

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



One Dog at a Time

Pen Farthing

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Nowzad Dogs

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One Dog at a Time

Saving the Strays of Helmand
An Inspiring True Story

Pen Farthing



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Prologue

'SERGEANT, I THOUGHT you might want to do something about this.'

Mase, the young Royal Marine who had called me on the radio to join him in his sand-bagged sentry post, was pointing towards the barbed-wire road block. It was about 100 yards north of our isolated compound in the Afghan outpost of Now Zad.

Thick with rolls of gleaming, new wire, the obstacle was designed to prevent a suicide bomber driving directly into the compound's thick mud walls. Today, however, it had only succeeded in stopping something else - a small, white, terrified-looking dog.

Straight away I saw it had a wire noose tied around its neck. I had seen dogs tied up like that before out here in Afghanistan. This one had obviously broken free from whatever it had been tied to and tried to run through our makeshift barrier, but the trailing strand of wire from the noose had caught fast on the barbed wire. The more it struggled to break free, the tighter the noose became. The dog was slowly killing itself.

'Bollocks,' I said to myself.

The 100 yards that separated me from the dog was in no-man's-land. Definitely no place to pretend to be a member of the RSPCA.

The obstacle was situated across the only 'real' road in this area of Helmand province, a single strip of tarmac that ran north to south for over 400 metres. At one time the shops that ran along this road had sold fruit, vegetables, watches, shoes, medicines, even music tapes. Not so long

ago their wares would have been spilling out on to the road tempting passers-by.

Now, however, there was no one to be seen, and the fronts of the stores were a mess of twisted metal and broken wood; their walls decorated with bullet holes. No place to take a stroll, even if you were carrying the world's largest white flag. Aside from the threat of rifle fire, the network of alleyways that led off the road was notorious as a hiding place for local Taliban fighters. We had even named one of the alleyways 'RPG alley', after the rocket-propelled grenades that they fired at us.

As I scanned the scene now, I knew that the Taliban could be hiding in any one of these buildings just waiting for one of us to pop out of the compound.

I closed my eyes, wondering why this was happening to me.

Deep down I knew that I should just tell Mase to carry on with his sentry duty and ignore the dog. I knew others in my position wouldn't even give the animal a second thought. They would leave it to die of starvation or stand by while it strangled itself to death. Hell, some might even use it as target practice.

But I knew I couldn't just walk away. Especially, given what had happened in the four months or so since I'd arrived in Helmand province.

I opened my eyes and turned my attention back to the white dog.

It had stopped struggling and had resigned itself to lying on the ground, panting heavily from the exertion of trying to break free.

I explained my plan to Mase, although there wasn't much of one. I removed my webbing and radio and placed them down on the floor of the sand-bagged sentry post, or 'sangar' as we called them. I took out an extra magazine of ammunition and shoved it in my combat trousers pocket, just in case.

The plan was simple. The front of the sangar had a narrow slit that the sentry looked through, which was big enough for a man to slide through sideways. I would squeeze out through the slit, down to the edge of the roof on which the sangar was perched, then jump four feet down to the top of the sand-filled 'HESCO block' that protected the base of the building, and then drop off the side of that on to the tarmac road.

I waved at the sentry in the next sangar along. He waved back.

I pointed my weapon through the slit first and then followed it with my body.

Mase scanned the deserted street for any signs of bad guys. I hadn't really thought about what I would do if the Taliban decided to attack. I knew I should be able to climb back up into the sentry post extremely quickly. Hopefully even quicker if I was being shot at.

I looked north and south along the street one more time. Everything was eerily quiet.

'Later,' I said to Mase as I dropped down on to the HESCO block.

I had done some fairly stupid things during the course of my life. As my feet hit the tarmac road I thought that this might be the stupidest yet.

My heart was racing. I took a deep breath. 'Try not to get shot, idiot boy, or you won't be much use to anybody, let alone the dog,' I scolded myself.

All my attention was focused on the ruined shops ahead. There were a thousand shadows inside the rubble-strewn buildings, which meant a thousand dark places for an enemy to hide. But everything seemed as it should have been.

