

# Not Learning the Lessons – A UK Defence Strategy Doomed to Failure v2 11 May 2018

By Mike Hookem MEP – UKIP for Yorkshire & North Lincolnshire

In 1982, as a British Army reservist, I watched on, frustrated, as Chinook helicopters ferried men and supplies around the docks of Hull; loading merchant vessels that would soon form part of the armada sent to free the Falkland Islands.

For weeks, the air around my barracks had been alive with expectation and rumour; that we would be called upon to take part in the largest naval operation since the invasion of Normandy. As the taskforce prepared to depart, we finally knew we were to be left behind while other Hull men and women went to war.

Despite the dangers that going to war automatically entails, I felt gutted at the time; in fact, cheated of the opportunity to put to use the months and years of military training that I had worked so hard to accrue.

Over time, those feelings have changed. Rather than frustration and feeling that I missed out; I today feel great pride in those who risked all in that short, yet bloody conflict, thousands of miles from home; together with deep sorrow for those who laid down their lives to defend the South Atlantic Islanders right to 'be British.'

Today, as a Member of the European Parliament; UKIP's Defence Spokesman; Deputy Party Leader, and a student of military history; I have to say that my perspective of the events that unfolded in 1982 has somewhat changed.

No longer do I pour over the military tactics and battlefield stories, as I once did. Instead, I am more concerned with the political and strategic picture; the logistics employed to mount such a large operation; how casualties could have potentially been avoided; and the important question of whether the UK could still retake the Falkland Islands if it were invaded today.

Let's examine that question.

## Could we retake the Falkland's today?

Even in 1982, the British Army and Royal Navy were feeling the pinch of politically motivated 'cost-cutting' to its operational capability, following the publication of John Nott's 1981 Defence White Paper, "The UK Defence Programme: The Way Forward."

Under the plans published by Nott, the regular army was to be reduced to 135,000 men, a loss of 7,000, which, as now, was to be partly offset by the gradual expansion of the Territorial Army by 16,000 personnel. But the biggest blows came to the Royal Navy, with plans to sell its new Aircraft Carrier, HMS Invincible, to Australia and to focus 'primarily on anti-submarine warfare.'

The Royal Marines, who along with the Paras, were destined to play such a vital role in recapturing the Falklands, were, under Nott's plans, to look at disbanding their entire amphibious landing force and sell off the landing ships, HMS Intrepid and Fearless. Nott also demanded that nine of the Navy's 59 escorts would be decommissioned; together with a reduction in manpower of between 8,000 and 10,000 personnel.

Despite the deep cuts proposed a year earlier, the Royal Navy mustered an impressive amphibious force of 115 ships to head for the Falkland Islands. This force included the two aircraft carriers, HMS Hermes and HMS Invincible; two landing platform dock (LPD) ships, HMS Fearless and Intrepid; and six landing

ship logistics (LSL) ships. The Royal Navy was additionally augmented by Ships Taken Up From Trade (STUFT); requisitioned civilian vessels that including the SS Canberra, the Hull-based ferry, MV Norland, and the world-famous Cunard cruise liner, the QE2.

Fast forward 38 years and the thought of having 135,000 troops defending the Realm and our interests overseas seems like nothing more than a utopian dream; while the Royal Navy has suffered years of deep cuts John Nott would not have even dared to suggest.

Since the retirement of the Fleet Air Arm's Harrier force in 2010, today's Royal Navy does not even have the operational capacity to launch aircraft at sea, despite billions of pounds being investments into two new aircraft carriers. In fact, it is doubtful whether the two new carriers - the biggest ships ever built for the Royal Navy - will ever be fully equipped with aircraft, or adequately protected (1) whilst vulnerable at sea.

It is already stated that only one of the two behemoths will ever put to sea at any one time, as the Royal Navy cannot refuel, resupply or defend both carriers at the same time. It has also been pointed out that with recent developments in missile technology, the inadequately protected carriers are unlikely ever to be deployed on a Falklands style operation, as they would be too 'prime a target.' Other questions have also arisen over the combat readiness and capability of the F35 stealth fighter programme, the aircraft chosen as a replacement for the Harrier Jump Jet which is due to enter frontline service in 2020, due to serious ongoing engineering and software problems with the programme.

Many of the issues the UK's armed forces face today, can be traced back over decades, even before John Nott's white paper. However, it was to be a Conservative/Lib Dem coalition, driving for 'austerity,' that did the real damage to the UK's military capability. With the banking crash as a background, and demands from the then Chancellor, George Osborne, to slash the defence budget by 10% to 20% in real terms, the new coalition Government published its Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) 2010.

