

CONFIDENTIAL

Prime Minister
Press line at Flag A.
Paul Foot's article at Flag B.
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27th May 1983

Dear Robin,

GENERAL BELGRANO: MR PAUL FOOT

In an interview reproduced in a book on the Falklands campaign, "Our Falklands War" by Geoffrey Underwood, published last week, Commander Wreford-Brown is reported as saying that HMS CONQUEROR sighted the GENERAL BELGRANO visually early in the afternoon on 1st May last year.

In his statement on the BELGRANO affair to the House of Commons on 4th May last year (attached), the Defence Secretary stated that "the next day, 2nd May, at 8p.m. London time, one of our submarines detected the Argentinian cruiser...". The Falklands White Paper of last December also states that the GENERAL BELGRANO was detected on 2nd May (extract attached).

Mr Paul Foot, who has lately been showing an interest in the BELGRANO affair and has written articles for both the New Statesman and Daily Mirror, has drawn attention to this apparent discrepancy. I attach a copy of his article from yesterday's Daily Mirror. He implies that the Ministry has avoided stating that the cruiser was detected on 1st May as this would, as he sees it, have cast doubt on our repeated assertions that the BELGRANO posed a threat. This of course follows continued accusations that the cruiser was sunk for non-military reasons.

We believe that the Sunday Times are thinking of pursuing this further on Sunday and other papers may become interested. We therefore need to have a press line and I attach, for your information, what we propose. It is easy to show that in the Commons statement "detected" clearly means "attacked". We have since repeated that 8p.m. London time on 2nd May was the time of HMS CONQUEROR's torpedo attack on the BELGRANO. Similarly, the press line suggests that the word "detected" in the White Paper should not be taken to mean "located for the first time". The third paragraph of the press line stresses yet again the serious military nature of the threat.

Yours ever,

Jane Ridley
(J E RIDLEY) (MISS)

R Butler Esq

Falkland Islands

4.7 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. John Nott): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I shall make a statement about recent naval engagements in the South Atlantic, following the operation conducted by our forces to repossess the British sovereign territory of South Georgia.

In the House on 7 April I announced that our first naval action would be to deny the Argentine forces on the Falklands the means of sea reinforcement and resupply from the mainland. British submarines have achieved that objective. With the arrival of our task force on 30 April our next move was to stop reinforcement and resupply from the air, as well as by sea. Since the passing of resolution 502 the Argentines, instead of withdrawing, had continuously reinforced the islands. We gave two days' prior warning to the Argentine Government of the imposition of this total exclusion zone, and our task force is now enforcing it.

The task force was despatched to the South Atlantic with the support of the House and, I believe, of the country. Since its arrival in these waters our overriding duty has been to protect our task force against attack by Argentine forces.

We made it very clear to the Argentine Government and to the United Nations more than a week ago, on 23 April, that the Government would exercise their rights of self-defence to the full, including the use of force under article 51 of the United Nations charter if this proved necessary to protect our fleet.

I shall now describe the military sequence of events. Air attacks by Vulcan and Sea Harrier aircraft against Port Stanley airfield were launched early on 1 May. The runway was cratered and rendered unusable by transport aircraft from the Argentine mainland. A further sortie was made today to render the airstrip unusable for light supply, communications and ground attack aircraft operating within the Falkland Islands themselves. The other main airfield on East Falkland at Goose Green has also effectively been put out of action.

On 1 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.

The next day, 2 May, at 8 pm London time, one of our submarines detected the Argentine cruiser, "General Belgrano", escorted by two destroyers. This heavily armed surface attack group was close to the total exclusion zone

and was closing on elements of our task force, which was only hours away. We knew that the cruiser itself has substantial fire power, provided by 15 6in guns, with a range of 13 miles, and Seacat anti-aircraft missiles. Together with its escorting destroyers, which we believe were equipped with Exocet anti-ship missiles with a range of more than 20 miles, the threat to the task force was such that the task force commander could ignore it only at his peril.

