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Opening Extract from...

The Junior Officers' Reading Club

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Prologue

On the Dam

And suddenly we're on the dam.

Four wizened Pashtu Gandalfs sit impassively sipping *chai** around a dining table in the middle of a rose garden, and my first thirsty thought is not the obvious *WHAT are we going to do?* nor the reasonable *WHY are these four improbably old white-bearded guys sitting taking tea in the middle of a fire fight?* but *HOW is there a dining table in a rose garden in the middle of the dam?* It's an interesting point of speculation, but one cut short by another burst of fire, and to the cracking above and the thudding as bits of crumbling masonry and rose petals drift down into the broiling water beneath our feet is suddenly and worryingly added the melodic pinging of bullets bouncing off the sluice-gates and rusty turbines below.

Qiam, wisely, is already across the now perilous structure and gesticulating wildly for us to follow, but something holds me back, and I just have to have a sip of the *chai*, I hope out of respect for the Pashtunwali codes of hospitality, but maybe it's just the thirst. My mind is a whirlwind of half-remembered training nonsense, and I catch myself trying to work out who the senior man at the table is, because he's always furthest from the door, only there isn't a door, and he's usually a *mullah* or at least *haji*,†

* Tea.

† *Mullah*: a preacher. *Haji*: one who has been on a pilgrimage to Mecca, a term of respect.

and so maybe I should apologize for having my boots on, even though we're not strictly indoors.

God this is difficult.

I've lost track of time in the ambush and am trying to work out if it's still *sob bahir* or now *char bahir** when another burst rattles out, and the wall behind me becomes a cartoon of bullet holes everywhere but where my head seems – inexplicably – still to be. I've been an eternity on this extraordinary fucking dam (which wasn't even an objective, only a landmark), even though it's only been a matter of seconds, when I'm grateful to the elderly *sahib* who, taking stock of the situation and possibly sensing my general confusion, calmly finishes his tea, produces an AK47 from under the table and, smilingly, gestures me across the dam as he stands up and sprays a wild and deafening burst of covering fire in all directions.

It was surely never meant to be like this.

It was never meant to be like this in the orders group as we patiently explained how it would go to the childlike Afghans. Moving the little blocks of wood which were US up the little ribbons which were TRACKS and over the coloured powder which was CANAL into the little tins which were the VILLAGE where we would spend the quiet little night 'SECURING' the line of departure.

It was never meant to be like this in training on the Plain, where the enemy were always in BMPs, and I could never remember whether they were the scary armoured personnel carriers or maybe those were the BTRs, and none of it mattered because the worst course of action was always the Russians reinforcing with the seriously scary T80 tanks, which you always sensed were just behind the woodland in the direction of Hampshire, and hopefully they don't have an

* *Sob bahir*: good morning/day. *Char bahir*: good afternoon/evening.

AGS-17, whatever one of those is, but either way the right plan was always left-flanking with bags of smoke and avoid the machine-gun post.

It was never meant to be like this as with deep euphoria we rolled the entire *kandak** out of the gates of Shorabak and drove them bold as brass down the main road, the only road, with i-Pod blaring from the WMIKs and all the excited chatter on the radios of Gereshk and the crazy market and the stares of the locals and our firepower and the fact that we're leading the operation and the fact that we haven't got lost and the fact that we're nearly at the objective and the fact that there suddenly was the dam.

And then it was chaos.

I noticed Will on the other side of the canal, and everything was going so much to plan that the first rattle was almost offensively incongruous, and the temptation was to ignore it because if we didn't really hear it then maybe it didn't really happen. Then, rudely and undeniably, RPGs boom in from the front and the flank, and the ground and the hedgerows are alive with the sudden intensity of fire that's now bouncing like popcorn off the vehicles, and before we've even registered where it's coming from the Afghans are in the ditches to the side of the track pouring back fire and answering boom with boom. And the frozen pallor of our faces might be fear or adrenalin or just the excitement and realization that the three-year, ten-year, twenty-year expectation of various military careers is finally being fulfilled but it only lasts that split second it takes for me to snatch for the radio and whoop with delight 'AMBER 63, CONTACT, WAIT OUT,' and I've said it.

