

# My experiences in the Falkland Islands War (Operation Corporate)

**Captain J Burgess RAMC**

It all began for us on the Second of April 1982, when we heard that the Argentinians had invaded the Falkland Islands. Most had never heard of these remote parts and had not been following the events of the previous week when the Argentinians had moved into the Island of South Georgia.

At the time of the Invasion 3 Para were on Spearhead, as well as being part of the Parachute Contingency Force. All the medical boxes had already been packed and were fully scaled for a quick move. At 16.45 that Friday I asked the Intelligence Officer whether we would be required that weekend and he said there were no plans for the battalion to be deployed. I left for London. Minutes later a call came through from UKLF putting the unit on a greater stage of alert. A message was phoned to me in London and I hastily returned to Tidworth.

Nothing happened until the following morning when the CO spoke to his officers, though he knew few facts. Every organisation in the battalion hastily obtained further war stocks, and on the medical front this meant taking a trip to Ludgershall to collect a large number of individual first aid packs and extra dressings and drips.

These preparations went so smoothly that by the following day they were nearly completed. Meanwhile, a small group of the unit had flown to Gibraltar on the Friday night to requisition the SS Canberra and arrange the accommodation. There followed a few days of waiting; would we go or was it a preparation for nothing? Eventually the date for leaving Tidworth was agreed and on Wednesday, 7th we boarded the coaches for Southampton,

This was a moving experience, large crowds turning up to wave goodbye as the police-led convoy drove to the docks.

Once on board the Canberra it all shook into place, with the Regimental Aid Posts of 3 Para, 40 and 42 Commando occupying the crews' hospital in the stern of the ship. This arrangement worked extremely well with sufficient space for each unit. The medics shared cabins while the doctors were in the old First Class areas of the ship. Drugs and other medical stores required for the journey were removed from the hold and brought to the crew hospital. On Good Friday we sailed away from Southampton to great cheers from a massive crowd that lined the shores on either side of the water. Car hooters blew, lights flashed and the cheers could be plainly heard coming over the calm water. If this was going to war it was a great way of setting about it.

Life soon became more of a routine with morning sick parade, and then the rest of the day split into physical training and lectures on various topics from interrogation to first aid. Everyone received extra medical lectures and soldiers have never been so keen to learn all about these important matters. An extra team of stretcher bearers was found on the voyage and these consisted of the cooks, mess staff and soldiers from the Pay Corps. They were to do sterling work on the slopes of Mount Longdon. A few medical problems were encountered on the way: one soldier developed appendicitis and was operated on by a Royal Navy Surgeon in the passenger hospital on SS Canberra; he recovered in time to be fit enough to go ashore

with the rest of the force. The ship put into Freetown for the day to refuel, and this necessitated the taking of anti-malarial prophylaxis until the Falklands were reached, though there were no cases of malaria encountered. The Canberra reached Ascension Island after about ten days at sea, and there we stayed for about two weeks until the other ships of the task force caught up with the forward elements. The island provided a much needed break ashore, but took its toll. Many went down with foot problems; the combination of wearing light training shoes on the ship, and the extreme dry heat of the tropical island ripped the feet to shreds, and some of these problems were only just cured by the time we reached our destination.

It would be wrong to think that life at this time was serious quite the reverse. Most felt that while we were at Ascension Island, the talking was taking place and we were only out on a very pleasant cruise. There was much to do, whether it was lying in the sun, watching films or improving the profits in the bars. At one stage there was a threat of a submarine attack and the ship sailed the ocean around the island. No one objected as it improved the airflow in the ship. The 'Canberra Medical Society' was formed from the doctors of the services and the P and O staff, and this organisation arranged talks of various degrees of seriousness.

