



Operation CORPORATE 1982

The carriage of nuclear weapons by the Task Group assembled for the Falklands campaign

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NUCLEAR WEAPONS WITH THE OPERATION CORPORATE TASK FORCE

This note has been prepared in response to public interest in the carriage of nuclear weapons by the Task Group assembled for the Falklands campaign, Operation CORPORATE, in 1982.

1. Ministers became aware in the early days of April 1982 that some of the ships in the Task Group being assembled for Operation CORPORATE carried nuclear weapons. These were nuclear depth charges, a variant of the WE177 freefall bomb also in service with the RAF, for use in the anti-submarine role. These were embarked in the following ships initially deployed for Operation CORPORATE - HMS INVINCIBLE, HMS HERMES, HMS BROADSWORD and HMS BRILLIANT.¹

2. In early April the Ministry of Defence was asked to review the options for removing nuclear weapons from the Task Group without detriment to its main objectives. If removal from the ships was to be achieved, this would in the first instance be at Ascension Island, where the Task Group was gathering. This note describes the options available, the issues that were considered, the recommendations that were made and the eventual decision, for safety and operational reasons, not to remove the weapons from the Task Group immediately but to concentrate them on vessels with deep magazines.

3. The following methods of transfer from the ships initially carrying the weapons were available:

- Nuclear weapons could be moved between ships in the task group by passing the containerised weapons by heavy jackstay between ships. But the only methods available to transfer weapons to the Ascension Islands were by helicopter or by Landing Craft (LCT) from HMS FEARLESS. The latter method was not considered feasible because of the heavy swell that runs throughout the year making loading of the LCTs alongside ships at anchor hazardous, as well as the lack of suitable facilities ashore.
- There were two possible modes of helicopter transfer. The first entailed carrying the weapon (without any container) on the normal weapon pylon. No firing circuits would be connected and through the transfer the two-key system would be enforced. This mode would have high visibility due to the lengthy loading and unloading process. In the unlikely event of the helicopter crashing on the short overland section (½ mile) of the route to the airfield or on the airfield itself there was a possibility of radiological contamination due to fire and subsequent HE explosion. The second possible mode was to carry the containerised weapon as an underslung load. This had not yet been authorised.

¹ A full list of the ships known to have carried nuclear weapons and/or training and surveillance variants, together with available information on the movements of rounds between ships, is at Annex A.

4. Options for removal were canvassed as follows:
- The most vulnerable magazines were those in the Type 22 Frigates². The risk of damage to the nuclear warhead in HERMES, with its dedicated armour protected magazine deep in the ship, was assessed as minimal from Exocet and only moderate from a torpedo or mine. The risk in INVINCIBLE was slightly greater than in HERMES because of the effect that detonation of torpedo warheads would have on their collocated nuclear ones. Certain Royal Fleet Auxiliaries (RFAs) had dedicated deep magazines and the risks were similar to INVINCIBLE. It would be relatively simple to transfer weapons from the Frigates to a carrier or RFA, and this could be done without delaying the operation. The nuclear weapons in BROADSWORD and BRILLIANT could therefore be transferred at sea by heavy jackstay to HERMES, INVINCIBLE, FORT AUSTIN or RESOURCE, where they would be stowed in magazines offering greater protection. FORT AUSTIN might however be too far away and otherwise committed. This operation could be covert.
 - Removal of the weapons from the Type 22s to either RFAs or to HERMES or INVINCIBLE would considerably reduce the risk of a nuclear weapon accident during action. However further removal of the carriers' weapons to RFAs would make no contribution to safety unless operational restrictions were to be placed on the movements of the RFAs to keep them clear of any likely attack by the Argentine Navy, who might well regard them as a prime target in any case. These RFAs were highly important for Fleet support, both as supply ships and helicopter platforms, and restricting their movements would impose operational limitations.
 - No other RFAs capable of removing the weapons from the Task Group were available within the timescale of the operations.
 - The weapons could be packed in their special containers, lifted ashore to Ascension by helicopter and then airlifted back to the UK. Provided the rate of delivery to shore matched the rate of extraction by air to UK the time on the ground would be minimal. Because of the intricate loading procedures involved throughout, this operation would have high visibility and thus it would be difficult to keep the knowledge from those not involved, particularly from anyone with previous experience of nuclear weapons. In view of the need to reduce helicopter transit distance, it would be difficult to prevent a shore observer identifying from which ships the containers moved to and fro.
 - An alternative to airlifting the weapons back to the UK would be to store them on Ascension Island. However in the absence of suitable facilities to meet both the safety and security needs, the numbers of weapons involved could not be stored on the island for more than a very few days. Even if this were not the case, the weapon stowage and the necessary security guard would attract attention. The fact that

