

The British Army in Afghanistan 2006–14

Task Force Helmand



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British Troops in Afghanistan 2006–14

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
HELMAND PROVINCE	6
Extent, natural features and population ■ The Taliban ■ Operation 'Enduring Freedom' ■ The ISAF programme ■ The insurgency, and the return of the Taliban ■ Operation 'Herrick IV' – the move to Helmand	
2006: COMPOSITION OF 3 PARA BATTLE GROUP	12
The core battalion group ■ Transport, armour, artillery and helicopter support ■ Mentoring and reconstruction ■ Attached foreign units ■ UK Special Forces ■ Camp Bastion	
2006: THE BREAK-IN BATTLE	17
Early mistakes – failures of local intelligence ■ Platoon Houses ■ Sangin ■ Musa Qaleh 2006–2007: 3 Commando Brigade ■ Jugroom Fort ■ 'Advance to ambush'	
2007–2009: THE GUERRILLA WAR	29
Combat ISTAR ■ 'Clear and hold' ■ Guidance Card Alpha ■ Recapturing Musa Qaleh ■ The third turbine	
2009–2011: COUNTER-INSURGENCY	38
'Panther's Claw' ■ 'Moshtarak' ■ The beginning of the end	
2011–2013: STAGE FOUR TRANSITION	45
ENDEX	50
WEAPONS & EQUIPMENT	51
Infantry small arms: rifle & UGL – LMG & GPMG – marksman & sniper rifles – combat shotgun – pistols ■ LAWS ■ HMG & GMG ■ UK Special Forces Personal protective equipment ■ Protected mobility ■ Counter-IED	
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY	62
INDEX	64

BRITISH TROOPS IN AFGHANISTAN 2006–2014

INTRODUCTION

‘Without firing one shot’... That was the hope expressed by the then British Secretary of State for Defence, John Reid, as the first British Army battle group prepared to deploy to Afghanistan’s lawless Helmand province in 2006: ‘We would be perfectly happy to leave in three years’ time without firing one shot.’ Even for a politician, this was a spectacularly optimistic wish.

General David Richards, then commander of the NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, described the reality on the ground a little differently, explaining that British forces were soon involved in ‘some of the most intense warfighting seen since Korea’. The former

An infantry section leader, with the L123A1 Underslung Grenade-Launcher (UGL) mounted on his L85A2 rifle. He is encumbered with both his line-of-sight Personal Role Radio (PRR) on his left chest, with what appears to be a button compass attached, and the larger Bowman platoon radio in his backpack. The ‘admin’ pouch, with a prominent Union Jack patch, contains a map in a waterproof cover. This image also gives a good idea of the limited visibility encountered in the Afghan crop-fields of the ‘Green Zone’. (USMC photo by MC2 Jonathan David Chandler)



Operation 'Herrick' command responsibilities

Herrick I–III, 2003–2006:	Afghanistan Roulement Infantry Battalions (ARIBs)
Herrick IV, May–Nov 2006:	16 Air Assault Brigade
Herrick V, Nov 2006–Apr 2007:	3 Commando Brigade
Herrick VI, Apr–Oct 2007:	12 Mechanized Brigade
Herrick VII, Oct 2007–Apr 2008:	52 Infantry Brigade
Herrick VIII, Apr–Oct 2008:	16 Air Asslt Bde
Herrick IX, Oct 2008–Apr 2009:	3 Cdo Bde
Herrick X, Apr–Oct 2009:	19 Light Bde
Herrick XI, Oct 2009–Apr 2010:	1 Lt Bde
Herrick XII, Apr–Oct 2010:	4 Mech Bde
Herrick XIII, Oct 2010–Apr 2011:	16 Air Asslt Bde
Herrick XIV, Apr–Oct 2011:	3 Cdo Bde
Herrick XV, Oct 2011–Apr 2012:	20 Armoured Bde
Herrick XVI, Apr–Oct 2012:	12 Mech Bde
Herrick XVII, Oct 2012–Apr 2013:	4 Mech Bde
Herrick XVIII, Apr–Oct 2013:	1 Mech Bde
Herrick XIX, Oct 2013–June 2014:	7 Armd Bde
Herrick XX, June–Dec 2014:	20 Armd Bde

commander of the first British deployment, Brig Ed Butler, later quantified that comment: during the first six months in Helmand, British soldiers expended 'half a million rounds of small arms and over 13,000 artillery and mortar rounds', in more than 500 no-holds-barred contacts with the enemy. In the course of these engagements 35 British soldiers lost their lives. Eventually, a war that would last longer than both World Wars combined would claim 453 British dead, and several thousand wounded, both physically and mentally.

