



After landing on East Falkland Island, Argentine soldiers move through the city of Stanley during Operation Rosario, 2 April 1982. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

A Sad and Bloody Business

Land Force Lessons from the Falklands, Forty Years On

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In April 1982, the Falkland Islands became a household name. On 2 April, Argentine forces landed on East Falkland and seized Port Stanley, claiming the “Malvinas” for Argentina. The following day, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher stood up in the House of Commons to condemn this aggression, and at the end of her speech, announced, “A large task force will sail as soon as preparations are complete.”¹ It seemed preposterous that two American allies could fight over a bunch of remote rocks in the South Atlantic, yet as the weeks passed, diplomacy failed, British warships churned south, and the prospect for a peaceful resolution dimmed. On 2 May, the nuclear attack submarine HMS *Conqueror* torpedoed the cruiser ARA *General Belgrano*, taking 368 lives.² Within forty-eight hours, an AM39 Exocet air-launched antiship cruise missile slammed into the British destroyer HMS *Sheffield*, killing twenty-one crew members and the Royal Navy’s confidence in its ability to defend itself.³ The war had begun in earnest. Against the background of these losses, an amphibious force, Task Group 317.0, steamed toward Falkland Sound. Its passengers included the Landing Force, Task Group 317.1, composed of the Royal Marines’ 3rd Commando Brigade, reinforced with the 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the British Army’s Parachute Regiment, plus supporting arms. The mission of these two task groups was “to land a force in the Falkland Islands with a view to repossessing the Islands.”⁴ Prior to sailing, Cdre. Michael Clapp and Brig. Julian Thompson, the commanders of these two groups, had been warned by task force commander Adm. Sir John Fieldhouse, “This is going to be a sad and bloody business—I only wish I could offer you more ships.”⁵



Smoke billows from HMS *Sheffield* after it was hit by an Argentine Exocet missile in 1982 during the Falklands War. (Photo courtesy of the Press Association via Wikimedia Commons)



The Argentine cruiser ARA *General Belgrano* lists heavily to port in the Atlantic Ocean after being attacked by a British submarine 2 May 1982 during the Falklands War. It later sank. (Photo courtesy of the Press Association via Wikimedia Commons)

The amphibious operation at San Carlos on 21 May did, in fact, land a force in the Falkland Islands. Three weeks later, after an initial build up ashore and subsequent bitter fighting, the Argentine garrison would surrender to the numerically inferior British land force. It was a remarkable victory, but Fieldhouse’s warning had proved prophetic. On the British side alone, the war resulted in the loss of two destroyers, two frigates, one landing ship, a roll on/roll off container ship, ten fighter aircraft (Harriers), twenty-four helicopters, 255 killed, and 777 injured or wounded.⁶

The Falklands War marked the first significant naval campaign of the missile age, and the largest amphibious operation since the Korean War. As such, naval and marine planners have studied it extensively. Forty years on, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine underway and tensions high in the Pacific’s First Island Chain, it is worth looking at the joint campaign in the Falklands from a land force perspective. We will find much to learn about force projection, forcible entry, expeditionary warfare, and the limitations and the challenges facing our joint partners.

Action Stations! Surface Ships in the Missile Age

The Falklands campaign made very clear two things about surface warships in the missile age: they are essential for power projection, and they are vulnerable.⁷ The Royal Navy Carrier Force, Task Group 317.8, entered the total maritime exclusion zone on 23 April 1982 with thirteen ships; there were two

small carriers plus their escorts (assorted destroyers and frigates). Many of the escorts filled specialized roles, such as air defense, antisubmarine, or surface warfare, but all had at least some capacity in each