* *Kandak*: an Afghan National Army battalion, consisting of about 500 men.

I've said it.

I've said it first and I beam across at LSgt Rowe, who understands, and up at LCpl Price, who's ecstatically letting rip with the GPMG, and then we're bounding gleefully from the vehicles and firing, actually firing real bullets, at the invisible and unperturbed enemy. Actually firing our weapons in glorious and chaotic anger. Actually firing.

I knew, deep down, it was always going to be like this.

I

The Junior Officers' Reading Club

We had founded the Junior Officers' Reading Club in the heat of the Southern Iraqi desert. Marlow and me, the smart-alec Oxford boys, with surfer dude Harrison and the attached Coldstreamers. Basking in boxers on improvised sun-loungers, we snatched quick half-hour escapes from the oppressive heat and boredom routine – caught our breath among the books, wallowing after patrols and riding the adrenalin come-down. Convened behind the junior officers tent, the 'Crows' Nest', flaunting non-regulation underwear in a gesture of defiance to the quartermasters, we might have thought we were the Army's Bright Young Things, but we weren't the first and we won't be the last.

The club was a product of a newly busy Army, a post-9/11 Army of graduates and wise-arse Thatcherite kids up to their elbows in the Middle East who would do more and see more in five years than our fathers and uncles had packed into twenty-two on manoeuvres in Germany and rioting in Ulster. 'Too Cool for School' was what we'd been called by the smarmy gunner colonel on a course down in Warminster, congratulating through gritted teeth the boys who'd picked up gallantry awards while he'd been flying his desk, too old now to win the spurs he never got the chance to getting drunk on the Rhine.

But in a way he was right: what did we know just because we'd had a few scraps in the desert? The bitter, loggy major sat next to him had probably been to the Gulf back in '91, when we were still learning to read; probably been patronized himself when he was a crow by returning Falklands vets who

in turn had been instructed by grizzly old-timers sporting proud racks of World War Two medals, chests weighed down by North-west Europe and Northern Desert Stars, which told of something greater than we could comprehend, the stuff of history imagined in black and white when no one was anyone without an MC. Our grandfathers were heroes, whatever that meant, and they had taught the legends who charged up Tumbledown and who had returned to teach us.

We who didn't believe them.

We who had scoffed as we crawled up and down Welsh hills and pretended to scream as we stabbed sandbags on the bayonet assault course. We tried to resurrect the club at the start of our Afghan tour, lounging on canvas chairs on the gravel behind the tin huts of Camp Shorabak. Same sort of base, same sort of desert, just a few thousand miles the other side of Iran. By the end of the first month it was obvious that there would be no club. Each of us, wherever we were and if we could at all, would be reading alone. We went into battle in bandanas and shades with Penguin Classics in our webbing, sketch pads in our daysacks and i-Pods on the radio, thinking we knew better than what had gone before.

In the end we did and, of course, we didn't.

Out in Helmand we were going to prove ourselves.

This was our moment, our X-Factor-winning, one perfect fucking moment; we finally had a war. From university through a year of training at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, from Sandhurst to the Balkans, from the Balkans to Iraq, and now from Iraq to Afghanistan, it felt as though our whole military lives had been building up to the challenge that Afghanistan presented.

The only problem was we were bored.

We landed in Kandahar with high hopes. The whole battalion, 600 men, mustard keen to get stuck into the unfamiliar and exciting task of working alongside the Afghan National Army (ANA) for seven months. A task which promised as much action and fulfilment as the last few years had failed to deliver. Of course, there was nothing exciting about arriving in an airfield in the middle of the night, but the taste of Mountain Dew the next morning was the taste of expeditionary warfare.

