

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: The Royal Marines and UK amphibious capability, HC 622

Tuesday 5 Dec 2017

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Members present: Dr Julian Lewis (Chair); Leo Docherty; Martin Docherty-Hughes; Mr Mark Francois; Johnny Mercer; Mrs Madeleine Moon; Ruth Smeeth; John Spellar; Phil Wilson.

Questions 1-63

Witnesses

I: Lieutenant General (Rtd) Sir Robert Fry KCB CBE RM, Commandant General Royal Marines 2001-02, Major General (Rtd) Julian Thompson CB OBE RM, Commander, 3 Commando Brigade, 1981-83, Nick Childs, Senior Fellow for Naval Forces and Maritime Security, International Institute for Strategic Studies, and Dr Peter Roberts, Director, Military Sciences, RUSI.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lieutenant General (Rtd) Sir Robert Fry, Major General (Rtd) Julian Thompson, Nick Childs and Dr Peter Roberts.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to this session of the Defence Select Committee, dealing with the Royal Marines and the United Kingdom's amphibious capability. We have a distinguished panel of experts to guide us through this subject. Starting with you, Nick, I would be grateful if you said a few words to introduce yourselves and explain your areas of expertise.

Nick Childs: Thank you, Chair. I am Nick Childs, the Senior Fellow for Naval Forces and Maritime Security at the International Institute for Strategic Studies—so, essentially, the senior naval specialist at the institute. I am also the author of a couple of books on the modern Royal Navy. In a previous incarnation I was a journalist for the BBC for 30 years, covering defence, security and international affairs.

Lieutenant General Fry: I am Robert Fry, former Commandant General of the Royal Marines. Today I am involved in business; I am also visiting professor at King's College, at the Department of War Studies, and write the occasional column for *Prospect* magazine.

Major General Thompson: Julian Thompson, Major General, former Royal Marine for 34 years, commanded the 3 Commando Brigade in the Falklands campaign, also visiting professor at King's College; and I write military history.

Dr Roberts: Peter Roberts: I am Director of Military Sciences at RUSI and the senior research fellow for sea power.

Chair: Thank you all very much for giving up your time this afternoon.

Q2 Ruth Smeeth: Julian, why is our amphibious capability a strategic asset for the UK?

Major General Thompson: It is a strategic asset because, apart from the Americans, we are the only truly amphibious capability nation in NATO. It also gives the UK the ability to project power where needed with the leading commando group. It is able to do it without putting a foot on the ground until the moment arrives because it is able to wait offshore. It is able to do it without requiring an airfield and without what I call the "red carpet" of friendly nation providing fuel, roads, transport and so forth. It enables us also to pull out again, without any fuss or bother, whenever it suits us. So it gives us a flexibility that is absolutely crucial, and we are one of the few nations that possess this ability.

Q3 Ruth Smeeth: What do you believe our amphibious capability adds to our international dynamic? Obviously, one of the issues in future is the lead



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we take in NATO in 2019 and 2020 in terms of our amphibious capability. What unique skills does it give us in terms of power leverage with our allies?

Major General Thompson: It gives us something that many of them do not have—even the French don't have the same amphibious capability that we do, or the Dutch. We provide a niche ability that no one else, other than the Americans, has. In a NATO context we are a key part of the set-up, and in a non-NATO context we bring something to the party that no one else can bring.

Q4 **Mr Francois:** General Thompson, how has the British experience and expertise in amphibious warfare developed?

Major General Thompson: It has developed over hundreds of years, starting way, way back in the 18th century—for example with the attack on Quebec and many other amphibious operations all over the world in the various campaigns and wars that we have fought in the past. Coming to the more modern era, Gallipoli provides an example of a good idea badly carried out, because we had forgotten how to carry out an amphibious operation. It is quite extraordinary: the largest navy that the world has ever seen had forgotten how to use an amphibious capability. It was a real lesson in what happens when you forget about it.

The Second World War then provided huge numbers of amphibious operations—the only way of getting back into Europe was by amphibious operation. We had to relearn skills that had been forgotten and were thought to be so difficult that they could not be carried out. We learned from the Americans in their Pacific campaign, and then since the Second World War we have carried out a number of amphibious operations, including in Korea in 1950 to 1952—something like 25 raids carried out by commandos, and the landing at Inchon. Then we had the Suez campaign, which was a bad idea but well carried out—no one can blame the forces for that. Then in 1982 we had the Falklands campaign, and since then—the most recent but perhaps unknown example—flying into Afghanistan, a landlocked country, Royal Marines and SBS from carrier *Illustrious*, supported by an LPD in the Indian Ocean, by Chinook helicopter.

So this capability carries on and the expertise for it resides at the moment with the Royal Marines and the Royal Navy.

Q5 **Chair:** You have cited these famous historical examples, but of course all of them apart from the last were on a pretty large scale. To what extent is there a valid parallel between times when we had very large numbers of landing craft and times like today, when we are talking about loss of amphibious capability? We are basically talking about the loss of two ships. I hope other people come in on this as well: to what extent is the role of our amphibious ships today different from the large-scale efforts that we are all familiar with historically?

Major General Thompson: When I was serving, in the '60s, at first we did not have the LPDs, the *Albion* and the *Bulwark*—it was then the *Fearless* and the *Intrepid*—and there was a big hole in our capability. We



carried out a number of operations from the LPHs, the helicopter carriers, but we were unable really to carry out anything where we were going to fight against an enemy with a lot of artillery, armour and so forth, because we did not have any heavy lift. The LPDs, the Fearless and the Intrepid—now Albion and Bulwark—made all the difference in the ability to move heavy stuff ashore and maintain the logistic support needed.

For example, some of the light operations that we carried out in the '60s included when, at the invitation of the President of Tanganyika, we landed 45 Commando by helicopter from what was then a strike carrier, the Theseus, in Tanganyika at his request to put down a mutiny in his army. We carried out a withdrawal from Aden in '67. The last troops out were Royal Marines, taken out by helicopter, and then we—I was in the force involved—stayed offshore for two months, over the horizon, ready to go back in and to evacuate British nationals. Again, that would have been by helicopter. But there was always this need that we felt for something a bit heavier if required, and we did not have it until we got the Fearless and the Intrepid, replaced of course by the Albion and the Bulwark.

Dr Roberts: If you go back through history—to Buenos Aires, New Orleans and Suez—you can see where a capability gap in delivering the heavy lift, as the general said, across the beach has put a very light force at huge risk. The same was almost true for Operation Telic in 2003, where the Marines moved ashore but they needed heavy vehicles with them—that was the one deficiency they felt they had, so being augmented with armoured capability at the time of going in was absolutely critical.

There is this idea that you need a balanced force: you need not just to put the light elements—the infantry; the fighting man—in right at the outset along with his artillery, which might be air transportable or might be ship-based; but critically, for the close-in fight, you require armour with you, particularly where you move inland. You are going to encounter an adversary who is usually, these days, pretty well matched in terms of capability.

Q6 Chair: But as we are talking about only two vessels, presumably this has to be done under some sort of cover. If it were done openly in an opposed environment, would they not be very vulnerable?

Lieutenant General Fry: They are bound to be vulnerable, but that almost anticipates a wider discussion we might have about the nature of sea control and the changing nature of maritime operations. I would invite you to have that discussion.

I will make a couple of points in addition to what has already been said. Equipment is getting heavier; it is not getting lighter. There was a time when we could undersling Land Rovers and they could be flown quite considerable distances. Because of the requirements today for protected mobility—a lesson we learned bitterly in Afghanistan—those vehicles are much, much heavier. That means they are much more difficult to undersling under helicopters and the range they can travel is much reduced. The thing that traditionally has always limited offload is artillery



ammunition. That is the greatest single liability that an amphibious force has. If you do not get enough of that ashore, clearly, you are not going to build up enough combat power.

Let me try to use a really crude analogy. Think in terms of a football team: you have strikers, midfielders, defenders and a goalkeeper. If you take the midfield out of that team and still claim that it is going to be as effective as it previously was, you will find that it is deficient. If you then tell the goalkeeper to go and play as a striker, you might also find that your capability is compromised. They would still be kicking a football around, but you would not expect them to win a match. It is a very crude analogy, but that is the best way in which I can try to capture the entire condition.

Dr Roberts: Having thought about that question, can I come back with one point that I would not want you to miss? The LSD(A)s, which are the other landing ships that the Navy has, have the ability to offload and send in on a landing craft, and they can do it with heavy gear, but they can do one at a time—single operation—whereas Albion and Bulwark can do four together. This is really critical when you are putting anyone ashore on a beach that is not yours and you are not quite sure what you are going to experience. One or even two of these landing craft coming ashore presents considerable risk—far more than if you were able to land four together. All the operational theory, and all the experience going back 5,000 years to what Thucydides and Homer wrote about amphibious operations, is about the weight of the first elements going ashore. Operational analysis today would indicate that four landing craft is the minimum capability at which you should be able to land on that beach.

Nick Childs: In terms of it being just two ships, we must remember that this force was originally part of a package. It was a balanced package, as has been said before, with the original ambition to deliver a brigade ashore, and it was a package whose initial requirement was for two Oceans, two LPDs and I think five LSD(A)s—the Bay class—all together to provide that capability. That has been chipped away over the period, including in 2010. The ambition in terms of the size of the force to be delivered has already been reduced from a brigade to the lead commando group. That is why one of the Bays went then and why we went to extended readiness for one of the LPDs.

