

The Wars of Eigh



An Israeli F-15 pulls behind a Syrian MiG-23. This scenario recalls the 1982 Bekaa Valley war, in which the IAF shot down 86 Syrian MiGs. Israel took possession of this MiG-23 after its pilot defected to Israel, with his aircraft, in 1998.

Twenty-five years ago this spring, two short and intense armed conflicts—fought in widely separated theaters—delivered a jolt to military thinking. Defense establishments the world over vigorously debated all of the “lessons learned” from the small wars of 1982. They still do.

In the first, Britain and Argentina came to blows over the Falkland Islands, bleak South Atlantic outposts whose ownership had long been in dispute. This war, which ran from April 2, 1982

until Argentina’s surrender on June 14, 1982, boiled up like a sudden storm and vindicated some basic military truths.

The second war played out in more familiar terrain—that corner of the Mid-east where Israel, Syria, and Lebanon converge. Starting on June 9, 1982, and for two weeks thereafter, Israel’s Air Force tangled with Syrian air and ground forces. In the end, the reputation of high technology soared.

The United States had no direct role in either, but the equipment and tactics

used by the winning sides were familiar to Americans then—and are even more familiar now.

These wars provided the first real tests for state-of-the art US and NATO equipment. F-15, F-16, and Harrier fighters, along with AIM-9 Sidewinder missiles and French Exocet anti-ship weapons, were stars of the battles. Modern versions of these systems still serve as front-line weapons.

Military men still heed the conflicts’ lessons, the most prominent of which

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In the South Atlantic and the Middle East, two short air wars taught some lasting lessons.

By Adam J. Hebert, Senior Editor

was that the side with the better training and leadership is tough to beat—and is almost impossible to beat if it also possesses advanced weapons.

At the time, victory for the US allies didn't seem like such a sure thing.

Many wondered how Britain would manage to defeat a numerically superior foe while fighting at the end of a logistics tail that stretched more than 7,000 miles away from its home ports and bases. And because of Syrian weaponry emplaced throughout Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, many wondered whether fighters would be obsolete in the face of modern integrated air defenses.

Most especially, critics doubted that complex, high-tech equipment would work as advertised in the crunch of combat.

The Falklands War began with a strategic miscalculation on the part of Argentina's ruling junta. Britain had held the Falklands, a pair of islands 300 miles east of Argentina's southern tip, since 1833, but Argentina had never given up claim to the islands, which it called *Islas Malvinas*.

On March 19, Argentine scrap workers were laboring on the island of South Georgia, another British dependency east of the Falklands. Unexpectedly, they raised the flag of Argentina and refused to let British authorities stamp their passports.

London did not immediately respond to this provocation, a fact noted in Buenos Aires. The junta calculated Britain

would not act to save the Falklands and would merely cede possession of the islands, which had just 2,000 inhabitants and scant economic or strategic significance.

Argentina invaded the Falklands on April 2. After a brief firefight, the Falklands governor ordered the garrison's 84 Royal Marines to surrender to the more than 500 Argentine invaders. Argentina also occupied South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands.

To Argentina's great surprise, Britain's reaction was instant and warlike. Led by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the nation quickly chose to stand and fight. Three days after the invasion, lead elements of a British task force set sail to retake the islands.

The task force's 7,000-mile voyage took nearly a month. The nearest British-owned staging location was Ascension Island—a spit of land 3,900 miles away from the Falklands—with a modest airfield. This would be a naval campaign, but airpower was the clincher for both sides throughout.

As an RAF history of the campaign noted, "British forces were equipped and trained to fight a war in Europe as part of NATO," so to suddenly fight an expeditionary war with no prospect of local basing "meant that everything previously accepted as operational doctrine had changed."

Britain cobbled together every available asset, commandeering cruise ships as troop transports and freighters as supply ships. The RAF hastily added refueling capability to its Vulcan bombers. The Vulcans were due to be replaced by shorter-range Tornado fighters, but they were spared retirement for the duration of the Falklands campaign.

On April 25, Britain's lead ships were within several hundred miles of the Falklands. That day, Royal Marines retook South Georgia from a token Argentinian force. Soon, the 7,000-man invasion force would encounter 10,000 dug-in defenders on the Falklands.

