

NO WORSE ENEMY

THE INSIDE STORY OF THE
CHAOTIC STRUGGLE FOR
AFGHANISTAN

BEN ANDERSON



ONE WORLD

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CONTENTS

<i>Acronyms and abbreviations</i>	ix
<i>Maps</i>	xi
<i>Prologue</i>	xiii
<i>Introduction</i>	xv
<i>A note on translations</i>	xxi
PART I: THE BRITISH ARMY, JUNE TO OCTOBER, 2007 QUEEN'S COMPANY, THE GRENADIER GUARDS	1
PART II: US MARINE CORPS, JULY TO AUGUST, 2009 2ND BATTALION, 8TH MARINES	59
PART III: US MARINE CORPS, FEBRUARY TO MARCH, 2010 1ST BATTALION, 6TH MARINES	77
PART IV: US MARINE CORPS, JUNE 2010 1ST BATTALION, 6TH MARINES	175
PART V: US MARINE CORPS, DECEMBER 2010 TO JANUARY 2011, 3RD BATTALION, 5TH MARINES	189
<i>Afterword</i>	251
<i>Recommended further reading</i>	257
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	259
<i>Index</i>	261

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ABV	Assault Breacher Vehicle
ACOG	Advanced Combat Optical Gunsight
ALP	Afghan Local Police
ANA	Afghan National Army
ANCOP	Afghan National Civil Order Police
ANP	Afghan National Police
A-POB	Anti-Personnel Obstacle Breaching System
ASF	American Special Forces
CAO	Civil Affairs Officer
COC	Combat Operation Centre
COIN	Counter Insurgency
DC	District Centre
DFC	Directional Fragment Charge
DFID	Department For International Development
EOD	Explosive Ordnance Disposal
FOB	Forward Operating Base
GIROA	Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
GPMG	General Purpose Machine Gun
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
KIA	Killed in Action

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

LAW	Light Anti-tank Weapon
LTTs	Lines To Take
MEDEVAC	Medical Evacuation
MIC-LIC	Mine Clearing Line Charge
MRAP	Mine Resistant Ambush Protected
MREs	Meals Ready To Eat
NAAFI	The Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
NDS	National Directorate of Security (Afghan Intelligence Service)
OMLT	(pronounced ‘omelette’) Operational Mentor and Liaison Team
PAX	Passengers
PB	Patrol Base
PID	Positive Identification
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
Psy-Op	Psychological Operation
QRF	Quick Reaction Force
RC	Regional Command
ROC	Rehearsal of Concept
ROE	Rules of Engagement
RPG	Rocket-Propelled Grenade
R&R	Rest and Recuperation
SAW	Squad Automatic Weapon
Semper Fi	<i>Semper Fidelis</i> (‘Always faithful’ – the motto of the US Marines)
WMIK	Weapons Mount Installation Kit (mounted on a roofless Land Rover)

MAPS

Helmand Province	xviii
Operation Mushtaraq (Marjah)	120
The Sniper Hole (Marjah)	161
Pharmacy Road (Sangin)	222

INTRODUCTION

Everyone who has covered the wars in Afghanistan over the last thirty years has a few – possibly apocryphal – stories that perfectly sum up the struggles of foreign forces. One of my favourites came from a chance discussion with two American soldiers, whose home for twelve months – a dingy concrete arch – I was sleeping in.

I was in the Arghandab Valley, just outside Kandahar City, in October 2010. There hadn't been any fighting for a few weeks, so I was reading a book, written by a Russian journalist, about the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The author described a foot patrol with a wily old Russian commander when suddenly they had found themselves surrounded by a passing flock of sheep, guarded by their shepherd. Why, the reporter asked, had the sheep not been sheared? It was the middle of summer, when temperatures often top fifty degrees. The commander told him to grab a sheep and feel its belly. He did – and found several rifles, strapped underneath the animal, totally hidden from view. The commander grabbed another and found more. I was so amused by this story that I read it out loud to the two American soldiers. 'MOTHERFUCKER!' one of them screamed. 'We saw shitloads of sheep not too long ago and I remember thinking the exact same thing – why haven't they been sheared?' The likely answer to that question kept him angry for hours. We never seem to learn from history.