Shortly, however, this fun was to stop. Notice was given that the Canberra was due to set sail, and in a southerly direction. This was the signal for life to become more serious. The lights were dimmed properly and all became aware that war was imminent. By day one could see 19 ships around the Canberra, but it was also appreciated that there were plenty more beneath the horizon and the surface. Most noticeable was the Elk, the ferry that contained all of our larger cargo items and which had been with us since the start of the voyage. The Norland was also there carrying our sister battalion 2 Para. HMS Fearless, HMS Intrepid and countless others protected us. A blood donor session was arranged, taking 360 units from the battalion, and about 1000 in all. The date of the session was so keyed as to allow full recovery of the soldiers, yet the blood be suitable for the expected date of the battle. On leaving Ascension Island plans for the military operation came into the open. The Commanding Officer, Lt. Col. Pike briefed us on the detailed plan to land at Port San Carlos. The medical staffing was altered as well as getting the team of stretcher bearers. We gained CSgt Faulkner who had been in the RAP in Northern Ireland, and who was currently out of a job, being on the air staff arranging parachute manifests. This enabled us to double up on the numbers in the rifle companies from one medical assistant to two per company. The RAP was then going to consist of Captain Burgess, Padre Heaver, CSgt Faulkner, Sgt Bradley and Pete Kennedy.

At the earliest 'O' Groups we were told that we would be going ashore in Landing Craft (LCU) from the sides of the Canberra in the dark, and this procedure had been practised while at Ascension, but two days from the planned landing it was changed, the thought being that there were too many troops on the one ship. Consequently 3 Para were transferred to

HMS Intrepid by means of LCU. Here we got our first impressions of the conditions that the sailors had to endure with a ship sailing with a far greater complement than it had been built for. Even so the reception we received was superb in view of the difficulties of having to house an extra Battalion Group. It was while we were on this ship that a tragedy happened. One of the Sea King helicopters flying with members of the SAS on board came down at night after hitting an albatross. The loss of these 21 experienced soldiers was a hard blow especially as they were personally known to many on board. It was a greater shock than the loss of HMS Sheffield. Meanwhile the operation of the SAS to capture Fanning Head still went ahead as planned. The night of D-1 was a long night to remember. Since arriving on HMS Intrepid we had been ready to go into action, and now was the period of attempting to get some sleep while waiting for the time to go ashore and face the unknown. We were sitting in the Wardroom, reading, waiting, knowing that it was foggy outside, but that the fog could lift at any moment and give our position away; continually waiting for the bombs or torpedo to come at any second as we slipped into the sound.

Eventually it was time to move and pick up one's heavy Bergen and proceed down to the Tank Deck and be loaded aboard one of the LCUs. There was a slight hold up with 2 Para, and their unloading of the Norland with her narrow gangways and this resulted in 3 Para being further delayed. The company medics went with their respective companies, and the RAP followed up a few minutes later. By the time our boat floated out of the stern of HMS Intrepid it was broad daylight. Apart from the noise of the engine all was silent. It was a distinctly eerie feeling as we sailed past other ships in the sound and made our way up to the beach head about 3km from the settlement of Port San Carlos. Birds hovered overhead, but there were no aircraft.

Our landing craft reached the shore with no difficulty and the RAP regrouped on the land just as the guns of a frigate opened up on the enemy position on Fanning Head where there was still resistance. A Pucara suddenly came from the East and attempted to gun our positions but without damage. The Royal Artillery and their Blowpipe returned the fire, but the effect at that stage was more devastating on 3 Para than on the enemy. Luckily no one was injured in the fighting. Our objective was to move into the settlement and this was quickly achieved, the 40 enemy present in the village rapidly fleeing. However, they brought down two Gazelle helicopters who were escorting a Sea King with an underslung load; there was no explanation as to why the helicopters were so far forward over enemy held territory. After one pilot was brought down the enemy opened fire on him in the water with a machine gun as he tried to swim ashore. He was dragged out by the locals and taken to the bunk house – the site designated to be the RAP but he died before medical help could arrive. Meanwhile the mortars kept firing on to the fleeing Argentinians. Later that day the battalion established itself on the higher ground around the settlement, and the RAP took up residence in the bunk houses with four members of the press.

