

Another grim milestone of UK fatalities in Afghanistan

By Harvey Thompson
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On June 8, the number of UK fatalities in Afghanistan reached a grim milestone with news of the death of three British soldiers in a suicide attack in southern Afghanistan.

The three, two of whom were still teenagers, came from the Parachute Regiment. The dead soldiers were David Murray, 19, from Dumfries; Private Nathan Cuthbertson, 19, from Sunderland; and Daniel Gamble, 22, from East Sussex.

Their deaths brought the number of UK troops killed since the US-led invasion in 2001 to 100. Altogether, more than 800 NATO and US soldiers have died in the present Afghan conflict.

On June 10, two more soldiers from the same regiment were shot dead on foot patrol in southern Afghanistan. Their names have yet to be revealed, but the announcement means that it took less than 48 hours for the UK fatality rate of 100—already considered a significant landmark—to be superseded.

Announcement of their deaths was followed by the usual glib official messages of condolences, each one vying with the previous for some clumsy notion of justification.

Commenting on the three fatalities, Prime Minister Gordon Brown said, “They have paid the ultimate price, but they have achieved something of lasting value—helping turn a lawless region sheltering terrorists into an emerging democracy.”

But Anthony Philippon, the father of Captain Jim Philippon, 29, of 7 Parachute Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery, who was among the first UK soldiers to die in Helmand in 2006, questioned such official optimism. He stressed that the recent deaths would not be the last. “It was inevitable. It’s not going to get better, it’s going to get worse,” he said. “I think it is going to turn out as big a disaster as Iraq.”

There is evidence to back this up. The BBC’s Kabul correspondent, Alastair Leithead, charted the period from 2006 as the moment that the tide began to turn against British military involvement in the Afghan occupation.

He highlighted the statement made by the then-defence secretary, John Reid, in April 2006 as UK forces first arrived in Helmand province, when he told a press conference in Kabul, “We would be perfectly happy to leave in three years’ time without firing one shot, because our mission is to protect the reconstruction.”

By August, the commander of NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) at the time, British General Sir David Richards, described what was actually happening in Helmand:

“Days and days of intense fighting—being woken up by yet

another attack when they haven’t slept for 24 hours,” he said. “This sort of thing hasn’t really happened so consistently I don’t think since the Korean War or the Second World War. This is persistent low level, dirty fighting.”

It is sobering to reflect that in the first four-and-a-half years of the military occupation of Afghanistan, just seven British troops died—only two of them as a result of hostile action. By the time the British military death toll in Iraq reached 100—in January 2006—there had only been five UK fatalities in Afghanistan.

The apparent lack of any concentrated opposition to foreign forces allowed the British military and media for a time to portray the occupation as a “battle for the hearts and minds” of the population.

By the summer of 2006, all this had changed as the situation facing ordinary Afghans worsened. For millions of people, especially those who worked on the land, the years following the 2001 invasion saw them slip further into poverty amid near-drought conditions. In the cities, unemployment and destitution increased, alongside a severe lack of habitable housing due to the return of significant numbers of refugees.

Revelations of prisoner abuse by US forces had already emerged just months after the toppling of the Taliban and the installation of the US-client regime of Hamid Karzai, including disclosures towards the end of 2002 of the torturing to death of at least two Afghan detainees held at the US military interrogation centre at Bagram Air Base.

The numbers of foreign troops in Afghanistan continued to rise as did the civilian death toll, particularly as a result of US/NATO-directed air strikes.

After four years in power, it was clear that the Karzai regime was politically ineffective without the backing of ever-greater numbers of NATO/US troops. It was also widely perceived as deeply corrupt and in hock to the sectional interests of various narcotics barons, tribal chiefs and military warlords.

When British forces began arriving in Helmand province in 2006—to peak at almost 8,000—commanding officers seemed genuinely taken aback by the scale of the resistance by significant sections of the population.

British troops soon found themselves scattered across the province with too few helicopters to effectively resupply them, and being attacked day and night by large groups of insurgents and Taliban fighters. Corporal Trevor Coult of the Royal Irish Regiment, decorated for bravery in Iraq, said at the time, “It’s the

worst place I've been to. Baghdad's like a walk in the park compared to here."