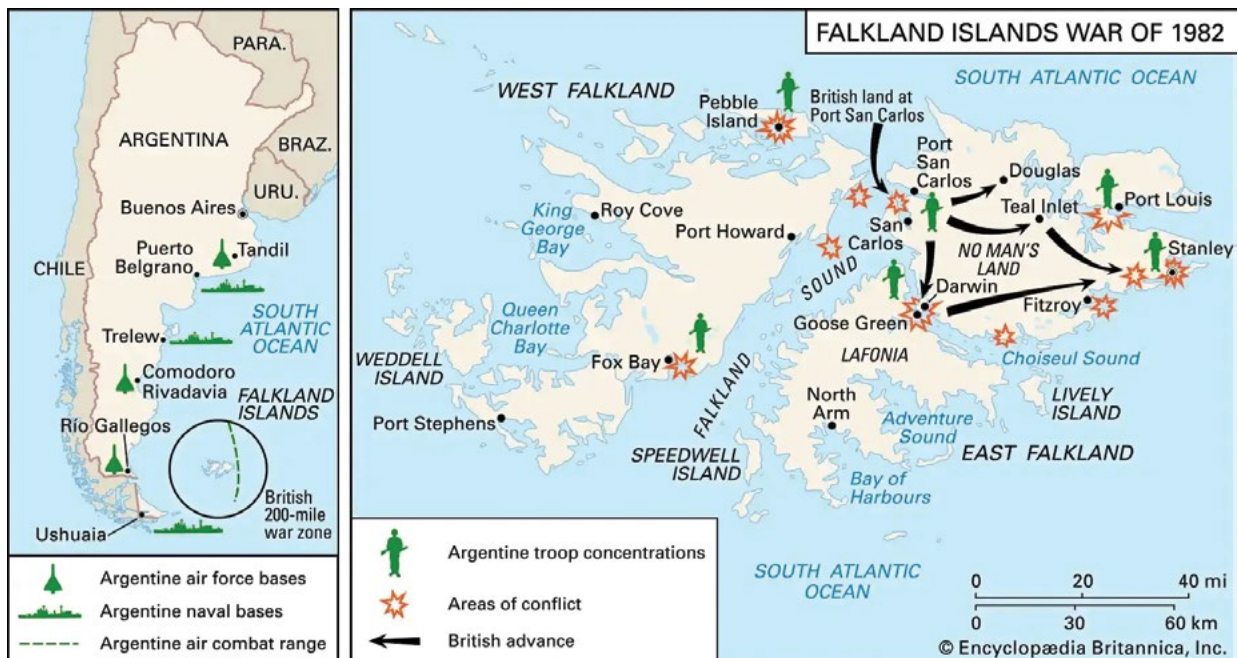
untested Sea Harriers on the two carriers, these five ships represented the task group's best hope of defending itself against air attack.⁹ By war's end, air attacks had crippled *Glasgow*, *Brilliant*, and *Broadsword*,

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role. The crown jewels of the escorts were three “Type 42” destroyers (*Coventry*, *Glasgow*, and *Sheffield*) and two “Type 22” frigates (*Brilliant* and *Broadsword*).⁸ The Type 42s were air defense specialists; their twin Sea Dart long-range surface to air missile (SAM) launchers suited them to protect NATO fleets against massed attacks by high-flying Soviet bombers delivering high-altitude antiship cruise missiles (ASCMs). The Type 22s were antisubmarine warfare vessels, but were equipped with short-range Sea Wolf SAM launchers, capable of destroying sea-skimming cruise missiles. (They, like many Argentine ships, also mounted Exocet ASCMs.) Aside from the twenty

and sent *Sheffield* and *Coventry* to the bottom of the South Atlantic.

While the Argentine navy's surface and submarine fleets failed to contest control of the sea, the Argentine air force and naval aviation proved an existential threat to the British task force. Having Type 42 destroyers of their own, the Argentines were familiar enough with British capabilities and limitations to avoid Sea Dart's firing envelope, generally attacking at or just above wave-top level. They carried out most of these attacks with “dumb” bombs and cannons, in World War II fashion. These attacks came in so low that they were difficult to detect by radar (more than one British ship



(Map courtesy of Encyclopædia Britannica, 2016; used with permission)

Falklands War, 1982

sustained damage when an Argentine jet struck its antennae, and at one least Argentine A4 Skyhawk crashed on landing because of sea spray coating its canopy).¹⁰ Another consequence of the low-level attacks was that many Argentine bombs failed to explode, their fuses not having had time to arm. Many a British ship limped out of action with unexploded 500- or 1,000-pound bombs lodged in fuel tanks or magazines.

