

Losing the Plot - Britain's losses in Afghanistan

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Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [AFGHANISTAN](#)

So far, the cost to the British taxpayer of our current 'Great Game' in Afghanistan is £12 billion(1). If only our eight years there had cost nothing but money. Leaving aside the horrendous cost to the Afghan people and their land, Britain's forces have suffered loss, not least, because of the muddle, ignorance and incompetence of those who sent them to war, a loss of face. As it is, the loss of British soldiers in an unwinnable war in Afghanistan goes on(2), while Government spokesmen trot out a changing array of reasons, excuses and justifications for fighting such a war and the soldiers wonder why they're there. With every sad death reported in the media, up pops an officer to talk about what a brave hero he was, such a first rate soldier, who died doing the job he loved. But still they go on dying.

And although the Ministry of Defence (MoD) provide figures for casualties (see notes 14 and 15), the figures mention everything but those personnel who may have died from their wounds, or complications arising from them, some weeks after they have been air-evacuated to this country for treatment. So, although at the time of writing, the total killed in action in Afghanistan is over 200, I do not think that this figure represents the real tally of those who have died for the misguided aims of those in power. The US Department of Defense apparently has a cut-off point for reporting a soldier dying as a result of being injured in action of about 2-3 weeks(3). Die within that time and you join the list of heroes. Die after that from your injuries and you are invisible, not one of the 'glorious dead' - which accords no value to the dead and no respect for those left to mourn. Where America leads, Britain follows. Certainly I have never seen it reported that someone has died from wounds he received some months ago, and the number of dead having risen because of it. And for each one killed, some will be injured, horribly or invisibly.

Take the invisible ones first. In 2007 Combat Stress warned they had seen a 53% increase in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) cases since 2004. They were already dealing with cases returning from two war fronts, but that wasn't the only reason for the increase. First, those who deal with ex-servicemen suffering from PTSD will tell you that it can take up to 14 years either for the damage to fully surface or for those affected to seek help. Second, the first (short) Gulf war took place 14 years before the noticed rise in cases. Our forces have been fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq for the last 8 years.

In November 08 the MoD were insisting that, of 195,100 serving personnel, only 0.45% suffered from mental disorders(4). Yet in March 09 a senior military psychiatrist admitted that the Government has "no idea" how big a problem it faces in the number of traumatised troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan(5). What trouble is to come? And will the Government ever take responsibility? Because the constant bleat coming from both Ministers and, sadly, commanding officers, is that only a small percentage of personnel are

affected by PTSD, and those receive first rate care. That doesn't explain why, of the British male prison population, up to 10% are ex-servicemen serving long sentences for murder, manslaughter and other violent crimes committed because of undiagnosed PTSD. Or that, on any night of the year there could be up to 35,000 homeless ex-service personnel on our streets(6). Nor why British forces should be so much more immune than US forces. Last year the RAND Corporation produced a report saying that 'some 300,000 U.S. troops are suffering from major depression or post traumatic stress from serving in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and 320,000 received brain injuries'(7). Frightening figures.

The physically injured are a little more visible, or what's left of them is. But again, despite the fine words, the Government seems to be more concerned about financing the damage that has been done in our name. Figure this: in July this year the MoD was defending the practice of spying on servicemen suspected of lodging false claims for damages for injuries(8). It said the tactic helped stop fraudulent claims and saved millions of pounds of taxpayers' money. Since 2000, 284 claims have been secretly tracked and monitored. This, said the MoD, was less than 1% of all claims. Not a lot, is it?

