

OPERATION BLACK BUCK 1 – THE LONGEST NIGHT

“ALL HISTORY IS A VERSION”

This is the artist's version of the events of the night of 30 April 1982, gleaned from his conversations with the signatories during numerous print-signing sessions and the various chats and lunches that followed. Other versions are in the “V-FORCE BOYS” series of books, Bob Tuxford's autobiography “CONTACT” and in Rowland White's seminal book about BLACK BUCK 1 “VULCAN 607”.

THE MISSION

On the *OUTBOUND* first wave of BLACK BUCK 1, the mission to bomb Port Stanley airfield, 11 Victors and 2 Vulcans took off at one-minute intervals from 23:00. There were 3 Sections: RED and WHITE each consisting of 4 Victors, and BLUE made up of 3 Victors and 2 Vulcans (the primary flown by John Reeve and the reserve by Martin Withers). During the initial climb, the primary Vulcan became unserviceable and was replaced by the reserve. As the mission progressed southbound, it became apparent from the low fuel states in the returning Victor Tankers that all of the aircraft had used fuel at a considerably higher rate than had been estimated on the fuel plan. The recovery, or *INBOUND* phase initially involved four Victors. They took off at 05:20 as planned. Almost immediately one [Milligan] became unserviceable, so the reserve [Elliot] was launched at 05:30. About this time, the Operations staff at Ascension received reports of Victors from the longer sorties of the *OUTBOUND* phase returning to Ascension desperately short of fuel. As a result, two further Victors [Barrett and Seymour] were launched at about 07:30. Barrett was sent to assist Skelton, while Seymour was tasked with meeting Tuxford. It was a very, very close-run thing, with potentially fatal consequences for any mistakes, as one aircraft with a major fuel leak was rescued along with Tuxford's aircraft which, without refuelling, would have run out of fuel hundreds of miles short of Ascension Island.

THE COMMANDER

Air Chief Marshal SIR MICHAEL KNIGHT KCB AFC

Sir Michael Knight was Air Officer Commanding No.1 Group during Operation BLACK BUCK. When Bomber Command was subsumed into the new Strike Command on 1 April 1968, No.1 Group took on the previous role of the command, holding the bomber and strike aircraft of Strike Command, including the Victor and Vulcan Forces. Sir Michael, affectionately and popularly known as “SMIKE” has been a great supporter of the V-Force during and after his RAF career in which he flew more than 100 types of aircraft including front-line fighters and strike/attack aircraft. He wasted no time in leaving his headquarters at RAF Bawtry, South Yorkshire, to join his officers and men on Ascension Island at the first opportunity. He remains a tireless and vocal supporter of the Victor and Vulcan.

THE VICTOR SIGNATURES

Group Captain ALAN BOWMAN MBE Officer Commanding Number 57 Squadron 1981-1983

Alan Bowman flew on six BLACK BUCK missions as navigator plotter. He commanded the Victor detachment at Ascension from 22 April to 14th July 1982. The detachment mounted initial long-range Victor reconnaissance missions in support of the operation to recapture South Georgia and subsequent Tanking support for Vulcan, Nimrod, Harrier and Hercules operations. These missions demonstrated the capability of the Victor tanker fleet and the future potential for Air-to-Air Refuelling in the RAF.

Wing Commander COLIN SEYMOUR Officer Commanding Number 55 Squadron 1980-1982

Colin Seymour flew two sorties during the night/day of BLACK BUCK 1. He led BLUE Section, refuelling the attack Vulcan twice before landing after 4hr40m behind four returning Victors with almost dry tanks. Alerted by reports of an unfolding emergency situation, he took off again at 07:30 and flew to meet Bob Tuxford who was desperately short of fuel. He found him over a thousand miles away, the fuel transfer was successful, and a disaster was averted, returning to Ascension after 5hr 40m.

Wing Commander CHRIS MORFFEW

Chris Morffew was the Navigator Leader on 57 Squadron and the Victor Detachment at Ascension. He prepared and delivered the Navigation brief for BLACK BUCK 1 and 2 before flying on tanker missions as the Navigator Plotter on Barry Neal's crew.

Wing Commander BARRY NEAL

Barry Neal was RED 3 on the Outbound Wave and took off again in the 4-aircraft Recovery Section a few hours later to refuel Martin Withers' Vulcan off the Brazilian coast after the attack on Stanley. One of the Victors became unserviceable during the transit, which meant that only one Victor instead of 2 would be available at the recovery rendezvous. Due to the weather conditions and the higher than planned fuel burn, the Vulcan was an hour late and critically short of fuel at the rendezvous, but Neal's Victor was standing by, and a successful fuel transfer was completed. On 12 October 1982, Neal and his crew in Victor XL232 had the honour of leading the Falklands Parade fixed-wing flypast over London.

