# CHAPTER THREE

## START LINE

> Noun: a real or imaginary line, the crossing of which marks the start of an advance, attack or other offensive operation.
> Abbreviation SL. See also 'line of departure.'
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> www.militarydictionary.com

Every military operation has its own start line and once across it, there is no going back. It marks the point of no return. Every individual, though, has their own start line. It is that moment when you know that things have irrevocably changed. You are no longer a peacetime soldier, playing at war. What you do from now on may get you killed. It's a hard line to cross for all kinds of reasons.

In May 1940 the German army was sweeping through France. After nine months of the 'Phoney War', a British armoured column was sent to attack the enemy flank at Arras. As it advanced, the column arrived at a level crossing on the D60 Dainville–Achicourt road. The barrier was down. After years of exercises in which every effort was made to avoid any damage to private property because the army simply couldn't afford the

costs of compensation, the column ground to a halt. It was some time before anyone plucked up the courage to smash through.

'Don't you know there's a war on?' was a familiar enough expression during World War II, yet it captured perfectly the air of unreality that often accompanies war. On a bright summer's day it can be almost impossible to believe that the ships out at sea and the men walking past are engaged in a struggle to the death. Max Hastings, accompanying the Falklands Task Force, remembers finding islanders watching a video as all around them the British army and navy fought a war. The video? A war film.

The men who dropped from the sky or waded ashore in Normandy had been at war since the day they were called up and mentally ready since their call-up papers arrived. For those who have experienced peacetime soldiering, setting out for war can be an odd business. 'There was a lot of pomp and ceremony as we left Southampton,' recalls Falklands veteran Denzil Connick. 'As we boarded the ship, the Parachute Regiment Band and the Band of the Royal Marines played. All our families were there, flying flags and waving us off. As the ship sailed away, we could see people lining the coastal roads in their cars, flashing their lights and beeping their horns, but as the coastline disappeared the mood on the ship changed. It went very quiet and thoughtful. My thoughts were: "Will I ever see Britain again? Will I be coming back?" As we sailed towards Ascension Island, the soldiers aboard the ship spent every minute practising their military skills and getting their fitness up to scratch. We still weren't sure that we would actually see any action. The feeling was that we would probably just arrive and the diplomats would have sorted it out. But then we heard that the *Belgrano* had been sunk and we knew there was no going back.'

Journalists Robert McGowan and Jeremy Hands sailed with the Falklands Task Force in 1982: 'Somehow, [passing] Sierra Leone marked the end of the holiday, the point where the serious intentions began. The pervading feeling of "tee hee, bet we never get there" suddenly changed to

one of "Jesus, we really are going all the way."' Aboard the luxury liners commandeered to transport troops, ship's stewards wore helmets as they served tea and coffee in the lounges.

American psychiatrist Dr J. Dowling's term 'apprehensive enthusiasm' is a good summary of most soldiers' emotions during the period leading up to their first experience of combat. It encapsulates the strange mixture of dread, disbelief and sheer excitement. Each soldier looks ahead and wonders what sort of person he or she will become as they face the ultimate test. Many set off on the road to battle conscious of the fact that they are about to embark upon an experience which, for good or ill, is unique. Roy Grinker and John Speigel described how men fantasise about the upcoming experience: 'Their minds are full of romanticized, Hollywood versions of their future activities in combat, coloured with vague ideas of being a hero and winning ribbons and decorations for startling exploits and with all sorts of exhibitionist fantasies to which few would publicly admit.' Will they do their duty or will they fail? As Lieutenant Alan Hanbury-Sparrow wrote as he went to war in August 1914: 'What's all the knowledge of the world compared with what we are about to discover?'

