous ambition to seize the opportunity of the conflict to enhance their reputation in high-profile operations, beyond established command structures and central planning. The key problem overall was that the SAS were not well prepared, either by training, experience, or regimental ethos, to work closely alongside conventional forces, particularly in direct action.

Dedicated British special forces operations in the Falklands War were undertaken by the SAS and by the Royal Marines Special Boat Service (SBS). The British Army has one regular SAS regiment, 22 SAS Regiment, totalling some 260 men – just a fraction of the thousands of conventional forces that embarked with the Task Force. This SAS Regiment has four operational squadrons: A, B, D, and G, of which the last three fought in the Falklands. Each SAS squadron consists of some 65 men commanded by a major, and then divided into four troops, each under a captain. In overall command of the SAS in theatre was a Colonel, Michael Rose, who established his headquarters on HMS *Fearless*; so in rank too, SAS officers in principle had only a relatively minor role in the Task Force. Ashore, they were controlled by the Commanding Officer (CO) of 3 Commando Brigade, Brigadier Julian Thompson, while the SBS was under Commodore Michael Clapp, head of amphibious operations.[4] In the early phases of the war, the SBS were tasked with beach reconnaissance of likely landing areas, while the SAS were to monitor Argentine forces concentrated around the main centres of population. The SAS were to report on enemy command structure, weaponry, morale, helicopter assets, minefields, and communication centres.[5]

[3]Cedric Delves, *Across an Angry Sea: The SAS in the Falklands War,* (London: Hurst & Co, 2018).

[4]Julian Thompson, *3 Commando Brigade in the Falklands: No Picnic*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2014), p. 44; Michael Clapp & Ewen Southby-Tailyour, *Amphibious Assault Falklands: The Battle of San Carlos Water*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2007), pp. 75-76, p. 102.

[5]Clapp & Southby-Tailyour, *Amphibious Assault*, p. 101.

The retaking of South Georgia on 25-26 April aside, the first insertion of special forces in the Falklands proper took place on 1 May, the day the main campaign to recover the islands began. That day witnessed the first Vulcan raid and Sea Harrier attacks on Stanley and Goose Green airfields, naval bombardments, and the first downing of Argentine aircraft. Despite all this activity, Admiral Woodward, the Carrier Battle Group commander, called the insertion of special forces Britain's 'really serious purpose of the day'.[6] While, as already noted, three SAS squadrons took part in the war, only two, D and G, were principally engaged - the role of B squadron is discussed later. The SAS patrols inserted on 1 May were all from G squadron, marking a clear division of responsibility with respect to D squadron. The primary reconnaissance role – based on deep-cover lengthy surveillance of enemy positions – fell to G and not to D squadron, which instead took on a direct-action role. This laid the foundation for the two squadrons' very different experiences during the war.

In the Cold War context, the principal role of the SAS was to gather strategic intelligence behind Warsaw Pact lines, and they were well prepared for it. The men inserted in the early hours of 1 May patrolled continuously and until almost the end of the month. They were ordered to stay away from the Falkland islanders, given the risks of detection and of placing the islanders in jeopardy.[7] From observation posts among crags in the hills, they spent weeks watching roads, troop deployments, and aircraft movements, and spotting for air strikes and naval gunfire. From the end of May until the eve of the final battles for Stanley, the SAS and SBS also patrolled the north-east of East Falkland to secure the left flank of 3 Commando Brigade. Throughout, no G squadron patrol was ever discovered by the Argentines; by contrast, a later D squadron patrol was discovered on West Falkland, resulting in the death of Captain John Hamilton. SAS intelligence gathering activities thus provide the main support for their CO Michael Rose's later contention that 'without the contribution of the SAS, the war could not have been won … in so short a timeframe and with so relatively few casualties'.[8]

With G Squadron accorded the primary intelligence role, D squadron was left with the more glamorous but challenging task of direct action against enemy forces, under

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[6]Sandy Woodward with Patrick Robinson, *One Hundred Days: The Memoirs of the Falklands Battle Group Commander*, (London: Harper Press, 2012), p. 184; see also Thompson, *3 Commando Brigade*, p. 28.

[7]'They were told: Stay up on the hills', Brian Hanrahan & Robert Fox, *I Counted Them All Out And I Counted Them All Back: The Battle for The Falklands*, (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1982), p. 105.

[8]Michael Rose, 'Advance Force Operations: the SAS', in Linda Washington (ed.), *Ten Years On: The British Army in the Falklands War*, (London: National Army Museum, 1992), pp. 75-76, see also p. 55.

its commanding officer Major Cedric Delves. This too was a key role of the SAS, and not only were they highly trained for it, albeit primarily in counter-terrorism rather than conventional warfare, they also enjoyed specific advantages, in privileged access to advanced weaponry and other technology. U.S. special forces supplied them directly with different ordnance, including Stinger shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles, used to shoot down an Argentine Pucara on the day of the British landings at San Carlos on 21 May.[9] However, SAS direct action also faced important constraints. At the outset, they had no authorisation for these, which would come from the War Cabinet only later and for specific operations.[10] Moreover, the SAS fell under the command of Brigadier Thompson, and until the landings under Admiral Woodward. As we will see, these constraints chafed with Rose, Delves, and their superiors.

The SAS undertook or participated in direct action in the Falklands War on five main occasions: in the retaking of South Georgia – Operation Paraquet; the Pebble Island raid; actions against the Argentine mainland – Operations Plum Duff and Mikado; the seizure and defence of Mount Kent; and the raid on Cortley Ridge. Four of these actions primarily involved D squadron, while Operations Plum Duff and Mikado involved B squadron, the third squadron deployed. The SAS made up a significant element of the land force that retook South Georgia during Operation Paraquet, as will be discussed below. However, the most celebrated SAS action of the war was the raid on the Argentine Calderón airbase on Pebble Island to the north of West Falkland on 14-15 May, described at the time as 'the kind of thing we have not had the chance to do since World War II'.[11] The decision to target this airbase with special forces rather than air strikes or naval gunfire was possibly due to the proximity of the Pebble Island settlement to the airstrip, though see further discussion of this point below. The SAS attacked with small arms, grenades, rockets, and explosive charges, and destroyed or disabled all eleven Argentine aircraft at the base. At the time and since, the Pebble Island raid has been considered a brilliant action, of strategic significance.[12]

[9]Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, pp. 218-222; Mark Aston and Stuart Tootal, *SAS Sea King Down: The Extraordinary Story of the SAS at War in the Falklands*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2022), pp. 167-9, pp. 268-71.
[10]Clapp & Southby-Tailyour, *Amphibious Assault*, p. 76.
[11]Max Hastings & Simon Jenkins, *The Battle for the Falklands*, (1983; London: Pan Books, 2010), p. 235; B. H. Turner, 'The Pebble Island Raid', *Marine Corps Gazette* 104:2 (2020), pp. 61-64.
[12]Thompson, *3 Commando Brigade*, p. 46; Clapp & Southby-Tailyour, *Amphibious Assault*, p. 111; Lawrence Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign*, 2nd ed., 2 vols., (London & New York: Routledge, 2007), vol. 2, p. 435; Turner, The Pebble Island Raid, p. 64.

