

# For Want of a Nail, the Kingdom was Lost<sup>1</sup>

Vice-Admiral (Ret'd) Sir Jeremy Blackham



Credit: Admiral Jerome Lessard / SCS-OP/TTC / Canadian Armed Forces

*A Royal Canadian Air Force member moves pallets of COVID-19 response supplies to/from a CC-177 Globemaster transport aircraft during Operation Globe 2020 in Panama, 25 July 2020.*

This article deals with aspects of readiness for crisis – any crisis. It will focus on the United Kingdom, but the discussion has broad applications. I believe COVID-19 is a wake-up call for all governments. A global pandemic was No. 2 on the UK's national risk register at the time of the COVID-19 outbreak and so one might have expected preparations to be particularly well advanced. They clearly were not. Since my experience lies within the defence and security field, the article focuses on that sector, but the principles and problems identified are applicable to a greater or lesser extent to other forms of public business.

I have previously written on the dangers of basing strategy and political actions on a misunderstanding of the real, as opposed to the theoretical, capability of military and security capabilities. In this article I want to take that discussion a little further.<sup>2</sup>

During the Cold War the UK used to conduct an annual NATO-wide exercise known alternately as Wintex and Hilex. These exercises, which required fairly full permanent manning of war headquarters, ran 24/7 over a period

of two or three weeks. They incorporated a scenario which started with an increasingly dangerous period of tension between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, leading to conventional war and then escalating through tactical nuclear use up to the point of the release of nuclear-armed ballistic missiles. Headquarters were exercised in mobilizing reserve or lower readiness units, deploying them to operational deployment positions, testing communications and logistic support, taking control of industry, calling up reserve personnel and so on, testing all the procedural elements of such activity. Players took the roles of senior political figures for the purpose of seeking political approval of all these measures, and the real holders of senior military command posts played their own roles, insofar as their real day-to-day operational commitments permitted.

Having participated in several of these exercises, I realise that what we never tested was the actual reality of such measures. Did the people we called up actually exist? Did we have on our shelves the additional stores, munitions,

etc., that we were enthusiastically supplying to the front lines? Were the lower readiness units we were bringing forward actually manned and did we know where the personnel required were? Did we really have the stockpiles we were using? Was industry actually in a position to supply the additional requirements we were deploying? And so on. It quickly became clear to me that the answer in almost every case was NO. We were playing a game of fantasy and then feeling that we had shown that we were ready for war.

When I was Assistant Chief of Naval Staff (ACNS) in the mid-1990s,<sup>3</sup> I decided to run a Royal Navy (RN) only exercise, called Regeneration, to be played over a longer period, which was based on a similar scenario to that of Wintex. The difference was that this time when personnel were mobilized, they had to be named; we had to know where they were and whether they were fit. When extra stores or munitions were required, someone had to go to the appropriate depot and actually see them, or have a date by which industry could supply them. Units brought forward had to be seen to be in a fit operational state, or a plan to achieve higher readiness actually agreed and the capacity to do so demonstrated. I could go on. The exercise proved to be so difficult that we had to terminate it early. Readers will not be surprised to learn that the answers were, to say the least, scary.

Even so, there were still things we did not test. What, for example, would happen if the supply lines, which were increasingly global in nature and operated on a 'just-enough/just-in-time' basis, were interrupted by events related to the crisis? What would be the effect of a decision not to stockpile key items but rather to surge production or purchase all of a sudden in the midst of a vast increase in demand from several countries simultaneously? What would happen if states on which we depended for materials decided to give priority to their own needs, and we had no indigenous source of manufacture or supply? What would happen if the states which had become our principal suppliers turned out to be on the other side in a crisis?

