Ten Years After: An Ungentlemanly Act

The tenth anniversary of the Falklands War was a curiously muted affair. Because of its new-found sensitivity towards the feelings of former foes become potential allies in oil exploration, the still-ruling Conservatives decided not to use the occasion as an opportunity to 'glorify' the war. The Party's new leader, John Major, was also presumably less than eager to rekindle memories of the recently deposed Margaret Thatcher's finest moment. Neither, though, did the print or visual media approach the anniversary with much enthusiasm. Thus, the euphoric spirit so widespread in 1982 is seldom to be found in what tend to be rather sombre commemorative pieces.

A good example of the way in which the Falklands War was remembered in 1992 is provided by 'Belgrano's Children', an episode in the BBC 2 War Stories series that eschews triumphalist recollections of the British victory in favour of a sympathetic treatment of the ill-prepared Argentinian conscripts who suffered and died aboard the General Belgrano. Its elegiac tone is echoed in 'Simon's Return', a low keyed BBC 1 documentary in which Simon Weston, a Welsh Guardsman terribly disfigured by burns he received on HMS Galahad, returns to the Falklands before moving on to Buenos Aires to meet the pilot responsible for his injuries. Other documentaries provide Nick Barker, the captain of HMS Endurance, with an opportunity to speak freely about the Foreign Office's failure to listen when he warned them about an imminent Argentinian invasion ('Nick Barker') and allow Al Haig a chance to offer wittily sour comments about some of the personalities who helped frustrate his attempts to effect a peaceful solution to the Falklands crisis ('Woolly Al').
Furthest of all from a celebratory spirit, however, is Denys Blakeway's documentary, *The Falklands War*, broadcast by Channel 4 during January and February, 1992. Based on interviews with many of the war's major figures, including Al Haig, Francis Pym, Brigadier Julian Thompson, Admiral Sir Terence Lewin, Rear Admiral Carlos Busser, and Nicanor Costa Mendez but excluding Margaret Thatcher, who refused to take part, *The Falklands War* develops a view of the conflict in the South Atlantic that runs almost totally counter to the one that dominated in 1982. Thus, in the course of four episodes with the revealing titles, 'The Unnecessary War', 'In Peril at Sea', 'Trusting in Luck' and 'Bloody Choice', Blakeway tells a tale whose tone is set by an opening account of the lengthy history of political and diplomatic bungling responsible for the Argentinian invasion. The mistake upon which Blakeway dwells the longest is the decision to allow the residents of the Falklands an effective veto over a leaseback arrangement that seemed likely to resolve an otherwise intractible dispute. In Blakeway's reading of the Falklands War the rejection of this sensible proposal was probably the single most important factor in Argentina's decision to assert its claims to sovereignty over the Malvinas by force of arms.

Blakeway then goes on to depict the efforts of the task force during the war that followed not as a great triumph but as a series of near disasters averted by remarkable good luck. The operation to recapture South Georgia is thus described as going 'disastrously wrong' and serious doubt is cast on the strategic value of sinking the *Belgrano*. Similarly, considerable emphasis is put on the vulnerability of the British fleet in the absence of air superiority. A lengthy analysis of the events culminating in the sinking of HMS *Sheffield* also suggests a degree of incompetence on the part of the Royal Navy. The climactic land battle is characterized by Blakeway as both 'a reckless gamble' and a remarkable achievement seriously compromised by political pressure for an early victory and by inter-regimental rivalries. *The Falklands War* ends with some comments about the failure of military victory to resolve what Sir Anthony Parsons sees as the 'endless deadlock' over sovereignty.