

cc: MOD  
CO

10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

14 January, 1985

*Dear Mr. Joullias,*

Thank you for your letters of 13 and 21 December.

The 'three specific points' which you raise in your first letter in fact cover two groups of questions: those which relate directly to the decision on 2 May 1982 to change the rules of engagement to permit attacks on Argentine warships outside the Total Exclusion Zone, and those which concern the more general issue of the exercise of political control both in the Falklands conflict and in any future crisis.

As far as the 2 May decision is concerned, the annex to my letter to you of 19 September provided a full account, consistent with national security, of the circumstances leading to the change in the rules of engagement. Your first letter appears to be making two points about this decision: that Ministers should have been informed of the changes in the position and course of the General Belgrano reported by HMS Conqueror; and that the decision was taken on the basis of inadequate information and consideration. The question in your second letter, about when Lord Lewin was informed about the sighting of the Belgrano, is linked to the former point.

I have explained many times that the decision to change the rules of engagement was taken because of the clear and unequivocal indications of the threat to the Task Force. As

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this decision did not rest on the precise course and position of the Belgrano, changes in these details during 2 May were not relevant to the decision. This is not, as you suggest, a matter of hindsight. As Lord Lewin has made clear to the Foreign Affairs Committee, he was informed early on the morning of 2 May that Conqueror had sighted the Belgrano on the afternoon of 1 May. Although HMS Conqueror's signal was received in Northwood and the Ministry of Defence on the afternoon of 1 May and both the Task Force Commander and senior staff in the Ministry of Defence were aware of the report at that time, Lord Lewin himself had no knowledge of this and his belief that it was received around midnight was mistaken. He made it clear to the Foreign Affairs Committee that he was speaking from memory on this point. As to the timing at which Lord Lewin was informed, it has not been possible for some two years after the event to establish with certainty why he was not told sooner. However the key development, which led to the subsequent consideration of a change in rules of engagement, was the clear and unequivocal indications of the threat posed by Argentine warships on 2 May.

On your second point, the implication is that the decision to change the rules of engagement on 2 May was reached in isolation. The so-called "Mandarins Committee", to which Lord Lewin referred when he gave evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee, was not a formal committee but a highly informal group of senior officials which met as and when necessary to make sure that the process of taking and communicating decisions worked as effectively and as quickly as possible. The fact that it did not meet on the afternoon of 1 May or the morning of 2 May has no significance. The significant point is that the "War Cabinet" was meeting very frequently to discuss developments in the crisis and take the necessary decisions, and had already considered thoroughly and at length the diplomatic, military and legal implications of possible courses of action.

You also asked whether all changes in rules of

engagement were approved by the "War Cabinet". In most cases changes were approved by this body, but in a few instances a detailed change was approved by the Secretary of State for Defence within the broad principles already agreed by the "War Cabinet".

On the separate, more general issue of the implications of the handling of the Falklands conflict for future crises, I have already explained the background against which Ministers exercised political control over the Task Force in my letter of 8 October to David Owen, a copy of which was attached to my letter to you of the same date. As I said then:

"The overriding responsibility of Ministers during the Falklands conflict was to address the strategy, both diplomatic and military, which would meet the wishes of Parliament in relation to the recovery of the Falkland Islands with the minimum of risk to those serving in the Task Force. Ministers could not discharge this responsibility on the basis of minute by minute involvement in events happening 8000 miles away."

We have of course learnt many lessons from the experience of the Falklands conflict, but because these have implications for the details of our crisis management arrangements you would not expect me to reveal them. I can say however that the conflict emphatically underlined the fundamental principle that, in any such crisis, Ministers must be responsible for the overall political and military strategy on the basis of the information and advice provided by their professional advisers but that they cannot and should not attempt to be involved in the conduct of operations on a minute by minute basis. There are good practical reasons for this; in the case of the Falklands it would have been neither realistic nor sensible for Ministers to see copies of all operational signals exchanged between Northwood and the Task Force. As in all previous conflicts, Ministers were

necessarily reliant on their senior advisers to bring together all the relevant operational information to provide the basis for strategic decision making; in this context I am happy to reiterate the conclusion of the Falklands White Paper (Cmnd 8759): "In every important respect the Government and military machines worked extremely well during the crisis".

Yours sincerely

Margaret Thatcher

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