



MINISTRY OF DEFENCE  
MAIN BUILDING WHITEHALL LONDON SW1  
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MO 5/21

5th October 1984

Action taken  
on copies of  
these drafts  
R.

New answer,

THE BELGRANO

You asked for draft replies to the further letters of 25th and 27th September from Dr Owen and Mr Foulkes.

The Defence Secretary believes that, on balance, there would be advantage in sending replies to both of these letters which yet again set out the context in which Ministers were having to take decisions at the time and give a robust justification of the actions that were taken. I attach drafts on this basis. We have not sought to provide individual answers to each of Mr Foulkes's questions since we believe it would be inappropriate for the Prime Minister to reply to him in this way; but nearly all of his questions are covered in the proposed answer. The Defence Secretary can answer the detailed questions about rules of engagement when he appears before the Foreign Affairs Committee.

The attachments have been cleared with the FCO at official level, but have not yet been seen by the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary himself.

I am copying this letter and the attachments to Peter Ricketts (FCO), Henry Steel (Attorney General's office) and Richard Hatfield (Cabinet Office).

Yours etc,

*Richard Mottram*

(R C MOTTRAM)

C Powell Esq

DRAFT LETTER TO DR DAVID OWEN MP

Thank you for your further letter of 25th September about the sinking of the General Belgrano.

2. The approach that underlies your letter seems to take no account of the circumstances and pressures under which Ministers and their senior advisers must work when involved in an extremely hazardous military campaign. The overriding responsibility of Ministers during the Falklands conflict was to address the strategy, both diplomatic and military, which would meet the wishes of Parliament in relation to the recovery of the Falkland Islands with the minimum risk to those serving in the Task Force. Ministers could not discharge this responsibility on the basis of minute by minute involvement in events happening 8,000 miles away. Nor, as events unfolded in early May with the Task Force under great threat, could Ministers devote their time solely to establishing in detail the circumstances surrounding individual operations which had already taken place: their principal concern had to be to look ahead and to seek to anticipate events.

3. John Nott's statement on 4th May and my own comments at the time must be seen in this context. You seem to imply that between the evening of 2nd May and 4th May the Defence Secretary's sole concern would have been to establish the precise facts about events concerning the Belgrano on the afternoon of 2nd May. In fact he had many other concerns and his statement on 4th May covered a number of events since 1st May of which the sinking of the Belgrano was but one element.

4. As I have explained Ministers took their decision on 2nd May to change the rules of engagement in the light of the clear and unequivocal indications of the real and direct threat to the Task Force posed by the Argentine Navy. They were aware of the general disposition of our own forces and of our assessment of the probable movements of the Argentine Navy. Even where the position of an Argentine unit was known, as in the case of the Belgrano, this information could be updated only at intervals and between such reports the units concerned could move substantial distances in any direction. It was the case as John Nott said to the House in May 1982 and I repeated in December 1982 that "the General Belgrano and a group of British warships could have been within striking distance of each other in a matter of some five to six hours, converging from a distance of some 200 nautical miles". Conqueror's report of the Belgrano's reversal of course and of her position at 3 pm on 2nd May does not invalidate this since the Belgrano could have changed course again and closed on elements of the Task Force. Ministers were aware of the distance between the two groups of ships to the degree of accuracy and probability which was feasible and sufficient in the circumstances. I do not see how military operations could be conducted successfully on any other basis. If Ministers had sought to monitor every development in the tactical disposition of forces on both sides and tried to control every engagement in detail from London the results would I believe have been disastrous. It was against this background that I have already explained that Ministers were not informed at the time of the precise course of the Belgrano when she was sunk. Indeed this information did not come to Ministers' attention until the end of November 1982 when all

the details were eventually considered to deal with Parliamentary Questions.

5. As well as making much of the Belgrano's position, you also refer at length to the question of whether the accompanying destroyers were attacked in any way. The facts are that the original statements by Ministers were based upon Conqueror's original report that two torpedoes had hit the cruiser. It subsequently emerged that Conqueror had fired one salvo consisting of three torpedoes. I am aware of reports that the third torpedo hit the destroyer HIPOLITO BOUCHARD. All I can say [redacted] is that the destroyer was on the far side of the Belgrano when the salvo was fired. It is therefore possible that the third torpedo hit her but there is still no conclusive evidence available to us that it happened. There is therefore no need to correct my statement of 4th May since it is a statement of fact that the Conqueror did not attack the destroyer.