Not until you do the maths. 284 is 1% of 28,400. That means that in the last 8½ years, there have been around 28,500 claims for damages because of injuries. And that is over 7% of the *total* Armed Forces strength(9), or over 16% of the regular Armed Forces. Take out all those engaged in office or non-combatant jobs, and suddenly a very large problem appears. Either there is a compensation culture within the Armed Forces (hard to believe seeing how desperate many injured soldiers are to get back on active duty with their units), or an awful lot of people are getting hurt badly enough that they need and seek compensation. Admittedly some of the injuries would have occurred anyway, through accidents or negligence. But the majority must surely be for injuries sustained in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Some will be for loss of hearing, most affecting those serving in Afghanistan. In October 2008 the Times reported that 'nearly one in ten soldiers serving with one regiment have hearing defects that could bar them from further frontline service and affect their civilian job prospects'(10). And the compensation for total hearing loss was £46,000, due to be increased to £92,000. No wonder the MoD wants to claw back what it can. But there must be many more than we know who have lost limbs, suffered serious brain damage or are paraplegic. Modern medicine can work miracles, and keep people alive who even a few years ago would have died. And the one 'positive' result of violent conflict is that medical knowledge is advanced as surgeons become more practised at dealing with horrific injuries.

And yet - there is something odd about the figures of injuries sustained by British Forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. There are proportionately *more* people dying of the injuries they have received in action now than in previous years. For instance, in Iraq in 2003, 39 were 'killed in action' and only one 'died of wounds'. Yet in 2006 18 were killed in action and 9 died of wounds. And the following year 24 were killed in action and 13 died of wounds(11). In Afghanistan things were a little better but followed the same trend. In 2006 20 were killed in action and only one died of wounds, but from January to 15 July 2009, 41 were killed in action and 5 died of wounds(12). Are they running out of field hospitals and medical supplies? Is the lack of transport to get the wounded into medical care the problem? Or is it because they are not in tanks any more, but in vehicles which the MoD say are armoured, but in practice insufficiently so? Considering the MoD's record for kitting out the forces it has committed to fighting its wars, it would come as no surprise.

For the MoD's record on procurement and supply is truly terrible. It has been known for years that MoD procurement deals often wildly exceed their budget, sometimes by as much as 40%(13). A recent report by the National Audit Office, being sat upon by the Government, is believed to say that £2.5bn is wasted every year on equipment projects(14). From the start of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq there have been stories about shortages of essential equipment, some basic like body armour, and some expensive like helicopters. The helicopter shortage is a long-running saga of incomplete orders, helicopters built to the wrong specifications, helicopters waiting to be refitted and helicopters promised with a delivery date of 2014. At one point the Conservatives produced figures saying that only a third of the Armed Forces helicopters were usable(15). The shortage was made very clear when General Sir Richard Dannatt, on his last trip to Afghanistan before retirement, was interviewed by the BBC while hitching a ride in a US helicopter because no British helicopters were available. The latest story to surface is that Air Commodore Simon Falla, deputy commander of Britain's joint helicopter command, had suggested Britain could only send a limited number of helicopters to Afghanistan because of a shortage of parking spaces(16). All this of course gives rise to another outburst of excuses and justifications from the men at the top.

But without helicopters to move the troops around, they have to travel on land, constantly at risk from Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) or roadside bombs. Properly armoured vehicles, like helicopters, are thin on the ground. A number of Ridgebacks, built to replace the Snatch Land Rovers in which 37 soldiers have died, and armoured to withstand IEDs, have been sitting in Dubai because there were no planes available to fly them to Afghanistan(17). While they wait, soldiers are using vehicles like the Jackal which is supposed to give greater protection than the Snatch Land Rover. Except that 13 soldiers have already died in Afghanistan while travelling in one of these. According to Dr Richard North, the Jackal design is fundamentally flawed.

'The driver sits over the front wheel, the most vulnerable part of the vehicle which is also the most likely to trigger, and so take the full force of, a mine. The bottom of the Jackal is flat, meaning the blast is not dissipated. Reinforcing the bottom with more armour – as with the Jackal II – means that the vehicle will flip over with the force of a blast and crush its passengers..... The Jackal is just the latest failure by the Ministry of Defence to provide a mine-resistant vehicle to both Iraq and Afghanistan. A quarter of the 195 service personnel to have died in Afghanistan were travelling in poorly protected vehicles. Such is the problem from mines that convoys travel at four miles an hour, with a minesweeper on foot walking in front'(18).

