

A British soldier in full combat gear, including a beret and a large tactical vest, stands in a field holding a Union Jack flag. The background shows a vast, open landscape under a clear sky.

Strategic Landpower

The Falklands War as a Case Study for Expeditionary Maneuver and the 2014 U.S. Army Operating Concept

By Major Dave Lange

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/recent/falklands/images/falklands_6_yomp.jpg

**Strategic Landpower: The Falklands War as a Case Study for Expeditionary Maneuver
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“Strategic landpower is the application of military capabilities on land in conjunction with other 327 elements of military and national power to protect and advance national objectives.”¹ Since the Spanish-American War, strategic landpower for the United States has also faced the requirement to be expeditionary – that is, able to be employed at significant distances outside the nation’s borders. In the twenty-first century, this need to be expeditionary remains a critical requirement for American landpower. In recognition of this, the concept of expeditionary maneuver will be a key component of the soon to be published 2014 U.S. Army Operating Concept (AOC).

An excellent case study for expeditionary maneuver, as envisioned in the 2014 AOC, can be found in the Falklands War of 1982. On 2 April, 1982, Argentine military forces escalated their long simmering territorial dispute with the United Kingdom (UK) over the sovereignty of the Falkland Islands by launching Operation Rosario to seize the islands. At the time, the Falklands were defended by fewer than a hundred British Royal Marines. Britain² responded by launching a major military operation, code-named Operation CORPORATE, to force Argentina to return the islands to British control. The campaign was an audacious and risky one. It involved projecting land, naval, and air forces almost 8,000 miles from the British home islands against a technologically near-peer enemy which had superior numbers and shorter lines of communication. It is because of these characteristics that the British operations in the Falklands serve as a worthwhile case study, illustrating several aspects of the new AOC, as the U.S. Army looks to become more expeditionary in the near future.

Strategic Situation

Britain's strategic situation had several similarities to that facing the United States today and in the near future. In early 1982, Britain was engaged in the final stages of disengagement from much of her former empire, much as the United States is in the process of disengaging from the primary active theaters of the Global War on Terror. Britain in 1982 was reducing and restructuring its armed forces to concentrate on NATO obligations. Notable among the announced cuts were the inactivation of the light carriers *HMS Hermes* and *Invincible* and the amphibious assault ship *HMS Intrepid*. Similarly, the U.S. government has announced cuts in defense, including potentially reducing funds for aircraft carriers overhaul and refueling and "laying up" as many as three of the amphibious assault ships operated by the U.S. Navy.³

Viewing Britain's ongoing actions, the ruling Argentine junta interpreted these signs to mean that Britain would lack the will and the capability to contest an Argentine seizure of the Falklands. American retrenchment may similarly embolden potential adversaries to attack America's interests abroad in the future.

As a consequence of disengaging from her empire, most of Britain's military forces were based in the home islands, with the only remaining overseas based forces, especially ground forces, located on the European mainland or in the Mediterranean. This situation closely mirrors that faced by the U.S. military in the projected future, where the bulk of U.S. ground forces will be based in the continental United States or "overseas" in Alaska and Hawaii. Therefore, much like the British deployment to the Falklands, any future military action by U.S. forces will most likely take place over distances of several thousand miles.

