

**126. Memorandum From the National Intelligence Officer for General Purpose Forces (Atkeson) to the Chairman, National Intelligence Council (Rowen), the Vice Chairman, National Intelligence Council, the National Intelligence Officer for Warning, the National Intelligence Officer for Latin America, the Acting National Intelligence Officer for Western Europe, and General Palmer of the Senior Review Panel<sup>1</sup>**

DDI #3104-82

Washington, April 15, 1982

SUBJECT

What's Next in the Falklands?—Some Thoughts on the Tactical Problem

1. Everyone hopes, and many expect that the Falklands crisis will be resolved before the issue comes to blows. However, it is worthwhile at this juncture examining the matter from a military point of view to see how events may transpire if the current political efforts fall short of the mark. [5½ lines not declassified] three categories of military operations which the British task force might undertake upon arrival in the vicinity of the Falklands:

- Engage in a high seas naval confrontation;
- Blockade the islands;
- Assault the Falklands in an attempt to retake them.

2. All three of these categories have serious drawbacks from the British point of view:

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Central Intelligence Agency, Office of the Deputy Director for Intelligence, Job 83T00966R: Chronological Files (1982), Box 1, Folder 3. Secret; [handling restriction not declassified]. Rowen forwarded the memorandum to Casey under a covering note on April 19. Atkeson prepared a follow-up memorandum, which examined the Argentine defensive position, for Casey and Inman, April 21. (Central Intelligence Agency, Office of the Director of Central Intelligence, Job 84B00049R: Subject Files (1981-1982), Box 7, Folder 179: NSPG Meeting Re: Falkland Islands) Attached but not printed is a map of the Falklands/Malvinas, which labels the beaches referenced in the memorandum.

—The high seas confrontation (which would be attractive from a military standpoint) depends upon Argentine cooperation. The clear superiority of the British force in the open ocean is likely to deter the Argentines from venturing far beyond their land-based air coverage;

—A blockade of the islands could entail protracted deployment of the naval task force at great distance from support bases. Eventually it would have to be reduced or removed, probably before the Argentines would be obliged to remove their forces. Moreover, the indigenous British population may well suffer even more acutely from a prolonged blockade and occupation by an embattled, hostile military force;

—Assault is likely to cause casualties among the civilian population and between the combatants. This could vastly complicate the achievement of a political settlement in the short run, and contribute to an historical enmity between Argentina and the UK in the longer term.

3. These drawbacks notwithstanding, the British task force will have to assume one posture or another upon arrival in the contested area, assuming no political solution is forthcoming in the meanwhile. Barring Argentine acceptance of battle at sea, it comes down to blockade or assault. Blockade has an additional, near fatal drawback; it passes the initiative to the Argentinians. The Argentines can challenge the blockade or wait it out as they choose. In either case the strategic advantage is theirs, while the British are obliged to react as they can to whatever their adversaries do. Considering the shorter distances that the Argentines have to deal with and the likelihood that many small craft under air cover from the mainland could ferry supplies to the islands, it seems quite possible that they could keep their small garrison adequately provisioned for a longer time than the British could their rather larger commitment. Moreover, the extended deployment of British capital ships to areas in range of hostile land-based air would be a high risk posture for any length of time. The British must launch an assault—the earlier the better.

*Where?*

4. There is an advantage of seizing South Georgia first. Practically unopposed, the landing could be accomplished without much difficulty. The island would provide a rudimentary base and give the troops a chance to stretch their legs—perhaps to refresh their small unit tactics in the South Atlantic climate. Having loaded their troops onto commercial ships, the British probably need to sort themselves out before attempting a serious amphibious assault. South Georgia offers a convenient way station for staging. Three or four days may be sufficient for this purpose.

5. The main assault must be made on the Falklands themselves to settle the issue, if a military solution is in the cards. More than half of

the population lives on the eastern island, principally around Port Stanley. In World War II the eastern island would have been the immediate target, primarily to seize the airfield and the deep water anchorage at Port William. In this case, however, these objectives may be postponed until the latter phases of the operation. The British aircraft are helicopters and V/STOL, neither of which require an airstrip. The assault fleet includes five tank landing ships and an assault landing dock which, together with the helicopters, should be able to maintain an adequate ship-to-shore lift to keep the assault force (approximately 4,500 troops) supplied. Ultimately, of course, the British would have to have both the airfield and the port.

