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Military Misdemeanours

Corruption, incompetence, lust and downright stupidity

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Extract

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'GOTCHA!'

A cynical view of the 1982 Falklands Conflict is that it was a classic example of two unpopular governments resorting to violent jingoism in order to direct attention away from failed domestic agendas. It also scandalously robbed the British public of the chance to watch Argentinean football stars Ossie Ardilles and Ricky Villa play in the 1982 FA Cup final for Tottenham Hotspur. However, on a more serious note...

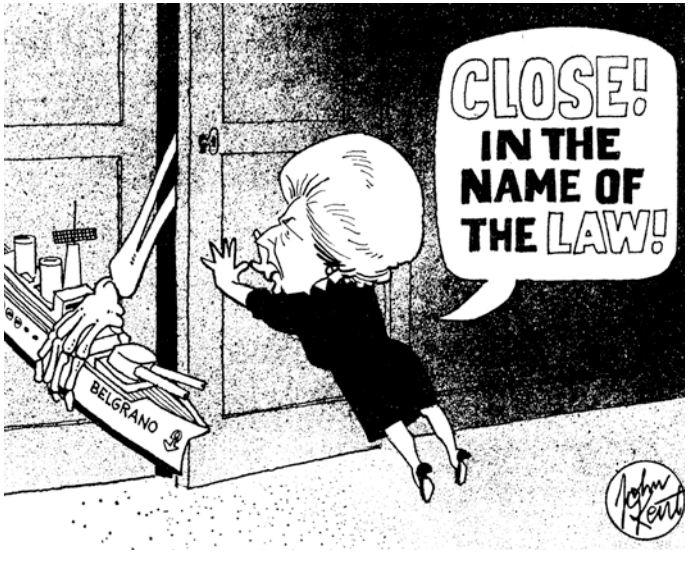
At 11:00am on 30 April a 'total exclusion zone' was established by the British within a 200-mile radius of the Falkland Islands. Four days before, the Argentine *General Belgrano* had left Ushuaia with an escort of two destroyers on a course to intercept the British naval task force.

On 1 May the three Argentine ships were picked up by the British nuclear submarine HMS *Conqueror* and tracked. Although it was outside the limits of the exclusion zone the commander of Conqueror, Chris Wreford-Brown, was concerned that the *Belgrano* might be able to reach a position from which it could cause havoc with the task force unless he attacked. His concern came at a time when British intelligence was warning that the Argentines were about to launch a full-scale attack on the task force. A decision was taken by the government and *Belgrano*'s fate was sealed.

The following day, at 18:56pm GMT *Conqueror* fired a salvo of three torpedoes at the cruiser *General Belgrano*. After a 57-second

run, Wreford-Brown saw an orange fire-ball as the first torpedo struck the ship; five seconds later he witnessed a second explosion and a large spurt of water or steam. By the time of the third explosion he was no longer waiting to see what had happened but was busy plotting his way out of danger.

On board the *Belgrano* there was pandemonium. The first torpedo had blown the bow of the ship off. The second punched through the armour plating and blew up, knocking out the ship's electrical power. Although the bulkhead doors were secure, the ship began listing heavily. About 25 minutes later Captain Bonzo ordered his crew to abandon ship. In total 323 Argentine crew were lost in the attack, the majority of whom were killed by the second explosion, which took out several mess rooms.



This cartoon of Margaret Thatcher was published in August 1984 when confidential documents about the sinking of the Belgrano *were leaked. (John Kent, the* Evening Standard, *20 August 1984, the British Cartoon Archive, University of Kent, © Solo Syndication/Associated Newspapers)*

Although the mission was a success – the Argentine Navy kept well away from the Falklands for the rest of the war – the sinking of the *Belgrano* left a bitter taste. The early edition headline in the popular tabloid *The Sun* infamously read: 'GOTCHA!' Later editions were toned down as the reality of the situation sank in. Hundreds of young men were either dead or adrift in the bitterly cold South Atlantic, desperately praying for rescue.

When it was later revealed not only that the *Belgrano* had been attacked outside the exclusion zone, but that it was in fact sailing away from the islands at the time of the strike there was a wave of outrage. Sure enough the British had changed their rules of engagement to allow *Conqueror* to attack the *Belgrano* outside the exclusion zone and this decision had been personally authorized by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who received criticism for the attack long into her premiership. The sinking was labelled as somewhere between an act of piracy and a war crime, or both.

