CHAPTER ONE

WHY I REJECTED NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

In 1969, I was a 25-year-old Royal Navy Lieutenant serving in the British aircraft-carrier *HMS Eagle* as back-seat aircrew in its Buccaneer nuclear strike jet squadron. 'Observer' is the Fleet Air Arm's traditional term for bombardier-navigator, whose job is to navigate the aircraft and help the pilot operate its weapons system. During the next three years, I accepted without question an elite role with my pilot as a 'nuclear crew', assigned a target from NATO's Single Integrated Operational Plan. Our task was to be ready to deliver a WE177 tactical free-fall nuclear bomb, of some ten kilotons explosive power, to detonate above a military airfield on the outskirts of Leningrad – which is now St Petersburg's airport.

Thirty years later, I landed there to speak at a conference reviewing nuclear policy and security on the eve of the 21st century. In a television interview, I apologised to the citizens of St Petersburg for having been part of a nuclear mission that would have caused appallingly indiscriminate casualties and long-term poisonous effects from radioactive fallout, and heavily damaged their beautiful ancient capital. By then I realised nuclear weapons would not save me – and they would not save the Russians either.

Following a decision by the British government that it could no longer afford strike carriers, in 1972 I switched to anti-submarine helicopters. A year later, I was appointed Senior Observer of a squadron of Sea King helicopters aboard the aircraft-carrier *HMS Ark Royal*. Our task was to use radar, variable-depth sonar and other

electronic sensors, plus a variety of weapons, to detect and destroy enemy submarines threatening our ships. All was well until we were ordered to be ready to use a nuclear depth-bomb, an anti-submarine variant of the WE177 design. This was because our lightweight anti-submarine homing torpedoes could not go fast or deep enough to catch the latest Soviet nuclear-powered submarines. The explosive power of the depth-bomb was again ten kilotons, nearly that of the atomic bomb which devastated Hiroshima. If I had pressed the button to release it, it would have vaporized a large volume of ocean – and myself. Unlike a strike jet, my helicopter was too slow to escape before detonation. So this would have been a suicide mission. Furthermore, there would have been heavy radioactive fallout from the depth-bomb plus the nuclear submarine's reactor and any nuclear-tipped torpedoes it carried. That action could have escalated World War 3 to nuclear holocaust. All this, just to protect an aircraft-carrier.

Yet my concerns were brushed aside. Soothing responses included claims that 'going nuclear' would only be needed in deep water hundreds of miles from land, where nuclear submarines could use their speed advantage and no civilians would be involved; and 'the Soviets probably wouldn't even detect it.' Because I was ambitious, and was assured that there would almost certainly be no need to use it, I complied. No one else in my squadron raised objections. That peculiarly potent military tradition, carefully nurtured to carve out and hold down the British Empire, was immortalised by Tennyson in his Crimean War poem *The Charge of the Light Brigade* about an earlier suicide mission: 'Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die.' That attitude was alive and well in the all-volunteer Royal Navy. However, my absolute trust in my leaders had been shaken. In the years which followed, I came to realise not only that nuclear weapons were militarily useless, but that the full consequences of their use had not been thought through.

In December 1979 in the House of Lords, a distinguished former military leader challenged the purpose of Britain's nuclear forces. Former UK Chief of Defence Staff Field Marshal Lord Carver declared:

> I have never heard or read of a scenario in which I would consider it right or reasonable for the Prime Minister or Government of this country to order the firing of our independent strategic force at a time when the Americans were not prepared to fire theirs – certainly not before Russian nuclear weapons had landed on this country. And, again, if they had already landed, would it be right and reasonable? All it would do would be to invite further retaliation.[1]

At the time I was a newly promoted Commander working in the Ministry of Defence in Whitehall, London, as Personal Staff Officer to an Admiral who had the responsibility of recommending the replacement for Britain's four Polaris nuclear-armed ballistic missile submarines. I witnessed the debate in the Naval Staff, and watched the nuclear submarine lobby campaign ruthlessly for a scaled-down version of the huge US Trident submarine-launched ballistic missile system. Yet it introduced a destabilising first-strike capability with its greater firepower and accuracy, and its massive cost threatened the future of the Royal Navy as a balanced, useful force.

Margaret Thatcher had just become Prime Minister. Addicted to all things nuclear, she forced the British nuclear energy industry to accept the US pressurised water reactor design that had recently failed at Three Mile Island. She welcomed the stationing of US nuclear-armed Cruise missiles on British soil in the face of huge public protest; and she decided to replace Polaris with Trident without consulting her Cabinet. Despite misgivings, the Chiefs of Staff were brought into line. One consequence was that the British surface fleet would shrink to become smaller than Japan's, while the nuclear submarine lobby's contribution to offsetting the cost of Trident was to allow a brand new class of conventionally powered submarines to be sold to the Canadian Navy.

