

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
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THE JOINT TASK FORCE COMMANDER AND
OPERATIONAL CONTROL OF ATTACK SUBMARINES

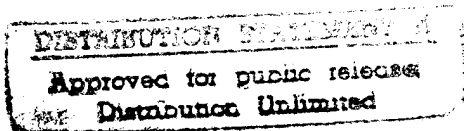
by

T.W. Meier
Commander, U.S. Navy

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: T. W. Meier



05 March 1997

DTIC QUALITY INSPECTED 4

Paper directed by
Captain George W. Jackson, USN
Chairman, Department of Joint Military Operations

19960815 051

C. E. Helms 16 May 96
Captain C.E. Helms, USN Date
Faculty Advisor

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

1. Report Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED			
2. Security Classification Authority:			
3. Declassification/Downgrading Schedule:			
4. Distribution/Availability of Report: DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A: APPROVED FOR PUBLIC RELEASE; DISTRIBUTION IS UNLIMITED.			
5. Name of Performing Organization: JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT			
6. Office Symbol: C		7. Address: NAVAL WAR COLLEGE 686 CUSHING ROAD NEWPORT, RI 02841-1207	
8. Title (Include Security Classification): THE JOINT TASK FORCE COMMANDER AND OPERATIONAL CONTROL OF ATTACK SUBMARINES (U)			
9. Personal Authors: T.W. Meier, CDR, USA			
10. Type of Report: FINAL		11. Date of Report: 20 May 1996	
12. Page Count: 21			
13. Supplementary Notation: A paper submitted to the Faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the JMO Department. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.			
14. Ten key words that relate to your paper: Joint, Task, Force, Commander, Attack, Submarine, Tempo, Movement, Maneuver, Unity, Effort			
15. Abstract: Attack submarines have a significant role to play in the regional or littoral conflicts of the future. The attack submarine, which predominantly operated independently in the past, will serve as a force multiplier for a joint task force responding to some crisis in the world. Central to the Joint Task Force Commander (JTFC) being able to use the attack submarine to meet his objectives is that he be able to operationally control those attack submarines. Today, the operational control (OPCON) of attack submarines is retained by the Submarine Type Commander or his subordinate in all naval, joint, or allied exercises. To enhance unity of effort, operational movement, operational maneuver, and operational tempo, the JTFC should be given OPCON of attack submarines used for the achievement of his objectives. The time to implement this change is not when we are faced with the next regional conflict requiring the attack submarine to participate with the Joint Task Force in more than just a strike warfare role. So that the U.S. Navy as a whole is practiced in the integration and effective use of attack submarines, the OPCON of attack submarines should routinely be given up by the Submarine Type Commander in naval and joint exercises.			
16. Distribution / Availability of Abstract:	Unclassified X	Same As Rpt	DTIC Users
17. Abstract Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED			
18. Name of Responsible Individual: CHAIRMAN, JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT			
19. Telephone: 841- 6461 6461		20. Office Symbol: C	

Abstract of

THE JOINT TASK FORCE COMMANDER AND OPERATIONAL CONTROL OF ATTACK SUBMARINES

Attack submarines have a significant role to play in the regional or littoral conflicts of the future. The attack submarine, which predominantly operated independently in the past, will serve as a force multiplier for a joint task force responding to some crisis in the world. Central to the Joint Task Force Commander (JTFC) being able to use the attack submarine to meet his objectives is that he be able to operationally control those attack submarines. Today, the operational control (OPCON) of attack submarines is retained by the Submarine Type Commander or his subordinate in all naval, joint, or allied exercises.

To enhance unity of effort, operational movement, operational maneuver, and operational tempo, the JTFC should be given OPCON of attack submarines used for the achievement of his objectives. The time to implement this change is not when we are faced with the next regional conflict requiring the attack submarine to participate with the Joint Task Force in more than just a strike warfare role. So that the U.S. Navy as a whole is practiced in the integration and effective use of attack submarines, the OPCON of attack submarines should routinely be given up by the Submarine Type Commander in naval and joint exercises.

