



10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

8 October 1984

Gen. H. Owen.

Thank you for your further letter of 25 September about the sinking of the General Belgrano.

The approach that underlies your letter seems to take no account of the circumstances and pressures under which Ministers and their senior advisers have to work when involved in an extremely hazardous military campaign conducted at a very great distance from the United Kingdom. The overriding responsibility of Ministers during the Falklands conflict was to address the strategy, both diplomatic and military, which would meet the wishes of Parliament in relation to the recovery of the Falkland Islands with the minimum risk to those serving in the Task Force. Ministers could not discharge this responsibility on the basis of minute by minute involvement in events happening 8,000 miles away. Nor, as events unfolded in early May with the Task Force under great threat, could Ministers devote their time solely to establishing in detail the circumstances surrounding individual operations which had already taken place: their principal concern had to be to look ahead and to seek to anticipate events.

John Nott's statement on 4 May and my own comments at the time must be seen in this context. You seem to imply that between the evening of 2 May and 4 May the Defence Secretary's sole concern would have been to establish the precise facts about events concerning the Belgrano on the

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afternoon of 2 May. In fact he had many other concerns and his statement that day covered a number of events since 1 May of which the sinking of the Belgrano was but one element.

As I have explained Ministers took their decision on 2 May to change the Rules of Engagement in the light of the clear and unequivocal indications of the real and direct threat to the Task Force posed by the Argentine Navy. They were aware of the general disposition of our own forces and of our assessment of the probable movements of the Argentine Navy. Even where the position of an Argentine unit was known, as in the case of the Belgrano, this information could be updated only at intervals and between such reports the units concerned could move substantial distances in any direction. It was the case as John Nott said to the House in May 1982 and I repeated in December 1982 that "the General Belgrano and a group of British warships could have been within striking distance of each other in a matter of some five to six hours, converging from a distance of some 200 nautical miles". Conqueror's report of the Belgrano's reversal of course and of her position at 3 pm on 2 May does not invalidate this since the Belgrano could have changed course again and closed on elements of the Task Force. Ministers were aware of the distance between the two groups of ships to the degree of accuracy and probability which was feasible and sufficient in the circumstances. I do not see how military operations could be conducted successfully on any other basis. If Ministers had sought to monitor every development in the tactical disposition of forces on both sides and tried to control every engagement in detail from London the results would I believe have been disastrous. It was against this background that I have already explained that Ministers were not informed at the time of the precise course of the Belgrano when she was sunk. Indeed this information did not come to Ministers' attention until the end of November 1982 when all the details were eventually

considered to deal with Parliamentary Questions.

As well as making much of the Belgrano's position, you also refer at length to the question of whether the accompanying destroyers were attacked in any way. The facts are that the original statements by Ministers were based upon Conqueror's original report that two torpedoes had hit the cruiser. It subsequently emerged that Conqueror had fired one salvo consisting of three torpedoes. I am aware of reports that the third torpedo hit the destroyer HIPOLITO BOUCHARD. All I can say is that the destroyer was on the far side of the Belgrano when the salvo was fired. It is therefore possible that the third torpedo hit her but there is still no conclusive evidence available to us that it happened. There is therefore no need to correct my statement of 4 May since it is a statement of fact that the Conqueror did not attack the destroyer.

Finally you suggest that the record should have been corrected on the eve of the publication of the White Paper on the Falklands Campaign to take account of the knowledge we then had of the exact course and position of the Belgrano, that there had not been "constant" changes of course and that three torpedoes had been fired. As I have explained many times, the precise position and course of the Belgrano were irrelevant; we do not have a continuous record of the course which the Belgrano followed but certainly she made many changes of course during 2 May which is all we have ever claimed; and the question of the number of torpedoes seems to have little bearing on the rightness or otherwise of the decisions taken. The attack on the Belgrano occupied one paragraph in a White Paper on "The Falklands Campaign: The Lessons" and at the time of its publication Ministers and Parliament were more concerned, and rightly so, with the continuing defence of the Falkland Islands and the lessons to be learnt from the campaign. With the benefit of the hindsight which is so

evident in this argument, it may be that it would have helped to have said something more at that time, consistent with the need to avoid giving information of operational significance. I have to say, however, that the events of recent months suggest that the process of disclosure will never satisfy those determined to misinterpret the Government's actions at the time, but it might lead into areas which could risk irreparable damage to national security. This has been and will remain a crucial consideration for this Government.

Yours sincerely
Margaret Thatcher

The Rt. Hon. David Owen, M.P.