Less well known but arguably equally important was D squadron's move from San Carlos to Mount Kent, forty miles to the east of and under a dozen miles from Stanley, between 24 and 28 May 1982. Mount Kent dominated the approaches to Stanley and over-looked the outer Argentine defences on Mount Harriet and Two Sisters. Having taken up a position there, the SAS defended it on 29-30 May against repeated incursions by Argentine special forces.[13] This operation represented a major leap forward for British forces, and in the view of one scholar was 'the most significant intervention of Special Forces in the advance towards Port Stanley.[14] Operations Plum Duff and Mikado and the Cortley Ridge raid are discussed hereafter.

Their positive contribution notwithstanding, critical views have since emerged of SAS operations in the Falklands. The critique focuses primarily, though not exclusively, on direct actions, and thus on the activities of D and B squadrons. The current section highlights three aspects of SAS involvement in and approach to the conflict which have attracted negative attention. These aspects are discussed first here in general terms, and then in later sections as relevant to three specific operations or episodes. Thus, from this point, the article does not adopt a straightforward chronological structure. Rather, it moves between themes and operations across the chronology of the war as a whole, in such a way as to highlight the relation between both.

The first theme is that of the independent communications the SAS enjoyed both with each other and their headquarters in the UK. This derived from the fact that United States special forces had given the SAS several Tactical Satellite or TACSAT radios. These very advanced hand-held radios made possible communication across the globe, and represented the only means of contact between the Falklands and the UK that lay outside Royal Naval control and the established chain of command. An SAS squadron commander in the Falklands claimed that as a result, his headquarters often knew of key events hours before the Commander-in-Chief Fleet himself.[15] But the system also caused problems.[16] The SAS under Michael Rose were able to pass their views on the war directly to the military high command, when arguably they were neither senior nor experienced enough in conventional warfare to do so productively.[17] 'Outlandish

[13]Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, pp. 237-258; Nick Van der Bijl & David Aldea, *5th Infantry Brigade in the Falklands,* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2014), pp. 61-66; Hugh Bicheno, *Razor's Edge: The Unofficial History of the Falklands War*, (London: Phoenix, 2007), pp. 191-197.

[14]Alastair Finlan, 'British Special Forces in the Falklands War of 1982', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 13:3 (2002), pp. 75-96, p. 90.

[15]Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, p. 15.

[16]Peter de la Billière, *Looking for Trouble: An Autobiography*, (London: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 344.

[17]The following passage draws on Southby-Tailyour, *Exocet Falklands*, pp. 38-39.

ideas for the conduct of the campaign' were fed directly from Rose's headquarters on HMS *Fearless* to military headquarters at Northwood. The potential impact of these signals was mitigated only due to the intervention of a Royal Marine officer attached to a Special Operations Group formed on 6 April to assess proposals for special forces operations by the various bodies concerned. In October 1982, Major General Jeremy Moore, the overall commander of land forces in the Falklands, wrote that the system for requests for special forces operations 'was short-circuited by the SAS using their own communications and taking orders from the Commanding Officer 22 SAS [Rose] based in HMS *Fearless*'.[18] We will see that SAS direct communications with their base during operations on both South Georgia and the Falklands also had significant tactical implications there.

A second feature was the great confidence, or indeed over-confidence, of the SAS in their own capabilities, coupled with a misunderstanding or over-estimation of those capabilities by some senior officers from other forces. This was something fostered actively within the SAS, which, in the view of Connelly and Wilcox, has 'engrained itself into society' through the 'secrecy and mythology' that surrounds it.[19] Critical scholarship on the SAS has noted that the aura that surrounds them, within government as well as in the popular view, has been the product of assiduous promotion. Drawing on the work of John Newsinger, Anthony King writes that 'the SAS has repeatedly overemphasized its own role in every campaign since the end of World War II'; SAS memoirs specifically 'can be hyperbolic, consistently exaggerating the performance of individuals and the SAS as a whole'.[20] This exaggeration even affects academic assessments, with usage of terms like 'phenomenally influential', 'enormous impact'.[21] During the Falklands campaign, again in the words of Major General Moore, this led to 'fatuous expectations' on the part of senior officers of the Navy or RAF of what the SAS could achieve, 'culled one suspects from avid reading of Boy's Own or Beano'.[22] It also probably fuelled accusations of arrogance or a prima donna attitude on the part of the SAS by those who fought alongside them: a sense that they were

[18]Quoted in Southby-Tailyour, *Exocet Falklands*, p. 39.
[19]Mark Connelly & David R. Wilcox, 'Are You Tough Enough? The Image of the Special Forces in British Popular Culture, 1939-2004', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 25:1 (Mar. 2005), pp. 1-25, see pp. 11-12.
[20]Anthony King, 'The Special Air Service and the Concentration of Military Power', *Armed Forces and Society* 35:4 (2008), pp. 646-666, see p. 648, pp. 650-651; John Newsinger, *Dangerous Men: The SAS and Popular Culture*, (London: Pluto, 1997), Chapter 3.
[21]Finlan, 'British Special Forces', p. 92, p. 94.
[22]Freedman, *Official History*, vol. 2, pp. 735-736.

not really team players, further exacerbated by the secrecy that cloaked their operations.[23]

