

How effectively did argentina employ its air power in the falklands conflict of 1...

[Environment](#), [Air](#)



This essay aims to identify two primary aspects of Argentinian air power employment that effectively let down the Argentinian cause and demonstrate that air power was not employed as effectively as it could have been. The first is the idea that the Argentinian air force was simply too ill prepared for a battle they waged. By rooting the cause of the Argentinian grab for sovereignty in a historical and political context we can more effectively and holistically analyse the mistakes it made with regards to its air power and military might - namely, that of underestimation. As this essay shall proceed to showcase, the Argentinian air power was neither trained nor equipped for this conflict and thus employed ineffectively. In addition to this Argentina underestimated the British's desire to maintain sovereignty over the islands, and miscalculated the force of their response. What is more is that the way they underestimated the British and their own military affected the way they employed their air power, and thus it was too inadequate to handle such a conflict, a view that is substantiated throughout by authors such as Lawrence Freedman. The second example of ineffective air employment this essay shall present is the misuse and the initial less than favourable state of the French Super Entedards and their Exocet missiles. These two ideas combined will demonstrate an ineffective employment of air power by Argentina in the Falklands conflict of 1982, in the limited capacity afforded to this essay.

In order to engage with whether or not the Argentinian military employed and deployed its air force effectively in the Falklands conflict of 1982, we must first establish a context for the conflict to ground and historicise it accurately. The purpose of this is not to prolong a narrative answer to the

question but for a comprehensive analysis of Argentina's tactical air force employment (as comprehensive as this analysis can be within the constraints of a word limit) we must engage in a contextual understanding of the larger conflict. This is especially important when we consider that part of the reason Argentina ultimately lost the war was due to the asymmetry of military strength between them and Britain - the former is a relatively small non-European country and the latter a veritable force of colonial military power that is felt across its former colonies even today. The Falklands conflict of 1982 was an undeclared war between Argentina and Great Britain over the Falklands Islands and its territorial dependency, the South Sandwich Islands and South Georgia - all territories dependent on the British at this time. The war is considered undeclared due to the fact that neither Britain nor Argentina officially issued a declaration of war. To provide a brief overview of key events, the conflict itself began on the 2nd of April when Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands to occupy them, which was then followed by an invasion of South Gerogia to establish sovereignty immediately.[1]The war itself ended with Argentina's surrender after 74 days of fighting, thus effectively returning the islands to British control (whether or not the word ' returning' is appropriate here is beyond the scope of this question, but it does have important implications of historical imperial ownership and whether or not it can be considered as ' sovereignty' to begin with).[2]The casualties of the conflict totalled to 255 military personnel on the British side and 649 military personnel on the Argentinian side, which is important to note because it begs the question: what did the Argentinian military do wrong to lose not just the war, but a substantial amount of

military personnel more than the British? The answer is of course multifaceted and requires more holistic analysis than can be provided here, and there may even be more than one, but nevertheless at the very least one answer is the inability of the Argentinian military to employ their air forces correctly. Not only were they ill prepared, but also used ineffectively, as this essay shall proceed to demonstrate.

The political context of Argentina is also massively important in understanding why Argentina's air force was as woefully underprepared and misemployed as it was. Argentina in the 70s had domestic issues and problems under the Peron government, which created the conditions ripe for a military coup from General Videlia in 1976.[3] Problems of assumption and underestimation seemed to be common for the Argentinian government as before the war even began they had assumed that British colonial powers would easily give up the rights to the Falklands territory. This is because they have previously been known to let colonies of similar sizes gain independence and be released from British imperial rule.[4] As we can tell from their loss, their underestimation of the British was clearly a mistake - as was their overestimation of their air force.

The first mistake Argentina made was the sheer underestimation of everything from their own forces and air power, to the response of the British. Despite the fact that Argentina had clearly initiated the conflict itself they were ill equipped for the subsequent "defence of the islands".

[5] Furthermore, the junta military dictatorship that ruled the country did not necessarily view the acquisition of the Falklands as an act of war, it simply

regarded it as a way to gain a diplomatic bargaining chip. As a result of this, they found themselves in a compromised position when the British responded with a full-scale mobilisation and task force to reclaim the islands.

