

Steve Davey's recollections:

I was the last "Fire One" to enjoy the Contractors Camp at MPA before we occupied the new RAF accommodation. The runway & main paved parking areas were complete with other manoeuvring areas, dispersal for the aircraft from Stanley, roads and access routes still under construction.

The Contractors Camp, or "Bronx" as it was later to be known as, was a maze of identical wooden huts with interlinking corridors, completely enclosed against the South Atlantic weather. The dining room was reached within the same complex, and the food from Kelvin the Caterers was exceptional and abundant. Female civilian staff were everywhere for cleaning and dining: they were affectionately known as Kelvin's Kittens. I had established a good rapport with the Kelvin Staff and before we moved to Service Catering I was able to liberate many frozen lobsters to my store for future use. When we eventually moved into a combined Sgts and Officers Mess, the RAF cooks were happy to do me the occasional Lobster Thermidor.

The Fire Section had seemingly limitless supplies of bread rolls and bacon from Kelvin's, which were delivered by one of the JCB drivers we called Worzel Gummidge. The smell of bacon butties pervaded the air around the Fire Section/Ops Complex, and often contractors and other people in the Ops area would drop in for a morning snack.

On the other side of the airfield, the brand new Crash Fire Section was a splendid building full of shiny fire trucks and the initiatives to make it a "home from home" by the lads in post were excellent; the "York Stone" fireplace in the crew room being an example. The walls were hung with ex Argentinean FN rifles.

The biggest drawback was the up-slope from the crash bays to the taxi-way and the restricted view from the control room windows. With the onset of winter, ice and snow covered the incline which made forward acceleration difficult with poor traction on the big heavy Crash Trucks. Of course the airfield was usually BLACK when the ground was WHITE and so there was no need to leave the bays!

The domestic Truck was positioned on the admin/accommodation site and was housed in the Contractors Fire Section, a (One Welsh Man) canvas shelter. A brand new domestic section came into being toward the end of my tour and was taken over by my successor, Steady Eddie (Ward)

Looking from the Crash Bays control room windows up the slope, the surface of the ATC access road and runway beyond was at eye level - all you saw were the rudders of the larger aircraft. This was very pertinent in one instance. Mrs H Jones, wife of Col H Jones VC of the Paras, and other bereaved wives had been on a visit, and were leaving on the afternoon Tri-Star. As it passed the control room on its take off run, a large trail of flame was apparent from the tail engine. It looked like a Doodlebug or a plumbers blow lamp (for those who don't remember Doodlebugs!). The duty local controller shouted "Abort!! Abort!!" to the Captain who engaged an automatic system on that aircraft which brought it to a safe stop. The reason for the flames was a strong cross wind component, and incomplete combustion. We deployed in that same wind and had to surround the front of the aircraft with our trucks to enable the gangway to be positioned without being blown down the runway.

Another snag was the total inadequacy of the Crash Alarm. The designers/specifiers must have worked in a Public Library Quiet Room. It was a single high pitched whistle audible only to dogs. I

explained to the Electrical Contractors still on site that a crash alarm was meant to summon up the blood and make the hairs stand on end. They apparently had never seen a Submarine picture or heard a Klaxon horn, but I think they changed it in the end.

Early in the piece I travelled down to Stanley on the unfinished hard core road with its "Skull & Crossbones" signs and the warning words "Slow Minefield". I had a romantic pre-conception of a quaint settlement, but on arrival the Islands' capital proved to be a real culture shock. At first sight the brightly coloured "wriggly tin" roofed dwellings, and the heavy peat smoke atmosphere, looked like the result of a multiple fog-induced pile-up between lorries carrying paint and corrugated iron.

And so onto RAF Stanley, to meet the incumbent boss (FS Fred Woods) and the "Trumpton Fire Brigade". The collection of containers and lean-to shelters which formed the Fire Section was rudimentary in the extreme, but it became evident that this section was all about function not form. I was immediately aware of the high level of cheerfulness, and enthusiasm for the main task of RHAG Phantom recovery.