Nevertheless, I still accepted the rationale for a nuclear submarine force like Polaris. This was a dangerous time in the Cold War: the Soviets had just invaded Afghanistan; the Polish trade union movement *Solidarnosc* was pioneering the East European challenge to Soviet hegemony; and new and more impressive Soviet warship designs were emerging almost every month. It was therefore also a very stimulating time to work in military intelligence. In my last appointment as Staff Officer (Intelligence) to Commander-in-Chief Fleet, I ran the team providing round-the-clock intelligence support to Polaris and the rest of the Fleet from the command bunker in Northwood just outside London.

In 1982, Britain suddenly found itself at war with an erstwhile friend, Argentina, over the Falkland Islands. The war was directed from Northwood; and at one point the outcome hung in the balance. If Argentine aircraft had sunk a troopship or aircraft-carrier before the landing force had got ashore, the British might have had to withdraw or risk defeat. What would Thatcher have done? Until the war, she had been the most unpopular Prime Minister in British history. Now she had become the Iron Lady, determined to show both the British and the world her leadership prowess. Nevertheless, Polaris had

clearly not deterred Argentina's President Galtieri from invading. With victory in his grasp, it is doubtful he would have believed even Thatcher would have seriously threatened a nuclear strike on Argentina.

I was never aware of the location of the deployed Polaris submarines. However, after leaving the Navy I heard rumours of a very secret contingency plan to move a Polaris submarine south within range of Buenos Aires, which in the event was not required. More on Thatcher's probable intent emerged in a memoir by former French President François Mitterrand's psychoanalyst, Ali Magoudi. Apparently, Mitterrand told him about a phone call he received from Thatcher after a French-supplied Exocet missile fired by the Argentinians from a French-supplied Super Etendard strike jet disabled the British destroyer *HMS Sheffield*. The British Prime Minister threatened to carry out a nuclear strike against Argentina unless Mitterrand informed her of the secret codes that would enable the British to jam the missiles' acquisition system. Mitterrand had been so convinced of her seriousness that he had complied.[2]

Clearly, defeat would have been unthinkable for the proud British military against such a foe, and it would have consigned Thatcher to political oblivion. Furthermore, Thatcher was a true believer in nuclear deterrence. Had she so threatened, it is probable that Galtieri would have called her bluff very publicly and relished watching US President Ronald Reagan try to rein her in. The Polaris submarine's Commanding Officer, briefed by me on the Soviet threat before he went on so-called 'deterrent' patrol, would have been faced with a bizarre shift of target and new rules of engagement. In the last resort, would he have refused the firing order or faked a malfunction, and returned to face a court martial with a clear conscience?

Although this nightmare did not arise, for me the Falklands War raised major concerns relating to nuclear weapons. First, there was the huge danger of the dilemma for any leader of a nuclear-armed state faced with possible defeat, but especially by a non-nuclear state. For make no mistake: if the US had failed to restrain Thatcher, a nuclear strike – even with just a single 200-kiloton Polaris warhead – on the airbase for the Exocet-armed Super Etendard jets at Cordoba would not only have caused massively disproportionate collateral damage and long-term casualties from radioactive fallout, but would have redoubled Argentina's resolve to keep fighting. The horrific prospect would then have arisen of escalating to a nuclear strike on the capital, Buenos Aires. International outrage would have already made the UK a pariah state, its case for retaining the Falkland Islands lost in the

political fallout from such a war crime. This led me to confront the realities of operating nuclear weapons on behalf of a leader in such a crisis. Had the Polaris Commanding Officer been given such an order and obeyed, the failure of nuclear deterrence would have compounded the ignominy of defeat with that of being the first to have broken the nuclear taboo since Nagasaki.

When the war was over I left the Navy at the end of 1982, taking the redundancy I had been granted in the government's 1981 defence review. I left for career reasons: having been promoted to Commander very early after a career spent almost exclusively in aviation, I was ill-equipped to succeed in the fierce competition to command a frigate, without which I could not reach the rank of Admiral. Underlying this, however, was my concern that I could not stay fully committed to the Navy if it had to operate Trident.

