

A COLD WAR...

Churchill's Falklands War Fear

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In 1942 the Japanese laid ambitious but largely unknown plans to take the Falkland Islands. here, **Steve Taylor** makes a fascinating examination of what the empire of the rising sun planned as its next conquest over the British empire and find resonating echoes that chime surprisingly with events which took place there some forty years later.

BELOW:

The cruiser HMS Exeter which, heavily damaged in her battle with the Graf Spee, was repaired in the Falklands, proving the strategic relevance of the islands long after steam turbines made their use as a coaling station obsolete.

THE JAPANESE ships steamed through the rough waters of the South Atlantic in late April 1942. The amphibious assault ship *Shinshu Maru*, carrying a battalion of elite Marines, escorted by the destroyers *Arashi* and *Natsugumo* had just rounded Cape Horn and were surging at a brisk sixteen knots towards the Falklands Islands, now less than three hundred miles away. As dawn broke two days later, right on schedule the destroyers sailed into Berkeley Sound and shelled Port Stanley with their 5-inch guns. The islanders were taken completely by surprise and casualties were heavy, many of the little town's wooden buildings being reduced to matchsticks by the Japanese guns, including

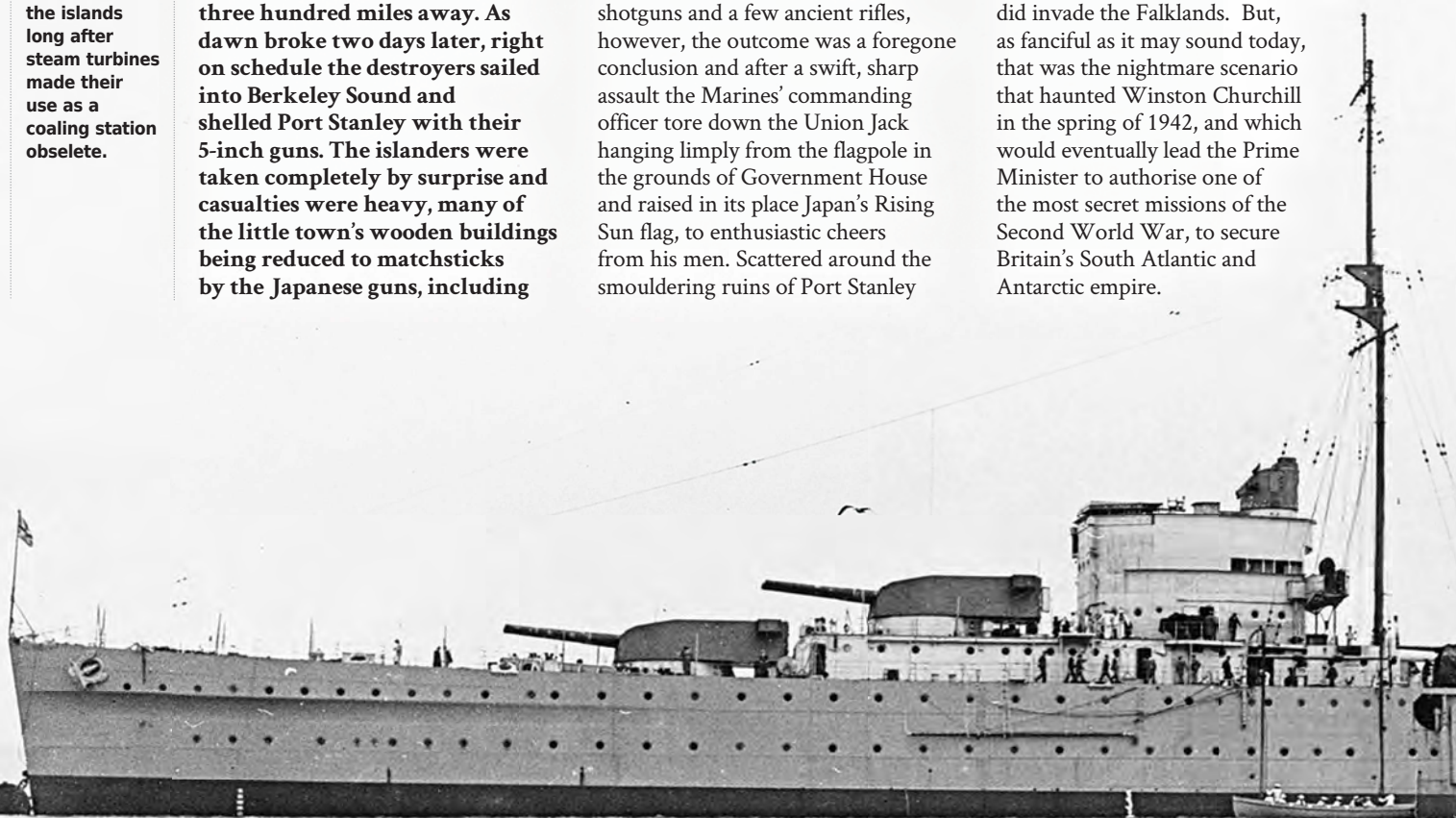
Government House, official residence of the islands' Governor Sir Allan Cardinall.