In the fullness of time it appears the British were justified in sending the *Belgrano* to the bottom. In a TV interview more than two decades after the sinking Héctor Bonzo admitted that he was still under orders to attack the British fleet wherever he found it and that he was anxious to do so.[97] His westward movement on the morning of 2 May was only a temporary measure to get the *Belgrano* into a better attacking position – not back to Argentina.*

* One final irony is that the *Belgrano* had been sold to Argentina by the United States. In US service the *Belgrano* had been named USS *Phoenix* and was a survivor of the 1941 Japanese Pearl Harbor attack.

SATANIC OPERATION

FRANCE has been alarmingly quiet for too long in these pages. The last time we heard of a French scandal was back in the days of red trousers. Making a welcome return, here are the French again, leaping like a hare out from the undergrowth of history straight into the onrushing headlamps of global condemnation.

On the evening of 10 July 1985 there was a party atmosphere on board the Greenpeace protest ship *Rainbow Warrior*. Having travelled to New Zealand, the ship was anchored in Marsden Wharf, in Auckland's Waitemata Harbour. The Greenpeace activists on board were preparing to lead a flotilla of yachts to French-controlled Mururoa Atoll to protest against nuclear weapons testing. The crew had been having a meeting to discuss tactics in their forthcoming protest and also celebrating a crew member's birthday with a cake and some beers.

The meeting broke up about 11pm and the crew split up. Some remained talking, finishing off the last of the beer; others returned to their cabins and went to sleep.[102] At about 11.50pm there was a dull thud that felt as though a tug had collided with the Greenpeace ship. The generator went out, and for a few seconds before the emergency lighting came on, the ship was plunged into darkness. Some of the crew ran up on deck, while others went to see what the trouble was.

Two minutes later, those on deck saw a flash of blue light below the surface near to the ship and felt the force of an explosion.

Those already on deck jumped onto the wharf to safety and watched in disbelief as the *Rainbow Warrior* began to sink before their eyes.

As the activists stumbled around in shock at what had just occurred, it became apparent that one of their crewmates was missing. Photographer Fernando Pereira had last been seen in the mess at the time of the first impact, but had not been sighted since. New Zealand Navy divers went onto the wreck, and at about 3.00am returned with Pereira's body. They had found him face down in a cabin. Although no one can be exactly sure what happened, it is believed he had gone to retrieve his cameras and had been caught by inrushing sea water after the second detonation.

New Zealand Prime Minister David Lange quickly condemned the explosion as 'a major criminal act'. A massive police investigation was launched to find the cause of the sinking and establish if the death of the photographer should be treated as murder.

The public's response to an appeal for information yielded immediate results. Following interviews with the crew the police said they wanted to interview a Frenchman who had visited the ship earlier in the day. Reading this in the press, a customs officer called Frank McLean reported an unusual incident involving a French crewed yacht, the *Ouvéa*. This yacht had been docked in Whangarei but had left on 9 July.

What was strange about it in McLean's opinion was that the three crewmen had brand new passports, all of which were lacking the usual creases and signs of wear one would expect. He also reported that the three men were distinctly military in their bearing. When McLean checked the vessel he also became suspicious that there was no photographic equipment on board despite one of the men telling him he was a photographer.

Shortly after the bombing these three men were brought in for questioning but were then released as there was insufficient evidence to hold them. The passenger on the yacht, another Frenchman, was also questioned but then released due to lack of evidence.

There were other reports of unusual activity reported to the police. At 7pm on the evening of the incident two strangers had been spotted carrying an inflated Zodiac rubber dinghy, which struck them as being unusual for its light grey colour. At 9.30pm another witness drinking at a boating club had seen a man get out of a Zodiac rubber dinghy, jog down the road, and then return driving a white camper van. He watched as the man and someone else took a large bundle out of the dinghy and loaded it into the camper van. Thinking this was suspicious, he telephoned the police and made a note of the van's registration plate.

The camper van was traced to Newman's car rentals and the staff warned to alert the police when it was returned. Sure enough, on 12 July a married Swiss couple, Sophie and Alain Turenge, came into the airport branch of Newman's with the white Toyota Hiace. They said they were going home early and asked for a part refund for the early return of the vehicle.

