

My Falklands Experiences - Mike Goupillot

My journey to the Falklands was in 1984. Well I did have to give the Argentines a chance to clear out before I got there didn't I? We travelled from RAF Marham in Norfolk in a mini bus to RAF Innsworth where we were kitted out with further useless items for our tour of duty. With my personal items and civvy clothes, KD tropical uniform(why I don't know, as Stanley is near the Antarctic Circle) combat kit and two crash kits, I felt like the proverbial donkey. From Innsworth to Brize Norton, where some young specky LAC from Air-Movements section seemed to have the power over all of us, from the lowliest ranks like me, to some very senior officers from all three services. No one was told anything other than "to wait". The LAC guarded information about flight times etc. like it was all Top Secret. Eventually after several games of get on the bus get off the bus, we were seated on a VC10 and on our way.

Travelling to Stanley was done in one of two ways; UK to Ascension Island via Dakar in Senegal by VC10, or chartered civil aircraft, this journey taking about nine hours on average, then it was on a ship such as the SS Uganda or MV Norland for the two week journey through the extremely rough South Atlantic, or for the lucky ones, a straight flight to Stanley. I being a Goupillot, got the SS Uganda. Dakar airport has little in the way of comforts, the idea is for a quick turnaround then off again. My flight was delayed for a number of hours by an engine malfunction which was only fixed when the right size sledge hammer was found to fix it! (I kid you not). Ascension is a volcanic rock rising out of the Atlantic Ocean, it also lacked in facilities for those passing through. It was a dust bowl area where everyone was herded into lines to wait in the baking sun for the helicopter shuttle out to the ships. The first and lasting impression of the ship was the smell of boiled cabbage and sweaty bodies; you never got used to it because it never went away. The cabbage was served out at every meal, and the bodies just got sweeter. Junior ranks cabins were just on the water line or well below for reasons only the Navy can explain. Each cabin on the Uganda had about 20 men to a room in small bunks with all their kit.

Physical training took place every day on the flight deck which was OK in the calmer waters but as we sailed south and the sea got rougher it was no joke. Some cocky barrel-chested PTI had us doing, amongst other things, star jumps, which requires you to jump in the air flinging your arms out to the side, fine until the ship hits a swell and you come crashing back to the deck from about 15 feet. Apart from lectures and some practical training there was little in the way of entertainment, though they once showed the film "Beneath the Waves" which is about enemy submarines attacking troop ships. Being under the jurisdiction of the Navy, everyone on board was given some menial tasks to do around the ship, ranging from swabbing the decks to tea making.

Another break in the monotony was guard duty where half a dozen RAF erks who don't know their port from their starboard or the right name for the sharp or blunt end, being given a route to patrol. Our orders included fire watch below decks, but when on the outer decks, to look for enemy submarines and to repel boarders. I'm a fireman for Pete's sake, I wouldn't know a sub from a whale till it was too late, and no one could explain how Argie swimmers were going to climb up the side of the ship doing about

30mph in gale force seas. Meal time was always the highlight of the day, for some obscure naval tradition custom, all cooks on the ship had girl's names: Mary for instance was about 6ft 6 (and that was just between the eyes) hisher arms so big that the anchor tatoos were almost actual size. Mary would take a shine to some young SAC and blow kisses throughout the meal we had some oor young lads who just did not go for meals at all. Food was taken on long tables and benches, with the whole meal served up onto a flat metal tray, custard running into mash and gravy. If the ship lurched either way your tray came back usually minus some food pinched by a much bigger bloke.