A recent article on this period in the *Guardian* newspaper noted, "In July 2006 a fire support section of the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers was sent at [one] hour's notice to reinforce the Gurkhas hard pressed in their Alamo at Nowa Zad. They were expected to cover the Gurkhas for only two days—but in the event did not come off their mortar position for 107 days, during which they fired 1,500 mortars 10,000 rifle and light machinegun rounds, and 89,000 general purpose machinegun rounds." By September 2006, 15 more British troops had been killed. In the same month, the biggest single loss of life for British troops since the Falklands war occurred when a Nimrod reconnaissance plane caught fire and crashed in Kandahar, killing all 14 servicemen on board.

NATO troops attempted to go on the offensive through the autumn and winter of 2006 in a series of major counterinsurgency operations. Alongside the rising death toll of insurgent fighters and Afghan civilians was now added the rising death rate of NATO soldiers. Tensions boiled over in the military alliance over the issue of which countries should commit more troops to the Afghan conflict.

By the end of 2006, UK casualties had reached a total of 44. A year later, the number of British losses in Afghanistan had almost doubled to 86 and hundreds had been horrifically injured, many losing limbs.

In recent months, the strategy of the insurgents has aped developments in Iraq, with more roadside bombs detonated by home-made pressure pads or by wire from hundreds of metres away and the proliferation of suicide bomb attacks.

Figures published by the United Nations show there were a record 140 suicide bombings in Afghanistan last year, up 600 percent in comparison with 2005. Taliban attacks increased fourfold over the same period. Two months ago, the International Crisis Group outlined a series of scenarios facing Afghanistan "without further help," all of them catastrophic: civil war along ethnic lines, the creation of a fully criminalised narco-state, the Pashtun south abandoned to Islamist extremists or, most disturbing of all, of regional powers being drawn once again into the Afghan conflict.

According to the *Independent* newspaper, "Despite the presence of more than 50,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan, some American officials believe that the country is replacing Iraq as the deadliest place in the 'war on terror.' In a speech by the US General Dan McNeill on leaving command of ISAF, last month, he said the NATO-led force of 45,000 was badly under strength and needed at least 80,000 to pacify the regions under its command, train an effective Afghan army and the notoriously corrupt police force. Many military historians would see this last figure as an appalling underestimation."

The latest casualties in Afghanistan will inevitably focus many minds on the legitimacy of the conflict. Caroline Wyatt, defence correspondent for the BBC, described it as "a grim milestone that will lead many in Britain to ask: is the mission worth this cost in lives, and does the UK—and NATO—have the right strategy in Afghanistan, and will it stay the course?"

Dr. Michael Clarke, head of the Royal United Services Institute,

stated, "If the British people think there is a point to the current operations in Afghanistan, then the figure of 100 deaths—although a tragic milestone—is sustainable. However, if they do not, and view the losses as pointless or avoidable, then even a single death is one too many."

The realisation amongst increasing numbers of frontline soldiers that they are just so much expendable material in the interests of a "mission" based entirely on lies is becoming a growing factor in military and public life.

In his June 9 column for the *Guardian*, Robert Fox gave a sense of this emerging disillusionment. He described the 100th British fatality as "no empty symbol and statistic, considering the length of the campaign—longer now than the entire Second World War—and that there seems no obvious end in sight in Helmand, or anywhere else across southern Afghanistan for that matter.

"The deaths have stirred some deep emotions within the army, and not all of them just grief. There is a great deal of frustration against the political class that sent them on the open-ended wild goose chase across Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgun and Zabul provinces—now the home turf of the biggest narcotics production in the world."

Fox cited a recent book by James Fergusson, *A Million Bullets*, in which the author reveals how "many of the soldiers that did the heaviest fighting in 2006, some now returned to duty with the same regiments and brigade in Helmand, expressed to him their doubts about the whole concept of the mission. An unsurprising number of the more traumatised questioned whether it was worth it all, so scarce were the signs of gain from it."

As if to remind the world of Britain's past imperial ambitions and defeats in the region, soldiers in Helmand recently unearthed British rifles lost in a massacre that took place there in 1880. According to the *Independent* newspaper of June 8, the soldiers recovered the weapons looted from the bodies of their Victorian forebears who were killed at Maiwand in one of the worst British defeats of Queen Victoria's 63-year reign. An Anglo/Indian force of 2,500 was routed by an Afghan army of about 12,000 men.

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