

# GR109 Thirty years on: reflections on CVA-01 versus TSR2

by Dr Jeffrey Bradford

**This essay was written during the 1997/8 Strategic Defence Review. Its analysis remains salient today**

*'This is a particularly difficult time to write about the future of aircraft carriers owing to the Government defence review which is now considering defence commitments' - Admiral Gretton, RUSI 1965.*

## Introduction

What purpose does military strategy serve in times of relative international calm? This essay seeks to address just such a question in the light of the current interest shown in emphasising Britain's maritime strategy over the continental commitment as part of the Strategic Defence Review process. In order to achieve this the paper will focus upon the implications of strategy on the procurement of major systems such as the aircraft carrier.

In time of conflict strategy provides a warm, cosy feeling for the government of the day that there is a grand design for the employment of the armed forces to achieve national political objectives. This is described in official Royal Naval thinking as military strategy, 'that component of national or multinational strategy, presenting the manner in which military should be developed and applied to achieve national objectives or those of a group of nations'<sup>1</sup>

For the military strategy in wartime is a serious issue regarding the deployment of forces, and sequencing of actions toward the successful completion of a campaign designed to meet the political imperatives of the day. Distinct from military strategy this concept is defined by the Royal Navy as the Military Strategic Level or, 'the level of command and planning for armed

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<sup>1</sup> Royal Navy. *The fundamentals of British Maritime Doctrine* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office 1995). Glossary. p. 225.

conflict (level of war) at which military resources are applied to achieve military objectives' <sup>2</sup>

However what is the real purpose of strategy when potential aggressors are diffuse, ill defined and conflict far away ? Clearly the armed forces can generate contingency plans for a near mechanistic employment of forces in a conflict which comes as a bolt from the blue. The United States Navy's Plan Orange devised in 1911 was just an example of the type <sup>3</sup> At this time though the Japanese were recognised as a major naval power and a possible future threat against the United States. Therefore they were accorded respect by the Naval establishment and its planners.

However planning in peacetime not only is focused toward potential enemies. Allies also are subject to similar scrutiny. At the turn of the last century United States Naval planners were preoccupied with Great Britain's Navy because 'the Royal Navy was the toughest opponent and England was America's most formidable overseas economic competitor' <sup>4</sup>

### **The late 1990's**

Today though there is no clear challenge for Britain and whilst Russia deserves respect as maintaining a residual significant defence capability there have been several demonstrable moves that at least for the immediate future indicate she is not regarded as a threat <sup>5</sup> This leaves us therefore with a dearth of aggressors to plan for and none likely to undertake an assault on these islands unless one was to take into account our cross-channel neighbours. This is not a new occurrence. A War Office report of 1932 made the assertion that, 'at present the enemy cannot be defined and this absence

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* Glossary. p. 225.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of Plan Orange see Hagan, K J. *This people's Navy: The making of American sea power* (New York: Free Press 1991). Ch. 8, pp. 238 - 239.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* Ch. 7. pp. 204 - 205. British incursions into Venezuela from British Guiana in July 1895 led to a confrontation which ended with Britain seeking a negotiated settlement for challenging the 'Monroe Doctrine' of US hegemony over North and South America.

<sup>5</sup> Not least completion of CFE and various nuclear related treaties and protocols including START II, the Partnership for Peace initiative, and the NATO-Russia Founding Act signed following a recent NATO Summit.

of a basis to the problem adds greatly to the difficulties of its solution’<sup>6</sup> It could be suggested that the defence of Britain in the cold war has become the defence of British interests at the end of the second millennium.

As an observer, an emerging theme of the past couple of years has been a resurgent interest in building a more flexible, readily deployed instrument of military power to prosecute the national interests of Britain. Clearly force structures and procurement relate to strategy and in this case maritime strategy. This is not a recent phenomenon. The last period in the recent memory of aficionados of British defence policy was the early 1960s leading up to the Defence Review of 1966.

