



KING ETHELRED'S COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING

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DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSIVE ENGINEERING,
CROWN WORKS AND APPLIED STUBBORNNESS

TWENTY-FOUR SECOND-HAND AEROPLANES: A FALKLANDS ARITHMETIC

An assessment of whether the Argentine Republic could take and hold the Falkland Islands by force, prepared after an American offer to settle the matter, with particular reference to range, tankers and the weather



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OTTOLINE V. MARCHBANKS-GRAY

M.Eng. (Hons.), D.Phil. (King Ethelred's)

Research Fellow in Expeditionary Logistics, Air Defence & Applied Arithmetic

*Fortitudine.
Ingenio.
Tea and biscuits.*



ABSTRACT

On 12 September 2026, in Dublin, the President of the United States said that he would probably be called into the 'potential disaster' of the Falkland Islands and would 'probably be able to settle it out', adding that he did not know whether Britain would be willing to travel that far, since it was 'weeks by boat'. The remark followed the arrival in Argentina of the first of twenty-four second-hand F-16 fighters purchased from Denmark, the country's first supersonic combat aircraft since 2015. The College has been asked, by several people and one Bursar, whether Argentina could now win a war for the islands. This assessment answers the question in the Department's usual manner, which is by counting.

It counts distances: Stanley is about 790 kilometres from the nearest Argentine air base and 2,130 from the base the F-16s live at. It counts tankers: the F-16 takes fuel through a boom, Argentina's two tankers offer a hose, and the aircraft that could bridge the difference has not been bought. It counts what waits at Mount Pleasant: four Typhoons, a Sky Sabre battery, a tanker, a transport, over a thousand people and an airfield built in 1985 for the express purpose of never again having to send a boat. It counts ships: Argentina has no submarine, one amphibious vessel and nothing on order; the Royal Navy has ten submarines and two carriers. And it counts the one thing that changed in 1982 and has not changed since, which is that the islands were empty of defenders in April of that year and have not been since June.

The finding is that Argentina could not take the Falkland Islands by force in 2026, could not in 2028 when the last of the aeroplanes arrives, and would need a navy, a tanker fleet, an amphibious force and a different set of islands before the question became interesting. The F-16 purchase is a serious and overdue rebuilding of a real air force and a reasonable regional deterrent. It is not an invasion. The Department's principal finding is that twenty-four second-hand aeroplanes with the wrong sort of tanker do not take islands; they arrive, look at them briefly, and go home, which was also the finding of 1982, arrived at more expensively.

Research status. This is a fictional King Ethelred's College assessment. The distances, aircraft, ships, weapons, dates, quotations and the events of 1982 are real and referenced; the fleet and inventory figures are those published by globalmilitary.net in 2026 and were not audited by the College. The scenario judgements in Chapter 9 are the Department's own. Nothing here is operational advice, and the Department has no view on what the President meant, only on what a boat is.

Keywords: Falkland Islands; Argentina; F-16; Mount Pleasant; Typhoon; Sky Sabre; air-to-air refuelling; amphibious operations; 1982; deterrence; arithmetic.

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The author was supervised by Major (Retd.) Alistair B. F. MacTavish, Senior Research Fellow in Infantry Systems, Field Craft and Practical Engineering, who read every draft, corrected the ranges, and asked at each stage whether the matter could not be settled with an L1A1. It could not. He has accepted this with the good grace of a man who was not surprised.

Professor Sir Peregrine W. Fortescue, Keeper of the South Atlantic Map Cupboard, supplied the maps, the departmental method and the reminder that the College settled the question of who should decide the islands' future in an earlier monograph, and that this paper concerns only whether anyone could decide it by force. Dr Euphemia Constance Featherstone-Smythe of Applied Geopolitics reviewed Chapter 10 and confirmed that the dominoes remain where she left them, which is leaning.

The Department of Improbable Systems calculated the fuel arithmetic in Chapter 4 and asked that the phrase 'the tanker speaks the wrong language' be credited to it. It is. The Department of Aeronautical Engineering confirmed the combat radius figures and asked that they not be used for planning purposes by anyone, which the College endorses.

Mrs Enid Partridge of the Senior Common Room provided tea throughout, and on hearing that the islands were 'weeks by boat' observed that her sister had flown there in eighteen hours in 2019 and found it very windy. This is recorded as the Department's first independent source.

Gerald was asked to find the Department's copy of the 1982 Official History. He has found a copy of a different history, of a different war, which he says is 'basically the same'. It is not.

A note on the fallen. Two hundred and fifty-five British and six hundred and forty-nine Argentine servicemen, and three Falkland Islanders, died in 1982. The Department's jokes in this paper are about arithmetic, aeroplanes and politicians. None is about them.

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NOMENCLATURE

Symbol	Meaning
MPA	RAF Mount Pleasant, the airfield and garrison complex on East Falkland, opened 1985
1435 Flight	the Royal Air Force flight of four Typhoon FGR4 fighters stationed at Mount Pleasant
Sky Sabre	the British Army's ground-based air defence system, with the CAMM missile; deployed to the Falklands in 2021 in place of Rapier
CAMM	Common Anti-Air Modular Missile, the Sky Sabre interceptor, engagement radius of about 25 km
F-16AM/BM	the mid-life-updated single- and two-seat F-16A/B, ex-Royal Danish Air Force, as bought by Argentina
MLU	Mid-Life Update: the 1990s modernisation of European F-16A/Bs, giving them 1990s avionics and 1980s airframes
AMRAAM	AIM-120 advanced medium-range air-to-air missile; 36 of the C-8 model approved for Argentina
Meteor	the ramjet-powered beyond-visual-range missile carried by the Typhoon; the Department declines to quote a range
AAR	air-to-air refuelling; by flying boom (a rigid pipe pushed into a receptacle) or probe-and-drogue (a hose with a basket)
KC-130H	Argentina's Hercules tanker: probe-and-drogue; the F-16 has no probe
combat radius	how far an aircraft can fly, do something useful and come back; not the same as range, which is how far it can fly before stopping
the offer	the President's remarks of 12 September 2026, quoted in Chapter 1
weeks by boat	the President's estimate of the time needed to reach the islands; see Figure 10.1
Crown Works	the College's founding mandate of 978 (ish), under which this paper is issued

