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Prime Minister
Very gloomy.
Mr. *A.F.C. 26/3*
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MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
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MO 5/21

26th March 1982

Dear John,

FALKLAND ISLANDS *talk etc?*

In his minute to the Prime Minister of 25th March the Foreign Secretary suggested that the Defence Secretary would wish to circulate a note on contingency planning on the military side. Mr Nott has agreed and I attach a note prepared by MOD officials on the defence implications of Argentinian action against the Falkland Islands. The note deals with the specific military options open to the Argentinians, which were identified in the JIC assessment of July last year. It does not deal with the current situation on South Georgia. The note makes clear that our scope for effective military action in response to whatever the Argentinians may do is extremely limited, and that almost anything we could do would be too late and/or extremely expensive.

I am copying this letter to Private Secretaries of other members of OD and to David Wright.

Yours sincerely

Nick Evans

(N H R EVANS)

A J Coles Esq

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DEFENCE IMPLICATIONS OF ARGENTINE ACTION AGAINST THE FALKLAND ISLANDS
(A Note by MOD)

Introduction

1. The recent JIC assessment (1) argued that the Argentine Government would prefer to pursue their sovereignty claim by peaceful means, but that if they concluded there was no hope of a peaceful transfer of sovereignty, military action could not be ruled out. Argentine military options were identified as:

- a. Harrassment or arrest of British shipping.
- b. Military occupation of one or more of the uninhabited islands.
- c. Arrest of the British Antarctic Survey Team on South Georgia.
- d. Small scale military operation against the Islands.
- e. Full scale military invasion of the Islands.

This note considers the defence implications of seeking to deter or counter these options by military means.

Argentine Military Capability

2. Argentina, with some of the most efficient armed forces in South America, has the military capability to pursue any of the options listed above. Her navy includes an aircraft carrier, a cruiser, 4 submarines and 9 destroyers backed up by amphibious ships, maritime patrol aircraft and offshore patrol vessels, and with 5 Marine battalions has the capacity to mount a substantial naval or amphibious assault operation. Air superiority would be afforded by land and carrier based combat aircraft. The Argentine Air Force inventory includes over 200 fighter aircraft and 11 Canberra bombers.

Note:

1. JIC(81)(N)34 dated 9 July 1981.

Operational and logistic support are relatively close by, the Falkland Islands being about 400 miles from the nearest Argentine naval and air bases.

Britain's Military Capability in the Area

3. The Falkland Islands are nearly 8,000 miles from the UK. They comprise two large and upwards of 100 small islands with a population of about 1,800 concentrated in and around the capital, Port Stanley, on East Falkland. The two Falkland Islands dependencies, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands Group, are situated about 800 and 1,300 miles respectively to the South East and are uninhabited except for the 20 scientists of the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) on South Georgia and an unauthorised Argentine base on South Thule.

4. We retain a garrison of 42 Royal Marines on East Falkland, equipped with light infantry weapons, whose primary task is to defend the seat of Government at Port Stanley. The garrison could offer small-scale resistance to a minor localised incursion, but do not have the manpower, firepower, transport or communications to deal with anything but a very minor incident on one of the outlying islands. The part-time Falkland Islands Defence Force (approximately 100 men thinly scattered throughout the Islands) is of very limited military value.

5. The Ice patrol vessel, HMS ENDURANCE, patrols the area in the summer months (November-April) but 1981/82 will be her last season. She is very lightly armed but has two Wasp helicopters embarked, equipped with anti-ship missiles. She has also a secure communications link with the UK. Her main value lies in maintaining a visible RN presence. After 1982 there will be only infrequent visits by RN ships.

General Constraints on Reinforcement of the Falkland Islands

6. Apart from South American airfields, which would be denied us, the nearest airfield is at Ascension Island, nearly 3,500 miles away. The only RAF aircraft which could cover this distance and operate from the 4,100 ft Port Stanley runway is the Hercules. Carrying maximum fuel and with its payload reduced to no more than 30 lightly equipped men, the aircraft could cover the distance only with favourable winds. Moreover, the lack of diversion airfields, limited airfield facilities including aviation fuel and the adverse and unpredictable weather conditions, all militate strongly against using Port Stanley airfield for military operations.