I. Introduction

The attack submarine offers the Joint Task Force Commander (JTFC) a highly flexible and capable platform. Arriving ahead of the Joint Task Force, the attack submarine can sanitize an area, enforce an imposed maritime exclusion zone, provide special operations/reconnaissance support, and conduct intelligence gathering. Upon the arrival of the Joint Task Force, and depending on the situation, the attack submarine can be assigned to a battle group to conduct anti-surface warfare, anti-submarine warfare, independently conduct mine and countermine warfare, or provide a Tomahawk platform for strike. As demonstrated by the Falklands War, "a principle use of the submarine in regional conflict could be the early application of force, acting in consort with other U.S. forces to keep an adversary's maritime forces in port or to deliver an attack that destroys his will to fight."¹ Central to the JTFC making use of these capabilities is the issue of operational control (OPCON).

The submarine force has a history of operating independently and having central control unlike any other service community². Less than a decade ago, the U.S. Navy's top priority was anti-submarine warfare.³ In support of that priority the attack submarine operated independently,

¹Roger F. Bacon, "Submarine Warfare It's a Changing," U.S Naval Institute Proceedings, June 1992, 53.

²i.e. surface, aviation, etc.

³Thomas A. Brooks, "Whatever Happened to ASW?," U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings, February 1996, 13.

conducting missions of great importance to the national security of the United States and training to face their most likely adversary, the Soviet submarine. The Submarine Force Commander (Atlantic or Pacific) or a subordinate commander maintained OPCON of submarines in most if not all missions.

With the demise of the Soviet Union, the U.S. Navy reexamined its priorities and provided new direction, stressing forward presence, regional conflicts, and crisis response. The U.S. Navy realized the need to develop its capabilities in the littoral areas of the world. The crisis of the future would require Naval Expeditionary Forces, shaped to operate jointly, and operating forward from the sea.⁴

The attack submarine has a significant contribution to make with the new direction of the Navy. Attack submarines are currently supporting battle groups and would likely be a major player in a future regional conflict. What really hasn't changed, however, is the commander who exercises OPCON of attack submarines. Using submarine safety as the paramount reason, the Submarine Force Commander retains OPCON of attack submarines when assigned to battle groups or participating in joint exercises. With the change in emphasis of submarine missions, it is time to reexamine how we operationally control attack submarines.

⁴U.S. Navy Dept., ...From The Sea: Preparing The Naval Service For The 21st Century, White Paper (Washington: 1992), 1-2.

II. Definitions

Before further examining the issue of who should exercise OPCON of attack submarines, it is important to understand the terminology that will be used throughout this paper. It is in the context of these definitions that submarine OPCON will be discussed.

OPCON from the submarine force perspective is:

"the authority delegated to a commander to direct forces assigned so that the commander may accomplish specific missions or tasks which are usually limited by functions, time, or location; to deploy units concerned; and to retain or assign tactical command and/or control of those units."⁵

Submarine OPCON also includes:

"Responsibility for overall area-wide waterspace management (WSM) and prevention of mutual interference (PMI) for submarine operations within the CINC's or COCOM's area of responsibility."⁶

"Responsibility for and control of the Submarine Broadcast."⁷

The Submarine Operating Authority (SUBOPAETH) is the naval commander exercising OPCON of all assigned submarines. The Submarine Force Commander or his designated subordinate commander for a specific area is the SUBOPAETH for the theater CINC for all submarine operations. Submarines operating with

⁵COMSECONDFLT/COMSUBLANT, Coordinated Submarine/Task Group Operations Manual, TACNOTE ZZ-1010-1-94 (Norfolk, VA: 1994), 1-2.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

battle groups and participating in naval, joint, or allied exercises are under the OPCON of the SUBOPAETH.⁸

III. The Attack Submarine and the Falklands War

The Falklands War is a recent example where the nuclear attack submarine played a significant role in a regional conflict in support of a joint task force. Because U.S. and British submarines are operated similarly, it also serves as a good example illustrating some of the issues that are involved with OPCON of attack submarines.

