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801 NAVAL AIR SQUADRON

Por Lieutenant Cdr A. R. W.

Relata las acciones del Escuadrón 801 de Sea Harrier durante el conflicto de Malvinas.

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THE NAVAL REVIEW

801 Naval Air Squadron

Preparations

THE SQUADRON, like so many other units, was roused from its peaceful existence of a major leave period overnight on the 1/2 April. In our case it was the Senior Pilot telling us those fateful words, 'Report to Yeovilton as quickly as possible.' At our parent station the whole organisation was busy that morning preparing aircraft, equipment, and personnel to embark in the various ships destined for the South Atlantic. We soon learned that the Squadron was to be enhanced by using pilots, maintainers, and aircraft from 899, the Headquarters Squadron. Preparations continued into the weekend and although the aircraft did not embark until Sunday morning in Portsmouth Harbour the main body of personnel travelled by bus on Saturday.

The ship sailed on Monday 5 April to an emotional send-off from what seemed like the whole population of Portsmouth and Gosport. Even as we cleared the harbour the first brief was in progress and aircraft were being armed with live 1000 lb bombs ready for a sortie in the exercise areas. This event caused the first complaint of the crisis when the inhabitants of Southsea spoke of 'excessively loud bangs' and windows that were rattled by the force of the blast. Perhaps the Argentines should have taken the hint at this early stage! This sortie marked the beginning of a busy programme of flying training for the next twenty days which consisted of AI/Air combat training, night flying, and weaponry practice for the aircrew. This period gave a good opportunity for the flight deck crew and maintainers to devise how best to operate from a small deck with eight Harriers and eleven Sea Kings embarked. Certain firsts were achieved during our trip south involving 2 inch rocket projectiles fired under *Lepus* flare illumination, and culminating in a night 2 inch RP attack by the CO on *Invincible's* splash target. It soon became a matter of routine to fly with

live Sidewinder missiles which, through necessity, sharpened everyone's concentration. At the same time a new programme became available for the aircrafts' weapon-aiming computer which allowed bombs to be lofted at a target from a range of approximately 3 miles. Finally, a large amount of intercept and air combat practice was carried out amongst ourselves and against the *Hermes* Squadrons in preparation for the coming air battle.

Hostilities begin

The Squadron's first operational achievement came on 22 April when an Argentine Boeing 707 was intercepted whilst attempting to shadow the Force. This became a regular feature of life although the 707s did decide that discretion was the better part of valour when the Total Exclusion Zone was announced. The TEZ became a reality on 1 May when hostilities commenced in earnest. Squadron Daily Orders for that day contrived as the last order 'Have a nice day' — a sense of humour prevailed even at Action Stations.

There were several encounters with enemy Mirages on 1 May although it was not until the end of the day that the first shots were fired by the Squadron when two of our aircraft engaged a pair of Mirages high over West Falkland; one of these Sea Harriers claimed the first kill of the war when he downed a Mirage with a Sidewinder stern shot. The second Mirage fared no better as it was also hit by a missile *en route* into the nearest friendly cloud. It was later heard that at about the same time one of *Hermes'* aircraft had also shot down a Mirage and that other enemy aircraft had been destroyed by ships AA fire. On a subsequent launch that evening Squadron aircraft were back in action when they were sent after some disappearing radar contacts by *Invincible*. The CAP found three Canberras at very low level and claimed one 'confirmed kill' and one 'possible'. At the end of the day it was a nice feeling to know

that we had bloodied their noses without loss to ourselves.

The Sidewinder Missile that was employed by the Squadron continued to prove a most formidable weapon and it retained its reliability throughout the war. After this hectic start life settled down into a regular pattern of Action Stations and CAP during daylight hours as we continued to patrol the TEZ, with long periods of deck alert at night. For the Squadron the most poignant event of that period was the tragic loss of Lieutenant Commander Eyton-Jones and Lieutenant Curtis in appalling weather conditions on 6 May 1982.

