

Minesweeping in the Falklands

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Prologue

This story was first published as a three-part series in the editions of February, April and June 2013 of TON Talk, newsletter of the TON Class Association. The officers and men who crewed the five trawlers taken up from trade (STUFT) to form a makeshift minesweeping capability to support the Falklands Campaign, were all serving in TON Class minehunters, redeployed at short notice for this adventure.

It is ironic that the history of minesweeping (as opposed to mine hunting) began in the Royal Navy with the use of hastily adapted trawlers in the First World War and ended with the live minesweeping operations in the Falklands, also using hastily adapted trawlers, nearly seventy years later .

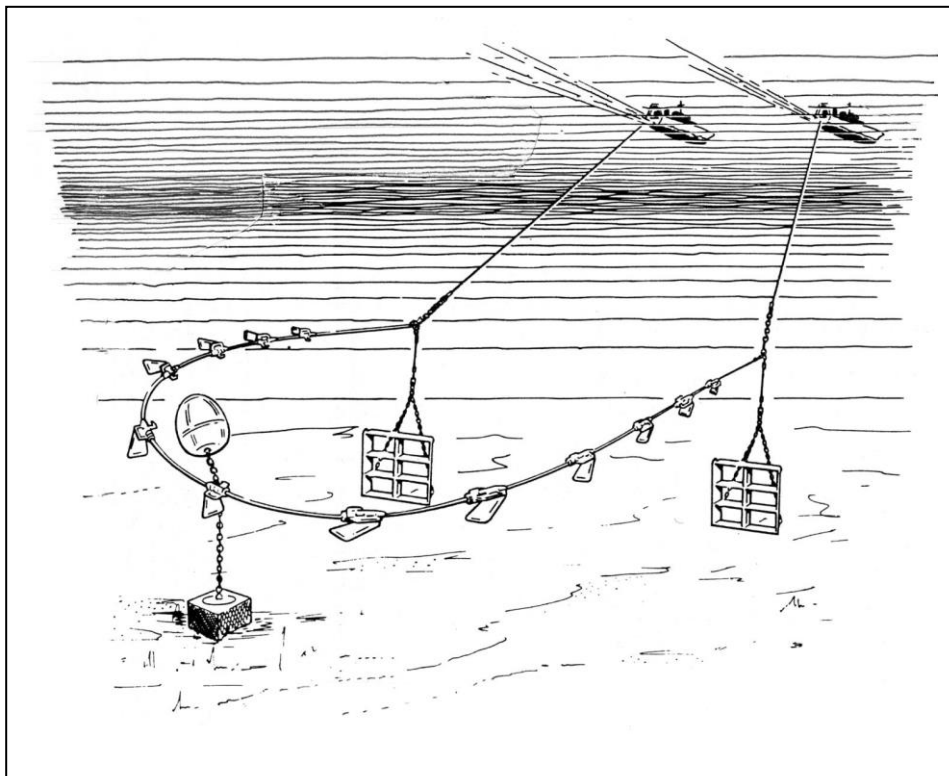
Extracts from Commander Bernie Bruen's Book "Keep Your Head Down" were also published in TON Talk and are reproduced with his permission

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Peter Down
Editor, TON Talk

Background

As an end user of the Extra Deep Armed Team Sweep (below) during the Falklands crisis, it has been interesting to read the articles in recent editions of TON Talk on the development of the EDATS system.



I can vouch for the challenges of close quarter ship handling discussed by Commander Richard Edwards-Evans and Lieutenant Commander Peter Myers in February 2012's edition, although no fun for me with Kort nozzles or bow thrusters, just a controllable pitch propeller and a barn door of a rudder. There is no doubt that the success of EDATS and the simplicity of the concept of using fishing trawlers owe much to the drive and commitment of Commodore Hastie. His frustrations when officialdom took over with the River Class development that he discusses in the August edition are well understood. Were it not for the efforts of these men and many others, we might have been embarrassed for lack of a capability in 1982. Perhaps I can add to the story and tell of the EDATs deployment and use in the South Atlantic during the Falklands Campaign.

My first experience of team sweeping was as a Midshipman in the Malta Squadron in the late 1960's where initially I was more concerned about finding an original rugby shirt in order to comply with SHAVINGTON's strict sweep deck dress code. Soon bitten by the 'Ton' Class bug and, despite suffering the inevitable run-around, I grew to the close camaraderie of life in the 'Tons' and particularly enjoyed the process, teamwork and seamanship of minesweeping.

