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APRIL FOOL

Es el relato de las acciones del Stromness durante el conflicto de Malvinas.

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THE NAVAL REVIEW

April Fool

A sudden reprieve

RFA *Stromness* was empty. Issue stores gone, domestic stores run right down, military radio equipment gutted and stored, replenishment rigs stripped, and all the rest of the paraphernalia which makes an RFA into an operational ship landed ashore. She was an embarrassment to Portsmouth Dockyard, taking up valuable berths, serving no purpose, and getting in the way. Big, dumb, fat, and happy, she was finally moved into a drydock where, it was hoped, she would cause no more trouble and where she would merge into the background, forgotten until the time came to dispose of her.

I well remember going on the bridge that April Fool's Day 1982, counting the dockyard wires that held her snugly (there were about sixteen), and coming to the reluctant but inevitable conclusion that my beloved ship needed no Captain now. I went home for the weekend.

It was as well as I did, for we all remember what happened on 2 April. My little yellow car has never before nor since made such good time along the Dorset and Hampshire roads. Depression gone, full of purpose, I hastened to rejoin my ship, already a buzz of activity.

Preparations

The leisurely de-store process was reversed and became a frantic re-store programme. In most cases the domestic stores which had been landed could not be recovered without being redemanded. The writing of store demand notes started on Friday afternoon and went on throughout until Tuesday: by Wednesday afternoon virtually all demands had been met. Ship's provisions were topped up to the extent that for the first week we ate the food that fell out of the fridges first.

Rebuilding the radio room started on Friday 2 April and was completed in five days using a small team of ship's Radio Officers plus two seconded to the ship for the task.

The operational cargo was initially directed to be 7,500 man months of food only. However, this concept changed and the decision was made to sail with as much of the normal 15,000 man months of food as possible, plus an outfit of Naval Stores. We did not load the usual inflammables — the demand for paint would not be high this deployment. Ammunition was loaded in its place.

'Airport 82' — destined to become the San Carlos air strip — took up much of the upper deck, together with an assortment of chacons, minicons and military plethora. The convoys of lorries queued at the ship's side night and day. We could not charge the battery-driven pallet trucks fast enough and the clearway became littered with trucks under repair or awaiting new batteries. And it rained.

Meanwhile, preparations were going ahead to embark troops. No. 4 Hold upper-deck level (formerly the NAAFI store) was converted into a dormitory with 303 permanent bunks, shaving points and mirrors, heaters, and a central recreation space with dartboard and video. This project was started by Portsmouth Dockyard on Saturday and completed on Tuesday night. Plans were made 'on the backs of envelopes' — there was time for nothing else. The final result was a masterpiece of constructional ingenuity. Most of the men who built this facility had just been told they were to be made redundant and were working with their redundancy notices literally in their back pockets. This did not deter them for they worked twenty-four hours a day to get the job finished.

The ship's galley was prepared to enable upwards of 500 men to be fed daily — more than four times its design output. A large micro-wave oven was fitted, new work surfaces erected, and equipment overhauled and serviced. Two banks of electric tea urns (six each side) were erected at the after end of the clearway — an area soon to become

known as 'Tea Urn Square'. A bank of seven toasters was put up immediately outside the galley.

Lock-up spaces in the holds were allocated as armouries, the gyro room became the Imprest Office, the cadets' classroom the Ops Room, the Captain's Conference Room the Briefing Room, and the Command Shelter an Orders Office.

Finally came the men. On the morning of Wednesday 7 April 429 Royal Marines of 45 Commando boarded the ship. We sailed at 18.00 with the Embarked Force manning the sides, to a rousing and moving send off.

Organisation on the voyage

At last we were at sea and now the first priority became to establish an internal ship's organisation to enable this strange mix of people, Royal Marines, RFA Officers, Stores Officers, Chinese Crew, and Working Party to live and work together. For this was no ferry run: we would be grossly overcrowded for many weeks, perhaps months — a potential recipe for feud and friction.

