

Belgrano: there was no alternative

The Belgrano controversy drags on, wearying the great majority who have long understood the military imperative that convinced responsible ministers that HMS Conqueror should be authorized to attack. It is difficult to believe that the motives of those who still doubt the relative unimportance of the Belgrano's course at any particular time are other than political, but it might help them clear their minds if some of the professional aspects were spelt out in more detail.

A commanding officer making contact with the enemy reports to his operational commander in the traditional form, "What, where, whither, when". "Whither" is an estimation of the enemy's present course and speed. It is no sure indication of his future movement.

All that can be said with certainty when the signal is received—after a variable delay—is that the enemy must be within a circle whose centre is the reported position (where) and whose radius is the enemy's known maximum speed (30 knots in the case of the Belgrano) multiplied by the time that has elapsed since "when".

This circle is called the "furthest-on circle" and it expands as time passes. The sensible operational commander, which Admiral Woodward certainly was, must take account of the most dangerous possibility, that the enemy could be at the point on the circumference of the circle nearest to him.

Let me ask the doubters to put themselves in the position of the War Cabinet on Sunday, May 2, 1982, in possession of all the intelligence that is summarized in paragraphs 1 to 8 of the annex to the Prime Minister's letter of September 19 to Mr George Foulkes MP (report, September 20), but with none of the information now available with hindsight.

Particularly fresh in ministers' minds are the air attacks on our ships the previous day, the reported detection and attack on an Argentine submarine close to the task force, and knowledge that virtually all the Argentine fleet is at sea. They are aware of the intelligence appreciation that the Argentines are attempting a pincer movement on the task force.



Lord Lewin, Chief of the Defence Staff during the Falklands war, puts the military case for sinking the Argentine cruiser and argues that all subsequent evidence has shown the Cabinet decision was right

They have been briefed on the limitations of communicating with submarines deep in the South Atlantic. The Chief of Defence Staff gives details of HMS Conqueror's report that she is in contact with the Belgrano and asks for political approval to attack. This is given.

Would the doubters have wished to apply a caveat to the decision? If so, what? "Do not attack if she is steaming west?" But the Belgrano and her consorts remain a threat as long as they are afloat and undamaged. Course and speed can be changed in minutes. They may split and go in different directions. That HMS Conqueror will remain in contact cannot be guaranteed. Communication between the submarine and Northwood is far from immediate. In war, opportunities must be taken while they exist; there may not be a second chance.

At 3.40 pm on May 2 Northwood received an amplifying report from HMS Conqueror, still in touch with the Belgrano and her escorts. The position gave a new datum for furthest-on circles; this, together with course and speed, gave an indication that the Argentine ships were moving relatively slowly westward. None of this was reported to ministers, in my view correctly.

But suppose this latest information had been reported, what action would the doubters expect the ministers to take? Cancel the previous approval to attack? There is no new intelligence of Argentine intentions on which to base a reappraisal. At 30 knots, the Belgrano could still reach our ships

during the night. Recently refuelled, she might be preparing to pass south of the task force to attack our recently reestablished small garrison in South Georgia, protected by a single frigate.

Admiral Woodward had no reconnaissance aircraft to warn him of the Belgrano's approach other than anti-submarine helicopters, busy against another very real threat. He had no direct communication with HMS Conqueror and was feeling somewhat exposed.

To carry the hypothesis further: suppose ministers, against strong military advice, did decide to withdraw approval to attack. They would have been reminded that the signal reversing the order could take some hours to reach HMS Conqueror (we know now that the original signal took more than four hours from decision to reception). Since, when the permission to attack was received, the commanding officer of HMS Conqueror would immediately start the tactical manoeuvres for his approach to a firing position — these would be incompatible with exposing an aerial to receive further signals — it would be virtually certain that the attack would be completed before the cancellation order was received.

We now have much more information about Argentine actions and intentions on May 1 and 2 than were then available. From Admiral Lombardo's appearance on *Panorama* on April 16 we know that the Argentine fleet had been ordered to attack the task force and that Admiral Woodward's assessment

that it was attempting a pincer attack was indeed correct.

We also know from Admiral Lombardo that Super Etendard aircraft, armed with Exocet missiles, had taken off from shore bases on May 1, but that the attack failed because the necessary in-flight fuelling was unsuccessful. We know that, because lack of wind prevented the launching of the Skyhawk aircraft from the Argentine carrier, the warships were called back; Captain Bonzo of the Belgrano tells us that he had been ordered to a waiting position and was conducting "anti-submarine tactics" on passage, presumably because he thought he might be attacked.

Against this must be set the present knowledge that the Peruvian president was putting forward what, in the light of the detailed formulæ that had been exchanged and dismissed in the Haig shuttle, can only be described as tentative proposals for further negotiations. There has been no suggestion that the Argentine command rescinded the orders for their own ships and submarines to attack because this initiative was in progress — and they certainly knew about it while we did not. They do not appear to have been concerned about the effect the torpedoing of a British warship by an Argentine submarine on May 2 might have had on the British attitude to negotiations.

If all this had been known by ministers at the time, surely it could only have reinforced their resolve that, for the better safety of our own people, the opportunity to remove the Belgrano from the Argentine order of battle should be taken.

That the Belgrano should be sunk with such heavy loss of life is indeed tragic, but the responsibility lies squarely with the junta which launched the invasion of the Falklands, and which, when called upon by the United Nations to withdraw, poured in reinforcements, demonstrating that what it had intended to hold. These men are now under trial in Argentina for crimes against their own people. Which of our politicians would have been prepared to take the risk that the Falkland islanders should be left under their administration?