There is ample evidence of SAS self-mythologising in the Falklands campaign, but a single salient instance must suffice here. This concerns a celebrated diversionary raid undertaken by the SAS against Darwin, near Goose Green, to cover the landings at San Carlos on 21 May. The raid was made by around forty men of D Squadron led by Cedric Delves. The SAS were flown in by helicopter, with sub-groups targeting isolated farmsteads north of Darwin, including High Hill and Burntside houses. An assault was made with handheld missiles, mortars, and tracer. The most striking claims would later be made for the success of this raid. It was said that radio intercepts, or prisoners interrogated afterwards, reported that the Argentines believed they had experienced a battalion strength assault, one of at least five hundred men, or that the raid itself constituted the main landings. Rose himself circulated reports to this effect, and they were echoed by Brigadier Thompson, as well as in leading journalistic accounts.[24] It is unsurprising that they have surfaced as a matter of course ever since, whether in popular histories of the war, academic articles, or special forces memoirs.[25] They even appear in the official record, in Delves' post-war citation for the Distinguished Service Order, which again records that 'the enemy were heard to inform their higher HQ that they were under attack from at least a battalion'.[26]

Despite their currency, these reports appear entirely without foundation. Delves' own account of the raid in his 2018 memoir portrays it as a curiously desultory affair, in which his men fired for a short time on an uncertain target, 'it could be sheep', and received no response.[27] The official Argentine Army report on the war does not

[23]See for example Rod Boswell, *Mountain Commandos at War in the Falklands: The Royal Marines Mountain & Arctic Warfare Cadre in Action during the 1982 Conflict*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2021), p. 120.

[24]Rose, 'Advance Force Operations', p. 59; Thompson, in Hugh McManners (ed.), *Forgotten Voices of the Falklands*, (London: Ebury Press, 2007), p. 194; also in Imperial War Museum (hereinafter IWM), sound recording 12428, reel 3, from 8.55; Hastings & Jenkins, *Battle for the Falklands*, p. 246.

[25]Martin Middlebrook, *The Falklands War*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2012), p. 208; Finlan, 'British Special Forces', p. 89; Hugh McManners, *Falklands Commando*, (London: William Kimber, 1984), p. 196; Aston & Tootal, *SAS Sea King*, p. 248; Tony Hoare, *Born for War: One SAS Trooper's Extraordinary Account of the Falklands War*, (London: Welbeck, 2022), pp. 193-194.

[26]*London Gazette*, 8 Oct. 1982.

[27]Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, Chapter. 12, see p. 215; Mark Higgitt, *Through Fire and Water: HMS Ardent: The Forgotten Frigate of the Falklands War*, (London: Thistle Publishing, 2013), pp. 216-217, appears to record the length of the supporting naval

mention the raid; neither did the Argentine commander at Goose Green.[28] The Argentine commander at Stanley, meanwhile, notes the scarcity of records of the raid and says it 'had no influence on Argentine forces in the area'.[29] An Argentine history of the battle of Goose Green comments that allusions to the raid are rare in the Argentine historiography, and 'all but non-existent' in veterans' memoirs. One such account does state that the SAS helicopters were detected by radar and that tracer was seen for around half an hour; it also speaks of an 'exchange of shots' and refers to the action as a 'skirmish'.[30] But a dispatch sent from Goose Green to Stanley just after the raid described an action of 'possibly section strength in area 10 km NE Goose Green (High – Hile)' – for High Hill.[31] An Argentine army section typically numbers some forty five men, suggesting the Argentines were well aware of the true size of the attacking force, and that they placed the SAS more than four miles from Darwin. Meanwhile, the BBC's Robert Fox reported that none of the settlers at Goose Green noticed a nearby land attack that morning.[32]

Moreover, SAS over-confidence and the Darwin raid contributed to poor intelligence during preparations for the battle of Goose Green, which was fought by 2 Parachute Regiment (2 Para) a week later. The SAS provided the only eye-witness intelligence of the Argentine garrison there until immediately prior to the battle, while restricting 2 Para itself from patrolling out from its positions on Sussex Mountain.[33] Their initial assessment was that the garrison consisted of a single company of around 150 men,

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bombardment at under half an hour. The action at Burntside house lasted just 'ten minutes or so': Tony Shaw, *SAS South Georgia Boating Club: An SAS Trooper's Memoir and Falklands War Diary*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2022), p. 114.

[28]Italo A. Piaggi, *El combate de Goose Green: Diario de guerra del comandante de las tropas argentinas en la más encarnizada batalla de Malvinas*, (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1994), pp. 80-83.

[29]Oscar Luis Jofre, *Malvinas: La defensa de Puerto Argentino*, (Buenos Aires: Círculo Militar, 1990), p. 134. For wider scepticism regarding British diversionary tactics, see Francisco Cervo, 'El cerco estratégico operacional y el combate de Darwin – Prado del Ganso', in F. R. Aguiar (ed.), *Operaciones terrestres en las Isla* Malvinas, (Buenos Aires: Círculo Militar, 1983), pp. 123-189, p. 136.

[30]Oscar A. Teves, *Malvinas: La batalla de Pradera del Ganso*, (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Argentinidad, 2010), pp. 160-161

[31]Omar Edgardo Parada, *Malvinas, llagas de una guerra: IIIra Brigada de Infantería: testimonios de su comandante*, (Buenos Aires: Círculo Militar, 2012), p. 272.

[32]Robert Fox, *Eyewitness Falklands: A Personal Account of the Falklands Campaign*, (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 118.

[33]Dair Farrar-Hockley, in National Army Museum (hereinafter NAM), sound recording 5001322, from 44.11.

the figure they supplied to 2 Para's commanding and intelligence officers.[34] This figure contrasted with 3 Commando's Brigade's own assessment, made on the basis of conventional sources, which put the defence at more than three times this size.[35] The SAS were also able to say little about the disposition of the Argentine forces, and concluded mistakenly that no Islanders were present at the settlement.[36] Prior to the battle they revised their estimate upwards, and 2 Para's own intelligence gave them a clearer picture of the real situation, while the Argentine garrison was reinforced to perhaps 1,150 men. But the failings of SAS intelligence frustrated senior officers. The CO of 2 Para, Lieutenant Colonel 'H.' Jones, was recorded as asking, 'What the hell have the SAS been doing down here?', while Thompson himself later commented: 'The SAS didn't really go and look properly'.[37]

