

New Perspectives on the Falklands War¹

Sophie Thérèse Ambler and Thomas C. Mills

Department of History, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

s.ambler@lancaster.ac.uk; t.c.mills@lancaster.ac.uk

Dr Sophie Thérèse Ambler is Reader in Medieval History and Deputy Director of the Centre for War and Diplomacy at Lancaster University. She holds a Philip Leverhulme Prize in History and in 2022 is a Visiting Fellow at All Souls College, Oxford. Her early work centred on political ethics; her current research in the realm of social-military history and battlefield landscape combines cross-chronological insights and methodologies to investigate the experiences and cultures of combatants, and the shifting patterns of thought concerned with their responsibilities in conflict.

Dr Thomas C. Mills is Senior Lecturer in Diplomatic and International History and Deputy Director of the Centre for War and Diplomacy at Lancaster University, and Chair of the Transatlantic Studies Association. His research interests centre on the diplomacy of Britain and the United States in the modern era, with a particular interest in the economic relationship between the two countries. He has a strong interest in applying historical knowledge towards a greater understanding of contemporary events and has collaborated with think tanks including the British Foreign Policy Group, and is an Associate Fellow of Canning House.

Abstract

Marking the fortieth anniversary of the Falklands War, this special issue brings together new research, and opens avenues for further investigation, on the armed conflict between the United Kingdom and Argentina over sovereignty of the Falkland Islands that stretched between April and June 1982. Across four articles, it explores the broad themes of combatant experience, conflict memory, international relations and policy, from an interdisciplinary investigation of the

¹ The contested sovereignty of the archipelago discussed below is of course reflected in differing terminology to refer to the islands – ‘Falklands’, ‘Malvinas’ or some combination of the two. The editors of this special issue have left this terminology at the discretion of the contributors, while adopting the common English-language usage in the present introduction.

conflict landscape to an examination of cinematic portrayals of Falklands veterans, and from the application of the lens of the global Cold War to an appraisal of the impact of the conflict on UK defence policy. The special issue also includes a previously unpublished naval memoir of the war, highlighting the continued emergence of new sources that makes the Falklands War a potentially highly productive area of study.

Keywords

military landscape, combatant experience, history of film, global Cold War, defence policy

The various commemorations, conferences and publications produced throughout 2022 to mark the fortieth anniversary of the Falklands War revealed both continuity and change in how the conflict is viewed. One constant has been the fact that the fundamentals of the dispute between the United Kingdom and Argentina over the sovereignty of the islands that led to war in 1982 remain unresolved. Writing in the *Guardian* newspaper in April 2022, Santiago Cafiero, the current Argentinian Foreign Minister, stated: “The 1982 conflict did not alter the nature of the dispute between both countries, which is still pending negotiation and resolution.”² Many in Britain (or indeed the Falkland Islands) would, however, disagree: the war made negotiations over sovereignty far harder. One of many British politicians commenting on the Falklands War throughout 2022 was the then Foreign Secretary Liz Truss. Her statement was typical in explicitly connecting the loss of British lives in the war and the dispute over the territory with Argentina: “They were servicemen and women who gave their lives and we should pay respect that they gave their lives fighting for the self-determination of the sovereign islands.”³ It is possible that the passage of time since the end of the war will make a resolution to the dispute

² Santiago Cafiero, ‘Forty years after the Malvinas war, Britain still acts as if the dispute is settled. It isn’t’, *The Guardian*, 2 April 2022, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/apr/02/falklands-war-britain-sovereignty-uk-un-resolutions> (accessed 24.10.22).

³ Harry Cole, ‘Liz Truss to remember Falklands war dead rather than celebrate 40th anniversary of victory’, *The Sun*, 13 June 2022, available at: <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/18876973/liz-truss-falklands-war/> (accessed 24.10.22). For a similar sentiment, see the exchange between Dan Jarvis and Jim Shannon in the House of Commons debate to mark the fortieth anniversary of the Falklands War: ‘Falklands War: 40th Anniversary’, *Hansard*, Volume 716, 13 June 2022, available at: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-06-13/debates/40F43465-0F2E-4780-8A8A-5D5287669D5B/FalklandsWar40ThAnniversary> (accessed 24.10.22).

over the Falklands between Britain and Argentina more likely, though there is little sign of this at present.