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The offer

On Saturday 12 September 2026, at a meeting in Dublin with the Taoiseach, the President of the United States was asked whether the Falkland Islands had come up in a recent telephone call with the British Prime Minister. He replied that he was sure he would be 'called into that potential disaster', and that if he were, he would 'probably be able to settle it out'. He then cast doubt on whether Britain would be willing to travel so far. 'That is very far away,' he said. 'You're talking about weeks by boat. So I don't know.'[1]

The College has three observations. The first is that the islands are indeed very far away, which is the whole of the argument and is dealt with in Chapter 4. The second is that Britain is not proposing to travel there, because it is already there, and has been since 1833 and, in the sense that matters here, since 14 June 1982. The third is that nobody has gone to the Falklands by boat in a hurry since 1982, and that the reason is an airfield, described in Chapter 5, which the United Kingdom built at some expense so that it would never need to again. The Department notes that 'weeks by boat' is nevertheless an honest description of the 1982 Task Force and has plotted it, with the alternatives, at Figure 10.1.

1.2 The question

The remark arrived nine months after the first six of twenty-four second-hand F-16 fighters landed at Río Cuarto, restoring to Argentina a supersonic combat aircraft for the first time since its Mirages were retired in 2015. Taken together, an American offer to settle and a rebuilt Argentine fighter force have produced, in the College's post and at High Table, a question the Department is qualified to answer: could Argentina now take the islands by force, and could it hold them? The Department has treated this as an engineering problem, which is what it is. Islands are taken by landing on them, and landing on them requires control of the air over them and the sea around them, and both of those are matters of distance, fuel, hulls and arithmetic before they are matters of courage or right.

1.3 What the College has already said

This is the third Crown Works paper on the South Atlantic in a year. The Falklands monograph established that the islands' future is for the people who live there, who answered the question in 2013 by 1,513 votes to 3, and that distance from a coastline is a measurement and not a conveyance deed.[2] The dominoes thesis established that Washington's goodwill is a finite resource which a government interested in the Falklands ought not to spend carelessly.[3] Neither paper asked whether the islands could be taken. This one does, and answers no, for reasons that fit on a napkin and are set out at greater length below because the Bursar has paid for the paper.

1.4 Method

The Department applies the Fortescue method, with the Major's addition. Remove adjectives; check dates; separate a capability from a headline; apply the rule symmetrically; if it produces a British claim on Calais, inspect it again; count the tankers; put the kettle on.

College hypothesis. A fighter aircraft is a way of being somewhere else for a short time. The whole question of the Falklands, in 1982 and now, is how short, and whether anyone is waiting when you arrive.

2 WHAT HAPPENED LAST TIME

2.1 Seventy-four days

On 2 April 1982 Argentina landed on the islands and overwhelmed a garrison of some sixty Royal Marines. The islands were, in every sense that mattered, undefended: no airfield fit for fast jets, no air defence, no warship on station. The United Kingdom assembled a task force and sailed it 8,000 miles; it left Portsmouth on 5 April and landed at San Carlos on 21 May, forty-six days later, which is the origin of 'weeks by boat' and was true. Argentine forces surrendered at Stanley on 14 June. The war lasted seventy-four days and cost 255 British and 649 Argentine lives, and three islanders.[4]

2.2 The air war, and the arithmetic of range

The Argentine Air Force and naval aviation fought with skill and courage and at the very limit of their aircraft. The Mirages and Daggers flying from the mainland had, by most accounts, about five minutes over the islands before fuel forced them home; the Skyhawks did better because they could take fuel from the KC-130 tankers; the Super Étendards with Exocet sank Sheffield and Atlantic Conveyor and then ran out of missiles. Aircraft attacking ships in San Carlos Water were so short of fuel and time that they released bombs at heights too low for the fuses to arm, which saved several British ships and is the single most important engineering fact of the war. Range, not bravery, was the binding constraint. The Department asks the reader to keep this in mind for Chapter 4, because the mainland has not moved.

Britain's own long-range arithmetic was no kinder. The Black Buck raids sent one Vulcan bomber from Ascension to bomb Stanley airfield, a round trip of some 12,600 kilometres, and needed eleven Victor tankers to get it there and back. The Department regards this as the most expensive way of making a single hole in a runway yet devised, and also as the reason the runway was not used by Argentine fast jets, which is the point of a hole.



Figure 2.1 - A Vulcan taking fuel from a Victor tanker over the South Atlantic, 1982, the hose and basket clearly shown. The Department wishes the contrast with Chapter 4 to be visible.

2.3 The sea war, in one sentence

On 2 May 1982 the submarine HMS Conqueror sank the cruiser General Belgrano, and the Argentine surface fleet returned to port for the rest of the war. The Department records this because Argentina has no submarine today and the Royal Navy has ten, and because the lesson of 1982 for any navy without them was learnt in an afternoon.

