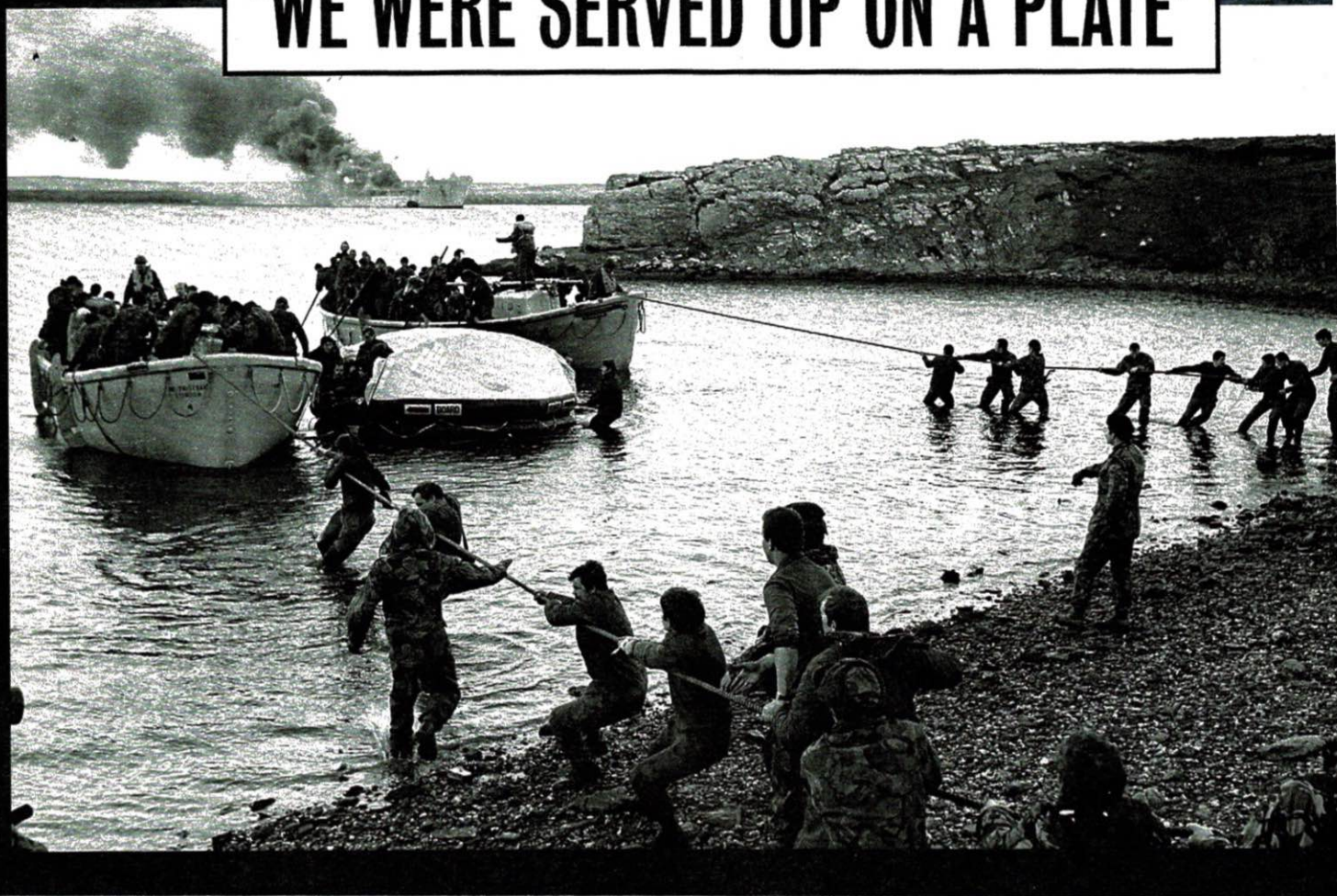


RFA Sir Galahad after
its bombing by Argentine
jets. Below: survivors are
pulled ashore at Bluff Cove

