



MINISTRY OF DEFENCE  
MAIN BUILDING WHITEHALL LONDON SW1

Telephone 01-~~9307022~~ 218 2111/3

Prime Minister

MO 5/21

This is the 'Belgrano' 12th September 1984  
text mentioned by Geoffrey Howe. I also attach  
your letter to Denis Davies in case you  
want to refer to them.

Agree to meeting with Sir G. Howe  
& Mr. Heseltine to discuss the text?

New Charter.

REPLY TO MR GEORGE FOULKES MP

Yes Mr CDP  
12/1

In his letter of 24th August, Tim Flesher asked for a draft reply to the letter to the Prime Minister from George Foulkes MP on allegations in the New Statesman about the background to naval operations in the South Atlantic at the end of April and in early May 1982.

There has, as you know, been extensive consultation between the Defence Secretary, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and the Attorney General about whether the reply to Mr Foulkes might be used to set out a definitive position on which the Defence Secretary would draw when appearing before the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Autumn and on which all Ministers could draw in the continuing public controversy over this matter. I attach a draft reply which might serve this purpose which has been prepared jointly by the FCO and the MOD and discussed between the Ministers concerned. The Prime Minister may wish herself to hold a meeting to discuss the attachment. You will note that two sentences in paragraph 11 of the draft Annex are in square brackets: the Defence Secretary would propose to explain orally the background to these.

I am copying this letter and the attachment to Janet Lewis-Jones (Lord President's Office), Len Appleyard (FCO), Hugh Taylor (Home Office), Henry Steel (Attorney General's Chambers) and Richard Hatfield (Cabinet Office).

Yours etc.

Richard Mottram

(R C MOTTRAM)

C Powell Esq

DRAFT LETTER FROM THE PRIME MINISTER TO GEORGE FOULKES MP

You wrote to me on 23rd August about decisions taken by the Government at the time of the Falklands conflict.

2. Your questions reflect a number of fundamental misconceptions about the situation in the South Atlantic in May 1982. I am enclosing, as an annexe to this letter, a statement of the position which should clear up these misconceptions, and remove any doubts in your mind about the reasons for our actions.

3. To put the matter briefly, in April 1982 Argentina had attacked and invaded British territory; despite intense and continuing diplomatic efforts, Argentina refused to comply with a mandatory resolution of the United Nations Security Council to withdraw its forces; with all-party support, and in exercise of our inherent right of self-defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter, the British Government despatched the Task Force to the South Atlantic; by 2nd May the Task Force, strung out and vulnerable, had already been attacked by Argentine aircraft and there were clear and unequivocal indications that it was under further threat from a pincer movement by Argentine warships, including the cruiser 'General Belgrano' and the aircraft carrier '25 de Mayo'. The then Argentine Operations Commander, South Atlantic, has since confirmed publicly that his warships had indeed been ordered to attack. No Government with a proper sense of responsibility could have refrained from taking appropriate measures

to counter the threats to the Task Force, and to ensure its safety to the maximum extent possible. Risks could not be taken especially when hostilities had been so clearly embarked upon by the Argentines.

4. On your questions about the Argentine aircraft carrier, the rules of engagement as agreed by Ministers on 30th April permitted our forces to attack the '25 de Mayo' in circumstances in which it posed a military threat to the Task Force. A warning that Argentine warships threatening the Task Force would meet with an appropriate response had been delivered to the Argentine Government on 23rd April. There is no truth in the suggestion that the Foreign Secretary and the Attorney-General opposed or dissented from these rules of engagement. *Serious.*

5. On the question of whether a Polaris submarine was deployed as described in the New Statesman article, the Government made it quite clear at the time that, although it has been the longstanding practice of successive Governments neither to confirm nor deny the presence or absence of nuclear weapons at any particular time, there was no question at all of our using nuclear weapons in the Falklands campaign.

6. I have given you as full an account of these matters as is consistent with national security. I must make it clear that it is, and will remain, quite wrong for me to disclose <sup>everything</sup> all the material <sup>with</sup> that was available to Ministers at the time. To do so would <sup>irreparable</sup> ~~risk~~ <sup>that could be</sup> real damage to national security and ~~could~~ <sup>could</sup> put lives at risk in the future.

