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Update 11/15/10: The following article describes our experiences surrounding the Falkland Island/Malvinas War which took place while we were on the mission field in the early 1980's.

A Talk About the Falkland Islands War Days

by a missionary who was in Chile at the time

--Given at ORU on October 29, 2010 by Dean Helland (Missionary to Chile 1975-1990)

I and my family had gone to Chile as missionaries in 1975, following a military coup of the Communist government of Salvador Allende by the armed forces which resulted in the head of the Army, Augusto Pinochet, becoming president. The coup took place on September 11th, 1973.

Our first furlough came in December of 1979 and lasted only two months. We returned to Chile in February of 1980.

We lived in Concepción, Chile, the second largest city of Chile, located 325 miles south of the capital city of Santiago. It was the site of a large military garrison. Historically, the military had marched to Santiago several times and replaced the government with one more to its own liking in the early days of the republic. Concepción is located next to Talcahuano, its port city. Talcahuano is the site of a naval base. The Bay of Talcahuano is the largest in the world, with the San Francisco Bay in California being the second largest in the world.

Historical Background

Chile had defeated Peru and Bolivia in the War of the Pacific a century earlier, in 1879. Ever since then, both countries had vowed to take back the land annexed from them in northern Chile by the end of the next century. Argentina had not taken part in that war, for Chile had ceded territory to Argentina to keep them out of that war, I was told by Chileans. Meantime, Argentines were being taught in their public schools that Chile had stolen the southern-most territories which had earlier been part of Argentina.

Though there was no war up to 1979, there were certainly war sounds made by the neighboring countries, including Argentina. The Beagle Islands off the extreme tip of South America were in dispute between Chile and Argentina. Queen Elizabeth II of England was the arbitrator, and she ruled that the islands belonged to Chile. Argentina rejected this decision and nearly went to war with Chile toward the end of 1978. It seemed that the southern cone countries of South America would soon be embroiled in a war with Peru and Bolivia to the north and Argentina to the south and east. It later came out that had this war taken place, all the main cities of Chile would have been bombed by the Argentine Air Force, and Buenos Aires would have been bombed by the Chilean Air Force which was based in Brazil, resulting in the loss of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of lives.

Another dangerous element in the mix was that all of these countries now had military dictatorships. Due to the pressures of the Soviet Union and terrorist activities instigated by local Communists who had been trained in Castro's Cuba, each country was under a state of alert and brooked no nonsense from either local citizens or foreigners. It was during this time that an entire generation of young Argentines was basically eliminated by the military in the Argentine "Dirty War".

One night in late 1978, we heard military planes taking off from the nearby military bases. The next day we learned that only skeleton crews remained on the bases. The rest had been flown either north, where the Peruvian and Bolivian forces were concentrated at the border, or to the extreme south, where Argentina had gathered its forces opposite Punta Arenas, near the tip of South America.

Shortly thereafter, my family took a vacation at the base of the Andes Mountains in the home of a pastor of a small church in San Fabián de Alico. When we came out to the Pan American highway ten days later, I purchased a newspaper before continuing on, and was stunned to read that the CIA had reported to the Chilean government that the US expected Argentina to attack Chile in the south the next day. I said to my wife that we had better hurry back home in case the US embassy was trying to contact us to leave the country.

We heard later that Argentina had sent 5,000 coffins south along with its soldiers to show its seriousness, but this served only to demoralize their troops. Pinochet had warned the citizens of Punta Arenas, where the ground attack was to take place led by Argentine tanks, to stay in their homes, that the military would do what it had to do, and that Chile would not give up a single centimeter of its territory to Argentina. Argentina called off its attack on Chile only one hour before it had planned to attack.

At a pastor's conference, an inside source related to the pastors that the Argentine navy at that time had rounded the tip of South America to attack the Chilean navy, but was amazed to see on its radar that not only the Chilean navy, but also warships from the United States, France and Germany were awaiting its attack on Chile. In reality, those countries had not sent a single warship, but that conclusion

was enough to cause Argentina to halt its aggression for the time being. A Chilean naval officer told me later that had Argentina attacked, it would have totally destroyed the Chilean navy, for Chile had no defense against the Exocet missiles which were the heavy-weight weapon of the Argentine navy, freshly purchased from France.

Meantime, the Vatican stepped in and continued the negotiation process over the Beagle Islands, forging a treaty in 1984 which was accepted by both countries known as the Friendship and Peace Treaty.

The Falkland/Malvinas Islands (1983)

The Falkland/Malvinas Islands were in the Atlantic Ocean off the southern coast of Argentina. It was inhabited by British citizens who spoke English, but got their practical needs met through trade with Argentina. It was a remnant of the old British Empire, and England held on to it due to its militarily strategic location in monitoring shipping around the tip of South America. Remember that the cold war was still going on with the Communist bloc countries.

Argentina's military government was in trouble at home. It had nearly gone to war with Chile over the Beagle Islands, but now turned its attention to the Malvinas Islands (as they were known in Spanish) where its claims of sovereignty seemed more defensible. Possession of these islands had long been a sore spot between Argentina and England.

Gearing Up for War

It was amazing to witness the psychological warfare which preceded the actual war. It took three weeks for Great Britain to send its navy down to the area, and while they were coming, both sides launched a most interesting psychological propaganda warfare. At night, Argentina would turn up the power on its radio stations so that we could hear them clearly in Chile and all the surrounding countries. I remember listening to a prestigious university professor giving all the historic reasons why the United States would back Argentina's claims against England. I thought he was sure having a pipe-dream. Of course, I was right. Argentina has been unhappy with the United States ever since due to its moral support of England during this conflict.

