

Petty Officer  
Graham John  
Robert Libby, DSM



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# HERO *of the* MONTH

by Lord Ashcroft



The ARA *Belgrano* in January 1982, taken by a former naval cadet who sailed on the ship just 83 days before its final mission  
SAMUEL SCORPIO

HMS *Conqueror* is best known for sinking the Argentinian cruiser ARA *General Belgrano* during the 1982 Falklands Conflict in an incident that is still controversial more than 40 years on. Yet for crew member Petty Officer Graham Libby, his greatest test came not at the actual time of the sinking, but less than a month later when he showed outstanding courage as a diver to solve a major problem faced by his submarine.

Graham John Robert Libby was born on December 2, 1958, in Portsmouth, Hampshire. The son of a Royal Navy diver, he was brought up and educated in the city before leaving school at 16. As a boy, he had initially wanted to join the Fire Brigade, but he eventually enlisted in the Royal Navy in 1975, aged 16. Two years later, he transferred to the Submarine Service and, like his father before him, was also one of the ship's divers.

By spring 1982, Libby had been serving aboard *Conqueror* – arguably the most famous British submarine ever launched – for three years. Some 285ft long, with a beam of 32ft, *Conqueror* was commissioned on November 9, 1971. She was a Churchill-class nuclear-powered submarine with a complement of more than 100 officers and crew. By late March 1982, after completing a three-month overseas deployment, *Conqueror* was back at her homebase of Faslane, on the eastern side of Gare Loch, Scotland, home to the 3rd Submarine Squadron. With the submarine in need of some repair work, her crew was given leave.

### Sink the *Belgrano*

Just two days before Argentina's invasion of the Falkland Islands, and with diplomatic alarm bells ringing loud and clear, *Conqueror's* officers and men were ordered to return to the boat and prepare for war. Libby was one of those on leave at his home in Portsmouth on April 1, 1982. He told Mike Rossiter, the author of the book *Sink the Belgrano*: "I had only been there a few

days when there was a knock on the door and there was this policeman stood there saying, 'You've been recalled. Make your way to the boat.' It was the morning of April 1 that he knocked and, and I thought, this is a wind-up, April fool!"

However, the policeman was deadly serious and Libby was soon back on duty. Under newly appointed Commander Christopher Wreford-Brown, *Conqueror* was soon sailing south, but with many of the crew convinced that the dispute would be settled by diplomacy.

Libby was the submarine's 'scratcher', the crewman responsible for the maintenance of the outer casing. Part of his role was to ensure that the capstans, winches and cables were all properly secured and that they made no noise when the boat was underway. In war, such noises could betray the submarine's position, resulting in it being torpedoed or bombed. Libby was also the most senior diver on board.

After nearly three weeks at sea, *Conqueror* was approaching South Georgia, 900 miles southeast of the Falklands. By this point, the British government had decided to retake South Georgia prior to mounting an attack on the Falkland Islands. At one point, *Conqueror* surfaced so that some SBS men on board could be picked up by helicopter and transferred to HMS *Antrim*, a County-class destroyer. However, just at the worst possible moment, one of the SBS men and Petty Officer Libby were hit by a huge wave that swept them into the bitterly cold sea.

Both men were rescued by helicopter and taken to *Antrim*, where they were placed in a cold bath while their circulation slowly improved. Libby spent six hours in recovery before being returned to his submarine, which had remained on the surface as engineers tried to repair its communications problems.

Once in the war zone, *Conqueror* was on the lookout for potential targets. On April 23, 1982, the British government made

a statement that said Argentinian ships might be a target "if they could amount to a threat to interfere with the mission of British Forces in the South Atlantic." This went further than the government's earlier statement that had restricted targets to inside the 200-mile Total Exclusion Zone.

Soon, British Intelligence passed on information to Commander Wreford-Brown that a four-ship Argentinian convoy made up of the *Belgrano*, two destroyers and an oiler, was in his vicinity. On April 30, after detecting the *Belgrano*, Wreford-Brown decided to go closer, strongly suspecting his target would eventually come within firing range. On May 1, although the captains of both the *Conqueror* and the *Belgrano* were initially unaware of it, the fighting for the Falklands had started in earnest.

The final order to sink the *Belgrano* came on May 2 and was issued by the British War Cabinet. Soon after, *Conqueror* fired three Mark VIII torpedoes at three-second intervals, two hitting their target. Soon the *Belgrano* began to list to port and to sink towards the bow. Twenty minutes after the attack, at 1624hrs, Captain Hector Bonzo ordered the crew to abandon ship. Inflatable liferafts were deployed and the evacuation began. A total of 323 men lost their lives, many killed in the two initial explosions. At the time of the attack, there were 1,052 men on board.

### Life on the line

In the two days after the attack, *Conqueror* patrolled the area close by, becoming a target for the Argentine Air Force seeking revenge for the *Belgrano's* sinking. After one near miss from an enemy attack, *Conqueror* experienced a series of communication problems and, as part of an effort to repair the situation, an aerial wire was released into the water. However, this became tangled around the propeller, so rather than solve the problem, the wayward aerial had created another more serious one.