### **An Undermanned Army in Crisis**

The SDSR 2010 called for a cut in British Army personnel numbers from 102,000 to a mere 82,000 by 2018; a 40% reduction in Challenger 2 tanks; a 35% reduction in AS90 self-propelled artillery, and the withdrawal of 20,000 British troops from Germany. The SDSR 2010 also set out plans to make up the shortfall in full-time personnel numbers by increasing the size of the Volunteer Reserves (formally known as the Territorial Army) by 20% to fill the capability gap, reflecting similar proposals by John Nott three decades earlier.

In January 2018, the number of full-time British Army personnel stood at a mere 81,660 according to the National Audit Office. However, when this figure is broken down using the Government's own recently relaxed rules for personnel deemed 'operationally ready,' the number immediately falls to 77,470. Recent newspaper reports have even suggested that when sickness, injury, and other personal considerations are taken into account, the number of operational ready soldiers falls to as low as 60,000, the smallest standing UK army for over a hundred years.

As for the Government's plans to increase the number of reservists, the figures make even grimmer reading. The recently privatised armed forces recruitment programme has become something of a national embarrassment, despite a £440Million, 10-year contract with Capita, that has seen over £664 million spent on "recruitment and retention" incentives in the last five years for both reserve and full-time personnel of all forces.

According to the National Audit Office, only 1,975 reserve soldiers were recruited by Capita in 2013-14 against a December 2012 Army Demand Plan requirement of 6,000. This is a pattern that became increasingly familiar over following years. In the year 1st June 2016 to 1st June 2017, the number of people leaving the reserves rose by approximately 20%, while intake fell by 18%, leaving a meagre 1.4%

increase in reserve manpower, despite a shortfall of 3,000 'trained' reservists. In April 2018, a report by the National Audit Office revealed the percentage of regulars leaving the Armed Forces voluntarily, has increased from 3.8% annually in March 2010, to 5.6% in December 2017.

In fact, things have become so bad, in October 2016 the Government was forced to redefine what is classified as a 'trained' soldier to meet operational requirements.

According to the Independent newspaper, "some critics have also claimed official figures now underplay the true scale of the problem because the Government has redefined "trained soldiers" in a way that allows many more reservists to be counted as trained strength."

Under the Government's new rules, any troops who have passed basic training (phase 1), but not yet completed trade or 'advanced' training, such as an advanced infantry skills course (phase 2), are classed as 'trained.' Before 2016, only troops with both phase 1 & 2 training could be counted as fully trained and deployable. Why the change? The answer, of course, is to meet targets and make it look as if the British Army has better readiness than is the actual case!

The fact is, like any voluntary organisation, the volunteer reserve will always suffer from fluctuating numbers. From my own time in the TA, I know there is always a core of troops who are dedicated to the unit; while the commitment of others wavered, only showing up when the whim took them, despite being kept on strength for months or even years.

While the SDSR 2010 removed a large amount of capability and operational readiness from the British army, especially regarding personnel and armour, the Royal Navy (RN) suffered even more devastating cuts. These cuts included the loss of its last remaining aircraft carrier; a reduction in the number of helicopter landing ships; the scrapping of the Fleet Air Arm's Harrier jump-jet force; and a reduction in personnel of 5,000 to 30,000.

### **The Royal Navy, All at Sea**

On the 6th June 1944 – commonly known as D-Day - 900 RN vessels of all types took part in the invasion of Nazi-occupied Europe.

While it is unrealistic to expect the Government to keep the RN at wartime levels throughout protracted periods of relative peace, we, as an island nation, must retain a force that is adequately trained and equipped to deal with the flare-up of unexpected conflicts.

While in 1982, we were able to muster 115 to head for the South Atlantic, today, the entire RN fleet stands at a mere 89 vessels. These ships include one as yet non-operational aircraft carrier, six amphibious assault ships, six destroyers, thirteen frigates, seven attack submarines and four ballistic-missile submarines. The rest of the fleet is made up of minesweepers, survey ships and other support vessels; with many no larger than the small patrol ships.

Sadly, until March this year, the RN could also boast a helicopter carrier. However, the last remaining vessel of this type, HMS Ocean, was decommissioned in March 2018 and sold to the Brazilian navy.