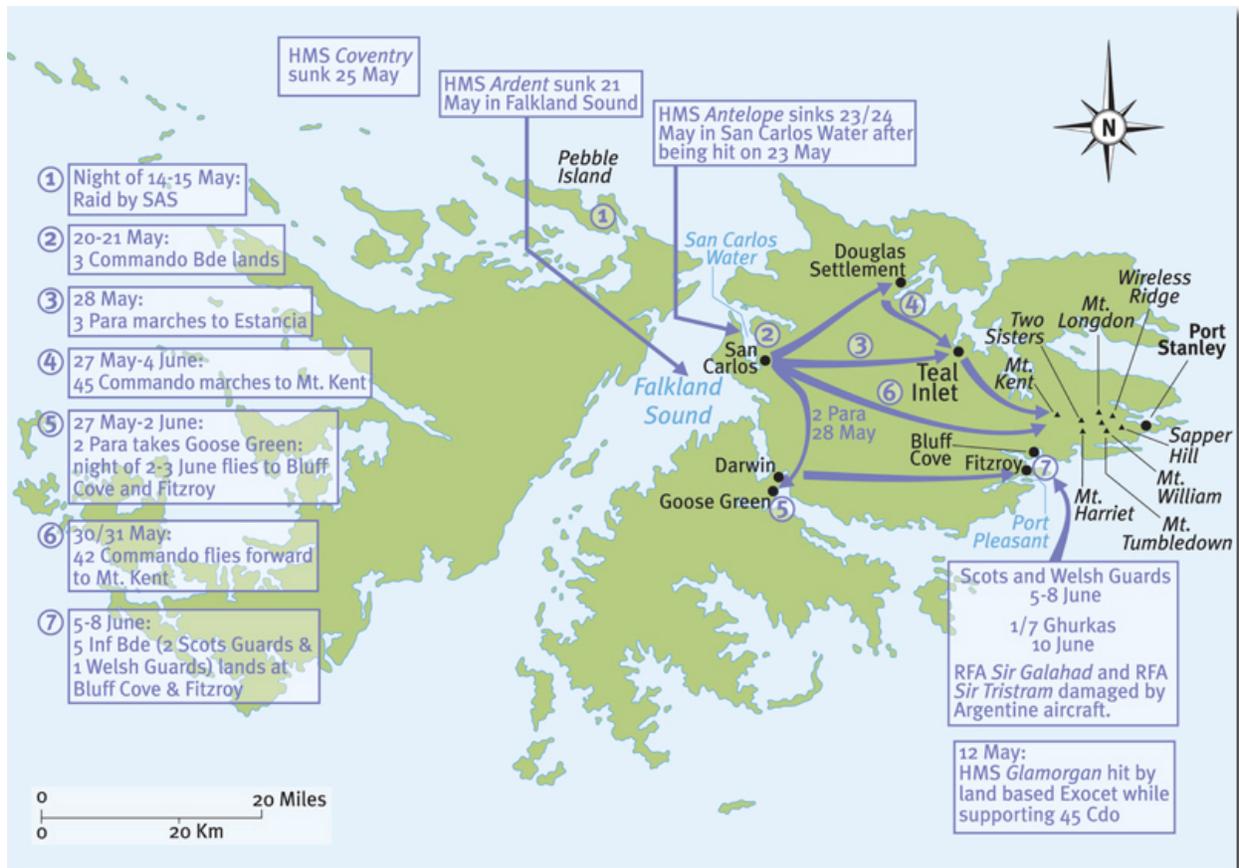
The Falklands war also exhibited the spread of advanced weaponry across the globe. Technologically, the Argentine forces were near-peers to the British. Most notable among Argentina's high tech weapons was the Exocet anti-ship missile. Even though they possessed a very limited number of these missiles, the Argentines used them quite effectively, sinking the

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HMS Sheffield and the *MV Atlantic Conveyor*. The missiles were judged such a threat by the British command that they considered launching a raid on mainland Argentina by SAS special operations forces to neutralize the remaining missiles.⁴ The Argentine air forces boasted numerous modern aircraft, including French built Mirages and Super Etendards and American made A-4 Skyhawks. The ground forces of the opposing sides were almost identically equipped, to the extent that both sides used variants of the same Belgian-designed rifle, the FN FAL. This situation is congruent with the projected future global operating environment where the proliferation of advanced weapons technologies, as well as the innovative weaponization of non-military technology, will reduce or neutralize the current U.S. technological overmatch.

Operation CORPORATE, Expeditionary and Strategic Maneuver, and the Army Operating Concept

Operation CORPORATE, the British military response to recover the islands, serves as an excellent exemplar of what current U.S. Army concepts call strategic and expeditionary maneuver. The current draft of the Army Operating Concept (AOC) defines strategic maneuver as “the agile posturing and employment of forces and capabilities, in all domains on a global scale, to gain and maintain positional and psychological advantage over potential adversaries.”⁵ This is an apt description of British military operations to regain control of the Falklands. Through Operation CORPORATE, the British military used naval forces to establish maritime supremacy and provide a platform from which to project air and land power to achieve the national strategic objective of reestablishing British sovereignty over the islands. The establishment of maritime supremacy, and the freedom of seaborne maneuver that stemmed from it, allowed the British task force to establish positional advantage over the Argentine forces in the islands when the time came to put troops ashore.



