Logistics in The Falklands War

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The recent Australian *Defence White Paper 2016* defined the unique security challenges facing the nation. Strategic planning within the document includes recognition of the regional and global nature of the nation's security interests, and the very different sets of challenges that are created for the defence force by state, and also non-state actors such as terrorists. The White Paper suggests that the defence budget should grow to 2 percent of gross national product, a significant part of which would be applied to the development of maritime capability.

Emblematic of this commitment is the recent commissioning of the two 27,800 ton amphibious assault ships (LHDs) of the Canberra class – *Canberra* and *Adelaide* – now progressing toward initial operating capability. At full operational capability, the ships will enable the embarkation of a full Amphibious Ready Group based upon the Second Battalion of the Australian Army and their supporting arms, reflecting a transition for the unit from a strictly ground force to an amphibious force. The two LHDs will join the existing capabilities borne by the 16,000 ton dock landing ship *Choules*, which will soon be upgraded from a command-and-control, as well as a weapons, perspective. The three ships together will hopefully constitute a flexible and deployable amphibious force.

Amphibious forces in the future, however, face the possibility of arriving in a future combat theatre and finding themselves facing an arsenal of advanced, disruptive technologies that could turn previously perceived technological advances and plans for force generation "on their heads", where Australian armed forces no longer have uncontested theatre access or unfettered operational freedom to manoeuvre The next century will see foes striving to target concentrations of troops and material ashore, while concurrently attacking forces at sea and in the air. The lessons learned from previous conflicts have never been more important; with increasing numbers of out-of- area operations required in remote trouble spots, and at short notice. Given this reality, the adaptive logistical requirements necessary for sustaining any expeditionary interventions require sober assessment and pragmatic planning.

Where are the precedents to help find such guidance? There have been no amphibious assaults to speak of since Inchon in the Korean War, and Suez in 1956. The British expeditionary assault upon the Falklands in 1982, however, provided many lessons, given the inadequate training, little intelligence, no contingency plans, a politically driven rush, and an 8000 mile logistical tether from the homeland. It is not surprising, then, that logistics during the UK "Operation Corporate" were confusing and challenging. It is one of the best examples of "lessons learned" for addressing both anti-access and area denial in a modern conventional conflict.

There is a saying attributed to various past military commanders of the mid-20th century, that "amateurs or juniors discuss tactics, while their seniors and other professionals discuss logistics". There is also a, perhaps apocryphal quote attributed to the former Chancellor of Germany, Otto von Bismarck, stating, "Fools state that they learn by experience. The wise man learns from the mistakes of others". As such, the story of the British assault upon the Falklands, as recorded in the book, "Logistics in the Falklands War"[1] - by Major General Kenneth Privratsky, US Army (Retired) should be mandatory reading for all those who will partake in instituting preparations, as well as implementation, of future ADF amphibious operations. Surprisingly, in this tome written by an American General Officer/ professional logistician, with credible guidance from, among others, Major General Julian Thompson, the Commander of the 3 Commando Brigade at the Falklands War, the book details the saga of British efforts to supply the modern logistical equivalents of "Beans, Bullets, Black Oil and Bandages" to the invasion force.

The British ultimately won the war, chiefly because of their ability, in an improvised military campaign (for which they had no prior planning), to project and sustain a Task Force consisting of a Carrier Task Group and an Amphibious Task Group, across a distance of 8,000 miles. A vital role was played by the small British territory of Ascension Island in the South Atlantic, just over half way distance (3800 miles) to the Falklands. The 26 ships (later rising to 44) of the Royal Navy that took an active part in the campaign were supported by 22 ships of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, including 6 specialist Landing Ships (Logistic), by two ships of the Royal Maritime Auxiliary Service, and by 54 requisitioned civilian "ships taken up from trade", known as STUFT vessels, from 33 different civilian companies. Many of the civilian STUFT ships used had to be fitted with extra equipment, including helicopter landing decks,

specialist communications apparatus, and water treatment plants for the long voyage. In addition, the cruise liner *SS Uganda* was requisitioned and converted to serve as a hospital ship.

