

Orders at Goose Green 1982

by Brendan B. McBreen

A bad operation order, poorly communicated and poorly understood, almost cost the 2d Battalion, the Parachute Regiment (2 Para) the battle of Goose Green during the Falklands War in 1982.

Spencer Fitz-Gibbon's *Not Mentioned in Despatches* (1995) contends that the battalion order for the Goose Green attack was an overly complex ballet of six phases with fragile linkages that required excessive oversight and coordination. A critical flaw in the order was its assumption of perfect intelligence on the enemy. It was never understood by the battalion's officers or soldiers.

Yet this order, and the style of planning and control that it represented, was the norm in the British army. The battalion commander who wrote it had been the lead instructor at the army's school of infantry. When the battle quickly exceeded the scope of his order, he froze all initiative, berating his company commanders to remain in position, in some cases for hours: "Let me fight my own battle!"

The Falklands War. On 2 April 1982, Argentina seized the Falkland Islands, a British possession off the coast of Argentina. See Figure 1.

Three day later, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher ordered a Naval Task Force, with two aircraft carriers and a Marine brigade, to retake the islands by force.

The Falklands Islands lay east of Argentina in the South Atlantic Ocean, 7000 nautical miles from Great Britain. In the southern hemisphere, the May–August winter weather was terrible: wet, cold, and windy.

The British Naval Task Force, which eventually totaled over 60 Royal Navy ships, 60 merchant ships, and two British infantry brigades, arrived off the Falkland Islands in early May. British air forces included both Harrier jets and helicopters, but helicopters were scarce and could only be used for logistics and MEDEVAC. The British had limited reconnaissance, bomber, and refueler aircraft.



Figure 1. The Falkland Islands.

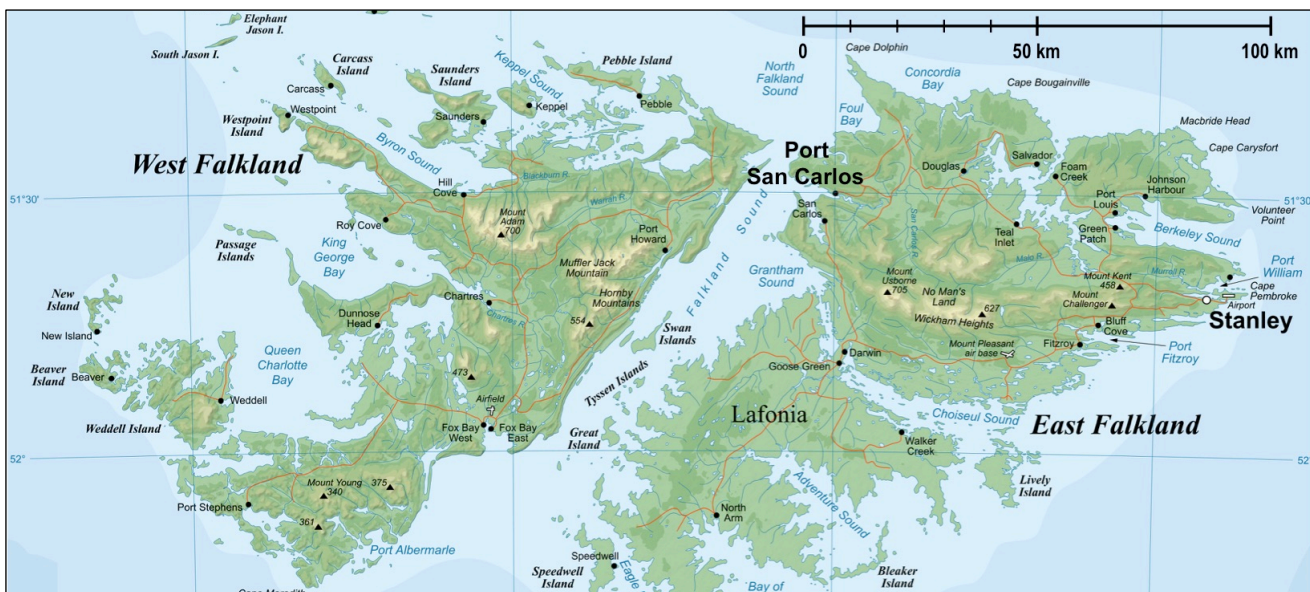


Figure 2. West and East Falkland Islands.

