



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

6 March 1984

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP
House of Commons

Dear Prime Minister

I am writing on behalf of the Shadow Cabinet to ask for your comments on the serious discrepancies which exist between the Government's version of the circumstances surrounding the sinking of the General Belgrano by HMS Conqueror on 2 May 1982 and statements made regarding the affair in two recent publications.

The Government maintains, in paragraph 110 of the Falklands Campaign: the Lessons, Cmd 8758 that the Conqueror detected the Belgrano on 2 May 1982. Yet in the book "Our Falklands War: the men of the Task Force tell THEIR story", by Geoffrey Underwood, the Commander of the Conqueror is reported to have said that he visually sighted the Belgrano early in the afternoon of 1 May and followed it for over 30 hours.

In another book published on 5 March, "The Sinking of the Belgrano", by Desmond Rice and Arthur Gavshon, the authors also maintain that the General Belgrano had been located 48 hours before it was sunk and was then trailed for more than 30 hours. They further assert that when the Belgrano was sunk it was on course for the Argentine coastline.

Because of the widespread concern regarding the reasons behind the sinking of the Belgrano, I should be grateful for your comments.

Yours sincerely

RT HON DENZIL DAVIES MP

DS5/9/9/46-11

5/21

16 March 1984

APS/Secretary of State thro' PS/Minister(AF)

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*Let 1 done to ink this
Submission fully sets out the
balance of arguments between
Draft 1 and Draft 2 which
we have now dismissed
JPL 2/13*

LETTER FROM THE SHADOW CABINET TO THE PRIME MINISTER ON
GENERAL BELGRANO

You asked for a draft reply to send to No 10 for the Prime Minister to send to Denzil Davies and the Shadow Cabinet. Minister(AF) asked me to prepare a draft admitting for the first time that BELGRANO was sighted on 1 May and not 2 May, this is Draft 2 attached. I have however prepared an alternative reply, Draft 1, which maintains the existing public line. There are no operational or intelligence reasons for withholding the 1 May date and the choice between the drafts is therefore essentially political.

No Drafts on GDR bases were sought

2. Any decision to admit the 1 May date will need to take into account that:

- a. Sir John Nott in the Commons on 4 May 1982, the Official Despatch and the Falklands White Paper all say that BELGRANO was detected on 2 May.
- b. On 10 December 1982 Mr Dalyell was told by Mr Blaker that it would not be in the public interest to say at what time the first contact with BELGRANO was made by an RN submarine.
- c. The Government has frequently taken the line that the affair has been fully explained and the Prime Minister took this position on 21 February 1984 in the Commons in response to a supplementary from Mr Dalyell.

However, if it were decided to admit the 1 May date, it might be possible to argue:

- a. Sir John Nott's statement was clearly meant to refer to sinking (8pm London time) not detection.

b. In the Lords on 13 July 1983 Lady Young explained the White Paper by saying that it referred to the events of 2 May and not when BELGRANO was first located.

c. An answer based on visual contact made on 1 May is not wholly inconsistent with Mr Blaker's reply on 10 December 1982. (There was a sonar contact with the escorting tanker of the BELGRANO group on the afternoon of 30 April.)

3. Whatever the arguments for admitting the 1 May date (and this would bring the Government's position into line with the interview given by Commander Wreford-Brown) the main objection to a change of position is that it will only encourage Mr Dalyell in his other accusations. Mr Dalyell will also use the admission to continue his argument that the sinking was for political not military reasons. Any admission will also raise questions about why the admission was not made when the discrepancy first emerged about a year ago.

4. This minute and Draft 2 are classified CONFIDENTIAL because of the existence of the draft. If it is decided to use Draft 2 it is unclassified.



