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820 NAVAL AIR SQUADRON IN OPERATION CORPORATE

Por B. A. Jones

Es el relato de las acciones del Escuadrón de helicópteros del Invincible durante el conflicto de Malvinas.

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820 Naval Air Squadron in Operation Corporate

(Due to delays in the despatch of mail from an operational ship, this contribution arrived too late for inclusion with similar articles from HMS Invincible *published in the April 1983 issue—Editor.)*

OPERATION CORPORATE began for 820 Squadron on the morning of 2 April with the recall of all personnel from leave. HMS *Invincible* had returned only the week before from two major Nato exercises: JMC 821 in the North Sea and Alloy Express in Norway. Due to the short time the ship was planned to be alongside prior to a Mediterranean deployment the aircraft had, unusually, remained on board over leave. Consequently the squadron was at a high operational state, having recently experienced cold weather amphibious operations and also having all its equipment already onboard.

The recall proceeded without difficulty and all Squadron personnel were onboard by Sunday, 4 April. The Squadron also received extra personnel to take us from peacetime to wartime manning standards giving us 14 crews and 11 Sea King Mark 5s, rather than our usual 11 and 9 respectively.

Whilst primarily an ASW squadron, it was realised at an early stage that we could be called upon to perform many of the secondary roles such as SAR, loadlifting, etc. and, immediately *Invincible* was clear of Portsmouth, work began to build up proficiency at these, and to expand on experience recently gained in JMC 821 and Alloy Express. Many defects in equipment were highlighted at an early stage: a GPMG mounting for the Sea King Mark 5 was designed and manufactured by the Squadron in twenty-four hours, and these were later in great demand by other squadrons. The aircraft themselves were repainted in a new 'low visibility' finish.

The aircraft performed extremely well throughout the conflict in whatever role they were called upon to operate. Aircraft availability was in the high ninety per cents, a remarkable figure for any helicopter. From 1 April until 7 August the aircraft had flown over 4,100 hours, 2,200 of them in the active ASW role where most unserviceabilities occur. An examination of the various roles that the Squadron was tasked with demonstrates clearly the flexibility that any Naval Helicopter Squadron must possess and highlights the value of the helo at sea.

Active ASW

This was the Squadron's primary role. Over 2,200 hours active ASW were flown in under 3 months, the majority of it at night or IMC. An ASW screen was instigated on leaving Ascension Island on 18 April and was not withdrawn until 17 June, with 3 aircraft from 820 and 826 Squadron permanently on task. Aircraft were armed initially with 1 torpedo and 1 depth charge but this was increased to 2 depth charges as we moved southwards from hot conditions to colder weather. The depth charges proved very useful in classifying any contacts held and sorting out the initial confusion caused by the large amount of marine life.

The weather was generally far worse from a flying viewpoint than we had been led to expect. Thick fog was a familiar sight and the 'poor visibility approach' recovery, previously an emergency procedure only, became the standard method. It was very successful and aircraft were often recovered in visibility of 50 metres or so.

Initially there were many contacts called by both helos and ships, but after a 'settling in' period the number of contacts called decreased as 'Nonsubs' were classified as such at a much earlier stage. Both depth charges and torpedoes were dropped on contact but there was no evidence of damage to any submarines. Having worked with submarines of a similar type to the

Argentinian 209s in Alloy Express, everyone realised the difficulty of detection of such a small boat and any contacts gained were prosecuted fully.

The value of an ASW screen lies in its deterrent capability, and therefore the screen in the South Atlantic can be said to have been 100 per cent effective: no ships of the force suffered damage by submarines.

Surface search

Surface search is a role that is regularly practised by ASW squadrons and it came as no surprise to be tasked for such duties. The endurance of the Sea King allowed large areas of sea to be searched, problems only arising when 'mother' departed from the pre-briefed MLA and omitted, or was unable because of emcon policy to pass the new course and speed to the helo. There were several close shaves as aircraft returned to where the ship should have been and found only water and minimum land-on fuels were adjusted as a result. Another difficulty encountered was the need to positively identify any surface contacts gained. This could only be done visually and crews were obviously reluctant to approach close enough to visually identify small vessels, armed with only a GPMG.