The House will know that the attack by our submarine involved the capital ship only and not its escorting destroyers, so that they should have been able to go to the assistance of the damaged cruiser. We do not know whether they did so, but, in so doing, they would not have been engaged.

On 3 May, at about 4 am London time, a Sea King helicopter keeping watch against submarine attack around the task force was fired on by an Argentine ocean-going patrol craft. This vessel was then attacked and sunk by a Lynx helicopter. A second Lynx then came under attack from another Argentine vessel, which was itself attacked and damaged.

It must be a matter of deep concern to the House that there has been loss of life from these engagements including the sinking of the "General Belgrano", but our first duty must be the protection of our own ships and men. There may be further attacks on our forces and they must be allowed to act in self-defence. We cannot deny them that right. Nor must we forget that military action began by an attack on British marines and the forceable seizure of British territory. The way of stopping the fighting forthwith is for the Argentines to withdraw their garrison from the Falkland Islands in compliance with the United Nations resolution 502.

Mr. Denis Healey (Leeds, East): The right hon. Gentleman rightly said in his press conference last night that his policy was and would always be to use minimum force under strict political control to achieve a diplomatic solution. I confess that it is not always easy to achieve that in the stress of battle. Nevertheless, on the evidence that he has just given, it seems that he has successfully achieved that objective, first, in the reoccupation of South Georgia; secondly, in the attacks on the airfields and military facilities on the Falkland Islands; and, thirdly, in the actions that he has just described within the total exclusion zone.

I shall address my questions entirely to the action against the Argentine cruiser "General Belgrano". The right hon. Gentleman said that the Government were concerned about the loss of life that had occurred. I understand that the action took place 36 miles outside the total exclusion zone. Although it appears now that there have not been 1,000 lives lost, as we feared earlier, the number must run into many hundreds. As I said in questions to the Foreign Secretary after his statement, the loss of life is already causing great concern among our friends and allies all over the world.

Almost two days after the event it should be possible for the Secretary of State to give the House more details than were in his statement. It is in both his and the Government's interest to do so if widespread international concern about the incident is to be allayed.

First, will the right hon. Gentleman say how far the Argentine ships were from the task force? He said that they were hours away. I hope that he will forgive me for saying

[Mr. Denis Healey]

that that phrase is far too ambiguous and uncertain. It makes a big difference whether they were 50, 100 or 300 miles away. Any of those distances could be described as "hours away".

Secondly, what were the two escorting destroyers? Were they by any chance the type 42 frigate that Britain sold to the Argentine?

Thirdly, if the attack was necessary to protect our forces, could not action have been taken to cripple rather than to sink the cruiser? With respect, if the Government have pledged themselves to the minimum use of force, they must issue instructions that ensure that minimum force is used. I accept that it is not easy for submarines that were designed for global war against a great power to exercise the use of minimum force in a police action against a minor power. There remains the question whether it was possible to cripple the cruiser rather than to sink it, as was done to the submarine off South Georgia. That question deserves to be answered.

Finally, can the right hon. Gentleman explain why the Press Association reported earlier today that the "General Belgrano" had fired first and then later withdrew that statement as not being true?

I ask these questions in no carping spirit. If it is indeed the Government's intention at all times to use minimum force to achieve a political solution, they must avoid risking the lives of half of the population of the Falkland Islands in a single engagement.

Mr. Nott: The right hon. Gentleman is correct. I said at a press conference yesterday that it was our policy to use minimum force. The task force remains under the political control of the Government. It operates within a political framework. Nevertheless, in exercising minimum force it must bear in mind the overriding need not to endanger itself—our own men and our own ships.

