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Dr. J. Rector
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**The Accounts of the Falklands/Malvinas War and a Projection of the
Future of the Islands**

To name a group of small islands (4,700 square miles in total proportion) of bare semi-rocky land, 300 miles off the southern coast of Argentina is to engage a constant debate that is still open today and has yet to reach a resolution. To the British, these islands are the Falklands, and to the Argentines they are the Malvinas.

To speak of whom first discovered the Falklands/Malvinas is also a subject of debate. In reality, there are no trustworthy historical records that can give unbiased information to whom made the first claim to the islands. The first nations to make claims about their 'discovery' were Spain and England in the sixteenth century. Two centuries after these claims were made, France also made a claim to the islands: "The famous French explorer Louis-Antoine de Bougainville was said to be an early discoverer during voyages in the 1760s."¹ It was from this claim that the Spanish-speaking world gave the islands the name of 'Malvinas;' the sailors of the expedition were from Saint Malo, France, thus they named the islands 'Les Isles Malouines,' a term converted into the Spanish language as 'Las Islas Maluinas,' which consequently evolved into 'Malvinas' in modern Spanish. "An

¹Eugene L. Rasor, *The Falklands/Malvinas Campaign* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992), 14.

original account [on the French 'discovery'] was by Antonie Pernetty, published in three volumes in French in 1769 and in English in 1787."²

Since their discovery in the sixteenth century, there were never permanent settlements on the islands until the nineteenth century. Before 1833, Spain, France and Great Britain established settlements, but those were abandoned.

Since Argentina officially gained its independence in 1818, the Falklands/Malvinas were considered by the new Argentine government as Argentine soil on the grounds that Spain had sovereignty over the islands and the Argentine territory before the independence movement. The young Argentine administration then assumed that the islands were a part of the mainland country of Argentina: "The Argentine position claims that Argentina succeeded to Spain's sovereignty rights over the Falkland Islands (Malvinas) in accordance with principles of international law."³ Spain, for its part, had claimed the islands on account of having discovered and ruled over the Americas, in which on May 4, 1493 Pope Alexander VI 'awarded' Spain exclusive right to claim and control over any area west of an imaginary line parting from approximately present-day Brazil's western boundaries.

Due to political tensions in the nineteenth century, on January 2, 1833, Great Britain invaded the Falklands/Malvinas and made a permanent settlement there. The islands remained under British control for over 145 years.

²Ibid.

³Roberto C. Laver, *The Falklands/Malvinas Case* (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2001), 70.

In the 1960s, following the decolonization of European settlements around the world after the end of World War II, Argentine diplomats made demands at the United Nations General Assembly for Great Britain to withdraw from the Falklands/Malvinas islands. Talks back and forth between diplomats to the United Nations from both countries took place for over a decade and a half. A resolution was never achieved and relations between Argentina and Great Britain deteriorated.

It was on the morning of April 2, 1982 that Argentine military forces suddenly invaded the Falklands/Malvinas islands. The invasion came as complete shock to the islanders and to the United Kingdom. The long-stand dispute over the islands had reached a modern armed conflict. Over 1,000 Argentine marines and Special Forces troops battled the British garrison of 80 soldiers. The fight lasted for about three hours, until the British soldiers had no choice but to surrender to the overwhelming Argentine military force.

The motives for this invasion came from Argentina's unpopular military regime. At the time, the country was going through a period of extreme economic struggle and the regime was desperate to elevate their reputation. Under the command of General Leopoldo Galtieri, who had been the military dictator of Argentina for only four months, an amphibious military campaign was launched on a matter that would unify the nation: the "repossession" of *Las Islas Malvinas*.

