

The Battle for Goose Green – The RMO’s view

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Abstract

Summary: By virtue of the Battalion I serve with, I was the first Task Force Doctor on to the Falklands. On Friday the 21st May, 2 Para made an assault beach landing, thankfully unopposed, on San Carlos beach, the RAP was with them

Introduction: As 2 Para occupied the Sussex Mountains for six days and on Wednesday 2 May, moved off at last light to Camilla Creek House, 5 miles from Darwin. The Battalion laid up in the area of Camilla Creek during 27 May and early the next morning moved out to create history....

Goose Green – Friday 28th May, 1982

We set off from Camilla Creek House at about 2 a.m. tired before we started after the previous night’s TAB. On our backs the RAP (Regimental Aid Post) Medics were all carrying in excess of 80lbs of medical kit and the uneven ground ensured that we all fell regularly.

We laid up near the mortar line just north of the Darwin Peninsula whilst A and B Companies put in their first attacks. There was a steady drizzle, and those of us who had worn our waterproofs were glad of them – some of us even dozed.

About 2 hours after the initial H hour, Battalion Main HQ, (including the RAP) moved off and down the narrow track onto the Peninsula itself. To our left, a large area of gorse had been ignited by white phosphorous grenades and the flames lit up the night sky. The crackle of burning gorse could be heard above the reassuring crump of the naval gunfire support. We had just come level with the first cache of Argentinian prisoners, on the edge of the track, when the first salvo of the Argentinian guns bracketed the track.

We heard the distant crump and the incoming whistle and barely hit the ground before the first rounds of “HE” hit the peat either side of the track. We wormed our bodies in, face down to the banks on either side of the track, so that our Bergens gave our backs some protection. The reality of the war began to sink in.

Again we were bracketed, but miraculously nothing landed on the track, and the soft, wet peat, off the track, kept the shrapnel to a minimum. We had no casualties.

A tracer round cracked 6 ins over my head from somewhere off to the right – a stray round buried my head further into the earth.

The first two attacks had had no casualties, but now D Coy came up against stiffer opposition and Chris Keeble, the Bn 21C, asked me to move forward up the track to deal with the first casualties. His parting words, as I led the RAP off were, “Watch out for the sniper on the right flank.”

I then realised where that not so stray round had come from, and was convinced that the collar of my waterproof jacket, white on the reverse, would make me a perfect target. It may well have but nothing happened.

We ran low and fast for about 400 metres, until we came across the two D Coy wounded, both minor gunshot wounds. It was about 6 a.m. still with a further 4 hours of darkness – so after finishing our treatment regime, all we could do was reassure them and keep them warm and sheltered from the rain until dawn, when the first choppers would fly.

The CO, ‘H’ appeared, with his TAC HQ and came to find

out how the casualties were – “Alright Sir, we’ll try and get them back to Camilla Creek in the captured Landrover.” He and the Adjutant, one of my close friends, David Wood, were joking about a shell that had landed between them, yet left them both unscathed. “These Argies have got some shit ammunition.” It was to be the last time I would see either of them alive again.

TAC 1 disappeared and Battalion Main moved in around us. Time drifted by and the shelling periodically came our way. As the sky started to brighten we lost the benefit of the naval gun support and at dawn we found ourselves in a natural bowl of land to the north of Coronation Point.

One or two more casualties were brought in, together with our first dead. Two of my Medics had lost friends and I had lost some of my own patients – we were all affected. We improvised shelter for the wounded using a captured Argie tent until at first light helicopters came in bringing ammunition resupply. We got the casualties into the Choppers and I went back to my routine of listening in to the Battalion Command net – Reading the Battle.

There was a big battle raging ahead of us, and nothing seemed to be moving. We all began to dig into the peat because the shelling was now more constant, our own guns becoming less vociferous.

Shortly after 1300, I heard the message over the net “Sunray has been hit.” The Battalion called for a helicopter to pick him up and it became obvious that there were other casualties in trouble. I rounded up my Medics and split them up into two teams – one under my command and the other under Capt Rory Wagon, the Doctor who had been attached to us from Ajax Bay Field Hospital (Table 1).

Table I
2 Para Regimental Aid Post (2 & 9)

Team A	Team B
RMO (Doctor)	Attached Doctor
Radio Op	Radio Op
L/Cpl – RMA	Cpl – RMA
Pte – RMA (3)	Pte – RMA (2)

Table 1. Padre and his bodyguard moved with Team A. RAP Deployment possibilities – 1. A & B Co-located. 2. A & B Deployed independently. 3. A & B “Leapfrog” One moves, other deals with casualties.