We believe that the action took place just outside—about 35 miles—the total exclusion zone. However, as I said in my statement, the cruiser and the escorting destroyers were only hours' steaming time away. [HON. MEMBERS: "How many hours?"] The right hon. Gentleman asked for the precise distance. I cannot give it, as I am not prepared to reveal the position of our task force. Nor can I give full details of the exact composition of the Argentine forces operating against us. The right hon. Gentleman will know, because he, too, has been Secretary of State for Defence, that communications are not necessarily received instantly by a submarine. It sometimes takes time for communications to be made, for reasons that have to do with the natural concealment of the submarine, but the group was hours away from our task force.

Only two torpedoes were fired at the cruiser. It is impossible to say whether that would have crippled the cruiser—that could not be predicted—but, having fired its torpedoes, the submarine clearly could not remain in the area without endangering itself. Therefore, in accordance with normal procedures, it fired the two torpedoes and then left the area. I have not heard of a report by Reuters or the Press Association about who fired first, but I can tell the House that in this case, due to the serious threat that the group of Argentine naval vessels posed to our task force, our submarine was ordered to fire some torpedoes at the cruiser.

Mr. Healey: With great respect, the right hon. Gentleman's answer about the distance between the task force and the Argentine forces is inadequate. First, the action took place nearly two days ago. No one could assume that our task force would still be in the position in which, according to the right hon. Gentleman, it was identified by the Argentine destroyers at that time.

Secondly, those of us who have had the right hon. Gentleman's and my experience in these matters know of the difficulties of communication with submarines. But I did not ask where the submarine was. I asked where the task force was. The task force is a surface force in continuous communication with the Ministry of Defence in London, as we know from the hourly press reports from correspondents aboard some of the ships.

Mr. Nott: I realise that the right hon. Gentleman asked where our task force was, but that is not information that I think it would be prudent to give to the House. As he will know, the task force is within the region of the Falkland Islands, around the area of the total exclusion zone, but I cannot be asked to give precise nautical miles in a case of this kind.

Several Hon. Members rose—

Mr. Speaker: Order, I propose to allow 20 minutes on this statement and then to move on to a personal statement.

Mr. David Steel (Roxburgh, Selkirk and Peebles): I join in the congratulations extended to our forces on the success of the operation so far.

Will the Secretary of State confirm that the military policy remains as described by the Prime Minister in the debate last Thursday as being measured and controlled? The right hon. Gentleman presumably accepts that if the scale of loss of life already suffered by the Argentines were repeated against us in retaliation it would quickly equal the total population of the Falkland Islands. Will he therefore tell us whether there is a general directive to the fleet commander that all action must be taken only if it is totally unavoidable?

Mr. Nott: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks about the skill of our men with the task force.

The right hon. Gentleman is quite right. The action of our fleet in the South Atlantic must at all times be measured and controlled. I wholly agree with him on that. I am sure that he will accept from me, however, that in the conditions in which our forces find themselves—repeated air attacks had been launched on them the previous day, we have reason to believe that there is a submarine or perhaps two operating in the area, and the Argentines themselves announced that they had sunk HMS "Exeter", brought down 11 of our aircraft and severely damaged HMS "Hermes", all of which is clear evidence that the orders of the Argentine fleet are to sink our ships—we must do nothing that endangers our task force, which went there and is there with, I believe, the consent of the majority of Members of the House.

Sir John Eden (Bournemouth, West): Is it not absolutely clear that, despite all the efforts of British Ministers, there can be no negotiated settlement unless the Argentines agree to withdraw, and that if they do not repossession of the islands by military means is unavoidable? As it seems that the Argentines have so far rejected every opportunity to come to the negotiating table, will my right hon. Friend ensure that the British task

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force does not have to hang around for too long in inhospitable waters, but that any necessary military action to repossess our territory is taken with expedition and speed?

Mr. Nott: My right hon. Friend is correct. We require a negotiated settlement—a long-term peaceful solution to the problem—but that must come after withdrawal of the Argentine forces in accordance with resolution 502.