'Yeah, for now,' I muttered to myself.

I didn't have all day. I took one last look through my weapon sight and moved towards the dog, the muzzle of my rifle moving with me as I scanned the area. I ran at a

crouch up the centre of the tarmac road. The dog was only about 70 yards ahead now. It seemed to have resigned itself to being caught in the wire, but as I got closer it started to fight to free itself again, obviously panicking that I might try to hurt it.

‘Chill, dog, I’m on your side,’ I called out as I arrived.

I was conscious of talking too loudly, but the dog struggling against the wire obstacle was making enough noise as it was. With the metallic clattering of the barbed-wire strands knocking against the upright struts, everybody within a mile would know what I was doing.

‘Help me out here little fella, I don’t want the Taliban to know I am here, all right?’

I didn’t have the time to go for the softly, softly approach.

I let my rifle hang by my side as I pulled out my Leatherman and reached into the coils of barbed wire as far as I could. I wasn’t too bothered about the dog trying to bite me. I had my jacket and leather combat gloves on. It wasn’t as if it was that big anyway. Its filthy white coat covered a lean under-nourished body. Its frightened eyes kept me in check as the wire cutter tool sliced through the thin strands of wire at the first attempt.

The dog was still pulling madly away from me as the strand broke. In an instant it shot away through the other side of the obstacle without even a second thought. As it ran the wire loop was still hanging around its neck, but I hoped that it would eventually work loose.

‘No problem, buddy,’ I said, watching it go.

I looked around quickly, suddenly aware of how exposed I was. Standing in the middle of a deserted Afghan street in the Taliban heartland was not a good idea.

As swiftly as I could, I walked backwards towards the sentry post, keeping an eye on the road all the way.

‘Nice one, Sarge,’ Mase said as I rolled head first on to the floor of the sangar.

I realised I was breathing heavily; the fast climb back up had been more physical than I had thought it would be. As I looked back along the road I smiled to myself. The dog was nowhere to be seen.

'Let's keep this one quiet, eh?' I said as I dusted myself down.

'Keep what quiet?' Mase smiled.

I gave him the thumbs up, grabbed my webbing, and headed towards the ladder back down into the compound.

As I climbed down, the impact of what I'd just done hit me.

Things were seriously getting out of hand. How the hell had I managed to become personally responsible for the welfare of seemingly every stray dog in Helmand?

CHAPTER ONE

No Going Back

Six months earlier

AS I REACHED up high with my left hand, the tiny grit-covered edge my fingers grasped didn't really feel that solid. Even if it was strong enough, I didn't think I could hold my full body weight on just the fingertips of my left hand.

I looked down again at the small wire that I had placed in the rock face two feet below me, as protection should I fall off. The wire was connected to a piece of solid aluminium I'd jammed into a half-inch-wide crack in the rock face and clipped on to the rope that was tied securely into my climbing harness. It didn't look big enough to stop a falling 13-stone marine. But I knew it would.

As I weighed up my next move, I knew that there was no going back once I left the secure hand- and footholds I was finely balanced on at the moment. Once I committed to my left hand I would have to push upwards and go for the top of the rock wall. It was all or nothing.

I was preparing myself to make the move when I heard a voice shouting up at me from 50 feet below.

'Get up there, climbing ninja. It gets dark in a few hours.'

I looked down nervously, followed the way-too-thin-looking climbing rope as it snaked its way back down the steep rock wall, and saw Lisa at the end of it. She was staring up at me with her normal encouraging smile while holding the device that would lock the rope and stop me hitting the ground, should I fall.

That's the problem with being married to a Wren, I thought. They have the same sense of humour as Royal Marines; they are, like us, firm believers in encouragement through taking the mick.

'Lisa - I am trying to figure out the moves. Do you mind?' I shouted back.

'It looks easy - just reach for the left-hand hold and go,' she replied, matter-of-factly, as if it was the easiest thing in the world. And then Beamer Boy, our completely daft springer spaniel, started barking up in my direction. It was his familiar 'get up there so I can run around some more' bark.

