

9/21/F.

TOP SECRET ATOMIC

AB17

TOP SECRET
ATOMIC

page 1. of 2. pages
copy 3 of 4. copies

EZ

D/DS17/5/6

PS/S of S

Copy to:
PSO/CDS
PS/PUS

OPERATION CORPORATE: DEPLOYMENT OF UK NUCLEAR WEAPONS

1. Further to my minute of yesterday's date, the technical staffs concerned have now had an opportunity to consider the practicability of removing the nuclear weapons on board HM Ships involved in this operation before they deploy to the South Atlantic.
2. Subject to further detailed studies, it appears that in principle it would be possible to unship the weapons from all the warships concerned during their currently planned 24-hour stop-over at Ascension Island (none of our international obligations puts any restrictions on this course of action). The weapons would then be airlifted back to the UK by RAF Hercules. This operation could be carried out without penalty to the currently planned timetable for the operation, although the Hercules effort required (perhaps some 20 or so sorties) would necessarily be at the expense of other commitments. It would also be necessary to seek specific Ministerial approval for some relaxation of the extremely stringent safety regulations governing the handling of nuclear weapons in peacetime (for which there are precedents). Separate submissions would be made by Heads of DS8 and DS16. Extra manpower would also have to be made available on Ascension Island.
3. The principal arguments in favour of having the weapons on board the ships are that in the event of tension or hostilities between ourselves and the Soviet Union concurrent with the operation CORPORATE, the military capability of our warships would be severely reduced. Furthermore, the additional tasks imposed on the Services by their removal would be most unwelcome; the stopover time at Ascension Island is short and much has to be done. The penalties so far as Hercules lift capacity is concerned would also be avoided. We should also avoid the risk that the journalists travelling with the UK force would observe the operation and seek to report it despite the blanket protection granted to us on the subject of nuclear weapons by the D-notice already extant. Indeed, since the operation would involve the ships' helicopters flying the weapons ashore (as opposed to unloading the ships) it would be almost impossible to avoid press interest without physically confining the journalists below decks, itself likely to provoke adverse comment. Against this, there is the point that any

/otherwise

TOP SECRET ATOMIC

press coverage which might subsequently emerge to the effect that we had disembarked our nuclear weapons would probably be to our advantage given the current public disquiet over their potential carriage in the task force and possible use should hostilities occur.

4. The arguments in favour of removing the weapons rest both upon potential public and international reaction should their presence become known and upon judgements as to their likely fate in the course of any hostilities and the exceedingly high potential cost that might result from accident or damage. The public disquiet as to the possible presence of nuclear weapons in the force has already been mentioned. Were a ship carrying nuclear weapons to be lost or damaged in international waters, there is a strong probability that, if only on moral grounds, we should have to declare the existence of an actual or potential radiological hazard (and the release into the environment of significant quantities of fissile material would cause major presentational problems). It is also conceivable that a weapon might fall into the hands of the Argentines, either by salvage or by capture. The consequences of this could be extremely damaging, and might indeed be imagined to jeopardise future UK/US relations in the nuclear field. There is also the question of the Treaty of Tlatelolco; were the UK to be detected in breach of its obligations - if, say a ship with nuclear weapons entered the Falkland Islands territorial waters, the consequences could be highly embarrassing. Under the terms of the Treaty the Contracting Parties (the South American signatories) can report non-compliance to the UN Security Council and General Assembly.

5. It is the strongly held view of the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary that offloading should take place.

6. The strongly held view of the Naval Staff is that notwithstanding the potential problems involved and for the reasons set out in paragraph 2, the weapons should be left on board HM Ships during the operation. If nevertheless, Ministers felt that they should be removed, a decision would be required urgently in order for the practical preparations to be put in hand.

7. Subject to the views of CDS and PUS, S of S may feel that the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary should be consulted before a decision is reached. If so, a draft minute to the Prime Minister will be prepared.

D. Brennan

7 April 1982

D BRENNAN
DS17
MB9340 7917MB