As my right hon. Friend says, the Argentines have so far rejected every opportunity to withdraw. I should not like to go into detail about the military options, such as repossession, that are open to us, but the best way of avoiding any further loss of life is for the Argentines not to challenge the total exclusion zone and not to pose a threat to our ships and men. The right way to ensure that there is no further loss of life is for the Argentines to withdraw their garrison from the Falkland Islands in accordance with resolution 502.

Mr. Jack Ashley (Stoke-on-Trent, South): Will the Secretary of State assure the House that he fully appreciates that the massive support that we have from the United States and Europe is conditional upon avoiding huge losses of life, British or Argentine? Is he aware that there is now a real danger that we shall lose the support of our friends and allies?

Mr. Nott: I fully agree with the right hon. Gentleman that the support that we have so far received is based to a large extent on the belief that we shall not use more force than is necessary to persuade the Argentines to withdraw from the Falkland Islands. We are attempting to use the minimum force to achieve our objectives. I know that the right hon. Gentleman will agree with me, however, that nothing that we do or say to our forces must put them in peril. We have no choice but to take as our overriding duty the protection of our own ships and men.

Mr. Jim Spicer (Dorset, West): Does my right hon. Friend accept that most people in this country and certainly in the House will welcome his last statement? Is he aware that, above all, given the power, range and accuracy of the weaponry possessed by both the Argentine navy and air force, the House and the country would consider it a dereliction of duty if we did not take such action as was necessary to stop any attack?

Mr. Nott: The cruiser, although elderly, with its two destroyer escorts, posed a very considerable threat to our task force. All were heavily armed and the Exocet missile carried by the destroyer escorts is a potent and dangerous weapon for use against our task force. With a submarine in that area, we could not allow the Argentine group to go on threatening our ships and men, as it would have done if we had simply ignored it.

Dr. John Gilbert (Dudley, East): Is the Secretary of State aware that the Seacat missile on the "General Belgrano" would be of no significance in surface-to-surface engagements and that the dangerous armament—the Sea Dart or the Exocet—was with the destroyer escort? How does he propose to refute the suggestion that the attack was not aimed at using the minimum force to achieve the maximum military advantage, but that, on the contrary, it was aimed at producing the maximum casualties and psychological shock to the Argentines?

Mr. Nott: Obviously, I reject that charge utterly. On the specific points raised by the right hon. Gentleman, Seacat is not a surface-to-surface missile, and I never suggested that it was, but the Belgrano had 15 6in guns, which were a very considerable threat and have a very considerable range. What he said about the destroyers is, of course, correct as well.

Mr. Keith Speed (Ashford): It is correct that the guns are radar-controlled, that the cruiser carried substantial armour and that these ships would have been a significant threat to our task force had they been allowed to get through. Can my right hon. Friend tell us anything about the reports that the cruiser was afloat for some considerable time before it sank?

Mr. Nott: I cannot confirm the latter point. I understand that a report was issued by the Argentines initially that the cruiser was only damaged—that her propeller-shaft was damaged. If the evidence that we have had from Argentine sources is to be believed, the cruiser was crippled in the initial torpedo attack and did not sink immediately. But we cannot confirm that evidence. It comes from the Argentines.

Mr. A. E. P. Duffy (Sheffield, Attercliffe): The Secretary of State admits that the Exocet missiles on the destroyers represent a potent threat to the task force. Would not he and the Prime Minister have better met their stated objective of preserving the task force with minimum force if the submarine, if it had to be deployed, had confined its attention to the destroyers?

Mr. Nott: Had one of the destroyers been torpedoed instead of the cruiser and men had lost their lives, the House would have been just as deeply concerned about the loss of human life from the destroyer as about the loss of human life from the cruiser.

Mr. John Roper (Farnworth): Will the right hon. Gentleman accept that we share his view that ensuring the safety of our forces is the highest priority? Is he satisfied that the supply vessels and the troop carriers travelling between this country and the South Atlantic have adequate protection from Argentine surprise attacks?

