

CONFIDENTIAL



10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

24 April 1986

Dear John,

MINE CLEARANCE IN THE FALKLAND ISLANDS

The Prime Minister has considered the Defence Secretary's minute of 22 April in which he proposes that work on the project to find a safe and effective solution to the problems of detecting and clearing mines in the difficult terrain and conditions in the Falklands should cease with the end of the existing research contract.

The Prime Minister agrees with the Defence Secretary's conclusion though equally shares his view that presentation will require very careful handling.

I am sending copies of this letter to the Private Secretaries to the other members of OD(FAF) and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

*Yours sincerely,
Charles Powell*

(Charles Powell)

John Howe, Esq.,
Ministry of Defence.

CONFIDENTIAL



cc PC ①

MO 5/21V

PRIME MINISTER

Mr. Kvinger proposes stopping research into a new mine detector system for use in the Falklands. It is now clear that it would cost at least £25m. & take several years. Instead he

MINE CLEARANCE IN THE FALKLAND ISLANDS

proposes relying upon existing safety precautions. It is not a 'hot' issue in the Falklands.

No existing mine clearance system has proved capable of detecting the whole range of mines laid by the Argentinians in the Falkland Islands, in particular the plastic anti-personnel mines. Following a number of serious casualties (including one death) among personnel carrying out the work, minefield clearance ceased almost 3 years ago pending the discovery of a safe and sure method of finding the mines. A Statement to this effect was made in the House in November 1983. The remaining minefields have been fenced off and clearly marked with signs warning the public to keep away.

Agree?
CDP
23/4

Yes
m

2. Two years ago, my Department instituted a programme of research with the aim of finding a safe and effective solution to the problems of detecting and clearing mines in the difficult terrain and conditions in the Falklands. A research contract was subsequently placed with a firm, ERA Technology Ltd, which has produced a prototype mine detector using pulsed radar. In trials last summer it was successful in detecting and



"recognising" a high proportion (some 90%) of the previously undetectable "plastic mines".

3. However, a 10% failure rate is patently unacceptable on safety grounds. Since then, therefore, research work has continued to try to improve the detection rate, to reduce the incidence of false alarms (which amounted to about 1 per square metre) and increase the equipment's operating speed. Although ERA Technology consider that a much higher detection success rate may be realised in due course, in the first phase of the development programme, and it may be possible to increase the equipment's speed, there is still a long way to go before we can be confident of having a practical and effective solution to the Falklands mine-clearance problem.

4. I am advised that the equipment being designed is using systems at the limits of technology in this field. Even if the present technical difficulties could be overcome - and this is by no means certain - it will be about 2 or 3 years before it would be possible to carry out representative trials in the Falklands and 3 or 4 years before full clearance could actually start. Clearance itself would still be a slow and dangerous operation which could take about a further 10 years and involve considerable numbers of specially trained military manpower.



5. By 30th April, when the current contract ends, the research by ERA Technology will have cost some £3M, which has been borne on Defence Votes, and further work is still needed to establish whether it would be worthwhile to enter into full development and subsequent production of the equipment. The current assessment of the total project cost of such equipment is some £25M. But because of the novel nature of the technology being developed, this early assessment could well turn out to be an underestimate. Although there may be a military advantage from this technology, the development of such a system is not a priority for defence and there is no defence money to fund it. There is no military need for this equipment in general war. Equally, there is no military requirement to clear the minefields in the Falklands. The Falklands' requirement is purely a civil one.

6. In my view, the estimated cost of £25M for developing the equipment to detect the remaining mines is very high and, as I say, could be still higher. No resources have been allocated for such expenditure and it seems to me that even if the Government had £25M to spend on such a project, the Falkland Islanders could probably find better uses to which the money could be put than this. I do not believe that the high costs which are in prospect can be afforded in relation to other claims on public expenditure and I propose that work on this project should cease with the end of the existing research contract.



7. Although the removal of the mines laid in the conflict is a desirable objective in bringing life in the Islands back to normal, there cannot in my view be an unqualified commitment to their complete clearance regardless of the risk to soldiers, the practicability of the proposal or the time and resource implications. Those mines causing a real danger to the Islanders immediately after the conflict were either removed straight away or fenced off. Thus, there is now no serious danger to the Islanders unless they stray inside the minefields. At the present time there is no realistic alternative to continuing with the current stringent safety precautions by keeping the minefields securely fenced off and clearly marked. This will involve us in a military commitment for the foreseeable future and I shall ensure that the Royal Engineers will continue to police and maintain the minefield fences and markings and, as now, any "rogue" mines which stray outside the perimeter fence because of subsidence or earth movement will be destroyed. The safety of the Islanders will, therefore, continue to be very carefully protected.

8. The issue has not been raised for some time by the Falkland Islands Government, which appears to have accepted the current position. But, the presentation of this decision will clearly require careful handling to ensure that the efforts we have made to find a practical long-term solution, the difficulties we have encountered and the continuing military commitment which we



shall be making to policing the minefields to ensure so far as possible, that they are kept safe are fully understood. I should, of course, be happy to discuss the detailed presentational aspects with the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary.

9. Subject to your agreement, therefore, and those of OD(FAF) colleagues, I propose that we should proceed accordingly.

10. I am sending a copy of this minute to other members of OD(FAF) and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

C.Y.

Ministry of Defence

22nd April 1986

