Wednesday, Feb 6th 2013. I write these words on the RRS *Ernest Shackleton* as she leaves the Falkland Islands en route to South Georgia. The ship has started to move with the waves and increasing swell, the first dolphins and albatrosses have been seen already, and we have almost three days of travel ahead of us before arriving at King Edward Point. Our red-hulled vessel is almost bursting at the seams with the number of heavy shipping containers and fuel drums on board - some 420 tonnes all told. Safely stowed under the main hatch cover are our three helicopters, which were flown aboard yesterday. Team Rat has been arriving from all corners of the globe over the past 10 days, and all souls are now settled on board. The ship took on 667,000 litres of fuel and has 160,000 litres of water on board. Nearly two years of planning and preparation have been focussed on this moment. We are ready, and we're off to South Georgia.

Since arriving in the Falklands a fortnight ago, my time has been spent scurrying around in excellent but rather frayed 4WD vehicles trying to ensure that all elements of the project remained on track, that the ship's officers and crew were content as the loading progressed, and most importantly that the arriving team members were greeted, transported, fed, accommodated and briefed on what's going on. Each day a working breakfast with Geoff Pring, our Falklands manager, was followed by a variety of tasks, increasingly involving an hour-long journey out to the Mount Pleasant military facility where the project's three helicopters were parked after their long journey from the UK. Just ten miles from Hangar 9 on the airfield is the harbour, where the Shackleton was slowly filling up with gear and people, having earlier moved round from Stanley Harbour.

The resourceful Geoff, who always seems to know just the right person around Stanley to get something done or where to find a specialist piece of kit, has been very busy over the past weeks and months. Among many other tasks, he has been accumulating the equipment arriving by different routes, arranging for the helicopters to be moved to Hangar 9 from the ship on which they arrived, and filling and storing...
700 drums of aviation fuel for the coming season's work. Geoff will remain in Stanley to oversee the final preparational logistics and then will join Team Rat on South Georgia in early March.

Geoff and I were joined on Jan 31st by the vanguard of our aviation team – engineers Mark Paulin and Paul Wilkinson, together with pilot George Phillips. They wasted no time in getting to the aircraft and preparing them to fly, only to discover that two of the three had developed problems during their long journey from the UK, and needed some replacement parts before they could be declared fit to take to the air. Fortunately, despite this being a weekend, the necessary parts were located in the UK and couriered to Deputy Project Director Rob Webster, who was travelling next day to the Falklands. Within minutes of Rob's arrival at a very windy Mount Pleasant airport on the Monday, the parts were on their way round the airfield to Hangar 9, where the engineers were ready to replace the faulty parts. By 23:00 that night the work was completed, and all aircraft were declared airworthy again – to huge relief all round.

All three helicopters were flown on to the ship yesterday, debladed and then swung ever-so-carefully into the hold by the ship's crane. As the photo on page 5 shows, it was a tight fit, with just inches to spare between the tail booms but, once strapped down, our precious aircraft looked ready to withstand whatever the coming journey might throw at them.

We received fantastic in-kind support from the military staff at Mount Pleasant. Needing to have a fire-extinguisher at the ready when ground-testing our helicopters, we received instead three huge fire trucks on a training exercise, with their attendant firemen interested to be briefed on our operation.

Once the most delicate and colourful cargo was secured, the main hold cover was rolled into place and 12 shipping containers of bait could be swung onboard – each weighing nearly 15 tonnes. Every time a lift was made, the ship rolled to starboard as the huge cables became ram-rod tight and took the strain, then rolled back again as the weight was transferred amidships. Starting at first, this movement became routine after a while, causing no-one to even look up as yet another 30 pods of bait came on to the vessel in their secure steel box.

We had hoped to get away by the evening of Feb 6th, but strong winds the previous day had prevented all deck work and frustratingly it eventually became apparent that departure would have to be set back until the following morning. Not for the first time, I'm sure, our plans were defeated by the notoriously fickle weather at the bottom end of the South Atlantic.

But the next morning dawned bright and breezy, and thirty very excited SGHT passengers lined the railings and monkey island of the Shackleton as she slipped her moorings with the aid of her powerful thrusters, picked up Tula (flat-bottomed tender) and made her way under the guidance of a harbour pilot towards the open ocean. Soon after, both engines were engaged and we were on our way.
Team Rat arrives & gets to work
Loading the ship
Helicopters become sardines!
A hold transformed. Within a few hours, a food packing station (the ‘tween decks hold) had been transformed into a helicopter hangar. The photo above was taken mid-morning on Tues Feb 5th, and the one below shows the same space just after lunch. In that time, and under the generalship of our Head Chef Gerard Baker, 8 tonnes of food had been unpacked, sorted into weekly rations, stowed in plastic drums, stacked and shrink-wrapped onto pallets, then secured ready for the passage to South Georgia. Just about the entire team was involved in this monumental effort, which saved a lot of effort and anguish on the high seas. This was only the dried/preserved food. Gerard was less than forthcoming on what plans he had for the 200kg of butter in the freezer, but we hear rumour that he bakes spectacular cakes! Hunger is not a challenge we are likely to face under the care of Gerard and his two assistants Oli Prince and Ant Dubber.
At last underway, we now look forward to some three days of relative ease at sea before reaching South Georgia at first light on Sunday morning. Then we will face a frenetic day of offloading containers and aircraft, then re-organising everything in readiness for the depot-laying work. To do all this we will need good weather and no more than moderate winds – conditions which have been few and far between this season on the island. We also need a good ship and experienced, cooperative officers and crew. I am absolutely delighted that the Captain of the RRS Ernest Shackleton on this voyage is none other than Robert Paterson, who was serving as a Government Officer at KEP during the Phase 1 operation and became a firm friend of Team Rat. Robert and his colleagues have already worked tirelessly to make this charter a success, and we are grateful for their dedication and constructive attitude during the Falklands loading process.

The most important thing is that the depot-laying team is now all but complete. We have our pilots, engineers, bait loaders, organising team, GIS specialist, doctor, film team, trustees and guests. We lack only Sally Poncet and Sam Moore, who are awaiting our arrival at South Georgia, and Nick Prentice, who will reach the island shortly after we do. The next few days will be spent getting everyone up to speed on what we will be doing over the island and what their role will be in achieving our goals. We come from many different countries spread across the globe, but have joined this ship to accomplish a single, hugely challenging goal. It’s a voyage that I’m sure will be enormously enjoyable and unforgettable. If you haven’t already done so, do sign up for future Newsletters & follow our progress.

Tony Martin