

Saved but Still Fearful

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With the war over, residents worry about a new invader—the outside world

During the fierce, short war between Argentina and Britain over the Falkland Islands, TIME Caribbean Bureau Chief William McWhirter covered the combat from Buenos Aires.

Last week McWhirter was one of the first American journalists to be allowed by the British to visit the islands and to observe the changes, many unexpected, caused by battle and its aftermath in what had once been one of the most unchanging and neglected corners of the world. His report:

The invasion is now complete. Not, this time, by a conquering and hostile foreign army, nor by the remaining British garrison of 4,500 troops, who have dwarfed and engulfed the capital, if in a good-natured and well-meaning way. This time the invader is an even more threatening and less welcome presence—the outside world. The Falklanders, who had created a kingdom of simple but idyllic make-believe, now fear that the war and its aftermath will make reality a permanent visitor to their islands. "We used to talk about it during the occupation," says Gerald Cheek, a third-generation Falklander who was interned during the war. " 'When the British come, there's going to be a hell of a party.' Well, the party never happened."

The Falklands, of course, are no longer far away and forgotten. Their whimsical place names, such as Teal Inlet, Goose Green, Bluff Cove and Two Sisters, are now recognized as battlegrounds. San Carlos Bay became famous as "bomb alley." The fighting between one army fleeing and one pursuing across East Falkland has left the casual litter of war: gullies and ravines filled with the carcasses of crashed choppers and camouflaged trucks; thousands of rounds of unexploded ammunition and fat 500-lb. and 1,000-lb. bombs wallowing in the soft earth like beached whales. Many of the small cottages with their brightly painted trimming, window boxes and hothouses were angrily, savagely violated by the frustrated Argentines. Their floors are deep in mud, cupboards torn from the walls, furniture smashed, dishes broken and even children's toys crushed.

One act of desecration was cruder: mines sown indiscriminately around the capital and the smallest settlements. Perhaps 12,000 such mines, some plastic and hard to detect, some as small as 2 in. or 3 in. wide, were buried in the fields and beaches around Port Stanley, and another 4,000 in tiny Fox Bay on West Falkland. British explosives experts hope to have the town areas cleared by October, but the farming regions not for another year and the outback not for years beyond that.

For the Falklanders, who have grown up with the freedom of a population of 1,800 that was able to roam and explore mountains and valleys of white grass in an area roughly the size of Lebanon, the new danger has imposed a form of rare confinement. Their days used to be spent in their gardens and in the peat bogs, where they wind-dried the islands' source of fuel for their stoves. "Peat has become a way of life to us," says the Rev. Harry Bagnall, Port Stanley's Anglican vicar. "There are times of the year when the only thing we talk about is our peat." Now the small but precious freedom of being able to gather peat has been denied by the mines. "People anticipated having to

repair buildings and fences" after the fighting, says John Leonard, a longtime U.S. resident of the islands, "but the confinement is really tragic. The ground is poisoned."

The dangers are not exaggerated: three British soldiers have already lost limbs in clearing out the mines. Almost daily the small houses on the hillsides of Port Stanley shake and their windowpanes rattle as the engineers detonate more finds.

By contrast, the weeks of alien occupation seem to have left the Falklanders with more anecdotes than scars. The islands produced their own heroes during the war. There was Terry Peck, who guided the British patrols on their first reconnaissance missions. And Midge Bucket, who became Port Stanley's one-woman complaint and rescue squad. And Tim Dobbyns, who risked his life to travel all night to Port Stanley to deliver the news that all 114 inhabitants of the Goose Green settlement had been interned in the church hall by the Argentines.

