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SOUTH ATLANTIC ISLAND

Se refiere a la isla de Ascensión y su administración.

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THE

NAVAL REVIEW

South Atlantic Island

MY FAMILY had just finished telling me that my frustration at not being in the Falklands Task Force was making me irritable when the phone rang. My appointer wondered whether I would be happy to take charge of our Forces on a South Atlantic Island. 'When?', I asked. 'As soon as possible,' he replied. 'Does the name of the Island begin "A"?' I asked, ever mindful of security. He affirmed that it did and I assured him that I was on my way. 'Briefings tomorrow and fly out as soon as you can after that,' he added. He congratulated me on being so amenable and I told him that I remembered being an appointer myself and giving an officer a pierhead jump to an Indian Ocean Island. I was sympathetic to his problem and extremely keen to go.

The meeting in MOD reached two conclusions, neither of which stood the test of time. The first was that the tri-service numbers on the island would not be more than about two hundred, and the second that I should have the power of veto on anyone sent there. Commander-in-Chief said that he was happy that I was going to look after what was an important staging post and gave me some wise advice not to send any angry signals!

A quick return home to collect the efforts of the cottage industry which had been set up to deal with my white uniforms, a visit to the local naval air station to pick up some invaluable khaki uniform, and I was on my way to RAF Lyneham, a C130 Hercules and Ascension Island.

Ascension Island

Ascension lies at 7° 56'S and 14° 25'W, 7 miles long, 7 miles wide and is a 34 square mile outcrop of volcanic rock with no indigenous population. The people normally resident there number about 1,000 and are employed by Cable and Wireless, BBC, NASA, USAF, PANAM, CSO, South Atlantic Cable Co., and the FCO. Wideawake Airfield was built in 1942. The first aircraft to land on it was a Fairy Swordfish from HMS *Archer*; it became an important staging post in World War II, and in 1966 the runway was extended to 10,000 feet as part of the expansion needed by the island's role in the USAF Eastern Test Range. The airfield has a large dispersal capable of taking up to 24 large fixed-wing aircraft and on one occasion 36 helicopters. It is commanded by a Lieutenant Colonel USAF and managed on contract by PANAM. This specifies that the airfield shall be manned to provide up to 285 aircraft movements per year!

The climate is pleasant, not unbearably hot and usually a south-easterly gets up during the day, sometimes as high as 30 – 5 knots. The anchorage in Clarence Bay is affected by a long heavy groundswell which often renders the landing jetty unusable and makes swimming from the beaches dangerous. The volcanic dust is pervasive and the volcanic rock wears out shoes and tyres at a remarkable rate. The highest point of the island, Green Mountain, is 2,817 feet high and is covered by a small bamboo forest. When I had first visited the island in 1957 in HM Yacht *Britannia*, I had not been on watch ashore but Prince Philip and his party had come back and described how they had gone through a long dark tunnel and come out into fairyland. This was up Green Mountain and I was to discover exactly what they meant.

The island is administered by the Resident Administrator, who was to prove a great source of support. It has 2 civilian doctors, a small 14-bed hospital, 1 dentist, 1 school and 2 shops. Communications are weekly by USAF aircraft, and 6 times a year by a small supply ship (UK – Ascension – St Helena – South Africa). Everything has to be flown or shipped in to the island. There are no pubs, restaurants, or hotels. There is no television or ready-made entertainment.

Aim

This was to be the base for the forward

logistic support of British Forces on Operation Corporate. There were two more or less distinct parts to our task. First, the support of ships in the South Atlantic involved the transhipment of people, stores, ammunition, and helicopters from Support Command, and chartered transport aircraft by helicopter and lighter to ships passing the island. Second, the RAF operations mounted from the island had to be supported and the defence of the island had to be secured. Fitness and weapon training had to be provided for troops in ships which stopped over at the island.

Constraints

It was obvious to the simplest of sailors on the island but not always back in the UK that the rate of build-up of our base in terms of numbers of people was heavily dependent on overcoming some fairly basic constraints. Since this was the most fundamental part of my task and has read-across to other parts of the world including the Falkland Islands, it is worth detailing the main constraints and how they were overcome.

