

John Kelly

Born 1938. Naval officer and helicopter pilot.
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H.M.S. Fearless, on which John Kelly served as Executive Officer during the Falklands War.

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The following is extracted, with acknowledgement and thanks, from John Kelly's obituary published by The Times on 12th July 2023. Additional images have been added by Lives Retold editor Alex Reid, who served with John Kelly as a naval helicopter pilot in 848 Squadron on HMS Albion and in Borneo.

1. Introduction



Kelly co-piloted a Sea King helicopter as the Falklands conflict neared its end and he persuaded designers to give HMS Invincible a ski jump for its jets. Flying under the trajectory of British gunfire, Captain John Kelly watched the shells fall on Argentine positions around the capital of the Falkland Islands while his helicopter helped to keep the batteries supplied with ammunition.

As second in command — or executive officer — of the amphibious assault ship HMS Fearless, Kelly was in the air only as a last resort. He had not flown on operations for more than ten years, but the ship's helicopter squadron was short of pilots and Kelly volunteered.

For three days he flew with 846 Naval Air Squadron as co-pilot of a Sea King as the battle for Stanley reached its climax in June 1982.

His role in the final days of the conflict — two months after the Argentinians had invaded the British territory in the South Atlantic — was only one of several ways in which Kelly influenced the outcome of events in the Falklands.

2. Borneo

Kelly had started flying in 1960 after graduating from the naval college in Dartmouth and serving in a frigate and a minesweeper. He trained on jets but switched to helicopters. “It was the best decision I made,” he said, “because I joined the helicopter world at the beginning of the Sixties just as it was about to mushroom.”

He completed his commando flying training in 1962 and worked with the SAS in the Brecon Beacons. He then served with 848 squadron in the commando carrier HMS Bulwark, which sailed for the Far East after its pilots had helped to tag elephants in Kenya. In the spring of 1965 he was posted to Borneo, part of the former British colony of Malaysia, where an armed insurgency, supported by Russia and China, was being directed from Jakarta. The three-year conflict is known as the “Indonesia Confrontation”.

A young lieutenant, Kelly was one of 25 mostly inexperienced pilots serving with 848 who embarked in the aircraft carrier HMS Albion off the Cornish coast. He later led a flight of four Wessex helicopters deep into the Borneo jungle, commanding the detachment from a forward base at Nanga Gaat. The crews were nicknamed the “Junglies”.



Kelly commanded a team of Wessex helicopters in Borneo in the Sixties.

One of his former pilots, Captain Iain Mackenzie, said: “He led by example and quickly moulded an efficient team that operated in the most demanding and hazardous conditions — high temperatures, humidity and frequent fierce tropical storms.

“His pilots had to fly hundreds of miles over dense jungle using the most elementary of maps without navigation aids, flying troops and supplies in and out of small, tight clearings hacked out of the jungle.”

Years later, Kelly told the IWM: “It was the greatest adventure of my life, earning the Queen’s shilling, flying around Borneo, doing something I never imagined I would do. It was unique for me.”

Kelly was appointed MBE for his “outstanding leadership” in Borneo, and was later awarded the OBE for his service in the Falklands.

3. After Borneo

Among his many roles after returning from Borneo, Kelly commanded 846 and 847 squadrons in Britain and Malaysia, and was dispatched to the Ganges Delta to undertake flood relief work. He was promoted in 1973 and took command of the frigate HMS Llandaff.

On one occasion, his ship was moored in Mombasa when a Russian destroyer came into port with an admiral on board. As the senior British officer, Kelly called on his Cold War adversary and talked to him through an interpreter.



Laying a wreath at the San Carlos Bay memorial, c 2011

Kelly said: “He told me that, ‘In my navy, anybody can become an admiral, you only have to work hard and have ability’. So I looked him in the eye and said the same was true in my navy. My grandfather was a coal miner, my father was a school master and I’m in command of one of Her Majesty’s ships — his jaw dropped. He couldn’t believe that the captain of a ship in a capitalist country could have had such a humble background.”

After leaving the frigate, he took a fellowship in international studies at Cambridge before serving as a staff officer in Whitehall. On return from the Falklands, he was promoted and posted to Supreme Headquarters

Allied Powers Europe in Belgium. He later held several influential positions at the Ministry of Defence, including director of naval security. As a staff officer with the directorate of naval operational requirements at the Ministry of Defence in the mid-1970s, he helped to persuade the designers to change the specifications for the aircraft carrier HMS Invincible. Instead of a flat deck, the ship was built with a ski jump, which improved the performance of its Harrier jump-jets: the more efficient take-off allowed them to carry more weapons and fly further. The Harrier would provide the air cover crucial to victory in the Falklands.



