

Sub torpedoes Argentine cruiser in 'war' zone

Por David Fairhall, defence correspondent, The Guardian, 3 de mayo de 1982, Londres, Reino Unido

The Argentine cruiser General Belgrano was reported hit by torpedoes fired from a British submarine last night. It was severely damaged, the Ministry of Defence reported.

The General Belgrano, at 13,645 tons, is the second-biggest ship in the Argentine fleet. It carries helicopters and Seacat missiles. It is equipped with 6in and 5in guns and was built in 1939.

The cruiser posed a significant threat to the British task force, said a Ministry spokesman. The action, which was at about 5pm London time, was fully in accordance with the instructions given to the task force commander based upon the right of self defence under Article 51 of the UN charter.

The British submarine suffered no damage in the engagement and has resumed patrol, the Ministry said.

The cruiser was attacked as it entered the 200 mile exclusion zone heading for the Falklands. The Ministry of Defence was unable to say whether the cruiser was sinking, but it was hit by more than one torpedo.

The ship carries 1,000 men, and has been in service since 1951, when it was brought from the Americans.

The attack was almost certainly carried out by a nuclear submarine which can outpace the ageing warship.

Earlier Buenos Aires had ridiculed the British Airforces' belief that their air attacks and naval bombardment had "severely damaged" the runway of Port Stanley airfield in the Falklands, thereby severing the Argentine garrison's link with the mainland.

Argentine communiques also contained claims about shooting down 11 British Harrier aircraft and damaging the carrier HMS Hermes. But whereas aircraft losses could be categorically denied by the British - simply by counting their planes - there was obviously some room for doubt as to how much damage had been done on the airfield. Sooner or later the Argentinians will have to demonstrate the truth of their claim by attempting to fly into Port Stanley again, running the gauntlet of the Royal Navy's blockade. The British, for their part, might in any case be planning further raids on the 4,000ft runway to prevent its being repaired.

Reporters on board HMS Hermes said last night that they had seen photographers showing craters on the runway and damage to surrounding areas.

Before last night's attack, Saturday's battles were followed by a lull in which both sides considered their next moves.

Conflicting claims apart, Britain's first military operations against the Argentine garrison on the Falklands, starting before dawn on Saturday, seem to have been conducted with immaculate professional skill.

After destroying at least four Argentine aircraft and apparently putting the Port Stanley airfield out of action, the British forces reported just one casualty - Able Seaman Ian Brunell, from Teignmouth, Devon, who received a serious though not critical splinter wound in the chest.

With a choice of Vulcan V bombers and carrier-based Sea Harrier aircraft to attack the airfield, the British planners chose both - a single Vulcan bombing from high above the clouds by radar so as to dig deep holes in the rock foundation of the thinly-covered

tarmac runway, followed by a low-level daylight raid with Sea Harriers to hit parked aircraft, fuel stores and control towers.

The Vulcan, converted only days ago to carry 21 L000lb bombs instead of a single nuclear weapon, flew from Ascension Island, 3,500 miles away, refuelling from an air tanker on the way there and on the way back.

It dropped its bombs through the darkness using the radar outline of the clearly-defined peninsula on which Port Stanley's 4,000ft runway is built, about 21 miles outside the town. Subsequent reconnaissance showed, according to the Ministry of Defence in London, that the runway had been "severely damaged." Officials estimated that the bombs would blast craters 15ft deep, and at that time of the morning they must have come as a shattering surprise to defending troops.

Harriers from the carrier Hermes followed up as soon as it was light, causing considerable damage to military installations and storerooms. Some of them also turned their attention to the 3,000ft grass airstrip at Goose Green on the narrow isthmus joining the two main parts of East Falkland, to which the Argentinians seem to have dispersed their Pucara close ground support aircraft, together with helicopters.

The Pucararas were an important target because they could be lethal to Royal Marines going ashore later, and the helicopters are vital to the Argentinians' mobility across an archipelago that stretches about 150 miles from East to West.

More than one Argentine aircraft was damaged on the ground. The only damage to the Harriers was a single hole in a tail fin.

The Harrier attacks were mounted from about 50 miles offshore. Late in the afternoon, however, several of the British warships moved in closer to shell Port Stanley airfield. The aim will have been to disrupt the engineering teams which by then were likely to be out repairing the runway - unless Argentine claims that it was never damaged in the first place were correct - and do further damage to the surrounding buildings.

The Argentine sappers may have been using metal sheets to cover holes in the runway.

This bombardment prompted retaliation by Argentine fighter-bombers flying from the mainland 400 miles away, near the limit of their useful combat range.

Others closed in to tangle with the British fighters off Port Stanley, when one was brought down by a heat seeking Sidewinder missile up his jet tailpipe and another apparently by confused Argentine ground fire from round the airfield. Argentinian communique admitted the loss of two aircraft, both of them Daggers, the Israeli version of the French mirage III.

Later that evening, the Argentinians mounted another raid on the British ships, and one of their ageing British built Canberra bombers was shot down and a second apparently badly damaged.