

Malta PM asked Ark Royal captain to lie

The Prime Minister of Malta tried to persuade the captain of the HMS Ark Royal to lie to journalists during a port call last year, according to information *Sanity* is now able to disclose. The Prime Minister was also apparently willing to run risks that the carrier captain found unacceptable. And the British High Commission was privy to the Maltese PM's requests, according to documents in our possession.

According to a transcript of radio communications between the nuclear-capable carrier's Captain Michael Harris and the Valletta harbourmaster, Prime Minister Edward Fenech Adami was anxious to avoid humiliation by anti-nuclear protesters and dock workers who were blocking the ship's entry into Malta's Grand Harbour. The PM first insisted that the vessel enter the harbour, despite what Captain Harris described as the risk of accident. Then, when the carrier was forced to repair to alternative mooring in St Paul's Bay, he asked Captain Harris to state – untruthfully – that plans to use the second harbour had been agreed several days in advance. The British High Commission in Valletta was aware of this request, and agreed to it, according to a statement attributed to the PM in the transcript.

The Ark Royal's visit to Malta took place on June 25 of last year, and raised a political storm in the former British colony (pop. 350,000).

Under successive Labour governments, Malta had pursued a policy of neutrality and opposition to nuclear weapons. But the Nationalist administration elected in 1987 has attempted to give a pro-Western tilt to Maltese policy. It can only be presumed that Mr Fenech Adami's acceptance of a British request for four-day port call was intended to demonstrate the new warming to the West.

The Labour opposition, along with peace groups and the General Workers' Union (the Maltese TUC), demanded the cancellation of the visit. On June 24, a group of dockers commandeered an oil tanker, which they moored at the narrow mouth of the Grand Harbour. 10,000 port workers went out on strike, and demonstrations erupted around the island.

The following is a series of extracts from the Ark Royal/harbourmaster transcript, demonstrating the sequence of events. Emphases are our own. The time is 6 am Malta time, June 25, 1988. The 'tower' referred to is the harbourmaster's control tower.

Tower: Everything is ready for your entry into the Grand Harbour. The Government representative says that there is only a crowd of a few hundred people who could be slightly hostile on the Senglea side.

Captain: Is there a possibility that the crowd could be dispersed from there?

Tower: The rep. says that it would be better if the security forces didn't intervene as a confrontation in the port could develop. The government doesn't know what the opposition has prepared and it would be better if they weren't provoked. From helicopter surveillance

it simply looks like a hostile crowd.

Captain: It seems to me that this is the moment for the Government to consider the possibility that we enter another port, or at least that we postpone entry for a few hours so that the situation may clarify. I say again, as I have always insisted, it is no honour for Her Majesty's Navy to be insulted or ridiculed by a crowd.

Tower: The government rep. insists that you do your utmost to enter the Grand Harbour. As soon as the Government gives the signal a huge crowd of Maltese will go to the Valletta side to give you a tremendous welcome. With either your entry into another port or a postponement, both you and the Government will be humiliated.

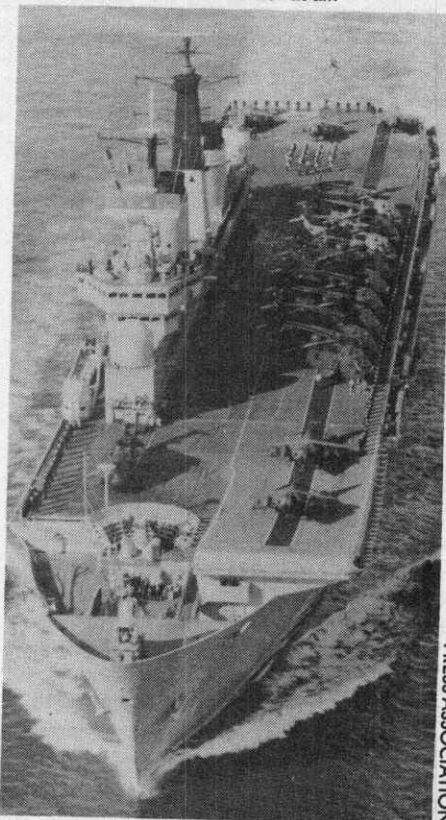
Captain: I must insist that the crowd at Senglea and Vittoriosa is dispersed as a dangerous situation could develop for Her Majesty's Navy since the Grand Harbour is so narrow.

Tower: The Govt rep remains averse to this course of action.

Captain: I insist that I require exact information on the situation. I maintain that Her Majesty's Navy cannot afford to enter into a confrontation. *We cannot run any risks, as this would cause untold danger . . .* I insist that an alternative port is indicated or we will not enter at all.

Tower: It is the P.M.'s wish that every attempt is made to enable your entry into the Grand Harbour.

Captain: If the decision for us to enter an alternative port is not forthcoming, I'll take it myself; or else I will not enter at all.



The Ark Royal: dockers blocked its entry into Grand Harbour

Tower: The gov't rep reports that . . . there is the possibility of a confrontation. The P.M. is therefore considering the withdrawal of the security forces and your entry into an alternative port.

Captain: I thank the Prime Minister, but it is necessary that we have a prompt decision as I have an appointment with journalists.

Captain (later): We are heading in the direction of St Paul's Bay.

Tower: I have a special message for you from the Honourable Prime Minister. *He insists that you tell the journalists that arrangements were made for your entry into St Paul's Bay many days ago. Already arrangements have been made with the BBC that they interview the P.M. and he will say the same. This is personal request from the P.M.*

Captain: It seems to me that it is not right to involve me in this way. These communications could have been intercepted and if this is the case I'll be in a lot of trouble.

Captain: I feel that I am not in a position to say things that are not true. It could greatly embarrass Her Majesty's Navy and Her Majesty's Government.

Tower: The gov't rep says that the P.M. insists that this line is taken. It seems that *on this he has the agreement of the British High Commissioner in Malta.*

Captain: I declare that I will try to avoid saying so but if I am questioned directly I will answer as you have requested. I maintain that this is also of great risk to me personally.

Tower: The gov't rep conveys the P.M.'s personal thanks for your co-operation and promises you that he will never forget what you are doing today.

Naval Captain Michael Harris is no longer in command of the HMS Ark Royal. He was relieved by Captain John Brigstock this spring.

● B.W.

◆ Rumours that Swansea was a possible Z-berth for nuclear subs were promptly denied by the local council in 1988. Then the local CND group got wind of a meeting held between local council officers and the Navy early this spring to discuss the very same plan. A resolution from West Glamorgan County Council's Public Protection Committee reminded Swansea that the county is a nuclear-free zone (as is the whole of Wales), and local MPs took up the protest. The Navy is still confident that 'normal procedures' will have the subs in by the autumn, while council officers have been saying in one breath they know nothing about it and with the next that there's nothing they can do to stop it. As local opposition grows, activists are wondering when West Glamorgan will move from passing resolutions to taking action. After all, the County Council has stumped up £75,000 to oppose the next reactor at Hinkley – which is a bit further away than Swansea docks.

PRESS ASSOCIATION