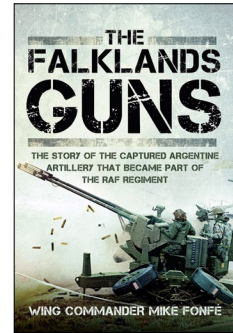


## Book Review

# The Falklands Guns – The Story of the Captured Argentine Artillery that Became Part of the RAF Regiment



Author: Wing Commander Mike Fonfé

Publisher: Frontline Books Great Britain (ISBN: 978 1526774422), 256 pages

Reviewed by Wing Commander David Caddick

---

### Introduction

*The Falklands Guns* by Wing Commander Mike Fonfé, a retired RAF Regiment officer, is a fascinating read. It tells the remarkable story of how captured Argentinian Oerlikon twin barrelled 35mm anti-aircraft guns, their generators, copious amounts of ammunition and their Skyguard surveillance and fire-control radars were recovered from the Falkland Islands, refurbished to 'as new' condition, and then formed into a highly effective and lethal Royal Auxiliary Air Force Reserve Squadron. This squadron was subsequently expanded to form 2 squadrons and a wing headquarters providing low level air defence to two main operating bases within the United Kingdom, a capability declared to NATO and is in the author's own words a 'boy's own' dream.

The important point of the whole book is that it takes the planets to align to ensure that the right person, with the right skills and the right vision, is in the right place, at the right time to make these things happen. But before we get to the NATO declared squadrons, Mike Fonfé takes us on a journey through the Falklands War. He has produced a detailed and comprehensive study of the air war in the Falklands, looking at the ground based, or should I say surface based, air defence systems from both sides and how they affected not just the air war, but the whole campaign. In particular, he highlights how an integrated air defence system

should work by exposing the failings of the ad hoc integrated air defence system that both the Argentine and British forces put in place during the Falklands campaign. For any student of the Falklands campaign this section of the book is, indeed, a must read.

The subsequent recovery of the weapons system back to the United Kingdom is a fascinating and at times incredible story. Guns had been stripped of optical sights, their spare parts and toolboxes had been 'liberated' as souvenirs, and the guns themselves ended up in various places as trophies, including a well-known museum. The task of finding, identifying, collecting, and bringing together all this equipment to RAF Waddington is a study in ingenuity, inventiveness and quite often a bit of brass neck. This is where the combination of the author's experience as an Instructor in Gunnery, guided missile specialist and formidable staff officer enabled him to navigate the labyrinth of the MOD and single services, often taking an unconventional approach and most importantly building a small team around him who were equally as enthusiastic and formidable in their own specialist areas.

The formation of the Reserve gun squadron again demonstrates Fonfé's agile approach. From the outset he recruited both male and female gunners and trained them as anti-aircraft gunners first. Once they had mastered the guns, they moved on to master the radar control systems and continued to progress until those with the aptitude and ambition could command a complete unit of one radar and three guns - there would be time to learn to march later. He based this approach on the Swiss model of using a conscript Air Force and concentrated on the basics. Of course, he was helped by this in so much that the guns and the radars were manufactured by the Swiss, and the equipment's ability to stand idle for many weeks and then be brought into action by conscripts was built into the design and maintenance of the awesome weapons systems. Having established the squadron and made it an essential part of NATO's order of battle, Fonfé was deservedly promoted and moved on to other duties and there his story really ends.

It would be fascinating to have some insight into the detailed decisions as to why this cost effective and deadly capability was finally taken from the RAF order of battle in 1993, but the end of the Cold War and the overall drawdown of the UK armed forces seems to be the reason. However, a legacy of Fonfé's work lives on. The Skyguard radars are still in use with the Royal Air Force today, although from the reviewer's own experience few people in the RAF know that they were once captured on a battlefield many thousands of miles away, or the incredible story of how they ended up in the service of the RAF.

In summary, *The Falklands Guns* is a fascinating read, and left me thinking if a similar situation arose today would we have the right people with the right skills and vision, in the right place? I would like to think yes, but if we are truly going to be operationally successful, agile, and innovative, then this is a case study for every aviator to read.