

# Admiral Sir Peter Herbert obituary

Cold War submarine commander who defied a smoking ban during the Falklands conflict and played a key role in the sinking of the *Belgrano*



Peter Herbert and his wife, Ann, on their wedding day in 1953

When Vice-Admiral Peter Herbert first saw the message from HMS *Hermes* in the South Atlantic, he was “very, very cross”. He had spotted the signal from Rear-Admiral Sandy Woodward, commander of the British naval task force attempting to retake the Falkland Islands, as the SSIXS satellite transmitted it to Northwood Command Headquarters in Hertfordshire, and immediately stopped its transmission.

At that moment Herbert, who was flag officer submarines, plundered another cigarette from his flag lieutenant, Philip Mathias, in defiance of his wife, who had banned him from smoking. Woodward (obituary, August 14, 2013) had deliberately overstepped the authority of his rank and ordered the hunter-killer submarine HMS *Conqueror* to attack the Argentine cruiser ARA *General Belgrano*, even though she was sailing outside the total exclusion zone established around the islands by the British.

The submarine had located the *Belgrano* south of the Falklands on May 1, 1982, but could not attack because of the rules of engagement. Fearing that the cruiser would either switch direction and attack the task force or slip away, Woodward decided to concentrate minds, particularly in Downing Street, to get a swift extension to the rules. He then transmitted the order to HMS *Conqueror*.

At about the same time Herbert was in the operations room at Northwood. "I took it off the broadcast," he recalled later. "Obviously it had to go right up to the prime minister."

At Chequers a meeting of the war cabinet was hastily convened, which issued one stark instruction: "Sink it."

Within a short time Herbert was signalling HMS *Conqueror* with the order, which arrived on board when she raised her communications mast on the afternoon of May 2. The enemy cruiser was torpedoed and sunk that day, with the loss of 323 lives.

The incident was not the only occasion when Herbert found himself at odds with the commander of the task force. While Woodward was confronting the Argentine forces that had invaded the Falklands on April 2, Herbert was also discharging his responsibilities to Nato, running classified submarine patrols in the eastern Atlantic. He had to ensure that the hot war in the Falklands and the equally hard-fought cold one against the Soviet Union were assigned sufficient hunter-killers.



Herbert returning to HMS Valiant in 1983

In the South Atlantic, however, Woodward was insistent that boats deployed there should come under his direct command, even though all submarine operations had been handled by command HQ for the previous decade. The issue took some thrashing out, but eventually Herbert and Admiral Sir John Fieldhouse, commander-in-chief fleet, who was in overall command of Britain's battle to regain the islands, successfully argued that

nuclear submarines were a strategic asset and the maelstrom of war was no time to consider structural change.

With his authority reconfirmed, Herbert worked deftly to ensure that Soviet attack boats hunting for the British nuclear deterrent — a Polaris submarine — were kept at bay. As for his smoking habit, Herbert routinely returned home reeking of tobacco, and his wife was in no doubt who was to blame. She would scold Mathias, the source of her husband's supply of cigarettes, often with her spouse standing behind her, swathed in gold braid and grinning at his junior officer.

Herbert had long experience of submarines. He had been commanding officer of HMS *Valiant*, the first entirely British-made nuclear-powered submarine, between 1963 and 1968. When he arrived at the Vickers Shipbuilding and Engineering factory in Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, the first hoops had just been put on to the slipway and he watched the boat take shape from the keel up.

He faced a steep technological learning curve during the building programme; there was no working prototype for her nuclear plant, so engineers had to rely on a wooden mock-up as a training aid. When the submarine left Barrow for the first time, the main throttles stuck, forcing her to limp north to Campbeltown at five knots. For this and other glitches, HMS *Valiant* was dubbed the Black Pig.

To test the submarine's nuclear plant fully, Herbert sailed her dived to Singapore at full power in 1967, with just one short stop in Mauritius. The air conditioning broke down in the Indian Ocean, which pushed temperatures to 60C in the machinery room, and a small bolt worked loose in the gearbox. These faults apart, the crew was thrilled with how the boat performed. Returning to Faslane, Herbert thrashed her steam turbines again, sailing at up to 28 knots and entering the naval base in just under three weeks. She made the trip in 19 days, but had to sit at sea for 24 hours; there was a press conference the next day and the presiding admiral did not want the submarine pitching up a day early.

