Ships Taken Up From Trade – ‘STUFT’

'WHAT THEY DID IN THE FALKLANDS WAR'

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Ships are listed in chronological order of departure

P & O’s Canberra and Elk sailed in company from Southampton on 9 April 1982. Canberra’s role was that of an ‘Assault Ship’ and her great endeavours in the South Atlantic have earned her high acclaim - not least of all from the 3rd Commando Brigade whonicknamed her their ‘White Whale.’ Canberra took part in the transport of 3 Commando Brigade to the Falklands, landing them that morning of 21 May in San Carlos. She then rendezvoused with QE2 at South Georgia and embarked elements of 5 Brigade and then entered San Carlos water again to land the Brigade on 2 June. She transported Argentinean POWs to Puerto Madryn and ended her war with the unforgettable triumphant return of the 3rd Commando Brigade to Southampton.

Canberra accommodated 2,400 troops for the voyage South and transported 4,400 POWs in one lift. Her Senior Naval Officer, Captain C. P. O. ‘Beagle’ Burn, RN, reported that ‘at San Carlos and elsewhere a first-class P & O geriatric passenger landing and reception organisation, managed by the Senior Assistant Purser and the gallant ladies of the Bureau, took Royal Marines, Welsh Guards and Argentinians in its stride.’ The 4,400 POWs were handled, for convenience sake, as P & O luggage; each man had a company label, coloured for the appropriate deck, attached to his left shoulder throughout his stay on board! The ship operated without a major engine room breakdown for the 13.5 weeks of her deployment. The Senior Naval Officer reported: ‘The P & O deck officers were of a particularly high calibre and they seemed to relish the frenetic pace of military activity compared to their normal cruising routine.’

'Two Gun Ship’
P & O’s ro-ro ferry Elk became the Royal Navy’s first ‘Two Gun Ship of the Line’ when her twin 40/60 Bofors were mounted during her call at Ascension Island. The guns crews consisted of eager volunteers from the Royal Navy, Royal Marines, Army and RAF personnel; in addition a backing crew of P & O officers and crew were also trained. Captain John Morton, the ship’s master, in his report dated 16 April said: ‘A great variety of emergency drills, intelligence briefs, first aid lectures, vehicle running, weapon training and physical jerks continued throughout the day with the ship’s staff, surprisingly enough, joining in. The last time I saw the cook convener, he was learning to strip and re-assemble a machine gun.’

AW Task Group

Elk sailed from Ascension as part of the AW Task Group, tactically loaded for support of an amphibious landing and with a full complement of helicopters. The group, which also included Canberra, Norland, Atlantic Conveyor and HMS Fearless and Intrepid sailed from Ascension on 7 May fully darkened, without navigation lights and with radar and radio silence imposed.

On meeting the Task Force outside the Total Exclusion Zone (TEZ) on 16 May, two hectic days of cross-decking of first line ammunition and stores took place and all Elk’s helicopters were disembarked. She then remained with the Task Force, with the Brigade’s entire war maintenance reserve of ammunition on board, until ‘called forward’ for three overnight runs into San Carlos to land essential stores and vehicles and re-supply rations and ammunition. Following the Argentinian surrender, Elk remained in San Carlos for two days before loading the entire Commando Logistic Regiment and stores and transporting them to Port Stanley where she arrived on 20 June.

Loss of ‘Atlantic Conveyor’

Atlantic Conveyor was taken up from trade on 14 April and sailed for the South Atlantic with five Chinook and six Wessex helicopters embarked on 25 April. Arriving off Ascension on 5 May she embarked eight Sea Harriers and six GR3 Harriers. Sailing in company with the amphibious Group, Atlantic Conveyor proceeded South, arriving in the Total Exclusion Zone on 19 May with 25 aircraft onboard. The Harriers were disembarked to HM Ships Hermes and Invincible and the ship then remained with the Carrier Battle group.

She was due to go into the assault operations area on the night of 25/26 May to disembark her helicopters and associated stores, but at 1942Z on 25 May she was hit in very quick succession by two air-launched Exocet missiles (AM39) which penetrated her main cargo deck port side aft causing explosions and a fireball. The ship was abandoned in a calm and orderly manner. Three men died onboard and nine more failed to survive after entering the water. Among these were her master, Captain Ian North.

Atlantic Conveyor sank whilst under tow at 0350Z on 28 May. Her sad loss was deeply felt, but her contribution to the operation was great and lessons were learnt and passed on to other ships taken up from trade which gave them an improved chance of survival if attacked.