Now we are in a position where the force that you have is a reduced force and the balance is at risk. Taking out these capabilities that provide the heavy lift, as you say, unbalances the force even further. So although it is two ships, it is another move away from that balanced package. There are challenges around how you deliver heavy capability, even with specialised shipping, in an anti-access/area denial environment where you have more challenges to that shipping as it approaches the beach.

Q7 **Chair:** I just want to be clear on the point I raised earlier, as I still don't think that I have the entire answer. Would you ever envisage a scenario in which one or, at most, two of these landing platform docks would be operating in broad daylight under fire, trying to put relatively small numbers of landing craft ashore, or would they always be trying to do



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that covertly and stealthily—under cover of darkness, for example?

Major General Thompson: You would want to try to do it covertly, and where the enemy wasn't. That is what you'd want to do. Even in 1982 during the Falklands, we chose to land where there weren't any enemy, or not very many. There were other reasons for that, but that was one of the key reasons. You wouldn't do a dash up the beach unless you absolutely had to.

Q8 **Chair:** So we are not talking the Normandy landings?

Major General Thompson: We are not talking "Saving Private Ryan", no.

Chair: Exactly. That is the point that I wanted to get at.

Major General Thompson: There is one other point, Chair, which is command and control. The LSD(A)s do not have anything like the command and control facilities that the LPD does. Somebody once rather arrogantly described amphibious operations as the scholarship level of warfare. One of the reasons is the array of communications you need to fight the various battles at various layers: the anti-submarine battle, controlling your own aircraft, anti-aircraft, controlling the task groups, surface actions; and then the managing of the landing itself, vectoring the landing craft, managing the air lift in; and of course, fighting the land battle, which is the ultimate object of the whole game. The LSD(A) has nothing like the communications that you require to do those five things, which are all going on sometimes simultaneously.

Q9 **Mr Francois:** To the panel as a whole, what lessons can we take from the Falklands war in 1982, and how relevant are they today?

Major General Thompson: The first one is that the unexpected always happens. The second is that it is a come-as-you-are party: you have to go with what you have, and if you haven't got what you've got, you can't do it. The third is don't land where the enemy is strong. Land somewhere else. The fourth one is the need for a good surface lift of landing craft to lift the heavy stuff. General Fry referred to artillery ammunition. Artillery ammunition in that war took priority over rations, it was so important, and it was all-consuming of our lift. If you don't have enough lift, you won't get your artillery ammunition ashore and you lose the battle.

Lieutenant General Fry: I would add another, which is that if you don't have a mix of capabilities and you don't rehearse it on a regular basis, you cannot expect it to go 8,000 miles and for it to work like clockwork. It has to be a capability in being.

Nick Childs: To reinforce that point, what we are talking about with the UK's amphibious capability, particularly compared with others, is that it is a synergy of all the different capabilities coming together. It is an elite and highly capable landing force, but a mix of shipping that is specialised and understands the requirements, and it links the two up through command and control. It is also the sense of each element knowing that the other knows its business and that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts in many respects. It is the link of all the capabilities that is the difference,



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and in some ways the point that still separates the UK's capability from some other potential peers that one could mention.

Dr Roberts: I have two. The first would be that when you rely on assumptions, you will be unpicked and that will potentially be your undoing, particularly when those assumptions are based on the dependencies of allies being there when you expect them to be with the capabilities that you think they will bring. The second one is about logistics. Your predecessors on this Committee in 2003 did a report on the amphibious capability and elements of Operation Telic—the invasion of Iraq in 2003. They took evidence from Air Marshal Burridge, the commander of joint force operations. He said that criticality of logistics, sea lift and amphibious shipping, for him, could not be provided by air because the limitation was not the aircraft available but the landing sites available in the theatre to which they were going. The only way they could deliver the amount of kit they needed to the fight on the frontline was through shipping.

Q10 **Johnny Mercer:** Sir Robert, in your experience, is the UK's current amphibious ORBAT—for want of a better word—sufficient?

Lieutenant General Fry: Well, it is sufficient for what we are saying we are going to do in its current form, but we have already knocked three holes in it. We know that Ocean is going to go, and there is the possibility of losing two LPDs. If that was the case, it would be a completely incoherent capability for all of the reasons we have just talked about. The shipping that was still in play after the last defence review, against the scale of force we expected to have to put ashore, was about in balance, but things have changed sufficiently since then to have knocked that balance out.

I would say, partly in answer to this question and partly in answer to the one that went before, that we are talking about amphibious operations at the very top end of warfare. That's exactly what you should be testing us upon, because everything should be judged against that, but there are, of course, a whole range of other operations that are taking place habitually around the world. In the last year or 18 months, there has been hurricane relief in the West Indies, operations in the Mediterranean to limit the movement of refugees across the Mediterranean Sea, and anti-piracy operations off the eastern coast of Africa. To understand fully the range of amphibiousness, you need to have those things in mind just as much as you have in mind the most testing operations.

Q11 **Johnny Mercer:** What would you say to a Government that says to the military and the top-level budget holders, "You've got a budget, which is increasing. If you can't manage it, I'm sorry about that, but you have a budget, and if you decide to cut amphibious capability, that is for you."? What should the Government do in that instance?

Lieutenant General Fry: I don't presume to give the Government advice. It seems to me that if that choice is taken, it is ignoring both the evidence of history and everything we can see about the future. Julian touched on



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amphibious operations. The entire Second World War was essentially about amphibious operations. It was about breaking back into Europe and getting into north Africa. The entire Pacific campaign was based upon a series of amphibious operations. There is an unbroken thread through everything we have done. Virtually since the Army under Wellington was inserted into the peninsula during the Napoleonic Wars, this has been a constant theme.

Looking at the future, globalisation increasingly means that the resources that service global economies move by sea. Some of the figures here surprised me. Over the last few years, for the first time in human history, more people live in cities than don't live in cities—I think the number is about 52% at the present time. That number will increase to something like 75% by the middle part of this century. Overwhelmingly, those cities will be on the coast, because that is where resources land. Particularly in the global south, we will have these huge conurbations—take, for example, the contiguous area between São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, which supports over 40 million people at the present time, let alone what is going to happen in the future. Think of Lagos, Karachi and Dhaka, and think of the liabilities we might have as a globally oriented nation. It seems to me, not only looking backwards but looking forwards, that the case to remain in the game at an effective level is overwhelming.

- Q12 **Johnny Mercer:** That is very clear, but my question is this. The Government understands that—the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Defence Secretary understand that—but we have a budget within which every organisation has to operate. If that budget is handed over to the Royal Navy—it is cut down into four between the Navy, the Air Force, the Joint Forces and the Army—and if they cannot live within that budget and decide to remove the amphibious capability, what do you expect the Government to do about it? With due respect, your level of senior officer is there, or certainly was there at the time, and is now replaced by your successors. What is going wrong? Why can we not live within that budget? You cannot justify removing the amphibious capability from this nation. I get that; everybody gets that. But what else do we do? What are the mistakes, and how do we get round them?

Lieutenant General Fry: We exist between two poles of defence procurement: the American example and the French example. In America you have a large number of very large, effective producers; that gives you the ability to drive down price and lead on research. The French have a system of dirigisme, of which you are aware, where the state is closely allied to the major defence producers. We lie somewhere in the middle.

I think that historically our defence procurement has been poor, and we don't always get value for money. It seems perfectly legitimate that we try to do far better at that than we have in the past. So my first challenge would be to say: "Do better with the money that you already spend", and there would be comparative figures so that we could compare ourselves internationally. I suspect we would do very badly in that.



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You are leading me in a direction where I could either be critical of the First Sea Lord of the day, or critical of the Government of the day. I am not going to do that at the present time. I recognise that there are a series of challenging questions here. It seems wrong to contemplate losing something that has been so significant in the past and seems to me to be so significant in the future. The only answer I can give to you directly is, let's get better at doing the business of defence—the pounds, shillings and pence business—and do that as well as we do the operational business of defence.

Q13 Johnny Mercer: Can you regenerate amphibious capability quite cheaply and quickly?

Lieutenant General Fry: No, of course you can't. First of all, you have to bring the ships into service. I would use the example of carrier air. How long is it going to be before the first of those aircraft carriers is available and it actually performs as a functioning operational platform? Something like a decade. Exactly the same period of time would be true for amphibious platforms.

Q14 Johnny Mercer: Okay. And how have more recent reforms and restructures—think back to Commando 21 and things like that—affected operational effectiveness and capacity?

Lieutenant General Fry: I think they have made a significant difference at a tactical level; they haven't changed the calculus at all at the operational or strategic level. At the strategic level, that's an enduring thing. Recent reforms have made some significant differences in the way in which we tactical deploy.

Q15 Chair: Before moving on, can I just pick up something Johnny said earlier about the budget, and the fact that there seems to be a new approach by Government to offload the guilt, as it were, on the service chiefs? They are saying, "It is not us taking these decisions. Here is your budget: you take the decisions," and then they blame them for choosing between—as Admiral Sir George Zambellas said—having their left arm cut off or their right arm cut off. It is not much of a choice.