As an army marches on its stomach, so a ship floats on its belly. Food and its preparation was going to be either the biggest bone of contention or the strongest factor in smoothing the voyage. 45 Commando brought most of their cooks with them. The galley was divided into two with the smaller area being used to prepare Chinese food plus food for the RM and ship's officers; the larger area was handed over to the RM cooks and catered for the senior and other ranks. All baking and sweet preparation was done overnight. The microwave became invaluable and every piece of galley equipment was put to full use. Delicate timing was required to enable the Chinese crew to eat separately from the Marines; the Senior Ranks used the officers' dining room with equally delicate timing.

Routines were established for laundry and linen changes, water rationing (one shower a day) was instituted and properly supervised. Designated ship areas — RAS pockets, clearway spaces, forecastle and

flight deck when available, were allocated for use by the Marines for lectures, PT drills, etc. Gradually, through attention to mundane detail, an orderly organisation developed which was to stand the test of time right through the operation.

And so the first leg of the voyage continued in fine, balmy weather. We crossed the equator with the usual hilarity. An unrelieved diet, for the troops, of films, videos, and training, training, training; for the ship, replenishment after replenishment. The Marines wore the decks smooth running and jumping in their boots. Every spare space in the ship was taken up with small groups weapon training, map reading, equipment checking, first aid lecturing. Never still, never idle.

A conflict of roles

We arrived at Ascension on 20 April and it was here the conflict between our amphibious and replenishment roles became most noticeable. Everyone wanted *Stromness* for everything — and all at the same time. There were ships to be issued with beer, food, and stores (in that order of priority), amphibiosity to be exercised, 415 loads to be collected from RFA *Regent* as she passed the island and finally the Fleet Target Group to embark and disembark (we were too committed to other things to fly them). This conflict was to continue and whilst, with good planning and considerable effort, it was possible to fulfill both roles, there is no doubt in my mind that each suffered at the expense of the other. Whilst I appreciate that in the circumstances there was no other option, for the future beware multi-role concepts.

Fresh water

Fresh water became a problem. No matter how hard we rationed, the evaporators just could not cope. How we longed for the water carrier *Fort Toronto* to appear, and when she did, how glad we were to see her. Our first meeting was on 5 May when we replenished all night and loaded 733 tons — we had been down to less than 20 per cent. As the water was being pumped across

everyone had a shower, the laundry worked full blast and dawn revealed the ship festooned with drying personals — opportunities had not been missed! This was the start of a long and happy relationship and before we left the Falklands we had taken 2,500 tons of fresh water from *Fort Toronto* — all of it at sea.

Defence preparations

On sailing from Ascension it became time to gird our loins in earnest. We had no armament other than the GPMGs of 45 Commando, and no training. Always in the past the aim had been the maintenance of the RFA civilian status and even defensive weaponry had been decreed to compromise that status. Little thought had been given to how we were to defend ourselves. I am pleased to say that things are different now. Our ships are being fitted with chaff and small-calibre rapid-firing weapons. They are being willingly and efficiently operated by our own men who care not for their status but do care deeply about their ability to defend themselves.

On this occasion no one doubted that we would become a target, and we were determined to fight back. The engine room became known as Krupps Factory for its ability to manufacture machine gun mounts and arc of fire stops — all *ad hoc* and made from scrap metal, but effective none the less. There were so many ships in close company that it was difficult to get clear arcs for live firing exercises, but we achieved a few and confidence grew. The GPMG remained our only weapon and, whilst perhaps not all that effective against aircraft, it was very reassuring. When 45 Commando disembarked we were down to only four guns — manned by the stay-behind party. The most we ever had mounted was eighteen at one time (using the troops from 5 Brigade). I was reliably informed this represented 21,600 rounds per minute into the air — a formidable barrage.

