

VI

'D' COMPANY'S ADVANCE

D Company, under Major Phil Neame, had the following objectives to attack in Colonel Jones' plan:

Phase 3: Position at 645605

Phase 4: Boca Hill, if necessary

Phase 6: Goose Green

This was not, however, how Major Neame intended to regard the company's role in the operation. In the absence of the detailed information necessary for deliberate battle-planning, and anyway tending not to expect things to run necessarily according to programme, Neame preferred to treat the operation as an advance to contact.

As D Company passed through the bottleneck between Camilla Creek and Burntside Pond, there was a great deal of firing over to their left – A Company attacking Burntside House. B Company, straight ahead of D, had not yet started their assault, so D Company paused. They were not in the event required to act in support of either A or B, and it seemed that OC B had decided to advance against the objective originally allocated to D for Phase 3. However, D Company were committed to the fighting by the CO in what was approximately Phase 3; though not when and where previously expected.

Sitting around a map, in the relatively benign environment of the battalion O group, orders can sound so simple and tidy: D COMPANY WILL THEN PASS BY B COMPANY AND ATTACK THE ENEMY POSITION AT GRID 645605, or words to that effect. This is D Company commander's description of what happened at about 0900:

H went charging ahead down the axis to see what was happening¹ and got shot at, and came back and briefed me that there was enemy on a hill over there which I couldn't even see, and told me to get on with it. And I think that hill was probably the Phase [3] objective, but I couldn't guarantee it, and certainly H wasn't prepared to guarantee it either. It was, as far as he was concerned, just a hill where he thought there were enemy, and off he went, and I . . . had very little idea as to exactly where this hill [was] or where the enemy were on it.

I had only the sketchiest idea of where A and B Companies were. I felt that I was probably going to be moving ahead of them at this point, but they were to my left and right respectively; and so I just took it as a straight *advance to contact*, and remember using those words particularly; it was by no means a deliberate attack as had initially been envisaged in the orders . . . I attacked it with just one platoon up, and actually said . . . 'advance to contact and wait and see, folks'.

And as it happened, things turned a little awry because we got hit in the flank very much between myself and B Company; and it was only at that point that I began to become exactly aware of where B Company were – when they complained that my shots were falling rather near them.

If you were to stand on the track about where Jones and Neame had this conversation (probably about 650604), at night looking south, you would understand Neame's uncertainty about precisely what the colonel wanted him to do. Even on a relatively bright night – and this was far from a bright night – you would see ahead of you nothing more than a dim horizon. You would not be able to ascertain whether it was a low rise 300 metres away, or a higher ridge 1300 metres away. You would not know whether the rise was actually shown on the map, or was an undulation which didn't quite break the 50- or 100-foot contour lines, and therefore didn't appear on the map despite being quite noticeable on the ground. If, having just progressed along a couple of kilometres of fairly featureless terrain in the blackest of nights, in awful weather, you could not be certain as to your precise location, then orientation to the map and to the expected enemy locations would be quite difficult.

This would be especially true if you had been led to believe the enemy were at X and Y but not Z, and now it seemed they were at Z but possibly not Y; or, it might occur to you, they are in fact at Y, but you are maybe further to the west than you thought.

In such circumstances of unknown terrain, darkness, bad weather and navigation difficulty, the certainty of the positional plan is impossible to attain, and the *Befehlstaktik* orders methodology entirely inappropriate. The position which Jones had discovered seems in fact to have been by the track where it crosses Coronation Ridge about 647600, some 3-400 metres southeast of the grid reference he had originally envisaged D Company clearing in Phase 3; and in a place where no Argentinians had been expected.

D Company were now put into arrowhead formation, and advanced towards the hill. Neame continues:

My lead platoon actually advanced onto this hill, the so-called objective [at 647600], which emerged out of the gloom, and which we really only identified because there was quite a lot of small-arms fire coming from it. But there was no real problem of gaining a footing; there was . . . what I'd call . . . fairly heavy, but very erratic, small-arms fire coming from the position – and only from small bits of it – and so the platoon first really advanced into the position without opposition, and then set about clearing it. And that was very much down to section-level once they were on the position; and somewhat miraculously we hadn't picked up any casualties.