Of the 89 vessels that have survived the cuts, only the six destroyers, thirteen frigates and seven attack submarines can be considered frontline vessels, with adequate sensors, weapons and protection to fight and survive in a battle against a sophisticated foe. However, as with the army, the numbers do not represent the true state of readiness. At any one time, approximately half of the RN's vessels are undergoing maintenance or training periods, and several others are committed to routine standing patrols, leaving just a handful to respond to emergencies.

Many of these issues have been compounded by poorly judged procurement of new equipment, cost overruns, and engineering issues that have seen some of the RN's newest vessels laid up for significant works, including propulsion issues with the in-service Type 45 Destroyers, and electrical and build issues with the latest class of patrol vessels.

The introduction of any new technology can be troublesome, however, many of the current issues with the Type 45s could have been avoided had the then Labour Government listened to the builders, BAE Systems, and opted for a tried and tested propulsion system, rather than a 'revolutionary,' yet unproven Rolls-Royce supplied gas turbine design.

A design flaw with the Northrop Grumman intercooler system has on occasion left ships with no source of power or propulsion, especially when operating in warm climates. This has meant ships that should be out on-patrol are missing engagements, due to being in harbour undergoing expensive overhauls under the Type 45 Power Improvement Project (PIP).

The number of replacement vessels is also becoming a significant issue. In recent years, the Royal Navy has acquired just six new Type 45s, to do the work of the twelve Type 42 destroyers it replaces, and it is the same story with new submarines. Just seven new Astute-class attack submarines have been ordered to replace twelve outgoing Swiftsure and Trafalgar-class subs. While both the Type 45's and Astute class submarines are bigger and pack more firepower than their predecessors, there just aren't enough of them to cover all the areas or tasks undertaken by the older vessels.

However, ships are only as good as the crew, and it is with personnel numbers where the RN is struggling. As of Jan 2018, the Royal Navy was approximately 2,000 sailors short of its target of 31,000 personnel. Retention of experience personnel is now under such strain that a senior Royal Navy insider is quoted as saying the navy, "is diabolically short of senior rate engineers." The same source continued, "they can't retain or train the replacements fast enough to stop the shortages." According to Labour peer and former First Sea Lord, Admiral Lord West, the problem stems simply from the move to axe 4,000 sailors under the SDSR 2010.

In fact, the pressures have become so great regarding manning, ships such as HMS Dauntless, one of only six Type 45 destroyers, have been laid up to have their crews dispersed to other vessels.

Further blows to the Royal Navy's capability are still in the pipeline. Reports leaked late last year suggest that a further 2,000 Royal Marines out of a total force of 6,600 may be axed, together with the Royal Navy's two amphibious assault ships.

The proposed cuts come on top of the consolidation or closure of several major Royal Marine bases including the Royal Citadel in Plymouth.

While the leak led to an angry backlash from MPs, who stated that the Royal Marines, "risk being sacrificed to short-term Treasury book-keeping;" the pressures of finding experienced crew for the two new aircraft carriers and filling the £20 billion 'black hole' in the defence budget could prove too great an opportunity for the Treasury not to wield the knife.

Speaking of the cuts, General Julian Thompson, who led 3 Commando Royal Marines during the Falklands War, warned, "these plans will spell the end of the Royal Marines as we know them. The days of D-Day scale amphibious landings may be over, but the days of landing against an enemy that is going to fight you on the beach aren't."

Military insiders have also warned that any further cuts to the Royal Marines could have a dramatic effect on recruitment into the UK's Special Forces, 40% of whom are taken from the ranks of the Marines.

## Clipped wings (2)

While the Government has made a great deal of noise regarding the purchase of new equipment for the Royal Air Force (RAF), such as an order for nine new Boeing P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft and the introduction of the F35B Lightning II in 2020; things are far from well.

As with both the British Army and Royal Navy, the RAF is currently running at least a 5% deficit in personnel and struggling to recruit replacements for experienced people leaving the service, with recruitment figures down 1% on the past year.

Under the SDSR 2010, the RAF also suffered huge losses in capability, most notably with the retirement of its entire Harrier ground attack force; and the loss of its maritime patrol BAE Nimrod aircraft; the closure of RAF Kinross and a manpower reduction of 5,000 personnel.

The RAF has also seen much of its pilot training capability removed from the Force's control and outsourced to a consortium headed by Lockheed Martin (manufacturer of the F35B) and Babcock International, under a 25-year, £1.1 billion Private Finance Initiative (PFI).