You will immediately recognise some of what happened in the UK and elsewhere during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in respect of personal protective equipment (PPE), even when the vast majority of states were on the same side. In 2016 the National Health Service (NHS) was subjected to a stress test to assess its readiness to deal with a global pandemic. To what extent were things in the UK made worse during the pandemic crisis by the fact that this exercise was conducted? Conducting this stress test was assumed by the establishment – and, to be fair, by the World Health Organization (WHO) – as proof that we were well prepared but in fact the exercise highlighted



*Members of 1 Canadian Field Hospital set up flooring for the Mobile Expandable Container Configuration during Exercise Collaborative Canuk at Canadian Forces Base Kingston on 9 September 2015.*

some serious shortcomings. Despite finding some major gaps, no investment to plug them appears to have been made. The report and its recommendations were neither published nor actioned.

As we can see from this example of the NHS, the problem is not confined to the Ministry of Defence. It may well be government-wide. In 2001 a serious outbreak of Foot and Mouth disease in cattle caught the Agricultural ministry napping. I had good reason to know that no adequate plan existed, and the army had to be brought in to sort out the logistics, while the disease continued to spread.

The growth of globalization, whilst bringing hugely increased wealth to many states and individuals, has meant we increasingly rely on 'someone else' to make the required products more cheaply. A global supply chain has

*Credit: Cpl. Mark Scholombs & CDSB Garrison, Petawawa Imaging*

been created, fine-tuned to the just-enough/just-in-time philosophy, which allows companies to avoid investment in stock holding and to acquire one day's worth of consumption every day whilst taking advantage of lower wages in other parts of the globe, and allowing their own indigenous industries to collapse. The desire for profit for some has trumped the assessment of risk for all. Private greed may have trumped national interest; and at times this wealth was used to persuade political parties to accept this paradigm.

But there were always warnings. The blockade in 2000 of oil refineries in UK by striking tanker drivers, operating a fleet of tankers precisely sized to just-enough/just-in-time dimensions, almost brought the country to its knees. The just-in-time strategy collapsed rapidly under this kind of pressure. The threat of even temporary closure of the Strait of Hormuz would almost certainly lead to immediate petrol rationing as the UK knows from its experience during the Suez crisis of 1956. Yet the UK is proposing after Brexit to reduce its emergency fuel stocks to a level below the EU-directed levels. British policy of outsourcing offshore energy needs has led to several near misses in that during extreme conditions overseas companies will usually be bound to serve their own countries first. How much more difficult might it be to obtain supplies in a major security crisis?

It gets worse. Despite a brave attempt in 2006 by Lord Drayson, then Minister for Defence Procurement, to create a UK defence and security industrial strategy giving the country at least 'national industrial sovereignty' over some key capabilities, nothing has been done to ensure that this is so. Instead, the UK has increased its dependence on potential enemies for huge swathes of its information technology (IT) and related capabilities. This is an area which of course spreads far beyond immediate defence and security arrangements and has tentacles deep into the lives of almost all ordinary citizens. In this case, there is at least some reason to believe that the UK government has specifically decided to ignore the warnings it has received.<sup>4</sup>

The UK has also in many areas either abjured stockpiling strategic items or failed to replace them when they have become time expired on the assumption that surge production, or at least surge purchase, will be possible in a crisis. For that reason, we have in some areas allowed our home industry to collapse in pursuit of cheaper prices in other countries. But suppose that the crisis is an international or even a global crisis in which there is intense competition for the same supplies and those states that manufacture the item feel compelled first to meet their own needs before those of other customers. What then? Should we be thinking beyond simple cost issues in deciding what



*Container cranes overlook Burrard Inlet in Vancouver on 3 September 2018. Despite the immense global infrastructure established to enable maritime trade, much of it is structured around the 'just-enough/just-in-time' mode of supply.*

Credit: Timothy Choi



Credit: Niel Owen via Geograph.org.uk under CC BY-SA 2.0 license

Grass mounds cover fuel tanks at the defunct Flax Bourton underground fuel depot in this March 2014 photo. It was part of the UK's Government Pipelines and Storage System, built to store aviation and other fuels during the Cold War.

industry to retain? But, of course, any industry needs to be continuously fed with orders if it is to survive and this can be expensive.

