

Special Forces Cadets: Hijack

By Chris Ryan

Extract

The sun was setting as the whale-watching boat returned to harbour. Max fist-bumped the kid he'd prevented from going overboard. 'Take it easy, Marcus,' he said. Marcus nodded. Ever since the ship's captain had told them about the Falklands War and the Belgrano, he'd seemed shy of Max and his friends, Max thought. It was obvious that Marcus had understood on some level that they weren't quite who they said they were. The adults on the boat, of course, had paid them no attention. Sometimes, youngsters could be far more perceptive than grown-ups.

Which was why the Special Forces Cadets existed in the first place.

Max, Lukas, Abby, Lili and Sami made a special effort to thank the ship's crew for the whale-watching tour as they disembarked. It wasn't just that they wanted to be polite. Today's trip was part of their cover. They wanted their presence to be remembered, maybe even commented upon. Perhaps tonight, over a pint in the pub, the skipper would mention that he'd had five teenagers on his boat. The more people were aware of them doing ordinary tourist activities, the more easily they would accept that they were ordinary tourists. Which they were not.

It was a short walk from the harbour at Stanley, the capital of the Falkland Islands, to the guest house where they were staying. In the forty-eight hours since they had arrived on a military aircraft from RAF Brize Norton, the airbase in Oxfordshire, the cadets had taken pains to ensure that they were seen around the town. They had soon become familiar with the geography of this small, quaint capital.

Here, thousands of miles from home, they had been surprised to find British supermarkets and cosy pubs. There were red telephone boxes and union flags flying from several houses.

It felt to Max like a tiny seaside resort.

'Fish and chips?' he suggested as they approached one of the main streets.

'What?' said Lukas, Sami and Lili in unison. Max had forgotten that, as they came from America, Syria and China respectively, fish and chips weren't really on their radar.

'You haven't lived,' Abby said, 'till you've had fish and chips.' She led them into the shop where a red-faced man stood behind the counter. 'Cod and chips, five times,' she said.

The man nodded and started scooping chips from the fryer. 'Been out on the boat, have you?' he said.

That was good, Max thought. It meant he knew who they were, and had accepted their cover story.

'Yep. Birdwatching tomorrow,' Abby said. 'Up on the moors. We're hoping to see some penguins while we're here as well. Er, do you think I could have a gherkin too?'

'One gherkin coming up.'

‘And a pickled egg.’ She turned to the others and saw their faces. ‘What?’ she said. ‘I’m hungry!’

Outside the chip shop, the cadets sat on a low stone wall and unwrapped their parcels of food. ‘Eat up,’ Max said quietly. ‘It’s going to be a long night.’

‘A cold one too,’ Lili said, ‘by the feel of it.’ And it was true. The temperature had suddenly dropped and there was a biting wind.

‘I wouldn’t mind being Woody and Angel right now,’ Abby said. ‘Comfortable bed, nice warm ship.’ She nodded out to sea as she popped a chip into her mouth. Woody and Angel were the cadets’ Watchers: the adults who, along with their leader Hector, had selected and trained them and who were currently stationed on a British naval patrol vessel in the waters surrounding the islands. With a bit of luck, that’s where they would stay.

But luck, the cadets had been taught, was not something to be relied upon. Sharp skills and a clear head were likely to keep you alive longer.

‘Do you really think having Woody and Angel here would make people suspect us?’ Lukas said, frowning.

‘Not exactly,’ Max said. ‘But the five of us being here by ourselves means that any Argentine spies in the vicinity are going to actively discount us if they’re searching for anybody suspicious. And it could be anyone. The captain of that ship we were on today. The chip guy.’

‘Hope it’s not the chip guy,’ Abby said, her mouth full.

‘I liked him. He pickles a mean egg.’

‘What I mean is,’ said Max, ‘we can’t trust anyone. We need to make sure that everybody we meet thinks we’re just here for the wildlife.’

‘Good job we’ve got Max to remind us of this stuff, hey, guys?’ Abby said.

Max gave a rueful smile. Maybe he had been a little patronising. But it did no harm to remind themselves of why they were here, even if the Watchers had briefed them all thoroughly about the curious rumour that had reached British intelligence just under a week ago . . .