2.4 The lesson Britain drew

The United Kingdom concluded that it had been able to recover the islands only because the Argentine junta had not expected it to try, and that it would prefer not to rely on that again. It therefore built, at Mount Pleasant on East Falkland, a full military airfield with a runway long enough for airliners and bombers, opened it in 1985, and has kept fast jets, air defence and a garrison there ever since. The strategy, which the College regards as sound, is that the islands should never again be empty, so that no task force need ever again be sent. The President's 'weeks by boat' describes the problem the airfield was built to remove.

3 THE PURCHASE

3.1 What was bought

In April 2024 Argentina agreed to buy twenty-four F-16A/B fighters from Denmark, which was retiring them in favour of the F-35, for about US\$300 million. The aircraft are F-16AM and BM: airframes built in the early 1980s and put through the European Mid-Life Update in the late 1990s, giving them a modern radar, digital cockpit and the ability to fire the AIM-120 AMRAAM. The United States, which controls the type, approved the sale and a supporting package with a ceiling of about US\$941 million covering training, spares, thirty-six AIM-120C-8 missiles, Sidewinders, Mk 82 bombs and Paveway guidance kits.[5] The first six aircraft landed at Río Cuarto in Córdoba province on 5 December 2025, were greeted by the President of the Republic, and began training in March 2026. The remainder are to follow in batches through 2027 or 2028.[6]

The Department wishes to be fair to the purchase before it is unkind to the arithmetic. This is a competent, affordable and overdue rebuilding of an air force that had flown nothing supersonic for a decade. The F-16 is the most widely operated fighter in the world; the Danish examples were well kept; the missiles are real; and a country with an exclusive economic zone the size of Argentina's ought to have a fighter force. If the College were the Argentine Air Force it would have bought them too. It would then have bought a tanker, which is Chapter 4.

3.2 Why these and not others

Argentina had tried for years to buy something newer. A deal for Swedish Gripens failed because the aircraft's ejection seats, among other parts, are British-made and the United Kingdom would not licence them; Korean, Israeli and Indian offers foundered on the same embargo; a Chinese offer foundered on Washington. The F-16 carries an American seat and no British parts, and so passed. The Department observes that the British embargo has therefore shaped the Argentine fighter force for forty years without a shot being fired, which is what an embargo is for, and that it has now been circumvented by a purchase the United States arranged, which is what an ally is for.



Figure 3.1 - An Argentine F-16AM in Fuerza Aerea Argentina markings on the ground at Rio Cuarto, drop tanks fitted, no refuelling probe, because it has none.

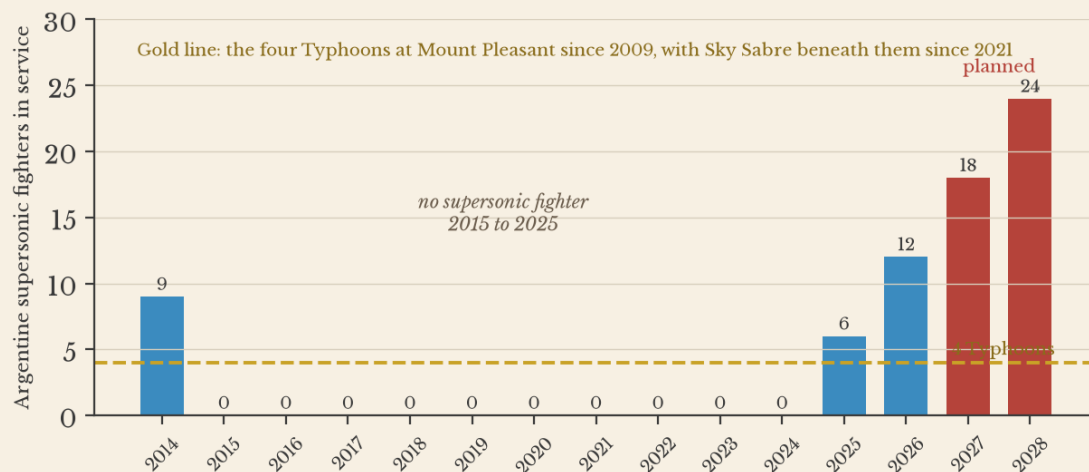


Figure 3.2 - Argentine supersonic fighters in service by year, against the four Typhoons at Mount Pleasant. The 2027 and 2028 bars are planned deliveries. The decade of nothing is not a gap in the data.

3.3 Where they live

The fleet is based at Río Cuarto, in the centre of the country, 2,130 kilometres from Stanley. That is a sensible place to keep an air force and a hopeless place to attack the Falklands from; any operation would have to deploy forward to the southern bases used in 1982, at Río Gallegos, Río Grande and Comodoro Rivadavia, which are 790, 705 and 960 kilometres from Stanley respectively. The Department has measured these on the globe and gives them in Figure 4.1. They are the same distances as in 1982, the Earth not having been consulted about the purchase.

4 THE ARITHMETIC OF SEVEN HUNDRED AND NINETY KILOMETRES

4.1 Combat radius

Range is how far an aeroplane can fly. Combat radius is how far it can fly, fight, and come home, and it is the only number that matters. Published figures for the F-16 give a radius of about 550 kilometres on a high-low-high profile with a load of bombs, and something between 500 and 1,000 kilometres on an air-to-air sortie depending on drop tanks and how long one wishes to loiter.[7] From Río Gallegos, at 790 kilometres, an F-16 with tanks can reach Stanley, do a little, and return; an F-16 with bombs cannot, or not usefully. The five minutes of 1982 have become perhaps ten to twenty. This is an improvement. It is not an air campaign.

