

As part of the *Panorama* team following The Queen's Company in Afghanistan, **Ben Anderson** kept the following diary which was subsequently printed in the *London Review of Books*.

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*19 June.* After two years of negotiations with the Ministry of Defence in their new, fortified Whitehall headquarters, I was finally on a plane, in my eye-catching blue body armour and helmet, on my way to Kandahar airbase en route to Helmand province. I was travelling with my producer-cum-cameraman to make a film for *Panorama* about what we were doing in Afghanistan, almost six years after the invasion.

*23 June, Camp Bastion.* This is a rapidly expanding mini-city in the middle of the Helmand desert. There is construction going on everywhere with builders and machines struggling to keep up as more and more soldiers arrive. Designed to accommodate 2300 soldiers, Bastion will soon be able to hold 4500. The materials being used – concrete and steel rather than plastic and tent fabric – leave no doubt that we intend to be here for decades to come.

As I queued for food outside one of the three huge scoff tents, a soldier told me that we were achieving nothing here, that this is not our fight, just Blair sucking up to Bush. He claimed this was the majority view. He said he spends his time counting down the days until he is sent home.

After four days I'm beginning to understand how he feels. We're supposed to be flying to Gereshk, the second biggest town in Helmand province, but there aren't enough Chinook helicopters. We could drive there in forty minutes, but travel by road is far too dangerous. So we just wait, and spend the day trying to avoid the heat, which is impossible because the air-conditioning in the tent doesn't work. One Naafi serves the entire base, with a dry bar and a small supermarket. But the generator can only power half the building so the bar never opens. In the supermarket, drinks don't stay in the fridge long enough to get cool. There was lots of excitement about a double-decker Pizza Hut bus that had arrived. But when it finally opened some soldiers got salmonella poisoning and it was immediately closed.

A Nato air strike killed 25 civilians yesterday. The senior British commanders are saying that the Taliban were firing from the compound that was hit: that at the time no civilians were visible. It was only after the 500 lb bomb was dropped and the

Taliban had fled that they realised their mistake, and found 25 corpses in a small room in one corner of the compound. Compounds here are a series of rooms and outbuildings around a central courtyard surrounded by high walls. So the only way to check for civilians is from the air. That the pilot saw none is hardly a surprise: people are not likely to stand out in the courtyard waving as the Taliban enter their homes and start firing. Every senior British soldier I spoke to was certain that the people tried to flee, but were prevented from doing so. They claim that the Taliban either use women and children as human shields, or worse still, deliberately hide them in the buildings they are firing from, so that they will be killed by Nato bombs, enraging the local population and increasing resistance to the foreign forces. All the soldiers I spoke to said that their consciences were clear. But there is public outrage over civilian casualties and today President Karzai said that deaths like these will wipe out any goodwill generated by everything else foreign governments are trying to do here. I've never seen him so angry. If nothing changes, there's a real chance that ISAF won't be able to use air strikes at all and British troops will really know what it's like to be in a quagmire.

I've seen a few officers when asked about civilian casualties give roughly the same response. They impersonate an Afghan they've never met by holding up their hands, shrugging their shoulders and saying, 'It's the will of Allah,' implying that Afghans don't mind losing loved ones in the way we would.

Three Canadians were killed by an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) on a drive so routine they were in a roofless jeep.

I've just been told we won't get out of here tomorrow; there are no places on the Chinooks again. Soldiers going on leave are higher up the priority list than we are (journalists are almost bottom) but face the same delays, which don't get added onto the end of their leave.

*24 June.* A Chinook landed at lunchtime today, with casualties on board. They landed right next to the scuff tents and everyone watched as the injured were unloaded. A couple of hours later, some walking wounded were led off another Chinook, and two body bags were laid out on the ground. Nobody stopped to watch and one soldier walked right past without looking. Later, the Estonian flag was flying at half-mast.

During down time, the soldiers' conversation is mostly about 'contact'. A good contact is a shoot-out that involves a number of enemy fighters and lasts a decent amount of time. One company will travel for days in search of the Taliban. When found, they

'annoy' the Taliban enough to provoke a contact, usually by sending a single jeep a little too close, and then 'spanking them'. So far nobody has mentioned anything vaguely relating to the big plan that is supposed to make this mission end differently from all the others here. It's called the 'comprehensive approach' and is supposed to lead to a democratic, secure and reconstructed Afghanistan. It involves removing the Taliban, providing security and then installing QUIPs (quick impact projects) to impress the locals and win their hearts and minds. Then bigger, long-term reconstruction efforts will begin, which will be presented to the Afghans as the work of the central government, to whom they will offer their complete support, in turn rejecting the Taliban. To that end, the British ambassador has just said that we may be here for thirty years. I started mentioning this idea and got scorn or sarcasm from the soldiers every time. One lieutenant colonel even said that if I found any of the Foreign Office or Development people in charge of all this reconstruction, would I please point them out to him, because he's never seen any.