Vulcan Surprise

The RAF had Vulcans, Nimrod surveillance aircraft, and Victor tankers based at Ascension and ready to perform long-range missions. The first strike from the British forces came May 1 and was a masterpiece of mission planning. From Ascension, two Vulcan bombers (one was a backup) and 12 Victor tankers took off for the mission to disable—but not destroy—the main Falklands airfield at the capital of Stanley.

Achieving total surprise, a Vulcan dropped 21 separate 1,000-pound bombs on the airfield. One cratered the main runway. Others damaged facilities and parked aircraft. Minutes later, 18 Sea Harriers from the carriers *Hermes* and *Invincible* hit the airfields at Stanley and Goose Green and set up combat air patrols.

The Vulcan attack had critical after-shocks. If the RAF's long-range bombers could reach the Falklands, the junta reasoned, they could also reach Buenos Aires. Argentina's Mirage III fighters were soon committed to air defense. In effect, they sat out the war.

Argentina had reasonably high-quality aircraft. Its most formidable elements were 78 US-built A-4 Skyhawks and five French Super Etendard fighter-bombers. The Skyhawks were old but still served in many militaries, including the US Marine Corps.

The Super Etendards had only recently arrived from France. Each was equipped with an Exocet anti-ship missile, which would be used to devastating effect.

The Day One attacks convinced Argentina that an amphibious assault was imminent. The junta launched 40 land-based fighters to attack the Royal Navy's carriers and assault ships.

Falklands runways were too short for modern jet aircraft, however, so the Argentines had to operate from the mainland, at bases more than 400 miles away. This put the Falklands near the edge of the fighter's unrefueled combat radius, giving the attackers precious little time to search for targets or engage in lengthy battles.

British superiority was immediately evident. Argentina's fighters were faster, but Britain's Harriers were equipped with a new "all-aspect" AIM-9L air-to-air missile, which allowed pilots to attack from any direction. (Argentine missiles required a tail shot.) By day's end, at least four Argentine aircraft had been shot down, against zero British losses.

The next day, HMS *Conqueror*, an attack submarine, sank the *General Belgrano*, Argentina's second largest warship, with loss of 321 sailors. A stunned junta pulled back its Navy, including its only carrier. This greatly simplified Britain's task and further increased the importance of airpower for both sides. Airpower was all Argentina had left.

And it was quite a bit, as was demonstrated on May 4. Two Argentine pilots flying Super Etendards, convinced they had found the carrier *Hermes*, launched a pair of Exocets. One of the sophis-



The Super Etendard-Exocet combination proved deadly again on May 25. A missile struck the converted container ship *Atlantic Conveyor*, one of the task force's two primary supply ships, and killed 12 men. *Atlantic Conveyor* later sank with most of the task force's tents and 10 helicopters.

Fortunately for Britain, Argentina soon ran out of Exocets and failed to obtain more, despite its best efforts.

Over the next days, attacking aircraft sank another Royal Navy frigate and hit two landing craft. Fifty British troops died in a June 8 attack on the landing ship *Sir Galahad*. The carnage would have been worse if Argentina's bombs worked properly; about half of those that hit ships failed to explode.

The problem was poor fusing. Ar-



For the Falklands campaign, Britain was forced to scrap its NATO-based war plans. Britain hastily assembled a task force to recapture the islands, 7,000 miles away. A Newsweek cover of the time played off the 1980 movie "The Empire Strikes Back."

ticated weapons, skimming at Mach 1 just above the water, locked on to HMS *Sheffield*, a destroyer, and struck amidship just above the waterline. The weapon, which miraculously did not explode, nevertheless tore through the hull and set the warship on fire. Twenty sailors died, and *Sheffield* sank six days later.

Over the next two weeks, Britain marshaled its arriving forces and staged air attacks on key targets. Argentina knew that its best hope was

to defeat the invasion force, because once the highly trained British troops went on the offensive, there would be little hope for poorly trained Argentine conscripts.

The invasion began May 21. Argentina launched 75 combat aircraft to attack the invading force. They sank one frigate and damaged four others. Operating at the very end of their combat range, they had little room for maneuver. Britain shot down 13 enemy aircraft.

gentine pilots flew at extremely low altitudes to survive, but their bombs were designed for drops from higher altitudes. Many did not have time to properly arm. Some passed straight through ships they hit.

