INTRODUCTION

The battalion has executed a feat of arms and gallantry probably unsurpassed in the glorious history of the British army.

General Sir Edwin (now Field Marshal Lord) Bramall
Chief of the General Staff during the Falklands war (cit. Frost p178-9)

If one looks at the conduct of the battlegroup in the attack, I would always look to Goose Green to find out how *not* to do things. . . . In my mind there were many, many things that went badly wrong at Goose Green that . . . against a good enemy, would have cost us very dearly indeed; and we got away with it because they were less good.

A 2 Para officer present at Goose Green

Midday, Saturday 29 May, 1982. The Darwin-Goose Green isthmus, East Falkland.

It had been a long, freezing night for the men of 2nd Battalion The Parachute Regiment. A night without shelter against the South Atlantic winter, with no sleeping bags, with little food and water. The battalion had been fighting throughout the daylight hours of the preceding day, and half the night before that. They had spent their second night in the isthmus, exhausted, replenishing their meagre ammunition stocks from captured supplies, attempting to dig defensive positions using mostly bayonets and mess tins; and simply trying to keep warm. The British subunits were dispersed in a fragile, broken 'ring' around the tiny settlement of Goose Green and its grass airfield – Condor air base to the Argentinians.

2 Para had been scheduled to capture the settlement well over 24 hours previously, at about midday on the 28th. The fighting had petered out around dusk on that day, and their enemy, Task Force Mercedes, had remained in occupation of Goose Green overnight – a night when the exhausted 2 Para, critically low on ammunition, could almost certainly not have successfully assaulted the settlement. Now, around midday on the 29th, the Argentinian commanders accepted defeat.

The Argentinian Air Force contingent was the first to parade. As their surrender was taken by the British battlegroup commander Major Chris Keeble, the scene was watched by a few of 2 Para's exhausted soldiers and the BBC correspondent Robert Fox. Fox subsequently wrote:

> At first we had mistaken the Air Force contingent for the entire military garrison remaining in Goose Green after the fighting. There were about 250 Air Force personnel on parade. If there was the same number again of Army and special forces, it would be roughly the strength we had expected to find in the settlement, about 600 men at the most, for we knew by the morning of the surrender that over 100 Argentinians must have been killed and wounded on the battlefield and 100 prisoners were being held on the beach by Darwin.
>
> What Major Keeble's party saw next was one of the most amazing sights of

> the campaign. We saw the soldiers coming out of the houses and the huts, first by platoons and then companies. There was first fifty, then a hundred and then too many to count quickly. . . . As they marched up the slope towards us, we realised clearly for the first time that the previous day the paratroopers had been fighting not a few companies of Argentinians as had been suggested at [the] Orders Group, but at least two, and possibly three, battalions. With masterly understatement, Chris Keeble said he was glad we had not needed to fight in a second day of battle. . . . (Fox pp196-7).

The very next day the British chief of the general staff himself, General Sir Edwin Bramall, sent a message to 2 Para to express

> how immensely highly I and my colleagues on the Army Board rate the performance of the battalion against an enemy over double their number, determined to stand and fight . . . in achieving all its objectives in a ten hour battle after losing the CO and capturing over 1200 prisoners the battalion has executed a feat of arms and gallantry probably unsurpassed in the glorious history of the British Army. (Frost pp178-9)

Ten years later Field Marshal Lord Bramall reiterated his praise for 2 Para's 'heroic' victory, increasing the size of the enemy force from 'over double' to 'quite three times' 2 Para's number (Washington p16).

Major-General Edward Fursdon, defence correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* at the time of the war, has described the battle thus:

> with only three 105mm guns . . . in support, 2 PARA headed out to attack Darwin and Goose Green. . . . On 28 May they advanced through Burntside House to Darwin and the hills overlooking Goose Green, having bitterly outfought successive lines of excellently prepared Argentine positions, and having survived intensive shell, mortar, heavy machine gun, ground-firing anti-aircraft guns and Pucara aircraft fire. (Fursdon p10)

And thus has the battle for Darwin and Goose Green passed into British military history. It is certainly how it has been recorded in the post-operations reports and other army documents, and all the published accounts that I have come across.[1] So from the point of view of either military theory or simple curiosity, the most obvious question prompted seems to be: how on earth did 2 Para manage to win such a spectacular victory against such grave odds?

