

SS Atlantic Conveyor – one Coachmaker’s Falklands’ experience

Easter week of 1982 started slightly abnormally, but not in a way which gave me any inkling of what was to come. I had qualified as an aircraft engineer officer in the Fleet Air Arm only a year earlier, and was enjoying my role of Deputy Air Engineer Officer (DAEO) of 707 squadron at RNAS Yeovilton, which comprised 12 Wessex V helicopters and was responsible for conducting advanced flying training and operational flying training on Wessex Vs for Commando aircrew, as well as providing the final stages of training for engineering mechanics and technicians starting their careers in the Fleet Air Arm. The engineering leadership of the squadron was the Air Engineer Officer (an experienced Lt Cdr), myself (in the rank of Lt), and a Warrant Officer as Senior Maintenance Rating.

It being the week before Easter, the squadron would normally have been shut down and on leave, but following the occupation of a whaling station and the subsequent invasion of the Falklands, the Prime Minister had announced the formation of a Task Group to sail South, and the newly introduced Sea King 4s of 846 squadron were preparing to go south on HMS Hermes to provide troop and load lift capability, augmented by two flights of two Wessex Vs from 845 squadron which were embarked in Royal Fleet Auxiliaries (military fuel tanker and stores carrying ships manned by merchant seamen). It had become clear that we were needed to move spares, maps, and documentation around the UK over the Easter week, so I stayed at work that week while my boss took his planned family holiday on a narrowboat, and we ran a skeleton operation of two aircraft and a few staff to meet the support needs. At the end of the week, I decided I deserved at least Easter weekend off so went down to Plymouth to stay at my girlfriend’s parents’ house for the weekend, culminating in an extremely aggressive and alcoholic game of bridge on the Saturday night with her brothers.

So the phone call at 0600 the next morning to announce that one of our aircraft had started up that morning at RNAS Prestwick and covered the airfield in oil smoke was not exactly welcome. Oil seeping past a bearing/seal at the back of the engine and into the turbine casing was a known problem and was a deferrable defect, so I told the pilot to fly it back to Yeovilton and I would meet him there so that we could remove the engine to change the seal. Having got there, it became clear that the tempo of operations was hotting up, so I made sure that we would be ready to pick up at full pace the next day.

Sure enough, the early part of the week was very busy, and then the phone rang towards midday on Wednesday 14th April: “Is that Lt Henley, DAEO of 707 squadron? Well congratulations, you’re now the AEO of 848 squadron, which is just about to form. Jump into the Lynx that you can see starting up just outside your office window and come up to London for a briefing.” Thus a couple of hours later I found myself in MoD Main Building for the first time in my life, in a room with more stripes than I had ever seen (in time honoured tradition, RAF outnumbering RN by a ratio of 4:1) listening to a horrifying assessment of the likely attrition rate of Harriers in the conflict, and the need to transport replacement aircraft (RN sea Harriers and RAF Harrier GR3s) down to the South Atlantic. The ship chosen was SS Atlantic Conveyor, currently in Liverpool being resurrected from standby, and sailing shortly to Devonport to be fitted out for her new role. 848 was to embark six of our 12 Wessex, with the other six divided into flights of two to go onboard RFAs.

We embarked in a newly converted Atlantic Conveyor inside Plymouth breakwater on 26th April, and immediately sailed south. The journey south could fill another chapter of a book, including two massive fuel spillage incidents, and a two-day stop at Ascension Island to embark the Harriers, transfer stores between the Task Group, and collect a mountain of equipment which had missed our sailing but had been flown to Ascension.

We arrived in the vicinity of the Falklands to join the main task force around 19th May. Come the afternoon of 25th May we found ourselves integrated with the main Task Group, with instructions to prepare ourselves to detach that evening and steam into San Carlos water to disembark our helicopters (we had by now detached one Wessex to replace one of the two lost on Fortuna Glacier, but it had been replaced by one from 845 which had been displaced from another RFA in order to accommodate an ASW Sea King detachment on that ship). We had six Wessex Vs and three Chinooks on board. The Chinooks had had their blades removed for the journey south, but had now been re-bladed; one was ranged on the after spot, but could not be flown until we were in sheltered water and were able to lower the rear ramp, which was otherwise inside the arc of the rear blades; of the two on the forward deck, one was airborne on a flight test post re-blading, and the other was stowed on deck with its blades fitted and spread. One of our Wessex was also airborne.

We had been in company with the task force for a few days, and had been joking amongst ourselves that we were "Duty Target" – the container walls sheltering the main deck gave us a huge radar signature, and it was obvious that we were positioned on the threat side of the high value units in the Task Group, particularly HMS Hermes.

My team had spent the day removing the covers from the aircraft which had been wrapped in water vapour repellent bags for the journey south, and one by one they were moved to the front launching spot, blades spread, and a rotors-engaged ground run carried out to ready them for disembarkation. As ever, the last aircraft to be run had a defective oil pressure sender on the gearbox, so we replaced the sensor, finished the run, and I made my way up to the bridge to report our readiness to disembark to Captain Mike Layard, the ship's Senior Naval Officer. As I was making my report, I heard over the radio a report of an incoming air raid, so I made my way down to my action station, which happened to be the officers' mess bar. Thus I had the dubious honour of being sat on a bar stool at a bar with someone's unfinished G&T in front of me, garbed in full anti-flash at the moment that the ship was struck by two Exocet missiles.