12 Platoon's sergeant, (later WO2) John Meredith, explains:

we moved up, we came under fire, and we then went into the routine that we'd worked out before. . . . We took out . . . between 8 and 12 trenches with two of the sections. . . . I lost one of the sections in the confusion there.

And at one time we were taking fire from B Company – which was understandable, because we as a platoon . . . most probably fired at them anyway.

12 Platoon, commanded by Lieutenant Jim Barry, was weak in numbers – 22 all ranks – but deployed a great deal of firepower: five GPMGs (half as many as the whole Argentinian infantry regiment, according to the latter) plus an M79 grenade launcher and a number of 66mm anti-tank weapons.

It was while 12 Platoon were clearing this position on the southeastern high-point of Coronation Ridge, with the OC close behind them, that D Company were temporarily embarrassed, as Neame mentioned above. Their right rear platoon was hit by automatic fire from what the company commander thought were two machine guns. D Company were caught rather flat-footed, as Neame puts it: Webster's (right rear) 10 Platoon was pinned down at a time when Barry's (forward) 12 Platoon was otherwise occupied, and

Waddington's (left rear) 11 Platoon could not engage the new enemy for fear of hitting Webster's. The new position was about 300 metres northwest and downhill from the one 12 Platoon were involved with.²

Testifying to the utter confusion of this contact, members of 10 Platoon give varying versions of what happened. Lieutenant Webster was advancing his platoon two-up. Webster says that as he advanced he could see a number of sangars ahead, but didn't know whether or not they were occupied. The enemy opened fire, he says, at about 30-40 yards – he remembers thinking, 'They've cocked up, they should have opened fire earlier'. He says that the fire included heavy machine gun fire; he remembers seeing green tracer which, unlike the British red tracer, burned from the muzzle.

His platoon sergeant, (now Colour-Sergeant) Jimmy O'Rawe, describes the platoon's predicament:

We were absolutely gobsmacked – we just couldn't move at all . . . everybody was flat on the ground. It was flat ground, it was dark, and we were seeing tracer about a foot over our head. . . . And they were well dug-in, they had a good field of fire, there was no dead ground. . . . No tufts of grass, no wagon-ruts or anything; it was like a football pitch. And whatever cover we had was through darkness and staying close to the ground, and moving forward that way.

It took us a while, but then we, being close to the ground, got a bit of an image of a horizon, and we could see the nearest trench to us. It wasn't firing. We [that is, Corporal Elliott's reserve section plus 1 or 2 others] went forward to that.

By this time . . . my platoon commander was way out on the right.

Webster, however, is under a very different impression. He believes he was more centrally placed; that Sergeant O'Rawe and Corporal Owen's section were *in dead ground by the track* on the left; and that Corporal Elliott's section was *behind* the platoon commander. But Corporal (later Sergeant) Staddon thinks Elliott's section was pinned down behind him, which would put Elliott on Webster's right rear; not behind him as Webster says, or on his left as O'Rawe says. And Corporal (now Colour-Sergeant) Elliott isn't sure what happened:

when people start going down and the rounds are whizzing past you, the next thing you want to do is get your bloody head down . . . especially when it's dark, and all you can see is flashes of tracer that's going past you. At this stage you don't know what's going on; so everybody hit the deck.

As a sergeant from another platoon says, 'The hardest part is actually keeping in contact with your own people!'

Webster remembers that the Argentinian fire was initially heavy, but 'from then on it was sporadic, and they seemed confused about what they were doing. I don't think they were too determined – in theory they should've blasted us'. He attributes the falling off of enemy fire to the virtual disappearance of the targets into the ground, as 10 Platoon took cover.

Webster says that he, his platoon signaller and his runner, together with Corporal Staddon's section on their right, started to crawl towards the enemy – 'we were so close there was nothing else to do really':

I'd like to say it developed through clever thought and training – but it just kinda happened. . . . We were so close, we just knew what needed to be done. And there was no room for manoeuvre, we had no alternative but to go forward.

Webster was shouting to Corporal Staddon, but couldn't hear his own voice; he was

deafened, he says, by four or five Argentinian mortar rounds which came down around his platoon at this time. According to Staddon,

Lieutenant Webster spotted one of the positions, and he said 'Watch my tracer!' Now the position couldn't have been no more than 75 metres away – they were on top of us – and tracer doesn't start to burn until at least 100 metres.