Mr. Nott: I am very conscious of the need to provide adequate protection for the supply vessels and for troop reinforcements. It is, of course, a very important matter.

Mr. Julian Critchley (Aldershot): What will be the effect of the Falkland Islands affair on the future allocation of resources to defence?

Mr. Nott: With respect to my hon. Friend, I do not think that this is quite the moment to discuss that issue.

Mr. George Foulkes (South Ayrshire): Will the Secretary of State correct the statement by the Prime Minister and confirm that not all Members of the House supported the sending of the task force? Will he accept that it is reasonable for us all to believe that it has always been the intention of the Government to achieve a solution to this problem by military means, unless he can tell us, apart from putting forward one unacceptable precondition and a willingness to listen to other peoples ideas, what specific proposals for a peaceful solution have been put forward on the initiative of the Government?

Mr. Nott: The Foreign Secretary devoted a large part of his statement to that latter matter. The House generally,

[Mr. Nott]

I believe, supported the sending of the task force, although I am not for one moment claiming that every Member of the House did so. In the early stages of this affair, after the Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands, we had great difficulty in protecting HMS "Endurance" from the Argentines. It was only skill and to some extent good luck that prevented our losing a considerable number of the Royal Marines on HMS "Endurance" at the outset of this affair. When the Argentines first attacked Port Stanley they heavily mortared the marine barracks, believing that the Royal Marines were there. To suggest that we fired the first shot or that we are responsible for the hostilities—I know that the hon. Gentleman did not suggest this, but it is being suggested in some quarters—is a travesty of the truth.

Mr. Robert Atkins (Preston, North): Does my right hon. Friend begin to agree with the remarks attributed to Air Chief Marshal "Bomber" Harris yesterday, or the day before, when he suggested that too much publicity was given to the nitty-gritty of strategic and tactical decisions taken by the people on the high seas facing difficulties in protecting our interests and our troops? If he does agree, what steps does he think can be taken to rebut some of the nonsensical remarks by right hon. and hon. Gentlemen opposite?

Mr. Nott: It would be of assistance to us if retired Service officers and others would not speculate so widely on all the military options that are open to us. It would also, naturally, be of help to us if the BBC and other media could have rather fewer programmes of this kind, because we are talking about lives, and the lives of our own Service men, and at the moment some of these programmes go rather too far.

Mr. William Hamilton (Fife, Central): Will the Minister confirm what the Prime Minister said earlier this afternoon, namely, that the decision to launch the torpedoes was a political decision—in other words, it was made by either the Prime Minister or the right hon. Gentleman, or both of them together? Or was it made by the admiral on the spot? It is extremely important that the country should know who is making decisions to kill in the South Atlantic.

Mr. Nott: Throughout this affair we have kept close control of the rules of engagement that go to the task force, and that must be obvious. The overall political control remains with the Government and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was, of course, confirming that. That must be the case. We did not fire the first shot, and the day before the "General Belgrano" was sunk there was launched upon our ships a substantial and dangerous air attack. It was only because of the superior skill and the better aircraft that we have available that our ships were not sunk the day before. I hope that the country understands that very clearly. We cannot allow Argentine naval or air assets to be left free to attack and sink our ships.

Mr. Michael Latham (Melton): Did my right hon. Friend note last weekend the difference between the military dictatorship of Argentina telling lies to its people about alleged losses of British personnel and ships and their subsequent jamming of the BBC, and his duty to

respond fully and truthfully in the House, as he has been doing this afternoon, in our democracy? Will he assure the world and the country that any figures given by his Ministry of losses will be absolutely true?

Mr. Nott: We will do our utmost, given the distances and the problem of immediate communications, to publish nothing but facts. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. A great deal of propaganda and misinformation have been put out by Buenos Aires. There was no great sense of outrage when they announced that they had sunk HMS "Exeter", shot down 11 of our aircraft and severely damaged the "Hermes". Indeed, this was put out from Buenos Aires with great pleasure before we were able to deny it. There does not seem to be any predisposition on their part to hide the fact that they have been attempting to sink our ships and shoot down our aircraft.

