

25(A-9)

PRIME MINISTER

ADDITIONAL BRITISH FORCES FOR THE GULF

You are meeting a group of senior officers tomorrow, with a representative of Vickers, to probe them on the reliability of the Challenger tank, before we reach a decision whether to send an Armoured Brigade to the Gulf. A list of those attending is attached. In addition, to CDS (Craig) and CGS (Chapple), it includes a very senior tank officer, the Challenger Project Manager from the Procurement Executive and the Managing Director of Vickers. The Defence Secretary insists on being present, but I have urged him to stick to a non-speaking role. This is your show.

As part of the preparations for the meeting, I have spoken to Sir Nigel Bagnall and Sir Martin Farndale. You may find it helpful to have a summary of their views.

Sir Nigel Bagnall was, as ever, rather laconic. Challenger was a very robust tank. Problems with it had arisen only because the Government had been too parsimonious to buy and hold enough spares. Provided there were adequate spares and logistic back-up, it would perform very well in the Gulf and the Government would not be risking anything by sending it. There had been problems with the fire control system, but he thought these were largely now resolved. Mechanically it was a good tank, and he regarded the allegations about its overall lack of reliability as alarmist. He thought sending an Armoured Brigade was now the best course, although equally he was certain you had been right not to rush into a commitment of ground troops. Lightly armoured forces would be no good at all. Nor was he much in favour of an Artillery Brigade: an Armoured Brigade would have its own artillery and would be a much more flexible and effective force. He reiterated his main point: the key was to have an adequate supply of spares.

Sir Martin Farndale was more reflective. Armour in the desert was very different from armour in Europe. He had extensive experience of both. The key was to have a balanced force, ie tanks, armoured infantry, artillery, an engineer squadron and some helicopters. That pointed to a full Armoured Brigade rather than a smaller force. Air superiority was vital in the desert, but it seemed that we and the Americans could now probably rely on that. Armoured infantry was also essential: tanks were defenceless at night in the desert: and that was the time they had to be re-supplied and serviced. The biggest problems in the desert were logistic. In Europe you could always cobble something together and live off the land, but in the desert it was different. The logistics had to be superbly organised, with adequate spares and back-up.

Sir Martin recognised that Challenger did not have a very good reputation for reliability but made the same point as Sir Nigel Bagnall: the problems stemmed basically from a shortage of spares. There had never been enough money to buy the full range of equipment needed. But provided priority was given to the needs of the Challenger tanks sent to Saudi Arabia at the expense of those in Europe, this problem could be overcome. The fire control system was not as modern as that in the Abrams M1A or the Leopard: but actually it was just as effective, although a second or two slower than more modern systems. He would much rather go to war in a Challenger than a Leopard in the desert, indeed he thought the Challenger was as good as the M1A in practice. All that said, he recognised that a worst case of poor reliability and difficulties with the gun turret could occur, causing grave damage to our reputation and endangering lives. But on balance he thought the risk could be taken.

I asked about the alternative option of an Artillery Brigade with an armoured reconnaissance regiment. He thought this was a perfectly reasonable alternative, and in some ways easier to operate because of commonality of equipment with the Americans. But there was no doubt that it was a less high profile contribution and he assumed the Americans would be much keener to have tanks.

Sir Martin wanted you to know that he had been thinking over these issues very carefully during the last few days and had been intending to write with his views. What he had given me was not just a snap judgment.

In the light of this, it seems to me your aim tomorrow should be to do some destruction testing on the MOD and the company, to see how well they stand up to your scepticism about Challenger. The main areas to cover are:

Reliability

You will want to extract from them actual operational availability figures for Challenger in Germany.

You will want to press them on the subject of spares and their availability, and whether they can be sure of having sufficient spares to keep a high proportion of the tanks operational in Saudi Arabia.

Modifications

You will want to probe them on the modifications which are said to be necessary. What exactly do they involve? Have they been tried before? How crucial is their effect on the tanks' performance? Will they cause delay, or give rise to new problems?

Fire Control System

This has frequently been identified as Challenger's weak point.

Is it really a match for the latest Soviet tanks which it will be up against? Why has it had to withdraw from NATO firing competitions in the past? Is it sufficiently accurate when the tank is on the move?

Operational Experience

Anecdotal evidence from Germany suggests that the Armoured Brigade has scarcely exercised as a formation, indeed

training has been very limited because of financial limitations and difficulties caused by the Germans. Do we really believe that they can bring performance up to scratch in a short time and operate as a unit? What sort of training will be necessary? (Remember what happened when the Welsh Guards were taken straight from public duties in London to the Falklands and were unable to complete their march to Port Stanley.)

Command and Control

How do they envisage the tank forces fitting in with American forces? What role do they expect to be given? Do they really believe that our units are sufficiently experienced and practised to undertake this role in the desert? Or are we needlessly putting lives at risk?