Argentinian Forces. Defending the Falklands were two Argentinian infantry brigades: eight infantry battalions, a marine battalion, a squadron of armored cars, and two artillery battalions. Air defenses included SAMs, AAA guns, and MANPADS. The 10th Argentinian Brigade defended Stanley, the capital, while the 3rd Argentinian Brigade had one regiment outside Stanley, one at Goose Green, and two on West Falkland. See Figure 2. Argentina did not have aerial reconnaissance or satellite imagery, and so relied on pilot reports and BBC newscasts for intelligence and BDA.

Amphibious Landings. On the night of 21 May, British forces landed at Port San Carlos, 100 kilometers west of Stanley.

By the following day, the 3 Commando Brigade HQ, the brigade maintenance area, and five infantry battalions were ashore. See Figure 3.

The Brigade commander, Brigadier Julian Thompson, planned to leapfrog his units east across the island toward Stanley. With few vehicles, most units would move by foot.

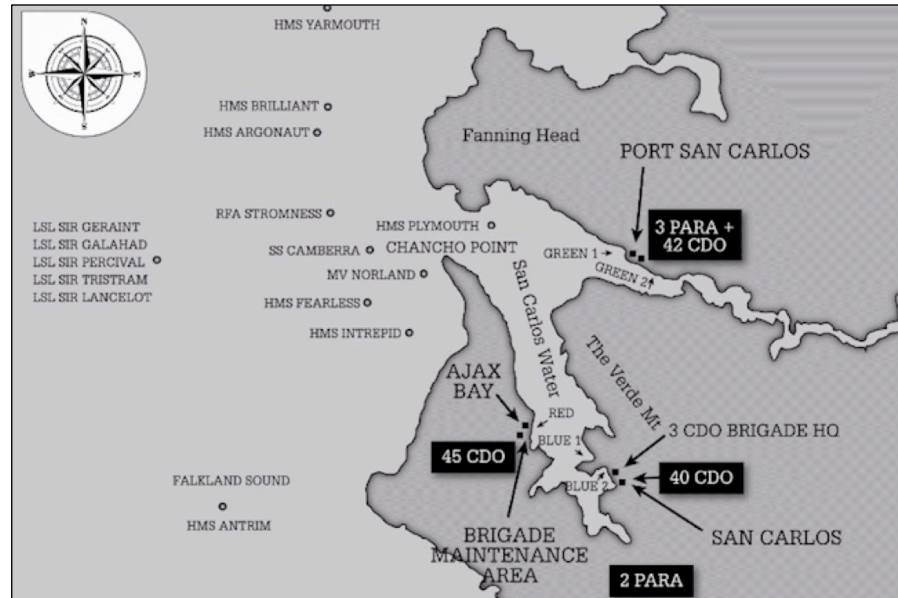


Figure 3. Brigade landings at San Carlos Water, 21–23 May 1982.

3 Commando Brigade had three marine battalions, two army battalions, and three artillery batteries:

3 Commando Brigade

40 Commando (Battalion), Royal Marines
 42 Commando (Battalion), Royal Marines
 45 Commando (Battalion), Royal Marines
 2d Battalion, the Parachute Regiment
 3d Battalion, the Parachute Regiment
 29th Regiment Royal Artillery: (18) 105mm
 Logistics Regiment
 Brigade Aviation Squadron (15) Helicopters
 Recce Troop
 22 SAS
 Brigade Air Defense, Engineer, EOD, Medical, and Ordnance

Brigadier Julian Thompson
 LtCol Malcolm Hunt
 LtCol Nicholas Vaux
 LtCol Andrew Whitehead
 LtCol Herbert 'H' Jones
 LtCol Hew Pike
 LtCol M. Holroyd Smith
 LtCol Ivar Helberg
 Maj Charles Cameron
 Lt Mark Coreth
 LtCol H. Rose

Once ashore, 45 Commando was ordered to move 30 kilometers to Douglas, 3 Para was ordered to move 40 kilometers to Teal Inlet, and 2 Para was ordered to move 30 kilometers to seize Goose Green.

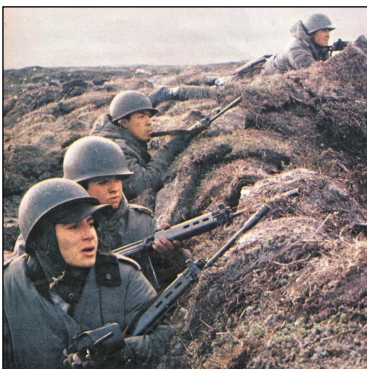


Figure 4. Argentinian positions.