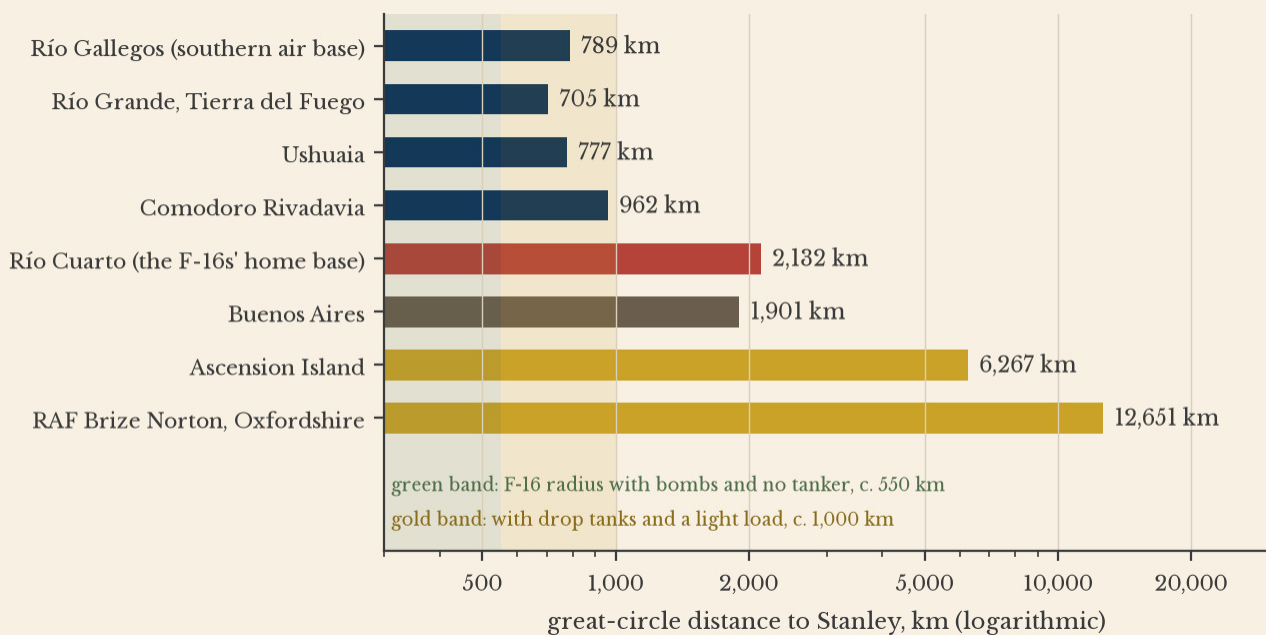


Figure 4.1 - Great-circle distances to Stanley from the places that matter, measured by the Department, against the F-16's published combat radius without a tanker. Río Cuarto is where the aircraft live; the southern bases are where they would have to go first.

4.2 The tanker speaks the wrong language

The way to turn a short radius into a long one is a tanker, and here the purchase has a difficulty the Department regards as the most important single fact in this paper. There are two ways of refuelling in the air. The American way, used by the F-16, is a flying boom: a rigid pipe extended from the tanker and pushed into a receptacle on the fighter's back. The naval and British way, used by Argentina's Skyhawks in 1982 and by everything Argentina flies today, is probe-and-drogue: a hose trailed from the tanker with a basket on the end, into which the receiving aircraft pushes a probe. The Danish F-16s have a receptacle and no probe. Argentina's two KC-130H Hercules tankers have hoses and no boom. They cannot refuel each other. The Argentine Air Force knows this and has been evaluating second-hand American KC-135 boom tankers, of which it currently owns none.[8]

Until it does, every F-16 sortie against the islands is a sortie on internal fuel and drop tanks from a base 790 kilometres away: out, a few minutes of business, and home, with the mainland not having moved. The Department of Improbable Systems, which did the sums, describes this as 'the 1982 problem with a better radar', and asked that it be recorded that the tanker Argentina owns speaks the wrong language to the aeroplane it bought.

Item	Figure	Consequence
Río Gallegos to Stanley	c. 790 km	At the edge of an air-to-air radius with tanks; beyond a strike radius with bombs
Río Cuarto to Stanley	c. 2,130 km	Out of the question without forward deployment
F-16 radius, bombs, hi-lo-hi	c. 550 km	Cannot strike Mount Pleasant from the mainland and return
F-16 radius, air-to-air, tanks	c. 500 to 1,000 km	Minutes on station over the islands, not hours
Argentine tankers	2 KC-130H, hose and drogue	Incompatible with the F-16 receptacle
Boom tankers owned	0	Under evaluation; none delivered
AMRAAM approved	36	One and a half missiles per aircraft, for the war and the training
Typhoons waiting	4, with Meteor	Plus a Sky Sabre battery beneath them and a runway behind them

Table 4.1 - The arithmetic. Every figure is public; the Department has merely put them on the same page, which nobody selling aeroplanes had reason to do.

Departmental observation. In 1982 the Argentine pilots had five minutes over the islands and used them with great courage. The purchase gives their successors perhaps fifteen, and a better radar with which to see the Typhoon that has been waiting for them since 2009.

