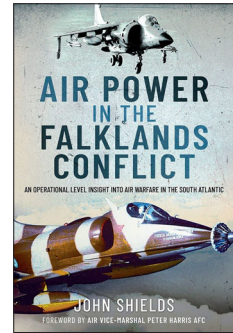


## Book Review

# Air Power in the Falklands Conflict: An Operational Level Insight into Air Warfare in the South Atlantic



Author: John Shields

Publisher: Air World, 2022 (ISBN: 978-1399007528), 376 pages

Reviewed by Flight Lieutenant Chris Whelan

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### Introduction

In the years since the 1982 conflict ended, participants, historians and analysts of the Falklands War, have attempted to make sense of the multiple, complex factors which interacted with each other during the fighting. What has emerged from this are enduring simple narratives. The bravery of Argentine pilots flying low-level attacks against British shipping (so vividly captured on British news cameras) has become a fixture of narratives of the war. The Sea Harrier too, about which many doubts were held before the conflict but soon proved itself to be lethal to the point where it dominated the skies and deterred greater air attacks by Argentina, is another.

John Shields sets out to test these and other narratives with an operational-level analysis of air power during the conflict. In terms which are set out clearly at the beginning, he does not focus on the higher strategic aims or the details of individual tactical actions but on the broader operational objectives set in between. He further supports his argument by identifying both the British and Argentine Centres of Gravity (CofG), where they rested and how they changed as the conflict progressed. He makes a sound case for three British CofGs, which shifted as the campaign progressed – the aircraft carriers prior to the landing, the

landing craft and supporting vessels during the amphibious landing operations and the land forces during the final stages of the war.

Within this clear and well-defined framework, Shields uses a wealth of archival and anecdotal evidence to support his case. He begins with chapters focussing on air operations before, during, and after the British amphibious landings. He continues with separate chapters on prosecuting the Argentine CofG (focussing on air attacks on Stanley airfield) and defending the British CofG (concentrating on the effectiveness of the Sea Harrier), before drawing conclusions. Shields highlights the importance of unified command, focussing on outcomes rather than outputs when it comes to operational effectiveness and understanding fully the capabilities available to both forces and the theatre of operation.

This is an extremely well-researched book and thoroughly supported argument from a noted author in this field. Shields includes extensive diagrams, annexes and lists providing a wealth of information, often on a day-by-day basis, which tracks the progress of the campaign, sourced from archival documents and previous books from both sides of the war. Highly illuminating and simple-to-understand diagrams, such as a schematic tracking numbers of Argentinian air weapons deployed compared to how many successfully reached their intended targets (p. 68 onwards) and another tracking employment of British AIM-9L Sidewinder missiles in combat (p. 130), add real weight to well-worded arguments. With this wealth of data, Shields is able to examine, in detail, previous assertions from authors such as Nigel 'Sharkey' Ward (*Sea Harrier over the Falklands*, Leo Cooper:1992), whose claim that the Sea Harrier so dominated the skies over the islands that the Argentinian air force was rendered ineffective and demonstrates effectively that this claim does not stand up to current scrutiny. He makes a reasoned case that the Argentinian attack aircraft, while flown bravely, did not pose as great a threat to the British, simply because they focussed their attacks on the wrong targets, especially during and after the British amphibious landings. Shields is also able to argue convincingly that British focus on attacking the airport at Stanley did not support the campaign at the operational level, and that British resources would have been better spent elsewhere, especially using valuable Harrier GR3 sorties for battlefield reconnaissance in the final stages of the campaign. Shields' air defence experience also shines through in parts, especially in discussions of air-to-air engagements, which adds real colour to the statistics supporting his assertions.

This book reads better as an academic discussion than a flowing historical narrative. The impressive wealth of data included with the arguments, especially in extensive annexes at the end of the text, leads to the reader frequently turning back and forth between chapters which distracts from the flow of the text, or simply overwhelms. Whilst it is undoubtedly detailed in its focus, this book also cannot be said to be a truly comprehensive examination of the air campaign. Any reader looking for information about the use of Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance or Air Mobility will not find it in anything like the detail the Attack and Control of the Air roles are examined in this book. Shields is at pains to highlight

what he is not including in his discussion, but this is much more aimed at exploring the kinetic effects produced by the British and Argentinian Air forces during the war.

That being said, this book makes a fine addition to the collection of any reader with an interest in the Falklands Conflict, operational level military analysis and planning, or both. The explanation of the often-misunderstood Centre of Gravity and its application to this conflict recommend this title on its own. With the addition of the exhaustive detail on the prosecution of the air war, this work will likely act as the standard reference book for any researchers or general interest readers looking to go beyond the well-worn and established legends surrounding this brief and decisive conflict.

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