Obviously, locals will be grateful if a new well, school or road is built for them. They will probably even smile, shake hands and share a cup of tea with the soldier in charge. But Afghans are among the world's shrewdest fence-sitters and it will take a lot more than what's currently being offered before they take sides.

*25 June.* Gereshk and Lashkar Gar are within what's called the Afghan development zone, where security is good enough for a limited amount of reconstruction (or construction, as many soldiers are quick to point out) to take place. Whatever work is being done takes place under heavy guard in these two towns and, to a lesser extent, in Sangin. A few hours before we arrived in Gereshk a British soldier was killed when he drove over an IED.

*26 June.* I met a company commander, Simon Butt from the Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters, today. He described the area we'll be entering when a big operation starts in a few days. It's called the Green Zone, because it's a solitary strip of fertile land about a mile wide that follows the Helmand River from Kajaki all the way to Iran. In contrast to its fortified Baghdad namesake, the Helmand Green Zone is where most of the fighting takes place. Its irrigation ditches, hedgerows and walled compounds allow the Taliban to fight a classic guerrilla war that can seem very similar to the one fought by the Vietcong, complete with a complex network of trenches, tunnels, traps and weapons caches. The American Special Forces call it the Heart of Darkness.

Everyone's fear is mines, which are all over the Green Zone and being freshly laid all the time. The Green Zone is muddy and a lacework of irrigation ditches makes it impossible to access with any kind of vehicle. So even though I'd promised my girlfriend that I would only ever travel in an armoured vehicle, we will spend the entire operation on foot. My legs and genitals are suddenly feeling hopelessly fragile. It doesn't help that one of the soldiers I'm sharing a tent with has nicknamed the mission Operation Certain Death.

Simon has already lost a few men, but as company commander he can't be seen to grieve and says that has to wait until he gets home. Even then, the first thing he'll do is go and see the families of the men who have been killed. When he spoke, his eyes didn't leave mine for a second and I don't remember seeing him blink. He said there are teenage soldiers in his company on their first tour who have already killed 20 men. This is called 'growing up fast'.

*27 June.* We spent last night with the 1st Battalion of the Grenadier Guards, the Queen's Company that guards Buckingham Palace in redcoats and bearskin hats. They are living with the Afghan National Army (ANA) at a small base that was built by the Russians in the 1980s. They are together at all times and form what's called an Omelette, or OMLT, which stands for Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team. The Grenadiers have to fight the Taliban while simultaneously training a much larger unit of the fledgling ANA. Sitting around a wooden table, Mac, Shadders, Dave Wilkinson and Jack Mizon described how much of an ask that is.

They started politely and diplomatically by describing the ANA as 'below average' but were encouraged by the general laughter to give me the whole story. By the time they had finished I had an image of the ANA as heavily armed, badly dressed Keystone Cops on drugs. I was told that they often sprint towards the Taliban when attacked, but show no interest in cleaning weapons, exercising, drilling or turning up on time. During a recent ambush, some of them refused to crouch in a ditch because it would have muddied their boots. The desertion rate is around 20 per cent and is rather higher among those who have been told they are being deployed to Helmand. They can be bribed to work with 'sexy mags' – *Nuts*, *Zoo*, *FHM*. Cultural sensitivity training had taught the Brits not to let them even see these magazines for fear of causing offence to Islamic culture. But the ANA beg for them. Just before I arrived they had been told to stop smoking weed. So they all sat in a circle, put their stash into one big pile and set it on fire, inhaling the fumes. They thought this counted as

not smoking. One of them, when caught, ran outside to his jeep, but was so stoned he reversed into a river.

The ANA battalion commander invited us for bread and lamb stew in a dimly lit room with a single electric fan and peeling green paint on the walls. He recently saw a suspicious looking 18-year-old sitting outside a base as a convoy was getting ready to leave. He asked the boy to stand up and, as he did so, the commander noticed a bulge around his waist. He immediately told one of his soldiers to shoot, but the boy blew himself up first.

This morning we all woke at 5.30 to go out on a reconnaissance patrol into a village called Zumbelay in the Green Zone. Six families had recently fled the village saying that 15 Taliban fighters had forced them out.

After walking less than a kilometre we saw some other villagers running away, which usually means they know there are Taliban close by and that there will soon be fighting. Not long afterwards a single shot was fired, then dozens of shots that seemed to be coming from all around us. I lay down in the grass next to Sergeant Major Glenn Snazle, who shouted at everyone to take cover. I could hear the bullets breaking the sound barrier above our heads and remembered the instructor on the BBC Hostile Environments course saying that if you can hear that sound, you are too close. I gripped the earth with both hands as if that might lessen the impact of a bullet.

The Taliban were shooting at us from three different positions when we heard a huge set of booms that were too loud to come from anything I'd seen being carried here. I was told that the Taliban were now firing Chinese 107 rockets at us. You hear them being fired and then nothing for what feels like an age until they explode. Luckily, they landed hundreds of metres beyond our position.