Author Raleigh Trevelyan recalled his 'father saying to me on embarkation leave that the worst part of battle was wondering how you were going to behave in front of other people [...] I don't think even now I really fear death, or even the process of dying. It is only the thought of whether or not I shall acquit myself honourably that obsesses me.' Quietly, troops look inside themselves and think about the future. Between closest friends, soldiers talk about their fears of being seriously wounded. Secretly, some make pacts with the man they trust most: 'If things look really bad, you will put an end to it for me, won't you?' From time to time, the promise has to be kept.

Ian Gardiner, a company commander in the Royal Marines during the Falklands, remembers: 'It is not easy to describe one's feelings before one is committed to battle. Fear, certainly, plays a part but it is not fear of

death itself. It is more a sadness for the grief that will follow one's death among one's family. As a company commander responsible for the lives of some 150 men, I felt pretty lonely in that hour when our preparations were complete and before we moved off, but I am prepared to bet that each individual felt just as lonely in his own way. I found that I didn't actually want anyone to speak to me. I spent my hour smoking a cigar and preparing myself to accept whatever disasters the night might bring – in a single word – praying. It was a mental exercise I would not care to have to repeat.'

For some, the journey to the combat zone may take weeks by ship. For others it may be just a few hours by plane. All too soon, though, the day dawns when the soldier arrives 'in theatre'. Their war is about to start. Whatever the fantasies that have built up on the way, the reality is often very different.

'We'd been messed about,' former Paratrooper Jim Love remembers about his arrival on the Falklands.

> Just like the Grand Old Duke of York's troops. Up the stairs, down the stairs, and back round to start again. Tonight it was a bit different though, after this practice we weren't going back to our cabins. We were assembling in the forward lounge for a final briefing. A church service of sorts was also being held by the padre, David Cooper. It was totally voluntary attendance, of course.
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> I went because I had only got around to paying him the twenty pounds that I owed him. It was for conducting my wedding service at the Garrison church in Aldershot. They'd given me four hours off to get married. When it came to paying for the service and organist I was skint. So the padre kindly offered to pay. It didn't pay to be on the wrong side of the line in circumstances such as these.
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> The forward lounge had a tinge of religion attached to it. We must have sat in it watching Monty Python's the *Life of Brian* God only knows how many times. The song 'Always Look On The Bright Side

of Life' had become a bit of a theme tune for the whole adventure. It was, however, quite pleasant to see how many people had found religion in the last few hours before the dawn on 21 May. A couple of mumbled verses of 'To Be a Pilgrim' were duly sung and Padre Cooper gave us the good word. Then it was all down to us.

We were all professional soldiers trained to an extremely high standard. Supremely confident in our own abilities to cope with any given situation. With an absolute faith in our comrades that they would be there with us, shoulder to shoulder. It was the politicians we couldn't trust, [but we all felt] it didn't hurt to have an extra bit of air cover from really high up if the shit hit the fan.

I'd actually missed the only practice run at filling the LCU [landing craft]. That had taken place several days before at Ascension Island. It had been a bit too hot and bright. I'd been suffering from a hangover at the time. I had managed to find some excuse to get out of the practice. Quite lucky really, because they had ended going round and round the bay for a couple of hours. A couple of the blokes had managed to top up their tans and the rest got heat stroke.

It had been a trip round the bay in reality. Shorts, PT vests, sunshades and life jackets. There only being twenty life jackets, hence only twenty people on each trip. It was a real eye opener when it finally happened for real. No life jackets, total darkness and an attempt at the f*cking world record for filling an LCU with overladen troops. It took hours. I honestly can't remember if it was cold that morning or not. It was crisp, but I never felt the cold.

Fortunately we didn't have to climb down any scramble nets or such like. It would have probably been a physical impossibility I reckon anyway. No. It was simply what you might say, 'a blind leap of faith' into the darkness. Into what you hoped would be the arms of someone to help drag you across the side of the LCU. To safety. Well, what was considered the relative safety of the bobbing-like-a-cork craft. (It was better than drowning of course.) Nobody wanted

to end up in the cold embrace of the South Atlantic and Davy Jones' locker.

