

PRIME MINISTER

Belgrano: Mr Dalyell's letter

*This letter was sent
to the department original with
A.R.'s*

12/4

You owe Mr Dalyell a reply to his letter of 5 April at Flag 'A'.

✓ He has a Question on the Belgrano at No 5 tomorrow. We do not recommend that you reply before then since he will only exploit whatever you say.

But in case you take a different view I attach a reply. The FCO and MOD agree that you should not answer his letter in detail. Our objective must be to try to bring this controversy, such as it is, to an end as soon as possible.

✓ You will recall that the Foreign Secretary is about to send Mr Dalyell a detailed reply to the eleven Questions which he posed during the Foreign Affairs Debate on 22 March.

We recommend that your Answer to Mr Dalyell's Oral Question tomorrow should follow the terms of the proposed letter from you to him, ie. there is no point in prolonging all these exchanges because his basic contention is simply not true.

We have commissioned answers to the detailed questions which he put in his letter of 5 April to you. These are at Flag 'B'. You will want to have these by you at Question Time in case you decide at the time that you must deal with a detailed Question.

A.J.C.

11 April 1984

1. If air attacks on Port Stanley Airfield were for the purpose of enforcing the Total Exclusion Zone why were cluster bombs, air-burst shells, and other anti-personnel devices used if this was part of the process of enforcing the Total Exclusion Zone?

The closure of Port Stanley airfield was an important part of enforcing the Total Exclusion Zone as was made clear from the start. The attacks were intended to close this supply route and to destroy aircraft on the ground. It was for the operational commanders to select the most appropriate weapons for the task.

Was HMS Conqueror instructed to search for and locate the Belgrano by Admiral Woodward, by Fleet Headquarters, Northwood, or by whom? In other words, who perceived the Belgrano Group to be a threat to the Task Force in general, and as you have argued on Television, our Carriers in particular? Candidly, I have suspected for many months that the notion that the Belgrano Group were endangering the Task Force emerged as a post-facto rationalisation.

CONQUEROR was under the operational command of Flag Officer Submarines at Northwood. Naturally both he and CINCFLEET were concerned about all movements of the Argentine fleet.

Admiral Woodward, commanding the surface Task Groups in the South Atlantic, asked for a change in the Rules of Engagement on 2nd May because of the threat posed by BELGRANO as part of the wider disposition of Argentine naval forces. Although this request came from Admiral Woodward the threat to the Task Force was clear at all levels of command and the request was endorsed by Ministers.

3. Admiral Woodward asked for a change in the Rules of Engagement to permit the Belgrano to be attacked outside the Total Exclusion Zone - and, as we all know, you and Members of the War Cabinet agreed to that change. Why then did your former Defence Minister, (Sir) John Nott, a Member of the War Cabinet, who participated in the deliberations on the matter, mislead the House of Commons without any corrective by you, by saying on 4th and 5th May that the decision to torpedo the Belgrano was taken by the Submarine Commander? Parliament, Press, and People were deceived - why?

As Sir John Nott made quite clear on 4 and 5 May 1982, the Task Force - including submarines - operated under strict political control with Rules of Engagement approved by Ministers. It was for local commanders to take decisions within those rules.

You refer to destroyers armed with Exocet missiles. Do I take it that the Government is backing away from its original claim that Belgrano also was armed with Exocets?

Sir John Nott made quite clear in the House of Commons on 4th May 1982 that BELGRANO was not armed with Exocet.

5. Can you explain why the Conqueror detected an Argentine oiler auxiliary, in the Belgrano Group, when the signals from the 44 year old iron-clad, USS Phoenix (Belgrano) were considerably stronger?

For technical reasons connected with sound propagation under water.

You stress that on 2nd May "we had indications about the movements of the Argentine Fleet" which led to Admiral Woodward's request for a change in the Rules of Engagement. What precisely were those "indications"? My information is that the Argentine Fleet was by that time under orders to return to base, and you knew that. Gavshon and Rice in their book cite precise times (20.00 hours on May 1st, and 01.19 hours on May 2nd) when those orders were sent by Admiral Allara, and the Naval Command in Buenos Aires. The text of one of those messages is included in their book.

The Rules of Engagement were changed because the indications were that the BELGRANO Group, in conjunction with the Argentine Task Groups to the north of the Falklands, presented an urgent and immediate threat to our ships. There were no indications that the Argentine Fleet was homeward bound.

7. You quote Admiral Woodward as saying that his request for a major change to the rules of engagement in order to attack the Belgrano was "the first and only time throughout the campaign" he had made such a request. This is just not true, Prime Minister, because when Conqueror was in Argentine Territorial waters he again asked for a change in the Rules of Engagement, so as to be able to operate within those waters. (Reference Gavshon and Rice, Page 130.)

I have no reason to doubt Admiral Woodward's statement which I quoted in my letter to the rt honourable Member for Llanelli.

. Prime Minister, will you please explain how the Belgrano and her Group, sailing on a 280 degree course, (confirmed to me in Parliamentary answers), sailing West North West, could in any way have been completing a pincer movement? Have you every heard of naval ships engaging in a pincer movement while retreating to home port in an opposite direction? And, can you explain how on earth it was that a huge, slow-moving hulk like the ancient Carrier, 25th May, could have "slipped past" the sophisticated, speedy nuclear powered submarine, presumably HMS Splendid, which was "trailing her" and which had been built at a cost of many £millions to the British tax-payer?

9. Will you explain your assertion that it was irrelevant to the sinking that the Belgrano was heading homewards and well outside the Exclusion Zone and nowhere near the Burdwood Bank?

Warships can change their speed and course at will, and can travel many miles, in any direction, in a few hours. That is why the course and position of BELGRANO at any particular moment were irrelevant to the threat that she posed.

On how the northern half of the pincer slipped past the submarine barrier, I cannot add to my previous letter.

9. Has your Government enquired into the reasons why the British Embassies in Washington and Lima took so long to report on the Peruvian Peace Initiative, and its preparation, if, as you claim "first indications" only reached London at 23.15 hours on May 2, and 0200 hours May 3 respectively? Did you know that an Associated Press' Despatch from Lima, timed 23.44 hours, BST, May 2 said that President Fernando Belaunde Terry has announced that Britain and Argentina that night would end hostilities over the Falklands? Reuters and other international wire services carried similar reports.

Our Embassies in Washington and Lima reported, fully and promptly, all the relevant information that was available to them. Agency reports of President Belaunde's press conference in Lima on 2 May reached London slightly earlier than the telegram from our Embassy because the then Ambassador was personally briefed by the Foreign Minister immediately after the press conference. All the reports of the Peruvian ideas were sent after the Belgrano had been sunk. President Belaunde's press conference was itself held four hours after the sinking.

11. In what way would earlier disclosure of "first contacts" with the Belgrano Group have prejudiced operations? Disclosure for instance after the end of hostilities in June 1982? Don't you think that it would be far better if you and your Government were to be open and truthful with the House of Commons and the British People?

The Government's overriding concern has been to ensure that information should not be made available that would be valuable to the Argentine navy in any future conflict. The Argentine Government have, of course, refused to declare a formal end to hostilities. With the passage of time we judge that that risk in this particular case has diminished.