Squadron Leader BOB TUXFORD AFC

Bob Tuxford took off as WHITE 2, and was scheduled to receive fuel twice from outbound tankers at the first two refuelling brackets. He was then tasked to refuel the attack Vulcan (BLUE 2) and the last outbound Victor (WHITE 4) flown by Steve Biglands before recovering to Ascension. Unforeseen thunderstorms at 40°South located around the third refuelling area resulted in Biglands' aircraft breaking its probe whilst taking fuel from Tuxford's aircraft. After changing roles, Tuxford continued to the last bracket to refuel the Vulcan despite eating into his fuel reserves, in the deliberate and sombre knowledge that without refuelling, his aircraft would run out of fuel some 500nm south of Ascension Island. His actions and his crew's joint decision to continue south below safe fuel minima were crucial to the success of the mission. He was awarded the Air Force Cross and his crew the Queen's Commendation for Valuable Service in the Air.

Flight Lieutenant STEVE BIGLANDS

Steve Biglands's Victor XH669, BLUE 3 (Reserve), became WHITE 4 in the Outbound Wave, and was planned to take fuel from Bob Tuxford's XL189 at 40° south, then escort the Vulcan all the way south to the final refuelling before the attack. In appalling weather as they neared the Falkland Islands, with the basket and hose swinging wildly, the probe broke, and the fuel transfer was not completed. Biglands gave back what fuel he could spare, retaining sufficient to get back to Wideawake, as with the broken probe he could not be refuelled. Tuxford, now short of fuel, continued south with the attack Vulcan.

Flight Lieutenant NEIL BROOKS

Neil 'Badger' Brooks flew several BLACK BUCK missions including Victor XL192, WHITE 3 in the Outbound Wave on BLACK BUCK 1, transferring fuel to Steve Biglands, BLUE 3, before recovering to Ascension.

THE VULCAN SIGNATURES

Squadron Leader MARTIN WITHERS DFC

Martin Withers, flying the reserve Vulcan XM607, stepped into the lead after the primary attack Vulcan experienced problems with cabin pressurization shortly after take off. He continued the mission to drop 21 x 1000lb bombs on the runway at Port Stanley from 10000ft at 04:38 local time. XM607 was air-refuelled 7 times, 6 of them at night, by Victor K2 tankers and was airborne for 15 hours 45 minutes to complete the (then) longest bombing mission on record. The final refueling rendezvous was made further south and an hour later than planned. With less than 8000lbs of fuel remaining, spread around the Vulcan's 14 tanks, they were close to running on fumes when Victor navigator Chris Morffew directed Barry Neal through a perfectly executed 210° turn rolling out 3 miles dead ahead of the Vulcan with the hose trailing. For Withers and his crew it was deliverance. Given the trials and tribulations of BLACK BUCK 1 so far, it was a miracle.

Squadron Leader JOHN REEVE

John Reeve was captain of XM598, the BLACK BUCK 1 primary Vulcan, which developed a cabin pressurization seal failure after take off. He flew Vulcan XM607 on BLACK BUCK 2, the second successful attack on Stanley on the night of 3/4 May.

Squadron Leader BARRY MASEFIELD

Barry Masefield was the Air Electronics Officer with John Reeve's crew on BLACK BUCK missions, responsible for the defensive suite and Westinghouse 101-10 ECM pod carried by Vulcan XM607. He later flew as a crewmember with the Vulcan Display Team and with Victor Tankers in the Gulf War.

Flight Lieutenant JIM VINALES

Jim Vinales was serving as a navigator plotter on No.44 Squadron in 1971 when he became one of the few rear crewmembers to have walked away unhurt after abandoning a stricken Vulcan in flight. He is a former winner of the prestigious Giant Voice Individual Navigation Trophy, and was John Reeve's navigator plotter on BLACK BUCK missions.

Flight Lieutenant BRIAN GARDNER

Brian Gardner was a Vulcan captain and AAR pilot flying supernumerary with Neil McDougall's crew. He shared the air refuelling workload in the left-hand seat of XM597 on three AGM45 Shrike anti-radar missions - BLACK BUCK 4,5&6. BLACK BUCK 4 was aborted when close to the target due to a tanker unserviceability, while BLACK BUCK 5&6 were successfully completed. On the return flight from the BLACK BUCK 6 attack, following damage to the Vulcan's refuelling probe, the aircraft was forced to divert to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where the crew were held for a week before being released to fly XM597 back to Ascension on 10 June.