C S PONTING
Head of DS5

Att

DRAFT LETTER FROM PRIME MINISTER TO DENZIL DAVIES MP

DRAFT 1

1. Thank you for your letter of 6 March, about the sinking of the Argentine cruiser General Belgrano on 2 May 1982.

2. I do not accept that there are serious discrepancies in the Government's explanation of the reasons for the sinking of the General Belgrano. We have consistently made it clear that the cruiser was sunk for military reasons because she presented a threat to the Task Force. (1)

3. Paragraph 110 of Command 8758 described the events of 2 May which led to the sinking of the Belgrano. As Lady Young explained on 13 July 1983 it was not intended to say when the cruiser was first located. In fact we have consistently said that it would not be in the public interest to say when the Belgrano was first located. That remains the position. In any case the time at which Belgrano was first located is not relevant to the decision to attack her. (not said before) (2) (3) (4) (5) It was on 2 May that the Task Force Commander, in the light of the threat posed by the Belgrano group as part of the wider configuration of Argentine Naval Forces, sought and obtained a change in the Rules of Engagement to enable Belgrano to be attacked outside the Total Exclusion Zone. (5)

4. When she was attacked Belgrano was on a course of 280°. She had made many changes of course during the day and could have done so again at any time. Her precise course at any given moment was irrelevant to the threat that she presented. (4)

5. You allege that there is "widespread concern regarding the reasons behind the sinking of the Belgrano". I do not believe that

is so. It is fully understood that the Government's overriding
and proper concern was to take the necessary measures to protect
the Task Force - which had been sent to the South Atlantic with
all-party support.

DRAFT LETTER FROM PRIME MINISTER TO DENZIL DAVIES MP

DRAFT 2

1. Thank you for your letter of 6 March, about the sinking of the Argentine cruiser General Belgrano on 2 May 1982.

2. I do not accept that there are serious discrepancies in the Government's explanation of the reasons for the sinking of the General Belgrano. We have consistently made it clear that the cruiser was sunk for military reasons because she presented a threat to the Task Force. (1)

3. Paragraph 110 of Command 8758 described the events of 2 May which led to the sinking of the Belgrano. As Lady Young explained on 13 July 1983, it was not intended to say when the cruiser was first located. The Government has declined to give this information before now for security reasons, because of the insight it would give into our knowledge of Argentine naval movements. Although this is still an important constraint on what we can say about the events of the time, this constraint is now of less importance and I can confirm that Belgrano was first sighted by HMS Conqueror on the afternoon of 1 May. (2) (3) (4) (5) (6) (7) (8) (9) (10) (11) (12) (13) (14) (15) (16) (17) (18) (19) (20) (21) (22) (23) (24) (25) (26) (27) (28) (29) (30) (31) (32) (33) (34) (35) (36) (37) (38) (39) (40) (41) (42) (43) (44) (45) (46) (47) (48) (49) (50) (51) (52) (53) (54) (55) (56) (57) (58) (59) (60) (61) (62) (63) (64) (65) (66) (67) (68) (69) (70) (71) (72) (73) (74) (75) (76) (77) (78) (79) (80) (81) (82) (83) (84) (85) (86) (87) (88) (89) (90) (91) (92) (93) (94) (95) (96) (97) (98) (99) (100)

4. The time that Belgrano was first sighted is not of course relevant to the decision to attack her. As Peter Blaker explained in a written answer on 29 November 1982, it was on 2 May that the Task Force Commander, in the light of the threat posed by the Belgrano group as part of the wider configuration of Argentine Naval Forces, sought and obtained a change in the Rules of Engagement to enable Belgrano to be attacked outside the Total Exclusion Zone, and therefore it was on 2 May that the ship was sunk. (101) (102) (103) (104) (105) (106) (107) (108) (109) (110) (111) (112) (113) (114) (115) (116) (117) (118) (119) (120) (121) (122) (123) (124) (125) (126) (127) (128) (129) (130) (131) (132) (133) (134) (135) (136) (137) (138) (139) (140) (141) (142) (143) (144) (145) (146) (147) (148) (149) (150) (151) (152) (153) (154) (155) (156) (157) (158) (159) (160) (161) (162) (163) (164) (165) (166) (167) (168) (169) (170) (171) (172) (173) (174) (175) (176) (177) (178) (179) (180) (181) (182) (183) (184) (185) (186) (187) (188) (189) (190) (191) (192) (193) (194) (195) (196) (197) (198) (199) (200)

5. When she was attacked Belgrano was on a course of 280° . She had made many changes of course during the day and could have done so again at any time. Her precise course at any given moment was irrelevant to the threat that she presented.

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6. You allege that there is "widespread concern regarding the reasons behind the sinking of the Belgrano". I do not believe that is so. It is fully understood that the Government's overriding and proper concern was to take the necessary measures to protect the Task Force - which had been sent to the South Atlantic with all-party support.