

Ships sail back from Hollywood

DUNCAN CAMPBELL looks at the impact that the air-sea fighting around the Falklands is having on US naval strategy.

WHEN THE SMOKE finally dies away in the South Atlantic, naval planners everywhere will be picking over every detail of every air, sea and missile engagement to discover new-found needs. This fierce (though, in Britain, unreported) debate is already taking place in the United States. At its heart is a huge chunk of President Reagan's military expansion plan to boost the US Navy fleet from 450-odd to 600 within five years. With the US Air Force having access to far fewer overseas bases than in the 1950s and 1960s, the Reagan plan is intended to project US military power overseas through a total of 15 aircraft carrier task forces.

The Falklands naval operation is the biggest since the end of World War 2. The only naval action which came anywhere near the same scale was Suez (see table). General MacArthur sent more than a Marine division ashore at Inchon, Korea, in 1950. In 1958 the US Marines went in at Beirut. The sinking of the Israeli destroyer *Eilat* after the 1967 Six Day War — destroyed, like *HMS Sheffield*, by a single anti-ship missile — is virtually the only

recent naval skirmish worth analysis.

The Falklands are providing a unique test. The details may remain obscure for a while, as the Royal Navy will not wish the world to know that some systems — Sea Dart anti-aircraft missiles, for instance — have not worked too well. And the actual outcome of many engagements may well have depended on rival deployments of electronic warfare-jamming techniques — hush-hush stuff.

The proposed US Navy task forces will centre on gigantic nuclear-powered carriers like the *Nimitz* and *Eisenhower* (now under construction). At \$3.4 billion each, with 5,000 crew and 100 aircraft aboard, they will form a tempting target for any attacker.

The carriers will not be the only large ships joining the US Navy. On Reagan's orders, four World War 2 battleships — *Iowa*, *New Jersey*, *Missouri* and *Wisconsin* — are to be restored to active service. Some of them last saw active service playing sail-on parts in Hollywood movies, like the *Battle of Iwo Jima*. Putting them back into service has unearthed some problems. The battleships' main armaments are four huge turrets with triple 15-inch guns. When they fire, the whole ship shakes violently. They shake so much that one salvo from the rear turrets would damage the ship's helicopters. One salvo from any turret would probably knock out most modern anti-aircraft missiles. Missile guidance gyroscopes, and modern computer, communications and radar equipment would not last long under the traumatic shock of a few salvos.

In any rational organisation, the anachronism of the battleship venture would be recognised, and the proposal shelved. The US Navy is pressing on. Draft orders will require the ships' helicopters to take off before the rear turrets can fire. Another proposal is to convert the hulls to carry cruise missiles.

These arguments have been concen-

trated by the naval battle in the Falklands. Both the pro- and anti-big ship lobbies in the US have claimed that the sinkings of the *Sheffield* and the *Belgrano* prove their case. The Pentagon has taken to abusing its most vociferous opponent, Senator Gary Hart of Colorado, by nicknaming the *Hermes* and *Invincible* 'Gary-Hart-carriers' — on the grounds that they lack the ability to defend themselves with their own fighters against attacking aircraft. The *Sheffield* was sunk providing an outer air defence for the *Hermes*. Just a few more Etendard, and a few more Exocet, and *Hermes* might well have been sunk too. Such would be the fate of the *Nimitz* carrier battle groups in a war with the USSR, says Hart.

The US Navy's 15 such groups — including aircraft and supporting ships — could easily fall prey to a few Soviet nuclear-armed cruise missiles. They would be just as vulnerable to submarine attack. The Soviet Union has — through satellite monitoring of ocean movements and submarine-launched, nuclear-armed cruise missiles — a formidable capacity to engage the *Nimitz*-type carriers. Critics of the US Navy plan are by no means just 'bleeding-heart liberals'. One critic is former CIA and NATO chief, Admiral Stansfield Turner, who wrote that 'it would be a shame if the human tragedy of the *Sheffield* falsely led us to perpetuate a dying form of naval warfare.'

As the Falklands crisis has shown, however, the true role of capital ships like *Invincible* has never really been to do battle with the Soviet Union. They are about military power elsewhere and the capability for adventures, like Suez and the Falklands. To be blunt, any Navy other than the Red Navy, faced with a US carrier battle group, has little option but to surrender. Events like the downing of the Libyan fighters in the Gulf of Sirte last year show just what the ships of the American Navy are able to do. □

USS *Missouri* — a.k.a. 'big mo' — is to be dragged out of retirement by President Reagan. It shakes violently every time its guns fire



Suez and the Falklands: the Naval battle orders

Falklands¹ Suez²

Ships engaged

Aircraft Carriers	2	3 (2) ²
Cruisers/Assault Ships	2	4 (3)
Destroyers	14	13 (4)
Frigates	28	6 (8)
Submarines	5	5 (2)

Total naval	49	31 (18)
Naval auxiliaries and landing ships	20	unknown
Other auxiliaries, including troop carriers	52	unknown

Losses (at 26 May)

Ships	5	0 (0)
Aircraft, helicopters	over 10	3 (1)
Men killed	over 97	16 (10)
Men wounded	over 100	96 (33)

1. The Ministry of Defence has never released any ship totals, so figures are based on departure reports and other sources.

2. Suez order of battle and casualty data from Col T N Dupuy, *Elusive Victory* (MacDonald and Janes, 1978). The figures in brackets are the French Navy's order of battle. The French also deployed the conflict's sole battleship, the *Jean Bart* (included under *Cruisers*).