That only set off Fizz, our Rottweiler, who, like Beamer, was tied to the base of an oak tree. Soon the pair of them were joining in a chorus of barking encouragement.

'OK, everybody shut up. I'm going,' I said, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath as I turned back to face the rock, my nose only centimetres from the sharp granite.

Without really thinking I launched myself upwards. My left hand gripped the hold, I smeared my feet against the cool granite rock face and pushed upwards, reaching for the 'thank God holds' at the top of the climb. I pulled my body clear of the edge, rolled on to the open ledge that signalled the finish of the climb and looked down to where Lisa, Beamer Boy and Fizz Dog were standing.

Lisa was looking up at me with an expression that said: I told you it was easy, why didn't you do that half an hour ago? The dogs were hopping around excitedly because they knew their tied-to-a-tree duty was almost over and we would soon be on the move.

It really was good to be on summer leave.

For the last four months all I had done was eat, sleep and breathe the preparations for my six-month tour to Afghanistan and the day I would be thrust into the fight against the Taliban. With the 20 or so young lads who made up 5 Troop of Kilo Company 42 Commando Royal Marines I

had spent my days and nights on exercise all over the country, with little or no time for a personal life. We'd spent endless hours on the wet miserable rifle ranges in the north-east. We'd also endured long days in the vast rolling countryside of the Thetford Army training areas, taking part in Afghan-based scenarios designed to help us deal with potential situations we might face once out there.

At times it was hard and eye-opening but the lads had taken it all in their stride. I had watched them mature into Royal Marines with pride.

After all the hard work we'd put in, I should have been excited by the prospect of going to Afghanistan.

It was, after all, what I'd dreamed of as a kid back in my home town on the south-east coast of England, where all my mates and I wanted to do was play at soldiers down in the marshes. Back then we would set up make-believe ambushes in the woods behind my nan's house, using water bombs as our ammunition, dreaming of the day we would be in a helicopter on an SAS-style mission to kill the bad guys. Now, it was going to be for real.

But with the daily reports of the constant battles from the army units we were due to replace I was beginning to have niggling doubts. What if we weren't ready? What if I forgot what to do?

Since starting my leave, however, I had tried really hard to concentrate on having three weeks of non-marine time. The dogs had played their part in helping me; they were a great way of getting my mind off things. Fizz and Beamer Boy were a great pair of companions and loved going on Dartmoor for walks, which worked out well, given my passion for rock climbing on its testing granite tors.

Fizz was your typical Rottweiler, with her distinctive black-and-tan coat and docked tail. Now aged six, she had come to us as a puppy from a breeder in Manchester. Lisa had picked the most active-looking of the nine or so fluff-balls we'd found scampering around the floor next to their

worn-out-looking mum. For Lisa it was love at first sight and to this day Fizz is still Lisa's dog.

We'd had our fair share of abuse from passers-by over the years, people who didn't have a clue as to the difference between a sausage dog and a St Bernard, but were convinced none the less that all Rottweilers belonged to the devil. But I was adamant then and still am now that it's the way you bring a Rottweiler up that counts. Apart from the times when she was indulging her passion for chasing cats or squirrels, Fizz was the softest dog on the planet. Although, it has to be said, if someone was aggressive towards her she would snap back at them, which I thought she had every right to do. If somebody punched me I would punch them back. Of course, I still wouldn't leave Fizz alone with just anybody and we normally kept her on a lead.

Beamer, our black-and-white springer, was just hyper, so hyper in fact it sometimes got really annoying. But you couldn't ever blame him for that. His passion was for anything that was wet and dirty. For instance, he loved nothing more than floating around in the smelliest cattle trough he could find, with only his head and eyes showing above the water. He would normally do this, of course, when we were out on a long walk, didn't have any towels in the van to dry him and when we had a long journey home. We had got him from an animal rescue centre in Somerset. After buying Fizz we'd decided that if we got another dog it would be a rescue; there were far too many of them that needed good homes. Picking Beamer up from the centre I knew we had made a good decision. I don't think his fluffed-up tail has ever stopped wagging since. Our only regret that afternoon in the rescue kennel was seeing row after row of other dogs, wagging their tails, barking away, just wanting to be loved. If we could have we'd have taken them all with us. We were just heartbroken at having to leave them in their runs.