Shortly after the Argentine forces had gained control over the Falklands/Malvinas, another series of diplomatic talks began at the United Nations. On April 3, 1982, the United Nations Security Council

passed Resolution 502 which called for Argentina to withdraw its military forces from the islands. This resolution was ignored by the Argentine military government and all hopes to end the conflict peacefully were abandoned:

The then First Sea Lord Sir Henry Leach had assured the prime minister that in terms of being able to make an effective response he could have a task force ready at notice to sail within 48 hours. Authority was, therefore, duly given for that task force to assemble and to begin to sail from the following Monday morning of the 5th of April.⁴

The passage of the British task force from the United Kingdom to the islands would take three-weeks, but before the force could focus on liberating the Falklands/Malvinas, they had to reoccupy South Georgia Island, an Argentine-taken small British outpost on a group of islands even smaller than the Falklands/Malvinas. These islands are located approximately 800 miles southeast of the Falklands/Malvinas islands, but are of no significant economic value. It was in the waters surrounding South Georgia that the first retaliations began against Argentine forces on April 2, 1982, when the Argentine submarine Santa Fe was spotted in the vicinity by British war helicopters. The British helicopters engaged the Santa Fe. The submarine was critically damaged and put out of commission. Its crew was captured after bailing-out off the shores of South Georgia Island along with the small Argentine unit who had no option but to surrender before the overpowering attacks of the British Marines and British naval fire support.

⁴The Falklands War, written by Steve Gillham and Bob Carruthers, 100 min., Discovery Civilization, 2002, DVD.

The conflict was taken to the Falklands/Malvinas within the first week of May of that year, when British bombers flew out of the Ascension Island near the equator on the Atlantic and made a series of raids on Stanley Port, the capital of the Islands to the east. Almost immediately, the Argentine Air Force launched a series of air attacks against the British fleets, but most of them were intercepted by the Royal Air Force and the Argentine air retaliation was suppressed by air-to-air combat.

The most controversial episodes on the Falklands/Malvinas War came on May 2, 1982, when three Argentine battle ships were spotted sailing with their courses set on the islands. At the time when British intelligence found out about these battle ships, they were within 30 miles from entering the 200 exclusion zone that the British government had declared around the islands. After consultation within the British War Cabinet, the British submarine Conqueror was ordered to attack the Argentine warships on grounds that they posed a threat to the British taskforce. The Conqueror was able to trail the ships and with its sophisticated weaponry was able to sink the light cruiser General Belgrano. This ship was one of the surviving ships at the Pearl Harbor Japanese attacks during World War II. After the war, the United States had sold the ship to Argentina and it was now at the center of a world controversy. At the time of the sinking of the General Belgrano, its course was taking it back to Argentine port and away from the Falklands/Malvinas and its location was well outside of the exclusion zone. This was the first naval loss for the Argentine forces and it claimed nearly half of the country's total number of

casualties. With this attack the Argentine Navy was put out of the war. All the Argentine naval units returned to their ports to never come out again during this war.

Revenge for the sinking of the General Belgrano came rather quickly. Two days after the sinking of the cruiser, an Argentine jet fighter aircraft fired a missile at the HMS Sheffield. Even though the projectile did not go off, the impact of the rocket and the burning rocket fuel claimed the lives of 20 British seamen aboard the ship. Many others were burnt and wounded due to the attack.

Over the first three weeks of the month of May, British ground troops were deployed on the northwestern side of the islands to confront the already settled troops of Argentines at scattered posts. They chose to begin ground retaliation through the northwest because this zone was further away from the main concentrations of ground Argentine troops near the other end of the islands around the Port of Stanley. The major milestone in the Falklands/Malvinas War came on May 20, 1982 when Great Britain launched a full-scale ground attack on the Argentine occupying troops.

Over the following three weeks the fate of the Falklands/Malvinas was to be decided. British troops on land, with the support of heavy gunship fire, were able to quickly advance over the grassy and rough terrain of the islands. Argentina retaliated furthermore on a series of air strikes against British ground troops and warships. These jet fighter aircrafts were flown out of the Argentine mainland because the Falklands/Malvinas lacked a sustainable airstrip to contribute with the Argentine war effort. In all, it was during the British land

campaign that more lives were lost in combat, surprisingly not by ground troop combat but rather by air raids against British naval ships off the coast of the Falklands/Malvinas. The total number of warships lost on the British side after the devastating attacks on the Sheffield was two destroyers and two frigates. This proved the effectiveness of Argentine aerial tactics.

Despite the losses of these naval war vessels, the British Royal Navy proved to dominate the waters, but on the contrary, no clear air superiority was established by either side. The British forces lost a total of 10 Harrier jet fighters and 24 helicopters, while the Argentines lost 25 helicopters and a total of 75 fixed-wing aircrafts. Most of these were destroyed while sitting at the hangers on the Falklands/Malvinas in British Special Forces surprise attacks and Royal Air Force bombings.