Christened Operation 'Herrick' by a Ministry of Defence (MOD) computer programme, the deployment began as a three-year, fixed-term commitment to stabilize Helmand in a so-called 'peace support operation'; but there was no peace to support, and it soon escalated into brutal asymmetric warfare against a fanatical and cunning insurgent enemy. This book aims to provide a basic summary of the operations conducted and the equipment used by the UK Task Force in Helmand; the author has paid special attention to the early years of the campaign, since he believes that events in this period became central to the outcome of Britain's 'Fourth Afghan War'. Due to the limitations of the series format, it is impossible to provide more than the briefest flavour of a vastly complicated nine-year campaign, and the focus is primarily on 'kinetic' or combat operations rather than on the more strategically important reconstruction and mentoring roles undertaken by the British military. Readers seeking more depth will find in the Select Bibliography on pages 62–63 some of the many excellent official and unofficial tour histories and memoirs available.

This work aims to avoid any political comment – a difficult task when documenting a war that became so highly politicized. Controversies such as the use of the Land Rover Snatch vehicle, and the shortage of transport helicopters, are necessarily mentioned since they impacted on military

operations. Due to continuing counter-insurgency (COIN) and counter-terrorist operations by friendly forces in Afghanistan and elsewhere, it is obviously impossible to describe in any detail the technical and tactical capabilities of certain systems, particularly in the fields of Counter-IED and ISTAR (intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance).

OPPOSITE

HELMAND PROVINCE

Helmand's physical terrain consists primarily of arid desert (the 'Dasht'); this is more or less bisected, from north-east to south-west, by the Helmand River, Afghanistan's longest, from which the province takes its name ('Many Dams', in Pashtu). Along the Helmand River stretches the 'Green Zone' of fertile, irrigated land, where the majority of the province's population live and support themselves through primary agriculture – particularly the cultivation of opium poppies. It has been argued that a political wish to combat the drugs trade badly handicapped British military efforts.

In the mid-20th century, American civil engineers undertook a massive project to build a network of irrigation channels and concrete-lined canals to allow agriculture to thrive along the Helmand River. This programme came to an abrupt end with the Soviet invasion of 1979; today these same US-built irrigation channels, many of them now clogged and badly in need of repair, are used by insurgents to ambush ISAF troops.

The Green Zone itself is tailor-made for asymmetrical warfare. It provides ready-made concealment for mines and IEDs, and facilitates close-range ambushes from concealed firing points. The myriad of irrigation channels serve as crude anti-tank ditches, and the densely cultivated terrain itself ensures that armoured vehicles cannot venture far into it. The thick overhead cover also makes identifying targets from the air difficult, even with the advanced optics and thermal imagery now available. War in the Green Zone is an infantry war. (MOD Crown Copyright)

HELMAND PROVINCE

Helmand is one of the most southerly provinces in Afghanistan, sharing a southern land border with Pakistan. It is the largest of all the country's 34 provinces, covering some 23,390 square miles (58,000km²), or roughly the size of the Republic of Ireland, with a population estimated at one million-plus. The provincial capital, Lashkar Gah, is a city of some 200,000 people and a significant historical trading hub. In the north-east of the province is the strategically vital Kajaki Dam, providing limited hydroelectric power to the Helmand Valley – and a constant target for insurgents.

Most of the population support themselves by primary agriculture in the irrigated 'Green Zone' stretching along the Helmand River; running roughly from north-east to south-west, this forms the living 'spine' of the otherwise desert province. Although a number of staple crops such as wheat and rice are harvested in Helmand, the province has become synonymous with the opium trade. Over 90 per cent of the world's heroin originates in Afghanistan and, according to the United Nations (UN), at least 50 per cent of that comes from Helmand, which makes the province the leading drug-producing region in the world. Cultivation of the opium poppy finances insurgents and civilians alike, since most Helmandis make their living to some degree from the drug trade (a fact which damagingly distracted some British politicians). The end of the harvest season, traditionally taking place between April and June, now signifies the start of the fighting season, when poppy farmers become insurgents.

The Helmandis live in timber-framed adobe-style compounds (essentially, condominium villages), each surrounded by high perimeter walls of baked mud mixed with straw. Compounds may be isolated among the crop-fields, or may be built clustered together in groups. Their outer walls can withstand hits from the 30mm Chain Gun of the Apache helicopter gunship, and often require breaching by means of anti-tank bar mines or heavy engineering vehicles. The insurgents turn these compounds into strongpoints by drilling 'murder holes' in the walls, particularly those that face on to alleyways or tracks that British troops may be obliged to use. These loopholes can be disguised with mud or debris until such time as they are required.

Helmand has always been known as something of a wild frontier, viewed with suspicion by the comparatively urbane Afghans in the capital, Kabul. While Afghans have a tribal and familial rather than a national consciousness, all have long memories of foreign incursions into their territories. Their bitter war against Soviet occupiers in the 1980s has not dimmed the legends of the British campaigns in 1842, 1878–80 and 1919. The first of these 'Afghan Wars' had ended in the massacre of a retreating British-Indian force, and the second had seen a famous Afghan victory in 1880 at Maiwand in nearby Kandahar province (the spiritual home of the Taliban) – a victory that still has a celebrated place in the rich oral history of the Afghans. Helmandi hostility towards the *Angrez*, as the British are called in Pashtu, is not a