We'd had to lie slightly to the people at the animal rescue home before being allowed to take Beamer. They'd wanted us to prove that the dogs would be living in a stable home, that Lisa and I would not spend too much time travelling between our various work venues and that Beamer would spend no more than four hours or so on his own every day.

Our way of life in the military meant that we did everything but stay at home. But we also knew that Beamer would adapt just as Fizz had and that they would both have a fantastic lifestyle. In fact, I doubt that many dogs would refuse the lifestyle that our two hounds now enjoyed.

A couple of years on and the pair were now absolutely inseparable. We couldn't even take one of them to the vet on its own, they both had to go, which always amused the vet. It was the same if I was in camp in Plymouth for the day. The two of them would have to come with me, as if they were afraid one of them would miss out on the fun. It was amazing how many well-hard marines would knock feebly on the door of the gym asking to be let in when Fizz was propped against the see-through glass door, on self-appointed sentry watch. I would just shake my head and tell them not to be so scared. They always looked visibly relieved when they opened the door and tentatively walked past Fizz, who didn't even bat an eyelid.

Both dogs loved travelling, too. All I had to do was ask who wanted to go for a drive and both would immediately tear down the garden path towards our waiting van. They would sit on the rear seat and stare out of the window at the passing countryside for hours on end. The previous summer, en route to a climbing trip to the Alps, Fizz had happily propped herself up against the rear side window for nine hours.

I had met Lisa ten years earlier in North Wales. She had just passed her course to become a Physical Training Instructor for the Navy and was studying at the Military

centre where I worked as a rock-climbing instructor for the marines.

We had got on well and stayed in touch but it had taken a lucky phone call to get our romance going the following year. By chance we realised that we were both going to be in the same place one weekend, and from there the relationship that was to be my life soon began.

We had a lot in common from the start. My friends were already Lisa's friends, and I could joke around with her mates and feel comfortable around them. Lisa was a Navy footballer and armchair Man. U. fan and I was a climber. Part of the deal when we married was that I had to get into football and she had to 'get' climbing.

It wasn't too difficult for me. My passion for football had peaked as a youngster when I watched Ipswich, the team of my youth, beat Manchester United 6-0 at Portman Road back in 1978. It couldn't get better than that, especially as both my dad and brother were Man. U. fans. But Lisa fulfilled her side of the bargain too.

Piling the dogs into the van and walking on the moors to find a rock to climb was now our weekend ritual. As long as we always made it home for *Match of the Day* in the evening then Lisa was happy. Our relationship was - and still is - built on trust and we didn't harbour any secrets from each other. I still find it slightly amusing that, out of most of our friends who are married, Lisa and I are the only ones who have a joint bank account.

By the time I'd finished the day's climb, the sun was dipping over the eastern edge of Dartmoor. We jumped in the van and headed in search of a country pub, which we soon found down a quiet country lane on the Cornwall-Devon border. The dogs sat happily under our table in the beer garden, as good as gold as they waited for the leftovers from our lasagne and chips. This was probably the closest I got to doing nothing so I relished the hour or so we spent there.

Lisa and I sat chatting. As was often the case, we fantasised a little about where we would buy a house when we left the forces. Mid-Wales was the clear favourite. We fancied a smallholding near the mountains where we could run a small B&B, I could offer rock climbing and mountaineering coaching and the dogs would have loads of free space to run around.

But lately America had been coming a close second. I wasn't sure my potential outdoor business could make us enough money to compete with the ever-increasing cost of living in the UK.

As the evening closed in, we talked about other, more mundane and everyday things too. But every now and again I would stare into space and my mind would turn to Afghanistan and what was to come.

I had no idea how life-changing it would be.

