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'Even had I wanted to...':

Intelligence and Special Operations in the Falklands Campaign

Lawrence Freedman has produced a balanced, well-researched and meticulous account of the Falklands Campaign. It combines scholarship with a lightness of touch. Official history can be - and often is - associated with ponderousness. There is no danger of that here, for the two volumes are tightly written and constitute an enjoyable read. Freedman's long-term interest in this campaign means that he has interviewed most of the key participants, even those who died before he undertook this official commission.¹ However, official history is also associated with notions of 'screening' and security vetting prior to publication. Where secret service is concerned, official history has sometimes constituted an instrument with which the authorities have sought to 'police the past'.² Accordingly this essay sets out to explore just what these volumes can tell us about the treacherous landscape of intelligence and special operations.

Intelligence and the Falklands Campaign

What was Lawrence Freedman allowed to see, and what was he permitted to tell? Conversely, what was excised by the trembling hand of the Cabinet Office? Addressing this question in his preface, he glosses over the exact nature of the material made available to him, referring only to 'a range of delicate and sensitive sources'. Certainly he saw a great deal of Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) material, probably a range of GCHQ material and SIS reports, and in some cases specific intercepts, particularly insofar as they informed strategy and operations. However, one also senses a general aversion to the subject. 'Even had I wanted to', he observes, 'it would have been impossible to provide a comprehensive declassified evaluation of the performance of the intelligence community, or even credit many of the contributions' (vol.II, xxiii.).

Accordingly, Freedman's open engagement with the subject of intelligence has real limits. The author has drawn his own common sense remit that focuses on intelligence insofar as it impacted directly upon the campaign. In this respect Freedman moves in the spirit of previous official histories, notably Harry Hinsley's magisterial official history of British intelligence during the Second World War. This also emphasised intelligence 'in context', exploring its significance for major decisions, rather than pursuing the subject for its own sake. Inevitably, this will not please the trainspotting aficionados of the world of intelligence studies, but it has to be said that even as a contextual approach the intelligence dimension of the Falklands campaign seems lightly sketched.

Does the intelligence picture offered by Freedman change our view of the more salient issues? Not a great deal, but this volume has at least three significant things to say. First, Freedman concurs with the government's view that intelligence warning was largely absent. When the Argentine invasion took place in early April 1982, neither British nor American intelligence realised this was about to happen. At the same time surprise was not total. There was a growing sense that something was being prepared, although the general impression was that no action would be taken until perhaps the autumn of 1982. In short, on this matter, Freedman supports the findings of the Franks Enquiry of 1983. One of the most closely guarded secrets in the early stages of the conflict was how little intelligence the British had on the Argentinean order of battle. We depended on a British naval officer who collected information on the Argentinean forces as a hobby (vol.II, p.70).

Secondly, and perhaps most striking, is the revelation that Margaret Thatcher was somewhat in the dark about the sinking of the *Belgrano*. Latterly, Thatcher was severely criticised for permitting the attack on the Argentine cruiser outside the British-imposed exclusion zone. It now seems that key intelligence concerning this most controversial action of the Falklands campaign reached British commanders and politicians in London after the fact. Events turned largely upon a sequence of Argentine navy signals that were intercepted and read. On 1 May 1982, the Argentine navy was told to find the British task

force around the Falklands and launch a 'massive attack' as soon as possible. The cruiser *Belgrano*, which was then sailing outside the exclusion zone to the north, was ordered south. This signal to the *Belgrano* was intercepted by British intelligence. Shortly afterwards the War Cabinet met at Chequers and approved a military request to changing the rules of engagement and authorise an attack on the *Belgrano*, although she still lay outside the exclusion zone.

Later on, other intercepted signals demonstrated that the Argentineans had been ordered to reverse course and resume their previous positions, probably because they had been observed by British aircraft. However, this new intelligence material was 'not distributed on the British side until the next day' and so had no impact on the day's events.

Accusations were later made that Thatcher chose this action to 'torpedo' an American-backed Peruvian peace plan. It is now clear that the *Belgrano* was sunk for naval rather than political reasons (vol.II, pp.285, 290).

Thirdly, this study sheds new light on the issues of the Falklands aftermath. An entire chapter is devoted to the Franks Enquiry, which looked at a range of issues including intelligence, and the lack of warning of the original invasion.³ It seems Franks had to fight valiantly to get substantive discussion of the JIC into his report, something which Whitehall repeatedly asked to have excised. This was a typically ludicrous manifestation of the hyper-secret Thatcher era, since the JIC had been frequently discussed in the press by 1983. More shocking is the revelation that Franks seems to have been 'nobbled' in assessing the performance of the intelligence community during the outbreak of the Falklands conflict. Lord Frank's committee accepted the findings of a pre-existing review of this subject, conducted by a senior member of the intelligence community. Even the Cabinet Office at the time thought the submission of this pre-packaged material was odd, noting that it was 'ex post facto' and even had perhaps a 'whiff of exculpation about it'. In short, Freedman largely agrees with the analysis offered by Franks, but has some doubts about the process (vol.II, pp.720-1).

