

OPPOSITE Royal Navy Sea Harriers of 801 Squadron share the flight deck of HMS *Invincible* with RAF Harrier GR 3s of 1 Squadron (foreground) and a lone Sea King on the voyage down to the South Atlantic.

experienced by the Argentinians occurred on 12 May. Eight Skyhawks attacked the destroyer *Glasgow* and the frigate *Brilliant* as they lay on line. Of the three initial attackers, two were shot down by missiles and the third crashed into the sea. The pilot of one of the second flight obtained a direct hit on *Glasgow* with a 1,000lb bomb, but it passed straight through the ship with minimal structural damage, exploding in the sea well clear on the other side. Another bomb bounced on the surface of the water, passing right over *Brilliant*, and also fell in the water. The pilot who had gained the strike on *Glasgow* then passed over Goose Green, where his aircraft was shot down by the AA defences and he was killed – the second fatal Argentinian ‘blue-on-blue’ to occur.

The experiences of the last few days, meanwhile, had convinced the Task Force Commander, Admiral ‘Sandy’ Woodward, that daylight bombing attacks on a target as heavily defended as Port Stanley were too dangerous to risk. Any further attacks should be made only at night.

On 14 May two 846 Squadron Sea Kings put a party of 45 SAS troops ashore at Pebble Island, where they destroyed six Pucarás, four Turbo-Mentors and a Skyvan. Following this raid the airstrip was out of action for the rest of the conflict. Two days later the pilots of four Sea Harriers found two ships – the transport *Babia Buen Suceso* and the merchant ship *Rio Carcarana* – in harbour at Fox Bay. These were strafed, following which both were abandoned.

Meanwhile, reinforcement of the Task Force’s air strength was under way. At Yeovilton 809 Squadron had been formed on 8 April from the ‘rump’ of 899 Squadron, and was equipped with the eight factory-fresh Sea Harriers which had been rapidly completed. On 6 May these aircraft undertook the

Fleet Air Arm’s longest flight to date, flying the 4,000 miles to Ascension in a single ‘hop’, refuelled under way by RAF Victor tankers. On arrival they joined the RAF Harrier GR 3s of 1 Squadron, which had arrived aboard *Atlantic Conveyor*.

All 809’s aircraft were loaded on this vessel, which retained six of the GR 3s, six Wessex helicopters of 848 Squadron, a replacement Lynx and four RAF Chinooks. Four GR 3s were left at Ascension as that island’s sole air defence. On arrival in the operational area on 18 May, four Sea Harriers were attached to 801 Squadron on *Invincible*, while the other four and the GR 3s went aboard *Hermes*. Next day the ammunition ship *Fort Austin* arrived, carrying four Lynxes fitted with special electronic equipment to serve as Exocet decoys; two flew aboard each carrier.

With the arrival of these reinforcements the Task Force had reached its maximum strength in operational aircraft. On *Hermes* it was decided to strip the Sidewinders and their launchers from the GR 3s, which would concentrate on ground attack when the invasion began. During the 19th a single 846 Squadron Sea King took off on a secret mission.

Flown by Royal Marine pilot Lieutenant Richard Hutchings (who had carried some of the SAS troops involved in other night operations), he now carried a small group of SAS who were to investigate the practicality of an attack on the Argentinian airfield at Rio Grande in the far south of the country. It was believed that the Super-Etendards and the remaining Exocet missiles were held here. A project had been advanced to force-land two C-130 Hercules transports full of SAS troops at the airfield to destroy these particular assets. This plan was codenamed Operation ‘Mikado’.

The prior insertion of the reconnaissance group was Operation ‘Plum Duff’, and involved the long flight of the Sea King to Argentine territory, and then on to Chile at maximum range, since return to the Task Force was out of the question. En route, an unreported oil exploration platform was spotted directly ahead that required a fuel-consuming diversion, while arrival in the target area was met by fog. Uncertain that the helicopter had arrived at the right location, the SAS commander aborted the operation at that point, he and his men setting off to take cover and report.

The helicopter crew then flew on into Chile, landed the aircraft – now virtually out of fuel, and destroyed it. They then went into hiding in the countryside for eight days to protect the security of ‘Mikado’, should it go ahead. Finally, they announced themselves as having been forced to land after running short of fuel during a routine reconnaissance sortie. This made international

BELOW HMS *Fearless* dodges Argentinian bombs in San Carlos Water.

