

MEMORANDUM FOR CABINET BY THE MINISTER OF
INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM

Visit of U.S. Sixth Fleet between
November 13 - 22, 1965

The Ambassador of the United States of America has informed the Government of Malta that arrangements were being made for the Sixth Fleet to visit Malta between the 13th and the 22nd of November, and asked whether permission could be given for two gasoline carrying vessels which will be accompanying the Sixth Fleet to berth in the Grand Harbour or Marsamxett Harbour. The Petroleum Ships Regulations as recently amended contain a clause (Article 18) stating "No ships carrying dangerous petroleum shall enter Grand Harbour or Marsamxett Harbour". Under this clause U.S. Naval vessels of the AOG (Auxiliary oilers, gasoline) type would not be permitted within the harbours.

2. During the visits of the units of the United States Sixth Fleet to Malta it is customary that AOG type vessels accompany the visiting units, since they must carry the aviation gasoline required for the operation of airplanes aboard aircraft carriers and of helicopters which are carried aboard various ships of the fleet. In the view of the U.S. Embassy to deny entrance to the two main harbours of Malta to the AOGs would cause serious operational difficulties to the units of the Sixth Fleet. These difficulties could at times be so grave as to preclude the particular Sixth Fleet units considering visits to Malta or to require cancellation of planned visits. The Embassy believes that this would be seriously detrimental, not only to the United States but to Malta as well. At best, a requirement that the AOGs be berthed outside the main harbours would cause major inconvenience since logistics and port facilities for these vessels (water, telephones, transportation and access to liberty ports) would not be available. Since Malta is favourably considered by the Sixth Fleet as a liberty port because of the conveniences available in the Grand Harbour, denial of these conveniences would probably require a reconsideration of the desirability of Fleet units stopping at Malta for shore leave purposes.

3. This difficulty arose as the new Petroleum Regulations do not incorporate the exception which was included in the old Regulations regarding Naval vessels carrying petroleum and aviation fuel. Considering that the Grand Harbour and Marsamxett Harbour are in thickly populated areas and their waters are narrow and considerably used by ships of all types, it was not considered appropriate to discriminate between naval and other ships carrying petroleum to avoid any major fire or explosion which would affect the populous towns and cities around the harbour and endanger general shipping.

4. In other countries, ships carrying inflammable or dangerous goods are normally berthed well away from port centre. This enables the Port Authority to make reasonable relaxations and still satisfy basic safety considerations. In Malta, this cannot be done for geographical reasons. A safe place approaching such condition is Marsaxlokk Bay.

5. As stated above, however, under the old Petroleum Ships Regulations an exception was made for vessels of the Royal Navy which carried petroleum and aviation fuel. This exception was based on the fact that naval vessels exercised extraordinary precautions and protective measures which are not within the capability of commercial vessels. In the case of the United States Navy, for example, only a small proportion of the total cargo normally carried by AOGs is aviation gasoline. The precautions taken aboard U.S. Navy vessels include all those listed in the Government of Malta petroleum ordinance. Over and above these additional extraordinary safety measures are employed aboard U.S. Navy vessels. Every modern safety measure is incorporated in the routine procedures in these ships to counteract any danger of this gasoline vaporizing and becoming hazardous. The aviation gasoline is isolated in special tanks with surrounding open spaces and a carbon dioxide smothering system is installed in each tank, possible of activation on a moment's notice and which would maintain a blanket of carbon dioxide in the tanks for extended periods, thus totally counteracting any vaporisation. Additionally, a full, specially trained fire-fighting crew is maintained on the alert on board ship on a 24-hour basis.

6. The presence of Naval Units in our harbour is of considerable benefit to our economy in this particular difficult period and visits by vessels of the U.K. and of other friendly nations should be encouraged as far as possible. It would be advisable, therefore, to remove current restrictions on the berthing of gasoline ships accompanying naval forces provided such ships satisfy certain conditions.

7. Considering that naval vessels of N.A.T.O. countries and vessels of the U.S.A. and of other friendly nations might call at Malta much more frequently now that Malta has joined N.A.T.O. and is an independent nation, Ministers might be prepared to consider the amendment of the current Petroleum Regulations to enable warships and ships under the control of the Services and ships of visiting forces to berth in the Grand Harbour or Marsamxett Harbour.

9. The drafting of the amending regulations might take some time as consultation with the British Authorities and with experts are advisable before the regulations are formulated. Ministers might wish to consider, under the circumstances, whether the gasoline ships accompanying the Sixth Fleet during their visit this month should not be allowed to berth in Marsamxett Harbour in anticipation of the amendment of the current regulations. It may not be out of place to mention that a U.S.S. gasoline ship berthed in the Grand Harbour between the 9th and the 17th of September last as the Port Division was not aware that she was a gasoline ship.

10th November, 1965.