I've been travelling to Afghanistan, and in particular Helmand – the country's most violent province and the focus of first Britain's, then America's, military effort – for five years. When I was first

INTRODUCTION

there, what I saw raised continuous and obvious questions that I thought were too stupid to ask out loud. All those bombs are for five guys in sandals, with AKs? And they escaped? Those roofless old jeeps are all you have? Those junkies and thieves are the good guys? If the Taliban have been routed, why do all these IEDs keep popping up around us like mushrooms? If the people are so happy to have been liberated, why do they look so angry?

With each trip, the war became less recognisable as the one being described from podiums in Kabul, Washington and London. A positive spin could be expected but there was often such a gulf between what we were told was happening and what I was seeing with my own eyes that I sometimes questioned my recollections. Only when I watched the hundreds of hours of footage I'd gathered did I realise the situation was even more calamitous and our ambitions more fantastic than I had at first thought. And my shock only increased when I got accurate translations of what the Afghans I'd filmed were actually saying.

Each time I returned, there were new policies, new forces, new ambassadors, generals, planes, drones and even tanks. And there was a surge, because a surge, we were told, had turned things around in Iraq. On each visit, I was told that the Taliban were on their last legs, the Afghans were almost ready to provide security for themselves and the government was almost ready to govern. Mistakes were made in the past but now we're doing it right. Even the increasingly audacious attacks by the Taliban were seen as proof of their desperation. The tipping point was close.

I was deeply sceptical. I had to keep going back to see if I was wrong. Billions of dollars were being spent. Brilliant minds were dedicated to the project. The credibility of a superpower and NATO hung in the balance. Such an effort, with such high stakes, couldn't result in so little.

This is a simple book, written chronologically, about what I've seen: an honest account of what the war looks like on the ground. As it drags on and public interest evaporates, I don't think I have anything more important to offer than that. Apart from a tiny

INTRODUCTION

handful of quotes taken from my notebooks, every word spoken here was transcribed directly from my many video tapes.

In the months following the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration thought they had bombed their way to a swift and brilliant victory in Afghanistan. Some even thought they'd invented a new way of fighting wars, from twenty thousand feet, where none of their blood need be shed.

The Taliban, we now know, hadn't been defeated. They had merely stepped off the stage, to watch what happened next. Many had been willing to play a part in the new reality, which would have been entirely consistent with the history of conflict resolution in Afghanistan. But they were snubbed. What happened next, after vital resources had been diverted to Iraq, was simply a return to predatory power politics and the rule of the warlords. To a place where the corrupt and vicious thrived and the most able and honest were sidelined. The state of affairs that had allowed the Taliban to sweep to power in the first place. The 2005 elections, which might have led to a truly representative government, were a sham, with some observers claiming that fraudulent votes outnumbered the genuine.

So the Taliban gradually returned, slipping back over the border from Pakistan as easily as they had left. As fighters, they were surprised to discover that beyond Kabul, there was no one around to stop them. Soon they were operating in every province of Afghanistan. In the countryside, where most Afghans live, they began to provide better security, justice and employment (often through participation in, or the protection of, the opium trade) than the government itself. Sadly, this wasn't difficult.

This eventually led to the deployment of NATO forces beyond Kabul. In the summer of 2006, just over three thousand British troops (of which only six hundred or so would actually be out on patrol and in contact with Afghans) were sent to Helmand province. Helmand, together with neighbouring Kandahar, was the Taliban's historical power base. At first, the Brits didn't wear helmets, handed out toys to children and were only tasked with 'facilitating reconstruction and development'. The defence secretary even