'WE WERE SERVED UP ON A PLATE'





On June 8, 1982, 38 members of the Welsh Guards perished when the troopship Sir Galahad was attacked by Argentine jets. It was the army's darkest moment of the Falklands conflict. And it needn't have happened. In his new book, Crispin Black, a survivor that day, reveals how mistakes and prejudice led to an avoidable tragedy



Recently, I dreamt I was back on the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Sir Galahad. Again. I used to dream like this often in my twenties and thirties. Then the dreams went away. I'm not sure why, but getting married and having children probably helped, and leaving the army. That night they came back.

The dreams are always disturbing, but strangely often different. They run through the senses in random order. The smell-taste one is the worst – the smell of burning human flesh.

There are sound-themed dreams too. Not a great genre, to be honest. Shouting is all right; "Get down, get down," was a sensible instruction. The closer you were to the deck, wherever you were on the ship, the less likely you were to be killed or wounded. But screaming, the noise men make who are dying or about to die, with no possibility of escape, was a primal, desperate sound as loud and nerve-shredding in my dreams as on the day. Followed always by silence. No hope of rescue.

On June 8, 1982, there were eight young Welsh Guards officers aboard Sir Galahad from two different rifle companies. Only six of us are still around.

We were all connected and have remained so. Peter, Ollie and I were at school together. (Our most famous school song, appropriately, is *Forty Years On*.) Tony was at school with Johnny. Jan was connected to everyone by rugby. Tony to quite a few through polo. Peter and Hugh stood as godparents to each other's children. Johnny and I were best men to each other and mutual godparents. And so on. But above all we remain connected by having shared the same experience – the Argentine air attacks at Fitzroy on East Falkland as the Falklands war was moving to its climax.

The Falklands war was a ringing military victory for Britain. At the same time, it was the scene of Britain's worst military losses since 1945. The task force squandered half a battalion. The last time Britain had incurred close to such a major loss in a day was in 1951 at the [Korean War] battle of Imjin River. But that was when the Glosters had to defend themselves against the Chinese communist army, outnumbered 18 to 1. We were "served up on a plate" to the Argentine air force, in [task force commander] Admiral Woodward's stark words.

We have become so accustomed to events "down south" in 1982 as presented to us over the past 40 years by a tide of, at times, boastful accounts that our historical judgment and in some cases common sense have been misled. It is difficult today to make the imaginative leap away from this version of what happened (which out of politeness I will label the



THE NOISE MEN MAKE WHO ARE DYING OR ABOUT TO DIE, WITH NO POSSIBILITY OF ESCAPE, WAS A PRIMAL, DESPERATE SOUND



From top: RFA Sir Galahad ablaze; survivors come ashore

"orthodoxy") and identify what did happen and should have happened: the war could have been won earlier at less human cost. The Sir Galahad tragedy need never have happened.

The orthodox view about the Falklands is that all was well from the moment 3 Commando Brigade under Royal Marines Brigadier Julian Thompson had finished coming ashore on Saturday, May 22, 1982, until the Army's 5 Infantry Brigade landed on Tuesday, June 1. It was then that things began to go wrong.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Before 5 Infantry Brigade (2nd Battalion Scots Guards and 1st Battalion Welsh Guards, the Gurkhas and our artillery regiment) even got there on June 1, the different styles of warfare of the Royal Marines and Royal Navy – and a complicated top command structure without army commanders – had started to cause unforced casualties.

Major General Jeremy Moore took over as Commander Land Forces Falkland Islands when he landed just ahead of the reinforcing 5 Infantry Brigade. Instead of being the solution, he became the source of further unforced errors. Moore was a hero with a Military Cross and bar from Borneo, unusual in those days. But he was a Royal Marine, and the most he had commanded before was 3 Commando Brigade – only one moving part. He was the wrong man to lead a two-brigade operation.