Argentinian airmen continued to score hits on the task force, but also suffered horrendous losses. The Sidewinder-armed Sea Harriers were brutally effective. They fired 27 AIM-9Ls and scored 24 hits, destroying 19 enemy aircraft.

British troops, now ashore, made short work of the cold and demoral-

ized Argentine garrison. On June 14, it surrendered.

For Britain, however, the war had been no walkover. Argentina's naval and air force aviators generally performed with skill, bravery, and success. Britain never achieved air superiority around the islands, and British ships were under threat of air attack to the bitter end. Attacking aircraft regularly managed to get through combat air patrols, wreaking havoc.

All told, the Falkland Islands campaign took the lives of 255 British troops and three civilians. The Royal Navy and RAF lost 34 aircraft. Yet the Falklands remain part of the British Empire.

The task force's inability to achieve air superiority or protect the fleet from marauding Argentinian fighters highlighted Britain's need for an effective airborne early warning capability. In 1986, the RAF ordered six E-3 AWACS aircraft, and Britain now flies a fleet of seven AWACS.

Argentina coughed up more than just the islands it had seized. It suffered 746 fatalities and lost about 100 aircraft, of all types, to a wide variety of causes. It also lost the cruiser *General Belgrano*.

Furious Argentinians soon threw out the junta that had led it into the Falklands disaster, and democratic elections were held in 1983. The RAF's history of the campaign had this observation: "One result of the Falklands conflict was the liberation of the Argentine people."

The Bekaa Valley

As the Falklands War was reaching its climax, another high-intensity war—this one an air war—was about to begin. On June 3, 1982, PLO terrorists attempted to assassinate the Israeli ambassador in London. The next day, the Israeli Air Force staged 60 air strikes against PLO targets in southern Lebanon. The PLO responded with large-scale artillery and rocket attacks on Israel.

On June 6, 1982, Israel launched a major ground invasion of Lebanon, in an effort to eliminate the PLO as a military threat and wipe out the Syrian military presence in Lebanon.

Syria had been preparing for this event for a long time. In 1973, the IAF suffered heavy losses to Egyptian air defenses at the beginning of the Yom Kippur War. In response, Syria had invested heavily in a Soviet-designed integrated air defense system, which it set up in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley—a transit point between Beirut and Damascus.



Lebanon's Bekaa Valley is a key transit point between Beirut and Damascus, Syria. Syria loaded the valley with advanced Soviet anti-aircraft systems, in hopes of destroying the Israeli Air Force. It was not to be.

But Israel had also learned the lessons from the previous war and had spent the intervening nine years developing ways to counter enemy air defense networks. And while "Operation Peace for Galilee," as Israel called it, had the look of a spontaneous reaction to the assassination attempt, Israel had actually been preparing for a year for this specific mission.

The main air campaign against the surface-to-air missile sites in the Bekaa Valley began on June 9. The Israelis had mapped out the locations of 19 SAM batteries and their associated radar sites and knew the Syrian radar and communications frequencies. Israel had also set up dummy radar sites in the Negev desert so its pilots could practice attack missions.

The air war began with a slew of Israeli unmanned aerial vehicles over the valley, followed by strike packages. With the strike force in the air, Syria recalled its fighters to give the land-based air defenders free reign to shoot at anything overhead.

Syria's itchy trigger fingers would come back to haunt them as air defense radars stayed on and anti-air-

craft gunners showed a lack of firing discipline.

Israeli Scout, Mastiff, and Firebee UAVs drew fire intended for manned aircraft and were able to keep constant track of the enemy radar and missile sites, relaying real-time data to the Israeli commanders.

Then, from the strike packages, cluster bombs and anti-radiation missiles rained down on the SAM sites, and 10 of the 19 SAM batteries were hit within 10 minutes, some by artillery. For Syria, the worst was yet to come. All 19 SAM sites were destroyed within two hours—with no Israeli losses.

This forced Syria to scramble its fighters to prevent the IAF from having free reign over the battlespace. The result was one of the largest dogfights since World War II, with top-of-the-line Soviet MiG-21 and MiG-23 fighters going head-to-head against the then-new F-15 and F-16. The battle turned into a rout of historical proportions.

