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THE RAF CONTRIBUTION TO THE FALKLANDS CONFLICT

Es el relato del Air Marshall Sir John Curtiss, Air Commander del Task Force Commander durante el conflicto de Malvinas.

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THE NAVAL REVIEW

The RAF contribution to the Falklands Campaign

(This article was collated from inputs from the units involved by Air Marshal Sir John Curtiss, KCB, KBE, CBIM, who was the Air Commander to the Task Force Commander for the Falklands Operation – Editor.)

Introduction

SINCE the end of the 1960s the Services have responded to the reshaping of the defence requirement to an almost totally NATO commitment by the gradual reduction in the capability for long-range intervention operations. Orientation towards a European war was reflected in the range of RAF front-line aircraft, and although a small force of tanker aircraft was available its main task was to prolong the endurance and range of air defence fighters, and there was no NATO requirement to refuel the large longer-range aircraft. The Vulcan bomber had an air-to-air refuelling (AAR) capability in the 1960s, but this was not maintained when the concept of operations was changed. The Argentinian invasion of the Falkland Islands on 2 April 1982 thus presented a unique challenge to the Royal Air Force. The nearest available airfield to the islands was Wideawake on Ascension Island some 3,300 nautical miles away.

Despite the obvious difficulties, it quickly became clear that the RAF could assist the Task Force in the recovery of the Falklands in three main ways:

- (1) Fly men and equipment on an air transport airbridge to Ascension for transfer to Task Force ships, thus, enabling the Force which was required to leave UK ports quickly to embark the stores and men at Ascension that could not be assembled in the UK in time.
- (2) Provide RAF Harriers and helicopters to supplement the Fleet Air Arm Sea Harriers and helicopters in the carriers.

- (3) Deploy our long range aircraft, Victors, Vulcans, Nimrods and Hercules to Ascension Island to bring air power to bear deep into the South Atlantic, but to enable us to do this we had to extend their radius of action by the rapid addition of an AAR capability.

Ascension Island

Ascension was clearly the key forward base for the whole operation. Task Force units stopped there to reallocate resources between ships which had been hurriedly loaded in the UK, and therefore did not have the optimum distribution of stores and equipment for the anticipated battle. Extra men and supplies were also flown in and Wideawake was the airhead for the air transport force. Once the bulk of the ships had moved on south, the emphasis changed and the main role of the island was to provide the mounting base for all land-based aircraft operating in support of the Task Force.

Wideawake airfield was leased to the US Government and its facilities were run by Pan American Airways under contract. The base had a 10,000-foot runway but the normal number of aircraft movements per week was three or four, and this level of activity had never stretched the island's supply of aviation fuel, accommodation, or aircraft parking space. All of these were to present problems after the first RAF aircraft in Operation Corporate landed on Ascension. The demand for aviation fuel rose dramatically and a tanker had to be positioned off Georgetown almost continuously to pump fuel ashore. Bowsers were used to carry the fuel from the bulk fuel installation at Georgetown to the airfield but they could not meet the demand and the Royal Engineers laid a fuel pipeline from Georgetown to the airfield. The number of British servicemen on the

island built up rapidly to about 1,000. Permanent accommodation was available for only a few, and tents and later portacabins were flown in. Fortunately the climate made camping quite acceptable. Other problems were solved but the shortage of aircraft parking space could not be remedied in the time available. The single parking apron could take a limited number of jet aircraft and there was a continual problem deciding which type of aircraft were needed and when. Priorities were assessed and those not immediately required for operations had to fly back to the UK, or to a staging post en route, to make way for aircraft for which there was a greater need.

Air transport operations

The airbridge between UK and Ascension started on 2 April and was flown by Hercules and VC10 transport aircraft. Up to fourteen sorties a day were flown. The numbers of crews required for the operation resulted in all training being stopped and the Hercules force being reinforced with ex-Hercules aircrew from other units and commands. The flying rate on the aircraft was more than doubled from the peacetime routine.

