

OPERATION CORPORATE 1982: A MARITIME DOCTRINAL PERSPECTIVE

On 2-3 April 1982, Argentine military units invaded the British South Atlantic possessions of the Falkland Islands and South Georgia. Although taking them by force was a gamble, the Argentine Junta desired to strengthen their standing at home, and based their decision on mounting evidence of British political weakness, including publicity concerning major cutbacks in the British Armed Forces. The United Kingdom's limited deterrent posture in the South Atlantic had clearly failed, yet by the middle of June the islands were back under British control. The key to the rapid and successful outcome of Operation CORPORATE was the Royal Navy's inherent readiness and its ability to conduct a joint campaign of maritime power projection across 8000nm of the Atlantic Ocean.¹



Jubilant British crowds salute the departure of HMS Hermes, the task force flagship, from Portsmouth.

The first units of the British task force that took back the Falklands sailed from UK ports between 5-7 April, their prompt despatch a military act to demonstrate national resolve. But the response was in no sense an isolated measure; rather it was designed to support ongoing diplomatic efforts to secure an Argentine withdrawal. Nevertheless, once it became clear that the Junta intended to ignore international disapproval, the task force's mission readily changed from coercion to combat. Of greatest importance to ultimate success, a clear military aim was selected and maintained throughout. Although the operation remained incredibly complex, at all times the adaptability of the forces involved ensured that Britain's leadership could anticipate and fine tune their military responses.

Particular care had to be taken in planning, for the challenges were greater than would normally have been considered acceptable for an attacking force. Most notably:

- the distance to the theatre meant long lines of communication and constraints on the amount of force that could be applied
- the Argentine garrison had significant time to prepare their defences
- the British could not expect superiority either in the air or on the ground
- British forces would be required to maintain combat readiness over an extended period, while remaining at sea with a sub-Antarctic winter approaching
- contrary to extant defence policy and long-term NATO contingency training, this would be a purely national campaign.

These difficulties made it essential to construct a campaign that achieved an acceptable end-state before British forces reached their operational limits through personnel fatigue and equipment breakdown, and were thereby forced to withdraw. The military conditions that would bring about this end-state were identified as the removal of Argentine forces from Port Stanley, the major population centre/seat of government in the Falklands.

As always, military resources were limited, making it essential that critical task force components were protected throughout the operation. Chief among these components were the two light aircraft carriers, HM Ships *Hermes* and *Invincible* and their embarked fixed and rotary-wing aircraft. The Argentine threat was multi-dimensional, but in addition to the task force's offensive potential, its inherent mobility, versatility, and sustainability also provided a spectrum of effective defensive options.

Since the bulk of Argentine ground forces were concentrated at Port Stanley, a direct assault here might shorten the campaign, but the military risks of such an action were immediately judged too high. Moreover, an assault risked high civilian casualties, an unacceptable outcome when the operation aimed to free the local populace. Hence, the agreed campaign plan sought to minimise these risks, while taking advantage of British maritime strengths.

The subsequent campaign therefore consisted of several sequential phases. These phases included:

- the deployment into theatre of nuclear-powered attack submarines, which could exploit their speed and stealth to collect intelligence, conduct surveillance and build the recognised maritime picture
- the assembly and deployment of the task force, including storing and combat preparation, and the taking up of ships from trade to achieve sustained reach
- a smaller scale operation to retake the island of South Georgia, thereby transmitting intent to the Argentine forces and removing any potential to outflank British forces

- the establishment of a sufficient degree of sea control to permit a landing in the Falklands, while simultaneously denying the Argentine garrison the possibility of reinforcement
- an amphibious assault in a remote and therefore less well-defended area of the Falkland Islands to establish a beachhead
- a breakout from the landing area, followed by an overland advance against Port Stanley.

If a deployment is distant from a naval force's normal operating base, maritime doctrine emphasises the importance of a forward deployed logistics element. Vital to the strategic mobility demonstrated in the Falkland's campaign was the early set up of Ascension Island in the mid-Atlantic as an advanced logistic support site. It was thereafter used as both an airhead and a tanker base in support of the Joint Operational Logistics Pipeline. The first task force units reached Ascension on 10 April, followed by the flagship *Hermes* on 16 April and the Amphibious Force on the following day. Time was taken to complete planning, embark additional stores, re-stow cargo, and refresh embarked troops ashore.

