

HMS Fearless

HMS Fearless in the Falklands

The Royal Navy commissioned HMS Fearless and sister ship HMS Intrepid during the Cold War in order to provide the Navy with the ability to carry out amphibious operations on either of the NATO flanks.

Used mainly by the Royal Marines, the ships have in-built command centres and can be used to coordinate the landing stages of an amphibious assault.

Most famously, the Royal Navy deployed HMS Fearless as part of Operation Corporate during the Falklands War.

The ship was a key component of the campaign, and played a vital part in the recapture of the Falkland Islands. The Royal Navy finally decommissioned HMS Fearless in 2002.

- select the 'hotspots' to find out more about HMS Fearless during the Falklands War

This Learning Object requires Macromedia Flash Player 7 or above.

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Britain's amphibious capabilities

At the outbreak of the Falklands War the outlook from amphibious warfare in Britain was bleak. The United States coordinated all amphibious operations, and as part of NATO and the United Nations.

The government had predicted that Britain was unlikely to ever have to mount such a war without US backing and was refusing to replace the amphibious ships.

In 1980 HMS Fearless went in for a refit and its old equipment was modernised with new specialist radio and satellite terminals fitted and its machinery renovated.

The LPDs were in fact two of only a few ships that were to have satellite communications in the Falklands, which became an important point when communicating with Task Force Planners in London from the South Atlantic.

The next year however, the Government announced in the 1981 Defence Review that both LPDs were to be decommissioned. HMS Intrepid would be the first to go in 1982 with Fearless getting paid off in 1984.

The Royal Navy were to lose their amphibious capabilities. This also posed a serious threat to the survival of the Royal Marines who used these ships to mount their operations and was key to their rapid reaction capabilities.

A turn around of the fate of both the LPDs came about in 1981 however, after Secretary of State for Defence John Nott witnessed Fearless in action during training in Plymouth. Many argue that this may have influenced his decision to save the LPDs from scrapping.

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Fearless in the Task Group

HMS

Fearless was in for repair at Portsmouth Dockyard when she was called up to form part of the Amphibious Task Group.

The Group was under the command of the Commander-in-Chief of the Fleet Admiral Sir John Fieldhouse RN, based in British Maritime Headquarters at Northwood in London.

The Admiralty Board

brought the ship to "Immediate Notice" for sailing and the Fleet Maintenance Group and the ship's company had to work around the clock to get the ship ready for action.

Fearless set sail towards the South Atlantic carrying Headquarters 3 Commando Brigade, two troops of the Blues and Royals and personnel from 846 Naval Air Squadron.

HMS Fearless was part of the Amphibious Task Group, sent out with the Landing Force to attack and recapture the Falkland Islands. The ship's role was to deploy troops and provide a Command and Control Centre during the San Carlos landings.

The ship flew

the pennant of Commodore Michael Clapp RN, who commanded the Amphibious Task Group and was central to the planning of the British amphibious operations in the Falklands

Commodore Clapp and Brigadier Julian Thompson, Commander of 3 Commando Brigade, and their staffs on board HMS Fearless undertook all planning for the amphibious operation.

They would then hand the plans

to Major General Jeremy Moore, Commander of the British Land Forces during the campaign. Moore would then take the plans back to Northwood for approval.

Clapp and Thompson were in a very unique situation. The war had caught the British Defence establishment by surprise. The two commanders therefore had to plan the landings without much direction from their superiors at Northwood.

The co-location of the commanders and staffs of these two groups on board Fearless for those seven weeks travelling to the South Atlantic was crucial in the success of the operation.

However, once landed the communications aboard Fearless proved inadequate and the headquarters had to be relocated ashore.

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Heading South

HMS Fearless left Portsmouth on 6 April 1982 and travelled with its Task Group to Ascension Island where they could train and prepare for war.

During this time all departments undertook much preparation. In the medical section stores had to be sorted out and prepared for use.

The ship's Air Department had to get used to integrating with the squadron from the Fleet Air Arm personnel and carrying out flight deck training, as Fearless had never had any experience of operating with 846 Squadron before. It was in fact, the first time that Sea King helicopters had operated from an assault ship's flight deck.