Indeed, D squadron's early experiences on South Georgia and then at Pebble Island seemingly led them to under-estimate the likely vigour of Argentine defences more broadly. In both places, they faced small and isolated garrisons which surrendered quickly, and this appears to have tinted their assessment of the much larger force at Goose Green. They briefed 2 Para that Argentine morale was low and military discipline weak, and that 'if we knocked them hard they would fall, crack like a windowpane'.[38] It was on this basis that 'H.' Jones concluded his Orders Group prior to the battle by saying: 'All previous evidence suggests that if the enemy is hit hard, he will crumble'.[39] After he was killed in action his replacement Major Chris Keeble commented: 'All this rubbish about them not wanting to fight … They were fighting hard'.[40] To be clear: intelligence gathering provided the signal contribution of the SAS to the British war effort. The deep-cover surveillance over weeks undertaken around Stanley by G squadron yielded hugely important information. But by contrast, intelligence provided ad hoc and during direct actions by D and B squadrons proved less satisfactory. In a letter covering his post-war report, Major General Moore

[34]Thompson; *3 Commando Brigade*, p. 90; Mark Adkin, *Goose Green: A Battle is Fought to be Won*, (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 1992), pp. 72-73.
[35]Nick Van der Bijl, *Nine Battles to Stanley*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2014), p. 119; Thompson; *3 Commando Brigade*, p. 90.
[36]Fox, *Eyewitness Falklands*, p. 188; Fox, in IWM, sound recording 12427, reel 2, from 13.49.
[37]Hastings & Jenkins, *Battle for the Falklands*, p. 301; interview with Thompson, Feb. 1990, in Adkin, *Battle is Fought*, p. 100, and Fn. 8, p. 286.
[38]Philip Neame, in Adkin, *Battle is Fought*, p. 113; see also p. 98; Neame, in McManners (ed.), *Forgotten Voices*, p. 242; Neame, *Penal Company in the Falklands: A Memoir of the Parachute Regiment at War, 1982*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2024), p. 45.
[39]Helen Parr, *Our Boys: The Story of a Paratrooper*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2019), pp. 103-104; Adkin, *Battle is Fought*, pp. 56-57.
[40]Hastings & Jenkins, *Battle for the Falklands*, p. 305.

indicated that 'four major SAS reconnaissance tasks had been conducted in a less than impressive manner'; this related to D squadron reconnaissance patrols in South Georgia, Goose Green, and even Pebble Island, and to B squadron's activities during Operation Plum Duff.[41] And to this assessment might also be added the reconnaissance of D squadron patrols on Mount Kent, which was similarly regarded as unimpressive by the COs of 3 Commando Brigade and 42 Commando.[42]

The third and final feature in the critique of the SAS focuses on their determination to carve out high-profile roles for themselves and to become key protagonists in the war. Newsinger notes that the Falklands represented the Regiment's first involvement in conventional warfare since 1945, and came in the wake of the positive publicity that followed the storming of the Iranian embassy in London two years earlier. From the outset, Newsinger thus argues that 'there was a determination to push the regiment into the limelight, to grandstand, to ensure that this was remembered as the SAS's war', through undertaking what he calls 'suitably daring headline-grabbing operations.'[43] The author is not alone in regarding this as having led the SAS to seek to determine the course of events, beyond the existing Falklands War campaign design, and parallel to the formal chain of command. Lawrence Freedman, author of the official history of the war, calls this their 'readiness to act outside the standard command structures'.[44]

Evidence of this tendency will be described here in two instances, though other examples follow. Firstly, several accounts suggest that Michael Rose played a decisive role in bringing about the Pebble Island raid, by deliberately introducing spurious reports of a radar station there at intelligence briefings held on board the flagship HMS *Hermes*, presumably to ensure a role in the operation for his men.[45] Certainly, as early as 7 May, Rose was briefing naval officers that 'his men were to take out an enemy radar installation on Middle Peak of Pebble Island'.[46] Meanwhile, Freedman cites an unidentified source to the effect that the decisive factor prompting the raid was indeed '(fictitious) claims that an Argentine warning radar was …located on the Island'.[47] There were of course good reasons to target the Pebble Island airbase, with or without a radar. Nevertheless, for a relatively junior officer like Rose to introduce

[41]See Southby-Tailyour, *Operation Exocet*, p. 295, n. 10.
[42]Vaux, *March*, p. 112; Thompson, *3 Commando Brigade*, p. 114.
[43]Newsinger, *Dangerous Men*, pp. 29-30.
[44]Freedman, *Official History*, vol. 2, p. 735.
[45]Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, pp. 140-142; Aston & Tootal, *SAS Sea King*, p. 175; Hoare, *Born for War*, pp. 157-158.
[46]Southby-Tailyour, *Reasons in Writing*, pp. 167-168.
[47]Freedman, *Official History*, vol. 2, p. 435.

conjectural briefings so as to shape the decisions of the Admiral commanding the Carrier Battle Group seems extraordinary.

Secondly, the SAS also intervened to force the British move forward to Mount Kent. Delves claims that D squadron's move to Mount Kent from 24 May was devised by Rose, partly so as 'to suck Brigade forward onto Mt Kent /Challenger'.[48] The unit chosen for this was 42 Commando Royal Marines, whose commanding officer, at first highly sceptical about the plan, was persuaded by Rose to support it.[49] The aim was to break the deadlock that for logistical reasons had delayed the British break-out from the beachhead for almost a week, by enticing 3 Commando Brigade into an earlier move forward than was planned by Thompson.[50] As we have seen, this yielded a strategically significant advance towards Stanley. But Rose's actions increased the military and political pressure on Thompson, who as early as 24 May was instructed that engagement with the enemy around Stanley 'requires earliest possible development of D Sqn SAS operation [near Mount Kent]'. This was the prelude to a peremptory order from the overall Commander of the Task Force in London, Admiral Fieldhouse, on 26 May for an action to take Goose Green and for a move out of the beachhead, including to reinforce the SAS.[51] The latter represented serious intromission by the senior military command in the UK in the handling of the war by the men on the ground, and deeply angered Thompson.[52] Freedman describes the frustration of local commanders with the failure of those eight thousand miles away to understand the logistical obstacles to an early advance, as well as their tendency to underplay the strength of enemy resistance – both factors arguably exacerbated here by the actions of the SAS.[53]

We now move to more detailed discussion of several controversial operations in which the criticisms of the SAS discussed in this section were prominent: Operation Paraquet, Operations Plum Duff and Mikado, and the raid on Cortley Ridge.

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[48]Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, p. 237.