I was 38 years old. With a working wife and no children, I trained as a roof thatcher in Dorset where we were living. Enduring many bad puns from friends about the political regime at that time, I thatched for eight idyllic years. This proved vitally therapeutic following the bizarre, high-profile murder in 1984 of my aunt, Hilda Murrell. My mother's unmarried elder sister, Hilda had become my mentor and close friend after my mother's death when I was nineteen.[3]

The murky circumstances surrounding her murder, amid swirling opposition to nuclear power and weapons in the country, marked the beginning of a new journey for me. Hilda had convinced me that nuclear-powered electricity generation in its current form was unacceptably hazardous. She died a few weeks before she was due to testify at the first public British planning inquiry into a new nuclear power plant, at Sizewell in Suffolk. I presented her submission, criticising the government's plans for dealing with the radioactive waste, on her behalf. Then, following the Chernobyl nuclear power plant catastrophe in April 1986, I took up her campaign against nuclear-powered electricity generation. In the process, I learned that the British nuclear energy industry had begun as a cynical by-product of the race to provide plutonium for nuclear weapons. This pathway to acquiring nuclear weapons, and also warship propulsion, was followed by all the nuclear-armed states extracting fissile material from nuclear power plant spent fuel, despite no safe solution for highly radioactive waste storage or eventual disposal. This posed a new, potentially catastrophic risk to the environment and public health, with no consideration of power plant and spent fuel storage vulnerability to attack in conventional war or by extremists, let alone nuclear war. Nevertheless, I resisted taking the ultimate step of opposing nuclear weapons.

My case for supporting Polaris and nuclear deterrence crumbled with the Berlin Wall in 1989 followed by the dismantling of the Warsaw Pact. However, it took the 1990–91 Gulf War to break me out of the brainwashing that had sustained my belief in nuclear weapons. I realised that if I chose to speak out against them, I would be one of very few former British Navy Commanders with nuclear weapon experience to do so.

From the moment in November 1990 when the US doubled its original figure for ground forces assigned to eject Iraqi forces from Kuwait, I realised that this was to be a punitive expedition. My military intelligence training warned me that the US-led coalition's *blitzkrieg* strategy would give Iraq's President Saddam Hussein the pretext he needed to attack Israel in order to split the coalition and become the Arabs' champion. If sufficiently provoked, he could use Scud ballistic missiles with chemical or biological warheads. If such an attack caused heavy Israeli casualties, Israel's Prime Minister Shamir would come under massive domestic pressure to retaliate with a nuclear strike on Baghdad. Even if Saddam Hussein did not survive (he had the best anti-nuclear bunkers that Western technology could provide), the entire Arab world would erupt in fury against Israel and its allies, its security would be destroyed forever, and Russia would be sucked into the crisis.

In January 1991, I joined the growing anti-war movement in Britain and addressed a crowd of 20,000 people in Trafalgar Square. A week later, on the night of 17 January, the first Scud attack hit Tel Aviv two days after the Allied *blitzkrieg* began. For the first time, the second city of a *de facto* nuclear state had been attacked and its capital threatened. Worse still for nuclear deterrence dogma, the aggressor did not have nuclear weapons. The Israeli people, cowering in gas masks in basements, learned that night that their so-called 'deterrent' had failed in its primary purpose. Thirty-eight more Scud attacks followed.

The American journalist Seymour Hersh, in his bestseller *The Samson Option*, recounted how Israel reacted:

> The [US] satellite saw that Shamir had responded to the Scud barrage by ordering mobile missile launchers armed with nuclear weapons moved into the open and deployed facing Iraq, ready to launch on command. American intelligence picked up other signs indicating that Israel had gone on a full-scale nuclear alert that would remain in effect for weeks. No one in the Bush administration knew what Israel would do if a Scud armed with nerve gas struck a crowded apartment building, killing thousands. All Bush could offer Shamir, besides money and more batteries of Patriot missiles, was American assurance that the Iraqi Scud launcher sites would be made a priority target of the air war.

> Such guarantees meant little; no Jews had been killed by poison gas since Treblinka and Auschwitz, and Israel, after all, had built its bomb so it would never have to depend on the goodwill of others when the lives of Jews were being threatened.
>
> The escalation didn't happen, however; the conventionally armed Scud warheads caused – amazingly – minimal casualties, and military and financial commitments from the Bush administration rolled in. The government of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir received international plaudits for its restraint.
>
> American officials were full of private assurances for months after the crisis that things had been under control; newsmen were told that Israel, recognising the enormous consequence of a nuclear strike, would not have launched its missiles at Baghdad.
>
> The fact is, of course, that no one in America – not even its President – could have dissuaded Shamir and his advisers from ordering any military actions they deemed essential to the protection of their nation.[4]

Meanwhile, in Britain, the Irish Republican Army just missed wiping out the entire Gulf War Cabinet with a mortar-bomb attack from a van in central London. A more direct threat to the government could barely be imagined. What if instead they had threatened to use even a crude nuclear device? In such circumstances a counter-threat of nuclear retaliation would have no credibility whatsoever.

