The Empire Strikes Back from The Air? British Airpower on the Road to Falklands

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This research seeks to fill a gap in the existing scholarly literature concerning overall preparedness of British airpower for the Falklands War. The British defense establishment and airpower-related services fell victim to preparing for war against the Warsaw Pact and were not well-prepared for the Falklands War. However, British combined forces still won the war by a large margin. This paper examines the UK's strategic background, operational contingency planning, force structure, doctrine, training, and posture to assess the RAF and RNFAA in the 1970s and compare them with the actual operational contingency, the required airpower-related military forces, and the performance of the existing RAF and RNFAA forces in the Falklands War. Yet it concludes that the risk of unpreparedness for peripheral contingencies might be warranted because of the imperative of strategic prioritization. The implication of this research suggests that the US, as it faces similarly conflicting demands on its strategic assets, might also have to prioritize and make hard choices on its political commitments.

The current literature assessing the evolution of the Royal Air Force (RAF) in the post-East-of-Suez period, the rise and fall of British naval aviation in the thermonuclear age, and the air combat in the Falklands War is excellent; however, the coverage of the overall preparedness of British airpower for the Falklands conflict is thin. This paper addresses this vital question, arguing that the British defense establishment and airpower-related services fell victim to preparing for the last war. As a consequence, they were not sufficiently prepared for the Falklands war, though British combined forces still triumphed by slim margins. The paper examines Britain's strategic direction and operational contingency planning in the era before the Falklands War. It then evaluates the force structure, doctrine, posture, and training of the RAF and Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm (RNFAA) to meet these perceived strategic directions and operational contingencies. As part of that evaluation, it distills the actual strategic direction in the late 1970s and early 1980s and the actual operational contingency requirement in 1982. Finally, this paper assesses the wartime value of the RAF and RNFAA's pre-war force structure, doctrine, posture, and training. The paper finds that British air power was not sufficiently prepared for the Falklands conflict because of imperial retrenchment and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) priorities. Therefore, Britain prevailed in the Falklands conflict primarily because of Argentine deficiencies and good luck.

British Strategy After the Empire

The United Kingdom's post-WWII economic recession, combined with the Soviet conventional military threat to Northern and Central Europe and nuclear threat to the British Isles, doomed British hard power in the Indo-Pacific.[1] By the late 1960s, Britain was committed to defending East of Suez territories in the Persian Gulf, Southeast Asia, and Oceania. The British

[1] Piers Brendon, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire, 1781-1997* (New York, NY: Vintage, 2010), chapters 13-17.

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conventional forces were so overstretched that the iconic Trooping the Color ceremony for the Queen's birthday would be jeopardized by one additional contingency.[2] These trends culminated in the UK's *Healey Review* strategic defense assessment from 1966-1968 and Prime Minister Harold Wilson's 1968 announcement that British troops would be withdrawn in 1971 from major military bases in South East Asia, Indian Ocean islands, and the Persian Gulf.[3] This withdrawal represented a contraction of the UK's global presence that official histories claimed as the eventual end of the British Empire.[4] After the empire, British strategy was laser-focused on NATO commitments, including three divisions of ground force and several hundred tactical aircraft to the Northern Army Group (NORTHAG) of the NATO Central Front. Other vital strategic objectives included countering the Soviet naval threat to NATO's northern flank, helping secure the alliance's sea lines of communication (SLOC) in the northeastern Atlantic and the English Channel, and maintaining tactical and strategic nuclear deterrence against a Soviet attack.[5] The UK's *Mason Review* strategic defense assessment in 1974-1975 reaffirmed the domestic and European orientation of British defense strategy, further bolstered by the 1981 *Nott Review* strategic defense assessment.[6]

British Operational Contingency Planning in the 1970s

The centerpiece of British operational planning in the 1970s was a forward conventional defense with NORTHAG on NATO's Central Front against a massive Soviet ground and air offensive on the North German Plain. America's Vietnam-era European drawdown, the post-Khrushchev Soviet conventional buildup, and the differentiated doctrinal and organizational transformation of the NATO armies contributed to NATO's unfavorable conventional balance in the 1970s. The First British Corps had no common operational concept with the other four NORTHAG corps on the Army Group level and no American mobile reserves. The Corps would be by itself in a shooting war.[7] If the Warsaw Pact broke the defensive West German Hessen-Hoxter Line in the British Army of the Rhine's sector, the British commander would have to deliberately escalate and "use nuclear defense and denial weapons." This response was directed by NATO's overall strategy documents MC-14/3, MC-48/3, and the British Defense Planning Staffs' appreciation.[8] The limited exchanges of tactical nuclear weapons would delay

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[2] William James, "Global Britain's Strategic Problem East of Suez", *European Journal of International Security* 6, no. 2 (2021): 173–80, https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2020.24.

