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MO 25/3/4

10th January 1980

Top copy of this letter filed on Prime Minister (Pt 2)  
'Visits to Departments.'

Dear Clive,

PRIME MINISTER'S VISIT TO THE MINISTRY OF DEFENCE  
4TH JANUARY 1980

Annex A  
Filed on  
Defence (July 79)

'Exercise  
Cruisador &  
etc'

Annex C filed  
on Defence  
(Jan 80) ✓  
'Para Capability'

My Secretary of State thought that it might be helpful to the Prime Minister if I were to let you have some notes on points which arose during her visit here last Friday and on which time did not permit full discussion.

I attach three notes accordingly, dealing with the NATO Exercise Programme (Annex A), Northern Ireland Border Bases (Annex B) and the UK's Parachute Capability (Annex C). I hope that these notes will be self-explanatory but I should perhaps add some very brief covering comments. As regards the Exercise Programme (see paragraph 3) we stand ready to re-examine the question of the extent of Ministerial participation in exercises; it may be that the Cabinet Office would like to take the lead on this. As regards Northern Ireland Border Bases, my Secretary of State proposes to discuss with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland the conclusions of the GOC Northern Ireland when he has completed the study to which reference is made in the fourth paragraph of Annex B. As regards Annex C I would draw attention particularly to the studies which it is explained in its paragraph 4 are in hand.

The question of the RUC's requirement for weapons was also raised during the Prime Minister's visit. On this, I understand that the Northern Ireland Office are undertaking a full study of alternative sources of supply and that this

/ study ...

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study will be reported to the Prime Minister. The Army's standard handgun is the Browning 9mm semi-automatic pistol, which would not meet the RUC requirement for a revolver. Revolvers are not issued to HM forces except for a very limited number for specialist uses.

Perhaps you would let me know whether there is any further advice we can offer, either in respect of the matters to which I have referred above, or on others which were discussed during the Prime Minister's visit.

X | My Secretary of State explained to the Prime Minister, as you know, that he would very much welcome it if the Prime Minister could find the time to pay a further visit here; he considers that we could arrange one with an equally wide range of interest given the wide scope of defence business; and we would ourselves find another visit extremely valuable.

I am sending copies of this letter to George Walden (FCO), Roy Harrington (NIO) and Martin Vile (Cabinet Office).

*Yours and,  
Brian*

(B M NORBURY)

Prime Minister.

✓ The Cabinet Office are going to put in advice on Ministerial participation in NATO crisis management exercises.

I think that it would be a good idea to ask for the conclusions of the study on Northern Ireland border bases to be reported to you in view of the interest you have taken in the problem. Agree? **Yes MT.**

The study on the parachute assault capability will now be submitted in the more general work on our defence capabilities which is being done for OD and on which Sir Robert Armstrong reported on the week-end.

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As regards X/ above, I imagine that you will not wish to go back to Defence before you have completed your first round of visits to Government departments. Agree? **Yes MT**

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ANNEX B  
TO MO 25/3/4  
DATED  
10th JAN 80

NORTHERN IRELAND BORDER BASES

There are ten border RUC stations in Northern Ireland, in which soldiers are stationed to provide protection for the police. Besides soldiers actually on duty at the bases, others are needed in bases to provide an immediate reserve, maintain a rota, and provide essential support services. Many of the casualties which the Army has suffered have been the result of attacks on border bases or the patrols tasked to protect them, whose activity in the long run is bound to become predictable. Crossmaglen and Forkhill in South Armagh have been attacked more times than the other bases, particularly by mortars, and for this reason these two bases are being mortar-proofed. This work will not be completed until 1981, largely because there is not enough space to accommodate more than a small Royal Engineers construction team in each base.

2. The opportunities presented to the terrorists by the limited number of approach routes to border bases to use culvert mines to ambush Security Force vehicles threaten all supply runs and mobile patrols. In the extreme case of South Armagh all Army movement has for some years been by helicopter. Building materials for the works at Forkhill and Crossmaglen are supplied every 6-8 weeks by road convoys. These have to be protected which involves an extra battalion for three days to support the troops in the area.

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3. In strictly military terms it would be preferable to pull back to main bases away from the border, such as Bessbrook Mill, and to operate forward from them. Closure of border stations would permit a more flexible pattern of deployment, would avoid tying down men guarding these static and vulnerable positions and could possibly allow us to lower further the force level in the Province or to increase patrol activity. Terrorists would be forced to attack further from the border, which would be more dangerous for them.

4. The RUC deployment cannot, of course, be seen only in military terms. Withdrawal from the bases might be represented, within Northern Ireland especially, as the abandonment of territory to the IRA, and this would raise difficult political problems. The new General Officer Commanding (who took up his appointment earlier this week) is now reviewing the disposition of his forces. The Secretary of State has asked him, in consultation with the Security Coordinator, the Chief Constable and the Northern Ireland Office, to look particularly closely at military strengths on the border.

5. The Prime Minister also queried the living and working conditions in the bases. There is no doubt that conditions are far from ideal but they are largely imposed by the small size of the original police stations. In addition, mortar-proofed accommodation must necessarily be of small size

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because the construction techniques used would make larger buildings prohibitively expensive and this requirement, allied to the problem of space, means that Forkhill and Crossmaglen are particularly cramped. However, additional building is being planned for these bases. A good deal of money has been spent on providing amenities but there are obvious financial limitations on spending money on accommodation which we hope will only be used for a limited time and where individual soldiers serve on four month tours.

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