And what happens if producers of major military components or weapons are allowed to stop production? In the case of the UK's T42 anti-air warfare (AAW) destroyers' main armament, Sea Dart, we purchase a stock of missiles calculated on the known annual expenditure of practice firings across the planned life of the ship class, and its numbers. But what if the weapon production line closes? In this case, the UK significantly extended the life of the T42-class destroyer in order to save costs by delaying its successor, the Type 45, thus increasing peacetime usage and allowing missiles to deteriorate beyond utility. As a result, the RN became unable to embark full outfits of weapons to operational ships. Fortunately, no crisis occurred which required the expenditure of a significant number of missiles; experience teaches us that weapon expenditure in conflict is always greater than anticipated.

One might compile a long list of examples, but much more important is the question of what to do about it, and how to break the current paradigm. Let me start with a theorem which I believe can be shown to be true by many examples. In general, prevention or preparation either to avert or to meet a crisis is cheaper in both blood and treasure than mounting huge efforts to deal with it after the crisis occurs. Losing large numbers of people or equipment or emerging from a crisis in poor shape is likely to bring highly disagreeable consequences. One of the key factors in deterrence is to understand that because an item is never used against the threat for which it is designed does not necessarily mean that you should not provide it since its provision may prevent, or ameliorate the event you wish to avoid. For example, nuclear deterrence rests absolutely on this principle, although in that

particular instance there are other important factors to be considered. Simplistic criteria such as 'we haven't used this for 10 years, so we don't need it' will obviously not meet the circumstances of a global pandemic, or an unexpected conflict.<sup>5</sup>

The issue is not, however, simply whether we should or should not stockpile items. Should we, for example, preserve the ability to manufacture crucial items for ourselves rather than hope to be able to increase our imports of a particular item in a crisis? This leads to the question of which are the relevant items. Should we, where possible, maintain production lines in reserve so that they can be re-activated? Which production lines can be switched off and then switched on again *ad lib*? What is the opportunity cost of doing this and how do we select the relevant items? And when we, after due consideration, decide to use offshore suppliers, how should we choose them? Would sovereignty of manufacture ensure supplies but make them unaffordable? The question is rather would it increase the chances of a successful outcome in whatever military or security campaign was being waged, and is the cost justified by the price of failure?

None of these questions is easy to answer, but that cannot be a reason for shirking the responsibility. Here we enter the realm of strategy and of the estimation of strategic risk, and the premium we are prepared to pay to mitigate or obviate that risk. There are several categories of risk. There are those contingencies which, while very serious, do not appear very likely and moreover will by their nature take time to develop. They might be managed on the basis of taking a risk about the level of stockpiles required. Thus supporting industries with regular orders may not be necessary if, but only if, they can be obtained and brought into active service within the likely warning time. For example, some platforms and some already

developed technologies might be obtained in that time; others like a nuclear deterrent cannot and must therefore be maintained continuously.