While staff kept the couple talking the police were called. A detective was sent to the airport and the couple were brought in for questioning. It was very quickly realized that both were travelling on false passports. In fact, their identity was established as Major Alain Mafart and Captain Dominique Prieur, both of whom were agents of the DGSE (Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure), part of the French secret service.

Meanwhile an investigation of the wrecked Greenpeace ship revealed a huge hole measuring 6 by 8 feet in the side of the vessel. The fact that the metal had been pushed inward indicated that an

explosive device had been placed on the outside of the ship's hull. A second device appeared to have damaged the propeller and rudder. Sure enough, fragments of limpet mines not used by New Zealand's armed forces were found attached to the hull.

Putting together the evidence it appeared the *Ouvéa* had been used to transport explosives and French agents to New Zealand. This was reinforced by the discovery of fingerprints from the captured agents on documents taken from the *Ouvéa*. After the crew of the *Ouvéa* had been questioned they and their boat disappeared – literally without trace. New Zealand police concluded that the yacht had been scuttled mid-ocean and the crew had been taken off by a French submarine.

With a clear motive established – the fact that *Rainbow Warrior* was heading for French waters to protest against their nuclear tests – and the clumsy trail of evidence left behind, New Zealand pointed an accusing finger at the French government who they believed were behind the attack. Such an accusation caused an almighty international row and led to strenuous denials from the French government – denials which no one outside France seriously believed.

In truth it was so glaringly obvious that the French were behind the attack that President Mitterrand was obliged to order an inquiry into the matter on 8 August. It reported that although six agents from the French secret service, DGSE, were in New Zealand at the time, they were on an intelligence-gathering mission against Greenpeace and did not commit the attack. When received this report appeared as credible as a chocolate kettle, and it was immediately followed by a second inquiry headed by the French Defence Minister, Charles Hernu.

While the French newspaper *Le Monde* accused Mitterrand of being behind the mission, a scapegoat was required. Hernu interviewed the head of DGSE, Admiral Lacoste, and asked him to explain himself. The investigation became farcical when Lacoste refused to answer certain of the Defence Minister's questions, citing the need for secrecy to protect his agents' lives. Lacoste was sacked and Hernu resigned.

On 21 September French Prime Minister Laurent Fabius came clean and admitted that the DGSE had been ordered to neutralize *Rainbow Warrior*. Ironically enough, Fabius was one of the few people mentioned so far who didn't have prior knowledge of the attack.

New Zealand was understandably enraged by the whole business. As some pointed out, there are a lot of New Zealanders buried in war cemeteries in France – were they to be repaid by French saboteurs attaching limpet mines to a ship and killing an innocent man?[103] There were also international implications to the affair. Pereira was a Dutch citizen and *Rainbow Warrior* was registered in Great Britain. Clearly France was in line for some major criticism.

Meanwhile, on 4 November, the trial of Prieur and Mafart began. At an earlier hearing the two had pleaded not guilty to charges of arson, conspiring to commit arson and murder. However, to avoid prolonging France's embarrassment, the pair caused surprise by pleading guilty to a lesser charge of manslaughter. New Zealand's Solicitor General, Paul Neazor, QC, accepted the plea as it could not be proved the French agents were personally to blame for placing the explosive devices, nor that they intended to kill. They were each sentenced to ten years' imprisonment.

Perhaps the most scandalous aspect of the case is yet to arise. Neither Mafart nor Prieur served anything like their full sentence before they were allowed back to France. While most of the world condemned them, a sort of siege mentality developed inside France and calls were made to put economic sanctions on New Zealand to secure the agents' release. New Zealand stood to suffer very

heavily if France used its influence on the European Community to impose greater tariffs on New Zealand lamb, butter and other agricultural produce.[104]

The growing perception that the agents were heroes was reinforced by the sending of gifts to them in gaol. As they faced their first Christmas in prison, French politicians sent them presents of cognac and wine.[105]

A solution to the dispute was offered by Dutch Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers, who suggested that both parties should go to the UN. New Zealand demanded an apology, $9 million compensation and a ruling that France would not try to oppose New Zealand exports through the European Community. There was some haggling over the price, but eventually France agreed to pay $7 million and apologize for its violation of New Zealand and international laws.

In return for this – and this caused a lot of anger – New Zealand agreed to transfer Mafart and Prieur to the custody of the French military authorities on the French Polynesian island of Hao where they were to remain for three years. Although kept away from the media, the two agents were able live quite normally.