What was needed was a strong hand to make sure that the two brigade commanders worked well with each other, and that resources were equitably and efficiently distributed between the brigades as laid down in Britain's core military doctrine. Moore simply lacked the requisite qualifications.

The world was shocked to discover after the war that Argentine officers were given different ration packs from their men. Yet 5 Infantry Brigade was dramatically less well equipped than 3 Commando Brigade – rubbish boots, polyester army-issue socks, spray-proof wetproofs, leaky sleeping bags, bergens bought in a hurry from camping shops, some of them in civilian colours, difficult

radios. And we were less well fed. All the units of 3 Commando Brigade enjoyed Arctic ration packs stuffed with treats, chocolates, cocoa – more than 4,000 calories per man per day. 5 Infantry Brigade had standard Nato ration packs at around 2,500 calories per day.

With the arrival of 5 Infantry Brigade there were more army soldiers in the Falklands than Royal Marines (seven major units – five infantry battalions, two artillery regiments – to three major Royal Marine units). Army troops were to pay the price for Moore's muddled wavering and the ingrained parochialism of those who viewed much of the army as interlopers.

The two Guards battalions of 5 Infantry Brigade, based at San Carlos, were to be landed by sea at the front line, 11 miles from Port Stanley. The approach would have to be made at night as Fitzroy Sound was visible from the high ground around Port Stanley and the Falklands task force had not yet established air superiority over the islands from its aircraft carriers. Two of the brigade's battalions – 2 Para and 1/7 Gurkha – were already ahead.

At short notice on the evening of June 4, two Welsh Guards companies were loaded onto HMS Intrepid, one of the two major troop-landing ships with the task force – with the intention of going forward that night with the Scots Guards, with the remainder of the Welsh Guards in another ship in the convoy.

HMS Intrepid's crew stood and watched – a surly bunch. As we sat in the wardroom, which we eventually found (there was nowhere else to go), my platoon sergeant arrived asking for a word. The navy's chefs wouldn't give the guardsmen an evening meal: "Your men have been issued with compo rations." The prospect of 300 or so hexamine burners boiling up tins of chicken curry in the corridors brought about a change of mind.

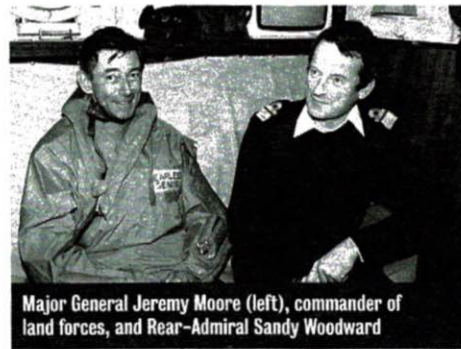
The plan wasn't clear to us junior officers. Within a few confusing hours the whole thing fizzled out and we were turfed off back to the beach at San Carlos. No reason was given.

In the end, it was decided to move the two Guards battalions separately. None of the moves went well.

The 2nd Battalion Scots Guards [2SG] eventually moved forward on the night of June 5-6 on HMS Intrepid. This move, the first actually to put to sea, escaped by a whisker being a disaster two or three times the size of the Galahad two days later – a whole battalion rather than half of one, with many more casualties.

It should have been straightforward enough, with only one serious operational detail to tie up. Navy ships cruising on a gunline offshore while bombarding Port Stanley with their 4.5in guns needed to be

MAJOR GENERAL MOORE BECAME THE SOURCE OF FURTHER UNFORCED ERRORS. ARMY TROOPS WERE TO PAY THE PRICE



Major General Jeremy Moore (left), commander of land forces, and Rear-Admiral Sandy Woodward

warned about the movement of friendly forces by night in landing craft.

