

TALK ON OPS IN AFGHANISTAN – February 2011

Early in February, Terry and I attended a talk in aid of The Royal British Legion, the Army Benevolent Fund and North Creake church, given by Major James Lee of the Coldstream Guards, who had recently completed a six month detachment to Afghanistan, stationed in Helmand province on Op Herrick 11.

The presentation began with an introduction to the country, its ethnic/linguistic distribution of population, and its government boundaries, none of which are in harmony. National boundaries mean nothing to the tribes, so, for instance, they cross and re-cross the border into Pakistan without a thought. The population is tribal, and this over-rides everything that the Afghans do. Having said that, they are generally friendly to coalition troops unless being watched by Taliban or other insurgents, as then there would be reprisals. It is very rare for the coalition troops to encounter women or even girls over the age of about thirteen, because of the protective nature of their religion.

In fact, much of the Afghan ethos is built upon pride, loss of face, and retribution, so there is little in common between the Afghan natives and the coalition forces trying to win their "hearts and minds". Every aspect of their lives and values is different from ours, including the fact that they do not hold long term views – men will look forward only to the next harvest, and cannot think or plan beyond that, which makes the concept of a change of government, regime, or lifestyle alien to them. This is mainly because of the short life expectancy in the country, and in an attempt to improve matters, the coalition forces are bringing more advanced medical facilities to the local population where they can.

The Afghan insurgents are very technologically advanced, and adapt to changes in coalition practices very quickly: the example was given of an explosive device which the coalition personnel avoided by changing their tactics, and within **12 hours**, devices were being deployed by insurgents which took account of this and achieved their objective of destroying the coalition vehicles.

The greatest threat currently is from improvised explosive devices (IEDs), referred to by the media as "roadside bombs". Although initially fire fights posed a greater threat, the coalition's successful deployment of greater fire power and technology put them ahead, so the insurgents changed tactics. The most important piece of equipment used by the infantry against IEDs is an enhanced metal detector, although IEDs are now being made without metal content. At present, the battery can be picked up by this device, but because of the large number of IEDs planted and the small number of bomb disposal teams, these teams cannot be called until a positive identification of an IED is made, so after initial contact by metal detector, soldiers creep forward lying prone, feeling through the sand with their fingertips, to establish whether or not a bomb is in their path. If one is found, a cordon is established, the bomb disposal team called, and until their arrival, a 24 hour guard is mounted. This situation has, on occasions, lasted for as long as three days before the device can be deactivated.

Soldiers are living in tented accommodation with few facilities: Maj Lee told us how much morale improved when an "Afghan washing machine" appeared on camp – a cement mixer, which was quickly put to use for washing clothing. Soldiers' lives are being saved because of modern medical practices and the speed with which serious casualties are evacuated from the battlefield to Camp Bastion, the main British base, and if necessary back to the UK. On the battlefield, the chief means of immediate survival seemed to be a shell dressing and a tourniquet to stem the serious loss of blood from a major limb injury.

Maj Lee was very complimentary about the quality of the equipment being used by British forces in theatre, which he feels is ideal for the conflict, and he showed us several horrifying slides of soldiers who had been shot in the head but saved from injury by the standard issue Kevlar helmet.

A large number of questions was put to Maj Lee after his presentation, and the evening, which was organised by Brigadier Peter Stewart-Richardson of North Creake, raised £624 for the three charitable beneficiaries.