

Memories, dreams, reflections — A personal view 22 years after the Falklands war.

By Neil Douglas Allen, ex-Radio Operator, HMS Broadsword.

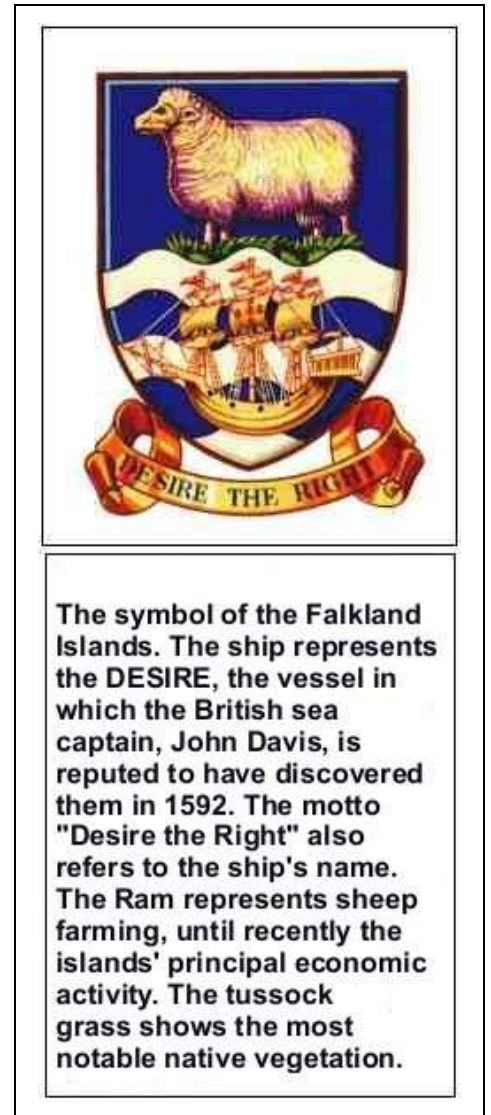
Like many ex-members of HMS Broadsword's ship's company, I have a framed print of David Cobb's painting of the sinking of HMS Coventry hanging on a wall in my house. Occasionally, a visitor will comment on it, but few know that it has anything to do with me.

I come from a Naval background, in a "lower-deck" sort of way. My father was a Chief Radio Supervisor in the Royal Naval Reserve, until his untimely death when I was thirteen. My grandfather was a Chief Petty Officer who, among other travels, was on the World War 2 convoy route to Murmansk in the Russian Arctic. He had, as millions of others did, some tales to tell. And tell them he did, until I, as a young lad, got thoroughly sick of hearing them. As a youth growing up in 1970s Britain, none of that seemed relevant to me. That is the reason I don't bring the subject up with visitors: nobody likes to think he's boring anyone. But something that did strike me as curious was how my granddad's eyes would light up and he would smile when he mentioned some name.

"Good friend of yours, was he?" I'd say.
"Oh no," he'd reply, "I couldn't stand him!"

Someone once said that you could recreate part of Naval life at home by inviting a couple of hundred people who you don't particularly like, to come and stay for a few months. There is some truth in that.

As I have grown older, I have occasionally noticed that I get that same curious glance from other people. Usually, it's just before the two-yearly HMS Broadsword Association reunion in Chester, which is about the only time I see anyone from those days. Why bother getting on a plane just to



see a bunch of old friends who you could phone or e-mail? It can't be worth all that trouble just to drink a drop of English beer on a Saturday evening, can it? And wasn't I glad to get out of the Navy? And haven't I always said that, although joining the Navy was the best thing I ever did, getting out was the second best? So why go? Who wants to go on boring one another about what they did half a lifetime ago? Haven't we moved on since then? Yet still I go and I probably always will. Why? That is what I want to explore a little further, to provide some answers to those curious glances.

I left the Navy towards the end of 1984, after eight years. My travels took me north — this was the Cold War and the shifting fences of politics had now recast my granddad's allies as "the enemy". I went west, spending months on the East Coast of the United States; and thoroughly enjoyed it. I tried to go east, but never got as far as Suez. And I went south, once during the Falklands war and again when it was all over.