### **The 1960’s**

With the passing of three decades much material salient to the defence activity of the times has been released by the Public Record Office enriching our knowledge of events. This period has much to offer us today in thinking about the role of strategy in times of peace to which the paper shall now turn.

The role of the aircraft carrier was absolutely clear in the two decades prior to the 1960s. It was the new naval decisive weapon used in a global conflict for destroying similarly equipped fleets of great power adversaries. As the threat of major conventional war receded and atomic then nuclear weapons entered the arsenal so did the credibility of such systems similarly atrophy.

The first phase of peacetime strategy for the Royal Navy saw thoughts about integrating the fleet into this brave new strategic world. The Navy would aim to survive the nuclear exchange, contribute to it where possible and then fight conventionally afterwards. The problem possibly was that such a strategy was hard to exercise and probably unlikely to occur. Against this backdrop somewhat crucially the aircraft carriers in service were simply ageing physically, and deteriorating in effectiveness becoming steadily obsolete.

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<sup>6</sup> Bellamy, C. *Knights in white armour: The new art of war and peace* (London: Hutchinson 1996). Ch. 1. p. 42. Bellamy cites the ‘Kirke’ Report of the Committee on the Lessons of the Great War October 1932, Public Record Office WO32/13087. p. 29.

Would 'broken-backed' warfare - a protracted period of conflict proceeding a nuclear exchange provide a naval strategy which would result in Whitehall support for bringing a new carrier project to fruition ?

The second stage saw an opportunity for the aircraft carrier to prove its worth and subsequently for planners to consider new strategic policies. The Kuwait intervention was just such an opportunity. The fortuitous availability of a carrier group East of Suez enabled the effective deterrence of Iraq from invading its neighbour <sup>7</sup> The benefits of such an exercise were threefold. Firstly politicians could bask in the glow which results from successful employment of the armed forces in pursuit of British interests. Secondly there were operational lessons to be gathered from the exercise. Third there were opportunities to use the Kuwait operation as support for a shift in strategy towards a new strategic concept. The opportunity to use an example of 'best practice' in terms of the employment of maritime power to define future requirements was one the Royal Navy were not going to let wither on the vine.

Clearly offering the political masters a new Naval strategy based around a carrier task force was one which could be communicated with ease, as well as proving attractive. No small consideration when the issue of procuring a class of next generation capital ships. There was however a significant problem for this tactical employment in peacetime of military strategy. Rather than the Treasury, politicians or even the armed forces of a hostile power, the challenge for the Royal Navy was posed by the Royal Air Force.

The Royal Air Force had spent the last couple of decades confident in the superiority of their decisive weapon, the manned bomber. The current crop of politicians remembered the bombings of the Second World War and associated this with the need to engage in such efforts against other countries first. The arrival of the Atomic and Thermonuclear weapons only added to the mystique of the service offered by the Air Force. However the

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<sup>7</sup> See Brown, N. *Strategic Mobility* (London: Institute for Strategic Studies 1963). Ch. 4. pp. 88 - 96. Further Darby, P. *British defence policy East of Suez 1947 - 1968* (London: Oxford University Press 1973). Appendix I. pp. 225 - 229. Also Koburger, C jr. 'The Kuwait confrontation of 1961' in *US Naval Institute Proceedings* (Jan. 1974). pp. 42 - 49.

Royal Air Force suffered the same problem as the Royal Navy. For this service also as the immediacy of the war's end faded away so a new crop of politicians did not take the bomber arguments at face value. Technological development meant that the enormously expensive V bomber force developed in the early 1950s would be surpassed by the missile <sup>8</sup>

The Royal Navy's bid to position itself as provider of a more efficient service in the nuclear deterrence field stripped a major *raison d'être* from the Royal Air Force. Its strategic nuclear deterrence role ceased in 1969. Clearly it had to market itself in order to justify its programmes of developing new generations of aircraft. It settled on the strategy of providing air power from island bases around the globe in support of British interests. This clearly set the Royal Air Force on a collision course with the Royal Navy. The prize was control of a piece of intellectual territory within the battlefield of ideas. Not that of who provides air support of Naval forces, the Navy or Air Force but more importantly whom should have responsibility to aerial attack of targets far from the UK mainland ?

