Sandy Woodward, naval hero of the Falklands, tells Caroline Phillips why he deserted his wife after 32 years

While we talked he doodles, drawing a battleship. He speaks in a crusty voice, peppering his conversation with pukka expressions such as "chaps" and "oh, good Lord".

Admiral Sir John "Sandy" Woodward, Britain's greatest living naval hero and the man who led the task force to victory in the Falklands, is speaking publicly for the first time about his adulterous affair with a family friend, the breakdown of his marriage after 32 years and his ongoing friendship with the man whose wife he stole.

We meet in a cozy cottage in Twickenham, South West London, that he acquired after leaving the marital home. A grandfather clock ticks in the corner and his own sketches and watercolour seascapes cover the walls. Woodward, 6ft tall, wears a stripy shirt and striped Royal College of Defence Studies tie. He has a weather-beaten face, grey hair and eyebrows that rise expressively.

How does he wish to be addressed? "You can call me Sandy," he replies. "Or Admiral. Admiral Sandy or Admiral Sir John." He was nicknamed Sandy, aged one, despite his dark hair.

He had a job that was formidable, isolated and daunting but it earned him the respect of a nation. Acquaintances have sometimes dubbed him private, paranoid, a cold fish and arrogant. In truth, he is sensitive, humorous, clever and self-critical.

He met Charlotte, his wife, in London in 1958. A doctor's daughter, she was then a radiographer. They wed in 1960. "It was a pretty ordinary marriage," Woodward says, now.

"We rubbed along. Sometimes I was prickly to her, beastly, tetchy, not tender enough. I'm sure I was quite difficult. If you're going to rise to the top of the military, there has to be a little iron in your soul.

"People think I got into a terrible mess because of the war. They try to attribute the break-up of my marriage to the effects downstream from 1982. It may have been a contributory factor but it wasn't the pivotal thing. We wound each other up too much often. We rowed too often. No, I didn't hit her and I wasn't verbally abusive. I was just acid.

"Sometimes I'd be at home only 64 days a year," he continues. "As the years go by, the separations make it harder to get back into the domestic scene. Instead of worrying about how you're going to pay the gas bill, you're sitting with Mrs T at No 10, thinking about national defence.

"The estrangement is progressive unless you make positive and continuous efforts to keep your connections. I..."
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men have strong libidos. Does he regard himself as highly sexed? "No, I don't. I'm normal. But if you see yourself as paranoid, you're most unusual for a paranoid."

Jim was gently, correctly about the new marital arrangements. "I can't remember how he responded initially, which suggests it wasn't violently or strongly," explains Woodward.

"He is highly intelligent, good-humoured and sensible, and didn't get overexcited about the whole business. Charlotte is no longer good friends with Prin. She finds what has happened hard to live with."

AMAZINGLY, the other three remain close. "I don't know how. You'll have to ask Tim. We meet up sometimes with the family or sailing in Chichester Harbour. Occasionally Tim comes to stay the night."

Woodward was born in Cornwall, the son of Tom, a modest and unambitious Barclays Bank cashier. He was the baby of the family — with an "independent" brother Jim and an "equally tough" sister Liz — and went to boarding school at eight.

He was bullied, felt isolated and learned to cope. He finished there as head boy, "albeit a very moderate one."

At 13 he began to prepare for a vacation in the Navy, having won a scholarship to the Royal Naval College, Dartmouth. "The services are really like an extension of school life."

Today Woodward spends his time sailing, writing "blood and thunder fiction" (airport novels), playing bridge and lecturing. "I'm not rich."

NEW LIFE: Woodward with lover Winitred Hoult
BEFORE THE SPLIT: Woodward says he regrets his "sheer carelessness" towards his wife Charlotte

...he says, "I'm not particularly interested in making money. But I don't need much money. I mean, basically." In a sense, his Falklands War has continued. Even now he has on his computer a brilliant simulation of the military defence of the Falklands. "We've line at the moment in the extremely unlikely event that the Argentineans come again."

HE is also spearheading the scheme to create Britain's first national memorial to the Falklands war dead at the naval college in Pangbourne, Berkshire. "All social occasions, people would come up to me and say, 'You killed my son. That's difficult to deal with unless you're prepared for it and I wasn't. It happened more than once."

"I can't remember what I said. I didn't feel personally responsible. The son was killed in the service of his country but no mother is going to be comforted by that. For some, the price is too high."

"I'm finding it very difficult to accept. Woodward was my best friend."

Woodward also explains how 11 years after the war ended, a light is still being waged. History has broken out between himself and the other hero of the Falklands campaign, Commodore Michael Clapp. He remembers Mike as a special friend and has written a graphic, interesting book. He really wants to get into this. This is personal between us."

"I didn't ask for more. I'm very lucky." But he has not divorced Charlotte. "We haven't got round to it, partly for financial reasons. While we're still married she gets half my state pension if I'm run over." He relates it to Charlotte's story. "When you come back to a clear focus of threat to your personal, you see your marriage from a different perspective."

He moves his cup of coffee and confronts his mortality. "I'm not frightened of dying. I'm an atheist. But it's not a very likely that I'd be popping up in Heaven in view of the things I've done."

"A girl at Bryanston School said I was a murderer. That would be enough to send me to Hell if it were true."

He finishes the last line of his doodle: "For me, Hell would be to be interviewed permanently by the media."

Too late he recalls that his service training taught him to divulge no more than name, rank and number if interrogated.