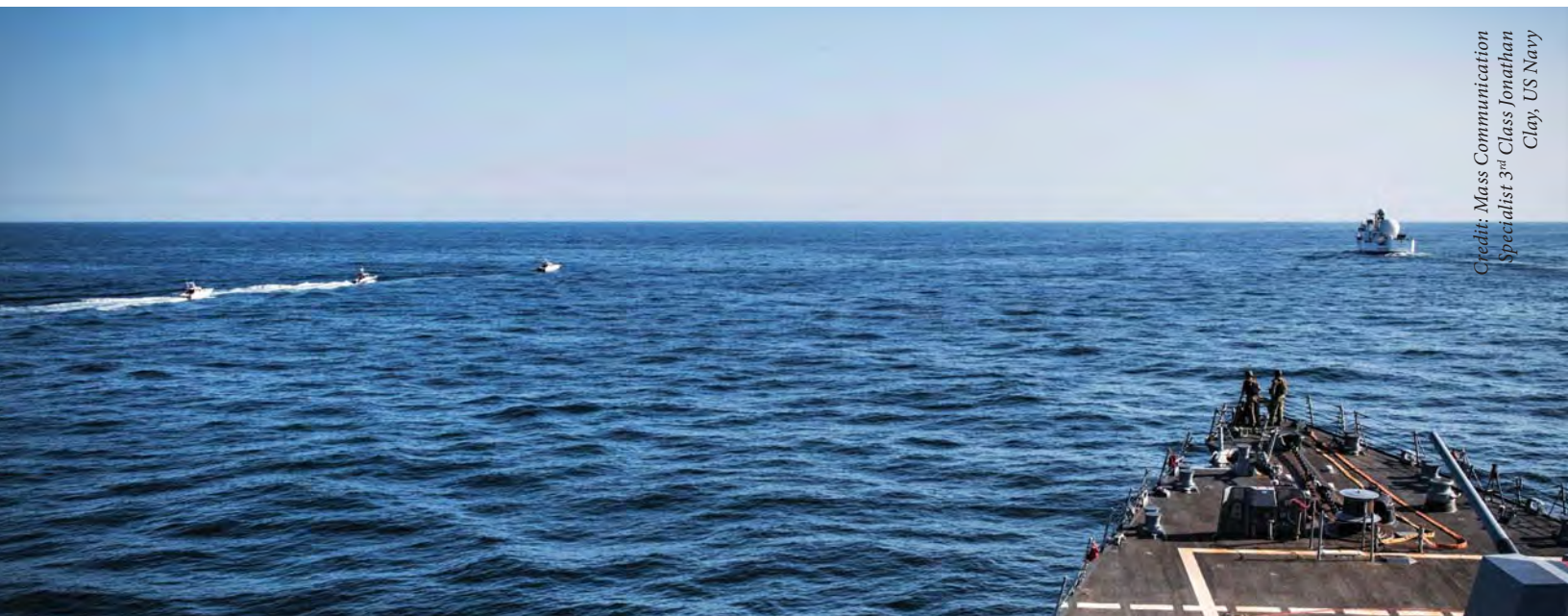
Other contingencies may be less threatening but much more likely. For these, some capabilities may be regarded as required in any combat, and so need to be permanently maintained at some agreed level. And there will a range of contingencies in between these two extremes when judgments must be made between the likely warning time and the size of reserve stock to be held. You might have to accept supplies after operations were actually underway, or delay the operations. You might decide that you have other less important stores and reset your purchasing priorities, or rely on other states to assist you. This last clearly needs careful mutual coordination ahead of any operation.

Further obvious questions arise over manning, training, readiness, sourcing of items to be purchased, etc. To what extent, and at what level of training and availability, and above all at what notice, must the capacity to generate these resources, by definition in excess of the capabilities required for normal peacetime operations (if such a thing still exists), be maintained? It is, in this context worth recalling that in 1982, when the UK armed forces found themselves ordered to go to war against Argentina, the operation was able to get underway swiftly. This was because there was still, since it was taking place during the Cold War, a reserve of almost all the necessary resources which allowed a substantially augmented force to be put together quickly to deal with an unforeseen crisis. Even then the force had expended almost all its ammunition

when the surrender came. Moreover, the UK had at that time the defence industry to commence replacing lost units and platforms more or less immediately. This is less the case today. The UK is now in a situation where any significant platform losses will leave it much more vulnerable for a considerable period after a conflict, even if it wins. But the Falklands experience is something of a red herring. What is relevant is whether we, or any state, could assemble and sustain a sufficient force fit to do what is necessary at very short notice in the event of a sudden and unforeseen crisis today. Your answer to that question will tell you a great deal.

I have listed examples of what I see as a challenging intellectual and management problem in a world which looks, post-COVID-19, likely to be even more unstable and potentially dangerous than before the pandemic. I must now try to pull these together.