The consequences of victory are clear for those competing operational requirements for new equipment. A factor of some interest however can be identified regarding the budgetary implications. Research has noted how the defence budget has been split relatively equally between the Army, Navy and Air Force over a period of some years <sup>9</sup> This means that the bargaining games over the defence budget aim never to seriously wound a competitor's budget in a given year. Rather that winning the battle for ideas gives leverage over the marginal percentage points which enable procurement of vital systems for organisational ends. This view would be reinforced by the common choice of procurement as the first port of call in a defence review.

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<sup>8</sup> For further details see Wynn, H. *RAF nuclear deterrent forces* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office 1994).

<sup>9</sup> See Brown, N. *Arms without Empire: British defence in the modern world* (London: Penguin 1967). Ch. 6. p. 149. Further Crowe, W J III. *The policy roots of the modern Royal Navy 1946 - 1963* (Princeton: Doctoral thesis 1964). Appendice II. Data for the early 1960s shows convergence to within 2 % between the Army, Navy and Air Force budgets.

The first shots in the battle were fired at the highest military level. The Chiefs of Staff meeting indicated that, 'there would be a need for aircraft carriers to provide floating airfields... irrespective of whether this power is provided by the Royal Air Force or the Fleet Air Arm'<sup>10</sup> Clearly the corporate view at this early stage was that the Navy had every right to attempt to protect and if possible conceive the successor to the current generation of its decisive weapon.

However arguments from the Admiralty and Air Ministry camps became increasingly vocal. The Chief of the Air Staff wrote a minute to the Chief Scientific Advisor suggesting, 'I gather that the Admiralty now acknowledge that carriers and sea-borne support are useless for dealing with inland emergencies'<sup>11</sup>

Another tactic deployed by the Air Ministry was to seek to have their island basing strategy compared directly against the new carrier programme. The Chief of the Air Staff sought to ensure that, 'both sets of figures are put on a comparable basis'. As a more junior Air Ministry figure suggested there would be significant difficulty for the Admiralty requiring £620 million vis-à-vis the £45 million island basing strategy<sup>12</sup>

This strategy envisaged the build-up of a number of airfields on islands from which to project air power to crisis zones. A recently released map 1 illustrates the concept little removed from British strategy a century earlier depicted in map 2<sup>13</sup> The Admiralty were not long in striking back. An Admiralty minute noted of the Air Force plan that,

'The island basing strategy does not, on at least three main grounds, as follows, appear to be a valid concept:- a) strategic reality, b) political feasibility,

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<sup>10</sup> Chiefs of Staff meeting, 24<sup>th</sup> December 1961, Public Record Office DEFE7/2234.

<sup>11</sup> Chief of the Air Staff to Zuckerman, 27<sup>th</sup> February 1963, Public Record Office DEFE7/1819. p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Kent to Lawrence-Wilson, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1963, Public Record Office DEFE7/1819. para. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Map 1 is derived from a memorandum from the Air Ministry to the Secretary of State for Defence, 18th October 1962, Public Record Office DEFE7/1819. Map 2 is replicated from Kennedy, P. *The rise and fall of the Great powers: Economic change and military conflict from 1500 to 2000* (London: Fontana Press 1988). Map 8. p.289.

and c) military practicability... The proposed establishment of a large stockpile in Thailand... provides an excellent example of such inflexibility' <sup>14</sup>

The Admiralty sought to promote an aircraft which both services could operate known as the Buccaneer. To the Air Force however this was a pre-emptive strike aimed at wresting control of aircraft procurement from them. The rebuttal was delivered at several levels, the Defence Research Policy Committee concluded, 'that the performance of the NA.39 [Buccaneer] falls so far short of the strike/reconnaissance requirement for 1965 in almost every respect that it cannot be seriously considered for this role' <sup>15</sup>

The Chief Scientific Officer conducted an enquiry into carrier forces examining the common intellectual ground between the Navy and Air Force as well as the advantages and disadvantages of each <sup>16</sup> The key points derived from the investigation included; the Navy provided integral air cover, were geographically flexible, were less vulnerable and provided a physical presence.

