

A CRUISE SHIP GOES TO WAR

CUNARD'S QUEEN ELIZABETH 2 PLAYED A CRUCIAL PART IN BRITAIN'S VICTORY IN THE FALKLANDS WAR

RICHARD H. WAGNER

(Originally published in *The Log*, Navy League of the United States, New York Council, Fall 2005)



QUEEN ELIZABETH 2 (wartime configuration - 1982)

DISPLACEMENT: approx. 37,000
net tons
LENGTH: 963 feet
BEAM: 106 feet
SPEED: 28 knots
POWER PLANT: Steam turbine
ARMAMENT: .5 inch Browning
machine guns; 7.62mm general
purpose machine guns; Blowpipe
Surface-to-Air missiles;
Sea King helicopters.
CREW: 650
TROOPS: 3,000
LAUNCHED: 1969
ENTERED PASSENGER SERVICE: 1969
BUILDER: John Brown & Co. Scotland

Cunard Line ships have served as troop ships ever since the Crimean War. These ships played no small part in these conflicts. Indeed, after World War II, Winston

Churchill credited the QUEEN MARY and the QUEEN ELIZABETH as having shortened the war by a year because of their ability to transport whole divisions at a time. As seen below, the QUEEN ELIZABETH 2 (QE2) played just as vital a role in the Falklands War. Using her great size and speed, QE2 transported the main British land fighting force to the other end of the globe before the South Atlantic winter closed in, which would have made retaking the Falklands impossible. It was not a role anyone envisioned for QE2 beforehand but she enabled Britain to succeed in a war it was ill-prepared to fight but determined to win.

The Conflict

The Falklands War concerned the sovereignty of the only major island group in the South Atlantic. Located 300 miles east of the Strait of Magellan, the Falkland Islands are cool, damp, and windswept. The primary industry is sheep farming and the 1,813 people on the islands are of British extraction and consider themselves British.

The dispute between Britain and Argentina over the islands has a long

history. The British first landed there in 1690 but did not stay. Instead, the first colony was established by the French on East Falkland Island in 1764, a year before the British settled on West Falkland Island. The British abandoned their colony in 1774 but, Britain has always maintained that it never relinquished its claim of sovereignty over the entire island group.

The French colony was sold to Spain and, following independence in 1816, Argentina proclaimed itself successor in interest to Spain, asserted sovereignty over the islands, and appointed a governor in 1829 despite British protests. Three years later, Argentine officials on the islands arrested some American sailors, accused them of poaching seals, and sent their captain to Buenos Aires for trial. America responded by sending USS LEXINGTON to the islands, which proceeded to destroy the fortifications and declare the Falklands without government. Two Royal Navy ships arrived two years later and evicted the remaining Spanish/Argentine colonists. A new British colony was established and there has been a continuous British presence ever since.

A century later, Argentina revived her claim of sovereignty and talks were held under United Nations auspices. Politicians in London toyed with the idea of "lease back" under which sovereignty would pass to Argentina but the islands would continue to be administered by the British but that idea was rejected by the islands' inhabitants. Accordingly, Britain refused to cede the Falklands on the ground that the island's population overwhelmingly wanted to remain part of Britain.

The dispute blossomed into warfare in March 1982 when a group of Argentine civilians landed on South Georgia Island ostensibly to collect scrap from an abandoned whaling station. South Georgia, 800 miles east-southeast of the Falklands, is a mountainous island completely covered in glaciers. No state had ever claimed it prior to British annexation in 1908. The only inhabitants were about 20 members of the British Antarctic Survey, which also furnished the island's magistrate. Nonetheless, the Argentines raised their flag and refused to acknowledge British authority on the ground that the island is an administrative dependency of the Falklands and the Falklands rightfully belong to Argentina. The colonial governor of the Falklands sent 22 Royal Marines to support the magistrate, which, in turn, led Argentina to send 100 marines supported by a frigate and an icebreaker. A fire-fight ensued in which the British downed an Argentine helicopter but after the frigate began shelling their positions, the British surrendered.

