PROLOGUE

Scramble!

If I were you I'd buy the Sea Harrier.

Admiral Sergey Gorshkov,
Admiral of the Fleet of the Soviet Union, 1967–85

HMS Hermes, *South Atlantic, 21 April 1982*

Lieutenant Simon Hargreaves checked his canopy was closed and locked. Beneath him, the flight deck pitched as the carrier turned into wind. By holding up five fingers against the cockpit perspex he confirmed to the aircraft handlers that his Martin-Baker Mk.10 ejection seat was armed and the safety pins stowed. He continued running through the pre-start checks.

LP cock – on. Battery masters – both on. Check voltage. Jetpipe temperature.

All good.

He turned on the booster pumps, selected START, pressed his stopwatch and punched the starter button. Immediately behind him he heard, and felt, the whine of the Rolls-Royce Pegasus engine spooling up. He set the throttle to idle and carried on working through the checklist, making sure his fighter's navigation system was aligned – vital if he was ever going to find his way back to 'Mother' out here over the South Atlantic, midway between Brazil and Namibia, over 1,000 miles from land in any direction.

Outside, the last ground locks were removed.

Flying controls – full and free movement. Flaps . . . check.

He could hardly believe his luck. The youngest and least experienced member of 800 Naval Air Squadron, he'd only been out of training for a couple of months. It was just weeks since he'd landed on board HMS *Hermes* for the very first time. And now he was being scrambled to intercept an unidentified radar contact approaching the Task Force from the southwest at 20,000 feet.

At 1130Z he'd been preparing to fly a training sortie. Fifteen minutes later, after the order to launch, the armourers had removed the training rounds from beneath the wings and sharpened his

fighter's dark grey lines with a pair of ghost-grey AIM-9L Sidewinder heatseeking missiles. Live rounds. Beneath the fuselage was a pair of 30mm ADEN cannon. There hadn't been time to load them.

The shadower had been picked up at a range of 160 miles. But now it was almost on top of them.

Trim at 5º nose up, check fuel, flaps – full.

Hargreaves checked his canopy and ejection seat again. To his right, the Flight Deck Officer directing the launch signalled him to wind up the engine. Eyes on his instruments, Hargreaves advanced the throttle lever to 55% to make sure his engine rpm was within limits. After checking the engine nozzles, he placed the flat of his hand against the glass of his canopy to accept the launch.

Standing to his right, the FDO whipped down a green flag and crouched to the side of the take-off run that stretched ahead towards the ski-jump over the ship's bow.

The young fighter pilot slammed the throttle lever to the stops with his left hand. Engine gauges flicked round their dials in harness with the big Rolls-Royce turbofan winding up behind him. A second later, 10 tons of thrust began to overwhelm the brakes, scrubbing stationary rubber across the rough metal flight deck. Then Hargreaves released the brakes and the jet leapt forward, accelerating fiercely to 90 knots in just three seconds before pressing its pilot further down into his seat as it nosed up the ramp and over the bow. As soon as the cockpit cleared the deck he pulled the nozzle lever back to the short take-off stop then left the controls alone, allowing the Sea Harrier to arc through a ballistic trajectory as she accelerated to wingborne flight.

Capitán Luis Dupeyron saw it all from 20,000 feet as the Fuerza Aérea Argentina Boeing 707 banked to get a better view. After first locating the British fleet using weather radar, the crew of the big jet freighter, serial TC-91, made visual contact with the Royal Navy ships at 1138Z. But after a six-hour flight to find the Task Force, when Dupeyron, the Argentine Naval Observer on board, saw *Hermes* turning into wind below them he knew it was time to go. The

curving white wake meant the British carrier was preparing to launch fighters. On Dupeyron's instruction, the 707 was soon climbing away through 35,000 feet, her pilots eking as much speed out of the old airliner as they could.

On paper, the SHAR could reach 40,000 feet two minutes after brakes off. In practice, with the target already turned tail and gaining altitude, Hargreaves didn't have a great deal of performance to spare. If he let impatience get the better of him and pulled the nose up, his speed would drop off, and rather than finding himself on the wing of the target he'd have to dive to build up speed again. He kept the speed high, resisted the temptation to try to climb too quickly, and was rewarded for it. Ahead, the distinctive shape of a Boeing 707 airliner began to resolve. As he approached more closely, so too did the pale blue roundels that adorned it. And the words FUERZA AÉREA ARGENTINA in black capitals painted behind the flight deck.