One morning, as SHAVINGTON steamed out of Grand Harbour, Valetta in the warm Mediterranean sunshine with the rest of the 7th Mine Counter Measures (MCM) Squadron, I vowed that if I achieved nothing else in this man's navy, I would strive to command one of these excellent little ships. Well, I managed to achieve nothing else of particular note in this man's navy apart from becoming a Mine Warfare and Clearance Diver (MCD) specialist of which I am proud but I did get to command a 'Ton'. In fact, I was lucky enough to have two and, in between and thanks to General Galtieri, had the privilege of leading a squadron of five large minesweeping trawlers in a time of conflict.

The Story Begins

I was on Easter Leave from HMS MAXTON in March 1982 having been in command since the previous September. At my First Lieutenant's wedding the day after the Falklands invasion, discussion among the guests between glasses of champagne and mouthfuls of cake centred on when we were going to sort this out and who would be going. A few days later it turned out that there was a real mine threat and a mine countermeasures requirement had been issued by CINCFLEET but how were we going to provide it ? Clearly, the ageing 'Tons' would be unsuitable as they would struggle to get to the South Atlantic in one piece without inordinate support; after all, they were designated as 'Coastal'. What of the new 'Hunt' Class MCMVs due to come into service, could they be made ready in time ?

Rosyth was a buzz of activity on my return as Lieutenant Commander Phil Morton, Staff Officer to the Captain Mine Countermeasures, had rustled up some trawlers following the plan based on all the good work done by Commodore Hastie and the Bristol and South Wales Divisions of the Royal Naval Reserve. Initially, four 'ellas (CORDELLA, NORTHELLA, JUNELLA and FARNELLA) were taken up from J Marr & Sons of Hull but then the notion of a stores ship resulted in the acquisition of PICT from British United Trawlers. PICT was the sister ship of the ill-fated GAUL lost with all hands while fishing some years previously.

I had the privilege of instructing in HMS VERNON in the early '70s and got to know and respect the character of the Royal Naval Reserve (RNR) divisions during those wonderful summer days of the annual VERMEX series of exercises. The memory of the crews' determination to do well, the teamwork and of course the side splitting humour

enjoyed both during and after the day's work was done is still very strong. I was privileged to be a participant in a seven ship team sweep that was typical of the high standards achieved during those training periods. Yet in Rosyth in early April 1982, the word came through that Queen's Order No 2 that called up the Reserves could not be signed without a declaration of war. Thus, experienced RNR crews would not be called upon to man the trawlers that were being converted to minesweepers. Nowadays of course, the cost of maintaining military capabilities has forced the concept of employment of reserve forces to change and it would not surprise me if once again mine warfare became a reserve forces commitment in the future.

I was summoned to the office of the Captain Mine Countermeasures where Captain Jeremy Stewart informed me I had been appointed to CORDELLA as Commanding Officer and as Senior Officer of the force then being assembled and I was to go and get organised. To a man, according to Tom Chambers, MAXTON's First Lieutenant, the crew of MAXTON wanted to come too but the majority of the 140 officers and men of what was to be designated the 11th Mine Counter Measures Squadron were to be drawn from 'Ton' Class crews of ships in maintenance in Rosyth. Three crews came from the 4th MCM (Fishery Protection Squadron), and two from the 1st MCM. This enabled running ships to be kept operational and provided almost all of the manpower for the STUFT (Ships Taken up From Trade) trawlers from within the MCM Flotilla.

Keen to be involved, the South Wales Division of the Royal Naval Reserve sent a team of very willing volunteers to Rosyth where they were employed as best they could be under the guise of two weeks annual training.



**Northella and Farnella
Commissioning**

Acknowledgement Navy News

Having turned over MAXTON to my First Lieutenant, I put together an appreciation of the situation with Lieutenant Commander Chris Pott, a MCD specialist who had relieved me six months previously as the 1st MCM Squadron Staff Officer Operations (SOO). We had the ships that were designed for deep sea operating but the EDATS system they were to be fitted with was intended for use against deep laid moored mines. The problem was that the areas around the Falkland Islands likely to be mined were relatively shallow. This would put the trawlers and their crews at risk not only from influence ground mines but also from moored mines, particularly if ships were team sweeping as they would be required to do with the EDATS system.

To counter the threat of magnetic mines, the ships would need to be 'wiped' [degaussed] for the southern latitudes and some sort of acoustic self protection would be required as well. The solution for the acoustic problem was to fit three of the ships with an Acoustic Hammer (AH) each that would be deployed over the side using an ad-hoc rig. Yet the acoustic self-protective 'fix' was to get us into hot water as it would later appear to the local area commander in the Falklands that we had an acoustic minesweeping capability. Even so it is highly likely that the trawlers' influence signatures were considerably in excess of the ships they were trying to protect in the depths of water that they would be employed. We had to hope that no influence mines would be encountered.