The decisive last four battles over the Falklands/Malvinas came on the night of June 11, 1982 when a brigade-size British ground force launched an attack against the last standing, and the biggest Argentine post at Port Stanley. Although the major concentration of Argentine troops was on this city, the firefights took place on the mountains in its vicinity. Three days later the Argentine troops were defeated on those same mountains and Stanley presented the last threat from occupying troops on the islands.

Fortunately for both sides, on the night of June 14, 1982, the Argentine forces surrendered at the Port of Stanley without a fight; a battle that could have claimed the lives of soldiers from both sides as well as the civilians that inhabited the city-port. General Mario

Menéndez from the Argentine Army was the official signing officer of the Argentine surrender to the British forces. The War for the Falklands/Malvinas had come to an end.

According to Argentine soldiers' accounts, the Argentine ground forces did not have the necessary equipment to fight the war. Many of the Argentine weaponry was faulty and in many cases ammunition was expired. In one particular case, an Argentine veteran, Jorge Altieri, tells how most of their rifles jammed upon engaging the advancing British forces. Such factors played a vital role in the defeat of the Argentine ground forces.

The news of the surrender of the troops was devastating for the people of Argentina. Within days of it, Leopoldo Galtieri was removed from power and for the next several years he faced numerous civilian and military court trials where he was found guilty of mismanagement of the war along with other civil rights violations committed under his command during the time of the Military Junta government. Galtieri served several years in prison for his crimes but in 1991 he received a pardon from the then Argentine President Carlos Menem.

To the surviving soldiers of both Armies, the events of the Falklands/Malvinas War were psychologically devastating. More British veterans' lives have been claimed by suicide than the number of British soldiers that died during the conflict. By May of 2002, the total number of suicide cases among the Falklands/Malvinas veterans had reached 264. A total of 258 British soldiers were killed during the struggle to retake the islands. Up to the present year, there has

been an estimated 400 cases of suicide among the Argentine veterans of this war.

Currently, the Falklands/Malvinas islands are an overseas expansion of the United Kingdom. They are under the control and administration of the British government, but Argentina still claims them as their own. Nonetheless, the two nations have diplomatic and trading relations.

After the war in 1982, Great Britain settled a major military base in Stanley to prevent the possible overrun of the islands should diplomacy with Argentina fail again. Commercial flights land at this massive military complex on a daily bases, but the tensions of war are present in everyday life. Commercial aircrafts are commonly escorted by Royal Air Force jet fighters to ensure the security of civilian air travelers.

While Great Britain was favored by most nations for retaking the Falklands/Malvinas in 1882, the debate over whether Argentina or the United Kingdom has the right to claim and administer the islands is a constant topic of debate.

In the end, the islands have proven to be purely a symbol of national pride for Great Britain and Argentina. The islands do not present a major world economical advantage. The major source of income in them is due to fishing. When the world renown Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, was asked about his own opinion of the Falklands/Malvinas conflict, he replied that The conflict between Argentina and Great Britain was as "a quarrel between two bald men for

possession of a comb!"⁵ With this statement, he implied that neither country needed the islands, that the conflict was a senseless war between two nations that did not have a purposeful use of a small group of bare-lands in the South Atlantic Ocean.

While the future of the Falklands/Malvinas is uncertain due to the Argentine's current claims over the islands, a conclusion to what nation these islands belong to cannot be drawn. After all, the history of the colonization of the New World was shaped through bloody battles. It can then be said that in our modern era, Great Britain has earned the title to the islands by defeating Argentina.

The unfortunate reality of the fragmented world we live in is that nations wage war against each other over economic, political and/or sovereignty issues without regarding the loss of human life. The former United States Secretary of Defense during the Vietnam War era, Robert S. McNamera, declared in an interview in 2003 that war is human nature and that it cannot be avoided. History textbooks present the Falklands/Malvinas War as a modern conflict that lasted a couple months from the morning of April 2, 1982; but in reality, it began when the first European explorers set their eyes on them and claimed them for their empires. It is a conflict that has not yet ended.

⁵Rasor, 6.

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