6. Finally you suggest that the record should have been corrected on the eve of the publication of the White Paper/<sup>on the Falklands Campaign</sup> to take account of the knowledge we then had of the exact course and position of the Belgrano, that there had not been "constant" changes of course and that three torpedoes had been fired. As I have explained many times, the precise position and course of the Belgrano were irrelevant; we do not have a continuous record of the course which the Belgrano followed but certainly she made many changes of course during 2nd May which is all we have ever claimed; and the question of the number of torpedoes seems to have limited bearing on the rightness or otherwise of the decisions taken. <sup>attack on the</sup> The/Belgrano occupied one paragraph

in a White Paper on "The Falklands Campaign: The Lessons" and at the time of its publication Ministers and Parliament were more concerned, and rightly so, with the continuing defence of the Falkland Islands and the lessons to be learnt from the campaign. With the benefit of the hindsight which is so evident in this argument, it may be that it would have helped to have said something more at that time, consistent with the need to avoid giving information of operational significance. I have to say, however, that the events of recent months suggest that the process of disclosure will never satisfy those determined to misinterpret the Government's actions at the time, but it might lead into areas which could risk irreparable damage to national security. This has been and will remain a crucial consideration for this Government.

DRAFT LETTER TO MR GEORGE FOULKES MP

Thank you for your further letter of 27th September about events at the end of April and the beginning of May 1982.

2. The tone of your further letter suggests that you have little understanding or sympathy for the overriding concern of Ministers and their senior advisers at that time to protect the lives of those serving with the Task Force. Nor do you seem to appreciate that timely decisions had to be taken to adapt to changing circumstances in our efforts to achieve a negotiated settlement and in the military dispositions on both sides on the basis of the sometimes limited and imperfect information available at the time. If, as you seem to imply, you believe that Ministers did not act in good faith and reasonably, it would be preferable if you would state this openly. I am myself entirely content to accept the verdict of the British people on whether the Government were right to respond to Argentine aggression and to take those actions which we and our senior professional advisers believed necessary to protect British lives.

3. As I explained in my letter to you of 19th September and in my letter of today's date to Dr David Owen (copy attached), John Nott's statement of 4th May must be seen in the context of the preoccupations of Ministers at that time. It is also simply not true to suggest that the Government has not sought to rectify "the errors and misleading impressions", as you put it, in that statement.

My letter of 4th April 1984 to Mr Denzil Davies dealt with the question of when the General Belgrano was first sighted by HMS CONQUEROR. The Annex to my letter to you of 19th September gave a good deal of further detail about events at that time including the question of the Belgrano's course and position. My letter to Dr Owen deals with the question of the alleged attack by CONQUEROR on one of the Belgrano's escorting destroyers. I have to say that the provision of this further information seems merely to prompt further questions of an increasingly detailed kind: some, at least, of these questions seem to be of doubtful relevance. None of this further detail has altered the Government's explanation of why it was necessary to change the rules of engagement on 2nd May and to attack the General Belgrano. Nor does it cast doubt in any way on our rejection, since questioning began on this issue, of alternative hypotheses put forward by Mr Dalyell and others. I have explained previously that it is now possible to give some of this further information which we were reluctant to reveal in 1982, as it has lost some of its operational significance.

4. You ask a number of questions about the reasoning behind the creation of the Maritime Exclusion Zone (MEZ) and the Total Exclusion Zone (TEZ) and the changes which were made in the rules of engagement. These are matters which the Foreign Affairs Committee can no doubt address, if they wish, when the Defence Secretary appears before them. I cannot say with certainty what influence the MEZ and the TEZ exerted on Argentine operations. At all times the Task Force had rules of engagement which enabled it to respond to the threat presented by Argentine forces, but the precise circumstances in which Argentine ships and aircraft could be

engaged varied as the situation - and in particular the position of the Task Force and the threat which Argentine military forces could pose against it - developed. The rules of engagement were within the scope of the warning issued to the Argentine Government on 23rd April. That warning was reported to the United Nations Security Council on 24th April and met our obligations under Article 51 of the UN Charter. The changes that were made in the rules of engagement took full account of diplomatic, military and legal considerations and of our best assessment of the threat. The Chief of the Defence Staff and the Service Chiefs of Staff were responsible for giving professional military advice, taking account, of course, of the views of the operational commanders.

5. You ask a number of questions about the activities of the "War Cabinet". As was explained in the White Paper on the Falklands Campaign, the group of Ministers who conducted the higher management of the crisis met almost daily. The Foreign Secretary raised in writing on 1st May whether there was a need for a further warning to the Argentine Government. The Attorney General was present when Ministers met on 2nd May. My letter to Dr Owen deals with the question of when Ministers knew of the precise course of the Belgrano on 2nd May. I have already explained to you that this was irrelevant to the decision to permit the ship to be attacked.

