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LOGISTICS OPERATIONS ON ASCENSION ISLAND – 1982

Es el relato de las actividades logísticas en la isla de Ascensión durante el conflicto de Malvinas.

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Logistics Operations on Ascension Island — 1982

WHEN the patrol delivered my passport to my home in deepest Devon and a pussers' black car arrived all on a Saturday morning to take me to Northwood, I knew something serious was afoot. Argentina had invaded the Falklands.

I had been between appointments and working on a paper on the officer complementing of the Type 23 frigate. A friend in the quieter reaches of Admiralty had put himself on the distribution of signals to and from Captain Nick Barker in HMS *Endurance* and so we had shared much merriment following the exchange of messages. Of course it was not true that the Argentines had no intention to invade the Falklands — they had several plans and had rehearsed the operation. The problem was that London refused to believe the evidence. My chum and I had been on a run ashore in Buenos Aires in 1969, he had been to the Falklands (then a rare thing) and now had an Anglo-Argentine wife; I speak some Spanish and in 1971 I had joined a expedition to the Andes which took me across Chile and the Argentine. Our knowledge of the scene added spice to our illicit reading.

At Northwood the Commander in Chief turned from more pressing matters to say 'Ah, Peter: you're the man who's going to Ascension Island, I want you to go out there and make things work. Good luck.' That was it: the best briefing and the shortest I have ever received.

Twenty-four hours later, joined by the S&S drafting emergency relief party with its leader, FCSA North, and by Commander Tony Woods and his team from Yeovilton, we were airborne in a Hercules. Gibraltar during a brief stop seemed eerily quiet. The guardian Lynx at North Front was unusual and foreboding. Ascension Island from the flightdeck windows 18 hours later confirmed expectations gleaned from reading the Admiralty chart, the South Atlantic Pilot and the slimmest of references in the Kingsbridge library. About the size of the Isle of Wight, almost inaccessible from the sea, rocky and barren without even a fringe of swaying palm trees, life sustained by weekly flights from America and quarterly supply ships from England, and about to be shaken gently into the Twentieth Century.

Ten years on from the Falklands War, when lessons related to logistics were learnt, and since other lessons from the Gulf War are also likely to highlight the importance of logistics, it may be timely to review what happened on Ascension Island between early April and the middle of July 1982. I will try to do this by examining some of the tasks which arose on Ascension and by describing how problems were approached and solved.

A cautiously worded signal to the Task Force had said something to the effect that there might be an opportunity to pass a small amount of urgently needed airfreight through a temporary airhead on Ascension Island. From the first moment of arrival it was clear that the task was greater by several orders of magnitude. New arrivals put their kit down on the runway and turned to. There were three early priorities: to organise the airhead, to accommodate our people and those who were following, and to feed them.

The airhead

As we arrived, several Hercules had already visited Ascension Island. Their cargoes sat hunkered on the apron, just as they had been unloaded and waiting inspection. Advanced elements of the Fleet Air Arm were assembling Lynx helicopters and painting out aircraft markings.

The Joint Services priority code for stores and movement is not a sharp surgical instrument. Once stores demands are upgraded, everything moves up in priority. In any case, once the airbridge was open and worked up there was little control over the flow of material to the fleet further south. Some items reaching the airhead did look suspiciously like ironing boards. The method which we adopted from the beginning, and seemed to work well throughout, was simple. Arriving air cargo was sorted by customer code, assembled into convenient helicopter loads (I decided to assume a Wessex: we worked by rule of thumb, one net/pallet for a Wessex, two for Seaking, three or four depending on shape, for a Chinook) and then to relate loads to known and anticipated movements of ships. Packages were not opened,

so without a package or airway bill number we could not answer queries from understandably frustrated ships who asked to know, 'Where is the new gizmo for my broken gadget?' Working continuously during daylight hours, we soon celebrated the first 1,000,000 lbs of airfreight, we toasted the first 10,000,000 lbs of freight and then we stopped counting.

Accommodation

The next priority was accommodation. Familiarity with Portland DISTEX had prepared me for what I was to find on a recce of the island. There was some accommodation to be wrested from the various authorities on the island such as Cable & Wireless, there were derelict buildings to be renovated, and sites for tented accommodation to be selected. Five artificers waiting to join their LSLs were formed into an engineering team, given access to the C&W and BBC stores and orders to prepare basic accommodation. Soon portable buildings of every description began to arrive, flat-pack, concertina, and inflatable. The climate was kind (a permanent breeze mitigated the heat, there were only very occasional heavy showers, the nights were balmy) but living conditions were permanently overcrowded and unsanitary. We were undoubtedly lucky to experience no major health problems.