At the end you will want to say that this is a very serious decision which affects the lives of our soldiers, our reputation as a serious military power and the standing of Vickers as a company. You will require them all to indicate to you that they advise without any serious reservations that the Government can safely take the decision to send Challenger, and that we have the skills, the resources, the spares and the experience for it to operate reliably and effectively in the desert.

C.P.P.

CHARLES POWELL

12 September 1990

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MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
 MAIN BUILDING WHITEHALL LONDON SW1A 2HB
 Telephone 071-21 82111/3

MO 6/17/15J
 MO 26/4/2/1J

12/1k September 1990

Dear Charles

CHALLENGER 1 TANK

The team the Defence Secretary plans to bring to the Prime Minister's meeting on Challenger 1 reliability at 3.00pm on Thursday 13th September is:

Chief of the Defence Staff

Chief of the General Staff

Assistant Chief of the Defence Staff for Operational Requirements (Land Systems) - Major General A S J Blacker

Project Manager, Chieftain and Challenger Tanks - Mr S R Jackson (Assistant Director, Engineering).

The Vickers Defence Systems Ltd will be represented by Mr G Boxall, Chairman and Chief Executive (who will be travelling down from their Leeds plant).

The Prime Minister might find it helpful to have the attached list of the main areas which the Defence Secretary addressed during his own review yesterday.

✓
in green
John Webb

(S WEBB)
 Private Secretary

C D Powell Esq
 10 Downing Street

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REVIEW OF CHALLENGER 1

Overall Availability in Germany

Key Areas for Reliability -

- MUFF Couplings
- Laser Sight
- Thermal Optics Sight
- Other Turret Systems

Modifications for a Saudi Arabian deployment -

- Air Cleaners
- Flexible Hoses for Oil Cooler
- Batteries
- Generator
- Coolant
- NBC Charcoal

Other Issues -

- Trials in Saudi Arabia 1985 and 1987
- Ammunition Containers
- Automatic Track Tensioning
- Air Conditioning
- Auxiliary Power Units
- VDS Initiatives

Support -

- Contractor Support
- Spares Levels
- Replacements for sensitive equipments

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Secret and Personal

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Prime Minister

Prime Minister

The Attorney wanted me to give you this, but not tell the other party.

I have served in tanks and have kept up my interest in armoured warfare, and I have no personal interest in whether Challenger is sent to the Gulf.

He thinks sending Challenger up against the Iraqis would be suicidal. COP 11/9.

I think your instinctive reservations are right. The function of the tank on the battlefield is to knock out the enemy's tanks: it is no more than a mobile gun platform. I suggest you should ask for a report on Challenger's sighting and fire control capacity, and for another on the extent to which Challenger regiments in Germany have been able in the past year to exercise, in armoured formations at all, under pressure of financial constraints and German environmental constraints. You will I think find that exercising has been drastically cut back. Contrast Iraqi recent experience in the use of armour, in desert conditions.

Artillery will have been better able to train: it delivers a front-line punch: and it is less dependant on infantry protection at night, being further to the rear.

PM 11/9/90



10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

13 September 1990

Thank you very much for your kind letter received this morning. What a coincidence that I chose yesterday to telephone you! The Prime Minister was immensely grateful for your helpful advice which she greatly appreciated. It was particularly valuable in helping her to frame questions for the experts today. The decision will be announced tomorrow, but I have little doubt about which way it will go.

CHARLES POWELL

General Sir Martin Farndale KCB

KW
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32

PRIME MINISTER

ADDITIONAL BRITISH FORCES FOR THE GULF

General Farndale rang me back again this morning to say that he had reflected overnight on his advice and believed it was right. He suggested there were three crucial questions which those concerned should answer:

- have the problems with the fire control system been rectified?
- has the propellant pressure problem with the gun been resolved?
- has the performance of the engine in desert conditions been put right? (It was apparently problems with the engine in desert conditions which led to Challenger's failure to pass its trials in Saudi Arabia some years ago.)

CDN

CHARLES POWELL

13 September 1990

GENERAL SIR MARTIN FARNDALE, KCB

Worthing (0903) 771125

13-9
Sea Barn Manor
Kingston Gorse
East Preston
Sussex BN16 1SB

Dear Charles,

11 Sep 1990.

It was very nice to meet the Prime Minister,
Mr Thatcher and yourself on the Shorts Stand at
The Farnborough Air Show last week.

I will simply say that, at this testing time,
I stand ready to help in any way I can. I have
served with Armours in the deserts of Egypt and the
Sinai and for some years along the Saudi Arabian
border with the old South Arabian Protectorate in
the 1960s. I have commanded armours at brigade,
division, corps and Army Group level and am
well aware of the problems our force will face.

Yours sincerely

Martin Farndale.