Both forward companies had casualties in locations 1½ km apart. Rory’s team went out to the right flank and I moved my lads out to the left, to the hills around Darwin. As we moved forward we had to dive for cover as two Pucara aircraft appeared ahead. They roared over us and I turned in time to see them

spot two scout helicopters emerge from the direction of Camilla Creek House. The Pucara swooped, like hawks, and the choppers took desperate evasive action. One chopper disappeared up the valley whence it had come and managed to escape. The other chopper exploded in a ball of flame. The Pucara disappeared.

We found 'A' Company on a hill 1 km to the west of Darwin, their casualties collected together at the base of the hill, amongst them the Company Medic. Again the shock of dealing with people you knew in a far from clinical environment – but we steeled ourselves and went to work.

We dealt with the casualties and I'd once more called for helicopters. Ahead of us the battle carried on. There was no sign of 'H' so I asked the Sgt Major. "H is dead, Sir, and Captain Wood, and Captain Dent" – the CO and two good friends all at once; - but there was nothing else but to continue the job.

The casualties had all had their wounds dressed and drips set up. We'd given them pain killers and filled them full of antibiotics. We tried to keep them dry and warm and kept up a steady banter to reassure them, especially a lad with a head injury, who I didn't want to go into a coma.

By now we were beginning to run low on medical supplies – there's a limit to how much you can manpack. At least no more casualties had come in, although there were some wounded amongst the Argie prisoners for whom we did what we could.

Then over the hill came what for me will always be the Seventh Cavalry – 4 scout helicopters, fitted with Casevac Pods and bringing our medical resupply. We got all the wounded away and even some of the more seriously wounded Argie prisoners. Then the shelling started again and we moved up the hill slightly, into a gully which gave natural cover against low trajectory artillery fire.

It was here that we spent the rest of the day. The helicopters coming in under cover of the hill.

We continued to treat casualties, our own, and in quiet phases Argentinians, with the smoke of the battle field and the burning gorse at times almost fogging us out. Fatigue was setting in and we all wondered how much longer this could go on. For most of the afternoon the battle had seemed to be going against us, but, as dark set in, it swung back in our favour and as darkness fell the artillery fell silent and gunfire became sporadic. We were still holding three battle sick – twists and sprains – and though we tried for a helicopter we knew they would keep, if it didn't arrive.

We were all expecting the battle to start afresh the next day, so we set up a stag system to look after the casualties and laid down in the gorse to sleep, after I'd first sat down with the RSM and the Padre to work out who our dead were.

The day had been long and hard, tragic and frightening, the night was bitterly cold, and we none of us had sleeping bags.

Some people lay down actually in burning gorse to keep warm. I lay down in a clump of non-burning gorse and thanked my stars for the space blanket I'd bought in the UK and shoved in the back of my smock!

I managed to wrap my body in this totally non-tactical piece of foil. The silvered surface caught the flicker of gorse flames and I crinkled like a Sunday roast, but it made the temperature bearable.

Although I was exhausted I wondered whether I would sleep after the horrors of the day and as I lay in a twilight state every rustle of my foil blanket was a machine gun and every gorse was an artillery shell. I was aware of the tricks my mind was playing on me – and I wondered if I was cracking up.

I slept.

I awoke in the half light of mid-morning and couldn't feel my feet. Then I could and they were painful. Around me the RAP was stirring.

Chris Keeble happened by and told the Padre and I of his plan. He would give them the opportunity of an honourable surrender.

There followed a void; a lack of hostilities. Whilst the Battalion took the time to fly in ammunition, we took the time to fly out our casualties and do what we could for the remaining injured amongst the prisoners.

It was as we were treating the prisoners that we heard the news of the surrender. The battle was over. Although our work was not quite finished yet, at least it would not get any worse.

All told we treated 33 of our own (Table 2) and over twice that number of Argentinians.

	Wounded	Killed in Action	All Wounds Fatal and Non-Fatal
Gunshot Wounds	*16	12	28 (56%)
Shrapnel/Fragments	*17	4	21 (42%)
Shot down – Helicopter Pilot (Massive injuries)	0	1	1
Totals	33 (66%)	17 (34%)	50

Table 2. There were no burns, psychiatric or mine injuries. One case of a fatality caused by close proximity explosion of a 30mm anti-aircraft shell has been included as a fragment wound.

*All survived.