The 18/19 May saw reinforcements arrive in the form of 809 NAS who had recommissioned and worked up at Yeovilton during the weeks of our transit south.

Between the time of our arrival in the TEZ and the actual landings there was very little contact with the enemy, and it appeared that they were holding their Air Force back for attacks on the Landing Force. We attempted to provoke reaction by dropping 1000 lb bombs on Stanley Airfield whilst *en route* to the CAP Stations. This was done from high level, well outside AAA zones and above the maximum range of AA missiles, with the prime intention of damaging the runway, enemy positions, aircraft, and stores, as well as causing general havoc within the Argentinian garrison. By the time of the actual landings the replacement aircraft and pilots had been fully integrated into the Squadron and were as ready as the 'old hands' for the next round.

Troops land on the Falklands

A total of 28 sorties were flown on 'D' Day during which time the Squadron claimed 2 confirmed Mirages and 1 Pucara, plus 1 possible Mirage. During the forenoon the main opposition were Pucaracs and Aeromacchis although mid-afternoon saw the arrival of the large-scale air raids from the mainland — their targets were the ships lying in San Carlos water. The 801 aircraft

flew LOCAP over the Sound, patrolling the AOA working through the CAP Stations from north to south, before returning to *Invincible* 80–100 nautical miles to the east. Throughout the day and night, 3000 troops had been put ashore virtually unscathed. The raids continued although there was very little contact with the enemy fighters who seemed reluctant to fight the Sea Harrier, none of which were lost in air-to-air combat. During this phase the enemy were getting good GCI information and it was not until Stanley fell that this advantage was denied to them.

As the ground forces moved past Goose Green and on through the Island it became evident that enemy Hercules transports were supplying Stanley, and the Squadron began a major effort to intercept these aircraft and either destroy them or cause them to turn back. At the same time other aircraft were tasked as LOCAP against the Super Etenard and on one occasion chased a departing raider. However we had more luck against the Hercules and one was splashed to the north of the Sound. This was our final kill of the war although several more sightings of Mirages occurred, but they turned away well outside missile engagement range. We continued to mount day patrols and launch from alert at night to counter high-level bombing attempts against our land forces. Two aircraft were lost at this stage, the first when the ship rolled heavily in a rough sea causing an aircraft to slide uncontrollably across the deck. The pilot ejected safely and was only slightly hurt. The second loss was attributed to an enemy surface-to-air missile fired from the Stanley area which hit the aircraft whilst returning from a CAP sortie. Once again the pilot ejected safely although he was forced to spend nine hours in his dinghy before being rescued by a Sea King from our sister Squadron (820 NAS).

The offensive on Stanley

The first days of June were all similar — overcast, dank days with long spells of thick fog which considerably hampered flying although some sorties were still flown.

By 9 June the ground forces were well established and pushing towards Stanley leaving a Harrier Forward Operating Base at Port San Carlos capable of dealing with both Sea Harriers and GR 3s. This proved to be a useful bolt hole in an emergency, although it was not used overmuch by our aircraft. On 12 June the main offensive to take Stanley started and our task was to provide air cover to *Glamorgan* who had been hit by a surface-launched Exocet whilst engaged in NGS. By the surrender on the 14th the Squadron had flown 600 missions (having been tasked with 602), fired 12 missiles and 3000+ rounds of 30 mm canon, and dropped 56 1000 lb bombs. One of the reasons that we were able to be so effective in the air war was the availability of all aircraft. This was partly due to the basically high reliability of the Sea Harrier, but mainly to our maintainers and ship's personnel who support them. Their collective efforts ensured that we had as many aircraft ready to go as we had pilots to fly them and throughout the war their standards never dropped. It is a telling and lasting tribute to their dedication and skills that only 2 war missions out of 602 tasked did not launch.