Catering

Small numbers could be fed on repayment in the PANAM canteen, but as numbers grew rapidly and unpredictably it was clearly incumbent upon the British forces to cater for themselves. The analogy with a Portland DISTEX grew. Field kitchens were needed and these were initially manned by the RAF's Field Catering Support Unit. Next we needed provisions: one evening I reckoned we had about 24 hours' rations left on Ascension and I organised a press gang to seize the rations which a certain formed unit were guarding jealously — until force of habit caused them to retire for tea! I also enjoyed replying to DGST(N)'s signal exhorting me to make maximum use of local purchase, though later I was wilfully to misinterpret this signal for another purpose. Soon we had 40ft refrigerated containers flown in, had taken over a disused

warehouse in the harbour area, and CPOCa (now Lt) Peter Hayward had established a model, island-wide distribution system. Within a few weeks there were over 1,000 people on the ration strength. Eventually when northbound HMS *Splendid* signalled in her LOGREQ, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, for strawberries and cream for 80 we were able to provide.

Transport

With the camps and the airfield in four main locations and separated by several miles of sun baked roads, transport became a high priority. Bicycles featured prominently on the airfield: the RE Colonel and his Major on engineering recce were given a motorbike. 845 Squadron's OCRM, Lt Mark Ellis, took charge of five doctors and organised a motley fleet of transport, some hired from the BBC and others commandeered from waiting units. The island bus service did well until the doctors had to join their ships. I was not amused when on the morning after professional MT staff took over, the bus service collapsed — the drivers needed their compulsory rest period.

Manpower

During the next few weeks I was to recall frequently Drake's demand that 'I must have the gentlemen to haul and draw with the mariner, and the mariner with the gentleman . . . and I would know him that would refrain to set his hand to a rope . . .' Manpower was always in short supply, specialist teams could be called out from UK and when they did arrive tended to be good, but numbers only exacerbated internal administrative problems and took our eye off the main responsibility which was to ships and operations in the South Atlantic. Specialists also tend to act like Plymouth Brethren when faced with tasks outside their profession. When not employed on their primary aims, I used every man available. Writers were employed as cooks and accountants, doctors as drivers, ordnance artificers as plumbers and builders. Sailors proved themselves to be especially flexible, perhaps it is because of our all-of-one-company ethic.

Regulating

There was little control over the flow of people

onto the island, but we needed at least to register the arrivals, to sort them as transients or as would-be residents, and to house them. There had even been a small number of minor disciplinary problems. Then there was the need to regulate the growing camps. Specialist teams for each of these functions might have been better, but would have added to our problems. Enter Lt Ernie Lord and his team of RN regulators, who from their billet in a 19th century jailhouse, cheerfully undertook all these tasks!

Organisation

By this time I had gathered a staff with considerable expertise. We met daily to examine routine matters and emerging problems. We thought particularly carefully about the need to call in extra people and usually there was some tri-service debate about who would be most suitable for any given task. The organisation looked like this:

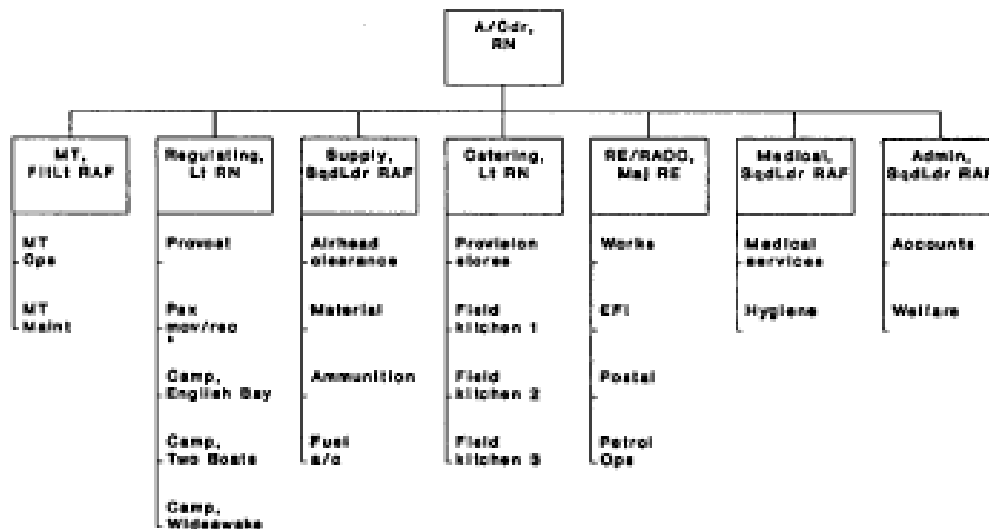
his great achievement was laying a pipeline to the airfield from the fuel farm in Clarence Bay some three miles away.