Water

We were always very conscious that the greatest show-stopper to large increases of people on the island was the supply of fresh water. Luckily, the two distillation plants, one at BBC and the other on the American base, had some spare capacity for normal maintenance, and by delaying this until it was possible to enhance both plants by flying in small reverse osmosis equipments (of different voltages of course), potential shortages were averted. Water rationing was applied to some servicemen in particular areas under particular circumstances.

Aviation fuel

This is supplied to the island by US Sealift Command tankers which anchor off and discharge their fuel through a floating pipeline to a fuel farm in Georgetown some three miles from the airfield. It is shipped by bowser to ready-use tanks on the airfield. The critical link in this chain, assuming a steady supply of US tankers which we got, was the speed at which bowsers could be loaded and driven from Georgetown to Wideawake. Even the build-up of twelve additional RAF bowsers to the five operated by PANAM did not solve the problem since only one could be loaded at a time. The Royal Engineers came to the rescue and in the remarkably short time of a few days, a pipeline was flown in, assembled, and operating. The efficiency and dedication of the sappers was most impressive. By the time I left Ascension we had used 5½ million US gallons of fuel.

Accommodation

Paradoxically, this was one of the easiest and at the time most difficult of our problems. In 'management' terms it was a non-starter — an unpredictable requirement with varying standards chasing non-existing resources. At one end of the requirement, the Royal Marines of X and Y Company professed themselves pleasurably satisfied with a flat piece of volcanic ground where they could 'bivvy' — why I ever gave the CO of Y Company a cabin when he was my OCRM I'll never know! At the other end, RAF aircrew some of whom were flying sorties of over twenty-four hours, required air-conditioned, undisturbed rest, and preferably furniture to keep their clothes in, and a refrigerator to keep the beer cold. Need to be close to the airfield played a part and those in transit were generally less well accommodated. Accommodation impinged on other constraints — water, food, sanitation, and transport. Numbers and ranks were never known until the transport aircraft arrived.

One of my first decisions was to open the 'Lunar Bay Holiday Camp'. At the other end of the island at English Bay, this was a tented camp based round some huts which had a few showers and heads and a field kitchen. Ideally suited for those who were familiar with Club Mediterranée and enjoyed good food, open air living, and a certain amount of volcanic dust, it became a way of life from which some were reluctant to be dislodged, although I have to admit that one Chinaman did attempt

suicide there, more in anticipation of war service than in rebellion against his environment, I like to think. The flexibility provided by tents was considerable.

On the American base, the authorities were extremely generous in allowing an initial degree of overcrowding which was to cause problems in the medium term. This was exacerbated by some RAF aircrew, each successive wave of whom saw it as their main aim to move beds, furniture, and fridges to suit the whim or pecking order of their particular crew. This infuriated the tidy mind of the PANAM administrator and led to a recurring argument every few days. Meanwhile, an Army Captain and his Warrant Officer took possession of a disused urinal, reserved their accommodation during a temporary abscence, and were finally given formal notice to quit as the quarters were required for their original purpose.

There was only one thing to do and I did it. A Regulating Lieutenant, a Fleet Master-at-Arms, and four Regulators arrived post-haste, accommodated themselves in the old disused local Police Station (two Leading Regulators to a cell), and took charge of accommodation, movements, and discipline, to my and their complete satisfaction.

Material aid was also at hand. After a certain amount of prolonged and not altogether satisfactory negotiation between too many authorities, 4449 Mobile Support Squadron USAF arrived in a phased succession of C141s with thirty-one expandable accommodation modules, each capable of sleeping twelve people, bunks, bed linen, and ashtrays provided, air-conditioned or heated to choice. Washing and heads facilities were also in the package. The Regulating Branch preferred to call this accommodation Victory Village and named each module after famous Admirals. The rest of us called it Concertina City. It provided a step jump improvement in our capability, and if the generators were a bit noisy, then as Milton Friedman would say: 'There's no such thing as a free lunch.'

Meanwhile, elsewhere on the island, two teams of people were bringing every suitable disused building back into service. The redoubtable Sappers formed one team and Cable and Wireless had a gang who, if not helping the war effort by loading lighters, were rapidly installing showers and heads. Accommodation for over two hundred people was provided in previously disused buildings. Empty bungalows were lent by Cable and Wireless and CSO and even the old zymotic hospital was renovated. At our peak we accommodated 1,463 people.