5 WHAT IS WAITING

5.1 Mount Pleasant

RAF Mount Pleasant is the airfield the United Kingdom built after 1982 and the reason the islands are not empty. It has a main runway of about 2,600 metres, a second of 1,500, hardened shelters, radar, a port at Mare Harbour and a garrison of over a thousand service personnel. Its air component is No. 1435 Flight with four Typhoon FGR4 fighters, and No. 1312 Flight with a Voyager tanker and an Atlas transport. Beneath them sits a Sky Sabre battery of 16 Regiment Royal Artillery, deployed in 2021 in place of the Rapier that had guarded the islands since the war, whose CAMM missiles engage aircraft and cruise missiles out to about 25 kilometres.[9] At sea is the patrol ship HMS Forth. In the harbour, when required, is something larger.



Figure 5.1 - A Typhoon FGR4 of 1435 Flight low over Mount Pleasant, the runway behind, a Sky Sabre launcher and its radar in the foreground, the wind visibly blowing.

5.2 Four against twenty-four

The naive arithmetic is four Typhoons against twenty-four F-16s and the Department has been asked about it at dinner. The less naive arithmetic is this. The twenty-four are not all delivered until 2027 or 2028, and an air force keeps perhaps two-thirds of its fleet serviceable on a good day. Those that fly must fly 790 kilometres each way without a tanker and arrive over the islands with minutes to spend. They are met by a fighter with a longer-ranged missile, a better radar, and a full tank, which has been waiting at the top of its climb with a ground-based missile system beneath it that engages anything the fighter has not. The defender also owns the only fast-jet runway on the islands and can land, refuel and go again while the attacker is still flying home. Thirty-six AMRAAMs for the whole fleet do not alter this. The Department does not say the F-16s could do nothing; it says they could do very little for very long, and that this is what the airfield was built to ensure.

5.3 The reinforcement

Mount Pleasant is also a runway that receives. The RAF's airbridge from Brize Norton reaches it in about eighteen hours, with a stop on the way, and has done routinely since the 1980s; more Typhoons, more missiles and more people arrive by air in a day, not by boat in weeks. The islands' defence is therefore not the four aircraft on the ground at any moment but the four plus whatever the United Kingdom chooses to add, and it can add it faster than an attacker can cross the water. This is the fact the President's remark overlooks, and the Department suspects the Argentine Air Force does not.

5.4 The boat, should one be needed

If a boat were needed, it exists. The Royal Navy has two Queen Elizabeth-class carriers operating the F-35B, six Astute and four Vanguard submarines, six Type 45 destroyers and the frigates, with sixteen hulls on order.[10] The Argentine Navy has three destroyers of 1980s vintage, six corvettes, one amphibious ship, no submarine in service since the loss of the San Juan in 2017, and nothing on order. The College notes that the boat would take weeks, as the President says, and that this is why the airfield was built, and that it would in any case arrive with ten submarines against none, which is the arithmetic that ended the sea war in 1982 in an afternoon.

6 THE SEA AND THE LANDING

6.1 The fleets, as published

Islands are not taken by aircraft. They are taken by soldiers, who arrive by ship and must be fed by ship, and the ships must survive the crossing and the stay. Figure 6.1 redraws the published 2026 comparison of the two navies and air forces from *globalmilitary.net*, whose composite indices rank the Royal Navy sixth in the world and the Argentine Navy forty-fifth.[10] The Department has not audited the index and does not need to; the columns that matter read zero. Argentina has no submarine, no carrier, one amphibious ship, no ship on order and no fixed-wing naval aviation. Its navy is, in the analysts' phrase, a constabulary and coastal force, and a good one, and that is what it is for.

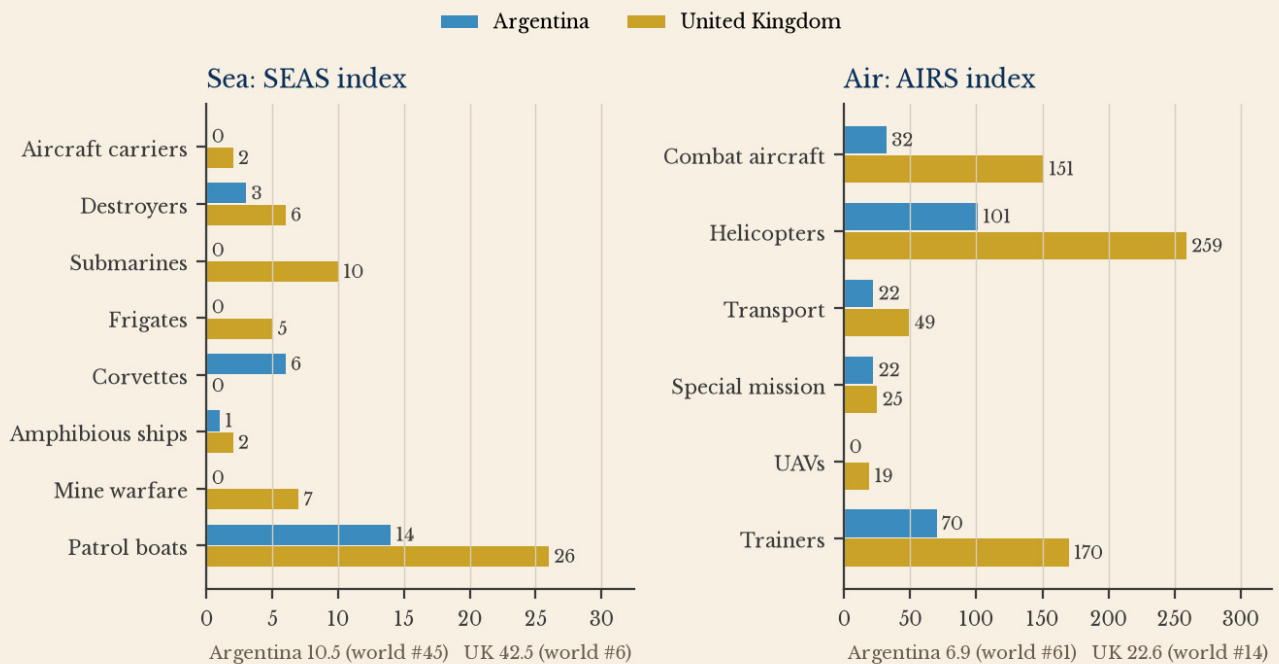


Figure 6.1 - Fleet and air inventory categories as published by *globalmilitary.net* in 2026, redrawn in College colours. Numbers are active hulls and airframes at each side's latest inventory year; the Argentine combat-aircraft figure predates most of the F-16 deliveries.