In response to events in the Falklands, on 29 March 1982, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher ordered three nuclear submarines (*HMS Splendid*, *HMS Spartan*, and *HMS Conqueror*) to proceed to the vicinity of the Falklands Islands. *Spartan* departed within 48 hours, *Splendid* followed on 1 April, and *Conqueror* three days later. Not until 2 April did the British Cabinet decide to send a naval task force to the Falklands. On 12 April, the day the British-imposed Maritime Exclusion Zone went into effect, *Spartan* took up station off Port Stanley.⁹

From the very beginning, a goal of the British Command was to locate and shadow principle units of the Argentine fleet, which included two German made Type 209 diesel

⁸Ibid.

⁹Max Hastings and Simon Jenkins, The Battle for the Falklands (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983), 60-61.

submarines, the aircraft carrier *Veinticinco De Mayo*, and the cruiser *General Belgrano*. This became one of the missions of the nuclear submarines, in addition to enforcing the Maritime Exclusion Zone.¹⁰ Later, reinforced by the nuclear submarine *HMS Valiant*, the submarines provided intelligence on the departure of Argentine attack aircraft flights.¹¹ From the time the first three submarines were ordered to depart for the Falklands, operational control of the submarines remained at Northwood with the Flag Officer Submarines.¹²

Admiral Sandy Woodward was put in charge of the naval task force headed to the Falklands. Woodward argued at the time that he should have operational control of the assigned submarines because he felt he had the staff to appropriately support their control, he felt he needed to be able to control them in response to rapidly changing circumstances, he himself had a submarine background, and he had the necessary communications capability. This was not done, however, for reasons which Admiral Woodward felt were political.¹³

On 1 May, Woodward recognized what he thought was a pincer movement by the Argentine fleet toward his task force. To the northwest was the carrier *Veinticinco De Mayo* with A4

¹⁰Ibid., 147.

¹¹Ibid., 207.

¹²Patrick J. Symons, "C3 in the Falklands Conflict," Signal, August 1983, 92.

¹³Sandy Woodward and Patrick Robinson, One Hundred Days (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1992), 122.

fighter bombers and possibly some Exocet-armed Super Entendards. To the southwest was the cruiser *General Belgrano* with two escorting destroyers, each carrying eight Exocets. Woodward's hope was that *Conqueror* could keep a close watch of the *General Belgrano* and either *Splendid* or *Spartan* could shadow the carrier. *Spartan* was the closest to the estimated *Veinticinco De Mayo's* position, but had twice been diverted by Northwood to perform other tasks. Once *Splendid* was available to pursue the search for the Argentine carrier, she was constrained by operating areas assigned by Northwood. *Splendid* never found the carrier. The *General Belgrano* was attacked and sunk by the *Conqueror* on 2 May. The Argentine fleet returned to port for the rest of the war.¹⁴

IV. OPCON by the Submarine Type Commander

Just as OPCON of British submarines remained with the Flag Officer Submarines during the Falklands War, OPCON of U.S. submarines continues to be exercised by the Submarine Type Commander. The current system, unique to the submarine community, has evolved through the years as a result of the type of missions the submarine performed. Throughout World War II, submarines operated independently conducting missions such as commerce interdiction, coastal reconnaissance, scouting, lifeguarding during air strikes, and intercepting

¹⁴Ibid., 127.

and attacking enemy warships.¹⁵ Submarines were centrally controlled by the Submarine Type Commanders of their respective fleets.¹⁶ With the Korean War submarines again conducted independent, but limited, operations such as reconnaissance and lifeguarding. In fact, during the Korean War, submarines were not even collocated with other naval assets in the theater.¹⁷

With the development of the nuclear submarine, OPCON of submarines became a little more involved. The submarine went from a vessel that spent more time on the surface than submerged, to one that stayed submerged entirely except for brief periods of time. The nuclear submarine, conducting its missions of the Cold War, was routed to its area of operations submerged in order to remain covert. The Submarine Type Commander, exercising OPCON, had to ensure that the submarine could safely transit and operate without risk of collision with another allied submarine.