Meanwhile, Argentina had assembled a task force to invade the Falklands. On 2 April, 800 Argentine marines made an amphibious landing and seized the airfield. Argentine Army troops then flew in. Overwhelmed, the governor ordered the 70 Royal Marine defenders to surrender. Some 10,000 Argentine troops would eventually take up defensive positions on the islands. The governor was expelled and over one hundred islanders placed under arrest.

It must have appeared to the military junta, headed by army General Leopoldo Galtieri, that was ruling Argentina at the time, that they had gambled and won. Taking the Falklands

was very popular at home and the patriotic fervor took attention away from the severe economic and political problems that were dogging the country. Moreover, it appeared that it had been accomplished at very little cost as Britain undoubtedly lacked both the will and the means to fight for these remote islands.

Had the gamble been taken a few years earlier, it might well have succeeded. With the loss of empire and the difficult economic problems resulting from World War II, Britain had gone through a period of self-doubt. It had been fashionable to question what was once popularly viewed as a great civilizing force and, to anyone who knew anything, Britain's decline to a third-rate nation appeared inevitable. However, by the late 1970s, many Britons had had enough of self-flagellation and had found a voice in the Conservative Party leader Margaret Thatcher who asserted that Britain was not finished yet. Elected Prime Minister in 1979, she was not about to let a group of South American military dictators bully Britain or oppress British subjects. "We were defending our honor as a nation, and principles of fundamental importance to the whole world - - above all, that aggressors should never succeed and that international law should prevail over the use of force," she wrote later. Thus, while diplomatic attempts to end the crisis would continue for another month, the lead elements of a British task force were sent south three days after the Argentine invasion.

The logistical problem presented by this war was akin to the one facing the United States in the Pacific in World War II. There were no friendly airports or ports near the war zone which could

be used to launch an invasion. Thus, Britain would have to transport the necessary men and supplies eight thousand miles for landing on enemy-occupied islands. In addition, all of the air support and, at least initially, artillery support would have to come from the sea. All told, over 100 British ships and 25,000 men and women would be needed.

Contrary to the position taken by the Ministry of Defense, Sir Henry Leach, Chief of the Naval Staff told Mrs. Thatcher that Britain had the forces to liberate the Falklands. However, this was not the type of war that the Royal Navy had planned to fight. Like their American counterparts, British planners had assumed that the next war would be fought against the Soviet Union on the plains of Europe. The role of the Royal Navy in such a conflict would be to help safeguard the supply routes across the North Atlantic from America. Accordingly, the Royal Navy had transformed itself from a power projection navy to, essentially, an antisubmarine warfare navy. As a result, the Royal Navy could only field two aircraft carriers, the venerable HMS HERMES and the newer but smaller HMS INVINCIBLE, equipped with a total of 20 Sea Harrier jump jets to oppose over 100 Argentine aircraft including American-made Skyhawks and French-built Mirages, Daggers, and Super Etendards. Eight destroyers and 15 frigates, none with big guns, were the surface combatants that would have to provide naval gunfire as well as protect the fleet against Argentine naval and air attacks. The Maritime Exclusion Zone around the Falklands that Britain declared would have to be enforced by a

handful of nuclear and non-nuclear submarines.

Nor was the Royal Fleet Auxiliary prepared to supply all of the troop transports, tankers, freighters, and other vessels that would be needed. 22 of the 27 ships in the RFA participated but even with these, the government had to charter or requisition from the British merchant navy, tankers, North Sea ferries, container ships, trawlers, repair ships, tugs, freighters, and even cruise ships.

QE2 Is Drafted

At the end of April 1982, QE2 was returning to her homeport of Southampton, England after making her maiden call at Philadelphia. The ship's company was aware that a number of British-flag ships, including the popular P&O cruise ship CANBERRA, had been "taken up from trade" by the British government but no one seriously expected QE2 to be requisitioned. The ship was the largest and fastest passenger ship in service and the only one still making regularly scheduled transatlantic crossings. She had been constructed during the late 1960s incorporating innovative designs and cutting-edge technology. She cost nearly 30 million pounds and was by far the most famous ship in the world. Still, to pass the time, some of the younger officers studied charts for the South Atlantic and made hypothetical course calculations.

