



THE FINAL ENGAGEMENT

Falklands Air War: 1982

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IN THE spring of 1982 Dave Morgan had just started an exchange tour with the Royal Navy flying Sea Harriers at RNAS Yeovilton. His conversion was rudely cut short on 2 April when Argentine forces invaded the Falkland Islands. He took

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part in the first raid on Stanley Airfield on 1 May, getting shot through the tail fin, and flew another 54 operational SHAR missions and two Wessex helicopter flights before the end of the conflict on 14 June. He was credited with sinking

one enemy vessel as well as shooting down two helicopters and two A4 Skyhawks. This is the story of the final air engagement of the war. Lt Cdr Morgan was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his part in the conflict. >>

During the closing stages of the Falklands conflict **David Morgan** became the last RAF pilot to shoot down an enemy aircraft whilst serving as an 'exchange' pilot flying a Sea Harrier with the Fleet Air Arm. Here, he tells the story in his own words.



The morning of 8 June 1982 started much the same as any other during the conflict. The ritual of a shower, putting on clean underwear and 'lucky' flying suit and a good breakfast before checking the briefing room for the day's commitments as dawn was breaking. It transpired that I was unlikely to be needed before midday, as I was due to carry out the final part of my night qualification that evening. I therefore volunteered to fly in the left hand seat of one of the Wessex helicopters which had been saved after Atlantic Conveyor was hit by an Exocet missile. It had been nearly ten years since I had flown the Wessex full time, but I found it soon came back and I spent a happy couple of hours delivering mail and supplies around the fleet.

After lunch, I flew a mission patrolling to the north of Falkland Sound. The weather had cleared beautifully by then, with very little cloud and just the odd thunderstorm over the sea. At this stage of the conflict we were normally using the metal landing strip at Port San Carlos to refuel between sorties. Unfortunately, Wg Cdr Peter Squire, the Commanding Officer of No 1(F) squadron, had experienced an engine problem whilst landing there that morning and spread his aircraft all over the strip, coming to rest on top of a slit trench. My sortie was completely uneventful but very soon after we set off back to HMS *Hermes*, HMS *Plymouth* was attacked by a formation of Daggars, a frustrating but not unusual occurrence and we were glad to hear that her damage had not been serious.





'STAND CLEAR OF INTAKES AND JET PIPES, SCRAMBLE THE ALERT-FIVE SEA HARRIERS'

That evening, Dave Smith and I strapped ourselves into our aircraft to come to five-minute alert, with our minds fairly full of the night landing to come. Shortly before we were planned to launch, we were jolted back to reality by the broadcast 'Stand clear of intakes and jet pipes, scramble the alert-five Sea Harriers' We had a job to do!

LIKE A TIGHTLY COILED SPRING

We were airborne within three minutes and streaking towards the sun that was now low on the western horizon. For the next quarter of an hour we flew in silence, both wondering what we would find when we got to the islands. Finally, approaching the CAP station, I radioed the pair of Sea Harriers we were relieving to get an update and was told that they were 'over the action' to the north of our briefed station. As we got closer, I saw a huge vertical column of oily black smoke rising from a bay to the southwest of Stanley. Overhead, the grim reality unfolded. Two landing craft were at anchor in the bay, wreathed in a nightmare of smoke and explosions. We could only watch with increasing concern and frustration as the living beetles of lifeboats crawled back and forth between ship and shore, with their desperate human cargoes. There was little we could do but search the lengthening shadows

for further attackers, as we ploughed our parallel furrows back and forth, a couple of miles above their heads. To fly lower would have denied us radio contact with our controller in San Carlos and risked spooking the troops on the ground into thinking we were the enemy, returning to cause further chaos.

Some five miles to the south of our racetrack in the sky, I noticed a small landing craft, leaving Choiseul Sound and heading up the coast towards us. On checking, this was identified as friendly and became a particular point

to check each time I turned back onto a westerly heading. I felt great empathy with them, as I imagined the crew, cold and tired in their tiny boat and I wondered if they had any idea that we were watching over them.

The next 40 minutes crept by as we circled, using the minimum possible amount of fuel, neither of us talking and both of us very much aware of the tragedy being enacted below us. Finally, I made a routine check of the fuel gauges as I rolled into another turn to reverse track, and realised that I now had only four minutes flying before >>

ABOVE:
A Sea Harrier launches from HMS Hermes carrying 1000lb bombs.

OVERLEAF:
Morgan with Sea Harrier ZA192 after being hit during the first raid on Stanley airport on 1 May 1982.

LEFT:
A cockpit view of a Sea Harrier flying at low level.



BELOW:
Sea Harrier
launching from
HMS Hermes,
1982.

I had to turn east, into the rapidly darkening evening sky for *Hermes*. I searched the gathering dusk below me for the small landing craft and soon picked it out, butting its way through the South Atlantic towards Port Pleasant, white water breaking over its bows.