Israel now held every advantage. It had newer, more capable aircraft, a monopoly on airborne early warning capabilities, and a cadre of battle-



After Israeli UAVs and strike aircraft wiped out the Syrian SAMs and radar sites, Syria was forced to scramble its fighters. Israeli F-15s and F-16s then routed the Soviet-built MiGs. These IAF F-15s show their kill markings from the war.

hardened pilots. Israel knew the enemy communications frequencies and had the capability to jam them, it had the new AIM-9L, and it even possessed greater numbers of aircraft.

85 to Nothing

Israel's AWACS capability meant it knew where Syrian aircraft were the minute they took off, and the Syrian pilots themselves found their communications jammed, leaving them on their own against the coordinated Israeli defenses. This was especially problematic for Syria because the nation practiced Soviet-style control, in which ground-based commanders typically micromanaged the pilots.

"Within half an hour, we shot down about 26 MiGs," David Ivry, who was second in command of the IAF at the time, previously told *Air Force Magazine*. (See "The Bekaa Valley War," June 2002, p. 58.)

Two days of air combat ended with the Syrian air forces decimated and the IAF basically untouched. Claims vary widely, but Israel says it shot down 85 MiGs with no air-to-air losses. This was all in air combat—the IAF never went after air bases, and it never went into Syrian airspace.

A margin of 85-to-nothing sounds preposterous. It is the sort of result that various dictatorships and communist regimes have claimed in battles against democracies over the years and is not unlike the assertion in the Soviet military newspaper *Red Star* that Syria shot down 67 Israeli aircraft in the battle, including F-15s and F-16s.

In a 1984 RAND report, Benjamin S. Lambeth noted that "we cannot rule out the possibility that much of the press comment that has appeared on the Bekaa Valley operation has been a product of intentional Israeli disinformation, both to protect the more sensitive aspects of IAF operational tactics and perhaps also to exaggerate the image of Israel's combat prowess for its psychopolitical effect."

But no matter whose version you believe, Israel and its largely American equipment undeniably trounced Syria and its front-line Soviet equipment. Even Syria acknowledged the loss of 60 aircraft while claiming just 19 kills.

As was the case in the Falklands, advanced Sidewinder missiles resulted in most of the kills. The MiG-21 and MiG-23 were victimized equally.

Israel said 37 F-15s shot down 40

Syrian jets with no losses, and 72 F-16s downed an additional 44 Syrian fighters. An IAF F-4E accounted for the final air-to-air kill. Two or three IAF fighters are believed lost to ground fire.

The battle also discredited the argument, in vogue at the time, that sophisticated aircraft were too complex, and therefore unreliable, to be effective. The IAF reportedly maintained 100 percent readiness for its F-15s and F-16s throughout the Bekaa Valley battle.

As Lambeth noted, "This performance record drove a stake through the heart of the argument, most vocally propounded in James Fallows' *National Defense*, ... that there is an inverse correlation between the sophistication and operability of modern fighter aircraft."

After the war, the Soviet Union quickly dispatched several teams to Syria to seek out possible systemic problems in the hardware the Soviets were shipping to client states worldwide.

The equipment was part of the problem, but Syria was outclassed by Israeli skill as well. Lambeth reported a sarcastic story circulated in Soviet circles: "A Syrian general, upon being told by his Soviet patrons that he already had the best Soviet surface-to-air missiles, replied that what he really needed were some good surface-to-aircraft missiles!"

The lesson was that it is hard to stop the combination of sophisticated weapons and quality training. It is a lesson that resonates even today. In 1982, Syria lacked both and was routed by the better-prepared Israeli Air Force.

Thousands of miles away, the performance of Argentina's pilots—equipped with a handful of advanced weapons—was a lone bright spot in that nation's battle against Britain over the Falklands. They were done in by geography, poor bomb maintenance, and poor leadership.

Britain had put together a masterful and unexpected expeditionary campaign that made the most of its advanced weapons and highly skilled troops. Britain achieved everything but air superiority around the Falklands. That flaw meant British ground and sea forces were vulnerable through the conflict.

A quarter of a century later, the wars of 1982 can still teach quite a bit to anyone willing to learn. ■