

# WHY IS ARGENTINA INVADING A SCOTTISH ISLAND?

Expecting a 17-country round-the-world trip, **Able Seaman Michael Roche** set out in HMS *Broadsword*, his first ship, but didn't get much beyond Gibraltar before the vessel was ordered back following news which initially left some crew members questioning why Argentinians were invading what sounded like a Scottish island! He takes up his dramatic story.....

## 2ND FEBRUARY 1982

Joined my first ship HMS *Broadsword* as Able Seaman (Missileman) Michael Roche. *Broadsword* was an impressive sight. I did my joining routine and was given my first job as the bosun's mate on the gangway.

Then came the news about what we would be doing for the next few months: a 17-country trip around the world starting in Gib and onto Singapore. I was buzzing along with the rest of the crew at this trip of a lifetime.

We sailed early April 1982 and headed towards Gib to join the rest of the annual Spring Train Exercise Group, which consisted of at least 20 war ships and tankers.

All onboard were looking forward to warmer temperatures. We entered Gibraltar and I had my first foreign run ashore on the Friday evening, and, to be honest, my first-ever alcohol.

0800 Monday morning we set sail with HMS *Yarmouth* heading into the Med. A day had gone passed and I was on watch on the bridge just having taken over the middle watch (0000-0400).

A signal was received which, basically, said about-turn, return to Gib, store ship, and prepare for war.

Below : HMS *Broadsword*.





⋮ **Above** : HMS *Hermes* (R12), HMS *Broadsword* (F88) and HMS *Yarmouth* (F101) anchored off Ascension Island on April 17th, 1982.

Confusion set in with some crew members querying why the Argentinians were attacking a Scottish island - what the hell was going on? After a broadcast from the Captain we learned that the Falklands was an island group a few hundred miles from Argentina in the South Atlantic.

We left Gib after a couple of days with food and missiles stacked in every vacant space.

As the days went on, we started training on all weapon systems and made sure we were all up to scratch. As we approached the Equator, I was chosen to be King Neptune's daughter, and what a sight I was!

We arrived at Ascension and the amount of ships that were around was very impressive – with choppers moving from ship to ship with weapons and stores.

Then the time came to leave and head to the Falklands. As we left a signal came out to all ships that there was a submarine following us: we all went to action stations, but nothing came of it.

*Broadsword* was given the job of protecting the flagship HMS *Hermes*, which meant wherever she went we went with her, and when action stations were piped, we closed in to about 100 metres to protect her from incoming missiles.

⋮ “We arrived at Ascension and the amount of ships that were around was very impressive – with choppers moving from ship to ship with weapons and stores.”

As we sailed into the South Atlantic the waves and wind were slowly getting worse. I remember the *Invincible* disappearing, then she was back. I'd never seen sea like it - 20 metres plus waves. Very frightening.

As we entered the Total Exclusion Zone of 200 miles set up around the Falklands, we were ready to go to war. Then when the *Belgrano* was sunk, I thought to myself this is it we are at war.

A couple of days later the *Sheffield* was hit by an Exocet missile. It really brought it home to me that that could have been us. The mood onboard was very sombre, but we all knew that's what we had joined up to do.



Above : Damage caused to HMS *Broadsword*.

## D-DAY 21ST MAY BOMB "ALLEY", SAN CARLOS WATER

It was very early in the morning and we entered Falkland Sound, then San Carlos Water. As the light began to appear all you could see were ships everywhere. The big "White Whale" *Canberra* was standing out like a sore thumb.

As we waited patiently all hell broke out. Skyhawks and Mirages appeared and all you could hear was gun fire and missiles flying all over the place.

It was like a war film, but it was for real. That said, as the day went on you got used to it.

The warships in San Carlos were being shot at and HMS *Ardent* was the second casualty of the war. The next day it was *Antelope*. At that stage I was thinking please don't let the next be us.

I remember a Skyhawk was picked up, it released two bombs and, as if it was in slow motion, the fins on the bombs opened and were heading straight for us.

We all hit the deck, looking up to see the first bomb flying over the forecastle and the other go between the main mast and funnel. I could tell God was on our side that day.

That night when the darkness came, lying in my bunk crying my eyes out, I really thought my time was up.

## 25TH MAY 1982

On the picket line between Argentina and the Falklands. The day started off as routine, but then just after lunch HMS *Coventry's* sea dart went off. There was an Argentinian troop-carrying helicopter heading towards the islands when all of a sudden there was an explosion and it was gone.

As time went on we got radar contact confirming two sets of Skyhawks were on their way towards us – and as we were at action stations we were prepared for them.

*Coventry* locked on with a sea dart. The 40/60 anti-aircraft guns were firing rounds bouncing off the sea. Two Skyhawks released their bombs. One bomb hit us just above the waterline on the starboard side. It went up through flight deck and hit our Lynx helicopter, taking half with it as it bounced into the sea without exploding.

*Coventry* was under attack and it was hit by three bombs. Within 20 minutes she was listing to port and the crew had to abandon ship. Our Geminis and sea boats were released. There were life rafts everywhere. As the crew were coming to us they were scrambling up the nets their faces covered in blood.

Some were crying, all very cold. We got them onboard. They had nothing. Our crew gave them what we could - cigs, food and beer.

Later on that night we limped into San Carlos where the crews of *Coventry* disembarked. As they got off, their last farewell was a whistled rendition of "Always look on the bright side of life"!

Looking back on the day our Captain Bill Canning was exceptional. He was very calm and collected. And in tribute to the entire *Broadsword* crew: we worked as a team and we all went home together.



Above : Michael Roche at the War Memorial in Sunderland.