

The war in Afghanistan is a costly and bloody conflict, as these five soldiers know only too well. In tribute to their bravery and sacrifice, we tell their incredible stories, while Savile Row's finest make each a suit fit for a hero

Words by Philip Watson
Photographs by Nadav Kander

NO ORDINARY HEROES

Over the past four years, Afghanistan has seen the deadliest fighting of modern times. British troops, especially those based in the southern province of Helmand, have faced daily ambushes, gun battles, firefights, even hand-to-hand combat. This has not been a war fought at a clinical distance with precision bombing.

At the same time, there has been something horrifically contemporary about the conflict, with British forces facing a relentless and resilient guerrilla insurgency whose most effective weapons are suicide bombers and IEDs (improvised explosive devices). The result for troops on the ground is a conflict that is both unconventional and unpredictable.

The casualty figures are stark and instructive. At press, 246 British Armed Forces personnel have been killed in Afghanistan, and more than a 1,000 wounded. Last year alone, 108 British troops died in the war, making it the bloodiest conflict for the Armed Forces since the Falklands.

For many servicemen, Afghanistan is the pinnacle of soldiering. Quiet acts of heroism are commonplace, unsung bravery almost routine. Horrendous injuries are treated, limbs and body parts picked up, lives saved.

What follows are captivating stories of men doing the job that they love and live for in the most demanding of circumstances, while five leading Savile Row tailors created a suit for each in recognition of their bravery.

LT ALEX HORSFALL



LIEUTENANT ALEX HORSFALL, 26, is a platoon commander with 2nd Battalion The Rifles. He was brought up near Copehill Down, a Ministry Of Defence training facility on Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire, and wanted to join the Army from an early age. He studied at Eton, where he joined the school's Combined Cadet Force, and the University Of Exeter, where he was a member of the Officer

Training Corps. He passed out from Sandhurst in 2005.

"The coolest of the cool in the Armed Forces is to be in the Army, the infantry, and to be a platoon commander, and that's the challenge I went for — to be responsible for 30 men, for their lives.

"I went out to Afghanistan in March 2009 and I was in charge of a PB [patrol base] near Sangin in Helmand Province. Sangin is the most heavily IED-ed place on Earth at the moment. There were roadside bombs and other IEDs everywhere — in fields, tracks, walls, even in the bellies of animals which are sent towards our patrols. Afghanistan is a very different war: it's a war against IEDs. It's about finding them before they find you.

"Suicide bombers are also a constant danger. In one incident, a 10-year-old boy with a bomb concealed in a wheelbarrow got close to one of our patrols. His older brother detonated the device, killing the boy and injuring several of our men.

"I can't remember too much about what happened on 10 July, when I got injured, but we were on a morning patrol in the Wishtan area and I was leading a section that was lined up by a small wall in a complex of alleyways and compounds.

"We were ambushed by a daisy chain of five bombs that exploded together. One rifleman was killed and six other guys, including me, were seriously injured.

"I had lost a leg and had badly injured my left arm, but luckily a medic, Corporal Carl Thomas, got to me and applied





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tourniquets, dressings and blood-clotting bandages. I couldn't breathe, so he also performed a tracheotomy. Apparently, I wasn't happy about him inserting a tube into my throat, so I tried my best to fend him off and punch him with my broken arm. Without doubt, he saved my life.

"I was being taken out of the area on the back of a quad-bike trailer when another daisy chain of five IEDs exploded next to a nearby stretcher party. The blast killed four other guys. It was the bloodiest day for the British forces since we came into Afghanistan in 2001 — three other soldiers were killed elsewhere.

"Back in Britain, I had my left leg amputated above the knee and the three middle fingers of my left hand removed. I'd broken my jaw, left eye socket and bones in my right arm. I had large flesh wounds on both thighs and burn wounds to my left arm. I also, for a time, lost my sense of humour.

"I don't have any regrets. Afghanistan is, to me, a successful war. The Taliban no longer control any major town or city in Helmand, and the al-Qaeda network is no longer dominant in the country. Rather than the Afghan people suffering under a Taliban dictatorship, we're helping to establish a government and a democracy.

"I played a small part in all that, but I don't for one minute think I'm a hero. All I did was to go for a walk with a gun and tread on the wrong bit of earth."

CPL BRAD MALONE



CORPORAL BRAD MALONE, 24, is a section commander with 45 Commando Royal Marines. Born and raised in Seaton Delaval in Northumberland, he joined the Marines

at 16 and has been on tours of Iraq and Afghanistan. Malone was awarded the Conspicuous Gallantry Cross, the second-highest British military honour, last September. His citation states that "on three separate occasions [in Afghanistan], he excelled in the heat of battle" and "demonstrated gallantry, leadership and courage far beyond that reasonably expected of a junior rank".

"I had my heart set on the Marines from when I was very young. They're a different breed, really. The Marines have the longest and toughest infantry training course in the world, and joining them was, for me, the ultimate challenge.

