



Major-General Dair Farrar-Hockley MC, OC A Coy 2 Para in 1982, describes the battle for Darwin during the Falklands War in February 1982, giving a vivid account of the tactics of the battle and the total determination of the men of 2 Para to overcome the odds to win the battle.

The Battle for Darwin Thirty Years On

By an extraordinary set of circumstances, the company commanders of A, B & D Coys of 2 Para met at Darwin settlement on 3rd February 2012. It gave us an opportunity to look again at the Darwin and Goose Green battlefield and see what each company had experienced during those four critical days at the end of May 1982: a humbling encounter. Thus inspired, I determined to put on record A Coy's battle for Darwin Hill and the ridge to its west, as a tribute to our soldiers and their utter determination to win at all costs.

The lead up to the first land battle in the Falklands campaign had been one of marked contrast. For five days, exposed to the extremes of winter weather on Sussex mountain - before the days of goretex and other such comforts - we had watched while ships in the sound were attacked daily by Argentine aircraft; and notably the loss of both HMS *Ardent* and *Antelope*. Now at last it was our turn,

and we were glad to get going with a view to inflicting our will upon the enemy.

The battalion, led by D Coy, moved south through the night of 26th May over broken terrain and after fourteen miles reached Camilla Creek House. In a bold move, the CO ordered us — all 450 men — into the house, conscious of the need for some rest and warmth before first light. Two hours' sleep, huddled together on shelves, in cupboards and the like were to prove invaluable. It would be a long time before we would sleep again. As we moved out of the house, the stunning news that the BBC had reported our advance towards Darwin & Goose Green on the World Service was met with incredulity and not a little anger. Adopting defensive positions in the open countryside, we hoped to find cover from enemy aircraft which we assumed wrongly were looking for us.

Later that day, 27th May, in a much delayed 'O Group', Colonel H had directed that '*2 Para is to capture the Darwin & Goose Green area*': critically, taking the two settlements in daylight to avoid killing the civilians we had come to free after more than a month of captivity. Returning to my company, light was already fading as I prepared to give orders.

A Coy's initial attack in the early hours of 28th May was on Burntside House. Inaccurate intelligence (*'the civilians in the house have left but it is now in enemy hands'*) meant that we nearly killed the Morrison family. Happily, that was not so: but two Argentine soldiers just to the north of the house were killed while the remainder of their section

— we were never quite sure how many — disappeared into the night.

As B Coy followed by D marched south down the west of the isthmus to capture Goose Green, A Coy set off along the east side for what looked to be our most challenging task of the night: to destroy the enemy company on Coronation Point. So, 80 or 90 enemy, perhaps, holding a small feature on our direct path, hemmed in between the sea on our left and a track on our right — the boundary with B Coy. Not more than a kilometre of frontage and no room for an out-flanking attack. To our considerable surprise, the position was devoid of enemy.

Given that daylight was not much more than an hour away — and despite the fact that the orders required A Coy to be 'in reserve' for the next phase of the operation — we sought permission from Battalion HQ to move forward: on three occasions this was denied. '*Wait for the CO to join you*'. As it was, he arrived more than an hour later — close to first light — and was insistent that we got going.

Placing 3 Platoon (Guy Wallis) on the edge of Coronation Point to give covering fire for our assault on Darwin Settlement (our third and final target) we were ambushed from the crest of Darwin ridge (some 100 feet above and to our right) as we made for the security of the gorse gully and the base of Darwin Hill — our start line for the assault on the settlement.

The immediate action of the leading sections was to take six or seven trenches at the base of the gully in short order. What followed as the light came up was not to be so easy.

Under cover of darkness, the advantage was in our favour: we could get amongst the enemy and overwhelm them with our aggression. With daylight, the advantage shifted as the Argentines could pick us off at range: thus, our rapid early success ground to a slog.

Of what did the enemy comprise, and where were they sited? Since orders for the battalion attack contained no plan to capture Darwin Hill nor the ridge to the west, it was a surprise to find it so heavily defended on the east of the Isthmus. Initially pressing 2 Platoon (Mark Coe) to try and outflank the enemy by heading up to the top of the gully, it became clear that sniper and fixed line machine guns would make that impossible. If we were to achieve a quick outcome (Colonel H's intent) it would be essential to get the enemy's head down with a bombardment of some description.

Our training had been in the all arms battle, but it was good that we had also trained for the unexpected. One by one, all the fire support which had been 'on call' was denied. Fog at sea prevented Harriers taking off; so too the attack helicopters of the day. The battalion's artillery support was woefully small given the loss of the *Atlantic Conveyor* a few days beforehand, in which ten out of eleven helicopters on board were sunk. We had knowingly gone into battle 'under-gunned.' With Special Company located to the NW of the isthmus, the rifle companies found themselves 'out-gunned' since none of Special Company's fire teams could engage the enemy — save the valiant efforts of a section of the mortars, despite high gusting winds.

The cold light of day brought a reality check. While B Coy was held up by the enemy at Boca House, A Coy too was on its own. Attrition, rather than manoeuvre in the all arms battle, was the order of the day. While I had no doubt that we would capture the hill, I had no idea of the time it would take; nor the cost in lives.

