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Mr Speaker - In winding-up this debate tonight I should like to start by making a personal observation in answer to the right hon Gentleman

The brutal seizure by force of the Falkland Islands and the dependencies has been a serious blow for this country and as a member of the Government I take of course my full share of the responsibility.

The House will wish no doubt to hold an inquest on what went wrong but I believe that that time should be when we have returned the Falkland Islands to British administration and not whilst our task force is at sea. This is a time to look forward to how we can achieve the Government's objective, which as I understand it is shared by considerable numbers of right hon and hon Gentlemen in this House, and it is in this connection that I have an important Statement to make.

INTELLIGENCE

Two major criticisms have been made of the Government's unpreparedness. The first is that our intelligence let us down. Or that we totally ignored it. At Question Time yesterday my right hon Friend the Prime Minister made it absolutely clear that it was not until the 31st March that we received information that a large number of Argentine ships were heading for Port Stanley. On the 1st April further evidence made it clear that the Argentine force was preparing for the assault of the Falkland Islands.

I believe, in fact, given the considerable knowledge that we did possess others would have drawn the same conclusions as ourselves. But clearly we were wrong.

My noble Friend Lord Carrington whose tremendous services to the nation we will all miss deeply, in speaking on this subject publicly last Monday, accepted that we had misread the signs - and that in the light of subsequent events we should have recognised that the bellicose and aggressive statements which had both accompanied, and followed, the diplomatic talks between this country and the Argentine - were of a different nature to those that had existed on and off for 20 years or more.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

But if I may be permitted to hazard a personal opinion I do not in fact believe that a firm intention had been made to invade the Falkland Islands until around about 31st March. But I would like, in this connection, to emphatically deny the report contained in newspapers yesterday that intelligence reports had been received in this country several weeks ago indicating that an Argentinian invasion on the Falklands had already been agreed.

In the days preceding the sailing of the main elements of the task force there was a great deal of preparatory work. This involved the movement of troops, all weapons and stores of every kind. The checking in each ship of the task force of all essential systems to ensure sea worthiness and operational readiness for a prolonged operation in the harsh weather conditions of the South Atlantic, with long lines of communication.

At the Royal Dockyards and naval stores depots and establishments there was a splendid response from the civilians of the Ministry of Defence who worked long hours, often throughout the night to get the Fleet to sea. We are immensely grateful to them.

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The second accusation is that our Armed Services for which I bear direct responsibility were themselves found unprepared to go to war. If this were true I would admit it - but such a charge is false. To have assembled a task force of the present size and to have despatched it to fight a battle 8,000 miles from home should be convincing proof of that. We were in fact only able to assemble such a task force - in such short time, because our plans were ready both in terms of our fighting units and of their essential logistic support.

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Another example of the readiness of our plans was the speed with which we were able to charter transport aircraft, and acquire civilian ships which had been practised, in exercises, against just such a contingency. I would like to express my thanks to the Shipping Industry for their co-operation and support. I will return later in my speech to the role of these ships.

There is one other acknowledgement that I must make. It goes to the Royal Marine contingents who defended the Falkland Islands and South Georgia and of whom one major national newspaper disgracefully said that they surrendered without firing a single shot.

A seventy-five strong detachment put up a splendid fight against overwhelming odds. The initial assault on Government House by a large company of troops was repulsed. On being thrown back the Argentinians showed no stomach to press their attack until the arrival of the Marine battalion, some 600 strong equipped with armoured personnel carriers armed with cannon, one hour later. The Royal Marines succeeded in bringing the convoy to a halt by knocking out the leading vehicle.

They were still defending the Residence some three hours later when the Governor, in his capacity as Commander-in-Chief decided it would be wrong to continue in view of the risk of bloodshed and injury to the immediate population living nearby.

Similarly, the Royal Marine contingent of 22 men in South Georgia inflicted many casualties including several killed. They damaged an Argentine corvette and destroyed a large Argentinian helicopter.

These actions show to those who may sometimes doubt the will and resolve of the British people - that we are prepared to fight for our interests and that we maintain our armed forces at a high state of readiness and that, if we are attacked, we will respond in kind.

Major Norman who commanded the Royal Marine detachment on the Falklands and his men will be forming up at Poole after a short break over Easter, and will then be prepared and ready to return to their duties in the Falklands. Major Noote, who commanded the detachment who had completed their tour of duty on the Islands, and volunteers from his detachment - all of whom took part in the fighting last Friday - will be deploying with the amphibious force now at sea.

COMPOSITION & COMMAND

I should like the House to know just how formidable a force is now on the high seas heading for the South Atlantic. The carriers INVINCIBLE and HERMES, with augmented complements of Sea Harriers and Sea King helicopters, will be capable of launching a powerful attack against enemy surface ships and submarines.

The Type 42 destroyers SHEFFIELD, GLASGOW and COVENTRY possess an effective anti-air capability in the Seadart missile which can also be engaged against surface warships. The County Class destroyers ANTRIM and GLAMORGAN, fitted with Seaslug, are also primarily equipped for anti-air warfare. But these destroyers can be used also to detect and destroy enemy submarines.

The Type 21 general purpose frigates ARROW, ALACRITY and ANTELOPE are fitted with the Exocet surface to surface missile system but can also attack submarines with their helicopters as can the Type 22 frigates BRILLIANT and BROADSWORD. These frigates are also fitted with Exocet and possess a good self defence in the Sea Wolf systems. Finally, the Type 12 frigates PLYMOUTH and YARMOUTH with their sonar and helicopters will add to the anti-submarine capability of the force.

