

BOOKS



Reviews of books relating to the military profession and of particular interest to Marines are welcomed. Prospective authors are encouraged to contact editor prior to submission. Preferred length 300-750 words. Any book reviewed in this section may be purchased through MCA Bookservice, but prices are subject to change.

NO PICNIC: 3 Commando Brigade in the South Atlantic: 1982. By Julian Thompson. Hippocrene Books Ltd., New York, 1985, 201 pp., \$24.95. (Member \$22.45)

reviewed by
LtGen Bernard E. Trainor

The battle for the Falklands in the spring of 1982 bemused Americans. The "war" was viewed as something out of Gilbert and Sullivan wherein both the antagonists were anachronistic, bungling villains of an earlier age of imperialists and caudillos. Neither side evoked much emotion in America's heartland. It was with a sense of detachment and only mild interest that the drama of the South Atlantic was viewed from the western shores of the North Atlantic.

But drama there was aplenty. In an age of lasers, thermonuclear devices, and stealth aircraft, it was a refreshingly old-fashioned fight with soldier pitted against soldier, and both pitted against cruel terrain and the elements. Indeed, it was as the title states, "no picnic."

The author of *No Picnic*, Julian Thompson of the Royal Marines, commanded 3 Commando Brigade in its recapture of the Falklands after the surprise Argentine takeover of the islands in April 1982. The recovery expedition launched from the United Kingdom, 8,000 miles from the target, was at best a jury-rigged affair. A penurious British defense program had focused military resources on Britain's NATO role and, in so doing, emasculated its ability to credibly project force beyond NATO boundaries. Britain, therefore, inadvertently invited Argentine adventurism against one of the Crown's few remaining overseas possessions. Although British ingenuity in response to the surprise attack in the Falklands won admiration and acclaim, it should not be forgotten that Britain's myopia in matters of defense uselessly cost lives and could have resulted in disaster for Her Majesty's forces. Britain learned that the war a nation does not expect to fight is likely to be the one it ends up fighting.

That things turned out right for Britain in the Falklands is a tribute not only to English make-do but to the stamina, skill, determination, and courage of the soldiers, sailors, and Marines who fought the battle.



It is to Thompson's credit that he does not focus on the controversial and broader politico-military aspects of the Falklands affair. He leaves that to others. Rather, he limits himself to that which he bore witness to—the performance of his brigade in the bareknuckled brawl for control of the islands. It is a fascinating story of the three Royal Marine Commandos and one parachute battalion that made up 3 Commando Brigade, as well as the units that supported them. These were tough, well-trained troops, and they made the difference in the end.

In telling his story, Thompson discounts as myth the pusillanimous Argentine. Contrary to contemporary reports, Thompson contends that the "Argies" fought well for a relatively untrained conscript force. They made good use of terrain, obstacles, and fields of fire. Artillery support was professionally handled, and officers and NCOs, for the most part, were both skillful and brave. In some instances, at Darwin, Goose Green, and Mt. Longdom, for example, the Argentines put up a creditable fight by any standard. But in the final analysis, they were no match for the British Regulars.

No Picnic unfolds in sequential order. It takes the reader through the hectic days of confused mountout from the United Kingdom; through Ascension Island staging; and finally to the cold and misty uncertainty of the landings at San Carlos Bay. The entire expedition was a dicey gamble. The British did not have control of the air, and Argentina made the British Lion pay dearly for that inadequacy. Indeed, without the few Harriers available to the amphibious force, the operations probably could not have been mounted.

Thompson stresses the importance placed on tactical reconnaissance. As the result of an appalling lack of national intelligence, he had to rely upon task force assets for answers to his essential elements of information. High marks go to the Royal Marine Special Boat Squadron, the Special Air Service, and the Marine Mountain and Arctic Warfare Cadre, which provided Thompson with the eyes and ears of battle. Equally high marks go to the helicopter pilots who ran great risks in supporting not only these special units but the brigade in general. These helicopter crews paid a stiff price in lives for their gallantry.

Following the unsupported landing at San Carlos, the difficult move on the main Argentine force at Stanley is described with each unit's movements detailed. The weather was atrocious, the terrain inhospitable, and the Argentine air attacks on the brigade's logistical support were devastating. If these problems were not enough, the British press broadcast to the world—to include Argentina—the disposition and intentions of the brigade as it moved eastward. This was a bitter pill for the troops to swallow in the interest of the public's "right to know." In spite of a lack of intelligence, a lack of secrecy, and a severely damaged logistical base,



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the commandos and paras "yumped" across the storm-swept desolation of East Falkland in the direction of the Argentine vital area of Stanley. In surprisingly short order they made their march and positioned themselves for the attacks against the commanding terrain of Two Sisters, Mt. Harriet, and Wireless Ridge. The successful night attacks on these features are a testament to tactical proficiency and small unit leadership of the highest order. These actions, which brought the brigade into Stanley and to victory, are well-described and illustrated. There are also vignettes in the telling to give the reader an acute sense of the action and character of this peculiar war.

