



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
LONDON SW1A 0AA

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Dear Margaret,

I am puzzled.

Your answer to-night to Question Number 47 W seems to be at variance with Peter Blaker's answer on 29th November.

Peter says that the <sup>B</sup>elgrano was on a 280 degree course - West North West towards Uschaia. You confirm the statement made on 13th May, and refer to "converging from a distance of some 200 nautical miles."

If you were both to be right, does this not place the British Fleet on dry land on Argentinian soil? This can hardly have been the case! So, who is less than accurate - you or Peter Blaker?

Do not the facts point inexorably to the conclusion that whatever the reasons for launching a Mark 8 torpedo from Congueror, designed to sink the <sup>G</sup>eneral Belgrano, they had little to do with military exigencies of proecting the Task Force at 8 pm London time on Sunday 2nd May?

Yours sincerely

*Anna Delgado*

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**"General Belgrano"**

Mr. Dalyell asked the Prime Minister what was the distance from the "General Belgrano" to the nearest British surface vessel at the time the cruiser was torpedoed.

**The Prime Minister:** As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence told the House on 13 May—[Vol. 23, c. 1030]—the "General Belgrano" and a group of British warships could have been within striking distance of each other in a matter of some five to six hours, converging from a distance of some 200 nautical miles.

Merchant Ships (Anti-missile Seducers)

Mr. Dalyell asked the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has had from the General Council of British Shipping on proposals to fit certain merchant ships with anti-missile seducers; and what cost estimate he has made.

Mr. Pattie: I refer the hon. Member to my earlier replies on 18 October—[Vol. 29, c. 46-47]—and 10 November—[Vol. 31, c. 163]—which made it plain that matters such as he has raised will be examined in a

working party set up under the auspices of the Shipping Defence Advisory Committee, on which the General Council of British Shipping is represented.

In-flight Refuelling

Mr. Dalyell asked the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 22 November, *Official Report*, c. 364, what is the maximum speed of a Hercules aircraft; what is the stalling speed of a loaded Victor tanker aircraft; whether the refuelling manoeuvre has to be carried out as the two aircraft are diving, and at what maximum rate of fall; and what is the lowest height above sea level at which any part of this manoeuvre is carried out.

Mr. Blaker: It is not the practice to release operational information of this kind.

Mr. Dalyell asked the Secretary of State for Defence, in view of the relative performance characteristics of Hercules and Victor aircraft, what assessment he has made of the risks associated with the refuelling of Hercules aircraft by Victor tankers en route to the Falkland Islands.

Mr. Blaker: There were full trials and assessments before operational clearance was given.

United Kingdom-Port Stanley (Air Journey)

Mr. Dalyell asked the Secretary of State for Defence on how many occasions Royal Air Force Hercules aircraft en route to the Falkland Islands have had to turn back, and have landed having completed more than 21 hours in the air.

Mr. Blaker: Four.

"General Belgrano"

Mr. Dalyell asked the Secretary of State for Defence what course the "General Belgrano" was steering when she was torpedoed.

Mr. Blaker: The "General Belgrano" was attacked under the terms of our warning on 23 April that any approach by Argentine warships or aircraft which threatened our forces would encounter the appropriate response. There were indications on 2 May that the carrier "25 de Mayo" and her escorts would approach the task force from the north, while the "General Belgrano" and her escorts were attempting to complete a pincer movement from the south. Concerned that HMS "Conqueror" might lose the "General Belgrano" as she ran over the shallow water of the Burdwood Bank, the task force commander sought and obtained a change in the rules of engagement to allow an attack outside the 200-mile exclusion zone but within the general principle set out in our warning of 23 April. Throughout 2 May, the cruiser and her escorts had made many changes of course. At the moment she was torpedoed, about 8 pm London time, "General Belgrano" was on a course of 280 deg.

SS "Uganda"

Mr. Dalyell asked the Secretary of State for Defence whether he is satisfied with the availability of resources to protect and escort SS "Uganda" en route to the South Atlantic.

Mr. Wiggin: Yes.

have been consistent only in their inflexibility and insistence. Meanwhile, Argentine troops are still on the Falkland Islands. They persist in their illegal occupation. We have taken no steps to withdraw in accordance with the mandatory resolution of the Security Council.

We cannot allow the present situation on the Falkland Islands to endure. As the right hon. Member for Leeds, East said, we should remember the consequences of allowing the Argentines to get away with this aggression. Our diplomatic efforts are intended to bring it to an end peacefully, but these efforts have been and must continue to be, accompanied by military actions. I was naturally encouraged by the right hon. Gentleman's comment that so far the official Opposition had supported all our military actions.

I want to devote most of my short remarks to the military aspects of the affair, just as my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary concentrated on our diplomatic efforts.