Meanwhile, at a meeting at the Prime Minister's country residence, Mrs. Thatcher was advised that QE2 was required to transport the next wave of troops. "I asked whether it was really necessary or advisable to use this great

ship and put so many people in it, but as soon as I was told that it was necessary to get them there in time I gave my agreement."

As QE2 neared England, she began to pick up commercial radio broadcasts that said that QE2 had been requisitioned. After confirming these reports with Cunard's shoreside offices, the captain made a public announcement that the ship would be leaving service following passenger disembarkation the next day. Approximately, 1,000 officers and crew members volunteered to accompany QE2 into the war zone. Out of these, 650 were selected including 33 women.

After disembarking the passengers, work began to transform QE2. Art work, silver, furniture, and casino equipment was taken ashore for storage. Wooden panels were laid down to protect the carpets from the soldiers boots. Hundreds of cots were brought aboard. Although the troops would not be packed in like they were during World War II on the QUEEN MARY, which carried as many as 16,000 soldiers, the plan was to take 3,000 soldiers on QE2 - - roughly 1,000 more people than her maximum peacetime passenger capacity. In addition, military communications equipment was brought onboard and a secure communications center was constructed. Tons of military stores and cargo were brought on including vehicles, jet fuel and ammunition. Since there was more than would fit in the hold, some supplies, including ammunition, were stored on the open deck near the funnel.

The most significant alteration came about because the military wanted to use QE2 not just as a troopship but as a helicopter carrier as well. Since the

ship is 963 feet long and has plenty of open deck space, this did not seem to be much of a problem at first blush. However, one of the innovative techniques used in QE2's construction was the bonding of an aluminum superstructure onto a steel hull. This hybrid construction gave QE2 a strong hull that could withstand the rigors of the Atlantic as well as a light weight superstructure that would save fuel and lessen the ship's draft so as to allow her to enter more cruise ports. But, while the aluminum superstructure is strong enough to support the occasional small private helicopters that corporate executives and film stars land near the funnel on Sun Deck, it would not be strong enough to support the stresses and loads associated with military helicopters.

The solution was to build two heliports. The smaller one would be built forward of the superstructure on a platform extending over the capstans. The second platform would be built aft resting on a series of girders that would be anchored in the structures that support the weight of the ship's two outdoor swimming pools. However, since QE2's open decks aft were built in a series of terraces, part of the superstructure had to be cut away in order to create an expanse large enough to meet the military's requirements.

Once the alterations were completed, the ship embarked the troops, consisting primarily of the Fifth Infantry Brigade, which was comprised of battalions from the Scots Guards, the Welsh Guards, and the Queen's Own Gurka Rifles. All of these units were elite units in Britain's all-volunteer army. The plan was that these units would be the main British invasion force,

following up on initial landings made by Royal Marine commandos and troops from the Parachute Regiment (acting as infantry) who were already en route south. Considering that Britain's plans were built around these troops, it is clear that much depended upon QE2. Indeed, if QE2 had been lost, it is difficult to see how Britain could have prevailed.

Meanwhile, the war at sea had heated-up. The nuclear attack submarine HMS CONQUER had encountered and sunk the second largest ship in the Argentine Navy, ARA BELGRANO (formerly USS PHOENIX (CL 47)). This caused the Argentine Navy to pull most of its ships back to Argentina. However, the Argentines vowed to sink Britain's most famous ship, which they referred to as the "Black Slug." To this end, they chartered a Boeing 707 to conduct long range searches for QE2. In addition, the Soviet Union had agreed to furnish Argentina with information on British ship movements. A few days after the BELGRANO sinking, the Argentines demonstrated their ability to strike back, sinking the destroyer HMS SHEFIELD with an air-launched Exocet missile. Thus, QE2 was going to be actively hunted by a foe that could make good its threats.

The Voyage South

QE2's departure from Southampton was anything but quiet. The government wanted to display its determination. Accordingly, bagpipes and regimental bands played while families and well-wishers lined the shores. Military and naval commanders crowded onto the ship's bridge much to the annoyance of the pilot and the ship's officers. The press gave full coverage.

