

Destroyer Sheffield is sunk: 30 dead

Por David Fairhall, defence correspondent, The Guardian, 5 de mayo de 1982, Londres, Reino Unido

British forces in the South Atlantic suffered their first serious losses yesterday afternoon when the destroyer HMS Sheffield was hit and destroyed by an Argentinian missile and a Sea Harrier was shot down while attacking an airstrip on the Falklands.

The number of deaths on the Sheffield may be as high as 30, according to the Defence Secretary, Mr John Nott, who gave details of casualties in a statement to the House of Commons late last night.

HMS Sheffield, 3,660 tons and with a complement of 270, is believed to have been hit by an Exocet radar guided missile, probably fired from a land-based Super Etendard fighter bomber.

The missile apparently struck the control room buried deep in the superstructure and fire broke out. When it became clear that the fire was out of control the crew abandoned her.

Mr Nott told the House that nearly all the ship's company and captain were accounted for but after originally saying that 12 sailors were missing, he updated it to 30.

The Sea Harrier is believed to have been shot down during an attack on the Argentinians' secondary airstrip at Goose Green.

The pilot, Lieutenant Nicholas Taylor, aged 32, of Ryme Intrinseca, near Yeovil, Somerset, was killed.

The raid followed a night bombing raid on the main airfield at Port Stanley by a Vulcan V-bomber flying from Ascension Island. A Defence Ministry statement said the other three Sea Harriers flying with Lt Taylor returned safely.

An Argentinian communiqué put the time of the raid at 6.50pm London time, claiming two Harriers brought down by anti-aircraft fire.

Last night's communiqué from the Ministry of Defence in London stated: "In the course of its duties within the total exclusion zone around the Falkland Islands, HMS Sheffield, a Type 42 destroyer, was attacked and hit late this afternoon by an Argentine missile.

"The ship caught fire, which spread out of control. When there was no longer any hope of saving the ship, the ship's company abandoned ship. All who abandoned her were picked up. It is feared there have been a number of casualties but we have no details of them yet. Next-of-kin will be informed first as soon as details are received."

The Exocet is a "fire and forget" sea skimming anti-ship missile designed and built by the French. The British task force carries it and so do nine of Argentina's destroyers and frigates almost certainly including the two destroyers that were escorting the cruiser General Belgrano when she was attacked and sunk by the British nuclear powered hunter-killer submarine Conqueror on Sunday night with heavy loss of life.

But reports from Argentina indicated last night that the missile was launched from one of the Argentinian Navy's newly delivered French built Super Etendard naval fighter bombers.

An immediate concern is that if one Exocet can get through the British defences there is no reason why others should not do so. The missile is launched in the general direction of the target and then homes in on the biggest object its radar can detect.

The only defensive weapon the Royal Navy has which is designed to take on a sea skimmer of this deadly kind is the Seawolf anti-missile missile, mounted on the two

Type 22 frigates, Broadsword and Brilliant which seem to have been keeping close guard on the carriers for this reason.

Royal Navy chiefs were said last night to be "totally stunned" by the loss of Sheffield, which is believed to have sunk as the fire worked through her. "They just can't believe it," said one Defence Ministry official.

Sheffield was the first of the Navy's Type 42 destroyers built primarily for the Sea Dart medium-range air defence missile they carry along with a Lynx anti-submarine helicopter. She was launched by the Queen from Vickers's Barrow-in-Furness yard in 1971.

Her commanding officer is Captain James "Sam" Salt, aged 42, who lives in Petersfield, Hampshire, with his wife Penelope. He was reported safe.

Argentina last night withheld an official report on the Sheffield but sources claimed that six Super Etendard planes had been responsible for the strike. An official communiqué stated that two Sea Harriers had been shot down over the Falklands, with one pilot killed.

British sources say that Argentina has five Super Etendards. It had ordered 14 but the remainder have been held in France because of the arms embargo which followed the Argentine invasion of the Falklands.

It is a powerful, versatile single-engined fighter bomber designed originally to operate from the French Navy's carriers, refuelling in flight if necessary.

The Argentinians presumably intend to use it from their own elderly ex-British carrier, the Venti-cinco de Mayo, but the aircraft which destroyed HMS Sheffield probably operated from the mainland airbase at Rio Gallegos in southern Argentina.

It is understood that the British destroyer was lying to the west of the main Royal Navy task force, acting as an air defence picket with her Sea Dart missiles - which coincidentally have the same range of about 25 miles as Exocet.