Map 1: British Operations in the Falklands

Operation CORPORATE also serves as an example of expeditionary maneuver. *The Army Operating Concept* defines expeditionary maneuver thusly:

“Expeditionary maneuver is exploiting positional advantage by responding rapidly to arrest and control instability and restore stability in an operational area. . . It is not solely the speed of a force that matters; it is the character and momentum of the force that matters. Army forces must be capable of delivering desired outcomes within timeframes that are consistent with those priorities.”⁶

During the Falklands campaign, British forces, having gained maritime supremacy, were able to exploit their positional advantage, quickly putting troops ashore at San Carlos just seven weeks after Argentine forces seized control of the islands. Once they were ashore, British troops were

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able to force the surrender of the Argentine ground forces in the islands in just over three weeks, even though the British ground forces were outnumbered. This ended the military portion of the conflict 75 days after it began.

In the case of the British campaign in the Falklands, the requirement for speed, along with momentum, were important for two reasons. The first reason was political – Britain needed to present a military presence to contest Argentina's action, and the action had to be conducted in an expeditious manner to maintain both international and domestic political support. The second reason was an operational one. British forces needed to conclude their operations as quickly as possible, because the supporting fleet, a mix of Royal Navy and requisitioned civilian ships, could not maintain its position off the Falklands, thousands of miles from the nearest base, indefinitely, especially in the face of the approaching South Atlantic winter weather.⁷ The increasingly cold weather would also place additional strain on ground forces ashore, degrading their effectiveness even in the absence of enemy action.

The central idea of the AOC is Integrated Distributed Operations (IDO). THE AOC states that Army forces will

“conduct IDO to prevent, shape, and win utilizing agile, responsive, and adaptive combined arms and special operations teams guided by mission command . . . Mission tailored Army units, organized with the capabilities needed for a specific mission and environment . . . defeat enemies rapidly through the informed use of physically separated or collocated, mutually supporting independent actions.”⁸

While British forces were unable to prevent the conflict – in fact, as noted earlier, Argentina's perception that Britain was weakening its military capabilities likely contributed to the Argentine junta's decision to seize the islands – British forces in Operation CORPORATE displayed many of the listed attributes of IDO. The British military was able to rapidly deploy a fully joint task force which included special operations forces and a combined arms ground element featuring

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units trained to operate in cold/harsh weather environments such as that found in the Falklands in late fall.⁹ Royal Navy attack submarines shaped the theater by sinking the *ARA General Belgrano*, after which the Argentine navy stayed in home waters. Once ashore, the British army used battle groups moving along separated axes of advance to attack the main Argentine ground force from multiple directions simultaneously, seizing key terrain to break the defense and ultimately force the Argentine defenders to surrender.

Examined more closely, British operations in the Falklands campaign displayed many of the elements of IDO, as detailed in the AOC. The first of these elements is to “combine specific unified action partner elements, forces, and capabilities rapidly to accomplish campaign objectives.”¹⁰ Though the military operations to retake the Falklands involved only British forces, partner nations such as the United States and France contributed in other ways. The United States allowed British forces to use of Wideawake airfield and other facilities on Ascension Island as an intermediate staging base (ISB), as well as other logistic support.¹¹ The French air force conducted air combat training for the Royal Navy’s Sea Harrier pilots using aircraft operated by the Argentine air forces.



Map 2: The U.K. to the Falklands

The actual military operations integrated efforts and capabilities from all three branches of the British armed forces, as well as British industry and non-military portions of the British government. The efforts of the Royal Navy were the most visibly integrated component – projecting sea power to eliminate interference by the Argentine Navy, providing sea lift and amphibious assault capability for ground forces, providing sea-based air power for both air defense and close air support, and missile-based air defense for the landings. The Royal Navy’s efforts provided proof of naval theorist Sir Julian S. Corbett’s axiom that, “great issues between nations at war have always been decided – except in the rarest cases – either by what your army can do against your enemy’s territory and national life, or else by the fear of what the fleet makes it possible for your army to do.”¹² The Royal Air Force also contributed through air

