

THE FALKLANDS

In January 1985 I set out for a 4 month detachment to the Falkland Islands. The war had finished in 1982 but the base where I was headed, RAF Stanley, was on MV status (Military Vigilance) in readiness for further military action from Argentina.

My first leg of the journey was RAF Brize Norton in Oxfordshire. After processing and dropping off our luggage, we all boarded a VC10 and headed to the Ascension Isles, which is about 1000 miles off the African coast in the South Atlantic. We had one refuelling stop in Dakar, Senegal, Africa, where we were allowed to stretch our legs on the tarmac for a couple of hours during the refuel.

When we landed on Ascension Island, we were quickly put into groups of 12 and then each group was flown by Puma helicopter to the helipad on the SS Uganda. There was a mix of Army, Navy and Air Force on board the ship plus a detachment of the Queens Gurkha engineers, who took the duty of guard patrol at night.

The SS Uganda was an awesome experience; formerly a passenger steam liner built in 1952, she was later used as an educational cruise ship for P&O. During the Falklands war she was commissioned as a Military hospital ship with the call sign 'Mother Hen'. The vessel was now re-commissioned as a troop carrier and was to be our home for the next 11 days, sailing south towards the Falklands following the line of Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and Argentina. While on the ship I volunteered to take fitness classes on the helipad and I gave First aid lessons to all three forces aboard (on one occasion I had to give a lecture on the effect and treatment of burns in the ships cinema to over 100 troops). As this was above and beyond my duties as a Fireman, the ships Warrant Officer sent a letter of commendation to my section when I arrived.



Having disembarked at Port Stanley, we were taken by a small boat to the town where we were picked up and transported to our Coastel (floating accommodation, similar to what oil riggers use).

I reported for duty at the Fire Section the next day where I was introduced to my new crew mates and the way of life working at this unique remote operating base in the South Atlantic. One of our main duties was setting and re-setting the RHAG (Rotary Hydraulic Arrestor Gear). This was designed to slow down the Phantom aircraft by catching a hook that was dropped down from the aircraft when landing and catching a cable which then broke the speed of the aircraft through a series of gears. (The Phantoms deployed their rear parachutes as added breaking assistance too) RHAGs were essential bits of kit at RAF Stanley due to the very short runway, and the Phantoms' landing speed. Other aircraft there included Harrier jump jets, and C130 Hercules, which we called 'Fat Alberts'.

During my tour I made sure that on my days off that I didn't stay indoors and get '*cabin fever*' as some did. So I weight trained in the three gyms available. There was the Army gym (mostly Welsh guards, Royal Engineers and Royal Green Jackets at that time), which was at

their Coastel, about a ten minute walk from our Coastel. They also had two bathing pools, one cold and one warm which were great to use after a good workout. Another gym was our own one which was in a Porta-cabin but not as well equipped as the Army ones. The third gym I used (see photo), was when I did two weeks at Kelly's Garden & Port San Carlos with the Army (Welsh guards). It was a corrugated tin shack with one multi-gym, a few rusty weights and lit by a single light bulb. (You can see the cable for the light in the photo). Kelly's garden and Port San Carlos made a nice break from Port Stanley. My duties there were mainly fire training for the Army lads , fire equipment servicing (see photo) and an early am mail pick up from the daily helicopter drop off. (Which made us Firemen popular!).



During my tour I also took various 'bimbles' around the war zones, such as Mount Tumbledown, Mount Longdon and the Twin Sisters hills which overlooked Stanley. I volunteered to do the driving too (see picture), which was a great experience negotiating a truck through Falklands terrain. I also got to fly in a variety of Helicopters, including the Twin bladed Chinook, which was awesome.

After a tour of 4 months, I was shipped home via a 10 hour flight to the ascension Isles on a 'Fat Albert' followed by the last leg to Brize Norton on a Tri-Star. That was an amazing experience for a 26 year old and with the Falkland Islands being over 8,000 miles away, it was, and still is, the furthest single journey I have ever travelled to date.