It had started, by all accounts, with an old farmer called Banfield. The cadets had seen a photo of him. His face looked pinched by the weather and reddened by his fondness for the bottle. He had bumped into the governor of the Falkland Islands late one evening, plainly the worse for wear. Slurring his words, and with one arm around the governor’s shoulder, he said that he’d seen figures emerging from the sea into a secluded cove late the previous night.

The governor hadn’t taken him seriously. The farmer had a reputation as a drunk and he couldn’t sensibly answer any of the governor’s follow-up questions.

— How many figures did you see?

— Five, said Banfield. No . . . fifteen . . . no . . .

— Did they reach the shore by boat?

— No, no, there were no boats. No boats at all.

— What did these figures do after they came ashore?

— Ah, that’s the strange thing, said Banfield. They completely disappeared.

— Had you, by any chance, had a drink?

— Absolutely not! Well, maybe a little something to keep the cold at bay, Governor . . .

The governor had reported the conversation back to London. Two days later, Hector was briefing the cadets in his usual surly, no-nonsense style.

‘There has been intelligence chatter in the South Atlantic for several months now,’ he told them as they sat in the first-floor briefing room at Valley House, their home and headquarters in the wilds of Scotland. ‘Argentina is showing a renewed interest in the Falkland Islands. But there’s been no direct evidence of a second attack.’

‘Until now,’ Lili had said.

‘Maybe. The uncorroborated word of a drunk sheep farmer is hardly convincing. We can’t trust him. There’s no way the British government would make accusations against Argentina, or deploy a task force to the region, on such a flimsy pretext. At the same time, we can’t ignore this information completely. We need independent verification that this farmer really saw what he thinks he saw.’

‘Let me guess,’ said Lukas. ‘That’s where we come in?’

‘Right,’ Hector said. ‘Ordinarily we would deploy an SAS team to put in surveillance on the island. But there’s a problem. We’ve reliable intelligence that the Argentines have agents embedded in the Falklands. We’re fairly sure they have regular islanders on their payroll, probably living in Stanley. But there’s also some evidence to suggest that there’s a mole at the local RAF base at Mount Pleasant. We can’t guarantee that an SAS deployment to the Falklands would remain a secret.’

‘Why does it need to remain a secret?’ Max asked. ‘The Falklands are British, aren’t they? Surely we can send whoever we want there.’

‘True,’ Hector said. ‘But if we arouse the Argentines’ suspicion, they may well change their tactics. Sometimes, the best course of action is to let the enemy continue, unaware that you know what they’re doing. That way, you can make an informed decision about how best to stop them. The Falklands has a tiny population and newcomers are easily noticed. But if five teenagers turn up on, say, a wildlife-watching holiday, not even the most suspicious Argentine agent is going to think they’re there to put in military surveillance.’

‘One of these days,’ Abby said, ‘you’ll let us go on a real holiday.’

‘You think?’ Hector said.

‘Not really.’

‘Good. For a minute there, I thought you were going soft on me. There’s a weekly RAF flight to the Falklands. It also transports civilians. It leaves Brize Norton at midday tomorrow. You’ll be on it. When you arrive in Stanley you’ll check in to the Atlantic View guest house in the centre of town. Woody and Angel will be stationed on a Royal Navy patrol ship that regularly sails the waters around the Falklands. They’ll have a Special Boat Service unit with them – they’re like the SAS, but on water. Ostensibly they’ll be on exercises, which is perfectly normal. But if you get into trouble, or you need backup, they’ll be there. Meanwhile, by day you’ll be straightforward nature tourists: whale-watching, birdwatching, rambling – you get the picture. By night, you’re

to put in covert surveillance on the cove where this farmer claims to have seen the figures coming ashore. If there's a repeat performance, you're to find out what their objective is.'

'What do you think their objective is?' Lili asked.

Hector glanced uncomfortably at Woody and Angel, who were standing at the far end of the room. 'If pushed,' he said, 'I'd say that we're dealing with Argentine special forces scoping out possible landing sights and making advance preparations for an invasion. If – when – it happens, such an invasion will be swift and well planned.' His eyes narrowed.

'You're too young to remember the Falklands War,' he said. 'But I'm not. My own father was part of the task force, and he told me some grisly stories about men dying badly. We have the opportunity to ensure that doesn't happen again. This might sound like a straightforward surveillance operation, but there's a hell of a lot riding on it. Don't let me down.'