The Royal Air Force alternatively possessed in the island basing strategy an un-proven concept which was based on the assumption of no enemy opposition at the point of entry, but was cheaper. Significantly the study concluded that reaction time of Naval Task Forces and Air Force island based air power was about the same. The following month the Minister for Aviation requisitioned a copy of the study.

The result of this internecine stalemate coupled with the relative autonomy of the ministries meant that each continued work on its capital ships. In any event the CVA-01 aircraft carrier project and TSR-2 aircraft were still in their formative stages. The Army relatively speaking was more than busy deploying

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<sup>14</sup> The Island Strategy - note by the Admiralty, 31<sup>st</sup> January 1963, Public Record Office DEFE7/1819. para. 2 - 3.

<sup>15</sup> Strike/Reconnaissance aircraft note by the Air Ministry, Public Record Office DEFE7/1114. p. 3. para. 16.

<sup>16</sup> Report of enquiry into carrier task forces, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1963, Public Record Office DEFE19/20. p. 6.

troops world-wide by any means available and somehow attempting to honour the political commitments required of it.

The real battle for survival commenced after the election of a new government in October 1964 with a mandate to reinvigorate Britain's defences. Following a weekend presentation to the Cabinet at Chequers the defence review process sought to wrestle over the major evolving financial decisions in the mid 1960s defence budget. Already aircraft projects had been cancelled and the Air Force TSR-2 project was as a high profile case top of the list.

The central issue for the Secretary of State for Defence in the newly consolidated Ministry of Defence regarding the TSR-2 was that, 'even if this project was continued it seemed certain that we could not afford to produce the successor to the TSR-2. The problem would therefore be postponed, not solved' <sup>17</sup> The same report estimated that over a decade it would be possible to save between six and eight hundred million pounds by cancelling then purchasing American alternatives.

Given the broad Cabinet support for cancelling the project the Air Force channelled their efforts into obtaining the successor aircraft they wanted - the United States F-111A bomber. Indeed it was later noted that the Chief of the Air Staff saw the F-111A as superior to the TSR-2 <sup>18</sup> Scenting blood the Admiralty sought to push the Buccaneer as the joint service aircraft once more. The services rapidly started deploying biased analyses through briefing papers causing sufficient concern for one civil servant within the Ministry to note of a particularly flagrant attempt;

'I am worried by the fact that it lists only the pros of the F-111A and the cons of the Buccaneer, so that, if used by the Secretary of State, it will expose him to the risk of being charged with not presenting a fair case' <sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Defence and Overseas Policy Committee (Official), 13<sup>th</sup> January 1965, Public Record Office CAB148/18. p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Defence and Overseas Policy Committee (Official), 5<sup>th</sup> meeting 1966, Public Record Office CAB148/25. p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Cottrell to Cooper, 1<sup>st</sup> February 1966, Public Record Office DEFE19/81.

In terms of crisis management the Air Force were equally capable of going on the offensive. They retaliated that with studies showing seven Buccaneers to be equivalent to 3 F-111A aircraft prompting the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee (Official) to note that, 'the conclusion must be that a UK carrier force was very expensive in terms of cost effectiveness'<sup>20</sup>

By now the Air Force had lost their TSR-2 project and felt that they were safe in having obtained agreement with the United States to procure the F-111A. This by no means meant that the Royal Navy had won the day. The previous Chief of Defence Staff had ruffled the feathers of his Chief of the Air Staff by intervening to dissuade potential export buyers of the TSR-2 instead pushing the Buccaneer project<sup>21</sup> The Air Force would not forget this quickly. Although the TSR-2 was lost a replacement was being procured vindicating in some sense their strategy. Regarding the overall defence situation the 2<sup>nd</sup> Secretary for Public Expenditure at the Treasury noted that, 'the Navy's expansion was the main cause of the rising costs'<sup>22</sup>