Holy Schmoly, he thought, *this isn't just an airliner off course, it's Argentine military*.

Hargreaves struggled to keep the surprise out of his voice as he reported what he'd found back to *Hermes*. 'TC-91,' he confirmed, reading the jet's serial number to them, partly to reassure himself he wasn't seeing things.

'A plane is coming!' shouted a crewman, his face glued to one of the small windows that ran up and down the Argentine freighter's cabin.

'Where?'

There was no time for an answer. Looming just off the 707's port wing was a Sea Harrier, blue and red roundels clearly visible against the dark sea grey. Armed, intentions unknown. Adrenalin coursed through the veins of everyone on board the big FAA transport. They knew they were defenceless in the face of the interceptor flying alongside them. The Sea Harrier manoeuvred lazily from one wing to the other like a cat toying with a mouse. But when the British fighter dropped back, out of sight from TC-91's cabin windows, the hearts of those on board beat a little faster still. It was from behind that the infrared seeker heads of the fighter's Sidewinder missiles would most easily lock on to the hot exhaust from the four turbojet

engines. On the flight deck, the crew braced themselves for the impact of the missiles.

Hargreaves was gentle on the controls though. Hard manoeuvring would have cost him energy and seen him lose ground to his quarry. And as the 707 continued to climb towards 40,000 feet the Sea Harrier's performance advantage became even more marginal. Instead he watched them, the crew's faces peering out from portholes stitched along the pale blue cheatline that ran the length of the fuselage.

Zero chance of escape, he thought.

Twelve minutes after first formating on the Argentine jet, Hargreaves peeled away for the last time. At no point did he ever make any attempt to communicate with them, but there was never any doubt that they were at his mercy. *Next time*, he thought, *I might have to shoot this thing down*.

Five hours later, TC-91 touched down at Ezeiza Airport in northern Argentina, the eight passengers and crew relieved to have succeeded in locating the British fleet and to have survived their first encounter with the Fleet Air Arm. It had been an unsettling experience, though. *The coming confrontation*, realized one of the pilots on board, *will not be easy*. But, he thought, perhaps the British were also beginning to appreciate that recovering the Falkland Islands would be no walk in the park.

As the Royal Navy Task Force continued south, a message was passed from the British government to the Argentine Junta via a Swiss diplomatic back channel. It made clear that, should the Grupo 1 reconnaissance missions continue, their aircraft would be fired on.

Without warning.

PART ONE

Task Force

Upon my arrival in Berkeley Sound East Falkland, – I investigated the matters in question and finding them to be of the most inquisitous and illegal character, – I determined to break up and disperse this band of pirates, many of whom had been sent from the prisons of Buenos Ayres and Monte Video, and were thus let lose to prey upon a peacable and industrious part of our community.

Captain Silas Duncan,
USS *Lexington*, 3 February 1832

ONE

On immediate notice to embark

RNAS Yeovilton, 31 March 1982

THE FIRST SIGN of trouble at Royal Naval Air Station Yeovilton, the Somerset headquarters of the Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm, came late on a Wednesday night with a phone call from Scotland. The Operations Officer aboard HMS *Splendid* called wanting to know if FONAC (Flag Officer Naval Air Command) could arrange for a hydraulic pump to be transported from Devonport dockyard to Faslane, the Scottish home of the Navy's nuclear submarine force, by nine a.m. the following morning. *Splendid*, the Navy's newest nuclear attack boat, had been hauled off the trail of a Soviet Victor class hunter-killer and told to return to base with all despatch where she was now being stored for war. Yeovilton's duty Sea Heron, one of three old piston-engined De Havilland airliners used by the air station for hack work and VIP transport, was already committed, having battled her way through foul weather to deliver stores to Portsmouth. By 11.15 FONAC had made arrangements for a 750 Squadron Jetstream T2 from RNAS Culdrose in Cornwall to make the delivery to Faslane instead.