HMS Broadsword was known as "a happy ship", which is a tribute both to her commanding officer and to the team as a whole. But, just so we know what I am talking about, what exactly is a "happy ship"? Having served on three ships, some happy and some not, I believe I can at least try to define it. Those who have never been in the Royal Navy might think it means sailing through balmy weather, in a relaxed atmosphere, with plenty of good runs ashore to come. While by no means unpleasant, this is *not* what I mean. I would define a "happy ship" as one where the following criteria apply:

- **Relations between those in the hierarchy are governed by mutual respect.** Anyone can be a martinet with the law and the Naval Discipline Act behind them. That is the easy way and it is sometimes necessary. But the hard way is to get them to respect you. It means that if someone junior to you suggests something, you don't dismiss it as coming from someone whose opinion has no value. You at least listen. On the Broadsword, if I had something to say that wasn't overtly daft, I could take it up with the killicks and Senior Rates and, if necessary, go to the Divisional Officer and above. And I would be listened to. Now don't get the idea that you could go and knock on the Captain's door and complain about something. That's not the way the Navy works — it is a hierarchical organisation.
- **Where only constructive complaining is tolerated.** There is nothing wrong with complaining — it is the motor that drives

improvement — but *only* if done with a suggestion about how the situation can be improved.

- **Rigorous professionalism** — Despite all the jokes and posturing to the contrary, I do not believe that anyone thinks they are in the Navy for a holiday. If anyone does, they are running the risk of receiving a severe shock and should get out.

I would be the first to admit that these ideals were not always lived up to, not least by me. But at least they *were* ideals.

I am not going to describe any events that are already well documented on the H.M.S. Broadsword Association website. But I would like to record one anecdote that shows the sense of humour that is so important in keeping everything in perspective.

I was the "beer bosun" of 3H1 mess, an unofficial position that requires much bending of regulations. The "beer bosun" is responsible for buying the mess beer issue from the "can man" or NAAFI canteen manager. He runs the mess cash float — itself against the regulations — and makes sure the mess always has a covert stash of beer, in case we need to welcome guests. In practice, I found that hardly anyone ever drank at sea. So I used to buy up the small regulation allowance every day, stow it somewhere and build up a good supply for when needed — when the mess decided to have a party. Now few men who hold the rank of Master-at-Arms, or "Joss", are naive and I am sure he suspected all this and wasn't bothered, as long as there was no abuse. But it was still best for someone who could not be "busted" to a lower rate to be "beer bosun" and I said I'd do it.

One Sunday morning, a dockyard worker poked his head through the mess door.

"Need any work doing, lads?"

He was looking for something — anything — that he could do to claim some extra overtime at the Sunday rate. These were the days before privatisation.

"Hedge", the killick of the mess, thought for a moment.

“Yes,” he said, “you can build us a beer stash, somewhere that can survive a search by the Joss.”

So he got to work. Now everyone could be happy. The man got his extra pay. We had our beer stash. And the Joss could search the mess if he wanted, without finding beer in all the usual places.

After we had sailed for Exercise Springtrain, I gradually turned all the money in the float into beer, stashed it and forgot about it. It was there if needed and, as I said, most people didn't even drink their small daily allowance at sea.

Several months later, both ourselves and H.M.S. Coventry were bombed, all of which is described in graphic detail on the website. I was the radio-operator in the seaboat that, along with the Gemini, was launched to try to get people away from the burning, sinking H.M.S. Coventry. This is the scene depicted in David Cobb's painting and in a series of spectacular photographs in the "Coventry" section of the Broadsword Association website. The bomb that had hit the Broadsword had hit the water and bounced upwards through the flight deck, cutting a Lynx helicopter in half on its way, before disappearing harmlessly over the side. Anyway, when the seaboat was finally hoisted back on board Broadsword, with the Coventry capsized and her great propellers facing the sky, we had not only our own ship's company, but most of theirs, too. A Type 22 Frigate is a relatively spacious ship, but there was not much room to move. I made my way down to 3H1 mess, where I was greeted by the cry "BEER BOSUN! We need more BEER!" Indeed, we did. We had a lot of guests in the mess. I ran off to find Kev, the Can Man, who was part of the first aid party. The conversation went something like this:

"Kev, I know this isn't a good time, but I need some beer..."

"F..... HELL! Can't you see I'm busy?"

"Listen! Those guys have just had their ship blown from under them and they're thirsty! They're cleaning us out! They've nearly finished our secret stash! This is an EMERGENCY!"

"Right. Follow me."

So we opened a hatch and climbed down the ladder to the NAAFI store.

"How many cans do you want?"

"A dozen should do."

"Is that ALL?"

"No, a dozen CRATES!"

"Sign here!"

So we struggled back up the ladder with the crates and Kev left me to carry them down to the mess, where there was a truly astonishing scene — every available piece of space contained a wet, blackened, often burnt, survivor. Some had not been wearing their anti-flash hoods properly and had their hair burnt off. One or two appeared to have had their eardrums blown out. Yet, they were singing away, as if they were in some pub down Union Street in Plymouth!

