

Troops surrender at Port Stanley

Por David Fairhall, Defence Correspondent, The Guardian, 15 de junio de 1982, Londres, Reino Unido

A ceasefire was agreed in the Falklands last night after British troops had fought their way into the outskirts of the capital, Port Stanley. The Prime Minister told the House of Commons that white flags were flying over the town, and that the Argentinian defenders had thrown down their weapons.

At the Ministry of Defence, officials were more circumspect. British troops had been ordered to stand fast overnight, they said, because it was impossible to move into the town in darkness without risk of further clashes. But there was every expectation that at first light, the British would resume their advance and disarm the defending garrison.

For the moment, it was true that the Argentinians had "surrendered", but not necessarily without conditions. Negotiations would resume at day break, said the minister.

Initial contact between the opposing forces' headquarters was made by radio at 5pm. A ceasefire was then ordered. The two commanders General Mario Menendez, and the British second-in-command Brigadier John Walters, met at Moody Brook, the former Marines barracks with an interpreter.

The Ministry of Defence in London was kept in touch with the progress of negotiations at five-minute intervals through an open telephone line routed through Northwood, Middlesex.

Although no formal agreement was signed, and reports from Buenos Aires suggested that the ceasefire might last only until 10am this morning local time if the British surrender terms were unsatisfactory, defence officials in London were confident that the 'fighting' was over.

Their priorities in this morning's negotiations would be to stop the fighting throughout the Falklands, including West Falkland, where an Argentinian garrison of up to 2,000 men is still intact, to separate the defenders from their arms, and to secure the safety of all civilians.

There is no question of the Argentinians leaving the islands with their weapons. These would be handed over to the British troops. The aim would be to ship the Argentinian soldiers out in a very short time.

Whatever terms the British have offered, the Argentinians have little real option but to accept them. Throughout the day commiques issued in Buenos Aires had prepared Argentina for the inevitable defeat.

In London Mrs Thatcher told jubilant MPs last night, "After successful attacks general Jeremy Moore decided to press forward and the Argentines retreated. As our forces reached the outskirts of Port Stanley large numbers of Argentine soldiers threw down their weapons. They are reported to be flying the white flag over Port Stanley".

"Our troops have been ordered not to fire except in self defence. Talks are now in progress between General Menendez and our deputy commander Brigadier Walters about a surrender of the Argentine forces on the East and West Falklands. I will report further tomorrow".

The Prime Minister's statement was followed by loud cheers, and waving of order papers.

The Defence Secretary, Mr John Nott, said later he assumed the Union Jack would be flying over Port Stanley within a few hours. "We have still got to get the final details worked out but it looks very good". Asked if the war was over, he said, "It looks like it".

This followed the news announced by Mr Nott at his own ministry, that the defenders had been seen "streaming back into Port Stanley" as the British forces captured three of the four remaining hills to the west of the capital, and began their final advance into the town.

By the time Mr Nott gave this news, at about noon Falklands time, the leading British troops were within sight of Government House, at the western end of the Stanley waterfront, from which the governor Mr Rex Hunt was forcibly evicted two months ago.

The only high ground still apparently held by the Argentinians was Sapper Hill, Mount Tumbledown and Mount William to the south west, and Wireless Ridge, on the north western side of the harbour, had already fallen to the British - a combined force assembled from elements of the 3rd Commando Brigade, the Parachute Regiment, and the 5th Infantry Brigade, which includes Gurkhas, Scots and Welsh Guards.

On Tumbledown and Wireless Ridge the Argentinians put up fierce resistance from prepared positions, but even so British casualties were reported to be "incredibly light". It was from Mount William that the defenders were seen running back into the town, but it was immediately clear whether they were retreating to trenches in the rear, so as to make the British fight their way across the flat ground leading into the town itself, or preparing to give up the struggle.

Whatever their intention, the British now have a stranglehold on the Argentinian garrison, able to shell and mortar them from two sides. The airport was also within range of the British 103mm guns.

There will be no inclination among the British soldiery, therefore, to accept anything but an unconditional surrender - particularly after the casualties they have suffered - although even at this stage diplomatic pressure may force Mrs Thatcher's Government to give the Argentinians some way out.

Earlier reports from Buenos Aires yesterday suggested that President Galtieri had authorised General Menendez to give in, provided it was compatible with his idea of military honour.

The assault on Port Stanley began before dawn on Friday, when a first push carried the British up on the Two Sisters ridge, on the Mount Harriet and Mount Longdon. It was the last of these, to the north west of the town, that saw the heaviest fighting, and accounted for most of the estimated 50 Argentinian dead. Fatal British casualties in this first phase of the attack were less than half that number, although many more were wounded. By yesterday afternoon, "some hundreds" of Argentinian prisoners had already been taken.

There were several signs throughout the day that Argentine authorities themselves believed, and perhaps even knew, that the battle would be lost.

As the British advanced on Port Stanley the government news agency, Telam quoted an unidentified officer warning that "it has to be remembered that the enemy army forms part of the NATO forces and has equipment of high technological development". For some time the authorities have been selling the idea that if Argentinian is defeated it will be because it is up against not only Britain but the industrial West. Telam's officer maintained the line: "We are confronted with two great powers, Great Britain and the United States".

The high command's communique yesterday began to emphasize that Argentina's troops defending Port Stanley faced an enemy superior in numbers and weaponry.

The Argentine people first began to know that the situation was serious when the communique started to interrupt television coverage of the World Cup. The Argentine garrison received nothing from the mainland, although the weather has been good enough for flying over the past two days. Four raids were mounted, but British defence officials characterised them rather as "flights over the islands" than as serious attacks.