This building proved ideal in many respects, in that it provided shelter and good clean facilities, but its main disadvantage was that it was on the seafront and clearly visible to any attacking Mirage and Etendard bombers. Air raids continued that day, and for the next week, although no damage was done.

On Sunday 23 May 3 Para sustained the first of its casualties when there was an incident involving 'A' and 'C' Companies and a map reading error. The end result was that 8 soldiers were wounded, two receiving 7.62 rounds to the head, one serious

abdominal wound and the other limb injuries, some serious. After it became clear that the enemy were not in the area, a Sea King helicopter arrived in Port San Carlos and flew the CO and half the RAP and stretcher team to the scene. The aircraft was full, and the pilot presumably tired. To avoid Argentinian detection he flew extremely low and as he approached the casualties behind a slight rise the tail of the plane hit the ground. This immediately caused the aircraft to lose control; it took off again and began to spin before crashing to earth once again. Luckily no one was injured in the crash and the helicopter did not catch fire. The wounded were then given further treatment and evacuated on other helicopters. They all survived although the two with head injuries are left with severe disability. The RMO and stretcher bearers were then flown back to the bunk house in Port San Carlos where we were then bombed, this time the bombs only just missing the house. It was a day to remember!

The rest of the time in Port San Carlos went off really without incident, apart from the bombing raids. The next move for the battalion was to be a foot march across the island to the East. The Company medics went with their companies and the medical sergeant accompanied battalion headquarters; apart from many foot problems encountered with the cold and wet conditions there were few medical emergencies, the only incident of note was an accidental discharge when the culprit managed to shoot through his left shoulder with an SLR. As soon as the battalion went firm in the settlement of Teale Inlet the RMO flew in to treat some of the foot problems. He arrived as the last of the enemy were fleeing to the East. Here the RAP was set up in the bunk house and it was shared with a section of the Special Boat Service who were mounting operations throughout the time of our stay. The only problems were the intense cold as it had started to snow hard that night, a number of minor leg wounds caused by a sub machine gun and the local population who had not seen a doctor for some weeks.

It initially seemed that we would be staying in the location for a number of days to sort out the foot damage, but that evening word came through from Brigade Headquarters that we were to proceed onwards with all speed to Estancia House. The soldiers marched onwards, often in agony. At Estancia House there was a far smaller settlement consisting of one house and a large barn. Part of the house became the RAP, and the barn an admin shelter. It was here that we received news of the losses at Bluff Cove which would mean inevitable delays. We were bombed at night, but it was ineffective except in scaring the civilian population, especially the children.

Estancia House brought changes to the medical organisation of the battalion, and Captain Michael Von Bertele arrived with two extra medics from 16 Field Ambulance. These were to prove invaluable on Mount Longdon. Little happened in the wait before the battle. There were visits by General Moore, Brigadier Thompson, and the CO of the SAS; but this period was used as a time to prepare the battalion for the rigours ahead. There was a great delay, initially to await the arrival of two Royal Marine units; and then to let 5 Infantry Brigade catch up on their route from the South. The time was also used for aggressive patrolling behind the enemy lines on the hill, and attempting to find a way up the cliffs that buttressed the mountain.

Eventually a medical plan was evolved which essentially made two RAPs. Captain Burgess with his own staff would march on the hill under the direction of Major Dennison the OC SP Coy. As much medical equipment was to be taken as possible, and personal items were excluded. The stretcher bearers would also come with the first wave on foot, carrying some medical stores and stretchers of the folding airborne type, and also a large

quantity of belt ammunition for the machine guns. No Red Cross markers were used by anyone in 3 Para. The rearward RAP would follow up behind in Volvo BV tracked vehicles with further stores and would have the capability to move through the first RAP and set up independently if the advance proceeded down Wireless Ridge.

