

The 2nd Parachute Battalion's War in the Falklands:

Light Armor Made the Difference in South Atlantic Deployment

by Captain Daniel T. Head

Since the end of the cold war, the United States government has increasingly called upon the Army to respond to contingency situations throughout the world. Generally, American policy makers choose light infantry units as the contingency ground troops of choice because they deploy rapidly and require a minimal amount of logistical support.

Unfortunately, light forces often arrive too light, and, despite over fifty years of combined arms doctrine, light infantry forces are employed without enough support. They either cannot accomplish their mission, or they can only accomplish it with the serious risk of heavy casualties. Even against a relatively untrained force, light infantry forces need the direct fire support of armored forces as part of the combined arms team to effectively accomplish their missions with minimal casualties.

The Falkland Islands War of 1982 provides a perfect example of this. The experiences of the 2nd Battalion, the Parachute Regiment (2 Para) in the Falklands prove, with a recent and relevant example, that rapid deployment infantry must have armor support in order to ensure success in combat operations with low casualties. 2 Para's experience is instructive because the battalion fought in two battles during the war, Goose Green and Wireless Ridge. Goose Green was the first major land battle of the war, and in it, 2 Para fought almost entirely with dismounted infantry. Wireless Ridge was the decisive point of the larger battle for Port Stanley that ended the war, and during that fight, the battalion received support from a combined arms team including one troop of light armor, two Scorpions and two Scimitars. The contrast between these battles highlights the importance of combined arms warfare, particularly the impact that direct fire support from armored vehicles has on light infantry

operations. Armored vehicles allow the light infantry commander to effectively mass fires anywhere on the battlefield in order to achieve direct fire superiority; this allows him to develop simple plans, maintain freedom of maneuver, and retain the offensive throughout the battle.

Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands on 2 April 1982. The British government immediately began assembling a joint task force in order to conduct a show of force in the South Atlantic and, if necessary, to recapture the islands. The 3rd Commando Regiment of the Royal Marines made up the bulk of the ground forces initially deployed, but it had several attachments. Among other units attached, two parachute battalions (2 Para and 3 Para) and two troops of light armored reconnaissance vehicles, 3 and 4 Troops of the Blues and Royals, deployed with 3 Commando to the Falklands.

The British government felt that speed was essential to the domestic political success of the mission to recapture the islands, so the deployment quickly became rapid deployment. Due to the speed of the deployment, space aboard British ships was critically tight and the terrain and weather in the Falklands uncertain, so only limited logistical lift assets, mostly Volvo tracked vehicles designed for use in snow, deployed with 3 Commando. 3 and 4 Troops' squadron commander was denied permission to deploy with his units due to limited space available, and so the reconnaissance troops deployed under the command of a 24-year-old lieutenant.¹ The last of the British forces deployed for war on 9 April 1982.² 3 Commando would operate with little helicopter support and under conditions of air parity throughout the war. Fortunately for 3 Commando, the ground war in the Falklands could not start until

naval supremacy was established, so the brigade stopped at Ascension Island during the voyage to the South Atlantic, while the British Navy established naval dominance in the area of operations. Ascension Island, about midway between the Falklands and England, was designated as the staging area. At Ascension, the British had a chance to conduct some training, including gunnery for 3 and 4 Troop and landing techniques for 3 Commando,³ and the task force had a chance to reorganize its jumbled supplies prior to combat following the chaos of rapid deployment.⁴

British Royal Marine infantry battalions and parachute battalions were organized similarly. Each battalion consisted of three rifle companies of approximately 120 men each. Each rifle company contained three troops (the size of American platoons) and a headquarters section, and each troop was further subdivided into three sections (squads) and a headquarters element. Additionally, each battalion contained a support company and a headquarters company. The infantry were armed with 7.62 semi-automatic rifles (with no burst selection as on the M16A2), and each section had one General Purpose Machine Gun (GPMG) and 66mm Light Anti-Tank Weapons (LAW). Each troop also had a Carl Gustav (84mm) Medium Anti-Tank Weapon (MAW). Each battalion support company was equipped with a mortar troop with six 81mm mortars and an anti-tank troop with 14 Milan anti-tank wire-guided missiles.

