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A FALKLANDS CRUISE

Es el relato del Lieutenant Cdr Martin Reed, Chief Officer del Canberra durante el conflicto de Malvinas.

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THE NAVAL REVIEW

A Falklands Cruise

(Lieutenant Commander Martin Reed, RD, MNI, RNR, was the Chief Officer of Canberra during the Falklands War. The following article is taken from his diary and first appeared in Seaways, June 1983 – Editor.)

FROM the very first day it was impossible for me to keep the ship shiny white, the usual non-stop task of a passenger ship mate. Either we were too busy working troops and boats, the weather was too foul, or we were on the move; so, no fresh white paint, just accumulating rust. The Captain wanted to paint our glistening yellow funnels a drab grey, unfortunately due to lack of paint and opportunity it couldn't be done; I don't think he's forgiven me yet!

Then, of course, we had problems 'blacking-out'; if anyone has seen the *Canberra* at night they will realise the problem. From 'Blackpool illuminations' we had to achieve a Stygian gloom; night after night off Ascension my naval counterpart and I drove the crash boat around the ship spotting light leakage and making ourselves dreadfully unpopular with all and sundry. Suffice it to say that as we crept into San Carlos Water on 'D-Day' we were 'light-tight'.

On board our troops were superb; not only were they very well trained and motivated, they also took great care of the ship. Some parts suffered, of course. The washing machines in the accommodation, normally used for passengers' scanties, tended to collapse under continuous full-load running; the composition surface of the promenade deck began to disintegrate under 4,000 man-miles of daily running; our beautiful bone-white teak decking reacted badly to gun-oil and mortar base-plates — there were times when the Bosun and I could have wept!

Working off Ascension we settled into hard training in all forms of assault and soon had the ship worked-up to utilise helicopter assault streams and/or landing craft. The large LCUs (about 100 tons) we

took alongside the galley gun-post shell doors, from where the troops had a heavily laden jump down on to a heaving deck-edge. The LCVPs, platoon size, we took alongside our gangway pontoons, last used in Suez Bay to offload our passengers on the Cairo tour! My deck crew soon became adept at handling lines and fenders from the promenade deck, 35 ft above the landing craft, as we experimented with positioning the craft.

My Night Order Book has some interesting entries from those days: '20.4.82, Darken ship as per usual; 3/o and C/O will do rounds via Crash Boat at 2100'; '22.4.82, the attached sketch shows ammunition stows with present fixed and mobile hoses . . .'; '25.4.82. We are under sailing orders at 6 hours notice.' So away we went to find the rest of the Task Force.

Deck crew

Most people will admit that a Merchant Navy crew appreciate a solid regular routine, broken every now and again by a good run ashore. On this cruise their job varied daily and sometimes hourly in all weathers, at all times, and we had one opportunity to grant shore leave in three months!

They were deeply involved with fire and other emergency drills, working with an RN damage control team when we called fire parties out to all places and at any time; no more the weekly DoT sports day. They did more boatwork than most people would do in a couple of years and formed a good part of the RAS team. They coped with issue RN pattern foul weather and Arctic gear (beautiful long coms!) and with the intricacies of the respirator, anti-gas, which was thankfully never needed.

Several also volunteered as hospital assistants and many joined the oddest bunch of volunteers I have ever led, the close air defence team.

Once the military had left the ship we needed volunteers to man our machine

guns. I eventually had fifty trained(?) machine gunners ready from all parts of the ship to take over our defence. Heaven help the opposition! All of my lads worked well at every job handed out and I am very proud of them; almost a scratch crew, enrolled as volunteers within a week, they did well.

RAS (Replenishment at Sea)

We put the ship alongside but twice in the three months — once at Freetown for bunkers (12 hours) on the way south, then nothing until Puerto Madryn in Argentina to land prisoners (4 hours) after the surrender. Throughout the period we refuelled and re-stored from the RFA ships by jackstay, derrick and gantry rig, and by helicopter (Vertrep). In total we RASed fuel 10 times (including practice rigs); the longest spell was 10 hours with *Olna*.

Whilst we toddled along at 10–12 knots, HMS *Active Ambuscade*, *Alacrity* and *Minerva* successively fuelled from *Olna*'s starboard side. One of my distinct memories of this RAS was after dark. The distance line markers and the hoses were marked with Cylume pencils, green chemical lights, giving a beautiful soft green glow, whilst the RAS parties on *Olna* and *Canberra* had their lifejacket lights switched on (we always wore lifejackets on the RAS point) all twinkling away like overlarge fireflies. Both ships were completely blacked-out; with just the sound of the sea between us and the gentle lights it was a scene of intense beauty—quite unforgettable.

Vertreping became a way of life from the very start. If in company, it seemed we were always working aircraft. Indeed, early on, we lost all count of deck landings and underslung loads. Often we department heads sat mute in the Captain's morning conference as a Wessex or a Sea King battered deafeningly past his windows to land on the forward flight deck some 50 ft away.