**Mr. Healey:** The right hon. Gentleman will recall that I asked him questions about the one action on which we had doubts, but he may be coming to that.

**Mr. Nott:** I will deal with that later.

Our military effort has been calculated to serve two purposes: first, to put increasing pressure on the Argentine garrison on the Falklands, and on the Argentine Government, to recognise our resolve and to accept a peaceful withdrawal; and secondly, to put us into a position from which, if all diplomatic efforts fail, we can take the further military action necessary to end the illegal occupation of the Falkland Islands. As the right hon. Member for Leeds, East said, there would have been no purpose in sending the task force unless we were in some circumstances prepared to use it.

From the first, our military actions have been complementary to our diplomatic efforts, and entirely consistent with our inherent right of self-defence under the charter. These actions have comprised a steady progression. The progression has not been dictated wholly by our diplomatic efforts; it has been necessary as a consequence of the time needed for our forces to deploy to the South Atlantic from the United Kingdom, although while this was taking place we have continued to place whatever military and economic pressure we could on the Argentine Government to recognise their misjudgment of our resolve and to withdraw from the islands.

I can therefore give a complete assurance to my right hon. Friend the Member for Farnham (Mr. Macmillan) that any period of delay has been caused not by doubts but by the movement of our forces to the area of potential conflict.

Now our forces are deployed to the Falklands area, they will take the action necessary to deny reinforcement and resupply of the Argentine garrison, and to protect themselves against attack from Argentine naval and air forces. The consequent engagements have already led to significant loss of life and casualties on both sides. The whole House regrets that this is so, and mourns those British Service men who have died while performing their duty to this country with conspicuous skill and courage.

The right hon. Member for Leeds, East discussed the degree of force which was acceptable in meeting the Government's aims. Our military build-up has been

gradual, graduated and closely controlled. Ministers have never been in any doubt, however, that if it became necessary to use force, force would have to be used.

We do not underestimate the threat posed to our forces by Argentina. The whole House agrees, as the right hon. Member for Deptford (Mr. Silkin) has just said, that we cannot put our Service men at risk by requiring them to pull punches in the face of that threat. However, I can assure the House that our task group will not employ unnecessary force. It will use only the force necessary to fulfil its mission and to protect itself.

The right hon. Member for Leeds, East referred again to the sinking of the cruiser "General Belgrano" and to the fact that she was some 30 miles or so outside the total exclusion zone. That zone was not relevant in this case. The "General Belgrano" was attacked under the terms of our warning to the Argentines some 10 days previously that any Argentine naval vessel or military aircraft which could amount to a threat to interfere with the mission of British forces in the South Atlantic would encounter the appropriate response.

The "General Belgrano" was in a heavily armed group of warships. The cruiser and two destroyers had been closing on elements of our task force. At the time that she was engaged, the "General Belgrano" and a group of British warships could have been within striking distance of each other in a matter of some five to six hours, converging from a distance of some 200 nautical miles.

Following attacks on our ships the previous day, and given the possible presence of an Argentine submarine and other information in our possession, there was every reason to believe that the "General Belgrano" group was manoeuvring to a position from which to attack our surface vessels. Therefore, under certain rules of engagement that we had already agreed, our submarine attacked the cruiser for reasons of self-defence of our own fleet.

In this connection, I again emphasise that at all times the task force has been under political control. The clearest evidence of that is the political oversight we give and the regular, almost daily, meetings that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister holds with those of her Ministers most closely concerned. At these meetings, political and operational decisions are taken and approved.

I was asked about an announcement that has just been made about the call-out of reservists. It is not expected that any large-scale call-out of reserves will be needed, but we need a small number of skilled personnel mainly in communications. Therefore, it will be a selective call-out of specialists, and the present plans envisage that in due course up to about 300 may be involved.

Our military action so far has inflicted on the Argentine forces a number of serious reversals. South Georgia was retaken with no British casualties. As many as 10 Argentine aircraft have now been lost, whereas our task force has lost only one aircraft, a Harrier, as a direct result of Argentine action.

Argentine losses include one Canberra, two Mirages, three Sky Hawk aircraft and two Puma helicopters. Three further military aircraft, whose presence was in breach of our total exclusion zone, were severely damaged during attacks on airfields on the Falkland Islands. There have also been significant Argentine naval losses, which I shall not outline on this occasion.

I take no pleasure in the loss of life and the waste of resources that these losses represent. Nevertheless, I do take satisfaction from the evidence that they provide that

## Falkland Islands

4.7 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. John Nott): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I shall make a statement about recent naval engagements in the South Atlantic, following the operation conducted by our forces to repossess the British sovereign territory of South Georgia.