It was in that instant that I spotted something which triggered the explosive action which lies, like a tightly coiled spring, beneath the outwardly calm carapace of the fighter pilot. My worst fears and fondest dreams had, in a single instant, been realised. A mere mile to the east of the vessel was the camouflaged outline of a Skyhawk fighter, hugging the sea and

heading directly for the landing craft which had become a very personal part of my existence for the last 40 minutes. This was the very thing we had been anticipating and dreading so much.

LOCKED-ON AND READY TO FIRE

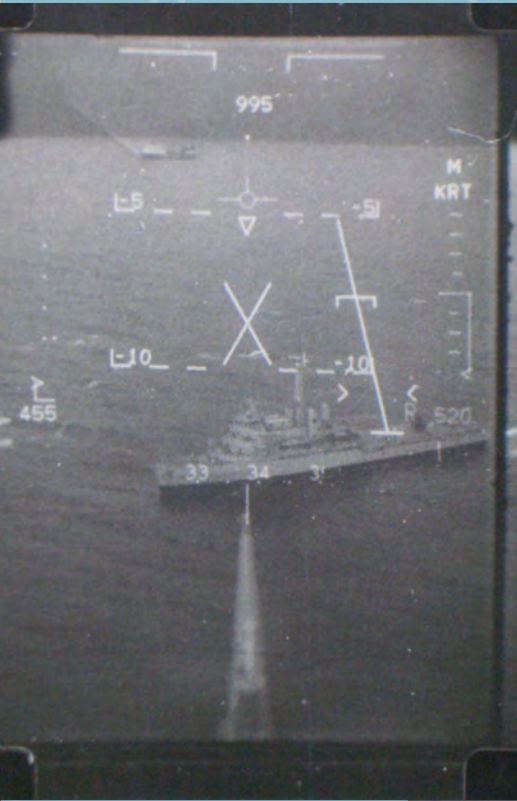
I jammed the throttle fully open, shouted over the radio: 'A4s attacking the boat, follow me down!', peeling off into a 60 degree dive towards the attackers. Dave Smith wrenched his Sea Harrier around after me but lost sight of me as we plunged downwards with the airspeed rocketing from the economic 240 knots to over 600 knots as we strained to catch the enemy

before he could reach his target.

I watched impotently, urging my aircraft onwards and downwards, as the first A4 opened fire with his 20mm cannon, bracketing the tiny matchbox of a craft. My heart soared as his bomb exploded a good 100 feet beyond them but then sank as I realised that a further A4 was running in behind him. The second pilot did not miss and I bore mute and frustrated witness to the violent fire-bright petals of the explosion which obliterated the stern, killing the crew and mortally wounding the landing craft. All consuming anger welled in my throat and I determined, in that instant, that this pilot was going to die!



**'PULL UP, PULL UP,
YOU'RE BEING FIRED AT!'**



lock, mashed the lock button again and fired and the thin grey missile flashed back across my nose and impacted his machine directly behind the cockpit. The complete rear half of the airframe simply disintegrated, as if a shotgun had been fired at a plastic model from close range. As the aluminium confetti of destruction fluttered seawards, I watched, fascinated, as the disembodied cockpit yawed rapidly through 90 degrees and splashed violently into the freezing water.

RAG-DOLL FIGURE

I felt a terrific surge of elation at the demise of the second A4 and started to scan ahead, in the murk, for the others. I had just picked out the next one, fleeing west, his belly only feet from the water, when a parachute snapped open right in front of my face. The pilot had somehow managed to eject from the gyrating cockpit in the second before it hit the water. He flashed over my right wing so close that I saw every detail of the rag-doll figure with its arms and legs thrown out in a grotesque star shape by the deceleration of the canopy. My feelings of anger and elation instantly changed to relief, as I realised that a fellow pilot had survived. An instant later, immense anger returned as I started to run down the next victim before he could make good his escape in the gloom.

Now that I had launched both missiles, I had only guns with which to

despatch the remaining Skyhawks and as I lifted the safety slide on the trigger, I realised that my head-up display had disappeared and I had no gunsight. This was a well-known 'glitch' in the HUD software and could be cured easily by selecting the HUD off and then on again. In the ten seconds it took for the sight to reappear, it was all over. The A4 broke rapidly towards me as I screamed up behind him with a good 150 knots overtake. I pulled his blurred outline to the bottom of the windscreen and opened fire. The roar of the 30mm rounds leaving the guns at the rate of 40 per second filled the

cockpit. I kept my finger on the trigger and walked the rounds through him as best I could.

Suddenly, over the radio came an urgent shout from Dave Smith: 'Pull up, pull up, you're being fired at!' All he had seen of the fight up until now, because of the failing light, was two missile launches followed by two explosions. He then saw an aircraft only feet above the water, flying through a hail of explosions and assumed it to be me. By now I had run out of ammunition and at Dave's cry, pulled up into the vertical, through the setting sun and in a big lazy looping >>

ABOVE: Head-Up-Display film of a practice bomb attack, a gun attack on Skyhawk and the launch of an AIM9L Sidewinder.