Victualling

I travelled out on the same day as the first field kitchen, and I knew all was going to be well when I asked the RAF Sergeant in charge of it if I could have breakfast from his kitchen on arrival. 'No ye canna have breakfast but we'll give you lunch' was his reply — realistic and willing. An unlikely but extremely successful partnership between Lieutenant (S) RN, a Chief Caterer, and the same RAF Sergeant provided a tri-service catering team second to none. On one occasion we did get down to one day's supply of rations, but the daily C130s and the careful planning of our resupply from back home created great confidence. In the early days, menus were restricted to whatever imaginative creation could be made from compo but latterly the three field kitchens were producing excellent multi-choice meals with fresh vegetables; 'better than we got back home' was a general opinion. Throughout, the cheerful, patient St Helenians in the US commissary produced meals for a large percentage of us and surpassed even their normal high standard with special meals for survivors from South Georgia, HMS *Sheffield*, and the *Atlantic Conveyor*.

Supplying the ships

This main task was the responsibility of NP 1222, commanded by an exceptionally dedicated and hardworking Commander (SD) (AE). Stores were unloaded from the transport aircraft by three RAF MAMS teams working twelve hours on and

twenty-four off. They were then sorted and moved into dumps by ship name by an assorted team of DGST(N) fork-lift truck drivers, naval supply ratings, and soldiers. Luckily there was considerable space to the south and to the east of the dispersal because the stores dumps became very large.

In the early days eighteen helicopters were reassembled and flown on to passing ships. Many a startled Fleet Air Arm maintainer was greeted off the transport aircraft with a tool kit and the message that he could have a bed when that Wessex 5 or Lynx had been rebuilt. The response was magnificent and the 'time to rebuild' got faster and faster. What is more the aircraft all worked.

Our helicopter force on the island varied but usually consisted of two Wessex 5s, one Sea King and one Chinook. This provided a most flexible and powerful lift capability, with the Wessex and the Sea King doing the main day-to-day running and the Chinook being particularly useful when a heavy lift was required over a long distance. We ran short of RN Sea Kings and an RAF Mark 3 was sent to assist. The difference in manning was the subject of some comment (RN 2 aircrew plus 8 maintainers, RAF 4 aircrew plus 10 maintainers), but inter-service co-operation reached an all-time high when the RAF Warrant Loadmaster offered to fly in the RN Wessex 5s to ease the load on the RN crewmen. Interestingly enough, a Chinook load was too large for the average ship to stow quickly enough to allow a steady flow pattern. The best vertreps were those with the ships just off the end of the runway and night vertreps, although conducted many times, were less effective than those by day because they were slower.

The high tempo required by the integration of helicopter and fixed-wing operations took a lot of people by surprise but developed into a fine art. The PANAM air traffic controllers, of whom there were only two for the first month, were magnificent. They estimated that, on 18 April, when we had over five hundred movements, Wideawake was the busiest airfield in the world, having taken over from Chicago O'Hare. For the most obvious reasons, flight safety became the concern of everyone and in over 13,000 movements there was only one incident in dispersal when a carelessly left VC 10 ladder was blown against a 707. The USAF Colonel was persuaded by the PANAM Manager, myself, and all the RN that helicopter hot refuelling was safe, but I confess that I was highly embarrassed when he quietly asked if we usually left so much live ordnance around our fields back home. An ammunition dump was constructed in the next few days.

The ability to squeeze a quart out of a pint pot in terms of airfield operations was a highlight and was achieved with great co-operation and flight safety discipline. I do not believe that it could have worked with any other organisation than a small, efficient, dedicated team like PANAM.

Sometimes for a ship without a helo deck or for very large and bulky loads, it was more effective to load by lighter. The stores/people were then moved to Georgetown, craned on to large lighters operated with great skill by Cable and Wireless St Helenian Coxswains and taken out to the ship at anchor in Clarence Bay.

Once everyone realised that Ascension Island was not a stores depot but only a transhipment point and that we had no control over what was or was not loaded on to transport aircraft in UK, the operation went remarkably smoothly. The only hitches occurred when stores were not properly addressed and the sight of a forlorn Commander (S) wandering down the lines of stores, looking for 'that special item' was not unusual. All stores were Priority One and there was no way that we could give any other priority except to getting them all south as fast as was possible. It is difficult to be precise about the numbers of people this task needed but total RN numbers varied between eighty and a hundred, and even including the

helicopter groundcrew I don't suppose there were more than a total of about 120.

