



10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

4 April 1984

NB Previous correspondence
with Garden House

Dear Mr. Davis,

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.

/ The

BTC.

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.