The VC10s carried out some flights to Montevideo in Uruguay, the first on 3 April to pick up the Falkland Islands Governor and the Royal Marine garrison. Later at the beginning of June these flights collected casualties landed in Uruguay from the hospital ships. However, the main effort was on the UK - Ascension route and the VC10s were employed moving heavy and varied payloads over the long distances involved at speed. The aircraft were regularly flying with 20 tons of payload, completing the round trip to Ascension and back in less than twenty-four hours. With this speed of recovery it was possible to maintain a high sortie rate out of UK, in roles ranging from full trooping or full cargo to aeromedical.

The Hercules, the ubiquitous workhorse, shared the airbridge with the VC10 and the airfield at Ascension became a familiar sight to all the crews as the pace of the operation

built up. Every load seemed different; anything that had not been prepared on time for the departure of the Task Force was carried plus spares and mail.

As well as sharing the UK - Ascension air-bridge task with the VC10, Hercules aircraft were based in Ascension for airdrop operations to the fleet in the South Atlantic. Rapid modifications to these aircraft had been made to increase their radius of action. AAR probes and extra fuel tanks in the fuselage were fitted. These measures enabled the vital supply line to be extended into the Total Exclusion Zone (TEZ) and, ultimately, after the cease-fire to the Falklands.

Harriers

An early concern in the planning for the operation was the vulnerability of our ships and troops to air attack by Argentine land-based aircraft. The only air defence was the comparatively few Sea Harriers embarked in *Hermes* and *Invincible* and the ships' gun and missile systems. Clearly the Sea Harrier was a critical resource and all available aircraft were prepared for the Task Force.

RAF Harriers, the GR3 version normally employed in land-based close air support for the Army, were tasked with supplementing the Sea Harriers and providing battle replacements. These aircraft previously had no air defence role and thus work was rapidly put in hand to arm them with Sidewinder missiles and to 'navalise' the aircraft. Thanks to the response from Industry and the Service Maintenance Units, together with long hours by squadron personnel, the first ten aircraft were ready to deploy by 2 May. Whilst the aircraft were being modified, pilots were hurriedly going through an operational work-up period. This included air combat training, live missile firing, ski-jump experience, and a variety of live air-to-ground weapon shoots.

Using air-to-air refuelling, nine Harrier GR3s were deployed direct from the UK to Ascension. The transits took 9 hours 15 minutes and are the longest Harrier sorties flown to date. After arrival at Ascension, six of the Harrier GR3s and eight Sea Harriers, which had earlier transited from

the UK using AAR and the staging facilities en route were flown onto MV *Atlantic Conveyor* on the morning of 6 May. For the No. 1(F) Squadron pilots, this was their first deck landing experience.

The Amphibious Group, which included *Fearless*, *Intrepid*, *Canberra*, *Norland*, and *Atlantic Conveyor* left Ascension on the evening of 7 May and, having joined the LSL Group en route, entered the TEZ on 18 May; the cross-decking of aircraft to the carriers started the same day. The transfer was assisted by near perfect weather but, regrettably, considerable quantities of spares and ground equipment were not transferred in time and were later lost when *Atlantic Conveyor* sank.

The arrival of the GR3 in theatre allowed the release of Sea Harriers from the low-level attack role and, the Squadron flew its first mission on 20 May, attacking a fuel storage area at Fox Bay on West Falkland. Altogether, between 20 May and 14 June, the Squadron flew about 150 operational sorties. Tasking covered the full range of offensive air support missions.

Initially, the Squadron mounted airborne alert sorties for close air support of the landings at San Carlos, but as the landings were largely unopposed, most aircraft were diverted to armed reconnaissance tasks. On one such task, four Argentinian helicopters were found harbouring-up on the slopes of Mount Kent and three were destroyed. The Squadron carried out a number of sorties prior to and during the attack on Darwin and Goose Green, and close air support had a significant influence on the outcome of that particular battle. These early operations were not without cost; one aircraft was shot down during a re-attack at Goose Green, and another at Port Howard.