The Falklands and the British Intelligence Community

The most striking intelligence aspect of this study is what is missing. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Roberto Calvi, a banker who aided a global effort to procure Exocets for the Argentineans and ended up under Waterloo Bridge, is conspicuously absent from the index.⁴ More disappointing however is Freedman's unnecessary difficulty with words like 'sigint' and 'intercepts'. It is noticeable that the only significant discussion of 'intercepts' occurs in the account of the *Belgrano*, where they help to clear the government of wrongdoing. It is not permitted anywhere else. The Cabinet Office, it seems, has lost none of its taste for the political use of intelligence. Moreover, the general coyness about sigint is unnecessary since much is now in the public domain. For example, since 1997 we have known that *HMS Endurance* was in fact a sigint platform. In the words of her own captain, Nick Barker, the ship was a 'listening station' while the Spanish-speaking operators were known by the rest of the ship's company as 'the Spies'. Barker adds, 'they were invaluable during the conflict' - again we will not read of this in Freedman.⁵

Does the absence of the sigint story really matter? For those interested in the significant impact of the Falklands on the British intelligence community, or upon Anglo-American relations, it probably does. The Falklands was the catalyst for 'Zircon', the UK's ill-fated experiment with an independent sigint satellite system in the mid-1980s. During the Falklands War, American defence and intelligence agencies had certainly been helpful. The National Security Agency had allowed the re-targeting of one of its powerful sigint satellites for a few hours each day and handed the take over to GCHQ. After some argument, imagery satellites had also been diverted at considerable financial cost (their operational lives were shortened). American intelligence assisted in the precise location of many Argentinean units. However, this episode also illuminated a dangerous over-dependency on American satellite technology. By 1983, the supplicants of Cheltenham had begun to ask, what would happen if the one day the Americans decided not to be quite so accommodating?

The result was a planned UK sigint satellite codename 'Zircon', budgeted at £100 million, but given the UK's inglorious record in the realm of space, it would probably have cost more. Eventually the plan was uncovered and then abandoned on cost grounds, with Whitehall opting to lease American satellites on a timeshare basis. Of course, the story of Zircon has been told elsewhere and is often portrayed as an effort to stabilise the Anglo-American intelligence relationship. However when viewed in the context of the Falklands campaign, one wonders whether this is the full story.⁶

In 1982, Britain's European allies rallied to her cause quicker than the Americans.⁷ The Defence Secretary, John Nott is quoted in this study as asserting that: 'In so many ways Mitterand and the French were our greatest allies' (vol.II, p71). This included signals intelligence. Recent revelations suggest that sigint from French Guyana, and also from the Dutch site at Eemnes, was important in assisting the British effort. So one of the fascinating questions raised by the aftermath of the Falklands is whether ZIRCON was really an effort to shore up the Anglo-American intelligence relationship, or whether it was an attempt to either 'going it alone' or else diversify by building up stronger European intelligence partnerships.⁸

Freedman's chapter on American support has remarkably little to say about intelligence. Moreover his analysis of the Falklands campaign lacks any overall assessment of the texture of the Anglo-American intelligence relationship during the early 1980s. To what extent did this relationship provide a 'special bond' of the type so often celebrated - even evangelised - in some academic literature. Alternatively, to what extent did it represent something more calculating? Put another way, was this relationship an expression of liberal institutionalism, of shared democratic ideals and long-established habits of working together. Or else had sentimentality evaporated by the last decade of the Cold War, revealing a certain realpolitik?⁹

The humble unofficial historian has little to go on here. Recently, UK file releases from the Ministry of Defence have slowed to a trickle and so it is hard to probe events after 1970.¹⁰ However, the limited evidence now extant suggests that the attitude was more

hard-nosed bargaining rather than bonhomie. In August 1975, some British diplomats had been asking why the Defence Intelligence Staff (DIS) spent so much time collecting information on subjects of no earthly interest to the UK, which sometimes led to collection operations that were 'ill-advised'. PUSD defended the DIS and interjected that this was often gathered to please the Americans and was intended to offset the vast amount of material that they provided to the UK. They observed that intelligence exchange was 'the last bastion' of the special relationship, adding that it 'gives us an entrée to American political thinking in a way that no other country is able to benefit.' In short, the Anglo-American intelligence relationship also provided a window on Washington. One presumes that such America-watching must have been a big factor during the Falklands Campaign.¹¹ America-watching has since become a growing activity for all American allies.¹²

Deception and Special Forces

Intelligence is not a distinct subject, but merges seamlessly with deception, psychological warfare and special operations. One post-war intelligence chief remarked that intelligence is normally a 'Cinderella service' - and it is war that 'changes Cinderella into the Princess'. This is perhaps even more true of deception, which remains relatively inactive until cover is required for military operations. After 1945, the UK had taken unusual care to preserve a strategic deception infrastructure. This was distilled into a small organisation, the Department of Forward Plans under John Drew, which also undertook psychological warfare.¹³ A descendant called Special Projects Group carried out planning for these activities in 1982.