Half an hour later the phone rang again. The Department of Naval Air Warfare (DNAW) were calling from Ministry of Defence Main Building in London. Could a stripped-down Westland Wessex V helicopter, complete with crew and maintainers, be ready to load aboard a Royal Air Force Hercules bound for Ascension Island in the morning? There was no hint of what was to come. This remote mid-Atlantic outpost, one of the UK's last colonial possessions, was about

to displace Chicago O'Hare as the world's busiest airfield. FONAC's telephone didn't stop ringing for the next three months.

And another British overseas territory was the cause of it all.

In Moody Brook Barracks, Port Stanley, the Commanding Officer of Naval Party 8901, the small detachment of Royal Marines charged with the defence of the Falkland Islands, told his men 'tomorrow you're all going to earn your pay'.

The next day, the first day of April, Lieutenant Commander Tim Gedge was sitting in a lecture hall in Gosport, listening to his new boss, Rear Admiral Derek Reffell, explain the intricacies of the naval redundancy programme. The Senior Service was to be savaged by swingeing cuts to its frontline imposed by the new Conservative Party Defence Secretary, John Nott. HMS *Invincible*, the Navy's brand-new aircraft carrier, was all but on her way to join the Royal Australian Navy, the number of destroyers and frigates was to be reduced by around a third, and HMS *Endurance*, the Antarctic Patrol Ship, was to be disposed of. It was only through the direct intervention of the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Henry Leach, that Nott had been persuaded of the need to retain the two assault ships HMS *Fearless* and HMS *Intrepid*. To have lost them alongside *Invincible* would have made Reffell's position as Flag Officer Third Flotilla, or FOF3, responsible for the Navy's carriers and assault ships, practically redundant too. But even with their stay of execution, another fact remained: with fewer ships, fewer people were needed to sail them.

As the Admiral continued, Gedge was pulled out of the presentation to take a phone call from the Commander in Chief Fleet's office. He must, he was told, report to CINCFLEET at Northwood HQ in northwest London in half an hour.

'I may be the aviator on the staff,' Gedge told them, 'but I don't have a helicopter. It'll probably take me two hours.'

'That's far too long,' came the reply.

Tim Gedge's soft-spoken manner and apparently gentle demeanour gave little indication that he was one of the Royal Navy's most

experienced and accomplished fighter pilots. After discovering that the Glasgow University Air Squadron would pay for him to learn to fly while he studied for an engineering degree he was bitten hard by the flying bug. A year later aviation had so displaced engineering in his affections that he left academia altogether to follow in the footsteps of an uncle who'd flown seaplanes in the Navy in the 1930s.

After flying training he was posted to all-weather fighters, flying De Havilland Sea Vixens off HMS *Victorious* in the Far East. Recognizing his ability, the Navy sent him to the RAF's Central Flying School before posting him to RNAS Lossiemouth as the Qualified Flying Instructor on 764 Naval Air Squadron, the Fleet Air Arm's elite Air Warfare School. Returning to the frontline as QFI on 892 NAS, HMS *Ark Royal*'s F-4 Phantom squadron, he'd begun to plan for a career with BOAC when his eight-year short service naval commission came to an end. Faced with losing him to the airlines, the Navy offered him £1,500 to persuade him to extend his commission to twelve years. But it was poor compensation for the prospect of losing four years' worth of seniority with BOAC. Instead, he told them what it would take to keep him. The next morning he was called in to see 892's Commanding Officer.

'Tim,' the boss began, 'I've just had a very surprising call from London; as of eight a.m. you are on the General List and you're off to do the Air Warfare Instructor's course.'

There was no argument. *My bluff*, Gedge thought, *has been totally called*. And he wasn't unhappy about that at all. Now enjoying the security of a permanent commission, he completed the AWI course as 764's Senior Pilot before earning his watchkeeping tickets aboard the frigate HMS *Jupiter* in Singapore, and completing another tour with *Ark*'s Phantom squadron as Senior Pilot. Postings to Dartmouth as Aviation Officer at Britannia Royal Naval College and as Brigade Aviation Officer to the Royal Marines followed, but in 1979 he was sent to RAF Wittering to learn to fly the Harrier. The same year had seen the Royal Navy take delivery of its first British Aerospace Sea Harrier FRS.1. And Gedge had been flying the SHAR, as the Navy pilots quickly christened their new jump jet, until just two months earlier, when he'd joined FOF3 as fixed-wing adviser to

the Admiral. As much as there was to do, he couldn't help feeling that his new office job paled a little in comparison to being a fighter pilot.