When it was apparent that they couldn't get any more in the LCU we set sail in a circular course until they managed to fill the other two LCUs. Then it was off to the landing site of Blue Beach 2. We did have one well wisher who waved us bon voyage. Wendy [the gay ship's crewman who had organised shows and entertainment throughout the voyage] had decided to say goodbye to us all and wish us luck. The total darkness of the South Atlantic was split by a ray of light from the upper decks of the *Norland* when Wendy opened one of the deck doors. It was like a searchlight. We could actually hear him calling 'Bye boys' in the eerie silence above the LCU's engine. Over a hundred voices in unison told him to 'shut the f*cking door'. And he did.

The plan was that the SBS would secure the landing site and if it was all clear they would show a green light. If a red light was seen then it was a hot beach and the enemy were waiting for us. No lights and it probably meant we were in the wrong place. Squashed in like we were, face stuck in the Bergen of the man in front. I had visions of the film *The Longest Day*. High cliff faces, men being machine gunned and shelled while trying to wade ashore. They didn't have the heavy Bergens that we had, however. They also had forgot to tell us what the beach would be like. We could hear the hooligans [SAS] on Fanning Head as we passed in the dark waters below.

I don't know how long it took. Time wasn't a factor. We did, however, fail to find any lights on the first two attempts to beach (it being decided after each abortive attempt that we were in the wrong place). On the third try, we managed to reach a decision in the wheel house that this was it. With the engine putt-putting away, the LCU crunched and scraped its way towards the rocky beach. The closer we got, the more the tension increased in the middle and rear section of the LCU. This was due to not being able to see anything except the

bloke in front of you – or rather his Bergen. Messages were passed from man to man, forward and back again in whispered tones.

'Can you see a light?'

'No.'

'Can you see the beach?'

'No.'

'Can you see anything?'

'No. Some f*cker's put a big metal ramp where the window should be.'

They decided to drop the ramp anyway.

There came the cry 'Ramp down troops out'. This was it, the retaking of the islands. The invasion was on. Nothing happened. It was repeated. Still nothing happened. Nobody moved. One of the crew of the LCU scrambled along the side of the craft to the front and the ramp.

'What's up?' whispered the tentative voice of the Marine.

'Have you seen how deep the f*cking water is, take us in a bit closer,' came the reply.

'Get out.'

'F*ck off.'

The CSM intervened, he started shouting, 'Go! Go! Go!'

Men started to move. The invasion was back on again.

Soon it was my turn. I stepped off the end of the ramp and into the chin-deep, ball-breaking icy waters of the South Atlantic. I was relatively lucky – I'm 6'2". The bloke in front had been about 5'6". All I saw was a helmet bobbing towards the shore in front of me.

We sloshed ashore across a small two-foot wide pebble beach. Then climbed the foot-high bank on to dry soil. Everybody was milling about. There appeared to be no enemy positions or any sign in fact, that they were even there. The invasion stopped for a moment yet again.

Everybody needed a piss.

> Once that had been sorted we set about finding where everybody was and formed up in our respective groups. Two of the officers appeared to be arguing with a couple of nuns. You could see the out lines of figures in black with a light or white ring around the face. Similar to the nun's habit. I'm glad I never said hello sister, cause it was the SBS blokes. Apparently they weren't very happy, because they weren't expecting us for another two nights yet. We offered to go home again. They didn't laugh.
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> We moved off along the coastline following a narrow path. Heading towards our second objective, Sussex Mountains. Most of us would never feel that we had dried out at any stage after that first soaking. Especially our boots and feet.