Goose Green was a small village on the narrow isthmus to Lafonia island. The terrain in the area was primarily rolling grassland, with few distinctive features and little cover or concealment.

The isthmus was well-defended. One thousand Argentinian soldiers had dug defensive trenches, sited automatic weapons with interlocking fields of fire, and positioned artillery and antiaircraft weapons. See Figure 4.

Under Lieutenant Colonel Piaggi, two companies of the 12th Regiment manned the primary defenses. One company of the 25th Regiment was attached. A reserve company arrived during the battle. See Figure 5.

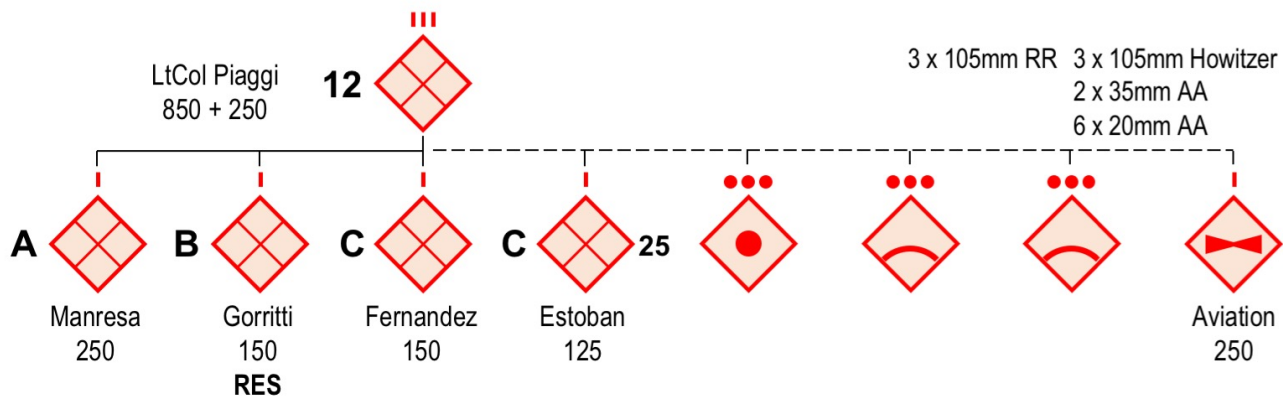


Figure 5. Task Organization of Argentinian 12th Infantry Regiment at Goose Green, 27 May 1982.

The Battle. Early on 27 May 1982, 2 Para marched 21 kilometers to an assembly area and prepared for combat. After dark, the six companies moved 14 more kilometers to their start line. See Figure 6.

With no vehicles, the battalion had very few supporting arms. Helicopters lifted just three artillery tubes and 960 rounds of HE into a support position. 2 Para carried only two 81mm mortars and very few rounds. No air would be able to fly until after daylight. No armor and no vehicle-mounted suppressive weapons were available to support the infantry assaults.

The attack on Goose Green began in a cold fog three and a half hours before dawn on 28 May 1982. In the dark, advancing companies on both flanks surprised and then fought through multiple Argentinian positions. The *HMS Arrow*, providing fire support offshore, withdrew after 0300 when her gun jammed. The two battalion mortars ran out of ammunition and the attack sequence was delayed.

At daybreak, both lead companies were stalled in the open by enemy fire. Air support was late due to fog. The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Jones, was killed before 1000 as he assaulted an enemy position. Two hours later, Major Keeble, the XO, renewed the attack and captured Darwin Hill, an intermediate objective. On the east side of the isthmus, one company moved forward to the airfield.

But by now the battalion was exhausted and precariously low on ammunition and water. Casualties were mounting and could not be moved. All supporting arms were expended. After dark, tired but determined British units prepared for a morning assault on Goose Green.

In the morning of 29 May—after a day and a half of grueling small-unit combat on both sides—Major Keeble called on the Argentinians to capitulate or be destroyed. Lieutenant Colonel Piaggi, surrounded with no hope of reinforcement, surrendered his Argentinian position at Goose Green.

