

REMEMBRANCE DAY ADDRESS 2017

Midnight, 21st May 1982, San Carlos Water, East Falkland. The Norland, a North Sea merchant vessel normally ferrying tourists between Hull and Rotterdam was stationary, in total darkness, except below deck emergency lighting. Standing, weighed down by enormous loads in the dim blue eerie light of the companion ways, the click of the ship's public address system jerked us from our private thoughts and anxieties. The by now familiar Yorkshire tones of Don Ellerby, the ship's master, broke the silence: "You've been a wonderful bunch of passengers. It's been a pleasure sailing with you. We hope you have a good time ashore, and we look forward to sailing you safely home shortly." His 'passengers' were 2 PARA, about to start the adventure of their lives - one which for better or worse, would mark them all.

I feel humbled to be asked to give a short address on this day, when we remember those who have given their lives in the service of their country in the Great War and since.

My father fought as a sapper throughout the First World War. His closest elder brother was killed in the last few weeks. Brigadier Julian Thompson titled his account of the Falklands War 'No Picnic.' But, by comparison with the call made on previous generations, in all humility, I think perhaps it was just that! Nevertheless, it brought its challenges - and its scars, with many still suffering today.

You may recall that 2 PARA was commanded by Col H Jones, who was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross at the battle for Goose Green. The Battalion subsequently fought for Wireless Ridge - being the only unit to fight two major engagements in the War.

I'm sure, had he lived, H would have emphasised that his medal was very much in recognition of the Battalion's, courage and commitment at Goose Green, rather than his. The truth is that they were symbiotic. One went with the other. We were, without doubt, pushing the odds, under-resourced, outnumbered and outgunned for a number of reasons, many beyond our or Julian Thompson's control.

As H prepared his plan, intelligence from our own recce patrols made that ever more apparent - the map of the narrow isthmus filling with red. To add to the pressure, we picked up on our combat radios the BBC World Service reporting an announcement in Parliament that a Para Battalion

had advanced within a few miles of the settlement. If we had picked it up, then we had to assume the Argentinians had also.

H must have been assailed with doubt. You do not need to have been in battle, I suggest, to know, from your own experiences, that it is in the quiet moments before action - perhaps, for example, before you commit to that perilous black ski run - that the human spirit is truly tested. But, there was not a hint of doubt as H gave what were to be his last set of formal orders. The thing I remember was the extra-ordinary confidence and commitment he instilled in the Battalion before the battle.

No plan survives contact with the enemy, and we quickly encountered set-backs - and casualties, but they were seen as just minor difficulties to be negotiated on the way to inevitable success. We had a complete belief that we would win the day. The commitment was total - I have always believed that even with 50% casualties, we would still have been pushing forward. So, a battalion of 650 men, short of firepower, overcame an Argentinian garrison in excess of 1200, fighting from prepared defensive positions. More remarkable, contrary to what was planned, it was mostly fought in daylight on open countryside which distinctly favoured the Defence. We should not have succeeded by any normal assessment, even allowing for the questionable quality of the opposition. Jesus admonished his followers for not recognising that faith can move mountains. At Goose Green, I believe that's exactly what happened.

That faith manifested itself in countless acts of selfless gallantry - even chivalry - during the battle - not least many cases of rescuing wounded comrades under fire. Let me give you one less dramatic but personal example. Around midday, my company had tried to outflank the enemy on Darwin Hill by going along the western shoreline. We were brought to a stop by totally exposed ground dominated by the enemy with heavy machine guns 500 yards away on Boca Hill. But it had got us within range for our light machine guns, and we also started to engage their bunkers with our anti-tank missiles. After a while, white flags began to fly from the enemy position. Had they had enough? No-one knew for sure, but I reasoned that taking a surrender would save time, precious ammunition - and lives. After much prevaricating, my warning that before long I would be cut off by the tide - there is actually little tide in the Falklands - got the decision. Everyone on our side was instructed to cease firing, and D Company to put the enemy's intents to the test. I reasoned with those around me that it was, for once, time officers earned their pay, and that as this had very much been my judgement call, I would lead the company out of its cover. Heart in mouth I started to stand, when Corporal Harley

pushed me firmly down, and jumped forward shouting; “This is Tom’s work, Sir - we need you for other things” - or words to that effect. I did not protest!

That 500 yards was the longest 500 yards of our lives! Twice, it looked like things would unravel, but we secured the surrender without mishap. But for me, Cpl Harley’s selfless, courageous, even gracious, act epitomised the spirit of the day - and of the Toms I was so privileged to lead.

I recall a little later sharing a moment with one of my sections at the outskirts of Goose Green. Our task was to attack the Schoolhouse, a known strong point, but straight ahead was what looked like an abandoned Command Post. To be sure, I ‘invited’ a section to make sure by firing a shoulder-launched anti-tank rocket at it. Twice they missed the proverbial barn door at 50 yards. Perhaps it was the nerves and excitement of having just tip-toed through a minefield. As I roundly cursed their incompetence, there was embarrassed laughter. It took the experienced section commander on the third attempt to hit the bulls eye - which earned him a little round of applause. This magic moment of farce and laughter was precious, but not to last. We started taking casualties from in-bound enemy artillery. Our own counter-battery fire was clearly misguided wishful thinking. We were out on a limb, the Battalion Aid Post separated from us by a forward slope raked by Triple A fire. Unable to casevac them, indelibly etched on my mind is Private Dixon going down with a scream of pain two or three yards from me, then listening, with helpless anger, to his cries turning to a terrible whimper as he died a few moments later. Those few moments seemed an age. Difficult, but, still the Toms ploughed on. The School house fell.

I cannot better reflect on these incidents that I have described than to quote Robert Fox, then a BBC reporter embedded with us, in a broadcast after the battle: “the odd sort of thing I’ve learnt about the Paras, and they’ve a fearsome reputation, I know, is that among the officers and many of the men, I have found some of the most civilised men that I have ever been in a tight corner with in my life. The standard of personal generosity, of kindness, of respect, ...strange to say of respect for human life is of a very, very high order indeed - and I think that says a lot for their efficiency. That is why they are such good fighting troops, because they are fighting troops who care desperately for each other as individuals.”

The Battalion Group lost 21 of these amazing individuals in the course of the war. A further 49 were injured. 10 of the killed and 6 injured were from my company - some 20%. I have a picture taken of my Company formed up, 5 rows deep, on the heli-deck of the Norland, hastily constructed as we travelled South. Then, I think we still thought that this might be a cruise to the sun and common sense would prevail. The sinking of the Belgrano and then the Sheffield dispelled that illusion soon after. When I look at that picture now, I am conscious that the equivalent of a complete row did not make the trip back with us - because, quite frankly, diplomacy and good sense failed.

I'm not sure I mourn them. But I do always remember them. For me, they are still with us, part of that band of brothers who, 35 years ago, to quote Tennyson's Ulysses, "drunk delight of battle with our peers, far on the ringing plains of windy Troy." Together, willing and able to overcome the chaos of war - with grace, compassion - for friend and foe, courage, generosity - and above all humour. They answered the clarion call - and more. Ordinary people achieving extra-ordinary things - doing the right thing in the right way. On this day, I feel privileged to honour them. They were, to quote Montgomery: Every man an Emperor.

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