As I sat in the small shack, the northerly wind was hammering the rain against the wall of the corrugated-iron shelter. At times, it was beating hard enough to almost drown out the firing from the range nearby.

On the battery-powered radio in the corner, BBC Radio Five Live was having a special debate on British troops in Afghanistan. It felt surreal listening to the presenters talk about the place in which I would be serving in less than a week.

The picture being painted by the debate was not good.

The lead item on the hourly news that day had been about the identity of the young Royal Welsh Fusilier who had been killed the day before. There was also an update on the crash a few days earlier of an RAF Nimrod just outside Kandahar - all 14 servicemen on board had been killed, including one Royal Marine.

In recent weeks I'd absorbed lots of reports of this kind, not just on the radio but also in newspapers. In particular,

there had been a lot of in-depth reports from the parachute regiment we were due to replace at the end of their deployment, many of them focused on life in the so-called 'safe houses' that they were occupying in the more remote regions. Precisely what was 'safe' about a mud compound that was surrounded by religious fundamentalists with guns who wanted to kill everybody inside I had yet to understand.

The reports also explained how the Taliban were trying to wear down the lads by limiting their sleep pattern to a few hours per day. They said the threat from incoming mortars and heavy machine-gun fire was constant. There were also reports on the lack of food and water they were experiencing because of the problems with supply lines. It didn't sound a fun place to visit.

I knew I'd joined the marines for all this but at the moment I couldn't fire up any enthusiasm for it. I was worrying about other things. I knew that Lisa, along with probably every other family member and loved one connected to the lads about to deploy, would be reading the papers and listening to the radio too. From the detailed intelligence reports we got back at camp, I also knew things out there were even worse than the media reports suggested.

All the secret excitement I had felt about going to Afghanistan had gone. Inwardly I felt anxious and slightly scared. I loved life, I wanted to spend my time with Lisa and the dogs exploring the hills without a care in the world, but it was too late for that now. We were leaving in three days. The possibility of being killed was now very real.

I knew time would stop while I was out in Afghanistan. There would be no dwelling on things, no wondering about life back home, no more taking the dogs to work with me or sitting in the pub with Lisa or planning our weekend to fit some climbing in. I would have to become totally focused on the job at hand. No privacy, no rest, no respite from the

constant threat of being dropped right in the middle of some real nasty shit.

Added to that, I was now responsible for 20 lads and I knew I had to get on with it and concentrate on getting them - and me - back in one piece. No distractions; just get the job done.

As I looked around at the lads that made up 5 Troop they too were hanging on every word that came from the radio. Some of them were more or less straight out of training, one even from only the previous week. The youngest of them was just 18, nearly 20 years younger than me. I felt too old for this shit, but that, I suppose, was the whole point of being a troop sergeant; I had the experience to look after these youngsters. After 32 weeks of what everyone tells us is the hardest military training in the world, I felt fairly confident they would produce the goods when we needed it.

But again I had my niggling worries. Are they really ready? Will they really cope with life on the front line?

Scanning their young faces again as they listened to the radio, I began to see the apprehension spreading across them. Not good. Only one thing for it, I decided, and stood up.

I knew we still had another 40 minutes before it would be our turn to practise our last sessions of live firing on the wet peat bogs outside. But a quick half an hour of troop fitness training wouldn't go amiss in the meantime, I reckoned.

'Right, outside everyone, time for some morale-boosting exercise,' I shouted.

As I pulled on my waterproof camouflage jacket, I didn't see too much movement; in fact, only one of my marines had made a move to go outside.

'Any time today, ladies,' I said in a louder voice.

'But it's raining, Sergeant,' Tim, one of my keenest and youngest marines, piped up.

'Well, I'm sure the Taliban will understand and let us shelter indoors when it rains out there,' I replied in my most sarcastic of sergeant voices.

'But it doesn't rain in Afghanistan, does it?' said another marine.

I shook my head in disbelief.

'I guess geography is not your strong point then?' I looked once more around the room. 'Move it, NOW.'