The ship moved slowly down Southampton Water surrounded by tugs. Most spectators probably thought this stately progress was just part of the event. Others, more familiar with the comings and goings of QE2, would have known that QE2 normally proceeds slowly in these waters so as not to disturb the underwater pipelines leading to the oil refinery at Fawley and to negotiate the tricky sand bars near Cowes. But, this time, QE2 was going slowly because she could not go faster. During the previous transatlantic voyage, one of the ship's boilers had been taken down for routine maintenance. Now, one of the other boilers had sprung a massive leak. As a result, the ship had only one working boiler and could only manage seven knots - - a speed at which the ship is difficult to control. Thus, the tugs surrounding the ship were not ceremonial escorts but were there to help maneuver and propel the giant ship.

Once out of sight of land, QE2 anchored and repair work commenced. In the end, the problem turned out to be a valve that had been left in the wrong position. Now that QE2 was capable of attaining her service speed, she headed out to sea leaving the third boiler to be repaired en route.

QE2 could only hold enough fuel for a one way voyage to the Falklands, which was some 8,000 miles away. Accordingly, provision was made for replenishing at sea. Normally, QE2 takes on fuel through an opening on the starboard side of Five Deck. However, this opening was too close to the waterline for use at sea. Therefore, a fuel pipe was installed in a baggage entryway on Two Deck in the midst of some of the first class cabins and then

run below to the tanks. To test this arrangement, QE2 rendezvoused with the tanker RFA GREY ROVER and with soldiers and crew members hauling on lines and hoses, several tons of fuel were successfully taken on.

The first leg of QE2's voyage was marked by regimental dinners and evening entertainment by the various regimental bands. Officers were assigned to eat in the luxury Queens Grill restaurant while senior NCOs had to make do with the slightly less sumptuous Princess Grill. Enlisted personnel used the ship's two large dining rooms.

The Fifth Infantry Brigade had just completed training exercises in the Welsh mountains - - the British terrain deemed most similar to the Falklands. To maintain their edge, the troops continued to exercise during their two weeks onboard QE2. Floating garbage bags were used for target practice from the open decks. Soldiers running in full combat gear around the one-fifth mile jogging track on Boat Deck caused the chalking to protrude from between the teak planks. The Gurkas were especially serious about staying fit. Starting at the bottom of "A" Stairway, one soldier would climb on the back of another who would then run up eight decks. To simulate conditions if the ship lost power, the runners were blindfolded.

The first leg ended when the ship arrived in Freetown, Sierra Leone, to take on fuel and water. Some adventure was added to the call when the gold-braided pilots told the Cunard officers that the practice there was for the ship's officers to dock their own ship. However, the captain managed to bring the giant ship along side in this unfamiliar harbor without incident.

Little effort had been made thus far to keep the ship's movements secret and the ship had been observed by a Soviet spy trawler. After leaving Freetown, however, the ship's radar was turned off, electronic silence observed, and the ship was blacked-out at night. With hundreds of portholes and large picture windows, achieving a full black-out was not easy. In order to avoid painting the windows black, black garbage bag plastic was taped over them. While this arrangement blocked the light, the plastic caused a greenhouse effect that severely taxed the ship's air conditioning as she traversed the tropics. Unfortunately, these precautions were defeated when the ship crossed the path of another Soviet spy trawler.

The next stop was Ascension Island, a British colony some 4,000 miles from the Falklands that the British were using as a forward staging area. Major General Jeremy Moore, RM, Commander Land Forces Falklands, had flown out from Britain and joined the ship there.

While QE2 was making her way south, the British had established a beachhead at San Carlos Bay and the fleet had come under incessant air attacks. A Cunard container ship, ATLANTIC CONVEYOR, which had been acting as a support ship for the carriers, was destroyed by an Exocet missile. The destroyer HMS COVENTRY and the frigates HMS ANTELOPE and HMS ARDENT burnt and sank following air raids. Accordingly, heavy machine gun platforms were installed on the wings of QE2's bridge, light machine guns at various other locations, and Blowpipe air defense missiles were placed around the funnel. The mood was somber as the

great liner, blacked-out and without radar, hurdled toward the war zone at 27 knots.

