

378. Memorandum From Secretary of Defense Weinberger to President Reagan<sup>1</sup>

Washington, July 19, 1982

SUBJECT

Military Lessons from the Falklands (U)

(C) As reported to you in my activity report of 4 June 1982,<sup>2</sup> we have begun to study the issues and implications of the battle in the Falklands. A long-term study effort has been established along the lines of our analysis of the 1973 Arab/Israeli war. While an interim report is expected in mid-September,<sup>3</sup> some very early observations are now possible.

(TS) The first conclusion evident from the experience in the Falklands is the danger of attempting to draw conclusions too quickly. The widely-mentioned "lesson learned" concerning vulnerability of ships with aluminum superstructures, which followed the sinking of HMS SHEFFIELD, is a case in point. In the rush to draw conclusions, many supposedly knowledgeable people assumed that the SHEFFIELD had an aluminum superstructure. This was not, in fact, the case. Although we have little data to go on, it appears that the EXOCET missile did not explode but instead penetrated a space next to a main engineering plant and may have ignited a fuel fire, which spread beyond the control of the ship's fire fighting organization. The central fact is, though, that we now believe that the presence or absence of aluminum in SHEFFIELD was not a contributing factor in her tragic loss. At least

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Washington National Records Center, OSD Files, FRC 330-84-0003, Argentina (June-Sept) 1982. Top Secret. Iklé forwarded the memorandum to Weinberger under a July 16 covering memorandum, noting that Weinberger had promised "an informative memo" in a June 4 weekly activity report to Reagan and recommending that Weinberger sign the memorandum. Clark forwarded Weinberger's memorandum to Reagan under a July 27 covering memorandum. Reagan initialed the covering memorandum, indicating that he saw it. (Reagan Library, Latin American Affairs Directorate, NSC, Falklands/Malvinas: NSC & State Memos, 1982) In response to this memorandum, Clark sent a brief note to Weinberger on July 27, informing him of Reagan's appreciation of the memorandum and noting: "Elaboration on these initial points and subsequent assessment, in association with lessons resulting from the DOD examination of the Lebanese conflict, will enable the Administration to present future defense requests to Congress from the perspective of the most recent combat experience." (Washington National Records Center, OSD Files, FRC 330-84-0003, Argentina (June-Sept) 1982)

<sup>2</sup> Attached but not printed.

<sup>3</sup> Weinberger submitted an interim report on the status of the Department of Defense effort to identify lessons learned in the South Atlantic conflict under an October 15 covering memorandum to Clark. (Reagan Library, Dennis C. Blair Files, Falklands (October 1982-December 1982))

two other British combatants with aluminum superstructures were lost due to conventional bombs, but we will not know the full story behind these losses until the Royal Navy completes its investigation.

(C) We intend to proceed carefully in arriving at lessons learned and using them in briefings or other communications. I have established the appropriate mechanisms in DOD to achieve these objectives.

(S) The progress of our study effort will depend on the pace with which the British and Argentines go about collecting, organizing, and analyzing pertinent data and reports from those that participated in the conflict. The British are well along in organizing their lessons learned effort which will be a centrally controlled, integrated MOD study. We can expect that the British will be helpful in conveying to us what they are learning.

(U) There appears to be consensus on the following preliminary lessons:

(S) —Flexible and skilled forces capable of multiple tasks can be decisive. Although the British had inadequate or no contingency plans for such an effort, they did extremely well in developing ad hoc plans, devising appropriate operations and tactics, and carrying out their objectives. They were able to load depot stocks aboard 58 civilian ships by the end of May using requisition, charter, and conversion where necessary. Furthermore, the first elements of the Task Force sailed in five days, two days less than the British thought necessary for a contingency in Europe.

(U) —The usefulness of naval forces has been reconfirmed in dealing with contingencies like the Falklands conflict. British actions demonstrated the need to be able to project naval power to remote geographic areas and to engage in amphibious operations, for which British operational concepts and tactics proved very successful, especially in the assault and ground actions.