The passing of four decades since 1982 brings, however, an opportunity for new research on the war. One of many academic commemorations of the Falklands War was a roundtable focusing on participant perspectives, hosted by Lancaster University's Centre for War and Diplomacy in May 2022. This featured two of the contributors to this volume, Helen Parr and Tony Pollard.⁴ During the roundtable, Parr pointed out a fact that is perhaps more striking than it should be: a greater passage of time separates us today from the Falklands War than that which separated participants in the Falklands War from the Second World War. The conflict was not so long ago, however, to preclude historians from drawing upon testimony from living participants and witnesses. Parr's award-winning book of 2018, *Our Boys: The Story of a Paratrooper*, drew from the testimony of veterans and their families to reconstruct the role of paratroopers in the Falklands campaign, situated within the regiment's military culture. The value of participant testimony, and the opportunities and challenges it presents to historians, is a theme developed in this special issue with the inclusion of a previously unpublished memoir of the conflict. This was written by Lieutenant Commander Michael Ambler, who served in the Falklands campaign as a Senior Warfare Officer aboard *HMS Fearless* under Commodore Michael Clapp, COMAW (Commodore, Amphibious Warfare). Naval memoirs of the war are rare compared to those produced by army personnel and this chapter offers an insight into the debates and frictions within naval command during the campaign. It also provides an insight into everyday life on board *Fearless*, both the quotidian and harrowing, as well as a military culture distinct from those of the army regiments. As Parr points out in her preface to the piece, the memoir also offers an opportunity for historians to explore combat memory and participant testimony, for Lt Commander Ambler's contemporary diary of the conflict – which was not available to him at the time of writing – can now be read alongside the memoir (extracts have been provided in the footnotes). It is hoped that the inclusion of this material in the special issue will encourage further research into the experience of naval personnel in the war.

⁴ 'The Falklands War at 40: Voices of the Conflict', The War and Diplomacy Podcast, 26 May 2022, Centre for War and Diplomacy, Lancaster University, available at: <https://anchor.fm/cwdlancaster/episodes/The-Falklands-War-at-40-Voices-of-the-Conflict-e1jhfhf> (accessed 24.10.22).

Just as the testimony of Falklands veterans is a valuable source for historians that risks being lost with the further passage of time, the physical remnants of the conflict are subject to deterioration and plunder. That these remnants – from shell casings and fox holes to field kitchens – can still be found *in situ* presents an extremely valuable opportunity to investigate a conflict landscape, combining cutting edge archaeological techniques with the expertise of veterans. The Falklands War Mapping Project, led by Timothy Clack and Tony Pollard, has been undertaking such research, with the aim of providing the first extensive and intensive archaeological survey of the Falklands conflict landscape.⁵ Fieldwork conducted in March-April 2022, focusing on Mount Tumbledown, identified Argentinian improvised defensive positions as well as the imprint left by British ordnance. In his contribution to this special issue, Pollard takes an interdisciplinary approach by combining early stage archaeological investigation of the conflict landscape with participant testimony – both published Argentinian and British accounts and the author’s visits to the Falklands with veterans. In so doing, he is able to explore the dynamic and complex relationship between landscape and combatant across time, from combatants’ perceptions of the islands as they readied for war, to their (often disorientating) encounters with the landscape during the campaign and attempts to situate themselves, to the impact of return visits to these sites of conflict for veterans.

The experiences of Falkland veterans in the war’s aftermath is a subject that has been explored in cinema – the topic of Sam Edward’s contribution to this special issue. Edwards shows how film-makers in Britain tackled the motif of the ‘returning soldier’ through the context of the Falklands War. The cinematic response to the campaign was not vast. A point that emerged in the anniversary roundtable at Lancaster was the relatively small impact the Falklands War left on national consciousness in Britain – compared, for instance, to the Second World War. One explanation advanced was the relative brevity of the campaign, and another the comparatively small number of families who could claim personal ties with combat personnel (although the decision to return the bodies of fallen troops to Britain did mean that local communities were confronted by loss). Those British filmmakers who did portray the experiences of Falklands veterans engaged with contemporary themes in American cinema, which explored the experiences of Vietnam veterans through the prism of Post-Traumatic Stress

⁵ See the project’s Open Access edited collection: Timothy Clack and Tony Pollard, eds., *1982 Uncovered: The Falklands War Mapping Project* (Oxford, 2022), DOI: [10.32028/9781803273822](https://doi.org/10.32028/9781803273822).