Off Ascension we loaded 120 tons of first line ammunition and assault stores by helicopter in one day, real non-stop work;

again, after, D-Day, I remember taking on 61 pallets of rations, 101 pallets of ammunition and stores and 15 lifts of personnel in a short 10 hours, a very busy day!

D-Day and beyond

San Carlos Water — just the name brings back so many vivid memories it becomes difficult to pick out examples to write down. Tension had obviously been mounting over the previous 24 hours and I can recollect the hair lifting on the back of my neck as we slid past the silhouette of Fanning Head early that morning; we had been briefed that the Argentinians were on Fanning and could be a problem. The same hairs came crashing down when HMS *Antrim*, somewhere out in the darkness, opened fire in support on Fanning and other positions. After we had anchored just off the point to wait for five hours before moving in to the final anchorage in San Carlos, I wrote in my journal: 'About to rest now from 02.05 to about 04.30, lullabied by *Antrim*'s 4.5 shelling Fitzroy' — some lullabye!

The first air attack came at 08.50 in beautiful weather conditions. From the bridge we saw a Puccara aircraft come racing round Fanning Head, launch a salvo of rockets at HMS *Argonaut*, and turn in towards the anchorage and us! I am quite sure that we were the first ship in San Carlos Water to open fire with our machine guns and Blowpipe missiles as the 'plane veered away down our port side, over the headland and away. I remember turning to the First Officer and saying: 'I don't know about you, but my hands are shaking!' 'Don't worry,' he replied, 'So are mine!'

My next diary entry reads: '12.45 have survived four (?) air attacks.' During those four hours we had started to take on wounded, Argentine as well as British, and the horrors of war were with us, not to leave for many days.

So the day went on until dark (with two hours off for lunch!) with successive alerts and air attacks. When dusk fell I had the very moving experience of bringing the

survivors of HMS *Ardent* on board; wet, cold and shocked, their bearing and discipline was magnificent and they deserve the highest praise.

According to our original plan we were to remain in San Carlos Water as primary casualty receiving ship, but that evening an urgent signal ordered us to land all remaining men and kit, military and medical, to leave the anchorage by 22.30. This we did, weighing anchor precisely on time, in an absolute flurry of activity; we let go our last LCU eight minutes after getting under way! Personally I felt, as my diary records, 'a feeling somehow of betrayer as we were told to leave'. It was as though we were sneaking off, leaving our boys ashore with no home to come back to; a very correct decision but not a nice feeling. As we sailed out into the Sound, darkened and silent, we saw the wreck of the *Ardent* aground and burning, a sad sight at the end of a very long day.

South Georgia

Beautiful Alaskan-like scenery, South Georgia is the only place I would like to revisit. I went ashore on arrival with the amphibious operations officer to see what assistance we could offer 'M' company, now in garrison. Whilst discussing their 'shopping list' we enjoyed an excellent pint of draught beer in Shackleton House! (Beer on *Camberra* had long been rationed to two cans per head per day.)

This jaunt ashore was followed by a long, memorable, radar-guided, launch trip round the assembled ships to distribute mail and take all COs for a conference on *QE2*; memorable since firstly it was in nil visibility (freezing fog) and secondly the ships were allowed to switch on upper deck lighting to assist; the first lights allowed for what seemed like years!

We spent the next 24 hours embarking the majority of 5 Brigade from the *QE2*, utilising the converted trawlers forming the Royal Navy's deep armed team sweep.

Once more we were experimenting with positioning ships alongside (my poor paint!) and torrents of men, ammunition,

and supplies came pouring aboard to be sorted, bedded, and stowed. Late on the Friday we disembarked the *Ardent* survivors to HMS *Leeds Castle*. Led by a piper from the Scots Guards, we led them down through the galley and out along a brow through the shell doors. Hundreds, then thousands, lined the rails to shout and sing their farewell. Our Royal Marine band formed up of its own accord on the promenade deck and all work stopped as we played and sang our adopted heroes off their temporary home. They went off to the *QE2* and eventually home; we went back to San Carlos

San Carlos again

Dull and heavily overcast, our two days off Ajax Bay as we landed 5 Brigade were tense but thankfully lacking in air attack. I took the crash boat, still motoring well, into Blue Beach, San Carlos Settlement, to set up our beach party to land the Welsh Guards' heavy machine gun company with 0.5 in guns coming ashore in our ex-passenger launches. The jetty had received a bit of a battering from the LCUs but was luckily untouched by bombs, although one crater from an unexploded bomb lay in the beach alongside. From the jetty, the scene ashore with lines of heavily laden troops waiting in the mud to move off was reminiscent of many of the classic infantry pictures from the First World War.