7. A British military response to Argentine provocation would therefore have to be primarily a naval one. Unless RN forces were already deployed to the South Atlantic or Caribbean as part of a normal peacetime deployment, reinforcement would probably have to come from the UK. With passage time in the order of 20 days for surface ships and a minimum of 13 days for a nuclear powered submarine (SSN) and, depending on the scale of the operation, the additional time required for assembly and preparation, reinforcement by sea could take a month or more. There could be significant penalties to our commitments elsewhere. It could be possible, at the outset of a period of rising tension with the prospect of Argentine military action against the Falkland Islands, to deploy a SSN to the region. If done covertly, this could provide us with advance warning of Argentine military deployments. If overtly, it could serve as a useful deterrent pending the arrival of further naval reinforcements.

Possible Responses to Argentine Action

a. Harrassment or Arrest of British Shipping. While the amount of British shipping currently in the area is relatively small, it offers an easy target for Argentine harrassment. We could decide to deploy a frigate on a semi-permanent, deterrent basis. To maintain one frigate always on station would require the deployment of two, to allow for maintenance and unserviceability. In the absence of local South American facilities, two RFAs would be required in support. Such a RN presence might be effective in deterring harrassment, but the initiative would remain with the Argentines, once the force departed. Prevention of an attempted arrest of British shipping could require the use of force.

b. Military occupation of one or more of the uninhabited islands. A realistic force to evict a small military force from an uninhabited island would be a Royal Marines Company Group (around 150 men) with amphibious assault craft and helicopter support. In addition, a naval protection force (on similar lines to 8a) would be required. Were the force to remain for more than a few weeks, additional logistic support and resupply would be needed.

c. Arrest of the BAS team on South Georgia. To pre-empt a possible arrest, an additional detachment of Marines could be deployed to the Falklands to be stationed on South Georgia. They would need accommodation and, in the absence of a RN presence, would have to rely on a BAS ship for deployment and subsequent resupply.

d. Small scale military operation against the islands.

Permanent or semi-permanent reinforcement of the garrison to deter a small-scale invasion of say East Falkland would require a larger force. This could comprise a Royal Marines Commando Group of 850 men including an air defence capability of Blowpipe or Rapier as well as support from amphibious assault craft, helicopters, engineers and RN ships. Air support would be desirable, but only the Harrier could operate from Port Stanley airfield and its deployment would pose a formidable operational and logistic problem.

Invincible or Hermes, as available, could provide Sea Harrier air cover and support helicopters but such deployment would be costly.

e. Full scale military invasion of the Islands. In

order to deter a full-scale invasion, a large balanced force would be required, comprising for example, Invincible or Hermes with an LPD and LSLs, 4 destroyers/ frigates, plus an SSN, supply ships in attendance and additional manpower, up to brigade strength, to reinforce the garrison. Such a deployment would be very expensive and would engage a significant portion of our naval resources. Moreover, its despatch could well precipitate the very action it was intended to deter. If then faced with Argentine occupation of the Falkland Islands on arrival, there could be no certainty that such a force could retake the Dependency. Argentine national pride would demand a maximal response. Their geographical advantage and the relative sophistication of their armed forces would put our own task group to a serious disadvantage, relying as it would on extended lines of communication.

conclusions

9. Military measures to deter or counter Argentine military action against the Falkland Islands would require the despatch to the area of additional forces, primarily naval, and on a substantial scale. Any such deployment would be costly and pose considerable logistic difficulties. To deter or repel even a small scale invasion would require a significant commitment of naval resources, at the expense of commitments elsewhere, for a period of uncertain duration. To deal with a full scale invasion would present significantly greater problems requiring naval and land forces with organic air support on a very substantial scale; the logistic problems of such an operation would also be formidable.