INTRODUCTION

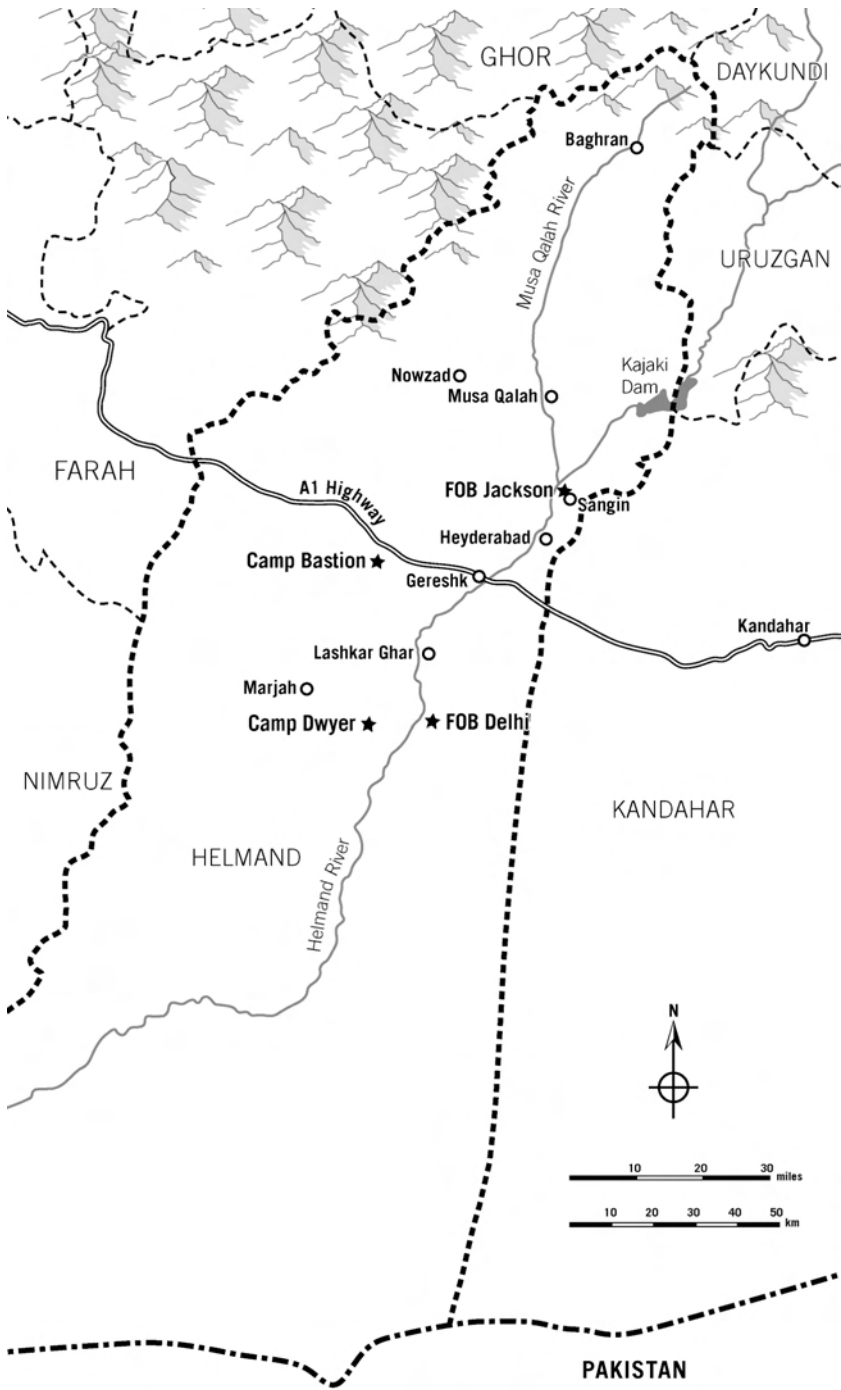


Figure 1 Helmand Province (© David Berger)

INTRODUCTION

hoped they could complete their mission without firing a single bullet. Our good intentions, it was thought, would mean that we would be welcomed. Soon afterwards, the war in Afghanistan really began. The Brits found themselves fighting off waves of attacks against their tiny and isolated patrol bases.

I first started travelling to southern Afghanistan in the summer of 2007, when the hopelessly under-manned British forces were struggling to hang on to what little ground they had. Since then, I've spent a lot of time with British, Afghan, and American troops, often during key operations, as they tried to carry out the latest policies. I stayed with them for weeks on end as they fought their way into towns and villages with the aim of establishing a permanent presence. I spent as little time as possible on the main bases, where not much ever happens. Staying with the infantry also meant I got to talk to Afghans far more than is thought possible when you're on embeds and to see how the war has affected their lives. The stories and exchanges recorded here are not anomalous. I've made an effort to exclude any that are. They show what happened many times. Some of the people represented here might feel cheated. They might argue that things eventually improved after I left. While this may be true, the overall picture continues to worsen considerably.