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lift, reconnaissance, and the use of Nimrod strategic bombers to strike targets in the Falklands. The British Ministry of Defense made tremendous efforts to procure the necessary ships to transport British troops to the South Atlantic, in the form of Ships Taken up from Trade (STUFT.) These ships included the passenger liners *SS Canberra* and *RMS Queen Elizabeth II*, which were converted to troopships, as well as the cargo ship *MV Atlantic Conveyor*, which, in addition to transporting cargo, was also modified to allow the launch of additional Harrier fighter aircraft. The conversion of the *Atlantic Conveyor* also serves as an example of the contribution of British industry to the war effort. In addition to modifying the *Atlantic Conveyor* other ships, British industry retrofitted numerous aircraft for mid-air refueling, greatly extending their operational reach, and retrofitting RAF Harriers, previously used only for ground attack roles, to use Sidewinder air-to-air missiles, increasing the number of aircraft available for air defense of the fleet and the landings.¹³

The second element of IDO present in Operation CORPORATE was “overmatch[ing] opponents through a system of units and capabilities.”¹⁴ The primary ingredients in this system were Royal Navy sea and air power with British Army ground forces, with smaller pieces from the Royal Air Force. The Royal Navy established maritime supremacy around the islands, along with some measure of air superiority, which allowed the landing of the ground forces. For the British ground forces, which were outnumbered by their Argentine army opponents, the primary source of overmatch came from the combination of their superior physical conditioning, training, and morale.¹⁵ This combined to allow an outnumbered force to attack and defeat a numerically superior enemy in prepared defensive positions.

Another key element of IDO is the conduct of expeditionary maneuver, which the AOC defines as “exploiting positional advantage by responding rapidly to arrest and control instability and restore stability in an operational area,” and making “exterior lines an advantage.”¹⁶ In the case of Operation CORPORATE, this meant exploiting the positional advantage provided by the

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Royal Navy sea control, sea lift, and amphibious assault assets to counter the Argentine seizure of the Falklands before Argentina could establish *de facto* sovereignty over the islands. Thus joint integration enabled the British forces to gain positional advantage despite operating almost 8,000 nautical miles from the U.K., and over 2,500 miles from the only available ISB on Ascension Island. The seaborne mobility also gave British forces a tactical advantage in recapturing the islands, because even though they were operating on exterior lines relative to Argentine army forces on the islands, the British were able to choose where they landed and put troops ashore at points that were defended lightly or not at all. Troops already ashore could also be picked up and moved by ship to other locations, allowing them to move faster than they could solely on land.

The final element of IDO seen in Operation CORPORATE was the interdependence of special operations and conventional forces. British special operations forces, in the form of the Special Air Service (SAS) and Special Boat Squadron (SBS) played a key role in the successful recapture of the islands. SAS and SBS teams conducted all of the ground reconnaissance of the islands prior to the main landings. SAS troops also successfully conducted a raid which disabled or destroyed all of the Argentine light attack aircraft at the airfield on Pebble Island, greatly reducing the aerial reconnaissance capabilities of the Argentine forces in the Falklands and increasing the British fleet's freedom of maneuver. After the landings at San Carlos and capture of Goose Green, the SAS troops played an important role in gaining control of the key terrain feature of Mount Kent for British forces.

Similarities in Risks

A number of the risks identified in the AOC can also be seen in British operations in the Falklands war. The most important of these is the scarcity of lift assets. In the early 1980s, the British military was turning its focus to operations within NATO, which required less lift assets than had been the case previously. To remedy the lack of sealift, Britain had to utilize STUFT,

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as noted previously, including the aforementioned *Canberra*, *Queen Elizabeth II*, and *Atlantic Conveyor*, plus 59 other ships, for a total of 62 requisitioned civilian ships.¹⁷ Many of these ships had to undergo various modifications to allow them to fulfill their assigned roles. The RAF also had many of their C-130s, which are normally an intra-theater lift platform, retrofitted with aerial refueling capability to allow them to function as strategic airlift platforms. While in the Falklands example, requisitioning civilian sealift and adding capability via retrofit was enough to get the job done, these are hardly methods which can be counted on to deliver the desired results in future conflicts.