Minutes later the *Shinshu Maru* sailed up Stanley Harbour and disembarked the Marines, who charged into the town. The mostly middle-aged members of the Falkland Islands Defence Force, the islands' equivalent of the Home Guard, did their best. Armed only with shotguns and a few ancient rifles, however, the outcome was a foregone conclusion and after a swift, sharp assault the Marines' commanding officer tore down the Union Jack hanging limply from the flagpole in the grounds of Government House and raised in its place Japan's Rising Sun flag, to enthusiastic cheers from his men. Scattered around the smouldering ruins of Port Stanley

lay the bodies of over a hundred FIDF members and islanders. The Japanese had lost just nine men, with a dozen more wounded.

A NIGHTMARE SCENARIO

With the fall of the Falklands on 28 April 1942 the Empire of Japan now stretched from the frontier of India into the very heart of the South Atlantic. Of course, the Japanese never did invade the Falklands. But, as fanciful as it may sound today, that was the nightmare scenario that haunted Winston Churchill in the spring of 1942, and which would eventually lead the Prime Minister to authorise one of the most secret missions of the Second World War, to secure Britain's South Atlantic and Antarctic empire.



Churchill's connection to the Falklands dates back to 1914 when, as First Lord of the Admiralty, he despatched a battle fleet under Vice Admiral Doveton Sturdee to the South Atlantic to deal with the German battlecruisers *Gniesau* and *Scharnhorst*, which were sunk off the Falklands on 8 December. A quarter of a century later he again occupied the post of First Lord, and again the Falkland Islands played a pivotal role in the Royal Navy's first great victory of the war, providing an essential resupply base for the cruisers HMS *Exeter* and *Cumberland* during their successful efforts to box in Hitler's mighty pocket battleship *Graf Spee* in Montevideo harbour, forcing her captain to scuttle the ship.

Upon the outbreak of the Second World War the Admiralty also feared the Germans might try to establish refuelling bases for their U-boats and surface raiders in the Antarctic, after a Nazi expedition under the noted polar explorer Alfred Ritscher visited the Continent in 1938 and laid claim to a portion of Antarctica for the Fatherland, christening it New Swabia. No secret Nazi Antarctic bases were ever discovered by the Royal Navy, but by 1942 a new potential threat to Britain's colonial holdings in the South Atlantic and Antarctica had emerged.