[49]Nick Vaux, NAM, sound recording 5002744, from 24.30.

[50]A member of D Squadron calls this 'bouncing enough forces forward': Aston & Tootal, *SAS Sea King*, p. 292. See also Nick Vaux, *March to the South Atlantic: 42 Commando Royal Marines in the Falklands War*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2007), pp. 97-8.

[51]Freedman, *Official History*, vol. 2, pp. 557-563; for Thompson's reaction, see *3 Commando Brigade*, pp. 113-114.

[52]Thompson, in Michael Bilton & Peter Kosminsky (eds.), *Speaking Out: Untold Stories from the Falklands War*, (London: André Deutsch, 1989), p. 227; also in Adkin, *Goose Green*, p. 68, p. 77.

[53]Freedman, *Official History*, vol. 2, pp. 557-562; also Van der Bijl, *Nine Battles*, p. 123.

Paraquet was the name given to the operation to retake South Georgia, a dependency of the Falklands located eight hundred miles to the south-east.[54] Plans for this were prepared from the day of the Argentine invasion on 2 April, when Captain Brian Young of the destroyer HMS *Antrim* was appointed to head a flotilla to go to South Georgia. HMS *Plymouth* and HMS *Endurance*, the only navy ship normally stationed in the South Atlantic, were assigned to this group, along with the Royal Fleet Auxiliary RFA *Tidespring*. The operation's land force was led by Major Guy Sheridan of 42 Commando Royal Marines, and initially consisted of 42 Commando's M Company with further forces attached, including a troop of SBS. One of D squadron SAS's four troops, Mountain Troop, was to accompany them.[55]

The forces taking part in the operation were embarked at Ascension Island, with M Company and associated troops sailing in RFA *Tidespring*, and D squadron sailing in another RFA ship, *Fort Austin*. *Fort Austin* replenished the South Georgia flotilla at sea on 12 April, with Mountain Troop alone due to transfer at that point to HMS *Endurance*. However, the D squadron C.O. Delves now intervened. He was disappointed that his remaining three troops were to be left out of the operation, and in his own words 'reacted badly'. He thus took the opportunity to embark the *whole* of D Squadron with the South Georgia flotilla; a move he termed 'shaping our own destiny'. Captain Young and Major Sheridan were surprised by this, even disconcerted.[56] But Young consulted with Northwood, which was receptive to the idea.[57] The whole of D squadron duly joined the flotilla.

The presence of Delves and the whole of D squadron threw the operation's command structure and planning off kilter. The sheer weight of SAS numbers aside, Delves was a Major, like Sheridan, the commander of the land forces and, moreover, enjoyed independent TACSAT communications with his Headquarters. Early plans for a naval bombardment by *Antrim* and *Plymouth* with *Endurance* landing troops directly on to the beach were soon shelved in favour of a more cautious approach, and discussions came to centre on reconnaissance.[58] Sheridan ordered Delves and his SBS counterpart to plan for the scouting of Leith and Grytviken respectively, instructing them among other

[54]Roger Perkins, *Operation Paraquat: The Battle for South Georgia*, (Chippenham: Picton Publishing, 1986), is detailed but dated.
[55]Vaux, *March*, pp. 17-19; Thompson, *3 Commando Brigade*, p. 38.
[56]Guy Sheridan, 'What Really Happened in South Georgia on Op Paraquet in 1982', *The Sheet Anchor* 461 (special number 3) (2020), p. 1. I am grateful to John Beales for bringing this piece to my attention.
[57]Freedman, *Official History*, vol. 2, p. 229.
[58]Nick Barker, *Beyond Endurance: An Epic of Whitehall and the South Atlantic Conflict*, (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 1997), p. 177; the SAS opposed the earlier plans: Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, p. 33.

things that they should 'avoid glaciers like the plague'.[59] Despite this instruction, however, Delves' plan soon came to focus on a helicopter insertion on the Fortuna Glacier, over-looking Leith to the north-west of Stromness Bay.

This plan to approach Leith by crossing the Fortuna Glacier was thereby controversial from the outset. All those present with expertise in arctic conditions, or mountaineering, or knowledge of South Georgia argued against it. These included Sheridan himself, Captain Nick Barker of HMS *Endurance*, a naval lieutenant who had recently led an expedition to the glacier, the men of the British Antarctic Survey based on the island, and the aircrew of *Antrim*'s helicopter who were to fly in the SAS.[60] Sheridan's view in particular should have carried weight, when his battalion commander regarded him as 'probably one of the greatest experts in the military' in arctic warfare and arctic conditions, and who himself knew South Georgia.[61] All these men argued that unpredictable weather and dangerous surface conditions made an approach across the glacier too hazardous, while expressing scepticism about the other arguments advanced in favour.[62] But Delves was unmoveable. He was determined that D Squadron should play some leading role in the operation.[63] He consulted SAS HQ in Hereford via TACSAT and spoke to two men who had climbed Everest and a third who had crossed the glacier two decades earlier, who said it was feasible.[64] For his part, Sheridan was unwilling to contradict Delves openly, though he advised Young not to authorise the plan.[65] But Young was not alone in supposing that the SAS must know what they were doing, and almost disastrously, it went ahead.[66]

Mountain Troop was inserted on to the glacier on the afternoon of 21 April, and by nightfall had only been able to cover a half a mile in the appalling conditions. By the following morning, they were at serious risk from exposure and requested urgent extraction.[67] After a first failed effort, on the second attempt the helicopter from

[59]Sheridan, 'What Really Happened', p. 2; Vaux. *March*, p. 42.
[60]Barker, *Beyond Endurance*, pp. 178, p. 180; Chris Parry, *Down South: A Falklands War Diary*, (London: Penguin, 2013), pp. 64-65; Tony Geraghty, *Who Dares Wins: The Story of the SAS, 1950-1992* 3rd ed., (London: Little Brown, 1992), pp. 85-86; Hastings & Jenkins, *Battle for the Falklands*, p. 160; Van der Bilj, *Nine Battles*, pp. 68-69; Middlebrook, *Falklands War*, p. 105.
[61]Nick Vaux, in NAM, sound recording 5002743, from 40.41, see also from 42:21.
[62]See Parry, *Down South*, pp. 65; Vaux, *March*, p. 42; Freedman, *Official History*, vol. 2, p. 242.
[63]Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, p. 38.
[64]Perkins, *Operation Paraquat*, p. 125.
[65]Sheridan, 'What Really Happened', pp. 2-3; Barker, *Beyond Endurance*, p. 180.
[66]For example: Parry, *Down South*, p. 69: 'they know their business, I thought'.
[67]Aston & Tootal, *SAS Sea King*, pp. 92-95, is a rare eyewitness account.