I have travelled elsewhere in Afghanistan but I have chosen to focus on Helmand province, where the war has always been fiercest. Helmand also offers the benefit of seeing how the two largest contributing forces – British and American – coped in such unforgiving terrain. The Brits eventually had eight thousand troops there but it was nowhere near enough. The Americans ended up sending thirty-three thousand and even then, their small gains were described as 'fragile and reversible'. I was able to directly compare the two in Sangin, where a third of British casualties occurred, which was taken over by the US Marines in 2010. It was no coincidence that I came closer to being killed with almost every visit. Apart from a few square kilometres of land – and it was never more than that – being cleared and secured here and there, the only thing I ever saw

INTRODUCTION

happen was an increase in troop numbers and a corresponding increase in casualties, military and civilian. This, I was told, was further evidence of the Taliban's desperation and proof that the insurgency was in its last throes.

Ben Anderson

10/9/11

PART I

THE BRITISH ARMY
JUNE TO OCTOBER, 2007
QUEEN'S COMPANY
THE GRENADIER GUARDS

The British Army, it was thought, would be perfect for Helmand province. From their extensive experience in Northern Ireland, they knew how to interact with people, and with their self-deprecating, informal approach, should be brilliant at winning hearts and minds. They first deployed to Helmand in 2006, when they were the only major military force in the province. They expected to stay no longer than three years.

The Ministry of Defence had kept reporters away from the fighting. But when the soldiers started releasing their own footage, shot on hand-held cameras and mobile phones, showing fierce fighting from tiny, isolated and almost derelict outposts, they were forced to change their policy. After over eighteen months of negotiations, I was finally allowed to join the troops in the summer of 2007.

The MoD weren't the only ones who didn't want me in Helmand. The BBC had also shown little interest. The trip only happened at all because I'd been supported by one executive, who had commissioned me before. Everyone else thought there was

NO WORSE ENEMY

nothing to say or learn about the war in Afghanistan, and even less public interest. Only when I returned with hours of footage of battles that lasted for days was I given a slot in peak time.

CHAPTER 1

‘My conscience is clear because it was a genuine mistake. You know and I know the Taliban were keeping those people there because it was a target’, said Lieutenant Colonel Richard Westley, the Commanding Officer of the Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters. He was holding a *shura* (a meeting of elders) with Dur Said Ali Shah, the Mayor of Gereshk, the second-largest town in Helmand province. ‘I would like to make a goodwill payment to help with the cost of the funeral. This is not compensation. Nothing can compensate for the loss of a whole family. But it might just help with the payment for the ceremony, the funeral and the guests that have to be entertained as part of Afghan protocol.’

The Mayor nodded.

‘I will rely on your judgment and wisdom to tell me when the best time to do that is’, said the Colonel.

The Mayor nodded again but remained silent.

On the day that I first arrived in Helmand province, twenty-five civilians had been killed by a 500lb bomb dropped on a building from which the Taliban were firing. Only after the bomb had been dropped and the fighting stopped did the British soldiers who had called for the air strike realise their mistake. As well as around thirty fighters, they found the bodies of civilians, including nine women and three children. They had been hiding in a small room in one corner of the compound.

‘The intensity of fire from that building was such that trees and branches were being knocked down by it, and the risk to my

soldiers was so great that we engaged with an aircraft and dropped a bomb', the Colonel explained.

Every senior British soldier I spoke to was certain that the people had tried to flee but were prevented from doing so.

The Colonel said that even the man whose family was killed blamed the Taliban.

'He was vehemently against them and holds them responsible for a pretty deceitful and cynical incident where they rounded his family into a building, then fought from that building, knowing that we would respond. We killed all the Taliban but unfortunately, and unknown to us, we killed all the civilians that the Taliban had been incarcerating there. We were duped. And frankly, that rather hurts because we like to think we're a little bit cleverer. While we are deeply deeply regretful about it, it is some comfort when people come up and say "look, we don't hold you responsible, we know who is bringing about the evil in the valley and it isn't ISAF (International Security Assistance Force)".'