Two years later, Mafart returned to France claiming that he had a health condition that required attention in Paris. Prieur also returned to be at her dying father's bedside. Needless to say, in both cases that was the end of their punishment.

While Prieur was last heard of giving birth to a child and leaving the service, in 1988 Mafart was promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel, then in 1991 was awarded the French Legion of Merit. Although this award was bestowed routinely on service personnel who had completed 14–18 years' service, it was interpreted by many as being a reward for his part in Operation *Satanic* – the French codename for the mission.

With the passage of time some of the details in the mission became much clearer. In 2005 the French newspaper *Le Monde* received a 23-page, handwritten report dated 8 April 1986, which had been prepared by former DGSE chief Admiral Pierre Lacoste on the orders of incoming President Jacques Chirac's Defence Minister, André Giraud. Until the publication of this hitherto secret report, the official line was that Mitterrand had not given the order to sink the *Rainbow Warrior* and that the decision was made solely on the authority of Charles Hernu under pressure from elements within the French Navy.

Although the report is not conclusive proof, Lacoste clearly states that Mitterrand did know about the mission and gave them a green light to go ahead with it.[106]

In 2006 Xavier Maniguet, a doctor and French Navy reservist, revealed that he had been part of the mission. He confirmed earlier suspicions that the *Ouvéa* was used to smuggle explosives and diving gear into New Zealand. His part in the operation was to pose as a playboy who had chartered the yacht and its three-man crew. Maniguet was arrested along with the three crewmen who had been picked up because of their suspicious passports. He was released after a night of questioning by the New Zealand police.



Cartoon by Kal [Kevin Kallaugher] published in The Observer, *1 September 1985. (The British Cartoon Archive, University of Kent, © Kevin Kallaugher)*

Maniguet said that Mafart and Prieur collected the sabotage equipment from the boat and passed them on to a third team – the agents who actually placed the charges on the Greenpeace ship, and who escaped from New Zealand without detection. According to Maniguet, the pilot of the Zodiac dinghy that took the two divers to a drop off point from which they swam to the *Rainbow Warrior* was former DGSE agent Gérard Royal. However, according to Royal's younger brother Antoine, the agent was actually the man who placed the limpet mines on the hull of the ship.[107]

It appears that the DGSE had a history of dirty tricks against protest ships and had developed special bacteria to contaminate the fuel lines of *Rainbow Warrior*. However, Defence Minister Hernu wanted to make a big splash and ordered them to blow the ship up.

Under pressure from Hernu for speedy results, the mission was not properly thought out. The only information the sabotage team had on Greenpeace was from the agent Christine Cabon whom the DGSE had planted in the organization as a mole under the name Frederique Bonlieu. Although Cabon was able to give the team helpful background information, there was little of operational use.

Mafart was in charge of planning. He argued that a bomb should be placed on the propeller shaft of the ship, which would have been enough to cripple it. However, Mafart claims that Hernu put pressure on DGSE bosses to actually sink the vessel. It was therefore decided to place a small charge to knock out the engine and to scare everyone off the ship. The second charge would then detonate two minutes later and blow a hole in the ship below the water line, causing it to sink.

To achieve the best results, Mafart revealed that the saboteurs obtained a set of blueprints for the vessel and worked out where to place the charges so they would not hit cabins. There was – he says – absolutely no plan to harm anybody, pointing out that if they had wanted to kill the crew they could have easily bombed the ship while it was out in the ocean.

Another problem facing Mafart was the strange insistence that the team use four-hour timers on the mines rather than the usual 24- or 48-hour ones. If these longer timers had been used all the agents would have been able to evacuate the country before the police were alerted.

In the event, Mafart woke up the morning after the bombing and was horrified to learn that one of the Greenpeace crew had been killed. From their room in the Hamilton motel, Mafart and Prieur made an emergency call back to DGSE for guidance. Inexplicably they could not get through to their case officer. Feeling abandoned, the two agents added up their options and decided to use their Swiss passports and fly out of the country.[108] Next thing they knew, they were facing a murder charge.

The moral of our story is that although peace protestors might at times be a nuisance, governments can't go blowing things up just because life is being made difficult for them. The net result of the attack – other than the consequent wave of protest – was that Greenpeace received a great deal more public support and an increase in donations, including compensation from France, which allowed them to replace the vessel.

In conclusion, if it had not been for the tragic death of a peaceful civilian, the whole affair could be described as more Inspector Clouseau than James Bond.