



10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

19 September 1984

*Dear Mr. Foubkes.*

You wrote to me on 23 August and 14 September about decisions taken by the Government at the time of the Falklands conflict.

Your questions reflect a number of fundamental misconceptions about the situation in the South Atlantic in April and May 1982. I am enclosing, as an Annex to this letter, a statement of the position which should clear up these misconceptions, and remove any doubts in your mind about the reasons for our actions.

To put the matter briefly, in April 1982 Argentina had attacked and invaded British territory; despite intense and continuing diplomatic efforts, Argentina refused to comply with a mandatory resolution of the United Nations Security Council to withdraw its forces; with all-party support, and in exercise of our inherent right of self-defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter, the British Government despatched the Task Force to the South Atlantic; by the end of April as it approached the Falkland Islands the Task Force was increasingly vulnerable to Argentine attack; by 2 May it had already been attacked by Argentine aircraft and there were clear and unequivocal indications that it was under further threat from a strong and co-ordinated pincer movement by the major units of the Argentine Navy, including the cruiser 'General Belgrano' and the aircraft carrier



'25 de Mayo'. The then Argentine Operations Commander, South Atlantic, has since confirmed publicly that his warships had indeed been ordered to attack. No Government with a proper sense of responsibility could have refrained from taking appropriate measures to counter the threats to the Task Force, and to ensure its safety to the maximum extent possible. Risks could not be taken, especially when hostilities had been so clearly embarked upon by the Argentines.

Your questions about the Argentine aircraft carrier and the events on 2 May are answered in the Annex.

You also asked whether a Polaris submarine was deployed as described in the New Statesman article on 23 August. There was no change in the standard deployment pattern of our Polaris submarines during the conflict. Moreover, the Government gave a categorical assurance at the time that nuclear weapons would not be used in the Falklands conflict (see the statement made by Viscount Trenchard in the House of Lords on 27 April 1982 - Hansard Vol. 429, Col. 778).

I have given you in the Annex as full an account of these matters as, I am advised, is consistent with national security. I must make it clear that it would be, and will remain, quite wrong for me to disclose all the material that was available to Ministers at the time. To do so would still risk irreparable damage to national security and could put lives at risk in the future.

Those who seek to criticise the Government's actions (including people outside this country who have every reason to discredit the Government of the United Kingdom) are not subject to the same constraints and have felt free to make a large number of assertions. I have already explained why I cannot make public everything which would make it possible to discuss whether those assertions are true or false. In



these circumstances, I must emphasise the central point. On the basis of all the material that was available to Ministers at the time, my colleagues and I were satisfied that we took the right decisions in order to protect the lives of our forces. Nothing that has since been put forward - and I can assure you that it has all been examined with the utmost care - has led me or any of my colleagues to have any doubts that we were right.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Thatcher

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George Foulkes, Esq., MP.

ANNEX

1. The threats which faced the Task Force at the end of April and the beginning of May 1982 can only be appreciated in the light of the situation in the South Atlantic at that time.
2. On 2nd April 1982, the process of diplomatic negotiations over the Falkland Islands was abruptly interrupted by Argentina's unprovoked armed invasion of the Islands. Having obtained control of the Islands, the Argentines then refused to comply with mandatory Resolution 502 of the United Nations Security Council, which demanded an immediate withdrawal of their forces.
3. In exercise of the inherent right of self-defence under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, and in parallel with intense but ultimately unproductive diplomatic activity, the British Task Force was despatched at the beginning of April, with all-party support, following Argentina's action, which was wholly inconsistent with international law and the UN Charter. 28,000 British Servicemen and civilians eventually sailed in the Task Force; it was the foremost and continuing duty of the Government to take such decisions as were necessary to protect them as the events of the moment demanded.
4. On 7th April, the Defence Secretary had announced the establishment, as from 12th April, of a 200 nautical mile Maritime Exclusion Zone around the Falkland Islands; but it was made clear in the announcement that this was 'without prejudice to the right of the United



Kingdom to take whatever additional measures may be needed in exercise of its right of self-defence, under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter.' Mr Nott told the House of Commons that if it became necessary, the British Government would use force to achieve the objective of securing Argentine withdrawal. He added: 'We hope that it will not come to that. We hope that diplomacy will succeed. Nevertheless, the Argentines were the first to use force of arms in order to establish their present control of the Falklands ...'