And then he decided to put light up, which was the worst thing he could ever have done, because it exposed us straight away.

Communications on the radio was bad, and I was actually screaming at him to try and sort something out. . . . He kept . . . trying to push me further to the right; and the more to the right I went, the more the ground exposed us to the [enemy machine] guns. I needed to move in towards him.³

And I kept telling him light was no good, tracer's no good.

Amidst the noise and the enemy fire, Webster and Staddon obviously failed to make any sense to each other; which illustrates again that a commander cannot expect to be able to control his immediate subordinates – in this case, notwithstanding that they were within shouting distance. This was not merely because they couldn't hear each other properly and their radios were not working: in Staddon's account, Webster was attempting to give Staddon an order which he (Webster) *could not see was impossible to carry out*. Naturally, attempting to give orders when pinned to the ground 50 metres or so in front of an enemy position and deafened by fire is a problem to which there is no simple answer. But the other aspect of the problem must not be overlooked – that in this case, as in many more, the superior will be unable to give specific orders to his immediate subordinate in contact, unless he is fully aware of the latter's situation.⁴

Ultimately, according to Shaun Webster, they had crawled to within grenade-throwing range of the Argentinians, and the position was silenced by a grenading method he describes as 'frag and fry' – fragmentation grenades followed by white phosphorous. A rifleman seems to have thrown the first one or two grenades on his own initiative before the idea spread and the others followed suit: 'It was more or less over by then, because by the time you'd put the grenades in, there wasn't really any opposition. And we were more or less on top of them by then'.

Staddon, however, says the position was eventually taken by an outflanking assault by 11 Platoon across 10 Platoon's front. Benet's account (pp98-100) merges these two viewpoints, stating that Webster's platoon silenced the forward edge of the position, after which Waddington's took the rest.

This awkward spell lasted, according to Staddon, a good half an hour. During this time the company commander was trying to ascertain what was happening and to decide how best to deal with the problem. Also he was exchanging words with B Company commander about who was shooting at whom; which resulted in an order from Neame to Webster's platoon to stop firing.

Major Neame decided that if he tried to use 12 Platoon (once they had cleared the position they were already involved with) to help 10 Platoon, by engaging the position west of the track, 12 Platoon would be shooting at B Company. So he tried to speak to Lieutenant Waddington on the radio, to see if his 11 Platoon could do anything to help Webster – perhaps by going right-flanking behind (north of) 10 Platoon. But radio communications proved unreliable at the crucial moment, and Neame was unable to direct Waddington to this task.

Fortunately, however, it appears that Waddington himself decided to act, and carried

out more or less what his OC had in mind – without actually being ordered to do so.⁵

This is Chris Waddington's account:

We were moving up onto a suspected enemy . . . position. 10 Platoon was on my right. As we were moving up, suddenly green tracer came from a machine gun position on top of the hill, and it sprayed over the top of 10 Platoon.

At that instant the command net went chaotic – everyone was trying to send a contact report. Everyone was dashing down, taking cover. I dashed into a hole and looked around and I could see all the boys' faces looking towards me, looking for some word of command, something to do. I contacted 10 Platoon commander, said 'Do you need fire support from me?' He said yes, so I moved a section up onto a little rise which was just in front of me, and got the rest of the platoon into a little gully.

As the section got onto the top of this rise, they in fact encountered another enemy position which hadn't been located. As they came on top of the rise, the gunner and the 2 i/c of the section, Lance-Corporal Bingley, saw this position and tried charging straight in. The enemy opened up and Corporal Bingley was shot, and died instantly. The machine-gunner was shot in the hip and dropped the gun, and at the same time another member of the section was shot in the stomach by a ricochet – gave me three casualties within the first two minutes of the battle.

Fortunately my platoon sergeant got in there straight away and started dragging the casualties back. Meanwhile the section commander . . . finished off the Argentinian position with a white phosphorous grenade.