Into this highly charged environment the Chief of the Air Staff minuted the Secretary of State for Defence with a minute entitled 'The Defence Review - The case for dropping carriers'<sup>23</sup> His arguments centred around the speed of carriers, their logistic tail, the risk of mishaps and vulnerability. In conclusion he noted, 'it is impossible not to conclude that the carrier programme represents the least productive sector of the defence programme'<sup>24</sup>

The introduction of new criterion for determining the relative merits of projects in financial terms, such as functional costing and the increased application of operational research techniques set the challenge for the Navy to overcome.

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<sup>20</sup> Defence and Overseas Policy Committee (Official), 19 January 1966, Public Record Office CAB148/25. p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Jackson, B and Bramall, D. *The Chiefs: The story of the United Kingdom Chiefs of Staff* (London: Brassey's 1992). Ch. 11. p. 365.

<sup>22</sup> Sir Richard Clark in Treasury historical memorandum no. 26 The Defence budget 1946-1971, Public Record Office T267/23. p. 26. para. 153.

<sup>23</sup> Chief of the Air Staff to Healey, 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1965, Public Record Office DEFE13/589.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 8. para. 22.

Essentially quantitative methods of analysis meant that the aircraft carriers' qualitative advantages such as physical presence and geographical flexibility were difficult if not impossible to put in more than very crude financial terms.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer noted early into the Wilson government that the defence programme needed to be kept at £2,000 million at 1964 prices by the fiscal year 1970<sup>25</sup> The Carrier programme raised that figure to £2,120 but without it the figure would be only £2,055 million<sup>26</sup> At this point the Chiefs of Staff, Chief of Defence Staff and the Secretary of State were for cancellation of CVA-01. The Secretary of State's Private Secretary was discussing the CVA situation in terms that,

'A plan to abolish the Fleet Air Arm (or by far the largest part of it by cancelling CVA-01 and abandoning the rest of the carrier programme won't fall like an apple from the tree as part of the Defence Review harvest in the Autumn. We must plan the moves with care'<sup>27</sup>

Only The Chief of the Naval Staff and the Minister for Defence (RN) were defending the programme at the highest levels in the Ministry. This situation required drastic action. The Chief of the Naval Staff presented a new plan regarding the structure of the proposed carrier programme. Reactions to its presentation were mixed. The Admiralty Board 'did consider their plan the better'. The Chief of the Air Staff predictably 'had grave doubts on the accuracy of its costings'. The Chief of Defence Staff felt time had precluded him analysing the plan properly. With some eloquence The Chief of the General Staff was noted as stating, 'if the costing of the revised Naval plan were correct and if the plan did not affect the Navy or the air support with the Army required, he was in favour of it'<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Public expenditure - Memorandum by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, 26<sup>th</sup> January 1965, Public Record Office CAB129/120. p. 3. para. 11.

<sup>26</sup> Defence and Overseas Policy Committee (Official), 19 January 1966, Public Record Office CAB148/25. p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> Nairne to Healey, July 1965, Public Record Office DEFE13/589.

<sup>28</sup> Defence and Overseas Policy Committee (Official), 27<sup>th</sup> meeting, Public Record Office CAB148/25.

The Secretary of State was under continuous pressure through-out the period to deliver defence goods at a cost deemed acceptable in military and political terms. The pressures of the period guaranteed the loss of TSR-2 and later on CVA-01 in spite of threats by the Minister of State for Defence (Royal Navy) who subsequently resigned along with the Chief of the Naval Staff. In his resignation speech to the House of Commons on the 22nd February 1966 Christopher Mayhew suggested;

‘The rigid fixing of the defence budget in advance placed a heavy strain on inter-service relations... by rigidly fixing in advance a level compelling each service to fight for its own vital interests by fighting the vital interests of the other services’<sup>29</sup>

As a footnote the loss of CVA-01 ultimately did little to protect the Royal Air Force’s strategy East of Suez. Currency crises of the late 1960s led to the American purchase of F-111A aircraft to be cancelled ending at least for the present a bitter spat between two of the three services.

