

When The Troops Go In

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The public might, after all the Presidential and Prime Ministerial rhetoric, wonder what the Pentagon and Ministry of Defence are really up to. We have had our fair share of bomb blasts on television, we have seen the nightly ritual of tracer as if it is a firework display or some run up to Halloween and November 5. We are constantly re-assured that flames at night are doing the trick of illuminating the darkness of Afghanistan, we are told by special briefings that there are very few targets left, and yet the footage shot by Al Jazeera, shows an intact but worried population. How many goats have died in the campaign so far I wonder.

Ironically the only reliable figures for deaths came from a direct hit on the United Nations approved mine clearance offices in Kabul. If anything was an own goal, that was it. Maybe they gave their coordinates to the US intelligence believing they were safe and the coordinates were filed in the wrong box, hence the highly accurate hit. Civilian casualties are inevitable.

In Afghanistan timing is always important. The extremes of temperature and altitude make fighting conditions very difficult for outsiders. During the First Afghan War in 1839-42 the British formed the 27,000 strong Army of the Indus - its purpose to dislodge the Persian army who had deposed the weak ruler, Shah Sooja-ul-Mulk. Ninety percent of the Imperial troops were Indian and drawn into two columns. They took Quetta and then advanced on Kandahar. From there they advanced on Ghuznee, a fortress that had to be breached by explosive. They only had black powder, no semtex or bunker busting bombs. The 13th foot, otherwise known as the Somerset Light Infantry, formed the covering party. After this display of force the British entered Kabul unopposed re-instated the unpopular Sha Sooja al Moolk and then installed their own envoy to keep an eye on things. That was the easy bit. In October 1841 the Afghans rose up again, murdered the envoy. Then the First Afghan War began in earnest. Jellalabad was besieged from November through till April the next year and Somerset troops were on the inside. Luckily they had missed the main disaster when the garrison from Kabul was annihilated on its way back down. 4,000 troops and 8,000 followers were massacred. The vast portrait of the sole survivor Dr Brydon on his horse covered in dust and at the end of his tether reaching the gates of Jellalabad, is on public display in Taunton Museum. Maybe what Dr Brydon really needed was a long cool glass of Somerset Cider…

What is not often realised is that in this Afghan campaign and in all subsequent campaigns, over ninety percent of the troops were Indian, and even they relied on local scouts and guides who were later formed into recognised regiments of Special Forces. They were acting behind enemy lines and gathering intelligence long before the LRDG and SAS were even though of.

By the time of the Second Afghan War in 1878-80, the British had learnt the usefulness of the Ghurkhas. No less that four regiments were employed. This war had been sparked by anti-Russian sentiment and the drawing up of a certain line, called the Durand Line in 1873, which defined the Eastern borders of Afghanistan. It is this border I today that has caused all the trouble. Imposing a set boundary on nomadic tribesmen causes more problems than it solves. During this war, General Roberts led the famous march from Kabul to Khandahar to relieve a garrison under the command of a certain General Primrose.

Beleaguered troops are the order of the day in Afghanistan, only they did not have Apache and Chinook helicopters to help them out. By the time the third Afghan war of 1919 started no less than nineteen battalions of Gurkas were represented from eleven different regiments. Getting stuck in requires more than just space age ration packs. On night patrol, Kukris are more useful than computer games.

What worries me most of all is that the troops however special, have no real idea of what is involved. At this time of year the mountains are covered in snow and the passes closing one by one. Afghanistan is a tough country at the best of times, and the Afghans have had twenty years to get used to so called ’modern’ warfare. The problem is that the weapons are too sophisticated. How many millions of dollars have been spent knocking out a few ageing anti aircraft guns and primitive MIG fighters? Perhaps the best policy is to get the Taliban to commit its forces to a set piece battle outside Kabul before the winter sets in, then hammer them from the air, but time is fast running out.

And there is another factor that has hardly been mentioned, altitude. I have crossed six passes in the Hindu Kush, the highest being 16,500 ft and that was bitter even in summer. Carrying packs and weapons at that altitude is no joke. As to tactics in the steep valleys, many of the Russian helicopters were shot down from above, by tribesmen with heavy

machine guns, there being no armour on the top of the helicopters. And with thinner air the helicopter payloads will be dramatically decreased. I have seen Indian helicopters totally stripped out working at over 19,000 ft. It requires enormous skill, and the higher you are the more vulnerable you are to strong invisible mountain winds.

Royal Marines from the West Country may well be used. They have had training in arctic warfare and they will need all the skills they developed there. Tracks left in the snow are very obvious. Camouflage is vital and frostbite is always a problem. I myself was snowed in, at exactly this time of year in Nuristan and later spent a winter in the Himalaya. Winter lasts for six months and the weather works in the Afghan's favour. Starvation is a weapon of war.

Committing ground troops at this time of year will be a fine line between bravery and foolhardiness. The Afghan people have seen off the Russians once and the British three times. Vietnam is only just round the corner…