² It should be noted that the Type 22s to which these comments refer (BRILLIANT and BROADSWORD) were the Batch I Type 22s. The magazine design in later batches of the Type 22 was different.

these weapons were stored ashore would soon become known to those on the island, from whom it could leak further. In addition, such storage would not comply with agreed security standards.

5. Safety issues were also considered:

- In the event of a nuclear weapon accident there was no risk of an atomic bomb type explosion.
- Some types of accident could potentially result in the detonation of the conventional high explosive in the weapon or a fire. In such circumstances essential personnel (others would be kept away) in the immediate vicinity of any accident might be killed or injured as a result of blast or debris, and there would be a possibility that some fissile material might be dispersed into the atmosphere (or the sea). If fissile material were released as the result of an incident on land, people might not be able to live or work safely in certain areas until these had been decontaminated. Dispersal of fissile material in or on the sea would have much less significant consequences for human health than an accident on land.
- MoD safety authorities had assessed that, provided that the weapon in its container was carried at a height not more than 75ft over the sea and 40ft overland, the weapon would be likely to remain safe if accidentally dropped from the aircraft or if the container made contact with the ground due to turbulent air conditions. Flying time overland would be short as the airfield was only half a mile from the beach.
- Maximum attention to safety would be given in drawing up detailed operation orders. Experts from the UK would direct the various stages, and specialist accident response teams would be sent out beforehand. It was most unlikely that in any phase of the removal more than one weapon would be involved because of the normal safety rules for storage and handling.
- It was conceivably possible for a hit on a magazine in action to lead to the dispersal of fissile material from some or all of the weapons. As already noted this risk could be, and was, minimised by transferring the weapons to the deep magazines in HERMES and INVINCIBLE.

6. The principal argument against full removal of the weapons was the delay involved. The lift of weapons by helicopter to shore would conflict with CINCFLEET's heavy storing programme for the ships, planned for only a 24 hour stopover; CINCFLEET estimated that a further 36 hours would be required to complete the total operation with subsequent major disadvantage to operations in the Falkland Islands. The early arrival of the Task Group in the area was highly important to prevent the further build up of Argentine forces on the Falkland Islands, and in particular improvements to the operational capacity of the airfield there. Disembarkation of the weapons by night might reduce the delay but it was not recommended because of the considerably greater risk of an accident.

7. Other relevant factors (not all of which were of equal weight) were as follows:

- Were any of the Ships of the Task Group carrying nuclear weapons to enter territorial waters around the Falkland Islands, South Georgia or the South Sandwich Islands we would immediately be in breach of our obligations under the Treaty of Tlatelolco³. But it was possible, without detriment to the operation, to ensure that ships carrying weapons did not enter those waters.
- Apart from the question of Treaty obligations, it was clearly suspected that HM Ships deployed in the Task Group were carrying nuclear weapons. Our policy on this general question (like that of the United States) had always been to refuse either to confirm or deny the presence or absence of nuclear weapons in any particular place at any particular time. Besides sticking to this policy we could state categorically that we had no intention of using nuclear weapons in this dispute.⁴
- The risks and consequences of contamination needed consideration. Whilst the consequences if one of HM Ships carrying nuclear weapons were to be damaged or sunk during the course of hostilities and the weapons it was carrying were damaged could be serious (the risk could be minimised by transferring the weapons to vessels with deep magazines, which would in any case be exposed as little as possible to damage from enemy action).
- It was also conceivable that weapons might fall into the hands of the Argentines, by salvage, if one of HM Ships that had been sunk, stranded, or captured. However unlikely, the consequences of this would be most serious and the acquisition of UK nuclear weapon technology in this way by a State which had no such weapons would have damaging consequences.
- The implication for our nuclear stockpile of the loss of either HERMES or INVINCIBLE would be serious, since the ships were carrying approximately 40% and 25% respectively of our entire stockpile of nuclear depth bombs.
- If the weapons were to be removed at Ascension Island, there would be significantly greater risk of their existence on the Task Group's ships becoming known. The lengthy and complicated operation could be