The regiment was supported by its organic artillery battalion, 29 Commando Regiment Royal Artillery, with three 105mm gun batteries with six guns each.⁵ 2 and 3 Para also each had a Patrols Company, C, in addition to their three line companies. Brigadier Julian Thomp-



Photo at left of a Chinook cargo helicopter hovering over two British armored vehicles gives some sense of the barren landscape, devoid of cover. Above, a lightweight Scimitar (only 8 tons) moves easily over the boggy terrain.

son commanded 3 Commando throughout the Falkland Islands War.

3 and 4 Troops are part of B Squadron, Blues and Royals, one of the regiments that, together with the Life Guards, make up the British Household Cavalry. They were equipped to conduct armored reconnaissance with Scorpions and Scimitars.⁶ A total of four Scorpions, four Scimitars, and one Samson light recovery vehicle deployed to the Falklands. The Scorpion light tank weighs eight tons, has very low ground pressure, and can traverse even very boggy, restrictive terrain. Additionally, the Scorpion has a crew of three, aluminum armor, a full NBC system, and a 76mm main gun with a 7.62mm coaxial machine gun. The main gun fires high-explosive squash-head (HESH), high-explosive (HE), canister, smoke, and illumination rounds, and the turret has a second generation day and night thermal sight. The Scimitar is very similar, but has a Rarden 30-mm high-velocity cannon which fires sabot, HE, and armor-piercing special effects (APSE) rounds.⁷ These vehicles proved to be perfect for the Falklands because they could deploy rapidly (two can fit on a C-130, but the Blues and Royals traveled by ship) and they were light enough to move on the islands and could be recovered easily... so easily that when one hit a land mine during the final battle for Port Stanley, the vehicle was recovered by Chinook helicopter.⁸

By mid-May 1982, 3 Commando had successfully landed on East Falkland, the location of the islands' principal town, Port Stanley, while 2 Para waited in an assembly area on Sussex Mountain. On 23 May, 2 Para received a warning order to conduct a battalion-sized raid on Argentine positions at Darwin and Goose Green, two towns containing a set of strongpoints that controlled the isthmus between East Falkland and the rest of the

island chain, approximately 11 miles away. As with all military operations, terrain was a major factor. First, the Falkland Islands in general can be considered an obstacle to movement because they are made up of rocky outcroppings surrounded by bog. There are virtually no improved roads on the islands, and wheeled vehicles could not hope to move through the terrain when they were loaded down with supplies. Thus, because the British did not have air superiority and had few helicopters in general, 2 Para had no choice but to attack from their assembly area in the north along the obvious avenue of approach down the isthmus to Darwin and Goose Green. The Argentines were dug in on the only defensible terrain nearby, and, at the time, the British ground commanders believed that their light armored vehicles could not maneuver effectively through the boggy ground. Also, there was no real cover and concealment available to the light infantry that were to attack Goose Green because the Falklands have no trees or other vegetation to hide attacking forces. Additionally, the battalion could be supported by only three 105mm artillery pieces that would be moved into position by helicopter, along with their ammunition. One frigate, the *Arrow*, would provide naval gunfire support, but it could only fire during hours of limited visibility due to the Argentine air threat. Since the infantry would have to carry everything that they took to battle, they could only take two mortar tubes with ammunition.⁹ Moreover, ammunition would be critical throughout the battle due to the difficulty of resupply.

Nonetheless, the battalion moved out for the attack on 27 May 82 with two days basic load of rations and ammunition.¹⁰ 2 Para's commander, LTC H. Jones, had a relatively simple plan that depended on stealth to accomplish his mission. He

would use his C (Patrols) Company to conduct area reconnaissance up to his line of departure. Then he would attack at night with two companies, A and B, abreast down the sides of the isthmus and infiltrate through Argentine positions to Boca House, a major strongpoint adjacent to Darwin. There, D Company would pass forward to take this major strongpoint while B Company would continue around to Goose Green Airfield in order to complete the destruction of the Argentine outer ring of defenses and envelop Goose Green. Once Goose Green was encircled, the battalion would clear the town in daylight to avoid civilian casualties.¹¹

