

One of a series of articles
covering the lives of Dovorians of international renown.

Terence Lewin

- from Maison Dieu to the Falkland Islands

by Lorraine Sencicle B.A. (econ) hon

On 19 November 1920, Terence Thornton Lewin was born in Moray House, Maison Dieu Road but due to a clerical error, he was registered as a girl! Nonetheless, by the time he was 11 he was attending the all boys, Judd School, Tonbridge and went on to marry and father three children. However, his claim to fame came from a totally different quarter but, sad to say, he has not received recognition in the town of his birth.

On leaving school, Terence wanted to be a police officer but as the outbreak of WWII was imminent, he joined the navy instead. During the war he served on H.M.S. *Ashanti*, was mentioned in dispatches three times and was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. When peace returned Terence stayed in the navy and rose through the ranks, from second commanding officer of the Royal Yacht *Britannia* in the 1950's to First Sea Lord in 1977.

Knighthed, Sir Terence was appointed the head of all three Services - the Chief of Defence Staff - the top ranking member of the armed forces. Much of his time in that position he was fighting increasing cutbacks in defence expenditure and this included the withdrawal of the navy from the South Atlantic.

He was six months off retirement when,



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on 19 March 1982, a group of Argentineans announced that they had captured South Georgia, in the south Atlantic, for Argentina. On 2 April, Argentina occupied the Falkland Islands, but the feeling in Government was to let them have them. After all, it was said, there was nothing there but sheep and a few islanders - a legacy of British colonialism.

Sir Terence, however, felt otherwise and made this clear. The Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, much to everyone's surprise, took his advice one-step further and set up a 'War Cabinet', which of course included Sir Terence. According to his biographer, Admiral Hill, he and Mrs Thatcher, "... really clicked, once they learned to trust each other."

The 'War Cabinet' sent out two separate task forces, one surface force and the other nuclear-powered submarines. At

the head of the surface task force was Rear Admiral Sandy Woodward who was increasingly concerned that his force was in danger. He made it clear that this came from three separate contingents: an aircraft carrier battle group to the north, Exocet missile-armed frigates in the centre and to the south the gun-armed cruiser, the *General Belgrano*, accompanied by two Exocet-armed destroyers.

Woodward was authorised to take action against any Argentinean forces he thought were threatening him but was not able to command the submarines to help without going through the 'War Cabinet'. Further, neither contingent could attack unless they were within the Total Exclusion Zone (TEZ) declared by the UK on 30 April. This was a circle of 200 nautical miles (370 km) from the centre of the Falkland Islands and at the time, both contingents were outside.

As the *Belgrano* steamed towards Woodward's task force, the Rear Admiral contacted the 'War Cabinet' for permission to allow the submarine *Conqueror* to attack. Sir Terence went straight to see the Prime Minister, who was at Chequers, and persuaded her to order the sinking of the *Belgrano*. The *Conqueror* torpedoed the *Belgrano* on 2 May, 36 nautical miles (58 kilometres) outside the TEZ.

Three hundred and twenty-three members of the *Belgrano's* crew died with 700 men rescued from the open ocean despite cold seas and stormy weather. Controversy followed, particularly in the UK, where it was argued that the *Belgrano* was sailing away from the TEZ. Further, although

international law stated that in times of war, the heading of a belligerent ship has no bearing on its status, the Falkland's conflict was not technically a war.

Two days after the sinking of the *Belgrano*, HMS *Sheffield* was hit by an Argentinean Exocet missile, which led to an inferno killing 20 crew and severely injuring 24. The Falklands struggle was to rage until Argentina was forced to surrender on 14 June. On 20 June the British retook the South Sandwich Islands and declared hostilities to be over. By that time 3 Falkland Islanders, together with 255 British and 649 Argentine members of the armed forces, had been killed, over half of the latter due to the sinking of the *Belgrano*. Since then much of the islands are no-go areas because of the minefields that the Argentineans left behind. However, in 1994, the Argentinean Government stated that the sinking of the *Belgrano* was a 'legal act of war' but still claimed sovereignty over the Falklands.

Following the Conflict, the proposed cutbacks in the surface fleet were abandoned and replacements for many of the lost ships and helicopters were ordered, plus more Sea Harriers. Sir Terence was given the task of restructuring the Armed forces, for which he was created Baron Lewin of Greenwich. He died on 23 January 1999 when he was cited as being, "one of the greatest military leaders of the late 20th century." Yet there is nothing in Dover in recognition of him.

This article first appeared in the Dover Mercury and the Dover Society would like to thank them for the use of this story. Editor