The Argentine navy's Super Étendard aircraft could also attack by launching Exocet ASCMs. Throughout the war, Argentina possessed only five air-launched Exocets. Despite British familiarity with Exocet, these five ASCMs sank two ships: the HMS

start secondary fires that rapidly overwhelm a crew's ability to control damage. While a large aircraft carrier might absorb two or three ASCM hits and survive, a single ASCM hit on a cruiser, destroyer, frigate, or cargo ship will likely be fatal.¹¹

Why is this important to the land force? In a word: risk. Unlike an infantry squad or tank platoon, if a naval commander sails her or his ships into the line of fire, the ships cannot take cover or back down behind an intervisibility line; they must fight their way out. The Argentines had only five air-launched Exocets, which they used to sink two ships. While a modern U.S. strike group has many advantages that the British



A screenshot from a China Central Television YouTube video shows a version of a Chinese H-6 bomber firing a YJ-12 antiship missile July 2016 during an exercise in the South China Sea. The Falklands War demonstrated the vulnerability of surface naval ships to antiship cruise missiles, a lesson that did not go unnoticed by the United States and its rivals. (The video has since been withdrawn.) (Screenshots from YouTube)

Sheffield and the *SS Atlantic Conveyor*. In naval battles of the Second World War, ships as small as destroyers suffered numerous hits and kept fighting as long as their armored magazines were not penetrated. In contrast, modern warships are full up with relatively vulnerable fuel, electronics, and munitions. An ASCM is especially dangerous as it delivers a large warhead at high speed: 165 kilograms at Mach 0.9 for Exocet; 205–500 kilograms at more than Mach 2 for a modern Chinese YJ-12. Such large warheads, traveling at such high speeds, inevitably cause massive damage and

lacked in 1982 (many based on lessons learned from that conflict), it is important to remember that a single Chinese H-6J or H-6K long-range bomber can carry six YJ-12 ASCMs, which they can probably launch from two hundred nautical miles away. A fast attack hydrofoil might carry eight ASCMs. If a foe such as China managed to mass a regiment of H-6s and/or a squadron of small attack boats, a modern U.S. or allied strike group could easily find itself fending off a barrage of one hundred to two hundred supersonic cruise missiles. Considering that a U.S. carrier strike group typically

puts to sea with a carrier, a cruiser, and two or three destroyers, the adversary would not need a 40 percent kill rate to succeed. With two hundred missiles, a 3 percent hit rate would have staggering strategic and operational consequences. If that strike group also happened to be supporting an expeditionary land force, that land force could suddenly be isolated, with little prospect of help for a long time. Our naval counterparts are valiant warriors, but they must carefully weigh the risks before exposing their ships to enemy fire.

You Can't Always Get What You Want

While successive rounds of defense budgets had whittled down the fleet of amphibious ships available to the Royal Navy, it retained one critical asset: the HMS *Hermes*. This flat-topped ship was a small aircraft

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carrier with a full-length flight deck and below-deck hangar. The Royal Navy had modified *Hermes* for antisubmarine warfare duties, but in its former role as the primary amphibious platform for the Royal Marines, *Hermes* had been referred to as a "Commando Carrier." (The modern, larger, U.S. equivalent is the America-class landing helicopter assault ship.) Having trained extensively with *Hermes*, it came as a shock to the commando brigade staff when they received word that *Hermes* would not serve in an amphibious role. Fieldhouse had decided air superiority was a prerequisite to any amphibious operation in the Falklands. With only a single carrier, the

HMS *Invincible*, the carrier group could not possibly generate enough sorties to control the air. Thus, the amphibious force would have to make do without *Hermes*, and the landing force would have to make do without the ability to count on air assaults from the water. The primary mode of ship-to-shore movement would have to be via watercraft.¹²

At no point during the hostilities did the British ever come close to establishing air superiority. The Sea Harriers were very effective, and the Argentine pilots feared them, but they were too few and far between to control the air. Ultimately, Fieldhouse decided to execute the landing without air superiority, so Thompson had to make do once again, having neither the helicopters of the HMS *Hermes* nor the protection of air superiority.

Control of sea and air remains a prerequisite for an amphibious operation. A land force commander will certainly have unfulfilled requirements. While the land component may ultimately be the main effort, it should plan to make do with what it can get.

