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Mr Rob Evans
 Reporter
 Newsroom
 The Guardian
 119 Farringdon Road
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Reference: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Date: 5 December 2003

Dear Mr Evans,

REQUEST FOR INFORMATION ON NUCLEAR WEAPON ACCIDENTS AND INCIDENTS

Thank you for your letter of 23 October pursuing your request for information about one of the incidents referred to in the Oxburgh report. This was included as Serial 13 of Section 2 of the revised table supplied with our letter to you of 3 October which the Ombudsman regarded as a satisfactory outcome to your complaint about the level of information we had previously been willing to provide on incidents referred to by Oxburgh. As explained in our response to the Ombudsman, we continue to operate a policy that we Neither Confirm Nor Deny the presence of nuclear weapons at any particular location or time. Within these limitations we can, however, provide some additional information, including explaining the broad context, which will, I hope, be helpful.

The Oxburgh report notes that seven nuclear weapons containers received some external damage in the course of ship to ship transfers during the Falklands campaign. The weapons transferred were nuclear depth charges (and inert training and surveillance variants). It was normal practice at the time for certain surface ships to carry such weapons, although it was made clear at the time that “there is no question at all of our using nuclear weapons in this dispute” (Official Report, House of Lords, 27

April 1982, Volume 429, Column 778). The transfers took place well away from other sea going traffic, and the weapons were held in ships with the best protected magazines before being returned to the UK. These activities were also consistent with our obligations under the Treaty of Tlatelolco (Latin American Nuclear Free Zone). Various transfers took place in April, May and June 1982 but available records do not show which of these gave rise to damage to the containers.

We know that no weapons were damaged but, with one exception, available records provide little additional information about the damage to containers (or whether they contained actual weapons or inert variants). In what was considered the worst case, a container sustained severe distortion to a door housing. Our records show that there was no damage to its contents (an inert surveillance variant). This suggests that the damage to other containers was slight. All were subsequently examined and found to be safe and serviceable.

You also sought additional information about the subsequent recommendations made by CINCFLEET. These were essentially modifications to detailed handling procedures. As you will be aware, the Royal Navy's surface ships ceased to carry nuclear weapons in the early 1990s and the records which are still available do not show how these recommendations were implemented.

Yours sincerely,

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