Disorder (PTSD), identified officially in 1980. Edwards thus shows how *Resurrected* (1989), *Tumbledown* (1988) and *For Queen and Country* (1989) examined the mental and physical impact of conflict on Falklands veterans, but did so in the particular context of a British society deeply divided in the 1980s by race, class and politics.

The focus on participant perspectives in the articles by Pollard and Edwards in this special issue are indicative of a rich body of work on the Falklands War that explores the conflict through the prism of those who fought it.⁶ Political histories of the Falklands War are less voluminous.⁷ The reluctance of historians to view the conflict in the light of broader trends in British overseas policy and international politics reflects a view that the war was something of an anomaly. In the first book-length study of the Falklands War, published in 1983, Max Hastings and Simon Jenkins were at pains to make clear the limitations of what could be learned from the war: “Very few of the conclusions that can be drawn from the Falklands experience have a wider application than to this conflict, at this moment of history, under this British government.” It was a war wholly of its time. Or as the authors phrased it more bluntly: “It was a freak of history.”⁸

The sense that the Falklands War has little to offer in terms of shaping our understanding of broader political trends has started to change in recent years. New interest in the war has been accelerated by the release of government documents produced at the time of the conflict. The previous decennial anniversary of the Falklands War in 2012 coincided with a significant release of UK government documents on the conflict under the ‘30-year rule’ of declassification. This release of archival material has indeed facilitated an increase in studies published on the Falklands War over the last decade. The articles in this special issue by Michelle Paranzino and Gerald Hughes are typical of new histories of the Falklands War that make particular use of recently declassified sources that speak to various ways in which the conflict relates to broader political trends – both national and international – linkages not apparent to earlier chroniclers of the conflict like Hastings and Jenkins.

⁶ Recent additions to this field of literature include: John Beales and Neil K. Jenkins, ‘Pilgrimage Respecified: Falklands War Veterans’ Accounts of their Returns to the Falkland Islands’, *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 15 (2022): 328-349; Nicholas van der Bijl, *Argentine Perspectives on the Falklands War: The Recovery and Loss of Las Malvinas* (Philadelphia, 2022).

⁷ Exceptions to this from within the last decade include Andrea Chiampan, ‘Running with the Hare, Hunting with the Hounds: The Special Relationship, Reagan’s Cold War and the Falklands Conflict’, *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 24 (2013): 640-660; Stella Krepp, ‘A View From the South: the Falklands/Malvinas and Latin America’, *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 15 (2017): 348-365.

⁸ Max Hastings and Simon Jenkins, *The Battle for the Falklands* (London, 1983), 316.

The relative reluctance of international historians to study the Falklands War may be explained in part by the fact that it stood directly at odds with the dominant Cold War paradigm of the post-Second World War era. In pitching two Western-aligned powers against one another, the Falklands War jarred with the principal trends shaping post-war international politics. In her article in this special issue, Michelle Paranzino engages directly with the contradictions and complexities of the Falklands War in the context of the global Cold War. In particular, she argues that the war saw two of the foundational principles of the post-war international order – anti-colonialism and self-determination – come into conflict, as Argentina championed the former and Britain the latter, both in support of their claim to the Falkland Islands. This created acute dilemmas for the two leading superpowers in formulating a response to the conflict. After failed attempts to mediate between its two allies, the Reagan administration eventually sided with its NATO ally. Paranzino argues that, in so doing, the United States effectively abandoned its support for anticolonialism in Latin America, embodied historically in the Monroe Doctrine. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, backed Argentina in the conflict on the strength of its anticolonial rhetoric, despite the fervent anticommunism of the regime in Buenos Aires. Beyond the realm of the great powers, the Falklands War caused further divisions throughout South America and the Caribbean, with most of the Spanish-speaking countries of the region backing Argentina, while the Anglophone Caribbean tended to side with Britain.

