

SECRET AND PERSONAL



10 DOWNING STREET

LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

13 September 1990

ADDITIONAL BRITISH FORCES FOR THE GULF

The Prime Minister had a discussion this afternoon with the Defence Secretary, the Chief of the Defence Staff and the Chief of the General Staff about the advisability of sending an Armoured Brigade equipped with Challenger I tanks to join the multi-national force in the Gulf. The Assistant Chief of the Defence Staff for Operational Requirements (Land Systems), Major General Blacker, the Project Manager, Chieftain and Challenger Tanks, Mr. S.R. Jackson and the Chairman and Chief Executive of Vickers Defence Systems Ltd., Mr. G. Boxall were also present.

The Prime Minister said that the Challenger I tank did not enjoy a good reputation. On a recent day, chosen at random, their availability in BAOR had been only 17 per cent. There were problems with the gun turret and the fire control system. There had also been difficulties with the engine during desert trials in Saudi Arabia some years ago. The Defence Secretary's minute reported that various modifications would be necessary before the tank could be successfully deployed in the Gulf. It had also been suggested that the Armoured Brigade had scarcely been able to exercise as a formation because of training constraints in Germany. Ministers had to make a difficult judgment against this background whether it was reasonable to send an Armoured Brigade to join the multi-national force. Put in the simplest terms, she did not want our equipment to let our armed forces down. Nor did she want to put our young soldiers in a vulnerable position when that could be avoided. We also had to think more widely of the reputation of our forces and of our industry if the Challenger tank were to fail. She therefore wanted to be reassured about certain aspects of its performance, and above all that it could achieve much higher levels of reliability and availability.

The Chief of the General Staff said that the question was: could we send our forces to war in the Challenger tank? His answer was that we could. The tanks which would be sent to Saudi Arabia would be the latest versions. Given proper support, they could deliver and sustain a high degree of battlefield reliability. Our troops would be better protected than would the US marines with their M60 tanks. And the Challenger would match other Allied tanks in terms of performance against the Soviet/Iraqi T72s. They had the additional advantage of being

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able to operate at night, which the Iraqis were unable to do.

Major General Blacker said that the Challenger I was not what the army would wish. But availability ratios exaggerated the scale of the problem with it. The average figure for immediate availability in July in BAOR had been 22 per cent. But for availability within 24 hours, the figure rose to 43 per cent. Many of the faults which affected the availability figures were minor and related to what was necessary to comply with German road traffic regulations rather than for going into battle. The intention would be to send only the most recent versions to Saudi Arabia. The crucial factor would be adequate spares support. It would be essential to have Challenger properly supported by a full range of spares and proper logistic back-up. In Germany, the army was trying to support seven Challenger regiments with spares sufficient for only four regiments. In the Gulf, an attempt would be made to reverse that ratio. He was confident that Challenger could be kept running in battle provided there were sufficient spares. In reply to a question from the Prime Minister, General Blacker agreed that the availability of the Abrams M1A and of the German Leopard was much higher. The Challenger was fundamentally unreliable. But that was a problem which could be circumvented if it was adequately supported. The Defence Secretary added that the soldiers who would man the tanks had confidence that it would perform, provided it had proper spares support. The Prime Minister commented that the problem of shortage of spares did not reflect well on the management of the MOD or of the Army, especially when one recalled the vast sums of money wasted on projects like AWACs and the EH101.

The Prime Minister reverted to the problems with Challenger's fire control system. The Chief of the General Staff said that the turret was ergonomically a mess. Challenger could not match the speed of fire of the Abrams or the Leopard and was a second or two slower in engaging its target. This was why it had been withdrawn from the NATO Firing Competition. The Defence Secretary said that, even so, it ranked above the T72 in this respect. General Blacker added that the Challenger would have the best night-firing capability of any tank in the Gulf.

The Prime Minister asked about Challenger's ability to operate in the desert. Mr. Boxall said that the earlier trials in Saudi Arabia had been encouraging in most respects. For example, the tank tracks had lasted for over 3,000 kilometres, while the Abrams had lost tracks. Challenger had demonstrated its ability to engage targets at night, whereas the Americans have declined even to try night-firing. The Prime Minister asked about engine problems. Mr. Jackson said that a great deal of work had subsequently been done to overcome three major faults in the engine system. There would still be problems with engine breathing in desert conditions, and new filters and seals would be required to cope with this. The Prime Minister enquired when these would be ready. Mr. Boxall said that it would take about two weeks, but the parts could be fitted while the tanks were in transit. Alternative sources of reply were being established, and the key companies for providing back-up had agreed to send representatives to the Gulf. The Prime Minister said that it would be vital to galvanize suppliers to provide maximum support.

We had to equal the levels of performance at the time of the Falklands conflict.

The Prime Minister asked whether it was the case that the Armoured Brigade had scarcely exercised as a formation. General Blacker acknowledged that there had indeed been a diminution in the level of major exercises in Germany.

The Prime Minister said that she kept coming back to the question of reliability which was crucial. What level of availability on the front line in Saudi Arabia could the MOD guarantee? The Chief of General Staff said that the target would be 80 per cent. The Prime Minister asked whether that would in practice be achieved. The Chief of the General Staff said that, with adequate back-up, the army expected and planned to achieve the 80 per cent target. The Prime Minister commented that it would be prudent to send a number of spare tanks in addition to the two regiments envisaged. It was very important that all necessary equipment should be provided, including helicopters if these were found necessary.

The Prime Minister concluded that she would like to receive the formal recommendations and advice of those attending the meeting in written form and signed, so that she could make it available to members of OD at their meeting the following day.

(CHARLES POWELL)

Simon Webb, Esq.,
Ministry of Defence.

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13 September 1990

ADDITIONAL BRITISH FORCES FOR THE GULF

I enclose a record of this afternoon's discussion which should be treated as a draft. I should be grateful if you would show it to those present at the meeting who are at liberty to suggest any amendments which they think would improve its accuracy so far as their individual contributions to the discussion are concerned. It would be helpful to have this tonight or first thing tomorrow morning.

C. D. POWELL

Simon Webb, Esq.,
Ministry of Defence

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