But those first March days of 2007, sat on the boardwalk, acclimatizing outside the Korean takeaway, watching the many multinational uniforms amble towards the 'shops' for souvenir carpets, we had to pinch ourselves to remember this was a war zone. The indeterminate South African accents of the military contractors mixed with the sub-continental sing-song of the shit-jobs men jumping in and out of the ancient jingly wagons which rolled haphazardly past millions and millions of dollars' worth of hardware while the Canadians played hockey on the improvised pitch, and I was bored. As bored as I'd been when I decided to join the Army, as bored as I'd been on public duties, guarding royal palaces while friends were guarding convoys in Iraq, as bored as I'd been once we got to Iraq and found ourselves fighting the Senior Major more than Saddam. Stone-throwing, chain-smoking, soldier-purging bored.

Waiting for the onward staging to Camp Bastion, it was pretty easy to forget that Kandahar was already in the middle of nowhere. An iso-container city where big swaggering joint headquarters with lots of flags sat side by side with puny National Support Element tents and the luxury of the semi-permanent pods of the KBR guys, who were the real power in places like this. All right, the Taliban weren't in the wire, but surely Kandahar was at least dangerous enough not to have



*LSgt Dragon sums up the mood of the early stages of the deployment –
Kandahar, March 2007.*

a bunch of Canadians playing roller-hockey in the middle of its airfield.

Bored of the coffee shop at one end of the complex, we hopped on an ancient creaky bus, drove past the local market, where no doubt the Taliban info-gathering went on each Saturday as the RAF Regiment juicers bartered for fake DVDs, and hit another café 500 metres down the road. A sign by the bin, overflowing with empty *venti* coffee cups, announced that here six years ago the Taliban had fought their last stand. A worrying thought occurred: surely we weren't late again?

From Kandahar we decanted into Hercules transport aircraft for the jerky flight down to Camp Bastion, the tented sprawl in the middle of the 'Desert of Death' that was the main British base in Helmand. There we conducted our

reception staging and onward integration package under an oppressive and drizzling cloud. The mandatory and in equal measures dull and hilarious set of introductory briefs and exercises completed by all British soldiers entering an operational theatre was as vague as ever. All anyone wanted to know was: were we going to be shooting people? and: would we get in trouble if we did? The answers, to everyone's relief, were 'yes' and 'no'.

After days which seemed like weeks we arrived at Camp Shorabak, the ANA sister camp next door to Bastion. This would be our home base for the next seven months. The photos 'the Box' – the broad-shouldered commander of the Inkerman Company – had taken on his recce had shown a horizon that symbolized everything Op Herrick (the umbrella name given to ongoing UK operations in Afghanistan) was going to be that previous tours hadn't been. The view shuffling at night to the loos down in Iraq had been depressingly eloquent – the burning fires of the Shaibah refinery and silhouetted pipelines told you all you needed to know about that war. The Hindu Kush, on the other hand, was the symbol of the great adventure, the danger and hardship that we hadn't endured last year. But a bubble of brown and grey cloud blocked out the sky the week we arrived, and we couldn't bloody see it.

To add insult to injury, it even rained. At least in Iraq it had never rained.

The Marines we were taking over from didn't care. They were going home and had lost too many guys too close to the end of their gritty, six-month winter tour. Patience sapped by working with the Afghans we still hadn't met,

they shamelessly crammed into the gym to work on their going-home bodies, laughing when we asked them questions about what it was like ‘out there’.

We were trying to get to grips with the theory of our task. A normal infantry battalion, the basic building block of any army, works in threes. The basic fighting unit in the British Army is an eight-man ‘section’ (sub-divided into two four-man ‘fire teams’). There are three sections in a platoon – each platoon headed up by a young whippersnapper lieutenant or second-lieutenant and a wiser, grizzlier platoon sergeant – and three platoons in a company – each company led by a more experienced major and an even wiser and grizzlier company sergeant major. These three ‘rifle companies’ are the basic elements of a battalion, supported by a fourth company of specialized platoons (support company) and a large headquarters company which provides the logistic and planning support in the rear echelons. A tried and tested system forming up a happy family of nearly 700 fighting men, a system which we knew and trusted and which worked.

A system which, for the purposes of our job in Afghanistan, had been thrown out of the window. We were to be an Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team (an OMLT), the set-up of which was simple, but bore no relation to anything we’d ever done before.

