

*Mr Lyellmore*  
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MILITARY THREAT POSED BY THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER  
"25 of MAY"

The attached paper by the Defence Secretariat will be tabled for consideration by the Chiefs of Staff at their meeting at 1030 on Wednesday 28 April 1982.

Attachment:

Draft OD(SA) Paper - Military Threat Posed by the Aircraft Carrier "25 of May" (5 pages).

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*JW 14/5*

27 April 1982

DRAFT OD(SA) PAPER

Argentina: Military Threat Posed by the  
Aircraft Carrier "25 of May"

Memorandum by MOD

1. This paper considers the military threat posed by the aircraft carrier "25 of May" to our forces in the South Atlantic, identified options for eliminating that threat and makes recommendations.

THE THREAT

2. Argentina has one old aircraft carrier. However it carries (7-9) The Skyhawk and, possibly, up to 5 Super Etendard aircraft. Both types of aircraft are capable of mounting air-to-surface and air-to-air attacks at a distance of about 400 miles from the carrier. The 6 Tracker aircraft can carry out radar surveillance operations up to 500 miles from the carrier giving her the capability to direct other air and naval units into attack positions as well as using her own offensive aircraft. The Argentines are thus able to threaten our forces from the air at a great distance from the Argentine mainland. We would expect the carrier to be escorted by two or three other vessels with a balanced ship-borne surface-to-air and surface-to-surface capability.

WHAT IS THREATENED

3. The threat is posed to:
- a. Our forces engaged in enforcing the Total Exclusion Zone (TEZ);

- b. all our other ships in and around the Falkland Islands and their dependencies;
- c. all the vessels in the re-supply and reinforcement chain from Ascension Island which will be only lightly escorted by RN warships. These ships will be particularly vulnerable;
- d. aircraft undertaking maritime and other operations South of Ascension Island.

#### CAPABILITY TO DEFEAT THE THREAT

4. Argentine carrier-launched aircraft engaging our forces can be defeated by our own aircraft, by anti-aircraft missiles and, best of all, by neutralising the carrier. Although the air cover provided by our Sea Harriers should be able to cope with land based Argentine aircraft which challenge the TEZ and may be near the end of their radius of action, the additional threat from carrier based aircraft launched outside but close to the TEZ will stretch our air resources leaving little offensive effort available for other priority targets. Anti-aircraft missiles will be effective but may be out numbered by several aircraft attacking simultaneously. This particularly applies on the re-supply/reinforcement route from Ascension where escorting forces will necessarily be limited. The requirement, therefore, is to neutralise the carrier itself.

#### HOW TO NEUTRALISE THE THREAT

5. Means. The carrier could be engaged by surface ships, Sea Harriers or submarines. A submarine (SSN) could shadow the carrier covertly and an attack launched with an acceptable

level of risk to the SSN's own security. Engaging the carrier by surface ships or Sea Harriers would require the diversion of ships and aircraft specifically to this task and would involve considerable risk to these forces. A SSN would give the greatest certainty of success with least prejudice to other operations.

6. Effect of Attack on Carrier. A SSN could only attack the carrier with torpedoes. As a result of such an attack, the carrier would probably be disabled. It is possible that the carrier might sink quickly, but this is unlikely given a reasonable level of damage control. An attack by gunfire, missiles or bombs might have similar serious results. If the carrier did sink, it is probable that her crew numbering about 1,000 would have time to abandon ship with life rafts. Her escorting vessels should be able to pick up survivors.

7. When to Attack. There are three options:

- a. Wherever our forces locate her;
- b. Whenever she approaches to within a certain distance from our forces;
- c. When she advances beyond a boundary line, defined by us, and notified to Argentina.

The political disadvantages in a. is that the carrier could be attacked while in no way posing an immediate threat. The political disadvantage of b. is that the carrier might be unaware of her proximity to our forces given that the necessary distance within which she should not be allowed to approach must be considerable. c. appears to be the best of these

options in that the area to which the carrier was confined would be clearly stated, and by transgressing that boundary would be demonstrating hostile intent.

8. Warning. There are strong arguments, both political and legal, for notifying the Argentine authorities that their carrier is liable to attack by our forces, whichever option of those listed above is selected. This could be done bilaterally through the Swiss along the lines that their carrier, in certain specified circumstances, would be treated as hostile and encounter the appropriate response.

#### RECOMMENDED OPTION

9. The recommended option would be to notify Argentina that without prejudice to our forces right of self defence, their carrier would be treated as hostile if she advanced south and east of a line joining the positions  $23^{\circ}$  S  $35^{\circ}$  W and  $43^{\circ}$  S  $56^{\circ}$  W, thence westward along latitude  $43^{\circ}$  S to the mainland. A map is attached.

10. Provided the carrier remained north and west of the designated line, she would not be liable to attack except in self defence. Beyond that line, she would be and would indeed pose a direct threat to our forces in and around TEZ and the important re-supply/reinforcement chain between Ascension Island and the TEZ.

11. The best method of enforcing this prohibition would, after a warning period, be to instruct a SSN to shadow the carrier and attack her if the line was crossed. This solution requires a dedicated SSN which whilst it could not guarantee continuous

*Some torpedo!*

surveillance, would be more economical in effort than other more difficult means. An attack by SSN would require the SSN to close within about 1500 nm of the target. The probability of a hit at this range is good. A disadvantage is that the SSN can only be contacted periodically (normally at 12 hours interval) with reduced flexibility to enable a counter order to be issued if political events demanded it.