Saying goodbye is never easy. Saying goodbye and not knowing when you will be back is the worst feeling in the world.

I looked at Lisa and knew she was holding back the tears. I didn't think my attempts at the steely commando face were working too well either.

'Pack it in or you'll have me crying in a minute,' I said, trying to smile, but it didn't make either of us feel any better.

Even Fizz and Beamer knew something was up. They somehow sensed that the packed bags outside meant I was going away. Neither of them raced to get their leads as they normally did when I opened the front door. Both just sat upright in their beds looking at me. I bent down and shook both their heads in turn.

'Fizz Dog - you are in charge, be good - no chasing squirrels, all right?'

She just continued to look at me with her sad big brown eyes, a confused expression on her face.

'I hate this,' I said, shaking my head and holding Lisa for the last time.

I held her for not nearly long enough. I kissed her quickly as tears rolled down her face, and turned straight for the door. I walked out into the early-September morning without looking back.

CHAPTER TWO

Covert Operations

AS THE LAST echoes of the explosion faded, the view from my vantage point seemed unchanged. Apart, that was, from the smoke that was rising, mushroom-like, into the early-morning sky.

Down below me nothing was moving in the tightly packed alleys, compounds and basic mud dwellings of the town. Not even the usual morning birdsong broke the silence. As I had been finding out lately, incoming mortar rounds tended to have that effect. Like the rest of the locals, the Afghan birdlife hid away when the firing started and emerged again only when it stopped. It would be a while before they returned to their favourite perches in the sparse line of trees to the north of the mud-walled district compound (DC), that myself and the 53 marines of Kilo Company now called home.

It was only two weeks since we had arrived in the small market town of Now Zad. During the short time we had been here the Taliban had managed to keep us occupied nearly every day.

They tended to hit us with their mortars first thing in the morning or about half an hour before it got dark at night. The Taliban weren't stupid; they knew we would be able to home in on the muzzle flashes from their weapons at night with ease. They used the dark to move around the woods instead.

Taliban Central, the expanse of woods where they felt safest, was on the other side of a large *wadi* - a riverbed

that's dry save for when it rains - that the locals used as a road during the dry season. We, naturally, had named it the Taliban Motorway. Apparently, even the might of the Russian Army had not been able to penetrate the woods and tame the Mujahedeen resistance, which was not a great confidence booster if it was true.

As the last of the smoke from the mortar round impact faded, I scanned the far distance with my weapon sighting system but could see no fleeting movements that might give the bad guys away.

At first sight Now Zad looked exactly like a scene straight out of Monty Python's *Life of Brian*. Nothing had changed in hundreds of years. There was no electricity and sanitation was non-existent. The ever-present dust lined the inside of our nostrils and mouths and stuck to everything we owned. The stink of human waste was bad, especially on the sunnier days we were still getting in the run-up to winter.

The surrounding landscape was, it had to be said, spectacular.

To the south the flat expanse of the Afghan desert plain stretched into the distance, barren and uninhabited apart from the nomadic goat herdsman who somehow eked out a living in this unforgiving place. But five or six kilometres to the west, north and east of the town the mountains rose suddenly from the desert floor. To the north a sharp, dome-shaped peak called Narum Kuk ran from west to east, overshadowed by the vast ranges of the Zar Kuh Kuhe Mazdurak Mountains in the far distance.

The only greenery for miles was found close to the mountains. An abundance of trees and small hardy bushes grew along the line of the Taliban Motorway stretching away to the north-east. The plants and shrubs owed their survival to the winter rains from the mountains that thundered unpredictably down the deep-sided *wadis*. As we were finding out, the town had been plagued by some of

the worst fighting seen since the coalition forces removed the Taliban from power. Sitting at the head of the Sangin Valley, Now Zad was a transit stop for the Taliban to resupply as they headed west towards two other important strategic locations, the main dam at Kajacki and the market town of Sangin, both of which - like us - were taking their fair share of punishment. Our attackers were probably using us as target practice while they were passing through to one of these two locations, I guessed.