6.2 The landing problem

To take the Falklands one must land a force able to defeat the garrison, which means a brigade or more with its vehicles, guns, fuel and rations, and then keep it supplied across 790 kilometres of the roughest water in the world for as long as it takes. In 1982 Argentina managed the landing because nobody was there to stop it, and then lost the ability to supply what it had landed on the day the *Belgrano* went down. In 2026 the landing force would have to be carried in one amphibious ship and whatever merchant hulls could be requisitioned, escorted by three destroyers and six corvettes, past ten submarines, under a sky owned by the defender. The Department has tried to write this scenario without adjectives and finds that the nouns do the work.

Requirement	Argentina, 2026	Verdict
Air superiority over the islands	24 F-16s (by 2028), no tanker, 790 km from base	Not achievable against 4 Typhoons, Sky Sabre and reinforcement by air
Sea control of the approaches	3 destroyers, 6 corvettes, 0 submarines	Not achievable against 10 submarines and a carrier group
Amphibious lift for a brigade	1 amphibious ship	Not available
Sustainment across 790 km	16 auxiliaries, mostly coastal	Not survivable under submarine threat
A runway on the islands	Mount Pleasant, held by the defender	The objective is also the obstacle
Surprise	The islands have been garrisoned since 1982	Not available; that was the point

Table 6.1 - What an invasion needs and what exists. The Department has been generous in the second column and does not think it changes the third.

Departmental finding. Argentina could not land a brigade on the Falkland Islands in 2026 and could not keep it fed if it did. The F-16 purchase does not touch either problem, and was not meant to.

7 THE LAND, BRIEFLY

The garrison on the islands is an infantry company group with engineers, signals, logistics and the air defence regiment's battery, plus the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy's people: over a thousand in all, on an island the size of Northern Ireland with a population of under four thousand. It is not large, and it is not meant to be, because its purpose is to hold the airfield for the eighteen hours it takes the airbridge to deliver more. In 1982 the Argentine Army landed some ten thousand men and lost to a force that had to walk across East Falkland in winter carrying everything. The Department mentions this not to relive it but to note that the arithmetic of the land campaign, like that of the air and the sea, is decided before the first soldier is wet: by whether he can be landed, fed and reinforced, and whether the other side's aircraft own the sky he stands under.

8 THE WEATHER, AND THE RUNWAY PROBLEM

The South Atlantic in winter is a hostile operating environment in the Department of Improbable Systems' formal sense. The 1982 war was fought in April, May and June, the southern autumn, in gales, sleet and seas that put an aircraft carrier's flight deck under water. Nothing about this has improved. An aircraft with minutes of fuel to spare over the islands has fewer minutes in a 60-knot headwind on the way home, and a landing force that cannot be resupplied in fair weather cannot be resupplied at all in foul.

There is also the runway problem, which the Department regards as elegant. The only runway on the islands that can take a fast jet is Mount Pleasant, which is the thing being attacked. An attacker cannot use it until he has captured it; he cannot capture it while its defenders fly from it; and he cannot fly from anywhere else long enough to stop them. In 1982 Stanley's short runway could not take Argentine fast jets either, and a Vulcan made sure. The Department has looked for a way round this and has not found one that does not begin with a tanker fleet Argentina does not own.

9 FOUR SCENARIOS

The Department has considered the ways in which force, or the threat of it, might be applied, and gives its assessment of each. None is a forecast. All are arithmetic.

Scenario	What it requires	Assessment
A surprise air strike on Mount Pleasant	Suppressing Sky Sabre and four Typhoons at 790 km without tankers, with 36 AMRAAMs and an unrepaired runway problem	Not credible. Some damage possible; no lasting effect; reinforcement by air within a day
Blockade of the islands	Ships and submarines able to stay at sea and survive	Not credible with no submarine and three elderly destroyers against ten submarines
Harassment: patrols, overflights, incidents	Aircraft and ships, and a tolerance for losing them	Possible, and pointless; the F-16 makes the patrols faster and no more effective
A settlement pressed from Washington	An American President with an offer and a British Government short of friends	The only scenario in which the islands change hands, and the one the dominoes thesis warned about

Table 9.1 - Scenarios. The Department notes that only the last has no aeroplanes in it, and that it is the one the President mentioned.

The Department's reading is therefore that the F-16s are not, and were not intended to be, the instrument of any of the first three, and that the fourth is a matter for Applied Geopolitics, whose paper on it is already in the Map Cupboard. The purchase gives Argentina a modern air force for the first time in a decade, a credible defence of its own airspace and economic zone, and a seat at any regional table. It does not give it the Falklands, and the Argentine Air Force, which flew there in 1982 and counted its own minutes, knows this better than anyone in Dublin.