The battle went basically according to plan until daylight. C Company moved out at 1800, and at 280235MAY82, A Company crossed the LD. B Company began its attack approximately 45 minutes later.¹² The two companies moved up together and cleared or effectively bypassed bunkers in the dark due to superior training, night vision capability, and naval gunfire support. The battle was going well, but slowly, when the artillery began to run out of ammunition around dawn. When dawn began at 0530, the battalion had reached its secondary objectives and had taken few casualties. However, once daylight illuminated the battlefield, the battle began to go against 2 Para. The relatively untrained Argentine conscripts began to pour machine-gun fire into the exposed British infantry. Since the British had bypassed several bunkers during their infiltration, they found themselves surrounded and in poor terrain. The battalion bogged down around Darwin Hill and Boca House, and ammunition became a serious issue. The mortars ran out of ammunition shortly after sunrise and the *Arrow* had to withdraw to safety about two hours after sunrise. 2 Para's attack was halted and in

danger of failing. At around 0830, 2 Para's commander was killed as he led an assault on an Argentine machine gun nest in an attempt to get his battalion moving.¹³ However, about that time, A Company began to break through the defense by using LAWs against Argentine bunkers. Additionally, LTC Jones had ordered his Milan and Machine Gun Troop to move to support B Company. By massing their fires against Argentine strongpoints, B Company was finally able to achieve direct fire superiority and break through the line at Boca House.¹⁴ Once Boca House was taken, the British had broken through the Argentine's first line of resistance and victory became only a matter of time and determination.¹⁵ 2 Para slowly encircled Goose Green, and, by sundown, they demanded and received the Argentine garrison's surrender. The poorly trained and led Argentine troops could not cope with the collapse of their initial line of resistance. 2 Para, a battalion of 450 men, captured 1200 prisoners of war. 2 Para lost 17 men killed and 35 wounded and achieved a great victory, but overall the battalion was basically lucky. The battle had gone very well in darkness, but once daylight hit, the Argentine conscripts were able to fix the entire battalion for several hours and kill many of its key personnel. Clearly, a well-trained force would have been able to defeat and probably destroy the British parachute battalion attacking without support at Goose Green.¹⁶

2 Para learned a lot at Goose Green. By the time the British forces marched across East Falkland to the climactic battle with the Argentine garrison at Port Stanley, the Scimitars and Scorpions of the Blues and Royals had proved their mobility through the boggy countryside of the Falklands. 2 Para was assigned to seize Wireless Ridge, the ridge overlooking Port Stanley itself and the suspected location of an Argentine regimental command post. Again, terrain was important. During this battle, the Argentines were dug in along several pieces of key terrain. Two Argentine companies occupied Wireless Ridge itself while company strongpoints were sited on several nearby hill masses. All Argentine positions were well dug in, with overhead cover and ammunition cached in bunkers throughout their positions. 2 Para's new battalion commander, LTC D.R. Chandler, had a simple combined arms plan. 2 Para would conduct an infantry assault supported by 3 Troop from the Blues and Royals, both 2 and 3 Para's mortar platoons, two 105mm artillery batteries, naval gunfire from the *HMS Ambuscade* and the battalion's or-

ganic Milan and Machine Gun Troop. He would first seize Rough Diamond, a hill mass northwest of the ridge itself, with D Company supported by direct fire from 3 Troop. Then A and B Companies would attack on line to seize Apple Pie, a ridge adjacent to Wireless Ridge. Then D Company would move up to the western flank of the defensive line along Wireless and envelop the Argentines, again supported by direct fire from 3 Troop and A and B Companies.¹⁷ Clearly, the battalion had learned the value of both direct and

the flanks or rear this time. Once Rough Diamond was seized, A and B Companies moved to attack Apple Pie. The direct and indirect fire support quickly broke the defenders' spirit, and 2 Para watched as the Argentines fled down the ridge to the dubious safety of Wireless Ridge itself. While D Company moved to its next start point west of the ridge, 3 Troop and the Milan and Machine Gun Troops moved to Apple Pie. D Company moved out and captured the first half of Wireless fairly easily, but the Argentines



The four Scimitars deployed to the Falklands first stopped at Ascension Island, where their training included gunnery in preparation for the invasion. Their 30mm Rarden cannons were later used to pick off Argentine bunkers.

indirect fire support in infantry operations.¹⁸ The attack was to take place entirely at night.