Belatedly forced to research the history of 'the Bomb', I learned that the British scientific-politico-military establishment bore considerable responsibility for initiating and spreading the nuclear arms race. Having alerted the US to the feasibility of making a nuclear weapon, the UK participated in the Manhattan Project. In 1947, on being frozen out of further collaboration by the 1946 McMahon Act, it began to develop its own nuclear arsenal. Thus the UK became a role model for Saddam Hussein: the first medium-sized power with delusions of grandeur to threaten nuclear terrorism. Also, the doctrine of nuclear deterrence had practical flaws; it was immoral and unlawful, and there were more credible and acceptable alternative strategies to deter aggression and achieve security.

Having given up thatching as the Gulf War loomed, later in 1991 I became Chair of the UK affiliate of the World Court Project. This worldwide network of citizen groups helped to persuade the UN General Assembly, despite desperate countermoves led by the three NATO nuclear weapon states, to ask the International Court of Justice for its Advisory Opinion on the legal status of nuclear weapons. In 1996, the Court confirmed that the threat, let alone use, of nuclear weapons would generally be illegal. For the first time, the legality of nuclear deterrence had been implicitly challenged.

One aspect of the Court's decision was especially important. It

confirmed that, as part of international humanitarian law, the Nuremberg Principles applied to nuclear weapons. In particular, Principle IV states:

> The fact that a person acted pursuant to order of his government or of a superior does not relieve him from responsibility under international law, provided a moral choice was in fact possible for him.[5]

This has serious implications for all those involved in operating nuclear weapons – particularly military professionals who, unlike a President or Prime Minister, really would have to 'press the button'. What is at stake here is a crucial difference between military professionals and hired killers or terrorists: military professionals need to be seen to act within the law.

My research and experience led me to a fundamental contradiction underlying a willingness to use nuclear weapons, which cannot be wished away by any sophisticated rationalisations. In order to make nuclear weapons acceptable to political leaders, public opinion and those in the military who have to operate them, there has been a systematic effort to play down the appalling side effects and 'overkill' problem associated with even the smallest modern nuclear weapons. Added to such a ploy is the assurance that 'there would almost certainly be no need to use them.' Yet, simultaneously, support for nuclear deterrence demands belief in the terrorising power of nuclear weapons. In this respect, they are not weapons at all. They are utterly indiscriminate devices that combine the poisoning horrors of chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction, plus inter-generational genetic effects unique to radioactivity, with almost unimaginable explosive violence. This is why *a state practising nuclear deterrence is actually conducting a deliberate policy of nuclear terrorism.*

There is another fundamental objection to relying on nuclear deterrence. If deterrence based on conventional weapons fails, the damage would be confined to the belligerent states and the environmental damage would be reparable. What is at stake from the failure of nuclear deterrence is the devastation and poisoning of not just the belligerents but potentially most forms of life on Earth. Closely related to this is the crazy reality that nuclear deterrence is a scheme for making nuclear war less probable by making it more probable. Moreover, the danger of nuclear war under a regime of nuclear deterrence is greater than we think, especially when the US and Russia persist with a high-alert launch posture. One consequence is that, since Hiroshima, we have lived with what Jonathan Schell described as:

> ...the fissure that nuclear weapons have created between our political selves and our moral selves, [as a result of which] we are compelled to choose between a position that is politically sound but immoral and one that is morally sound but politically irrelevant.[6]

I will explain how I have resolved this dilemma by rejecting nuclear deterrence on the grounds that it is impractical, politically unsound and counterproductive to our real security needs, as well as immoral and illegal. Moreover, there are alternative, non-nuclear strategies to deter war and secure just and lasting peace.

Notes

1 Lord Carver, Hansard, House of Lords, v. 403 (18 December 1979), Cols. 1628-30.

2 Ali Magoudi, *Rendez-vous: La psychanalyse de François Mitterrand* (Maren Sell Editeurs, Paris, 2005). This account of Mitterrand's conversations with Magoudi is taken from John Follain, "The Sphinx and the curious case of the Iron Lady's H-bomb", *The Sunday Times*, 20 November 2005.

3 See http://www.hildamurrell.org for more information.

4 Seymour Hersh, *The Samson Option* (Random House, New York, 1991), p. 318.

5 These principles were first enunciated in the charter of the International Military Tribunal for the trial of Nazi leaders convened at Nuremberg, Germany under the terms of the London Agreement of 8 August 1945. The principles were unanimously adopted at the first session of the UN General Assembly in 1946 (Resolution 95), and their current text was agreed in 1950 by the International Law Commission, a UN body devoted to formulating and developing international law. See also Adam Roberts and Richard Guelff, eds, *Documents on the Laws of War* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

6 Jonathan Schell, *The Abolition* (Avon Books, New York, 1984), p. 98.