Twenty-six years earlier, Marine David Henderson had experienced similar confusion when he landed at Suez:

> As we neared Port Said we were all prepared for the landing wearing light fighting gear only (our Bergens with our spare kit and K rations were to follow us later). It was true they followed us but somebody forgot to pass on the information that we were not attacking the harbour by landing craft now but hitting the beach by helicopter. As a result our gear was put ashore in the wrong place and we had very little to eat the whole day […] On top of our normal supply of personal ammo we carried quantities of mortar bombs, Energa grenades and spare mags for the Bren guns, spread out evenly amongst us. All in all quite a load. We were not allowed on deck until our turn to load up and this did not help our nerves one bit. We could hear the sounds of shelling and bombs going off for what seemed hours and I must admit that my brain was whirring with all kinds of thoughts. At last our squad was summoned on deck and we made our way up narrow stairs and passageways loaded down and bumping into everything on the way.

Strangely, as soon as we came out into daylight all fear seemed to leave us for the moment and we clustered at the ship's rail staring at the sight of the British and French invasion fleet. It was incredible – there were craft of every shape and size all around us, and some were already making their way back into station having unloaded their men and material somewhere ashore, while others were offloading still more into smaller landing craft.

A huge pall of heavy black smoke was pouring skyward from some fuel depot that had either been shelled or bombed and one or two large buildings were also alight. There was also a continuous thump and whine of gun fire as escort ships laid down a pattern of fire well inland of the troops who were already ashore. There were no helicopters on deck, so we assumed they were somewhere on the beach delivering squads of our buddies, so we were directed to our marked out positions as practised and waited. Soon we could see the craft approaching, not in well-formed formations, but strung out at irregular intervals and different heights and it was apparent that at this stage of the operations the pilots were not in the least interested in pretty flying but just getting in and out with their loads and trusting the opposition were lousy shots.

Our craft came thumping down onto the deck and we all scrambled aboard and held on for the expected lurch as we took off, but instead we watched as the pilots and crew calmly got off and stood around chatting or walked around stretching their legs. One or two high-ranking officers came over and engaged the pilots in animated conversation and made some sort of notes on maps as they had, of course, been receiving constant reports over the radio, but I suppose there was nothing to match face-to-face reporting. After what seemed ages the crew climbed aboard and with an escalating roar of engines we were on our way. At this point my bowels hinted that I had better not open my legs too much or they might just cause me a bit of embarrassment. Nobody spoke, nobody looked at one

another; we had all picked a far-off point either out the door or on the floor and just stared.

'Out! Out! Out!' screamed a voice from somewhere, and like an elephant relieving itself after a particularly heavy meal we poured out the door of the craft landing on top of one another and spread out on the sand. Off went our transport in what seemed a rather hasty exit and as it made its way back for its next bundle of nervous men with the sound of its engines slowly diminishing, we became aware of the sounds of outgoing and incoming small arms fire.

I checked my rear end area and was relieved to find that the overwhelming explosion that had happened to me as my feet hit the beach had only been wind. Our sergeant and corporal marshalled us together and we moved up to form a line along a promenade wall where we laid out our forward markers (this was a series of vivid coloured strips that troops would lay out indicating to any supporting fighter plane the forward positions we had reached). This had hardly been finished when there was a terrifying scream of engines and a blur of explosions as one of our own Navy attack fighters did a strafing run straight up the beach. It has never been explained to me how a pilot supporting a beach landing that had been progressing for some time could possibly think to track his run straight along the water's edge. Thankfully no one in our squad was hit but many boys in a following wave of choppers caught the brunt of the attack and two of them were lads I had gone through basic training with. After the shock of this, and probably because of it, what happened next was straight out of some *Carry On* film. We were all lined up behind this wall fearfully taking in the area in front of us over which we were getting ready to move.

Over the road was a line of buildings, mostly blocks of flats, which were all linked together by a wall with one or two gates in it, and we were all squinting at the doors and windows straining to catch a sight of the enemy. Nothing moved and we were sure that with all

the activity on the beach, any defenders would have moved back. Suddenly, a figure holding a rifle appeared as if from nowhere right in front of us and began to trot along the length of this wall. Without waiting, we all opened up on him blazing away with great gusto. He stopped dead in his tracks and stared at us and without thinking we also stopped firing. Then he was off again this time as fast as his feet could go and off we went again firing at him with a trail of bullet holes following his track and dust flying all around him. He must have been very good at his prayers that morning because not one of us hit him and he scampered round the end of the buildings and out of sight. Our sergeant by this time was going crazy stamping his feet in the sand and crying out for us to cease fire and take aim all at the same time.