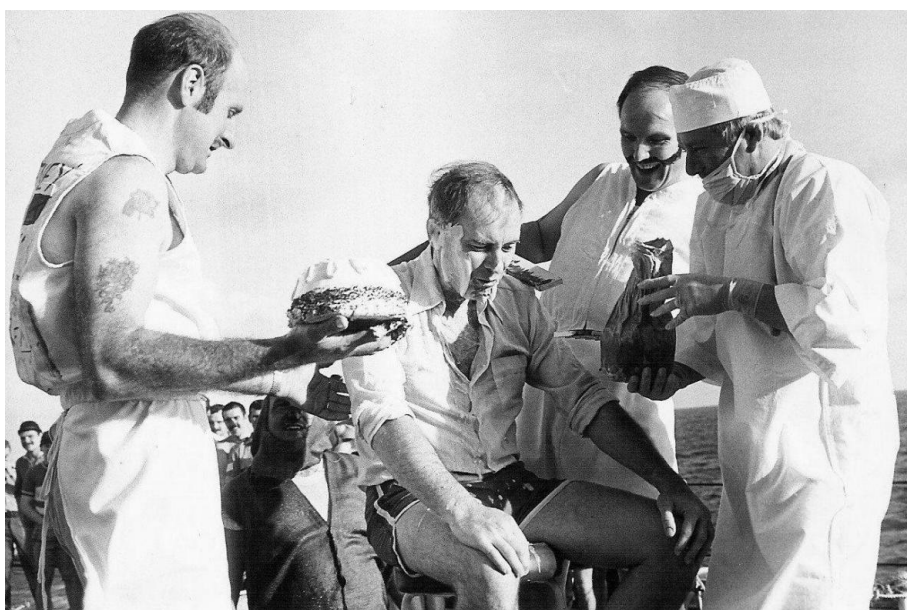
HMS Invincible, with its 'ski jump'.

4. The Falklands War

In 1981, as executive officer of *Fearless*, he helped to persuade John Nott, the defence secretary, to reverse a decision to scrap the navy's amphibious assault ships. Nott visited *Fearless* and was sufficiently impressed to change his mind. Without them, Britain would not have been able to retake the islands.

After the invasion of the Falkland Islands, Kelly received a signal in the early hours of April 3 ordering the ship to prepare for war. He had been scheduled to take up another post, and had less than half a crew because most were on leave after duties in Norway and the Caribbean. However, he calmly organised the provision of stores and ammunition — and the rebricking of one boiler — with *Fearless* sailing in haste on April 6. The ship would become the command centre for the British landings.

According to Rear-Admiral Jeremy Larken, the captain of *Fearless* at that time, Kelly helped to create a ship that “was both efficient and happy” and “notably successful in meeting the most unusual demands placed upon her”.



Kelly being shaved during HMS Fearless's “crossing the line” ceremony on the way to the Falklands in 1982.

He described Kelly, a committed Christian, as a “tough man”. He had a “well developed sense of emotional intelligence” and “a great way with people; a great way with sailors. He was hugely influential without anyone knowing he was there”.

In an audio history recorded for the Imperial War Museum (IWM) in 2016, Kelly described the fierce air attacks on British ships in San Carlos Water

— “the navy had been taking it on the chin for five days and lost several ships” — as well as the tension as they waited for decisive moves on land.

The descriptions of his helicopter sorties are vivid. He flew four hours of operations on June 10 after being recalled as a pilot; seven hours on the second day; and nine hours, one in darkness, on June 12 as the British assaults went in on the mountains around Stanley.

“I can remember picking up ammunition for the gun batteries, and moving it forward,” said Kelly. “We just threw out the rule book, putting as many shells, physically, as we could get in the net, never mind the weight, with the helicopter staggering off sideways, until it got transitional lift . . . and then eventually got going.”

5. Personal Life

John Stuart Kelly was born in Sheffield in 1938, the son of John and Anne Kelly, who also had a daughter, Patricia. While both parents were teachers, his father was an accomplished footballer who had been presented to Hitler during a tour of Germany. He returned to Britain convinced there would be war.

Indeed, John was fortunate to survive childhood because of the conflict his father predicted. A German incendiary bomb hit the family home in Sheffield and fell through John's cot. His father smothered the device with sand.

The family moved regularly, living in North Yorkshire, Leicestershire and Buckinghamshire. After passing his 11-plus, John attended the Royal Grammar School in High Wycombe, where he excelled at maths and physics, captained the 1st XV and was head of house.

He married Sue Watson, a dancer, in 1966 after meeting her while on a flying course in North Yorkshire and following her career, driving to shows across Europe. After their marriage, she became a dance teacher.



In retirement Kelly became a church treasurer in his Hampshire village and took a leading role in the British Legion

The couple had three children: Jeremy and Oliver, who pursued careers in finance, and Sophie, who works in fashion. When his wife suffered a stroke in recent years, Kelly dedicated himself to her recovery. She survives him along with their children.

They created a home in the village of Martin, Hampshire, where Kelly was church treasurer and played a leading role in the local British Legion. He enjoyed watching sport and loved classical music. He had a passion for classic cars — he drove his daughter to her wedding in a 1962 Alvis TD21 — and maps.



An Alvis 1962 TD21.

According to his son Jeremy, “He loved planning family holidays and plotting our best route on a map laid out on the kitchen table. Typically, when his high level of enthusiasm was not met by the rest of the family, he would defend his diligent planning with the wonderful phrase, ‘Time in reconnaissance is seldom wasted’. Once the much-planned odyssey actually started, the family would then inevitably hear his other favourite phrase, ‘A plan is a basis for change’, as a last-minute variation was thrown in.”

He also retained a passion for HMS Fearless. In 2007, he watched as the ship was towed out of Portsmouth Harbour to the breakers’ yard. “It was a very emotional day,” he said. Fifteen years later, on the 40th anniversary of the Falklands conflict, he led the production of an anthology celebrating the ship’s contribution to the British victory.

Recalling those events, Larken, his former captain, said: “As my key ‘alter-ego’, John Kelly never failed to raise and discuss issues, not least when he reckoned I had got it wrong, but I don’t recall us ever failing to reach agreement.”

John Kelly died of skin cancer on June 19, 2023, aged 85.