[3] Claire Mills, Louisa Brooke-Holland, and Nigel Walker, "A Brief Guide to Previous British Defence Reviews" (London, UK: House of Commons Library, February 2020), 9-11.

[4] William Roger Louis and SR Ashton, *East of Suez and the Commonwealth 1964-1971: East of Suez* (London, UK: The Stationery Office, 2004), forward.

[5] David French, *Army, Empire, and Cold War: The British Army and Military Policy, 1945-1971* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), chapter 12.

[6] Mills, Brooke-Holland, and Walker, "Previous British Defence Reviews", 12-13.

[7] Michael Mahler, *Tales from the Cold War: The U.S. Army in West Germany 1960-1975* (Dahlonega, GA: University Press of North Georgia, 2021), chapter 11; Richard Bitzinger, "Assessing the Conventional Balance in Europe, 1945-1975" (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp, 1989), 24-32; Helmut Hammerich, "Defense at the Forward Edge of the Battle or Rather in the Depth? Different Approaches to Implement NATO's Operation Plans by the Alliance Partners, 1955-1988", *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 15, no. 3 (2014): 169, https://jmss.org/article/view/58117.

[8] North Atlantic Military Committee, "Final Decision on MC 14/3" (NATO Strategy Documents 1949-1969, January 1968); North Atlantic Military Committee, "Final Decision on MC 48/3" (NATO Strategy Documents 1949-1969, December 1969). MC 14/3 and MC 48/3 formalized the Allied strategic thinking in the mid-1960s when the NATO forces' conventional combat power peaked. For the development of flexible response and forward defense, and a net assessment of

the enemy's advance across the Weser River by several hours; deep tactical nuclear strikes and strategic counter-value strikes would follow.[9]

On the Northern flank, the Royal Navy (RN) and the RAF were tasked with countering the Soviet maritime interdiction and strategic threats. The RN's anti-submarine warfare (ASW) vessels, with the assistance of ASW installations in Norway and Denmark, would block Soviet attack submarines from entering the North Sea and the Atlantic. They would also stop Soviet strategic submarines from entering the Baltic and Barents Seas in the Greenland-Iceland-Norway (GIN) Gap. British high-speed interceptor-fighters would take off from Germany and Home Islands to intercept Soviet Backfire bombers launched from the Kola Peninsula.[10]

The only contingency London accounted for beyond its NATO commitments was the crisis in Northern Ireland. In February 1969, British Secretary of State for Defense Denis Healey reported to Harold Wilson "on the implications of any possible requirement for military assistance" in maintaining law and order in Northern Ireland. Healey postulated that military intervention against the worst-case civil unrest scenario might require a force of up to two pre-designated divisions stationed in the Home Islands.[11] This further drew fiscal and manpower resources away from the RAF and RN. Overall, the decline of British military potential, the existential nature of the Soviet threat, and the immediacy of the Northern Ireland crisis left the traditional British task of global power projection with a large investment gap in the 1970s. This, in turn, cast an inescapable shadow on the RAF and RNFAA in terms of their ability to win a Falklands-like scenario.

RAF and RNFAA's Military Preparations in the 1970s

Force Structure

Force structure reflects changes in a country's threat environment and the evolution of military thoughts among its national security elites. British nuclear planning was never satisfactorily settled due to their ill-fated struggle for a robust independent deterrent. The RAF had to constantly devote energy and resources to the research and procurement of nuclear weapons and their delivery platforms for both strategic utility and organizational survival. The late 1960s Soviet fielding of high-speed high-altitude interceptors and surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) made the previous RAF strategic nuclear delivery platform, the V bombers, largely obsolete. The Valiant (the mainstay of the V bombers) was designed in the early 1950s for high-altitude nuclear delivery and was entirely unfit for low-altitude penetration tactics. The Vulcan and the newer Victor were also suboptimal for long-range missions: low-altitude flights reduced their cruise range and the constrained defense budget forced the Air Ministry to reduce the radius of action requirement by 1/4.[12] The RAF tried to keep the bombers in service

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conventional balance in Europe in the mid-1960s, see: Deye Li, "Soldiers, the City, and the State: The Berlin Problem and the US Military, 1960-1965" (Undergraduate Honor Thesis, 2022), chapters 2-5.

[9] Kristan Stoddart, *The Sword and the Shield: Britain, America, NATO, and Nuclear Weapons, 1970-1976* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 153–54.

[10] Geoffrey Till, *Britain and NATO's Northern Flank* (Hampshire, UK: Macmillan, 1988), chapter 5, 10.

[11] Ronan Fanning, "Playing It Cool: The Response of the British and Irish Governments to the Crisis in Northern Ireland, 1968-9", *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 12 (2001): 64, https://www.jstor.org/stable/30002059.