In 1968 HMS *Valiant* became the first nuclear-powered British hunter-killer to conduct a Cold War intelligence-gathering operation, sidling up as close as possible to the Soviet navy, even under the Arctic ice. Denis Healey, the defence secretary at the time, made his concerns clear. "Don't you bloody well get detected," he told the submarine commander as he left on the mission.

Herbert recalled how the deployment "was surprisingly easy because we were quiet and we could wander and watch things going on. I watched, from about 1,000 yards behind a cruiser, watching its missile launch and those sorts of things . . ."

Any such patrol requires nimble reflexes, though, and he had to ensure that HMS *Valiant* smartly slid off into the deep when the Soviet submarine she was sitting beneath started to dive.



Herbert in 1978, when he was made flag officer carriers and amphibious ships

Peter Geoffrey Marshall Herbert was born in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, in 1929, the son of Arthur Herbert, an engineer who went on to become the sales director for Rover cars, and his wife, Phyllis. After growing up in Coventry and attending Dunchurch Hall preparatory school in Warwickshire, he entered Britannia Royal Naval College in Dartmouth, Devon, aged 13.

Herbert discovered that he suffered from crippling seasickness so opted for the Submarine Service because boats can dive below choppy waves and evade strong surface swell. He learnt the complex and demanding art of fighting underwater in HMS *Truncheon* as second-in-command, serving with a number of men who had been successful captains during the Second World War. Some of the men he came across, however, had been deeply scarred from traumatic patrols. "There were some who were absolutely shot," Herbert said. "You didn't blame them, they'd had a hell of a war."

After Herbert passed the navy's submarine command course in 1956, his first commands included HMS *Excalibur*, which he was given after the hatch had fallen on his predecessor's head. An experimental boat that ran on high-test peroxide, she was fast and agile but would flip-roll if not controlled carefully. When exhaust fumes leaked down the fin, Herbert had his first taste of carbon monoxide poisoning.

He had met his future wife, Ann McKeown, as a child. Their parents were friends. She attended his college passing-out ball in 1945 and he fell deeply in love with her. While Herbert's credentials appeared to make him a dashing and enviable catch, Ann was not so sure. It took him six years to persuade her of his virtues. When his persistence finally paid

off, they were married in Berkswell, Coventry, in 1953. The couple doted on each other for 59 years, settling first outside Andover in Hampshire, before moving to Bourton-on-the-Hill in Gloucestershire in 1983. They had two children: Rory, who is the head of fund registrations at Allianz, the financial services company, and Clare, who is a therapy radiographer, as well as four grandchildren.

Herbert was marked out for high office early in his career, and he danced up the ranks from commodore to full admiral in just six years. He was knighted in 1983. He served as deputy chief, Polaris Executive (1976-78) and flag officer carriers and amphibious ships (1978-79). His last role was as vice-chief of the defence staff (personnel and logistics) from 1983 to 1985. Herbert did not enjoy his stint at the Ministry of Defence, where he had difficulty working with Michael Heseltine, the defence secretary. He complained that Heseltine would not listen to his concerns about the retention of men and women in the armed forces.

On retiring from the Royal Navy, Herbert became chairman of the armed forces charity SSAFA for nine years, a governor of Cheltenham Ladies' College and chairman of governors of Cheam preparatory school. He was devastated by Ann's death in 2012, but continued their long-shared passion of tending a sumptuous one-acre garden at their Gloucestershire home. Next to the mowers and leaf blowers in the barn were the tools for his other passion, woodwork.

Among the young officers who served under Herbert in HMS *Valiant* was Michael Boyce, future chief of the defence staff and admiral of the fleet, who was then in his early twenties. According to Lord Boyce, Herbert was "a remarkable commanding officer", adding: "He really knew his business. He was absolutely unflappable and everybody loved him."

**Admiral Sir Peter Herbert KCB, OBE, naval officer, was born on February 28, 1929. He died on May 3, 2019, aged 90**