The Unfriendly Skies

There are simply never enough friendly aircraft to go around. An eager land force commander might assume that with two aircraft carriers in his joint task force, there would be plenty of fighters available to ensure air supremacy and provide copious close air support (CAS). Nothing could be further from the truth. As his amphibious task force approached its amphibious objective area in Falkland Sound, Clapp was particularly concerned about Argentine air attack as the amphibious objective area was just within range of bomb-laden fighter/bombers flying from bases on mainland Argentina. Clapp accordingly requested a modest three combat air patrols (CAPs) of two Sea Harriers each on the air avenues of approach to San Carlos. Unfortunately, the math did not work. To maintain six aircraft constantly on station, the naval air squadron needed an additional six Harriers in transit (to or from the CAP stations), and six on the decks preparing to go on station; this accounts for eighteen of the twenty Sea Harriers in the force. This does not allow for any Harriers down for maintenance, nor, in fact, for air defense of the carriers. CAS was out of the question.¹³ As it turned out, the Sea Harriers rarely prevented an attack. They generally had to engage fleeing enemy aircraft as they attempted to return to base after



British commandos from the 40 Commando Anti-Tank Troop march toward Port Stanley, Falkland Islands, in 1982. Royal Marine Peter Robinson brought up the rear carrying the Union Jack flag. (Photo by Pete Holdgate via the Imperial War Museums)

attacking, vectored on by controllers on the warships under attack.

Given the lack of air superiority, the amphibious group relied heavily on Army and Marine air defense assets, as well as its own Blowpipe and a handful of Stinger man-portable air defense systems, Rapier SAMs, and small arms fire from the landing force. In the relatively close quarters of San Carlos Water, much of the weight of close-in air defense fell on the shoulders of seventeen- to nineteen-year-old sailors in sand-bagged emplacements on the superstructure of ships. Firing light antiaircraft guns, general-purpose machine-guns, World War II vintage Bren light machine-guns, and even flare pistols, these young ratings attempted to distract the Argentine pilots enough to throw off their aim. On occasion, they even knocked them from the sky. The price was high on both sides.¹⁴

To be fair, a modern U.S. expeditionary strike group would rely far less on merchant shipping and be better equipped with close-in weapons systems. It would presumably be within range of more capable fighters vectored onto incoming threats by airborne early warning. To counter this, a contemporary foe flying large, well-coordinated joint strikes from numerous land bases could potentially mass

overwhelming force and break through and bring the fight to the amphibious force. To guard against such an eventuality or against an attack on the carrier, a carrier strike group commander would, out of necessity, focus heavily on defensive counterair operations to the detriment of land operations (including CAS in support of the landing force). A wily land force commander might ask to have dedicated Marine Corps F-35Bs, embarked on a landing ship

helicopter dock or landing ship helicopter assault, in his amphibious task force. While these aircraft could certainly provide local defense and CAS missions, there is a tradeoff; as with the HMS Hermes, the fighters would displace badly needed helicopters. Arguably a CH-53, CH-47, AH-64, or AH-1Z would be far more valuable to the landing force than an F-35 in the long term.

A landing force disembarking from amphibious ships will have to accept risk. The commander of a landing force will never have everything he or she wants. Sometimes the best the landing force can do is select the best amphibious objective area in close coordination with the amphibious force and focus on getting troops, equipment, and supplies ashore as quickly as possible; only then might the landing force be master of its own destiny.

For Want of a Nail: Sustainment Rules

I have heard the quote “Amateurs discuss tactics, professionals discuss logistics,” or some variation thereof, attributed to generals from Napoleon Bonaparte to Omar Bradley to Georgy Zhukov. Whoever first said it, it was never truer than when one is talking about an amphibious operation.

The British secured the beachhead around San Carlos Water early on D-Day of the landing operation. With nearly five battalions of highly trained marines and paratroopers dug in on the high ground surrounding the small bay, the focus of the transportation effort

immediately transitioned from landing troops and weapons to building a base of operations. Things immediately went awry.

Thompson, the commander of the landing force, had planned to build what the current U.S. Army would call a brigade support area (BSA) on and around the beaches near the San Carlos settlement. As is U.S. practice, this BSA would house supplies (primarily ammunition, fuel, food, water, and medical, roughly in that order), maintenance activities, and medical facilities. Transportation would generally be by helicopter. The brigade counted on the eventual arrival of four CH-47 and ten Wessex helicopters, stowed aboard the SS *Atlantic Conveyor*. The CH-47s were too large to

send it to the bottom of the ocean. Clapp knew that Thompson planned on *Canberra* remaining anchored in San Carlos, from which it could push supplies forward on demand and constantly replenish the BSA. Thus, it was with heavy heart that Clapp ordered *Canberra* to sail out of San Carlos under the cover of darkness, to return only when called upon. Its precious cargo would remain available on a day or two's notice, but it would require planning and forecasting to get any of its cargo ashore, and it would be only in short bursts to minimize exposure. This was undoubtedly the right decision; had the Argentine air force shifted emphasis to merchant shipping, or had an enterprising or errant pilot struck *Canberra*, British land operations could well