I remember how Argentina radio bragged about their soldier boys from the Pampa. They said that they were raised using machetes as toothpicks, and couldn't wait to confront the British. Meanwhile, England touted the efficiency of its Gurka warriors contingency. It maintains 800 Gurkas in its armed

forces at all times. They are noted for stealth in going behind enemy lines and silently slitting the throats of enemy soldiers.

An Argentine soldier I talked to later confided that he and about 30 other soldiers on the Falkland Islands were in an outpost facing the British warships. He and a companion were sent out on a reconnaissance patrol during the night. When they returned, all 30 of their fellow Argentine soldiers had had their throats slit and were all dead.

The Exocet Missile vs. Harrier Aircraft

These missiles may be fired at a ship from as far as 100 miles away. They skim over the water just below the speed of sound and use radar to hone in on their target. Hundreds of them were used by Iran in their war against Iraq earlier. In the Falkland Islands War, they were used by Argentina to sink the British warship, the HMS Sheffield, and a 15,000 ton British merchant marine ship. A number of them misfired due to being launched too close to the British ships from airplanes. Had Argentina had more experience with them, they could have sunk the entire British fleet and won the war. In essence, these missiles have made surface warships obsolete in modern warfare, and the United States is keenly aware of this.

The Harrier aircraft operated by Great Britain from its warships is no doubt responsible for England's victory over Argentina. It was able to dodge missiles shot at it and was able to operate from land and sea. No Harrier was lost in the battles which lasted 74 days. Officially, 649 Argentine soldiers died and about 257 British soldiers were slain during the war.

Chile was officially neutral in this war, but in reality cooperated with Great Britain by providing intelligence it later came out. For this reason, years later Margaret Thatcher insisted that Augusto Pinochet be returned to Chile and not put on trial before the World Court for crimes committed during his term in office. She attributed the British victory in the Falkland/Malvinas War largely to his help.

All along, Argentina had claimed that it was winning. When it had to announce defeat, there was an enormous reaction of disillusionment from the Argentine people for having been lied to by the government. Earlier, an entire generation of young people had nearly been wiped out by the military government in its quest to eradicate Communist subversives. Now, it had lost a war and hundreds more of its young people. The result was a soon return to civilian government and the imprisonment of the primary military leaders, including president Galtiere. Previously, Argentina had proudly noted that there was no red in their flag, for they had not shed blood in any war. They had now lost this badge of honor and lost a war in doing it.

Currency Fluctuations

Before this time, inflation of the US dollar had been at historic highs. Under Jimmy Carter, inflation of the U.S. dollar neared 20%, and its effect on currencies around the world was devastating. Dollars had been used in trade with foreign countries, and businesses were permitted to use them for purchases abroad. While it had been illegal for private citizens to own dollars in 1975, it soon became legal for them to own dollars, but all limits to owning dollars were completely removed because National Banks had become glutted with what seemed to be worthless dollars.

Before they were removed from power after losing the war with Great Britain, the Argentine military government went on a weapons-buying frenzy in order to replace the weapons it had lost in the war with Great Britain. Argentina needed dollars to purchase these new weapons. Consequently, it started offering twice the dollar's value in the local currency in order to get private citizens to turn in the dollars which they had squirreled away. The effect on surrounding countries was dramatic.

I knew a Chilean businessman who began travelling back and forth to Argentina twice a week with his suitcase full of US dollars. He would bring back Argentine currency and change it into dollars back in Chile. In that way, he would duplicate their value on every trip. He told me that he made about US\$100,000 on every trip he made.

The Case of Bolivia

Before the Falkland War, Bolivia was experiencing a prosperous economy for the first time in its history. For the first time, Japanese cars were being imported and driven by Bolivian owners. In Chile, car accidents were at an all-time high due to a massive influx of new drivers on the road with their new cars.

When Argentina began sucking dollars out of the banks of other South American countries to buy new weapons, from one day to the next, inflation expanded dramatically in Bolivia. Throughout that country, new cars were abandoned by the tens of thousands. The new owners just left them at the side of the road and walked away from them. Not only could they no longer afford to make the monthly payments on their cars, they could no longer afford even to fill the gas tank with their currency. For example, a photocopy of one sheet of paper in Bolivia cost the equivalent of ten cents US money. That

was because the paper and the photocopy machine were made of imported materials. However, suddenly that same amount of money (10 cents in U.S. money) could purchase locally-grown food which would feed the average family for a week.

I had made a trip to Bolivia in 1976 for a Pastor's conference. The old currency there had just been replaced by the new peso, which was worth 10 to the dollar at that time. I got a sample of the crisp new bills as a souvenir. On a trip back from the United States to Chile which took me through Bolivia in 1986, just ten years later, I asked a young boy at the airport if he would accept dollars so I could buy a newspaper. I was amazed when he gave me change for a dollar for a 50-cent newspaper which consisted of one bill of a million pesos and three more bills for 100,000 pesos each. Fifty-cents in American money had inflated from five pesos to one million three hundred thousand pesos in ten years! I said that I should frame the million-peso bill in order to show my friends that I was now a millionaire!

Update 3/31/10: Both Haiti and Chile have suffered terrible earthquakes in the recent past. Billions of dollars of help have poured into Haiti from around the world and rightfully so. We have sent money there ourselves. However, the material damage in Chile was much greater and much more extensive. Of particular interest to us is the damage done to the National Bible Institute in Chile, under the leadership of missionary Paul Hoff. I worked with him there for a number of years, and he has asked me to present the needs they are facing. You may contact him directly to decide what kind of project you and/or your church may take on to help with the Lord's work in Chile. Not only was there significant damage at the site in Santiago, but also in Concepción and Temuco, cities we know well. You may reach Paul at phoff@vtr.net. Tell him I sent you!