To solve another problem, that of presenting each ship to a moored mine threat while team sweeping, we needed a precursor sweep. The theory is that a precursor sweep removes mines that are dangerous to the minesweeper before other mines can be dealt with from which the minesweeper should be relatively safe. Basically, if we assumed our influence self-protective measures were satisfactory, then we would need a sweep that removed all contact mines moored shallower than 9 metres (the maximum draught of the trawlers was 8 metres) and any influence moored mines down to around 50 metres.

I threw the problem at the experts in the Admiralty Underwater Weapons Establishment (AUWE) at Portland where another MCD colleague Lieutenant Commander Chris Massie-Taylor was the naval officer appointed as the 'Applicator'. His job was to translate such requirements to the boffins and then interpret their solutions back to the operators. I posed the question that using large 'Jumbo' minesweeping floats, normally used to support acoustic sweeps, could we turn the large EDATS Kite Otter Multiplanes (KOMS e.g. tin gear) into an Oropesa sweep system and could AUWE predict some float and kite wire length tables please?

As readers of TON Talk will be aware, an Oropesa sweep is diverted to port and/or starboard of the towing minesweeper and allows other minesweepers following astern to tuck in safely and be protected from mines by the sweep of the ship next ahead. Of course, the lead ship is at risk but only for the first run, which is why you start well clear of where you believe the mine field to be. Following minesweepers then widen the swept path in turn and in comparative safety as they are tucked inside the next ahead's float. On the return run, the lead ship takes a line that is within the now wider swept path produced on the previous run by the other minesweepers. Previously swept live floating mines will need to be kept an eye on until you can deal with them and one should always be prepared for those that leap out of the water suddenly in front of your bow that will require your instant attention, but more of that later.

At the same time as Chris and I deliberated sweep systems, we believed that PICT would be wasted solely as a stores carrier. Not only was it wise to spread stores among all the ships in which there was ample capacity in any case but it would also be valuable to have PICT as another minesweeper. This provided redundancy if any of the others were lost as well as making any sweeping task more efficient. I think too that crew morale would have suffered had any ship not been able to take part on an equal basis and I knew that this would have been intolerable for the Commanding Officer and his team.

The five trawlers were pulled off the fishing grounds and ordered into Rosyth to be met by a succession of large freezer trucks that relieved them of most of their fish (we kept finding them months later). The bewildered crews were paid off although the skippers remained behind for a couple of days to advise on ship handling characteristics. The ships then

underwent rapid conversion, were stored for war and with their Royal Navy crews undertook two days shakedown in the Forth exercise areas.

During the conversion period the team from HMS CAMBRIA South Wales Division RN installed the minesweeping gear and hammered on a set of sweep wire in each of the five ships in order to get us started; ships subsequently were able to reel on three sets of combined sweep and kite wire while on passage. The RNR team briefed the sweep deck crews on the intricacies of Trawlex linkages, two barrelled winches, the sweep transfer procedure and lastly the tensiometer gear.

Fishing trawlers have powerful winches for handling fishing gear but with two barrels only as compared with the three barrelled winches used in the 'Tons'. Thus it was necessary to attach both sweep and kite wires together on each of the two barrels. After you had deployed one sweep wire with the kite wire already attached by a Trawlex link, the link was then shackled further to either a sweep wire from your cohort, if team sweeping with EDATS or, in an Oropesa configuration, to your other sweep wire that you had already deployed. These other sweep wires would have been held temporarily under tremendous tension on an auxiliary winch or, in the case of Oropesa sweeps, would have been veered to the auxiliary winch and then disconnected from the other main winch barrel prior to connecting to the link. The entire sweep would then be veered with the sweep wire joined to the kite wire at the Trawlex link with the Trawlex link further attached to the kite via the kite pennant. As the sweep is lowered, the kite pulls the sweep down to the required depth.

There is no doubt that the CAMBRIA team's contribution had been significant in our preparations and their enthusiasm and commitment, albeit tinged with a little envy, was typical of the Royal Naval Reserve. The team's efforts were recognised subsequently by the award of an MBE to the officer in charge, which is not bad for 14 days annual training. Without detracting from their contribution, the considerable effort required to get the ships away was by no means theirs alone as many people from a large number of organisations worked very hard in the few days it took to prepare the ships, not least the excellent Rosyth dockyard workers who showed what could be done when it needed to be done and all without a job card, typical of the "can do" attitude prevailing at the time.

PICT and the 'ELLAs were then commissioned as Her Majesty's Ships and thus entitled to use the HMS prefix. They were the only Ships Taken Up From Trade (STUFT) to have this distinction. Weeks later when the trawlers arrived off the Falklands Islands, a signal warned all friendlies "There are some rusty looking trawlers about; they are not painted grey but they are ours and they fly the White Ensign".