Gone was the familiar comfort of the formations and tactics they’d spoon-fed us at Sandhurst. Suddenly we found ourselves in much smaller companies of about thirty, the platoons reduced to mere six-man teams loaded with experience: captains and colour sergeants you would normally expect to find in more senior roles and the junior men all corporals and lance-sergeants who hadn’t been the junior men for a few years. In these teams we were to attach ourselves to an ANA formation and mentor them as we both trained and fought

together. Each six-man platoon would be responsible for an ANA company of 100, each company of thirty responsible, therefore, for a whole *kandak* – an ANA battalion of 600 men – with our own battalion commander no longer commanding his companies but sat on the shoulder of the Afghan brigadier, advising him on how best to deploy his brigade of thousands. We would use our experience and expertise and superior training and resources to form each Afghan battalion into a credible fighting force. The potential for fun was incredible, the potential for fuck-up immense.

So we should have been glad of the enforced lull at the start, should have been grateful for the time to get our heads around what everyone soon referred to as *omelette*. But, as weeks passed and the training continued and the cloud stayed down, what we were dreaming of was getting out there and having a fight.

The invite to my going-away party had promised ‘The Great Game, Round III – Beards, Bombs and Burkhas’, but we were getting bollocked for not shaving before early-morning PT, and as for bombs, we fucking wished. It was only a matter of time before the creeping bullshit would start; before those with nothing better to do would start to patrol the huts, complaining that the mosquito nets weren’t in straight enough lines or that we should be carrying our weapons in the showers. The sergeants, infuriatingly tidy and unfailingly up at 0530, would crash around the hut and have us pining for the little eight-man tents we’d resented back in Iraq. Like clockwork they would order ‘lights-out’ at 2200, and the hut would become a profound dull tunnel lit by the blueish glow of laptops being watched on camp cots. Padding back from the showers, I’d pick my way past rows of fluorescent faces,

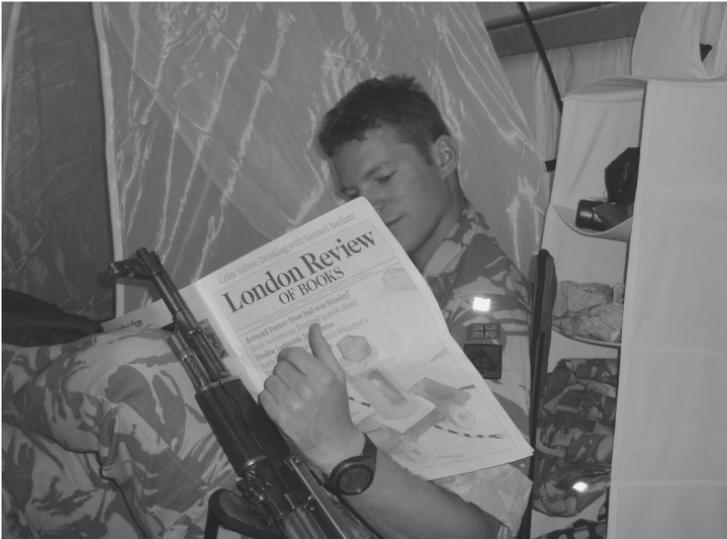
featureless and blurred through the mosi-nets, each man absorbed in the snug little world of the nylon domes, somehow finding a privacy in the headphones and pretending to sleep through the telltale rhythmic rustling of the cot next door.

The frustration grew when the Inkerman Company, lucky bastards, were crashed out in the middle of the night on a real-deal, this-is-not-a-drill, load-up-the-wagons tasking. As it turned out, they spent the next week bored and cold and with no sight of the enemy, but what was worrying was how selfishly and childishly jealous we all were. With nothing remotely gung-ho to boast of, we couldn't even be bothered to write home and moodily sat out at nights on the Hesco fence, watching the thunderstorms. Towering clouds hurling magnificent bolts of lightning silhouetting the mountains to the north drifted over our heads as we sulked and, in the finest tradition of bored soldiers, sat around throwing stones at each other.

