

YET ANOTHER SALTY DIP

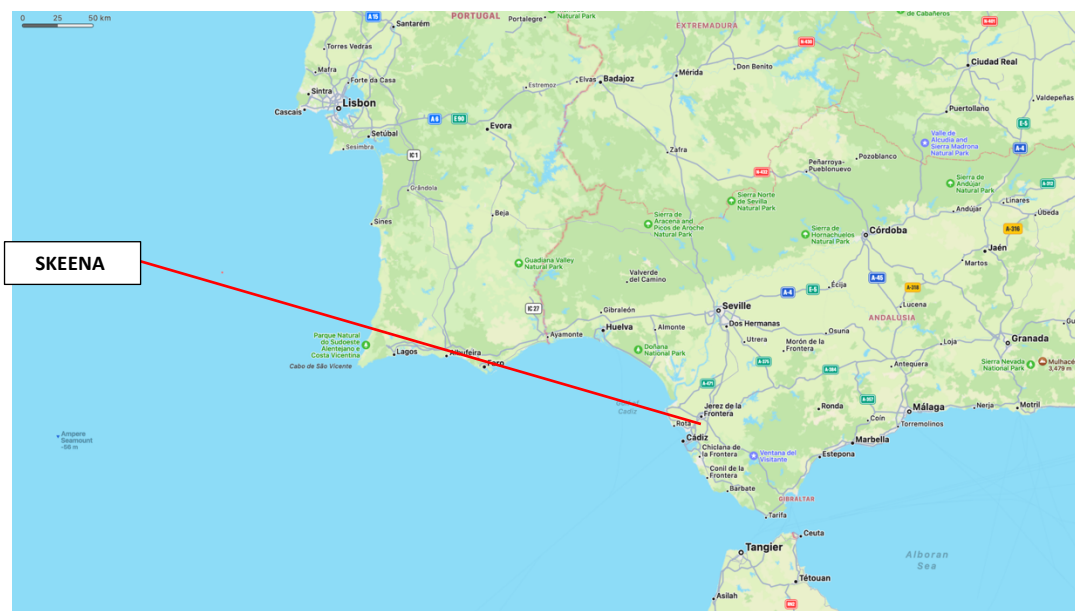
It is 1985 and I am still CO Skeena on my second tour with STANAVFORLANT(SNFL). Having just returned to Leixoes Portugal after trailing the USSR aircraft carrier Kiev from Gibraltar to the Hebrides heading for Murmansk, the entire squadron is enroute Cadiz Spain. This was to be a historical port visit as it was the first time SNFL called into a Spanish port since her entry into NATO in 1982.



Still well to the North-West of Cape St Vincent, the sickbay tiffy reported that one of our sailors developed acute appendicitis requiring immediate surgery. As Murphy would have it, my Sea King is in pieces undergoing a long maintenance routine called a 'SUPP 8'.

My request for an AirEvac to the other two helicopter carriers, HMS Brilliant with one Lynx and the German frigate Rheinland-Faltz with two being refused, I laid out the problem to my Air Boss, Wally Sweetman, and the Deck Chief, WO1 Scott. Their response was immediate: "Give us two hours".

The nearest medical facility was the US naval hospital in Rota Spain. The Sea King's endurance required a straight line track cutting across Portugal's territory and air space.



While the bird was buttoned up, two OP IMMEDIATE messages were dispatched: a NOVA(Notice of Visiting Aircraft) to Rota and a request for overflight permission to Portuguese authorities. Everything went according to plan. The operation was a success; the sailor had a full recovery and returned to the ship during the port visit to Cadiz, just across the bay.

Now to the meat of this story.

It was anticipated that the aircraft will require fuel at some stage, hence the crew was armed with US dollars, an AMEX card and a USAF fuel card to cover all eventualities. How wrong we were.

Considering the time-speed-distance problem with an allowance for patient transfer admin, fuel stop and 'J factor', the aircraft's return ETA was calculated. After ETA +1 hour, I became worried. At +2, concerned. At +3, alarmed. As there was no means to establish communication with the aircraft, all we could do was wait and hope. No one can imagine our joy when the silent vigil in the Ops Room was interrupted by Wally's voice requesting pigeons.

The post-flight debrief revealed that when they landed at some small airport in Portugal in the middle of the night, they were told that they cannot get fuel because the company providing fuel has just one customer, a small local airline, and they work only on an invoice basis. Ergo cash nor credit card was acceptable. After difficult negotiations in Portuguese, French and English, the local guy agreed to call the airline's boss with the suggestion that he could come to the airport, accept payment in cash or by credit card and bill the airport for the amount. Success! Being the middle of the night, this took some time, hence the long delayed ETA.

Sadly Wally was killed in a Sea King crash off New Brunswick on 28 April 1994. He was 40 years old.

Wally, old buddy, this is for you and all Sea King air crew.