Hedge was not too happy when he saw the beer.

"This is for the Coventry lads only," he shouted, "I don't want to see any of our lot getting tanked up."

Later that evening, I watched from the bridge wing as the landing craft came alongside to take off the survivors. As the craft pulled away, someone in it shouted "Three cheers for the Broadsword, lads!" and then they gave three loud cheers.

I turned to Hedge and said, "Look at that! Bloody incredible isn't it! You've got to admire their spirit!"

"No, you haven't, mate," he replied, "they're going home, aren't they? We're not!"

There is a subject that has suffered much ill-informed press comment and that is the Falkland Islands themselves. If you go to the official website of the Falkland Islands, you will see them described as "these remote and beautiful islands". This is in complete contrast to their popular image. If you were among the many thousands who were forced to spend time at or near Port Stanley in the early 1980s, it's understandable that you would have unpleasant memories. No one likes living in a hut for six months, surrounded by areas that might be mined, with only a bunch of drunken construction workers and a copy of "*Debbie does Dallas*" for company. I agree with the previous description, though. I will explain why. When I left the Broadsword, I returned to England for several months, and then got drafted on to H.M.S. Danae for another trip to the South Atlantic. Danae's ship's company had had a miserable time of the whole Falklands affair. They got down there just as the war ended and suffered months and months of boredom and tedium, mostly at sea in the hostile Southern Ocean. At the time, it was considered highly likely that rogue elements within the Argentine military would have another

crack at the Royal Navy to avenge their humiliating defeat. So they remained in “defence watches”, never knowing when they were going to pick up the telltale transmissions that would indicate that they had a minute or so to try to decoy an incoming Exocet missile. Nothing ever happened and they got back home months later. No cheering crowds waiting for them. Now I am not for a moment suggesting that anyone on the Danae had wanted to be in the war zone. They were not stupid. But, as one of them said to me, “you got all the glory and we got all the crap”.

Because of all the damage the fleet had suffered, the turn-around time was short and soon, Danae was off down south again, with me on board. Before joining the Broadsword, I had never done more than about ten days at sea between touching land. On the Broadsword’s trip south and back we did, if my memory serves me correctly, just over a hundred days at sea with, according to the Association web site, 1,656 hours of that in “defence watches”. And we were off for a similar stretch on the Danae, whose ship’s company had not been home for long. Oh joy! We were not a happy bunch.

Strange things happen to small communities isolated from the rest of the world for months on end. Bizarre slang words appear and spread around the ship, until its occupants almost speak a language of their own. The military sense of humour, black and satirical at the best of times, takes on a particularly sharp edge. Strange sports began to appear. One was known as “crinkle-bar jumping”. On Leander Class frigates, the paint-shop was right up in the bows of the ship, as far forward as you could get. Just through the entrance hatch, above head height, was a zigzag bar where paint-pots were hung when the ship was in harbour. If you went up there during a storm, preferably wearing a hard hat, you could grab hold of the bar, wait until the bows were on the crest of a wave and then let go. And you would hang in midair for a few seconds, as if inside a falling elevator, while the ship’s bows plunged into the trough of the wave. I never did it myself, because it sounded like a short cut to the sickbay, but some people were quite keen on it. Once, we spent about six weeks just steaming slowly up and down in a line between the islands of Steeple Jason and Grand Jason. We were keeping a radar watch on the western horizon, as there was not yet any land-based radar that could do it. “Leave” meant landing on the islands themselves for some “rest and recreation”, which for some people, took some imagination, given the remoteness of the place. I had a week’s leave at a settlement at Hill Cove. Fortunately, I have always loved hill walking and wild places and so I, at least, was in the right place. I can’t tell you what a relief it was to get off the ship, just for a change of scenery. I walked for miles

around the shores of Byron Sound, and there were endless long parties with the “kelpers”, whose social life had been greatly improved by our presence. With great regret, I left Hill Cove after my weeks leave, flying by helicopter to Port Howard and then back to the Danae. Sometimes, we would get ashore by seaboat, nudging into some remote cove where a few of us would set off with walking boots and rucksacks. There are curious rivers of boulders snaking across this landscape that have puzzled visitors since Darwin’s day. Some people would go salmon fishing – yes, you can do that there, too. Even the area around San Carlos or “Bomb Alley” is a beautiful place in the Austral summer with the sunlight shining on the sea that covers the wreck of H.M.S. Ardent. So you see why I incline towards the view that this place is not so bad as it is made out to be. I was always so glad to get there, just to get off the Danae for a bit of peace and quiet; perhaps I might even go back there, one day.