Water

Problems over water, laundry and hygiene illustrate a number of features about tasks on Ascension Island. In the nineteenth century the RM garrison had gathered water from a dewpond on Green Mountain. By 1982 there were two separate supplies, by tanker and by desalination, to the Americans at the airfield and the civilians elsewhere. There were also different rates of consumption: at the airfield there was enough fresh water to satisfy keen gardeners. The two systems had no cross connection, and in April 1982 one of the BBC desalination plants was under maintenance. Restricting consumption would have been undiplomatic, so the BBC plant had to be brought forward and another plant built by the RE.

There was no laundry, which increased water

JOINT LOGISTICS COORDINATOR



My two foremost aides were Majors Roy Lennox RAOC and Peter Hill RE. Major Roy, with his omniscient staff tables, looked after the HQ organisation and supervised, for example, our moves from a wooden hut, into tents and eventually into portable cabins. Major Peter not only took over all the engineering tasks, including assembling a desalination plant and repairing the English Bay sewage works, but

consumption by individuals and presented a hygiene risk. The first attempt to solve this problem brought out some decrepit WWII vintage trailers from UK which actually added to our problems. A deeper recce of the island — we were forever searching for more roofs — had identified a 1960s laundry. On a 24hour visit to the island by a TA Major (very hurriedly recruited, I thought), we obtained spares to set

this laundry to work, but the Pioneer Corps were unfamiliar with the equipment. This problem had a unique solution: HMS *Exeter*'s Chinese laundry crew, having declined the opportunity to see the Falklands at close quarters, were told they could not leave Ascension Island for security reasons, but if they were willing to run a laundry service for a few weeks. . .

Civic relations

The great laundry crisis had been partly precipitated by the lack of other facilities on the island. A large number of men took up jogging and ran barechested in order to avoid the difficulty of washing their shirts afterwards. This offended conservative sensibilities and caused complaints from civilians residents about lewdness. The key to this was that very many of the British and Americans, totalling with their families about 400, had come to this remote island to escape the modern world, and so their initial curiosity about British forces had, in some cases, worn very thin. The one shop on the island was run by NAAFI, NAAFI staff in NAAFI uniforms, selling NAAFI items, but with the important difference that it was run under contract to the London Users' Committee, representing BBC, C&W, etc, charged huge prices and was resupplied only every two months by the RMS *St Helena* out of Bristol. Troops could not understand why access to their apparently familiar NAAFI was restricted, and the islanders resented their shop running out of nutty and even staple goods. The balance was redressed once EFI, the uniformed branch of NAAFI, had set up a dedicated shop for the British forces with new lines of goods which began to leak across to the civilian population, and HMS *Exeter*'s sew-sew began to offer a dress making service to the ladies. There were also significant green issues on the island about turtle breeding beaches and wideawake terns and other birds.

At official level civil relations were conducted with the island's Administrator, from the FCO, and the heads of the organisations working on the island. There were few problems, once we had reached an accommodation which included, for instance, not overflying the church during services, and voluntary restrictions on using civilian clubs to the point of drinking them dry.

The RE started a programme to repair paths and bridges on Green Mountain, the RM beat retreat, Commander British Forces invited guests to a cocktail party. Individually the islanders responded superbly and with patriotism to all manner of calls for assistance, whether making gun spigots in C&W workshops or entertaining survivors on their way north.

There were other tasks too, such as preparing for casualty evacuation and to support a field hospital, though mercifully this was not needed. There was planning a POW camp (those staff tables told us how many rolls of barbed wire to order), and though in the end we kept the prisoners on ships until it was time for them to board their Red Cross flight to Montevideo, I brushed up on the Geneva conventions in English and Spanish. There were wrecked cars to buy as targets for troops to practise firings, ranges for them to zero-ise their weapons, and one day, which seemed like a holiday, to stop work at the airfield and watch rehearsals for a heliborne assault. There was also our own internal and operational security to consider.

Shipping

There was also control of shipping. Initially we stored RFA *Fort Austin* using lighters from an old stone pierhead and its single crane, later augmented by a mobile. Once the amphibious force arrived the mexefloats, which could not be moored, had to be constantly craned in and out of the water: we seemed always to have them in the wrong place. The visiting tanker was unloaded by floating pipeline: later the station tanker had a permanent pipeline rigged. There was constant boat traffic, even a visiting yachtsman, though he decided to stay just long enough to replenish his beer stocks! Most of these tasks were delegated to the newly appointed harbourmaster, a Leading Seaman. One of my duties was to board the Danish MV *Aes*, bound for the Falklands with supplies, inspect her cargo and detain her at Ascension. Since I could make myself understood in Swedish to the Danish crew, this led to the suggestion that she be allowed to proceed south to Port Stanley with me onboard in a covert role — not taken up.