NO APRIL FOOL

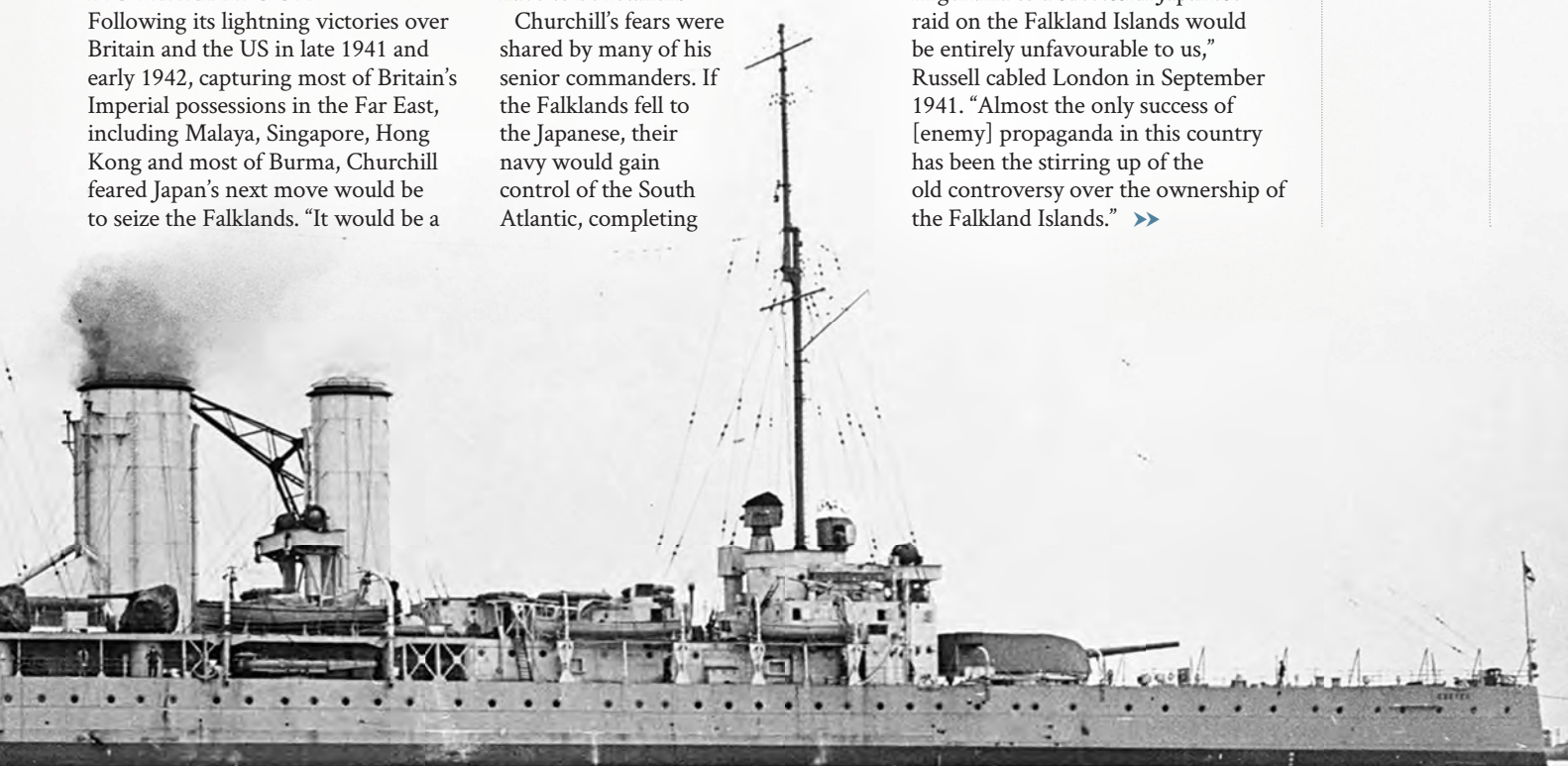
Following its lightning victories over Britain and the US in late 1941 and early 1942, capturing most of Britain's Imperial possessions in the Far East, including Malaya, Singapore, Hong Kong and most of Burma, Churchill feared Japan's next move would be to seize the Falklands. "It would be a

very serious thing to lose the Falkland Islands to the Japanese," he wrote on 1 April 1942 to General 'Pug' Ismay, his Chief of Staff. But this was no April Fool's joke; Churchill was in deadly earnest. "The Falkland Islands are very well known, and their loss would be a shock to the whole Empire," he continued. "They would certainly have to be retaken."

