

Senior Registrar and RAMC Major James Ryan onboard the QE2, then later RFA Sir Galahad

Reminiscences of a Distant War – A Medic at War

In 1982 I was 37 years old and a lecturer in surgery and an honorary senior registrar in my final year of training and also a Major in the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC). Like all of my contemporaries, military and civilian, at that time I had a unique and lengthy training, which today would raise eyebrows but was a good preparation for war. Penetrating ballistic missiles do not respect anatomical boundaries or surgical sub-speciality interests, particularly when deployed as a single-handed surgeon on campaign service.

Outbreak of war

This was a wholly unexpected event. My generation of military surgeons were fully expecting a general war in North-West Europe following an invasion by the Warsaw Pact. With no warning, Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands on 2nd April having landed on South Georgia a few hours earlier.

My warning to deploy on active duty took effect on 12th May when I embarked on the great Cunard ship *QE2* at Southampton. My Field Surgical Team, designated 55 FST, was to be part of the surgical support for 5 Brigade consisting of Welsh and Scots Guards, Gurkhas and Support Arms. Some of the Guards were aloof and unfriendly to the RAMC Medics and largely ignored us. One group of Guards officers would not come to RAMC doctors for treatment. Instead, they came to a private arrangement with the on board Cunard medical staff that were more to their liking, which I found quite hurtful. They would change their attitude when we next encountered them during the war

On a lighter note, the first intended anaesthetist for my FST was one Major H Hannah. That is until it was realised that this was Helen Hannah – a woman. Not just any woman, but the widely admired and redoubtable Major Helen Hannah RAMC. This caused consternation. The British Armed Forces were not yet ready for a woman on their battlefield and she was quickly replaced by the equally well-known and redoubtable Lt Col Jim Anderson RAMC who would soon be appointed OC 55 FST. At our first O Group we were told without humour that the ship had been re-designated LPLL –Landing Platform – Luxury Liner. She put to sea at 1600 hours with no one believing that the team would get much further than the English Channel.

In preparation for war service, engineers in Southampton installed two helicopter pads, transformed public lounges into dormitories, further installed fuel pipes that ran through the ship down to the engine room to allow for refuelling at sea, and they covered carpets with 2,000 sheets of hardboard. A quarter of the ship's length was reinforced with steel plating, and an anti-magnetic coil was fitted to combat naval mines. Over 650 Cunard crew members volunteered for the voyage, to look after the 3,000 members of 5 Brigade.

The journey south took 15 days leaving ample time for exercises and training with unfamiliar equipment. There was also ample time for pleasure. The author kept a diary throughout the campaign and it helps to illustrate the surreal atmosphere on board. It seemed bizarre to go to war on the world's finest luxury liner.

A few diary entries reflect the mood on board.

“12th May ...retired to the 1st class bar for large gins at 2100 hrs – retired to bed at 2330 hrs!

13th May ...Lifeboat drill ad nauseam...Superb lunch – fresh salmon yesterday – fresh crab today - and wonderful wines.

15th May...My first operation at sea – an appendectomy on a young combat engineer in the QE2’s operating theatre.

17th May ...Captain’s cocktail party followed by a steeplechase in QE2’s Officers Wardroom!” It became increasingly easy to imagine that all were on a holiday cruise, at least for the officers.”

Into the War Zone

Reality checked in when active service conditions were declared as we approached Grytviken in South Georgia. The QE2, initially bound for the Falkland Islands, had unexpectedly turned away and headed for South Georgia – a distance of over 7500 miles from Southampton. Why? The given explanation was a threat from submarines. This would lead later to a spectacular insult by the crew of the P&O vessel SS Canberra which went directly to the Falkland Islands to off load her troops – some time later her crew hung a sheet over the side of Canberra with the ditty – *“P&O cruises where Cunard refuses”!* Whether Cunard’s QE2 was not to be risked or whether there was a genuine submarine threat is for historians to decide. All who cruised on the QE2 retain an enormous affection for her. (In 1985 while on tour in Hong King the author had a chance to reboard the ship and explore familiar surroundings).

