



cc mol MF

10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

23 February 1983

Mr D. Owen

Thank you for writing to me on 14 February about the control of Thor missiles when they were based in this country.

I must say that there is no confirmation from immediately available sources of the alleged events which you have reported in your letter, and it will therefore be necessary to undertake a detailed investigation of the whole matter. In view of the passage of time since the alleged events are supposed to have taken place, it may take a little time to complete our enquiries.

I will of course write to you again just as soon as we have completed our enquiries; but I thought you should know that these might take a little while.

Yours sincerely

Raymond Baxter

The Right Honourable Dr. David Owen, M.P.

all



902

MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
MAIN BUILDING WHITEHALL LONDON SW1
Telephone 01-~~9207022X~~ 218 6169

D/S of S/PS/10

21st February 1983

Dear Willie,

*14/2/83 to see
2 GRV
12/2/83
wm
22/2*

In your letter of 15th February to Richard Mottram, you asked for a draft reply for the Prime Minister to send to Dr David Owen MP, who had written to her on 14th February about the question of control of the "Thor" missiles based in the UK over 20 years ago.

In view of the passage of time since the alleged events to which Dr Owen refers, it will be necessary to check out the facts very carefully indeed, and if necessary interview those personnel who were involved, so as to obtain their version of what might have happened. This may take a little time, and in the meantime you may consider that the Prime Minister should send a short acknowledgement to Dr Owen. I attach a draft for your consideration.

*Yours ever,
Barry Neale*

(B P NEALE)

W F S Rickett Esq

DRAFT INTERIM REPLY FROM THE PRIME MINISTER TO DR DAVID OWEN MP

Thank you for writing to me on 14th February about the control of Thor missiles when they were based in this country.

I must say that there is no confirmation from immediately available sources of the alleged events which you have reported in your letter, and it will therefore be necessary to undertake a detailed investigation of the whole matter. In view of the passage of time since the alleged events are supposed to have taken place, it may take a little time to complete our enquiries.

I will of course write to you again just as soon as we have completed our enquiries; but I thought you should know that these might take a little while.

2 FEB 1985

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10

file *Box*

15 February 1983

I am writing on behalf of the Prime Minister to thank you for your letter and enclosure of 14 February.

I will place this before her at once and you will be sent a reply as soon as possible.

WR

The Rt. Hon. Dr. David Owen, M.P.

AB

Dr. DAVID OWEN MP 22/2
dual key control + cruise
missiles



file
NBS
Copy of reply
to Jan Kydd

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

15 February 1983

I enclose a copy of a letter to the Prime Minister from the Right Honourable Dr. David Owen, M.P., with which he encloses one that he has sent to your Secretary of State, largely about dual-key control and cruise missiles.

I should be grateful if you could let me have a suitable draft reply for the Prime Minister to send to Dr. Owen as soon as possible.

I am copying this letter and enclosure to Roger Bone (Foreign and Commonwealth Office).

W.P.S. BICKETT

Richard Mottram, Esq.,
Ministry of Defence



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

PPS

8
15

14th February, 1983

Rt Hon Mrs Margaret Thatcher MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London
SW1

David Owen

I enclose a copy of a letter I have sent to Michael Heseltine concerning arrangements for the control of the launch procedures of cruise missiles. However, I am writing to you on a related matter which concerns information I have been given surrounding dual control which I have not sought to use and on which I would be grateful for your confirmation as to whether the events I outline below actually happened. If they did in fact occur, I think you would be the first to recognise that serious questions are raised, in that the Thor missile could in fact for some years have been launched by one person.

I gather that launch of the Thor missile was initiated by an RAF officer with a 15 minute countdown proceeding to within 1½ minutes of launch. At that point the countdown was automatically held unless the USAF officer, acting on command, authorised its continuation. The actions of each officer consisted of turning a key in the control panel. I have been told of a potentially disastrous event which occurred which resulted in no accident and was known to very few people. The two launch control officers were required to remain at post throughout their duty shifts. On one occasion a USAF officer left his post and stepped outside. The 'RAF' officer now sitting alone at the joint control panel took out his key and tried to insert it in the lock operated by the USAF officer's key. It turned, and at that point the whole system was under his sole control.

I am told that as a result there was a rapid refitting of all locks throughout the system. But for some three years up to that time, the dual control stretching through separate channels of communication up to the Heads of State had been at risk and it was only the fact that dual control existed which alerted the RAF to the situation. Either the British or the American officer could have fired this missile, in flagrant breach of the fundamental principle that no one person can ever fire a missile. The mistake would never have been discovered if there had not been RAF participation and we would have been blissfully unaware that a single US officer was in complete control.

Of course, if my information is incorrect then I am very relieved, but if it is correct I suggest to you that it is only a matter of time, given the present public concern, before these facts come to light, with a very adverse effect on the whole public debate. If this incident did happen, of itself it is a justification for the introduction of a dual key mechanism

In your letter to me of 17th January you said "As you know, the option to purchase cruise missiles and their launchers (but not warheads), which would have given us physical control, was one which we decided against in 1979. I do not think that you yourself took a different view on this point at the time." I have gone carefully over my papers and I can find no ministerial decision which is in any way compatible with a decision having been taken by the last Labour Government to reject dual key arrangements for ground launched cruise missiles and if you are being fed this information, it is in my judgement incorrect. It could be argued that my party political position would be helped now by going along with the Sunday Times story that the last Labour Government made a decision over ground launched cruise missiles. In fact it did not do so; what it did do of course was participate fully in the NATO preparatory work which led up to the decision which your Government must have made when it took office.

I only mention this because I do not see any advantage whatever for any of us in trying to make a party political point on the issue of dual key. A dual key mechanism for cruise missiles is now an essential element in carrying public confidence in the dual track decision of 1979. I hope you will now announce your intention to seek an agreement with the United States over a dual key mechanism and that by doing so this will strengthen the US negotiation position in the INF talks because it will become apparent to the Soviet Union that British public opinion would be prepared if necessary to accept cruise missile deployment, having been satisfied on the control mechanism.

I am for obvious reasons not at this stage making this announcement public.

David Owen

David Owen

PARLIAMENTARY QUESTION

For answer on: Thursday, 17th February, 1983
(DAY) (DATE)

If ORAL
insert X

W

If for
WRITTEN
ANSWER
leave blank

If for
PRIORITY
WRITTEN
insert W
and give
date for
answer

Name.....The Rt. Hon. Dr. David Owen MP.....

Constituency (.....Plymouth Devonport.....):

To ask.....The Secretary of State for Defence.....

.....
(TITLE OF MINISTER)

If, in the event of deployment of Cruise missiles in Great Britain, any RAF personnel accompanying a ground launched cruise missile off the air base will operate under a separate chain of command from the USAF personnel, and whether the same procedures over launch and countdown will be in operation as was the case for the Thor missile.

Signed.....
