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PRIME MINISTERLOW FLYING IN THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

I last minuted you on this subject on 10th April 1989 setting out the position that I intended to adopt with the German Defence Minister, Dr Scholz. Since then matters have moved on. The possible linkage with the SNF debate no longer seems critical and, on the German side, Dr Stoltenberg has replaced Scholz. I have had the opportunity to discuss the matter at length with Stoltenberg and I have also kept in close touch with my opposite numbers in the other "Sending States" culminating in discussions on this subject in the USA and Canada last week. The purpose of this minute is to report developments and to seek confirmation that you are content with the proposed way ahead.

2. In his discussions with me, Stoltenberg has made it clear that, although the subject is no longer as much in the forefront of the public mind as it was, it had by no means gone away. Stoltenberg needs to report formally to the Bundestag on this issue next month and is anxious to finalise a package before then. The key issue outstanding is the amount of time spent at 250 feet by Sending States' air forces and Stoltenberg has recently written to Sending States seeking further reductions in this training beyond those already offered.

3. My professional advisers (the Chief of Air Staff has been closely involved throughout) remain firmly of the view that the current level of low flying training for RAF Germany needs to be maintained and, for training at 250 feet, this would equate to maintaining the average of 20 minutes per sortie which is



currently available in the FRG. Any reduction in this figure in the FRG would therefore need to be compensated for by increasing the availability of 250 feet training elsewhere. The position of the other sending states is, however, different. Unlike the RAF Tornado and Harrier aircraft, other Sending States' aircraft are not dedicated to the low level offensive role and do not need to spend quite so much time training for it. In some cases, the location of their bases relative to available low flying areas would also make it very difficult for them to achieve a figure of 20 minutes per sortie at 250 feet. Indications now are that all of the other Sending States could be satisfied with an average of 15 minutes at 250 feet per sortie.

4. I discussed this at length with Dick Cheney, with whom we have kept in very close step. He sympathises with our position, but is very keen that the Sending States should do something, if possible, to try to reach an accommodation with the FRG, both to give some support to Stoltenberg (who has a far more realistic attitude than Scholz on this issue) and so as not to exacerbate Kohl's broader political problems. We also have our own national reasons for ensuring that this issue does not become divisive in our relations with Germany; in the defence field, these include in particular the need for German support for land training and German acquiescence to a sensible solution on the EFA radar. Cheney made it clear that, subject to certain caveats, an average 15 minute figure would be acceptable to the US. I stressed to Cheney, as I have to Stoltenberg, that the package of measures already put together was a substantial one which could offer considerable attraction if put properly to the German public and that, as far as the UK was concerned, any reduction in 250 feet flying in the FRG would necessitate additional flying of this nature elsewhere. I agreed with him, however, to look further at what could be done to assist the FRG.



5. A reduction in RAF Germany 250 feet low flying to an average of 15 minutes per sortie would require some 1500 additional hours per year of 250 feet flying to be made available elsewhere. Up to 650 hours could realistically be exported to Goose Bay in Canada, albeit with some increase in nugatory transit time, in tanker support and in the amount of time personnel were expected to spend away from their families. The Canadian Defence Minister, Mr McKnight has indicated to me that he was prepared to consider increases of this order, although the timing of such a move would need to be carefully considered to ensure Canadian domestic sensitivities were taken into account. The remainder, up to some 850 hours of low flying training, would have to be absorbed in the UK.

6. Whilst public opinion in the UK in respect of low flying is relatively stable, it is still a sensitive issue. Any significant increase in the load on the UK low flying system, particularly in response to reductions in RAF flying in Germany, would be acutely controversial and politically very difficult. Any transfer of RAF Germany low flying to the UK could only be contemplated if it could be absorbed here without an increase in the total low flying in the UK. Paradoxically, the better the package that the Germans can present to the Bundestag, the greater the pressure that we are likely to come under in the UK. We must, as a minimum, be able to say that there would be no general increase in low flying in the UK.

7. This said, the Chief of Air Staff has said that, if it were necessary to reduce the amount of low flying in the FRG along the lines suggested, it should be possible to absorb the necessary 850 hours in the UK without any overall increase, provided that adjustments were made also to the amount of flying currently carried out in the UK by the USAF and the German Air Force. I have made the point to Cheney that we could certainly not justify any increase in the total amount of flying in the UK and he accepts this.



8. In sum, the position now is that our professional advisers believe that, while a reduction from 20 to 15 minutes per sortie at 250 feet in Germany could not be accomplished without training compensation elsewhere. But such a reduction could be managed with a combination of increased RAF use of Goose Bay and of the UK low flying system (at the expense of Allies) if the political requirement to maintain Alliance solidarity and the goodwill of the FRG government requires such a compromise.

9. I believe that we should therefore, reluctantly, accept such a reduction in 250 feet flying in the FRG providing it is in final settlement of a package of measures on this subject. Although Stoltenberg has also been seeking further reductions in the hours within which low flying in the FRG can take place by banning training on Friday afternoons, Cheney and I are agreed that this should be firmly resisted. As far as the need to carry out additional low flying elsewhere is concerned, I would propose to pursue timing and presentational aspects of a transfer to Goose Bay with my Canadian counterpart. For the UK, I would propose to look very carefully at how the additional training should be absorbed within existing figures to ensure that we could make the strongest presentational case to the UK public. Finally, the FRG government should be left under no illusion that such an agreement has been reached lightly. The political capital which I believe will result should be exploited by us all.

10. I am sending copies of this minute to the Foreign Secretary, and to Sir Robin Butler.

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Ministry of Defence

18th July 1989

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10 DOWNING STREET

LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

19 July 1989

**LOW FLYING IN THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC
OF GERMANY**

The Prime Minister has considered the Defence Secretary's minute of 18 July about low flying in the Federal Republic. She agrees that we have no alternative but to accept reluctantly a reduction in 250 feet flying in the FRG if that will settle the problem. But it must be clear that there will be no increase in the total amount of low flying in the United Kingdom.

I am copying this letter to the Private Secretary to the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and to Sir Robin Butler.

(C. D. POWELL)

Brian Hawtin, Esq.,
Ministry of Defence.

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