President Karzai denounced the incident on television, saying that the 'careless' killing of innocents will wipe out any goodwill generated by everything else foreign governments are trying to do in Afghanistan. 'Afghan life is not cheap and should not be treated as such', he said, more angry than I had ever seen him. The deaths took the toll for 2007 to almost 250, more than the number killed the previous year. It was still only July.

The Colonel addressed the Mayor directly. 'It is my promise to you that we will not again strike buildings unless we are absolutely sure that civilians are not in the area. I will find the Taliban and I will destroy them. But if I kill ten Taliban and one civilian, that is a failure.'

Afghan homes are surrounded by high and impenetrable walls. The actual living quarters are hidden from view. The pilot who dropped the bomb had flown over the building twice and seen nothing but Taliban fighters with weapons. That there were no civilians to be seen is hardly a surprise – they were unlikely to stand out in the open after the Taliban had gone into their homes and

started firing. It is impossible to know that there are no civilians in a compound unless someone can go in and check every room, which they can't do in the middle of a fight. The bomb had been dropped at night, in complete darkness.

I asked if there would be a change in tactics.

'No. We just have to apply the tactics we've used in the past with a greater degree of certainty. Individuals have to be targeted directly, without buildings being hit. We need to be that bit more certain there are no civilians in the area.'

And if this happens again, I asked, do you stand any chance of winning the support of the local people? The people of Gereshk, he explained, were pragmatic. They would sit on the fence and see what happened before choosing which side to take. (Or whether to take sides at all, I thought.)

'I think we're at a fairly critical stage. I don't think another incident of that nature would undermine the good that we've done. But I'm just not prepared to take that risk', he said.

It wasn't chance that the first meeting I saw between Coalition troops and Afghans was about civilian casualties. The subject of damage to people's homes, or security in general, dominated the vast majority of discussions I saw. More than a year after entering Helmand, the British effort, which was supposed to be about aiding reconstruction and development, had become overwhelmingly military. The soldiers were struggling to protect themselves and the measures they were taking were costing the Afghans dearly.

The Mayor's phone rang with a tune that sounded like a theme from a Super Mario game.

'Good ring tone, good vibe', said Westley, nodding his head slightly to the rhythm.

The *shuras* took place every week and were open either to the public or to elected Afghan officials, who were supposed to be consulted on military operations and development projects, while being mentored on how to govern. But with the British faces changing every six months, Afghan officials often simply went along with

whatever was being said and took what they could. The long-term deals were done elsewhere.

Lieutenant Colonel Westley and Mayor Ali Shah sat on cushions at one end of a long, old carpet, in a small room just outside the soldiers' accommodation in Forward Operating Base (FOB) Price, the main British base just outside Gereshk. Below them, on the carpet itself, were an Afghan National Army (ANA) commander, a police chief, three British soldiers, 'Lucky' the terp (interpreter), and two American Special Forces soldiers, sporting thick beards, who never spoke.

'How are the people in the town feeling about security at the moment?' asked the Colonel.

The police chief said that the people wanted the Taliban out but they didn't want these big operations. The people didn't understand why the Taliban had to be fought in their midst. They wanted to know why there couldn't be another front line outside the town. Colonel Westley promised that would happen one day. The Afghan Army commander said the Taliban hid their weapons under their scarves and hid themselves among the people. They took shovels and pretended to be working in the fields. 'And as soon as you're gone, they throw away the shovels', he said.

'That's what insurgents do', said the Colonel, 'but with your help, the NDS (the National Directorate of Security – Afghan intelligence) and fingerprinting equipment I'll soon have ... we'll be able to see if these people have fired a weapon and if they are locals or Punjabis, Pakistanis or Chechens.' There had been intelligence reports and rumours about foreign fighters, including British Pakistanis (one with a Midlands accent), Arabs and even a sixteen-year-old female Chechen sniper.

'Between us we will sort them out', said Westley. He ended every statement with a sentence like this, always using the words 'we' or 'us'. A reminder that this was supposed to be a team effort. It was a sentiment or illusion that the Afghans didn't seem to share. They always said 'you'.