The days ticked by. The heat and dust grew more oppressive, and the reports from elsewhere in Helmand grew more exciting, and our own boredom intensified with each passing day we didn't get out 'on the ground'. Occasionally we would catch the whisper of something, the sniff of an American op going in to the north. But we were scheduled to spend the next two months training our *kandak* in camp. The idea of spending months trying to force Sandhurst on the ANA was unthinkable. Other companies started getting sent on real patrols and getting into real fights. Marlow was down on the Garmsir front line, and the daily SITREPs – situation reports sent back from the boys on the ground – were tantalizingly full of heavy engagements. The ANA soldiers, who had watched with amusement as we played our incomprehensible touch sevens on the helipad, started to get bolshy, trying to



Life in Camp Shorabak. My fellow platoon commanders 2Lt Folarin Kuku (top) and 2Lt Will Harries (bottom) deal with the boredom in time-honoured fashion – playing with guns.



play football right through our games. We were already telling our new comrades to piss off in their own country – as someone shouted from the wing: how the fuck was it ‘their’ helipad when their army had no helicopters?

They barely *had* an army.

★★★

205 Brigade of the 3rd (Hero) Corps of the Afghan National Army, though they didn’t know it and though certainly not enough of us knew it, were the solution to Afghanistan. We were trotting out the right phrases – ‘An Afghan solution to an Afghan problem’ – but we didn’t believe them. Back with the Operational Training and Advisory Group (OPTAG) on pre-deployment exercises in Norfolk, we had asked one of the instructors what special preparation we should undertake to be an OMLT, and he had made a gag about eggs. It wasn’t OPTAG’s fault, not that the training they delivered wasn’t a waste of time. The problem was all in the name; ‘mentoring’ and ‘liaison’ sounded like holding hands and building bridges. If we’d wanted to build bridges we’d have joined the Engineers; we were combat soldiers, teeth arm, and our culture demanded more. If they’d called the task OBFET (Operational Blow the Fuck out of Everything Team), then every battlegroup in the Army would have been creaming for it, but the Afghans might have objected.

Afghanistan was only going to work if the ANA could eventually do it for themselves. The Paras, first out when the war began, had been thrust into a fight they couldn’t win on their own and forgot about the ANA in the midst of keeping the Taliban from their throats. The only story anyone heard about the ANA during the whole of the first British deployment into what the papers soon exclusively referred to as ‘the lawless Helmand Province’ was the one about how they ran

away when Tim Illingworth of the Light Infantry won his Conspicuous Gallantry Cross. The Marines had come in six months later with a whole lot more people and, in theory, a whole lot more sense. They dedicated almost a whole Commando, the OMLT Battlegroup, to the task of bringing on the ANA, but they hadn't found it sexy enough and had sulked, taking it out on the ANA, alternately over-working and ignoring them.

So of course, if we're honest, the Grenadiers hadn't wanted the task either, and we'd sucked it up when we were told we were going to be 12 Brigade's OMLT. After all, we were going in with 1st Battalion The Royal Anglians, who had been the lead infantry battalion in 12 Mechanized Brigade since forever and even had previous Afghan experience, although we all knew by then that the Kabul peacekeeping tours of pre-2006 had nothing to do with the war in Helmand. The Grenadiers were tired from their tour of Iraq and an unknown quantity down in Aldershot; the Anglians had trained hard for the task of proving that, if the Paras and the Marines could do it, so could the line infantry.

We knew they'd get the *important* jobs over us; we'd only just got back from a no-notice deployment out to Iraq so we could finally wear the yellow medal that everyone else in the Army already had. Bumming around Shaibah Logistics Base, feeding detainees and cramming down lobster in the American D-Facs in Baghdad was no adequate preparation for what – even by autumn 2006 and presumably to the justified annoyance of those Falkland veterans marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of what was hardly a picnic – everyone was calling 'the most intense fighting the British Army has experienced since Korea'. A square-bashing Guards battalion was never going to be on the 'main effort' – our reputation was as unreconstructed traditionalists, stuck in the obsolete mentality