We established at an earlier hearing that the service chiefs retain the constitutional right, if they think that the country is not being adequately defended, to demand to see the Prime Minister and put that situation in front of the Prime Minister. I know it is asking a lot, but at what point would any of you think that the time had come that the service chiefs ought to be exercising that right? Are we getting close to it now?

Lieutenant General Fry: Let me answer the question in a slightly different way. It seems to me that this is the politics of the playground—the way that, traditionally, if the Army wins the Navy loses, or whatever. That is the way we look at defence reviews. The fact that the process is now based in the Cabinet Office under the National Security Adviser means that GCHQ might win but Defence might lose. It is essentially the same thing. It is the abdication of the real issues of deciding where money goes.



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It seems to me that this is a question for whole Government, and it is about comparing expenditure upon education, the national health service, welfare, defence and all the other things. By putting that down to the lowest available level, the Government is abdicating some of its fundamental responsibilities to make those decisions and actually unloading the guilt upon others.

Chair: Indeed. Can I just hear some other voices on this before I bring in Leo?

Major General Thompson: I would absolutely agree. It is no good one the one hand reducing the status of the chiefs and on the other hand, saying, "Actually, we want you to make these strategic decisions". You can't do both. The strategic decisions should be made by Government—that is the job of Government, if I may be so bold.

Q16 **Chair:** Would you say, then, that among these strategic decisions would be a decision that we were going to gravely reduce, if not entirely eliminate, our amphibious capability?

Major General Thompson: That would be a strategic decision.

Q17 **Chair:** Right. So you are saying that should stop with the Government, and it should not be—

Major General Thompson: Absolutely.

Q18 **Chair:** Right. Nick, have you a view on this?

Nick Childs: Yes. The framing of the question—this may in part be because of the structure of the process, but it is also because of the devolved structures now within the MoD—is being dealt with in a situation in which there is a deficit in resources. There are multiple culprits in all that—they lie at the strategic level and at the programme management level—but in a way it is a strategic and political judgment. You could argue, as has been postulated here, that the Government could say, "If the Royal Navy cannot provide this capability within its budget, that's up to the Royal Navy," but these are capabilities that at the very least, as they are currently framed, derive from the 1998 defence review, which first postulated a maritime-centred power projection capability in its current form. That, one way or another, has essentially been endorsed by a number of Governments, more or less enthusiastically, over a period of time.

As far as what the naval approach to this might or might not be, it is to say, "You have this choice. The maritime capability for power protection is essentially two pillars, centred on carriers and an amphibious capability. We are unable to provide that in ways in which we feel it is a balanced force." It is therefore a political judgment, ultimately, whether to say, "We will continue to endorse and provide that capability," or whether to acknowledge that it will be not just a different capability but a reduced capability going forward. It is, in the end, a political-level decision to say "We judge that this is the level of capability that we can afford and that is legitimate for this country."



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Dr Roberts: Those chiefs were the ones who agreed to the Levene reforms in the first place. In fact, they wanted them. They wanted their own money. They didn't want central Government—the Cabinet Office and the Treasury—deciding what capabilities they had. They are the ones who said, "Give us our money and we'll decide how to spend it." You can't have these people turning around to you now and suddenly saying, "Actually, no, we don't want that now. You did brilliantly and you gave us all our money, but actually we don't want that now because we don't want to make the difficult decisions." In a way, this is what they are paid for. This is what they have been asked to do. Their predecessors signed up to it. The whole review signed up to, "This is what we're going to do." In the same way, if there are questions to be asked about the Royal Marines, they are in a way questions about broader theatre entry capability. At the moment, the UK has two theatre-entering capabilities.

- Q19 **Chair:** Before we come on to that, there is an obvious disconnect, isn't there, in saying that the politicians decide, as they did in the 1998 review, that we want the concept of a sea base in which the carrier strike group exercises its air power from the sea and the amphibious force exercises what we might call land power from the sea? What this reform has done is to say that the politicians lay down, "We want an amphibious force and we want a carrier strike force," and they can then give a budget to the service chiefs that patently cannot pay for both those forces.

Dr Roberts: It is widely appreciated now that the review in 1998 was brilliantly conducted but chronically underfunded, and they have been since then. Actually, the time for the chiefs to have gone to the Prime Minister was in about '99, when they found out that wasn't sufficient money. What we should be seeing now is the national security capability review saying, "If this is a defence review about such a cut in a key capability, can we please go back and change the policy on which you're asking us to do our jobs?"

- Q20 **Chair:** Or they could go back and say, "Can we please change the size of the budget to enable the policy to be carried out?"

Dr Roberts: Absolutely.

- Q21 **Leo Docherty:** Surely the point is that the 2015 SDSR is basically underfunded. Would you agree with that?

Dr Roberts: As previous reviews have been, yes, absolutely.

- Q22 **Leo Docherty:** More broadly, looking at the higher level, above all the politics—this is an open question to you all—we have heard from other witnesses that Defence is institutionally underfunded. Would you agree with that assessment?

Major General Thompson: Yes. I think the point is that actually, of course, it is your potential enemy that dictates how much you should spend on defence, in the broadest terms.

Lieutenant General Fry: I would say that Defence is institutionally underfunded, for the reasons that I have already given. I also think it



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could do a lot better at spending the money that it has, which is the point I made a moment ago.

- Q23 **Mr Francois:** Isn't the truth that part of the problem within the naval budget has been the very considerable increase in the cost of the carriers? It has been very apparent that the admirals are determined to maintain the two carriers at almost any cost, and therefore that has had knock-on implications in other areas. It is partly why we are having this hearing today, isn't it?

Lieutenant General Fry: I wouldn't disagree with anything you have just said.

- Q24 **Mr Francois:** General Thompson, you made the point that if you fight, you fight with what you have got. I think that is very much a lesson of modern warfare. At the moment with the LPDs, we have one in service and one in extended readiness. So we have already got one in ER; what about the option of putting both LPDs in extended readiness, in order to keep them rather than to lose that capability completely?

Major General Thompson: There are two things there. First, you wouldn't be able to exercise with them, and therefore you would very quickly lose your expertise at how to use this instrument. Secondly, they probably wouldn't come out in time to meet the emergency. In extended readiness it takes something like a year to get them back into service, which is simply not enough time. You would be caught totally short-footed if you allowed yourself to get into that situation.

Nick Childs: Just to pick up on that point, one of the things we are missing a little, though I am sure we will come on to it, is that you have to remember the broader utility of these assets, beyond what we have been talking about, which is the maximum level of effort for amphibious capability. We have seen that broader utility on multiple occasions, and this is a utility that will grow, I think, in the future. The Chairman asked earlier whether we can envisage a time when an LPD might operate independently—and I can, actually, for a very limited contingency operation.

So we are talking beyond the type of operation we have in our recent memories, basically humanitarian aid and disaster relief operations. There is a broader utility to these assets that is being found to be valuable time and time again. In a fleet in which the number of platforms is woefully low anyway, and below what is implied by the tasking, being able to call on these platforms on a regular basis is a valuable asset in and of itself. It is enough of an issue having one at extended readiness without having both of them, I think. They bring capabilities that other elements of the fleet do not have, simply through their space and their in-built capacity for husbanding other assets such as landing craft or whatever it happens to be. That is an area that has been slightly missing from some of the arguments up to now.

- Q25 **Mr Francois:** Your point is that, in order for this capability to be real, you have to be able to exercise it regularly and use all the different parts of



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the orchestra, so that come the day you can actually play the concert.

Major General Thompson: Absolutely. There is no point in getting one out, even if you had time to get it out, and then saying to everyone, "Right, guys, get on board and start using this kit that we've never used before, and go to war with it". It would be absolutely crazy. Picking up the point that Nick made, my mind goes back to 1971, to the floods in what was East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, where HMS Intrepid was able to go into that riverine area, put her landing craft ashore, put engineer plant ashore and come to the aid of people who could only be reached by sea and by water—that is a very good example of the use of one of these very versatile ships in a humanitarian aid situation.

- Q26 **Mr Francois:** And as we are doing a bit on history today, the Nott review in 1981 recommended the deletion of Fearless and Intrepid, didn't it? It recommended deleting those ships.

Major General Thompson: Yes. I can tell a story about that. I showed him round the ship in 1981 and he stood in the tank deck watching the landing craft coming and going and said, "I didn't know we had a ship like this in the Royal Navy"—and he immediately cancelled the disposal of the ship. It was because he didn't know what it could do.

- Q27 **Chair:** So this was after he had originally recommended getting rid of them?

Major General Thompson: Yes.

- Q28 **Chair:** If he didn't know that we had such a ship in the Royal Navy, who planted the idea of cancelling in his mind?

Major General Thompson: A Member of Parliament, whose name I forget temporarily, I'm afraid.

Chair: That's probably just as well.

Major General Thompson: Probably a reservist, who suggested to him that he should visit the ship and told us that he was going to visit. So we laid on a little exercise especially for him.

- Q29 **Chair:** That wasn't quite my question. That was how he went to visit the ship, but if he had not known that the ship was as capable as it was, and did not know what it did or even that it existed in the form that it did, why had he originally recommended taking that class of ship out of service? Somebody must have suggested that to him; presumably, somebody on the officials side in the Ministry of Defence.

Major General Thompson: Quite possibly. I don't know.