I met a young lady from the settlement called Sarah, aged five or six, waving her latest acquisition, an empty ammunition box. 'Aren't you scared when things start going bang around you?' I asked her. 'Oh no,' she said, 'We've got a nice trench right outside the front door!'

The settlement shearing shed held Guardsmen and Gurkhas brewing up, whilst around the settlement in defence and as reserve we found our many friends of 40 Commando, all somewhat glum that they were not moving forward as assault troops.

All in all, it took us two rather nerve-racking days to unload 5 Brigade; my night orders of 2 June read: 'Be ready to go to Red Alert at any time during the

night. . . . Scare charge detonators are in the Monkey Island flag locker.' (Separate from the charges in case of a hit on the bridge magazine.) However, no attacks developed, no alerts called, and off we steamed again to the safety of the vast ocean.

We were very gratified shortly afterwards to receive a signal from COMAW reading: 'Thanks to master and complement for your courageous support in landing 3 Cdo Bde and 5 Inf Bde.'

The prisoners

We spent nine days steaming in or near our part of the Trala, the Tug, Repair, and Logistics Area, some 200 miles from Stanley until at last we heard over the shore gunnery control net that 'white flags are appearing over Stanley!' Very shortly afterwards we were called to proceed to San Carlos at best possible speed to pick up PoWs which we did; in fact, we embarked the first young conscript a short 18 hours after the official time of surrender. Off we went again with 1,121 PoWs and 200 guards for our first call at Stanley.

I particularly remember being escorted through the minefields off the port by HMS *Andromeda*, whose Captain later stated that he drove in watching us over his shoulder, since not only were we much wider than his ship, but the charting of the minefields was a bit dubious! I have vivid memories of stepping ashore on to the west jetty in Stanley to arrange our shore party for loading the hundreds of huddled prisoners coming down from the bleakness of the airfield. I also remember how long I took to thaw out when I eventually got back to the ship that evening!

Away then on 18 June on safe passage to Puerto Madryn in Argentina with 4,144 PoWs on board, and a new 'paint-job' — PW in large black letters painted on screens hung over the side and on top of the fiddle housing. As we neared the coast the sun came out and we felt its warmth for the first time for many days; a delicious feeling that also brought smiles to some of the prisoners.

We had led them all through the showers, so most of the ingrained dirt was gone and they were being fed twice a day; it took five hours to get them all through one meal! They were eventually convinced that we were not going to (a) shoot them, (b) throw them over the side, (c) torture them, and (d) eat them, and they were warm, fed, and sheltered; the only problem left was that all their clothing reeked of peat smoke, consequently so did the ship!

So to Puerto Madryn and our only meeting with the Argentine navy. The British-designed Type 42 destroyer, *Santissima Trinidad*, came out to meet us and courteously guided us in to port. As we moved up the bay she moved from one quarter to the other, obviously looking for the damage that the Junta had claimed to have inflicted. Brigadier General Gariay, who received the prisoners, also wished to see the bomb holes, we were almost sorry we couldn't show him any! Just under four hours later all our temporary guests were ashore and we were off back to the Falklands, cleaning up the 'whale' for whatever our next task should be.

Homeward bound

Glory be! Our next job turned out to be taking the boys home! Four days in Stanley, a quick flip back to San Carlos and we started the long haul back. Our old chums from 40 and 42 Commando were on board, but sadly we lost 3 Para, who returned with their sister Battalion; instead we carried 45 Commando, another great team. We doglegged out into the Atlantic, keeping out of air attack range, before heading north.

One last RAS with *Appleleaf*, a slow passage past Ascension to unload stores and personnel, then onward. Past the *Elk*, our 'chummy' ship who staged a 21-gun salute (we replied in kind), past HMS *Brilliant* whose ship's company raised three huge cheers for the 'Big White Whale', past Las Palmas (more personnel) and eventually to our last strange days tying up the loose ends of the voyage of a lifetime.

I remember the welcoming messages from the South Coast towns as we steamed along the coast; our final supremely moving 'Beat the Retreat' on the midships flight deck as we steamed past Tor Bay and finally the overwhelming welcome in Southampton Water that brings a great lump to the throat even now. A very proud handshake with the Prince of Wales was followed by my lovely family and home.

Personal view

Apart from a campaign medal, a host of memories and memorabilia, and many good friends, what have I gained from the experience? Certainly a fuller knowledge of my own capabilities and limitations; an

awareness of how to handle people under, at times, severe stress; a deeper knowledge of my ship and its own capabilities; and a deal of insight into the workings of the military mind.

Certainly I now have much amphibious warfare experience to add to my RNR training; I can own to expert knowledge of some aspects of STUFT; and I hope to be able to pass some of it along. Maybe the principal gain is an ability to face the day-to-day problems of life ashore and afloat with more equanimity. Trite to say, perhaps, but after facing the wrong end of a Mirage, other worries tend to diminish!

Ah well, let's go back to keeping the Great White Whale bright and shiny!