



SECRETARY OF STATE

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6 March 2003

Dear David,

IRAQ: OPTIONS FOR EMPLOYMENT OF UK LAND FORCES

A side-effect of the continuing impasse over Turkey has altered the balance between US and UK land forces in Kuwait. This may result in UK forces playing additional "cutting edge" roles. Early warning of other US thinking on possible larger roles for UK land forces, in case rapid decisions are required.

Our original thinking for the utilisation of UK land forces in any military action against Iraq envisaged that they would enter Northern Iraq from Turkey. In the light of continuing problems in obtaining Turkish approval for the transit of land forces, Ministers agreed in January that UK land forces should deploy to Kuwait. Given our assumptions at that stage about the timing of the start of a ground campaign and our land forces' likely readiness relative to the in-flow of US land forces, we envisaged that the primary role of 16 Air Assault Brigade and 7th Armoured Brigade would be to hold ground behind the advancing US formations.

These assumptions have been overtaken by events:

- problems have delayed the deployment of the US Army's 4th Infantry Division to southern Turkey. Because this ties up shipping, it has in turn delayed the deployment of other US land forces to Kuwait.
- Our two light brigades, 3 Commando Brigade Royal Marines and 16 Air Assault Brigade have now achieved their full operating capability; 7th Armoured Brigade is currently expected to do so by about 18 March.

Sir David Manning KCMG
10 Downing Street

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Although the timing of the start of military action remains uncertain, a sizeable proportion of the UK land package is now likely to be in a position to participate in combat operations from the start of the ground campaign.

As a result, 1 (UK) Division is now likely to represent a higher and more significant proportion of the overall combat power available in the early stages of the ground campaign: for example, on current assumptions, it is likely to contain nearly 30% of the available tanks.

It is clearly important that the US plan makes best use of the assets available. The Defence Secretary and the Chiefs of Staff judge that it would not be wise at this late stage to seek a major revision to the US plan. Nonetheless, the plan could make better use of some of the niche capabilities in 1 (UK) Division at the cutting edge of the campaign in South-Eastern Iraq: for instance, by providing an engineering capability to bridge the Euphrates for the US Army's V Corps. Mr Hoon has agreed that we should encourage US commanders to identify such a niche role (or roles) for which our land forces are well prepared and equipped.

In parallel, the US are exploring a number of variations on their basic plan which would give land UK forces a greater role:

- In the event that the Iraqi regime collapses at an early stage, possibly even before the initiation of the ground campaign, the US might wish to include one of our light brigades in their response to stabilise the situation. Both 3 Commando Brigade and 16 Air Assault Brigade are sufficiently ready to be tasked for such a role.
- The use of 7th Armoured Brigade to take part in manoeuvre operations north of the currently defined UK Area of Operations in the Southern Eastern corner of Iraq, possibly in a decisive phase around Baghdad.

By definition, "early collapse" scenarios could arise at any time. Moreover, as any military campaign unfolds, new requirements may emerge to which we should try to be ready to respond. But if the US do propose to involve 7th Armoured Brigade in decisive manoeuvre operations beyond South-Eastern Iraq, that will raise a number of issues. In particular:

- Logistic (including medical) support. The land package agreed in January contained less integral logistic support than the package previously envisaged for operations in Northern Iraq, primarily because the US had agreed to provide significant assistance in this respect. 7th Armoured Brigade would need an assured US logistics "tail" if it were to operate further north than currently planned.

- Handling of "Day After" operations. At the beginning of Phase IV ("Day After") operations, 1 (UK) Division would initially find itself spread across two different areas at once. While 7th Armoured Brigade was engaged in combat operations around Baghdad, 1 (UK) Division would have only its two light brigades available to deal with any immediate problems in South-Eastern Iraq. At the very least, we would need US assurances that they would facilitate a rapid re-adjustment at the earliest opportunity, to allow 7th Armoured Brigade to rejoin the rest of 1 (UK) Division.

Against this background, the Defence Secretary and the Chiefs of Staff agreed that we should not actively seek this sort of wider role, but that we should be prepared to consider any unsolicited US requests on their merits.

We will provide further advice in due course on the outcome of our discussions with the US on these issues, including our resulting assessment of the viability of the overall US military plan. But it is likely that decisions may need to be made very rapidly.

I am copying this letter to Simon McDonald (FCO), Mark Bowman (HMT) and to Desmond Bowen (Cabinet Office).

Yours
Peter

P D WATKINS
Private Secretary