Although the action was over *Invincible* remained in the area to provide air cover until 18 June when she detached for a Self Maintenance Period in a safe area 1500 nautical miles to the north-east of the Falklands.

Protective measures

This ten-day spell ended all too soon and by the beginning of July we were back on station in the TEZ, which then released

Hermes for the long trip home. Shortly after our return, the TEZ was replaced by a Falkland Islands Protection Zone of 150 nautical miles radius and it became our task to patrol this zone, intercepting and investigating air and surface intruders. Life became similar to a permanent 'work-up' at Portland with AI/ACM sorties, ADEXs, and CASEXs keeping the Squadrons and ship busy.

On the operational front we disembarked 3 aircraft to Stanley to act as a Quick Reaction Alert Force to counter any intelligence-gathering operations or probes from the mainland. The detachment consisted of 3 aircraft and 10 maintainers who rotated back to the ship on a 4-day cycle; these days ashore were a welcome break for all those involved and were naturally enjoyed. During this time there had been several launches to counter Neptune and Tracker aircraft seen by the Radar Picket ships operating to the west of the Islands but no contact was ever gained with them.

Homeward bound

By the end of August *Illustrious* had arrived to relieve us on station and on the 28 August we handed over the duties and detached at 20.00. The next most significant date was 31 August when we stood down the Alert aircraft for the first time since 23 April. From leaving Yeovilton in April to return in September the Squadron flew 1424 sorties and 1560 hours 30 minutes. On arrival back in UK HMS *Invincible* had been at sea continuously for 166 days.

A. R. W. OGILVY

Squadron Officers List

CO	Lieut. Cdr N. D. Ward, DSC, AFC	Relieved by Lieut. Cdr A. R. W. Ogilvy, AFC, 29 July 1982.
SP	Lieut. Cdr R. S. G. Kent	Relieved by Lieut. Cdr D. Hamilton
AWI	Lieut. Cdr Eyton-Jones	Killed in action, 6 May 1982
AWI	Flight Lieut. Mortimer, RAF	
	Lieut. Cdr B. D. Haigh	
QFI	Lieut. W. A. Curtis	Killed in action 6 May 1982
QFI	Lieut. Cdr M. Broadwater	
	Lieut. M. W. Watson	
	Lieut. C. H. Cantan	
	Flight Lieut. P. Barton, RAF	
	Lieut. S. Thomas	
	Lieut. A. McHarg	Joined from 800 NAS, July 1982
	Lieut. A. George	Joined from 800 NAS, July 1982
	Lieut. Cdr T. J. Gedge	Joined from 809 NAS, 19 May 1982
	Lieut. Cdr D. Braithwaite	Joined from 809 NAS, 19 May 1982
	Lieut. Cdr W. A. Craig	Joined from 809 NAS, 19 May 1982
	Lieut. D. Austin	Joined from 809 NAS, 19 May 1982
AEO	Lieut. Cdr R. Goodenough	Relieved by Lieut. Cdr S. H. Brooks, 19 July 1982
DAEO	Lieut. C. Thornhill	
Fighter Controller	Lieut. R. Holmes	

Squadron statistics

War missions tasked	602
War missions flown	600 (786 hrs)
Missiles fired	12
1000 lb bombs dropped	56
30 mm ammo fired	3061
Average NOS sorties/pilot	57
Total sorties during deployment	1424
Total hours during deployment	1560 hr 30 min

Kills

Date	Pilot	What	Gun/9L
1 May 82	Barton	Mirage	9L
1 May 82	Curtis	Canberra	9L
21 May 82	Ward	Pucara	Gun
21 May 82	Thomas	Mirage	9L
21 May 82	Ward	Mirage	9L
23 May 82	Braithwaite	Puma	Gun on ground
1 June 82	Ward	Hercules	9L/Gun

Possibles

1 May 82	Thomas	Mirage	9L
1 May 82	Broadwater	Canberra	9L
21 May 82	Thomas	Mirage	9L