There was a place that was sufficiently beyond the reach of Argentine aircraft for the whole ship to drop out of "defence watches" and have some time off — South Georgia. In April 1675, Antoine de la Roche, a London-born merchant sailing an English ship from Lima to England ran into a severe storm while rounding Cape Horn and was blown far to the east of his intended track. He came across an island with a deeply indented coastline and snow-covered mountains disgorging glaciers into the sea. This was almost certainly South Georgia. He found shelter in one of the natural harbours and spent two weeks carrying out repairs, but found the place so inhospitable that he didn't even land. Another sighting was recorded by the Spanish ship León, bound for Cadiz from Lima. Again, blown off course off Cape Horn, an island "of frightful aspect" was sighted on 29th June 1756. The first landing was by Captain James Cook R.N., aboard H.M.S. Resolution, in January 1775. He and his crew landed at Possession Bay and charted part of the coastline. Cook named it the Isle of Georgia, in honour of H.M. King George. He wrote "...the wild rocks raised their lofty summits till they were lost in the clouds, and the valleys lay covered with everlasting snow..."

The island lies at about 54 degrees south and is long and narrow, about 170km long and between 2 and 30km wide. It has been described as "the Alps in mid-ocean". The highest peak is that of Mount Paget at 2934 metres and there are twelve other peaks of more than 2000 metres.

My first sighting of it was when I went up to the bridge at 07:50 with a cup of coffee, to take over the forenoon watch as the bridge Radio Operator. I found everyone staring out of the bridge windows, eyes glued

to binoculars. I put a foul-weather jacket on and climbed up to the signal deck. About a mile on our starboard beam and stretching in both directions as far as the eye could see, a jagged, white, mountain range rose direct out of the ocean and disappeared into the clouds.

We stayed there for one week, visiting Grytviken and then the abandoned whaling station at Stromness. We were lucky enough to be there to witness the annual spectacle of the Southern Elephant seals, who had come ashore in their hundreds to breed. The sound of the gladiatorial combats of these huge animals carried clearly to the Danae, anchored in Stromness bay.

A few of us hiked up a mountain and looked down at another snow-covered ghost town, the old whaling station at Leith. It struck me at the time that claiming possession of such an awesome place must have felt rather like an ant claiming ownership of the City of London.

I don't think about the Navy too much these days, as it was all so long ago. But sometimes, very rarely, something will happen that brings it all flooding back. There are two particularly powerful triggers: music and smells. A couple of years ago, I found an old George Benson tape that I hadn't played for twenty years and it brought back memories and dreams so powerful and vivid that I could hardly sleep for three or four nights. And if I am anywhere near the sea and I catch a whiff of that potent cocktail of diesel fuel, sea water, fresh paint and old rope, then I'm immediately transported back onto the signal deck of a ship, with a chipping hammer or a paintbrush in my hand. Usually, these memories are nothing to do with the Falklands war. I suspect that this kind of thing is common to everyone who has spent a substantial time in the Navy and enjoyed the experience — which brings me back to where I began. I think I know now why my granddad smiled at the memory of someone he couldn't stand — he was thinking about the whole experience, not just one individual. And, after reading this far, I hope that you too understand why I will still keep going to these reunions. It has been said that “once Navy, always Navy” and, no matter what we all may be doing now, I think that's true.

“Darby” Allen,
April 2004.

Postscript — a homecoming

Reading through the above article a couple of years after I wrote it, it seems appropriate to supplement it with a few thoughts on my own experience of the immediate aftermath of the conflict.

A military operation is not like chess, where calculations can be made within a rigid framework of rules. It is more like poker, where bluff and the willingness to take calculated risks come to the fore. The good player will, over time, always beat the bad, but the vagaries of chance are never far away. The operation was extremely risky and the outcome could have been very different, both for ourselves as individuals and for the enterprise as a whole. Had one of the carriers been sunk, the task force would probably have been obliged to abandon the operation, with all the consequences that that would have entailed. Had the General Belgrano and its two missile-armed escorts been able to attack us in coordination with their aircraft carrier, as we now know they were trying to do, they could have ended the operation almost before it had begun. And, of course, if the bomb that struck the Broadsword had been dropped from just a little higher, it would have had time to arm itself before impact.