Communications

Initially our communications were woeful. Hard copy routed via Cheltenham could not be distributed quickly on the island. DSSS was, as ever, worse than using underwater telephone. Communications improved only once the RAF brought in ASMA. Soon there was near instantaneous, secure communications using keyboards and display screens via satellite and HQ 18Gp to the Fleet Supply Officer in Northwood using messageboards and totes. I was also able to use ASMA to generate simple databases, using word processing and spreadsheets, to help administer events on the island. One can only ask why it took the RN so long to adopt a similar system for secure, voiceless, personal point to point communications.

The USAF

Some readers may wonder why, so far, I have not mentioned the USAF. Most works of reference and every media article I have read, talk about the US base on Ascension. Let me put that in perspective. NASA, NSA, GCHQ, BBC, South African Cable Company, and C&W each had various stations on the island; the other prominent player on the island was PANAM, contracted by the USAF to run the airfield. The 10,000 feet runway had been built on Ascension for strategic purposes, but the associated facilities were mothballed. There was one regular flight each week to/from CONUS and one a fortnight en route to South Africa. The sole American uniformed person was one rather bemused USAF Lt Col, later joined by a permanently astonished Major who was overwhelmed by the British ability to improvise.

The RAF

Of the 1,200 plus personnel who were eventually accommodated on the island 80% were in support of RAF Operations. Airpower may be almighty, but it is important to remember in any future operation that it requires a complex infrastructure, relies on host nation support, and is very manpower intensive. The Seakings and Chinooks were invaluable, as were the C130 transports of the 'Truckies': all were essential to the naval operations from Ascension Island. But Operation Blackbuck, though a masterly air

operation, and the multiple launches from Wideawake were certainly dramatic, only achieved one bomb on the runway at Stanley. The Vulcan bombers and Victor tankers and all their associated air and ground crew placed immense pressure on Ascension Island's fragile resources, so that Blackbuck probably had a worse effect on friendly operations at Ascension than it did the Argentines. Even the Nimrods were ineffectual, especially when superior information was available from space. Worse, they were misleading to the Task Force Commander¹. Moreover their report of an Argentine freighter with a judas line caused a security scare, leading to Phantoms and RAF Regiment being based on the island thus causing yet more strain on resources.

Advice

Even in 12 short weeks on the island there was plenty of advice, with not less than six visits by staff officers advising on management structures and organisations. Each invariably recommended that his parent service should take over. One of these staff officers wore the first pair of desert boots to arrive on the island, though he was quickly relieved of them. I was reminded of Hotspur's complaint in *Henry IV* about the staff officer. The only visitor who was of great value was DGST(N)'s man, Paul Kirtley, who judged the situation, signalled for more MHE, and meanwhile took his coat off and turned to with the rest of us.

Lessons

Ascension Island 1982 may not represent a typical problem in naval logistics, but the lessons are surely relevant still, and some are ageless.

Administration. The Ascension Island experience taught me that however good your administration is it must not be rigid, but rather flexible and responsive. The test of sound administration is its ability to respond to the unusual and unexpected.

Co-operation. I have been privileged to work at various times with our two sister services including being president of a large tri-service mess, and two appointments to the central

¹ Sir Sandy Woodward, 'One Hundred Days' 1992, page 109.

staff in the Ministry of Defence. We may be robust, even rude, about our cultural differences, but we had best learn about each other's capabilities and characteristics.

Flexibility. Flexibility, including a broad knowledge of affairs outside any narrow specialisation, is essential for success.

Economy of effort. The navy does not normally contemplate fighting a war from a desert island — though I would remind the reader that Ascension Island was in commission for 1815 to 1930 as HMS *Ascension* and commanded for most of that period by a Royal Marines officer — but economy of resources as well as effort is clearly essential.

Concentration of effort. Our efforts were constantly diluted by pressure to become inward looking and concentrate on internal administration of troops on the island rather than affairs further south. Captain Bob MacQueen's sterling efforts to prevent this happening may have been insufficiently recognised.

Selection and Maintenance of the Aim. Understandably in the climate post the Nott defence review, no one had expected to fight a war like the Falklands. That we had no clear

aim other than defeating the evil of the day is, I hope, forgivable. The pre-existing Joint Theatre Plan was inaccurate. The signalled directive at the end of April from Northwood and a written directive in May from Whitehall were quickly overtaken by events. The long term aim therefore was unclear, the needs of airforce, naval and logistics operations were thus often in conflict. Logistics operations should have been selected as the principal aim and should have driven the associated air and naval operations. In future conflicts we must make certain that logistics is given sufficient weight.

In conclusion, if the organisation on Ascension Island was even moderately successful, it was because others had prepared the people, given them a broad spectrum of skills, and trained them to use their initiative. The war, such as it had been for me, was over one day in July when the OC of some southbound garrison unit protested about the misemployment of his men to help clean the apron.

PGH