[12] John Baylis, *Ambiguity and Deterrence: British Nuclear Strategy 1945-1964* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), chapter 9; Humphrey Wynn, *RAF Nuclear Deterrent Forces: Their Origins, Roles and Deployment 1946-1969, a Documentary History* (London, UK: Stationery Office, 1997), 44–50.

by introducing stand-off attack tactics using its Blue Steel and the American-built Skybolt air-launched cruise missiles. However, the liquid-fueled Blue Steel was extremely unreliable and US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara canceled Skybolt.[13] Britain then shifted its strategic nuclear deterrence mission to the RN, relieving the RAF of the need to replace its strategic bombers and allowing it to reduce the V bomber fleet size into the 1970s.

Since global power projection was no longer the strategic priority and joint expeditionary warfare was no longer an operational contingency, the UK's logistical demand for aerial transport and refueling aircraft diminished through the 1970s. In 1974, the RAF still had three tanker squadrons consisting of 56 Victor K1/K1A/K2 and four strategic transport squadrons of 14 VC-10, 10 Belfast, and 15 Britannia. By 1980, RAF only had two tanker squadrons of 16 Victor K2 and one strategic transport squadron of 11 VC-10.[14] This left the RAF ill-suited to support aerial operations beyond the North Atlantic and Europe. Moreover, although RAF did order Chinooks in 1978 to provide battlefield mobility to ground assault forces, they were generally not conceived to operate from carriers in littoral operations.

The RAF largely overlooked the value of airborne early warning (AEW) aircraft until the early 1970s. The RAF had relied on ground radars in the Home Islands to guide its Lightning interceptors. After the withdrawal of *HMS Ark Royal* from service, the RN assigned their Shackleton AEW-2 aircraft to the RAF No. 8 Squadron in 1972. The RN even paid for their maintenance and operations because the RAF "had no requirement for the AEW role."[15] However, the RAF did not have any long-range AEW until the procurement of the American E-3A in the late 1980s.

The North Sea, instead of the wide oceans, was conceived as the future maritime battlefield. In concert with a general reduction of defense spending as a proportion of GDP, the RN took over strategic nuclear deterrence from the RAF and made it the priority within the service. The RN almost exclusively focused on the development of dual-use ASW capability (destroyers and frigates) and maritime nuclear deterrents (nuclear-powered strategic ballistic missile submarines (SSBN) and the corresponding sea-launched ballistic missile [SLBM]). There was no perceived need nor budgetary means for the replacement or even maintenance of fleet carriers and naval aviation. As a result of the *Healey Review*, the RN canceled the CVA-01 series large carriers, scrapped the first two *Centaur Class* light carriers by the end of 1973, and decommissioned its two *Audacious Class* fleet carriers by the end of 1979. The last two *Centaur Class* light carriers were first redesignated as commando carriers carrying Royal Marine companies and then reassigned as ASW carriers carrying helicopters by the end of the decade.[16] Light carriers had neither long flight decks nor catapults: therefore, only helicopters and Vertical Takeoff or Landing (VTOL) aircraft could operate on them. The more capable traditional combat aircraft, like Buccaneers, lost fleet carriers on which to operate and were transferred to the RAF.

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[13] Chris Gibson and Tony Buttler, *British Secret Projects: Hypersonics, Ramjets and Missiles* (Hinckley, UK: Midland Publishing, 2007); Derek Wood, *Project Cancelled: The Disaster of Britain's Abandoned Aircraft Projects* (London, UK: Tri-Service, 1990), 144.

[14] *The Military Balance 1973-1974* (London, UK: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1974), 14; *The Military Balance 1979-1980* (London, UK: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1979), 38.

[15] David Hobbs, *The British Carrier Strike Fleet after 1945* (Barnsley England: Seaforth Publishing, 2015), 398–99, 402.

[16] Hobbs, *The British Carrier Strike Fleet,* 392-94.

Sea Harriers were the only bright spot in an otherwise collapsed force structure of British naval aviation in the 1970s. P1127, the prototype of the Harrier/Sea Harrier, successfully conducted trials on aircraft carriers as early as 1966. The RAF picked it for its fitness in providing close air support (CAS) in the Central Front battles. The RN choose the naval variant of the Harrier to be its future combat aircraft on light carriers in 1975. Under a tight budget, such aircraft would have to be multi-role. Sea Harriers were put in service in 1979 and three squadrons had equipped them before the Falklands War. The versatile Sea Harrier had five weapon pylons and could carry 2.27 tons of weapons, including WE-177 air-dropped nuclear weapons, Sea Eagle air-to-surface missiles (ASM), AIM-9/L air-to-air missiles (AAM), 1000lb bombs, and 2" rockets.[17] However, VTOL/Short Takeoff or Landing (STOL) operations on a light carrier flight deck dramatically reduced the Sea Harrier's fuel and weaponry. Major D. R. Taylor invented the ski jump that enabled the Sea Harrier to carry 2000 additional pounds when taking off.[18] Twelve-degree ski-jump structures were installed on the *HMS Hermes* and the first two light carriers of the *Invincible Class* before the Falklands War.