After the fall of Goose Green, the Squadron was tasked mainly on battlefield air interdiction sorties in the hills to the west of Stanley, but was also tasked against the airfield. The latter were very well defended, and further attacks were carried out by both Sea Harriers and GR3s using various profiles in order to optimise

weapons effects while minimising vulnerability to point defences; the attacks were successful harassing operations. By the end of the campaign, the admiral of the Laser Guided Bomb (LGB) in the theatre offered greater precision in weapon aiming, and when used in combination with Laser Target Markers enabled direct hits to be made against pinpoint targets.

As the defensive perimeter closed around Stanley, more and more aircraft were hit by ground fire. Although only one more aircraft was shot down, others frequently returned to *Hermes* with battle damage. Battle damage repair (BDR) was required for numerous superficial holes as well as major electrical and canopy repairs. As a result of the aircraft losses, which included a fourth aircraft following a crash landing at San Carlos, four more GR3s were flown direct from Ascension to *Hermes* using in-flight refuelling. Four tankers were required for each Harrier and much of the nine-hour transit was flown without any diversions. For the four pilots these sorties culminated in their first deck landing! This was a highly satisfactory display of airmanship and a demonstration of capability, particularly for those who had been thought outlandish for suggesting it.

Chinooks

It was inevitable that the unique capabilities of the Chinook would be needed at some stage of the Falklands crisis. In the event, their involvement began on 6 April when three Chinooks deployed to RNAS Culdrose to assist in the loading of the Task Force. A wide variety of stores were carried during this early period including a 5 ton propeller bearing for HMS *Invincible*, thereby avoiding her return to port and subsequent delay. The Chinook lift capability was quickly recognized; the equivalent of four Sea King loads were flown on most sorties over distances of up to 100 miles off-shore.

Simultaneously, a requirement for Chinook as an integral part of the Task Force had been identified. Despite the uncertainty of the final disposition of

support helicopters, work went ahead during this period to prepare aircraft and personnel for war. On 25 April No 18 Squadron embarked five Chinooks, an advance party of twenty men, and all support equipment, MT, and spares aboard the MV *Atlantic Conveyor*. The main party were to join the Task Force via Ascension Island at a later date.

The arrival of *Atlantic Conveyor* at Ascension, allowed the Chinook to support the unparalleled logistic operation needed to redistribute men and equipment amongst the fleet. The regular arrival by air of further stores and personnel at Ascension was supported by disembarking one Chinook to assist in the transloading. This aircraft was on task only ninety minutes after leaving the ship and flew 100 hours in the first three weeks without significant unserviceability. In just one day, 350 tons were airlifted to the fleet; the only limitation to Chinook operations during this phase was the ability of the receiving vessels to clear the flight deck of such enormous loads before the next was delivered.

The majority of No. 18 Squadron personnel embarked aboard the MV *Norland* which left Ascension Island on 7 May in company with *Atlantic Conveyor*, which was struck by an enemy Exocet missile on 25 May causing an uncontrollable fire. The order to abandon ship was given, and the Squadron lost its entire domestic and engineering support plus three Chinooks. The fourth Chinook whose hull letters were BN (Bravo November) was already airborne on task when the missile struck. BN spent that night on the flight-deck of HMS *Hermes* and the following morning flew ashore to support the assault.

During the ensuing weeks BN earned the nick-name 'Flying Angel' from the soldiers she supported. To achieve the task, a detachment of twenty-seven men with minimal personal equipment and no engineering documentation, tools, or spares were put ashore with BN. Amongst these men were two specialist night crews. During hostilities, the aircraft flew 109 hours

without servicing and carried 2,150 troops of whom 95 were wounded, as well as 550 prisoners and 550 tonnes of freight. By comparison these figures exceed by 50 tons most figures quoted for a squadron of 14 Sea Kings over the same period. Typical loads for a sortie during this period include 22 troops and 3 105mm guns, 81 paratroops in fighting order, and 64 medical evacuees from Bluff Cove.