Antrim and two from *Tidespring* made it on to the glacier. But having picked up the SAS, first one and then the second helicopter from *Tidespring* crashed.[68] *Antrim*'s helicopter took off six SAS, before spending the afternoon attempting repeatedly to lift off the remaining dozen, achieving this only on the third attempt. The episode had cost the Task Force two helicopters and had almost resulted in the loss of an SAS Troop. As the first British action of the war, it had a heightened political as well as military significance: the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, and the senior military personnel in London regarded the period between the loss of the two helicopters and the final rescue as the worst of the conflict.[69] Delves afterwards maintained that the Fortuna plan had been the right one, but that they were caught out by terrible storm conditions; although unpredictability of the weather had been the main basis for the objections to it. Nevertheless, SAS HQ in Hereford sought to blame the helicopter crashes on the Fortuna glacier on 'bad airmanship' on the part of the Fleet Air Arm, – the very force that had rescued its men from near certain death.[70]

Nor did the South Georgia travails of the SAS end there. On the night of 23 April, Boat Troop made a second attempt at a reconnaissance of Leith by deploying in five Gemini boats into Stromness Bay. Within minutes, the outboard engines on three failed, and two boats were then blown out to sea.[71] One was recovered the next morning, while the other was found days later washed up on the coast. Boat Troop did, however, garner useful intelligence on Leith. The sudden detection and disabling of the Argentine submarine ARA *Santa Fe* early on 25 April then precipitated a British assault by sea, air, and land on Grytviken. The majority of the Marines of M Company were more than two hundred miles away, *Tidespring* having been ordered off due to the submarine threat, so that the SAS made up about a third of the seventy five troops available for the assault. Following naval bombardment the Argentines at Grytviken surrendered without firing a shot. None of the attacking force fired their weapons either – except for the SAS, who fired Milan missiles and shot several elephant seals by mistake. As white flags appeared over Grytviken, Delves dropped out of communication with Sheridan and, against explicit orders, advanced to take the initial Argentine surrender.[72]

[68]Geoff Puddefoot, *No Sea Too Rough: The Royal Fleet Auxiliary in the Falklands War: The Untold Story*, (London: Chatham Publishing: 2007), pp. 65-71.
[69]Freedman, *Official History*, vol. 2, pp. 244-245; Hasting & Jenkins, *Battle for the Falklands*, p. 161; Geraghty, *Who Dares Wins*, p. 90.
[70]Southby-Tailyour, *Exocet Falklands*, p. 112.
[71]Shaw, *SAS South Georgia*, pp. 88-9.
[72]Sheridan, 'What Really Happened', pp. 5-8; Perkins, *Operation Paraquat*, pp. 174-175; Van der Bilj, *Nine Battles*, p. 76; Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, pp. 96-99.

Given all this, Delves' DSO citation as it relates to Operation Paraquet makes for surprising reading. It glosses over the controversial aspects, including the near fiasco on the glacier. Rather, it describes 'a brilliantly successful series of operations', and how Delves, by 'quick decisive action and personal display of courage … was able to accomplish the fall of Grytviken without a single loss of life'. It concludes that he 'made a unique contribution to the overall success of operations in South Georgia'.[73] The recommendation and text for this citation were written by Ian Crooke, the second-in-command 22 SAS Regiment.[74]

Undertaken by B Squadron, Operations Plum Duff and Mikado were, with the related SBS Operation Kettledrum, the only British assaults planned on the Argentine mainland during the Falklands War. They arose from the threat presented by Argentina's most effective weapon system, the Exocet missile launched from Super-Étendard aircraft.[75] The main Argentine air base for Super-Étendards was Río Grande in Tierra del Fuego, and this became the target for both SAS operations. Plum Duff was a helicopter-launched eight-man mission, designed first to reconnoitre the base and then make an opportunistic attack. Mikado, by contrast, was to consist of a frontal assault by more than sixty men of B Squadron landed directly on to the airstrip by an RAF Hercules aircraft. In proposing Mikado, the SAS appears to have taken as its point of reference the celebrated Israeli special forces airborne assault on Entebbe airfield in Uganda in 1976.[76]

Given the Exocet threat and the concerns it provoked, these operations seemed justified. Plum Duff was approved by the War Cabinet, and Mikado was supported by Admiral Woodward.[77] Nevertheless, they were so secret that even high-ranking officers in the fleet remained in the dark as to their nature.[78] Ewen Southby-Tailyour presented the first detailed and amply documented account of these operations in *Exocet Falklands,* published in 2014, a work which presents perhaps the strongest critique to date of the SAS in the Falklands. Southby-Tailyour argues that the operations were at best ill-judged and at worst reckless. A distinguished veteran of the campaign who has written at length on the war, his conclusions are based on extensive interviews with key actors and carry considerable weight.

[73]Citation, *London Gazette*, 8 Oct. 1982.
[74]Recommendation, 30 Jun. 1982, The UK National Archives (hereinafter TNA) WO 373/188/229.
[75]For example: Bryan Perrett, *Weapons of the Falklands Conflict*, (Poole: Blandford Press, 1982), pp. 77-78, pp. 125-126.
[76]Southby-Tailyour, *Exocet Falklands*¸ Chapter 1.
[77]Freedman, *Official History*, vol. 2, p. 437; Woodward, *One Hundred Days*, pp. 307-322.
[78]For example: Clapp & Southby-Tailyour, *Amphibious Assault*, p. 111.