After 40 minutes, we heard an F-16 arrive and one of the soldiers who was crouching in a small ditch and sweating heavily said: 'That is the sweetest sound in the world.' We could see the undercarriage of the plane as it passed us and fired missiles just beyond a building a hundred metres ahead. The Grenadiers and ANA went quiet, waiting to see if the missile strike had been accurate. The Taliban also stopped firing, I suspect because they were desperately trying to find a ditch or hole to dive into.

*30 June.* We were all chatting over a cup of tea outside the Naafi last night when a soldier sat down next to me and introduced himself. He asked what we were talking about, but didn't listen to my answer. His eyes were glazed and he was swaying

slightly, struggling to keep upright. I thought he was stoned or drunk and looking to start a confrontation. But instead he just said: 'I'm scared.' I told him he'd be lying if he said otherwise, or mad. But my words had no impact. Then he said that on the last big operation, he and a friend were lying next to each other when his friend got shot through the eye and died instantly. The Taliban attack was so heavy that no one could move, so for an entire hour he just had to lie there next to his dead friend.

'I hate my job, I can't function, can't sleep and I'm totally scared about this big op coming up.'

He has just turned 18 and this is his first tour. One of his superiors reluctantly agreed to let him see a psychiatrist, but said that if he's lying he'll be crawling around the camp until he's bleeding from his hands and knees. He's praying for malaria or a bullet in the foot so that he can go home.

We're going out to one of the patrol bases that form a kind of front line across the Green Zone again today, along a route that has been used many times before. This means there's a good chance an IED will have been set up along the way. It could be a roadside bomb, a car bomb or a suicide bomber. A motorcyclist approached some soldiers recently and was shot dead. One of the soldiers admitted he wasn't a suicide bomber but said he was probably up to no good anyway. He may have been a dicker: someone who calls the Taliban and tells them when a British convoy goes past. There is a sophisticated network of dickers here, just like there was in Northern Ireland, from where the term derives. Anyone who stands and watches us is treated with suspicion. The trouble is, most people stand and watch us when we pass.

Many of the Brits drive Wimicks, old roofless Land Rovers that constantly break down. They have been armoured with a patchwork of small bomb-proof mats, spread across the floor and seats. The matting might save your leg if you drive over a small mine, but won't save you from a good-sized bomb. The Americans, who drive around in heavily armoured Humvees, think the Brits are insane for going out with so little protection. Suicide bombers often glue nails and ball-bearings to newspaper, which they then wrap around their explosives. In a Wimick, the Brits' heads and shoulders are completely exposed to this weapon, which rarely kills but often maims horrendously.

A few hours before we arrived, the ANA saw a suspected Taliban creeping around in the abandoned houses behind the patrol base. They caught him and were well on the way to beating him to death when a British soldier intervened and told them to arrest

the man and take him to a nearby base. I climbed up into a watchtower and asked the ANA soldier on guard what had happened to the Taliban. He drew his finger across his throat and laughed. A Brit told me the man had been executed, but another said he'd been taken to the nearest base and arrested. It's often hard to know what to believe, as British soldiers are given LTTs ('lines to take') when speaking to journalists. After a few embedded weeks, you soon recognise the LTTs, especially on big issues like equipment, morale and civilian casualties. Most soldiers will wait until the camera is off, or the notepad is packed away, before saying: 'And now I'll tell you the truth.'

Jacko, a platoon sergeant from the Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters, showed me around the base and the nearby Russian-built trenches. During a recent operation he and his men were under fire for ten hours, he lost one man and was shot in the back himself. He was saved only because the bullet hit one of his spare radio batteries. I asked him if the knife in his breast pocket was a bayonet. It was and he's attached it to his rifle a few times already.

After dinner the fire alarm went off, but as we got up to leave we were ordered back in. A soldier whispered that bad news was on the way. When everyone had gathered the commanding officer emerged and told us that another soldier had been killed. Captain Sean Dolan had been on attachment with the Americans and had taken a direct hit from a Taliban mortar. He was a close friend of the commanding officer and Simon Butt, who stood perfectly still at the front of the tent, staring into space. Everyone slowly filed out but Simon remained frozen in the same position.

I walked outside and shuffled about on the black plastic decking, not knowing what to do with myself. Some Afghan workers in Kellogg, Brown and Root T-shirts started lowering the flags.

'Those fucking flags spend more time at half-mast than they do up,' one soldier said as he walked past.

*1 July.* The flags will stay at half-mast today. The Grenadier Guards were hit by a suicide bomber as they drove back to Gereshk from the Russian base where we had all slept. One is dead and four more are critically injured with shrapnel wounds to the head and neck (they were driving in roofless Wimicks). Their interpreter said the stumps of the bomber's legs were lying 20 metres apart on the road, with his jawbone next to one stump. The bomber had leaped onto the first vehicle from behind a fruit and vegetable stall, giving the gunner no time to shoot him. Sergeant Simon

Alexander and Lance Corporal Jack Mizon had been in the only other vehicle and had to treat the casualties themselves since there was no medic with them. 'Sergeant Wilkinson died straight away,' Jack Mizon said. 'Sergeant Black got a piece of shrapnel in his neck, but the thing was there were five casualties. One bloke had a head wound, someone lost his ear, and Sergeant McDonald had lacerations to his neck and his back. So there's two of us dealing with five casualties and then we started taking small arms fire.' Locals, it seems, just stood by and watched them struggle.