If today the U.S. faced a regional conflict similar to the Falklands, the SUBOPAUTH would probably function as the executive agent of OPCON for the JTFC as either a supporting commander providing support to the JTFC or as a commander

¹⁵Theodore Roscoe, Submarine Operations in World War II (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press 1949), 361.

¹⁶Ibid., 16.

¹⁷Gregory M. Billy, "An Operational Analysis of United States Submarine Employment in the Korean War," Unpublished Research Paper, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI: 1994, 11.

subordinate to the JTFC.¹⁸ In practice, the difference between these two options would probably be indistinguishable. In both cases the SUBOPAETH, which would be the Submarine Type Commander or one of his subordinate commanders, would exercise OPCON of attached submarines.

There are a number of arguments made supporting this arrangement. OPCON of other forces is a function that is normally "exercised through subordinate joint force commanders and Service and/or functional component commanders."¹⁹ For submarines, the argument is made that there is no commander more suitably trained, equipped, and with ready access to the information needed to effectively exercise OPCON than the SUBOPAETH. After all, the SUBOPAETH has a long history of exercising OPCON of submarines. It could be further argued that the SUBOPAETH contributes to unity of effort by ensuring that all submarines operating in the JTFC's area of operations contribute to (or at least do not detract from) his objectives. Even though the tasks of optimal use and deconfliction of submarines are similar to air, surface, and land operations, the SUBOPAETH argues that he can more efficiently perform these functions since the relative number of attack submarines that would be assigned to a Joint Task Force would likely be very small. With the administrative,

¹⁸Letter from George W. Emery to Duanne R. Ashton, 6 February 1996.

¹⁹Department of Defense, Joint Publication 0-2, Unified Action Armed Forces (UNAAF), (Washington: 1995), GL-7.

information, as well as waterspace management burden removed from the JTFC, the argument continues, he and his staff can concentrate on the operational or tactical tasking of the attached submarines.²⁰

With the SUBOPAUTH exercising OPCON for the JTFC as either a supporting commander providing support to the JTFC or as a commander subordinate to the JTFC, is it necessary that the SUBOPAUTH be collocated with the JTFC? It has been suggested that this arrangement would unnecessarily "divert JFC [JTFC] resources from his primary mission, lead to duplication of effort by the theater SUBOPAUTH and JFC SUBOPAUTH, and probably overwhelm existing JFC organizations." It is further suggested that given the advances in communications and information sharing technology, the actual physical presence of the SUBOPAUTH is unnecessary, and with continued advances, a somewhat virtual presence will be achieved, allowing the SUBOPAUTH in the future to be more responsive to the JTFC's needs.²¹

Even with the shift in submarine missions and the emphasis on operating jointly, there are many who would argue that the current system of the SUBOPAUTH exercising OPCON of all submarines is adequate. Those same people would probably argue that had Flag Officer Submarines been made subordinate to Admiral Woodward, all difficulties related to OPCON of

²⁰Letter from George W. Emery.

²¹Ibid.

attack submarines during the Falklands War could have been avoided. The SUBOPAUTH effectively exercised OPCON of attack submarines during independent missions, and can continue to do so in the joint environment to support the JTFC's objectives.