### **The lessons of the ‘60’s**

Having considered the case of the early 1960s what does it offer us some three decades later in understanding the defence policy process ? Given our understanding of the earlier reinterpretation of strategy to depict the aircraft carrier as a valuable tool the past decade or so shows us a familiar pattern. The 1980s saw the Royal Navy’s decisive weapon, the aircraft carrier deployed in support of NATO war plans for the defence of the North Atlantic against possible Soviet aggression. The end of the cold war and the review of defence known as ‘options-for-change’ has led to a new marketplace for the services known as ‘out-of-area operations’.

The expeditionary forces now in favour appear to represent little in conceptual terms different from those proposals cited in the 1960s. This new world order has coincided with the Royal Navy deliberations to consider again its options for replacing the current carrier force in the first decades of the next millennium. Further the Naval strategy emphasises inter-service co-operation or 'jointness'. The recent embarkation of Royal Air Force aircraft for training purposes on Naval carriers perhaps support this. The question arises as to whether Air Force resistance to the programme will stiffen if their own procurement interests come under threat. Possibly there is a perceived trade-off between the services in transferring RAF Harrier aircraft to the Fleet Air Arm in order that they can receive support for EFA and the future Tornado replacement - their capital ships<sup>30</sup>

Writers promote the virtues of the aircraft carrier in terms of their role in diplomacy, their inherent flexibility and Britain's world-wide interests<sup>31</sup> Clearly the Navy has its supporters for continued retention of the aircraft carriers. Its opponents one would suggest will be the rival defence procurement programmes which could be put in jeopardy should the Asian currency crisis of 1997 ripple outwards affecting the UK economy in the next few years. These could include new nuclear submarines, Army digitisation projects, and the Air Force requirement for new transport aircraft. The last is most significant as it enables the Air Force to pitch its requirement as necessary to offer a competing service with the Navy for the market known as 'expeditionary' or 'rapid deployment' forces.

## **Conclusion**

what could be said of the role of strategy in peacetime ? The continuing carrier conundrum illustrates well the cultural imperative of organisations to seek to defend those items of equipment which they believe to be their

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<sup>29</sup> Mayhew, C. *Britain's role tomorrow* (London: Hutchinson & Co. 1967). Appendix II. pp. 172 - 173.

<sup>30</sup> *Jane's Defence Weekly* (07.01.98). 'UK air, naval forces sign on joint future aircraft'.

decisive weapons. The through-deck-cruisers procured during the 1970s provided a compromise which enabled Britain to retain carriers by stealth. These were used in an anti-submarine warfare role with a few aircraft embarked for air defence. The end of the Cold War in the late 1980s has enabled them to become 'true' aircraft carriers in an environment where the enemy is not a first rank power.

Strategy seems to serve as an adaptive medium through which the high level decision makers can be made to understand why only they can fill a particular need for defence goods expressed as political commitments.

Whilst those outside the inner circle of decision makers cannot witness the meetings and read the staff papers being distributed in favour of a particular strategy it could be suggested that the very real pressures put on the services are up to a point a desirable goal. In any organisation it is the continued pressure to question how tasks are carried out and what the goals and operating procedures are appropriate that make them competitive, at least in business.

In the world of security and defence peacetime strategy and the battles over budget force the corporate identities of the Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force to be ready and able to respond with new ways of using resources to best effect rather than languishing in a policy vacuum. Regardless of the exact outcome of the Strategic Defence Review the democratic interest in getting the best defence for Britain cannot be a poor objective.

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<sup>31</sup> For examples see Cobold, R 'A joint maritime based expeditionary capability' in *RUSI Journal* 142 (4) (Aug. 1997). pp. 23 - 30. Also Bellamy, C. *Independent* (24.07.97) 'Gunboat diplomacy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century'.

defence policy formulation from Cranfield University, Royal Military College of Science.

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