We didn't realise what had happened straight away. There had been a very loud thump, followed by a pipe (tannoy) to "Hit the Deck" which we duly did. I thought that we had been hit by a bomb which hadn't gone off as there was no recognisable sound of an explosion, at least not where I was. The last pipe before the broadcast system failed was that we had been hit on the port quarter and were on fire astern. At that point the two of us in the bar decided to go down from the superstructure to see how we could help. As we made our way down the stairs it was clear that the impact had been more severe than we thought – all the fluorescent light fittings were lying smashed on the deck, and there were other signs of things being dislodged.

We arrived at the after deck, to find plenty to be done. The Chinook was sitting on the spot ready to go, but we had lost hydraulic power to the ramp so the rotors could not be engaged. In front of it, up against the rear of the superstructure were several pallets stacked high with ammunition ready for disembarkation. Unfortunately, they were placed very close to a large ventilation panel exhausting air from the decks below. This was now belching smoke and gouts of flame all over the pallets of ammunition. So, the first task was to choose one's moment, run into the pallet and grab as many boxes of ammunition as possible, and heave them over the side. Once we'd cleared the ammunition my thoughts turned to a liquid oxygen tank positioned forward on the port side of the ship, so I made my way forward to release it (it was mounted on a quick release system for exactly that purpose). However, someone had already had the same thought and it was floating in the sea off to port (fortunately for an RAF airman who had at some stage been blown over the side, as he used it as a float until he was recovered by one of our helicopters). So, I made my way back aft again, and witnessed HMS ALACRITY come alongside Atlantic Conveyor in an effort to transfer fire pumps and

firefighting crews over to us. I think they managed to get one pump across before they were ordered to cut the lines and stand-off, as there were fears that the weapons stowed on our car decks would cook off in the heat of the fires, and the ship would explode.

At that point, the order was given to abandon ship. Capt Layard and Capt Ian North, the ship's master, had made a very prescient decision during the journey south to rig jumping ladders on the starboard quarter above where the life rafts would deploy once released. The life rafts were deployed, and the jumping ladders also leading over the deck and down the 60 or so feet to the water. In truly British fashion, we formed an orderly queue for the ladders (despite the deck glowing red hot by this time), but when my turn came I only went down about six or seven rungs before the next rung was missing, removed by the top of an exploding gas bottle as it made a hole through the hull on its way out. At that point I decided that discretion was the better part of valour and let go, dropping into the water. I had a once only suit on with my lifejacket over the top (another story if you find me in a bar sometime), so was able to inflate my lifejacket once I was in the water. I swam to the nearest life raft, and after again taking my place in the queue of people hanging on round the side, was able to board. It was clear that we were going to be taking in more people than the maximum capacity, so we threw the container of equipment from the middle of the floor out of the door to make more room (this subsequently turned out to be a bad decision, as the equipment thrown out included the pump for inflating the floor of the raft). The raft was still attached to the ship by a line which was attached midway between the two entrances, so that one entrance was up against the ship and the other faced out to sea. Those trying to board by the entrance on the ship's side had real difficulty as the ship was pitching in the swell, and they were being dragged up against the ship's side. After trying several times to bring Capt Ian North in through that entrance, we suggested that he go round the side of the raft to try to embark through the other entrance. Sadly, that was the last anyone saw of him, and the world prematurely lost a truly great human being.

Eventually we cut ourselves free, and drifted away from the ship toward HMS ALACRITY who was lying astern, not far off our starboard quarter. The ship's company threw lines down to secure us to their ship, but somehow we managed to have two lines secured, one either side of the bow, meaning that we were held against the bow of the ship, as it tried to saw the life raft in half as it pitched up and down in the swell. Again, we made the call to cut the lines and drifted away down her starboard side, away from all the other rafts, and found ourselves alone and in the open ocean (now we really could have done with an inflated floor). Some of our occupants were rescued by being winched into a Sea King crewed by (amongst others) the Duke of York, and that episode now features in one of the iconic Falklands paintings.

We were finally recovered by some extremely good seamanship by HMS BRILLIANT, who managed to position herself to provide us with sheltered spot so that we could drift onto her starboard side, and we made our way up a jumping ladder into the ship. The rest of the evening is a blur, partially at least due to the copious administration of alcohol by the very generous ship's company. I'm aware that we did actually sail through San Carlos that evening while the ship conducted a Naval Gunfire Support mission, but I'm afraid by the time I next set foot on the upper deck we had been through and were back out at sea with the Task Force. We were subsequently lifted by Sea King to the BP Tanker British Tay, whence we were shipped to Ascension Island and flown back to the UK.

Tragically we lost 12 people, including two from my squadron, and I am aware of at least two (and probably many more) who were subsequently very badly affected by PTSD. It remains a very formative part of my early career, with some very fond memories of some very interesting moments, strongly tinged with the sadness of remembering those still on watch.