After two long weeks the ship eventually arrived in Stanley harbour giving those on board their first glimpse of the Island. A couple of hundred buildings, some of them little more than shacks, with red or green corrugated roofs making up the town, and even at this distance all you saw was mud glorious mud. Soon after the initial conflict, three offshore accommodation vessels known as Coastal's had been towed down to the Falklands and anchored in the bay. The RAF being quick off the mark, lay claims to the first to arrive. The accommodation, basic but comfortable in design, with 2 man bunks for 1,000 + men, ours had a canteen and laundry but little else. The next to arrive was the same with the addition of two canteens and a cinema this was used by the Navy. The poor Army were still in tents at this time and had to wait for theirs to arrive, but when it did it had three canteens, 2 laundries, 2 cinemas and a gymnasium so big it housed all the garrison watching a live Jim Davidson show; so much for superior RAF intelligence and guile. All junior rank firemen shared one wing but because of the 24 hour on 24 hour off shift tthere was only ever half of the fire section using it. A small communal area allowed the card sharps to fleece those like me on a regular basis. The journey to work was a short ten minute ride over muddy bumpy roads in the back of a four tonner which drove slowly past each section on the airfield allowing individuals to jump from the back of the moving lorry; lesson one- never jump into what you think is just a shallow puddle as you will end up with only RAF beret floating on the top and lesson two- make sure your'e first to jump off, as many first timer arrived at work dripping in muddy water being left until last by his mates. A dozen pairs of muddyfire boots sure makes a splash. The drop off point for firemen was at the back of the fire section near the Trumpton sign depicting a penguin in a fire helmet. The section itself was a couple of rat-infested portacabins which had been joined together and extended using old pallets and aircraft engine crates. A small control room doubled as the Sgt and Cpl's sleeping bunks, a tiny breathing apparatus repair and store room, a crew rest room, Fsgts office and dorm for the firemen was about all there was to it. the toilet was a small shack outside with a tube leading to an open drain. Meals were taken whenever possible in the large cookhouse about 20 yards from the fire section. The duty crew was one Sgt, 2 Cpl's and ten-twelve men, two RAF engineers were permanently attached to the crew; it was their job to maintain the Rotary Hydraulic Arrestor Gear (RHAG) at the end of the runway. Three Mk9 Foam Tenders, two TACR2 6wheel Range Rovers and one flat fronted small domestic Land Rover made up the crash combine. These were all parked out the front of the section in all weathers. Following shift changeover and parade, and the obligatory cup of tea, it was usually off to the first RHAG engagement of the day. Stanley runway is very short and made up of metal sheeting, and is blessed with thesea at one end and a mine field at the other. Hercules and Harriers had no problem landing, but each time a fully armed Phantom landed it had to engage the RHAG. Firemen at Stanley were truly unbeatable at getting

the aircraft clear, cable rewound and grommets re-spaced before the next aircraft landed. One and a half to two minutes was the norm and this had to be done up to a dozen or more times a day. As well as RHAG engagements there were constant helicopter movements, mount-ups for Hercules takeoffs and landings, pan wash-downs and in flight emergencies. Some firemen came from what they thought was busy UK flying stations; non of these compared with Stanley. All aircraft had code names; Hercules were "Fat Alberts", Harriers were "Budgies" Chinook Helicopters were "Wok Woka" and Phantoms were known as "Geese". Air Traffic Control often turned out the crews to "geese in difficulties"; of course we would go belting off to find the feathered variety in trouble; so funny these people in the glass tower. On a RHAG engagement, the TACR2 usually positioned at a point near the centre of the runway, and the rest of the vehicles deployed onto both cable drums, one each side of the touch down point. The Phantoms hook would grab the cable which eventually stopped (you hoped) the aircraft. The corporal on the TACR2 would go out make the armement safe if necessary, and using red bats marshall the aircraft and cable teams until the aircraft had disengaged and taxied away. Having just arrived and never having seen RHAG equipment, marshalled an aircraft or worked with Phantoms this was a steep learning curve for me. I had spent two and a half years on Queens Flight and was pretty good with helicopters but this was different; have you ever tried to bring a Phantom into the hover? After the last aircraft was down for the night it was our job to drive a range of old bowsers onto the runway to prevent the Argies sneaking in while we were all asleep. These had to be removed the following morning before flying could resume. Another vital task was to take the MK9 and fill up the water tank in ATC, vital in so much that this supplied the one and only flush toilet in the immediate vicinity. It was doing this job that I nearly came to dying on active service. Mail was, as I am sure to any of you that have been on long unaccompanied tours would agree, vital to ones health, welfare and sanity. On this one particular day mail had not arrived from Ascension for a couple of weeks. We were told it was something to do with sandstorms on the Island, which was difficult for us to comprehend as we were standing in two foot snow drifts and battling blizzards. As a result of no mail, men were becoming aggressive or suicidal, and in some cases both. My crew and I had connected a MK9 to the water tank in ATC and were waiting for it to fill up. A Hercules landed carrying the whole garrisons mail and taxied to where we were working. We raced over to the Pan to, as the loady thought offload, but we riffled through the sacks until we found those belonging to the Fire Section and ran back to distribute them to the rest of the lads. The rest of the mail sacks were off loaded and left stacked outside of ATC awaiting MT transport. The water tank in ATC held about 200 gallons of water and the MK9 held 1250 gallons; now if this had been the other way around, no problem, but it wasn't. The excess came down the stairs of ATC like a waterfall and the water absorbed into the mail sacks. I returned to find "bluey's" (airmail envelopes floating off across the Pan like paper boats. The quickest hose rolling that would have won any competition took place and we scarpered. Like any good fireman, the last thing I did was to cover our tracks. I bunged up the sink and turned the taps on full. Everyone on station was out for blood and would have killed the idiot that left the tap on, however we drove round in that mighty big tap with no one knowing it was really our fault.

