

CP 010
Prime Minister
CDP
29/5

Ref. A085/1433

MR POWELL

I acquired

a copy of a

paper prepared for Mr Tam Dalyell MP, we think by Dr Paul Rogers of the Institute of Peace Studies at Bradford University, setting out the evidence for thinking that a Polaris submarine was deployed to the South Atlantic during the war.

2. There is evidence that there are at least 33 copies of this paper and we know that one has reached the Argentine Government. It is therefore possible that some public use might be made of the document, which the Prime Minister might care to glance through.

REA

ROBERT ARMSTRONG

28 May 1985

THIS IS A COPY. THE ORIGINAL IS
RETAINED UNDER SECTION 3 (4)
OF THE PUBLIC RECORDS ACT

British Submarines and the Falklands War

Polaris and Others

It has been suggested that a number of British nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSN) were involved, during the Falklands War, in guarding a Polaris missile submarine on station in the mid-Atlantic in case it proved necessary to threaten Argentina with a nuclear strike.

A consequence of this was that there were insufficient SSN to carry out necessary military duties in the war zone itself. This note examines the latter suggestion using a variety of published and other sources. There are three sections:

Context

Chronology

Analysis

There is then a short conclusion.

April 1985

CONTEXT

1. There have been persistent reports that a Polaris missile submarine was deployed south-west of Ascension Island for a substantial period during the Falklands War. The rationale for this was that a successful Argentine attack on either of the carriers or on Canberra would have necessitated withdrawal of the Task Force and effective defeat. Therefore, a further option was required in case it was necessary to ensure a favourable settlement in such adverse circumstances. The only such option would have been to threaten a nuclear strike on Argentine mainland targets. According to various reports, the most likely target was the Argentine military centre of Cordoba.
2. The reports have come, in the past two years, from a number of sources, including a senior Conservative back-bench MP with an interest in defence matters, and ~~sources within the Ministry of Defence~~. Relatively wide publicity was given to them following an article in the New Statesman magazine in August 1984.
3. The government response has been to say that it does not, as a matter of policy, reveal any details of Polaris missile submarine patrols, but that normal arrangements were not interfered with during the Falklands War.
4. Significantly, maintenance of normal patrols and the stationing of a Polaris boat in mid-Atlantic for several weeks are not mutually exclusive. Britain has four Polaris boats, and the normal arrangement is to have one on patrol at all times. Another boat is frequently available for service, and could have been so available during the Falklands War.
5. It should also be recognised that the idea of threatening the use of nuclear weapons in a regional conflict is not new to UK defence policy. Serious consideration was given to

the location of nuclear weapons at British bases in the Middle East and South East Asia in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Nuclear-capable aircraft were actually so deployed at times.

6. Information very recently made available to the Labour Member for Linlithgow, Mr Tam Dalyell, has indicated that the Polaris boat deployed south-west of Ascension Island during the Falklands War was accompanied by at least two nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSN) acting as protective escorts. Mr Dalyell has suggested that this may have resulted in a shortage of such SSN in the war zone itself.
7. The present note examines evidence for such a shortage. It should be noted that the patrol area for a Polaris boat capable of targeting, for example, Cordoba, would be over 3,000 miles to the north of the Falklands. Thus any attack submarines escorting it could not also serve in the war area.
8. During the Falklands War, the naval aspects of the operation received such priority that almost every modern ship in the Royal Navy which was available for service was actually used. This included both carriers, both assault ships and most destroyers and modern frigates (ie. Types 21, 22 and 42). In addition, almost all the larger ships of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary were deployed, together with some fifty merchant ships.
9. A key element in protecting this very large surface force from Argentine naval attack was that provided by British attack submarines. At the time of the Falklands War, Britain had eleven SSN. Because of long- and short-term refits etc., perhaps seven would have been available for action during the Falklands War. Government sources have indicated that five actually served in the war zone, but these sources have not indicated whether all five boats were present throughout the war. This point is of singular importance. If all were present throughout the war, then it would probably

to have had other SSN guarding a Polaris boat elsewhere. If it was not, in practice, possible to deploy five boats in the war zone, at least for the key period of May 1982, then it would lend strong support to Mr Dalyell's contention.

CHRONOLOGY

1. The following chronology concentrates principally on the deployment of SSN during the Falklands War. As will be seen, it contains information which has not previously been made public and has been obtained from a number of sources, some first-hand. In examining the chronology it is appropriate to remember the main sequence of the conflict and the two major groups of British ships involved.
2. The Falklands War commenced with the Argentine invasion of the islands at the beginning of April 1982, the despatch of a naval task force from Britain a few days later and of a substantial amphibious landing force in mid-April. The naval task force was a Carrier Battle Group tasked with securing air cover over the islands, landing advance parties of SAS and SBS, enforcing a blockade and countering Argentine naval surface and submarine forces. The key ships were Hermes and Invincible. The Carrier Battle Group (CBG) operated in the war zone from the end of April through to the end of the war in mid-June. It was at risk from Argentine naval action and part of the defence consisted of a forward "barrier" of SSN operating south, west and north of the Falklands.
3. The amphibious landing force or Amphibious Task Group (ATG) arrived in the war zone in mid-May and was particularly at risk during the middle and latter part of that month. The forward SSN barrier was important throughout the war, but principally during May.

5 April Carrier Battle Group sails from Portsmouth.

9 April Major elements of Amphibious Task Group including

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Canberra leave Britain.