Having detached an advanced force with Royal Marines and Special Forces, the operation to recapture South Georgia began on 21 April. Naval gunfire covered the final advance of the assault force and the demoralised Argentine troops surrendered on 25 April. An unexpected bonus from the operation was the capture of one of the three operational Argentine submarines. However, the remaining submarines still posed a residual threat as a force in being, and continued to require the task force to devote much time and effort to anti-submarine warfare.

Further reducing any challenge to British sea control, on 2 May the submarine HMS *Conqueror* sank the Argentine cruiser *General Belgrano*. This action resulted in the containment of the remaining Argentine surface forces, including their aircraft carrier, ARA *Veinticinco de Mayo*, which took no further part in the campaign. Thereafter, Argentine capabilities for sea denial largely rested in their maritime air forces based on the mainland, the seriousness of the threat being demonstrated on 4 May, when the destroyer HMS *Sheffield* succumbed to an air-launched Exocet missile attack.

The primary British response to this threat was a campaign of attrition directed against the Argentine navy and air force to weaken, or preferably neutralise, their off-island defensive capability. This came about through a cumulative operation to stimulate action with the Argentine air forces through air combat and destroyer/frigate missile traps, preferably on terms favourable to the British.

The British had early on declared a 200nm radius Military/Maritime Exclusion Zone, taken from the centre of the Falkland Islands. From 30 April this was replaced by a Total Exclusion Zone, in which all ships and aircraft, naval, military or civil, in any way supporting the Argentine occupation of the Falklands were liable to attack. The blockade was enforced using fixed and rotary-wing air attacks, sweeps by surface action groups and the implicit threat of submarine action. There were never enough counter air forces to prevent the continual air resupply of

the Argentine garrison, but the ongoing pressure did much to keep the defending forces on edge.

In the meantime, the British task force had initiated advanced force operations using submarines, air and clandestine reconnaissance to prepare the battlespace in advance of the landing forces. Deception operations, including raids and bombardments, were also used to mislead the enemy's interpretation of British intentions, maintain the initiative and raise morale within the task force. On 20 May, with conditions judged ready, the British command used the ability of maritime forces to achieve surprise and the concentration of force to stage a full scale amphibious assault in San Carlos Water, an inlet off Falkland Sound.

While the amphibious units and supporting warships carried out their landing, the aircraft carriers stood off, conducting offensive counter air operations and air support. Control of the air over the amphibious objective could not be guaranteed, and once the Argentines realised that the landings were not a diversion the British suffered heavily from air attack. Yet, notwithstanding ship losses and damage, the task force possessed sufficient resilience to continue operations. Furthermore, the inability of the Argentine air forces to prevent the subsequent unloading and buildup of vital military stores reflected overall British success in their campaign of attrition. The overland advance from the beachhead began on 26 May.

The most serious British loss of the campaign was the container ship *Atlantic Conveyor* on 25 May, and more particularly her cargo—carrying helicopters and irreplaceable stores. This setback dictated substantial alterations to the offensive plan of advance. Further Argentine air attacks on two logistic landing ships on 8 June also inflicted substantial damage, but again not enough to thwart British intentions. Improvisation, strict prioritisation, and the flexibility of maritime support meant that the campaign's momentum was sustained.

Although the Argentine defenders in the approaches to Port Stanley still outnumbered the attacking British land forces, they were harried day and night by air attack, air portable artillery and naval gunfire support. Consistently outmanoeuvred and driven out from their strong defensive positions, the ill-supplied and demoralised Argentine troops retreated to Port Stanley. With military disorder setting in, the garrison surrendered on 14 June, just as the final British investment of Port Stanley was beginning.

Thus ended the war, but in the words of the commander of the British Task Force, 'only for the land forces',

Out here in the Battle Group, the electronic City still cannot sleep: the nightwatchmen remain alert. The combat air patrol is still on the flight deck, at ten minutes' notice to go. The eyes and ears of the Fleet are tireless.²

¹ This Semaphore is largely based on D Brown, *The Royal Navy in the Falklands War*, Pen & Sword Books, London, 1987; Royal Navy, *The Fundamentals of British Maritime Doctrine*, BR1806, HMSO, London, 1995, pp. 189-195; and Royal Australian Navy, *Australian Maritime Doctrine*, Sea Power Centre - Australia, Canberra, 2010.

² Admiral Sandy Woodward, *One Hundred Days*, Fontana, London 1992, p. 332.