- Q30 **Chair:** If he didn't know that the ship existed, he wouldn't have decided to cancel. Surely that illustrates that sometimes taking expert advice from officials is not as wise as it might be.

Major General Thompson: I would entirely support your view.

- Q31 **Ruth Smeeth:** Gentlemen, one of our issues with the current capability



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review is that the people making the decisions honestly do not understand the capability that Bulwark and Albion offer. That would not be dissimilar to the story that you just told. The Royal Marines, as a whole, do an incredible job, but they do it very quietly and they just get on and do it. Do you think that is part of the challenge? No one knows, even the senior echelons of Government, exactly what the Royal Marines are doing with these capabilities.

Major General Thompson: I would not want to accuse people of being ignorant.

Ruth Smeeth: I am.

Major General Thompson: But I think you are right, if I may say so. There is a lack of knowledge about what an amphibious capability does and what it gives you. Apart from anything else, it gives you huge deterrent capability, above all the other things that we have covered in this discussion. The trouble is that immediately when you talk about Marines and landing craft, Private Ryan flicks into your brain. That is the most unlikely thing, actually; it is about all the other things.

Lieutenant General Fry: Can I bring together two last questions and look less at the history than the future? The conversation, quite rightly because we are talking about LPDs, has been concentrating on the full amphibious offload—the top end of the register. One thing that we really have to understand is that in a generation's time, or a decade's time, the amphibious capability globally will be completely different. It will not look the way that it looks today. Increasingly, it will depend on robotic platforms. Increasingly, it will use autonomous vehicles. It will be increasingly dispersed, and it will be less and less about maintaining a persistent presence ashore. However, unless we remain in the game, we cannot expect to get to the next generation of capability. If we lose it now, we will be out of it forever.

Nick Childs: Can I reinforce that point? Picking up your question about ignorance or at least perhaps not having focus, part of the problem is that we are emerging from a period where we have had long, fixed land campaigns in which power projection has taken place, essentially across a benign superhighway, to coin a phrase, of being able to project maritime capability and military power in an uncontested environment. That world is changing. The maritime space itself is becoming more contested, and we are seeing even greater uncertainty and complexity in where threats will emerge.

General Fry has mentioned a world in which the gravitational pull of populations and the stresses and strains of populations are moving more and more towards potentially increasingly unstable mega-cities that, in very large part, are situated in a littoral environment. That adds to the complexity not only in the maritime space but in the land space, and therefore across the scene. We are moving into a new situation in which these capabilities are coming back as a premium.



On top of that, there is the problem of timing, I suppose. General Fry said that the capabilities we have right now, even if there are not further restrictions on them, will not be fit for purpose in the years ahead. The status quo—standing still—is not an option. If you will pardon me saying this, dressing it up as a reimagining of capability when actually you are talking about reducing capability is not a way to get to a place in the future where you are using the critical assets, including landing capabilities, in a different way. That is going to require further investment in robotics and aviation capabilities but also, to use the jargon, in the connectors—the landing craft and the armoured vehicles that you will put ashore. You are still going to have to put those heavy capabilities ashore, but probably standing further from the shore than you have been able to do up to now, because it will just be too risky.

- Q32 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** General Thompson, you made a very pertinent point earlier about considering the investment others are making in their armed forces—I will be a wee bit more diplomatic and use the word “others”; I think you said “enemies”. My constituency lies to the west of the city of Glasgow. It is technically roundabout 2° further north than the city of Moscow. Rather than only talking about the impact of amphibious forces in, say, peripheral cities, which become mega-cities, we can talk about the impact on our northern flank, where the Russian Federation has expanded its investment and is re-implementing the bastion theory. From my constituency perspective, that is a huge gap in which the amphibious forces can play a part.

Major General Thompson: Yes, it is. Of course, the amphibious forces in the past have been involved in plans for going into, say, northern Norway in order to pre-empt Russian forces moving in. That was part of the plans that I used to live with, as it were, during the days of NATO. The use of amphibious force was seen as absolutely key to that operation, which is why we are glad that the Royal Marines’ Arctic training programme, which was removed, has been restored this year.

Mr Putin is pushing the envelope. Our allies, the Norwegians, are very concerned about it. The Swedes, I believe, have reintroduced conscription, and they all see this possible danger coming from the east as it did before. The amphibious force can play a huge part in deterrent operations, and we hope we do not have a war as a result.

Dr Roberts: It is interesting, because NATO has just finished a very significant amphibious exercise to reinforce Norway against a threat from a northern neighbour who was fictitious but is obviously aimed at Russia. The Russian plan, which was articulated by Admiral Chirkov, is for an amphibious operation that moves into Norway from the north, practised on a pretty good amphibious capability, which was an intrinsic part of the annexation of Crimea, operations in Ukraine and then obviously the leading edge of the largest amphibious operation in living history that took place in 2008 in Abkhazia in Georgia, where the Russian naval infantry landed 11,500 people and annexed an entire country or a state of a country—a significant portion of land—with ground-based air support but without sea-based air support. They did it within about 96 hours. It was a



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flawless amphibious operation from those who we have often written down in our own intelligence estimates.

You can take this and transfer it elsewhere. You can look at the amphibious capabilities of the Chinese navy, the PLAN, which are very significant and growing enormously at a pace that will make them larger than the US Marine Corps by 2025, with two divisions capable at the moment and designed to annex countries, not simply areas of land. They are exercising against opposed beachheads. They are expecting losses that the Russians have experienced in Ukraine. We are talking about between 2,000 and 3,000 people dying in 15 minutes from serving troops.

That is the level at which our adversaries are preparing to take risk in amphibious operations. You can look at the permanent amphibious bases they are building in the South China seas as part of territorial annexation of that part of the sea. You can look at how the Chinese and the PLAN are building bases in Gwadar, Djibouti and now in South America, in which they are basing their marine corps. These are the ideas in which the others are investing in these areas. It is not simply them; the Iranian revolutionary guard, the IRGCN, is also investing in an amphibious capability, as are the North Koreans. Every forward-thinking military in the world is investing in amphibious forces as the cutting edge of their military capability, because this is how they earn reputation in military terms, but they also get political credibility from their hard power exercised through amphibious forces.

Major General Thompson: Clearly they have read Liddell-Hart, who wrote, "Amphibious flexibility is the greatest strategic asset that a sea-based power possesses."

Lieutenant General Fry: And they are not only trying to maximise it in their own inventory; they are trying to deny it in others. Nick used this phrase earlier on: anti-access/area denial. If anything is leading missile technology at the present time, it is this idea. So when the Chinese are getting involved with both ballistic and cruise missiles, launched subsurface from the air and from the land in order to dominate sea areas like the South China sea, it is in order to preclude those areas from amphibious incursion or carrier incursion by America and others. This is a two-edged thing. Not only are they trying to maximise the use for themselves, but they are trying to minimise the use for others. Iran, equally, has led with some of these missile technologies, as have the Russians.

Q33 **Mr Francois:** On the point about Russia, on Norway, the Russians use the concept of the correlation of forces. If we delete our amphibious capability so that we, the United Kingdom, no longer have an ability to reinforce Norway from the sea, does that weaken NATO's deterrent in terms of the correlation of forces?

Major General Thompson: Yes, it does. The Russians take our amphibious capability very seriously. They have had an opportunity to observe it for many, many years, because we have exercised in Norway in



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many years and they have been watching it. They watched our operations in the Falklands with greater interest, and they take a great interest in our amphibious capability. They regard it as a serious deterrent force.

Dr Roberts: And it is disproportionate, because much of NATO's amphibious capability is based on the British capability. So the reduction that the Dutch have undertaken and those elsewhere make those states now reliant on the UK as a framework. They cannot put together an amphibious capability by themselves. They require the UK to do it, and their forces have become designed on that. So it is not simply that we would make our savings and we would change the correlation of forces; we would change it, in Russian eyes, for the whole of NATO, by our own decisions over two ships.

Q34 **Mrs Moon:** I want to take us back to the Royal Marines, where Johnny started. One of the elements that you have not talked about at all is the impact on the decisions that we make, when we come around to cuts, on those allies we work with over certain capabilities. Norway has been mentioned, and there are plans proposed to cut cold-weather training, where we have a close relationship with the Norwegians and actually, in recent years, we have been retraining the Americans, who had lost the capability. Certainly, when I was with the Americans earlier this year, they could not speak more highly of the expertise we had brought to them—and how much they had to play catch-up not only in training but in their equipment.

What are the risks to our reputation, as well as our capability, when we withdraw our Marines from training and exercises? In particular, we are withdrawing from Black Alligator, which we would be in with the Dutch, who have some capability. We have not mentioned them, but we work closely with them and the Americans. Are we damaging our reliability and reputation as well as our capability when we do this?

Lieutenant General Fry: Of course—I think in several different dimensions. First of all, I think what the Americans were being very grateful for was probably the environmental training in Norway rather than amphibious training, which I think they are probably reasonably expert at. I also believe that the new Secretary of State for Defence has pledged a training budget to Norway. If I am wrong in that, I would be grateful if you could put me straight.

So we have a set of existing relationships which we really want to maintain, and they are with the nations that you have just mentioned. We also have some quite difficult decisions to make—not Defence but the Government—on the future defence relations we want on a global basis. We certainly want to continue to be involved with NATO, but what relationship do we want with any putative European defence capability?