The complicated Falklands command structure put these ships under the control of Admiral Sandy Woodward, not Commodore Michael Clapp (who was in charge of amphibious inshore vessels). Clapp checked verbally with the admiral earlier in the day. Woodward said there were no plans for a naval bombardment that night. And that was that. The conversation as recounted by Clapp echoes a scene in *The Return of The Pink Panther*:

Clouseau: "I thought you said your dog did not bite."

Hotel clerk: "That is not my dog."

It turned out there were ships on the gunline that night astride the battalion of Scots Guards' route. They were, in addition, totally unaware of the troops' movement. HMS Cardiff opened fire on the storm-tossed convoy of Scots Guards' four landing craft [LCUs]. Luckily, the captain was more cautious than he had been earlier that night and decided to use illuminating shells before opening fire with high explosive: he realised in the nick of time the convoy was British.

Just an hour before, HMS Cardiff had shot down Army Gazelle helicopter XX377 from 656 Squadron Army Air Corps, the air element of 5 Infantry Brigade. All four soldiers aboard were killed. This was not clear, however, until well after the campaign.

While the Scots Guards in their LCUs had a very narrow escape from HMS Cardiff, their icy-water-soaked journey was extraordinarily unpleasant and almost twice as long as planned by Clapp's staff.

They were unfortunate in that the ship taking them forward to the point where they transferred to landing craft was HMS Intrepid – the same ship that wanted to deny our guardsmen an evening meal. Intrepid's Captain Dingemans dropped the 650 men

early in their landing craft – "strangely far short of their destination" in the words of Admiral Woodward – into a stormy night ocean. Dingemans then headed for home.

The 35-mile journey inshore for the LCUs was horrendous, taking seven hours in the Falklands winter when it should have taken under three. Many of the troops were very seasick and all were soaked. In strategic terms, it meant that the Scots Guards landed in diminished fighting condition as a result of this early dump of the battalion at sea.

Dingemans went on to become a rear-admiral.

After our strange interlude on HMS Intrepid the Welsh Guards ended up back on shore. On June 6 we were moved onto HMS Fearless. That evening we received orders from our company commander after he returned from the Battalion Orders Group. The orders from Moore were short and clear:

Land at Yellow Beach (Bluff Cove, western bank), move through 2SG's position on foot to grid square 2167. Dig a defensive position astride the track to/from Port Stanley. Await further orders there.

The ship was to sail to a rendezvous point south of Elephant Island where we were to meet two LCUs. Along with the two LCUs on board HMS Fearless, the battalion (with full kit) was to be transported under cover of darkness into Bluff Cove to link up with the Scots Guards who had carried out the same journey the night before on June 5.

No LCUs made it to the designated rendezvous point. Our commanding officer was faced with a very difficult decision: either split the battalion in half, against all his most deeply ingrained military instincts, or return to Falkland Sound and hope the navy could get its act together the following night.

At this point our commanding officer was assured in person by General Moore whose headquarters was on HMS Fearless: "I'll get the other half of the battalion to Bluff Cove tomorrow night." Which meant we would only be split for the shortest possible time and, we assumed, that the arrangements to get the rest of us forward were already urgently under way.

Consequently, half of the battalion returned to Falkland Sound on HMS Fearless but with the personal word of the general to our commanding officer that we would be taken forward to Bluff Cove within 24 hours.

The first half of the Welsh Guards made its way successfully to the front line at Bluff Cove, but with only one out of three rifle

companies. The situation the Welsh Guards found themselves in because of sea transport difficulties constituted a severe military emergency. It was nerve-racking for us – the forward half of our battalion was now exposed to possible annihilation by the enemy.

Late in the morning we were told that HMS Fearless would not, after all, be taking us forward for a second go that night – June 7-8. We would be handed over to the Royal Fleet Auxiliary [RFA] vessel Sir Galahad. Fearless's friendly and helpful crew were slightly embarrassed.

The forward move of the Guards to the front line was the single largest movement of troops during the Falklands land campaign. Better planning and more resources would have saved lives and speeded up the victory.

