

**Jump TO Article**



The article on the pages below is reprinted by permission from *United Service* (the journal of the Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales), which seeks to inform the defence and security debate in Australia and to bring an Australian perspective to that debate internationally.

The Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales (RUSI NSW) has been promoting informed debate on defence and security issues since 1888. To receive quarterly copies of *United Service* and to obtain other significant benefits of RUSI NSW membership, please see our online Membership page:

[www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership](http://www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership)



**Jump TO Article**

## **BOOK REVIEW**

# ***Danger close: commanding 3 Para in Afghanistan***

by Colonel Stuart Tootal DSO OBE

*John Murray (Publishers): London; 2009; 306 pp.; ISBN 978-1-84854-259-4; RRP \$24.99 (paperback); Ursula Davidson Library cal no. 543.3 TOOT 2009*



*Danger close* is a first-hand account by the commanding officer of 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, The Parachute Regiment, Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Tootal, about the entry of the British Army into Helmand province, Afghanistan. He describes his battalion's training for the mission, the conduct of its operations, the difficulties of operating within a multi-national chain of command and how his battalion group fought a series of furious engagements with a strong and determined Taliban to secure the out-post villages they were ordered to defend for "political" reasons.

The 3 Para Battle Group mission was to support reconstruction projects in Helmand Province. Its 1200 soldiers started to deploy into Afghanistan during April 2006 but it was not complete on the ground until July and was chronically under strength for most of its tour. Rifle companies rarely had more than two platoons because of the theatre leave policy of two weeks in the United Kingdom and non-replacement of battle casualties and losses through illness.

Tootal gives us an insight into the character and strength of his men (who he annoyingly and constantly refers to as "the blokes"). On his return home on leave, Tootal follows up the treatment his wounded and maimed soldiers receive once they move out of the excellent military medical system. He finds them placed in an uncaring United Kingdom National Health System where they are treated alongside civilian patients in the interests of cost savings and efficiency. I cannot conceive how any government could send a wounded Territorial soldier home to Scotland by rail in the same bloody and filthy uniform he had been wearing when blown up by a roadside bomb which killed his mates.

Most of the narrative is taken up with describing the fierce infantry fighting in 50-degree heat for the mud-block compounds sited near villages dominated by the Taliban and held by under-strength rifle companies. Machine-gun, mortar and artillery ammunition was expended at a prodigious rate to defeat Taliban attacks and this expenditure led to shortages because force planning scales had not envisaged a level of combat intensity that had not been experienced by the British Army since Korea.

The Afghan National Army and National Police appear to be next to useless. The National Police especially could not be trusted and it is a relief when they desert.

3 Para returned home after six months of constant operations and 498 engagements with the Taliban. They had not won the war, but had forced a battle of attrition on a steadily improving Taliban and set the conditions in the province for subsequent British forces to build upon.

Over 30 awards for gallantry were made to members of the battle group, including a posthumous Victoria Cross and a posthumous George Cross. These came at the cost of 15 members killed-in-action and another 46 wounded.

The good maps enable one to follow the major actions fought. The excellent photographs put faces to the names of key characters. Tootal's style, however, sometimes is annoying, particularly when he affects modern military "speak", and it would have helped to understand the problem of finding enough troops for tasks if the battle group's order-of-battle, together with dates of arrival, had been included.

Tootal has complete disdain for the higher headquarters staff and logisticians living in air-conditioned splendor with their coffee shops, bars and markets in Kabul. He also has little respect for the European contingents based in secure areas who would never venture south to where the "real" fighting was happening. He is scathing about the lack of activity by the (British) bureaucrats of the Province Reconstruction Team and the Department for International Development, who did nothing to improve things for the Afghan people living in the areas his soldiers had fought so hard to make secure. He, deservedly, has high praise for his own combat-support soldiers and medical teams who slaved long hours under the same harsh conditions as his combat units to ensure food, water and ammunition were delivered to them, their casualties were evacuated under extreme danger and their vehicles and aircraft remained serviceable.

The key message which emerges from this book is the moral strength, courage, trust in each other and the determination of the members of the battle group and the Chinook helicopter crews. Corporals and sergeants figure prominently in the action and the bravery awards which followed. They are the glue which holds the soldiers together. Tootal speaks proudly of how his men kept going, day after day, with little sleep, poor food, constant fear and the loss of comrades. They do not fight for patriotism or the corrupt Afghan leadership. Like soldiers in all wars, they really fight for each other.

I recommend this book for those who want to find out what infantry fighting in Afghanistan is really like. It is not for those who want to understand grand strategy or the politics of our commitment there. It is a soldiers' story, simply told, which fills in many blanks in the limited reports our politicians and senior military allow us to see.

**Terry Smith**