

Remembering Afghanistan

As we mark the 10th anniversary of the end of Operation Herrick, or British operations in Afghanistan, on 12 December 2014, we speak to former frontline soldier, Rob, who was just 23 when he lost his sight in action.

Op Herrick was the code name for all British military activity within Afghanistan between 2002 and 2014. The operation saw a total of 616 serious or very serious casualties among British armed forces and civilian personnel, peaking between 2009 and 2010.

There was a total of 7,807 field hospital admissions, with around 28 percent of these being those wounded in action. There were also 7,477 medical air evacuations during the 12-year operation. In the 12 years of Op Herrick, British forces suffered a total of 457 deaths. Over 150,000 British service personnel served in Afghanistan.

Over 600 personnel suffered life changing injuries. One of these was blind veteran Rob Long. He spoke to our Military Engagement and Events Officer, Rob Cotterill, about his memories of the operation.

Rob Cotterill: Rob, lovely to chat to you this afternoon, and thanks for taking the time to discuss your experiences within Afghanistan, while serving in the Royal Artillery 473 Special Ops Battery.

In 2010, serving within the Royal Artillery, you were a frontline soldier within Afghanistan. What was your first impression of arriving within theatre? And what really struck you the most about actually being in Afghanistan?

Rob Long: Well, arriving in theatre, it's what you trained for, for years. I joined the army in 2006 and I've done all my training. I've joined an elite battery and now I've been posted to Afghanistan as part of a six-man team to do what I felt was a really important job: high, close target surveillance. And it was a culmination of all that training and all those years. I was excited.

I knew how dangerous it was. At that time in 2010 there was a huge IED (Improvised Explosive Devices) threat. It was something like 1,000 IEDs being laid a month in Sangin alone. It was ridiculously high, and we were there to combat that. I felt like that was an important job for, not only the safety of our troops, but the safety of the area because they're indiscriminate explosive devices.

We'd all seen the news of the soldiers coming back, but once you're out there you see that it's not just the soldiers getting injured - the British soldiers - it's the Afghan

national army guys, the Afghan national police, the civilians. And I was excited and really proud to put into action my training.

When you fly in, it's on an unmarked plane - almost like a civilian plane going from Brize Norton to Kabul and it's at night with all the lights off. So you can't really see anything, but you get out there into Kabul and you're met with a military airport, military base and everyone there, you know. There's no civvies there anymore.

It's everyone from ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) and the international forces are all there and it's "Welcome to Afghanistan". You're now in a war zone. Then you start your period of acclimatisation. So, once we got off at Kabul, we went straight over to Bastion and now you're out in the desert.

At this point, it's daylight. And flying over you see the desert; you see the mountains; you see all the terrain; you see the small villages. Arriving in Bastion, it's very different from the training environments I've been in, but Afghanistan is a very different climate, especially as we flew over there in the spring so we'd just had the winter. All the crops are gone and it's very flat, barren land, and the heat is just starting to rise a bit.

You can do all the training in these areas, but until you get there, you don't realise what you have to adapt to. You're shocked by the heat.

It's completely different, but getting over there, coming from a six-man team, we weren't training as... as a sort of battalion. We do get attached at battalion level to do the six months pre-deployment, but we were on quite a specialist mission, and it was rapid reaction.

When I got over there, it was great to see other small teams from my unit there and get to see what they'd done. We were halfway through the tour of Herrick 11 when we landed. So, the plan was to go through Herrick 11, go through Herrick 12 and see where we were by the end of Herrick 12 of our team. It was potentially going to be a 10 to 12-month tour.

Rob Cotterill: So, in, so in terms of your specific role in theatre - what you're able to say, given the unit you're working with - what were your tasks on a day-to-day basis?

Rob Long: So, we had the covert and overt sides of that. The overt stuff was putting up eyes and ears and surveillance - very obvious surveillance positions around the FOBs (Forward Operating Base). This would just be to deter people from getting too close to the FOBs because we'd have eyes on them straight away. We'd understand their routes, we'd understand the enemy's movements.

That was getting outside of the wire (the confines of the base) because, at this point, missions going outside of the wire were starting to slow down a little bit towards the summer of 2010.

It was most because of the IED threat, you know, that was their tactic at slowing us down. You could barely move in Afghanistan. You wouldn't be able to walk down a road without spotting a potential IED. Every day we were getting contacted as there was someone getting injured within a 10-kilometre zone of the FOB. So, we put out overt cameras - very, very obvious - so we could catch guys who were just being completely brazen and getting as close to the FOB as possible.

With the covert side there's not much as I can talk about - finding valuable targets, finding caches of weapons and basically that sneaky beaky running around to find where the threat's coming from.

Rob Cotterill: So, it would be fair to say that you were deployed at a time within Afghanistan, which was highly kinetic, quite punchy. You were subjected to quite a lot of small arms from RPG indirect fire as well from IED.

Rob Long: Yes, straightaway. It was straightaway. So, what happens if you land as a regiment, when you're doing your acclimatisation you're all together and there's big areas where the UK forces are stationed together in massive tents in Bastion and they will acclimatise together.

