

My thoughts on the Falkland Campaign

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The regular soldier spends much of his time training for war. It is curious that the more training he undergoes, the less he savours the thought of going to war because the greater is his knowledge of the terrible destructive capability of modern war weapons.

My call came as a member of the Parachute Clearing Troop – 16 Field Ambulance, not unexpectedly because I had followed the build up in the national press consequent on the invasion of the Falkland Islands by the Argentinian Forces. I had just finished a busy Outpatient Clinic and sat in my office completely drained of all compassion for the wives of majors, corporals and the rest of humanity when the 'phone rang. "Come and join us" was the call, so off I went to war. We all knew that we were going to sail to war but we also knew that this was going to be a limited cruise. We should meet in Aldershot, parade, embark and sail and that somewhere around Ascension Island, the politicians would sort it all out and we would all turn around and sail back again. With a bit of luck I thought I might miss out on about two weeks of outpatients clinics.

We duly paraded in Aldershot and for the first time in my long association with the Airborne forces, the unit P.C.T. was up to strength and had been completely equipped with all the paraphernalia of war that we had been trying to fight off for at least 10 years. After several false starts, we actually set off in a convoy of coaches and reached that most admirable port, Portsmouth. Much more, we were actually allowed to board the ship as part of the 2nd Para Brigade Troop. The ship itself had been recently acquired and converted from a North Sea Ferry – the *Norland*. Built for the holiday trade, with accommodation for 1,000 passengers, it suddenly had to accommodate 1,500 fairly carefree Paras, with all, if not more, of their equipment. Amid scenes reminiscent of the Hollywood films showing the departure of Kitchener's force for the Sudan portrayed so well in the original film *Four Feathers*, the *Norland* sailed. I cannot say that I was unaffected. It was an emotional occasion. The crowds cheered, the band of 2 Para played such stirring music as "Don't cry for me Argentina" and the RSM of 2 Para marched along the deck saying "If you lean on the rails, I'll break your arms – stand up". The Navy were particularly good. Ships in the dockyard sounded their sirens, Naval shore establishments lined the banks and cheered and the dockyard labourers showed a pride in the work they had put into these ships over the past two or three days.

The journey south was accomplished with surprising ease. The holiday air persisted and as the climatic conditions improved, the holiday atmosphere became even more marked. The 2 Para group entertained the ship's officers; the ship's officers entertained 2 Para group and eventually we both entertained one another, but suddenly we found ourselves at Ascension Island. The war climate had not improved. The politicians had not resolved the problem. Suddenly there was a vast increase in traffic signals, cross decking of the supplies between ships became more urgent. Essential supplies such as ammunition were suddenly dug out from the bottom of the hold where they had been buried under piles of arctic equipment and rations. The holiday atmosphere evaporated quickly and very impressively. It changed to one of sheer

professionalism. Training became more popular and more universal. Personnel began board drills with a more serious and interested attitude. The lifeboats of *Norland* were swung out and lowered, much to the amazement of the Captain who in his seven years in command, had never seen them move from the chocks. Much to the gratification of the Medical Services suddenly the big Army began to take us seriously. First Aid lectures became very much better attended and certainly the officers in the bar of an evening began to cultivate the company of the medical officers with rather searching questions.

The Medical Services, to their great credit, carried on as usual. Trained as they were to a superb level, they tried to pass this knowledge on to the people whom before had been too busy to take any notice. When it became obvious that due to our combination of postings, circumstances and bad planning, medical potential of the 2nd Battalion Parachute Regiment was less than adequate - an intensive training programme was instituted. Much of the emphasis of this was on the setting up of intravenous infusions. We had provided, thanks to the pre-planning of Major Malcolm Jowitt, RAMC, a plastic arm in which the insertion of intravenous infusions could be practised. It was after one such session when a member of 2 Para turned to his Regimental Medical Officer and said, "*For all the good I'm doing Sir, I might well be sticking it up his -----*". This led to a short time vogue for rectal intravenous infusions. I would like here and now to condemn this practice, if only that in the Falklands, it would have led to a spate of frost bitten bums, comp saturated colons, unfixable drips, and dead soldiers.

