

**Captain Bob McQueen. Island Base: Ascension Island in the Falklands War. Whittles Publishing, 2005.**

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Island Base is a marvelous collection of reminiscences about Ascension Island during the Falkland Islands War. Stitched together by Captain Bob McQueen, Commander of the British Forces Support Unit on Ascension, this collection of a dozen short narratives describes the frenetic activities on the island as British forces prepared for, and engaged in, war. There are contributions from Major General Julian Thompson, Commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commando Brigade, Group Captain Jeremy S.B. Price, Senior RAF Commander in charge of air-to-air refueling operations, Admiral Sir Michael Layard, Senior Naval Officer in SS *Atlantic Conveyor*, Captain Chris Craig, Captain of HMS *Alacrity*, Commodore Michael Clapp, Amphibious Task Group Commander, Lt. Colonel William D. Bryden, USAF, Commander of Ascension Auxiliary Airfield, among others. Their varied perspectives provide a kaleidoscopic view of rear area base operations during wartime.

Ascension Island is a thirty-four square mile volcanic outcropping, 2800' elevation, which lies roughly mid-way between the United Kingdom and the Falkland Islands, 4,000 miles from London and 3,300 miles from Stanley. The island itself is British, but was leased to the United States in 1940 through Lend-Lease, with the later proviso that the United States provide logistical support should the United Kingdom ever require it. Thus, a British Resident Administrator oversees the island, while an American Air Force Officer commands what is formally known as Ascension Auxiliary Air Field, but informally called Wideawake Airfield after the terns of the same name that nest nearby.

The United States constructed Wideawake Airfield in 1942 and used it as a steppingstone to ferry propeller aircraft across the Atlantic to Africa during WWII. Later, in the sixties, the single airstrip was lengthened from 6,000 feet to 10,000 feet to accommodate larger jets as NASA began to utilize the island to monitor missile flights down the Eastern Test Range. Later still, NSA began to employ it as a satellite tracking station. In 1982, the 1,000 residents of the island were all employees, contractors, and dependents of American, British, and South African companies operating on the island, including GCHQ, Cable & Wireless, BBC, South Africa Cable, Pan Am, NASA, and NSA.

When Argentinean forces seized the Falkland Islands on April 2, 1982, Ascension Island was quickly tabbed to function as a transit base for provisioning British forces on their way to the South Atlantic. It was too distant to function as a forward base for combat operations against Argentina, but it was perfectly situated to be a secure logistical, refit, and training base for forces preparing to move south into battle. The problem was that there were few facilities on the island. Indeed, the stories contained in this slim 123 page volume constitute a 'how to' guide to building an island base virtually from scratch. Broadly speaking, British authorities managed military operations and US personnel managed air operations and safety concerns.

Facilities on the island were barely adequate for the local population and had to be expanded rapidly to accommodate the surge in personnel. At its peak, the island was manned by a logistics staff over 1,400 personnel, who managed the provisioning, training, barracking and transit of troops five times their number. Improvisation was the order of the day and a 'make-do' attitude was evident by all. Housing was under

construction even as troops were arriving and to save time construction materials and much else were shipped mainly by air for base construction as well as for provisions and kit to be on hand when the troops arrived.

Air activity at Wideawake quickly burgeoned from the pre-war average of six flights a month to six flights an hour, and, at times, more, on the single airstrip! In fact, on one occasion 350 takeoffs and landings were recorded, a greater volume than at O'Hare Field. Fortunately, a large apron area provided parking space for planes and helicopters. For ships, circumstances were even worse. While Ascension Island offered passable anchorages, there was no port because of unpredictable ocean swells that ranged from four to forty feet and surged without warning. Thus, loading and off-loading of ships had to be accomplished entirely by helicopter.

Ascension Island was also optimally located to facilitate the American contribution to the war, which, aside from intelligence and satellite communications, centered on the provision of aircraft fuel, weapons, and construction material. The United States supplied 12.5 million gallons of jet fuel, hundreds of Aim 9L Sidewinder air-to-air missiles and bombs, and a large number of palletized, pre-fabricated housing modules. Of course, secure storage facilities for both the fuel and the weapons had to be constructed post haste, along with the accommodations for incoming personnel. In addition, fresh water was a problem, as there was none on the island. The two existing desalination facilities operated by the airfield and the BBC station were strained to the utmost until alleviated by the supply of a back-up reverse osmosis system.

The island had never been a military base and had only been used as a transit and communications center. When military forces arrived, suitable training grounds,

firing ranges, and storage depots, not to mention mess and sleeping quarters, needed to be found and constructed without undue disruption of the environment. Additionally, and perhaps most important, as the ships of the task force steamed south from England many were loaded rather haphazardly with little thought to their later off-loading for combat. Thus, Ascension Island served as an absolutely essential cross-deck and restow area as troops prepared to set off for landing operations at San Carlos. As Commodore Michael Clapp observed, "without Ascension Island, there would have been no Operation Corporate." Island Base thus serves as a welcome addition to the literature on the Falkland Islands War, providing a glimpse into a vital part of the British war effort that is still relatively little known and appreciated.

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