Sunday mornings was the only break in this routine, when all the personal weapons were

taken from the locked safe in the control room to be cleaned. We all ran round the station pretending to be Rambo, when we should have been cleaning the 9mm pistols, rifles and sub machine guns. When this was finished they were put back under lock and key. One day I was taking the weapons back when the biggest rat I have ever seen sat waving at me from on top of my bunk. If I had been quicker at weapons drill I would have fitted a magazine, cocked the SMG and shot the damned thing. About half way into my tour, I as a Cpl was sent with a n SAC Fireman for two weeks, to a place called Kelly's Garden at Port San Carlos. We were flown by helicopter across the island and on landing did a straight swap with two firemen we were replacing. The Fire Section was a small portocabin adrift in a sea of mud. Our vehicle a TACR2 was supposed to be our transport but which spent most of its time being dug out of the mire. The two firemen had little to do except cover helicopter movements in and out of the small outpost. The two of us spent our time swapping firemen's green string vests and long-johns for kit which the army had to offer. While there I was asked by an Army Grenadier Guards Regimental Sargeant Major if I would do him a favour, anyone who knows RSM's knows this is an order and not a request, so I of course said yes I would love to. Well I didn't want to fight as the Argies might have come back and I might be needed to fight them. The RSM was responsible for the safety of the troops based at Kelly's Garden and asked us to check all of the fire extinguishers on camp. He gave us permission to go where and when we pleased to do the job. He failed to tell us not to go into one particular hut, because it was here that Special Forces Intelligence secretly listened into Argentine military radio broadcasts. In we wandered with a bag of spanners and spare CO2 cartridges to end up face down on the floor with a loaded gun at our heads. No one had warned these lads of our arrival and we burst through the doors in green crash kit which was different from the normal kit worn by all the others. They had nearly shot us mistaking us for Argie Special Forces. I was eventually given a date for my return home. I packed my bags said my farewells and waited for my replacement to arrive by Hercules, but the aircraft off-loaded without him. I was told he had some kind of accident and would be delayed two weeks. Two weeks came and the same thing happened, I eventually did five months of a four month tour. When I finally departed half the camp came to see me off, I like to think it was to wish me well but I suspect it was to see the back of me as I had spent the last month crying into everyones beer. Thirteen hours in a Hercules parachute seat saw me at Ascension Island bent double unable to walk properly but closer to 'Blighty'. A further nine hours lording it up in the comfort of a VC10 and I was home.

Many thanks to Mike for his interesting and thoroughly enjoyable account of his Falkland Island experience. Mikes tale along with another eight personal recollections of time spent at RAF Stanley are to be included in the new book chronicling the history of the RAF Fire Service. Bearing in mind 240 RAF Fire men served at RAF Stanley there must be a few more tales to tell of RAF Stanley Fire section. If you have a Falkland tale to tell please contact the Flashpoint editorial team.