After extensive medical briefings the various sections were moved up from Estancia House to an area occupied by 'A' Coy. This move was by BV, and during the deployment news came through of one minor injury as a result of a shrapnel wound. The form up area was about 8 km from the objective, and at this point most of the battalion gathered, and here were also included a large number of civilians who had agreed to help the operation by providing their own tractors to transport items such as mortar ammunition. It was a glorious evening as the sun slowly set, and all enjoyed a last hot meal in the comfort of a dug in position. Major Dennison gave a short talk to those under his command, and as he did so shells started falling close, but soon all fell silent once again. The still air was disturbed by the arrival of a helicopter with a secret signal stating that on the latest intelligence the objective had now been occupied by a battalion of the very best Argentinian Marines, instead of the company strength that we had all been expecting. The outcome of this was a resolute 'No Change.'

At 2030 Zulu timing the RAP formed up and took its place in the march towards Mount Longdon.

Shortly after leaving 'A' Coy position the RAP was in dead ground from Two Sisters which provided some protection from enemy OP and detection. The march moved on steadily until the Murrell River was reached which was crossed with little difficulty and then continued eastwards. The stretcher bearers with their difficult loads suffered more than most on the march, but at about 0100 on the 12 June the RAP reached the first of the objectives about 1½ km from the western edge of the mountain.

It had been a dark night up until then, but the moon slowly rose above the eastern edge of the mountain silhouetting the objective. Suddenly the peace was shattered as 'B' Coy approached the mountain from the western edge, hit a minefield and gave away their presence. The attack then began to close in from the west, and as the support weapons were unable to give effective fire from 1500m out, SP Coy and the forward RAP then prepared to move up the slope to the rocks at the western edge of the mountain.

The small arms fire by this time had begun to get intense, with tracer and parachute illuminant lighting up the sky from all directions. The RAP closed in to its position, a location where it would remain until the end of the battle. It took some time to regroup all the stretcher bearers, and they were required at once to collect the wounded from the minefield to the north. Very shortly after arriving the first two casualties were brought in. The first was one of 'B' Company medics Private Dodsworth. He had been going forward to help the wounded when he was hit in the pelvis and legs by small arms fire. He went into unconsciousness at the RAP and was soon placed on the first BV to be transported back to the helipad for further evacuation. He died shortly after leaving the RAP.

The BV borne RAP came up the hill after this incident and provided extra necessary help with the second doctor. On their arrival the casualties began to be brought down in a steady stream. Many were seriously injured, having had limbs amputated in the minefields, and these were dressed further and then evacuated in the next vehicle for the six hour journey back to surgery. Some of the injured had been trapped in the minefields and due to the sniping at night they could not be evacuated as the attempts were beaten back repeatedly. News came through that another of the medics had been killed by a

shell. LCpl Lovett from 'A' Coy, and that another was trapped in a minefield and was being mortared, and had possibly been killed. The stretcher team leader approached me and asked if he should make a further attempt to retrieve the injured from the minefield, but I replied that as the injured had already been treated by the medic it would be foolish to waste further lives in repeated attempts. Having had two killed and one missing I had to preserve my medical strength. The injured were soon removed when the snipers had been cleared from the hill, luckily none were too badly injured. The battle then took another phase as we won control of the hill except for a few small pockets of resistance dug into the rocks. A very heavy mortar and artillery barrage then commenced, the rounds landing amongst the vacated Argentinian positions. These claimed many lives, and seriously put at risk the viability of the RAP.

One Argentinian, in attempting to escape ran through the RAP, indeed came between the area of the mortuary and where the RMO was attempting to treat the injured. He was shot by one of the sergeants who was standing by, and dropped dead in the middle of the RAP. The following day prisoners were to bury him in a makeshift grave, and while the Padre was saying a few words over the grave he was fired upon by a sentry escorting further prisoners down the hill. This led to a counter attack, as we looked in the direction of the shots, there were twenty of the enemy to be seen. Although a large quantity of ammunition was expended, no further casualties were reported.

