

ALQ 062/3		
4 JUN 1982		
CONFIDENTIAL		

Secretary of State 50
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Phy 7/2

Mr. Wright
The Secretary of State thinks that in view of the explicit ODSA request for action, a PS letter copied to ODSA is needed. July 2/6

Private Secretary

BOMBING OF THE BRITISH WYE

I understand that ODSA decided at their meeting yesterday that a protest should be made to the Argentines about their bombing a few days ago of the merchant vessel, the British Wye. As you will recall, this was an occasion when 8 bombs were directed at this ship, only one of which hit the ship and bounced off unexploded into the sea.

2. As Mr. Gillmore has recorded separately, it later emerged that the British Wye was in fact being used as a tanker to supply fuel to the Task Force. At this morning's meeting of the Chiefs of Staff therefore I raised the decision reached in ODSA yesterday and asked whether Ministers had been clear, in taking that decision, of the tasks on which the British Wye had been engaged. I said that I assumed that any Argentine merchant vessel engaged in comparable tasks would be regarded by us as a fair target, both within and outside the TEZ.

3. After some discussion, the Chief of Defence Staff confirmed that the British Wye was indeed performing this role, although she had not been actively engaged in it at the time of the Argentine attack. He nevertheless accepted that the point I had raised was a fair one, and said he would not wish to press the idea of a protest. Sir Frank Cooper said that he thought "the Foreign Office were being supine" and reminded the Committee that we had made a great deal of fuss about our own attack against an Argentine vessel only 30 miles outside the TEZ. The British Wye had been attacked in mid-Atlantic. I said that I took exception to his description of the FCO; I had a duty to advise the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary on this matter, and wished to ensure that Ministers had been fully aware of the facts in reaching their decision. The Chief of Defence Staff said that there was no doubt that the facts had not been fully presented to them, and repeated that he would not wish to press the question.

4. There was then some discussion about whether some play could be made of this incident with the press. (Mr. MacDonald reported that there had already been one story about it in The Star.) I said that I saw no strong objection to this, but that the considerations which I had mentioned applied also, to some extent, to press treatment. Mr. Moray Stewart reminded the Committee that, in an earlier discussion, the Chiefs of Staff had ruled firmly that there should be no publicity about unexploded bombs; he thought it would be difficult to deal adequately with this story without revealing that an unexploded bomb had been involved. The Chiefs of Staff looked rather thoughtful about this, and concluded that a decision should be left to the public relations experts.

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5. I should be grateful for your advice on whether we need to take formal action with ODSA on this question, if we do not (and I recommend that we should not) take action on their decision to protest to the Argentines. Since the Chiefs of Staff have said that they do not wish to press the question (and the Minister of State, Mr. Peter Blaker, was present) it might be sufficient, provided the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary agrees, if you were to have a word on the telephone with Mr. Coles.

for J. Mayne
(P.R.H. Wright)
2 June, 1982.

cc PS/PUS
Mr. Giffard
Mr. Gillmore
Mr. Fenn
Mr. Weston

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