Battle is by nature chaotic and brutal and our experience was to be no different. Our strength lay in the qualities of the airborne soldier. Guts, an utter determination to succeed, professional fighting skills of the highest order, unstinting support for one another, ABI (or 'airborne initiative') — that indefinable sense of taking the initiative, whatever your rank — and a brand of infectious, dark humour: all of them were needed.

Such initiative led to a series of sporadic sorties from different parts of the gully to test the opportunities to close with the enemy. This culminated in Sergeant Ted Barrett (1 Platoon) creating a fire base and inspiring those around him. The now intertwined sections of 1 & 2 Platoons began in small groups to fight their way up the hill from the gorse gully: our firm base throughout the battle. It was a slow, demanding task. Our advance could not be affected by complete platoons, but by skirmishing in small groups. Control was crude, principally by NCOs shouting to those nearest to move or give covering fire. Literally, we clawed our way up the slope, with little more than tiny folds in the ground to give cover on the bare terrain: a billiard table as some have described it. The situation was not aided by enemy artillery fire — controlled as we discovered after the battle by an observation post on Mount Osborne to the north of the isthmus.

Unswerving efforts took place to recover wounded comrades. Small successes in one place contrasted with casualties and delay in another. Back in the gorse gully, still smouldering from artillery fire the night before, CSM Colin Price looked after the rising toll of wounded, including Argentine soldiers — casualties from the first trenches captured. Later, as ammunition ran low, he oversaw its critical redistribution. Suddenly enemy on foot could be seen entering the cemetery and attempting to turn our flank: the fire base dealt swiftly to silence this new threat.

Exceptional leadership from Cpls David Abols and Tom Camp was evident. But they were not alone: many others — not least those men we lost in battle — junior NCOs and private soldiers among them, made a major contribution to the success of the day against a determined enemy company well dug in with rudimentary overhead protection, supported by artillery and heavy machine guns. Meanwhile, 3 Platoon, still manning their fire base overlooking the settlement and with no cover from enemy view, were eventually driven off their position by .50mm machine guns; the GPMG in the light role no match for these. Reaching us in the gorse gully, they brought additional firepower to the assault. It was a day when all ranks bound together.

As we got closer — after something over three hours — the combination of hand held light anti-tank weapons and machine guns proved decisive. The enemy company surrendered. We had inflicted more than 60% casualties upon them: 18 dead and 39 wounded. Just over 200 men had fought against one another: 114 from A Coy and 92 Argentine soldiers, at a total cost of 74 casualties.

Lieutenant Esteves received the Argentine's highest award for valour.

Taking the surrender on this small corner of the battlefield, it was important not only to deal urgently with casualties but to prepare for counter-attack; for this, as daylight had revealed, was the 'vital ground' which dominated the isthmus in every direction.

And what of our CO's contribution both to the battle and to the campaign? His determined charge against the enemy, demonstrating physical courage of the highest order was seen only by his tactical headquarters. Not long afterwards, the enemy had surrendered. Significantly, Colonel 'H' had trained us to have a tremendous self-belief in our capability to overcome any enemy. In addition to his exceptional personal courage, his decision to set us to a difficult task, conscious of the strategic importance of an emphatic victory after nearly a week of relative inaction by the Task Force, spoke too of his moral courage. His example, will and leadership remained with us for the rest of the campaign to recapture the Islands.

An hour or so after 'H's' death, Chris Keeble (Bn 2IC), who had now taken command of the Battalion, came up onto Darwin Hill. Thankfully, he had brought with him the ammunition we had been requesting for a while. Ahead of his party had come by helicopter, the vital medical teams who would preserve the lives of our own and the enemy's wounded soldiers. I had also asked for the padre, David Cooper, to come forward: a welcome sight after our losses.

Chris Keeble's initial proposal was to send A Coy forward to join B & D Coys, and now C Coy, in the fight for Goose Green. My own appreciation was somewhat different. First, A Coy had suffered fifteen casualties and these were an immediate priority along with the need for resupply of ammunition. Darwin settlement was still not secure below us; and the hill provided a dominant position from which to influence the battle. Why give it up now? He readily accepted my counter-proposal to send forward 3 Platoon to join C Coy on their operation towards Goose Green.

It was a privilege to have commanded A Coy throughout this bitter, hard fought battle: their airborne spirit had won the day. And that was not to be the end of it. Only a few days after the Argentine surrender at Goose Green, 2 Para was on the move again, with A Coy securing the settlement at Bluff Cove by heli-borne assault, some 28 miles inside no man's land as part of a brigade plan to open a southern flank in the battle for Port Stanley.

With this accomplished, we were to fight again in the battalion's night/day battle for Wireless Ridge, and then lead the way into Port Stanley. Ordered by the CO to halt on the racecourse, it was with great pride that I watched these magnificent, but war weary, young men begin to gather in the simple wooden grandstand for a photograph; although efforts to raise the company flag on the flagpole were a little less convincing, and showed that more practice was required! It was a relief to us all to know that no more lives would be lost.

Major-General Dair Farrar-Hockley MC (OC A Coy 1982)