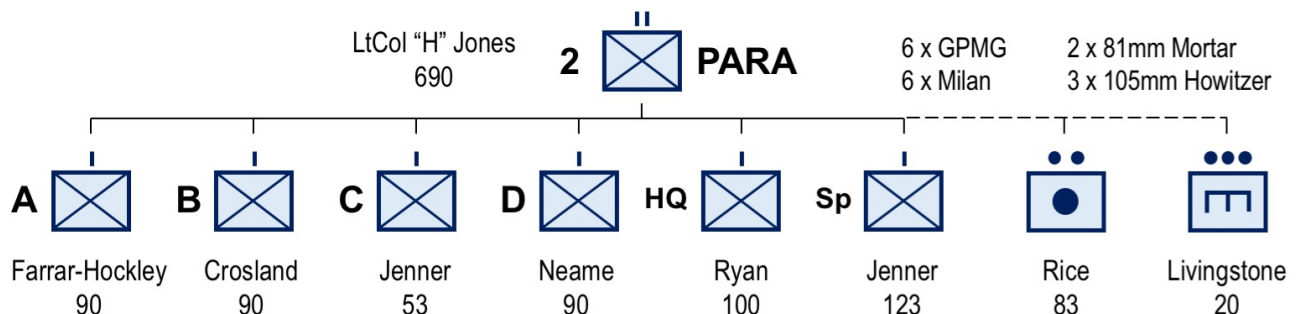


Figure 6. Task Organization of 2 Para at Goose Green, 27 May 1982.

Orders at Goose Green. The initial order from Brigadier Thompson to Lieutenant Colonel Jones was “carry out a raid on Goose Green isthmus and capture the settlements before withdrawing to be in reserve for the main thrust to the north.” These orders were re-issued three days later as “seize Goose Green in order secure the right (south) flank of the brigade advance.”

On the 27th, after a morning move to the Camilla House assembly area north of Goose Green, Jones wrote out his operation order in a farmhouse. His orders group was scheduled for 1100.

At 1100, several officers were missing. Jones was angry and postponed the brief until 1500. After another delay to interrogate captured prisoners, the orders group finally met at 1600. Officers and soldiers assembled one hour before dark. Jones talked for ninety minutes, impatiently interrupting his intelligence officer to finish his own brief. Company commanders then issued their orders in the dark.

The colonel’s order was a complicated sequence of six phases, each *tightly coupled*¹ to its predecessor. An approach march in the dark would be followed by multiple assaults in the daylight. See Figure 7.

1. “C” Company would secure the start line.
2. “A” Company would attack south on the left (east) side through Burntside House and Coronation Point to seize Darwin Hill (BLACK strong point).
3. “B” Company would then attack south on the right (west) side to seize Boca House and Boca Hill (WHITE strong point).
4. Once “A” and “B” had secured their initial objectives, “D” Company would advance in the center to establish a defensive position at their intermediate objective.
5. “C” Company would then pass through “D” Company to neutralize Argentinian reserves.
6. At first light, “C” Company would then clear the Goose Green airfield, “A” Company would secure Darwin, and “D” Company would secure Goose Green.

Like the gears of a machine, each phase of this order was linked to the previous step, even the two separate flanking movements. Note the linkage words *once*, *when*, *at*, and *then*. When unexpected events stopped one unit—which happened almost immediately—the entire mechanism seized up, waiting for the required phase to finish. These dependent events all required top-down oversight (and communications) for reporting and permissions. The colonel, unable to control battlefield events and losing his grip on the schedule, grew frustrated on the radio, yelling at units to wait: “Get off the net!”

Delay piled upon delay until the colonel was killed, which then released each unit to operate with more freedom of action. Adkin (1992) asserts that Colonel Jones had courage, but hindered 2 Para with a sequential order, full of intermediate objectives, that failed to give his commanders latitude to act.

“Jones was restrictive by nature and rarely delegated authority or allowed initiative. He liked rigid control and adherence to plan.” According to Major Keeble, “His company commanders had very little room to manoeuvre—they were almost like pawns.” (Fitz-Gibbon, 1995). This over-control was even more striking given the maturity, experience, and abilities of his company commanders.

The fact that Jones had been an instructor at the School of Infantry, and had spent twenty years with the Devonshire and Dorset Regiment before the Paras, meant that his order and leadership practices, which both sought close control of events, were likely doctrinal norms for these organizations.

Major Keeble’s outstanding leadership skills and more flexible directives then led to the British victory. Not until Jones’ choreographed scheme of maneuver was discarded did the battalion’s superb unit leaders—with autonomy, initiative, and combat skill—finally outfight and defeat the enemy.