V. An Operational Analysis

U.S. submarines from World War II through the Cold War for the most part operated independently, requiring little communication with the controlling authority and coordination with other forces. With the shift in emphasis to the regional or littoral conflict as well as operating jointly, the submarine must operate in an environment that may require frequent communication and a great deal more coordination. OPCON of attack submarines must be reexamined within the context of this new operating environment. Whether OPCON of attack submarines should be given to the JTFC can be determined, particularly in light of the Falklands War, by examining unity of effort, operational movement, operational maneuver, and operational tempo.

Important to the achievement of unity of effort is the sound organization of one's own friendly forces and assets. Organizational decisions impact on the ability of forces to react to changing situations and external stimulations within their assigned missions. Sound organizational decisions enhance the execution of operational decisions by "ensuring unity of command, economy of effort, timeliness of execution,

and flexibility."²² Prior to landing troops in the Falklands, the Task Group Commander, Admiral Woodward, had command of all the forces within the Total Exclusion Zone of 200 miles around the Falklands, with the exception of the submarines. Even though *Spartan*, *Splendid*, and *Conqueror* operated in support of the Task Group, Admiral Woodward did not have OPCON of those submarines.²³ With the mission that Admiral Woodward was assigned, he lacked unity of command and timeliness of execution and flexibility in his ability to direct the actions of the submarines in support of the protection of what he felt was his center of gravity. *Spartan* was twice diverted to perform tasks of secondary importance as far as Admiral Woodward was concerned and he was unable to change the operating areas of *Splendid* to support the search for the Argentine carrier.²⁴ In the dynamic battlespace of future conflicts, the JTFC must be able to control all forces within his area of operations to ensure all efforts contribute to his objectives.

Operational movement and maneuver "includes the activities of providing mobility for operational forces and

²²JMO Department, "Operational Decision Making," in Operational Art: A Book of Readings, Unpublished collection, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI: 1996, 4.

²³Symons, 92.

²⁴Sandy Woodward, 127.

countering the mobility of enemy operational forces."²⁵ As in the Falklands War, the submarine will be part of what could be a rapidly changing scenario, requiring the JTFC to rapidly respond to the changing circumstances. The attack submarines supporting the Falklands went from initially conducting operational reconnaissance off Port Stanley to an anti-surface/anti-submarine warfare role (operational protection), back to providing intelligence on the departure of Argentine flights, while at the same time enforcing the Maritime Exclusion Zone and all outside of Admiral Woodward's control. With the multiple missions the attack submarine can perform, the on-scene JTFC should be able to quickly shift the tasking, and if need be, the operating areas of attached submarines to meet his needs. In a scenario such as the Falklands example, the SUBOPAUTH would need to retain OPCON if the attack submarines were routed ahead of the Joint Task Force. Once the JTFC arrives in the vicinity, it is important that he be able to maneuver those assets as he sees fit in a timely manner. As in the Falklands, waterspace management and prevention of mutual interference could be inextricably intertwined with the attack submarine's operational or tactical use.

Working with movement and maneuver is operational tempo, with rapid tempo being desired. Tempo "allows us to take

²⁵JMO Department, "Operational Functions," in Operational Art: A Book of Readings, Unpublished collection, Newport, RI: 1996, 4.

action that sets in motion a series of actions and reactions, each of which may expose-if only for a moment-a critical vulnerability of the enemy."²⁶ Time is a precious commodity in today's battlefield, and the side with the fastest decision and execution cycle will have a distinct advantage.²⁷ The attack submarine has a variety of missions it can perform for the JTFC, and not having OPCON of supporting submarines can greatly impact on the execution side of that cycle, and thus limit our tempo. Without OPCON of attached submarines, the JTFC could miss that one moment when a critical vulnerability of the enemy is exposed.

With the attack submarine as a potential key player in the Joint Task Force of the future, unity of effort, operational movement, operational maneuver, and operational tempo take on new importance. These elements of operational art demonstrate that the current system of the SUBOPAUTH exercising OPCON of submarines attached to the Joint Task Force is no longer suitable.