Mr Speaker, this is a well balanced force capable of taking on any maritime threat, be it airborne, surface or sub-surface. In addition, the force contains a sizeable amphibious lift capability in the assault ship HMS FEARLESS and the 5 landing ships. Arrangements are in hand to supplement this force as necessary either for reinforcement or replacement, if that should be the need.

So far I have concentrated on the warships which make up the striking edge of this Fleet. I must remind the House that the deployment and maintenance of this force will pose great logistic problems, though ones that are not insuperable. The Fleet auxiliaries APPLELEAF, TIDESPRING, PEARLEAF and OLMEDA will provide tanker support; and the FORT AUSTIN which was already well on her way to the Falklands when the Argentines invaded last Friday, RESOURCE and STROMNESS provide stores support. These vessels are manned by members of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, who are, like their surface counterparts, professionals in their specialist field with long experience of operating with the Royal Navy.

It would not be right for me to give precise details of the Royal Marines and soldiers who will be sailing with the task force. -But I can tell the House that they include Royal Marine Commandoes and soldiers of the Parachute Regiment, together with Signals, Artillery and supporting arms. Should it be necessary to carry out an amphibious assault, sufficient manpower will be available for the purpose - and other Army units are on standby at this time.

PLANS

COMMAND ARRANGEMENTS

Let me describe briefly the command arrangements for the Task Force which is now at sea.

The Commander in Chief Fleet is in overall command of all forces allocated to the Operation. This he exercises from his operational headquarters at Northwood where he controls all communications and has access to all available intelligence. Similar arrangements would apply for any operations both out of area and in the Atlantic.

Operational command of the surface ships and embarked forces is vested in Rear Admiral Woodward the Flag Officer First Flotilla. He is an officer of very wide experience including sea commands. He was Director of Naval Plans in the MOD until May 1981.

[Brigadier Thompson the Officer Commanding 3 Commando Brigade will Command the Landing Force and Commodore Clapp, the Commodore Amphibious Warfare will have delegated command of the ships of the Amphibious Group.]

I am satisfied that this normal and well tried command and control structure for maritime and amphibious operations works well and I see no reason to depart from it at this time.

PLANS

I believe that the task force is well equipped, balanced, powerful and above all flexible. Its flexibility is important. There are a range of military options open to us. We will select the right one as the situation demands - and as the situation develops. I recognise of course that simply saying that there is a range of options open to us does not say much but I hope they will understand that I cannot divulge what is in our minds for the coming period. Security must be uppermost in our minds.

Mr Speaker, we have heard in the House today the voices of some who doubt the wisdom of preparing to use force, should peaceful means fail. I cannot share that view. When you stop a dictator there are always risks, there are greater risks in not stopping a dictator - a lesson this nation has learnt before.

There are also those who doubt our military capability to mount or to sustain the level of operations that may - also - be needed in the end. [There are those who suggest that we should now reconsider the plans for the defence programme we announced last June.]

Our defence programme is shaped round the response to the Soviet threat - and that remains our overriding defence priority. In terms of the sea/air battle these plans give emphasis to our submarine and maritime air effort - and it is right that they should. Indeed the lessons that this incident too, makes very clear is that we are right to increase the number of our forces of SSNs.

Nevertheless, as we said in Cmnd 8288, there will remain a wide range of tasks in peace and war for which the surface fleet is vital. And nothing in our recent review will prevent us from retaining such a capability in future years. A ship construction programme of £2000m is in progress - £400m worth of orders was placed last year. Many aspects of the fleets fighting capability is greatly improved - and the torpedo programme alone amounts to more than £2000 million.

This financial year we will be spending £ $\frac{1}{2}$ bn more in real terms on the Royal Navy's conventional forces than was spent in the year before we came to office.

As to the future we will still be spending more on the conventional Navy, even when expenditure on modernising the strategic deterrent is at its peak, than we were in 1978/79.

In the late 80s and beyond our capability for out-of-area emergencies will be performed by the new carriers HMS ILLUSTRIOUS now on sea trials and HMS ARK ROYAL now building. I make no apologies to the House for saying once again that, after the two super-powers, our naval capability remains the most powerful in the world.

P R E S C R I P T

Mr Speaker, there is one point I should make very clear: the deployment of a formidable task force does not mean that this Government has abandoned diplomacy in seeking to recover the Falkland Islands from Argentine military occupation.

Yesterday's communique, for instance, by the European Commission is another indication of the growing international revulsion at Argentine's actions.

But if diplomatic efforts fail, a military solution will be necessary. That means fighting, if we have to rid the Falkland Islands of Argentine military occupation. We have no wish to shed blood but we will not acquiesce in a cynical invasion - presumably in the false belief that we had not the will to respond.

The Argentine Government should be under no illusion. We are in earnest. And we shall have no hesitation in making use of the resources at our disposal.

PRESS

Mr Speaker, I would like to urge the House to say nothing in public that gives comfort or assistance to Argentina.

Great caution and restraint is needed over the coming weeks over what is broadcast on radio and television or published in the press. A military operation is under way and lives are at stake.

The Permanent Secretary of my Department has already put to those with editorial responsibility the need, which they fully appreciate, for discretion in these matters. Of course the media must be free to keep the public informed of events, but there are certain categories of operationally sensitive information where I think it will be generally recognised that unauthorised disclosure - or even too much speculation - could have very serious consequences for our Servicemen.