10 THE OFFER, RE-EXAMINED

10.1 Weeks by boat

The President's estimate is plotted at Figure 10.1 against the alternatives. It is accurate for 1982 and for no year since. The airbridge reaches the islands in eighteen hours; the Typhoon at Mount Pleasant reaches Stanley in seven minutes; and the boat, if one were sent, would sail into waters where the other side has nothing beneath the surface. The College does not doubt that the islands are far away. It observes that they are far away from Argentina as well, by 790 kilometres of water that the F-16 crosses with minutes to spare, and that distance is the defender's friend when the defender is already there.

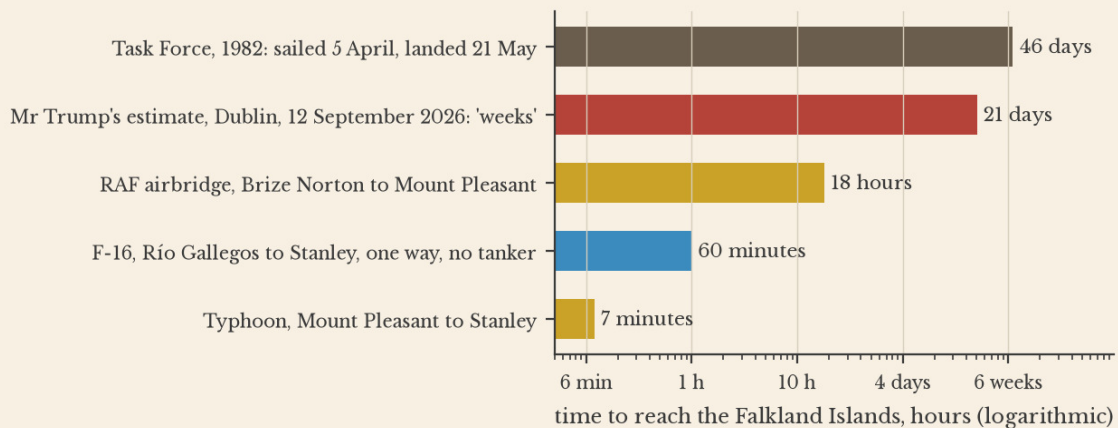


Figure 10.1 - Time to reach the Falkland Islands, measured. The President's figure is plotted at three weeks, which the Department regards as a fair reading of 'weeks'. The Task Force took forty-six days in 1982; the airbridge has taken a day ever since.

10.2 Settling it out

As to settling the matter, the College refers the President, with respect, to its earlier monograph: the question of the islands' future was put to the only people entitled to answer it in March 2013, and 99.8 per cent of them answered.[2] There is nothing to settle that a referendum has not settled, and nothing that force could settle in the other direction, for the reasons set out in Chapters 4 to 8. What remains is the dominoes thesis's warning: that the islands are defended by arithmetic and alliances, and that the arithmetic is safe while the alliances hold. The Department's advice to His Majesty's Government, which it has not asked for, is to keep the Typhoons fuelled, the airbridge flying, the friends in Washington, and the adjectives out of the correspondence.

College doctrine. An island is held by whoever is standing on it with an airfield. The Falklands have had one since 1985. Everything else, including the offer, is weather.

11 CONCLUSIONS

- Argentina has bought twenty-four second-hand F-16AM/BM fighters from Denmark with American approval, the first six delivered in December 2025 and the rest due by 2027 or 2028, with thirty-six AMRAAMs. It is a serious rebuilding of a real air force.
- Stanley is about 790 kilometres from the nearest Argentine air base and 2,130 from the F-16s' home. The aircraft's combat radius without a tanker is 550 to 1,000 kilometres depending on load. The mainland has not moved since 1982.
- The F-16 refuels by boom; Argentina's two tankers offer a hose; the boom tankers under evaluation have not been bought. Until they are, every sortie against the islands is the 1982 sortie with a better radar.
- Mount Pleasant holds four Typhoons with Meteor, a Sky Sabre battery, a tanker, a transport, a garrison of over a thousand and the only fast-jet runway on the islands, and it is reinforced from Britain by air in eighteen hours, not by boat in weeks.
- Argentina has no submarine, one amphibious ship, three 1980s destroyers and nothing on order; the Royal Navy has ten submarines and two carriers. A landing force could not be carried, escorted or fed.
- The only scenario in which the islands change hands has no aeroplanes in it. It is the one the President described, and it is the subject of the College's previous paper.

Principal finding. Twenty-four second-hand aeroplanes with the wrong sort of tanker do not take islands. They arrive, look at them briefly, and go home. This was also the finding of 1982, arrived at more expensively, and the airfield at Mount Pleasant was built so that it need never be arrived at again.

Secondary finding. The islands are 'weeks by boat' from Britain and eighteen hours by air, and are 790 kilometres from Argentina by any means. The President is right about the boat and has overlooked the aeroplane, which the Department regards as an unusual mistake for a man with his own.