Mr. Healey: May I ask the right hon. Gentleman once more if he can give us more details about the distance between the opposing forces, because this is critical in establishing the necessity to attack the cruiser in self-defence? The right hon. Gentleman told the House a moment ago that the Argentine ships were closing on elements of our task force, so presumably they knew where it was, and, since two of them survived, presumably the Argentine Government knows. The Soviet Government certainly knows, because it has three spy satellites over the area. Will the right hon. Gentleman tell us where the task force was 40 hours ago?

Mr. Nott: I have noted that the right hon. Gentleman thinks that the Soviets know where our task force is. I rather doubt that that is the case. The "General Belgrano" was sunk about 30 miles south of the exclusion zone. I repeat that I cannot tell the right hon. Gentleman where our task force was then or where it is now. With respect to the right hon. Gentleman's natural wish to know how close the forces were, given the delay in communications that can arise between London and a submarine, the fact that I have told him and the House that this group was only hours of steaming time away surely gives him sufficient information to appreciate that these ships were a threat to our fleet.

Mr. Alex Pollock (Moray and Nairn): Does my right hon. Friend recall that at the start of the crisis the Government were criticised severely in several parts of the House for failing to anticipate the invasion of the Falkland Islands by Argentina? Does he agree that it is ironic that some of those same elements should now be criticising the Government for meeting the threat on the high seas and thereby protecting the lives of our Service men?

Mr. Nott: I have noted my hon. Friend's point, and I rather agree with it.

Mr. Dick Douglas (Dunfermline): Will the right hon. Gentleman concede that no one in the House in his senses wants to see the conflict escalate? Both sides have proved in crude terms that they can inflict substantial damage upon the other. I do not ask him to give the exact position that was under threat by the "General Belgrano" and the two destroyers, but will he say whether our forces were within or outside the 200-mile exclusion zone?

Mr. Nott: It would be so easy for me to give the hon. Gentleman the answer, but I am sure that it would be wrong for me to do so.

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Mr. Michael Colvin (Bristol, North-West): Does my right hon. Friend agree that our attacks on the Falkland Islands airports will have caused heavy casualties among Argentine troops? It is these wounded Argentines and the other Argentines who need evacuation from the Falkland Islands, not the Falkland Islanders. Does he therefore agree that it might be worth while offering to the United Nations for its use the hospital ship "Uganda" to carry out this evacuation of wounded Argentines and any other Argentines who wish to leave? This may well provide the breakthrough in the negotiating position, where there is currently a stalemate. It would be an act of magnanimity and it might enable the Argentine people at home to see the real picture of what is happening on the Falkland Islands, rather than the counterfeit picture.

Mr. Nott: I assure my hon. Friend that if, for example, the Red Cross wants safe passage to collect Argentine wounded, we shall make sure that it has it. If we can recover wounded ourselves, we shall do so. We shall provide them with hospital and medical facilities in our ships. That would be part of the Royal Navy's normal conduct of affairs. However, there is sometimes a problem. For instance, in the case of the "General Belgrano", if we had attempted rescue ourselves we would have been within easy range of Argentine land-air attack. If we are to perform this humane function, we must do so without hazarding our own forces.

Personal Statement

4.43 pm

Mr. Bruce Douglas-Mann (Mitcham and Morden): With your leave, Mr. Speaker, I wish to make a personal statement.

I have already given notice to the Chancellor of the Exchequer that at the conclusion of today's business I wish to be appointed Steward and Bailiff of the Manor of Northstead—in other words, forthwith to resign my seat in the House. It is also my intention, however, as soon as the appointment has been effected, to relinquish it with a view to contesting a by-election in the constituency of Mitcham and Morden, which will result from my resignation. The right hon. Member for Bristol, South (Mr. Cocks), the Opposition Chief Whip, has agreed that he will move the writ for that by-election next Tuesday, 11 May so that the by-election can take place on 3 June. I am grateful to him for that.