6. I am not prepared to comment on questions 8 and 14 in your letter. Nor will I place the log of CONQUEROR's movements in the Library of the House of Commons: the submarine's log is classified.

7. Finally, you ask whether any material has been made available to Ministers since May 1982 which would have led us to take different



actions then. I in fact dealt with the point directly in my letter to you of 19th September, but I will, if I must, repeat to you again that no evidence has at any time become available to the Government which would make Ministers change the judgement they reached on 2nd May that the Belgrano posed a threat to the Task Force. The ship was sunk solely for that reason.

ARGENTINA: Relativis: Pz 38.

ECLADO

I agree. Excellent. FERRIS.  
See one question on page 3. I think this - which is  
still being cleared  
interdepartmentally - is  
very good. Any  
comments?  
C.D.P.

DRAFT LETTER TO DR DAVID OWEN MP

Thank you for your further letter of 25th September about the sinking of the General Belgrano.

2. The approach that underlies your letter seems to take no account of the circumstances and pressures under which Ministers and their senior advisers <sup>have to</sup> must work when involved in an extremely hazardous military campaign. (conducted at a very great distance from the UK) The overriding responsibility of Ministers during the Falklands conflict was to address the strategy, both diplomatic and military, which would meet the wishes of Parliament in relation to the recovery of the Falkland Islands with the minimum risk to those serving in the Task Force. Ministers could not discharge this responsibility on the basis of minute by minute involvement in events happening 8,000 miles away. Nor, as events unfolded in early May with the Task Force under great threat, could Ministers devote their time solely to establishing in detail the circumstances surrounding individual operations which had already taken place: their principal concern had to be to look ahead and to seek to anticipate events.

3. John Nott's statement on 4th May and my own comments at the time must be seen in this context. You seem to imply that between the evening of 2nd May and 4th May the Defence Secretary's sole concern would have been to establish the precise facts about events concerning the Belgrano on the afternoon of 2nd May. In fact he had many other concerns and his statement that day covered a number of events since 1st May of which the sinking of the Belgrano was but one element.

As I have explained Ministers took their decision on 2nd May to change the Rules of Engagement in the light of the clear and unequivocal indications of the real and direct threat to the Task Force posed by the Argentine Navy. They were aware of the general disposition of our own forces and of our assessment of the probable movements of the Argentine Navy. Even where the position of an Argentine unit was known, as in the case of the Belgrano, this information could be updated only at intervals and between such reports the units concerned could move substantial distances in any direction. It was the case as John Nott said to the House in May 1982 and I repeated in December 1982 that "the General Belgrano and a group of British warships could have been within striking distance of each other in a matter of some five to six hours, converging from a distance of some 200 nautical miles". Conqueror's report of the Belgrano's reversal of course and of her position at 3 pm on 2nd May does not invalidate this since the Belgrano could have changed course again and closed on elements of the Task Force. Ministers were aware of the distance between the two groups of ships to the degree of accuracy and probability which was feasible and sufficient in the circumstances. I do not see how military operations could be conducted successfully on any other basis. If Ministers had sought to monitor every development in the tactical disposition of forces on both sides and tried to control every engagement in detail from London the results would I believe have been disastrous. It was against this background that I have already explained that Ministers were not informed at the time of the precise course of the Belgrano when she was sunk. Indeed this information did not come to Ministers' attention until the end of November 1982 when all

the details were eventually considered to deal with Parliamentary Questions.

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Is this true? I thought we had a detailed log.

in a White Paper on "The Falklands Campaign: The Lessons" and at the time of its publication Ministers and Parliament were more concerned, and rightly so, with the continuing defence of the Falkland Islands and the lessons to be learnt from the campaign. With the benefit of the hindsight which is so evident in this argument, it may be that it would have helped to have said something more at that time, consistent with the need to avoid giving information of operational significance. I have to say, however, that the events of recent months suggest that the process of disclosure will never satisfy those determined to misinterpret the Government's actions at the time, but it might lead into areas which could risk irreparable damage to national security. This has been and will remain a crucial consideration for this Government.

ADP

FEDB  
Any comment?  
CDP

DRAFT LETTER TO MR GEORGE FOULKES MP

Thank you for your further letter of 27th September about events at the end of April and the beginning of May 1982.

