

FALKLANDS MEMORIES

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THE ANNOUNCEMENT

I was on Easter leave 1982 when the news broke through that the Falkland islands had been invaded by Argentinean troops, being a young 22yr old and a little bit uneducated in the geography field, thought that these islands were off the coast of Scotland and if truth be told many others thought this as well. Instead they were a small group of islands off the eastern coast of southern Argentina.

It was announced by the conservative government at that time that a task force of Royal Navy warships were to be sent to that area, including HMS INVINCIBLE and HMS HERMES, no mention of course of submarines.

At our local pub where I used to spend my evenings (and all my wages!) all my friends were pulling my leg and teasing me that I may be called to go with the task force, of course I told them "what is the use of a diesel submarine down there" how wrong I was.

I remember coming off the train at Portsmouth Harbour station that Sunday evening, I had just returned from 2 weeks Easter leave with my parents in Leicester, the next day the task force was sailing to the South Atlantic to liberate the inhabitants of the Falkland Islands from their captors.

As I made my way across Portsmouth Harbour on the Gosport ferry I could see HMS INVINCIBLE, laden with both fixed wing aircraft and helicopters and I wondered what was going to happen, maybe it was a storm in a teacup and they would all turn back after a number of days and the normal carry on of naval life return.

The next day we all saw the departure of the task force from our base HMS DOLPHIN, (where ONYX was based in the 1st submarine squadron). The 2 carriers laden down with extra aircraft (more firepower!), then followed by destroyers and some frigates.

There were crowds gathered on the harbourside, cheering, waving union jacks and no doubt many a tear was shed.

PREPARATIONS

We sailed as usual the following week to carry out various training exercises, after a few days in the Portland exercise area we pulled into Plymouth the weekend.

I was duty on the Saturday, and I remember we were berthed behind the ill-fated HMS Ardent.

The next day some of us were in the barracks of HMS Drake when the announcement came that all members of Onyx ships company were to report back to the boat and we knew that we had been called to active duty.

Some of the ships company were at home in Plymouth including our CO, (Lt Cdr Andy Johnson), and had to return back, we sailed as fast as we could and arrived back at Gosport late that Sunday evening, no sooner had we tied up alongside than the boat was invaded by groups of people from various departments to start the necessary tasks to get us ready for the long trip that was to lay ahead.

Over the next 7 days Onyx was a hive of activity, loading extra provisions and it was necessary to store some of the boxes of tinned food on the deck making it more difficult for the taller members of the crew to pass down the thin, low corridors. The spare parts for the main generators were loaded and I remember the cylinder heads hanging in the junior rates bathroom.



Martin and Onyx in Hull 1981

We also had a number of rifles and machine guns delivered, there was some special brackets made to allow the machine guns to be fitted and fired from the bridge. It was all go that week, although we did manage to go ashore in the evenings and the news was all around Gosport that we were going south. We made the most of our last few days alongside, myself and the other single guys living onboard many a pint was supped in the local pubs around Gosport such places were the Royal Arms and the George And Dragon.

THE JOURNEY SOUTH

We left Gosport on Monday 25 April 1982 and slipped from Dolphin, we left Portsmouth to start our long journey only to return that evening as one of the guys suffered an illness so we sailed again after dropping him off in Dolphin. During the next week or so we proceeded on the surface, diving for periods of time to carry on with training and the other requirements to get us ready for whatever may befall us.

The CO gave us all a briefing in our respective messdecks as what we were our tasks were to be and also our role down there, but even the CO was in the dark as to what to expect and I think we all were thinking that it would all blow over by the time we got to the Ascension Islands as we were only making about 10 knots on the surface (O boats are not the fastest vessel on the water).

Time passed and the weather started to get hotter, so to break monotony and to keep spirits high we used to stop for "hands to bathe" and we used to have a bar b q from time to time on the casing.

We passed over the equator and the crossing the line ceremony was carried out, this involved rigging a small pool of water from some plastic sheeting and dunking the crew members (myself included) under the water, this was a naval tradition. And was followed by a large tot of rum each.

Yes, up until now it just seemed like a normal carry on and we reached Ascension Islands after a period of about 2 weeks.

We tied alongside an RFA, took on more Fresh water and Diesel and carried out some repairs to one of our generator.

Sailing from ascension news broke that HMS Sheffield had been hit and was sinking, moods changed, people onboard changed up a gear and we now realised that this was all for real.