Of course, there is no single universal answer to all this. I cannot answer the detailed questions for each individual country. It will depend on their national vision and ambition, their confidence in the reliability of any alliances or trade agreements they may have and their assessment of potentially hostile states. It will depend too on the strength of all the links in a supply chain of trained people, facilities, stores and spares, fighting equipment and munitions, fuel, food, etc., when each of those links may be under great pressure from the course of events, and some states in the chain have a different view of things. It will depend on the foresight of all those involved in the process both now and at the time of the crisis when it may be too late to address serious deficiencies.



Credit: Mass Communication Specialist 3<sup>rd</sup> Class Jonathan Clay, US Navy

Three Iranian patrol craft, left, pass near the ocean surveillance ship USNS *Invincible*, right, as USS *Jason Dunham* provides escort through the Strait of Hormuz.



Credit: CPT J. Scott Detweiler, US Army National Guard

A US Air Force airman manoeuvres a forklift through the Strategic National Stockpile Warehouse, 27 August 2020, in Colchester, Vermont, while supporting Vermont's COVID-19 control efforts.

There may, however, be certain common principles, not all of which are comfortable. If we have learned anything from the COVID-19 crisis, it is that preparation for foreseeable crises is essential, and *ad hoc* measures to repair the gaps after the crisis has broken are likely to be less effective, much more expensive, have widespread negative consequences and may create more human casualties. Democratic politicians must face the need to make difficult and unpopular decisions to invest in the deterrence or mitigation of potentially dangerous events. Deterrence and mitigation measures will need to rise in the order of public expenditure priorities. This almost certainly requires a domestic political consensus which many democratic countries find difficult to achieve. It will require some very plain and clear explanations of what is needed, and why, to deal with foreseeable contingencies. Here the COVID-19 experience just might help us.

The particular questions and, of course the particular answers, will necessarily vary from state to state, but here are some which are particularly relevant to defence and security:

- What is our national ambition and what therefore constitute our enduring interests?
- Are we prepared to defend those interests? Would we let them go if we judged the price too high?
- What should our defence and security posture be and at what readiness?
- Have we got the wherewithal to equip and train the ready security forces identified in the previous question?
- What additional forces might we need and at what readiness?
- Do we have stockpiles or reasonably assured supplies at least for all foreseeable operations at the appropriate readiness?
- What equipment is so critical that we judge it nec-

essary to have our own manufacturing capability to ensure availability in extreme circumstances? Where can we sensibly take a risk?

Many of these types of questions will apply to contingencies other than defence and security threats. This is the realm of national contingency planning and it is not possible to provide a universal template for the solution. There may even be no solutions to some of the problems for some states, but this too is useful information to guide national policy and strategy formulation. Given the risks that face the next generation, both man-made and natural, it would surely be reckless to duck this vital issue. Clearly there are many questions that need to be answered regarding preparedness and logistics – and these would make for excellent topics for future research. 🍷

**Notes**

1. Anonymous poem, known and quoted in several slightly differing versions:  
 For want of a nail the shoe was lost.  
 For want of a shoe the horse was lost.  
 For want of a horse the rider was lost.  
 For want of a rider the message was lost.  
 For want of a message the battle was lost.  
 For want of a battle the kingdom was lost.  
 And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.
2. Vice-Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham, “Jam Yesterday and Jam Tomorrow, But Never Jam Today,” *Canadian Naval Review*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Fall 2019), pp. 32-34.
3. At that time the only Assistant Chief of the Naval Staff (ACNS) and effectively First Sea Lord’s chief of staff.
4. This is the case at the time of writing – early June 2020 – but there are now some signs that the government is rethinking.
5. Interestingly, virtually none of the conflicts, with the possible exception of the Second World War, in which the UK has been involved since the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were foreseen a mere two or three months before their outbreak, well within the decision-making time of even urgent operational requirements. The major exception is the Second World War and even that started several years before Hitler wished it.

*Vice-Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham is a retired Royal Navy officer with wide experience of ship and task group command, combined operations, and equipment policy and procurement. He is a frequent lecturer and contributor to relevant professional journals.*