The voyage south continued. The Marines built up their exercise and training schedules until, to our inexperienced eyes,

the level of activity became frantic. There was calculated method in their apparent madness and events proved how, after over six weeks afloat and cooped up in the very limited confines of a ship, they achieved peak physical and psychological fitness by 'D' Day 21 May. A truly remarkable feat in itself.

Emergency stations

At 02.42 on 21 May the ship went quietly to emergency stations. Two navigational teams had been fully briefed on the entry and anchorage plan so that in the event of casualties on the bridge, the ship would still be able to make the anchorage. Each team had its own set of charts and instruments. All went well and we anchored in Falkland Sound. It was an eerie experience — a beautiful starlit early morning, the shore clearly visible. The tracer curved lazily over Fanning Head and the regular crack of the 4.5s echoed around the ships. The landing craft looked like radio-controlled models, circling and heading inshore. Finally, at 10.30, our Royal Marines gone, the ship quiet and unnaturally empty, we weighed and reanchored in San Carlos.

The story of San Carlos has been told many times, suffice it to say that *Stromness* escaped unscathed on 26 May, having discharged all the military cargo.

The next task took us to South Georgia, taking with us the poor, unfortunate *Coventry* survivors, to meet the *QE II* and collect more troops and more ammunition. Those of us fortunate enough to have seen that bleak island will never cease to wonder at its magnificence. The *QE II* looked drab and small against the mountains and glaciers. But we had little time to stand and stare. Four hundred and fifteen troops from 5 Brigade embarked and ammunition from *Lycan* filled the holds and overflowed into the clearway — pallets double banked almost its entire length. Back into San Carlos feeling very vulnerable and knowing now how the other ammunition ships felt, thinking that at least it would be quick and spectacular. But again we were lucky — the heavy overcast and menacing rapier

batteries deterred the low flyers. The troops and ammo were off-loaded in one day and it was back to South Georgia.

The 'floating grocer'

This time the emphasis was not on bullets but on bread. We were to revert to traditional role and again become the 'floating grocer'. The weather was unkind and twice we dragged across Cumberland Bay with MV *Saxonia* strapped alongside, Yokohama fenders squeezed to a mere eighteen inches. But each time we separated without too much damage. In four days we filled to capacity with fresh (albeit four weeks old), frozen, and dry provision. It was only when we examined the stocks that we discovered the 'great yeast famine' — tons and tons of breadmaking flour, but only enough yeast to bake off a very small proportion of it. Two tons of yeast was eventually airdropped by Hercules and brought into Stanley, where we collected and distributed it to the ships.

We spent the latter part of the campaign and the first two weeks of the peace delivering groceries. It was in this role that we desperately missed not having our own helicopter. Almost everything went by Vertrep — fine when the receiving ship had a helicopter, but sometimes very difficult when neither ship had one. Many a time did we achieve a few loads here and a few more there purely because of the persuasive powers of the Flight Deck Officer and the kindness of a passing pilot. We must not

build any more modern RFAs without organic Vertrep.

The fighting ends

Without doubt the greatest day for *Stromness* was 23 June when 45 Commando re-embarked. We had followed their battle closely. It was good to see them and the champagne we had been saving soon disappeared. It was an honour to take them on to Ascension, whence they flew home.

This was our final duty, for we too came north from Ascension to arrive in Portsmouth on 19 July. Never have the green fields of England looked quite so green as they did that day.

As a purely private record of those momentous days, my Navigator compiled a diary of events for us all to keep. I was asked to write the introduction:

This little diary tells the story of the most important one hundred and three days in the life of our ship.

She was built some sixteen years ago specifically to do what she has just done and it is fitting, in the twilight of her years, that she successfully achieved her most difficult task. There were moments of high drama but there were many more moments of light-hearted humour. We shall never forget how the Chief Officer adopted a great white tern, who fought the San Carlos battle with us and was affectionately called Mabel. Nor will we ever forget how pretty the Argentinian planes looked as they glinted in the sunshine.

Stromness has always been a lucky ship and was on this occasion. Others were not and we shall not forget them.

J.B.D.