Course South. Speed 10 knots.

I visited Northwood for briefing and was introduced to the Commander in Chief by Lieutenant Commander Hamish Loudon, the Fleet MCD Officer. In the middle of the command brief Admiral Fieldhouse fired a question at me, "How much Zero PIM time do you have planned?" [*PIM = Position and Intended Movements; signalled each night by HM Ships – Ed*] After a moment spent interpreting HQ speak, I responded with "An SOA (speed of advance) of 10 knots is planned Sir".

It was apparent that the CINC was concerned whether we would get to the Falklands in time to be useful as mine sweepers before the landings. The southern winter was approaching and if diplomacy failed, it would be vital to get any fighting done before the weather deteriorated.

PICT and three of the 'ellas could sustain 16 knots while JUNELLA, had been built to carry a much larger catch but at a slower speed, was flat out at 13 knots. We could get there more quickly but would need time at some point to work ourselves up in EDATS and with an EDATS derived Oropesa sweep.

I took the opportunity of my visit to seek out Captain 'Freddy' Fox, Assistant Chief of Staff, Operations (A/COS OPS) for whom I had worked in a previous appointment. With reference to Commodore Hastie's comments concerning the arming of minesweeping trawlers, when I asked whether the trawlers could be fitted with a point defence system e.g. a Bofors 40 mm or Blowpipe, Captain Fox gently dismissed the request by considering it unlikely the trawlers would be brought into a hostile environment until control of the air had been achieved. Hmmm !



**11 MCM Squadron
leaving
Portland**

The trawlers sailed from Rosyth in twos and singly. Four rendezvoused at Portland, practising astern refuelling from an RFA. PICT joined later in the Bay of Biscay during a gale. Heading south, we attracted interest from French and Spanish Maritime Patrol aircraft. We exercised team sweeping on a daily basis; each ship team swept with each other on both sides, then in threes and then the full five all together, including turns.



Passage South

Similar to the experience gained in VENTURER and ST. DAVID, it was less stressful all round to allow a monitored auto pilot to conduct the turns. We even tried team sweeping at night but only once. You can rig up lights as for a night RAS but with ships only 30 feet apart while passing sweeps, a seaman's eye struggles to appreciate change in distance sufficiently quickly to be safe.

We refuelled at Ascension Island and continued south unescorted and silent, bothered only by flying fish, RAF Nimrods firing recognition flares and King Neptune. Three days out, an RAF Hercules parachuted five sets of EDATS size wrought iron Oropesa otter slings to us together with five copies of the previous day's Sun newspaper. The slings had been specially manufactured in Rosyth Dockyard and were delivered in a big waterproof cardboard box. That small gesture with the newspapers was much appreciated and spoke volumes that the guys in Rosyth were with us.



With tables predicted by AUWE and a little ingenuity, we were now able to stream the Deep Double Oropesa Sweep using the EDATS tin gear and the Jumbo floats. The tables gave us

lengths of float wire to fly the otters at the required depth as well as how much kite wire to deploy to fly the kite at the correct depth. Using sextants, ships' Navigating Officers measured the distance between the two floats that provided the swept path of individual ships and we were all set. By the time the Squadron reached South Georgia at the end of May after a month at sea the five ships were well shaken down having completed in all some 117 hours of minesweeping.

Still concerned about our lack of self defence against the likely air threat, I spoke with the Royal Marine Company Commander at Grytviken soon after arriving and was able to acquire a couple of boxes of 66 mm anti-tank rockets for each ship, 12 missiles each. These rockets leave a smoke trail with which we hoped to convince a pilot that the missile was guided, although a lucky hit would have been quite spectacular.

Captain Nick Barker Royal Navy was the local area commander and called me over to HMS ENDURANCE the next day where he explained that the Cunarder QEII was due within hours with 5 Army Brigade embarked. It was vital that the 5000 men of the Scots Guards, the Welsh Guards and the Gurkhas should transfer over to CANBERRA and the NORLAND as quickly as possible for onward transit to the Falkland Islands. He was concerned as to how to achieve this as the ships could not berth on each other owing to the Atlantic swell and asked me whether I thought we could use the trawlers to do the job. After the long passage south, the ships' companies were very keen to do something positive towards the war effort and needed no encouragement. It felt really good to be useful.

There are many stories regarding the 5 Brigade transfer but the key achievement was that the job was completed within 36 hours, 400 troops at a time. Yet we were not alone and the two Sea King 4s that had come down with QEII worked their socks off too shifting the bulk of 1200 tons of stores.