Or did they? Was Goose Green *really* a 'feat of arms and gallantry probably unsurpassed in the glorious history of the British army'? And did 2 Para really attack 'at least two, and possibly three, battalions', and outfight 'successive lines of excellently prepared Argentine positions'?

No. Unfortunately a great deal of nonsense has been written about Goose Green. The above statements and many more like them were grossly inaccurate, but have become accepted as fact in most quarters this side of Ascension Island.

The present study seeks to examine the battle with a more critical eye than previous published accounts and army reports have done; and the motive for doing this is not merely the academic pleasure of reducing legend to its raw data and reassembling it as history. There is also a more utilitarian purpose: to begin asking *what effect does the unquestioning glorification of its experience have on the British army as a functioning social organism*?

That is, if the army's doctrine[2] – its philosophy of warfare and *modus operandi* – is 'based on the hard won and often bitter experience gained in war'[3] and if the experience of the Falklands war (or others) is so gravely misunderstood or misrepresented by the army establishment, then what are the likely effects on the evolution of British military doctrine, and therefore on training and education, and thus ultimately on the army's future performance? It will be argued here that, despite a major effort at reform in recent years, the military lessons of the Falklands war have been hindered by failure to understand events; a failure largely attributable to inaccurate and biased reporting.

I have been told by a recent chief of the general staff, who was sent a draft of the doctoral thesis on which this study is based, that I seemed 'to have fallen into the modern practice of wanting to decry everything'. Sometimes one may feel that the utmost rot may be written about the British army, as long as it is complimentary rot, but that serious criticism, however strongly substantiated by thorough research, is somehow indecent. Fortunately, however, not all military personnel are suspicious of the truth, and many if not most of the 150 people I interviewed while researching the Falklands campaign have been forthcoming with the kind of material which doesn't often find its way into official histories and reports.

One senior officer who served in the Falklands admitted to me that ever since the war he has helped maintain a facade, helped perpetuate a myth about his unit's experience for the sake of the regiment's reputation; and one of his colleagues, eyewitness to a controversial incident during the land campaign, admitted that he has often deliberately misled researchers with half-truths. (He added that he hadn't told me any half-truths. I half believe him.) I have also heard confessions from NCOs that they lied to their superiors when a certain event was being investigated, rather than risk their unit's reputation being sullied. This attitude is not exclusive to 2 Para; and when it is added to the high degree of partisanship commonly displayed in writing by army officers and military historians, it is hardly surprising that researchers content with skimming the surface of that campaign have all, without fail, managed to contribute more to the inspiring annals of military legend than to history.

Of course, this problem did not begin in 1982. One can also ask whether the army's pre-Falklands experiences had led to the appropriate developments in the doctrine applied during the Falklands war. It will be argued in this study that they had not; that the army went into the war with outmoded doctrine on tactics and command, and that this caused unnecessary problems for British units. It will be seen that 2 Para at Goose Green enjoyed more success when departing from the army's tactical norms than when adhering to the methods taught at the Royal Military Academy, the School of Infantry, and the Staff College. In order to understand this – and to explain the result of this battle in terms appropriate to current debate in NATO armies on tactics and command – it is necessary to look briefly into the relationship between tactical and command doctrine on the one hand, and battlefield experience on the other.

The first thing to understand about military doctrine or ideology is that different armies can have their own distinct ways of operating – different military cultures contain different value systems. What is normal practice in one army may be seen as outlandish in another – including such basic things as their approach to command. Some armies have more functional command values than others; some cling to outmoded ideals. All probably write their history in a way which supports their ideology.

