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OD(SA)(82)69

5 JULY 1982

COPY No 16

CABINET

DEFENCE AND OVERSEA POLICY COMMITTEE
SUB-COMMITTEE ON THE SOUTH ATLANTIC
AND THE FALKLAND ISLANDS

BURIAL OF SOUTH ATLANTIC CASUALTIES

Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Defence

Introduction

1. At our meeting on 16 June (OD(SA)(82)57th Meeting) I was invited to establish the feasibility of bringing the bodies of servicemen killed in the Falkland Islands back for burial in the United Kingdom where this was the wish of the next-of-kin. This report includes the further consideration requested at our meeting on 21 June, including consultation with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission about arrangements for the final burial of servicemen on the Falkland Islands and about appropriate procedures in respect of Argentine dead.
2. Of the 255 task force personnel who were killed or missing presumed killed in the recent operations in the South Atlantic, 75 have been buried in temporary graves in the Falkland Islands. The remaining 180 were either lost at sea, buried at sea, or are missing presumed dead.
3. It has been the traditional practice in two world wars and subsequent conflicts that servicemen killed in action overseas are buried close to where they fall, although an exception was made in the case of Suez, where it was feared the graves would be desecrated. This policy provides equal treatment for all, and allows those who have fallen together to rest together. "Peace-time" policy since 1967 has been to give next of kin the option of having bodies repatriated at public expense. This option is usually taken up.

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4. If the traditional war-time policy were followed the 75 burials in the Falklands would be transferred to individual graves in an official cemetery in Port Stanley. Alternatively it has been suggested that their next-of-kin should, as in the present peace-time policy, be allowed to have the bodies removed from their temporary graves and returned to the United Kingdom for final burial or cremation. This note discusses both of these options.

Repatriation

5. In both cases the bodies will be exhumed from their present temporary graves, embalmed, and prepared for final disposition. Bodies to be returned to the UK would have to be placed in sealed coffins. This process involves specialist work which can only be done by civilian contractors. The Ministry of Defence already have a contract with a suitable firm who would take on the work. This would involve sending to the Falkland Islands, preferably by air, two qualified undertakers along with a supply of coffins and other equipment. The undertakers would be able to carry out all the necessary work on the bodies within one month, including preparing them for air transport back to the United Kingdom. The only assistance they would require from the Ministry of Defence is space on an aircraft, a private place to carry out the work, and servicemen to help with the actual exhumation. The contractors would also deal with the paper work and with the delivery of the body in the United Kingdom to an undertaker nominated by the family who would arrange for final burial or cremation at the family's expense.

6. The contractors will do the best they can to make the bodies presentable, but it is inevitable that some of them will be seriously damaged. It is therefore most inadvisable that the coffins should be opened after having been sealed in the Falkland Islands, and next-of-kin would have to be made aware of this.

Burial in the Falklands

7. If it were decided not to offer repatriation of bodies to next-of-kin, and in any case for those next-of-kin who chose not to take up the option, the bodies would be transferred to the military cemetery in Port Stanley. The same civilian contractors

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would supervise the exhumation, embalming and transfer to permanent graves which would be of traditional Commonwealth War Graves Commission design adjacent to or in Stanley Cemetery, where there are already 33 war graves of the two World Wars.

8. In addition to the graves a memorial could be erected bearing the names of all those buried or lost at sea or whose graves are unknown; in this way all the dead would be commemorated together. The Commission have been consulted and have expressed their willingness to undertake responsibility both for a memorial and for the maintenance of graves on a contract basis. They have also suggested that, both to commemorate the unity of all Services in the campaign and to give relatives a point in the home country to which their feelings could be directed, there might be a corporate memorial to all who lost their lives, those in identified graves as well as the missing, at an appropriate place in the United Kingdom, possibly the Commission's military cemetery at Brookwood.

9. Whenever a serviceman is buried abroad a visit to the grave at public expense is allowed for the nominated next-of-kin and one other within two years of the death. I propose in the present case to interpret this as applying to all the fallen, whether they rest at sea or on land, in marked or in unmarked graves; and where appropriate to extend the facility to both the widow and the parents of an individual serviceman.