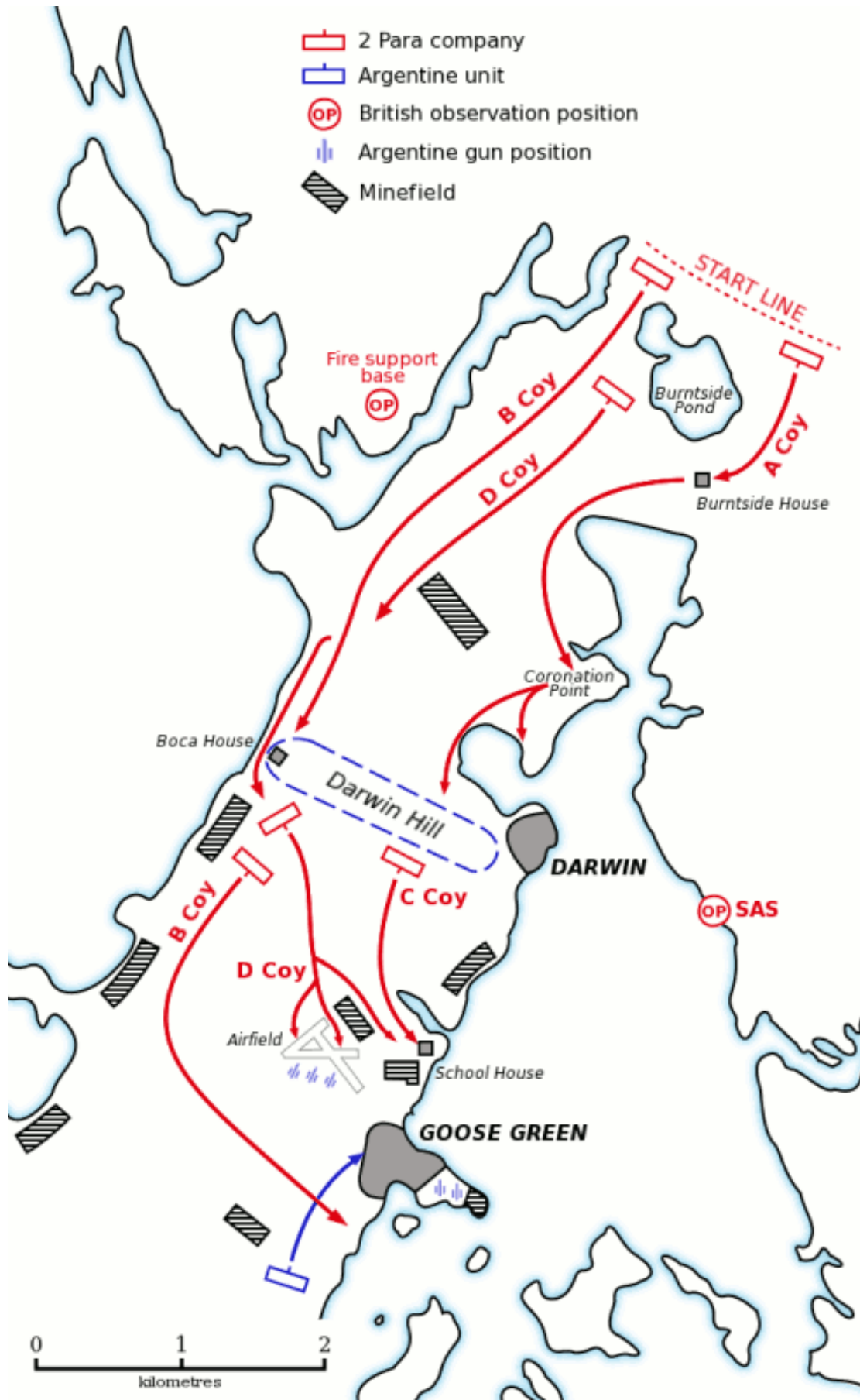


Figure 7. Battalion concept of operations, 2 Para, 27 May 1982.

Experienced commanders at Goose Green. The six company commanders of 2 Para who fought in the Falklands were *very* experienced Majors. The average age was 36 with an average time-in-service (TIS) of 16 years. All had wide experience leading, fighting, and training. All were true mentors for their platoon commanders, NCOs, and soldiers.

- Major Farrar-Hockley, 36, with 15 years TIS, had served in Malta, Cyprus, and Northern Ireland.
- Major Crosland, with 18 years TIS, had served in Northern Ireland and with the SAS in Oman.
- Major Roger Jenner, with 20 years TIS, had been promoted from Private to Sergeant Major, then Lieutenant to Major.
- Major Neame, 36, had served in Northern Ireland and Oman, and with Special Forces.
- Major Ryan, 42, with 20 years TIS, was promoted from Private to Major. He had served with the Rhodesian Army and fought rebels in Dhofar, Oman.
- Major Hugh Jenner was 36.