In the rush to sail, many of the ships of the Task Force were not "tactically loaded" or "combat loaded". Most ships of the Task Force used a short halt at Ascension Island to redistribute personnel, stores and equipment before continuing to the Falklands. But, there were many reported cases of staff or equipment being assigned to more than one ship either at the start of the voyage, or at Ascension, and then losing contact with their parent unit or being unable to secure other transport.

The circumstances of the amphibious assault at San Carlos on the western side of the Falklands forced the British Navy and land forces to remain relatively fixed in place during the amphibious assault and beachhead buildup. This is when the Argentine air force unleashed its attack on British naval forces supporting the landing force. Within an hour of the first waves of Argentine aircraft attacking, it became evident that it was the ships, and not the men ashore, that were the targets. Because of the aggressive air attacks, the waters around the landing area and beachhead were referred to as "Bomb Alley". Flying just above the wave tops, the Argentine based attack aircraft made repeated attacks on the British Task Force with bombs and Exocet anti-ship missiles. The Argentine air attacks initially sank one British destroyer, 2 frigates, and caused the sinking of one critically and logistically important container ship, Cunard's *Atlantic Conveyor.* The attack upon *Conveyor* ultimately had a vastly negative effect upon British strategic mobility, by eliminating the main source of heavy lift helicopters which it was transporting for the landing force, all of which were lost at sea. Additionally, two more Destroyers, three frigates and three logistic landing ships were damaged.

Enemy action had an effect on the buildup in a way that simply was not anticipated. The entire brigade's operations had been planned on the assumption of keeping its logistics afloat. Nevertheless, the air assault forced the UK to create huge dumps on land at Ajax Bay. The Argentine Air Force also attacked the beach head and dropped 12 bombs on the brigade maintenance area, killing 6 men and wounding 27, as well as starting a major fire in 45 Commando's heavy weapons ammunition dump. The various stores ships were withdrawn, with only those unloading allowed in the area. The air attacks reduced the rate of off-loading supplies at San Carlos, which in turn slowed the start of the land campaign, thereby delaying logistics, resulting in the loss of manoeuvre opportunity in terms of time and speed. Political as well as military considerations also limited the use of two large ocean liners which had been used as troop transporters, *SS Canberra* and *RMS Queen Elizabeth 2*, neither of which could be risked as a target for any length of time. Likewise, they were designed for pier-side loading and discharge, and would prove slower to unload in the South Atlantic than the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Logistic Landing Ships.

The original logistics plan called for a small base to be established ashore but for most brigade supplies to be kept afloat off the beachhead, including two LSLs carrying resupply, and the cruise ship/ troop transport *SS Canberra* for immediate although not Geneva Convention protected medical support. Sea transport along the coast was further limited, however, by the limited numbers of landing craft, together with powered rafts known as Mexeflotes, and other smaller craft, as well as by British reluctance to risk larger vessels close inshore.

Following the first landings at San Carlos, it became obvious that the plan to hold most supplies offshore and afloat was impractical in the face of Argentine air attacks. Ajax Bay was chosen for the logistics base ashore, as it was the largest of the very limited beach landing areas, and with the only buildings, foremost being a disused mutton refrigeration plant. The fleet auxiliary and STUFT ships had to be brought in under cover of darkness to unload, mostly sailing away before each morning's air attacks. Most of the STUFT ships did not have the capability to unload by helicopter at night, despite the fact that unloading using landing craft and Mexeflote rafts was a long and difficult process.

The only suitable location for a field dressing station was at Ajax Bay, known as the "Red and Green Life Machine", housed within the disused refrigeration plant next to a large ammunition dump. In consequence, the British decided not to mark the dressing station with a Red Cross for protection under the Geneva Convention since it was so close to the ammunition dump, and at one point it functioned with two unexploded bombs lodged in its roof. In four weeks, 725 patients were treated, including among them 40% Argentine casualties. By the time that the Argentines had surrendered, the "Red and Green Life Machine", while under the supervision of then Surgeon Commander Rick Jolly, performed over 300 major surgical procedures upon both British and Argentine casualties, even though some arrived in such bad condition that they required as much as 5 units of blood to stabilise them prior to surgery. Within the facility, two British army and two Navy surgical teams worked side by side. The lighting was deemed inadequate, and there was no sterile water,

no autoclave, no diathermy machine, and a limited supply of linen. Gloves were worn but not often changed from one operation to the next.