In the House on 7 April I announced that our first naval action would be to deny the Argentine forces on the Falklands the means of sea reinforcement and resupply from the mainland. British submarines have achieved that objective. With the arrival of our task force on 30 April our next move was to stop reinforcement and resupply from the air, as well as by sea. Since the passing of resolution 502 the Argentines, instead of withdrawing, had continuously reinforced the islands. We gave two days' prior warning to the Argentine Government of the imposition of this total exclusion zone, and our task force is now enforcing it.

The task force was despatched to the South Atlantic with the support of the House and, I believe, of the country. Since its arrival in these waters our overriding duty has been to protect our task force against attack by Argentine forces.

We made it very clear to the Argentine Government and to the United Nations more than a week ago, on 23 April, that the Government would exercise their rights of self-defence to the full, including the use of force under article 51 of the United Nations charter if this proved necessary to protect our fleet.

I shall now describe the military sequence of events. Air attacks by Vulcan and Sea Harrier aircraft against Port Stanley airfield were launched early on 1 May. The runway was cratered and rendered unusable by transport aircraft from the Argentine mainland. A further sortie was made today to render the airstrip unusable for light supply, communications and ground attack aircraft operating within the Falkland Islands themselves. The other main airfield on East Falkland at Goose Green has also effectively been put out of action.

On 1 May the Argentines launched attacks on our ships, during most of the daylight hours. The attacks by Argentine Mirage and Canberra aircraft operating from the mainland were repulsed by British Sea Harriers. Had our Sea Harriers failed to repulse the attacks on the task force, our ships could have been severely damaged or sunk. In fact, one Argentine Canberra and one Mirage were shot down and others were damaged. We believe that another Mirage was brought down by Argentine anti-aircraft fire. One of our frigates suffered splinter damage as a result of the air attacks and there was one British casualty whose condition is now satisfactory. All our aircraft returned safely. On the same day our forces located and attacked what was believed to be an Argentine submarine which was clearly in a position to torpedo our ships. It is not known whether the submarine was hit.

The prolonged air attack on our ships, the presence of an Argentine submarine close by, and all other information available to us, left us in no doubt of the dangers to our task force from hostile action.

The next day, 2 May, at 8 pm London time, one of our submarines detected the Argentine cruiser, "General Belgrano", escorted by two destroyers. This heavily armed surface attack group was close to the total exclusion zone

and was closing on elements of our task force, which was only hours away. We knew that the cruiser itself has substantial fire power, provided by 15 6in guns, with a range of 13 miles, and Seacat anti-aircraft missiles. Together with its escorting destroyers, which we believe were equipped with Exocet anti-ship missiles with a range of more than 20 miles, the threat to the task force was such that the task force commander could ignore it only at his peril.

The House will know that the attack by our submarine involved the capital ship only and not its escorting destroyers, so that they should have been able to go to the assistance of the damaged cruiser. We do not know whether they did so, but, in so doing, they would not have been engaged.

On 3 May, at about 4 am London time, a Sea King helicopter keeping watch against submarine attack around the task force was fired on by an Argentine ocean-going patrol craft. This vessel was then attacked and sunk by a Lynx helicopter. A second Lynx then came under attack from another Argentine vessel, which was itself attacked and damaged.

It must be a matter of deep concern to the House that there has been loss of life from these engagements including the sinking of the "General Belgrano", but our first duty must be the protection of our own ships and men. There may be further attacks on our forces and they must be allowed to act in self-defence. We cannot deny them that right. Nor must we forget that military action began by an attack on British marines and the forceable seizure of British territory. The way of stopping the fighting forthwith is for the Argentines to withdraw their garrison from the Falkland Islands in compliance with the United Nations resolution 502.

Mr. Denis Healey (Leeds, East): The right hon. Gentleman rightly said in his press conference last night that his policy was and would always be to use minimum force under strict political control to achieve a diplomatic solution. I confess that it is not always easy to achieve that in the stress of battle. Nevertheless, on the evidence that he has just given, it seems that he has successfully achieved that objective, first, in the reoccupation of South Georgia; secondly, in the attacks on the airfields and military facilities on the Falkland Islands; and, thirdly, in the actions that he has just described within the total exclusion zone.

I shall address my questions entirely to the action against the Argentine cruiser "General Belgrano". The right hon. Gentleman said that the Government were concerned about the loss of life that had occurred. I understand that the action took place 36 miles outside the total exclusion zone. Although it appears now that there have not been 1,000 lives lost, as we feared earlier, the number must run into many hundreds. As I said in questions to the Foreign Secretary after his statement, the loss of life is already causing great concern among our friends and allies all over the world.

Almost two days after the event it should be possible for the Secretary of State to give the House more details than were in his statement. It is in both his and the Government's interest to do so if widespread international concern about the incident is to be allayed.

First, will the right hon. Gentleman say how far the Argentine ships were from the task force? He said that they were hours away. I hope that he will forgive me for saving