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PS/Minister(AF)

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MILITARY CONVOY ACCIDENT, 10 JANUARY - REPORT OF THE BOARD OF INQUIRY

1. We have now received the report of the Board of Inquiry established after the convoy accident near West Dean on 10 January. This minute summarises its findings; and suggests a means of presenting to public and Parliament its broad findings.

m/o 33/48

NARRATIVE OF EVENTS

2. An RAF road convoy carrying nuclear weapons from the Naval Base at Portsmouth on 10 January departed at 2-25 pm and was due to arrive at RNAD Dean Hill at 4-00 pm. The convoy travelled on the A36 to West Grimstead, and thence along an unclassified road to West Dean and RNAD Dean Hill.

3. Whilst on main roads, conditions were completely clear; but before the convoy reached the turn from the A36, the

reported slush on the unclassified road. The convoy subsequently encountered some intermittent thin slush on the unclassified road shortly after passing through West Grimstead, but vehicle handling was not affected.

4. Further down the unclassified road, the convoy was warned of an oncoming civilian car. 6 vehicles in the convoy (including 2 load carrying TCHDs) passed the car without difficulty; there is some evidence that the car may then have moved forward.

5. When the third load-carrying TCHD reached the car, it was stationary just over a foot from its nearside verge. The TCHD driver assessed that there was sufficient space to pass. He slowed to an estimated 5 mph but, when level with the front of the car slid toward the nearside. Both front and rear nearside wheels of the TCHD ran onto the verge, which gave way; the TCHD toppled to its left, coming to a halt on its side in a field 3 feet below the level of the road.

6. The fourth TCHD also slowed to about 5 mph to pass the car. When he saw the third TCHD topple, the driver braked. His vehicle slid to the left, coming to rest with its nearside front wheel embedded in the soft verge. The accident happened at 3-45 pm.

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THE BOARD OF INQUIRY

7. The Air Officer Commanding Maintenance Units, HQ RAF Support Command, convened a Board of Inquiry to investigate the full circumstances surrounding the accident. It took evidence from convoy personnel, including the drivers involved and the Convoy Commander; from the driver of the civilian car; from staff of RNAD Dean Hill; and from staff of HQ RAF Support Command and the convoy's Task Control at RAF Wittering. It investigated actual and forecast weather conditions; convoy Standing Operating Procedures; route authorisations; the serviceability of the vehicles; and the fitness of the drivers.

8. The Board found that the cause of the accident to the third TCHD was a combination of slow forward speed, the camber of the road, slippery conditions, the soft verge and the position of the stationary civilian car. The cause of the accident to the fourth TCHD was reported to be ice on the road, with the accident immediately in front of the vehicle being a contributory factor. The evidence regarding ice is not conclusive, for it was a clear, sunny but cold day and the weather forecast had predicted temperatures rising to +2 degrees Celsius. There was icing on the road by 4-15 pm; but the degree of ice formation at the time of the accident is open to question, particularly as the preceding vehicles had not reported icing.

9. All persons concerned in the movement were considered to have shown adequate care; no person was held to be blameworthy. Both drivers involved were fully fit; and their vehicles serviceable.

10. The Board did, however, consider that there were organisational matters which should be addressed to minimise the chances of repetition in future. In particular, it recommended that:

a. a mandatory requirement be introduced for Convoy Commanders to confirm with destinations, in a suitably secure manner, that there are no local factors affecting the proposed journey; and

b. all approved country roads be resurveyed bearing in mind that verges can collapse and cause a vehicle to topple; and that road camber can affect very heavy vehicles.

11. A suggestion that some routes should be authorised for certain seasons of the year was considered but rejected as operationally unacceptable, since some essential tasks would thus not be possible during the winter months. The Convoy Commander has, however, the authority not to travel if he considers road or weather conditions to be unsuitable.

12. The possibility of closing minor roads temporarily to civilian traffic to allow convoys to proceed unhindered was also considered but judged not to be merited. SOPs exist for the accompanying RAF Police motorcycle escorts which enable them, when the convoy is travelling on narrow, minor roads, to ask oncoming traffic to stop temporarily at suitable passing places to allow the convoy to pass safely. These SOPs have been given further emphasis and the option to consider stopping the convoy itself has been provided, although this is clearly a less secure option.

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13. The video recordings of the convoy's journey and of the accident itself showed convoy procedures and drills to have been well carried out. There was no damage to the weapons involved, which remained not only safe but completely serviceable.

PUBLIC HANDLING

14. Minister(AF) will wish to consider, in the light of the above, whether he might make a Parliamentary statement on the broad conclusions of the Board of Inquiry. This might be by means of an inspired written PQ from Mr [REDACTED]. A possible draft is attached.

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DRAFT INSPIRED WRITTEN PQ ON THE WEST DEAN ACCIDENT

Question: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, if he will make a statement on the findings of the Board of Inquiry established to investigate the circumstances of the accident to a military convoy near West Dean on 10 January.

Answer: A military convoy travelling to the Royal Naval Armaments Depot, Dean Hill was involved in a road traffic accident at about 3-45 pm on 10 January. Whilst attempting to pass an oncoming car, the nearside wheels of one of the cargo vehicles moved on to the soft verge of the road, which gave way. The cargo vehicle toppled to its left, coming to rest on its side in a field about three feet below the level of the road. The cargo vehicle immediately behind skidded on braking, and came to rest with its nearside front wheel embedded in the soft verge.

It should be emphasised that at no time was there any hazard to the public. Nonetheless, the usual Service practice was applied and a Board of Inquiry was established to investigate the full circumstances surrounding the accident, including road and weather conditions, the serviceability of the military vehicles involved, the fitness of the Service drivers and convoy operating procedures. After a full investigation, the Board concluded that all Service personnel involved were considered to have shown adequate care; no person was held to be blameworthy. Both Service drivers involved were fully fit and their vehicles serviceable. There is no conclusive evidence that the road or weather conditions were unsuitable for the journey on that day at the times proposed.

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We have considered and, where feasible, implemented a number of recommendations for minor organisational changes to minimise the chances of such an accident recurring in future. These include handling procedures for the wider vehicles when passing oncoming traffic on narrow roads.

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