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UK accidentally invaded Spain in 2002, reveals former First Sea Lord

'Luckily the Spanish government didn't make some thing out of it'

Jon Sharman | Tuesday 4 April 2017 11:49 | | 44 comments

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Royal Marines during a landing exercise in Gosport, in 2015 (PA)

The former head of the Royal Navy has told how British marines once accidentally invaded Spain while

He recounted the tale on the BBC's Today programme, after Downing Street was forced to play down the suggestion it might send a naval task force to The Rock in any dispute over sovereignty post-**Brexit**.

Former Conservative leader Michael Howard **caused uproar on Sunday** when he suggested the UK could go to war with Spain, as it had done with Argentina over the Falkland Islands, if it used the Brexit negotiations to assert sovereignty over the British territory.

Lord West said: "It wasn't one of the best days in my time. I had a phone call from the military commander saying, 'Sir, I'm afraid something awful's happened.' I thought, 'Goodness me, what?' And he said, 'I'm afraid we've invaded Spain, but we don't think they've noticed.'

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"I said, 'People always notice, tell me exactly what happened.' They had been doing a little landing exercise which was meant to take place on a beach in Gibraltar, and they had got lost, and gone up on the wrong beach.

"They charged up the beach in the normal way, being Royal Marines — they're frightfully good soldiers of course, and jolly good at this sort of thing — and confronted a Spanish fisherman who sort of pointed out, 'I think you're on the wrong beach.'

"And they all scrambled back in their boats and went away again. So I immediately had to get on to the Foreign Office and the governor of Gibraltar."

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Lord West added: "To be fair to them it is tricky at the northern point there, there are groynes, you know, sort of piers and jetties.

"I would've hoped they would have known exactly which the right beach was. I was teased mercilessly. I had a postcard from the head of the Army and Air Force which was a postcard of Gibraltar with an arrow pointing 'ours' and another arrow pointing 'theirs'.

"Because I'm afraid, historically, they have occasionally stirred things up and made trouble over Gibraltar, and I'm glad to say that didn't happen."

The incident has not been brought up since, he said. "It was only 30 of them as well. If I'd put 2,000 ashore it might've been a bit more tricky."

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