While the capability of the RAF was stricken by the SDSR 2010, the Government's latest review, the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) 2015, appeared to be a victory for the RAF, at least on paper.

Under the SDSR 2015, the government pledged to continue with the purchase of 138 F-35 'Lightning' multi-role fighter aircraft, albeit the first 48 at least being of the short take-off and vertical-landing (STOVL) variant (F-35B) rather than the conventional take-off and landing (CTOL) variant (F-35A) that the RAF would have preferred.

The government also decided to retain the first tranche of Eurofighter Typhoons in service which will allow the RAF to form two additional squadrons. Added to this was the acquisition of at least twenty new unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs), nine Boeing P-9A maritime patrol aircraft, three more Shadow R1 surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft, and the retention of fourteen C-130J-30 tactical transport aircraft.

To support this, the RAF was allowed a very modest increment in its personnel numbers. However, many of these posts are still to be filled, and with the lead time on new aircraft in some cases running to years, the RAF will still suffer large gaps in capability for many years to come.

Pressures on personnel also mean the RAF is now looking to retire its long-serving Panavia Tornado GR4 bomber force to redeploy personnel in other areas, despite the Phase 3 Typhoon (ground attack) aircraft not yet being available. Years of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have also left their mark on the serviceability of existing platforms. This was highlighted by the recent grounding of the RAF's E3A Sentry AWACS aircraft following electrical problems across the platform.

The future is also not bright for several existing platforms and services that were thought to be safe after the SDSR 2015, including the RAF Regiment, the R1 Sentinel intelligence-gathering platform that was initially protected, together with the world famous Red Arrow Display Team.

Budget pressures and the fluctuation in the exchange rate may mean the R1 Sentinel fleet is once again facing cuts, despite the often touted £178 billion equipment plan for the armed forces, while RAF Regiment is suffering from the same manpower stresses said to be behind the push for the retirement of the Tornado force.

The downward trend in aircraft and personnel led defence analysis group, IHS Jane's to warn that the RAF could be left with only 127 combat jets by the end of the decade as the 87 Tornados are retired; while

the Phase 3 Typhoons will not be in service until 2019 and the F35 will not be in full service until 2023. This scenario would leave the RAF with its fewest number of fighter planes since 1918.

However, it is the Government's direct lack of support for British aircraft manufacturing which could threaten the future of the Red Arrows. With the current Hawk T1 jet used by the squadron coming to the end of its life; some recent accidents and a lack of commitment from Government to buy a replacement for the Hawk, the future of the display team has now been cast into doubt. With the lack of Government interest in buying new variants of the Hawk, there is also the potential that a future Red Arrows squadron may be forced to fly an aircraft supplied by either Germany, the US or South Korea.

As for the much-vaunted Lockheed Martin F35 programme, serious issues with the aircraft remain even after entry into service, with the director of Operational Test and Evaluation in the US, Robert Behler, branding the platform, not "operationally suitable."

In fact, according to US defence website, [breakingdefence.com](http://breakingdefence.com), "the one F-35B aircraft, being used to see if the plane will survive the 8,000 hours that it is required to do, pretty much fell apart last year and so already needs replacing before those hours have been flown."

This was corroborated by Behler who wrote, "The effect of the failures observed and repairs required during the first two lifetimes of testing on the service life certification of the F-35B aircraft is still to be determined. The service life for all three variants was planned to be 8,000 hours; however, the F-35B service life may be less than that, even with extensive modifications to strengthen the aircraft already produced."

This is worrying for a platform that is going to provide the backbone of RAF strike capacity over the coming decades, especially when added to the already well-recognised engineering and combat performance problems.

### **So, Could We Retake the Falklands?**

The frank answer to this question of whether the UK could retake the Falklands today has to be a resounding NO!

Mounting an operation with the same size and strength as that seen in 1982 would be an impossible logistical and military exercise for our armed forces today. Bearing in mind that the UK currently has no operational aircraft carriers that it and would be reticent to use them, even if they were available as they could not be protected whilst at sea.<sup>(1)</sup> Following the sale of HMS Ocean, the RN no longer even has the capabilities of a helicopter landing ship or a platform from which to launch the strike aircraft that played such a critical role in 1982. Add to this the potential sale of the ships used by the Royal Marines for amphibious landings, then not only would an invasion have to be made without vital air cover, but also the UK would have no way of landing troops by sea.

