

There was no time to think about the operation in which we were to be involved. Personal feelings were confused. Those who lived outside Portsmouth area could only phone their families and try to reassure them others who were able to go home were conscious of a sense of unreality which was to pervade. From the beginning, the chapel impressed upon the ships company that the safe return of Hermes depended upon each man maintaining an alertness and efficiency of the highest order. As we steamed towards Ascension Island we were preparing for war. But there was not a man on board that did not hope for a peaceful solution to the crisis. Our departure from Portsmouth had been sudden and unexpected so it was natural after the first few days our thoughts were of our families we had left behind and were prominent in our minds. On 1<sup>st</sup> May Sea Harriers from Hermes attacked Port Stanley airfield. Soon after one of our aircraft came down and an airman killed, he was the first to die at the hands of the Argentines. There would be no turning back now although officially the door remained open for a diplomatic settlement. The mood in the ship was changing, now our opinions no longer mattered and were a part of something outside of our control.

Everyone became an avid listener of the news bulletins of the world service. It was not only the fate of the Falklands but our futures perhaps even our life or death that we listened to every broadcast. The days progressed, and it became more difficult to move around the ship, especially at Action Stations. Closed up in the sickbay we grew together in mutual support, there was plenty of humour and some deep silences – humour as I sat on the deck of the doctor's office; an exocet missile had been released: we waited, and I caught sight of a poster informing me that "smoking can damage your health:" it seemed totally irrelevant at that moment: - deep silence – on the afternoon of May the 4<sup>th</sup> as we heard over the main broadcast that HMS Sheffield had been hit by a missile, we would be receiving casualties as soon as possible.

That day which brought home to people in Britain the horror and reality of what was happening in the South Atlantic, had no less an effect on us. We had expected retaliation from the Argentines, following the sinking of the BELGRANO, but not a direct hit on one of our most modern warships, while mentioning the BELGRANO it might be worth saying that the loss of the Argentine cruiser had a marked effect on the HERMES, and I expect the rest of the task force. Contrary to some newspaper reports, there was no cheering, no great feeling of elation, no celebration. In many cases the news was received in silence. We could picture the damaged ship: we knew the freezing temperature of the water, and could imagine sailors like our selves fighting for survival, there were those who asked, was it necessary? Others with fuller knowledge of the situation knew it was. All of us knew that now there was the likelihood of retaliation.

It surprised many to discover that the fear of death was not nearly as strong as the fear for those that they loved. The mental picture of wives and children suffering the agonies of bereavement haunted the men's thoughts at moments of threat and danger.

On 5<sup>th</sup> July thirteen weeks after leaving Portsmouth the Captain spoke four words over the main broadcast-"WE ARE GOING HOME" HMS Hermes had been released from the task force. We had decided several days earlier to hold a remembrance service as we left the South Atlantic. Actually, it was as we passed Ascension Island that a time was set aside after a busy day flying, for a service to be held on the flight deck at 1830, as aircraft were being towed away or secured a dais was placed in position and a microphone rigged, it was a warm evening and the sun was low on the horizon. The service proceeded along the lines of the remembrance day parade; red roses cast on the sea in

memory of those who had died for the act of remembrance everyone turned to face the sea. As the familiar lines were spoken” at the going down of the sun and in the morning we will remember them” the sun set and the silence enveloped the flight deck. The atmosphere remained long after the service and men stood around talking quietly not wanting to go below. Tears had been shed that evening, not only for those who would not be returning but also for ourselves. We were leaving behind some of the most intimately revealing and personal weeks of our lives, and now we could return our thoughts towards family reunions.

Pieces taken from original notes of Roger Devonshire “Rev Dev”