We were out of the country well before the first indications of trouble and we were isolated from news of what was going on at home for most of the time. Our main source of information was the BBC World Service, which was listened to with religious attentiveness every hour. Working in the Main Communications Office, I had a pretty good idea of what was going on tactically, but the bigger picture was much less clear. Incoming mail was sporadic and outgoing mail was held for a month at Ascension Island as an alternative to censorship. The first real chance that I had to assess the mood back in England came when the conflict was well and truly over and we, in company with the Hermes, reached Ascension Island on the way back home. Together with the sacks of mail were piles of old newspapers that had been printed at the height of the conflict. I put them in rough chronological order and began to read. As anyone who remembers the media atmosphere back then will understand, it was not a particularly pleasant experience. I felt as if the whole country had gone mad. Private Eye's satire: "Kill an Argie and win a Metro" seemed to just about sum it up.

We were very fortunate that we stopped in Gibraltar on the way home. As far as I am aware, we were the only ship that took part in the conflict that did so. (This was to pick up a London taxi that we had left there on the way down — that is another story!)

Captain Canning mustered the ship's company on the flight deck, made it pretty clear that he wasn't happy with the way the press had treated the matter either and gave us a rather moving speech about how we'd all operated pretty well together. He was worried — rightly so — about the consequences of our stopover in Gibraltar:

"Go ashore, enjoy yourselves, fill yourselves up with beer IF YOU MUST — but if anyone comes before me on a charge involving either violence or damage to property, I will not hesitate to issue a warrant, despite the fact that we've spent so long at sea. You know — and I know — who I'm talking about!"

A tremendous drunken run ashore followed. Fortunately, the damage (at least to us) was confined to hangovers, bruises, and lightened bank balances. Nobody ended up in Naval Detention Quarters, which would have been a sad end to our venture. Looking back, that visit to Gibraltar was important because it gave everyone the chance to let off steam before being thrown straight into the arms of their families, who were waiting on the jetty when the ship docked in Plymouth. The ship then became even more crowded than when we had had the Coventry's ship's company on board, with a queue of people trooping slowly down aft to look at the patched-up holes where the bomb had entered and exited; and taking photographs of the cannon shell holes that pockmarked the ship's side and superstructure.

My feelings about the conflict remain mixed to this day. Months afterwards, I switched on the TV and there was Captain Canning, being interviewed. He said something like this:

"It has to be said that this conflict did us a great deal of good. Of course, it is desperately sad that people had to lose their lives, but it gave us a chance to test our operations and procedures under live conditions".

He was right. It did do us — that is, those of us in the forces who were lucky enough to come through it unscathed — a lot of good. I remember someone once expressing the opinion that the only danger to "Jack" was from falling into a dry dock when staggering back on board after a run ashore. Thankfully, attitudes like that had been banished, anyway.

And I was proud of what we had achieved. We had gone to the far extremity of the world, at the end of a tenuous logistical chain, without air superiority, and had carried out a complex military operation against a well armed, well prepared enemy, all organised at short notice. To sum up, the Forces had risen to the occasion and had not been found wanting.

On the negative side, England, when I finally returned, seemed to be split into two polarised camps. These can be caricatured, on the one hand, as the crowd who seemed to think that the conflict was a cross between a football match and the Last Night of the Proms; and on the other hand, the anti-war crowd who so hated the Thatcher government that some were willing to be apologists for a right-wing military dictatorship that had invaded British territory. As I didn't fit into either of these camps, I soon got fed up with explaining that it was possible to show some appreciation of the forces' professionalism and the real sacrifices that had been made, while still viewing what had happened as an example of humanity's collective folly. The wave of jingoism that had swept the popular press was repellent to anyone of a more reflective nature and I got so sick of the atmosphere that I found that the best thing to do was just not to talk about it at all. Then, of course, people thought I didn't like to talk about it because I found it stressful. This, as far as I was concerned, was nonsense.

When I was at HMS Mercury, I was asked to take part in the victory parade through London. My old ship's company had largely gone their separate ways and the Broadsword was out of the country again. I was in a new environment, surrounded by people I hardly knew. By then I was thoroughly disgusted with the behaviour and attitudes of the media and wanted no part in it. Of course, there was no shortage of volunteers, many of whom had never been anywhere near the Falkland Islands. I felt that we really should have been reflecting on how this situation had come about and how to stop this kind of thing happening again — totally unrealistic, of course.

I have never again met anyone who was on the Coventry. I have no idea what became of the burned and the wounded, never mind the families of those who lost loved ones. I am aware that the Broadsword was a lucky ship as well as a happy ship and the thought is a humbling one.

"Darby" Allen
August 2006.