Perhaps no one was more resourceful, however, than Msgr. Daniel Spraggon, pastor of St. Mary's in Port Stanley. He parlayed a combination of Catholic power and skillful play-acting into a number of successful ploys against the Argentines. The priest's most effective moment may have occurred when houses in the capital came under fire at night from jittery sentries enforcing the curfew. "Old Mary Hill's house was fired up," says Msgr. Spraggon, "then Stella Perry's and Stan and Daphne Cletheroes'." The crunch came, however, when the rectory received 27 rounds one night. The next day Spraggon put on his robes and stormed into the Argentine military headquarters. "Now you've really done it," he thundered. "How are you going to settle this with Rome? What would Galtieri have said if you had shot a priest?" As a result the "fire-ups" came to an end.

There were other forms of protest.

Patrick Watts, who runs the Falkland Islands Broadcasting Service, sharpened his sarcasm by reading Argentine-supplied news broadcasts, such as the assertion that the carrier Hermes was running out of fuel, that there was a mutiny aboard the Invincible and that the British were holding an emergency training exercise in Brazil for their unfit troops. "Everybody here just curled up and laughed," says Watts. "They thought it was a great joke." The Argentines finally turned off the station's transmitters after accusing Watts of playing God Save the Queen and It's a Long, Long Way to Tipperary.

Although the Argentine invasion only instilled in the Falklanders a deeper sense of suspicion and dislike of the Argentines, the islanders often displayed sympathy over the plight of individual soldiers. The islanders fed hungry Argentines at their back doors, passing out sweets and cigarettes. "I caught the fear in their eyes," says Msgr. Spraggon. "One soldier violated the curfew one night to see me and just broke down and cried and cried."

'Son,' I told him, 'you just cry, you're going to be better afterwards.' " The Falklanders have been far less resourceful, even somewhat helpless, in coping with the arrival of the British forces. The soldiers have filled nearly every house in town up to the attic, drying their uniforms across backyard clotheslines.

They have occupied the town gymnasium, and sleep on the floors of the courtroom and the town magistrate's office. They even come into the kitchens of the tin and clapboard seafront houses to take tea from their adopted mums like loving sons.

Many of the residents now feel oddly useless and irrelevant on their own islands. They feel unable to convey their mixed feelings of gratitude and frustration to the troops as they again assume the role of a submissive population. "I had to watch myself the other day," says one Port Stanley resident. "The soldiers thought they were being helpful by burning up my wood boxes. They thought it was rubbish. They don't understand how important everything is to us here. Wood is too expensive to burn." Snaps one housewife whose small cottage now contains nine soldiers: "You have to bite your tongue from thinking they liberated us so we could wash their laundry and clean their plates. I wonder who is going to rescue us from them?"

Broadcaster Watts is one of the few islanders to discuss the dilemma openly. "British ships and the British military presence is something we have always wanted here. Now we must decide whether we can carry on our lives underneath all this British pressure or whether we revert to the way of life we had before, with the same dangers. It's no good saying we can forget about the Argentines. We can't. The military have taken over our airport. We are going to have to learn where this leaves us and where this is going to take our futures."

The former British Governor, Rex Hunt, who returned to the Falklands under the new administrative title of civil commissioner, last week donned his red tunic with the silver braid and put on his hat with the ostrich-feather plumes to open the first postwar session of the legislative council. He puckishly paraphrased Winston Churchill to thank the British liberators: "Never in the course of human conflict has so much been owed by so few to so many." Says an admiring islander of Hunt: "He knew us before, he knows our problems, he knows the way of life we had before and he knows the way of life the people want."

"The most immediate problem for us," admits Hunt, "is to find a way to preserve the quality of life here under all these pressures. There is still some confusion and bewilderment about the immediate future." Not surprisingly, Hunt is more optimistic than most of the islanders about where that future is going to lead. He enthusiastically outlines a new road system throughout the islands: incredibly, there is now a total of only some eight miles of roadway in the entire colony. There are proposals for expanding the crude wool industry to include knitting mills and building abattoirs for the Falklands' unutilized cattle and mutton (some 23,000 sheep carcasses are thrown away each year because of a lack of markets). Some islanders also hope to open up new grazing lands, market such island delicacies as upland geese, sea trout, salmon and crabs, and develop the Falklands' seaweed beds.