However, even with the ski-jump structures, the fixed-wing AEW-2 was still too large to take off on light carriers. The AEW-modified Sea King helicopter would provide limited situational awareness of the battlefield to the carrier strike group (CSG). However, their reconfiguration for AEW missions would not be raised until the decision to go to war in the Falklands was made. As a result, they would not be ready for deployment until the very end of the conflict.[19] In conclusion, the substantial albeit still severely limited compatibility between RAF/RNFAA force structures and the requirement of the Falklands conflict was achieved inadvertently since the British defense establishment did not conceive the Falkland-typed scenario in the 1970s.

Doctrine

RAF doctrine in the fourth edition of the *AP-1300* centered on nuclear deterrence and operations in the advent of the thermonuclear age. It stated:

> [T]he aim of air power…is therefore: (a) To maintain a level of nuclear striking power that will cause a potential aggressor to have grave doubts as to his ability to achieve his war aims without incurring devastating retaliatory damage; and (b) Should this deterrent fail, to destroy the enemy's nuclear offensive power and his means of continuing the war.[20]

When the RN assumed the exclusive strategic nuclear role and the RAF lost its relevance on the strategic level, *AP-1300* was withdrawn as "obsolete" in the early 1970s. The RAF experienced a doctrinal vacuum and general disinterest in theoretical thinking that extended through the 1970s and into the early 1980s.[21] The UK's NATO-centric strategic priorities and operational conceptions brought about the dominance of NATO tactical air doctrine in the RAF. Still, the Britain-dominant Second Allied Tactical Air Force (2ATAF) had distinct differences with the

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[17] Hobbs, *The British Carrier Strike Fleet,* 439; Douglas C Dildy and Pablo Calcaterra, *Sea Harrier FRS 1 vs Mirage III/Dagger* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 20–30.

[18] Hobbs, *The British Carrier Strike Fleet,* 427.

[19] Hobbs, *The British Carrier Strike Fleet,* 470-71.

[20] Viktoriya Fedorchak, *British Air Power: The Doctrinal Path to Jointery* (London, UK.: Bloomsbury, 2020), 59.

[21] Fedorchak, *British Air Power,* 65; Peter W Gray, *Air Warfare: History, Theory and Practice* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, An Imprint Of Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, 2016), 19.

America-dominant 4ATAF. NORTHAG faced a much greater threat of Soviet operational breakthrough than the Central Army Group (CENTAG) due to terrain and quality of forces. The RAF therefore designed its tactical doctrine to maximize defensive resilience against the Soviet first echelon's maneuver-strike. In contrast to 4ATAF's more centralized command and control (C2), emphasis on the Soviet second echelon, and the deep interdiction, 2ATAF's attack aircraft would primarily be employed in the portion of the close fight beyond allied artillery range, in coordination with ground forces. In short, the British focused more on CAS and close interdiction.[22] Correspondingly, the RAF adopted the concept of Tactical Air Support for Maritime Operations (TASMO) in the mid-1970s to perform the remnant tasks of the absent carrier air wings to support operations in the northeastern Atlantic.[23]

Training

Despite losing their large carriers, the RNFAA's airmen did not give up on training. The RNFAA established the air-sea advanced training unit Fleet Requirements and Aircraft Direction Unit (FRADU) in 1972 which substantially expanded the RN's training regimen. Using Hunter T8 and GA11 advanced trainers, trainees participated in AEW and electronic countermeasure (ECM) exercises required by NATO's northern operational environment. FRADU also conducted simulated ship attacks, provided fighter control training, and ran helicopter fighter affiliation training.[24] Even after the reassignment of RNFAA's three squadrons to the RAF Strike Command, the Fleet still directed that these squadrons participate in the Navy's exercises, trials, and training. Along with the RNFAA squadrons, the newly established TASMO squadrons also substantially advanced their learning curve of fleet air combat.[25] NATO also organized CLOCKWORK winter training in Norway starting in 1970 with the RN and Royal Marines as the spearhead forces. CLOCKWORK trained a cadre of aircrew and commandos in Arctic warfare techniques. After the training, NATO often organized COLD WINTER exercises with commando carriers or amphibious vessels in the littoral, which coincidentally had an operational environment and concept similar to those of the future Falklands conflict.[26] However, the RAF Vulcan bombers were purely assigned for NATO nuclear operations and neither aerial refueling nor conventional bombing was practiced in the late 1970s.[27] As this paper will later show, this would limit the effectiveness of British suppression of enemy air defense (SEAD) and interdiction missions in the Falklands War.[28]

Posture

British military posture concerned the dispositions of armed forces and their relations with temporal sequence and geographical space. Following the global retrenchment of the 1950s and 1960s, the RAF did not have many bases remaining after 1971. The RNFAA underwent a major cut of its once-global footprints. The RN Air Stations at Lossiemouth, Brawdy, Hal Far in

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[22] D J Stein, *Development of NATO Tactical Air Doctrine, 1970-1985* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1987), 10, 26–29.