There is no doubt that the unique capabilities of BN during the period of hostilities became an important asset in the offensive. The contribution of all four aircraft would have been of great significance to the logistic support of the units ashore and might well have reduced the time taken to regain Port Stanley.

The Victor tanker force

The Victor tanker force very quickly found itself almost totally committed to a series of complex operations spanning vast areas of the South Atlantic. Immediate preparations to deploy the Victor aircraft to Ascension Island demanded round-the-clock and very intensive work at Marham to upgrade force capability. In the first place, although the Victor itself is capable of both giving and receiving fuel, normal peacetime tasking from the UK had required only a limited number of the aircrews to be 'receiver trained'. In the short space of two weeks, sixteen tanker crews were trained to receive fuel in flight both by day and night. Secondly, the Victor was, in the early stages of operations in the South Atlantic, the only aircraft immediately available and suitable for maritime reconnaissance operations over the vast distances involved between Ascension Island and the Falklands/South Georgia area. So the aircraft were modified for the reconnaissance role, and fitted with cameras and a long-range navigation equipment. By mid-April, all aircrew training and aircraft modifications had been completed. On 18 April, five Victor tankers deployed to Wideawake airfield. Twenty-four hours later another four Victors followed and the tanker aircraft strength was increased to sixteen later that week.

Less than two days after the first Victor arrived at Ascension, a maritime reconnaissance mission was launched to South Georgia and its surrounding area seeking enemy shipping which might pose an immediate threat to the Task Force units positioning to recapture the Dependency. Two further air-refuelled maritime reconnaissance missions were mounted on succeeding nights before this surveillance task — a specialist role outside the normal training of the Victor crews — was handed over to the Nimrods with their more advanced sensors, once Nimrods capable of in-flight refuelling were deployed to Ascension. Of course, the use of Nimrods for this task necessitated the continued and heavy use of the Victors, now acting in their normal role as airborne 'gas stations'.

In order that both the Victor and, subsequently, Nimrod reconnaissance aircraft could fly surveillance tasks covering those areas of special interest to the Task Force, considerable tanker support was required. It was necessary, over such great distances, to refuel the refuellers to ensure that tanker support was in the right place at the right time, with the right amount of fuel to supply the aircraft carrying out the mission.

Meanwhile, like the Nimrods before them, Hercules aircraft were being modified, in a remarkably short timescale, to receive fuel in the air. At the Victor's home base at Marham in Norfolk, the remaining Victor aircrews, groundcrew, and instructors worked continuously on the task of training additional Vulcan, Nimrod, and Hercules pilots in the techniques of day and night in-flight refuelling.

The scale of air-refuelling operations from Ascension Island during the South Atlantic hostilities was such that the tanker aircrews were regularly flying up to 120 hours a month, much of the time at night and in unpredictable weather conditions. Peacetime flying rates were trebled and, frequently, all but one of the Victors at Ascension were needed to meet the daily tasking. Over a 2 month period the tanker aircraft flew some 3,000 hours on nearly

600 sorties but during the whole campaign, only 3 sorties failed through a malfunction of the Victor's refuelling equipment and none was lost through tanker aircraft unserviceability — a truly remarkable record.

The campaign demonstrated conclusively the value of air-to-air refuelling as an adjunct to successful long-range air operations. Although distances were greater than could reasonably have been planned for out-of-area operations, this factor merely served to emphasise the value of air-refuelling as a very flexible force-extender and force multiplier. The speed with which aircraft were modified and crews trained was remarkable — months and even years of work being compressed into days. With air refuelling, the Royal Air Force was able to mount long-endurance sorties over thousands of miles of the hostile South Atlantic, almost as a matter of routine. Indeed, the outstanding performance of the Victor and its crews was the very cornerstone of air operations from Ascension in support of the Falklands Task Force.