As he drove north in a black naval saloon borrowed from the Gosport motor transport pool, Gedge tuned in to BBC Radio 4. News bulletins included the latest reports on the simmering crisis in the South Atlantic, now nearly a fortnight old.

After an illegal landing by Argentine scrap merchant Constantino Davidoff on the British territory of South Georgia on 19 March, Margaret Thatcher's government despatched the ice patrol ship HMS *Endurance* to intervene, prompting a chorus of jingoistic headlines in the British press. A bit of provocative graffiti and the hoisting of the Argentine flag? A gunboat would teach them some respect. But signals intelligence soon reached London that perhaps Davidoff's salvage operation, already dependent on the support of the Argentine Navy who referred to the enterprise as Operation ALPHA, heralded an altogether more significant military interest in South Georgia and the neighbouring Falkland Islands. And Britain's response, or at least how it was perceived in Argentina, actually accelerated the process.

A week after the ALPHA landings, the Swiftsure class nuclear-powered hunter-killer submarine HMS *Superb* sailed from Gibraltar on Operation SARDIUS, prompting press reports of her departure. While SARDIUS would actually see *Superb* sail north towards the Shetland-Faroes gap to find and track a Soviet Victor II submarine, in Argentina, naval commanders assumed, not unreasonably, that *Superb* was on her way to the South Atlantic. Believing they'd triggered the despatch of the one thing capable of preventing Operation BLUE, a long-standing plan to occupy Las Malvinas, the Admirals knew the seaborne invasion of the Falkland Islands was now a race against time. They had ten days before they expected *Superb* to arrive. The British did nothing to disabuse them of that because, as the First Sea Lord put it, 'it did not profit us to do so'. In fact, the first boat ordered south was *Superb*'s sister ship, HMS *Spartan*, on 1 April. The confusion was immaterial. All that mattered was that for the Argentine Navy's Commander in Chief Admiral Jorge Anaya, the price he'd extracted for supporting General Leopoldo Galtieri's accession to power in December 1981 – the new

leader's blessing for Operation BLUE – must now be paid without delay. Or the opportunity would be lost.

Arriving at Northwood by lunchtime, Gedge parked and was taken straight through to the Commander in Chief's office. CINCFLEET himself, Admiral Sir John Fieldhouse, was absent, but the combined presence of so many senior naval commanders waiting for him was scarcely less imposing. After a cursory welcome, the questions began.

'If we are to go operational, what assets would FOF3 wish to send?'

'Where are we going?' Gedge asked with deliberate ingenuousness. 'What's the operation?'

'We can't tell you that. It's too highly classified and you don't have the security clearance.'

'Assuming we're going to the Falklands,' Gedge volunteered, pausing only to clock some slightly nervous blinking among his audience, 'we need to send all the carriers and all our fighter aircraft' – knowing full well that meant just two carriers, HMS *Invincible* and HMS *Hermes*, and twenty Sea Harriers – 'and we need to look at whether we take anti-submarine aircraft based on intelligence.' Gedge was queried about the numbers of Sea Harriers. Over the previous two years he'd embarked his squadron aboard both ships and knew their capabilities well. 'Twelve in *Hermes*' – the larger of the two carriers – 'and eight in *Invincible*.'

Gedge was instructed to return to Fort Southwick, the old Napoleonic-era fort overlooking the Solent from which FOF3 conducted its business, and to ensure that the Sea Harrier squadrons were ready for possible action.

'What should I tell the COs?'

'You can't tell them anything. Just make sure that they're on immediate notice to embark.'

As Gedge drove back to Portsmouth with as much speed as possible, the BBC was reporting that an invasion of the Falkland Islands was supposedly imminent.

It wasn't the first time the Royal Navy had been asked to forestall the possibility of Argentine action against British South Atlantic

territories. In 1976, HMS *Endurance* discovered a small detachment of Argentine soldiers on Southern Thule. In direct response, nothing beyond a protest from the Foreign & Commonwealth Office was done. But, as talks between Britain and Argentina over the future of the Falkland Islands got underway the following year, Operation JOURNEYMAN saw the despatch of HMS *Phoebe* and HMS *Alacrity* towards the South Atlantic. And while the two frigates and their Royal Fleet Auxiliary support ships loitered at a considerable distance from the Falklands, Britain's first nuclear submarine, HMS *Dreadnought*, patrolled within 4 or 5 miles of the islands, prompting a conversation within the Argentine Admiralty about whether their own submarine force could do anything about it. The answer, despite the recent introduction of new diesel-electric submarines bought from Germany, was no.