The one relationship I would say that we must maintain, above all others, is with the US navy and the US marine corps. As always, they lead the field in the intellectual development of maritime force, and they are thinking at the present time about something that they title "Littoral



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Operations in a Contested Environment”—you can work out exactly what that means—which is about how future amphibious operations will look a generation out, or maybe half a century out. If we no longer have the capability to be able to play at an appropriate level with the Americans, we will lose out on that completely.

If we lost out on that, we lose out on access to the very leading edge of doctrinal thought and technological development, so far not only as amphibious forces are concerned but maritime forces as a whole. In every one of those three dimensions, it is vital that we remain engaged.

Dr Roberts: It would be interesting to know what the US places more value on. There is some anecdotal evidence to suggest that, if you offered a US military commander either a British carrier or a British amphibious group, they would take the amphibious group any day. In fact, I hope you are getting written evidence on that basis from a former commander of mine.

The reality is that amphibious forces play to an area in which the Americans feel slightly weaker than in carrier power, where they can deliver 11 nuclear-powered carriers, each with 70-odd jets on board; we could provide, maybe in five years, something that might help them. However, in amphibious capability, we provide them with a land footprint—a clear signal of political investment in any intervention. That is a very different signal from that of carrier power. From the discussions I have had in DC this year, it strikes me that amphibious capability is actually a lot more critical to the special relationship than carrier power.

Major General Thompson: I lecture to the United States Marine Corps every year at their expeditionary warfare school, and they say exactly the same: the things we bring to the table—the amphibious kit and expertise—are terribly important to them. After all, they have so many carriers anyway that our one will not add much to the game at all.

Nick Childs: Could I beg to differ slightly on that? You are right that the US navy has more full-size carriers than the rest of the world put together, but they really struggle to meet their commitments at the moment. It is not the case that they have a surplus of aircraft carriers, which we have seen in the fact that they have gapped carriers in the Gulf. It is becoming increasingly difficult for them to maintain readiness; they are overstressing their carriers.

Judging which is the more critical capability between amphibious capability and carrier strike is a very difficult and delicate thing to do. It is testimony to the degree of value that the United States navy, in particular, puts into the regeneration of the UK's carrier capability that they essentially lent one of those hard-pressed aircraft carriers to the UK for a period of two weeks, just after Queen Elizabeth first set sail, in order for the nascent UK carrier strike team to be able to learn how to operate a carrier.

A ship that had just spent nine months on a hard-pressed operation against ISIS in and around the Gulf turning right at Gibraltar on its way



home was a not inconsiderable commitment, so far as the US is concerned. That bespeaks either the fact that they put huge value on this as an asset that can deliver an equivalent capability to fill those gaps in the future once it has regenerated, or a concern that the UK might not be able to step back up the strategic ladder of carrier capability without their help, or it could be a bit of both.

But I think they also viewed the whole concept, particularly of forward presence and maritime power, as a seamless whole. The amphibious capability is an important part of that and we have seen statements from US senior officers saying that that is also important; but saying this is more valuable than that—one isn't quite arguing on a pinhead there, but they are both critical capabilities as far as the US is concerned, in looking at maintaining its global commitments in an increasingly challenged environment.

- Q35 **Mrs Moon:** To bring you back to the Royal Marines, if I may—you do keep wandering off to amphibious capability—is it not also important, therefore, that our Royal Marines are trained and used to working alongside allies, in particular those who can defend our northern flank, which is increasingly vulnerable, in terms of the Norwegians and the Dutch? I know we have talked a lot about amphibious capability, but I am also very concerned that recent surveys of the Marines have shown quite a level of service dissatisfaction and unhappiness. We have all met the Royal Marines; these are not unhappy, disgruntled individuals—they are quite the opposite. So, why are we getting such negativity, why is there a reduction in morale, what should we do about it and how much is a lack of recognition of how critical they are playing a key role in that depression and low morale?

Lieutenant General Fry: The Royal Marines have been around for 353 years. In my judgment, the decade after 9/11 has been the time when they have been most successful in that entire history and given the greatest military utility to the nation. You can look at this in any number of different ways: look at the Royal Marines as a proportion of the national order of battle, or as a proportion of the naval order of battle; look at the number of senior appointments within Defence that the Royal Marines have gained during this time; look at the way in which 3 Commando Brigade and all the Royal Marines serving in special forces have engaged the enemy ever more closely. 3 Commando Brigade or the Royal Marines as a whole would defer to nobody in terms of combat capability and what they gave during the wars of 9/11. As I think you have identified, Royal Marines are fairly bright and intellectually curious; for example, 17% of other-rank Royal Marines have first degrees. So when they have gone through a period like that, when they think that they have led Defence, they then find that the heart is about to be ripped out of the capability which defines them and one in six or seven of them is going to be made redundant, it is hardly surprising that their morale plummets.

- Q36 **Mrs Moon:** We have talked a lot about what our capability gap would be if we lost our amphibious assault capability. Can we look at the dramatic hole in our defence capability if we lose 1,000 Royal Marines and if we



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lose their training and expertise in niche areas? They are absolutely vital to our defence. Can you say a little about that? It is an area where I worry sometimes—in the Ministry of Defence they are told, “You’ve got to lose this much budget”, because of a black hole. They don’t look at the capability, they look at the figures, and say “Oh, we could get fifty quid here and £100,000 there”, rather than, “What are we actually going to lose?” May we focus on that?

Lieutenant General Fry: Let us look at the facts and then look at the implications. In the last decade or so the Royal Marines have produced three Deputy Chiefs of the Defence Staff, one Vice-Chief of the Defence Staff and one Chief of Joint Operations—from an officer population that is a fraction of the warfare branch of the Royal Navy. So there is one bit of evidence of talent. As you know, because evidence has been given before, for 5% of the infantry in the British armed forces, it provides 44% of the nation’s special forces. So if you look at the top end of the Royal Marines, at the intellectual quality that comes out, you look at the military quality right the way through. If those two things are lost then the impact on Defence would be very considerable. But it is more than that. I think that Richard Barrons was giving evidence a few weeks ago and he talked about institutional failure. I do not for one second think that the Royal Marines will fail as an institution, but Government is inviting it to fail. It is inviting it to fail if it rips out its capability and more than decimates its manpower. Even the most loyal and dedicated force has a limitation to its loyalty under these circumstances. What we are actually proposing is to take 1,000 of the finest infantry in the world in order to backfill the manning of a capital ship. That seems to me to be just utter folly.

I think that the consequence overall is certainly the emasculation of defence at the top and the bottom ends and the possible compromise of one of the institutions that this country looks to. We really need as a country at the present time our beacons of excellence, because we are confused about where we are, and here we are, contemplating something that for 300 years has represented exactly that, purely as an accounting exercise.

Mrs Moon: Thank you.

Dr Roberts: I can’t believe I’m saying this, but you might be doing a disservice to those in the MoD. Whether it was a slightly flippant comment or not, I don’t think anyone really walks in to those decisions and sees the deletion of 1,000 Royal Marines as something where we can save 50 quid. I am sure they are taking it really, really seriously, in terms of cuts.

But I do think there is this sort of disregard for the amphibious capability, including the Royal Marines—for our own capability—and the disproportionate impact. Sir Robert expressed the very eloquent idea that what they deliver, including in their contribution to special forces, is huge. But in the future they will continue to be the Achilles warriors, the Myrmidons, the guys who were like ants coming off the first ship with Achilles at Troy, which Homer depicts beautifully. These guys coming ashore were not just the cutting edge, but the absolute spearpoint. The



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Royal Marines today are engaged with technology, experimentation and thinking about conflict in a completely different way from most other formations in the British Army, so to lose them not only would put us at a disadvantage in force structures, but might set us back a decade in terms of our military relationship with technology and the evolution of combat and how we fight in the future.

Mrs Moon: And we have already, since 2010, lost 700, so it's not just that we would lose 1,000; we would be losing nearly 2,000 since 2010. It is much more risky than I think we have been willing to face, and that does worry me. Yes, in one sense the comment about saving 50 quid was flippant, but I am very conscious that certainly in 2010 I spoke to senior people who were saying, "Oh well, we got rid of that capability because it took a big hit in the cuts that we were being asked to achieve," so people were looking at the figures rather than the capability. Thank you.

Q37 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I want to ask Nick and Peter about others—our allies or any other countries and what they are doing about amphibious platforms and capability.

Nick Childs: Peter has touched on this already, in terms of some of the big players, particularly China. There are, across a broad range of actors, significant investments in amphibious capabilities, for different reasons: everything from the fact that for many countries humanitarian aid and disaster relief is becoming a strategic mission all by itself and amphibious capability is important in that, to the ability simply to transport and move forces over long distances but also in that power projection capability that exists. So there is global investment in amphibious capability, but at different levels of ambition and of sophistication. Certainly within Europe you see that in terms of platforms. There are a number of new platforms either recently delivered or being delivered, which in some ways show the way to the future, I think at least in terms of naval platforms; and that is an investment in what are termed LHDs, which are essentially a combination of HMS Ocean aviation capability, a full-length flight deck and hangars and support facilities for aviation, and the floodable-well-deck ability to take heavy equipment of Albion and Bulwark. The French navy have invested in that capability; the Spanish navy; the Italian navy has just started construction of an LHD for their forces that is, essentially, half the size again of HMS Ocean. The Turkish navy is doing the same. You move further afield and those trends and developments are being seen there too. The Australian navy has just, essentially, reconstituted a task group capability built around two LHDs—so two of these combined amphibious assault ships and helicopter carriers—and is turning that into a significant capability, which is certainly of value, and fits into the Asia-Pacific dynamic of a relationship with the United States in particular.

