

'Harry's War': The ugly truth

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Afghanistan veteran, Leo Docherty, criticises the British military campaign in Helmand province, where the Prince served until his tour of duty was cut short after details of it were leaked on the internet

Never has a young man looked as happy as Prince Harry did shooting away at suspected Taliban positions, near the town of Garmsir in Helmand province last week. After the crushing disappointment he suffered in not going to Iraq in 2007, the chance finally to deploy on operations as a forward air controller (responsible for guiding fighter jets and helicopter gunships to their targets via radio) will have come as a thrilling relief from the grim monotony of life in barracks.

I know how he feels. I too was an officer in the Household Division. A demanding year's training at Sandhurst leaves you at the peak of physical fitness and motivation, bursting with pride in your regiment and schooled in the noble sacrifices made by the heroes of previous wars. The craving for action and adventure is overwhelming, matched by a sense of "doing your duty". The desire to serve in Afghanistan is reinforced by a vague knowledge of heroes of the colonial-era "great game".

A favourite poem of the Army is one of James Elroy Flecker's, which sums up the aspirations of all young officers: "Go as a pilgrim, and seek out danger ... pit your very soul against the unknown and seek stimulation in the company of the brave." Every young officer wants to do just that. And operations are definitely a chance to seek out danger and live out the heroic ideal. As Harry said of his time in Garmsir: "It is somewhat what I imagine the Second World War to be like."

On operations the routine of regimental duty is replaced by a volatile mixture of excitement, frustration and terror. Courage, coolness and earthy humour are all that matter. Profound friendships are quickly forged between all ranks. The Gurkhas working with Harry have, to his delight, treated him like any other officer, probably for the first time ever. Indeed as Harry said himself: "This is about as normal as I'm ever going to get."

Did he say normal? If dropping bombs on Afghans and fighting from a base in Helmand is as close as Harry will ever get to normal life, then it's a sad indictment of his existence back home. But the real point here is that life for Afghans in Garmsir has been very far from normal since we Brits arrived.

In September 2006, British forces attacked and occupied what was until that point a thriving agricultural town. This means that the local farmers, who are poor cash-croppers exploited by opium barons, grow a great deal of poppy. But the British arrival, as in other towns across Helmand, brought nothing but military might - no means of development, no

improvement in local living standards and no alternative to the poppy.

The most basic tenets of counter-insurgency were abandoned in the Army's haste to see action. Violence ensued as poppy farmers and opium traffickers teamed up with the Taliban to oppose the foreign occupiers. As the first British bombs fell, killing Afghan civilians, the battle for hearts and minds was lost.

The fighting rages still and opium production has soared to new heights. Overwhelming firepower (the kind that Harry co-ordinates) cannot resolve the fact that the British campaign in Helmand is illogical; we are trying to fight our way to winning hearts and minds and losing the trust of the population in doing so. Scores of civilians have been killed by British ordnance in Helmand. In 2007, at least 6,000 people died in the conflict across Afghanistan, of which approximately 1,400 were civilians. At least 500 of these deaths were directly attributable to Nato forces, mostly in air strikes; 89 British troops have been killed and 329 injured.

As General Sir Richard Dannatt has pointed out, we are there for the good of the Afghans, but at the moment we are having the reverse effect. The Taliban are resurgent. Funded by millions of dollars of opium money, they are responding to greater British troop numbers by increased use of suicide bombing tactics.

The US's top intelligence official, Mike McConnell, stated last week in Washington that security in Afghanistan is "deteriorating" as President Karzai controls only about 30 per cent of the country and the Taliban 10 per cent, with the remainder under tribal control. Put simply, this is a disastrous military adventure and not a just war.

Perhaps Prince Harry knows this. More likely, however, is that he's not too bothered about it because, for him, as for every other young officer, seeing active service is more important than any other consideration. This attitude is perhaps unavoidable in a highly trained professional army in which "cracking on" and doing what you're told is an institutional requirement.

But the Army has over the past few years of the "war on terror" exceeded itself when it comes to blind obedience. Take the Iraq war. In 2003 my fellow officers and I knew the WMD issue was a blatant ruse, but we cared little. Scanting action we ignored the fact that we'd been told a pack of lies, and satisfied ourselves with the vague notion that it was all for the good. We simply craved active service.

Given the monumental human tragedy that has unfolded in Iraq over the past five years, you'd think that further military adventures hatched on the backs of MoD fag packets would have been guarded against, but along came Helmand province.

Tragically, the fact that many soldiers are killed in these operations serves only to strengthen the myths of heroism and sacrifice that the Army relies on to pursue these adventures in the first place. These ideals allow the admirable personal qualities of soldiers killed on operations to be readily confused with the nature of the conflict. Partly a psychological defence mechanism, it allows soldiers to come to terms with the deaths of their colleagues without calling into question the fundamental reason for such deaths.

This graveside reasoning goes roughly like this: "He loved his job and the Army; he was an honourable man; therefore his death can only be honourable and worthwhile." Following this

line of reasoning after the deaths of friends and colleagues in Iraq and Afghanistan, I eventually found the answers wanting, became disillusioned and left. But if a few disillusioned officers leave, it makes no difference to the Army; there are always more fresh faces arriving from Sandhurst.

So if the Army is blinkered in its lust for action, and lied to by its government, surely the media are there to point out unpleasant truths. At this point the images of Prince Harry blasting away on a machine gun seem dangerously close to propaganda. While his bravery and commitment are beyond doubt, his 10-week stint in Helmand has revealed itself as a PR recruiting stunt, cooked up by the MoD and facilitated by the media's collusion.

Rather than highlighting the appalling truths about the war in Helmand, the media, dazzled by the heroic ideal that Prince Harry so perfectly embodies, perpetuate the myth that this is a just war fit for heroes. The frenzy of coverage in Friday's papers (with the conspicuous exception of this newspaper) was facile; "Watch Prince Harry fighting in Helmand," proffered one broadsheet website.

This is war reduced to entertainment, willingly ignorant of the truth that young men like Harry, both British and Afghan, are dying violent pointless deaths in Helmand province. Outrage is the only response to this, not entertainment.

Prince Harry won't have the opportunity to make a proper judgement about the war in Helmand. After 10 weeks, six short of his planned stay, he's returning home, a pin-up hero yet an exploited victim of the media circus that drove him to seek "normality" in Helmand in the first place. The media he blames for hounding his mother to her death have stripped him of his professional *raison d'être*. "I generally don't like England that much... it's nice to be away from all the press and the papers and all the general shite that they write," he has said.

Coming home will be a blow. But this is war, not therapy. It's a war worth fighting, but it's a war worth getting right, which we're not doing at the moment. Let's hope those troops who have served alongside Harry and have months still to go get the chance, like our young Prince, to come home soon.

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