No Picnic is a first-person and first-rate account of a vicious little war fought under dreadful environmental conditions. In this age of data processing and wargames, the predictable computer outcome of the struggle would have been a British loss. They were outnumbered by a well-armed and well-supplied enemy in prepared defensive positions. 3 Commando Brigade was on the short side of every element factored into a wargame. But wargames are not wars, and they cannot compute the

human factor—the very factor that carried the day for the British. They were on the short side of the equation in everything but skill, toughness, and leadership. In these areas the British were clearly superior, and therein lay the difference between defeat and victory.

No Picnic makes interesting reading for a military and general readers alike. It is clearly written and easy to follow. In fact, if there is a fault to the book, it is in its relative simplicity. It reads a bit like an after-action report. One would have hoped to see more of Brigadier Thompson in it. The worries and uncertainties plaguing the man were formidable, yet we catch little of the personal torment Thompson experienced as he, and he alone, fulfilled his duties as commander of an extraordinary brigade doing an extraordinary job.

FALKLANDS COMMANDO. By Capt Hugh McManners, RM. William Kimber & Co, Ltd, London, 1984, 224 pp., (available by special order only) \$13.50, plus \$2 shipping UPS or \$1.25 USPS.*

reviewed by Maj Kevin A. Conry

All Marines, particularly those who have participated in combined arctic operations in northern Norway, will find Capt McManners' *Falklands Commando* well worthwhile. In clear, crisp, descriptive prose he details the adventures of his five-man forward observer (FO) team of 148 Commando from its initial attachment to the Royal Marine Special Boat Squadron (SBS) until the termination of *OPERATION CORPORATE*.

By way of brief explanation, the full title of Capt McManners' unit is 148 Commando Forward Observation Battery Royal Artillery. It is based at Poole with the Royal Marines. Each member of the unit must pass the arduous commando course at the Commando Training Center, Lympstone. Following successful completion of the commando course, parachute training is conducted at Aldershot, the depot of the parachute regiment. The purpose of teams from 148 Commando is to control and direct both naval gunfire and artillery in support of ground forces.

The author traces his personal participation in the Falklands campaign from the point of being recalled on short

* Copies of this book must be ordered by the reader from Articles of War Ltd., 7101 North Ashland Ave., Chicago, IL 60626, (312) 338-7171.

notice from leave until the Argentine surrender and his return to the United Kingdom aboard *Canberra*. His use of chronological sequences is smoothly framed and is sprinkled with an endless variety of anecdotes. For example, with so many long days to pass en route south, McManners describes some amusing incidents undertaken to pass time and relieve some of the inevitable apprehension and tension that accompany any commitment to combat.

Participating in a number of operations ashore gave the British soldier and Marine a keen appreciation of their previous arctic training in Norway a few months before. Nearly everyone in the 148 Commando FO team, as well as the SBS to which McManners' team was attached, had just returned from Norway in March 1982 with 3 Commando Brigade.

In a chapter entitled "Survival," the author discusses the problems of hypothermia, weather, and various types of clothing and equipment. He compares British, Dutch, American, and Danish field rations and elaborates on small field stoves. Also, the American M16 was a much preferred weapon by the 148 Commando and the SBS. Although somewhat out of context with the rest of the book, this chapter is interesting and offers useful insight to the reader.

With his direct style, obviously relying on his diary numerous times, the author manages to keep the reader's attention throughout. He tastefully expresses his personal reactions to violence and death, fear, and arduous arctic-like conditions, embellishing it all with a bit of British understatement. His even-handed portrayal of all participating British military units is refreshing. Despite his personal associations, there is no obvious attempt to glorify any particular unit or to overdraw the role of special forces regarding their contributions to the larger effort.

In a few well-chosen words, Capt McManners succinctly and aptly describes the classic range of feelings during his experiences in the South Atlantic... "one was either worried, scared stiff, completely tired out and pissed off, or tremendously relieved."

For anyone with an interest in special operations forces, this book will provide particularly enjoyable reading. In the larger sense, it portrays very well the day-to-day feelings, misunderstandings, and thrills of a participant in a recent event that must be one of the most interesting applications of amphibious power projection in the last 30 years.