7. Those who seek to criticise the Government's actions (including people outside this country who have every reason to discredit the Government of the United Kingdom) are not subject to the same constraints and have felt free to make a large number of assertions. I have already explained why I cannot make public ~~all~~ <sup>every thing</sup> of the material which would make it possible to discuss whether those assertions are true or false. In these circumstances, I must emphasise the central point. On the basis of all the material that was available to Ministers at the time, my colleagues and I were satisfied ~~(beyond doubt)~~ that we could only reach the conclusions and take the decisions that we did, ~~Nothing~~ that has since been put forward - and I can assure you that it has all been examined with the utmost care - has led me or any of my colleagues to have any doubts <sup>that we were right</sup> about the rightness of our decisions. ~~3~~

*it is  
shown  
with  
the  
Czech's  
words.  
and we  
were  
satisfied.*

DRAFT ANNEX

1. The threats which faced the Task Force at the end of April and the beginning of May 1982 can only be appreciated in the light of the situation in the South Atlantic at that time.
2. On 2nd April 1982, the process of diplomatic negotiations over the Falkland Islands was abruptly interrupted by Argentina's unprovoked armed invasion of the Islands. Having obtained control of the Islands, the Argentines then refused to comply with mandatory Resolution 502 of the United Nations Security Council, which demanded an immediate withdrawal of their forces.
3. In exercise of the inherent right of self-defence under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, and in parallel with intense but unproductive diplomatic activity, the British Task Force was despatched at the beginning of April, with all-party support, following Argentina's action, which was wholly inconsistent with international law and the UN Charter. 28,000 British Servicemen and civilians eventually sailed in the Task Force; it was the foremost and continuing duty of the Government to take such decisions as were necessary to protect them as the events of the moment demanded.
4. On 7th April, the Defence Secretary had announced the establishment, as from 12th April, of a 200 nautical mile Maritime Exclusion Zone around the Falkland Islands; but it was made clear in the announcement that this was 'without prejudice to the right of the United

Kingdom to take whatever additional measures may be needed in exercise of its right of self-defence, under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter'. Mr Nott told the House of Commons that if it became necessary, the British Government would use force to achieve the objective of securing Argentine withdrawal. He added: 'We hope that it will not come to that. We hope that diplomacy will succeed. Nevertheless, the Argentines were the first to use force of arms in order to establish their present control of the Falklands ....'

5. In late April 1982 the Task Force was strung out between Ascension Island and the Falklands and vulnerable to attack. On 23rd April 1982, the Government accordingly sent a message to the Argentine Government reminding them that the establishment of the Maritime Exclusion Zone had been without prejudice to Britain's right to take whatever additional measures might be needed in exercise of its right to self-defence, and making it explicitly clear that any approach by Argentine warships or military aircraft which could amount to a threat to interfere with the mission of British forces in the South Atlantic would encounter the appropriate response. It was clear that this applied outside the Exclusion Zone as well as within it. This message was circulated in the United Nations Security Council and released publicly. *or 26 April* *When? Date?*

6. On 28th April 1982 the Government announced the establishment of a 200 nautical mile Total Exclusion Zone around the Falkland Islands, effective as from 30th April, which would apply to all Argentine ships and aircraft. The announcement again stressed that 'these measures

are without prejudice to the right of the United Kingdom to take whatever additional measures may be needed in exercise of its right of self-defence, under Article 51 of the UN Charter'.

7. The threats to the Task Force, as perceived in London and by the Task Force Commander, were explained in the letter of 4th April from the Prime Minister to Mr Denzil Davies.

8. On 1st May 1982 the Task Force came under attack for the first time from the Argentine airforce, operating from the mainland. As the Defence Secretary said in the House of Commons on 4th May: 'On 1st May the Argentines launched attacks on our ships, during most of the daylight hours. The attacks by Argentine Mirage and Canberra aircraft operating from the mainland were repulsed by British Sea Harriers. Had our Sea Harriers failed to repulse the attacks on the Task Force, our ships could have been severely damaged or sunk. In fact, one Argentine Canberra and one Mirage were shot down and others were damaged. We believe that another Mirage was brought down by Argentine anti-aircraft fire. One of our frigates suffered splinter damage as a result of the air attacks and there was one British casualty whose condition is now satisfactory. All our aircraft returned safely. On the same day, our forces located and attacked what was believed to be an Argentine submarine which was clearly in a position to torpedo our ships. It is not known whether the submarine was hit. The prolonged air attack on our ships, the presence of an Argentine submarine close by, and all other information available to us, left us in no doubt of the dangers

to our Task Force from hostile action'. All British units were on maximum alert to deal with any naval or air attacks.