(TS) —The importance of gaining and maintaining air superiority in maritime/amphibious operations was also reconfirmed. The British used small carriers capable of deploying limited numbers of Sea Harrier aircraft, but lacking any bases close enough to the action to be usable, the small carriers provided only a small volume of air offense and defense. In fact it was the lack of long-range air defense warning systems, and air attack systems, that made this such a close run thing. One of the first lessons seems to be the inestimable value of large carriers, with their air defense provided by ships of the carrier groups, in such situations. If the British had not been lucky in several instances when Argentine MK-82 bombs struck six ships and did not explode, the outcome would have been much worse. We do not currently know the reasons for these Argentine failures, but we are looking into the following possibilities:

- fuzes may have been defective
- Argentine pilots may have delivered the bombs at too low an altitude

(S) —The ability to improvise in the midst of conflict resulted in many unplanned successes. Britain modified quickly a large number of commercial ships for use as mine-sweepers, troop carriers, aircraft transporters, hospital ships and other purposes. The Argentines managed to improvise the mating of the EXOCET missile to the delivery aircraft, without prior training, and after the French technicians had left. And they also appear to have launched the land version of this missile under much the same handicaps.

(S) —The difficulty of Britain—and possibly other allies—to support over time non-NATO military actions without reliance on U.S. assistance. This is due not only to inadequate forces, but the refusal of many NATO allies to consider any NATO planning for activities outside the NATO area. Ironically enough, the only NATO country to accept our pleas for such planning has been England.

British logistics capabilities were severely stressed by the long distances involved, and their stocks of some conventional warfare materials were quite limited, especially so for the latest, higher technology items. This required the early provision of U.S. material as well as the use of Ascension Island.

(S) —British need for U.S. support tells us something important. Our NATO allies have designed their own forces with few reserves and supplies. This is likely to result in requests for U.S. augmentation in any non-NATO contingency. A drawdown of NATO and U.S. stocks and capability results. We may not have planned adequately for this.

(U) In addition to these lessons, the following observations and preliminary assessments now seem noteworthy:

(S) —Mobile and man-portable surface-to-air U.K. missile systems, such as Rapier and Blowpipe, were quite effective. These systems are currently credited with downing a large number of Argentine aircraft. Realizing that about seventy percent of all free world produced anti-ship missiles have been exported to the Third World, we should not be too surprised that the Argentines also downed at least two U.K. helicopters using Blowpipes previously supplied by the British.

(S) —The value of good training was demonstrated. The value of good leadership was even more conclusively demonstrated. The outnumbered British forces outperformed and defeated conscript Argentine ground forces in defensive positions. The British believe this high level of performance was due to the rigorous and active training their troops undergo, and the excellent leadership qualities of their officers and NCOs. By contrast, Argentine officers were widely reported, by Argentine soldiers, to have neglected the soldiers' welfare.

(S) —The need for timely and secure communications was evident. The British were able to take advantage of existing communications systems, with U.S. intelligence assistance, to coordinate military operations and to exploit Argentine weaknesses. U.S. assistance in this area gave the British a distinct advantage.

(S) —The British set and conveyed clear objectives that were understood and implemented by the British military leadership. This allowed necessary authorities to be delegated, unequivocal rules of engagement to be established, and on-scene field commanders to proceed as they believed required.

(S) In the final analysis, the battle for the Falklands appears to have been a closer call than many would believe. The British won primarily because their forces, inferior in numbers at first, were superior in training, leadership and equipment. But luck also played a significant role. The failure of the Argentine bombs is but one example; others exist. The British prevailed and pushed to victory just in time as they were critically low on artillery rounds and other supplies (8 rounds per barrel of artillery and no helicopter fuel) when they retook Stanley.

(S) Finally, it must be said that one of the factors in the British success was the strong and very rapidly delivered and effective help from us. Their requests for various items frequently resulted in deliveries within less than 3 to 5 days. And many of the items we supplied so rapidly were vital, such as air landing runway matting.

(S) As to the lessons to be learned from the conflict in *Lebanon*, I have established a coordinated study effort. But since that conflict is still in a delicate stage we have held back from approaching the Israelis. I realize that Prime Minister Begin promised you that his government would make data available to us. When the time is right, we will send some experts to Israel.

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