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## Two Invasions Bob Young

Apart from brief attachments to the Submarine Service and the occasional Fleet Air Arm squadron, I was perhaps fortunate to experience two real operations. The first was when I was serving in the guided missile destroyer *Devonshire* and was associated with the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus, and the second was whilst I was in the carrier *Invincible* in the 1982 Falklands War.

The Cyprus conflict involved the assembled RN ships carrying out a major airlift of British residents and tourists off the island. As one of the IO's duties in a guided missile destroyer was that of Flight Deck Officer, I recall spending seemingly endless around-the-clock hours guiding vast numbers of helicopter landings and launches as wave upon wave of evacuees were airlifted to safety. Certainly, when the operation was over, to go back to the IO's routine tasks of NAMET teaching, weather forecasting, entertainments and Confidential Books Officer was somewhat of an anti-climax and gave one the yen to get back to more exciting times!



**Bob Young and his team on winter exercise off Norway**

Be careful what you wish for, as in my case the exciting times re-started with a vengeance eight years later. As SMetO/SIO in *Invincible*, I was on Easter leave when I received, along with many others, a telephone call at 0400 instructing me to return immediately to the ship which was under short notice to sail to the South Atlantic. I remember at the time thinking that this was like something out of a movie!

Although the IO complement in an *Invincible* class carrier listed two METOC Officers for the ship, one METOC Officer for the embarked helicopter squadron, plus two Education Officers, everyone was tasked with a myriad of secondary duties from bridge watchkeeping, entertainments officer and public relations.

As *Invincible* sailed from Portsmouth, one of the hot topics of discussion was what would happen if either *Invincible* or *Hermes* was disabled or destroyed. Indeed Admiral Woodward was reported as saying, 'Lose *Invincible* and the operation will be severely jeopardized; lose *Hermes* and the operation is over'. Thoughts such as these certainly began

to focus the METOC team on the importance of the forecasting tasks ahead, particularly after having researched the expected South Atlantic winter weather conditions. As it happened, the team of forecasters and meteorological ratings performed tremendously under some extreme conditions, often with very little information available.

As events evolved and the ship went into an Action Stations status, it was discovered that I had been a naval architect before joining the Royal Navy and as such had the wherewithal to help correct any trim or stability problems resulting from enemy damage. Hence my action station became HQ 2 (Damage Control Headquarters) which was a back-up station to the main HQ1, and the METOC forecasting team was immediately reduced in numbers. Thankfully such damage control services were never needed, despite the Argentine claim that they had crippled the ship, but the long hours spent in a small space deep in the bowels of the ship with six other members of the ship's company provided an experience far from the normal routine for an IO.

For a large number of the ship's company Action Stations meant long hours of inactivity punctuated with the odd incident. For the most part, in HQ 2 we fell into that category. Memories include the sinking of the Argentine cruiser *General Belgrano* on 2 May and the muted sadness that prevailed among the HQ 2 team who felt empathy for the enemy sailors who died doing their duty. These emotions progressively changed over the period of the next three weeks when news of the sinkings of *Sheffield*, *Coventry*, *Ardent* and *Antelope* reached our ears; certainly the sinking of the *Atlantic Conveyor* on 25 May was a little too close for comfort.



**HMS *Invincible* – lead of three light carriers  
by permission of Navy News (MOD)**

Enjoyable distractions during Action Stations included the action messing meal breaks. Even though getting to the mess meant negotiating a multitude of Zulu Alpha hatches and doors, these excursions provided welcome breaks from the confined surrounds of HQ 2. Added to this there were a few occasions when an hour or so after sunset the Wardroom bar would open, for a short period for two beers max, and I can report that even in a Wardroom stripped to its bare essentials a pint of Courage Special Bitter never tasted so good!

Meanwhile back at flight deck level the METOC team, often devoid of the usual plethora of information, was quickly learning the art of single observer forecasting and how to draw and extrapolate weather charts with only half a dozen observations on which to base their analyses. On reflection, during the 45 days of war, the ship spent 15% of the time in fog, which was often very welcome, and over 30% of the time in Sea State 5, that is wave heights of two metres or higher. So heavy were the South Atlantic seas that on one occasion an 'on alert' Harrier jet was lost when it slipped off the flight deck into the ocean; fortunately the quick thinking pilot ejected safely.

Returning to the mundane theme of secondary duties, another of mine was that of ship's Public Relations Officer. Just prior to sailing to the South Atlantic, I was delighted that an intense period of press interest associated with the 1981 Defence Review's intended sale of *Invincible* to Australia was over and the sale had just been rescinded. However, on the morning of 5 April 1982 when *Invincible* left Portsmouth for the South Atlantic, press interest was to escalate way beyond our expectations when five major newspaper journalists embarked for the duration of the conflict.

I very soon realised that being the Public Relations Officer was not going to be a 'walk in the park' particularly as we

had on board Prince Andrew who was serving as a Sea King helicopter pilot with 820 Squadron. Throughout their time with us the journalists had to produce continuous copy to feed the demands of their editors for 24/7 news.



**Bob Young keeping his distance from the press pack encircling Prince Andrew**

What had hitherto been a secondary duty assumed much greater proportions and was to do so during the Falkland War and through until 17 September when Her Majesty, the Queen, and a host of journalists boarded *Invincible* off the Solent on our return to Portsmouth.

We had been at sea continuously for carrier operations for 166 days and during that time had steamed 51,660 miles in support of the recapture of the Falkland Islands.