At the same time modern warfare doesn't work in an ancient land with guerrilla fighters. Tanks work against tanks not hit and run insurgents. Nor can Snatch Land Rovers, Jackals and similar vehicles succeed against IEDs. Because modern warfare can't cope with the nature of fighting in Afghanistan the sniper is being resurrected (19). Mind you, judging from the photos of the camouflage being used I suspect it won't be long before the insurgents start targeting anything that looks like a small mobile haystack. Worzel Gummidge with a Kalashnikov isn't in it.

And as a final blow to the Armed Forces sagging self-esteem, there is this. According to a leaked Army memo Britain's war effort in Afghanistan is being hindered by a number of frontline troops too fat to fight(20). The memo from Major Brian Dupree, of the Army physical training corps in Wiltshire, said basic fitness policy "is not being carried out". Units were routinely failing to fulfil the Army's basic fitness regime of two hours of physical

exercise a week, he added. *Two hours a week?* What on earth do they do for the other 166 hours a week, apart from eat? Surely the British soldier was supposed to be the epitome of physical fitness. Are the dreaded route marches with full kit restricted to less than 15 minutes a day?

Can one even begin to picture it? Our Army, so full of 'brave heroes' and 'first-rate soldiers', so 'fully supported' (and kitted out) by the MoD, reduced to this – a convoy of not quite well enough armoured vehicles crawling across the Afghan landscape at 4 mph, preceded by a walking man with a red flag (sorry, mine sweeper), hopefully watched over by some small protective haystacks concealing the army's best sharpshooters(21). They also, presumably, have at times to move at 4 mph. Who volunteers to walk in front of the convoy like this? Or will the unlucky man have been 'volunteered' because, being a little overweight, it was thought some extra exercise was called for? How else find someone willing to be such a sitting duck? After all, not all the moveable vegetation in Helmand will be British.

Truly, while Afghanistan weeps over its thousands of dead, the Taliban must be crying with laughter.

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Notes

1. *Revealed: £12 billion hidden costs of Afghan war*, Independent, 26 July 2009

2. Ditto the American Forces and those of the other nations caught up in this situation. The Canadians in particular seem to be taking a disproportionately hard hit in relation to the size of their force operating in Afghanistan.

3. A look at the war-dead in Afghanistan. Occupation Soldiers, the Resistance, the Civilians and the Future by Les Blough, Axis of Logic

4. *Forces mental illness figures out*, BBC News, 4 November 2008

5. [*MoD doctor: we've no idea how many troops suffer from trauma, Independent, 17 March 2009*](#)

6. *Memorandum from Robin Short, Martin Kinsella and David Walters*, Select Committee on Defence, written evidence, 28 June 2007

7. *Mental health injuries scar 300,000 U.S. troops*, Associated Press, 17 April 2008

8. *MoD defends 'spying' on soldiers*, BBC News, 18 July 2009

9. Regular Armed Forces: 191,900; Regular Reserves: 191,300; Volunteer reserves: 42,300. giving a total strength of 425,500 (2006 figures). 2007 figures put the Regular Armed Forces at 195,100.

10. Deafness is the new scourge of British troops in

Afghanistan, Michael Evans, The Times, 30 October 2008

11. Op Telic Casualty and Fatality Tables, Ministry of Defence

12. Op Herrick Casualty and Fatality Tables, Ministry of Defence

13. Lewis Page, a former naval officer, claims in his book *Lions, Donkeys and Dinosaurs* that the MoD spends two to three times more than it needs for its equipment.

14. *MoD accused of wasting millions*, BBC News, 20 July 2009

15. *UK rationalizes helicopter fleet between Iraq and Afghanistan*, Global Security 21 May 2008

16. *Why the helicopter shortage in Afghanistan is down to parking*, Guardian, 14 August 2009

17. *'Life-saving' Afghanistan vehicles stranded in Dubai*, Telegraph, 4 August 2009

18. *Revealed: How Army's new armoured vehicle is a death trap too*, Independent, 9 August 2009

19. *Return of the Sniper*, Independent 4 July 2009

20. *Troops 'too fat' to fight*, Independent, 2 August 2009

21. Have you noticed that the Rifle Brigade, the home of the sharpshooter for at least two hundred years, is now registering casualties in Afghanistan?

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