Once he got us under control we got the bollocking of our lives, and this was not the type of lecture we had screamed at us by our instructors during training, this was meant to be understood and we certainly got the message, from the fact that we were wasting precious ammunition right up to his last statement of, 'Shooting the next bastard who let off wasted shots.' I often wonder if some Egyptian officer was watching the beach through his binoculars trying to work out what tactic was being planned with this squad of Marines sitting in a row on the sand with an NCO lecturing and waving his hands about. It was a different set of men who crossed the road after that incident, as nothing beats reality for teaching someone the facts of life; you didn't stop somebody by just pointing your rifle in his general direction and pulling the trigger, you forced yourself to get control of your fear and take aim. Very difficult but a life saver.

Once the soldier has landed in the war zone, he quickly finds himself somewhere that American military historian S.L.A. Marshall once described as the loneliest place where men could be together. Even in the sectors of the World War I Western Front where the trenches were only

metres apart, men could go for months without seeing a live German. Even in the midst of some of the greatest battles of the war, soldiers never saw the enemy except as a distant blur. Men talk about 'the empty battlefield' because it's a brave or foolish soldier who, knowing the enemy is somewhere out there, stands up. For the most part the infantryman's world is limited to the few yards on either side of his position and at ground level. Studies conducted amongst the American military in World War II found that men in these isolated positions, unable to really see what is happening, often took no part in battle, even when their lines were under attack. Only specialists and men who worked in teams to man machine guns, mortars and bazookas routinely reacted aggressively. For many, the experience of suddenly having another human being attempt to kill you is almost too surreal to accept.

In a blog from Afghanistan, Lance Corporal James Atkin of 21 Engineer Regiment wrote about his first 'contact':

> The task was to clear an 8km route to a patrol base. I have worked with the four men on the team in the past but never on a search task [searching for booby traps and hidden roadside bombs]. Off to the right of us was a steady hill with small compounds scattered 400m away along the side of the hill. There were people walking around by the compounds, and there was some greenery up there. Off to the left about 300m away were cornfields. So I was enjoying my time on this mission with the views and scenery. It was disgustingly hot and the ground was baking hard sand. Behind our team was a fleet of vehicles. The machines are huge, angry-looking, rumbling things with big heavy guns constantly looking around for any threats. I felt pretty safe in this environment despite the country I am in. The search team I was working with was commanded by Lance Corporal 'Mick' Meagan who is cool, calm and methodical. The other three searchers I knew I could trust as much as I can trust myself. So that is the scene set.
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> So, we were walking along doing our thing, making sure that our

path was clear of any improvised explosive devices [IEDs]. Just minding our own business. When out of the corner of my eye I saw some puffs of sand jump up, maybe thirty metres away. Then I heard the gunshots. Four or five of them. I stood there for a split second and asked out aloud, 'Are we being shot at?' I looked at the others but they were already down on their belt buckles. I kept my eyes on the target as I hit the ground and the baddie ran into the compound he was stood next to. The range to the target outweighed the distance that my pistol could shoot at. Messages were shouted back. The gunners in the vehicles trained their weapons on the compound. But children quickly came back out to play and life went back to normal by the compounds. So we would have been prevented from shooting even if the guy had reappeared. We ran back to the safe haven behind the trucks and eventually clambered into the lead armoured truck. That was it, the contact ended.