Troops busied themselves on the long journey with maintaining their fitness and preparing themselves for what would be ahead.

First aid training as well as mortar and artillery fire drills was carried out so that troops knew the procedures for calling for and adjusting fire. Training to raise awareness of the likely terrain of the Falkland Islands was also carried out.

On board the ship was incredibly cramped. The LPD was stocked with every possible store, vehicle and weapon that they would need for the expedition.

On 16 April Rear Admiral Sandy Woodward, Commander of the Carrier Battle Group, visited the ship via helicopter from HMS Hermes for the first of many high level conferences on board.

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Ascension Island - preparations for war

On 17 April HMS Fearless arrived at Ascension Island, where the ship would stay for the next three weeks. During this time, the ship's engineers were able to finish off the repair work that that did not get finished before they set off.

Also due to the hurried departure of the ship all the stores needed to be reorganised and re-distributed amongst the Amphibious Task Force.

While at Ascension Island the troops took the opportunity to rehearse the landings and the Royal Marine Assault Squadron practiced operating the landing craft.

Brigadier Thompson and Commodore Clapp had begun planning the final troop landings for the ground assault on the Falkland Islands whilst at sea.

Thompson knew that the Argentinean staff officers planning the operations would expect an assault on Stanley through Fitzroy or somewhere that had a decent road into the capital for wheeled vehicles to be able to enter the city.

He predicted that any route near to the capital would be heavily fortified and there was a chance that civilians might get hurt in the crossfire of any action that would take place.

The lack of helicopters would also present a problem for the landing parties. HMS Hermes was often used as a Landing Platform Helicopter (LPH) for amphibious exercises, but the ship would be deployed elsewhere as a base for the Sea Harriers.

The troops needed to approach the island by landing craft. Britain had already scrapped and not replaced most of the equipment that could be used for an opposed landing, so the slow approach to shore would have to be made in secret.

Major General Moore made two visits to Ascension Island and by his last visit on 29 April firm plans had been set for the landings to be made at Port San Carlos.

Port San Carlos was better suited to an amphibious landing as its beaches were better matched for bringing the LCUs and Mexeflots closer to the shore.

The beach also provided good space for unloading and basing stores for establishing the beachhead and then advancing onwards towards Stanley.

The disadvantage about landing at San Carlos, however, was the distance that the troops would have to travel to capture the capital - around 80km in a straight line.

With the troops each carrying a load of around 120lbs on their backs over very difficult and potentially mined terrain, this would be no small task.

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To the TEZ

On 7 May HMS Fearless and the Task Group left Ascension Island and made its way to the Total Exclusion Zone (TEZ) of the Falklands waters.

The ship met up with HM ships Intrepid, Argonaut, Ardent and the Atlantic Conveyor, Canberra, Norland, Europic Ferry and RFA Stromness en route.

As they approached the TEZ security became even more vital as they could not afford to lose the troops who would go on to stage the land campaign.

During their trip down the fleet was put on submarine red alert for about an hour and all vessels steamed at 16 knots and carried out zigzagging manoeuvres as evasive techniques.

On 13 May, still 900 miles away from Port Stanley, 60 officers assembled in the wardroom of HMS Fearless to hear the Brigade Commander Brigadier Julian Thompson give orders for the amphibious landing at Port San Carlos.

40 Commando and 2 Para were to secure San Carlos and Sussex Mountain with 45 Commando and 3 Para to secure Ajax Bay and Port San Carlos settlement. 42 Commando would stay behind in reserve.

Troops would then move the artillery and air defence to cover the beachhead. Next the SBS (Special Boat Service) and the SAS (Special Air Service) carried diversionary tactics at Goose Green for the final push to the high grounds around Stanley, then onto the capital itself.

On 15 May with convoy still some 810 miles away from Port Stanley an Amphibious Assault Conference was held in Fearless for further planning in preparation for the landings.

By 16 May the troop convoy rendezvoused with HMS Antrim, and HMS Plymouth and with LSLs Sir Galahad, Sir Geraint, Sir Percivale, Sir Lancelot and Sir Tristram.