There was no guarantee that any of the roads in or out could be safely travelled, so the only way in had been by helicopter and that had been a major operation. The army regiment we'd replaced had been holding this isolated outpost from the Taliban for more than 100 days. They had arrived, like everyone else, believing the politicians who said they were on a peace-keeping mission that would last for three years and would not require them to fire a single round.

The Paras had left Afghanistan after putting down around 87,000 rounds of ammunition and with little, militarily speaking, to show for it. Despite having suffered around 250 casualties, the Taliban were still there, still hell-bent on disrupting the efforts of the ISAF to stabilise the country and allow rebuilding to take place. I was hoping that would not be the case with us; I was hoping we would fare a little better.

'You think they have finished with the alarm call? I had just picked up my breakfast, the bastards,' Hutch - one of my more experienced section corporals - muttered, without once coming off of aim from behind the GPMG machine gun propped up on the sandbags in front of him.

Sure enough, when I looked in the back of the sangar I saw bacon and beans deposited all over the lower sides of the rear sandbags. Hutch's breakfast had landed there when he had hastily taken cover.

'Yeah, maybe,' I said. 'Don't they normally fire three in a row though? That was only two.'

Hutch said nothing.

'Anyway, you could do with losing a few pounds. They're doing you a favour.'

Back in Plymouth Hutch was one of those who went to the gym to stay in shape, not get in shape. Married with kids, he was as keen as they came for a young corporal marine, although I imagined his wife would probably have been happier if he had taken a different career path.

I kept scanning the woods but there was no sign of the mortar crew. Where the hell were the little buggers? I soon had my answer.

'Hill to all stations - incoming,' a voice screamed through my headset, signalling that the lads in the observation post on the hill above the town had noticed the giveaway puff of smoke in the distance.

'Heads down, here we go again,' I yelled down into the compound beneath me, where the lads who were off watch had gathered to see what all the excitement had been about. 'Incoming. Get under cover now.'

They looked up at me with glum resignation in their eyes before turning and running back to the safety of the old police cells we were using for our accommodation.

The slowly growing howl of an incoming mortar as it arches across the sky sounds good only in movies. Right now it was scary as hell, not least because it was a complete lottery as to where it would land.

Luckily for us this mortar crew didn't seem that competent.

I heard an explosion behind me, well away from our compound, and looked up once more to survey the damage to the once thriving town. Not that it would've mattered had it hit another building near us. There were no people living within 200 metres of our compound; it was just too dangerous. The buildings closest to us along the main

bazaar road were just rubble, with nothing but piles of twisted metal and snapped wood where doors and shop fronts once stood, their contents long since ransacked.

There were people still living in the northern part of the town, but we hadn't patrolled that far away from the compound yet so we didn't know how many were there. Given the devastation the constant battles had caused, many of the locals in this southern part of town had done the only sensible thing, packing their bags and moving further south until it was over.

Their decision seemed even wiser now as the lads on the hill opened up with the heavy machine guns in the direction of the mortar firing point. That one lucky spot of the smoke from the mortar tube had been enough. They had obviously found the enemy.

In the sangar it was almost impossible to hear anything over the 'thud thud thud' of the 50-calibre machine gun firing over our heads.

'Hey fatty, guess we miss breakfast again,' I yelled over to Hutch.

This time he turned his head towards me, his eyes alive with adrenalin, and gave me the finger before resuming his fire position.

We had flown direct from the UK to Camp Bastion, the main British concentration in Afghanistan, just over a month ago. The vast camp, named after the first British soldier to be killed in the conflict, sat in the middle of the Helmand desert surrounded by miles of nothing. There was no tarmac road, only the dusty worn tracks that led there through an unforgiving desert.

Bastion was the biggest tented camp of its kind. Impressively, it was built by the Royal Engineers in 2006 in about 12 weeks. More than 4,000 British servicemen and women currently called it home.

Most of the camp was made up of row after row of identical tented walkways. Trying to find the Expeditionary Forces Institute (EFI) shop that sold cans of fizzy drink and chocolate bars was a mission in itself. Quite why the EFI sold swimming goggles when there was no hint of a swimming pool for over one thousand miles was a question I never got answered.