2. The tone of your further letter suggests <sup>a remarkable absence of</sup> ~~that you have little~~ understanding or sympathy for the overriding concern of Ministers and their senior advisers at that time to protect the lives of those serving with the Task Force. Nor do you seem to appreciate that <sup>timely</sup> decisions had to be taken, <sup>in constantly</sup> ~~to adapt to~~ changing circumstances <sup>in our</sup> efforts to achieve a negotiated settlement and in the military dispositions on both sides and that such decisions had to be taken <sup>and</sup> ~~quickly~~ on the basis of the sometimes limited and imperfect information available at the time. If, as you seem to imply, you believe that Ministers did not act in good faith and reasonably, <sup>I would</sup> ~~it would be~~ preferable <sup>to say so</sup> ~~if you would state~~ this openly. I am myself entirely content to accept the verdict of the British people on whether the Government were right to respond to Argentine aggression and to take those actions which we and our senior professional advisers believed necessary to protect British lives.

3. As I ~~sought to~~ explain <sup>ed</sup> ~~in the Annex to~~ my letter to you of 19th September and ~~have done so again~~ in my letter of today's date to Dr David Owen <sup>(attached)</sup> ~~of which I attach a copy~~, John Nott's statement of 4th May must be seen in the context of the preoccupations of <sup>and Parliament</sup> Ministers ~~at~~ that time. It is also simply not true to suggest that the Government has not sought to rectify "the errors and misleading

impressions", as you put, it in that statement. My letter of 4th April 1984 to Mr Denzil Davies dealt with the question of when the General Belgrano was first sighted by HMS CONQUEROR. The Annex to my letter to you of 19th September gave a <sup>great</sup> good deal of further detail about events <sup>at that time</sup> ~~on 2nd May 1982~~ including the question of the Belgrano's course and position. My letter to Dr Owen deals with the question of the alleged attack by CONQUEROR on one of the Belgrano's escorting destroyers. I have to say that the provision of this further information seems merely to prompt further questions of an increasingly detailed kind; some ~~of which~~, <sup>or these questions</sup> at least seem to be of doubtful relevance. None of this further detail has altered the Government's explanation of why it was necessary to alter the Rules of Engagement on 2nd May <sup>and</sup> ~~which~~ led to ~~the~~ attack ~~on~~ the General Belgrano. Nor does it cast doubt in any way on our rejection, since questioning began on this issue, of alternative hypotheses put forward by Mr Dalyell and others. I have explained previously <sup>that</sup> ~~why~~ it is now possible to give some of this further information which we were reluctant to reveal in 1982, <sup>as</sup> ~~since~~ it has ~~now~~ lost some of its operational significance.

4. You ask a number of questions about the reasoning behind the creation of the MEZ and the TEZ and the changes which were made in the Rules of Engagement. These are matters which the Foreign Affairs Committee can no doubt address, if they wish, when the Defence Secretary appears before them. I cannot say with certainty what influence the MEZ and the TEZ exerted on Argentine operations. At all times the Task Force had Rules of Engagement which enabled it to respond to the threat presented by Argentine forces, but the precise circumstances in which Argentine ships and aircraft could be



engaged varied as the situation - and in particular the position of the Task Force and the threat which Argentine military forces could pose against it - developed. The warning which was issued to the Argentine Government on 23rd April was reported to the United Nations on 24th April and met our obligations with regard to the attack on the Belgrano. The changes that were made in the Rules of Engagement took full account of diplomatic, military and legal considerations and of our best assessment of the threat. The Chief of the Defence Staff and the Service Chiefs of Staff were responsible for giving professional military advice; taking account, ~~of course,~~ of the views of the operational commanders.

5. You ask a number of questions about the activities of the "War Cabinet". As was explained in the White Paper on the Falklands Campaign, the group of Ministers who conducted the higher management of the crisis met almost daily. The Foreign Secretary raised in writing on 1st May whether there was a need for a further warning to the Argentine Government. The Attorney General was present when Ministers met on 2nd May. My letter to Dr Owen deals with the question of when Ministers knew of the precise course of the Belgrano on 2nd May. I have already explained to you that this was irrelevant to the decision to permit the ship to be attacked.

*It would not be right for me*

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7. Finally, you ask whether any material has been made available to Ministers since May 1982 which would have led us to take different actions then. I ~~in fact~~ dealt with ~~this~~ point directly in my letter to you of 19th September, but ~~I will if I must repeat to you again that~~

no evidence has at any time become available to the Government which would make Ministers change the judgement they reached on 2nd May that the Belgrano posed a threat to the Task Force. The ship was sunk solely for that reason.

CP

- 4 OCT 1984