What followed were more plans that were shredded or fell by the wayside. 5 Infantry Brigade's battalions became subject to the weather, the availability of LCUs, mechanical failure, confusion – and Argentine attack.

At 10.26am local time on June 8, two and a half hours after RFA Sir Galahad anchored next to RFA Sir Tristram, the Argentine air force were informed of the presence in Port Pleasant of two large ships and a number of smaller ones. It looked like an opportunity to inflict substantial losses on British troops.

The Argentine planes didn't swoop out of nowhere for the task force. Our early warning system had been triggered the moment they appeared within radar range. HMS Exeter, the picquet [early warning] ship, had sounded "air raid warning red".

Catastrophically, however, the message didn't reach us. Sir Galahad's radio was either on the wrong frequency or malfunctioning. Sir Tristram thought the alert only applied to San Carlos. That left five [Argentine] Skyhawks looking for unprotected prey in Port Pleasant. They attacked with 500lb bombs and 30mm cannon fire at 1.05pm local time, according to their records. Sir Tristram had few people on deck, but Welsh Guards were at that moment crowding Sir Galahad's deck to load the LCU Foxtrot 1 from above, as its landing gate had stopped working.

On June 8, 1982, each time death came intimately close, I found that I went quite far along the process of dying – even if each time fate failed by a slim margin to administer its coup de grâce. A few moments after I exited the ship's superstructure on the port side, my platoon radio operator grabbed me.

"It's red, sir, air raid warning red." I replied, "It can't be. It can't be. We can't go from no air threat to red, just like that," and reached for the handset.

The blast coming through the door we had just left hit with tremendous force. Other

Brigadier Tony Wilson, commander of 5 Infantry Brigade



WOULD THE SHIP GO UP IN ONE HUGE EXPLOSION? WOULD I BE BLOWN INTO SMALL PIECES OR BECOME A HUMAN FIREBALL?



explosions kicking off, screaming, men emerging from the door behind in the most awful state, the smell of burning flesh – I just couldn't see how we were going to make it. The military side of my brain concluded that something had gone very wrong and we were sitting ducks – if we managed to survive the initial strike, which wasn't looking good.

But at this stage there was plenty to do – try to find the rest of my platoon, help with the casualties, give morphine and try to look as though things were not as dire as they were. The non-military, non-Welsh Guards part of my brain was telling me to get the hell out of there. But my platoon sergeant's words as we approached the Falklands came to me, "Remember, sir, we're all relying on you."

The bombs dropped on us did not explode but deflagrated, a technical term for common or garden burning after their casings had split. Not that we could tell the difference. The intense heat started to cook off mortar and artillery ammunition; which in turn blew up the fuel tanks in the tank deck; which in turn

set off the explosive mixture inside the bombs and so on. That's why there were two or three seconds between the bombs being dropped and the blast – as if they had paused to catch their breath before unleashing destruction.

I was standing opposite Johnny just outside the door to the superstructure on the port side. Close, very close to him. He was hurled into the bulkhead with such force it dislocated his shoulder. But the blast left me on my feet. Something hot, nasty and fast pinged past my head. I dread to think what it was.

I thought at the time how odd the blast was – random, fickle, merciless. By this time, the non-Guards part of my brain was screaming at me to get away. I caught sight of our second-in-command, Jan Koops, who was 6ft 5in (a couple of inches taller than me). He moved calmly among the wounded. I was reassured – at least someone was in charge. Perhaps I might make it after all.

Maybe, just maybe, there was going to be enough time. And then another huge explosion from the tank deck. I could feel the shudder going through my boots. The deck in some parts was hot, getting hotter. We were loading casualties onto helicopters and life rafts with even greater urgency, if that were possible. More explosions, sinister rumbling from below. The decks were heating up more, the paint beginning to blister. Would the ship go up in one huge explosion? Would I be blown into small pieces or become a human fireball? Would I drown in freezing water trapped under tons of grey painted steel?