The frustrating truth for Argentina was that it was no more able to contest British naval power in 1977 than it had been in 1833 when two Royal Navy warships, HMS *Clio* and HMS *Tyne*, re-established British sovereignty over the islands.

In 1774, after less than a century of frankly half-hearted exchanges of sovereignty with France and Spain, the British left their settlement at Port Egmont on West Falkland, naively hoping that a plaque asserting that 'Falkland's Ysland, with this fort, the storehouses, wharf, harbour, bays, and creeks thereunto belonging, are the sole right and property of His Most Sacred Majesty George III' would be sufficient to retain possession.

In Britain's absence, control of the former Spanish settlement of Puerto Soledad in East Falkland passed to the United Provinces of the Río de la Plata, newly independent from Spain in 1818. In reality, it wasn't much of a bauble; little more than a port in a storm for a lawless American sealing fleet. But when Captain Silas Duncan of the US Navy's twenty-four-gun sloop-of-war USS *Lexington* intervened in an attempt by Buenos Aires to impose a little order on the behaviour of his countrymen, his response was to destroy Puerto Soledad and declare the islands 'Free of all Government'. The vacuum left in *Lexington*'s wake was promptly filled by *Clio* and *Tyne* and the islands had remained in British hands ever since.

The United Provinces of the Río de la Plata formally became the Argentine Republic in 1860. And, unlike in 1833 and 1977, in 1982 Admiral Anaya knew he had a brief window in which to reverse the historic injustice and humiliation suffered by his country before the arrival of any meaningful British naval force that might stop him.

Back at Fort Southwick, Tim Gedge phoned the two Sea Harrier squadron bosses. He caught Lieutenant Commander Andy Auld, the taciturn Scot who'd recently taken the reins of 800 Naval Air Squadron, at Yeovilton. 800 were supposed to be going on Easter leave the following day. Their counterparts on 801 had already dispersed, so Gedge put a call in to their piratical CO, Lieutenant Commander Nigel 'Sharkey' Ward, at his home in Wincanton. Gedge told them both that leave was cancelled. Both squadrons needed to be ready to embark aboard the carriers. Auld and Ward had put two and two together and knew what was brewing, but when they asked Gedge for confirmation, his hands were tied by his instructions from Northwood.

'Listen to the BBC,' he told them.

With the Argentine invasion force still at sea, President Reagan, after hours of trying, was able to speak to General Galtieri. The President had no desire to see war between two allies but told Galtieri that Argentina would unavoidably be seen as the aggressor. In an hour-long conversation with the General, Reagan left him in no doubt about Britain's determination to fight. Following the call, Galtieri spoke to Admiral Anaya, the driving force behind an invasion now codenamed Operation ROSARIO. It's too late for second thoughts, Anaya is reported to have told him, because his ships were already in formation off the Falklands.

At 2.55 a.m. on 2 April, FONAC took a call from Northwood HQ telling them that *Invincible* and *Hermes* had been brought to immediate notice to sail. Each required an expanded Sea Harrier squadron and a full complement of Westland Sea King HAS.5 anti-submarine helicopters. Whether or not to embark the 'Junglies', the troop-carrying Sea King HC.4s, was yet to be decided.

TWO

A ferocious display

Captain Jeremy 'JJ' Black and his wife were sound asleep at home in their picturesque Hampshire farmhouse when the phone rang. Black cursed as he reached over to silence it. It was four a.m. He picked up.

'Is that Captain Black?'

'Yes,' he replied, his voice betraying his irritation at the early morning disturbance.

'I have just received a signal from the Commander in Chief ordering *Invincible* to be brought to four hours' notice for sea by twelve hundred hours tomorrow.'

'What for?' he asked, recognizing the voice of the ship's Duty Officer.

'Oh, there's some trouble brewing in the Falkland Islands, a landing by the Argentinians or something.'