Time passed, the weather grew colder and the seas grew rougher, we were sailing into a hostile grey environment and into a sense that it was not a game but we all had to be on the ball as it could mean the difference of life or death. We were overflown by what I believe was an Argentinean 707 reconesance plane and this caused us to dive as fast as we could.

WAR ZONE

We sailed from the Ascension Islands; the weather turning more unsettled, the temperature dropping and the seas became rougher. Less time was spent on the surface and we ploughed our way onwards, dived and snorting when we could to keep the batteries charged. Moral though was still high onboard and we were kept busy both with watchkeeping duties and the more mundane task of keeping the boat clean, the thoughts of home on all the crews minds, when would we see home again? What events were we likely to encounter?

News broke through that the General Belgrano had been sunk by an RN submarine (I cannot remember if we knew which one it was at that time), this boosted moral and some of thought it would be great if we could sink the Argentine aircraft carrier Veinticino de Mayo, we learnt later that after the loss of Belgrano, the Argentine navy all returned back to Argentina.

We reached our patrol area and carried out our duties; we also carried Special Forces onboard.

We also had to go into San Carlo Bay (nicknamed "Bomb Alley") on occasion to pick up more equipment, due to us now being in a "war zone" we used to go in after dark, on the surface, with no navigation lights and behind a frigate, we had a night sight fitted to our attack periscope to allow us to guide our way in with frigate acting as escort.

We usually tied up alongside either HMS INTREPID or HMS FEARLESS (the 2 RN assault ships, sailing in the early hours before daybreak and before any risk of air attack.

The ships company onboard were now becoming very tired now due to the fact that we were having to keep watches, come into San Carlos and close up at action stations from time to time and I certainly wished it would all come to an end and that we could make our way back home again.

Weeks went by and everyone was asking themselves when is it all going to end.

Then we heard of the Argentine surrender and we all thought that it was time to surface and set a course northward home, we were all wrong Onyx was to remain on station and we carried out exercises with our own ships and keep a presence to provide a guard for the islands- everyone was upset by this decision, tired and homesick we plodded on and tried to keep a smile on our faces, my own sympathy lay with the married guys whose loved ones were thousands of miles away and we all knew we had a long trip home and to be kept down there seemed cruel.

HOMeward BOUND

To everyone's relief, the news we had been waiting for, we got the signal that we were to make our way home.

Everyone drew a sigh of relief, it was short-lived though. On our way back one of our generators developed a serious defect and it could not be fixed at sea, so we could only limp home on one main generator and because of this we had to ask for an escort vessel and a merchant ship the "STENNA SEASPREAD" was allocated to do this duty which also meant that she was going to be home later because of us (I bet the crew loved us)

We ploughed northwards at what seemed a snails pace and all of us prayed that our working generator would last the 8000 miles back to Gosport, some of us were wishing that we had sets of oars onboard so as to get up some more speed.

Time slowly passed and 1 day seemed like 1 week until the sight that some of us wondered if we would see Portsmouth.

We had missed out on the good things in life, the freedom to walk around, a hot bath and of course a nice cold beer (or2 or3).

We were not allowed alongside but instead we anchored off Spithead and everyone thought this was mental torture, laying in my bunk that night I did not sleep, I was like a small child awaiting Santa Claus to come down the chimney and leave a pile of Christmas presents.

The time had come; we were to make our way into HMS DOLPHIN.

Would you believe it, the windlass gear suffered a fault, which meant we were unable to raise the anchor. The order was given to split the anchor cable, leave the anchor on the bottom of the harbour entrance and get alongside.

I was part of the casing party that day, the weather was lousy, for an August afternoon the rain was falling quite heavily at times, and cold too but nobody cared it could have snowed for all we cared it just didn't matter.

We were so busy preparing the casing for coming alongside that it wasn't until we fell in for entering harbour that we noticed something a bit different.

The crowds were out to greet us, people were lining the walls, it seemed that all of Portsmouth had turned out to greet us, all cheering and waving flags even banners saying "Well done ONYX". There was a tug escorting into Portsmouth harbour with water cannons spraying water the noise was deafening as we passed the ships berthed in the harbour and their ships company cheering this small black vessel limping home.

Personally I had never experienced anything like it before and even had to hold a tear back, many others must also have felt the same.

At 1330 on August 18th 1982 we berthed alongside, our families on the jetty to meet us and there is just one thing question I still ask myself to this day,

WHY COULD THEY NOT HAVE KEPT THE BAR OPEN FOR US!