For the sake of analysis, this study will identify two conceptual models of tactical

command system. The first is called here *directive command.* Directive command rests on an understanding that combat is inherently chaotic; that it cannot be tamed, but that the chaos can be exploited by the more flexible and quick-reacting command system. It implies a system in which orders are given in the form of *directives.* A directive is an order which indicates an end-state to be achieved, but which leaves the method of its achievement to the imagination and on-the-spot judgment of the subordinate commander. This allows subordinates the freedom to act appropriately in response to unfolding events – whatever surprises may occur during the fighting – while still providing the guidance necessary to prevent diversification of effort. Directive command values can be identified, for example, in the writings of the ancient Chinese military philosopher Sun Tzu, and in the Prussian-German command philosophy since the 18th century. Such values have also been advocated from time to time in the British army, though directive command has never been the predominant school of thought.

Directive command is distinguished from its conceptual opposite, called here *restrictive control.* Restrictive control rests on the spurious premise that combat is a structured, mechanical affair which can be rendered orderly by detailed planning and strict adherence to orders. It results in superiors attempting to control the actions of their subordinates according to a predetermined plan often made in great detail in the wishful thinking that fate, the enemy, the weather, and other factors not subject to one's own command system can somehow be expected not to interfere with one's plans. On analysis it can be seen that the British command tradition has generally been of the restrictive control variety.[4]

These two models of command culture should be seen, for practical purposes, as opposite ends of a spectrum. In reality all armies probably operate somewhere along this continuum. Moreover, as an army evolves, its command system may move closer to one end or the other, and at any given time there will no doubt be proponents of differing command methods existing in the same army. Since the 1970s, for example, the British army has been showing increasing signs of evolving towards a directive command culture, and significant reforms in military doctrine have been brought about since the Falklands war. Of course, one can also find considerable evidence of resistance to change.

It will be seen in this study that, the Falklands war occurring at a time when change was in the offing, there could be radically different tendencies within a given battalion. The incidents of Goose Green and other battles illustrate both the traditionally-dominant restrictive control system, and also the presence of values conducive to the development of a more modern directive command system. Different commanders tend to consistently display either restrictive- *or* directive-style values.

It will also be seen that when the restrictive control values were strongly in evidence, less success was met than when the directive command values were predominant. To understand this it is necessary to analyse the battle in some detail, as superficial accounts can be highly misleading. In this case, not only have the various published and unpublished accounts usually misrepresented Goose Green as a spectacular achievement; they have also tended to reinforce the restrictive control values. When historians, journalist-authors and the writers of post-operations reports retrospectively tidy up the battlefield and give an impression that what was meant to work actually did work, this tends to lead to the obvious but possibly false conclusion that the command theory was vindicated in practice.

Goose Green offers a prime example of this phenomenon. Colonel H Jones' plan for

2 Para's attack has often been given the credit for bringing about their victory; whereas more thorough research and analysis show that this was not the case. Apart from the overall mission – the words CAPTURE DARWIN AND GOOSE GREEN – the plan parted company with the reality before breakfast and had been shot to pieces by about lunch-time. This vindicates the traditional German dictum that no plan survives contact with the enemy, and suggests that the British army was teaching an unworkable battle-planning methodology.

It has also usually been held that, when 2 Para came up against an obstacle which temporarily derailed their attack, it was their own colonel's personal intervention which restored the momentum – intervention for which he was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. It will be seen in this study that, on the contrary, the colonel was doing more to *hinder* the effective functioning of his battalion at this time; and that his death, charging an enemy trench, was unnecessary, pointless, and certainly not the reason for 2 Para's eventual gaining of the upper hand. It will be seen that the relatively centralised, authoritarian nature of restrictive control contained in British military doctrine and practised by Colonel Jones, actually *absorbed* 2 Para's fighting power, where a directive command system would rather have stimulated and focused it.

Shortage of space here precludes the fullest possible analysis of Goose Green in the context of the evolution of land warfare – the only way to evaluate lessons from one battle applicable in other comparable situations. Some of the analysis contained in the original doctorate thesis will therefore be postponed to a subsequent volume. However, the present study will seek to achieve the following aims:

1. To explain how the battle for Darwin and Goose Green was won, in terms appropriate to the contemporary debate on command and tactics in NATO armies.
2. To demonstrate the superiority of directive command over restrictive control, by reference to the events of the battle.
3. To explain how the reporting of the battle has tended to reinforce the traditional restrictive control values, obscuring flaws in the British army's tactical and command doctrine, and thus militating against the success of the post-war reforms.