By May 25 and with the submarine patrolling north of the Falklands, there was only one thing for it: the submarine would have to surface – dangerous in itself with enemy aircraft in the area – and a

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PETTY OFFICER GRAHAM LIBBY

## HERO OF THE MONTH



HMS *Conqueror* returning home after the conflict, an achievement made possible by Libby's courage  
MIRRORPIX/ALAMY



Libby and two shipmates with *Conqueror's* Jolly Roger  
LORD ASHCROFT MEDAL COLLECTION

diver, backed up by other crew, would be released into the water. His task was to investigate the problem and try to dislodge the wire.



Libby's DSM and South Atlantic Medal. The rosette denotes combat service and was awarded for a minimum one day's service within 35° and 60° South latitude (or at least one operational sortie south of Ascension Island) between April 2 and June 14, 1982  
LORD ASHCROFT MEDAL COLLECTION

The sea was both bitterly cold and rough and there was a real danger that the diver might be washed away. Even worse, if an enemy aircraft was sighted, the submarine would have to dive at once with the diver unable to get back aboard. The abandoned

diver would have no chance of survival, either freezing to death or drowning as it would be hours before it was safe for the submarine to resurface.

Petty Officer Libby volunteered for the task of trying to resolve the submarine's problem, later recalling: "I was a single man, I was quite happy to go out there because I was all pumped up. We had just sunk a blooming great warship – this could be the icing on the cake, you know? It's just something exciting that I might never ever get a chance to do."

In his book *Secrets of the Conqueror*, Stuart Prebble takes up the story: "Libby and [First Lieutenant] Tim McClement climbed out onto the submarine casing, with five other divers for support and back-up. All of the men were attached to the boat by lifelines, but straight away a wave swept Libby and [Lieutenant] John Coulthard into the water."

Coulthard was pulled back to safety, but Libby disappeared from sight, reappearing at the stern of the boat. Prebble wrote: "Clanking around his body as he was buffeted by the waves was a range of tools and hacksaws that he thought he might need for the task. He found that the aerial

Commander Chris Wreford-Brown (left) and Petty Officer Libby in Portsmouth following the conflict PA/ALAMY



***“If an enemy aircraft was sighted the submarine would have to dive at once with the diver unable to get back into the submarine. The abandoned diver would have no chance of survival”***

wire was indeed wrapped tightly around the shaft and blades. Worse still, even though the engines were of course stopped, the propellers were still turning gently and in danger of severing the diver's lifeline. Libby worked away with hacksaws, as speedily as he could, cutting off the wire in sections. The need for dexterity meant that he could not wear gloves, and gradually he felt his hands seize up and his entire body being penetrated by cold.”

McClement was constantly scanning the horizon for any sign of enemy aircraft, knowing that there would be no way of getting Libby back if the submarine was forced to dive. After 20 minutes, and just when Libby's stamina was on the point of giving out, he declared the propeller clear and was hauled back inside. Wreford-Brown later said of the action: “I think Libby was outstandingly brave.” This incident took place three weeks and two days after the sinking of the *Belgrano*.

### Calculated courage

As *Conqueror* patrolled close to the Argentinian coast, the Royal Navy

continued to suffer losses due to air attacks. However, slowly Britain gained the upper hand. With their forces weakened and demoralised, General Mario Menendez, the Argentine commanding officer in the Falklands, surrendered on June 14.

There were celebrations on board *Conqueror* and 24 hours later she was ordered home. She arrived at Faslane to a triumphant reception on July 13, proudly flying the white ensign and the Jolly Roger, embellished with her achievements, at the mast above the fin.

Libby's Distinguished Service Medal was announced in *The London Gazette* on October 11, 1982, when his citation concluded: “Acting Petty Officer (Sonar) (SM) Libby demonstrated a degree of cold, calculated courage and willingness to risk his life for the benefit of the ship far beyond any call of duty.”

Commander Wreford-Brown was decorated with the Distinguished Service Order and two other members of the company were Mentioned in Despatches for their efforts to repair the radio mast.

Libby received his decoration in an investiture at Buckingham Palace on February 8, 1983. In an interview for my book *Falklands War Heroes*, he told me: “It was a brilliant day out. I received my medal from the Queen, and I remember she called me by my first name. She had been incredibly well briefed, because she knew I was on a course and she asked me how it was going. She had definitely done her homework and from what I could see she had no notes or prompts from a projector

or anything else. She was very impressive – quite remarkable.”

After leaving the Royal Navy in 1984, Libby worked for Hampshire Fire Brigade at their headquarters in Eastleigh. As part of his role in the fire service, Libby began to specialise in rescue techniques following natural disasters. He retired from the fire service in 2016, after 31 years' service. Today, Libby, who has three grown-up children and six grandchildren, lives in the Portsmouth area. Reflecting on the Falklands Conflict and the sinking of the *Belgrano*, he said: “I have no qualms about what we did. I think we did the right thing. We'd have lost quite a lot more lives on our side without it.” **BW**

### FALKLANDS WAR HEROES



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book, *Falklands War Heroes*, was published in 2021. For more

information, visit [falklandswarheroes.com](http://falklandswarheroes.com). For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit [lordashcroft.com](http://lordashcroft.com). Visit his website about courage on: [lordashcroftonbravery.com](http://lordashcroftonbravery.com). Follow him on X and Facebook: @LordAshcroft