[23] Hobbs, *The British Carrier Strike Fleet,* 403-04.

[24] Steve Bond, *Fleet Air Arm Boys: Strike, Anti-Submarine, Early Warning and Support Aircraft since 1945* (London, UK.: Grub Street, 2021), 11.

[25] Hobbs, *The British Carrier Strike Fleet,* 402-03.

[26] Hobbs, *The British Carrier Strike Fleet,* 404-05.

[27] Rowland White, *Vulcan 607* (London, UK: Bantam, 2012), 89–90, 123–26.

[28] See Page 41 of this paper.

Malta, and Sembawang in Singapore were either closed, handed over to the RAF, or transferred to the host nations.[29] Many airbases, like Ascension Island, were not garrisoned and would take time to restore their full operational capacity.[30] Large forward bases are essential for conducting joint expeditionary operations. The absence of those bases in the former imperial periphery severely constrained Britain's global power projection capability. Since the strategic nuclear deterrent and tactical airpower in Germany were the respective readiness priorities of the RN and RAF, British air readiness for expeditionary warfighting was relatively ignored. The commando carrier *HMS Bulwark*, critical to amphibious operations, was withdrawn from active service from 1976 to 1978.[31] Corps-level rapid reinforcement, conceived for the I Corps, ranked high on the RAF's agenda. Full-scale rehearsals like CRUSADER 1980 involved moving 15,000 troops by air.[32] The conceived surge via air mobility revealed the British premise of an existing land foothold proximate to the British Isles in times of major conflict, underscoring the primacy of NATO priorities over expeditionary concerns.

Based on their operational conception, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) dictated that NATO members should hold ammunition stocks ready for 30 days of fighting. The consensus of the time was that NATO could hold for the first two weeks of the conventional war against the Warsaw Pact. This would allow time for the mobilization of NATO's superior manpower and resources which would disabuse the Warsaw Pact of any hope of winning. If NATO forces could not hold for two weeks in the Central Front, then NATO powers would use nuclear weapons as planned and conventional munitions shortages would not be a concern.[33] In reality, most NATO countries, including Britain, had stocks sufficient for no more than two weeks of high-intensity combat.[34] In sum, if Britain did not decisively succeed in the initial period of a conflict, it would be ill-prepared for fighting a long war of medium intensity.

In short, on every major aspect from force structure to doctrine, training, and posture, British air power in the 1970s was focused narrowly on its NATO mission and not on the long-range power projection required by the Falklands conflict.

Falklands: Strategic Direction and Operational Contingency Planning

The Thatcher Government claimed the Argentine invasion of Britain's long-occupied territory as the *casus belli*.[35] However, the shooting war in the Falklands made little strategic sense for Britain. During Britain's imperial age, control over the Falklands was a major boost for the

[29] Robert Harkavy, *Great Power Competition for Overseas Bases: The Geopolitics of Access Diplomacy* (New York, NY: Pergamon Press, 1982), 123–27.

[30] Lawrence Freedman, *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign. Vol. II, War and Diplomacy* (London, UK: Routledge, 2007), 30.

[31] "HMS Bulwark, R08, Commando Carrier," www.battleships-cruisers.co.uk, accessed April 23, 2022, https://www.battleships-cruisers.co.uk/hms_bulwark.htm.

[32] David Miller, *The Cold War: A Military History* (London, UK: Pimlico, 2001), 244.

[33] Miller, *The Cold War*, 300-303.

[34] Herman Roozenbeek, "Waste and Confusion? NATO Logistics from the Dutch Perspective," in *Blueprints for Battle: Planning for War in Central Europe, 1948-1968*, ed. Jan Hoffenaar, KrügerDieter, and David T Zabecki (Lexington, KY: University Press Of Kentucky, 2012), 95–99.

[35] "Debate 3 April 1982 - the Announcement of the Invasion to the House of Commons," April 3, 1982, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1982/apr/03/falkland-islands.

British command of the Southern Atlantic and Southwestern Pacific. The absence of major German challenges to the Entente's global SLOC after the RN's in the December 1914 Battle of Falklands Islands vindicated this commitment.[36] However, Britain was a regional power in 1982 and its NATO commitment was the imperative compared to the less vital and more distant Falklands. The Thatcher government's decision to launch an expedition and take them back by force was committing to a war of choice instead of necessity, a deviation from the UK's stated strategic direction.