JJ Black had been Captain of HMS *Invincible*, the Navy's newest aircraft carrier, for just three months. And on the face of it, his qualifications for the job were unusual. After joining the Navy aged thirteen in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, he had, by the time of his nineteenth birthday, been to war in Korea aboard HMS *Belfast* and patrolled the jungles of Borneo with the Royal Marines in search of Communist insurgents. In the years that followed he'd fired the 15-inch guns of HMS *Vanguard*, Britain's last battleship, and served aboard destroyers, cruisers and aircraft carriers before being given command of a coastal minesweeper, HMS *Fiskerton*, in the Far East, during which time he came under heavy fire while taking part in the dramatic rescue of Western hostages from terrorists in Brunei. Command of destroyers

and staff jobs in the MoD followed. But Black, a Gunnery Officer, had never been an aviator. In the Royal Navy, unlike their US counterparts, it was not a prerequisite for the Captain of an aircraft carrier. That Black had achieved the rank despite its absence from his CV, though, was a mark of the high regard in which he was held by the Senior Service.

'Make the General Recall,' Black instructed, and told the Duty Officer to inform *Invincible*'s Heads of Department to get to work. Now wide awake, his mind cycled through all that needed to be done to bring the 20,000-ton ship back to life, not least the formidable task of reassembling the ship's company, currently scattered far and wide on leave following a successful series of exercises in challenging weather off Scotland and Norway.

Black couldn't help but wonder whether, after the early morning excitement, it wouldn't all just blow over. A phone call to his friend Admiral David Halifax, Chief of Staff to CINCFLEET at Northwood, put paid to that notion. 'This is for real,' Halifax told him. 'Jump to it.'

Before heading into Portsmouth, another concern nagged at the Captain. His daughter and her friend were supposed to be celebrating their eighteenth birthdays with 120 of their closest friends on *Invincible*'s quarterdeck that evening. If Wellington could attend a ball the evening before the Battle of Waterloo, then he had every intention of holding a party for his daughter before his ship sailed, but he thought it might be prudent to make contingency plans. Eating a bowl of cereal, he walked round to his next-door neighbour who, conveniently, worked as Supply Commander to the Royal Naval Barracks in Portsmouth. Black explained that there was a chance he'd have to relocate his daughter's party to the barracks wardroom. 'I'd be so grateful if you could make the arrangements.' Black thanked him and, still eating his breakfast, returned home, leaving a surprised but seemingly unfazed neighbour in his wake.

That Friday morning, the atmosphere in the Sea Harrier squadron crewrooms was charged. Following the heads-up from Gedge the previous day, the two frontline Sea Harrier squadron bosses, Andy

Auld and Sharkey Ward, had each received a wake-up phone call around the same time as JJ Black.

When the Duty Officer of 899 NAS, the Sea Harrier's headquarters and training squadron, called his CO, Lieutenant Commander Neill Thomas, to tell him the balloon had gone up, the boss was unconvinced. 'Yeah?' he responded. 'Pull the other one.' Then he put the phone down and went back to bed. He needed to: along with most of his squadron, he'd only enjoyed about three hours' sleep. The squadron's run ashore the previous evening had got a little out of hand when a group of football fans took exception to the sight of 899's squadron boss sporting a grass skirt and singing on stage in Bristol's Beer Cellar. After the police intervened and A&E had patched up those requiring it, two coaches finally delivered them back to Yeovilton at around half past midnight.

It took another phone call from the Duty Officer to persuade Thomas he really had to get up. The 899 boss dressed quickly and headed in to work.

800's Air Engineering Officer, or AEO, had already called his counterpart on 899 to inform him that the two frontline squadrons needed three of his jets. The effort to fill their cockpits was also in full swing. After less than twenty-four hours' leave in the States, Lieutenant Al Curtis was already on his way back to the UK aboard an RAF VC10. 845 Squadron would have a Wessex helicopter waiting at Brize Norton to bring him back to his unit. At Yeovilton, Sharkey Ward and Andy Auld were like two playground football captains picking teams. Even with Curtis en route, Ward was still down a couple of players. His Senior Pilot (aka SPLOT) had discovered he was allergic to *Invincible*'s air conditioning system. While he received treatment he wouldn't be deploying. In his place, Ward bagged Robin Kent, one of Neill Thomas's instructors from 899. Eager to add further experience, he also claimed John 'EJ' Eyton-Jones, Paul Barton and Mike Broadwater from 899. Last on his list was Major Willard T. McAtee of the United States Marine Corps, 899's AWI.