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fly from the landing platform docks, the HMS *Fearless* and the HMS *Intrepid*, with the amphibious force. They could have operated from the HMS *Hermes*, but as we have seen, its services were required as a Harrier carrier. The maintenance and aircrews on *Atlantic Conveyor* had just managed to get a single CH-47 airborne before an Exocet hit the ship. The remaining helicopters, along with critical supplies (e.g., all the land force's tentage), sank with the ship.¹⁵

The loss of *Atlantic Conveyor* was not the only unforeseen logistics challenge. While the Argentine air attacks on San Carlos Water were not as effective as they might have been, the pilots pressed them home with great determination and gallantry. It was not long before Clapp realized that SS *Canberra*—a large, white merchant ship affectionately known as the “Great White Whale,” pressed into service as a troopship and supply carrier—was the largest and most obvious target in San Carlos. It was only a matter of time before it drew the attention of an Argentine Skyhawk pilot. *Canberra* was a merchantman, designed for efficiency, not for surviving battle damage. Having inspected *Canberra*, Clapp assessed that if a single bomb hit, even if it did not explode, the damage incurred would quickly flood the ship's massive engine room, which would

have come to a halt. Better to have limited access to supplies than have supplies under water.¹⁶

The sinking of *Atlantic Conveyor* and the removal of the “floating support area” were not just frustrating for the land force, but they dictated the shape of British land operations. Thompson had planned to build his base of operations over the course of a week or two and then begin a period of limited operations until the reinforcing British Army 5th Brigade arrived, along with Maj. Gen. Jeremy Moore to assume command of the now division (minus) land force. Thompson then envisaged executing a series of airmobile operations, leapfrogging companies and battalions forward to outmaneuver and isolate the Argentine garrisons. It was not to be.¹⁷

The land force had very few trucks, as the boggy soil of the Falklands would not support their weight. In fact, the only vehicles that could operate cross-country were a handful of Volvo BV tracked all-terrain vehicles and eight light reconnaissance tanks (four Scorpions and four Scimitars) of B Squadron, the Blues and Royals. The only way to move the brigade's light 105 mm howitzers was via helicopter. The only way to move artillery ammunition was helicopter. The only way to move bulk ammunition forward to the maneuver units was helicopter. The only

way to evacuate wounded to the Role II facility in the BSA was helicopter. The only way to bring up food and water was helicopter. Supplies were scarce due to the loss of *Atlantic Conveyor* and the repositioning of *Canberra* and other cargo ships; transportation was scarce due to the loss of the CH-47s. The land force commanders were hard-pressed to merely keep their troops armed and fed. There was no question of moving them by air, so once the time came for the marines and paratroopers to fulfill their role of closing with and destroying the enemy, there were only two options: walking or water movement.¹⁸



Argentine prisoners of war in Port Stanley, 16 June 1982. (Photo by Ken Griffiths via Wikimedia Commons)

The terrain of the Falkland Islands is some of the worst imaginable. Its peat bogs are wet, cut with gullies, and often devoid of cover and concealment for miles at a stretch. The marines and “Paras” who landed at San Carlos were among the best-trained and fittest troops in NATO, and they prided themselves on their ability to conduct long, cross-country foot marches that would break lesser units. Despite this, and the chance to acclimate before setting out on their “yomp” toward Port Stanley, the commando brigade staff found that the best rate of movement they could plan was one mile per hour. It took days to recover after the march, and the lack of helicopters denied Thompson the flexibility to reposition forces in an emergency.¹⁹ Had the Argentine defenders aggressively employed their wealth of helicopters, artillery, and infantry to conduct a spoiling attack, the results could have been disastrous for the British.