I was sitting on a trestle bench with the other Grenadiers when they dumped the charred carcass of the jeep on the ground next to us. Some young soldiers then put rubber gloves on and pulled the soldiers' kit out of the jeep and laid it out on the floor. Most of it was burned black and soaked with what I assumed must have been blood.

Jack Mizon was sent to the psychiatrist to check that he's 'all right in the head'. He says he's fine and wants to get straight back out on operations. Another soldier told me everyone should form a line and march through the Green Zone annihilating everything in sight or burning down entire 'sympathiser' villages, 'Vietnam style'.

If an Afghan approaches soldiers he is given a warning to stop. If he continues the soldiers are allowed to shoot. I suspect that after today there will be less of a gap between the warning and the shooting. As we drove back to the Russian base that afternoon, Sergeant Major Glenn Snazle held the steering-wheel with one hand and a clearly visible pistol in the other. I don't know how you conduct a hearts and minds campaign when you're shooting people who come too close.

*2 July.* I'd been to most 8 a.m. intelligence briefings and repeatedly heard reports about a suicide bomber in Gereshk. I told Jack Mizon that the reports had been correct, to which he said: 'What reports?' Nobody had told him.

*3 July.* Today they said the suicide bomber was one of five now in Gereshk walking around wearing bomb vests. Three of the remaining four were thought to be Pakistanis, the fourth Afghan.

*5 July.* We attended a shura today – a meeting where local elders come to speak on behalf of their communities – for families who had lost relatives during recent bombings. The bombs were American, but everyone defending them was from the Afghan central government. The elders raged about the bombings, saying the Taliban were far away by the time the bombs were dropped, that security is getting worse and

that people will soon start joining the Taliban. One man said: 'Life has no meaning for me anymore. I lost 27 members of my family. My house has been destroyed. Everything I've built for seventy years is gone. You need to bring order. We don't know how.' Then metal containers were placed on tables and opened. The elders were given bricks of Afghan money as compensation. One of the British soldiers had been told they were getting \$100,000 per person killed, which he thought was a fantastic amount. The actual amount was closer to £1000 per death.

Afterwards, I spoke to another man who had received compensation. He broke down when he said that the money was nothing compared to his loss. He didn't care who provided security, the Taliban or the coalition forces, he just wanted the fighting to stop. The money, a huge amount in Helmand, was handed out in public, with the famously corrupt Afghan National Police watching. I wondered if the man would soon be receiving another unwelcome visit.

*8 July.* Today was the start of the big operation and we joined the Grenadiers and two companies of ANA soldiers as they headed out across the desert and into the Green Zone again. The aim of the operation was to clear the village of Kakaran of Taliban and hold onto it. At the same time the Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters were to clear and hold Rajim Kalay, north-east of Kakaran and overlooking the Green Zone. The two forces would then work together to further clear and hold the Green Zone, moving the front line forward by about six kilometres.

We drove to one of the patrol bases and slept on the sand and gravel outside. We got up at 2 a.m. and walked into the Green Zone. Just after we left we heard an explosion. One of the Worcester and Sherwood Foresters' vehicles had struck a mine, but somehow nobody was hurt.

We crept through the fields that surrounded Kakaran but didn't hear or see anything. Every compound the soldiers searched was deserted. Sgt Simon Alexander told me the Taliban knew we'd arrived the night before and that they'd be waiting in a position where they could attack us from 360 degrees. But as I sat next to him, leaning up against a mud wall, it was easy not to care. Streams trickled past, birds sang, houses shone in the dawn sun and perfectly ripe bunches of grapes hung from verandas all around us. Gereshk was once part of the hippy trail and it was easy to imagine Dennis Hopper lookalikes falling about laughing and talking about being one with nature.

It was 8 o'clock by the time we had been through the whole village. There had been no incident. The sun hadn't yet become scorching and I was enjoying a ludicrously false sense of security when one of the interpreters ran over with a radio. He'd found the Taliban's frequency and had heard them say that they were about to attack. At 8.10 the ANA spotted a few Taliban and one of the soldiers rushed into a clearing with a grenade-launcher like a child who has just heard the tune of an ice-cream van. But as he knelt down and took aim he forgot that we were all standing in his back blast. After a volley of abuse from the British soldiers he moved a little further away and fired. We soon heard the crackle of Taliban machine-guns and everyone crouched behind a wall, leaning on a huge pile of harvested opium poppies. The ANA soldier fired a few more rocket-propelled grenades but was answered with machine-gun fire every time. Some of the Brits started stepping out from behind the wall and firing in the same direction. According to the interpreter with the radio, two Taliban were injured and trying to move for cover towards a compound about a hundred metres to our right. The Brits kept firing to keep them where they were so that an Apache helicopter could kill them. Suddenly bullets came from the hedgerow in front of us. Another group of Taliban had arrived to help out the four or five who'd been hit. They began shooting from an angle that made the wall we had used for cover useless. I sat on the floor as bullets came straight at us and told myself that the Taliban aren't very good shots and even if they are, their guns are old and unreliable.