of the Victorian era that was our heyday, so obsessed with pageantry and protocol that we were lesser soldiers for it. Grenadiers certainly weren't going to be favoured by an 'airborne' brigade commander – a Paratrooper who'd missed out on commanding his own troops and would have to settle for 'hats'.* The Paras had forgotten who'd had the imagination to set them up in the first place; their reputation was as unreconstructed hooligans, stuck in the obsolete mentality of the Second World War which was their heyday and so obsessed with being 'ally' and killing everyone that they were the lesser soldiers for it. We could play with the Afghans and teach them how to use their rifles for the time when the real soldiers had blown up all the Talibaddies and could hand a peaceful if not prosperous province over with smiles and handshakes and flag-ceremonies. Just like the British Army were supposed to be doing in Southern Iraq.

Problem was, down in Southern Iraq the Rifles and the Irish Guards were getting hammered. The Americans were pouring everything into a surge which nearly bled them dry, but was starting to work, while we were handing over the bases, doing dodgy deals with the militia and then stepping back as Basrah descended to anarchy. And this in a region we'd walked around years earlier wearing berets and smiles and gloating about how good we were at hearts and minds. But even then, Helmand was something else, and no one down there really knew it.

Except the Afghans.

They couldn't shape their berets. They didn't get up early and they stopped everything for meals, for prayer, for a snooze. They had no discipline. They smoked strong hashish

* The apparently derogatory term used by the Parachute Regiment for the rest of the Army.

and mild opium. They couldn't map-read. They had no tanks, no planes, no order to the chaos of their stores. Their weapons weren't accounted for. Their barracks weren't health and safety compliant. They wore what they wanted, when they wanted and walked around holding hands. They lacked everything that British Army training believed in and taught – and fuck me if most of them hadn't killed more Russians than we had ever seen.

I loved them.

I liked that they had more balls than I ever did to just stand up and say 'why' or 'no' or 'I don't care if there is a war on and a massive IED threat, I like watermelon so I'm going to steal a car I can't drive and run a Taliban checkpoint in order to go to the market.'

I couldn't train them at all.

The video-funnies – spoof Marlboro adverts with all-American cowboys covered in scratches herding cats – didn't do it justice. We would wander over to the Afghan side of camp mid-morning, the sergeants already gritting their teeth in fury because they'd been up since half-five and couldn't understand anyone who hadn't, hoping for the best. The best would usually be half of the soldiers we expected, lounging around on mattresses, sharing *chai*. Well, we reckoned half of the soldiers, but since we had no idea how many there were supposed to be, how did we know how many were half? And since there was no commander, or headquarters, or any sort of structure, how could we find out? I spent my first week with *toolay se, kandaki awal* – 3 Company, 1st Battalion ANA – trying to find out who commanded it.

★★★

Miserable March turned to April, and without warning the temperature soared, and the peaks of the Kush were suddenly

hidden in haze, not cloud. The remaining ANA were supposed to have come back from their leave, though still only half our Afghans were in camp. The combination of the rising temperature, the continued lack of action and our utter failure to make any progress in their training was starting to take its toll. The frustration was starting to show in shorter tempers, and the old-school lot were itching to form the whole *kandak* into three ranks and thrash them round Shorabak like Sandhurst cadets.

Instead we took those we could find out on the range and gulped hard and reassessed our desire to fight alongside them as they missed target after target with rusty and broken AK47s. As the gap between what we were realizing we would need to do in Helmand and what it was obvious we could never teach the ANA to do widened, so things descended into farce.

I guess it was inevitable that I would get told off for conducting the body-bag lesson from inside it.

Every so often something would stop us in our tracks and almost force a reassessment of our new allies. The blasé way in which the young and impressive sergeant mentioned that he was hoping to go back north with us because he had earned his reputation up there years before, capturing a number of Taliban during the civil war and, unable to take them all prisoner on his own, throwing them one by one down a well and tossing a grenade in after them. Even Mahjid – quiet, considered, intelligent Mahjid, with whom, standing in for all the other officers in his company, I daily talked over *chai* and too-sugary boiled sweets and liked more and more – mentioned how he too hoped we made it to Sangin so that he could avenge himself on the man who had shot him in the leg last year, pulling up his trousers to modestly reveal

barely half a thigh distinguishable beneath monstrous scarring.