Now I smile to myself and realise I can tell people I have been in the thick of the action, and I will spend my spare time working on my thousand-yard stare. Others claim that it wasn't even a contact as we didn't shoot back. I think they are just jealous. It was the first time anyone has shot at the men and women of 15 Squadron. It was also the first time in my eight years in the Army I have been shot at. It was nothing compared to the rest of the gun battles we hear about from other regiments but it was still interesting. It is a story I'll not tell my mum.

Serving in Borneo, Keith Scott's experience was very different to the random shots aimed at Corporal Atkin:

The confrontation years in Borneo can quite rightly be said to be one of Britain's small and 'dirty' guerrilla wars. Any engagements that did take place tended to be rather fleeting affairs, where usually the maximum amount of time spent in a 'firefight' was probably no more

> than a few minutes. Although there were occasions when longer engagements took place between larger, more evenly matched and equally determined forces. My own part in all this was usually concerned with the hit and run and dirty tricks tactics, classic components of guerrilla warfare and a little less on more involved fighting. My first experience of being under fire, though, was a very real in-your-face baptism, up close (about 30 feet) and very personal. It wasn't a few random shots fired roughly in the direction of myself and my comrades, the opposition were making a determined attempt to kill each one of us. When I had time to catch a breath, I found I had wet myself in fear, and Christ knows how, but I had also managed to eat a whole tube of sweets all at once without taking the individual wrappers off. I was 21 then, and my hair started going grey quite quickly after that. By the time I was 28 I had a head of hair the colour of an old man's, like it is now. But it can't all have been down to chance, not after escaping that amount of times – physically at least.

It's at this moment of first contact that a soldier learns what sort of person he is. He can either react or die. Only he can decide which it is to be. In his poetry, Jim Love has drawn on his own experiences of having to make a lonely decision under fire. Here he explains the background to it:

> I was just bimbling along, brain in neutral, when all of a sudden some bastard turned the lights on. Now lots of people will say that a tracer is pretty impressive and is a wondrous sight to behold. But I'll tell you people, when it's coming towards you and you can see every one of them coming, believe me, it puts the shits right up you! Death is now staring you right in the face. Bodies fell over like skittles. Right/left/right. I went forward and down, facedown. My chest and elbows hit the ground. Then my face hit. It smashed into the grass and mud and into the sheep shit. I tried to lift my head up and get my face out of the shit – literally.

I couldn't move, panic started to set in. I used my elbows for leverage, I moved a little then was face down again. My God I'd been hit! It was the only reasonable explanation. But where? I couldn't feel any pain, no holes. It's the shock, my brain told me. You won't feel anything because of the shock, the pain will hit you later. Right, I've got to find out where the wound is before I lose what strength I've got and I'm not able to move at all.

I rolled to my left. It wasn't easy. A couple of flies buzzed past my head. I looked up, to my right. It was like one of those cartoons on TV. Where the gopher or Bugs Bunny digs a tunnel across the golf course greens. Little bits of grass and mud were leaping in the air just like on TV, amazing.

Then I saw my antenna, the top section and at least half of the next section was stuck into the ground. That's why I couldn't move, stupid bastard. I hadn't been shot, it was the radio. The smack I'd felt that split second after I'd hit the deck was the weight of the radio slamming into me. I giggled, chuffed to f*ck. What now? That was the question. I looked back to where the tracer had been doing its Bugs Bunny impersonations. Nobody was moving, the tracer continued its sweep left.

Suddenly, one of the skittles leapt up from where he'd been lying and started to zig-zag, bobbing and weaving. I willed him on – crazy bastard, you're going to die. He jigged right, mad bastard, run for it. Yes … I promised to myself if he makes 15 metres, I'll get up and go too. The tracer had stopped and switched. Homing in on him, yellow/white flashes of light slicing through the still morning air. There still hadn't been any noise up till now, just the flies. There did seem to be a lot of flies about though, it must have been the sheep shit. 'Well', I thought. 'If he makes 30 metres, I'll definitely go for it.' While I'd been watching, I'd slid backwards and managed to free my antenna.