Towage and salvage

The United Towing Company’s tugs Salvageman and Yorkshireman sailed from Portsmouth on 10 April and on arrival at Ascension were used for local patrol, ferry and ship-handling duties. On 24 April they were joined by Irishman.

On 26 April Salvageman, the most powerful of the three, sailed in company with RMAS Typhoon for Tristram da Cuna, thence to South Georgia, where she arrived on 7 May. The following day Salvageman was ordered to sea to rendezvous with HMS Yarmouth towing HMS Sheffield. Sadly Sheffield sank whilst still under tow by Yarmouth, and Salvageman returned to South Georgia for bunkers before moving out to the
TARA (Tug and Repair Area) where she met Uganda and Stena Seaspread.

Mr B. W. Vere-Stevens, Senior Mooring Salvage and Boom Officer, embarked in Salvageman, reported that this period was enlivened by the occasional visit of an Argentinian C130 Hercules modified for bombing. Fortunately, this aircraft never got within sight of the STUFTs in the TARA. On 24 May Salvageman rendezvoused with HMS Glasgow and remained in company with the Task Group for 36 hours. During this period HMS Coventry and Atlantic Conveyor were hit by air attack and abandoned. During the engagement Salvageman was much comforted by Glasgow's 'covering fire'.

Shortly after the attack Salvageman was ordered to close the Atlantic Conveyor with a view to possible salvage, but with the ship ablaze from stem to stern and search and rescue operation completed Salvageman withdrew once more to the TARA in company with Glasgow. Here she was later joined by Irishman and Yorkshireman; the former had managed to get a line aboard Atlantic Conveyor, but the ship had sunk whilst under tow. The three tugs were kept busy supplying Stena Seaspread with the salvage plant and stores while she carried out battle damage repairs to, among others, Brilliant, Yarmouth and Argonaut.

On 5 June Salvageman and Yorkshireman left the newly-named TRALA (Tug, Repair and Logistic Area) and arrived at South Georgia on 7 June. Here they were kept busy berthing Endurance, Yarmouth and RFA Olmeda in the successful operation to re-take the island of South Thule. From 28 June to 15 July, Salvageman, Yorkshireman and Endurance worked together in the most hostile and uncomfortable of conditions at Grytviken re-floating the Argentine submarine Santa Fe. After towing her out and beaching her, Salvageman and Yorkshireman proceeded to Port Stanley and more routine tug type duties!

Forward support ship
Stena Seaspread sailed as a 'forward support ship' on 16 April. With her unusual looks and the ability to 'hover' in the Dynamic Positioning mode she attracted a great deal of comment from the RNI. Although really a 'multipurpose offshore maintenance and diving support vessel' she gave superb service as a repair ship.
Seaspread arrived in the tug and Repair Area on 21 May and all war ships that received action damage were sent to her for repair.

In almost every case these repairs were successfully carried out and the ships were either sent back to the Battle Zone, or dispatched home. Much of the repair work was carried out at sea. The ship's exceptional manouevrability, stability and good craneage facilities were invaluable assets in the fight to repair hulls and damaged plant and equipment.

Ships were also received for operational defect rectification and maintenance periods. During one such operation a Tyne engine change was carried out for the very first time with a ship at anchor. Another 'first' was the changing of a controllable-pitch propeller blade on a ship at anchor. The MN crew of 31 and the large Naval Party of 162 officers and men, merged into a single team and this liaison was a significant factor in the ship's success. She is now 'down South' again involved in diving operations.

Hospital ship
Uganda was requisitioned in Alexandria on 10 April, disembarked her passengers at Naples and arrived at Gibraltar on 16 April, sailing on 19 April. Her destination after stopping at Freetown and Ascension was a holding position midway between Ascension and the Falklands. She arrived on 7 May and joined up with HMS Antrim, HMS Antelope, five LSLs and RFA Tidespring and proceeded to the newly-established holding area at 50°S, 50°30'W, arriving 11 May.

The following day Uganda received her first casualties—HMS Sheffield survivors transported by Sea Kings from HMS Hermes. On 13 May Uganda was joined by the first of the ambulance ships, HMS Heda. Following the successful landings at San Carlos on 21 May, instructions were received for all hospital ships to proceed to a newly-designed Red Cross box, an area of ocean that moved, in steps, towards the Falklands as the war progressed.