I heard the Apache helicopter hovering above us come closer and watched Taliban positions in front of me to see its missiles land. Instead there was a terrific series of thuds right next to me, nowhere near the Taliban. I looked to my left and saw trees getting ripped to pieces. Earth and smoke rose high into the air forty metres away. The Apache had fired at last, but at what I had no idea. The ANA had walked along the line of trees that had just been chopped up, so perhaps their bandanas, sequined skull caps and brightly coloured scarves made them look like the enemy, but the pilot should have known where they were. Suddenly the Apache was making me more nervous than the Taliban.

The Apache came closer again and I heard the whoosh and bang of a Hellfire missile exploding. But again nothing happened to either of the Taliban positions. I looked around the wall to see what the Brits who called the air strike were doing. They were staggering around in different directions and were almost completely obscured by dust. The compound they had been leaning against had been hit, right in the corner where they were.

Then I heard shouting from up ahead, where the ANA had been attacking the hedge. They were angrily gesticulating towards the compound and getting up and walking towards us.

'What are the British fucking doing? They are giving me a headache. They are killing my guys,' the ANA commanding officer said as he walked back to the wall where we were and started shouting into his radio. Six of his men, he said, had been killed by the Apache strike.

Despite their bad aim and old weapons, the Taliban were getting awfully close. Jack Mizon arrived with a GPMG, a general purpose machine-gun, the biggest machine-gun a strong soldier can carry. When he started firing I climbed out of the ditch and ran as fast as I could across the open field. Something was fizzing into the mud and grass around my feet. I didn't see the ditch that my front foot disappeared into, causing me to fall face first onto the ground just past it. I bounced up again to see ANA soldiers behind the compound waving me in, screaming: 'Come, come, come. Fast, fast, fast.' The others arrived just after me and the soldiers turned to provide covering fire so that Jack Mizon could run to us.

We found ourselves in a small garden, still not inside the actual compound. The floor was piled high with harvested opium poppies, surrounded by high walls and shaded by grapevines. Then I saw something that made my throat tighten. The compounds in Kakaran were supposed to have been abandoned because of all the fighting, but a family of seven were crouching up against the wall next to me. There was an old man and six children. Three of the kids were toddlers and one was a baby. The man looked like he was begging for mercy, but from no one in particular. Two of the kids were covered in dust apart from wet patches around their mouths and eyes, so they must have been right next to the explosion when the Hellfire missile landed. They got no reassurance from the ANA soldiers, who helped themselves to the family's grapes and started smoking spliffs. Eventually one of the interpreters went over and did his best to calm them down and let them know that they were now safe. I wondered if they'd be accused of collaborating with the enemy.

We seemed to be surrounded by the Taliban with no way of escaping. They were free to move all around us, completely unseen. Anything that might discourage them was tried, including weapons I'd never seen before. I looked questioningly at the soldier next to me as we heard a strange chopping sound in front of us. 'Flechettes,' he said. Also called 'nail-filled rockets' or 'shipyard confetti', Flechettes shower large areas of ground with thousands of small steel darts. 'You wouldn't want to be the poor fucker

under that,' said another soldier, with pity rather than glee. I even heard soldiers speak admiringly of the Taliban, sometimes for their tactical ability but mostly for their bravery. Major Martin David, whose thoughtfulness made him seem a reluctant warrior, said: 'Even when they're onto a complete loser, they insist on pushing forward. On the one hand you have to admire that determination. On the other hand you feel sort of sad. It's just a shame that they don't seem to be able to surrender, which would save us all a lot of pain and hurt.' Jack Mizon had a different take. 'They are good at what they do. They're the kind of people that believe when they die they're going to wake up with 27 virgins . . . how can you fight against someone like that who doesn't give a shit? It's like, as soon as I die I'll be going back to Tottenham.'

The pattern became depressingly familiar: the Taliban would have an entire arms fair dropped on them, only to pop straight back up and start firing again. Soldiers began to collapse from heat exhaustion. One began trembling deliriously as his friends removed his clothes and poured water down his back and into his mouth. He dropped to his knees and fell back against a wall, like a boxer whose legs have gone.

The fighting from the front courtyard continued on and off for hours. Bullets bounced off the walls above our heads and seemed to be coming from new directions all the time. At one point bullets hit from opposite sides and nobody knew where to look or where to duck. An ANA soldier stepped outside to fire some shots at the Taliban but as he lowered his gun a bullet shot his magazine off, sending it spinning into the air with a metallic twang. He was so stoned he just smiled, picked up the magazine and walked back inside.