Next, working in 2 watches, 12 hours about, the ships continued to cross deck food, stores and ammunition from various merchant ships that arrived in a steady stream across to RFAs that similarly came and went.



**The Queen
and one of
Her Majesty's Ships**

South Georgia is subject to a phenomenon caused by katabatic winds whereby in about 15 minutes the apparent wind could change from flat calm to a Force 8 gale, fortunately not for very long. Merchant ships would drag their anchors and in some cases went to sea with a trawler attached alongside. I recall tiptoeing out of the anchorage to ride out one such gale at sea with 112 palletized yet unsecured Rapier missiles parked on the forward hatch but what's life without the occasional challenge ?

After 10 days at South Georgia, three of the Squadron were called forward to the Falklands and were convoyed into San Carlos the night following the bombing of SIR GALAHAD and SIR TRISTRAM. As a result of the fall of Goose Green, CORDELLA, PICT and JUNELLA received captured Argentine Rhinemetal twin 30 mm anti aircraft cannon which bode well until they were ordered to be given up to the Landing Ships Logistic (LSL) that were rightly deemed to have a higher priority.

A day or so later, CORDELLA and PICT were at anchor in Teal inlet following a night operation when they were over flown by a single Argentine A4 Sky Hawk at low level, thankfully devoid of bombs. The aircraft had obviously taken damage as it was travelling slowly and the engine sounded like a tumble dryer containing a handful of coins. The LSL SIR PERCIVAL, nearby unloading stores, opened up with its newly acquired 30 mm armament and morale in our neck of the woods rose as a thousand rounds per minute per barrel formed a cone of death of exploding shells, albeit well astern of the enemy. I would have been quite happy with a single 40 mm Bofors for morale boosting purposes or in fact anything better than small arms for, as we were to find out later, you have to get unwisely close to dispose of floating mines with a Light Machine Gun (LMG).



CORDELLA and LSL SIR PERCIVAL at Teal Inlet, East Falkland

I am thankful that today's MCM vessels are much better armed. During the day we remained at anchor rather uncomfortably in San Carlos water and operated in open water by night only to avoid the air threat. The three ships carried out unconventional operations inserting and re-supplying Special Forces units as well as a 'guinea pig' minesweeping operation once it had been clarified that 'Directive Charlie' had been ordered.

The 'guinea pig' task was ordered to establish the presence or absence of mines in the area where ships would be operating while conducting Naval Gunfire Support (NGS). Having asked for Directive Charlie, I received an unequivocal signal from the CTG that stated, "I accept the loss of a trawler against successful completion of the mission." Fine, the CTG understood the possible consequences of placing a trawler up against magnetic or acoustic mines in shallow water and had accepted the risk.

The presence of three Acoustic Hammers (AH) in the squadron, fitted for self protection as mentioned earlier, was nonetheless an influence minesweeping capability but of highly questionable effectiveness in terms of survivability of the minesweeper; hence the need to order Directive Charlie. As two of these units were still in South Georgia onboard NORTHELLA and JUNELLA, PICT drew the short straw. Operating as usual in complete radio silence, PICT proceeded in company with CORDELLA who took onboard all but 14 of PICT's ship's company at the entrance to the bay. Shortly after PICT had began the task closer inshore, the AH electrical supply failed. The importance of the mission had been made clear and time was critical so, instead of withdrawing his ship to effect a repair, Lieutenant Commander David Garwood ordered PICT to be made as noisy as possible. All machinery was run up, which put the generator on full load thus increasing the magnetic signature. Main engine speeds were alternately raised and lowered to cavitate the propeller and create more noise, all to encourage any influence mines present to show themselves.

I found out about PICT's actions that night from rumour control the next day once we had scuttled back to the safety of Teal Inlet yet it was exactly what had been necessary at the time. For his actions that night, David Garwood was awarded a Mention In Despatches for his resolute leadership in getting the job done. Fortunately, no mines were encountered for he and the ship's company remaining on board might not have survived. I remain convinced that had there been any mines in that area, PICT would have followed her sister to a watery grave.

On 15 June Argentine forces surrendered. Meanwhile NORTHELLA and FARNELLA that had soldiered on valiantly with the cross decking task in South Georgia, much to their chagrin, were ordered to rejoin. Now at full strength, the Squadron carried out an exploratory sweep in the approaches to Port Stanley, just in case. On completion PICT was given the honour of being the first warship to enter as a standoff was ordered so that we could plan the clearance of the known mine fields off Port Stanley.

Peace had broken out, as characterised by the signal "Officers will wear ties ashore and should now be saluted", to be followed by "Hostilities are over, medal bids should be submitted by Saturday etc". This last arrived a few days later while the ships were tackling the first minefield, provoking comments along the lines of "Hey, some of us are still working out here and these things are definitely hostile !".