On 24 May Uganda got her first glimpse of action when two Argentine A4 Skyhawks made a very low pass down her port side. At the time she was close to Eddystone Rock embarking 28 casualties from HMS Coventry and waiting for the incoming Casvac helicopters.

Back on station in the Red Cross box it became apparent that considerable time could be saved by moving Uganda closer inshore. Grantham Sound was selected and a plan evolved to anchor the ship there during daylight hours to receive casualties quickly and efficiently from Ajax Bay; with the exception of RAS(L) requirements to the north east of the Falklands Uganda anchored in Grantham Sound each day from 29 May until the eventual surrender of Argentine forces.

During her time as a hospital ship Uganda handled 730 battle casualties, both British and Argentine. Her Senior Naval Officer, Commander Gough, reports that the Uganda ship's company 'gave enthusiastic support to the work of the hospital and its success was due, in no small part to their help. In particular the Purser's Department deserve a special mention for their cheerful and unstinting work supporting the Naval Party.'

Mixed cargo
Europic Ferry sailed from Southampton on 23 April in company with Norland and Fearless and loaded with a 'mixed cargo' of ammunition, vehicles fuel, aircraft and equipment for the 2nd Battalion Para Regiment, 29 Battery RA and 656 AAC Squadron. After a one-day call at Ascension she sailed on 7 May as part of the Amphibious Group in company with Canberra, Elk, Norland, Atlantic Conveyor, RFA Stromness and HMS Fearless and Intrepid. On 17 May they met the carrier group and preparations were put in hand for the amphibious landing.

On the following day the ship went into action stations for the first time as enemy aircraft were detected. On the evening of 20 May the Amphibious Group detached from the Carrier Group and made passage to the landing area at San Carlos. Europic Ferry was the last vessel to enter San Carlos and anchored shortly after sunrise. The area was subjected to air attack throughout the day by Mirage, Skyhawk and Pucara aircraft. Thankfuly, the ship suffered no direct hits but was shaken on a number of occasions by near misses. All through the attacks her own armament of LMGs and Blowpipes were brought to bear.

Unloading completed, Europic Ferry sailed under cover of darkness to rejoin the Carrier Group in company with Canberra and Norland. For the next four days she remained with the Carrier Group close to Atlantic Conveyor. The ship's company took the opportunity to complete the repainting of the ship's superstructure. This had been started in San Carlos when it was mentioned that her funnel livery made a good aiming point for attacking aircraft!

On 25 May Europic Ferry was ordered to close Canberra to embark a Sea King, then to make a passage in company with Atlantic Conveyor and Elk to San Carlos with a frigate escort. In the event Atlantic Conveyor was hit by Exocet and Europic Ferry was detached independently and made her way to San Carlos, where she discharged all remaining personnel and equipment. The ship sailed under cover of darkness with Sir Geraint and escorted by HMS Plymouth to rejoin the Battle Group. Some three weeks later she entered Port Stanley to load for home.

The Senior Naval Officer, Lieutenant-Commander Roe, reported that 'the willingness and co-operation of the MN crew could not be faulted. Led by a master with considerable experience and very sound leadership the ship completed all tasks assigned in an exemplary manner.'
Two Para Transport

Norland sailed from Portsmouth carrying the Second Battalion the Parachute Regiment and supporting personnel on 26 April. During her call at Ascension disembarkation drills were conducted with Fearless's landing craft. Sailing South with the Amphibious Group, Norland entered Falkland Sound early in the morning of 21 May. She anchored with Fearless and Intrepid off Chancos Point at the entrance to San Carlos Water. 2 Para were disembarked into Intrepid's LCV's and once the troops were ashore Norland weighed and re-anchored off Doctor's Point in San Carlos Water.

She was the first ship to anchor in what was to become known as 'Bomb Alley'. Air attacks and unloading continued throughout the day and that evening a night passage was made back to the Carrier Battle Group. Astern, HMS Ardent was ablaze, flames shooting skywards. Norland returned to San Carlos Water on 23 May to continue offloading men and equipment. The air attacks continued unabated and that night the anchorage was illuminated by the horrific sight of HMS Antelope burning and exploding.

