

The Falkland Islands War



Thirty Years Later an Old War Threatens to be Reignited

Although in 1982 Great Britain defeated Argentina in a decisive and bloody battle for control over the Falkland Islands, Argentina never relinquished its claim. Now, 30 years later, the two contenders are again at each other in a new dispute over billions of gallons of oil recently discovered on this island cluster in the South Atlantic Ocean near the coast of Argentina. Will the guns blaze again?

In February, the *HMS Dauntless* laid anchor off the eastern coast of the Falkland Islands, just outside of the capital, Stanley. The naval personnel aboard this British warship immediately took up defensive positions, including arming their missiles.

Coinciding with the arrival of the ship, a military plane landed at the military airport of Mount Pleasant and a group of pilots disembarked. Among them was England's Prince William, a grandson of Queen Elizabeth II and son of Prince Charles.

Like many members of England's royal family, including his own father, Prince William sought a career in the military. He serves as lieutenant of a helicopter unit and pilots a search-and-rescue helicopter. The official statement as to why he was sent by the British to the Falkland Islands for six weeks was to take part in military exercises. According to the official government version of the story, Prince William's visit had been scheduled long before.

Skeptics, however, feel certain that his presence at this particular moment was not by chance. Argentina had recently raised the issue once again of its territorial claim to the Falkland Islands. By sending the heir apparent to the British crown to the Falkland Islands, England was making a clear statement that it fully intended to retain its authority over these islands.

Furthermore, the supposedly innocent military exercises were a reminder to the Argentine government of its defeat in the bloody war fought over those islands 30 years earlier. At that time Prince William's uncle, Prince Andrew, had piloted a fighter plane that attacked Argentine forces.

Regardless of whether England planned William's visit for political reasons or not, the leaders of Argentina heard the message clearly. Argentina's foreign minister sharply criticized the visit, accusing the British heir of arriving at the islands as a conqueror. Another Argentine official branded the visit a senseless provocation on England's part.

The idea of two Western lands using military means to settle a dispute instead of relying on diplomacy is unusual in the post-WWII world, to say the least. If negotiations fail, countries are expected to bring their dispute before the United Nations. If they are still not satisfied, they are supposed to bring their case before the International Court.

Speculation aside, the fact remains that these two countries did actually enter a bloody contest 30 years ago. With the numerous revolutions that rocked the Middle East, including the massacres in Libya and Syria, as well as mounting tensions between Iran and Israel, the world's attention has been focused far away from the South Atlantic. Nevertheless, Argentina and Britain have quietly been sharpening their swords and preparing for the possibility of a fresh conflict.

The new component to this conflict is the discovery of billions of gallons of oil beneath its shores. Yet, even further below the surface, lies a deep and long-running division that has touched off war in the region more than once in the past. It is this deep division that threatens to boil over and ignite a new and potentially bloodier conflagration.

History of the Falkland Islands

The Falkland Islands actually consists of 778 individual islands, most of them miniscule, near the southeastern coast of Argentina. Most of those islands are uninhabited. Their total population is believed to be about 3,100—not including the 1,700 British servicemen continuously stationed there.

The islands are just over 300 miles from nearby Argentina, yet they are some 8,000 miles removed from England. As far as the Argentines are concerned, that alone provides sufficient justification for Argentina's claim to the islands.

As far as historic ownership is concerned, the exact history of the islands varies depending upon whom you ask. Even the name is up for debate: in Argentina the islands are known as "Islas Malvinas."



HMS Dauntless arrives at the coast of the Falkland Islands sending a strong message to Argentina to stay away.

If you want to trust the foreign ministry of Argentina, the Malvinas Islands were discovered in 1520 by Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan. He was leading a Spanish expedition, but he never actually set foot on the islands.

According to the British, it was English Captain John Strong who first set foot on the islands in 1690. It was he who gave the islands their name (according to the British, of course), in honor of his superior, Anthony Cary, 5th Viscount of Falkland.

According to the Argentines, the first settlement on the islands was by Frenchmen in 1764. They built themselves a fortress, which they named Port Louis on the island of East Falkland (as it is known to the British). Spain protested this act of sovereignty, claiming that the islands belonged to Spain since Spain had been the first to discover them. (Are you getting confused yet?) Spain forced France to sell the islands to it in 1770. Since then the Malvinas always had a Spanish governor who acted under orders from the Spanish authorities based in Buenos Aires.

Following this version of the story, a British

expedition arrived at the islands in secret in 1765 and built the Port Egmont fortress on West Falkland in 1766. The Spanish, however, drove the British out in 1770. Spain later granted the English permission to return to the islands. However, the British government agreed to leave the islands in 1774 under a secret agreement it reached with Spain. In any case, the Spaniards retained sole authority over the islands as of 1774.

When Argentina declared itself independent from the Spanish empire in 1816, it automatically inherited rulership of the former Spanish isles off its coast. In fact, at that time Argentina already attempted to take control by settling its own subjects on the islands. British intervention blocked this plan, however.

Now for the British side of the story: The English contingent was forced to abandon Port Egmont in 1774 due to severe economic hardships it was facing. However, Britain never relinquished its rights to the islands. The Spanish settlement on East Falkland was abandoned in 1811 because the local climate did not suit the Spaniards. At that