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From cadet to colonel: the record of a life of active service

by Major-General Sir Thomas Seaton, KCB
*Hurst and Blackett: London; 1866; 435 pp. in two volumes*¹

Spoken from the front: real heroes from the battlefields of Afghanistan

edited by Andy McNab
*Bantam Press: London; 2009; 337 pp.; ISBN 978 0 593 06480 1; RRP \$35.00 (paperback)*²

With Britain again at war in Afghanistan, it is instructive to compare the current experience with that of the 19th century. From these two books, it is apparent that little in Afghanistan has changed fundamentally over the last 160 years, advances in technology notwithstanding. Like the current campaign, that of 1838 – 1842 was a counter-insurgency conflict waged against a skilful, highly committed enemy who knew the country in which he was fighting intimately. The desert and mountain terrain and the extremes of climate (summer temperature maxima above 55°C; winter temperature minima below –20°C) have changed little and neither have the people (including their Muslim religion, culture and education levels) – winning their ‘hearts and minds’ and delivering sound governance and acceptable infrastructure, while essential to ultimate success, remain daunting challenges. Treachery perpetrated by trusted Afghan allies and the frequent failures of diplomacy, political leadership and generalship evident in the 1840s also have their parallels today.

Institute member, Joe Southwell³, brought *From cadet to colonel* to my attention. It is an excellent account of campaigning in India and Afghanistan between 1820 and 1860, including Britain’s forced withdrawal from Cabool (Kabul) in 1842 and the Indian Mutiny of 1857. The author, an English infantry officer in the army of the British East India Company, wrote the book from his contemporaneous journals, sketchbooks and correspondence. It is a series of objective accounts of each of the campaigns in which he participated over a 40-year period, during which he rose in rank from lieutenant to colonel and served variously as a platoon commander, company commander, brigade major of a British infantry brigade comprising both British and Indian army units, and battalion commander.

The descriptions of the important landscapes, geology, natural history, key terrain (such as passes), forts and fortified towns, are very detailed; as are the descriptions of tactics used by the Indian army and its ‘native’ opponents, such as the Beloochees (Baluchis), and the manner in which individual engagements developed and progressed. The book is illustrated with drawings from the author’s sketchbooks, but has no maps. It would have been advantageous to have contemporary maps, because some place names and many spellings have changed in the

intervening years. Nevertheless, it is quite possible to follow the general routes taken during the campaigning using a current atlas, as key locations (e.g. Quettah, Candahar, Cabool, and Jellalabad) and features (e.g. the Bolan, Kojuck and Khyber passes) have not changed.

Overall, *From cadet to colonel* is a very well written book. I recommend it to anyone wishing to know more about the campaigns of the British and Indian armies in Afghanistan and India during the mid-19th century; or gain a better understanding of Afghanistan today.

Andy McNab, DCM, MM, has previously authored three war histories and 11 fiction books, all ‘best sellers’. His latest offering, *Spoken from the front*, records the experiences of some 20 British servicemen and servicewomen who served in Afghanistan between April 2006 and September 2008, a period covering five rotations of British troops, each consisting of an independent brigade group of two, initially, increasing to five infantry battalions, with combat and logistic support. The brigade group’s perceived role initially was to undertake stabilisation operations and infrastructure reconstruction in Helmand, a southern province bordering Pakistan. The increasing strength and nature of Taliban resistance, however, coupled with the rising British casualty list – with more than 200 British service personnel, including women and reservists, killed by September 2008 – soon established that it was warfighting, not peacekeeping, in which the British were engaged. Initially, gunshot wounds were responsible for most of the casualties, but, as the Taliban came to realise they could rarely beat the British in gunfights, they turned increasingly to the use of improvised explosive devices, with telling effect.

The book consists of some 70 vignettes (‘snapshots’) of a very dangerous modern battlefield as viewed by helicopter pilots and crew, infantrymen, artillerymen, engineers, intelligence personnel, military police and medical personnel; each of whom tells his/her own story in his/her own words – modern-day soldiers giving a range of eye-witness accounts of a modern-day war. The vignettes include graphic accounts of some truly heroic deeds. McNab has added some useful introductory and linking material to provide context for the vignettes and introduces each vignette by a new author with a brief biography of the author.

Given their multiple authorship, the vignettes inevitably vary in quality, yet the book is always very readable. It has a useful glossary of military jargon and acronyms, but needs some good maps and an index.

Overall, I am pleased to recommend *Spoken from the front* to readers seeking an insight into modern warfighting at the tactical level as experienced by British service personnel in Afghanistan.

David Leece

¹This book may be read online at:

<http://trove.nla.gov.au/work/4992443?q=from+cadet+to+colonel&c=book>

²The Ursula Davidson Library is acquiring this book.

³Lieutenant Colonel J. C. Southwell, OAM, RFD, ED (Retd) drew the book to my attention after reading Private John Muir’s contemporaneous account of the Indian Mutiny re-published in *United Service* 60 (3), 26 – 28 (September 2009).