None of this speculation includes an oil miracle. "Every indication is that oil finds would be forthcoming," says Hunt somewhat cautiously. A newly published British government publication, however, more brightly quotes the U.S. Geological Survey estimate that "the area could provide more than nine times the oil believed to lie under Britain's North Sea, making it the largest untapped resource in the world." Boasts Hunt: "Out of Galtieri's folly, there can be a better and brighter future for the islanders. They should be able to cash in on the name that the Falklands now has."

The islanders are less certain. Economic development could further change their way of life. So far, they have been given no figures from the British government for such aid, let alone what sums may be available for war damages: seven houses were totally destroyed and 80 shot up in the capital, mostly by the British navy. Nor is there any

escape from the fears that the Argentines may attack again, or that a future British government might hand the islands over to Argentine sovereignty anyway. Says Gerald Cheek: "Quite a lot of people have talked about moving away, myself included."

The islands' population cannot withstand any large-scale defections without collapse, although only 100 Falklanders appear to have left during the entire war. Hunt claims that just two families are applying to leave permanently, but the tensions have already surfaced, dividing families that stayed in the capital during the occupation from those who "retreated" to the outlying settlements.

Even the presence of so many eligible bachelors among the British troops seems worrying to the islanders.

"We had a lot of problems with the Royal Marines here before," says Cheek. "We lost five girls one year.

There has never been a year when we didn't lose one or two.

You can't afford to lose them, not with a small population like this one." Says a resident: "One isn't hearing talk of leaving, but you know damn well they're thinking it." An even less kind truth, of course, is that Falkland Islands life had already begun to slide away from its idyllic memories long before the Argentine invasion. The occupation, in fact, may even have served to awaken the islanders to the already present dangers. The Falklands population had continued to decline over the past decade as the uncertainty over and escalation of Argentina's claims grew. The political insecurity also served to dry up new investment. There were other signs of less satisfaction with the simple life. Divorce and alcoholism became persistent social ailments: in recent years, the islands' divorce rate ran as high as 50% among new marriages.

Although Falklanders, as before, leave their doors unlocked at night, the islands experienced two murders last year, their first since a celebrated case in 1900 when a black cook successfully turned a seal-hunting rifle on two white tormentors.

So far even the most thoughtful islanders have found few answers to the problems posed by the future. Says Stuart Wallace, 27, an ex-islands councilor and sixth-generation kelper who is married to an Argentine: "I'm emotionally tied to these islands. The point has been made that Britain will defend us, but our situation isn't any better than it was. It would be marvelous to have a brave new world, even a nice new island, but I'm pessimistic that this is the place I am going to be able to raise my family in."

As a possible start, one of the islands' heroes and their most energetic councilor, Terry Peck, called his own town meeting this week in the local gym, the first since the ending of the Falklands war. Although it lasted for two hours, most of the 100 townspeople who turned out were silent as proposals were offered for increasing the islanders' local legislative control; allowing residents to buy land from the Falkland Islands Co., which controls 46% of the region; and having a greater say over the teachers and contract workers sent out from Britain. Indeed, the evening revealed long-simmering resentments against the British. "Is there anything we can do about the same colonial administration that we disliked before that is now back?" asked Donald Davidson, who runs a tourist guesthouse in Port Stanley.

There was unanimous applause, however, when Peck resolved that "we have no more to do, ever, with the Argentines." Wearing a monogrammed E.R. on his dark blue blazer, he finally appealed, "I'm disappointed at the turnout and disappointed you don't have more to offer about our future. I want to get some punch into these islands."

That determined attitude may still be a way of uniting the individualistic and defiant islanders after all. They may even get around to having that party celebrating the coming of the British and the ending of the fighting. Promises Magistrate Harold Bennett, 65, who had retired after 36 years on the job only two days before the Argentine invasion and who is now back on his old job: "The Falklands are going to have their 150th anniversary next January.

We are going to have a bit of a celebration, if only because the Argies said it would never happen."