

Oh What an Ugly War

Por Roger Rosenblatt, Time Magazine, 17 de Mayo de 1982, Nueva York, Estados Unidos

A week of fighting proves how deadly is the game

Alfred Hitchcock mastered this effect: a fool acts huffy in a dangerous situation (a battle, an ambush). He protests the noise and inconvenience while the bullets pop around him, and the audience chuckles at his posturing. Then suddenly this character is shot; in *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) he examines the blood from his own wound.

All at once the audience is not laughing any more. It realizes that what seemed hilarious a moment ago was never really funny in the first place because the context was not funny, because nothing can ever be funny when death is possible. To bring the matter to the Falklands: there is no such thing as a comic war.

Why so obvious a fact was not seen before last week's events—before the destruction of two ships, at least nine aircraft and more than 300 people—was partly a matter of pacing. The three weeks it took for Britain's fleet to reach the islands was originally thought to be useful for diplomacy, and so it would have proved, had diplomacy worked. But that prolonged stretch of time also allowed a grand illusion to grow in the public mind—the idea that this war was going to be a cultural event, with the participating nations displaying the ceremonies of battle the way some birds display tail feathers, as rituals of violence minus the blood. For the spectators there was more than enough to be amused by, including the Falklands themselves, unknown to the world before April 2 and afterward an anthology of jokes about penguins, sheep and kelp. Those not giggling were celebrating. Argentine children waved flags; British children waved flags. Except for mothers, who know better, and politicians, who ought to, almost everyone was certain that this was going to be oh such a lovely war, so different from the common run, with all those awkward screams and telegrams.

Now dead boys float in the South Atlantic, and there is no doubt on earth what those dark festivals were leading to. Last Monday, after the sinking of the cruiser *General Belgrano*, British armchair admirals were smugly analytical about the deficiencies of the Argentine forces. One day later Mrs. Thatcher listened ashen-faced in the House of Commons as her Defense Secretary announced the death toll from the destroyer *Sheffield*. Sobered, the world sat upright. It was precisely because the war had seemed so playful initially that it seemed so dreadful now. If anything, it appeared worse than it was, so shocked was everyone by the execution of the inevitable.

Of course, a change of mood was not the only reason for the stunned reaction. There is something about this conflict being a war at sea—the first major naval engagement in nearly 40 years—that gives it a terrible stateliness. Ships go down slowly. The people on them die twice: once when hit, once when drowning. They give you time to consider their faces, time to imagine what it was like on that cruiser or destroyer, after the sides of the vessel were punctured and there was a scrambling for rafts and then a silence. A touch of World War II as well: high waves, black water. Memory mingles with imagination. Easy to visualize, the war seems larger than it is.

Then, too, the stakes are so preposterous. However grand the principles involved, one cannot help picturing the small, cold cause of all this trouble. What could have been solved with a conversation has now brought two once compatible nations to states of

mourning and alarm. We have seen all this before. But the passions are out of proportion to the problem. It is almost as if the problem did not count, as if the islands could sink tomorrow and the war would continue to run on its own abstract fury.

The weaponry is also out of proportion, yet another source of the world's surprise. The fact that helicopters have proved able to pick off surface vessels is said to have astonished some military experts, who had not foreseen such possibilities. None of them could have been quite as astonished as the captain of the General Belgrano, however, at the devastating power and accuracy of the British Tigerfish torpedo; or as the captain of the Sheffield when the Argentines let fly their Exocet missile from an aircraft he could not even see. Before the Falklands crisis these weapons were untried toys, and war was target practice. Now there is mixed amazement that they actually work. Some horror. Some delight.

But the deep surprise of the past week was still how quickly and fiercely a dispute became a war. One could see it coming and still not believe it. A war that neither country wanted fought over a place that neither country needed? Even the taking of South Georgia did not bring the seriousness of the matter home: an Argentine submarine waiting for the assault like a turtle on its back; a farce—until the Belgrano. The lesson of the loss of life on that cruiser was not merely revulsion, but a recognition of the essential nature of the whole transaction. And was there not some hint of malicious fascination in all this too? In its darkest heart, had not much of the world been goading these lines toward each other from the start; praising peace and negotiations, to be sure, but secretly eager to see what happens—even in a comedy—when a shot is fired?

By the end of the week everyone seemed to realize the enormity of such impulses, and was staring with some perplexity at his own fresh wounds. Not that this was any sure sign that the shooting would discontinue. Both sides were alternating between war whoops and mutterings of possible conciliation. Neither side was budging on the issue of Argentine withdrawal from the islands. There was talk of an invasion. Only one thing was certain, and that was known at the outset: people will kill each other over anything.