



10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

7 February 1983

Dear Mr. Wigley,

In my letter of 10 September, I undertook to write to you again when our Inquiry into the landings at Fitzroy on 8 June was complete. In view of the concern which I know exists in Wales about this, I would like to take this opportunity to comment fully upon what occurred.

First of all, the tragic events at Fitzroy must be seen in the context of operations to open the southern axis to Port Stanley by establishing 5 Brigade well forward as rapidly as possible. You will recall that 3 Commando Brigade were already approaching Port Stanley from the West. An opportunity to accelerate the southern advance came when 2 Parachute Regiment seized Fitzroy by helicopter on 3 June.

There ensued a rapid sequence of planning as events developed. It was decided that Fitzroy should be the base for the advance, and Bluff Cove (in the next bay to the East) the forward assembly area. The main 5 Brigade troop and logistic lift had to be by sea, because of a shortage of helicopters. The choice of ships to use for this forward movement - the Assault Ships (LPD), HMS Fearless and Intrepid, or the Landing Ships Logistic (LSL), RFA Sir Galahad and Sir Tristram, which had comparable troop and load-carrying capabilities - depended upon their different characteristics. LSL could enter the coves; LPD could not, and would therefore be exposed in open water if they conducted the operation in daylight. Their special functions for other operations

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meant this was unacceptable, and the LPD were therefore only used at night.

On 5/6 June the Scots Guards were successfully delivered to Bluff Cove by night after long trips in open landing craft from HMS Intrepid. In a similar operation the next night in HMS Fearless bad weather prevented rendezvous with the landing craft, and only half the Welsh Guards reached Bluff Cove. As Sir Galahad was to be sailed on the night of 7/8 June with Rapier Anti-Aircraft Units and 16 Field Ambulance, the opportunity was taken to embark the remainder of the Welsh Guards to make up for this delay. The shallow water in the anchorage precluded the use of a frigate to provide close air defence. The risks attendant on the LSLs unloading at Fitzroy were appreciated; but as there had been no serious air attacks for some days, because a similar operation at Teal Inlet to the north had been successful, and as there was an overriding need to deploy 5 Brigade quickly for the attack on Port Stanley, these risks were accepted.

Sir Galahad arrived off Fitzroy at dawn on 8 June; Sir Tristram was already unloading ammunition. At this stage resources were being pushed to their limits, and communications were difficult and overloaded - over 1,000 signals a day passed between Task Group Commanders alone. As a result, the fact that Sir Galahad was on her way was not known by 5 Brigade Units at Fitzroy; plans did not allow for unloading a second LSL, and unloading had to be improvised on her arrival. One of the landing craft which could have been available for ferrying had been sent back to Darwin for stores. The only beach was difficult for unloading; and there was a general shortage of mechanical handling equipment. All this inevitably resulted in delays before the one remaining landing craft and the single Mexeflote pontoon were able to unload ammunition they were carrying and reached Sir Galahad.

The decision had been taken to unload the Field Ambulance at Fitzroy before the landing craft took the Welsh Guards on the longer trip to Bluff Cove. It was decided not to land the Welsh Guards at Fitzroy because it was believed - erroneously - that the bridge

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between there and Bluff Cove was destroyed, and a tiring 18 mile march would therefore have been involved. They would also have been separated from their heavy equipment. Their task was to reach Bluff Cove fully equipped and fully fit for the marches and fighting that lay ahead. As the landing craft returned to Sir Galahad to pick up the Welsh Guards there were further delays when it developed a ramp fault.

The weather was clear, and the Argentinian air force chose that day for a series of attacks on the Task Force. The attack on Fitzroy came as the Welsh Guards were assembling in the tank deck, with the landing craft already alongside. The combat air patrol (CAP) on task over East Falkland had just been despatched to meet an attack on ships in San Carlos; there were limits to the number of aircraft that could be continuously deployed, and there was no time to generate a second CAP. Warning of the second raid reached Sir Tristram but not Sir Galahad. The Rapier units which had been landed earlier were masked by terrain or had developed temporary systems defects as a result of the rapid succession of moves to which they had been subjected. Both ships were surprised by the speed and direction of the attack (which came from the east) and only a few weapons were fired. Sir Tristram was hit, and fires developed near a suspected unexploded bomb. Sir Galahad was hit by three bombs which, though not detonating, caused serious fires, in one of which a fireball swept through the stern section of the tank deck and killed many men instantly. With fires developing and ammunition beginning to explode, the order was given to abandon ship, and there was much heroism in rescuing men from the tank deck and by helicopter and various craft.

Despite this setback the operation against Port Stanley had to go on. 5 Brigade was built up quickly, and within a few days was attacking Argentine positions near Port Stanley.

As Sir John Nott indicated in his letter of 19 November to Mr. Dafydd Elis Thomas, a complete and thorough investigation of the circumstances surrounding the events at Fitzroy has been

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carried out. Geoffrey Pattie set out our basic conclusions when he made the following statement in the House of Commons on 21 December.

"The Land Force Commander's concept for committing 5 Brigade to the south by sea was fully justified in view of the need for an early and concerted operation with 3 Commando Brigade against Port Stanley. The tragedy came about not through any major error but the ordinary chances of war, involving a combination of circumstances such as difficult and overloaded communications, disruption of plans by the weather, and resources pushed to their limits to achieve an early end to hostilities. The risks taken were no greater than some others in the campaign. Although it may be possible to criticise in retrospect some judgements made by individuals, these are of the type that will always be made in rapidly developing operations, and no blame is attached to anyone. The decision to press on with speed, rather than a slow and methodical build up, was right. The loss of life at Fitzroy was tragic: the overall loss of life would have been greater - casualties from exposure would certainly have been greater - if our forces had moved too cautiously."

The conclusions have now been confirmed by the Admiralty Board.

I hope that the further details which I have provided in this letter are helpful in setting the record straight regarding this tragic sequence of events in which so many fine young men died or were wounded. Peter Blaker will be writing in similar terms to Mr. Dafydd Thomas, who as you know has also enquired about this matter.

Yours sincerely
Margaret Thatcher

Dafydd Wigley, Esq., M.P.