The preparatory bombardment of Rough Diamond began at 132115JUN82, and at 2145, D Company crossed its LD with 3 Troop and the battalion Machine Gun Troop in support. 3 Troop conducted reconnaissance by fire to locate and destroy Argentine bunkers. They called this technique "zapping."¹⁹ "Zapping" involved engaging Argentine bunkers with machine-gun fire in order to provoke a response. Once the Argentines returned fire, usually with 7.62 machine guns, the Scimitar crew would engage the machine gun crew with 30mm cannon fire. This technique proved highly effective, and by the time that D Company got up to their initial objective, they found the entire position occupied by only a few Argentine dead; the Argentines forces had withdrawn.²⁰ Additionally, the light armor's night sights enabled 2 Para's commander to get good intelligence on enemy positions as his troops assaulted their various objectives.²¹ 2 Para was able to destroy all of the Argentine bunkers during their initial assaults, so no bypassed enemy would engage 2 Para from

withdrew in an orderly fashion and forced the company to fight from bunker to bunker. The attack might have stalled but for the highly accurate direct fire support from the Blues and Royals into the enemy's bunkers. This enabled D Company to assault and push the enemy out of his prepared positions and off of their strongest defensive position.²² At dawn, the Argentines mounted their only counterattack of the war, and D Company quickly repulsed it with indirect fire from 3 Commando's 105mm battalion. Shortly after dawn, 2 Para began preparing to continue its assault into Port Stanley, but peace intervened, so the battalion entered the city unopposed. 3 Troop led the way with infantry riding on their Scimitars and Scorpions.

Clearly, today's rapidly deployable forces can learn a lot from 2 Para's experience in the Falklands. By examining the war using the principles of war of mass, maneuver, the offensive, and simplicity, one can readily explain the necessity for armored forces in the light infantry fight. Light armored forces enable the rapid-deployment light infantry commander to easily mass overwhelming direct fires on any specific point or area target. This, in turn, allows the com-



Paratroopers hitch a ride on a Scorpion over the barren Falklands terrain after the conclusion of hostilities. Rapidly deploying light armor made the difference in this unexpected conflict over a distant British South Atlantic colony long claimed by Argentina.

mander to retain freedom of maneuver. Additionally, light armored forces can be transported more easily than their heavy counterparts, and so cause little loss in operational or strategic mobility. Since the light infantry commander now has a way to readily achieve direct fire superiority, he has the ability to retain the offensive, and this allows him to keep his plan simple and flexible. MG Nick Vaux, then a battalion commander in 3 Commando, called the Falklands, "The last place we expected to fight."²³ Clearly this statement can be applied to any number of potential battlefields for American forces. However, despite all of the challenges, 2 Para fought well both at Goose Green and at Wireless Ridge. The difference came in the appreciation for the combined arms fight that the battalion learned at Goose Green. MG Vaux said, "Once we cracked their defenses, they collapsed quickly, as any ill-trained army would. Their officers simply lost control."²⁴ Light armor enables the infantry commander to crack initial defenses quickly with overwhelming fire and shock effect; infantry can then effectively close with and destroy the enemy with minimum casualties, even in a rapid-deployment scenario.

Notes

¹Max Hastings and Simon Jenkins, *The Battle for the Falklands* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1983) pp. 91-93.

²Julian Thompson, *No Picnic* (Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1985) p. 14.

³LTC Andrew R. Jones, "British Armor in the Falklands," *ARMOR*, March-April 1983, pp. 26-27.

⁴Hastings and Jenkins, pp. 91-93.

⁵Thompson, pp. 3-4.

⁶Jones, p. 26.

⁷Jones, pp. 26-27.

⁸Jones, p. 30.

⁹Hastings and Jenkins, pp. 235-238.

¹⁰Hastings and Jenkins, pp. 238.

¹¹Hastings and Jenkins, p. 240.

¹²Hastings and Jenkins, p. 241.

¹³Hastings and Jenkins, pp. 243-245.

¹⁴Hastings and Jenkins, pp. 245-246.

¹⁵Hastings and Jenkins, pp. 247-248.

¹⁶Hastings and Jenkin, pp. 250-252.

¹⁷Thompson, pp. 175-177.

¹⁸Hastings and Jenkins, p. 304.

¹⁹Jones, p. 30.

²⁰Thompson, p. 177.

²¹Jones, p. 30.

²²Thompson, pp. 177-178.

²³Lt. Gen. Bernard E. Trainor, "Reflections on the Falklands," *Marine Corps Gazette*, January 1989, p. 70.

²⁴Trainor, p. 71.

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