Churchill's fears were shared by many of his senior commanders. If the Falklands fell to the Japanese, their navy would gain control of the South Atlantic, completing

their domination of the entire Pacific Ocean and cutting off the important shipping route around Cape Horn. The threat to the islands posed by the Japanese had first been raised seven months earlier (before Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor) by the British military attaché in Buenos Aires, Colonel Russell. "The reaction in Argentina to a successful Japanese raid on the Falkland Islands would be entirely unfavourable to us," Russell cabled London in September 1941. "Almost the only success of [enemy] propaganda in this country has been the stirring up of the old controversy over the ownership of the Falkland Islands." >>

ABOVE:
Winston Churchill prepares to broadcast to the nation. The legendary wartime leader feared the loss of the Falkland Islands.



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"The object of the reinforcement would be to make it necessary for the Japanese to extend their attacking force to a tangible size. This might well act as a deterrent."

ABOVE & BELOW:

The Japanese destroyers Natsugumo ('Summer Cloud', above) and Arashi ('Storm'). Arashi was sunk during the Battle of the Vella Gulf, August 1943, but famously was part of the convoy where the lead ship rammed PT-109, commanded by John F. Kennedy. The Natsugumo was sunk by US aircraft in October 1942. In this scenario, they bombard the Falklands.

Alarmed, the War Cabinet demanded that the Falklands' defences, which at the time amounted only to around 300 poorly-armed local volunteers of the Falkland Islands Defence Force, be strengthened. But in the spring of 1942 British forces were seriously overstretched. Where would the reinforcements come from? General Ismay's initial thought was to approach the United States. But this didn't find favour with the Colonial Office, a senior official writing to the General: "We feel that suggestions for garrisoning a British colony with US troops may raise important and possibly embarrassing political issues which ought to be considered before the American government is approached."

The Chiefs of Staff then briefly considered despatching South African

or Indian troops to the islands, before abandoning the idea on the grounds that soldiers from these warmer climes would be ill-suited to the chilly Falklands. Next, the Canadian government was approached, but Prime Minister MacKenzie King pointed out that his country's forces were already fully committed elsewhere.

A BRITISH TASKING

Ending any further argument over the matter, Churchill stepped in and insisted the Falklands be defended by British troops, even if this meant drawing off a unit from one of the fighting fronts. "The islands are a British possession and responsibility," he wrote to General Ismay. "A British battalion should certainly be found. "The object of the reinforcement would be to make it necessary for the





Japanese to extend their attacking force to a tangible size. This might well act as a deterrent."

And so 11th Battalion, West Yorkshire Regiment, who at the time were sailing for India, were diverted to the South Atlantic, docking in the Falklands in June, where they immediately set about strengthening the islands' paltry defences, moving two 6-inch naval guns dismounted from the cruiser HMS *Lancaster* in 1916 to Sapper Hill, in order to cover the approaches to Stanley harbour. But no sooner had the men of the West Yorks disembarked than the balance of naval power in the Pacific shifted dramatically in the Allies' favour, when the Japanese Navy suffered its crushing defeat at the hands of American airpower at the Battle of Midway on 4 June, losing

four aircraft carriers and halting their relentless advance across the Pacific. By January 1943 the Chiefs of Staff felt confident enough to report to Churchill that there was now "no likelihood of a Japanese attack on the islands," although a reduced garrison would be maintained there until the end of the war.

In the absence of a Japanese invasion, as the months passed boredom became the greatest enemy for the soldiers of the West Yorkshire Regiment. There were even several reported cases of attempted suicide, the Regiment's medical officer recording that "the remote situation of the Falkland Islands, combined with constant high winds and general bleakness and monotony, induces a depressed mental outlook." >>

ABOVE: Two images of Operation Tabarin operatives, posing for a shot, and later surveying, the British-controlled island of South Georgia.