Japan, too, is investing in constituting in a limited way an amphibious capability, in order to be able to project, and protect islands on which they are in dispute with China, in east China. So each of these countries sees the utility of amphibious capability in a particular way. South Korea is another that is developing a significant amphibious capability because of the very particular issues that it faces on the peninsula; but, again, two



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LHDs and, fundamentally, a brigade-sized amphibious landing force, they are putting together. So that is a broad picture, globally, of the kinds of developments you are seeing.

I would re-emphasise, though, in terms of what we are talking about on the naval platform side, re-imagining or imagining what the capability needs to be in the future, looking at investing in those capabilities in the longer term and, particularly, this combined platform may be the way to go in the future. For all that we have learned from the past and our own experiences about the right mix of shipping within our force structure, one might argue that, actually, even at its optimum, what we have and what we have had in terms of a collection of ships, going forward, is not, potentially, ideal; and maybe, because of the challenges of how you deliver amphibious capability in the future, combined capabilities around the aviation and the heavy floodable deck is the multi-purpose platform to go with in the future.

Dr Roberts: The Singaporeans can lift 10,000 troops, but we do not regard them as having an amphibious capability at all. They can move troops from one place to another, and I think a lot of the navies that we are seeing are after this aspiration; but if you go through the ability—you build the ships, which takes you maybe 20 years; then you build the expertise in operating them; then you put the soldiers on board, and if you really have an ambition you turn them into marines and you give this to them as their full-time job. That gets you to a certain level. You read those great books by Lord Keyes about how to develop an amphibious force, and Herodotus, and you pull all that great stuff through, but the reality is that you only really forge them into a full amphibious capability when they have been through combat.

Interestingly, the Sri Lankans were some of the people who had the most success with amphibious operations. When they were recapturing the north of their country, the Jaffna peninsula, they had some really bloody campaigns and lost a lot of really good people. It is about opposed beach landings, riverine operations, all the rest of the stuff that is far below what we regard as the sort of Private Ryan moment—divisions rolling across the beach and all the rest of that stuff. When you start to think about everything that this capability delivers when it is fully developed and combat-ready—riverine operations, river-crossing capability, patrolling, deep operations behind enemy lines, insertion—you start to develop a fully-rounded force. There are not many nations in the world that have that. It is a bit like having a nuclear deterrent. Once you have it, your place at the table is pretty much assured in military circles.

This level of capability is the most complex, difficult, challenging, risky and skilful, but also the most costly. This is not cheap. You are not just talking about equipping a man with twenty grand-worth of equipment to send him into a desert; you are talking about the ships, the aircraft and the platforms that take him there. That is not stopping all the other nations that Nick mentioned getting into the game. They want it, and they are



doing it in new ways. They are breaking all the orthodoxies we have about displacement craft and how many fit on a dock. They are doing it with wing-in ground-effect vehicles. They are doing it with hovercraft. All these things like drones, lift and autonomous resupply are on the basis of technology that can allow them to leap technological barriers, and they are generations different. They can make an advance in five years that has taken us 50 years to get to, and they are doing it at a pace that we are not catching up with. Speed and tempo are driving successful amphibious operations at the moment, and there is a difference between who is doing that and who is not.

Q38 Martin Docherty-Hughes: You are talking about breaking orthodoxies. We saw the article in the *FT* today about the use of the Mistral class should the Government decide to dispose of Bulwark and Albion. Some cynics think this is something of a double bluff to put pressure on the Government, but let's put the proposal out there. Is that a viable future option?

Dr Roberts: It would be an interesting mix. The carrier at that stage would have US Marine Corps jets on board before the UK capability was delivered, and we would have French ships with UK marines on board. When another nation is basing troops off your ship, you have a red card over what they can do when they deploy from your ship. The French effectively then have the lever over whether we can go or no-go for any amphibious operation we do, in the same way that we will be able to hold back American jets operating from the Queen Elizabeth for several years before our own jets arrive. It is a really incoherent force and force mix. There is a language barrier. There are command and control barriers, because we do not operate with the same systems. Command and control in amphibious operations is one of those ridiculously complex and difficult things to try to change. We are at different levels of force generation. We would be requiring their ships on one day and not on others. Who has responsibility?

Could it happen? Yes. Would it be a weaker force as a result? Undoubtedly.

Nick Childs: In terms of a long-term answer to how you deliver what we all regard as a critical strategic capability, it is not an answer to delivering those core elements of the capability. In the short term, in a situation in which we know HMS Ocean is going out of service anyway before carriers can come in even to fill as a stop-gap capability—and potentially we are talking about Albion and Bulwark going out as well—being able to co-operate and use those vessels and assets for a period of time strikes me as a valuable stop-gap in the way that things have happened in the past. The UK helped out the Dutch amphibious capability when they were regenerating their forces with new landing ships a few years ago.

In the future, frankly, given what the UK is trying to deliver in terms of maritime capability at the highest level and because numbers and resources are being squeezed all around, as we know, there will inevitably be more times when, to deliver at the highest level, even with the UK in



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the lead, we will require more partnerships. It will require more people gathering round the UK carrier to provide escorts and that sort of thing in the future. Greater partnership is one way of delivering a range of capabilities going forward, but in terms of delivering those core capabilities, if expeditionary maritime forces are going to be part of global Britain, saying, "Here is global Britain delivered by the French Navy" is not a strategic answer in the longer term.

- Q39 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Briefly, on the issue of core capabilities, I noticed in an article in the month's *Warships International Fleet Review*, which is not something I usually read on a regular basis, that many of our allies, including France and, as I think you mentioned, Nick, Australia, as well as Italy, are enhancing their amphibious capabilities. We all know that the Dutch, as we have mentioned previously, have recently invested in their Rotterdam class, for example. What are they seeing as important for investment that we are viewing as expendable?

Nick Childs: It is that broad utility of the force to cover a range of contingencies from immediate emergencies upwards. In an environment where uncertainty is greater, the ability both to deliver and to poise, posture and keep forces lingering that you can insert and, if necessary, withdraw—going back to what we were talking about at the beginning—is important when the littoral environment is becoming more and more complex.

I think there is a certain puzzlement. I am engaged with colleagues who see a certain dissonance in the messaging. There are messages about being more open and capable and having the ambition to engage further afield in future, including in the Asia Pacific region, and yet in Australia I hear colleagues saying, "But I also hear that you are thinking of essentially reducing your amphibious capability." Those two things do not add up, so in terms of the reputational element that we were talking about earlier, I hear and see people scratching their heads about just what is happening.

- Q40 **Chair:** Can any of you throw any light on any possible rationale that could be going on within either the Ministry of Defence or the capability review, and any reason other than financial savings why they might want to lose this capability?

Lieutenant General Fry: I am not sure that I can, but let me make an observation on the wider capability review that is going on at present. It seems to me that this is exactly the thing that we should be doing as a nation. Unless you look at all the instruments of national power, it is impossible to have a view on what strategy is. There is no point just looking at different dimensions of defence; defence is only one element of a strategy overall. Therefore, it seems to me entirely appropriate that this should rest around the office of the National Security Adviser. Whether the Cabinet Office has enough gas and capability to be able to do it might be a different issue, but I would recommend that the debate has to be elevated above the level of the Ministry of Defence.



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We had a conversation earlier where we were talking about decisions of grand strategic consequence being made by disaggregated decision makers within the Ministry of Defence: "Here is your lump of money, go and decide what to do with it." It seems to me that that is absolutely, fundamentally wrong. Decisions made about the future of national strategy have to be taken at the highest level of the Executive, not delegated down to somebody in Portsmouth, High Wycombe or anywhere else. We need to pitch our views upwards, not downwards. Therefore, Mr Chairman, to give you an explanation of what is going on in the Ministry of Defence is not really germane to the fundamental issue here.

Q41 Chair: Okay. So let's elevate the question, to use your terminology. What is going on in the NSC? Is there an argument other than the purely financial—for example, the vulnerability of a small number of key ships—that could be deployed in favour of losing this capability?

Lieutenant General Fry: I imagine that those discussions are taking place, but the burden of the evidence you have received today is that not only is there a huge weight of historical evidence, but there is a huge weight of contemporary evidence from the alacrity with which so many other nations are delivering amphibious capabilities at present. Every future projection suggests that technology and doctrinal changes in the area of amphibious operations will probably be more comprehensive than in any other warfare discipline.

If we get out of that, we are out of it, and we will not get back into something that is moving so quickly any time soon. That is the scale of the decision that we are making. If somebody within the National Security Council can gainsay the strategic logic of what I have just said, I would be fascinated to hear their argument.

Dr Roberts: I think there is a reason that they might be looking at: historically, we haven't changed the theatre entry capability of the UK armed forces for some time, despite the shrink in the remaining force structure. In essence, we retain two methods of conducting theatre entry: formations of 3 Commando Brigade and 16 Air Assault Brigade. 3 Commando Brigade do it by sea and 16 Air Assault Brigade do it by air.