Needless to say, no individual medal applications were made; we were a team not a collection of individuals and every squadron member had contributed equally to the team.

We had the minefield plan as recovered from the naval officer responsible for the mine lay by the two MCD officers on the Commodore Amphibious Warfare's staff, Lieutenant Commander Chris Meatyard and Lieutenant Alex Manning, and discovered that there were two fields consisting of up to 23 shallow laid moored contact mines targeted against the LSLs. Of significance, the mine case set depth was 6 metres below the surface and the deepest depth in the fields was of the order of 40 metres. One should remember at this point that the trawlers draught was 8 metres and that the ships would need to tow the sweep, not push it !



Three men, their beards and their ships on standoff in Port Stanley Harbour

Berkeley Sound adjacent to the fields was a convenient anchorage and allowed a 45 minute steam during which our precursor Deep Double Oropesa sweeps would be streamed with ships formed to advantage, according to the tidal stream direction, in minesweeping formation Golf. We knew our stuff by now or so we thought, at least we were accomplished at streaming sweeps and getting into formation, then to step over the threshold into the minefield at sunrise. I hoped my former Mine Warfare Section colleagues from HMS VERNON would be proud of me, practising what we had all preached.

In dozens of exercises over the years I had swept, hunted and dived on many exercise mines and even found and disposed of a few WWII mines but never thought I would be wire sweeping for real. Would the mines detonate on sweeping, could we sink floating mines safely with small arms and, more importantly, what were the chances of survival if one of the ships hit one?



Early morning streaming sweeps off Berkley Sound

On the first day, we swept to the south and parallel to the two minefields to establish a cleared datum line while experiencing the tidal effects and testing the navigation procedure. Each ship

reported distance and hence sweep coverage in relation to track every 2 cables by means of a precise navigation system we had brought with us. All reports were plotted in each ship for reasons that should be obvious. On leaving the first minefield, the formation would be required to wheel in formation 65 degrees to starboard in order to line up for the second field. CORDELLA led the way and managed to bottom her gear on a shallow patch so sweeps were recovered and the formation re-entered in the opposite direction to sweep the holiday.

Each new day followed the same plan when the weather permitted. The squadron left the anchorage at first light to be at the westerly minefield at the moment of sunrise with sweeps streamed, kites down and the formation established. Who would get the first mine?

Too Close for Comfort

The 23rd June 1982 turned out to be a busy day, although it all started normally enough. As the formation was coming to the end of the first minefield an unexpected helicopter arrived with the mail. The two mast configuration of all of the trawlers except PICT meant that helicopters could only be received on the wings of the bridge when mail and personnel were being transferred. This lesson was learned the hard way at Ascension Island when a Wessex 5 left bits of rotor blade behind on FARNELLA while trying to hover between the masts.

Not only was hovering above the bridge wing tricky for the pilot, with ships moving around in a seaway, it was noisy for the bridge personnel and, at that moment, inconvenient. Being a little busy initiating the turn into the second minefield, I asked that the helo be waved off and directed towards PICT, then second in the formation. Lieutenant Greenop, CO of NORTHELLA and third in line, afterwards recounted what happened next.



Bridge Plot. Lt Cdr Holloway second from right

In the midst of the helicopter activity he was suddenly aware of a large, black, shiny object with horns, the mine having shot up from depth with great force, now momentarily motionless in full view just off his starboard bow and far too close for comfort. NORTHELLA went hard to port to avoid the mine and into unswept water suffering a steering gear breakdown as she turned. This caused a problem for Lieutenant Rob Bishop, CO of FARNELLA, who ordered his ship further to port to avoid both NORTHELLA and the mine. Lieutenant Mark Rowledge, CO of JUNELLA astern of FARNELLA, had time and space to turn safely to starboard. PICT meanwhile fired green flares, the pre-arranged visual signal and apparently through the helicopter's rotor disc, as she swept a second mine. The helicopter pilot had had enough by this stage and went back to change his underwear.

JUNELLA recovered her gear quickly and sank the two floating mines by small arms fire. Having regathered our thoughts and composure we tiptoed out of the minefield, recovered gear and started again but with a greater distance between ships to allow for the possibility of a re-occurrence. No more mines were swept in the top field that day but JUNELLA bagged four more in the bottom field. With four floaters to contend with there was insufficient time before dark for a return run. Our hot wash up that night back in Berkeley Sound was hotter than usual. We had been blooded yet had survived the day.