"I went out to Afghanistan in October 2008, and was at a FOB [forward operating base] near Sangin. Our role was to go on ground-domination troop patrols and to the FLET [forward line of enemy troops] to take on the Taliban. At one point, we had almost daily contacts [attacks] — it was a very, very kinetic FOB to be in. I ended up being a section commander responsible for seven men, and there is no better job in the Armed Forces in Afghanistan. I had some of the best times of my life out there.

"I also had some of the worst. The Marines are like a close-knit family, so if one of your best friends gets hurt it hits everyone hard. One of our troops was killed in an IED-initiated ambush while I was out there, and 11 men from 45 Commando have been killed in Afghanistan. You pick each other up and get through it.

"You have to respect the Taliban to a degree because they can be ingenious and adaptable, but we're 10 times better soldiers and fighters than they are. If they fight us, we will win. We proved it time and time again in our area of operations.

"On one very long and heavy contact, though, my troop sergeant got pinned down in his mortar position by enemy fire, which was 360 [surrounding us]. So I ran to his aid [across open ground] and got him back to a safe area. I didn't think of it as dangerous or risking my life. I saw an opportunity, you just take your balls in your mouth and get on with it. He was a good friend — and the Taliban aren't that good shots anyway.

"It's quite an honour to get the award, although I feel I'm wearing it for all the troops in my company, for all the lads who fought, were injured, lost limbs, and who died. To be honest, the medal could have been issued to every bloke in my troop." →

2ND LT JAMES AMOORE



SECOND LIEUTENANT James Amore, 24, is an officer in 2nd Battalion The Rifles. He was brought up in Windsor, Berkshire in a family with a proud military history. James's father was in The Royal Green Jackets, and his relatives served in the Napoleonic Wars. He attended schools including Eton and Wellington, and enjoyed a protracted "rebellious period" before being accepted at Sandhurst in 2008.

"Joining the Army was something I wanted to do, ever since I was seven. I felt if I could make some small difference somewhere, that would be a good thing. I knew I would be deployed in Afghanistan at some point. Not going out would have been like training to play professional football but never actually getting a game.

"One of the first things that hits you is the extreme heat: it can be 55-60°C in the summer, which is tough when you're carrying up to 50kg of body armour and kit. You get cases of heat injury, and D&V (diarrhoea and vomiting) can be a problem. The dust can be unbelievable, too. But I was also struck by the stunning beauty of the country: the immense mountains and the lush vegetation of the Green Zone around the Helmand River.

"I took over as platoon commander when Alex [Horsfall] was injured. Wishtan is a really nasty place to operate in. It's a

maze of 16ft-high mud walls and narrow alleyways that are always being blocked off. The Taliban are constantly channelling you into ambushes. The soldiers nicknamed Wishtan "the Pac-Man Challenge", after the old computer game.

"You can't stay in the base — you have to patrol and dominate the ground. There were 25 guys in that platoon, so you know a lot of blokes are going to get hurt. Facing those odds, you find out something about yourself — it almost spurs you on.

"I never really thought I would be one of the casualties, though, until 19 July [nine days after Alex Horsfall was injured]. It was about six in the morning and the company was clearing an area, when I heard and felt an IED explode 50m from where my section was. I could see two casualties through a small hole in a wall, so we went to help them. Two guys had already gone through the hole, but as I went through it and hit the ground the other side, I must've stood near a pressure-pad device that detonated another IED.

"Someone said they saw me fly 25ft into the air, and apparently the barrel of my rifle was bent double, but I don't remember any of that. The explosion broke both my legs and blew my body armour up, breaking my jaw, nose and cheekbone. My left arm was damaged and shrapnel ripped into my left eye. I could see my eye in the reflection of the glasses of the medic who came to treat me and it looked like the jagged peaks of a mountain range seen from a great height.

"I was in an induced coma for five or six days, but I was lucky not to be killed or more badly injured. It grates me more than anything that I trained for 15 months to do my job for just three weeks, but I also know anything that happens now is a bonus.

"My time in Afghanistan made me more certain that the sacrifices our soldiers are making are 100 per cent worth it. I know that some of the guys who've been injured or killed would be livid if we just pulled out and did not finish the job. Their selfless acts of bravery would be wasted."





CPL TEL BYRNE



TEL BYRNE, 25, is a corporal in 2nd Battalion The Parachute Regiment (2 Para). Born and raised in Thornton, near Blackpool in Lancashire, he had wanted to join the Army since he was 12. He was accepted for the elite Parachute Regiment at 17, passed perhaps the toughest training and fitness tests in the Army, and has been on two tours of Iraq. In April 2008, he was posted to Afghanistan.

"I was a tearaway kid and not exactly the best student at school, but I always planned to join the Army. It's all I've ever wanted to do.

"My Iraq tours were quite boring, really. All your training in the Parachute Regiment is geared towards fighting, and that's what you want to do on operations. We're always ready to go anywhere, put in the hardest fight, the keenest to get involved. We're what the Army's for.

