# GLIMPSES OF THE FALKLANDS WAR

# Foreword

**Alan Holderness, Trustee Blind Veterans UK**

A sixteen-year-old boy, goes along to the local Army and Navy Careers Office, not really to join up, but to give his best mate some much needed confidence for his interview to join the Army. Having wandered aimlessly into the naval section, the Large Royal Marine Colour Sargent bawls out “*So you wanna be a Marine?*” “*Not really”* says I, and thirty minutes later I am heading back to my parents with the forms clutched eagerly in my hand awaiting a signature!

That is how my journey from Boy to Man began over 40 years ago. If I knew then that I was to lose my sight, lose my career and my Royal Marine Family, over the next few years would I have done the same?? Damn Right I would!

I joined Blind Veterans UK in 2007, again by way of a chance meeting at a Royal Marine Association Reunion. I was armed with a white cane and was mistaken for one of the St Dunstan’s group. Fortunately, I was regaled with all the amazing work they did for Visually Impaired Veterans, and to my amazement I was accepted as a member. I found out first-hand the work they did and the care the staff had for us, allowing us to live an independent life, fully trained on computers and up to date technology. Over time I needed to give something back, and in 2018 was successful in becoming a member Trustee of the Charity.

So back to the start of my service. After my initial training I was posted to 40 Commando RM, they had just returned from a very long stint in Northern Ireland, so fitting into a very close knit team would be hard work. However a few Exercises in Thetford, Salisbury, Dartmoor and Lundy Island and it was like I had always been part of this amazing family. Commando Sea Trials on HMS Invincible and Intrepid with the whole Unit further cemented me as a fully Paid-up member of the Fighting Forty as the Unit was known.

It was at the end March/Beginning April 1982 that the unit was on Spearhead, ready to deploy anywhere in the world with 24-hour notice, that we had gone to Altcar Firing Ranges to brush up on our *live firing*. At the end I along with a few others who lived in the north-west managed to wangle the weekend away with our families, prior to Easter. On Saturday Morning after a heavy session catching up with old school friends, I was in the shower when my mum shouted up to me that my Colour Sergeant was on the phone for me. Obviously, I thought it was a bite, a prank, however it was not. My family found it highly amusing that I was stood, dripping wet, with a towel around my waste and stood to attention saying, “Yes Colours” over and over again until I put the phone down and said SH#t ! I need to get to Plymouth asap as we could be heading to the Falklands. It was then we saw that Argentinian scrap dealers had landed on South Georgia all over the national news. My parents thought that the Falklands were up in the Highlands, however I knew it was thousands of miles away as I considered a posting there on one of the naval parties.

Finally, after many days of waiting around for ships and supplies getting ready, we set off from Southampton in the setting sun. Cars and well-wishers lined the headland as we sailed silently by, hooting their horns and flashing headlights. We waved back as we lined the walkways of SS *Canberra*, the so-called *Great White Whale* as it later became known, not really knowing who we were saying farewell to, but revelling in the excitement that was slowly building. The journey south was slow, with ships joining our group at every point. Our sun- filled days consisted of exercise, training and sunbathing, and we were getting paid for it! The mood onboard was one of total disbelief, and that all the sabre rattling of the politicians would end and we would return back to *Blighty* with our national show of force intact and respected.

As we moved further south into the rough and Icy waters of the South Atlantic, the mood altered, the training and exercise became more serious and intense, we saw that we had a purpose and the reality of what was about to happen was palpable. Daily almost hourly reminders of the dangers we faced, came by way of Air Raid Red warnings over the tannoy. Then on the eve of invasion we were transferred to the landing ship RFA *Fearless* due to a leaked report that troops were onboard the biggest whitest ship in the ocean. The transfer from the cargo bay of a civilian ship, to a landing craft in South Atlantic waters, was a daunting prospect, as one minute the landing craft was a few feet below, and seconds later was thirty feet below. Having to launch yourselves with kit weighing around 120kgs, in the darkness, in huge seas with only your mates trying to grab you was in itself a test of faith. A close friend of mine wasn’t so lucky, and fell into the icy sea, narrowly missing being crushed between ship and landing craft, and luckily being hooked by the Craft Coxswain and dragged aboard, cold wet and very much alive.

Two very memorable moments during the conflict that will be forever imprinted on my mind, was standing aboard a landing craft, waiting to go ashore, whilst overhead a full Naval Barrage of big guns pounded the mountain lines that surrounded the beaches we were to land on. It took my breath away, and thoughts ran through my head that this is what the thousands of D-Day soldiers who landed in France must have heard and felt during the Second World War.

My other memory was on the 27th May, when we were caught out by the Argentinian aircraft. We had been cleaning kit after patrolling and standing to. Aircraft appeared in the sky over the mountain range, quite low. We at first were unconcerned thinking they were our Harrier jets, as we had not had the usual loud warnings from the ship’s and our own HQ crying ‘Air Raid Warning Red’ as the aircraft approached, things started to move in slow motion as long silver tubes dropped from the sky with black and white parachutes attached. The ground erupted as Argentinian Skyhawks dropped bombs and strafed cannon fire across our positions. We all dived for cover, some not lucky enough were caught out in open ground, myself being one of them. Thankfully I was dragged into a nearby trench after being thrown through the air by a blast. No real injuries sustained, thankfully, however we were later to find out that one of our friends had sadly lost his life firing on the enemy planes with his GPMG and one of the bombs had exploded on his trench.

14th June 1982 not only marked Liberation Day for the Falkland Islanders, and surrender for the Argentinian forces, but also my 18th birthday, one I shall never ever forget as long as I live, but for totally different reasons for most 18-year-olds. A small can of Mackeson, a half bottle of Old Spice and a Falklands pound note given by one of the Islanders marked my celebrations, along with the cessation of hostilities.

The journey home was a blur, and nobody would have guessed the unbelievable welcome home we received at Southampton from family, friends and the people of the UK. Massive crowds waving flags and banners, military bands playing, and accompanied in by a flotilla of vessels. I remember feeling numb and confused by it all, and only a long time afterwards recognising the impact of what we had done, had had on the general public.

Looking back 40 years ago, I remember my grandfather, who was a Ship’s Marine manning the big ships guns during the Second World War, and thinking what he had experienced 40 years prior to me, and my own experiences of warfare. He rarely spoke about his time during the war, and when he did and I was a child on his knee, he only gave me the funny stories he had experienced. I am now at that point in my life, with my eldest grandchild at an age to ask questions about my life, what am I able to pass down to him? I shall probably speak of the amusing anecdotes, and there were many to tell during my time, but I will probably skip the horrors that did occur that will accompany to my grave.

My time and experiences I have had In the Royal Marines and in particularly during the Falklands War have made me the person I am today. Having been medically discharged and losing my sight have also contributed to the person I am today. A steely determination to succeed even in challenging times, when you feel at your lowest, the will to endure is strong. My time with Blind Veterans UK enforces those qualities, giving me strength to carry on when you feel that you are unable to. I will always know that when I am at my lowest ebb my Royal Marine family will always be there to put a smile on my face, and a boot up my backside, and when I fall Blind Veterans will be there to pick me up, dust me down and point me in the right direction.

Time flows like a deep running river, all seems still and peaceful on top, yet underneath the waters, like time run fast. Forty years have gone by in what seems a blink of an eye, and memories fade even faster. Books such as this that encapsulate memories are vital for our future generations, as it’s not always what is said, but what remains unsaid that is important.