REFERENCES

- [1] The Independent, 'Trump says he'll "probably be able to settle" UK's Falkland Islands row with Argentina', 12 September 2026; Bloomberg and the Buenos Aires Times, same day, reporting the President's remarks in Dublin alongside the Taoiseach.
- [2] King Ethelred's College, 'The Falkland Islands: Self-Determination, Proximity and the Limits of Historical Entitlement', Crown Works Monograph 978/2026, on the 2013 referendum (1,513 to 3 on a 92 per cent turnout).
- [3] King Ethelred's College, 'Sanctions, Dominoes and Diplomatic Self-Harm', Department of Applied Geopolitics, 2026.
- [4] Lawrence Freedman, 'The Official History of the Falklands Campaign', 2005; Ministry of Defence casualty figures: 255 British and 649 Argentine servicemen and three islanders killed; Task Force sailing 5 April, San Carlos landings 21 May, surrender 14 June 1982.
- [5] US Defense Security Cooperation Agency notification, October 2024: 24 F-16A/B Block 10/15 aircraft with associated equipment, ceiling US\$941 million; supporting package including 36 AIM-120C-8 AMRAAM, AIM-9 Sidewinder, Mk 82 bombs and GBU-12 kits; Argentina-Denmark contract of April 2024, about US\$300 million.
- [6] Aviation Week, The Aviationist and the US Embassy in Buenos Aires on the arrival of the first six F-16AM/BM at Rio Cuarto on 5 December 2025; Aviation Week on the start of training operations, March 2026; Terma support agreement for electronic warfare, 2025.
- [7] Published F-16 performance figures: combat radius about 550 km (295 nautical miles) hi-lo-hi with six 1,000 lb bombs; air-to-air radius of roughly 250 to 550 nautical miles depending on drop tanks and loiter.
- [8] Air Data News, 'Argentine Air Force evaluates Boeing KC-135R Stratotanker for F-16 aerial refueling', on the incompatibility of the F-16 receptacle with Argentina's probe-and-drogue KC-130H tankers.
- [9] Royal Air Force, 'Mount Pleasant Complex'; No. 1435 Flight (four Typhoon FGR4) and No. 1312 Flight (Voyager, Atlas); Janes and Forces News on Sky Sabre replacing Rapier in the Falklands, October 2021, with 16 Regiment Royal Artillery; CAMM engagement radius about 25 km.
- [10] globalmilitary.net, SEAS and AIRS index comparisons, Argentina and United Kingdom, 2026: navy composite 10.5 against 42.5 (world 45 and 6), air 6.9 against 22.6 (world 61 and 14), category counts as redrawn in Figure 6.1; analyst assessment of fleets, bases and construction pipelines.
- [11] Argentine Navy: three Almirante Brown-class (MEKO 360) destroyers, six Espora-class (MEKO 140) corvettes, no operational submarine since the loss of ARA San Juan in November 2017. Royal Navy: two Queen Elizabeth-class carriers, six Astute and four Vanguard submarines, six Type 45 destroyers.

Sources were consulted on 12 September 2026. King Ethelred's College is fictional; the distances were measured on a real globe and are given to the nearest ten kilometres.

APPENDIX A - SAMPLE CALCULATIONS

A.1 Time over the islands

Take an air-to-air sortie with two drop tanks and a radius of about 900 km on a straight out-and-back with no loiter. Río Gallegos to Stanley is 790 km. The margin is 110 km of radius, or about 220 km of flying, which at a cruising speed of roughly 800 km/h is some fifteen minutes to be spent over the islands, fighting, before turning for home. Combat burns fuel far faster than cruise; a minute of afterburner can cost several minutes of loiter. The Department therefore treats fifteen minutes as an upper bound and notes that it is three times the 1982 figure and still not very long.

A.2 The tanker that is not there

A single boom tanker on station 300 km short of the islands would roughly double the usable time. Argentina has evaluated such tankers and bought none; the two it owns cannot connect. The Department's calculation is therefore short: zero tankers times any radius is the radius.

A.3 Missiles per war

Thirty-six AIM-120C-8 across twenty-four aircraft is one and a half each, before training consumption. A fighter typically carries four to six on a war sortie. The fleet could therefore arm six to nine aircraft properly, once.

APPENDIX B - THE BURSAR'S CARD

If asked at dinner	Answer
Could Argentina take the Falklands now?	No. Count the tankers.
But they have twenty-four F-16s	Six, so far, 2,130 km away, with hoses they cannot use.
Four Typhoons cannot fight twenty-four	They do not have to. They have to fight the ones that arrive, for the fifteen minutes they can stay, with a missile battery beneath them.
Is it weeks by boat?	Yes, and eighteen hours by air, and nobody is sending a boat.
So what is the F-16 for?	Argentina. Its airspace, its economic zone, and its self-respect. All reasonable.
Then what is the risk?	A settlement pressed from Washington. See the dominoes thesis; keep the friends.
Could it be settled with an LIAI?	The Major says yes. The Department says see above.

Table B.1 - Answers approved for use at High Table. The Major has initialled the last line twice.

APPENDIX C - FUTURE WORK

The Department will revisit this assessment if Argentina acquires boom tankers, a submarine, or an amphibious force, in that order of importance, and asks to be told. It will also revisit it if the United Kingdom removes the Typhoons from Mount Pleasant, which would be the only way of making the President's arithmetic correct, and which the Department does not recommend.

A companion paper on the economics of the F-16 purchase, and on what a country with an EEZ the size of Argentina's ought to fly, is in preparation with Applied Geopolitics, which has asked that it contain fewer aeroplanes and more dominoes.

The Major has proposed a field trial. The Department has declined, and has hidden the rifle.

APPENDIX D - DEPARTMENTAL NOTE

The Department of Defensive Engineering, Crown Works and Applied Stubbornness holds the College's founding mandate of 978 (ish) for walls, fortifications, stores and such other practical matters as might prevent the Realm being taken by surprise before breakfast. It regards Mount Pleasant as a wall, the Typhoons as its garrison, the airbridge as its supply road, and the tanker problem as the moat. It notes that the Realm was taken by surprise in April 1982, before breakfast, and has not been since, and that this is the whole of the Department's argument.

The paper was written in two days, checked over a third, and read by the Major in an hour, at the end of which he said that it was 'sound, if long', and that in his day it would have been settled by a sergeant with a map. The Department has recorded this as concurrence.

Persevera Etelred