I was to return with a TACR 2, Fred Woods and the Falklands Fire Chief, whose name I do not recall, to provide cover for the last Phantom to leave Stanley.

One last trip to "town" during my tour was to help Fred celebrate his wedding anniversary by having dinner at The Upland Goose hotel. We had the signature dish of Upland Goose, which tasted of fish, obviously a reflection of the unfortunate the bird's diet. We had arranged to spend the night in the RAF Coastel, an experience for me but home again for Fred.

I had taken over from Trevor Chambers, now regrettably dead, who in turn had been preceded in post by Alan Quail and Ken Leverett. Trevor Chambers was a real Gentleman. As part of the incumbent WO's remit, RAF Ascension and South Georgia were to be visited during his tour. Following his trip to ASI, Trevor he was returning to MPA in a "Fat Albert" (Hercules) which suffered an engine failure somewhere over the South Atlantic. They diverted into Rio de Janeiro during carnival week and he enjoyed a stay in a hotel on the Government. He knew I was to follow him to MPA and sent me a postcard from sunny Rio to a snow-bound Kinloss.

I only know of one WO who visited South Georgia during his tour, one Peter Lee, also sadly no longer with us. I think Peter said he had been winched ashore in foul weather.

One day, while sitting in my MPA office, a Tri-Star Pilot came to see me for fishing tackle. I was somewhat gob-smacked until I was informed that I had inherited the title of "Fishing Officer", and that we kept the gear in the section together with maps of the best fishing areas. Kenny Leverett had set this up, being a keen angler himself he had sent a steady supply of sea trout etc. back to BZN his own station via the Tri-Star fish vans.

When everything was moving up from RAF Stanley it was intended to cull all the cats which had become personal pets during the occupation; ostensibly to prevent a proliferation of pussies at MPA. The firemen "Spirited" one tabby moggie away from Stanley to MPA ahead of the hunt. The lads christened it "Napalm" I don't know why but would hazard a guess that it had dropped a few nasty "Bombs" in its time. The boys made it a home in a cardboard box with his name painted on it.

One fine day, the cat found itself in its box in the crew room doing what cats do best, when a phone

was placed on top of the box. Following the afternoon Tri-star landing, an FNG (Falklands New Guy) fireman found his way to the section and was alone in the crew room with the box/cat/phone.

The established hands had observed this situation through the Georgian-wired viewing panels in the crew room door, and one bright spark then called the crew room phone from another extension in the Section.

The FNG detects the ringing and looks around, but no one comes to answer so gingerly he picks up the receiver on top of the cats box, and sez rather timidly.

“Fire Section”

“Hello” sez the Wag, “Is the cat in?”

The FNG locates puss in the box and replies

“Yes, but he’s asleep!”

“OK” sez the wag, “I will Call Back.”

Everybody fall about!

I did the obligatory “Bimble” out across the scrubland past the “Great Britain Hotel”. We past many Bennies, and loads of sheep on our way to Bluff Cove, Fitzroy, where we saw the Sir Tristram RFA memorials. My companions were Sgt Kevin Cook a 6 footer with a stride to match, and a fit young firemen who loved fell walking in the UK who had come prepared with the proper boots and backpack. After some 15 miles round trip I was feeling my 50 years and happy to catch a Land Rover back to MPA.

My early work consisted almost entirely of “Take-over Boards” with WTW and LMA PSA officials plus the normal RAF Representatives. The Army maintained a Force Fire Officer in Stanley at the HQ, known as COMBRIT some such acronym. He was a three piper and attended all the boards with me. I found him to be helpful, knowledgeable, and unpretentious, but he was succeeded in post by the antithesis of that ilk. This guy had been a Sub Officer in the old AFDFS at RAF Syerston, and graduated to Officer Grade in the Army Fire Service. From day one he adopted a very superior attitude toward all things non-commissioned and RAF in particular. He told me one day that he intended to do all future Fire Prevention inspections at RAF MPA, because RAF FP Training was worthless. He, on the other hand, had attended Moreton-in-Marsh, and was the real deal. I was incensed and relayed his intention to my Wingco Admin. Together we advised the RAF Fire Staff at High Wycombe of his aspirations. I think they saw this as establishment building for the pongos and his trying to take over an RAF base was a non starter. I was immediately created Force Fire Officer South Atlantic; and the Army chappy returned to wooden huts and sand buckets. The rest as they say is hysterical, except that all of my erstwhile colleagues that followed me to MPA did not think so.