We arrived in Grytviken in South Georgia on 27th May. Troops and equipment were cross decked from the liner to an awaiting North Sea ferry, MV *Norland*. Our adventure on the luxury liner was over. Oh, how we had come down in the world.

We departed South Georgia for the Falklands that evening in an overcrowded ship in appalling weather and rough seas.

Sir Galahad and Sir Tristram

55 FST had an uneventful first week on the Falkland Islands. Bad weather kept the Argentine Air Force at bay resulting in a deceptive calm. With both infantry Brigades ashore assaults on Argentine positions could now proceed and land the force in an area to the south of Stanley. The area chosen was at Fitzroy and nearby Bluff Cove. 55 FST was assigned to provide surgical support to the force.

Our CO, Lt Col Jim Anderson, attended the Brigade briefing and was told that his FST should board the logistic landing ship *Sir Galahad* that afternoon. It became immediately clear that Brigade Staff Officers envisaged that the surgical teams would simply board *Sir Galahad* carrying their medical kit in their hand luggage. Col Anderson informed them that 55 FST comprised over 20 personnel, numerous vehicles and trailers, furniture for operating theatres and wards and a considerable requirement for shelter, water, food and heating and this would

take some hours to achieve. The Brigade staff were appalled and a heated discussion followed. This was to be the first of many adverse events, which delayed the departure of *Sir Galahad* and 5 Brigade.

Sir Galahad eventually sailed for Fitzroy at night of 7th June and arrived in Bluff Cove in broad daylight on the morning of 8th June. She anchored alongside her sister ship *Sir Tristram*, which had arrived the day before. To arrive in daylight effectively behind enemy lines and to begin unloading troops is an invitation for the enemy to attack. This was to be just one of a number of tactical and operational errors that led to a disaster at Fitzroy/Bluff Cove. Worse would follow.

A battery of surface-to-air missiles that was to cover the deployment of troops was not operational, and air cover had been drawn away from the area by what turned out to be a decoy flight of Argentinian jets. Finally, it took many hours to begin unloading *Sir Galahad* because there was no room to dock the ship and unload directly onto terra firma. Landing craft were also in short supply and there were critical equipment failures on board. The Argentinians had plenty of time to call in a lethal air attack on what was effectively a sitting duck.

One of our surgical teams had just got ashore with its equipment when at about 1400 hours two waves of Argentinian fighter-bombers bombed and strafed the ships lying motionless in the water. My team were still aboard and the officers were having gins in the wardroom and watching a very tasteless 8 mm movie on a TV monitor.

After the hits by bombs and bullets I ended up on the floor but my gin had not spilt. We were in total darkness and all exits were buckled. A remarkable quietness ensued and people just sat still and in silence. After a seemingly lengthy period we heard the unmistakably posh voice of a young Guards officer. He had explored behind the small wardroom bar and found a trapdoor leading outside – this, we were told later was used to restock the bar with beer barrels. The officer, who turned out later to be a very young second lieutenant in the Welsh Guards, was cool and collected. He ushered us all out to safety only leaving himself when we were all safe.

Days later I related this tale to the Guards RSM and wondered if the officer should be put forward for an award. He shook his head and said that the young man had just done what would be expected of a Guards officer – no recommendation was made.

Out on deck was pandemonium. Our second in command was dead. Col Anderson had severe damage to his shoulder. They had both been outside bird watching when the attack came in. Col Anderson refused all medical attention. He simply made a makeshift sling for his left arm and carried on working for the rest of the war. Life rafts were deployed and helicopters hovered over the burning ship taking and winching people off the deck. The butcher's bill was appalling – 56 dead and 150 wounded.

We were brought ashore having lost all personal equipment and dressed only in shirts and combat trousers. We had also lost our personal weapons, cameras and in some cases our wallets and ID cards. The Royal Navy has a term for people like us - we are labelled 'survivors' and unfit for any duty. My FST was assembled, boarded on a helicopter, and evacuated back to the 'Red and Green Life Machine' Field Hospital at San Carlos where we were equipped and set to work on the continuing flow of wounded. We stayed with the Red and Green Life Machine till war's end.