A veteran of dangerous close air support missions over Vietnam in the propellor-driven Rockwell OV-10 Bronco, McAtee had arrived

at Yeovilton for an exchange tour with 899 NAS less than a week after EJ. The two became firm friends on the basis that, when McAtee risked being disciplined for querying the wisdom of his instructors by using phrases like 'Are you shitting me?', EJ could dig him out by explaining 'What he *meant* to say was . . .' EJ was also quickly on hand to sort things out when McAtee arrived unannounced in a Sea Harrier at the MoD's Farnborough test centre offering, by way of explanation, 'Well, I screwed up. I'm lost.' But the Navy quickly realized that Willy McAtee was a rough diamond, not only a vastly experienced Harrier pilot but also a Weapons Instructor who'd arrived in the UK armed with a copy of the Marine Corps TACMAN, the tactical manual detailing sight settings, bomb clearances and weapons release parameters for the AV-8A. They gave him a week's training in the peculiarities of low-level navigation in the UK and made him the squadron AWI.

And Ward wanted him on 801.

'OK, cool,' replied McAtee, who was of the view that you couldn't have a war without inviting the Marines.

As an American exchange officer, McAtee, alongside the Fleet Air Arm chain of command, also had an obligation to the Marine Corps. He called the US Embassy in London to speak to the Assistant Naval Attaché, a Marine grunt full Colonel.

'Colonel,' he said, 'I'm packing my stuff and going to war, so you won't be hearing from me for a while.'

'You're doing what?'

'I'm going to war.'

'What are you talking about?'

'You know, the Falklands.'

'Don't move.'

'I'm going with the boys,' McAtee told him.

While McAtee was trying to force the issue with his superiors, Neill Thomas hit a brick wall with his own. Despite long experience as a naval fighter pilot and, with 899 divvied up between 800 and 801, no longer having any kind of meaningful squadron to run, the Navy told him he was staying put. They regarded the idea of sending an extra Commanding Officer to either 800 or 801, each of which

already had a perfectly good one, as an embarrassment. 'I'll be a good boy,' he told them, 'won't tread on any toes . . .' But as desperate as he was to go, he was getting nowhere. Instead he turned his attention to trying to rustle up more jets.

At Fort Southwick, Tim Gedge was already doing just that and going about things in a characteristically meticulous fashion. In flawlessly neat handwriting, he produced a thorough audit of the status of the Sea Harrier force. He'd recommended to CINCFLEET sending twenty jets. As well as the necessary airframes and pilots, he also had to make sure the squadrons had sufficient weaponry, radars and avionics. He tallied up the contents of the two carriers' magazines. With seventy-five 1,000lb bombs on board, *Hermes* had room for another twenty-four. With thirty-six, *Invincible* could manage just another twelve. Both ships could take another 3,000 rounds of 30mm ammunition. Between them, they had sixty-seven AIM-9G Sidewinder heatseeking missiles. One hundred more were to be delivered to Portsmouth dockyard by Monday morning.

For now, he discovered, he was short of two of the twenty Blue Fox radar sets he needed for the SHARs to be able to employ their weapons effectively.

With 899 split between 800 and 801, each frontline squadron was now eight jets strong. That was all that Sharkey's expanded squadron needed for *Invincible*. To provide 800 with twelve airframes, Gedge could scrape one more aeroplane out of 899, and bring a couple out of long-term storage at RAF St Athan, where a number of brand-new jets were kept as attrition reserves. Then, potentially, there were SHARs being used for trials work by the Aeroplane & Armament Experimental Establishment (A&AEE) at Boscombe Down.

At lunchtime, the BBC's *World at One* reported that the Falkland Islands were now in the hands of the Argentine Junta.

Three hours later, in a ferocious display of jet noise and sea spray, eight of the Sea Harriers allocated to 800 Squadron embarked on HMS *Hermes* as she was tied alongside at Portsmouth.

