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PRIME MINISTER

LANDING ON THE FALKLAND ISLANDS

Sir Frank Cooper asked to see me this evening to follow up one point arising from this morning's presentation which is continuing to give him and, he said, the Chief of the Air Staff a good deal of concern. This is the weakness of the air defence of our ships.

He said that he is now convinced that once our amphibious force is ashore on the Falkland Islands, they will be all right. He said that both the Chief of the General Staff and the Chief of the Air Staff are now happy on this score. But the Argentinian air attacks on our ships at sea over the last couple of weeks have thrown into stark relief our difficulty in defending our ships from air strikes. We have lost SHEFFIELD. We were very lucky that the bomb which hit GLASGOW passed through her without exploding. He told me - and it was the first time that I had heard this - that BRILLIANT also had a close shave in the same attack when one of the Sky Hawks' bombs literally bounced over her bows. Admiral Fieldhouse himself made no bones at this morning's presentation about the short-comings of the Sea Dart air defence missile system and about the limitations of the Sea Harrier in air combat at low levels.

Sir Frank Cooper is not suggesting that these worries should in any way have a decisive effect on whether to undertake a landing or not. But his concern is that Ministers should understand that there is a real possibility that just before or in the course of the landing we might well lose two or three ships due to air attack. He thinks that it would be a good idea if you were to touch on this possibility with the Chief of the Defence Staff on Sunday morning. He does not believe that this is something which you would want to raise in front of the whole of OD(SA). Rather he suggests that you might like to bring it up informally after the meeting, perhaps over a drink, with the Defence Secretary, the CDS and himself. I suggest that you might draw the Home Secretary into the circle too if you wish to do what Sir Frank Cooper is proposing.

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If you are minded to raise the matter, I think that you could easily broach it with the CDS by saying that you had been reflecting carefully over what Admiral Fieldhouse had said during the presentation about the short-comings of the Sea Dart system and the Sea Harrier's air combat capability.

AWW

14 May 1982

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