The method used will be to follow the chronology of the battle, switching the emphasis from one of these aims to the other as opportunity permits.

Notes to the Introduction

1. The latest and most thorough study of the battle published so far, *Goose Green* by Major Mark Adkin (a retired British infantry officer), gushes '2 Para's victory was outstanding, even unique. It is difficult to find in modern military history a similar story of a single, isolated infantry battalion fighting its way forward over seven kilometres, against a series of in-depth defensive positions. This is precisely what 2 Para had to do . . .' (p268).
   The report of the Secretary of State for Defence, *The Falklands Campaign: The Lessons*, describes the operation with considerable inaccuracy. Eg '2 PARA began by attacking Darwin, supported by Naval gunfire. The settlement was secured by mid-afternoon.' In fact 2 Para did *not* begin by attacking Darwin; they had no naval gunfire support by the time they were anywhere near Darwin; the settlement was *not* secured by mid-afternoon (unless this means mid-afternoon on the day after the battle); indeed 2 Para did not actually attack Darwin at all. The whole account is muddled and misleading.
2. Doctrine is not necessarily codified. The British army only recently adopted a formal statement of its doctrine (in the form of *Design for Military Operations: The British Military Doctrine*

1989). However, even in the absence of such formulations, it may be considered that an army's 'doctrine' comprises its collected regulations, training pamphlets etc, together with whatever is being taught at, and otherwise imparted by, its training and educational establishments – its written and unwritten code of behaviour.

3. *Design for Military Operations: The British Military Doctrine* 1989, p5.
4. This is the belief of the Military Studies Department at the University of Manchester, whose school of thought informs the present study. One can identify a tradition of British military criticism to support it. Frederick Maurice's *System of Field Manoeuvres* (1872) and the later writings of GFR Henderson (around 1900) exemplify manoeuvrist, directive command thinking which urged fundamental changes in the British army's way of fighting, necessitated by the firepower revolution of the later 19th century. Such changes were not made between the firepower revolution and World War 1, by contrast with improvements made in the contemporary German army. LS Amery's *The Problem of the Army* (1902), GC Wynne's writings of the interwar period, contemporary books by JFC Fuller (notably *The Army in My Time* and *Memoirs of an Unconventional Soldier*) and JR Kennedy's *This Our Army*, give informed critiques of the British army's culture compatible with the Manchester school of thought. Tom Wintringham's writings from the early part of World War 2 strongly bring out the positionalist nature of British military thinking at that time, and John Ellis' *Brute Force* (1990) clearly demonstrates the attritionist aspect of British strategy and tactics in World War 2. Arguments that the army needs to develop a more directive/manoeuvrist culture have been put by officers at the Staff College Camberley in recent years: eg Applegate *et al* (1987), Shaw (1990). A number of my research contacts have shared this viewpoint.

   Michael Elliott-Bateman's *Defeat in The East* (1967) marks the starting point in the formulation of the Manchester military theory and gives a basic description of the mobile and positional cultures. Martin Samuels' MPhil and PhD theses, and resulting books and articles, are a source of more thoroughly developed comparative analysis of the British and German tactical command systems from the time of the firepower revolution to the end of World War 2. They show the extent to which the British army during that time held a mechanistic, structured view of warfare conducive to restrictive control and positional-attrition war, in contrast with the German view.

   The American military theorist Bill Lind's *Maneuver War Handbook* marks an important step in the evolution of manoeuvre theory and has been influential at Manchester. My own honours dissertation (1988) gives an early elaboration of 'directive command' and 'restrictive control', terms coined during an undergraduate course in Military Studies in 1988, and highlights the continuity of restrictive control/positional-attrition thinking in the British army from the late 19th century through the 1980s. Articles in *Defense Analysis* and *British Army Review* by Elliott-Bateman, Jonathan Moore, Samuels and myself (1987-1993), develop the school of thought further with reference to the two world wars, the English civil war, the Korean war and the Falklands. I have found the views expressed here shared to a greater or lesser extent by a large proportion of the army officers I have come across.