³ The Treaty establishing the Latin America Nuclear Weapon Free Zone. After the conflict a Parliamentary Question was asked and answered as follows (19 July 1982, Hansard, col 46w): '**Mr. Cook** asked the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in what area of the South Atlantic the United Kingdom is prevented from deploying nuclear weapons by its adherence to the treaty of Tlatelolco; and if he is aware of any infraction of the treaty by a signatory country. **Mr. Hurd**: By ratification of Additional Protocol I of the Treaty of Tlatelolco, the United Kingdom has undertaken not to deploy nuclear weapons in territories, including their surrounding territorial waters and airspace, for which it is de jure or de facto internationally responsible, and which lie within the geographical zone established in the Treaty. This covers the Falkland Islands and the Falkland Islands dependencies. The Treaty is not in force in the south Atlantic outside these territorial limits because there are countries in the area to which the treaty applies which have not ratified it. I am aware of no infractions of the treaty.'

⁴ The Government made its policy clear in Parliament: "there is no question at all of our using nuclear weapons in this dispute" (Official Report, House of Lords, 27 April 1982, Volume 429, Column 778)

observed by anyone with the Task Group or on the island, and even by the Russians. This would make it harder for Ministers to maintain the “neither confirm nor deny” line. Although we admitted freely that RN helicopters and Sea Harriers had the capability to deploy nuclear weapons (for instance in the 1981 Statement on the Defence Estimates) and it was therefore a relatively simple deduction to establish which classes of ships were capable of carrying nuclear weapons, we had never admitted that such weapons were carried in the ships in peacetime. International knowledge of this might well be damaging and would jeopardise future visits by RN ships of the same (or other) classes to foreign ports. Were potential host Governments to operate on the presumption that our ships and aircraft were carrying nuclear weapons, we could find a greater number of foreign countries closed to us. Furthermore, the movement towards the establishment of “nuclear weapon free zones” was likely to increase rather than diminish, which could lead to the presence of RN ships and RAF aircraft giving rise to increasing controversy.

- It was possible that, at the same time as the Falklands operation, a state of tension with the Soviet Union might develop. The removal of the weapons would make the re-deployment of the ships for NATO tasks dependent on first re-embarking their nuclear weapons. This could cause a delay in their deployment and necessitate a return to a UK port unless we were prepared to re-embark the weapons at sea. To take the latter course in tension would be highly visible to the Soviets who could be expected to be marking our ships. However since the stock carried in the Group represented a high proportion of our total stockpile it could be argued that some of them should be returned to the UK, thus making them available for use by the ships which still remained within the NATO area.

8. In summary, the Chiefs of Staff believed that removal of the weapons would unacceptably delay the Task Group’s arrival in the vicinity of the Falkland Islands and thus the early initiation of operations there. The operation of full removal would sharply increase the risk of the existence of nuclear weapons with the Task Group becoming publicly known.

9. The Ministry of Defence therefore concluded that:

- a. The risks involved in retaining nuclear weapons with the Fleet should be accepted.
- b. Nuclear weapons should be transferred from the frigates (BRILLIANT and BROADSWORD) to the larger ships in the Task Group (HERMES, INVINCIBLE, FORT AUSTIN and RESOURCE).
- c. Commander in Chief Fleet should be instructed to deploy his forces so that there was no question of the Treaty of Tlatelolco being breached.
- d. In public statements Ministers should adhere to the “neither confirm nor deny” policy.

10. In considering the issues, Ministers made clear that they would ideally have preferred the Task Group's nuclear weapons to be offloaded before it reached the area of the Falkland Islands. But it was clear that this would involve unacceptable safety hazards and operational penalties. All nuclear weapons with the Task Group should therefore be concentrated in HERMES and INVINCIBLE, with weapons being transferred at sea, by jackstay, from BROADSWORD and BRILLIANT. It was understood that this could be done secretly. In no circumstances should ships carrying nuclear weapons enter the territorial waters zone around the Falkland Islands. The Government's public position should remain that they were never able to confirm or deny the presence or otherwise of nuclear weapons in particular units; but that there was in any case no question at all of nuclear weapons being used in the present dispute. The conclusions of the Ministry of Defence (paragraph 9 above) were therefore endorsed.