Compared to American infantry units, British Army and Royal Marine officers on the Falklands were older, had far more troop-leading experience, and served longer command tours:

| Major David A. Collet, "A" Co CO, 3 Para in the Falklands Islands | | | | |
|---|--------|-------------------|----------------|-------------|
| TIS | Months | Billet | Unit | Deployments |
| 1 – 6 | ~48 | Platoon Commander | 3 Para | |
| 7 – 10 | ~48 | | SAS | |
| 11 – 14 | ~48 | Helicopter Pilot | Army Air Corps | |
| 15 – 16 | ~24 | Company CO | 3 Para | Falklands |

| LtCol Peter N. Ward, Royal Marines (RM) | | | | |
|---|--------|-------------------|----------------|-------------------------------|
| TIS | Months | Billet | Unit | Deployments |
| 1 – 5 | ~48 | Platoon Commander | 42 Commando RM | (4): Pac, Med, Indies, Norway |
| 6 – 7 | ~18 | Company CO | Army of Oman | Dhofar War |
| 7 – 9 | ~24 | Company XO | 42 Commando RM | Northern Ireland |
| 15 – 16 | ~24 | Company CO | 41 Commando RM | Cyprus, Northern Ireland |
| 23 | ~12 | Company CO | 40 Commando RM | Northern Ireland |

British infantry squads, platoons, companies, and battalions were small compared to U.S. units. Twenty-four-man platoons had three eight-man sections. Companies had less than one-hundred men. See Figure 8. British long-service professional officers, leading smaller numbers of soldiers, could focus on training and developing their people, and significantly increase the skill levels of their units.



Figure 8. 2nd Battalion, the Parachute Regiment, the Falklands Islands, 1982.

2nd Battalion, the Parachute Regiment

Falkland Islands 1982

The Battle of Goose Green



2 Para
SUSSEX MOUNTAIN, FALKLAND ISLANDS
27 May 1982

ANNEX A: Task Organization

2 Para

LtCol Herbert "H" JONES

Tac 1 HQ (13)
Tac 2 HQ (10)
Bn Main (33)

XO: Maj Chris P. B. KEEBLE
OpsO: Maj MILLER

"A" Company (90)
FOO
1 Plat (26)
2 Plat (26)
3 Plat (27)

Maj C. Dair FARRAR-HOCKLEY
Capt WATSON
Sgt T.I. BARRETT
Lt M. COE
Lt G. WALLIS

"B" Company (90)
FOO
4 Plat (28)
5 Plat (27)
6 Plat (28)

Maj John H. CROSLAND
Capt ASH
Lt HOCKING
Lt WEIGHELL
Lt C. CHAPMAN

"C" Company (53)
Patrols Plat (24)
Recce Plat (24)

Maj Roger JENNER
Capt FARRAR
Lt C.S. CONNOR

"D" Company (90)
FOO
10 Plat (24)
11 Plat (28)
12 Plat (26)

Maj Philip NEAME
Sgt BULLOCK
Lt WEBSTER
Lt C. WADDINGTON
Lt J.A. BARRY

Support Company (123)
AT: (22), (8) Milan
Mortars: (44), (2) 81mm
MG: (21), (6) GPMG
Assault Pioneer: (24)
Sniper: (12)

Maj Hugh JENNER
Capt P. KETLEY
Capt WORSLEY-TONKS
Lt LISTER
Sgt BELL
Sgt HEAD

Headquarters Company (100)
Quartermaster (20)
Signals (25)
Motor-T (22)
Regt Aid Post (15)

Maj M. RYAN
Capt GODWIN
Capt BENEST
CSgt CAUDWELL
Capt HUGHES

50 Independent Commando Squadron, Royal Engineers (20)

Lt LIVINGSTONE

Det, 32 GW Regt, Royal Artillery (12), (2) Blowpipes

WO2 SMITH

Section, 8th Battery, 29th Commando, Royal Artillery Regiment (DS) (83)

Maj Anthony RICE

Notes

¹ “If a plan is too tightly coupled, it is easily damaged, difficult to repair, and lacks the flexibility to address the inherent friction and uncertainty of war.” MCWP 5-10 *Marine Corps Planning Process*, 10 August 2020 , p. 33.

Sources

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