In the event, Plum Duff was the only one of these operations actually undertaken.[79] B Squadron's 6 Troop was flown out via Ascension, and the mission was launched from HMS *Invincible* in a Sea King helicopter. This crossed the Argentine coast where it landed briefly, only ultimately to drop the SAS deep in *Chilean* territory, perhaps eighty miles from their target. They attempted to walk back, but after a week abandoned the mission. The men were flown first to Santiago and then to the UK; the helicopter crew, meanwhile, attempted to sink their aircraft in the Magellan straits, and when this proved impossible, they burnt it on the shore.[80]

Southby-Tailyour argues that Plum Duff and Mikado were ill-considered because the preparations made for them were inadequate, and above all because Rio Grande in 1982 was in no sense comparable to Entebbe in 1976. Thousands of troops were stationed around the base, which had two radar systems, while destroyers stationed off the coast mounted further radars.[81] Río Grande was defended by four anti-aircraft batteries and a further ten radar guided anti-aircraft guns. That is to say, the probability of the Hercules aircraft allotted for Mikado reaching the airbase without detection or destruction was slim. Even had they reached their target, locating the Super-Étendards on a crowded airfield in the dark would have presented formidable challenges. And while the British sought to pass Plum Duff off as a surveillance helicopter forced to ditch in Chile due to bad weather, Mikado would have constituted an overt attack on Argentine territory, and come at significant diplomatic cost.

Plum Duff and Mikado displayed in heightened form aspects of SAS operations explored throughout this article. Both were potentially high-profile, headline grabbing operations. But they were approached without the careful planning required for complex, challenging missions. The only maps available to the men undertaking Plum Duff, for example, were torn from a 1930s school atlas or published by the Argentine government in 1942 to 1:100,000 scale.[82] In fact, so vague was the planning, and so dangerous the mission, that it prompted dissent within the SAS itself. A sergeant due to take part in Mikado resigned, and when his squadron commander informed SAS Director Peter de la Billière of this while expressing his own reservations, he was summarily dismissed.[83] One participant noted of De la Billière that 'he clearly wanted his Entebbe-style raid', with another adding: 'We're all going to die to fulfil an old man's

[79]Unless otherwise indicated, this paragraph is based on Southby-Tailyour, *Exocet Falklands*, Chapter 11.
[80]Sidney Edwards, *My Secret Falklands War*, (Hove: Book Guild, 2014), Chapter 8.
[81]Southby-Tailyour, *Exocet Falklands*, Chapter 4, pp. 171-172, p. 180, pp. 182-183.
[82]Southby-Tailyour, *Exocet Falklands*, pp. 134-136, pp. 162-164.
[83]Southby-Tailyour, *Exocet Falklands*, pp. 208-209; De la Billière, *Looking for Trouble*, pp. 346-347.

fantasy'.[84] Even Cedric Delves, himself poorly informed as to what was planned, wrote: 'Nobody in his right mind would contemplate such a gamble'.[85] Nevertheless, planning continued even after Plum Duff had failed, and after the Argentines had expended all but one of their air-launched Exocets.[86] It was only finally cancelled on 3 June.

Perhaps most striking of all, the mission was kept secret from virtually everyone. The SAS declined to engage with the Special Operations Coordinator appointed at Fleet HQ, whose role was to ensure that 'all operations, special and conventional, should be dovetailed and deconflicted rather than be conducted in isolation'.[87] In fact, 'the decision to use SAS troops from the United Kingdom on Plum Duff was … not a matter discussed at the Special Operations Group'.[88] And following the failure of Plum Duff, the SAS refused to provide Admiral Fieldhouse as Commander-in-Chief, Major General Moore as commander of land forces, or Admiral Woodward with any report, stating simply that it was 'no longer a matter for [them] … and thus no further information will be forthcoming'.[89]

As the end of the war grew nearer and the primary SAS reconnaissance role wound down, more of the troops shifted to direct action. Major General Moore later commented: 'I had a heck of a lot of special forces. As we were getting to the end of their reconnaissance role, they were very keen to be doing things'.[90] This presented a problem, however, since, again in Moore's words, 'there were more Special Forces than could be allocated tasks … which were given more through a sense of obligation than because of a valid requirement'.[91]

This was the context to the final SAS action, on 13/14 June – the last night of the war. Wishing to find a role for them, Moore stated, 'we concocted a plan for … a raid on the northern side of Stanley'.[92] This became a joint SAS and Royal Marines affair, led by Cedric Delves, against Cortley Ridge, which the Argentines called Camber Peninsula. This raid was purportedly diversionary, intended to draw Argentine fire

[84]In Southby-Tailyour, *Exocet Falklands*, p. 240, and quoted in Newsinger, *Dangerous* Men, p. 30.
[85]Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, p. 115.
[86]Southby-Tailyour, *Exocet Falklands*, p. 201, p. 221.
[87]Southby-Tailyour, *Exocet Falklands*, pp. 35-36, p. 201.
[88]Southby-Tailyour, *Exocet Falklands*, p. 204.
[89]Southby-Tailyour, *Exocet Falklands*, pp. 274-275 & p. 295, Fn. 10; Woodward, *One Hundred Days*, pp. 321-322.
[90]Moore, in McManners, *Forgotten Voices*, p. 412.
[91]Quoted in Southby-Tailyour, *Exocet Falklands*, p. 291, Fn. 34.
[92]Moore, in IWM, sound recording 10482, reel 5, from 20.13.

from 2 Para's simultaneous attack on Wireless Ridge.[93] The specific objective was several oil storage tanks on the feature. SBS rigid raider craft were to carry a score of D Squadron to the northern shore, while around sixty men of D and G squadrons provided covering fire across Hearndon Water.[94] The raid went badly from the start: an Argentine hospital ship reported the crafts' movements and illuminated them with spotlights.[95] The raiders were pinned down soon after they landed, and reported that they must withdraw. D and G Squadrons opened up in support, only themselves to be immobilised by withering fire.[96] The COs of 3 Commando Brigade and 2 Para state that the SAS requested assistance, which was refused; Delves disputes this.[97] The troops withdrew with several wounded.