The House will understand that a Member in my position has no control over the timing of a subsequent by-election. It may well wish in due course to consider whether that situation is satisfactory.

As most hon. Members will know, I announced on 10 December that I was leaving the Labour Party and joining the Social Democrats. I said then that it was my intention to resign from the House and to contest a by-election. This is not the occasion to discuss the reasons for my decision to leave the Party to which I belonged for over 30 years. However, I should like briefly to place on record the reasons why I have felt it right to seek the endorsement of my constituents for my decision. I do not wish the action that I am taking to establish any precedent—
[*Interruption.*]

Mr. Speaker: Order. I remind the House that it is customary to hear a personal statement in silence.

Mr. Douglas-Mann:—for other Members who may find that they can no longer support the policies adopted by the party under whose label they were elected. That would be to raise the party above the individual conscience and judgment of a Member of Parliament, whereas I think that it is the judgement of each individual Member of Parliament on what is in the public interest that should always be paramount.

There are many precedents of Members who have crossed the Floor of the House without resigning. Perhaps the late Sir Winston Churchill is the most famous example. Whether or not one accepts that such a fundamental change as crossing the Floor of the House involves an obligation to seek re-election, I believe that there is none upon hon. Members who consider that their views have not changed fundamentally but who personally feel that their parties have adopted a radically different position since the last general election. That is the position of my colleagues in the SDP.

My position is different, because I have given specific assurances to the Mitcham and Morden constituency Labour Party, which I have repeated at public meetings, that if ever I were to leave the Labour Party I should resign my seat and contest a by-election. That pledge was first given when my loyalty to the Labour Party was questioned following my criticism in the House of mass picketing at Grunwick in 1977. It has been repeated at public meetings. I do not think it necessary to adduce reasons for keeping one's promises, other than that one has made them.

From South Georgia to San Carlos

109. The first action at sea took place off South Georgia when on 25 April the Argentine submarine *Santa Fé* was attacked on the surface some five miles from the main harbour at Grytviken. She was badly damaged and subsequently beached. The same day the Island was repossessed by Royal Marines and Special Forces (which comprise the Special Air Service (SAS) and the Special Boat Squadron (SBS) of the Royal Marines (RM)). On 1 May a Vulcan followed by Sea Harriers carried out their first attacks on the Falklands, and the first Argentine aircraft were shot down. The carrier group made a major demonstration of force, simulating an amphibious landing off Port Stanley which successfully drew the Argentines and revealed some of their defensive positions.

110. On 2 May HMS *Conqueror* detected the Argentine cruiser, *General Belgrano*, accompanied by two destroyers, sailing near to the total exclusion zone. Other Argentine ships were also thought to be probing our defences to the north of the zone. The *Belgrano*, and her escorts armed with Exocet missiles, posed a clear threat to the ships of the task force. She was therefore attacked and sunk by torpedoes. Thereafter major Argentine warships remained within 12 miles of the Argentine coast and took no further part in the Campaign. Argentine submarines continued to pose a serious threat, but no task force ships were successfully attacked.

111. The task force suffered its first major loss on 4 May. HMS *Sheffield*, while on forward radar picket duty, was hit by an Exocet missile launched from an Argentine Super Etendard aircraft. The missile hit fuel tanks amidships and serious fires started, which filled the central section of the ship with acrid smoke. After nearly four hours, with the fires increasing in intensity, the Captain gave orders to abandon ship. 20 members of her crew died.

112. By mid-May the task force had accomplished two of its main tasks: the movement of the troops safely to the South Atlantic and the establishment of control of the seas around the Islands. The rôle of the carriers, HMS *Hermes* and HMS *Invincible*, was crucial at this and subsequent stages in providing air defence and the means of attacking enemy ships and ground positions, while their helicopters provided constant anti-submarine protection.