Vulcans

The advent of the Falklands Campaign saw the Vulcan, the RAF's only remaining long-range bomber, within three months of retirement after twenty-six years of front-line service without being used in anger. However, even at this late stage in its career it had an important role to play.

The Task Force, particularly the carriers, were deployed predominantly to the east of the Falkland Islands outside the unrefueled radius of action of Argentine mainland-based air power, but close enough to operate Sea Harriers and Harriers over the islands. This ability to operate outside the range of air attack was crucial to the survival of the Task Force. However, if the Argentines had been able to operate Skyhawks and Mirages from Port Stanley airfield the threat to the Task Force would have been immeasurably increased, and a modest improvement in the airfield facilities would have permitted this. It was

thus essential to prevent any improvement to the airfield and if possible cut the runway. Sea Harriers could only undertake this task if they were diverted from the air defence role and at the risk of attrition by the formidable gun and missile defences surrounding the airfield. On the other hand the Vulcan could carry 21 x 1,000lb bombs which could be delivered from above the maximum effective height of most of the defences, and which would also result in high impact velocity and angle to give much larger and deeper craters than could be achieved from low level. A great deal of preparatory work was necessary to convert both the Vulcans and their selected crews from the overland nuclear strike role in which they had played their part as a key element of the NATO deterrent for so many years. For operations in the South Atlantic, the requirement was for very long over-sea sorties, with few navigational aids, to deliver loads of conventional bombs by night on a small unit — but well-defended — airstrip.

The Vulcan had always had the capability of delivering conventional weapons; but the increasing sophistication of Warsaw Pact defences had long precluded these large and relatively slow aircraft from being used in the conventional role. Consequently, no training for 1,000lb bombing had been carried out for over seven years and the conventional bombing equipment had to be thoroughly overhauled and the crews, none of whom had ever dropped such weapons, had to be quickly trained. Crews and equipment also had to be made operational for the in-flight refuelling which was to be a vital part of each operational mission.

The overriding factor in determining the size of each raid was the essential requirement for air-to-air refuelling. A Vulcan launched from Ascension Island and carrying 21,000lbs of bombs, would require the support of ten or eleven Victor tankers to enable it to complete its bombing mission and return safely to Ascension.

On 29 April with all planning and training complete, two Vulcans flew from RAF Waddington to Ascension Island.

Twenty-four hours later both aircraft, with their entourage of supporting Victors, took off for the first bombing sortie against Port Stanley airfield. The second Vulcan was acting as airborne reserve, and planned only to fly as far as the first refuelling bracket; in the event, this was a wise precaution since the lead Vulcan developed technical problems and the reserve had to take on the task.

As the attacking Vulcan and the escorting Victors flew south they met severe turbulence and large electrical storms which made refuelling operations very difficult and led to a marked increase in fuel consumption over the planned figure. At the final AAR position, the last Victor transferred enough fuel for the Vulcan to complete the attack phase, although the captain was conscious that in so doing he would be unable to make the planned recovery to Ascension. However, the urgent actions of the operations staff in replanning the recovery phase ensured that both Vulcan and Victor returned safely to Wideawake.

Well outside Argentinian early-warning radar cover, the Vulcan, now on its own, descended and flew at low level to a point some thirty miles from the target; it then climbed quickly to 8,000 feet, switched on its radar and began the attack run. The Air Electronics Officer identified an early warning radar and jammed a threatening gun-control radar, whilst the radar navigator aimed and directed the aircraft to release the bombs at 0724Z on 1 May. The result was a large crater in the middle of the Port Stanley runway and a severe dent in the morale of the Argentinians.

After escaping from the threat of Argentine missiles and fighters, the Vulcan successfully met up with a Victor tanker at the planned rendezvous and landed 15 hours 45 minutes after taking off and having completed the longest-range bombing mission in the history of war in the air. A further four Vulcan missions were flown against targets on and around Port Stanley and its airfield using bombs and anti-radar missiles.

