

achieve my mission. It was necessary at an early stage to consider taking up ships from trade. An Order in Council under the Royal Prerogative to requisition ships was given on the evening of 4 April and announced in Parliament the following day.

It must be recorded that this operation could not have been mounted without the wholehearted co-operation of the Department of Trade, the ship owners, the masters and their crews who gave their unstinting support and worked with enormous energy and enthusiasm. The capabilities of these vessels were enhanced by installing additional equipment which included the provision of helicopter flight decks, a refuelling at sea capability, freshwater making plants and communications. These conversions were defined and completed with speed and efficiency that brings great credit to all the agencies involved.

In expectation of a requirement for additional naval air assets, 4 new Naval Air Squadrons were formed. These comprised one squadron of Sea Harriers, 2 squadrons of Wessex 5 helicopters and one squadron of Anti Submarine Sea Kings specially adapted for helicopter support operations. In addition, several new small flights, consisting mainly of Wasp helicopters, were prepared for the ships taken up from trade and warships taken from the Sales/Disposal List. These are noteworthy achievements and reflect well on the Naval Air Command.

The Royal Air Force supported by the British aerospace industry, the Chief Scientist's Department and the Ministry of Defence Procurement Executive was also quickly modifying Vulcan, Nimrod and Hercules aircraft. Air to air refuelling capabilities were developed and installed; anti corrosion measures were adopted for normally land based Chinook helicopters and R.A.F. Harriers. Additional equipment and weaponry were fitted to a number of assigned aircraft.

Early on, we established in my Headquarters a Logistic Support Cell. This was a tri-service organisation headed by the Force Logistic Co-ordinator whose task was to co-ordinate replenishment planning and all logistic requirements for the Task Force. I considered it essential that this organisation should be at Northwood to ensure optimum and economical use of sometimes scarce resources and the priority for supply of the most urgent stores. It was a vital asset and a most successful management tool.

The speed with which the operation was mounted did not allow ships and troops to prepare themselves before departure from the United Kingdom as adequately as I would have wished. All ships proceeding south therefore adopted a vigorous training programme at sea. Weapon systems were thoroughly overhauled, tested and fired: in some cases civilian weapons engineering experts sailed with the ships. Tactical and communications procedures were intensively rehearsed. Damage control exercises were constantly practised. Embarked troops carried out fitness and weapon training often in cramped, difficult and, for many, quite unfamiliar conditions. Ships had to prepare themselves for rapid and sometimes unscheduled replenishment from other ships, tankers and helicopters. Equipments were modified at sea without the usual dockyard support and ships and aircraft were painted to obliterate pennant numbers and identification markings. Later, it proved possible to give ships sailed in support of the operation a limited period of specialised sea training directed at South Atlantic operations, under the auspices of Flag Officer Sea Training at Portland.

The modifications to Royal Air Force aircraft to fit them for South Atlantic operations produced a need for an intensive programme for both aircrews and support personnel. Additional air to air refuelling instructors had to be trained so that they, in turn, could train the Vulcan, Nimrod and Hercules pilots as these aircraft acquired airborne refuelling capability. Each new weapons system had to be tested and the crews trained in its use. Harrier GR3 pilots were also practised in the use of the ski-jump for carrier operations.

#### **Ascension Island**

A key factor in this operation was Ascension Island, situated over 3,700 nautical miles from the United Kingdom and 3,300 miles from the Falkland Islands. Ascension Island was essential as a forward mounting base to replenish the ships of the Task Force and to provide them with stores, equipment and men that could not be embarked before their hurried departure from the United Kingdom. Air transport routes to the Island were activated on 2 April.

The Island airfield, Wideawake, was also vital as an airhead for all land based aircraft operating in support of the Fleet and land forces. However, with only limited facilities and totally inadequate technical and domestic back up, previously manned for and accustomed to dealing with only 3 movements each week, it was developed into a fully operational military establishment capable of supporting the permanent detachments of up to 17 Victors, 3 Vulcans, 4 Hercules, 4 Nimrods, 2 air defence aircraft and 2 support helicopters. Additionally, intensive daily air transport movements were accepted. The necessary engineering, freight handling, weapon loading and administrative support brought the establishment from nothing to over 800 officers and men of all three services within 3 weeks.

The fundamental importance of Ascension Island to the timely success of the operation meant that its vulnerability to a clandestine amphibious or audacious air attack, such as the Argentinians later demonstrated with their bomb carrying Hercules transport aircraft, could not be ignored. Air defence radar was installed to support the fighter aircraft, which were initially missile armed GR3 Harriers and later Phantoms. A detachment of the Royal Air Force Regiment provided ground defence. Seaward defences were provided by an R.N. guardship and daily Nimrod patrols of the sea areas out to 400 miles; a number of Argentinian merchantmen were detected close to the Island and these were shadowed by air and surface units until clear of the area.