The PSA officials in MPA were given honorary RAF rank/status as were the Met Men. On returning from my visit to Ascension I met a PSA man in the departure lounge I knew as George from our work on take-over boards. He was going back south after a trip home.

“Hello George” sez I, “Where are you sitting?”

“Seat 4a” he replies.

“Is there any room near you?” I ask,

“Its empty, only a party right at the front of the aircraft” he says.

I ask the movers if I can be seated adjacent to George and they say sorry we do not allocate seat numbers. So I pick up a blank boarding card and a marker pen and write “Seat 4f”. I forgot to mention that this was a British Airways 747 and on mounting the gangway I was ushered into First Class. George was on one side of the wide body and I on the other. George had got his seat at BZN because he was RAF Group Captain equivalent, I had no idea. My Sqn Ldr Ops was on the same flight back and was somewhere back in “Steerage”. The Party at the front of the aircraft was Air Chief Marshal Sir Patrick Hine and his ADC. I had met the BA crew on the beach the day before and we shared a barbecue and beer. The engineer asked if I would like to observe the take off from the flight deck and I accepted with alacrity. Wideawake airfield has a 9000 foot runway over a hill. Lining up the aircraft for take off just after dusk there were 3000 foot of lights and then a space between the volcanic hills at each side of the runway. This prompted the obvious remark between the pilots “Bloody short runway”.

I continued my tour at MPA into mid winter (June/July) with snow every day and the biting chill factor. When the small outstations closed all the TACR 2s came back to Mount Pleasant, and I had one for my personal transport. As mentioned, the Officers shared the Sgts Mess until their mess was ready and at cease work they would park their Land Rovers out in front and it became known as the Land Rover Owners Club. My Range Rover was a real piece of one-upmanship! However, a bored fireman either at MPA or Kelly’s Garden had cleverly altered the RANGE ROVER sign on the front bonnet to read HANG OVER, which could well have been more appropriate.

The only real excitement during my sojourn was a fire on Lively Island, spotted by ATC early one evening. We loaded the light pump, suction and delivery hose, the generator and floodlight from one of the Mk XIs onto the Rescue Sea King, and flew into action. Sgt Roy Bastable, SAC’s Gordon Smith, Kiki Dee, Fran Neary, Neil Bateman and Liam Rippon were successful in extinguishing the fire, but we were called too late to save the Farm Building. Gordon Smith is still serving as a civilian and as I write is the Chairman of the RAF Fire Services Association.

Without any obvious reason I found the tour quite exhausting. Maybe it was the twelve hour days and seven day working, with none of the usual UK respites and diversions. I was certainly glad when my turn came to leave. However, fate had one last trick to play.

The RAF Tri-Star Fleet had recently been purchased from Pan American Airways via BA and modification at Marshalls of Cambridge, who incidentally removed the in-flight movie capability (soon to be restored). Anyway, for whatever contractual reason, there was a BA Engineer resident at MPA during the initial service of the aircraft.

Now my shiny Tri-Star was on time, all prepared and ready to go, when the said engineer did a fuel sample and apparently our machine had too much anti freeze additive in the AVTUR. This is metered-in automatically with the fuel. The RAF crew were not too worried about this, but the Civilian Engineer would not approve. Consequently, all the fuel in the aircraft had to be pumped out to bowsers, transported to Mare Harbour, and fresh fuel brought back. It took something like seven

or eight hours to complete this task, and all the while the aircrew were running out of duty time. We had left the mess after breakfast and said our good-byes, so our return at Lunch time was of course greeted with the customary service "Schadenfreude". We got away in the end, but only just..