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One Hundred Days: The Memoirs of the Falklands Battle Group Commander

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BOOK REVIEWS

A book reviewer occupies a position of special responsibility and trust. He is to summarize, set in context, describe strengths, and point out weaknesses. As a surrogate for us all, he assumes a heavy obligation which it is his duty to discharge with reason and consistency.

Admiral H.G. Rickover

“A Victorious Admiral Speaks”

Woodward, John and Robinson, Patrick. *One Hundred Days: The Memoirs of the Falklands Battle Group Commander*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1992. 351pp. \$24.95

FUTURE HISTORIANS TRYING TO RECAPTURE the essence of naval warfare may well turn to Operation Corporate. It was a mission that theorists have always seen as among the most challenging—the movement of an expeditionary force across an uncommanded sea. Here too is that fusion of stealth, opportunism, and attrition that has been the mark of naval operations in the twentieth century.

This is the long awaited record of the Falklands campaign by the man who carried the chief burden of its planning and execution. Readers will not be disappointed. Admiral Sir John Woodward presents us with a vivid account of the principal naval actions. But this is not primarily a work of naval history; Woodward believes that insufficient time has elapsed to allow a proper perspective. But what we do get is a glimpse into the mind of the front-line commander. The authors' aim has been to “document the thoughts and opinions of the forward commander from first to last.” The enduring value of this book lies in its illumination of that little studied and less understood subject—the art of the admiral.

If this description makes the book sound coldly analytical, nothing could be further from the truth. Woodward and his mentor, Patrick Robinson, have produced a work that will appeal to a wide audience. It is fast-paced and entertaining, as well as instructive. Woodward's diaries and letters provide its framework and define its scope. It takes an unashamedly navalist perspective; Woodward makes no claim of deep insight into events in London or Buenos Aires, or into the conduct of the war on land. He sticks to matters within his direct experience, and here he has something important to say. Admiral

Woodward's diaries have an immediacy that no later writing could have recaptured; they are salty, uninhibited, and occasionally (as when depicting London officialdom as positioning itself for success or failure) bitterly ironic.

It is understandable, given the malice of the British press at the time, that Woodward should miss few opportunities to expose the shallowness of his persecutors. He writes, however, in sorrow rather than in anger, and he neatly avoids turning these memories into a vehicle for self-justification. If anything, this is a work of critical self-appraisal. No attempt has been made to conceal the errors of omission, the experiments that failed, the snap judgments based on partial understanding of the facts, or those less-than-sympathetic character traits exposed by the pressures of the moment. What Admiral Woodward says carries the ring of truth.

Retrospect tends to give successful campaigns an inevitability that was far from evident to the participants. Woodward saw this one as a "bit of a close call" and has seen no reason to change his mind. This judgment was based on two principal factors: first, that the inevitable decline in the material state of the fleet would make Britain's window of opportunity for effective intervention critically short; second, that fleet defenses against air and missile attack were dangerously fragile. We get a useful reminder of the tyranny of the calendar. In marked contrast to Desert Storm, this was a time-driven and not an event-driven plan. Scope for adjusting the timetable, whether for political or military reasons, was very limited indeed.

Doubts about the effectiveness of his air defenses—fully justified by events—defined how Woodward would handle his fleet and how far he could expose his all-important carriers (and thus his diminutive and irreplaceable air force) to risk. Without a measure of air superiority, the soldiers would rightly refuse to land. This perception influenced every important decision. We see it in Woodward's positioning of his carriers during the critical approach to and defense of the amphibious landing at San Carlos and in his reaction to the presence of the *Belgrano* and her Exocet-equipped escorts. Woodward was in no position to take chances. Restraint (and pundits often forget this) is the prerogative of those who enjoy overwhelming strength. Those who have regarded his employment of the carriers as overcautious should search the history books for any single instance when an amphibious operation has proceeded following the loss of or damage to a carrier. They will be hard pressed to find one.

What kind of man emerges from these pages? The foremost impression is of one who sets out consciously and deliberately to rule his emotions. While shuttle diplomacy continues, we see him banishing the comforting illusion that the dispute may yet be resolved by peaceful means. As tension shifts to war, we see the inner struggle to preserve dispassionate judgment, to resist impulsive actions based on insufficient evidence, to differentiate between setback and disaster, and to keep the mind firmly focused on essentials. As Woodward himself says, his

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job was to “stand back and observe; measure the odds, the gains and the losses and to make them move in our favor.” To a large extent, therefore, this book depicts Woodward's own mental and psychological preparation for war.

Admiral Woodward is a military leader of the controlled and calculating kind. He is given to reflection, he is constantly probing for explanations, and is an inveterate questioner of received wisdom. If not cautious, he is certainly judicious, and is by no means typical of his breed: parallels are hard to find in the history of British naval leaders, at least in this century. In his approach to the conduct of war, if not in the broader features of his character, he may remind American readers of Spruance. He is the thinking man's admiral.

What of Sandy Woodward the person? He comes across as a private man, who is a little embarrassed by the trappings of flag rank and who is mildly surprised to find himself where he is. He is remote, introspective, and a little cerebral. His notably sensitive handling of the question of battle stress and the tolerance that he shows for those few who (on conscientious grounds) could not give themselves wholeheartedly to this most avoidable of wars suggest a man of deep humanity. At the time, however, his natural reserve and the demands of his position would have concealed these gentler aspects of his character.

There is one discordant note. Admiral Woodward seems to have favorites. He is notably uneven in his treatment of subordinates. His co-author, who in his unobtrusive way appears to have steered Woodward clear of so many pitfalls, might have intervened here to better effect. One is left wondering whether this partiality was visible during the campaign. If so, it may help explain why Sandy Woodward, for all his gifts, has never attracted the unconditional affection of those who served with him.

That said, with success or failure resting on a knife-edge, there can be no disputing that here was the right man for the job. Surely, here lies the explanation for Admiral Fieldhouse's confidence in this enigmatic man. Naval officers and students of military affairs will learn much from this book about the nature of war at sea and about the qualities needed for high command. There are some, evidently, who are not open to instruction. A reviewer of this book writing for a quality London newspaper said this: “The Royal Navy lost nearly half of the ships it had started with and played little part in the final defeat of the Argentine army. It is the British army commanders, not Woodward, who deserve credit for the capture of the islands.” There is only one possible reaction to words like these—despair.

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