"That's why I was really up for Afghanistan. I was lucky enough to be a section commander at an FOB near Sangin in Helmand. It was the place to be, as it was the most contacted FOB in Afghanistan in 2008 and had the highest number of casualties.

"I don't understand why we're out there, and I don't get involved in the politics of it all, but, to me, Afghanistan is by far the best thing I've ever done. It was probably the best four months of my life because there were a lot of intense contacts and the adrenaline was massively high.

"I know it sounds strange, but you haven't really got any stress out there. You don't have to worry about money. You get

up and play a bit of chess or volleyball, then you go out and fight and do something you love. It was like a dream to us.

"My section of eight men would get ambushed by 15 to 20 Taliban with automatic and single-shot weapons, snipers and RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades], but the training would always take over. Your mind and body seemed to work on a higher level, and very soon we'd be all over them. I don't really think or care about the enemy. I don't have any feelings about them.

"It's guerrilla warfare: they can't match us for shooting or firepower, or beat us in a firefight, so they resort to IEDs. An IED is the perfect soldier: it never goes to sleep and just stays there, in any weather, for as long as it takes. Every guerrilla war for the next 100 years will use a similar tactic because, unfortunately, it works.

"I got injured on 13 August 2008. We were out patrolling at three in the morning, and I was lead man and I jumped into a little ditch. I landed on the pressure pad with my left leg and on the bomb with my right. It was a huge IED and it should have killed me and several other men but luckily it was buried quite deep and wired wrongly.

"It tossed me up into the air, completely knackered my right leg and blew off the little finger on my right hand. The air was bright and there was light all around me like when you burn magnesium in science class at school.

"I had to have my right leg amputated below the knee a week later. I was running again with a prosthetic leg after six weeks, though. I got the record for the quickest rehabilitation at Headley Court [the Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre, near Epsom in Surrey].

"I'm still the same person, and my leg doesn't really stop me doing anything. In fact, my injury has probably given me the biggest opportunity of my life. Through the Ministry Of Defence's Battle Back programme, I started cycling competitively, and now I'm a full-time professional athlete with the National Cycling Academy in Manchester. I reckon I'm now number five in the world in sprinting, but I only have one ambition: to win gold at the 2012 Paralympics in London."

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SAC CHRISTOPHER LEWIS



CHRISTOPHER LEWIS, 25, is a senior aircraftman with 1 Squadron Royal Air Force Regiment. He was brought up in Port Talbot in South Wales and joined the RAF at 18. He has been on three tours of Afghanistan and one of Iraq, and last year was awarded a Joint Commander's Commendation for his leadership and medical skills in Afghanistan in 2008. His citation reads: "His sense of purpose, desire to save life and disregard for his own safety in order to save one of his men was truly humbling."

"I was always interested in joining the RAF, but I also liked the idea of being a soldier. I then discovered that the air force had its own infantry unit — the Regiment — and I knew that was for me. I liked the physical aspect of the job: the assault courses, the section battle drills, shooting things, blowing things up. It was every young man's dream.

"Most of the RAF operate from bases, but the Regiment is a specialist airfield defence corps that works out in the field. We protect the areas around air bases in hot spots around the world, stopping the threat of SAMs (surface-to-air missiles) and pushing the enemy back to prevent rocket attacks.

"I was acting corporal and team medic with the Force Protection Wing at Kandahar airfield in 2008. The base is huge: it's like a small town of something like 13,000 international troops. So

protecting it was pretty important.

"We patrolled on foot and in 4x4 vehicles, and you always had in the back of your mind that something might happen, that there's a high danger of IEDs. On 27 October 2008, I was commanding the lead vehicle in a four-vehicle QRF [quick reaction force] looking for a reported store of rockets.

"I stopped the WMIK [Weapons Mounted Installation Kit — an armed Land Rover], did some checks on the route with mine detectors, walked forward with another guy, and as the wagon rolled forward it set off a massive IED. We'd pretty much stopped right on it.

"I was five metres from the vehicle and the blast wave knocked me over, but amazingly I wasn't injured. There was dust everywhere and a ringing in my ears like in the film *Saving Private Ryan*, and I knew immediately we would have some severe casualties. The wagon weighed about four tonnes, but I found out later that it was blown about 10ft off the ground, spun two or three times and landed on its roof in a nearby ditch.

"Three of my gunner colleagues were seriously injured, including my flight commander. I treated them the best I could, prioritised the casualties, took command, called in support and went to the wagon, where I could hear a cry for help. The driver was badly injured, pinned in his seat by the upturned vehicle, and fuel was drenching the area around him. I crawled under, made sure he was conscious and OK, and got one guy to stay with him.

"Eventually, the vehicle was stabilised and lifted so that the driver could be cut out, but I don't know how he survived. The wagon could easily have crushed him or caught fire. It was an absolute direct hit and we were very lucky that no one was killed.

"The commendation was a huge surprise, but I never think of myself as a hero or anything like that — the training kicked in and I just got to work. I've gone out there, done the job, been through some extreme circumstances, come back in one piece and managed to help some others come back as well. I can hold my head up high, I guess." 