

BEEN THERE DONE THAT

Falkland Islands – Jan-Feb 2003

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Introduction

Mount Pleasant Complex (MPC) - formerly Mount Pleasant Airfield - is one of the largest remaining, overseas detachments in the British Armed Forces. Approximately 8,000 miles from the UK (and only 400 miles from Argentina) it is situated on East Falkland Island, 30 miles south of the colony's capital, Stanley. The population of MPC is approximately 2000, consisting of RAF, Army, and Navy personnel, MOD civilian contractors, and a few families of the individuals on longer continuity tours.

The name change to MPC came about to reinforce the tri-service ethos that is heavily promoted.

The *raison d'être* of the detachment is to provide a garrison and deterrent against any potential Argentinian aggression. The teeth for this operation are provided by the F3 Tornado Air Defence Fighters and the Roulement Infantry Company (RIC). There are also, of course, all the appropriate support aircraft and personnel.

Medical Facilities

Medically, there is a regional medical centre consisting of 2 medical officers (both RAF due to the Aviation Medicine input required) supported by an RAF Nurse and 11 medics. The medics come from all 3 services, to give a truly purple feel to the RMC. The building itself is purpose built and akin to what one might expect to find in any Medical Centre back in the UK. The dental centre is co-located in the same building as the RMC, and is staffed by a dental officer from one of



Fig 2. Mount Pleasant Complex.

the 3 services (known as FIDO - Falkland Islands Dental Officer) a dental nurse and a receptionist.

The centre sees a range of clinical situations; the normal GP "bread and butter", as well as more A&E-type work. The main difference between work at MPC and back in the UK is greater clinical involvement with secondary care patients. The local hospital, the King Edward Memorial Hospital (KEMH), is in Stanley, 1 hour away by less than adequate road or 15-20 minutes away by Sea King. The hospital was recently rebuilt, after a catastrophic fire, and is now very well designed and equipped, especially for such a small rural community (serving approx. 2,500 islanders excluding MPC). It is staffed by civilians and run primarily by 4 well qualified GPs who have a wide range of extended skills between them, such as endoscopy, ultrasonography and ophthalmology. There is a resident consultant surgeon and anaesthetist who, due to their wide experience and knowledge can deal with most eventualities. The radiology department is state of the art, using digital technology to transmit data if required. As there is no resident radiologist, one's X-ray reading skills are quickly re-awakened.

As patients are released back in to one's care back in the RMC, closer follow-up is maintained and cases are often seen through to conclusion which might otherwise be absorbed in to the secondary care system.

From a personal point of view, the principle challenges and benefits of the job were the increased awareness of ones operational environment in terms of fitness to work, organising and prioritisation of aeromedical evacuation and the isolation from certain clinical specialities. It makes one more resourceful and independent and hones the skills of justification as to why patient X needs to go home 8,000 miles on the next aeromed flight.

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Fig 1. Map of the Falkland Islands.

Social Facilities and Accommodation

In terms of facilities, MPC has it all. It seems to be better equipped than most UK stations. This is not a comprehensive list but activities and facilities available include;

- Swimming pool
- Very well equipped gym
- 6 squash courts
- Lazer Quest
- Go-Karting
- Extensive internet access (more later)
- Free video and DVD library

The welfare system is well established. Each person gets a £20 phonecard every week (charged at approx £1/minute) and access to “Area 51” a vast, modern broadband internet facility consisting of approximately 40 terminals, to which everyone is entitled to 40 minutes per day.

The accommodation is reasonable, in smallish single rooms with access to communal showers, toilets and laundry facilities. The mess is good, the food is of a good standard and there is always a vast choice.

Other Opportunities

The greatest attraction of the Falkland Islands has to be the wildlife. I had the good fortune to go down in their summer so was able to take full advantage of the many helicopter or land trips offered to the more remote locations and islands. The penguins are the most famous from the impressive King Penguins to the Magellanic, Gentoo and the quirky Rockhoppers. There are also sealions, elephant seals, dolphins and killer whales.

It is also possible to immerse oneself in the history of the island and the conflict itself. I can highly recommend the series of lectures given by Mr John Smith (yes, it is his real name) a local historian and curator of the museum in Stanley. The RIC and RAF Regiment also run battlefield tours on Sundays, starting with an introduction to the background to the conflict and then going over the actual ground fought over by the British Forces in 1982. It is quite poignant to be there and tends to focus the mind as to what the troops had to endure. It is barren enough in the summer during the day, but when you consider that they were enduring harsh winter conditions and being shot at, you start to feel very humble.

I enjoyed my (brief) tour in the Falklands. It was my first overseas deployment and a good introduction to detachment medicine in fabulous and interesting surroundings. Whilst I am not suggesting that this was a hardship tour in terms of accommodation and facilities, it is enough to get a flavour of an operational environment.



Fig 3. Falklands wildlife.