It forced us to remember that we were the tourists here. We were action-starved soldiers who had flown in for our seven months of glory. The Afghans were in no rush – they lived it all year every year. The mandate for OMLT was to be completely integrated with the ANA: if they went out for a fight, we went with them. Brilliant in principle, except that at every rotation of Op Herrick a fresh bunch of British soldiers arrived hungry for some action and started a frenzy of planning and grand ideas, involving the tired Afghans who had just accompanied the previous lot.

Lieutenant Mahjid was weary, a good officer who looked twice his thirty years and who'd never go far because, for all his balls and brains, he had no patronage. He was only supposed to be second-in-command, but there was no company commander and no platoon commanders either; come to think of it, there was no company sergeant major, so it was pretty much his show. His soldiers were from all over the country but mainly, thankfully, far away from Helmand, where Pashtun tribal loyalties undermined what little military command structure there was. His best fighters were northerners, battle-hardened Tajiks and Uzbeks with ruthless eyes and Hazaras with their Mongol fighting blood, guys who had stood alongside Massoud, the Lion of the Panjshir, who had fought for the only team ever to defeat the mighty Red Army and then been the last rearguard against the insanity of the Taliban. Problem was, they all lived many hundreds of miles away in a country with no roads and they needed to go home once a year. They needed to keep making children.

We had forgotten, if we ever knew, that this 'training' we were delivering wasn't important, was, in fact, insignificant compared to bringing up a family.

And what the hell did we know? It took me three long

days of haggling and translating and drawing pictures and taking digital photographs just to get what I thought was a nominal roll of the hundred or so soldiers I was supposed to be working with. We had the audacity to be cross because thirty of them were still absent, trying to maintain their families on the other side of the country. We had the nerve to be pissed that thirty of those who were in camp refused to turn up to our training sessions, or that twenty of those who



1st Kandak, 3/205 'Hero' Corps, Afghan National Army, the ragtag bunch who'd done it all before – Camp Shorabak, April 2007.

did left their shirts untucked. Christ, we must have looked stupid as we trudged back across the sweltering helipad dejected to lunch after another failed attempt to teach vehicle checkpoint drills or safe weapon handling. It was the ones we labelled troublemakers early who turned out to be the best soldiers, lazily pretending they didn't know how to handle a

weapon when later it turned out they knew better than most and were just taking the piss because why would they bother to handle their weapons 'safely' when all they used them for was firing at Taliban, not manning gates in Surrey with empty magazines. We grumbled in the cookhouse afterwards over Black Forest gateaux about how the hell were we supposed to go to war with a ragtag bunch like that, forgetting for one crucial moment that most of that ragtag bunch had done this before.

2.iv.04 – 'An introduction to Terrence'

and we're OUT, we're finally out on patrol and after weeks of thinking too precisely on th'event, Afghanistan finally starts.

we'd come in excitingly enough as the Herc' had thrown an aggressive corkscrew landing and the first-timers jumped just perceptibly as chaff briefly lit up the cabin in a red phos' glow and we slammed the runway like some cheap African airliner when the storage cabins overhead all fall open except there is no storage, just us sweating in helmets and body armour so we all leg it off the back and into the middle of the desert.

later – much fucking around later – and we're tearing down Highway 1 in the middle of a sandstorm and the world is a blur of dust and green through the LUCIE night vision sights and though we've successfully wedged the i-Pod speakers into the dashboard of the WMIK, the combination of wind and static cackle on the radio is drowning out even Metallica's 'For Whom The Bell Tolls' which – after extensive debate – has pipped Too Many DJs Prodigy vs. Enya 'Smack My Bitch Up (Orinoco Flow)' as the soundtrack of choice for our first foray 'OUT' and even if we could have heard it, the

shattering cannon smack of the .50 cal booming through the night would have drowned it out and anyway I'm concentrating too hard on the ridiculous exhilaration of firing 6 rounds a second of 7.62 1-bit ammo – crack and tracer crack and tracer – out into the cloudy dark to care, until i wonder idly over the radio if maybe we actually shouldn't go easy on the fireworks given that there might be some nomadic herdsman or the odd mud hut getting ripped to pieces 500m to the north by our self-indulgent over-response to the remote possibility of 'Terrence' in the vicinity.