Public Views

10. Since Ministers made it known that they would be prepared to listen to the views of next-of-kin the Ministry of Defence have received representations seeking repatriation from next-of-kin of 15 of those buried on the Falklands. Included in these are representations on behalf of a British serviceman who is a Hindu and whose religion requires cremation rather than burial. This is not possible in the Falklands and his body will have to be repatriated if appropriate religious rites are to be carried out. On the other hand the relatives of Colonel H Jones have publicly stated that they wish his body to remain in the Falklands. Over two hundred letters have been received from members of the public supporting repatriation, though many of these are based on the mistaken assumption that the

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temporary burial in the communal grave at Goose Green shown on the television news was in fact the final burial. The Commander Land Forces reports a strong feeling in both his brigades, which he supports, in favour of repatriation.

11. Two other points from letters received need to be taken into account. First, some next-of-kin of those lost or buried at sea have asked about repatriation. Secondly some letters seeking repatriation have been received from the next-of-kin of those who died in previous wars and were buried in Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries overseas. Neither of these ideas is practicable; but both demonstrate that a decision to offer the option of repatriation to those buried on land would not escape criticism from those who would see it as divisive. Sensitive handling would be required; and a decision to offer repatriation would also have to be presented with a careful eye to the implications for future operations.

Costs

12. The costs to public funds of repatriation would work out at a maximum of £400 per body, including provision of a coffin, the fees of the undertakers and onward transport in the United Kingdom; but excluding air transport to the United Kingdom, which should be found from spare capacity provided that this would be available without undue delay. Costs of final burial or cremation in the United Kingdom would be met by the family.

13. Cost of burial in the Falklands would fall to the Ministry of Defence and would be made up of charges raised by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, which are at present uncertain, and costs of taking next-of-kin to visit the graves. Transporting next-of-kin may be costly, and a figure of £300 per passenger has been quoted. However, given the numbers involved, in neither case are the costs likely to be the deciding factor.

Procedure for seeking views of next-of-kin

14. If it were decided to offer the option of repatriation to next-of-kin this could be done by a visit from members of the Service welfare staffs who could discuss the problem and ascertain

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views. This would provide the opportunity of arriving at a properly considered view and advising next-of-kin:

- a. of the excellence of the facilities which could be provided by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission;
- b. of the visit facilities mentioned in paragraph 9 above;
- c. that an option for local re-burial would be irrevocable;
- d. that in the event of repatriation coffins should not be opened on return to the United Kingdom;
- e. of the intention, should we so decide, to erect a corporate memorial in the United Kingdom.

Some next-of-kin may be influenced by the decisions taken by the relatives of others who died in the same unit.

Argentine Dead

15. In addition to the 75 British dead there are 61 Argentine dead whose burial on the Falklands has already been notified. There are many more Argentine dead whose interment has yet to be notified or who are as yet unburied because it is difficult to get to their bodies who are in mined areas. Under the Geneva Convention we are obliged to provide them with burial in accordance with the rites of their professed religion and to mark and maintain those graves; this is being progressed as fast as possible. Whether they are subsequently repatriated is a matter for the Argentine government whose views will be sought. We cannot compel them either to repatriate or not to repatriate; colleagues may consider this relevant to the question of giving an option to our own next-of-kin. If the Argentine Government choose to repatriate the dead they will have to make their own arrangements and pay for the embalming and transport of the bodies. If they do not wish them to be repatriated it would be open to them to make an approach to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission about final burial. They would have to pay for any work carried out by the Commission.

Conclusions

16. In short:

- a. Current policy would provide for the burial of British dead

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in a Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery at Port Stanley, and for visits by next-of-kin.

- b. Those buried or lost at sea or whose graves are unknown would be commemorated on a memorial at Port Stanley; and a corporate memorial to all who fell in the campaign could also be erected in the United Kingdom.
- c. If Ministers assess that the strength of public feeling is such that current policy should be altered, it is feasible to arrange for the remains of those buried on land to be flown back to the United Kingdom for burial or cremation.
- d. It is for the Argentine Government to decide whether Argentine dead should be repatriated or buried on the Falkland Islands; either course is feasible.

Recommendations

17. I invite my colleagues to agree that:

- (a) the next-of-kin of British servicemen temporarily buried on land in the Falkland Islands should be offered the option of repatriation or of permanent burial in a military cemetery at Port Stanley;
- (b) those buried or lost at sea or whose graves are unknown should be commemorated on a memorial at Port Stanley;
- (c) a memorial to all who fell in the campaign, wherever they rest, should be erected in the United Kingdom;
- (d) in presenting to next-of-kin the option at (a) the points in paragraph 14 above should be discreetly brought out;
- (e) at an appropriate moment discussions should be opened with the Argentine Government on the disposal of Argentine dead.

5th July 1982
Ministry of Defence

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