The
convoy now consisted of 19 ships. On the 18 May
when they were joined by the aircraft carriers HMS Hermes and
Invincible and their escorts.

The ships were now on a war footing and
all were darkened during the night to avoid enemy detection and attack.
Even navigation lights were turned off as the now 22 ships moved
together in dark silence towards Falklands waters.

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On 19 May a command from the C-in-C Fleet at Northwood came ordering the transfer of 1200 men from the STUFT troop carriers to Fearless and Intrepid.

They had initially decided not to keep the three major assault units together. This posed a tricky task for the ships as the conditions were too rough to use the landing craft and the helicopters were in reserve for the final assault.

The alternative of using a Jackstay, to transfer the troops was also dropped as it was too dangerous and it would take up to 15 hours to complete.

Luckily, for the Amphibious Task Group, the high seas abated and the transfer by LCU could go ahead. HMS Fearless took on 600 men from SS Canberra.

The Commandos and Paras queued on the Promenade Deck of the converted ocean liner down to the gun port doors some decks down and, after handing down their equipment, had to jump from the liner into the landing craft.

It was a dangerous operation and luckily only one marine fell into the icy waters, he was soon recovered from the side of the landing craft. The transfer took about an hour and a half to complete.

This also meant that the already cramped conditions got much worse. The 600 extra troops meant men were sleeping in the Junior Rates Dining Hall, in the corridors, on the tank deck, and even inside the LCUs.

Thursday 20 May was the day before the landings would take place. The convoy was now less than 100 miles from Port Stanley and by 2000 that day had changed formation into waves.

HMS Fearless and HMS Intrepid were leading in Wave One. At 2040 the ship was at action stations as escorting warships began to barrage Argentinean positions on Fanning Head and the surrounding area.

Fearless anchored in Falkland Sound around midnight on 21 May ready to deploy its landing troops ashore.

Although the landing troops had practiced embarking the landing crafts from the LPD prior to the actual event, there had been no time to mount a full-scale drill.

The landings on the 21 May did not begin incredibly smoothly. A problem in the ballast pumps, which allow the ship to lower itself into the water and deploy the landing craft led to delays with the first LCUs carrying personnel from 40 Commando.

Phase one of the landings was complete by 0730 and by midday all the landing objectives had been successfully achieved.

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As the landings were taking place HMS Fearless moved to an anchorage in San Carlos water, which became more affectionately known as 'Bomb Alley'. The ship stayed there for the next six days.

During this time the efficient Argentinean air strikes in the area meant that the ship was subjected to regular air attacks, severely affecting follow

up troop and equipment movement to the shore.

On 23 May HMS

Antelope was sunk. LCUs and LCVPs from HMS Fearless rescued the ship's company.

Success for the ship's company came on 27 May when two gunners shot down Argentinean Mirage Aircraft.

On 28 May Fearless put to sea to refuel. The ship returned to San Carlos Water 31 May where the ship's company carried out support operations. They provided fire fighting and damage control parties and even ran a captured Argentinean oil rig supply vessel.

Helicopters flew from Fearless and sister ship HMS Intrepid in support of the ground troops in providing stores ammunition and the movement of gun batteries. The helicopters were also involved in search and rescue missions from the ship.

On 6 June the ship moved to a point close to Choiseful Sound. The ship's LCU F4, which was transporting communication Land Rovers to the ground troops was sunk with the loss of six members of the crew.

A team from

Fearless was also sent to survey the wrecks at Bluff Cove following the tragedy which saw the LSLs Sir Galahad and Sir Tristram carrying half a battalion of Welsh Guards bombed by enemy air craft.

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The Argentines surrendered on 14 June. The next day Fearless hosted the Commander of the Argentine Forces, Major General Mario Menendez, and four of his senior officers for a short time.

From 17 June the ship's company assisted with the clean up operations around Port Stanley

On 25 June, 10 days after the surrender of the Argentine forces, HMS Fearless left the Falkland Islands with 3 Commando Brigade embarked.

After a brief stop at Ascension Island the ship arrived in Portsmouth to a roaring reception.