When 5th Infantry Brigade arrived in the Falklands to reinforce the commando brigade, its leaders quickly realized the troops were not as fit or acclimated as the marines and Paras. The Welsh Guards, for example, had been performing ceremonial duties rather than training for combat prior to receiving the alert for deployment. It soon became apparent that a major cross-country march across East Falkland would render 5th Brigade combat

ineffective. Denied even the option to move them by foot, the only choice was to move them along the southern coast by ship. Unfortunately, 5th Brigade also lacked adequate communications gear and had no amphibious training or experience. As a result, during one of these amphibious movements, an element of 5th Brigade, to include a large complement of the Welsh Guards, found themselves in the water off Fitzroy, conducting a painfully slow offload from the landing ships RFA *Sir Galahad* and RFA *Sir Tristram*, when two flights of Argentine air force fighter-bombers penetrated the CAP. *Sir Galahad* was lost and *Sir Tristram* damaged. Fifty men lost their lives.²⁰

Ultimately, the land force overcame these setbacks. The commando and infantry brigades tightened the noose around the Argentine forces at Port Stanley and began a series of attacks against the well-equipped, entrenched defenders. Ammunition expenditure was far higher than expected, consuming so much of the available transport that by the time Argentine resistance collapsed some British units were subsisting on captured Argentine rations. It speaks volumes of the training and professionalism of the British marines and soldiers that after so much hardship, they were willing and able to close with the enemy, taking back the Falkland Islands at bayonet point, and at great cost.

In the end it truly was a “sad and bloody business” between the Argentine landings on 2 April 1982 and the surrender on 14 June; the Argentines suffered 649 killed and 1,657 wounded. The British forces sustained 255 killed and 777 wounded.²¹

As the Falklands War demonstrated, an amphibious forcible entry is truly a multidomain fight. In accordance with joint doctrine, in a contested environment, the landing force commander only assumes primacy once the landing force is ashore.²² Even then, the land force may be totally dependent on air and maritime forces for sustainment and fires. Today, the aggressive

authoritarian regimes in Russia, China, and North Korea, to name a few, continue to adapt and seek ways to challenge Western military primacy. We cannot assume the U.S. Army will always have the time and resources to deploy forces in an uncontested environment. Future conflicts may well be expeditionary in ways that challenge our preconceived notions. On 1 April 1982, few if any British military leaders expected to have to execute an amphibious assault and subsequent land campaign in the Falkland Islands. They quickly adapted, and they conquered. We would do well to learn from them. ■

Notes

1. Max Hastings and Simon Jenkins, *The Battle for the Falklands* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 78.
2. *Ibid.*, 149.
3. *Ibid.*, 151–54.
4. Michael Clapp and Ewen Southby-Tailyour, *Amphibious Assault Falklands: The Battle of San Carlos Water* (Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword Books, 2012), 74.
5. *Ibid.*, 43.
6. Secretary of State for Defence, “The Falklands Campaign: The Lessons,” vol. 437 (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1983), 27, 46.
7. Daniel K. Gibran, *The Falklands War: Britain versus the Past in the South Atlantic* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998), 144.
8. Hastings and Jenkins, *The Battle for the Falklands*, 347.
9. Brendan H. J. Donnelly and Grant T. Willis, “Death of the 42s: Type 42 Destroyers in the Falklands and Lessons for the Joint Force in the Twenty-First Century,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 20 April 2022, accessed 6 February 2023, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3004451/death-of-the-42s-type-42-destroyers-in-the-falklands-and-lessons-for-the-joint-fbclid/death-of-the-42s-type-42-destroyers-in-the-falklands-and-lessons-for-the-joint>.
10. Hastings and Jenkins, *The Battle for the Falklands*, 228.
11. Alan D. Zimm, “Antiship Missile Lessons from Sinking of the Moskva,” *Proceedings* 148, no. 5 (May 2022), accessed 6 February 2023, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2022/may/antiship-missile-lessons-sinking-moskva>.
12. Hastings and Jenkins, *The Battle for the Falklands*, 88.
13. Clapp and Southby-Tailyour, *Amphibious Assault Falklands*, 123.
14. *Ibid.*, 142.
15. Hastings and Jenkins, *The Battle for the Falklands*, 227.
16. Clapp and Southby-Tailyour, *Amphibious Assault Falklands*, 145–46.
17. Hastings and Jenkins, *The Battle for the Falklands*, 262.
18. *Ibid.*, 262–63.
19. Clapp and Southby-Tailyour, *Amphibious Assault Falklands*, 180.
20. Secretary of State for Defence, “The Falklands Campaign,” 12.
21. *Ibid.*, 46.
22. Joint Publication 3-02, *Amphibious Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 4 January 2019), III-4.