12 April First SSN, Spartan, arrives off the Falklands.

16 April Second SSN, Conqueror, arrives off the Falklands.

19 April Third SSN, Splendid, arrives off the Falklands.

29 April CBG arrives at the Total Exclusion Zone.

1 May CBG engages in air attacks and naval bombardment of Argentine forces on the islands.

2 May Conqueror sinks General Belgrano.

To 7 May 3 Commando Brigade assembling at Ascension Island. It comprises 15 ships, the most significant being Canberra (40 and 42 Commando and 3 Para), Stromness (45 Commando), Norland (2 Para) and the two assault ships Fearless and Intrepid.

6 May Conqueror experiencing steam leak and shaft noise problems but still operational. Splendid and Spartan in the area. Only three SSN in the entire war zone.

7 May At 8 pm, ATG leaves Ascension Island for the Falklands. Splendid, in the war zone, experiences serious generator problems.

8 May Splendid forced to withdraw out of the immediate war zone to South Georgia. Spare parts to be flown out and air-dropped in an attempt to keep the SSN operational. No indications of any other SSN being rushed down as a contingency measure. Now only two SSN on station in the entire war zone to act as forward barrier protecting the CBG, yet ATG has sailed from Ascension Island with brigade-strength landing force embarked.

9 May Conqueror's shaft noise problem worsens. Cavitation effects being produced above 15 knots producing excess noise.

- 10 May The attempt to air-drop essential equipment to Splendid fails, possibly through a faulty parachute.
- 11 May Valiant (a fourth SSN) reported to be still 2,000 miles north of the Falklands. Only Spartan and Conqueror on patrol in the Falklands area, with the latter still experiencing mechanical problems.
- 12 May Splendid still in vicinity of South Georgia and unable to be operational in immediate war zone around the Falklands. ATG ships still well north of the islands (perhaps 1,000 miles) report seeing submarine masts* - thought to be Soviet SSN trailing them. ATG has also been under surveillance from Soviet Bear aircraft, probably operating out of Luanda in Angola.
- 17 May Conqueror experiencing radio communications problems. Told it will be routed home on 1 June. Valiant arrives and fifth SSN (Courageous) reported to be on its way.
- 18 May ATG meets up with CBG ships.
- 19 May Cross-decking operation undertaken between ATG ships, to ensure landing forces are on the correct ships. Although four SSN are now on station in the war zone, Splendid is apparently not fully operational and is deployed south of the Falkland Islands in the area of minimum risk of Argentine forays. Thus the crucial cross-decking operation, involving ships in a particularly vulnerable state, takes place with just three SSN west and north of the islands (cross-decking taking place north-east of the islands).
- 21 May San Carlos landings commence.
- 23 May Courageous due by 29 May.

* ie. periscopes/aerials

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- 25 May Splendid to be routed home even though it was the last of the original three SSN to arrive and has only been in the war zone 36 days. Presumed therefore to be still not fully operational.
- 27 May Splendid routed home. Courageous not yet arrived so three SSN operational in war zone.
- 28 May Conqueror expecting to be routed home on 2 June.
- 30 May Courageous finally arrives - four SSN fully operational in the war zone for the first time since the start of the Falklands War.
- 2 June Conqueror ordered to stay in war zone, even though some food supplies running low and partial food rationing necessary.
- 6 June Spartan reported to be experiencing some food shortages.
- 7 June Spartan routed home - down to three SSN once more.
- 14 June War ends.
- 15 June Conqueror routed home.

ANALYSIS

1. It is clear that the government's report of five SSN operating during the Falklands War is not a reflection of the number in the war zone at any one time. Only from 17 May, nearly seven weeks after the Argentine invasion and nearly three weeks after the arrival of the CBG in the area, were four SSN present, and even then, one may not have been fully operational.

2. For a key period (7 to 12 May and possibly longer), only two SSN were operational in the Falklands area. Even though SSN can reach the South Atlantic from Britain within 15 days, there do not appear to have been SSN available to deploy to the war zone for a substantial part of the Falklands War, although at least seven out of the Royal Navy's eleven SSN might be expected to have been operational at the time.
3. Some SSN operating in the Falklands War zone appear to have had their patrol periods extended to the extent of having to introduce partial food rationing.
4. At one crucial stage in the war it proved necessary to attempt an air drop of essential spare parts to an SSN. It would appear that this involved a flight of around 8,000 miles by a Hercules (or possibly a Nimrod) operating from Ascension Island, with multiple air-to-air refuellings. The air drop failed and the SSN concerned does not appear to have been fully operational after that.
5. This evidence would appear to show a severe limitation on SSN availability in the war zone for much if not all of the war.
6. This, in turn, supports the information received by Mr Dalyell, namely that SSN were escorting a Polaris boat in mid-Atlantic to an extent which made it not possible to provide sufficient SSN in the South Atlantic.

CONCLUSIONS

Evidence supports the conclusion that there was a serious shortage of SSN at key stages in the Falklands War. If the Royal Navy did not have sufficient SSN for the two operations - guarding a Polaris missile submarine and aiding the protection of the Task Force, it would appear that the former was given priority.

The Polaris boat reported to be located south-west of Ascension Island was out of range of the Soviet Union but within range of parts of northern Argentina, including Cordoba. It would require an escort of SSN, not least because of the reported presence of Soviet SSN.

If Mr Dalyell's information is correct, and if, as the evidence shows, there was a serious shortage of SSN in the Falklands area, one is left with the uncomfortable conclusion that, in deciding to locate a Polaris boat in a position to threaten Argentina, should the need arise, the Task Force was denied SSN which would otherwise have been available. This would appear to have significant political implications, in addition to those arising from a preparedness to threaten a nuclear strike on a non-nuclear country.

Glossary

ATG	Amphibious Task Group
CBG	Carrier Battle Group
SSN	Ship, Submersible, Nuclear (ie. nuclear-powered attack submarine).

Note

This document has been prepared for Mr Dalyell and may not be referred to or quoted from without his agreement.