BELOW: Morgan with the wreck of OC No1(F)'s Harrier GR3 after a landing accident at San Carlos airstrip.



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manoeuvre, rolling out at 12,000 feet. In the vertical climb, I looked back down over Choiseul Sound and saw a white trail appear, accelerating towards the fleeing A4. About halfway to the target, the rocket motor burnt out and for a few maddening seconds, I thought it had been fired out of range and would drop into the water. Dave had not misjudged it though and after some seven seconds of flight, there was a brilliant white flash. The Skyhawk was so low that the flash of the warhead merged with its reflection in the water

of the Sound. A fraction of a second later, the aircraft disappeared in a huge yellow-orange fireball, spreading burning remains over the sand dunes on the north coast of Lafonia.

BANGED THE MACHINE DOWN

Climbing rapidly through 20,000 feet, I realised that we were going to be very tight for gas. Comfortably, we needed 2,000 lbs of fuel for returning to the ship and my gauges were reading less than 1,400 lbs. As I climbed through

25,000 feet between the odd burst of anti-aircraft fire, my low-level fuel lights came on, indicating 1,300 lbs remaining. At 40,000 feet, I called the carrier and told them that I was returning short of fuel and they obliged by heading towards us to close the distance. When I closed the throttle to start a cruise descent from 90 miles out, I was still uncertain that I was going to make it before I took an unwanted bath.

At 40,000 feet the sun was still a blaze of orange on the western horizon but as I descended, the light became



**‘MY WORLD
HAD BECOME
AN EXTREMELY
DARK AND
LONELY PLACE’**

ABOVE:

Sea Harriers readied on the deck of HMS Hermes as she heads south in heavy seas.

a progressively worse. By the time I had descended to 10,000 feet, my world had become an extremely dark and lonely place. The adrenalin levels, which had been recovering to normal during the twenty minutes after the engagement, now started to increase again in anticipation of my first night deck landing. To compound the problem and to give final proof of 'Sod's law', *Hermes* had managed to find one of the massive thunderstorms and was in heavy rain. I realised I did not have sufficient fuel to carry out



a proper radar approach and asked the controller to just talk me onto the centreline as I adjusted my glide so that I would not have to touch the throttle until the last minute.

With three miles to run I was still in thick, turbulent cloud when my fuel warning lights began to flash urgently, telling me that I had 500 lbs of fuel remaining. At two miles, I saw a glimmer of light emerging through the rain and at 800 feet the lights fused into the recognisable outline of the carrier. I slammed the nozzle lever into the hover stop, selected full flap and punched the undercarriage button to lower the wheels. I picked up the mirror sight, which confirmed I was well above the ideal glide path but dropping rapidly towards the invisible sea. With about half a mile to run, I added a handful of power and felt the Pegasus engine's instant response, stopping my descent at about 300 feet. The wheels locked down as I applied full braking stop to position myself off the port side of the deck and seconds later, I was transitioning



sideways to hover over the centreline of the deck, level with the aft end of the superstructure. I knew that I had very little fuel remaining, so finesse went out of the window as I closed the throttle and banged the machine down on the rain-streaked deck. Once safely taxied forward into the aptly named 'Graveyard' and lashed in place, I shut down the engine and heard Dave's jet landing on behind me. My fuel gauges showed 300 lbs, sufficient for a further two minutes flying!

HIS GUN HAD JAMMED

Our debrief took place in the Wardroom bar, which John Locke, the ship's universally loved and respected Commander, had kept open for us. Here we discovered that a pilot from our sister squadron in *Invincible* had reported seeing four aircraft destroyed during our engagement. Neither of us could give a satisfactory explanation of the fourth kill but this version was sent back to UK, describing the mission as a night training sortie. This elicited the following amusing response from C in C Fleet:

CONGRATULATIONS YOUR EVENING SORTIE. IF THIS IS WHAT YOU DO ON A TRAINING MISSION, I CAN'T WAIT TO SEE WHAT YOU DO WHEN YOU ARE OPERATIONAL!

I discovered some years later, that the fourth pilot, Hector Sanchez had in fact, escaped after jettisoning his fuel tanks. He made it to the C130 tanker with a teaspoonful of fuel, having received small arms damage to his aircraft. Hector survived the war and



recently retired from the Argentine Air Force. In the summer of 1993 we met in London before Hector and his wife stayed with us in our Somerset cottage. After several pints of scrumpy we discovered what had really happened that evening more than eleven years earlier. To my dismay, I found out that I had ended up in front of Hector and had it not been for the fact that his gun had jammed, he might have been the only Argentine pilot to shoot down a Sea Harrier! ☹

CENTRE:
An Argentinian Skyhawk takes on fuel while flying over the South Atlantic.

TOP:
David Morgan makes a post-conflict visit to the crash site of one of the A-4 Skyhawks he downed.

ABOVE:
Morgan and family at Buckingham Palace after the award of his DSC.



DAVID MORGAN'S BOOK HOSTILE SKIES IS PUBLISHED BY ORION BOOKS IN HARDBACK AND PAPERBACK.