With this and many other merry japes, we eventually made our way south and suddenly the merriment went out of the situation. Following a training lecture by the Royal Naval personnel on the invincibility of the Royal Navy ships, came the news of the sinking of HMS *Coventry*. If this put a damper on the situation, it also concentrated the attitudes towards training even more. The actual run into the Falklands was, to say the least, sporting, with false sonar alarms about submarines which turned out to be whales, sleeping in lifejackets, sailing through minefields and making the arrival at the shore somewhat of a relief. There is no doubt that by the time disembarkation from *Norland* for the beachhead on rather flimsy landing craft, in pitch darkness and under fairly adverse weather conditions took place, the professionalism of 2 Para group had reached its peak. I have nothing but admiration for the soldiers of the Parachute Battalion, for the Royal Navy and for the Merchant Navy personnel who risked much to get us there.

The arrival in San Carlos water of the M.V *Norland* highlighted the lack of communication between the different branches of the regular soldiers. While 2 Para disembarked and landed without incident, the first task of the P.C.T. was to establish aboard the *Norland* a mini-field hospital. This was done with the alacrity and expertise which one would expect of the unit. After a day spent in consistent air attack, it became obvious that the big ships would have to be withdrawn from San Carlos water during daylight and finally the message we had been trying to give to the Navy for some time got through – if there were troops ashore, the medical expertise should also be ashore. Besides, ships were dangerous. So, with a little difficulty, Parachute Clearing Troop arrived at Ajax Bay – the

first surgical teams ashore. Again it is a tribute to the Airborne soldiers that within an hour of landing, a surgical facility had been set up. This formed the basis of the field hospital which was eventually established at the old Refrigeration Plant at Ajax Bay of the Parachute Clearing Troop plus a marine medical support troop plus two surgical teams from the Royal Navy. This is the unit which bore the main bulk of the surgical load in the Falkland Campaign.

The time spent at Ajax Bay had its moments. quite apart from the large casualty load, there came a time when the Argentinian Air Force decide to remove the field hospital from the order. Had their bombs had the right fusing, they would have done this most successfully. However, the unit survived.

As the fighting advanced towards Port Stanley, it became obvious that surgical support was necessary nearer the front line. The only surgical teams whose equipment scales and general training fitted them for this task were 5 and 6 surgical teams of P.C.T. 5 F.S.T. were despatched to Teale Inlet, 6 F.S.T. were despatched to Fitzroy and in these locations, they carried on the treatment of battle casualties for the rest of the campaign. It fell upon 5 F.S.T to be the first to enter Stanley

where they set up in the local hospital. They were followed quite shortly by 6 F.S.T. It is interesting that while at Ajax Bay and in support of 2 Para elements of the P.C.T. were deployed to reinforce 2 Para medical elements in the attack on Goose Green. The attack went in against superior numbers and that success has now entered the history of the British Army. Not only were 2 Para outnumbered but they had to endure severe mortar and artillery bombardment and the ever persistent attention of the Argentinian Air Force. Towards the end of the engagement, a party of airborne medics were carrying a wounded man from 2 Para on a stretcher when they were spotted by an Argentinian Pucara aircraft. As it prepared to attack, the men carefully laid down the stretcher, cocked their weapons and put up a very intense fire against the attacking aircraft. It is perhaps one of the inconsequentialities of war that the casualty on the stretcher is reported as saying "*Don't shoot at it fellows, you might make him angry.*" I cannot help feeling that it was the anger of airborne forces which brought this conflict to a quick and successful conclusion. I cannot also help thinking that it was the expertise of the airborne medical service which resulted in the remarkably low casualty figures.