One wonders now, with those two formations, which are expensive, high-readiness and provide a disproportionate number of benefits to UK armed forces—particularly special forces and others—whether we can afford to have two when the remaining structure of the armed forces has shrunk so considerably. If we are going to use what is now around 10,000 people across our land forces to deliver the remaining 60,000, is that a fair trade-off, or do we think that, in some way, we need to change the balance of investment?

Chair: Just comment very briefly, Nick, because that leads very nicely into a question that I know Leo has.

Nick Childs: On your question about the economies issue, one can see one accountancy point to this, which is that standing still is not an option



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so far as delivering this capability in the future is concerned. To deliver it in the context of the more hostile environment in which it is taking place will require further investment to maintain it as credible. It will require further investment in robotics. It will probably require things like V-22 tilt-rotors, rather than just helicopters. It will require significantly more capable, longer-range, faster deliverers of heavy equipment than the landing craft of now.

The question then becomes what the value of that is, and I think there would be a consensus here that there is value in investing in that capability going forward. That is the nub: there will have to be further investment in that capability to keep it credible at the war-fighting level, beyond just the managing of forces around the littoral that many others are satisfied with.

- Q42 **Leo Docherty:** Dr Roberts, briefly, is there an argument that the carriers could be used to deliver that amphibious capability? Could the Bay class vessels substitute for the Albion class vessels?

Dr Roberts: There is an argument for that.

- Q43 **Leo Docherty:** What is your judgment?

Dr Roberts: I think it is deeply flawed, for lots of reasons: that their command and control is not suited, and because of the number of delivery platforms that they can launch from, the type of accommodation available on board and even the design of them. The wonderful thing, if you have been on board HMS Ocean or Albion or Bulwark, is that they are not designed for normal people. They are designed for Royal Marines who carry ridiculous weights in their backpacks and carry heavy weapons as they walk through the ship, so even things like the ladders are not like you would normally find on merchant or normal naval ships. They are at a much shallower angle and have deeper treads to allow guys with bigger boots carrying enormous loads and weapons to walk up. They are designed so that, as you step on to the landing craft or the helicopter, you do it all together with your Jeep next to you for underslung loads or your ammunition pallets. All of it is absolutely designed around amphibious capability, and this is crucial to delivering it properly.

It has cost us a lot of money to get here. The investment in this is not only in pure dollars but in intellectual time and space. The Royal Marines have been thinking about this for 353 years and will continue to do so. It is really hard to get right, which is why so many people come to the UK and want to replicate the capability we have. In essence, there is an argument that they could do it, but they can't.

Nick Childs: Can I just put in my two penn'orth on that? The aircraft carriers are fabulous and have a huge deck with a huge hangar. In that sense, having, as part of the capability of the carriers, an ability to act in certain contingencies as an amphibious capability, and even as a hybrid capability with some jets and some helicopters and aviation, is an asset and is part of its broader utility for certain contingencies. But as Peter mentioned, it is not the same as a bespoke amphibious helicopter carrier,



let alone an LHD, because of the internals of the designs—the fact that even Ocean, without a deck, has the ability to accommodate not only marines but vehicles and the like. And while it can also supplement that bespoke capability by providing extra aviation and providing reach—being able to help with delivering forces from over the horizon by aviation—that is still not enough if you want to deliver a fighting formation that still requires heavy equipment providers as well.

That remains a really difficult nut to crack. The US Marine Corps is struggling with how it is going to be able to deliver all that, but certainly the US Marine Corps is not saying, “We need fewer amphibious specialist ships to do that”. They are saying, “We need more”.

Lieutenant General Fry: All you could deliver from a Queen Elizabeth class carrier is probably less than a commando group with what it stands up in. There is no combat sustainability; there is no mobility when it gets there—it will be a non-persistent presence.

So it will have none of the characteristics that are traditionally associated with amphibious force, but there is a bigger argument than that. What fleet commander is going to put what the Americans describe as a lucrative platform within weapon ranges of a hostile shore? It is inconceivable. The argument just doesn’t run.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Thank you very much.

Nick Childs: And to add to that, it can’t be the answer in an increasingly hostile environment to put more and more eggs into the one basket. Certainly, that is not the way the Americans, or indeed many others, are doing it. They are distributing more capability around their fleets in order to pose more problems for potential enemies, and certainly for opponents. But it is also to make those other core capabilities, including the carriers, more viable because you have got more things to worry about.

Q44 **Chair:** We have two more questions to come, from Martin and Mark, but before my tablet battery expires, I want to ask for your comments on a letter I received in January 2017 when—having raised on the Floor of the House the rumour that there was a cloud over the future of the Albion and the Bulwark—I had a letter from Harriett Baldwin, the Defence Procurement Minister. She said on 25 January 2017, “You asked about the long-term future of the Royal Navy landing platform dock class ships, HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark. There are no current plans to decommission the ships early, and I can reassure you that their out of service dates are 2033 and 2034 respectively”.

She went on to say, “As the high readiness ship since 2011, HMS Bulwark continues to provide a vital asset to the Royal Navy”, and she lists some of the ways in which that has been proven. Finally, she says, “HMS Albion has reached a significant milestone in her major refit in dry dock and is programmed to replace HMS Bulwark as the designated high readiness ship this year.”

So, as recently as late January, there appears to have been no such plan



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whatsoever. That was an unusually clear message of reassurance from a Minister; we don't often get them. Maybe as a result of my reading it out, we will get even fewer in the future.

Do you not find it strange that one could get a message of that sort in January, and here we are at the end of the year discussing the very scenario that that message was seeking to dispel?

Lieutenant General Fry: Well, it is beyond strange: it would be completely incoherent.

Dr Roberts: But then again, incoherent is sometimes what the Ministry of Defence does very well.

Chair: A gold star in incoherence.

Dr Roberts: And in fact, the plans that were being circulated as part of this uber-secret capability review, and the measures that were being looked at by individual frontline commands, may not have made it to head office by that stage. Indeed, head office might have had some plans that won't have made it to frontline commands. So the degree of incoherence between all these separate operating bodies comes together in a wonderful smorgasbord of options, and at some stage the decision must be taken. It seems ridiculous, I completely agree, that this kind of thing would happen and that the letter could be written. Unfortunately, it is the way the Ministry of Defence operates on occasion.

Major General Thompson: It is all part of the abdication of making strategic decisions at the very top.

Q45 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Sir Robert, you mentioned putting a carrier on the frontline. It is a lot in terms of the £3.1 billion platform. Also, when you have a carrier strike, you are starting off with one indigenous carrier, but you are trying to do it with two, so it becomes nigh on impossible. Peter, what do our allies around the world think about the UK reducing its amphibious capability?

Dr Roberts: To use very lazy language, they think we are mad. No one invests such an amount of national capital—intellectual, physical and monetary—in a huge capability and a huge number of ships—sailors, airmen, concepts, relationships—just to simply delete it on the basis of a review that might be a defence review, but without any of the coverage, discussion, or debate around it. It would do us tremendous danger in terms of our reputation as a thinking nation, as a rational actor in a military space, to make such a decision. It does not bear any relationship to the way we are talking about foreign policy or the threats that we have.

Q46 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** We have heard a wee bit about the Royal Marines assets in the south-west. RM Condor in Angus plays a vital part in warfare training. Is there anything you want to say about RM Condor?

Dr Roberts: It is not simply gone. We regard the Royal Marines as the amphibious capability, but they do far more than straight amphibious big ship to hostile land type stuff: the riverine capability, the force protection



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capability, the boarding capability, and the hot and high, which was why they were the first guys in in Anaconda in 2001. They do the swampy stuff, which is why they were well suited in '03, and again across their amphibious capability in Sierra Leone in 2000. And they do the very cold, very high north type stuff, which is not necessarily Arctic, but Arctic warfare in terms of north Norway. They provide all this capability in one formation. It is hard to think of another capability or formation in terms of a group of individuals who have such a broad array of responsibilities and expertise contained within such a relatively small group. Condor plays a vital part in that, as does the experimentation wing of 539 Assault Squadron Royal Marines.

The first people to do information exploitation in Her Majesty's armed forces were 30 Commando. They broke new ground. They changed the orthodoxies of how we think about exploiting information. They have been at the cutting edge of how we develop cyber as part of an integrated tool on the battlefield: what payloads they want to use to help them defeat an adversary. These guys are right at the cutting edge, intellectually more than any other way, but also in their willingness to experiment, and that comes in Condor. It came recently in Taunton. They are right across the gambit of the corps' expertise. This is one of the reasons why, with this curiosity that Sir Rob mentioned, they reach the very highest levels of defence, because they are the brightest thinkers.

Chair: Phil, would you like to come in at this point?

- Q47 **Phil Wilson:** Do you believe the individuals responsible for the current capabilities review have sufficient understanding of the importance of our amphibious capability? Do you think they understand it? Or do you think they do understand it and it just comes down to money?

Dr Roberts: I would wonder how often and how regularly the individuals conducting the capability review—I can't call it a defence review, because it is not—have war-gamed some of these scenarios that we are talking about. It is all very well to sit down with paper and try and draw up a graph of what the capabilities might look like, but until you have war-gamed it right from theatre entry right through to nuclear escalation and nuclear de-escalation, then you start to understand from that war game the utility of amphibious forces armour, urban operations, surface compactness, ballistic missile defence, that whole array. If you have not experienced that, it is very difficult to engage in the intellectual process, because you can understand the theory, but you might not actually get it. You might not be able to fit it into a dynamic that allows you to mentally contextualise what it is used for. So I think this one of the areas that would tell how well placed they are.