5. In late April 1982 the Task Force was strung out between Ascension Island and the Falklands and vulnerable to attack. On 23rd April 1982, the Government accordingly sent the following message to the Argentine Government, making it clear that the terms of the communication came into effect immediately:

"In announcing the establishment of a Maritime Exclusion Zone around the Falkland Islands, Her Majesty's Government made it clear that this measure was without prejudice to the right of the UK to take whatever additional measures may be needed in the exercise of its right of self-defence under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. In this connection, HMG now wishes to make clear that any approach on the part of Argentine warships, including submarines, naval auxiliaries, or military aircraft which could amount to a threat to interfere with the mission of British Forces in the South Atlantic will encounter the appropriate response.



All Argentine aircraft including civil aircraft engaging in surveillance of these British Forces will be regarded as hostile and are liable to be dealt with accordingly."

It is clear from the above text that the warning applied outside the Exclusion Zone as well as within it. This message was notified to the United Nations Security Council and circulated accordingly on 24th April. It was also released publicly.

6. On 28th April 1982 the Government announced the establishment of a 200 nautical mile Total Exclusion Zone around the Falkland Islands, effective as from 30th April, which would apply to all Argentine ships and aircraft. The announcement again stressed that 'these measures are without prejudice to the right of the United Kingdom to take whatever additional measures may be needed in exercise of its right of self-defence, under Article 51 of the UN Charter'.



7. On 30th April, Ministers met to consider the implications of the capability of the aircraft carried by the Argentine aircraft carrier, the '25 de Mayo', to threaten our forces from the air at substantial distances from the Argentine mainland. After the most careful consideration of the legal, military and political issues, Ministers decided that our forces should be permitted to attack the '25 de Mayo' on the high seas (that is both within and outside the Total Exclusion Zone), in circumstances in which it posed a military threat to the Task Force. As set out in paragraph 5 above, a warning that Argentine warships threatening the Task Force would meet with an appropriate response had already been delivered to the Argentine Government on 23rd April; and Ministers concluded that no further warning was needed. There is no truth in the suggestion that the Foreign Secretary and the Attorney General opposed or dissented from the decision of 30th April. But on 1st May, the day he left for Washington, the Foreign Secretary raised the need for a further warning to the Argentine Government. The matter had been taken no further, however, when the general situation changed completely: first, with the attacks which the Argentine Air Force launched for the first time on the Task Force on 1st May and second, with the clear and unequivocal indications which became available that weekend that the Argentine Navy was committed to hostile action against the Task Force.

8. On 1st May 1982 the Task Force came under attack for the first time from the Argentine airforce, operating from the mainland. As the Defence Secretary said in the House of Commons on 4th May:



'On 1st May the Argentines launched attacks on our ships, during most of the daylight hours. The attacks by Argentine Mirage and Canberra aircraft operating from the mainland were repulsed by British Sea Harriers. Had our Sea Harriers failed to repulse the attacks on the Task Force, our ships could have been severely damaged or sunk. In fact, one Argentine Canberra and one Mirage were shot down and others were damaged. We believe that another Mirage was brought down by Argentine anti-aircraft fire. One of our frigates suffered splinter damage as a result of the air attacks and there was one British casualty whose condition is now satisfactory. All our aircraft returned safely. On the same day, our forces located and attacked what was believed to be an Argentine submarine which was clearly in a position to torpedo our ships. It is not known whether the submarine was hit. The prolonged air attack on our ships, the presence of an Argentine submarine close by, and all other information available to us, left us in no doubt of the dangers to our Task Force from hostile action'. All British units were on maximum alert to deal with any naval or air attacks.

9. As Admiral Woodward has explained "Early on the morning of 2nd May, all the indications were that the '25 de Mayo', the Argentine Carrier, and a group of escorts had slipped past my forward SSN barrier to the north, while the cruiser General Belgrano and her escorts were attempting to complete the pincer movement from the south, still outside the Total Exclusion Zone." The Argentine Operations Commander in the South Atlantic at the time, Admiral Juan Jose Lombardo, confirmed without hesitation on the BBC Panorama



programme on 16 April this year that the Argentine Navy, as we thought, were attempting to engage in a pincer movement against the Task Force, using the '25 de Mayo' and its escorts in the north and the 'General Belgrano' and its escorts attempting to complete the movement from the south.