Getting a grip second time round was more difficult. Despite the heat from the fires and explosions and the physical exertions of casualty-carrying, I didn't feel hot. It was a fine day but cold with a strong westerly wind. I should have been sweating. But then I realised I only had my shirt on, open at the neck. My tie had gone with a casualty. I think I must have given it to a medic for a tourniquet.

The explosions started going off the boil. Less frequent, less force. The deck was still hot but not getting any hotter. Hot but stable was good news. I could also tell that a lot of the crew and soldiers had managed to get off. Most of the casualties had been evacuated, but there were still guardsmen and crew members queuing up for helicopters that were shifting them as quickly as they could.

And then, other than the wind, everything went quiet. I started to feel cold. I could see Captain Koops still there searching through debris making sure no one had been left behind. I thought we might have to jump for it or at least go down the scrambling net and swim ashore. I stopped by an orphaned Clansman radio that was propped up against a bollard chattering away. "Air raid warning red," repeated, again and again.

It was the final blow. Given that the original warning arrived simultaneously with the enemy aircraft attacking us, all seemed lost. What was the point? The guardsmen had gone. Maybe it would just be a better idea to sit down with a cigarette. Grab one of the rifles lying on the deck. Go down with a few shots – just to keep the Argentine air force on its toes. And wait the few moments before death arrived with some humour and dignity.

But there was no sign of any aircraft and the Scots Guards machineguns at Bluff Cove were silent. I ran towards Jan trying to look reasonably in control and hoping he wouldn't argue. "Jan, it's time to go."

We hightailed it to the side where to our relief a mexeflote, a floating steel platform with a small engine, had just arrived. I was cold and shivering. Partly the temperature, partly shock, partly fear, partly growing relief, but mainly because I was in shirtsleeves.

We headed for the shore. I didn't want to look back but I did, saying the Lord's Prayer under my breath. Sceptical of religion at the time, I came to understand among other things that day that it is a strong human instinct to wrap dead bodies – out of respect perhaps, in dignified farewell, or as protection on the journey to the afterlife.

Somehow, at the back of my mind, I had been uncomfortable about the way I was dressed. It wasn't a Guards concern. But what could I have done? Combat jackets and army pullovers made serviceable improvised stretchers. My reluctant shedding of my kit was for the wounded.

The bombing and strafing of Sir Galahad had been a group experience with many others – not all of them Welsh Guardsmen – working together to save lives, soften intense physical pain and get the wounded and everyone else the hell out of there. There are no "outsiders" in these circumstances – not because of attitude or personal preference, but because of discipline, humanity and courage.

Functioning, trying to help, trying to lead, is one thing. Instinct and training all play their part. But death is a personal matter. A crowd is not company in those circumstances – even if the crowd comprises friends and comrades bound together by strong bonds.

For me on that day death had become a tease. Three times in 45 minutes it looked for sure. I faced it in reasonably good order, if (very) intermittent sangfroid qualifies for that description, remaining mindful throughout of my military duties. It might have been the wind, the temperature or the fact that I was plain terrified, but, as death approached – seemed certain – just a shirt on my back felt too thin for a shroud.

With victory in the bag, the task force's top officers could be certain to receive the rewards

AT LEAST ONE OFFICER WOULD HAVE TO TAKE THE FALL FOR THE EPIC FAILURE OF JUNE 8. WHO WAS IT GOING TO BE?

for the success. But at least one of them would have to take the fall for the epic and unprecedentedly casual failure of June 8.

Which officer was it going to be?

I recently discovered that there were some newly released documents in the National Archives at Kew – DEFE 69/926 ANNEX G – with the location of the wounded shown on a plan of Sir Galahad and where the bodies were found. As I leafed through the sombre yellowing documents, I came across one with a "Secret" stamp. It was [naval commander] Admiral Fieldhouse's "case explained" of June 8. I was intrigued and soon incredulous. What Fieldhouse wrote in secret must count as some of the most disgraceful pages in the history of the British military.

