



10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

8 October 1984

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Henry Steel

Dear Mr. Joubert,

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

The tone of your further letter suggests a remarkable absence of 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, in constantly changing circumstances and on the basis of sometimes limited and imperfect information. If, as you seem to imply, you believe that Ministers did not act in good faith and reasonably, I would prefer you to say so 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.

As I explained in my letter to you of 19 September and in my letter of today's date to Dr David Owen (copy attached) John Nott's statement of 4 May must be seen in the context of the preoccupations of Ministers and Parliament 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 4 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 19

September gave a great 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 alter the Rules of Engagement on 2 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.

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 23 April was reported to the United Nations on 24 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 the views of the operational commanders.

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 1 May whether there was a need for a further warning to the Argentine Government. The Attorney General was present when Ministers met on 2 May. My letter to Dr Owen deals with the question of when Ministers knew of the precise course of the Belgrano on 2 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 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.

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

Yours sincerely

Margaret Thatcher

George Foulkes, Esq., M.P.