Yesterday, 13 February 2011, the South Georgia Heritage Trust’s helicopters G-BATC & G-TVAM landed at Grytviken, watched by the entire population of South Georgia mainland and the crew and passengers of the MV Marina Svetaeva, on which they travelled. Thus was marked the beginning of field operations for Phase 1 of the Habitat Restoration Project, the culmination of years of hopes, expectations and hard work on the part of many people from all over the world.

My own journey to the South started nearly three weeks earlier, when I travelled from the UK to the Falklands via Sao Paulo and Santiago. Sally Poncet kindly drove out to Mount Pleasant to pick me up, and in Stanley I was introduced to Geoff Pring. These two people have been working hard in recent weeks handling the increasing Stanley-based logistics of the operation, as the focus of the project moved southward. Ken Passfield, our Cook and Accommodation Manager, was also in town, and Dion Poncet arrived a few days later on the Golden Fleece. After several false starts, Chief Pilot Bob Brett and our engineer Graham Charman flew in on Sunday 6th, with just 90 minutes to spare before their flight was cancelled altogether.

My ten days in Stanley were occupied with pre-embarkation logistics and communications with the Falkland Islanders (FI radio, Penguin News and a talk to members of the Legislative Assembly). The final evening on land was very pleasantly spent at a dinner graciously hosted by Nigel Haywood the Commissioner for South Georgia at Government House in honour of the HR Project. Guests included team members, Jan Cheek (SGHT Trustee), GSGSSI officers and several islanders who have helped the Project in a variety of important ways. Sadly, Bob and Graham were unable to reach GH in time because they were working on the two helicopters at MPA, preparing the aircraft for flying, and demonstrating their dedication to the cause – not for the last time I suspect.
**Helicopter travels**

Having been bought from Bond Helicopters at Staverton, near Cheltenham, our two Bolköw 105 aircraft were sent by road to Southampton and then by MOD ship to the military port in the Falklands – East Cove. The red one (G-BATC) was first to arrive, and yellow G-TVAM arrived five weeks later – leaving just a few days for the latter to be collected, re-bladed, refuelled, checked and flown to Stanley for embarkation on the MV *Marina Svetaeva* (MS). Bob Brett oversaw the transportation of both aircraft at each end of their journey down the length of the Atlantic, and had the satisfaction of flying them onboard the *MS* in brilliant sunshine.

Arriving on the helideck, the helicopters were once again stripped of their main rotor blades by Graham and Bob, then wheeled inside the hangar and tightly secured with strops. Fortunately the voyage to South Georgia was short (only 2 ½ days) and remarkably calm. On arrival at South Georgia we spent a pleasant day and a half with the *MS* passengers in the Bay of Isles, Fortuna Bay and Stromness Bay. In Fortuna Bay, shortly after dawn and in brilliant, calm conditions Graham, Bob and Ken re-attached the blades to TC in order for one aircraft to be ready to fly off the ship soon after arrival in King Edward Cove.

Sally and Ken prevent Bob from sustaining a hard landing while helping Graham re-attach the main rotor blades.

TC in Fortuna Bay with blades re-attached after emerging from the *MV Marina Svetaeva* hangar.

Helicopter TVAM makes its way from the ship on which it arrived from Southampton (1 & 2) to Mount Pleasant airport via low-loader (3) and finally onto the *MV Marina Svetaeva* for onward passage to South Georgia (4).
Heroism in Stanley Harbour

Many people have contributed to the herculean task of getting the helicopters safely to South Georgia, but perhaps none more heroically than Aaron Lawton, OneOcean’s Expedition Leader on the Marina Svetaeva. Aaron volunteered to pick up our two blade boxes, each 5 metres long and weighing 200kg, and take them the length of Stanley Harbour. This task was judged too challenging for the large harbour launches, but Aaron somehow managed to get both of them on a single inflatable zodiac boat and steer them in rough waters all the way to his ship. For his valour, Aaron was presented with a Team Rat sweatshirt to the applause of everyone aboard the vessel.

A nervous moment

One of the most important jobs in Stanley, and certainly the most nerve-wracking, was to inspect the bait that had been made for us by Bell Labs in Wisconsin back in October, and then sent by rail, lorry, ship, lorry, ship and finally another lorry via Southampton. Had the bait arrived in poor condition, as had a batch from another manufacturer sent to the Falklands a year ago, then the project would have had to be abandoned. It would be impossible to source a replacement in the available time.

With some trepidation, Sally, Darren Christie (GSGSSI) and I opened four of the seven huge steel containers and peeked inside. With great relief and much smiling we discovered that first one, then the 2nd and 3rd and 4th container had weathered the long journey perfectly. The contents looked as though they had just been packed.

Documentary team

A week after my arrival in Stanley I was joined by the three-member team from GEO in Germany who are to make a film documentary and magazine article about the Project. Ines Possemeyer and Roland Gockel, doing the filming, worked intensively to document the pre-departure work, while Ingo Arndt quietly built a photographic record of Stanley and our increasingly frenetic preparations for sea. All three of the team are a delight to work with, and I’m confident that what they produce will be of high quality.

Watching some playback, Ines Possemeyer (Director) and Roland Gockel (cameraman) seem surprised and delighted that some of the film they have shot is in focus.

Sally and I examine the contents of a shipping container full of bait. This is one of seven such containers loaded by Bell Labs in the U.S.. Our thanks to Bell for such an excellent job in ensuring that this vital part of our operation arrived in perfect condition.

Graham checks the blades (above) and Sally ensures that AM is spotlessly clean as part of our biosecurity requirements.
Smiles all round

The joy and relief of bringing the helicopters and most of our equipment to South Georgia was evident on the faces of all involved. The staff, crew and passengers of the MV Marina Svetaeva, and her operators OneOcean, were touchingly proud to have been so pivotal in bringing this element of the operation to a successful conclusion (upper photo), and I was charmed to be in delightful company both on departure from the ship (Sarah and Antje) and on arrival at Grytviken (Ruth, with Bob and I). Enormous thanks to OneOcean for supporting the Project in such an important way.

So ended one important chapter of this operation. The next – final preparations for the commencement of bait spreading in two weeks time - begins immediately. Priorities are to ready the helicopters for the work, check the whereabouts of every piece of our equipment, ensure all staff are properly briefed and trained, and place and secure the VHF repeater station.

We look forward to the arrival of first George Lemann (16th Feb) and then Deirdre Galbreith, Peter Garden, Nick Torr, Gary Patterson and Dion Poncet on the 23rd of the month. With them will come our bait and remaining equipment.

My thanks to the many, many people who have helped us get this far, most of whom will I hope receive this and future Newsletters/Diaries. Please also note that you can follow our progress on the Facebook link below.

Tony Martin

Facebook (http://www.Facebook.com/pages/South-georgia-heritage-trust/107047869335869)