CENTRE: Spotter aircraft, like HMS *Exeter's* *Walrus*, would have been vital in any attempt to track Japanese movement had they attacked the Falkland Islands.

BELOW: The *Shinshū Maru* in 1938. The pioneering Japanese Army assault ship was the first purpose built type in that role. She carried 54 landing craft, four gunboats and 12 aircraft (though they could not return to the ship). She was torpedoed by USS *Aspro* on 3 January 1945, after barely surviving air attack.



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ABOVE:
James Marr
on South
Georgia. The
Lieutenant-
Commander
led the secret
mission to
monitor
and defeat
Argentine
challenges of
UK sovereignty.

TOP RIGHT:
The Argentine
dreadnaught
ARA Rivadavia.
Although
aging, her
dozen 12in
guns would
have made her
a fearsome
asset if turned
against the
defences of
the Falkland
Islands.

BELOW:
The Fitzroy,
which carried
the Tabarin
expedition.

THE HIDDEN ENEMY

But plans were being prepared for an invasion of the Falklands in 1942 - not in Berlin or Tokyo, but in Buenos Aires. In September 1941, with Britain occupied fighting Nazi Germany and Italy, the Argentine government saw an opportunity to finally recover 'Las Malvinas', ordering naval officer Captain Ernesto Villanueva to draw up plans for an invasion, which were unearthed in 2013 in the archives of the Argentine Navy. Despite the lack of defences on the islands, Villanueva's detailed 34-page plan called for an impressive invasion force comprising "a battalion of Marines distributed in two battleships, two heavy cruisers, a light cruiser, twelve torpedo boats, a tanker and mine-laying vessels." The flagship of the task force would be the 30,000-ton, Great War-era battleship ARA Rivadavia, the pride of the Argentine fleet. The plan was to sail the ships into Berkeley Sound, just north of Port Stanley, and land the assault force at Cow Bay. The Argentine Marines, suggested Villanueva, would then "take control of Puerto Argentino [the Argentine name for Port Stanley] in a surprise action." But Villanueva's

plan encountered opposition from the army, Colonel Benjamin Rattenbach pointing out that while seizing the Falklands would pose few problems, defending the islands in the event of a British counter-invasion would prove far more difficult, if not impossible. (Ironically, forty years later, at the age of 85 Rattenbach would be brought out of retirement to chair an inquiry into the failures of the Argentine military during the 1982 Falklands War). Frustrated in its ambitions to take the Falklands by the army's opposition, the Argentine Navy instead embarked on a campaign to assert its sovereignty over disputed British territories in the Antarctic, sending the polar exploration vessel *Primero de Mayo* to Britain's most remote colonies in February 1942 and laying claim to the land.

Churchill responded by authorising Operation Tabarin, a secret expedition of scientists and Royal Navy reservists, under the command of Scots polar explorer and Royal Navy officer Lieutenant-Commander

James Marr, a veteran of four previous Antarctic expeditions, whose job was to visit each territory in turn and remove any illegal Argentine presence. The team set sail from Avonmouth in December 1943 aboard the troopship *Highland Monarch* and, after transferring to the elderly vessels *Fitzroy* and *William Scoresby* in Port Stanley, spent the next two years travelling between Britain's various Antarctic outposts around the Graham Land peninsula, planting Union flags on each as a symbol of British sovereignty.

Only on one occasion did the British team come face to face with the Argentines - a group of meteorologists in early 1945 - but the confrontation passed off peacefully. In March 1946 the Operation Tabarin team quietly returned to the UK, having achieved their objective of reasserting Britain's sovereignty over her dependencies in the South Atlantic and Antarctic, and deterring any further Argentine aggression in the region. Until 1982, at any rate. ☉

