

SECRET

PUS/V84/300

30th March, 1984.

PS/SECRETARY OF STATE

Copies to: PS/Minister(AF)  
CNS  
DCDS(I)  
Head of DS5

5/21

SINKING OF THE BELGRANO

After the Secretary of State's meeting this morning had broken up, he, you and I had a further word on the question of where, in the Prime Minister's reply to Mr. Denzil Davies MP, we could legitimately draw the line and stand absolutely firmly on the argument that to disclose any more information would be contrary to national security. We thought that it might well be possible to reveal that the CONQUEROR first detected the BELGRANO group on 30th April 1982 and first sighted the BELGRANO itself on 1st May but that we should not allow ourselves to be driven beyond that point, whatever the pressures. I have accordingly revised the letter for the Prime Minister to send to Mr. Davies, and I have put in square brackets in the attached draft the sentence which gives this new information. If the Prime Minister decides that she does not want to go this far, then the simple deletion of the passage in brackets leaves us with a reply which stands pat on the existing line. Either version will make it clear that the CONQUEROR had been keeping in contact with the BELGRANO before the Task Force Commander asked for a change in the Rules of Engagement.

JWW.

PUS

SECRET

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DRAFT LETTER FROM THE PRIME MINISTER TO DENZIL DAVIES MP

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

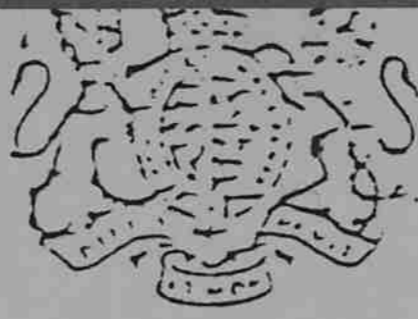
2. Paragraph 110 of Command 8758 described the events of 2 May which led to the sinking of the cruiser. As Janet Young explained in the House of Lords on 13 July 1983, that account was not intended to say when the cruiser was first located. [In fact the Conqueror first detected the Belgrano group on 30 April, and she sighted the Belgrano on 1 May for the first time.] But the essential point is that it was on 2 May that the Task Force Commander, in the light of the latest assessment of the threat posed by the Belgrano group as part of the wider disposition of Argentinian naval forces, sought and obtained from Ministers a change in the Rules of Engagement to permit the Belgrano to be attacked outside the Total Exclusion Zone.

§ When she was attacked the Belgrano was on a course of 280°. She had made a number of 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.

It was the Government's overriding and proper concern to take all the measures available to protect the Task Force.

3. In the light of all the information available to us at the time I know of no reason to question the rightness of that decision.

OR



10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

WILL NOT  
RECEIVE  
THIS UNTIL  
1615 TODAY

Dear Mr. Pons,

4<sup>th</sup> April 1984

Thank you for your letter of 6 March about the sinking of the General Belgrano.

The background to this event is worth recalling. On 30 April the Total Exclusion Zone was established around the Falkland Islands. On 1 May attacks by Vulcan and Sea Harrier aircraft were carried out on Stanley airfield as part of the process of enforcing the Total Exclusion Zone. On the same day the Task Force came under attack for the first time from the Argentine airforce and some Argentine aircraft were shot down. We were all very conscious of the risk that these assaults on the Task Force would be backed up by attacks by surface ships and submarines of the Argentine Navy and by aircraft from their carrier, the 25 de Mayo. All British units were on maximum alert to deal with any naval or air attacks.

HMS Conqueror, on patrol south of the Falkland Islands, detected an Argentine oiler auxiliary which was accompanying the Belgrano on 30 April. She sighted the Belgrano for the first time on 1 May when it was accompanied by two destroyers armed with Exocet missiles. Paragraph 110 of Command 8758 describes the events of 2 May which led to the sinking of the cruiser. As Janet Young explained in the House of Lords on 13 July 1983, that account was not intended to say when the cruiser was first located. The essential point is that it was on 2 May that we had indications about the movements of the Argentine fleet which led the Task Force Commander, Admiral Woodward, to request a change in the Rules of Engagement to permit the Belgrano to be attacked outside the Total Exclusion Zone.

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The circumstances on that day have been well described by Admiral Woodward in his lecture at the Royal United Services Institute on 20 October 1982:

"Early on the morning on 2 May, all the indications were that 25 de Mayo, the Argentinian carrier, and a group of escorts had slipped past my forward SSN barrier to the north, while the cruiser General Belgrano and her escorts were attempting to complete the pincer movement from the south, still outside the Total Exclusion Zone. But Belgrano still had Conqueror on the trail. My fear was that Belgrano would lose the SSN as she ran over the shallow water of the Burdwood Bank, and that my forward SSN barrier would be evaded down there too. I therefore sought, for the first and only time throughout the campaign, a major change to the Rules of Engagement to enable Conqueror to attack Belgrano outside the Exclusion Zone."

Ministers agreed to the proposed change in the Rules of Engagement at about 1 p.m. London time on 2 May. Orders were sent immediately to HMS Conqueror, which attacked the Belgrano at 8 p.m. London time. Because of the indications that the Belgrano posed a threat to the task force, her precise position and course at the time she was sunk were irrelevant.

The first indications of the possible Peruvian peace proposals reached London from Washington at 11.15 p.m. London time and from Lima at 2 a.m. London time on 3 May.

My comments on paragraph 3 about the first contacts with the Belgrano group go further than we have been prepared to do hitherto. I have only felt able to do this now as, "with the passage of time, those events have lost some of their original operational significance."

/Throughout

Throughout the events described above it was a major concern of the Government to protect by all the means available the Task Force which had been despatched to the South Atlantic with all-party support.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Thatcher

The Rt. Hon. Denzil Davies, M.P.