VI. Time for Change

Is it sufficient then for the SUBOPAUTH to be the executive agent of OPCON for the JTFC? If Admiral Woodward had OPCON of submarines operating in support of his Task

²⁶U.S. Navy Dept., Naval Doctrine Publication 6, Command and Control (Washington: 1995), 57-60.

²⁷Ibid, 13.

Group, would he have had timeliness of execution and the necessary flexibility? The problem of *Spartan* being twice diverted could possibly have been avoided, but Admiral Woodward still would have had to go back to Flag Officer Submarines to get the necessary area changes to support his tasking. The argument was made earlier that with advances in communications and information sharing, the SUBOPAETH can be brought more and more into the JTFC's command center. If we are not yet at the point where the JTFC can effectively command the Joint Task Force from CONUS, it is difficult to argue that technology is such that the SUBOPAETH does not need to be collocated with the JTFC.

The SUBOPAETH exercising OPCON of attached submarines contributes to unity of command and effort of the theater CINC, but probably not to that of the JTFC. The SUBOPAETH will still have to divide his resources and time to support the JTFC and the theater CINC, since some submarines will most likely continue to operate outside the JTFC's area of operations. It should be pointed out that Admiral Woodward argued not only that he should have been given operational control of submarines, but that the method of water space management should change.²⁸ This paper is not trying to argue the waterspace management method, but that it is conceivable that the JTFC's inability to control the waterspace could prevent him from effectively using attached submarines.

²⁸Sandy Woodward, 122.

The argument that there is no commander more suitably trained, equipped, and with ready access to the information needed to effectively exercise OPCON is certainly true. But it is also true that the SUBOPAUTHS are, for the most part, the only commanders who have exercised OPCON. The exercising of submarine OPCON is not that difficult of a problem. There currently is a procedure that delegates to a Battle Group Commander most SUBOPAUTH OPCON related functions.²⁹ That same procedure could be used on the operational level to give the JTFC OPCON of all attached submarines. In the case of the Falklands War, Admiral Woodward happened to be a submariner and knew what the possibilities were in using those submarines. So that future Joint Task Forces are practiced in the integration and effective use of attack submarines, the OPCON of attack submarines should routinely be given up by the Submarine Type Commander in naval and joint exercises.

VII. Conclusion/Recommendation

Attack submarines have a significant role to play in the regional or littoral conflicts of the future. The attack submarine, which predominantly operated independently in the past, will serve as a force multiplier for a joint task force responding to some crisis in the world. The Falklands War, the first conflict in which nuclear attack submarines were

²⁹COMSECONDFLT/COMSUBLANT, 1-2.

used, demonstrated this force multiplier affect.³⁰ At the same time, the Falklands War demonstrated the need to reexamine how we operationally control our attack submarines.

The JTFC must be able to maneuver his forces to achieve his overall objective. His operational capability hinges on his ability to react to rapidly changing circumstances, and as demonstrated by the Falklands War, having OPCON of attached submarines could be critical. Being able to control where a submarine operates in a timely manner could very well determine if the JTFC can effectively use the attack submarine to meet his objectives.

The current method of the SUBOPAUTH exercising OPCON has served the submarine community well and will continue to do so when the submarine is operating independently. When the attack submarine is used as part of a joint task force, the control of where those submarines operate needs to be in the hands of the JTFC. The waterspace management problem is not a hard one. There currently exists a paradigm that can be used to give the JTFC OPCON of attached submarines without the administrative and information management burden. The time to implement this change is not when we are faced with the next regional conflict requiring the attack submarine to participate with the Joint Task Force in more than just a strike warfare role. So that the U.S. Navy as a whole is

³⁰Harry D, Train III, "An Analysis of the Falklands/Malvinas Islands Campaign," Naval War College Review, Winter 1988, 34.

practiced in the integration and effective use of attack submarines, the OPCON of attack submarines should routinely be given up by the Submarine Type Commander in naval and joint exercises.

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