During the whole of the daylight casualties continued to arrive and these were evacuated as soon as possible by helicopter, although for some there was a very considerable delay. Every time a large helicopter arrived the position was immediately mortared again, so it meant that only the Scouts and Gazelles could be used. That night the shelling of the position continued with air-bursts lighting the sky and shower shrapnel around the rocks. One shell blew a medical assistant off a rock with slight injury, but an even closer burst knocked out the CSgt and he could not be found for six hours. A radio message asked that the medical team pick up a patient who had been injured and who was lying on the southern slopes of the hill about 500 metres from the RAP. It was decided that the medical sergeant should go out in one of the BVs to retrieve him. On the way out they struck an anti-personnel mine doing slight damage to the vehicle. On trying to reverse out another exploded. The vehicle returned without the casualty, but the medical sergeant was so badly shaken by these events and the shelling that he had to be evacuated as a battle casualty. The medical staff was now critical with two dead, one other case evacuated and two hurt by shell fire.

That night an armourer passed through the RAP going to the top of the hill when he was hit by mortar fire, lacerating one femoral artery and fracturing the opposite femur. Two others went to his aid but these were also hit by mortar fire, resulting in both sustaining bilateral fractured femora. They were in close proximity to the RAP when they arrived, but the first died very shortly afterwards, and another in a helicopter as he was being evacuated. The third survived with one amputation, and the other leg severely damaged.

The following morning saw advances by 2 Para who had passed through our position the previous day, and this took the pressure off 3 Para RAP. That morning an air raid passed over the position to strike at Brigade Headquarters, and then it all began to quieten, the shelling becoming less frequent and certainly less accurate as the enemy OPs were destroyed. The CO then began to brief his officers on the attack on Moody Brook, and the advance into Stanley itself, at least as far as the racecourse. During this 'O' Group on the side of the mountain the snow continued to fall, and everyone wondered how the

attack on Stanley would result as regards casualties. As the RAP was waiting, news came through from 2 Para that they were pushing forward into Moody Brook and large numbers of the enemy were to be seen fleeing in the direction of Stanley. Minutes later came the order to advance with full speed to Stanley.

The medical orbit of the move altered in that the RMO rode in the BV with his usual team, while Captain Von Bertele moved off before on foot. During the move it was learned that there were white flags to be seen over Stanley, and all rushed forward down the slope into Moody Brook. The snow had melted by this time, the sun was shining, but clouds of smoke were clearly visible coming from the western edge of the city, and from Moody Brook itself. The RAP vehicle being the first of the BVs to get into Stanley was stopped by a helicopter carrying the 3 Para flat, and this was attached to a Bangalore torpedo and carried high, victorious into the city.

The city was a mess, with no sewage, water or electricity; the battalion was forced to live in squalor with no food provided either. Looting Argentinian sources was the only way out until further supplies could catch up with the advance. Luckily there

was no shortage of Argentinian food in Stanley itself, the frozen steak being a favourite of 3 Para. Unfortunately with all the inadequate sanitation most of the battalion went down with diarrhoea and vomiting, and there was little that could be done to prevent this without a proper water supply provided by the Royal Engineers.

On the first evening in Stanley the RMO and Captain Von Bertele along with two guards crossed the 'White Line' that separated the opposing forces in the city, by showing their Geneva ID cards, and then went up the road to King Edward VII Hospital. They were the first British soldiers into that area, and the welcome bestowed will always be remembered. It was one of the proudest moments of being a member of 3 Para. It is impossible to convey in words those embraces and messages of thanks from the medical staff and other civilians sheltering in the hospital.

The Third Battalion the Parachute Regiment lost 23 killed and 48 wounded in the battle for Mount Longdon plus 12 wounded before the assault, and countless who suffered with their feet and will continue to suffer; but to liberate those islanders in the hospital did seem to make it all worthwhile.