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Landmines in the Sand: The Falkland Islands

The Falkland Islands contain approximately 117 mine fields. Many of the mines were remotely delivered. About 80 percent of these landmines are hidden beneath sandy beaches and peat, which make detection and removal very difficult.

by Juan Carlos Ruan, Inter-American Defense Board and Jill E. Macheme

Introduction

Ever since John Strong, a British naval captain, first set foot on the Falkland Islands (Malvinas) in 1690, the South Atlantic Island arc has been subject to numerous skirmishes and fiery debates between countries all vying for control. However, none of these disputes created an ordeal comparable to the islands' most recent conflict between Britain and Argentina. In 1765, Britain established a settlement on the Falkland Islands and declared sovereignty in the name of King George III. Since then, the British have maintained control over the Falkland Islands asserting their sovereignty. However, Argentina contests Britain's rights to the islands and contends that their rights to the islands are defined in the Spanish Papal Grants of 1493 and 1494, which claimed all of South America (except for regions maintained by Portugal as territory of Spain). Argentina also sees the Falkland Islands as a representation of British colonialism, and it states that its proximity to the islands compared to that of Britain warrants control. Though these opposing views have created bouts of turmoil for over 200 years, the most recent conflict occurred in 1982.

The British were unprepared for the attack, and the defensive attempts of the Royal Marines were ineffective against the thousands of Argentine troops. The British forces retreated to Montevideo, Uruguay, in order to organize a counterattack. During the next two months, the Argentines just as successfully gained control of the islands building up a military post of more than 10,000 troops and naming

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battle. A UN Special Committee on
Decolonization is currently negotiating
with both countries in hopes of find-
ing sovereignty between the islands.21
Moreover, heavy warfare left numer-
ous areas burdened with landmines.
Authorities at Port Stanley point out
that there are currently 117 mine fields
on the island containing approximately
25,000 anti-personnel and anti-vehicle
mines, 18,000 of which were placed
signs containing the warning "DAN-
GER MINES." There are also some
areas adjacent to mine fields where the
presence of mines, due to tidal action
or watercourses, is suspected. However,
these areas are also marked with ap-
propriate warning signs. Visitors to
the islands are briefed about the dangers
and can acquire a mine field map avail-
able from the Joint Service Exploitative
Ordnance Disposal Operations Cen-
ter (JSEODOC). If visitors come
across a suspicious object, warn the
briefing, they should do the following:
do not move or touch the object, mark
its position on the ground, note its
position with a grid reference, if pos-
nible note its size, shape, color and dis-
tinctive markings (if any) and report it
to the JSEODOC or the police in
Stanley. They are also warned that "En-
tering a minefield, attempting to de-
trump mines, damaging minefields, tak-
ing away minefield signs and driv-
ing animals into minefields are crimi-
nal offenses that may result in a fine
or short prison sentence." The
removal of landmines on the
Falkland Islands is difficult because
some of the mines were remotely de-
levered. About 80 percent of the land-
mines are hidden beneath sandy
beaches and peat that can shift a mine's
position and make detection and re-
moval more difficult.18 In 1983, heavy
casualties in demining units stopped
the first attempts to clear the Falkland
Islands of landmines. Since then, Brit-
ain has signed and ratified the 1997
Mine Ban Treaty, which makes them
responsible, as administrator of the
Falkland Islands, for clearing the land-
mines by March 1, 2002.19 Also, in
July of 1999, both Argentina (who still
claims the Falkland Islands and signed
but did not ratify the treaty) and Brit-
ain agreed to joint forces in the removal
procedure.20 All of the mine-infected
areas have been enclosed and posted,
and an Explosive Ordnance Disposal

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while the EEC imposed a trade emb-
argo over Argentina.20 However, it
was clear that resolution was far off as
Britain sent more warships to the is-
lands and rejected a United Nations
(UN) peace proposal.21 Likewise, Ar-
gentina continued to announce any
appeals for a truce.22 After 72 days, the
war was officially over on June 14 when
the British regained control of the capi-
tal, Port Stanley, and Argentina agreed
to a cease-fire.23 In total, this battle of
land, air and sea claimed 236 British
and 655 Argentine personnel.24

Landmine Situation
Though the fighting has ended, the
Falkland Islands are faced with
many problems in the aftermath of this
by Argentina.25

These mine fields are dispersed
to a total area of 20 sq. km through-
out the vicinities of Port Stanley, Port
Howard, Fox Bay and Goose
Green.18 The UN declared that there
were nine different types of AT and AP
mines minefield used during the conflict.18
The five AT mines are the Nobi (Israel),
SB-81 (Italy), FMK-3 plastic blast
mine (Argentina), C-3-A/B (Spain)
and the M1A1 (United States).18 The
four AP mines (approx. 5,000)18 are
the Nobi (Israel), SB-33 (Italy), FMX-
1 plastic blast mine (Argentina) and the
P-4-B (Spain).18

Today these mine fields are well
marked and do not pose a threat to
those aware of the situation. These lo-
ocates are marked with red triangular
signs and bordered on all sides by
white commercial tape. The white
commercial tape is only used on public
mines; there are also some mines on
private land. An unknown number of
mine fields have been marked by the
victims or marked by the British, but
numbers are unknown. The British
removed mines from the islands.20

While clearing the islands of mines
by using netting is not the most
futuristic solution, there are other
methods available. The British have
begun to experiment with a British
developed deployment. The
S-200-P (Britain) and
S-200-D (Italy) have been deployed
to the Falklands to clear
mines. These devices are used
to detect and clear mines
by a British conceptual
system.21

The Falkland Islands