As soon as we'd cleared the position we all reorganised, and breathed a big sigh of relief. We'd realised we'd been under sniper fire and machine gun fire for about 5-10 minutes, and nobody had really noticed it, we'd all been so intent in getting our casualties back and getting on and getting through this position.

Meanwhile 12 Platoon were still missing their third section, which had taken cover when the shooting started and had thus become detached. The then 2 i/c of this section, asked for his viewpoint on the engagement, succinctly describes the difficulty of understanding what was going on: 'All I know is I was on my fucking belt buckle!'

Sergeant Meredith told the platoon commander he would go back, but he was unable to find the missing section. On his way back through company main HQ he spotted some helmets over to the right – several figures coming along a fence line towards the track:

I asked the 2 i/c . . . if we had anybody forward right of him. He said no. I then asked him to put some light up . . . and four Argentinians were there. So we just wasted them . . . we killed two; one was wounded.

The fourth tried to escape southwards; but his route took him through one of the forward sections, who caught him.

Benest writes of the final part of the engagement:

To ensure that all enemy on the ridge were cleared Phil Neame now tasked 11 Platoon to clear all the bunkers once more. Waddington ordered his men to fix bayonets. 2 Section under Corporal Wells covered the platoon as it moved forward by sections. Corporal Harley attacked a trench with white phosphorous. On the right Corporal McAuley cleared another bunker, killing three enemy.

The company reorganised. It was about a quarter to ten; 2 Para were well into their last hour of darkness, with two more of the original phases to complete before dawn – each allotted an hour in the colonel's plan. By first light D Company were supposed to have

cleared the Boca Hill position (if B Company proved unable to do it), act as reserve to C Company while C cleared the airfield, and move into position to assault Goose Green – over three kilometres south – at first light. That was if there were no more surprises like this.

The 'Ostrich Factor'

Predictably, estimates of the strength of this position vary considerably. Neame and Webster believe the position on the hill – the southeastern rise of Coronation Ridge – was a platoon. Webster thinks the one on the lower ground to the northwest of it was another platoon *position*, but not necessarily manned by a platoon. The trenches were in depth, and the extremities contained the heavier weapons: Webster believes at least one sustained-fire machine gun, Staddon and Neame both think the guns were GPMGs. Meredith says 12 Platoon took out 8-12 trenches. Some of these were properly dug, others were just shell-scrapes, and there were some tents or bashas.

According to Webster, not all the sangars were occupied – because some Argentinians stayed in their tents and didn't fight. Neame speaks of the 'ostrich factor' afflicting many of the enemy. When Corporal Staddon went back looking for casualties, he came across 5 or 6 trenches occupied by Argentinians who had 'completely given up. . . . Their fight had gone by that stage.'⁶

As for the numbers of Argentinians accounted for, the post-operations report says 'about 20' enemy dead.⁷ However, by this stage of the battle that report has claimed practically as many Argentinians killed as the *final* Argentinian figure – with considerably more fighting still to come.

But even this figure, when viewed in the light of others, points to the fact that the Argentinians did not offer the most determined resistance. Of the four engaged by Sergeant Meredith (who were not actually fighting but trying to escape) 2 were killed and 1 wounded. Two members of 10 Platoon shot one Argentinian who, on reflection, was probably dazed – walking backwards from his trench without a weapon. Someone in company HQ shot an Argentinian still in his tent (Benest p103). And the company commander has this to say:

What surprised me was the number of Argentinian soldiers who were just not fighting. Some of them were just lying supine in the bottom of their trench with their sleeping bag pulled over their heads; others pretending they were asleep, et cetera . . . large numbers of them . . . certainly half.

Was this the sort of thing the chief of the general staff referred to when he called Goose Green a 'feat of arms and gallantry probably unsurpassed in the glorious history of the British army'?

As for the tactical lessons of D Company's contact, they effectively reaffirm B Company's:

1. In the absence of *precise* information on the enemy defence, a positional approach is unworkable.
2. Even with accurate intelligence, the conditions of night fighting are such that troops will probably not be able to stick to a predetermined plan except in the most general terms.
3. It is virtually impossible for even a company commander to *control* the battle along lines of his own choosing, particularly once in contact; responsibility therefore devolves on junior commanders who must often act without orders, in pursuit of the general intention.