The Cortley Ridge raid has divided opinion. It has been called 'flamboyant', 'swashbuckling' but 'unsatisfactory', or 'shambolic'.[98] Some participants later described it as an 'unacceptable risk mission' or even 'a total disaster'.[99] The focus on destroying oil tanks, when the oil would soon be needed by British forces and civilians, was questioned by observers from both sides.[100] And the broader rationale for the raid, of diverting attention from 2 Para's attack on Wireless Ridge, has also been questioned.[101] Senior officers in the Marines and Paras were irritated by it, and Moore himself acknowledged that the attack was not well coordinated with 3 Commando Brigade's operations and that his allowing it was 'a mistake' which 'hindered 2 Para' and 'was not helpful to them'.[102] Some writers have taken a more positive view, however.[103] The most supportive appraisal is that of Hugh Bicheno, who writes: 'The raid on

[93]Rose, 'Advance Force Operations', p. 59.
[94]Hastings and Jenkins, *Battle for the Falklands*, pp. 381-382.
[95]Jorge Muñoz, *Barcos hospital: sanidad militar en la Guerra de Malvinas*, (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Argentinidad, 2017), pp. 82-86; Parada, *Malvinas*, p. 490; Shaw, *SAS South* Georgia, pp. 139-140; Martin Middlebrook, *The Argentine Fight for the Falklands*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2012), pp. 268-269.
[96]Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, p. 308.
[97]Thompson, *3 Commando Brigade*, p. 180; David Chaundler, in IWM, sound recording 14152, reel 3, from 25.52; Freedman, *Official History*, vol. 2, pp. 648, p. 650; Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, p. 309.
[98]Hastings & Jenkins, *Battle for the Falklands*, p. 382; Middlebrook, *Falklands War*, pp. 272-273; King, 'Special Air Service', p. 650.
[99]Jenny Simpson, *Biting the Bullet: Married to the SAS*, (London: HarperCollins, 1996), pp. 32-33; Roger Edwards, in McManners, *Forgotten Voices*, p. 412.
[100]Jofre*, Malvinas*, pp. 253-254; Hoare, *Born for War*, p. 244.
[101]Finlan, 'British Special Forces', p. 90.
[102]Moore, in IWM, sound recording 10482, reel 5, 19.04 ('mistake') and from 20.30.
[103]Freedman, *Official History*, vol. 2, p. 648, p. 650; Hastings & Jenkins, *Battle for the Falklands*, pp. 381-382.

Camber Peninsula was an entirely successful diversion, as proved by the Argentine Army's official history and by Jofre's [the officer in charge of the defence of Stanley] 1987 memoir, in which he insists it was a full-blown amphibious landing attempt'.[104]

In that memoir, however, Oscar Luis Jofre, far from insisting that this was a 'full-blown amphibious landing', put the total raiding force at 'three boats, with around ten men in each', in itself an over-estimation of the true size of the attacking force.[105] By contrast, the Argentine Army's official report does call the raid 'an amphibious assault' and suggests, erroneously, both that a second wave was detected, and that hours later, there were indications the British planned further to increase the pressure on the Peninsula.[106] This report and others nevertheless make clear that the Argentine reaction was, beyond the vigorous local response, modest. Forty-five Argentine Commandos were sent to reinforce the Argentine positions, and crossed Stanley harbour to find that the SAS had already withdrawn.[107] The Argentines also disputed the ostensibly diversionary purpose of the raid.[108] Meanwhile, Jofre further wrote that 'without doubt this attack was aborted thanks to the energetic response of the [defensive] subsector': a rare Argentine success in the last hours of the war .[109]

The most striking discussion of the raid appears in Delves' own 2018 memoir, which underscores the raid's improvised nature as well as the misgivings it produced and its potentially disastrous consequences. Delves initially saw the operation as 'unlikely' and to be undertaken only if possible. But it was then confirmed at short notice, to his explicit consternation.[110] His mood became one of 'deep foreboding, tinged with irritation'.[111] There was little clarity around the objective: 'We had no immediately obvious high-value target to go for, no target save for enemy to our front. Nor was there precision, nothing to be precise about'. In these circumstances, the decision to target the oil storage tanks was not 'a clever choice'.[112] With the raiders soon forced to withdraw, an SAS trooper asked Delves for permission to target the hospital ship

[104]Bicheno, *Razor's Edge*, p. 306.
[105]Jofre, *Malvinas*, p. 254.
[106]Ejército Argentino, *Informe oficial del Ejército Argentino: conflicto Malvinas*, (Buenos Aires, 1983), pp. 112, p. 114.
[107]Jofre, *Malvinas*, pp. 253-256; Parada, *Malvinas*, pp. 489-490; Ejército Argentino, *Informe oficial*, p. 112.
[108]Rubén O. Moro, *La guerra inaúdita: historia del conflicto del Atlántico Sur*' (Buenos Aires: Editorial Pleamar, 1985), p. 490.
[109]Jofre, *Malvinas*, p. 253-254; see also Van der Bijl and Aldea, *5th Infantry Brigade*, p. 156.
[110]Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, pp. 295, p. 301, pp. 303-304.
[111]Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, p. 304.
[112]Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, pp. 305-307.

with a Milan missile – raising the prospect of a British attack on a hospital ship on the last night of the war.[113] When the SAS eventually withdrew though 2 Para's flank, they were almost targeted by British artillery, with a blue-on-blue incident narrowly averted.[114]

In conclusion: most of the problems that arose with SAS operations in the Falklands were the product of the differing expertise and experience of special as opposed to conventional forces. The SAS, accustomed to small-scale counter-insurgency operations in which they had largely a free hand, struggled to work effectively alongside much larger conventional forces, which controlled the campaign once ashore. Small-scale, risky actions that privileged speed and improvisation could produce successes such as at Pebble Island; but they could also conflict with the more measured, co-ordinated approach of the Royal Marines or Paras. And these differences were exacerbated by an ethos within the SAS that prioritised seizing the initiative over conformity to orders or the formal chain of command. Added to this was the determination of the SAS leadership to secure a prominent role; in Newsinger's words, quoted earlier, 'to ensure that this was remembered as the SAS's war'.

All of this meant that wherever the SAS were closely subordinate to conventional direction, they excelled – as they did in intelligence and surveillance operations around Stanley. By contrast, where they had a freer hand, they often performed less well. The irony, then, is that it was precisely in the direct-action role they most cherished that the weaknesses of the SAS were most apparent. Their buccaneering, go-it-alone approach only partially matched the demands of the larger coordinated campaign within which they were, after all, only a small element. In some cases – in South Georgia, Tierra del Fuego, or at Cortley Ridge – potentially disastrous outcomes were only narrowly averted. The broad conclusion to be drawn from the activities of the SAS in the Falklands were summarised by the CO of 2 Para, who argued:

> once the ground troops actually close up, then it's best that the SAS get off that particular real estate, because to have special forces and conventional troops operating on the same piece of terrain could have led to a fairly serious disaster.[115]

[113]Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, p. 312.
[114]Chaundler, in IWM, sound recording 14152, reel 3, from 26.12.
[115]Chaundler, in IWM, sound recording 14152, reel 3, from 26.34.