The runner went down, the tracer was zooming over his head. I stopped breathing. Everything stopped. I could visualise the Argy

gunner on tip toes, looking over the breech, beyond the barrel, to see if he'd got one.

He hadn't. Skittle number one was crawling like hell towards a fold in the ground. He rolled into the dip and was gone from sight. I was up and lumbering forward. Bodies were moving in a multitude of directions. One thoroughly pissed-off Argy machine-gunner started up again but it was like swatting at a fly on a table top. And he'd missed! Now the air was thick with flies and he didn't know which one to go for. 'Not me!' my brain screamed, 'not me! pick somebody else.' I was doing well, there was some thick yellow gorse ahead of me. The childish element had re-entered my brain once again. The gorse will hide you! Go for the gorse. Don't be silly; it's sharp, and spiky as hell. I could hurt myself.

The radio. If I go in backwards, using the weight of the radio in my Bergen, it'll take me right through the middle of the gorse bush and out of sight. Yes. A f*cking excellent idea. Let's do it. I had actually managed to build a bit of speed up as it happened. I suppose a little bit of adrenalin and a lot of fear does that to you. I half leapt, semi-spun into the air as I got close to the gorse. I tried to hold my head up but my back was arching. Like they used to teach you at school. The Fosbury Flop high jump technique of the seventies. It wasn't style. It was the weight of the radio in my Bergen, pulling me down. I hit the gorse. I bounced. Then I bounced again. I thrashed my arms and legs. Nothing. I just thrashed. I lay there, like a stranded turtle, on a posture sprung mattress. Bobbing up and down. The tracer swung my way. I did the only thing I could: I laughed. I couldn't do anything else. I think the laughter was just changing to racking great sobs 'cause I was really starting to lose it when the top branches snapped and I fell through the bush.

I reckon that the Argy machine-gunner must have been laughing his bollocks off too. He missed, and it all went high and over the top. Reality had set back in once more. I was yet again in the shit (sheep

of course). The soft stuff stank to high heaven but the hardened pellets dug into my knees. I was crawling along a tunnel (obviously made by the local sheep) about as fast as a man can who has just tried to hide behind a prominent yellow gorse bush – from several hundred individuals armed with machine guns which could demolish the proverbial brick shithouse wall in under five minutes. What a dick. I just hoped none of the lads saw me, they'd take the piss for a week if they had.

I looked around to see how many others had made it to safety at the bottom of the steep incline that was known as Darwin Hill. After a quick check, I came to the conclusion that there was only me. With my back to the hill, the sea was on my right, and nobody else. To my left was where the bad men were, and that's an understatement. (Later described as poor little conscripts, who were mistreated and underfed. Not from where I had been sitting.) Perhaps they've already started up the hill without me. 'Right,' I thought, 'nothing for it, I'll have to go up the hill. No cover after I leave here though, could be a bit of a problem. Crawl. Now there's an idea, brilliant one, too.' So, I started to crawl up the slope armed with my radio and my trusty 9mm Sterling Sub-Machine gun. After God only knows how long I noticed I was getting quite near to the summit. Which meant I was going to be seen by just about everybody on the island. I would also probably have to stand up. Quite honestly, I was f*cking knackered. I stopped for a rest and looked over to my right, from where there was quite a lot of smoke and, on the wind, the sound of heavy small arms fire.

However, there wasn't anyone really close to me. In fact, checking the left flank brought the same conclusion. I was on my own. Right. I checked my [ammo magazine], and made sure the breech wasn't obstructed, got ready to get up and do a one-man assault for the top of the hill. Then I had a better plan. I was on my own up here. At least there were lots of people on the right flank. There was a hell of

a fire fight going on. I crawled off to my right and started back down the hill, towards the smoke and the firefight. If I was going to die, I was not going to do it on my own. I wanted to at least see a friendly face. Someone I knew. I went off to find the lads.