

On the eve of the British withdrawal from Afghanistan, **Anthony Tucker-Jones** asks whether Task Force Helmand has achieved lasting security in the province

# OUT OF AFGHANISTAN PART 1



**T**he US-led Regional Command (South West) assumed control of combat operations in Helmand on 1 April 2014, marking the end of the British-led Task Force Helmand (TFH). The British military HQ in Helmand's provincial capital Lashkar Gah had already relocated to Camp Bastion early in the year – the latter now comes under the command of the US Marine Corps. At its peak, TFH had 10,000 troops deployed to 137 bases. Some of the last to go were Lashkar Gah, Lashkar Gah Durai and Price.

Much of the British military's heavy equipment has now been shipped home. That this process has been conducted largely without any major mishaps is testimony to the professionalism of the British armed forces. The mass exodus from Helmand has resulted in one of the largest logistical operations involving the British armed forces since the Second World War. About 5,000 British troops remain but they will be gone by the end of the year and a small training and liaison team in Kabul will replace TFH.

There has been much debate over whether Britain's military role in Afghanistan, and Helmand in particular, was one of nation building or counter-terrorism.

Arguably the former has not been a great success, but the latter has. Unfortunately over the years the distinction between the two has become blurred, leading to allegations that Britain's support for first Operation Enduring Freedom and then Operation Herrick was a fool's errand.

The idea of creating a unitary state out of the fragmented mess that is Afghanistan was an all but impossible task. Ultimately, however, it was the very professionalism and indeed optimism of the British armed forces in the face of a resurgent Taliban that fuelled TFH's mission creep in Helmand. Britain's Defence Secretary, Philip Hammond, recently claimed that this year's manpower wind down and the closure or handover of TFH's bases is a reflection of increased security in the province. But, when Prime Minister David Cameron visited TFH in late 2013, he said only "a basic level of security" had been achieved. To some this smacked of a job left unfinished.

With the dissolution of TFH, the question everyone is asking is what exactly has it achieved? Has it met its UN mandate of safeguarding the civilian population from the Taliban and ensuring al-Qaeda do not return? Certainly much of the recent analysis of TFH achievements in terms of security, stability and good governance has missed the central goal that was to stop Afghanistan being

an exporter of terror. TFH did all it could and probably more in Helmand with essentially a divisional-size force. Nonetheless, Sangin will inevitably and perhaps unfairly be the benchmark by which Britain's involvement in Helmand will be measured. During the ceremony to mark the end of TFH its final commander, Brigadier James Woodham, said, "The task force has achieved so much since 2006 and I pay homage to all those who have served under the task force. We are leaving Helmand in a better place, and the Afghan National Security Forces are well set to continue to deliver security to the region."

The deployment of British forces to Helmand was always going to be controversial, and the British government sold this policy decision on the grounds that TFH's job was to provide security for nation building, not war fighting. This assertion proved completely wrong when the 3,000-strong 16th Air Assault Brigade arrived. British troops were woefully ill-prepared to understand the intricacies of Afghan society and culture. While the British Army was able to fight the Taliban, it had no influence over rampant corruption and cronyism in Kabul or the Taliban's ability to operate with impunity from safe havens in neighbouring Pakistan.

The British were soon under pressure from Helmand's Afghan governor to expand their footprint across the province in order to help him maintain security. This was done grudgingly by TFH, and in the process stirred up a hornet's nest. The British government permitted mission creep without ever really considering if the goals were attainable or the consequences of stretching TFH across the vast province.

A counter-insurgency war had to be fought first before the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) could get to work. The expansion of TFH from 3,000 personnel to 10,000 was a clear acknowledgement that reconstruction was taking a back seat. The professional optimism of Britain's generals ensured more money, troops and new equipment were supplied as Operation Herrick escalated. Bravery and tenacity, coupled with superior firepower, soon persuaded the Taliban that they could not win a stand up fight. Instead they resorted to a brutal but effective improvised explosive device (IED) campaign.

While TFH brought some semblance of security to Helmand, the PRT was supposed to have fostered financial and political development. In the event, the PRT's much-vaunted Kajaki dam turbine and green zone policies failed to deliver. The turbine was never installed despite the dramatic if wasteful operation to get it on site. Although farmers were encouraged to grow food crops in the green zone, others simply created new poppy fields elsewhere.

By 2010-2011 only the three central districts of Nad-e Ali, Nahr-e-Saraj and Lashkar Gah were the responsibility of the TFH; the rest came under the US-led Task Force Leatherneck as Washington decided to surge Helmand with the firepower of the US Marine Corps. American resources inevitably meant that the weaker British forces became the centre of attention.

In November 2011 it was announced that Nad-e Ali would be handed over to the Afghan security forces.