4. Even when a platoon commander is within shouting distance of his sections, particularly at night, (a) he may be unable to properly appreciate the situation confronting them – and therefore be unable to dictate what they must do – and (b) he may himself be pinned down and unable to personally influence the fighting – requiring therefore, again, that his subordinates assume the responsibility for directing the action, if only they are in a position to do so.⁸

D Company's commander summarises command in a close-quarter battle:

I think control . . . was extremely sketchy; certainly, . . . all I was able to do was keep a rough grasp on what each platoon was doing with no control over how they did it. And I suspect really that, in terms of platoon commanders, they found themselves in the same position, with very little control over their sections.

And I think this bears out by the fact that we then encountered the same [conditions] that B Company had already encountered in terms of reorganisation – we were actually spread to the four winds. No-one actually quite knew where anyone else was. Without any obvious features to reorganise on it took an age, and was only possible by me eventually putting up white light and using a sort of clock-ray method, all of which would have made the School of Infantry shudder – but it seemed about the only thing that worked.

So . . . once we were amongst it, and especially because we were caught unexpectedly in the flank, control tended to go to the four winds, frankly; and one relied on individual and junior commander initiative to sort the enemy out.

Notes to Chapter VI

1. The CO's bodyguard, Barry Norman says: 'I said to the CO on 2 occasions, "Sir, I think we've overstepped our mark slightly, because the firing is behind us; and I feel we're now in front of the lead companies". And he said "Oh." So he got on the battalion net and the left and right markers of A and B Company were told to put up a Verey [light] to indicate their flanks. And on two occasions they were both behind us. And at some times a good couple of hundred metres behind us. So right from the outset we were leading the battalion, if you like, in the action.'
2. Deduced on the ground with Lieutenant-Colonel Neame. Remnants of these defensive positions can still be found at about 647604: about a platoon's worth of trenches in what seems to be the area from which D Company were fired upon. A little to the south, still on the forward slope of Coronation Ridge, are more trenches – something between a section and a platoon – in a line, parallel to a fence running roughly east-west. This position was presumably the one spotted by the C Company patrol but reported as 645605, somewhat further north and west.
3. It was over on the right that Staddon's section suffered two fatalities, Lance-Corporal Cork the section 2 i/c. and Private Fletcher the machine gunner. Staddon's other machine gunner, Private Mort, was hit at about this time somewhere in front; thus Staddon's section was without all its automatic firepower: Staddon.
4. One corporal says Lieutenant Webster was 'causing chaos' at this point, trying to do things himself rather than letting the section commanders do it: '[Corporal] Doc Owen was shouting at him at the time: told him if he doesn't shut his gob he'll get up and fill him in!'
5. Neame. Benest (p100) says that Neame ordered Waddington to manoeuvre, but doesn't point out that he couldn't get through to him.
6. Staddon. After daybreak, according to O'Neill, a large number of bypassed Argentinians appeared in the area north of Coronation Ridge with their hands up – up to 100 he says, although this seems excessive. O'Rawe says 50 or 60 Argentinians appeared in the morning

for the purpose of surrendering. Presumably these must have included a number from the western side of the Burntside Hill position, which B Company had bypassed earlier in the advance.

Sergeant (now WO2) Spencer, then defence platoon sergeant in HQ Company, says that after daybreak it transpired that a position thought to have been cleared by D Company was still occupied. Sergeant Spencer took two men on a recon, returned to brief the RSM, picked up the platoon and they assaulted. The Argentinians had gone by the time Defence Platoon arrived on the position, apparently down towards the western coast. There had been less than a platoon of Argentinians, of whom only a couple had fired at Defence Platoon, and three prisoners were taken. These may have been the Argentinians D Company later saw down by the coast.

7. Neame comments: 'Not far short of this for dead and wounded, seen with my own eyes as we re-orged on 12 [Platoon's] target'.
8. It is interesting to note that, while the evidence in this study finds that attempts to control the chaos of battle are fruitless – especially in the dark – Mark Adkin justifies Colonel Jones' *Befehlstaktik* by saying that the plan required 'extremely tight control by commanders' (p123). I would reiterate that any attempt to control extremely tightly during contact will lead to dysfunction.

SAMPLE