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## DECISION TO SINK THE *BELGRANO*

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[extract from Margaret Thatcher *The Downing Street Years* (1993), pp214-16]

The next day, Sunday, which I spent at Chequers, was one of great - though often misunderstood - significance for the outcome of the Falklands War. As often on Sundays during the crisis, the members of the War Cabinet, Chiefs of Staff and officials came to Chequers for lunch and discussions. On this occasion there was a special matter on which I needed an urgent decision.

I called together Willie Whitelaw, John Nott, Cecil Parkinson, Michael Havers, Terry Lewin, Admiral Fieldhouse and Sir Antony Acland, the Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office. (Francis Pym was in America).

Admiral Fieldhouse told us that one of our submarines, *HMS Conqueror*, had been shadowing the Argentine cruiser, *General Belgrano*. The *Belgrano* was escorted by two destroyers. The cruiser itself had substantial fire power provided by 6 inch guns with a range of 13 miles and anti-aircraft missiles. We were advised that she might have been fitted with Exocet anti-ship missiles, and her two destroyer escorts were known to be carrying them. The whole group was sailing on the edge of the Exclusion Zone.

We had received intelligence about the aggressive intentions of the Argentine fleet. There had been extensive air attacks on our ships the previous day and des>Admiral Woodward, in command of the Task Force, had every reason to believe that a full scale attack was developing. The Argentinian aircraft carrier, the *25 de Mayo*, had been sighted some time earlier and we had agreed to change the rules of engagement to deal with the threat she posed. However, our submarine had lost contact with the carrier, which had slipped past it to the North.

There was a strong possibility that *Conqueror* might also lose contact with the *Belgrano* group. Admiral Woodward had to come to a judgment about what to do with the *Belgrano* in the light of these circumstances. From all the information available, he concluded that the carrier and the *Belgrano* group were engaged in a classic pincer movement against the Task Force. It was clear to me what must be done to protect our forces, in the light of Admiral Woodward's concern and Admiral Fieldhouse's advice. We therefore decided that British forces should be able to attack any Argentine naval vessel on the same basis as agreed previously for the carrier.

Later we approved reinforcements for the Falklands which would be taken there in the *QE2*. It surprised me a little that the need for reinforcements had not been clear sooner. I asked whether it was really necessary or advisable to use this great ship and to put so many people in it, but as soon as I was told that it was necessary to get them there in time I gave my agreement. I was always concerned that we would not have sufficient men and equipment when the time came for the final battle and I was repeatedly struck by the fact that even such highly qualified professionals as advised us often under-estimated the requirements. We broke up still desperately worried that the aircraft carrier which could have done such damage to our vulnerable Task Force had not been found.

The necessary order conveying the change of rules of engagement was sent from Northwood to *HMS Conqueror* at 1.30 pm. In fact, it was not until after 5pm that *Conqueror* reported that she had received the order. The *Belgrano* was torpedoed and sunk just before 8 o'clock that evening. Our submarine headed away as quickly as possible. Wrongly believing that they would be the next targets, the *Belgrano's* escorts seem to have engaged in anti-submarine activities rather than rescuing its crew, some 321 of whom were lost - though initially the death toll was reported to be much higher. The ship's poor state of battle readiness greatly increased the casualties. Back in London we knew that the *Belgrano* had been hit, but it was some hours before we knew that she had sunk.

A large amount of malicious and misleading nonsense was circulated at the time and long afterwards about the reasons why we sank the *Belgrano*. These allegations have been demonstrated to be without foundation. The decision to sink the *Belgrano* was taken for strictly military not political reasons: the claim that we were trying to undermine a promising peace initiative from Peru will not bear scrutiny. Those of us who took the decision at Chequers did not at that time know anything about the Peruvian proposals, which in any case closely resembled the Haig plan rejected by the Argentinians only days before. There was a clear military threat which we could not responsibly ignore. Moreover, subsequent events more than justified what was done.

As a result of the devastating loss of the *Belgrano*, the Argentinian Navy - above all the carrier - went back to port and stayed there. Thereafter it posed no serious threat to the success of the taskforce, though of course we were not to know that this would be so at the time. The sinking of the *Belgrano* turned out to be one of the most decisive military actions of the war.

However, the shocking loss of life caused us many problems because it provided a reason - or in some cases perhaps an excuse - for breaks in the ranks among the less committed of our allies: it also increased pressure on us at the UN. The Irish Government called for an immediate meeting of the Security Council, though after intense pressure from Tony Parsons and some from Javier Perez de Cuellar the UN Secretary General, they were eventually persuaded to suspend their request - not, however, before the Irish Defence Minister had described us as "the aggressor". There was some wavering from the French and rather more from the West Germans, who pressed for a ceasefire and UN negotiations. Moreover, by the time of the sinking of the *Belgrano*, the diplomatic scene was already becoming more difficult and complicated.

I have already mentioned the peace plan which the President of Peru Fernando Belaunde Terry had put to Al Haig and which he in turn had put to Francis Pym in Washington on 1st and 2nd May, though we had no sight of it until later. With the sinking of the *Belgrano*, Mr Haig was once again bringing pressure to bear, urging on us diplomatic magnanimity and, expressing his belief that whatever the course of the military campaign there must be a negotiated outcome to avoid open-ended hostility and instability. To add to the confusion, the UN Secretary General was now seeking to launch a peace initiative of his own, much to the irritation of Mr Haig.