



10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

19 August 1981

Dear Lord Buxton,

Thank you for your letter of 21 July about
HMS ENDURANCE.

HMS ENDURANCE, like HMS PROTECTOR before her, has been a familiar sight in the South Atlantic and Antarctic for many years and her annual deployments have enabled her to perform a number of useful functions. It would be surprising therefore if the news that she is planned to be withdrawn from service in 1982 on her return from her next deployment had not met with some disappointment.

This said, it is important not to over-estimate the ship's role, both actual and potential, in defence of our national interests. She has only a limited military capability, being armed with two 20mm Oerlikon guns and equipped with two Wasp helicopters. She is not essential to the maintenance of our defence commitment to the Falkland Islands, of which the Royal Marines Garrison provides - and will continue to provide - a tangible demonstration. The withdrawal of HMS ENDURANCE from service will not impair our ability to maintain the operational effectiveness of the Garrison. I accept that the presence of HMS ENDURANCE in the region for some 6 months of the year helps to underline our commitment to the defence of the Falkland Islands. But

/in re-appraising

in re-appraising the future defence programme, in order to ensure that the several roles that our forces undertake are carried out to best and most economic effect, it has been necessary to take some hard decisions, including a reduction in the number of surface warships. Against that background, we have had reluctantly to conclude that HMS ENDURANCE's continued operation can no longer be justified.

HMS ENDURANCE's primary task, when deploying in Antarctic waters, has been to conduct hydrographic surveys. In this capacity, she has been able to assist the British Antarctic Survey with their scientific and research programmes. To this extent, her withdrawal from service will have some effect on the work of the BAS. It is, however, not the case that the role and work of the BAS cannot be sustained without the presence of HMS ENDURANCE. The BAS operate their own ships and are not dependent on HMS ENDURANCE for maintenance and supplies. You imply that the BAS's activities are in need of protection. But as I have said, HMS ENDURANCE's ability to provide defence against a determined assault is limited, especially bearing in mind that, for much of her 6 month's deployment outside the UK, she is at some considerable distance from the BAS' area of operation. In any case, the scientific and research programmes being conducted by various countries in the Antarctic region have hitherto been undertaken in an atmosphere of friendly and peaceful co-operation and within the terms of the Antarctic Treaty. This, as you know, expressly excludes any measures of a military nature in the area south of Latitude 60° South.

You were concerned that HMS ENDURANCE's withdrawal would prejudice our ability to secure maximum economic benefit from any possible mineral exploitation of Antarctica. A number of countries are signatories to the Antarctic Treaty and, like us, lay claim to sovereignty over certain areas of Antarctica. It is in an avowed attempt to avoid the risk of military conflict in defence of such claims and so to provide for the continued demilitarisation of the region that all the Treaty partners are about to engage in negotiating a regime for exploiting the

mineral resources of the area, within the framework of the Treaty itself. It is in our best interests that exploitation should proceed on an agreed basis rather than for individual countries to press their separate claims and so risk a breakdown of co-operation. Even if, despite our efforts, this were to happen and certain countries were to resort to the use of force in furtherance of their objectives it is not easy to see what significant role HMS ENDURANCE could play in defence of our national interests.

As for our negotiations with Argentina, our position is clear. We are in no doubt about the legitimacy of our sovereignty over the Falkland Islands and we are determined to ensure that the Islands' territorial integrity is preserved. We shall continue to maintain the permanent Royal Marines Garrison at its present strength on the Islands as a demonstration of our commitment. HMS ENDURANCE, on the other hand, has spent on average only some 30 days in Falkland Islands waters each year.

I would not like you to think that the decision on HMS ENDURANCE's future was taken lightly. The annual visits by HMS ENDURANCE are a feature of long standing and I know that she will be missed. But I hope that what I have said will help to put the decision in perspective and also to indicate the Government's determination both to see to it that the interests of the Falkland Islanders continue to be upheld and to ensure that our important economic interests in Antarctica are successfully pursued.

Yours sincerely
Raymond Hulse

Lord Buxton of Alsa, MC, DL.
