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SECCOS

THE THREAT TO ASCENSION

At your meeting this morning you called for an assessment of the Threat to Ascension. It is attached.

h.g.
~~DCDS(I)~~

28th April 1982

What are we doing about it -

urgently. - *hundreds for sea survey?*

ASSESSMENT OF THE ARGENTINE THREAT TO ASCENSION

Radar for approaching a/c? What forces

BACKGROUND

have we here to

1. There have been two indications of Argentine interest in the base at Ascension. One was on 26 April when an Argentine merchant ship, the Rio de Plata, approached Ascension and was intercepted by the RN. The other is a report from a USAF source with regular Latin-American contacts, who claims to have heard mention of a covert Argentine attack on Ascension - probably making use of a 707 aircraft. *protect fuel tanks and aircraft?*

AIM

2. To examine the options for, and the likelihood of, an Argentine attack on Ascension. *FW*

ASSESSMENT OF INTENT

3. A successful Argentine attack on key targets at Ascension would be a major propaganda coup. The physical damage caused might seriously interfere with our operations in the South Atlantic. Possible targets include the airfield and particularly the UK aircraft parked on it, and the water and power supplies. If relations between Argentina and the US break down, the fuel storage sites might also become a target.

4. International condemnation of an attack on Ascension, which would clearly extend the conflict outside the South Atlantic, might be muted by three factors. Firstly, because the UK declared herself ready to shoot first outside the South Atlantic when she declared a defence area around her Task Force; secondly, because the attack could be presented as an Argentine riposte to a UK landing on South Georgia or the Falkland Islands; thirdly, because a successful precision attack against specific military targets would probably cause little embarrassment either to Argentina or to her international supporters.

OPTIONS

5. An attack on Ascension might be possible from the sea, or from the air.

Sea Attack

6. An attack from the sea could be made by SBS type troops, or by midget submarines deployed from Argentina or neutral merchant ships.

7. Argentina has commando-trained Special Forces. During the past 3 weeks the men could have been trained up and equipped for a dedicated operation. So far, there has probably been little opportunity to deploy them covertly into the appropriate ships. As time passes the possibility of this form of attack may increase. But the chances of success must be small. The ships would probably be detected in transit to Ascension and disembarkation on the rocky coast would be hazardous. We therefore assess this threat as minimal.

8. The Argentines have 12 midget submarines, 10 of French and 2 of Italian manufacture. The French boats are not designed to carry heavyweight loads, but they could do so with some loss of endurance, and they can carry 4 divers. The Italian boats can carry 2 divers. All these boats could be launched from any merchant ship with a 3 ton crane. But, again, the monitored approach and the difficulty of getting ashore probably rule out this option.

Air Attack

9. Unless the aircraft carrier is employed, which is highly unlikely, there are no Argentine combat aircraft with the range to make a direct attack on Ascension. Using air to air refuelling, it might just be possible to reach Ascension with, say, an Etendard. But the aircraft would not be able to return to Argentina. We judge that a mission of this kind would be seen as such a desperate throw that it can be ruled out. But, the 'kamikaze' factor could be eliminated if the Argentines were able to negotiate staging rights with sympathetic nations in the North of South America: we will need to watch for indications that any such move is being planned.

10. There are, however, at least 14 civil and military airliners that could be used to drop paratroops or to land an attack force. The airliners would have a radius of action just large enough to reach Ascension and return. For the paradrop role they would probably need some modifications. The Argentines would also have to consider the hazards of weather and the likelihood of inaccurate drops as well as the limitations on numbers and loads. This will therefore be a less attractive option than an air landing.

11. If surprise could be achieved, an air landing might offer an attractive option particularly for attacks on the UK aircraft on the ground at Ascension. Surprise might be enhanced by disguising the aircraft as a neutral, by simulating an emergency that called for a diversion into Ascension, by operating at night - or perhaps by employing all three stratagems.

ASSESSMENT

12. We assess that an attempt to attack Ascension by sea is unlikely, and that even if it were made it would probably be detected. The possibility of attack by combat aircraft can almost certainly be discounted; but we need to watch for Argentine air redeployments to the North. A parachute assault is also unlikely. An air-landed coup de main, aimed at UK assets rather than the US infrastructure at Wideawake, cannot be ruled out.

13. In sum, if the Argentine Junta wanted a propaganda coup that could also severely damage our lines of communication and yet was an exclusive military target, they might risk attack.