In a section innocuously coded "Departures from doctrine", Admiral Fieldhouse points his finger directly at Tony Wilson, the brigadier of the only army formation on the Falklands, 5 Infantry Brigade. In an unusual departure from normal practice, Fieldhouse claims, Wilson personally and not the navy was in tactical control of the landing craft that day, and by implication any difficulties or failures belonged to him: "Tactical control of the ship-to-shore movement assets was delegated to the Commander Fifth Infantry Brigade."

In effect, what the admiral told his superiors is that, in contravention of the rules and regulations under which the navy operates, at Fitzroy, but only at Fitzroy, there was an "unusual arrangement" (his words) whereby army orders were paramount and that all commanders of amphibious assets – such as LCUs, the mexeflote, the Sea King helicopter – had to submit to instructions from 5 Infantry officers.

That the admiral's secret sentence to the Sea Lords was a fiction is clear. If what he said was true, a famous altercation between Welsh Guards Major Sayle and the commanding officer of the landing craft that met Sir Galahad in Fitzroy harbour would never have happened. Sayle's orders to take the Guards and their kit to Bluff Cove that moment would have been the law to everyone present. Fieldhouse's sentence also stood in contradiction to the policy Commodore Clapp had (he said) laid down with General Moore's consent. "I was not prepared to give tactical control of the landing craft to 5 Infantry Brigade for I was never to trust their command to employ them sensibly."

Fieldhouse's deceit remained unchallenged and Wilson was the only senior officer not to receive honours after the Falklands war. The admiral, having been able to take credit

for the Falklands war victory, was promoted to First Sea Lord, Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral of the Fleet and Chief of the Defence Staff – Britain's most senior military position below the monarch. A peerage and a seat in the House of Lords followed his retirement.

I assumed Fieldhouse's cover letter to the inquiry report would be the low point of the day, until I turned to another folder. There has been controversy about why Galahad went to Fitzroy rather than the nearby Bluff Cove, closer to Port Stanley, where the other half of our battalion was already along with the Scots Guards. The two places are only three and a half miles apart as the crow flies, six and a half miles by sea but 15-20 miles by land.

Parts of the navy have always maintained Fitzroy was our intended destination – and that the first half of our battalion (only half a battalion because two landing craft missed the rendezvous at sea to pick us up) was dropped at Bluff Cove in error. However, it has always been clear and undisputed that General Moore on June 6 had ordered the Welsh Guards to Bluff Cove.

And then I turned the page: Annex E8 "Events leading to the attack on RFAs SIR TRISTRAM AND SIR GALAHAD" to the inquiry. Under the heading "DESTINATION FOR OFFLOAD SIR GALAHAD" it stated:

"General MOORE understood the point of disembarkation to be FITZROY [point 3]."

The statements under this heading have codes (3170 Amphibious Group; 3171 Landing Group, that is Moore divisional staff), but this statement is his personally.

There can be only two explanations. Either Moore's evidence to the inquiry (not publicly available until 2065) has been doctored. As one of the witnesses in the inquiry, he would not have seen Annex E8 before Fieldhouse sent it to the Admiralty Board. Or, he lied.

I think I prefer the first. The second – after 38 members of our battalion were blown apart or burnt alive and more than 80 wounded on the way to execute the general's battle plan – that Moore intentionally did not answer truthfully and tried to shift the blame for carrying out his express words onto his subordinate, 5 Infantry Brigade's Tony Wilson, and thereby us, is just too much – even now, 40 years on. ■

Extracted from Too Thin for a Shroud: The Last Untold Story of the Falklands War by Crispin Black, published by Gibson Square on December 7 (£20). Part of the proceeds will go to welshguardscharity.co.uk