

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

D/DS5/9/9/18

APS/Minister(AF)

Copy to:  
APS/S of S  
PS/US of S(AF)  
Sec/VCNS  
PS/DUS(P)  
PS/DUS(N)  
ACNS(O)  
AUS(NS)  
DNW  
DNOT  
Head of DS11

MR TAM DALYELL MP: ARTICLE IN THE TIMES OF 14 DECEMBER ABOUT  
THE BELGRANO SINKING

- ...
1. You asked for a line to take on today's attached Times piece in which Mr Tam Dalyell, having received a further written reply yesterday from the Prime Minister asserts that, as the Task Force was some 200 miles from the BELGRANO and that she was on a course of 280°, the Task Force must have been on dry land. 200 nautical miles of 280° from the position of the attack would indeed be in Tierra del Fuego.
  2. Mr Dalyell is relying on the wording both of the Secretary of State's statement on 4 May to the effect that the BELGRANO group "was closing on elements of our task force"; and the wording of yesterday's answer from the Prime Minister to the effect that the group and the task force could have been within mutual striking distance in some 5 to 6 hours "converging from a distance of some 200 nautical miles", which itself repeats wording used by the Secretary of State on 13 May. Strictly speaking, the first formulation was inaccurate, implying as it does that the BELGRANO was actually closing on the task force when it was sunk. It is however the case that at various times on the day of the attack the BELGRANO had been heading, albeit briefly, for the task force: she had been changing course many times during the day. The second statement, when it refers to "converging" was talking of a hypothetical rather than actual occasion. A fuller wording would have been "if she had been converging".
  3. My advice would be that we should not seek to defend the 4 May formulation unless pressed on it, given the difficulty of sustaining it. Rather we should continue to hammer home the two points already made more than once that:-
    - a. The BELGRANO and her escorts were known to represent a threat;

and that

/b. ....

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~  
~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

b. They could have changed course and headed direct for the task force at any time; the actual course being steered at any moment is incidental.

.... 4. I attach a line to take with the supplementary framed in these terms, the aide-memoire of the events of 2 May plus relevant Hansard extracts. I understand that APS/S of S was proposing to forward a copy to No 10 in case Mr Dalyell raises the matter in this afternoon's Prime Minister's Questions. APS/S of S is also asking No 10 for an advance sight of Mr Dalyell's latest letter to the Prime Minister. A copy of the letter is now attached.

*Stephan Chaker*

14 December 1982

*pp* N H NICHOLLS  
Head of DS5

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~  
~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

LINE TO TAKE

As has been made clear, both in the House and in the presentation given to many hon Members by the Task Force Commander, the GENERAL BELGRANO and her escorts, in conjunction with other Argentine vessels to the north, represented a serious threat to the Task Force. She was attacked on that account and that account alone: the hon Member [for West Lothian]'s repeated allegations to the contrary have no foundation. The GENERAL BELGRANO had made many changes of course throughout the day and her heading at the moment of attack is merely incidental to the threat she presented to our ships and our men.

If pressed on Mr Nott's statement on 4 May (that BELGRANO was closing on element of the Task Force)

[My rt hon Friend] was speaking then on the basis of our ~~initial understanding and the~~ overall appreciation that the BELGRANO group threatened the Task Force. That appreciation has not changed and, as I have just said, the heading at the particular moment of the attack was incidental.

AIDE MEMOIRE

The Task Force Commander, Admiral Woodward, was concerned by intelligence indications on 2 May that the BELGRANO group would attack the Task Force from the South and the carrier 25 DE MAYO and her escorts from the North. The Carrier group had slipped the SSN barrier to the north and there was a risk that the SSN HMS CONQUEROR might have lost the BELGRANO group as they ran over the shallow waters of the Burdwood Bank. He therefore sought a change to the Rules of Engagement to allow an attack outside the 200 mile exclusion zone; this was consistent with HMG's announcement (on 23 April) that any approach by Argentine warships which threatened air forces would encounter the appropriate response. Ministers agreed; and the BELGRANO was attacked later that day. This was explained in a presentation to opposition MPs attended by Mr Dalyell and again in a written answer on 29 November. Mr Dalyell has already sought to obtain further details of the intelligence then available. This is highly sensitive and cannot be disclosed.

## Replies put Task Force on dry land

11MB 14/12  
By Anthony Bevin  
Political Correspondent

The Prime Minister has been asked to explain an apparent inconsistency in Government replies over the sinking of the Belgrano, placing a group of British warships on dry land due east of the Argentine port of Ushuaia.

Mr Tam Dalyell, Labour MP for West Lothian was told last night by Mrs Margaret Thatcher in a Commons written reply: "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."

Mr John Nott, the Secretary of State for Defence, reported to the Commons on May 4 that the Belgrano which had been escorted by two destroyers, was sunk on May 2 at 8 pm London time. He said: "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."

But in a written Commons reply on November 29, Mr Peter Blaker, Minister of State for the Armed Forces, told Mr Dalyell that the Belgrano, first detected at 8 pm London time, was on a course of 280 degrees, which indicated that the cruiser was making for her home port of Ushuaia.

Mr Dalyell last night used the Ministry of Defence's own position of the sinking - the Belgrano's course, and the convergent distance of the British warships, to plot the position of the threatened task force.

He said in a letter to Mrs Thatcher: "I am puzzled. Your answer tonight seems to be at variance with Peter Blaker's answer on November 29..."