



10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

9 June 1983

Dear Mr. Slater,

Thank you for your letter of 3 June.

There seems from your letter to be some misunderstanding about the background to the sinking of the General Belgrano: in particular when you suggest that she was attacked without warning outside the Total Exclusion Zone. The fact that the cruiser was outside the Total Exclusion Zone at the moment of attack is immaterial. Nor is there any question of the Argentine Government not having been given adequate warning before the attack took place. In our statement of 23 April 1982 we made it clear that any vessel or aircraft which threatened our forces would encounter the appropriate response. The text of this warning was formally communicated to the Argentines at the time. Its scope was not confined to the Total Exclusion Zone and there can have been no room for ambiguity on this score.

It was in conformity with the terms of this warning that the General Belgrano was attacked. There were indications that the cruiser and her accompanying destroyers to the south and the carrier 25 De Mayo and her escorts to the North threatened the ships and men of the task force with a pincer attack. In order to avert this threat, the task force commander sought and obtained a change to the rules of engagement to allow an attack on the General Belgrano under the terms of our warning of 23 April.

/ You

JJ
JSC

You say in your letter that the attack on the Belgrano might be seen internationally as an unwarranted act of aggression. This would be to forget that it was the Argentines, and not we, who first resorted to force when they invaded the Falklands, an act of unprovoked aggression which was overwhelmingly condemned at the United Nations. The Argentines consistently refused to comply with Security Council Resolution 502, which called for the immediate withdrawal of their forces from the Islands. As you know, we worked very hard for a peaceful solution. But eventually we had no option but to take the appropriate military steps to bring about an Argentine withdrawal, in the exercise of our right of self-defence under the United Nations Charter.

I share your concern about the need to ensure the safety and the freedom of operation of our merchant fleet. But I believe that this freedom of operation can best be safeguarded by demonstrating, as we did by the resolute action that we took last year over the Falklands, that aggression does not pay. By the same token, it was right to deal promptly with the threat posed by the General Belgrano; had we not done so, the toll in British lives might have been far greater. As Admiral Fieldhouse said in his Official Despatch, it was a threat that could not be ignored.

In the circumstances, I see no need for the inquiry for which you have asked.

Jim Slater, Esq., C.B.E.

Yours sincerely
Margaret Thatcher