Surface search sorties were conducted by both day and night in all weather conditions. It was an 820 Squadron aircraft on surface search that initially spotted the *Narwal*, which was engaged on surveillance of the task group. This vessel was later seized and sunk.

Search and rescue

All squadron aircraft were permanently SAR capable whatever their primary tasking and could be called upon at any time to carry out SAR ops. The Squadron was involved heavily in this field, picking up crews from two ditched Sea Kings, survivors from *Sheffield* and *Atlantic Conveyor* and picking up a Sea Harrier pilot 10 miles east of Port Stanley after 4 aircraft spent 8 hours searching up to 120 miles away from the ship. Most of these SAR ops were at night where the Sea King has unrivalled SAR capabilities.

Loadlifting/vertical replenishment

Due to the size and composition of the task force and the nature of operations the Sea King was in constant demand for vertrep and HDS. This demand was exaggerated by the large number of personnel having to be transferred between ships, and the high sea often preventing RFA flights from flying because of their decks being out of limits.

The transfer of stores and armament was a continuous process throughout the operation, and was responsible for a large number of flying hours and often strained both crews and aircraft availability. During the hostilities period of Operation Corporate roughly 28 per cent of flying hours were HDS/Vertrep sorties, and this increased markedly after the surrender when a daily HDS of several aircraft to Port Stanley with both stores and personnel was instituted.

Loads were transferred in high seas and at night with minimal lighting and only three loads were lost, a performance aided considerably by the work up in this role on the way down to Ascension Island.

Military support

The bulk of the military support operations were carried out by a two aircraft detachment based ashore at San Carlos settlement and initially tasked for night surface search of West Falkland to try to detect any resupply vessels approaching at night. Although these were flown in conditions where our own forces had tactical air superiority, precautions were taken against enemy air attack which included dedicated 'fighter evasion' sorties against Sea Harriers of 801 Squadron which had demonstrated that a helicopter is not an easy target for a 'fast jet' fighter to attack. Repainting the aircraft to war paint scheme had reduced the conspicuousness of the aircraft, although the rotor blades were still a problem. As described before, a 7.62 GPMG was also fitted in the cabin door.

The value of having a radar in the aircraft, even on military support operations, was emphasised when an 820 Sea King was able to fly the Commander Land Forces to Port Stanley to accept the surrender when darkness and driving snow precluded PNG operations. After the surrender the requirement for night surface search was cancelled, and the aircraft ashore were retasked for trooping and loadlifting, again demonstrating their versatility. A squadron aircraft was also provided to act as a gunship during the boarding and subsequent sinking of the *Narwal*.

Miscellaneous tasking

There were many 'one off' tasks which we were also called on to perform, including CASEVAC, dropping chaff to confuse enemy radar, acting as decoys, and calibrating radars. The basic rule on any sortie was to remain flexible and expect to be retasked for anything.

Engineering aspects

As a principle it was decided that wartime servicing would not be introduced unless it became absolutely necessary in order to provide the required number of aircraft, and in fact the need to use wartime servicing with its greater flexibility did not occur. During the period 24 engines, 34 main rotor blades, 14 tail rotor blades, 3 gearboxes, and 5 rotor heads were changed. The high standard of serviceability was a reflection on the great efforts of the maintenance team who worked long hours often only by torchlight to get the aircraft ready.

Summary

The helicopter in general, and the Sea King in particular, was indispensable to the success of Operation Corporate. Far from being a 'primary role only' vehicle, the Mark 5 Sea King proved itself a totally effective general purpose helicopter that has exceeded all expectations of reliability and adaptability, and aircraft serviceability was extremely high.

It is of significance too, that 70 per cent of the aircrew involved were in their first front line tour. It is a credit to their training that they were able to fly confidently and competently in conditions that even the highly experienced found demanding. There is little doubt that this training and the experience gained during two winter exercises considerably eased the transition to wartime flying and despite the heavy flying programme, with each crew averaging around 270 hours, no problems of fatigue were encountered during the longest period of continuous flying operations carried out by any air group in the Royal Navy, if not elsewhere.

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