Operationally, the British were working with a narrow margin. Expeditionary warfare entails combined and sequential operations.[37] The four essential phases for the UK's Falkland Islands campaign included: (1) Projecting a major combined force from the Home Isles to the Southern Atlantic, (2) gaining and maintaining regional sea control and local air superiority, (3) landing a major contingent on the East Falklands and securing a beachhead for the force buildup, (4) breaking out from the garrison perimeter and fighting all the way through until the capture of Port Stanley. The entire campaign concept would fail if one of the four phases failed. The time frame of this sequential campaign was much longer than a NATO-Warsaw Pact war, ranging from less than a month to possibly more than three months. This starkly contrasted to the mere two weeks the British prepared for in Europe. The British would have to pursue a rapid battlefield decision or confront attrition they were ill-prepared for. Fighting Argentina entailed a much higher operational intensity than did the Northern Ireland contingency. Therefore, the British military and economic capacity limitations would allow a protracted conflict in Northern Ireland but not in the Falklands.

Assessing the Preparedness of RAF and RNFAA in the Falklands War

The fact that carriers *HMS Invincible* and *HMS Hermes* were in Portsmouth in early April of 1982 was due to not only British luck but also the high readiness peacetime posture. The peacetime winter training in Norway made the operational environment of the sub-Antarctic South Atlantic familiar to the British combined forces.

Strategic bombing spearheaded the British air campaign in the Falklands War. The United States extended Ascension Island's Wideawake airfield to 10,000 feet in 1966, which made prompt deployment possible and prevented the delay of British strategic bombings. Despite this foothold, the RAF merely performed seven (conventional) missions in the 42-day duration of the strategic bombing campaign.[38] Only the lack of long-range bombers and tanker squadrons in the previously mentioned RAF force structure could explain the abysmally low sortie rate. It required 15 Victor K2 sorties and at least 18 inflight refueling to get one Vulcan bomber to the skies of the Falklands.[39] At the beginning of the war, the RAF tried to use Vulcans to conduct raids against Argentine airfields to gain local air superiority. The strategic bombing-air superiority mission BLACK BUCK 1 did crater Port Stanley Airfield's runway with a single bomb, disabling the operations of Argentina's high-performance combat aircraft

[36] Norman Friedman, *Fighting the Great War at Sea: Strategy, Tactics and Technology* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2014), 72–90.

[37] Julian Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (East Sussex, UK: Naval-Military Press, 2006), 43–50, 255–73.

[38] Kenneth Privratsky, *Logistics in the Falklands War* (Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword Military, 2017), 99-100; Freedman, T*he Falklands Campaign*, 542.

[39] Christopher Chant, *Air War in the Falklands, 1982* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Aviation, 2001), 40–41.

there.[40] However, all the bombs missed in BLACK BUCK 2. The deficient performance of BLACK BUCK 1 and 2 is partially because Vulcan bombardiers released the bombs at a higher altitude to evade the Argentine Roland SAMs.[41] Training deficiencies played into this risk-averse bombing tactic since nuclear weapons employment does not require pinpoint accuracy. Therefore, air defense evasion is the only concern for the crew. By contrast, accuracy was the centerpiece of counter-force conventional missions, which the RAF never practiced in the 1970s.

Another factor in the RAF's adoption of risk-averse bombing tactics was their tactical bombers' lack of cover and protection. To simultaneously prioritize accuracy and ensure survivability, the air commands could assign fighters equipped with anti-radiation missiles to enhance the ECM of the air formations.[42] Electronic warfare is a never-ending contest of innovation and adaptability between aircraft and air defense. SEAD escort would also have been useful for a sustained conventional bombing campaign as Britain practiced over the Falklands. Unfortunately, the RAF (like other NATO air forces) did not write SEAD escort of bombers into their doctrine. This was because such aircraft only take off for missions when the attrition of tactical aircraft becomes less of a military concern in a losing ground campaign in the Central Front. Factors other than bombing inaccuracy also contributed to the failures of the strategic bombing missions. For instance, the absence of peacetime aerial refueling training caused substantial refueling failures leading to mission failures in BLACK BUCK 4 and 6.[43]

Since bombing was relatively ineffective and the Sea Harrier had limited operational range, the fleet air defense became the main way for the RNFAA to gain air superiority. The British imposed rapid attrition on Argentine fighters with few friendly losses, deterring the Argentines from contesting the local airspace. Its success belied the air force-centric airpower theory which gives primacy to the offense in pursuit of air superiority.[44] Carriers were the clear center of gravity in this joint expedition because their loss or paralysis alone would inhibit the successful conduct of the second phase of the campaign and present a sufficient condition for campaign failure.[45] This fact enabled the concentration of combat aircraft around the CSG: British aircraft could easily refuel, reequip, and join the action again. Argentine fighters and strike aircraft had to operate at the extreme of their operational range, and therefore could not stay around the CSG for a long duration.