9. As Admiral Woodward has explained "Early on the morning of 2nd May, all the indications were that the '25 de Mayo', the Argentine 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." The Argentine Operations Commander in the South Atlantic at the time, Admiral Juan Jose Lombardo, confirmed without hesitation on the BBC Panorama programme on 16th April this year that the Argentine Navy, as we thought, were attempting to engage in a pincer movement against the Task Force, using the '25 de Mayo' and its escorts in the north and the 'General Belgrano' and its escorts attempting to complete the movement from the south.

10. As was further explained in the letter to Mr Denzil Davies, HMS Conqueror had sighted the Belgrano for the first time on 1st May. On 2nd May, in response to the threat to the Task Force, Admiral Woodward sought a change to the Rules of Engagement to enable Conqueror to attack the Belgrano outside the Exclusion Zone. On the basis of all the information available to the Government the Belgrano constituted a real and direct threat to the Task Force and those sailing with it. <sup>On the advice</sup> At the ~~express~~ request of their ~~most senior~~ military advisers, Ministers therefore agreed the proposed



change in the Rules of Engagement at about 1pm London time on 2nd May. Orders changing the rules were sent immediately to HMS Conqueror, which attacked the Belgrano at 8pm London time.

11. After the decision by Ministers to change the rules of engagement, Conqueror reported at 3pm London time the position of the Belgrano then and its position at 9am (London time) that morning. This report showed that <sup>although</sup> the ship had reversed course; ~~but~~ she was still operating close to the Exclusion Zone and could have changed course again and closed on elements of the Task Force. [Ministers were not informed of this change of course at the time because the clear and unequivocal indications of the hostile intent of the Argentine naval forces against the Task Force <sup>made</sup> the precise position and course of the Belgrano irrelevant.] [There has been no evidence available to the Government at any time to make Ministers change the judgement they reached on 2nd May that the Belgrano posed a threat to the Task Force.] In the Panorama interview which is referred to earlier, Admiral Lombardo stated that the decision to sink the Argentine cruiser had been tactically sound, and one which he too would have taken had he been in Britain's position.

12. The need to counter the threat to British forces <sup>some 7,000 nautical miles</sup> (many thousands of miles from their home base) was the sole reason for the attack on the Belgrano. <sup>solidly</sup> <sup>referred to</sup> <sup>with more</sup> No other consideration entered the calculations of the Ministers concerned, and in particular there was no question of the action undermining peace proposals put forward by the President of Peru. As has been frequently made clear, the first indications

of these proposals did not reach London from Washington until 11.15pm London time on 2nd May - over three hours after the sinking of the Belgrano - and from Lima until 2am London time on 3rd May.

13. Diplomatic action was, however, also pursued vigorously. Every effort was made to secure by diplomatic means the objective of the withdrawal of the Argentine forces. As the Prime Minister said in the House of Commons on 29th April 1982, it was the British Government's earnest hope that this objective could be achieved by a negotiated settlement. But by 29th April, the initiative of the US Secretary of State, Mr Haig, had foundered on Argentine obduracy. On 30th April, he announced that the United States Government had had reason to hope that the United Kingdom would consider a settlement on the lines of the second set of proposals formulated by the US Government; but the Argentine Government had informed the Americans on 29th April that they could not accept it. As General Galtieri later explicitly admitted in an interview with an Argentine newspaper, Argentine domestic political opinion made it impossible for the Junta to agree to a solution that would entail the withdrawal of Argentine forces. The British authorities by contrast, continued the search for a negotiated settlement until 17th May.

14. The measures taken for the defence <sup>*of the soldiers under review*</sup> (of the British Task Force in late April and early May 1982) were designed clearly and exclusively to meet the threats to which it was then exposed and to safeguard

SECRET

the lives of our forces. There was no question of any attempt to destroy the prospects of a negotiated settlement.