* * * * *

A few days later, after a heated argument with my Ministry of Defence minder, I attended another *shura* with some local farmers, about more civilian casualties caused by air strikes.

‘Where apologies are required, they will be made’, said Captain Patrick Hennessey. He was a well-spoken officer (you can usually identify a British Officer just by hearing them speak) from the Grenadier Guards, attached to the battle group commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Westley. ‘Then, the process of reparations will be looked into. Compensation is a big thing in the Afghan culture, in a way that we find quite strange. There’s a very clear financial compensation defined for the loss of a daughter, a son or an uncle and it’s something that we will go into in this meeting in depth’, he said.

The strikes had mostly been American, and been called by the Brits, but everyone defending them was from the Afghan government; the first and only time I saw any representatives from the central government in Helmand. Captain Hennessey and an American soldier – who’d appeared from nowhere – sat at the back of the room but were soon fast asleep in their plastic chairs.

An official, the head of the anti-crime department of the Gereshk district police, stood up to speak. A small man, with a neatly-cropped beard that had started to turn grey, he was as emotional as the men he addressed and struggled not to break down. ‘The ISAF operations are not useful’, he said. ‘They leave and the Taliban come back, so we will always have these problems. Local commanders, ex-Mujahadeen, can establish security, not outsiders. They are indiscriminate. They see no difference between women and children and the Taliban.’ His finger trembled as he raised it in emphasis. I thought he was going over the top, trying to let everyone know that he empathised with them. But then I realised that he too had lost several family members to an air strike. ‘You can ask anyone about how honestly I have served the government and if I have any links with the Taliban’, he said, almost in tears. ‘But they have hit me so hard that I am stunned. What can I do? I have lost four of my brothers. How can I look after their families now?’

NO WORSE ENEMY

Neither the other officials nor the farmers reacted. The fact that this had happened to a senior government official surprised no one. 'After the bombing, no ground troops came out at all. They could have come but no one did. I don't have anything else to say, my only request is that in future operations, civilian casualties should be prevented', he said, although the only two people in the room with any connection to air strikes were fast asleep.

The elders raged about the bombings, saying that the Taliban were often far away by the time the bombs were dropped, that security was getting worse and that people would soon start joining the Taliban. 'Life has no meaning for me any more', said one man, 'I have lost twenty-seven members of my family. My house has been destroyed. Everything I've built for seventy years is gone.'

Metal containers were brought in, placed on tables and opened. The elders were given bricks of five hundred Afghani notes, signing for them by dipping their right thumbs in ink and making fingerprints. Captain Hennessey thought that millions of dollars were being handed over: \$100,000 per person killed. The actual amount was closer to \$2000. The men were told the money had come from the president himself. As he handed it out, the ANA commander said, 'May God give you the fortitude to bear this and protect you from such sorrows in the future.'

The money, a huge amount in Helmand, was handed out in front of the Afghan National Police. I worried that the men (who carried the money wrapped in sheets and would bury it somewhere in their compounds) might soon be receiving another unwelcome visit.

Afterwards, I spoke to some of the men who had received compensation.

'I lost twenty people and I was given two million Afghanis [about \$46,000]' said one man, explaining what had happened. 'It was before 12.30 at night when your forces came to our area. They were involved in a fight but the Taliban retreated. I had put everyone, all the family and the children, into one room but after the fighting was over we brought them outside to their beds. Later,

a jet came and dropped bombs on our house. Two rooms were destroyed. In one of the rooms, my two nephews and my son were there. My son survived. I rescued him from the debris. In the other room were six of my uncle's family. All became martyrs. They were buried under the soil. I moved the children away and came back to rescue those under the debris. While we were trying to do that, the children were so frightened they started running away. The plane shot them one by one.

'All we want is security, whether you bring it or the Taliban. We are not supporting war. We support peace and security. If you bring peace and security you are my king. If they bring security they are our kings. I want nothing. I don't want a post in the government. All I want is to be able to move around.

'I was given this money for the martyrs but it means nothing to me. I wouldn't give one person for all the money I've been given. I'm grateful that the president has paid attention to us but if you gave someone the whole world it wouldn't bring a person back.'

He was in tears by the time he'd finished speaking. I couldn't ask him any more questions.