While Paranzino explores the complexities of the international reactions to the Falklands War as they unfolded throughout 1982, Gerald Hughes's concern is with the longer-term legacy of the war, in particular its effect on British naval policy in the decades following the war. Just as the Falklands War did not fit the dominant Cold War international paradigm, the military campaign also conflicted with a general narrative of decline attributed to Britain's international standing in the post-Second World War era. For Margaret Thatcher, the lesson was clear: "We have ceased to be a nation in retreat", as she put it in a speech to Conservative Party supporters shortly after the Falklands War came to an end.⁹ Hughes paints a more complex picture. While acknowledging that the Falklands War led to important changes to maritime aviation capabilities, he argues that principal logic of John Nott's Defence White Paper of 1981 – to priorities a 'Continental Commitment' over a 'Maritime strategy' – remained the orthodoxy after the war,

⁹ Margaret Thatcher, speech to Conservative Party Rally, Cheltenham, 3 July 1982, available at: <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104989> (accessed 14/11/22).

notwithstanding the efforts of the UK naval lobby to restore the primacy of the navy in British defence.

The articles contained within this special issue necessarily offer only a brief glimpse of the new and exciting work being undertaken by historians studying the Falklands War. Two areas of research not represented here seem particularly promising and worthy of note. The first is work which views the war from the perspective of Argentina, both the soldiers fighting the war and the politicians who ignited the conflict. The second is research which explores the role of intelligence in the war, again both operationally and in the realm of diplomacy. Unfortunately, both of these avenues of research face major obstacles. Viewing the war from an Argentinian perspective requires access to government archives not as accessible to scholars (particularly those in Europe) than are their equivalents in the United Kingdom. Research on the role of intelligence in the conflict is subject to all the usual concerns of secrecy which that realm activity is always subject. Nevertheless, works in these areas are appearing and, along with the articles in the special issue, speak to the promise of the new perspectives emerging on the Falklands War.

Bibliography

Beales, John, and Jenkins, Neil K., 'Pilgrimage Respecified: Falklands War Veterans' Accounts of their Returns to the Falkland Islands', *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 15 (2022), 328-349.

van der Bijl, Nicholas, *Argentine Perspectives on the Falklands War: The Recovery and Loss of Las Malvinas* (Philadelphia: Casemate, 2022).

Cafiero, Santiago, 'Forty years after the Malvinas war, Britain still acts as if the dispute is settled. It isn't', *The Guardian*, 2 April 2022, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/apr/02/falklands-war-britain-sovereignty-uk-un-resolutions> (accessed 24.10.22).

Chiampan, Andrea, 'Running with the Hare, Hunting with the Hounds: The Special Relationship, Reagan's Cold War and the Falklands Conflict', *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 24 (2013), 640-660.

Clack, Timothy and Pollard, Tony, eds., *1982 Uncovered: The Falklands War Mapping Project* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2022), DOI: [10.32028/9781803273822](https://doi.org/10.32028/9781803273822).

Cole, Harry, 'Liz Truss to remember Falklands war dead rather than celebrate 40th anniversary of victory', *The Sun*, 13 June 2022, available at: <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/18876973/liz-truss-falklands-war/> (accessed 24.10.22).

Hastings, Max, and Jenkins, Simon, *The Battle for the Falklands* (London: Pan Macmillan, 1983).

Krepp, Stella, 'A View From the South: the Falklands/Malvinas and Latin America', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 15 (2017), 348-365.

Thatcher, Margaret, speech to Conservative Party Rally, Cheltenham, 3 July 1982, available at: <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104989> (accessed 14/11/22).

'Falklands War: 40th Anniversary', *Hansard* 716, 13 June 2022, available at: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-06-13/debates/40F43465-0F2E-4780-8A8A-5D5287669D5B/FalklandsWar40ThAnniversary> (accessed 24.10.22).

'The Falklands War at 40: Voices of the Conflict', *The War and Diplomacy Podcast*, 26 May 2022, Centre for War and Diplomacy, Lancaster University, available at: <https://anchor.fm/cwdlancaster/episodes/The-Falklands-War-at-40-Voices-of-the-Conflict-e1jhfhf> (accessed 24.10.22).