The weather deteriorated, affecting our ability to see floating mines, and ships were stood down until conditions improved although four more mines were swept over the next five days when conditions allowed. I began to sense that CORDELLA's ship's company were wondering when we would sweep a mine as all the other ships had swept at least two. From the day the Squadron had arrived in South Georgia, lower deck had been cleared during the Dog Watches to keep everyone abreast of the day's events and to explain what we hoped to achieve the next day. That evening and with the help of a sketch, I explained that what we were doing was very much a team effort and, as CORDELLA was out in front keeping the others safe, if we swept any mines then we had got our sums wrong.

On 28 June, Lieutenant Nigel 'Bernie' Bruen arrived, somewhat unannounced, and was dropped onto CORDELLA's bridge wing by the mail helo while we were in the lap. In charge of a deployed Fleet Clearance Diving Team, Bernie was already something of a legend for serenading ships in San Carlos with his fiddle from a small boat in the middle of an air raid, let alone his EOD exploits to date. Not generally known is that he and his team of divers had given away all their spare clothing to survivors of ships that had been sunk.

I knew Bernie well and while fuelling at Ascension Island had been detailed initially to convey him and his team to the Falkland Islands. He now explained that CINCFLEET was keen to have a closer look at one of the Argentine mines and wanted to discuss how and when we could recover one. I stated that our progress through the mine fields was nearly complete and suggested that we might not get another opportunity after that day. Always a man of action and without more ado he borrowed a diving dry suit, hitched a ride on a Gemini dinghy, which was launched down the stern ramp while sweeps were out, and went across to JUNELLA, the mine disposal ship. With JUNELLA's enthusiastic support, he swam to a floater and attached a line though not without some difficulty.

*[TCA member Bernie's hair raising account of the mine recovery was published in TON Talk 120, June 2007 and is included as an Appendix to this account. – **Editor**]*

JUNELLA towed the mine inshore and beached it on a makeshift raft where Bernie, supported by his team, rendered it safe.

The mine was brought back to UK by JUNELLA for analysis (*below*) and I was reunited with it some 25 years later during a visit to the Imperial War Museum.



This was the last mine swept using the Oropesa gear and we were now well clear across both minefields. Back in Berkeley Sound we took stock and re briefed while reconfiguring for EDATS. Two of the ships had tensiometer gear that measured the tension of the sweep wire, thus determining the formation's speed, and would be able to act as speed guides. The seabed was relatively flat apart from CORDELLA's shallow patch for which we were easily able to compensate. Unlike Oropesa equipment that has fixed depth settings, team sweeps can be raised and lowered in reaction to changes in depth. Thus we attempted to fly the sweep as close to the seabed as we dared without parting wires. Ships reported shiny tin gear where it had touched bottom but we could not get the sweep any closer than 2 metres as that was the height of the Kite Otter Multiplanes (KOM)

Two complete runs through both mine fields in what was now a check sweep in EDATS failed to sweep any more mines. Nonetheless, it was rewarding to see all five ships joined up together doing the business. Turns were easy using each ship's auto pilot but had to be slow to avoid parting gear as the ships were significantly more powerful than the 'Ton' Class that we were accustomed to.

Finally, I had to admit we could do no more and, while PICT took charge for a final run through, CORDELLA detached to Port Stanley where I reported to my superior that the probability of any remaining poised moored mines was negligible.



Team Sweeping, PICT in charge. CORDELLA detached to report ENDEX.

Clearly, the Argentine Navy had laid more mines than we had swept but the others had somehow failed to function. This was confirmed subsequently by the two new Hunt Class MCMVs HM Ships BRECON and LEDBURY that arrived in theatre as we finished our work. In due course they had a good look at the minefields with their mine hunting sonar and ROVs and found empty sinkers, one or two mines still attached but flooded on the seabed and some married failures where the mines had failed to release from their sinkers.

Our job was done and when the Squadron was released we took the great circle route to Gibraltar to allow the ships' companies a run ashore before leaving for home to enjoy the onslaught of the wife and kids. Interestingly, although very few had been ashore since we had left Rosyth, most were back on board early after a simple normality check.

Flag Officer Gibraltar was gracious in welcoming us to the Rock and visited the ships alongside. Then, following our attempts to get into formation before leaving harbour he signalled that he was 'amused by our departure'.

**NORTH HELLA with PICT ahead
CORDELLA, in the middle
line, approaches the
jetty at Gibraltar
2nd Aug 82**



The Squadron arrived in the River Forth on 10 August 1982 and anchored overnight in Kirkcaldy Bay. At the anchorage the following morning we were joined by the Port Admiral, Rear Admiral John Warsop, with the inevitable pipe clenched firmly between his teeth, and Captain MCM. Captain Jeremy Stewart said some nice things as we had our moment of glory in front of the national press before making our way up river escorted by the 'Tons' HM Ships MAXTON and WOTTON; noting that FARNELLA's crew had come from WOTTON. A large crowd of cheering families awaited and there too stood Lieutenant Commander Hamish Loudon who had come to meet us on behalf of CINCFLEET.