In preparation for the Falklands assault, the British lacked a capable hospital ship. The only vessel in the Royal Navy earmarked as a potential hospital ship was the Queen's Royal Yacht *Britannia*, but, because she required special furnace oil upon which to operate, and only had a 200 bed capacity, planners deemed her unsuitable to support the task force. There were no friendly places to provide medical support in the vicinity of the Falklands closer than Montevideo Uruguay, (four and a half sailing days or 1000 miles) to the north-west. The projected inability to care for potential casualties therefore led to the requisitioning of the cruise ship *Uganda.* At the time, *Uganda* was in the Mediterranean at Alexandria, on an educational cruise carrying a thousand school children. After her owners received requisition instructions, *Uganda* proceeded to Gibraltar for modifications to accommodate a major surgical facility, an intensive care unit, a specialised burn ward (14% of all injuries incurred were burns), x-ray facility, as well as clinics and laboratories to treat patients, in addition to the installation of a helicopter deck to receive casualties. *Uganda* also lacked the capacity to produce fresh water for drinking or washing. Reverse osmosis fresh water generators were installed. Completion of *Uganda* at Gibraltar, complete with Red Cross markings to adhere to the Geneva Convention, occurred at a pace comparable to *Canberra* - in a mere 65 hours! While modifications were nearing completion, a 135 person medical team boarded Uganda to help store 90 tons of medical supplies for the new 500 bed floating hospital.

Uganda would provide the highest level of care in theatre. Following agreement among the warring parties, and with assistance of the International Committee of the Red Cross, she would be located in a restricted neutral navigational area designated a "Red Cross Box" at sea about twenty miles north of Pebble Island, along with two of Argentina's hospital ships, *Bahia Paraiso* and *Almirante Irizar*. Both countries had agreed that any casualties evacuated there should not participate further in the war.

The only communications available aboard *Uganda* was via maritime satellite. Three British fast dispatch vessels, former ocean survey ships *Hydra*, *Hecla* and *Hecate,* would transport 60-100 British and Argentine casualties each, those patients requiring additional or long term care, from *Uganda* to Montevideo, Uruguay. From there, the British casualties were transported by VC-10 medical evacuation planes, which would airlift the British casualties to the United Kingdom via Ascension Island.

Exposure to the cold weather was a problem for all troops in the Falklands and the boggy and rugged terrain also caused multiple cases of Trench foot and endemic mild diarrhoea from drinking the water. Battle casualty treatment and resuscitation at the unit level and evacuation functioned well, resulting in a very high survival rate for casualties treated. Of over 1,000 casualties evacuated back to the designated hospital ship *SS Uganda*, including over 300 Argentineans, all but three men survived. Worthy of note, however, was that the vast majority of British casualties occurred not on land, but at sea due to exploding fuel and the difficulty of reaching injured sailors in burning passageways and compartments. Ultimately, the war cost 255 British servicemen killed, 777 wounded with 10 percent of those permanently disabled, 6 ships lost, many other ships damaged, and 20 aircraft destroyed. For Argentina, it suffered an estimated 750 killed, 1100 wounded, and vast amounts of equipment lost.

As noted by British General Julian Thompson, on the scene in the Falklands, "Surely one of the strangest things in military history is the almost complete silence upon the problems of supply". Forces in the future, however, will again be expected to deploy quickly and operate over great distances in austere areas. When that happens, logisticians will need to provide support without reliance on fixed infrastructure, deep draft ports or airfields. The British experience at the Falklands highlights the difficulty of providing logistics over long distances into austere environments, particularly in situations of significant threat and especially for amphibious operations.

British Field Marshal Archibald Wavell stated, in 1944: "It takes little skill or imagination to see *where* you would like your army to be, and *when*; it takes much knowledge and hard work to know where you can place your forces and whether you can maintain them there. A real knowledge of supply and movement factors must be the basis of every leader's plan; only then can he know how and when to take risks with those factors; and battles and wars are won only by taking risks."

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References

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