Defence of the island

It was known from the outset that the Argentinians had the capability of getting a Boeing 707 or an in-flight refuelled C130 to Ascension and that they could land small parties of special forces from say merchant ships. My assessment of the likelihood of such an event remained low throughout because I believed that with the large US presence on the island any 'Argentine' attack would be the equivalent of a Lusitania or a Pearl Harbour, and therefore counter-productive. There were some indications back in UK that the possibility of an attack existed and it was decided to defend the island. After a 'recce' by two Army officers, a detachment of about forty RAF Regiment were sent to guard our key points and four RAF Phantoms with twelve aircrew and sixty-four groundcrew provided air defence. Although expensive in people this provided a sensible insurance. Plans to establish a Terminal Control Area or an Air Defence Identification Zone appeared to peter out short of an International Notice to Airmen. A daily Nimrod surveillance sortie was flown which usually established the position of *Primorye*, the USSR AGI as within ten miles of the island. The aim of providing a frigate as guardship did not last long due to shortage of ships further south, and the *Leeds* and *Dumbarton Castle* filled this breach as best as they could. A surveillance radar was installed at the top of Green Mountain with nineteen people to man, operate, and maintain it.

RAF operations

These were divided into air defence, Nimrod surveillance, Victor air-to-air refuelling, Vulcan attack, and VC 10 and Hercules transport operations. Chinook and Sea King operations have already been described.

The four Phantoms provided one aircraft at Alert Five twenty-four hours a day and flew usually one other sortie per day to keep aircrew current. As well as the one island surveillance mission, the Nimrods usually flew a long-range surveillance sortie down south every twenty-four hours. The range of these sorties was increased latterly with air-to-air refuelling. Other sorties were flown to support Vulcan – Victor rendezvous. The average population of Nimrod aircraft was four but there was considerable coming and going of aircraft and crews. An average of about seventy-five aircrew and about 150 groundcrew manned this effort.

At the beginning Victors carried out some mutually refuelled radar reconnaissance missions down to South Georgia, but very soon the Victor force built up to fifteen to support the Vulcan and later Nimrod and Hercules. The air force had gone to considerable trouble to get the most professionally qualified Group Captain to take charge of these very complicated missions — to the extent of having three senior RAF officers within a fortnight. The first two missions were to bomb Stanley airfield runway with direct action delayed fuse bombs. An Air Vice Marshal flew out to take responsibility for the first which, by chance, was programmed to happen just in time for the Bomber Command dinner. It subsequently became clear that only one bomb of the forty dropped on these two missions had hit the runway. What is not generally realised is that this sort of accuracy is about what might have been expected from high level free-fall radar bombing.

The Air Support Command operations with VC10 and C130 Hercules aircraft were carried out with great professionalism and dedication. Flow control was applied early in the operation and worked well. It quickly became clear that there was insufficient suitable aircrew accommodation for stop-overs and these took place at Dakar. Whether it was the thought of the topless female French tourists in Dakar that kept unserviceabilities to an incredible minimum or not, the regularity, dependability, and cheerfulness shown by all the 'truckies' were most commendable. Chartered

Belfasts were needed for the very large loads; their arrival was usually unpredicted because of the length of time they took to get down the route.

Another most valuable operation was the long-range air drops by Hercules aircraft. These were flown with great determination in the face of very changeable weather and the knowledge that the Argentinians were also flying C130s over our ships! One frigate did imply that it would have been nice to know that people were going to be dropped as well as stores!

Fitness and weapon training

The 3rd Commando Brigade stayed in their ships off Ascension for about eleven days. Their main task during this time was to restow the ships to the required mounting plan, but it was also very necessary to get as many troops ashore as possible for fitness and weapon training. Seven different live ranges were set up so that even the Scorpion armoured vehicles could zero their guns. As five of these were within the airfield area, careful control was needed and the epitome of this was when two Sea Harriers joined in battle formation, firing stopped as they broke downwind and restarted when they turned on to finals.

A very satisfactory routine was established. Troops would land by helicopter from their ships practising a helo assault, march to the ranges, fire their weapons, march six miles to English Bay, a quick dip since there was a safety boat, and then recover back to their ship by LCU.