Whereas we were coming in as a six-man team, so they had to find us a place. And the only place that was spare was right next to where the MERT (Medical Emergency Response Team) lands. So as soon as we got to Bastion, we were seeing soldiers coming in with the most devastating injuries every day.

Like, you get to Afghanistan... It was as soon as we arrived as there's guys coming off the helicopter. It was Blackhawks going in and out every hour, with guys coming off with, you know, Cat 1 injuries. They're missing legs, missing arms, complete disfigurements.

After the short period of acclimatisation, that's when we flew out to where our area of operations was going to be on Pharmacy Road.

It was right off the Afghan national highway. Obviously, that's a key area to protect from the IED threat so that civilians and the country can run through the main highway. Even landing there, we'd come under fire from RPG straightaway in the helicopter. And as soon as you're at the helicopter, you stand to, you jump up on a sangar and, yeah, welcome to Afghanistan! This is it straightaway.

You've got to jump in there and react and become part of the team of the lads in that force that have been there for six months or three months already. And they've experienced losses. A lot of the guys have been injured, taken incoming fire and fixed themselves up and they're still there.

Rob Cotterill: Yeah, it's tough. In terms of when you were out on patrol, and if we move forward to what happened to you on the 8th July, can you talk us through, the before, the during and the kind of after process and to where you are now?

Rob Long: Six of us went out that day to conduct more of the covert surveillance side of things. You have your sort of electronic countermeasures, and you have all your weaponry and everything and your mission critical equipment. We set up before first light.

The idea was to get in there, before first light. We had a few kilometres to go outside the FOB. As we started making it to our target area, we could see some activity. We could see some very young spotters. They had no business being in this area with a motorbike being how young they were.

It was clear what they were. We decided to push on because of the time constraints we were under and the job we had to do. We got to our target area. We conducted the job we were supposed to be doing and unfortunately, my patrol commander that day, Sam Robinson, he triggered an IED. First light was just coming up. And that was the last time I ever saw light again.

Sam... unfortunately was killed straight away. He was on top of the IED, so he got killed straightaway. Another colleague from the unit, he was injured as well. He had to be medevac'd. And my left eye got ripped out straightaway by the blast. My right eye was damaged too, but I can still remember flashes and, you know, it was still working enough to get me back to safety with the rest of the team and get medevac'd back to the nearest FOB.

I was team medic for that day, but every guy in the unit is medically trained. And thank God for that because they did an amazing job at getting me back within that golden hour and doing the right thing, sort of leaving certain injuries as they were wrapping up what they could.

I remember getting back to the FOB and, due to the training, due to the essence of what we were doing, making noise out the field is not what you want to do. But now I'm back in the safety of the FOB, that's when I could assess my injuries and, you know, really, really let go. And I do remember letting out a huge scream of pain. And then once I did that, the pain started, completely overwhelming me.

Having my colleagues next to me, grabbing my hand, telling me to calm down, telling me it'll be alright... you know, giving me reassurance, you know, I'm back, I'm back now. And that settled things down quite a lot until I was able to get the morphine and the medication that I needed to get me in a bit of a more stable state.

Rob Cotterill: I think one of the things from having prior conversations with you, that struck me, was a phrase that you said, the last thing you remember seeing was looking up at the sky, the Afghan scenery, but also seeing your colleagues before you actually lost your complete sight and how proud you were wearing the uniform

and actually doing the job that you trained for so hard to do. I think that's really something to be proud of as well.

Rob Long: I mean, you know what military humour is like. It's what gets you through. It gets you through the worst of it. I remember flashes from the IED instrument, but what I really remember about that tour and being a part of the army, is the laughs we used to have; the jokes; the smiles on the guys faces, and the professionalism of when they were doing their job.

They're the images I remember of Afghanistan. They're the images I remember of being in the British Army. That's what stays with me for the rest of my life, not the incident that ended my career. It's the experiences I got through from that. And that was one of the greatest things about the British army.

That's stuck with me through this sight loss journey, through when the times get dark. One of the things that's really stuck with me about my journey in the British Army and my time in Afghanistan is to remember that you can smile, and you can turn things around and have a perspective on things and laugh with your mates and, and get through, make it through to the next day.

Rob Cotterill: Rob, thank you very much for that. There was, there was a highly kinetic period in Afghanistan where we lost a lot of good soldiers - men and women. And of course, Afghan forces took a significant toll as well. So thank you for sharing your experience with us, telling us what it was like over in Afghanistan for yourself.

Rob Long: Yeah, thank you. I'm incredibly proud of what I did. Obviously it's not the way I would have wanted my career to have ended, but thanks to Blind Veterans UK I've been able to get my life back and make the most out of life. And a lot of that I want to do in honour of those guys who didn't get to make it back.

And that's another reason I can keep a big smile on my face is because, you know, what they would give to be here and what they sacrificed was, you know... it was the ultimate sacrifice. And I want to honour that in living my life to the fullest.

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