Fleet air defense requires early detection and timely interception before enemy aircraft are able to get close enough to the fleet to attack. As previously noted, the RNFAA could not operate fixed-wing AEW aircraft and their AEW modification of Sea King helicopters was not yet available. Therefore, guided-missile destroyers and frigates had to serve as pickets patrolling 10-20 miles away from the CSG to provide situational awareness. Pickets must keep their

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[40] Martin Middlebrook, *The Argentine Fight for the Falklands* (Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword Military, 2012), 172–75.

[41] Rodney Burden, *Falklands: The Air War* (New York, NY: Arms And Armour Press, 1986), 365.

[42] William Momyer, *Air Power in Three Wars* (Washington, DC: Office Of Air Force History, U.S. Air Force, 1986), 130–32.

[43] Burden, *Falklands: The Air War*, 365–67.

[44] Giulio Douhet, *The Command of the Air* (Washington, DC: Office Of Air Force History, 1983); Benjamin F Cooling, *Case Studies in the Achievement of Air Superiority* (Washington, DC: Center For Air Force History, 1994); John Warden, *The Air Campaign: Planning for Combat* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1988); Momyer, *Air Power in Three Wars*.

[45] See Page 38.

electromagnetic signatures down in order to avoid highlighting their position to the adversary.[46] This arrangement directly contributed to gaps in British situational awareness, and the sinking of *HMS Sheffield*, *HMS Glasgow*, *HMS Coventry*, and *HMS Ardent*.[47]

To assure the timely interception of Argentine aircraft, the Task Force ordered rigorous combat air patrols of at least two Sea Harriers airborne at any time.[48] Sea Harriers in the British force structure proved to be potent weapons against even the advanced Mirage III and Dagger fighters of the Argentine No. 6 and No. 8 Air Brigades. On May 1, two Sea Harriers shot down two Mirage IIIs in an aerial engagement. After that, the Argentine command decided to keep 8 Air Brigade's Mirages in the mainland bases for only limited defensive purposes.[49] The Sea Harriers downed 9 of 11 Argentine Daggers shot down in the war, with zero losses of their own in air combat.[50] Since contesting the airspace of the British Exclusion Zone[51] seemed to be hopeless, Daggers stopped carrying air-to-air weaponry by mid-May.[52] Benefitting from the TASMO training in performing maritime missions, the RAF assigned two of their Harrier pilots to fly No. 809 Squadron's Sea Harriers, and 6 Harriers from the No. 1 Squadron RAF were assigned to the Task Force.[53] However, the Sea Harrier also left loopholes in the British CSG's fleet air defense. Because Sea Harrier had no look down/shoot down radar and its pulse radar could not acquire low-altitude targets independently, the doctrinal imperative to counter the Argentine high-low-high strike tactic was insufficiently implemented.[54]

The RN was primarily trained for ASW against Soviet submarines in the 1970s; by comparison, countering Argentine's two submarines was fairly easy. The old *ARA Santa Fe* was detected and depth-charged by a Wessex ASW helicopter from *HMS Antrim*. It was then forced to surface and surrender on April 25 after being strafed by helicopters from *HMS Brilliant* and *HMS Plymouth*.[55] The newer *ARA San Luis* was also suppressed by Sea Kings from actively engaging British warships.[56]

The Sea Harriers and Harriers proved their versatility on May 21, the date of the British amphibious invasion. Two Harriers launched interdiction strikes against the No. 601 Combat Aviation Battalion's helicopter nest to cripple Argentine mobile defense against the invasion beachhead.[57] A Sea Harrier shot down an Argentine C-130E on June 1, making Argentine

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[46] Freedman, *The Falklands Campaign*, 257.

[47] Hobbs, *The British Carrier Strike Fleet,* 466-67; Middlebrook, *The Argentine Fight for the Falklands*, 370-73.

[48] Freedman, *The Falklands Campaign*, 280.

[49] Middlebrook, *The Argentine Fight for the Falklands*, 357.

[50] Freedman, *The Falklands Campaign*, 415.

[51] Shortly after the start of the conflict, the UK declared the British Exclusion Zone: a 200 nautical mile radius circle centered on the Falklands Islands. Argentine aircraft and ships were prohibited from passage through the zone.

[52] Middlebrook, *The Argentine Fight for the Falklands*, 203-04.

[53] Hobbs, *The British Carrier Strike Fleet*, 457.

[54] MJ Armitage and RA Mason, *Air Power in the Nuclear Age, 1945–82* (New York, NY: Springer, 1983), 206.

[55] Hobbs, *The British Carrier Strike Fleet*, 471-72.