Another risk identified by the AOC illustrated by the Falklands war is limited capacity of air and sea port facilities, especially sea ports. Air port capacity was irrelevant until after the outcome had been decided, due to the fact that the Argentines controlled the only hard surface airfield in the islands, and because of the extreme distance from the nearest airfield available to the British, Ascension Island. The largest sea port on the islands, Port Stanley, was also the site of the largest concentration of Argentine ground forces, and thus the British avoided making their initial landings there. The landing site they chose, San Carlos, had limited facilities, which significantly lengthened the time necessary for unloading troops, equipment, and supplies. This in turn increased the time before offensive operations could begin, and also increased the time that the fleet had to spend in a known, relatively fixed, location, leading to greater exposure to enemy air attack and contributing to the loss of *HMS Ardent* and *Antelope* to Argentine attack aircraft. Future U.S. Army forces may face similar bottlenecks in entering a theater of operation, increasing the time needed to build up enough forces to begin operations as well as the exposure of Army and Joint forces tied to the fixed port locations to enemy attack or other interference.

Conclusion

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In early 1982, Great Britain faced a strategic situation similar in many ways to that which faces the United States today. In response to aggression by Argentina, British forces launched a campaign which exemplifies strategic and expeditionary maneuver. British military operations also possessed many of the elements the U.S. Army calls for in its future forces, including integration of joint and unified partner capabilities, using these integrated capabilities to overmatch the enemy, and interdependence of conventional and special operations forces. Whereas Great Britain had to adapt and develop innovative solutions under the pressure of an initiation of hostilities, the U.S. Army finds itself in a position to make smart strategic choices now in developing future capabilities. A strong and adaptive military can successfully implement ad hoc solutions, but anticipation and deliberate force development are characteristics of an institution with strategic vision. For these reasons, Operation CORPORATE is worthy of study by those thinking about future U.S. Army operations and serves as a warning against shortchanging future force development in an era of fiscal austerity.

About the Author

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¹ Department of the Army, *The U.S. Army Operating Concept*, 2014 ed., DRAFT v0.7. (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2012), 7. Hereafter *AOC*.

² The proper name of the country is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. For ease of reading, this paper will refer to the UK as 'Britain' and use the adjective 'British.'

³ "Pentagon Changes Course, Halts LCS at 32 Ships", 24 February 2014, accessed 25 February 2014.

<http://www.defensenews.com/article/20140224/DEFREG02/302240026/Pentagon-Changes-Course-Halts-LCS-32-Ships>. The article notes that the DoD budget proposal does not request any funds for refueling and overhaul of the carrier *USS George Washington*. The article further states the Pentagon sources say the budget will seek to place up to three amphibious assault ships in "reduced operating status."

⁴ Duncan Anderson, *The Falklands War 1982*. (2002, Oxford: Osprey Publishing), 43. The raid was abandoned after a Royal Navy helicopter carrying an SAS reconnaissance team was detected and intentionally crash landed in Chile.

⁵ *AOC*, 14.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Winter solstice in the southern hemisphere occurred on 22 December, 1982, eight days after the Argentinian commander in Port Stanley surrendered. The first snow of the season had fallen on the high ground around Port Stanley on 1 June.

⁸ *AOC*, 13.

⁹ 3 Commando Brigade was a rapid response unit normally tasked to operate in Norway in the event of a Warsaw Pact attack on NATO. The Mountain and Arctic Warfare Cadre were also attached to 3 Commando during Operation CORPORATE, operating as two patrol groups.

¹⁰ *2014 Army Operating Concept, draft v0.7*, December 2013, 16. Hereafter *AOC*.

¹¹ Anderson, 24, 26.

¹² Julian S. Corbett, *Principles of Maritime Strategy*. (1911; reprint, Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004), 14.

¹³ Roger D. Baskett, "Strategic Mobility: An Expanded View, with Focus on Readiness and Sustainability" (MMAS Study Project, U.S. Army War College, 1991), 8-10.

¹⁴ *AOC*, 17.

¹⁵ Robert H Scales, Jr. *Yellow Smoke: The Future of Land Warfare for America's Military*. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 56.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 14. *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁷ James A. Haggart, "The Falklands Island Conflict, 1982: Air Defense of the Fleet." (Research paper, U.S. Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 1984). Located online:

<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1984/HJA.htm>. Accessed 23 January 2014.