

# Homecoming for HMS Hermes

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The flagship of the British taskforce to the Falklands, HMS Hermes, has arrived back in Portsmouth.

Thousands of relatives and friends crowded the dockside to welcome home the 1,700 crew, Royal Marines and survivors of the destroyed HMS Sheffield.

Several babies born during the conflict will be meeting their fathers, uncles and brothers for the first time.

The aircraft carrier - named after the winged messenger of Greek gods - began its 8,000 mile mission 108 days ago on 5 April.

An all-services salute including flypasts from RAF Harriers, Army Lynx helicopters and a naval Hunter training squadron accompanied the ageing ship as it cruised into port.

Flanked by a flotilla of smaller boats, Hermes replied with a 17-gun national salute, usually reserved for foreign visits.

One side of the ship has been decorated with a scoreboard showing the 46 enemy aircraft shot down by the Sea Harrier fighters launched from its deck.

The Hermes is streaked with rust amid rumours it has been operating on just two of its four boilers, sometimes running at half speed.

Captain Lyn Middleton was adamant the 28,700 ton ship - launched in 1953 - had not been dragged off the scrapheap to serve in the Falklands conflict.

He was modest about his company's service in the South Atlantic: "It was all absolutely routine, daily attacks, nothing untoward," he said.

But Able Seaman David Bass, 18, from Blackburn, Lancashire described a close encounter with an Exocet missile when he was on the bridge.

Executive officer Commander John Lock, 45, from Broad Windsor, Dorset, said: "Every time they fired something they hoped like hell it would hit us. We were the prime target."

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was helicoptered onto the carrier for an 80 minute inspection prior to landing.

The 2,800 ton ambulance ship, Herald, reached Portsmouth just two hours earlier