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CABINET  
DEFENCE AND OVERSEA POLICY COMMITTEE  
SUB-COMMITTEE ON THE SOUTH ATLANTIC AND  
THE FALKLAND ISLANDS

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BURIAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR BRITISH SERVICEMEN KILLED  
IN ACTION ON THE FALKLAND ISLANDS

Note by the Secretary of State for Defence

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1. At the OD(SA) meeting on 1st June, I offered to provide further information to colleagues on the arrangements envisaged for the burial of British servicemen killed in action on the Falkland Islands. These arrangements need to be seen in the context of considerable public interest, following the engagements at Darwin and Goose Green in which seventeen British soldiers died, both in the immediate arrangements made to bury the dead on the battlefield and in the quite separate issue of the Government's longer term policy on the repatriation of bodies to the United Kingdom.

2. While hostilities are still in progress the immediate requirement is to safeguard the health and morale of those still engaged in operations. The relevant instructions therefore place emphasis on the earliest possible burial of those killed in action. The timing and precise methods used will depend on circumstances; burial is always carried out reverently, but it is seldom possible to adopt such standard procedures as embalming corpses or burying them in coffins. A number of types of grave may be used, including a communal grave such as that used at Goose Green if operational requirements dictate an urgent measure of this kind. Those killed at sea are, on the other hand, almost always given a sea burial.

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3. When hostilities are over British military practice for land casualties is to establish a permanent cemetery as close as possible to the scene of the action so that the bodies can be transferred as soon as circumstances permit and with the minimum of fuss. This practice ensures that all the deceased are treated equally, regardless of rank or individual circumstance, and minimises practical difficulties in transporting the bodies over any significant distance. It also ensures that, so far as repatriation is concerned, the arrangements for those killed on land are consistent with those which apply at sea. Once permanent military cemeteries have been established, it is normal practice for arrangements to be made for next of kin to visit the graves should they wish to do so, although practical difficulties, such as a shortage of accommodation for next of kin in the event of large British losses, may have to be taken into account.

4. There are a number of special considerations in the case of the current conflict, including the distance between the Falkland Islands and the United Kingdom and inevitable public uncertainty about the future of the Islands in the longer term. These factors do not in themselves provide sufficient grounds to depart from traditional military practice. Nonetheless, if pressure from next of kin, or public opinion as a whole, were to prove overwhelming, it might be possible to satisfy individual demands by employing specialists to render the bodies sanitary and then to transport them to the United Kingdom, probably by sea. This might prove impracticable if eventual British losses were high and there were a large number of demands for repatriation; its feasibility would also depend upon ability to identify individual corpses. Moreover, the consolation which repatriation of their deceased might provide to next of kin needs to be weighed against the added sense of loss which might be felt by next of kin of servicemen who had been buried at sea or declared missing. The net result could prove divisive. In the light of all these factors my judgement is that it would be right to maintain the traditional practice by burying those killed in action in cemeteries on the Falkland Islands.

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5. - The public presentation of this decision would need to be handled very carefully. There are signs that the initial outburst of public concern is subsiding and we do not need to make any immediate announcement. Indeed to do so would stir up the debate again. We should say no more until the end of the campaign when a final decision can be made in the light of all the circumstances, which will include the total number of dead and the views of the families (which may then have changed to some degree). - Nevertheless continuing uncertainty about the Government's position is undesirable and we should not give any indications that the policy will be changed. At the same time, as the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster have already made clear, we must show ourselves ready to listen sympathetically to the view of next of kin.

6. I invite my colleagues to take note.

JN

Ministry of Defence

7th June 1982

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