An hour or so later a car horn sounded as people began to leave and the call was taken up in a cacophony of noise. It was an impromptu and proud salute as the 11th MCM disbanded without ceremony. It signalled too the breakup of an outstanding team of people with whom I am extremely proud to have served. The crews had been superb, highly motivated and thoroughly professional; I had the utmost confidence in the CO's whose loyalty, support and commitment had been of the highest order. We had made a great team.



11 MCM Squadron returns to Rosyth, FARNELLA leading

I returned to Northwood to be debriefed and had an informal 45 minutes with the Commander in Chief; just him and me and several cups of coffee. Admiral Fieldhouse put me at my ease and wanted to know of the successes and failures of our deployment from my perspective, warts and all. I took the opportunity to thank him for the efforts of his staff on our behalf, in particular for those of Lieutenant Commander Hamish Loudon who had looked after us admirably from afar. Subsequently, the Admiral graciously invited the Squadron commanding officers and their ladies to lunch with him and Lady Fieldhouse in what was to be a very relaxed, informal and unforgettable occasion. It was a privilege to be there.

Later, now in command of HMS BILDESTON that I had left in the good hands of my First Lieutenant Keith 'Taf' Flower, I took part in the Falklands parade through London along with two other Squadron members and was proud to do so again on behalf of the 11th MCM on the 25th anniversary.

I found an opportunity to visit HMS CAMBRIA on a training night and gave a slide presentation to the assembled company to thank them for their help the previous April.

Nothing was ever quite the same afterwards although my experience was turned to good use in 1986. Following the RN Staff Course I was sent to the Canadian Forces National Defence Headquarters in Ottawa for three years to work the mine warfare desk in their Department of Naval Operational Requirements. The purpose was to re-establish the Canadian MCM capability with the build of 12 Maritime Coastal Defence Vessels (MCDV) equipped with EDATS and manned by the Canadian Forces Reserve. Two offshore supply vessels were taken up from trade to prove the concept and train the crews.

I was extremely honoured to be given command of the squadron as a junior Lieutenant Commander, although more than likely it was a case of being in the right place at the right time with the right qualifications and experience. As a CO, I was very well supported by CORDELLA's ships company; I had a superb team of young officers, and very competent senior and junior ratings whose abilities to work well outside their comfort zones never ceased to impress me. I had a small Squadron staff that made my life much easier by sorting out the necessary administration and here I must single out Acting Radio Supervisor Peter Evans who worked miracles with the two coffee cans and bits of string we had been left as our communications equipment. I was delighted to hear of his eventual and well deserved promotion to Warrant Officer and his award of an MBE during his service.

I am grateful to all those officers under whose command I had served previously for I was able to take the best from their example and discard their worst. I reviewed constantly every decision I made both at the time and afterwards and have no misgivings or regrets at all about any of them although I did wonder why, after it was all over, that I was never debriefed from a professional viewpoint; nobody ever questioned why. It would seem as though everyone had heaved a sigh of relief that the RN had pulled one out of the bag, patted everyone on the head and then three months later became bored with the war stories.

Undoubtedly the rapid deployment of EDATs to the South Atlantic was successful, even if the capability was not in place until after the landings. We had done what we had been sent to do and had done it without blowing trumpets or otherwise drawing attention to ourselves.

Importantly, being able to hand back all 140 officers and men in my care to the safety of their loved ones that day in August lifted a weight from my shoulders and I am conscious that we had not been subjected to the horrors of the conflict. I recall our time in South Georgia and senior NCOs encouraging and helping young soldiers with their heavy packs as the youngsters made a leap of faith from QEII onto CORDELLA's deck rising and falling in the swell. When the deck lights were doused and we got underway towards CANBERRA in the darkness, a powerful choir of voices came to life as this band of brothers sang 'Men of Harlech' at the top of their voices. It was a moving moment then as the Welsh Guards took a further step towards their destiny that would end so tragically for so many onboard RFA SIR GALAHAD. It is a sombre memory now.

Those of us who went down to the sea in ships in 1982 were prepared to take on whatever we encountered at sea yet had an enormous respect for those whom we carried to war who would be taking the enemy on face to face. We had no illusions about what they might encounter.

It is poignant to note that as many combatants who died during the conflict on both sides have subsequently taken their own lives. There are those still suffering that we should remember in our thoughts too.