I am sure they are exceptionally bright people—they must be, in the Cabinet Office—but whether they can place this in the context of wider defence would be very interesting to see. For me, one of those key indicators is: how many war games have they done in the last year? Over what scenarios, and what coverage? How much is the National Security Adviser personally engaged in this? Does he wake up late at night,



thinking, “Oh my goodness, we don’t have a ballistic missile capability for the UK”? These are the kind of ways we need to judge whether they are engaged: not whether they are bright enough or whether they have read the subject, but whether they have engaged in the activity that broadens their experience into something contextual.

Lieutenant General Fry: Can I offer some thoughts on that? I do not think they know, but it is not their fault—how could they possibly know? How could any small group of people have a working knowledge of all of the capabilities that they are looking at the present time? That is a completely impossible manifesto to award to anybody. So what you have to look at is not the capacity or the predilections of the individuals involved; you have got to look at the quality of the process that they are involved in.

I am sorry to say it again, but I do think that this is not simply about conducting a mass audit and then taking a little bit of this and a little bit of that. It is setting it within the context of what our strategic ambitions are as a nation. Now, Mark Sedwill seems to me to be admirably qualified to do this work—as well qualified as anyone else in the public inventory at the present time—but what he should not be doing is making strategic decisions on behalf of the executive function of Government. That is your business. To actually say, “Are they right or wrong?” is, I think, in all honesty, missing the point.

Chair: We have an ongoing campaign to get Mark Sedwill in front of this Committee, and we do not intend to stop until we succeed.

Q48 **Leo Docherty:** Very briefly, there might be an argument that the threat has changed. This review is supposedly in response to increased threat. The National Security Adviser may make an argument that the cyber-threat or that sort of threat has increased and that there is an argument therefore to reinforce that capability. What would be your assessment of that?

Dr Roberts: I think he might be absolutely right, but he cannot look at the threat unless there is a change to the foreign policy, and there is no change in the foreign policy that sets a context for this national security capability review, which is why it cannot be a defence review. The situation has obviously changed, with Brexit, Trump in the White House, a different financial outlook, a big black hole in defences, a threatening Russia and a massively changed picture with China, so we have a very different security environment now going forward.

Q49 **Leo Docherty:** On that note, given that we have got a capability review that is looking at options to reduce conventional capabilities, how would you characterise that?

Lieutenant General Fry: No, that is completely the wrong conclusion.

Q50 **Leo Docherty:** I am saying that. How would you characterise that?



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Lieutenant General Fry: Well, I characterise it like this. You just posited the fact that there is an increase to the threat, so how does reducing capability come out as the logical answer?

Q51 **Leo Docherty:** That is my point. So how would you characterise a review if that—

Lieutenant General Fry: What I would say is that if there is an increase in threat, then the provision to meet the threat needs to be increased.

Q52 **Leo Docherty:** I agree. So if there were any other outcome, how would you characterise that review, in one word?

Lieutenant General Fry: Perverse.

Q53 **Chair:** So, in other words, we are told that there is an intensifying threat. Therefore, we have got to have a capability review, but, because nobody is willing to challenge the overall sum of money allocated to those capabilities, we are being told that if we increase any capability in one direction, we have to cut a capability in another. Is that not a fair summary of where we are?

Lieutenant General Fry: I think it is a fair summary, and it is egregiously stupid.

Chair: Yes, exactly.

Major General Thompson: It forgets that the enemy, or potential enemy, will dictate what you need to spend on defence. That is what we are actually talking about, and that is what you were suggesting.

Chair: Yes, but unfortunately by the time we find out what he is dictating, it is often too late to make the investment.

Q54 **Mr Francois:** One for Sir Robert about the process, and then one other. You are right in what you say about the fact that ultimately this is a decision for Government and a decision to be taken by Ministers. Is there not a risk in the way that the review is constructed that, in blunt terms, the MoD will sound lots of warnings about the dilution of this capability, what it means and what we lose, but at the end of the day the MoD will just get outvoted at the NSC table?

Lieutenant General Fry: Yes, I think that that is probably eminently possible. On the quality of the process: this should not be about a capability review; it should be about a strategic review. If the threats are increasing, the global context within which we operate is changing. Brexit changes so many things. It seems to me that a capability process, without a strategic context within which to operate, is utterly meaningless.

Q55 **Leo Docherty:** As a very brief aside, if I may: in your judgment, therefore, is the 2015 SDSR still valid?

Lieutenant General Fry: If this current round is being conducted on a change of threat, no. If it is so demonstrably different, we need to look at it again. That starts with a view of the national strategy that we want to



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prosecute. From the national strategy you derive conclusions about capabilities—not the other way around.

- Q56 **Chair:** Did it not used to be the case that the MoD would make its representations to the Cabinet, and the Cabinet would decide the strategy and the amount of resources? Was it not to set up the National Security Council that, in a sense, the strategy has now gone to the National Security Council, and the MoD can be outvoted on the National Security Council, while the politicians are setting the limits on the money but are not actually formulating a strategy? Is there a disconnection of that sort?

Lieutenant General Fry: National strategy can never be abdicated by the highest levels of the executive function of Government in this country. To say that the National Security Council now owns that in some way is disingenuous and possibly duplicitous.

- Q57 **Chair:** So was it a mistake to set up the National Security Council—

Lieutenant General Fry: No.

- Q58 **Chair:** Hang on—let me finish the question. Was it a mistake to set up the National Security Council, given that I do not think anyone would seriously suggest—although I do not think the minutes are available yet—that strategy is being set by the Cabinet?

Lieutenant General Fry: No, I don't think it was in any way the wrong thing to do. I said already that I think we have to have a process in this country—maybe a single centre—that looks at all the instruments of national power. Trying to create coherent strategy without doing that is utterly impossible. However, any politician who hides behind the National Security Council and says, "It's them what done it, nothing to do with me, guv!" is being generally duplicitous.

- Q59 **Chair:** So if the politicians have to really shoulder responsibility for what comes out of the National Security Council, the only body of politicians that can do that, presumably, is the Cabinet.

Lieutenant General Fry: I think you have led me elegantly to that conclusion, Chair. Yes.

- Q60 **Chair:** Okay. And are they doing that?

Lieutenant General Fry: It seems not, from every bit of this conversation.

- Q61 **Mr Francois:** This review will look at cyber and a variety of issues. Do you think that it is giving enough emphasis to peer-on-peer threats as well, or do you think they are regarded as less sexy, old school and that therefore there is a risk that the review will get the waiting room?

Lieutenant General Fry: In my opinion, if you want to understand cyber warfare in the 21st century, look at air warfare in the 20th century. Here was something that came out of nowhere and by whenever it was that Baldwin made the statement, "The bomber will always get through", we



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always assumed that air operations would dominate warfare in the future. They didn't. What has happened in the period since then is that they've become integrated into the full joint environment. That will happen to cyber over time. This extraordinary celebrity that it has at the present moment is a passing phenomenon. Understand it in that historical context.

Nick Childs: It is not a binary issue, cyber versus peer-on-peer. The peers are investing in cyber in a significant way and see that as part of their whole approach to conflict, campaigning and warfare. They are also investing in all those hard power capabilities, whether China or military power in Russia coming back. That is the context in which you need to look at these things. It is not cyber versus peer-on-peer; it is a broad spectrum. They are investing across the board, so it would be a false approach to say we either deal with the peer-on-peer threat or look at these more nebulous capabilities where we see at least some infrastructure problems, like cyber and so on.

Q62 **Mr Francois:** In fairness, my question was "Have we got the balance right?"

Lieutenant General Fry: No. I think we are fascinated. We are drawn like a moth to a flame to what is happening now, without seeing it as part of an overall balance that we should try to put together in order to look at the strategic challenges that we face.

Q63 **Mr Francois:** Okay, I tend to have a lot of sympathy with that. Lastly, we have talked a great deal today about the Royal Marines. For a force of under 7,000 personnel now, they seem to retain a tremendously strong place in the public's affection. Why do you think that is, and do you think it is likely to pertain?

Major General Thompson: I think it is because they have always delivered. They have always delivered quicker than people have expected, with less whingeing and complaint, and they have always got it right, or jolly nearly always. That is the reason. Also, they are very high-quality people. As you know, when you go meet them, you realise how high-quality they are, and they are actually very inexpensive, because they stay longer, on the whole, than their Army contemporaries. The money you spend on their training is earned over and over again.

Lieutenant General Fry: Mrs Moon made the observation that there was a big drop in Royal Marine satisfaction levels, and she is absolutely right, but I note that their current level brings them around to where everybody else is. That is the difference between where they have been in the past and where they are today, and it seems to me that that premium runs through everything that they do.

Mr Francois: Thank you.

Chair: As in our morning session on European defence policy, we have done an hour and three quarters, almost to the minute. We have covered a huge range of related subjects. I can only thank the entire panel of witnesses for a most fascinating insight into the topic under discussion. I



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thank my fellow members of the Committee for the double effort that we have put in today.