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Notably insurgent activity did not readily recover after the winter lull of 2012 because of the level of military operations during 2011. Nonetheless, the Taliban and their allies remained far from defeated and were bidding their time.

This was clearly not for the want of trying by TFH. The performance of 3 Commando Brigade during Operation Herrick 14 in the spring and summer of 2011 resulted in the British and American Forces Dining Club bestowing the brigade with a Historical Significance Award. This is given to outstanding units that have contributed to the UK-US alliance and set a benchmark. The joint efforts of the Royal Marines of TFH and US Marines of Task Force Leatherneck saw a 45 per cent reduction in violence in central Helmand. This only lasted as long as there were boots on the ground, however.

Britain's commitment to Afghanistan since 2001 has cost 553 dead British lives, the majority of whom were lost in Helmand – most notably in Sangin and Musa Qala. In particular, Sangin accounted for almost a quarter of British fatalities and was a terrible place to be stationed. The Taliban and the local drug warlords were never prepared to surrender this district because it lay at the heart of the province's illegal opium/heroin industry. Sangin was a vital growing and transit point for the opium trade.

The British armed forces, largely under-resourced, spent more than four years trying to hold the Taliban at bay in Sangin. In 2010 the US Marines were 'surged' into the area, but as the marines drew down their presence and withdrew behind the wire of their compounds, the Taliban returned. Left largely on their own, the Afghan security forces lost more men in five months than the British lost during their whole deployment in Sangin. American helicopters and drones partly hampered the Taliban's freedom of movement, but the Afghan security forces have no such luxuries.

Voting for the recent Afghan presidential elections only took place in two of the district's five main areas. It seems doubtful that Kabul will be able to hold sway in Sangin, unless the Afghan security forces find a way to co-exist with the Taliban. Casualties in Helmand remain the same as the last eight years; the only difference is that it is now the Afghan security forces that are bearing the brunt of these losses.

Perhaps appropriately enough, in light of its previous illustrious battle honours, the last unit to oversee the British withdrawal from Afghanistan and the end of Operation Herrick was the 7th Armoured Brigade. Better known as the "Desert Rats", this brigade took over from the 1st Mechanised in the summer of 2013.

The Desert Rats arrived in Afghanistan with 6,000 men supported by some 300 armoured vehicles. While the 7th Armoured Brigade deployed with enough punch to take on the Taliban, the bulk of the force was made up of engineers and sappers whose job was to pack up. By this stage the British presence had shrunk from 130 bases to just five. However you looked at it, this final tour of duty was essentially a rearguard action designed to ensure an orderly withdrawal.

Helmand's Governor, Mohammad Naim Baloch, has been at pains to highlight that the province has



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functioning schools and clinics, a new airport and one of the best prisons in the country thanks to the British. Security has been improved along the vital Helmand River that feeds the province's agriculture. The poppy farmers have been pushed out and improvements to roads ensure some semblance of central government and commerce. For a long time the green zone along the river was an unrelenting battlefield – now the Taliban are confined mainly to the north. Nonetheless, Baloch recognises it is time for Helmandis to take control of their own destinies and build on what has been achieved.

Whatever progress may have been made in Helmand, there is no hiding the fact that polling stations were not opened in a third of the province. The reality is that much of northern Helmand is in Taliban hands. In addition, last year saw a record poppy harvest and yet this year the government in Kabul failed to pay the work force tasked with destroying the annual crop. It is thought that more than 100,000 hectares of poppies have been planted. Afghan counter-narcotics forces despair that Kabul has not come up with a viable alternative for the province's opium farmers in order to wean them off this cash crop.

Defence Secretary Hammond claims that those who served in TFH have contributed to an operation that "has safeguarded our national security at home." Counter-terrorism experts may beg to differ on the basis that Somalia, Pakistan and Syria have exerted a much greater appeal to British radicals than Afghanistan ever has, however.

The British Army have been quick to duck the issue. When asked whether it had all been worthwhile, Brigadier James Woodham, the head of British forces in Helmand, responded, "It's always a difficult question to ask when there has been a human cost here in central Helmand. I guess ultimately history will judge the worth of what we've been doing at our government's request."

On balance, however, Brigadier's Woodham's assessment that TFH has left the province in a better state is true. The rights and wrongs of the campaign are for politicians and historians to wrangle over. In the meantime, as Prime Minister Cameron said, the troops should "come home with their heads held high." The time has come for them to put the sorrows of Sangin and the other forlorn British military outposts behind them. Come the end of 2014, Helmand will be someone else's problem.

***Inhospitable terrain: a British army officer shows PM Cameron a map of Helmand Province during a visit to forward operating base Sterga II***

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