[6]The Argentinian Air Force, also known as *Fuerza Aérea Argentina* ; or the FAA had never actually considered the possibility of engaging in a long-range naval air campaign against a such a primary NATO power. Being underprepared and under-equipped meant that the FAA had basically only two tanker aircrafts to serve both the navy and the air force, and not to mention the IAI Daggers and Mirage IIIs which were inadequate in terms of aerial refuelling. What's more is that because of disputes such as the Beagle conflict (a border dispute with the Chilean government) the FAA's tactics, training and equipment were all focused on a possible reaction from Chile.[7]

[8]In *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign* Freedman posits that on May 1st having misunderstood the signs, " the Argentinian air response was inadequate", effectively answering the question explicitly and directly.

[9]According to Freedman, there were 56 sorties that were planned but only 35 reached their targets, and what they had reached were " irrelevant".

[10]He goes on to say that neither Argentina's Mirage 111s nor their Daggers could match the British Harriers, and that also the Canberra was " hopelessly vulnerable".[11]The MoD press release later claimed that the Argentine air powers had been ineffective.[12]

What is interesting to note at this stage is that Argentina's military power in South America at this time cannot be overlooked. The general discourse on Argentina in the Falklands conflict is usually directed around their failures,

however it is important to recognise their power in the South American continent. At the beginning of the conflict the physical condition of Argentina's air power was the best and they were the largest and best equipped tactical air power in South America.[13]Not only this but their Naval Air Arm (or Comando de Aviacion Naval Argentina aka CANA) had three thousand men, and the FAA 19, 500.[14]What is often highly praised is the fact that Argentina had over 200 aircrafts in their inventory.[15]However, to return to the question at hand, having 200 aircrafts does not necessarily equate to having aircrafts that are well equipped and combat ready. In fact, at any given time, the both the Airforce and the Navy never actually more than 110 aircrafts ready to mobilise.[16]This was primarily due to a lack of spares and parts.[17]

With regards to the second reason why Argentina's air force was employed ineffectively, the newly acquired Super Etendards (armed with precision Exocet missile) from French proved to be " far from mission ready".[18]The pilots, which were trained in France, were given a pitiful 45 hours worth of basic non-tactical flight training.[19]Major Gabriel V. Green of the USAF writes that " in addition, the jets had not received the final combat configuration that would mate the aircrafts's radar and computer to the missile".[20]What this eventually led to was a series of mistakes made from non explicit targeting, lack of punctual re-supplying, refuelling issues and general operational issues. As Admiral Woodward stated in his book *One Hundred Days*, " The Argentinians started this game with five Exocets — five aces — and they had now, incontrovertibly, played them all, on 4, 25, and 30

May. Each time they let them loose on the first radar blip they saw— a set of three incompetent blunders which may very well have cost them this war.”[21]Such resounding statements from Admiral John Forster Woodward fortify the argument that the issues with the Super Entedards played a crucial role in the ineffectiveness of Argentina’s air power employment.

To conclude, Argentina’s use of air power in the Falkands conflict of 1982 was largely ineffective. Major Gabriel V. Green of the USAF put it well in his piece ‘ Argentina’s Tactical Aircraft Employment In The Falkland Islands War’ when he wrote that, in terms of Argentina’s ineffective employment of air power, there were “ two root causes...in both air-to-air and air-to-surface employment” which were “ inadequate equipment and training.”[22]He also proceeds to state that had CANA and the FAA been given “ robust, realistic training and acquisition programs, they would have been better prepared to address the shortfalls in doctrine, and equipment. These failures directly hindered tactical airpower’s ability to reach its potential in both air-to-air and air-to-surface mission areas during the Falklands Islands War.”[23]As evidenced in this essay, there were many reasons for Argentina’s air power employment failures, but primarily they were a lack of preparedness and an underestimation of multiple facets of their air power against the British’s which led to the misuse and misemployment of the French Super Entedards and their Exocet missiles.

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[2]ibid

[3]Bernard A. Cook, (2005), p. 1

[4]Lawrence Freedman and Virginia Gamba-Stonehouse, (1991), p. 6

[5]James S Corrum, (2002)

[6]ibid

[7]ibid

[8]John Pike, (2014)

[9]Lawrence Freedman, (2005)

[10]ibid

[11]ibid

[12]ibid

[13]Peter Way, (1983), p. 108

[14]Ibid, p. 68

[15]Christopher Chant, (2001), p. 37

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[16]ibid

[17]ibid

[18]Gabriel V Green, (2005), p. 12

[19]Ethell, Jeffrey & Price Alfred (1983), p. 27

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[20]Green, (2005), p. 20

[21]John Woodward,(2012)

[22]Green, (2005), p. 27

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