[56] Norman Friedman, "The Falklands War in Retrospect", Defense Media Network, April 2, 2015, https://www.defensemedianetwork.com/stories/the-falklands-30-years-later/.

[57] Middlebrook, *The Argentine Fight for the Falklands*, 351-52.

ground defense even less mobile.[58] A British air assault at this time could have been a huge boost for the British operational momentum, eliminating the need to fight across seventy miles of contested terrain from San Carlos to Port Stanley. But British vulnerability to Argentine Exocet strikes, somewhat attributable to the preparedness problems, contributed to the sinking of *SS Atlantic Conveyor*. The loss of five Chinooks on board called off any potential British airborne and airmobile assaults of scale.[59] As a result of this tactical airlift loss, the British ground campaign had to be conducted in an operational method that gradually pushed back the front instead of exerting military pressure synergically across the depth.[60]

Bad weather, a persistent air threat to the carriers, and the complex terrain of Goose Green prevented British airpower from providing significant close air support to the British invasion force.[61] Three RAF Harriers conducted the finishing strike against troublesome Argentine anti-aircraft (AA) guns in the late afternoon of May 28.[62] However, the lack of timely indirect fire was a major obstacle for the 2nd Battalion, the Parachute Regiment (on foot) throughout the battle.[63] The sortie rate for Harrier strikes on the Stanley battlefield was also modest despite the improved weather. This can be attributed to the capacity limitation of the Task Force and the overall limited number of Harriers in the RAF force structure. This was confirmed by an Argentine military surgeon, who claimed that most casualties in days before the Battle of Stanley were incurred by field artillery rather than airstrikes.[64] When British ground forces reached the Stanley perimeter despite the deficient initial preparedness of RAF and RNFAA, the fate of the Argentine forces was sealed. Free of constraints, the British command used four Scout helicopters for CAS and three Sea Kings for a final air assault against the last ground held by the Argentine garrison on June 14. Ironically, this effort was not much needed by then as the Argentine garrison surrendered on the same day.[65]

Conclusion and Lessons

British strategic direction in the 1970s drove continued global retrenchment and a tight focus on NATO commitment. Its operational contingency planning envisaged a quick conventional campaign against a massive Warsaw Pact invasion of Europe. Therefore, the RAF and RNFAA set their force structure, doctrine, training, and posture based on the aforementioned strategic direction and operational conceptions. However, the Falklands campaign deviated from the British strategic direction and brought unexpected operational requirements. The RAF, RNFAA, and other elements of British airpower were therefore only modestly prepared for the shooting war in 1982, winning the war on dangerous margins of luck and Argentine deficiency. In the absence of clear superiority, the Clausewitzian "play of chance and

[58] Chant, *Air War in the Falklands*, 68-69.

[59] Chant, *Air War in the Falklands*, 68.

[60] Shimon Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* (London, UK: Frank Cass, 1997), chapter 6.

[61] Mark Adkin, *The Battle of Goose Green: A Battle Is Fought to Be Won* (Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword Military, 2019), 267–68.

[62] Middlebrook, *The Argentine Fight for the Falklands*, 351-52.

[63] Adkin, *The Battle of Goose Green*, chapter 5, 339.

[64] Middlebrook, *The Argentine Fight for the Falklands*, 522-24.

[65] Middlebrook, *The Argentine Fight for the Falklands*, 610-13.

probability" will have a greater effect on the outcome of a war.[66]

The British lessons learned regarding military preparedness and joint forced entry power projection during the Falklands War resonate today. Future operations in the Indo-Pacific, particularly Taiwan, are more likely to resemble a scaled-up Falklands War than any campaign during the Global War on Terror.[67] The primary strategic lesson of this historical episode is that the trade-off between addressing different threats is real. It is simply unrealistic to optimize a military for handling all threats across the globe and the competition continuum. High-intensity land wars of yesterday's NATO Central Front or today's NATO Eastern Front, expeditionary warfare of the Falklands or Taiwan, and counterinsurgencies in Northern Ireland or the Greater Middle East all have different requirements. War preparation and force development have limits; therefore, focusing on preparing for the primary strategic threat, China in the West Pacific, is imperative. Political leaders should think twice before making commitments elsewhere that the armed forces might struggle to fulfill. Air services like the USAF might have to ditch unfit platforms like the A-10 to focus on high-end air warfare and long-range standoff capabilities. They will have to push for doctrinal innovation against organizational preferences like independent action of branches and offense-mindedness. They must adopt a relevant joint expedition campaign concept and adapt to the West Pacific operational environment. Finally, they must develop a highly readied, strategically concentrated, but operationally dispersed posture and expand the training regimen to cope with the probable attrition of skilled pilots.

[66] Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 88–90.

[67] Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Anti-access/Area Denial, U.S. AirSea Battle, and Command of the Commons in East Asia", *International Security* 41, no. 1 (2016): 7–48, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00249.