The results of the first Vulcan attack were particularly significant. It was the first offensive military action against the Argentine forces in the Falklands and as such was a clear indication of our resolve. More importantly perhaps from the military point of view it clearly demonstrated to the Argentinians that we had the means of attacking mainland Argentina. It is my belief that some of their air defence aircraft which were deployed south to take part in attacks on the Task Force were hurriedly redeployed north to cover the defence of Buenos Aires and other important targets. This would explain why there were no fighters to escort their fighter bombers in their attacks on our ships to protect them from the Sea Harriers. Furthermore, the primary military aim was achieved in that the Argentinians were unable to develop Port Stanley airfield or use it for refuelling or operating their fighter-bombers. Although the airfield was used intermittently by transport aircraft from the mainland these had no significant impact on the campaign.

Nimrods

Ascension Island became a second home for much of the Nimrod force during the Falklands dispute. Indeed, when two Mk 1 Nimrod aircraft of No. 42 Squadron landed at Wideawake airfield on 5 April 1982 — just as the Task Force was sailing from the UK — they proved to be the advance party of a military presence which would nearly match the normal expatriate civilian population of some 1,200 people. The Nimrod presence itself was to grow at the height of hostilities to number five Mk 2 aircraft flying a variety of missions in support of the overall operation.

Although the submarine threat was significant, ships transiting in the South Atlantic were assessed to be more vulnerable to attack by Argentine surface units. The Nimrod is first and foremost an anti-submarine and surface surveillance aircraft but a number of modifications were carried out to enable it to attack surface vessels. The aircraft were equipped with

1,000lb bombs, modified in-service torpedoes with an anti-surface capability, and Stingray. The search for an effective ASW weapon culminated in the procurement of Harpoon. Although Harpoon was not deployed before the ceasefire, it is now an important addition to the Nimrod weapons inventory which, combined with the Searchwater radar, gives a highly mobile ASW capability.

Sidewinders were also fitted after the first sighting of the Argentine Boeing 707 Shadower by a Nimrod crew. These missiles provided a limited self-defence capability as well as an offensive option against enemy transport, surveillance and maritime patrol aircraft. Throughout the Falklands conflict Nimrod aircraft conducted surface surveillance, a number of ASW sorties in support of the deploying Task Force, mail and spares drops, SAR, and rendezvous assistance at critical Victor/Vulcan refuelling points during the various operational Vulcan missions.

Mk 1 Nimrod aircraft of No. 42 Squadron flew the early operational sorties from Ascension but by mid April had been replaced by Mk 2 aircraft from Nos 120, 201, and 206 Squadrons with their greater capability. However, at this stage the radius of action limited surveillance and support to a point about half-way to the Falklands, but the arrival of the Mk 2P capable of air-to-air refuelling (AAR) on 7 May enabled us to extend support of the Task Force right down to the area of conflict.

By early May, Mk 2P aircraft were conducting surveillance off the Argentine coast to give the earliest possible warning of any attempt by the Argentine Navy to attack the Task Force. These sorties were of between seventeen and nineteen hours duration and required the support of up to twelve Victor K2 tanker aircraft to provide two fuel uplifts outbound and a single top-up during the return transit. This allowed about four hours of productive surveillance in Argentine waters at medium and low level with enough fuel in reserve for evasive manoeuvres if necessary. Remarkably, despite the hurried conversion of the

aircraft and crews, only one sortie was lost due to a refuelling problem.

By the end of May, Nimrod long-range sorties were terminated due to the refusal of the Argentine Navy to venture out of port. In consequence there were higher priority tasks for the Victor tanker fleet. However, Nimrods continued to provide SAR cover and fly surveillance missions around Ascension. These sorties were one of a series of measures taken to counter the possibility of an Argentine special forces operation against Wideawake.

Post-war air operations

After the cease-fire, resupply of our troops in the Falklands was a priority task and these were initially paradrop sorties. The sight of a Lyneham Hercules over the Falklands the day after the surrender was a good morale boost for our troops on the ground, and very rewarding for the 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.