A plan for the 5th Infantry Brigade to be based on Ascension for some weeks never came to fruition and they sailed past in *QE 2* with whom we conducted a covert long-range vertrep.

Relationships with the locals

Two choices were open: to disregard what the locals might feel or to carry them with us. I chose the second and was very lucky that the main *dramatis personae* were totally supportive and co-operative. The help received from the Administrator, the USAF Colonel, and the PANAM Manager was beyond measure. A series of weekly meetings with the managers of Cable and Wireless, BBC, NASA, CSO, and South Atlantic Cable Co. was instituted in order that rumour could be countered and all could feel that they were being kept in the picture. Initially, the novelty of the 'invasion', patriotism, and support for the cause meant that the civilian population opened their hearts and doors to us. After the Falkland Islands had been retaken a realisation that the island way of life was being adversely affected led to criticisms of those members of the forces who appeared to have time on their hands and whose behaviour was offensive. There were surprisingly few incidents, mainly because long working hours gave the forces limited time or energy for leisure activities.

There is a credibility gap between the impedimenta of British urban life and the simple leisurely, but more creative, pursuits of an island community. This is a factor which is being given deserved attention in the Falklands and one in which personalities at all levels play an important part.

People policy

For reasons which I hope are by now clear, I determined that I would endeavour to restrict numbers of servicemen on the island to such levels as were strictly necessary. Manning would be such as to require men to work a twelve- to fourteen-hour day, and leisure time would be such as to discourage boredom. Physical leisure activities, such as sport, and walking up Green Mountain, were strongly encouraged.

This policy met with unanimous support on the island. Overmanned detachments volunteered to reduce their numbers; individuals felt needed and enjoyed the satisfaction of a hard purposeful job well done. Unfortunately, it was not always understood in UK, and I cannot think what the aircraftman who made the sixteen-hour journey to and from Ascension four times must have thought. His local Group Captain considered that we needed him, the senior RAF officer on the island, a Group Captain, was certain that we did not!

Differences between services

It is generally considered to be unfair play to draw comparisons between single services on a joint service operation. However, two factors were so striking that it would be dishonest not to mention them.

First, there was some difference in resource and manning levels. The fact that RAF numbers on the island very quickly rose to eight hundred compared to one hundred each for the other two services was not entirely dictated by different requirements. Where overmanning existed, it was in a light blue uniform. I believe this to be due to the fact that the RAF are manned in five watches at peacetime levels. While there is much to commend the idea that everyone should have their leave when they want it in peacetime without the unit closing down, this leads to superfluous people in war. At no stage did economy of effort, either with people or other resources, appear to feature in the light blue staff manual.

Second, the air force appears to be managed in a different way from the other services. Authority is not delegated, control is divided amongst many authorities, and the decision-taking machinery is not clear-cut. To justify this comment, I can do no better than to quote the following extract of a conversation on the Air Staff Management Aid, two computer terminals of which sat incongruously in the corner of our Command tent.

Serial 043. FM 18 GP: Following high level discussion Air Cdr. may decide to send plus one CO pilot plus one crewman for Chinook detachment. Your views well known. Unable to disclose Air Staff reasoning.

Serial 045. For SRAFO FM COS 18 GP: Concerned that Chinook detachment aircrew element undermanned. 38 GP and ODIHAM support view that it should be increased by one co-pilot and one crewman. Your agreement required.

Serial 046. From SRAFO YR 045: Since I am not privy to the reasons leading to the conclusion at your end that Chinook detachment is undermanned, I can only listen to the advice of OC detachment. As you know, he considers that he is adequately crewed. From my own observations, I have come to the same conclusion. If there is some reason which dictates a radical increase in current Chinook task, then additional aircrew will be required but I am not aware of any such increase.

The discerning reader will have gleaned that at least six different authorities have now expressed an opinion on the putative need for two more aircrew. I wish I could say that my example is exceptional rather than typical.

Conclusion

Except for the factors instanced above, I was totally impressed with co-operation, ingenuity, determination, and good humour of all the servicemen I met. I was privileged to meet many brave men. All were completely convinced that our action in retaking the Falklands was morally correct, and this was a cause which all of us were proud to serve. It was certainly a different way of spending one's gardening leave.

VOX NON INCERTA