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HERCULEAN SUPPORT

Es el relato del Flight Lieutenant T. F. Locke, Comandante de Hércules en la RAF durante el Conflicto de Malvinas

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THE NAVAL REVIEW

Herculean Support

(A personal account by Flight Lieutenant T. F. Locke, LXX Squadron—Editor.)

THIRTY-EIGHT Group Royal Air Force boasts a variety of aircraft types — VC10, Harrier, Wessex and Chinook helicopters, and the ubiquitous Hercules. RAF Lyneham in Wiltshire is the home of the Hercules where I am an aircraft captain with LXX Squadron operating a 'Fat Albert', as it is affectionately known, in the tactical support role. In the following paragraphs I have described the part that the Hercules played in Operation Corporate and some of the lighter moments that crews will talk about for a long time to come.

My flying hours for the first quarter of 1982 totalled only seventy-nine. The need for fuel economies made any improvement seem remote, then came the Falklands crisis. All the political implications and the threat of hostilities were relegated in my mind by sheer delight at the prospect of much more flying.

A Hercules and VC10 supply line was very quickly established to move stores and people to Ascension for transfer to the Task Force as it moved south. Heavier loads required a refuel stop at Gibraltar. We have since reflected on how fortunate we were that flying almost directly south we had no time zone changes. In spite of long hours there was no jet-lag. Every load seemed different; anything that had not been prepared in time for the departure of the Task Force was carried plus spares and mail.

Many of us had visited Wideawake Airfield at Ascension as part of our training to retain a world-wide capability. Named after the sea birds that had to be shifted to build the runway, the airfield was normally a sleepy hollow with only eight movements a month. This changed dramatically and as the Task Force sailed past movements peaked at 800 a day; a lot of these movements were helicopters — nevertheless, it was a very busy airfield.

The Ascension route became very familiar as the pace of the operation

developed and crew rest at Lyneham between flights was reduced to twenty-four hours. Nevertheless, we were aware that there were 'goings-on' behind the scenes at Lyneham and after an incredibly short period we had a new capability — air-to-air refuelling (dubbed later by one journalist as the in-flight entertainment). By this time we had aircraft and crews based at Ascension for long-range air-drop tasks to the Task Force. These aircraft were equipped with extra fuel tanks that increased our radius of action to 2,800 miles. As the aircraft with refuelling probes were available the supply line was extended into the TEZ, and ultimately to the Falklands.

There was much to learn in addition to the skills of air-to-air refuelling. We operate regularly with the Army, but very seldom with the Navy. The Hercules carries no signaller, and the co-pilots had to learn how to communicate with ships and prove our friendly intent before getting too close. The unofficial and irreverent Dolphin and Falcon codes were mastered with great amusement, but there were regular frustrations with real coding and decoding. When our fuel was running low during an air-drop sortie to a ship we were forced to break into plain language and ask did they really want the mail? The reply was swift and needed no decoding. On another occasion, this time with fuel to spare, a ship's captain asked if we might manage a surface sweep 100 miles ahead. We obliged supposing that we were seeking an RFA ship. Having drawn a blank we were then told it was an Argentinian ship that had been expected! We know that Sea Kings made good decoys, but please not the Hercules.

The relentless freight and passenger lift to Ascension continued. Fat Albert and her crew stayed remarkably serviceable and the engineers and air movements staff never flagged in their considerable efforts to keep both us and the freight moving. Statistics became almost as incomprehensible as the

Astronomers Year Book; 4,000 air transport sectors had been flown by 28 May, and 10,000 Hercules flying hours (3 million miles) by 3 June.

The learning curve remained steep. The sight of an armaments officer fleeing down the steps of a VC10 was later explained — the 'remove before flight' pins on the Sidewinder missiles that the VC10 was freighting had been removed! Innovations and improvisation became routine. We were required to air-drop torpedoes, not at the Navy, but to the Navy. Our teams from 47 Air Despatch Sqn RCT were confident that the parachutes would be adequate, but there was always the danger that the torpedo would sink. This was resolved by attaching six inflated passenger lifejackets — it worked!

Ships' crews will testify that a whole chapter could be written about the air-dropping of stores to ships at sea. Part of a load had to be brought back because it was too heavy for the ship's lifting gear. Recovery of the loads whether by ship's helicopter, boat, inflatable, or grappling hook invariably took a long time and ate into our fuel reserves. This was resolved later by using watertight containers fitted with beacons so that the ship could continue the retrieval process after the aircraft had left the scene. The accolade for the ship with the smartest recovery drill went to *MV Norland*. Her side-thrust propellers moved the ship towards the load whilst the Gemini inflatable carried the derrick hook to the load.

The aircrew showed concern and admiration for the ship's Gemini crews operating in heavy seas. One air-dropped load became the plaything for a large whale and might have been carried away if the Gemini had not taken off in pursuit. The whale was clearly not amused because it turned its attention on the Gemini and finally had to be driven off by the ship's helicopter.

The sight of a Lyneham Hercules over the Falklands may have been a good morale boost for our troops on the ground, but it was also very rewarding for our crews

knowing that the air-dropped supplies were being delivered only thirty hours after their loading time at Lyneham. The long flights from Ascension to the Falklands and back, a round trip of some 7,800 miles, broke new ground. The rules on crew duty time had to be rewritten and the graphs on crew fatigue drawn by the Institute of Aviation Medicine had to be extended. Just occasionally an aircraft was prevented from dropping by driving snow that reduced visibility to yards and brought the cloud base to the deck. It was a morale-sapping experience having to take a load all the way back to Ascension.

There were numerous 26-hour round trips. In spite of valiant efforts by the mobile met teams to provide accurate forecasts of wind in the South Atlantic it was not uncommon to encounter head winds out and head winds back. Fuel planning was critical and there was always the compromise between most economical height to fly and the extra time battling against a head wind. It was on one such occasion that my crew were fortunate enough to establish a new Hercules endurance record of 28 hours and 3 minutes. Our initial dismay at the receding ETA at Ascension turned to excitement when we realised that only a slow descent at the destination was required to put us into the record books. Our fatigue was much less apparent on this occasion and the beer with breakfast tasted better than ever before.

Our Herculean effort was very much a team task involving not only the whole of RAF Lyneham, but detachment staff co-opted from many units. The long-range flights would not have been possible without first of all the rapid design and engineering support from Marshall's of Cambridge in fitting the refuelling probe, and later the production of the Hercules tanker (another new innovation) which was undergoing trials when the cease-fire was signed.

The essential refuelling support for the long range flights came from the Victor tankers. It says much for their expertise and very high professional standards that we

accepted as routine their appearance in the South Atlantic at the right spot and the right time, and their record shows a 99.5 per cent success rate.

Whilst many units were involved I hope they will forgive me for taking a personal view to summarise the Operation Corporate events, because I think it appropriate only to look at the respective mottos of the units mentioned in my introduction, 38 Group,

RAF Lyneham, and LXX Squadron — 'Par Nobile Fratrum' (with noble brothers), 'Support, Save, Supply', and 'Usquam' (everywhere). Our Falklands supply line continues, but Operation Corporate brought new challenges that have undoubtedly enhanced the role of the Hercules and given us more flexibility to respond to future contingencies. It was a rewarding experience.

T. F. LOCKE