Captain Patrick Hennessey suggested dropping a bomb, which everyone said was far too reckless as the Taliban were so close. He insisted he'd done it before and it worked. Before long we could hear an F-16 and Major David said: 'Thirty seconds until impact.' The compound shook and what was left of the grapes fell to the floor. Once again there was silence, and once again it was followed by Taliban fire. The bomb had missed and another was called in 50 metres further east. This time the silence lasted and the fight was finally over. Three compounds had been badly damaged, one had been flattened and as many as 15 Taliban were thought to have been killed.

I still don't understand how, but the only casualties the British suffered were seven soldiers who collapsed with heat exhaustion. At 4 p.m., almost eight hours after we had first come under attack, everyone walked wearily back to the patrol base. News

soon came in over the radios that the Taliban had already retaken the compounds we had left.

We left the Grenadier Guards, believing they were to be given some rest as they had been out on operations for 74 days straight. We went back to Camp Bastion and once again spent days waiting for a seat on a chopper. In the meantime the Grenadier Guards had been told that rather than heading back to camp for a shower and a good night's sleep in a bed, they would be taking the town of Adin Zai from the Taliban. They had walked towards it and come under fire almost immediately. By the end of the day they had dropped 12 bombs, killed as many as 80 Taliban, lost one soldier and had two seriously injured. But they had taken Adin Zai, which had been a Taliban stronghold. By the time we got there, the Taliban had been pushed out but were already fighting back.

An ANA jeep was parked in front of the compound everyone had taken as a base. It had a Dushka gun mounted on the back, so everyone was outside to see how the Afghans managed with it. The gun, which made a ferocious roar, seemed too heavy for the Afghan soldier and he kept firing bullets high into the air. His British mentors screamed at him to shoot down. A soldier hearing the shooting from a distance shouted: 'Are they shooting *at anything?*' It's a question I often heard and it always met the same, tired response: 'No.'

Once again air support was called in. I soon saw a shiny white missile skim through the air over my left shoulder. It landed just in front of us and a huge piece of hot metal landed at our feet. I thought I'd seen another mistake. The missile had landed barely a hundred metres in front of us – the Taliban couldn't be that close. I was told that the missile was perfectly accurate and that's exactly where the Taliban were. I went back inside and got my helmet and body armour.

The battle lasted into the night. I felt I was at an airshow rather than in a war. The range and power of the weapons dropped on the Taliban made the Brits cheer and the Afghans whoop and giggle as if they were at a karaoke party. The climax came when an F-16 flew over and fired a Gatling gun at a tree-line just in front of us, turning it into a row of black fireballs that rose high into the air. It was so loud and deep it made my internal organs move. But again, there was a brief silence and then the sound of small-arms fire coming back. I started thinking that the air support wasn't as accurate as claimed, or perhaps the Taliban were just used to the planes and helicopters, and dive into ditches whenever they appear, rendering anything short of a direct hit harmless.

*26 August.* After four weeks at home, we are back at Kandahar airbase and on our way to Camp Bastion again. As we left the plane everyone was given a plastic bag containing a Yorkie, two tracker bars, a tube of Polos, some Starburst chews, a bag of KP nuts and a small carton of syrupy orange. This is food for the desert. On the last trip, those who stuck with UK rations (most soldiers prefer American packs) regularly had to spend ten minutes wiping melted and exploded Yorkie chocolate from everything before they could eat. Even then the food was designed for English winters rather than the Afghan summer. We waited ninety minutes for a battered coach to take us across the base to a huge warehouse called RSOI-5, where soldiers in transit sleep. It looked like a factory farm, with three hundred neatly arranged old metal bunk beds under bright naked bulbs. All night soldiers came, left or fidgeted in the heat. The beds squeaked, so there was constant noise all around, like a chorus of frogs, making it impossible to sleep unless you were exhausted, which most of the soldiers seemed to be.

On the way in, a British military policeman who is training the Afghan National Police (ANP) told me he had to fire two men who had been caught smoking opium too many times. He'd just come from a base that was being guarded by a 12-year-old in uniform with a machine-gun. When I told him I was filming with the OMLT, he asked how long the soldiers thought it would take to train the ANA. I told him about ten years and asked about his guys. 'Double that, at least.'

*28 August, Sangin District Centre.* This is the base that was used by the Paras and Marines when they cleared the Taliban out of Sangin. I was told that they barely left the base and sat on the roofs, firing everything they had into the town for six months straight. The view reminded me of photos of Beirut in the 1980s. I don't think a single building still stood. The odd wall remains standing but covered in bullet-holes. Most of this side of town is just rubble.

*29 August.* There was a shura this morning, which Major David attended. A girl from the Royal Engineers started it off with a slide show for the hundred or so local elders who had gathered. She ignored the theory about starting strong and announced that the rubbish had been cleared from the bazaar (cut to slide of a dusty bazaar without rubbish). She then said that funds have been approved for a tractor to keep clearing rubbish from the bazaar, that the Americans have put up street lights, that irrigation ditches have been dug, two electricity transformers provided, while a school will soon be refurbished and funds have been approved for ten more wells in addition to the

ten that have already been dug. 'All of this in the last *three* months,' she said to the elders, who seemed bemused.