Stores and personnel were moved throughout that night and the whole of the next day, 24 May, when the ship came under her heaviest air attack. That evening the Weymouth based Air Launch Unit commenced discharging. She was 'welcomed' back to the TEZ by HMS Brilliant and was instructed to make for San Carlos for the third time. She arrived as high-level bombers launched an attack and joined an 'armada' of ships carrying out evasive manoeuvres, in confined waters, at night and without lights! After disembarking troops, Norland loaded 520 POWs onboard-six in number. Later, survivors from Antelope were embarked and Norland proceeded to a rendezvous with QE2 at Grytviken together with Canberra. Here, Antelope survivors were transferred to the Cunarder and elements of Five Infantry Brigade embarked. Norland's return to the Total Exclusion Zone was marred by the interception of a signal from British Wye under air attack some 300 miles to the North.

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A further POW run was made to Puerto Madryn with 2,047 POWs embarked. On 23 June Norland sailed for Ascension carrying 1,087 army personnel in company with Eurotic Ferry. This was to become known as the inaugural voyage of the Falklands-Ascension steamship company!

Iris sailed on 29 April and took up duties as a dispatch vessel operating between Ascension the Falklands and the Carrier Battle Group. Her role involves the carriage of essential equipment, mail and personnel.

Lycaon sailed on 5 May carrying ammunition. After rendezvous with the Carrier Battle Group she proceeded to South Georgia and on to the Falklands.

Stores support

Saxonia was used as a stores support ship and excellent use was made of her refrigerated capacity. She sailed on 8 May arriving South Georgia 23 May where she rendezvoused with HMS Endurance. Cargo was transferred to RFAs Resource, Stromness and Regent. Saxonia sailed for Ascension and UK on 13 June to commence another ‘round-trip’.

Baltic Ferry and Nordic Ferry sailed in company on 9 May loaded with troops, stores and ammunition in support of 5 Brigade. They rendezvoused with the Carrier Battle Group some 150 miles east of the Falklands and Baltic Ferry entered San Carlos Water on 1 June. She anchored in total darkness during an air raid. The ship was to make three visits to San Carlos interspersed with short periods in the TRALA (Tug, Repair and Logistics Area).

QE2 sailed from Southampton on 12 May with the 5th Infantry Brigade embarked. She rendezvoused with HMS Antrim on 27 May and anchored in Cumberland Bay South Georgia. Work started immediately on transferring troops, stores and equipment to Canberra and Norland. Survivors from Antelope, Ardent and Coventry were embarked on 29 May and the ship sailed for home.

Atlantic Causeway was converted to carry, operate and support helicopters in addition to transporting a large amount of general stores, equipment and vehicles. She sailed on 14 May and arrived off the Falklands on 29 May to disembark Sea King helicopters to San Carlos. The ship anchored in San Carlos Water on 1 June and sailed for the TRALA on 9 June with 169 survivors from Sir Tristram and Sir Galahad embarked.

Laying moorings

Wimpey Seahorse sailed on 16 May for South Georgia where she laid a first-class mooring in Stromness Harbour, a second-class in Leith Harbour and a third-class off Grytviken. She then sailed for Port Stanley, loaded more gear from Cedarbank and Strathewee and laid three first-class moorings in Port William and Stanley harbours. In addition she laid or overhauled six small craft moorings and helped out with tug duties—quite an achievement!

Contender Bezant was converted to a Harrier/Helo/ Transport and sailed in company with St Edmund on 20 May. On board were one Sea King, two Wasps and three Chinook helicopters, together with associated stores and equipment. After Harrier landing trials she embarked four aircraft off Ascension together with two Gazelles and another Chinook. She rendezvoused with the Carrier Battle Group and transferred two Chinooks on 13/14 June. On 17 June she anchored in Port William Stanley and commenced discharging. She sailed for Ascension and UK on 13 July in order to undertake another 'round voyage'.
Special category POWs

*St Edmund* transported personnel of 5 brigade and RAF detachments to the Falklands. Following the Argentine surrender she provided Rest and Recreation facilities for British troops. On 30 June she transported Argentinian special category POWs, including Brigadier General Menendez, to Puerto Madryn; the ship's 'buzz phrase' as the Argentinians stepped ashore being 'Sealink sets you free'! Returning to the Falklands, *St Edmund* ferried troops and civilians to and from Ascension before taking up the role of Port Stanley accommodation ship.

*Geestport* sailed on 21 May with a cargo of refrigerated stores. Arriving off Grytviken on 11 June she transferred part of her cargo to Royal Fleet Auxiliaries before rendezvousing with the Carrier Battle Group. After completing cargo transfers she proceeded to Port Stanley arriving on 23 June. Selected for her speed, *Geestport* lived up to expectations.

*British Enterprise Three*, like the Cable Ship *Iris*, was taken up as a despatch vessel. Sailing on 25 May she visited South Georgia and Port Stanley before being released due to frequent engine breakdowns.