However, more critically for an island nation, the RN now stands at a mere 26 combat capable vessels. Bearing in mind that 50% of these vessels are likely to be in maintenance or on training duties at any one time – rendering it incapable of putting an operational 'task force' to sea – and an operation to retake the Falklands from the sea is rendered entirely impossible.

In fact, if MoD planners were honest, we are today hard pushed to protect our home waters from unwanted visitors.

This situation was highlighted in a speech last year by First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Philip Jones, who said, "the degree of superiority at sea which Western navies previously enjoyed post-Cold War is diminishing."

Admiral Jones continued, “you don’t need to look very far to see rising and resurgent powers flex their muscles. It’s now clear that the peaks of Russian submarine activity that we’ve seen in the North Atlantic in recent years are the new norm. The same is true of the steady stream of vessels passing the UK on their way to join the Baltic, Mediterranean and the Black Sea fleets.”

In 2016, cover of the UK’s coastline by the Royal Navy was so depleted, that the emergency response ship was forced to race from the south coast of England to Scotland in order to cover a potential incursion by Russian naval vessels into home waters.

In terms of personnel numbers, the UK’s armed forces have lost approximately 50% in numbers of the personnel enlisted at the time of the Falklands War, before taking into account those who have not completed phase 1 & 2 training. This leaves the UK’s land forces at a low ebb, especially after years of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Regarding aircraft, we no longer have the assets or capability to mount an operation like ‘Operation Black Buck,’ the raid carried out by Avro Vulcan aircraft on the airfield at Port Stanley; without a land base within a reasonable striking distance of the Islands.

With issues surrounding the F35B aircraft and many of the new RAF platforms not likely to be available for some years, then that leaves the RAF facing years of capability gaps, despite increasing demands for airstrikes on Syria and anywhere else that may be required.

The RN could no longer even count on being able to mobilise commandeered vessels, as the size and composition of the UK merchant register has changed significantly in the past 36 years. In fact, the RN is today so overstretched, that the UK no-longer maintains a standing warship patrol around the Falklands, as had been the tradition since the recapture of the islands in 1982.

When Britain’s precarious military situation is applied to current global security challenges, the picture is even more troubling. With Vladimir Putin’s annexation of the Ukrainian territory of the Crimea and involvement in the Syrian Civil War on the side of Assad; a belligerent North Korea under Kim Jong-un (albeit subject to recent possible diplomatic improvements); continued IS activity across the Middle East and North Africa; the rise of al-Shabaab; Iran’s continued nuclear aspirations and China’s rapid expansion of its armed forces, the Ministry of Defence’s £178bn equipment plan to transform the services seems to pale into insignificance.

Growing intervention in Syria and the threat posed by a resurgent Russia are to be, in my opinion, the two great conventional military challenges of the next decade.

A clear sign of how ill-prepared the UK is for yet another armed conflict came two weeks ago, when Prime Minister, Theresa May ordered strikes on Syria. While our French and US partners pounded suspected chemical weapons sites with ship-launched cruise missiles, the UK could only contribute four ageing RAF Tornado strike jets accompanied by four Typhoons for defence.

However, the RN could only spectate while US and French warships of similar size and composition launched round after round of cruise missiles from their decks, the launchers on the British vessels having been scrapped at the planning stage for budget reasons.

With a belligerent Russian President acting as a power broker in the Middle East, where he is aiding the forces of Assad to win a vicious civil war, NATO and the UK in particular face a range of conventional security challenges in the coming decades, even before the threats posed by terrorist activity are added.

NATO as a whole and the UK, in particular, should take heed of Putin’s words on the annexation of Crimea – an act akin to Hitler’s actions in the Sudetenland – when he stated, “if you press the spring, it will release at some point.”

With a build-up of troops on both sides in Eastern Europe, we now face a flashpoint not seen since before the Second World War. The UK is totally unprepared for the eventuality of a quickly escalating state-on-state conflict.

However, here we are with a Conservative government to make yet further reductions in equipment and personnel.

Put simply; we are not learning the lessons of history!(3)

(1) Protection for aircraft carriers at sea is a strategic and imperative requirement. Please read the Preface to and about the sinking of the carrier in the excellent book by General Sir Richard Sherriff "War with Russia 2017".

(2) Even in May 2018 there is Media reporting of a funding shortfall in the current budget in excess of £20 Billion.

(3) Or, to put it another way, you can only possess an effective nuclear deterrent if you can before the requirement to utilise it can arise, you must have the capability to deploy at speed and where needed an effective real and adequate conventional armed force fit and ready for battle.