When the locals got their chance to speak one man said this was the 18th shura he'd been to, that they'd heard all this before and that none of it ever appears. 'The promises made by the government have not been met. First of all we need water, then schools, then clinics. The government needs to help us. We are hungry and our land is drying up.' Some complained that their homes were being destroyed or damaged during fighting. They said the rich can flee when there is fighting but the poor can't. They also complained that the reconstruction projects benefit only the few who hear about them. Then a group stood up and complained that they had all pooled their opium and that it had been taken away. Major David stood up to speak. 'The governor of Helmand's policy is that any significantly large amounts of drugs will be confiscated by his counter-narcotics police. He understands that in some compounds there will be one or two bags. Those will probably be ignored. But in this case there was over half a ton of opium in one compound . . . All inquiries about this must be addressed to the counter-narcotics police in Lashkar Gar. We have their phone numbers. This is a subject matter that is completely out of the control of any of the people here today.' A group of elders in the middle of the room clambered towards the front table for the phone numbers. It was the first time I'd seen drug producers chasing the men they were supposed to be running from. A British soldier leant over and whispered in my ear: 'And they'll probably get it all back, we can't piss the big drug lords off, they aren't against us yet.'

We have led the counter-narcotics campaign because 90 per cent of the heroin on British streets is thought to come from Afghanistan. Yet under our stewardship Helmand's last harvest was up 49 per cent from the previous year, another record, making it the biggest single producer of illicit drugs in the world, outdoing entire countries like Colombia and Burma for the first time. Three hundred million pounds have been allocated for counter-narcotics efforts next year. The policy seems to be focused on encouraging alternative crops (journalists are taken to see a lone mint farmer outside Lashkar Gar) and targeting the 'greedy, not the needy', which implies they can target the major players (who are well known and aren't being targeted) without cutting off income to simple farmers. I floated the idea of legalisation for medicinal use to a number of high-ranking officials here, but they all dismissed it outright, saying that it couldn't possibly be policed. But with a worldwide shortage of derivatives like codeine and morphine (there is a shortage of diamorphine in the NHS

and Macfarlan Smith now have poppy fields in Oxfordshire, Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire under a Home Office licence), Britain is in a position to avoid turning the population of Helmand against its troops and, at the same time, to provide desperately needed painkillers. The current policy has only led to more and cheaper heroin.

After the shura, we joined Jack Mizon and Ryan Lloyd from the Grenadier Guards and followed them to a patrol base called Tangiers, which used to be a madrasah. When we arrived, they discovered that the ANA who lived with them had been through their rooms, stolen \$9 and their best porn magazine. They had also pulled all their favourite glamour model pictures off the 'morale wall' and put them in the bin. A huge argument ensued and the ANA apologised profusely and even built a pathetic wire gate across the main corridor, separating their sleeping quarters from the Brits, promising it would never happen again.

*30 August.* We were attacked last night, just after we'd finished dinner and were laughing over a cold can of fizzy orange drink that an Afghan soldier had bought for us from the bazaar. An RPG thudded into the outside wall, followed by two or three more and a long burst of gunfire. Had the RPG landed twenty or thirty metres to the left it would have come right through the glassless window and into the tiny room we were sitting in. Everyone sprinted to their rooms to get their weapons and body armour. The Taliban were firing from a house on top of a hill that enabled them to shoot over the high walls and into the base. But by the time we got onto the roof there didn't seem to be much incoming fire. Whoever had fired had emptied whatever they had and then disappeared. There was a big operation going on six kilometres away and they probably assumed the base would be undermanned. They soon learned how wrong they were, as mortars, flares, bullets, the ANA and even an Apache helicopter started targeting the house on the hill. I knew the ANA were also firing because much of the tracer fire seemed to be going straight into the air, rather than horizontally at the target. The house was fired on for over forty minutes and I was left with the same feeling I'd had in the Green Zone. Much of Helmand was being used as a kind of giant sports field, where two groups of consenting adults regularly meet for a fight.

*4 September.* We are in Lashkar Gar, the British headquarters in Helmand, for a week with the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), which is here to facilitate reconstruction and development on behalf of the Foreign Office. The base is rarely attacked and as a result has the atmosphere of the activity camps you find on school premises during the summer holidays, where everyone is there against their will and

having to obey too many rules. Soldiers are told they can wear flip-flops to air their feet if they have just been 'in theatre', but not otherwise, and never in the cookhouse. Three more signs are stuck above three sinks outside, giving 11 separate instructions on how to wash your hands. There is a toilet for vomit and diarrhoea only, and even when you find the right cubicle and sit down for some peace and quiet, you look up to see an entire page from Kellogg, Brown and Root telling you how to pull the chain and make sure it goes all the way back in, to avoid flooding.