*Tor Caledonia* sailed on 27 May with a cargo of vehicles and equipment for 9 Air Defence Regiment Royal Artillery. Included were 350 Rapier Missiles. She arrived in the Tug Repair and Logistic Area on 12 June and transferred stores to the waiting ships before moving to Port William on 17 June and Port Stanley the following day. *Tor Caledonia* remained in Stanley for six and a half weeks for discharge and loading, during that time she provided much appreciated hot shower and sauna facilities to wet and weary soldiers.

*Stena Inspector* sailed from Charleston South Carolina on 6 June. A sister ship to *Stena Seaways*, she was also tasked as a forward support ship and relieved 'Seaways' at Port Stanley in order for that ship to return to the UK for a role-change to diving support.

*Laertes*, a sister ship to *Lycaon*, sailed on 8 June with a general cargo and arrived at Port William on 3 July. She remained in port for the rest of July and played host to numerous service personnel, mainly Welsh Guards and Royal Corps of Transport in need of replacement issues of clothing.

Helicopter Transport

*Astronomer* sailed as a helicopter transport on 8 June with six Wessex, three Scouts and three Chinooks embarked. On 26 June she rendezvoused briefly with the Carrier Battle Group and anchored in Port William Sound early on the following day.

*Anvelona Star* sailed on 10 June with a cargo of refrigerated stores for transfer to Royal Fleet Auxiliaries and units ashore.

*St Helena* sailed in company with HMS *Brecon* and *Ledbury* on 13 June. Her role was that of a 'mine hunter support unit' and she had been extensively modified to fuel and store her two 'charges' whilst under way. A helicopter hangar and flight deck were constructed aft and a Wasp flight embarked. Thirteen containerised modules were embarked, seven of which were in constant use as workshops and offices throughout.

Arriving at Port William on 10 July, minehunting operations commenced on 15 July in Falkland Sound. The group sailed for the UK via St Helena Island and Ascension on 14 August.

*Rangatira* sailed on 18 June with a full load of military personnel embarked. On arrival Port Stanley she took up duties as an accommodation ship.

*Cedarbank* transported the Port Stanley airport matting from the United States to Southampton where the load was 'split' with *Strathewe*. *Strathewe* also loaded stone-crushing equipment, and two 150-ton RCLs were loaded on deck.

*Myrmidon* and *Sapele*, of Ocean Fleets, transported hotted accommodation and stores to Port Stanley.

Tankers taken up

To provide the vital supplies of fuel oil to both HM Ships and ships taken up from trade, 14 tankers were taken up to supplement the Royal Fleet Auxiliary who ran them. Seven ships of BP's River Class were the backbone of this fleet and two of these, the *British Tamar* and *British Esk*, were the only ships taken up from trade with RN modifications already fitted; in this case the ability to refuel warships by the RAS astern method. The *British Avon* and *Pearleaf* now hold the world RAS record: 52 hours 40 minutes. These ships were designated 'Convoy Escort Oilers'.

Support tankers

The other five River Class, *British Tay*, *British Dart*, *British Test*, *British Avon* and *British Wye*, were auxiliary support tankers as were *Anco Charger*, *Balder London*, *Scottish Eagle*, *Eburna* and the G. A. *Walker*. The Alvega was used as a base storage tanker and *Port Toronto* as a water carrier. The *British Esk* carried 311 *Sheffield* survivors to Ascension.

Following the bombing attack by an Argentinian Hercules against the *British Wye*, in which one bomb literally bounced off the fo'c'sle, the ship was asked to report any distinguishing factors about the aircraft. The Commander-in-Chief Fleet thought, however, that perhaps this was asking too much as the Officer of the Watch would have had his hands full at the time. Back came the most comprehensive reply imaginable and the C-in-C sent back an immediate thank you with the comment that 'the only thing missing was the colour of the pilot's socks'!

Five trawlers, *Northella*, *Junella*, *Cordelia*, *Farnella* and *Pict* were requisitioned from Marns of Hull and commissioned under the White Ensign with full Naval crews. Named the 11th Mine Countermeasures Squadron they sailed from Portland on 27 April. Arriving at South Georgia on 26 May, their first task was ferrying personnel of Five Brigade and their equipment between *QE2*, *Canberra* and *Norland*. They then carried out minesweeping operations and assisted in 'special ops'. On 13 July 1982 they sailed for Gibraltar and home.

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