The 28,000-ton carrier was hardly in the first flush of youth. She'd begun life in 1944 as HMS *Elephant*, when her keel was laid down at the Harland and Wolff shipyard in Belfast. Early on in what was to be a protracted build, she was renamed *Hermes* to perpetuate the name of the world's first purpose-built 'airplane carrier'. The new *Hermes* didn't then join the fleet until 1959. Since then she'd served as a strike carrier armed with De Havilland Sea Vixens and Blackburn Buccaneers throughout the sixties, then a helicopter assault ship through the early seventies, before emerging in 1976 after a refit as an anti-submarine specialist. By the summer of 1981 she'd acquired the distinctive-looking ski-jump over the bow that signalled the addition of the Sea Harrier to her air group. It only added further character to the lines of a ship that seemed composed more of protrusions, overhangs, appendages and afterthoughts than smooth steel.

Beside her on the dock was a shanty town of cranes, conveyor belts, Portakabins, containers and a relay race of trucks delivering stores and weaponry. Two lorries carried nothing but timber that would be used to repair battle damage. A skip stencilled 'SCRAP' sat next to the starboard forward gangway; someone had painted out the 'S'. But for all the air of the reclamation yard she had about her, the overall effect was striking. She looked purposeful and intimidating. Now, after nearly eight months of testing exercises on both sides of the Atlantic under her hard-charging Captain, Lin Middleton, a South African former Buccaneer pilot, *Hermes* was due a lick of paint and a little TLC. After returning to Portsmouth less than two weeks earlier her island – the superstructure located on the starboard side of her flight deck that was home to the ship's bridge, Flyco (Flying Control), and her radar and communications masts – was clad in scaffolding. Her grey hull was still streaked with rust. The larger of the two carriers sailing south, *Hermes*, for all that she already looked like she'd been through a war, would be the flagship.

In the end, Neill Thomas was told he'd be joining her. A combined effort by him, his AEO and Tim Gedge at FOF3 had produced four more aeroplanes for *Hermes*. But now Andy Auld's twelve-strong Sea

Harrier squadron only had eleven pilots. As well as a pair of instructors, Thomas had already provided 800 with two of his students, but in an ideal world you wanted about three pilots for every two jets. 'What's the point,' he argued, 'of having the aeroplanes on board if you can't fly them?' And he volunteered immediately.

His persistence rewarded, the men chosen to join him were a naval test pilot drafted in from Boscombe Down, Sharkey Ward's designated replacement as CO 801, and another 899 student, Flight Lieutenant Dave Morgan, an RAF exchange pilot who over the course of the day had been told he wasn't going, then that he was going but not flying, before, like Thomas, finally being given the nod. Morgan had covered about a third of the Sea Harrier operational flying training course.

Reluctantly, JJ Black decided that he should move his daughter's party to the wardroom of the naval barracks. He had no concerns about *Invincible*'s ability to host a party as the ship's company stored for war, but he imagined what the press might make of it and realized it probably wasn't quite the image the Navy wanted to project. But it didn't stop him getting changed into full mess undress tailcoat and enjoying the occasion.

Black's determination to project an air of calm, confidence and normality would serve him and his crew well over the months ahead.

Sharkey Ward's Sea Harriers were scheduled to embark in the morning. Each was carried towards a vertical landing on a broiling pillar of 21,500lb of jet thrust that churned up the surface of the sea below. Their dramatic arrival would only add to the consternation of the archaeologists raising the wreck of Henry VIII's flagship *Mary Rose* from the bottom of the Solent that had already been caused by 800's SHARs.

Nothing could have been further from Ward's mind as he clambered out of the cockpit and bounded down to the deck. The squadron boss relished the prospect of what he'd decided would be a 'limited war'.

After successive tours flying the F-4 Phantom from *Ark Royal*, Ward, as boss of 700A NAS, the Sea Harrier Intensive Flying Trials

Unit, had played a central role in the introduction of its replacement. A short, sharp dust-up, he thought, might offer a chance to prove to doubters what the Navy's new vertical take-off fighter, in the hands of the Fleet Air Arm's finest, might be capable of. And remind both the public and politicians of how much they were needed.

For all the unshakeable confidence he had in the SHAR, Ward also knew that, still relatively new into service, there was room for improvement. He put in a phone call to Tim Gedge at FOF3 with a list of requirements. It was one of the more straightforward requests Gedge had to deal with.