11. After a complex series of movements during April, May and June,⁵ all the weapons (including the inert training and surveillance variants) were returned to the UK in FORT AUSTIN and RESOURCE (on 29 June and 20 July respectively). The weapons on board BRILLIANT and BROADSWORD were removed on 16 April and 20 April respectively, and the surveillance rounds were removed from SHEFFIELD and COVENTRY on 16 April and 17 May respectively.⁶ As has already been made public, at some point, or points during these various transfers between ships, seven nuclear weapons containers received some external damage; available records do not show which of these transfers gave rise to damage to the containers. We know that no weapons were damaged but, with one exception, available records provide little additional information about the damage to containers (or whether they contained actual weapons or inert variants). In what was considered the worst case, a container sustained severe distortion to a door housing. MoD records show that there was no damage to its contents (an inert surveillance variant). This suggests that the damage to other containers was slight. All of the weapons involved were subsequently examined and found to be safe and serviceable.

⁵ Available information on these movements is included in Annex A

⁶ No ship was sunk while carrying any nuclear weapon (including training and surveillance variants). The surveillance round carried by HMS SHEFFIELD, which was hit on 4 May, had been removed on 16 April; that carried by HMS COVENTRY (sunk on 25 May) had been removed on 17 May.

The only other ship of those listed in this Note to be hit by enemy fire while carrying any nuclear weapon (or training or surveillance variants) was HMS BRILLIANT, which suffered relatively minor action damage on 21 May, when she was carrying a training round. Training rounds contained no nuclear material.

HM SHIPS WHICH CARRIED NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND OR TRAINING AND SURVEILLANCE VARIANTS DURING OP CORPORATE

1. The following ships carried nuclear weapons and/or training and surveillance variants at some point during the operation:

Ship	Live rounds	Training rounds	Surveillance rounds
INVINCIBLE	Y	Y	N
HERMES	Y	Y	N
BROADSWORD	Y	Y	N
BRILLIANT	Y	Y	N
GLAMORGAN	N	Y	N
SHEFFIELD	N	N	Y
COVENTRY	N	N	Y
FORT AUSTIN	Y	Y	Y
REGENT	Y	Y	Y
RESOURCE	Y	Y	Y
FORT GRANGE	N	Y	N
ARGONAUT	N	Y	N

2. Available information on the movements of rounds is shown in the table below (which contains some obscurities which we have not been able to resolve):

DATE	FROM	TO	TYPE	REMARKS
6 April	BROADSWORD	PSTO(N) Gib	1 600 (T)	Pre-deployment offload
14 April	ARGONAUT	PSTO Devonport	1 600 (T)	Pre-deployment offload
16 April	BRILLIANT	FORT AUSTIN	600	
16 April	SHEFFIELD	FORT AUSTIN	1 600 (S)	
20 April	BROADSWORD	RESOURCE	600	
9 May	FORT AUSTIN	HERMES	600	FORT AUSTIN required in AOA
14 May	RESOURCE	INVINCIBLE	600	RESOURCE required in AOA
	INVINCIBLE	RESOURCE	1 600(T)	
15 May	RESOURCE	REGENT	600 + 1 600 (T)	
17 May	FORT AUSTIN	REGENT	1 600(S) (1 600(T)*)	
	COVENTRY	REGENT	1 600(S)	
26 May	REGENT	RESOURCE	600 + 2 600(S)	REGENT required in AOA
28 May	PSTO(N) Gib	GALATEA	1 600(T)	Return to UK
2 June	INVINCIBLE	FORT AUSTIN	600	Half INVINCIBLE outfit
3 June	BRILLIANT	FORT AUSTIN	1 600(T)	
	GLAMORGAN	FORT AUSTIN	1 600(T)	Return to UK
	RESOURCE	FORT AUSTIN	600 + 2 600(S) (2 600(T)*)	
	INVINCIBLE	FORT AUSTIN	600	
	FORT GRANGE	FORT AUSTIN	1 600(T)	
26 June	HERMES	RESOURCE	600 + 2 600(T)	Return to UK

29 June	FORT AUSTIN	POSO Devonport	600 + 2 600(S) + 6 600(T)	Return to store
20 July	RESOURCE	PSTO(N) Devonport	600 + 2 600(T)	Return to store

The references to '600' reflect the fact that the weapon was known as the Bomb Aircraft HE [High Explosive] 600lb MC.