Following the cease-fire, the Harrier GR3s were reoled for air defence duties. Flying continued from *Hermes* until a Harrier site had been established on the airfield at Stanley and was ready to receive aircraft. Thus on 4 July, the six GR3s of No. 1F Squadron disembarked after a seven-week tour of duty unique in the squadron's seventy-year history. Conditions ashore were primitive in the extreme with all technical and administrative accommodation in tents at the side of the runway. With temperatures in July and August seldom rising above freezing and blizzard conditions frequent, survival was sometimes the main aim.

On 14 June, replacement Chinooks arrived in the TEZ aboard MV *Contender Bezant*. At once these aircraft were utilised to ferry aviation fuel forward to support RN operations at Port Stanley. Up to 10,000 gallons were carried underslung in up to 6 fuel containers at a time. Other

tasks during the immediate post-hostility phase included regrouping of units, recovery of prisoners, and embarkation of Argentinian aircraft and helicopters for return to the UK. Chinooks were used extensively to off-load ships, carrying up to 10 tonnes directly from vehicle loading ramp or flight deck to the user-unit. By the end of August, Chinook had carried over 15,000 troops and 14,000 tonnes of freight. Serviced in the open, often with minimal support facilities, the Chinook has proven itself at an early stage of its service with the RAF as an indispensable asset to support the RN and Army.

A priority task was to repair and clear the runway at Port Stanley airfield so that the Hercules could operate a regular passenger and freight service between Ascension and the Falklands. Airlanding operations at Port Stanley started on 24 June, just nine days after the surrender and the former Governor, Sir Rex Hunt, was one of the first passengers, returning in his new role as Civil Commissioner.

In the six months since the cease-fire the airbridge has been continuously maintained with only a short break of two weeks whilst essential repair work was done to the runway. Even then the Hercules dropped mail and essential stores to the islands and even managed to 'snatch' return mail from the ground flying as low as twenty-five feet whilst doing so.

Bad weather and unserviceabilities have resulted in very few days when one or two aircraft have not completed the long trip to RAF Stanley sometimes replacing whole units, carrying vital spare parts, bringing our important visitors, and returning men to the UK after completing their tours on the islands.

Hercules are now based on the islands primarily for refuelling the Phantom air defence aircraft but also for surface surveillance and the dropping of essential supplies to units in the Falklands and South Georgia.

Improvements to the airfield at Stanley were an urgent requirement; we now needed to achieve what we had denied to the

Argentines. In August the runway was closed for two weeks while alloy matting was overlaid, and airdrop Hercules sorties were again necessary in this period. Subsequently, the Royal Engineers have extended the runway and fitted arrester cables, and numerous other improvements and facilities have been added. The airfield now supports Phantom air defence fighters and Hercules tankers as well as the Harriers that went ashore from the Task Force. Frequent visitors are the Chinooks and RAF Sea Kings based elsewhere in the islands which provide the majority of the support helicopter and search and rescue assets available to the garrison.

Conclusion

Like their counterparts in the other Services, the RAF had a number of problems to overcome, especially when account is taken of the almost unique difficulties of mounting land based air operations from an airfield almost 4,000 miles from the scene of battle. The ability

of the RAF to adapt rapidly and successfully to the many demanding requirements of the unforeseen and untypical scenario underlined once more the inherent flexibility of air forces and the need to ensure that our future plans preserve that essential quality. None of the lessons learnt were new, but many had to be relearned as a result of an unexpected but salutary experience.

The recapture of the Falkland Islands was a fine operation by all three Services that demonstrated convincingly the importance of joint warfare. We must all make every effort to learn the capabilities and limitations of our sister Services and to practise joint operations. This calls for far more than just establishing procedures; it calls for a total commitment to inter-Service co-operation. I believe that history will show that our great strength in Operation Corporate was our ability to work together which contrasted sharply with the fragmented nature of the Argentine forces.

SIR JOHN CURTISS