A Guards officer awoke early one morning and went out on the open decks for air. His men had become fascinated by the Book of Revelation and there had been much talk about its apocalyptic visions. As he was looking at the sea in the pre-dawn light, he recalled one that begins "I stood upon the sand of the sea and saw a beast rise up out of the sea . . ." (13:1). The water began to foam and a dark gray form began to emerge. Overcoming his initial reaction that he was seeing some biblical sea monster, he realized that what was before him was a nuclear submarine surfacing. Signal lamps flashed, presumably to the military communications center on QE2, and the sub disappeared.

Moving south, the heat of the tropics was replaced by the onset of the South Atlantic winter. Lookouts were placed on the bridge wings and near the funnel as a precaution against icebergs. All watertight doors were shut. On the night of 29 May, a heavy fog engulfed the ship. The ship's officers and the naval authorities agreed to risk giving away the ship's location by turning on the radar. The radar sweep showed over 100 icebergs in the vicinity. Most were small but others were miles long and hundreds of feet high. All night the ship weaved through the ice.

Rendezvousing with the destroyer HMS ANTRIM the next day, QE2 disembarked General Moore and his staff by helicopter. She then proceeded on to South Georgia which had already been retaken. At South Georgia, QE2's troops were transferred to the smaller CANBERRA and other

ships more suited to maneuvering in the confined waters around the Falkland beachhead.

In their place, QE2 embarked the survivors of COVENTRY, ANTELOPE and ARDENT. Some of the survivors were barely alive when they reached QE2 and were placed in the ship's hospital - - one of the best on a commercial ship. Other survivors who had seen how their aluminum ships had burnt so fiercely were reluctant to enter QE2's superstructure and even requested that their emergency muster stations be located within the steel hull. This request could not be accommodated because of the compartmentalization resulting from closing the water tight doors.

The Return Home

It had been thought that at South Georgia QE2 was beyond the range of Argentine aircraft. However, when a nearby British tanker was attacked, QE2 put to sea and headed into the ice floes where it was thought that she would be harder to find.

By now, the fuel taken on at Freetown was running out. Steaming north, QE2 met with the tanker RFA BAYLEAF. However, a storm made it impossible to pass a line between the ships. On the third day, the seas were still high but QE2 was down to a day and a half's fuel, so the ships tried again. This time 3,800 tons were passed before the replenishment had to be halted due to the onset of night and the chafing of the fuel hose. Although QE2's tanks were not full, it was enough to allow her to return to Ascension.

The plan had been to disembark the Royal Navy survivors at Ascension

and then return to the war zone. However, by now, the campaign was going well enough that the authorities decided that QE2 could go home. The troops she had brought south had landed and, even though they were outnumbered, they were well on the way to retaking the islands. This was not without cost. Especially hard hit were the Welsh Guards who sustained heavy casualties when the landing ship they were on was bombed.

On 11 June, QE2 entered home waters. As she steamed toward Southampton, helicopters brought newsmen, the Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Navy, and the chairman of Cunard's parent company. Near Yarmouth, the royal yacht BRITANNIA with the Queen Mother on deck joined QE2. Ships and small craft sounded their whistles as the great liner arrived home. Crowds again lined the shores. A few days later, the Argentine troops on the Falklands surrendered.

Although it had taken less than a week to convert QE2 for military use, it took nine weeks to restore her to passenger service. Admittedly, Cunard did take the opportunity to make a few changes, one of which involved the funnel. When QE2 was designed, a conscious effort was made to distance the ship from her predecessors, which, like much else during the 1960s, were seen only as old fashioned. Accordingly, since going into service, the ship's funnel had been painted white and black rather than the traditional Cunard livery of red-orange and black. After the Falklands, however, tradition mattered and QE2's funnel was painted in the Cunard colors.



QE2 in 2003 in full Cunard livery. (Photo: R.H. Wagner).