***Steve Walsh, Bombadier, Royal Artillery onboard RFA Sir Galahad***

**Attack on *Sir Galahad***

Once back at Fitzroy, it was decided that the Welsh Guards would be moved forward to Bluff Cove via sea. We accompanied them as we boarded *Sir Galahad*, a flat bottom troop ship. Accompanied by a second troop ship, RFA *Sir Tristram*, we sailed, under the cover of darkness, the short distance to Bluff Cove. We were quite happy aboard the ship, it allowed us to dry out our kit and get some hot food. Unfortunately, in retrospect, our happiness was both naive and short-lived.

Our team had managed to find a small room in the hold of the ship where ropes were kept. It was big enough for four of us and our kit. Captain Johnson had managed to find himself a decent cabin and presumably a seat at the captain's table. As the morning progressed, one company of Welsh Guards departed the ship and we remained on-board awaiting further orders. We remained in good spirits and had no idea just how much danger we were in. I left Moctor, Jenks and Woody briefly and went up the stairwell from the hold to the galley to get a hot drink. As I reached the penultimate deck level, there was a huge flash and bang and the ship felt as though it had been physically thrown. The noise of one or more Argentinian fighter aircraft roared overhead. Within a few seconds, the PA system broke the messages “*Air Attack Warning Red”* immediately followed by “*Abandon ship”.*

Initially, it was deathly quiet and then voices began to break through the silence. In the stairwell with me were around 20 soldiers, some had minor injuries but there didn’t appear to be any serious injuries. Some flash burns and some minor injuries from falling over in the stairwell. There was a leadership vacuum and I encouraged those around me to follow me through a door into a corridor that ran port to starboard across the ship. I kept them all moving to one end, hoping for an exit onto the outside deck. When we reached the end, the door and surrounding bulkheads were twisted metal and there was no way out. There was an element of panic amongst some of the soldiers as smoke filled the corridor. Some of the Chinese crew had now emerged from cabin doors into the corridor and joined our small party. I encouraged them all to turn around and move to the opposite end of the corridor in order to find an alternative exit onto the outside deck, (although in reality I didn’t really have a clue how to get out). One young guardsman had become hysterical and I had to shout at him to get him moving. More by luck than good judgement, there was a usable door at the far end of the corridor and we emerged onto the outside deck.

***Sir Galahad***

Once on the deck, there followed scenes too gruesome to include in this writing (or even recall) and I will omit the next 30 minutes. As a poet wrote *“Emotion and dread lay underneath but on the surface, it is not to be seen”.*

Suffice to say there was fire, explosions and smoke billowing around the ship.

My own priority was to locate my crew and help anyone that we could. I miraculously stumbled across my crew on the deck and they all appeared to be remarkably unscathed considering they had been in the bottom of the ship, where it appeared that at least one of the bombs had exploded. It appeared that locating ourselves in the small rope room had been a pivotal decision. If we had remained in the main hold, the outcome would have been very different. We couldn’t locate Captain Johnson but we heard that one bomb had entered the officer’s wardroom area. It was clear that the wardroom area was badly damaged and a fire was raging, so we decided that it was unlikely he would have survived. We moved together towards the bow of the ship, where there was less smoke. We stood there for a few minutes gathering our thoughts. The ship was exploding beneath our feet and we could clearly feel the heat rising upwards. We were ordered to climb down ropes to inflatable life rafts tied to the side of the ship. We did this very carefully, since we all knew that if we fell into the sea, we would only have two or three minutes in the freezing temperature before we would be overcome.

Moctor and Woody had climbed into an adjacent life raft but Jenks was with me in another. Once in the life raft, I looked around. There were around a dozen Guardsmen including two junior officers and a couple of Sir Galahad’s crew. I let go of the rope tethering us to Sir Galahad and had a better opportunity to review our situation. Some of the Guardsmen had burns injuries but our major concern was for the Chinese crewmembers who both had severe burns, one of whom was slipping in and out of consciousness.

Jenks and myself positioned ourselves by the small opening. To my great concern, in the lee of the wind, we had simply floated further down the side of the ship and continued to move towards the increasing fire and smoke. We searched the raft for oars, in order that we could propel ourselves away from the ship but to no avail.

Helicopters had begun to appear on the scene and one of the Sea King crews had spotted our precarious situation. I will always be impressed by the helicopter pilot’s quick thinking, as he positioned the helicopter in such a way as to blow the rotors downdraft against the ship's hull which then gently blew us away from the erupting ship. Once a small distance had opened up between the ship and the life raft, the helicopter swung around behind us and blew us further away from the ship. The helicopter then hovered above us and the loadmaster leaned out of the door. In very simple hand signals, I was able to indicate that two of the men in the life raft were in a serious condition. The loadmaster understood my signals and lowered a winch to the lift raft. Jenks and I moved the men over to the opening of the life raft and fastened them onto the winch strap. The helicopter winched them away and I will never know who they were or if they survived.

48 soldiers and crew died that day on Sir Galahad and many more suffered life-changing injuries.