10. As was further explained in the Prime Minister's letter to Mr. Denzil Davies, HMS Conqueror had sighted the Belgrano for the first time on 1st May. On 2nd May, in response to the threat to the Task Force, Admiral Woodward sought a change to the Rules of Engagement to enable Conqueror to attack the Belgrano outside the Exclusion Zone. On the basis of the clear and unequivocal indications available to the Government that the Argentine Navy posed a real and direct threat to the Task Force and those sailing with it and on the advice of their most senior military advisers, Ministers decided at 1 pm that the Rules of Engagement should be changed to permit attacks on all Argentine naval vessels on the high seas, as had previously been agreed for the '25 de Mayo' alone (see paragraph 7 above). The necessary order conveying this change was sent by Naval Headquarters at Northwood to HMS Conqueror at 1.30 pm (all timings in this and the following paragraphs are given in London time). Shortly after 3 pm, HMS Conqueror reported the position of the Belgrano at 9 am and 3 pm that day. HMS Conqueror had not then received the order changing the Rules of Engagement. The limitations in communications with our submarines operating in the far South Atlantic meant that submarine operations there could not be



monitored and controlled hour by hour. It was not until after 5 pm that HMS Conqueror reported that she had received and understood the new order and intended to attack. The Belgrano was attacked just before 8 pm.

11. Conqueror's report on the Belgrano's position was received by Northwood at 3.40 pm and made known to senior naval officers there and at the Ministry of Defence later that afternoon. The report showed that the Belgrano had reversed course. But she could have altered course again and closed on elements of the Task Force, acting in concert with the carrier to the north. In the light of the continued threat posed by Argentine naval forces against the Task Force, the precise position and course of the Belgrano at that time were irrelevant. For this reason, the report was not made known to Ministers at the time.



12. No evidence has at any time become available to the Government which would make Ministers change the judgement they reached on 2nd May that the Belgrano posed a threat to the Task Force. In the Panorama interview which is referred to earlier, Admiral Lombardo stated that the decision to sink the Argentine cruiser had been tactically sound, and one which he too would have taken had he been in Britain's position. It is, of course, the case that after the sinking of the Belgrano major Argentine warships remained within 12 miles of the Argentine coast and took no further part in the campaign.

13. As to subsequent operations by HMS Conqueror, immediately after the attack upon the Belgrano Conqueror herself came under attack from the Argentine escorting destroyers and, to evade this, moved away from the area. As her continuing role was to protect the Task Force from the threat posed by Argentine warships, she subsequently patrolled to the north and west of the area where the Belgrano had been sunk; when on 4th May Conqueror signalled that she was returning to that area, she was ordered not to attack warships engaged in rescuing survivors from the Belgrano.

14. Attention has been focussed on inaccuracies in the statement made by the then Defence Secretary, Mr. Nott, in the House of Commons on 4th May. It should be borne in mind that this statement had to be prepared in fast-moving and sometimes confused circumstances while Ministers were preoccupied with continuing threats to the Task Force. It was explained in the letter to Mr. Denzil Davies why it was



then possible to correct earlier statements which were made in good faith and to give further information about the Conqueror's operation. It would have been inappropriate to have given details at the time about the circumstances in which Conqueror detected and tracked the Belgrano and other aspects of the engagement since these could well have provided information valuable to the Argentine Navy.

15. The need to do everything we could to protect the lives of some 10,000 British personnel - Service and civilian then in the Task Force and at risk from the Argentine Navy - was the sole reason for the attack on the Belgrano. No other consideration entered the calculations of the Ministers concerned, and in particular there was no question of taking the action in order to undermine peace proposals put forward by the President of Peru, about which Ministers in London had no knowledge at the time. As has been frequently made clear the first indications of these proposals did not reach London from Washington until 11.15pm London time on 2nd May - over three hours after the attack on the Belgrano - and from Lima until 2am London time on 3rd May.

16. Diplomatic action was, however, also pursued vigorously. Every effort was made to secure by diplomatic means the objective of the withdrawal of the Argentine forces. As the Prime Minister said in the House of Commons on 29th April 1982, it was the British Government's earnest hope that this objective could be achieved by a negotiated settlement. But by 29th April, the initiative of the



US Secretary of State, Mr Haig, had foundered on Argentine obduracy. On 30th April, he announced that the United States Government had had reason to hope that the United Kingdom would consider a settlement on the lines of the second set of proposals formulated by the US Government; but the Argentine Government had informed the Americans on 29th April that they could not accept it. As General Galtieri later explicitly admitted in an interview with an Argentine newspaper, Argentine domestic political opinion made it impossible for the Junta to agree to a solution that would entail the withdrawal of Argentine forces. The British authorities by contrast, continued the search for a negotiated settlement until 17th May.

17. The measures taken in late April and early May 1982 were designed clearly and exclusively to safeguard the lives of those serving with our forces, by responding to the threat posed to our ships in order to ensure, in particular, the safety of our two aircraft carriers on which the protection of the Task Force ultimately depended. There was no question of any attempt to destroy the prospects for a negotiated settlement.