During the Falklands campaign, deception planning, although innovative, tended to cut across operational objectives. Initial plans to persuade the Argentinean Navy to run for port by exaggerating strengths ran foul of a desire to draw them out to sea. There were also the historic difficulties that have always dogged deception. The main conduit for transferring false information to the enemy was leaks to the press. Did Whitehall want to 'poison the well' by deliberately planting false information in newspapers, something

which would eventually come to light? The question does not appear to have been resolved. Other aspects resonate down the years. The scale of resources for psychological operations in-theatre were pitiful, as they have been in every British campaign both before and since (vol.II, pp.410-14).

By the 1990s the Ministry of Defence had discovered - to its chagrin - that many SAS veterans were writing books, inspired in part by the literary endeavours of Sir Peter de la Billiere.¹⁴ Accordingly, we have several accounts of the Falklands by SAS veterans to compare with this history. One of the most famous escapades was an SAS mission to sabotage an Argentine airbase. The War Cabinet, concerned that Royal Naval ships were vulnerable to Super Etendard bombers equipped with Exocet missiles, changed the rules of engagement to allow some activity on the mainland. It was proposed that special forces should undertake an intelligence-gathering mission, followed by an Entebbe-style raid on the Super Etendards at the Rio Grande airbase in Tierra del Fuego. Codenamed Operation Mikado, the SAS got cold feet and soon came to refer to this as Operation Certain Death. An SAS reconnaissance party in a RN helicopter took off on 17 May, but bad weather and low fuel forced it to land 50 miles from its target. Here the mission was aborted and it is often asserted that the RN helicopter crew was abandoned by the SAS troopers who scurried for the Chilean border. Meanwhile other SAS units had reportedly refused to carry out the main raid. Alas, Freedman sheds no light on these rather intriguing issues.¹⁵

Freedman prefers the strategic to the tactical, and so is better on the command problems of integrating irregular elements into a regular campaign. Special forces were given a number of traditional roles to which they were ideally suited, not least the destruction of local air power through a successful raid on the Argentine airfield at Pebble Island. However, they also fulfilled another traditional role, that of irritating senior officers by ignoring normal command structures. There were other problems. Too few regular officers understood what special forces could and could not do, meanwhile the plethora of special forces resulted in continual pressure to use them, producing some attacks and operations that were of marginal value (vol.II, p.729).

Command and control special forces - and indeed intelligence assets - within military theatres of command has great contemporary significance and has spawned its own theological literature. Like so many of the lessons draw out by Freedman - including the procedures for interrogation of POWs - these matters are never more pertinent than now. Indeed his most telling observation is his conclusion that while the Falklands campaign 'stands out as an anomaly in recent international history, the last war of a past imperial era ... it can now be recognised as one of the first of the coming post cold-war era' (vol.II, p.747). He is surely right. Accordingly, while the intelligence dimension is limited, nevertheless, Freedman will be required reading and contains much that is of more than mere historical interest.

¹ L. Freedman and Virginia Gamba-Stonehouse, *Signals of War The Falklands Conflict of 1982* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990).

² R.J. Aldrich, 'Policing the Past: Official History, Secrecy and British Intelligence since 1945', *English Historical Review*, 119, 483 (September 2004): 922-53.

³ On Franks see A. Danchev, *Oliver Franks: Founding Father* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).

⁴ N. West, *The Secret War for the Falklands: The SAS, MI6 and the War Whitehall Nearly Lost* (London Little and Brown, 1997), pp.180-94.

⁵ N. Barker, *Beyond Endurance: An Epic of Whitehall and the South Atlantic Conflict* (London, Pen and Sword, 1997), pp.30-1.

⁶ The most detailed account is given in Mark Urban, *UK Eyes Alpha: The Inside Story of British Intelligence* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), pp.57-69.

⁷ See also G. Edwards, 'Europe and the Falklands Crisis', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 22, 4 (1984): 295-313.

⁸ C. Wiebes, 'Dutch Sigint During the Cold War, 1945-94', *Intelligence and National Security*, 16, 1 (2001), p.275.

⁹ I have argued for a largely realist understanding elsewhere, see R. J. Aldrich, 'British Intelligence and the Anglo-American "Special Relationship" during the Cold War', *Review of International Studies*, 24, 1 (March 1998): 331-51.

¹⁰ MoD record release has come to halt due to the problem of asbestos contamination, see Ben Fenton, 'Asbestos Threatens British Cold War Record, *Daily Telegraph*, 24 October 2004.

¹¹ D. Tonkin (PUSD) memo, 'Management Review of MoD HQ', 29 August 1975, FCO 46/1246, PRO.

¹² A. Wilkie, *Axis of Deceit* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2004), pp.61-2.

¹³ DNI Admiral Rushbrooke makes these remarks in NID, Vol.42, 'HMS Anderson and Special Intelligence in the Far East', p.12, ADM 223/297, PRO, while John Drew can be found in Stephen Dorril, *MI6: Fifty Years of Secret Operations* (London: 4th Estate, 2000), p.157.

¹⁴ P. de la Billiere, *Looking for Trouble: SAS to Gulf Command* (London: Harper Collins, 1994).

¹⁵ P. Ratcliffe, *Eye of the Storm: Twenty-Five Years in Action with the SAS* (London: Michael O'Mara, 2000), pp.128-9.