113. It was now necessary to put land forces ashore in sufficient strength to repossess the Islands. San Carlos was chosen as the site for the amphibious landing because it offered a good anchorage which could be protected against submarine attack and was an area known to be lightly defended by the enemy and difficult for him to reinforce rapidly. The low hills surrounding the inlet afforded good protection against the risk of Exocet attack. Men of the SAS and the SBS had for some time been reconnoitring East and West Falkland. Taking advantage of the intelligence they had gained, and under cover of a Naval bombardment, the SAS carried out a daring night raid on Pebble Island on 15 May. They destroyed 11 Argentine aircraft on the ground.

114. On 20 May the main amphibious force moved towards San Carlos Water, taking advantage of an overcast sky and poor visibility, and keeping strict radio silence. Meanwhile Special Forces mounted a series of diversionary raids at various points around East Falkland. Under cover of Naval gunfire,

PAUL FOOT



report

BELGRANO The missing day in May



SAILORS' RETURN: Conqueror comes home.

THE more we hear about the sinking of the General Belgrano, the more the mystery about it grows.

Take this quotation from John Nott, Secretary of State for Defence, on May 4 last year in the House of Commons.

"The next day—May 2—at 8 p.m. London time, one of our submarines detected the Argentine cruiser, General Belgrano..."

Not much doubt about that, is there? The cruiser was detected on May 2 at 8 p.m. Now Mr. Nott, as he then was, was masterminding a war at the time and he may have got a bit flustered about the facts. But he wasn't at all flustered seven months later when he proudly presented to the House of Commons a Defence White Paper entitled: The Falklands Campaign: The Lessons.

Paragraph 110. of the White Paper starts: "On May 2, HMS Conqueror detected the Argentine cruiser, General Belgrano."

There we are again, in the cold light of peace, the cruiser was detected on May 2. No doubt about it.

This week a book lands on my desk. It is called Our Falklands War, is written by Geoffrey Underwood, a West Country journalist, and is pub-

lished by Maritime Books.

Mr. Underwood had a face-to-face interview with the commander of HMS Conqueror, another West Countryman, Chris Wreford-Brown.

Commander Wreford-Brown is quoted as saying: "We were asked to look for and find the General Belgrano group. It was reported to consist of a cruiser and escorts. We located her on our passive sonar and sighted her visually early on the afternoon of May 1."

May 1! But didn't Nott and his Ministry say, twice, that it was May 2?



CMDR. WREFORD-BROWN and JOHN NOTT: Conflicting stories of the Belgrano sighting.

Commander Wreford-Brown went on: "We took up a position eastern and followed the General Belgrano for over 30 hours. We reported that we were in contact with her... We had instructions to attack if she went inside the Total Exclusion Zone."

Sink

But then, on May 2, when the Belgrano was 50 miles out of the exclusion zone and steaming away from the Falklands towards her home port, Commander Wreford-Brown got an order from the Commander-in-Chief



of the Fleet at Northwood, Middlesex, to sink the cruiser. He promptly did so.

Why the discrepancy in the dates?

Could it be that Mr Nott and his Ministry were rather embarrassed to admit that the cruiser, which they insisted posed such a terrible threat to the Task Force 300 miles away, had in fact been shadowed for 30 hours before it was sunk?

Could it be that they knew perfectly well that the cruiser was not a threat at all, but was sunk anyway, for quite different reasons?

THE THINGS THEY SAY

... OR THE 13 PER CENT NORM

If unemployment is not below three million in five years, then I'm not worth re-electing.

Norman Tebbit, Minister for Unemployment, talking to Brian Hayes on the LBC, last Tuesday.

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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Principal Private Secretary

31 May 1983

Thank you for your letter of 27 May covering briefing on Mr. Paul Foot's article about the sinking of the General Belgrano. The Prime Minister saw and noted this.

F. E. R. BUTLER

Miss Jane Ridley,
Ministry of Defence.