*5 September.* An IED killed two British soldiers today, on a routine patrol just north of Lashkar Gar.

*8 September.* A big operation started last night and British forces came under an attack that went on well into today. We were supposed to be going to a meeting with the provincial council but it was cancelled. The medical evacuation helicopters would be too busy to be sent to collect us in the event of a roadside bomb. Yesterday a trip out to a shura in Rahim Khalay, the first of its kind since the town was taken from the Taliban, was cancelled when our helicopter broke down. Because it was the first time any foreign officials were to appear, more than five hundred local elders had turned up. There was a chance the chopper could be repaired in time to get us there a few hours late, but then the shura was mortared so everyone was told to go back to their offices. We'd been repeatedly mortared in the Green Zone and you soon become fairly relaxed about it because the mortars are so rarely accurate. But Foreign Office officials have to follow different duty of care rules from soldiers. One of the six retired policemen training the ANP told me that if one of them got hurt or killed the whole mission would be pulled. As a result the only training they can do is in offices on the base, or occasional brief trips to the ANP headquarters. When anyone does leave the base, they do so under the protection of heavily muscled private security guards from ArmorGroup, whose \$30 million a year budget provides better guns and safer and more reliable vehicles than the soldiers get.

Even if the Taliban weren't thwarting their efforts, I wonder how successful the PRT could be. They are an incredibly dedicated bunch: some have grown beards, speak Pashtu and understand Afghanistan and its tribal complexities as well as anyone (which means they also understand how little they can ever know and how hard it will be to win over the population here). But they are working with an allocated budget of no more than £25 million for the whole year, a sum the military sometimes get through in a few days. They number just 30, including administrative staff, next to

almost eight thousand soldiers, which will hardly win hearts and minds and won't counter the effect of all those bombs and bullets.

The truth is that the vast bulk of our efforts is concentrated on fighting a war and it's difficult to see that changing for a long time to come. The UN has reported a 30 per cent increase in violent incidents this year, with an average of 550 a month. Suicide attacks have risen sevenfold. It's no surprise that many local contractors won't work on the building projects that are underway for fear of being killed for collaborating.

This evening, the flags were once again at half-mast. During an operation last night, soldiers came under attack again. Two are dead and seven injured. What seems to be sapping the morale more than anything else is that all this goes largely unnoticed back home. Fatalities get a paragraph or two in the papers, but if last night's operation had been a perfect success, without any losses, it wouldn't have been mentioned at all. And because the MoD has a policy of not reporting non-fatal casualties, soldiers who lose limbs, eyes or their senses don't get a mention either.

*10 September.* There is a high threat of a suicide bombing in Lashkar Gar. A high threat seems to be in place when there is reliable intelligence that people are actually walking around wearing bomb belts. When we were here last time, we were allowed to attend every 8 a.m. intelligence briefing and I don't remember there being a day when there wasn't at least one man or car (it always seemed to be a white Toyota Corolla) moving around, ready to detonate.

In town today there were police everywhere: because of the suicide bomber, I was told. I attended a provincial council meeting where elected local councillors told David Slynn, the Foreign Office's top man out here, that the Taliban were hated and it was the perfect time to hit them. But they also said that local institutions are so corrupt that people still choose to side with the Taliban. They complained that the ratio of destruction to reconstruction was far too great, that all talk of human rights remained a dream, that outside of Gereshk, Lashkar Gar and Sangin, nothing was being done. There wasn't even any communication with locals outside the towns and no aid had yet been delivered.

*12 September.* I followed the Foreign Office staff to Sangin for another shura. At one point the district governor left, so the meeting was between one soldier, Major David, who was based in Sangin, and six FCO staff who had come from Lashkar Gar. I walked across a small footbridge to the house the Grenadier Guards occupy. Jack Mizon was there, and I recognised two others as they swam and washed in the river.

They seemed glum, which surprised me because they only had a week left of their six-month tour. Then they asked me if I'd heard about Goolie. I hadn't. They were out on an operation last Sunday, they said, when they came under fire. The Taliban had planned their ambush perfectly and knew exactly where the soldiers would take cover, behind a small wall nearby. As the soldiers crouched behind it they stepped on two freshly laid mines. Goolie lost a leg, an ANA soldier lost two legs and an interpreter was killed, probably because he was so close to the ground ducking the Taliban fire that his entire body took the force of the explosion. Even before this, as they got close to the end of their tour many soldiers had been getting far more nervous than usual about being hurt or killed. Some were annoyed that they had to go out at all. I asked Major David why his men couldn't just be allowed to relax and see out their last few days in Helmand in safety. He said that if he allowed them to do that, the enemy would see it immediately, take advantage of the freedom of movement and make life much more difficult for the soldiers who were about to take over. If their last seven days pass without incident, the Grenadier Guards will still have paid a high price for this six-month tour. Out of a unit of 36 soldiers, three have been killed and 12 seriously injured.

**Ben Anderson** is a reporter for the BBC and the Discovery Channel.