and when we've calmed down a bit and the last of the strangely beautiful red firefly tracer has burned out like a shooting star thousands of metres away I peer hopefully into the dark, reassuring myself that the rounds have tipped out in some harmless sandbank or – optimistically – shaken up some passing Taliban night move, but keep my fingers crossed that we haven't exploded the camel of some innocent clueless herder whose temporary stop to shelter from the storm just turned nasty in a cacophony of over-excited ISAF troops.

in a way it's a blessing to have far too much to consider as we rip down towards the mouth of the Sangin valley with essential cigarettes and Haribo and batteries and bullets and football scores for the poor suckers further forward who should have been going home by now but have just had their tour extended by 4 weeks in what the Nam-heads call 'the A Shau valley' after the notorious ground of Hill 936 a.k.a. *Hamburger Hill*. I haven't time to dwell on the absurdity of blasting out live munitions while driving down the Afghan equivalent of the M25 because within seconds we've got to slow down because fuck fuck FUCK the Afghan fucking police are firing at us.

not that we can blame them.

with characteristic *sang-froid* the British Tommy has come to know and respect his enemy in Afghanistan as 'Terry'. (*a la* Vietnam as in Viet Cong = VC = Victor Charles = Charlie, so Taliban = Terrence = Terry). Unfortunately Terry is a kind of funny name conjuring up images of Terry Thomas in tennis whites twirling his moustache and saying 'good show' in a silly voice – difficult to take seriously. Whether the Taliban who snuck into the police checkpoint we've just passed the night before were wearing tennis whites or had moustaches history doesn't relate but what is as certain as the nightmares of the boys who went there to take over the shift the next morning is that snuck in they did in the middle of the night and decapitated the policemen on sentry duty leaving the headless torsos still sitting round the table where they had been smoking for the oncoming guard to discover.

which should have been pretty incongruous in the foothills of the breathtaking mountains which rise like jagged walls from nowhere as the desert stops and the Kush starts. in the lush valley of the Helmand River the poppies are head height and in full bloom where fields of bright turquoise give way to a ludicrous pink, blossoms swaying in a delightful mockery of our desert combats and the dark green US Marine Corps hand-me-downs of the Afghan National Army or local drug lord militia (which is pretty much usually the same guys depending on which side of bed they got out of that morning and whether they pick up the rifle we gave them and come along and fight with us or pick up their own AKs – all Westside pimped-up with flashy stickers and painted magazines and in one inspired case a brass door knob for a cocking handle – and shoot at us instead).

should have been incongruous, but wasn't. isn't.

out here, it seems, anything goes.

back in the camp in the rear with the gear (which sadly isn't the Baghdad swimming pool or the Kuwaiti Ice-Cream parlour or a Saigon-style Baby-san massage hut so this war really needs to sort out its perks) exhausted, filthy, hungry soldiers drop their kit on their beds and head straight past the kitchen to queue for a desperate fix of Facebook. Before bedtime in the stinking hut with 30 blokes under mosquito nets, the Light Dragoons are in the middle of inventing a brilliant new game. You sellotape a peanut M&M above the double 20 of the dartboard, aim for it and laugh with each chip of coloured shell (the milk chocolate melts in your mouth and not in your hand) that falls to the floor as your opponent is obliged to lick it off the dusty concrete, that is unless the mice get there first. This is our entertainment and I shrug as Kuks or Will or one of the other guys I live so completely on top of that even after only three weeks our senses of humour have morphed into one grotesque entity misquoting constant Coogan-Gervaise-Morris-Atkinson-Ferrell-and every war film you ever saw, walks past and winks and in bad Afrikaans intones our favourite borrowed line from *Blood Diamond*.

'TIA bru'. TIA.'

This Is Afghanistan.

Of course, as soon as we started having fun, it all got serious.