6. Good landing beaches exist on both the eastern and western islands (See Map). The best are reported to lie near Port Stanley and Salvador on East Falkland. Landings in these areas would rapidly bring the action to a point of decision. Unfortunately, decisive military action would very likely also be the most expensive in terms of both military and civilian casualties. The beaches on East Falkland are probably well defended, and may require extensive bombardment to subdue the defenses and to clear mines and other impediments.

7. Other beaches exist on the southern coast of East Falkland in Choiseal Sound and the Bay of Harbors. The assault force could put ashore in these areas and then move northeastward toward Port Stanley. Some difficulty would have to be anticipated in crossing the island, inasmuch as there is only one known gravel road suitable for vehicular movement and the principal terrain feature, the Wickham Heights, stretches across the island, almost from coast to coast, posing a natural line of defense against approach from the south. An advance along the east coast against Port Stanley would be an exceedingly risky maneuver without first seizing Mt. Kent, a 458 meter promontory to the west. A battle for the heights, even if only modestly defended, could prove to be an especially costly venture for the British.

8. A far more attractive option would seem to be a landing on one or more of the beaches on the southern side of West Falkland. Those in the neighborhood of Fox Bay West would place the assault force astride three roads leading inland, offering multiple axes of advance to the north and west. The sparsity of the population on the western island would hold civilian casualties to a minimum, while the capture of the island would afford the UK both political and military prizes.

9. From the political point of view, the effort would demonstrate the Government's determination and the Armed Forces' capability for protecting British interests. From a military point of view it would offer a strong vantage point from which the Argentinian supply line to the continent could be subjected to ready interdiction and from which a follow-on assault could be mounted against the eastern island,

if necessary. Adequate beaches exist on the eastern side of Falkland Sound for such an attack. This maneuver would outflank the Wickham Heights to the north if the battle had to be joined on the main island.

*How?*

10. We should recognize certain strengths the British have which they can exercise in a West Falkland scenario. First, their destroyers, frigates and Harrier aircraft provide them plentiful strike capability for subduing shore defenses and preparing the landing areas. Second, their assault helicopters (capable of carrying 20 men each) provide them an inland landing ability simultaneous with a surface ship-to-shore movement. Third, the carriers can be held out of areas of vulnerability most of the time. The Harrier V/STOL aircraft can be based ashore as soon as a secure enclave is in hand, and the carriers could be quickly withdrawn from the area, out of range of Argentinian land-based air. Fourth, the seizure of West Falkland would oblige the Argentinians to operate their aircraft at extended ranges from the mainland, except for those few which might attempt to continue to use the Port Stanley strip. The British could mount periodic attacks on the strip to insure its neutralization. Of course, the flexibility of the V/STOL aircraft would make the British relatively less vulnerable to corresponding attacks on their landing areas.

11. The British assault would not be without risk. The Argentine land forces are well trained and well led. The British must bring superior fire power to bear at the critical points quickly. April marks the autumn in the Falklands, and the beginning of the storm season. Cloud cover exceeding seven-tenths of the sky exists for an average of 22 days per month in April, gradually increasing in May and June. Cloud ceilings, limiting ground-air coordination, hang below 3,000 ft. about 40% of the time, and below 1,000 ft. up to 25% of the time. Aerial photo reconnaissance of Argentine defenses could be spotty and unreliable. Sea states suitable for landings of heavy equipment, such as tanks, may be interrupted for a number of days. Some of the beach areas are known to have submerged rocks which would be hazardous to landing craft. The British would probably have to employ underwater demolition teams to remove some of the obstructions.

12. Once ashore, the British force should be able to sustain itself with periodic resupply by helicopter and surface ship-to-shore lift. Casualties, detainees and prisoners could be evacuated by similar means, perhaps to the South Georgia base.

13. A potentially great advantage of an operation against the western island is that the British might be able to suspend operations once the island was secure and before much blood was spilt. The drama of a victory in the west might prove sufficient to cause Buenos Aires to

reconsider its actions and to allow London to moderate its position regarding the ultimate sovereignty of the islands. Grounds for settlement might well be achieved without a full-fledged battle in the populated sectors.

14. In sum, a West Falkland military scenario, coupled with appropriate political action, may offer the contestants the following:

*For the UK*

- Quick military “victory”;
- Preservation of its reputation as protector of its interests and responsibilities;
- Avoidance of heavy losses;
- Some basis for later friendship with Argentina.

*For Argentina*

- An image as a gutsy minor power not afraid of playing in the big leagues;
- Achievement of at least a prospect of sovereignty over the Falklands;
- Avoidance of decisive military defeat;
- Avoidance of heavy casualties.

**Edward B. Atkeson**