Temperatures of 100 degrees Fahrenheit were not uncommon in the midday Afghan sun. To quote Robin Williams in the film *Good Morning, Vietnam*, it was 'hot, damn hot, crotch-pot cooking hot'. Just walking around Bastion meant that sweat stains grew under the armpits of my combat shirt and I couldn't begin to imagine what it would be like when I had to run around the desert with full kit. At least I wouldn't have to worry about putting any weight on out here, I'd told myself.

Apart from the heat, the worst thing about Afghanistan during those first days was the dust: it was everywhere, absolutely everywhere. It was in our sleeping bags, on our hands, under our nails, sometimes in our food or clogging the mouthpieces of our water bottles and, especially annoyingly, lining the inside of our combat helmets.

During the brief few days we had spent at Bastion the dust had become a really irritating part of our everyday life. I didn't have to tell the lads to clean their weapons daily, they just did it. But as soon as we ventured outside the accommodation tents, their work was undone. Within moments small gusts of wind deposited fine layers of dust on the newly cleaned metal, which stuck to the rifle oil like superglue.

It was even worse when we went out on to the open ground where we practised our drills. There the dust clouds would rip across the desert plain like monster tidal waves gathering speed as they charged towards us. When we got back inside our faces would be caked in the stuff, the dust stuck to our sweat like a beauty parlour-style

mudpack that you'd pay a fortune for on the High Street. The only dust-free area was where our combat goggles had protected our eyes.

On the only free evening we'd had I'd watched the sun go down from the top of the bulletproof HESCO protection blocks that formed the perimeter of the camp. Sitting there with my thoughts I'd seen the final Chinook flight of the night swooping in low from the east, straight across the fading face of the sun. The Chinook flew over the main landing site and headed straight for the emergency landing site by the fully equipped field hospital, which told me somebody was in a bad way. The scene would not have been out of place in an episode of *M*A*S*H*, which I'd watched as a kid.

Any thoughts we'd had of getting comfortable at Camp Bastion were very quickly knocked on the head. During Kilo Company's six-month tour we would spend less than four weeks in the tented city. The rest of the time would be in the 'real' Afghanistan, a very different place.

After being given only a few days to acclimatise we had been sent to the small market town of Gereshk where any thoughts of being broken in gently were quickly dispelled. Our first patrol had resulted in a firefight with the Taliban.

We'd passed through the old town of Gereshk for a rendezvous with the Afghan National Police, or ANP, who guarded the large, Chinese-built dam that gave the town its strategic importance. During our conversations with the ANP they'd pointed to a group of men standing on a nearby hillside. They told us they were Taliban but we couldn't get involved, and no shots had been fired. But as we'd made our way back up into the town the men on the hillside started firing mortars and small arms fire at the Afghans and us. So we'd had no choice but to engage them.

For a brief while we'd been caught in the middle of the Taliban engagement, with our rear exposed to a potential attack. It had taken the rockets from a Harrier fighter jet

our OC had called in to finish the encounter. It had been a sobering moment for most of us, a realisation that training was well and truly over.

With two weeks of patrolling under our belts we had then been sent back to Bastion to prepare for deployment to the 'safe' house in the town of Now Zad, where we'd be based for at least the next two months. The 'safe' house was where I was standing now, looking warily out from behind the sandbags of the sentry post for any sign of another incoming mortar.

I had just been about to sit down to a tasteless lunch of military brown biscuits accompanied by something that had come out of a tin labelled 'meat patty' when the call came over the radio for me to visit the small operations room that we had set up as the headquarters of the compound. After eating the same thing for lunch for the last few days I was grateful for the excuse to slot the biscuits back into their green packet. I trotted over and stuck my head in the door.

'You rang Boss?' I said as I looked around the corner of the room, which was crammed full, even with just four people stood in there.

As it turned out the boss, who was the Officer Commanding Kilo Company, was busy on the radio.

The signaller gave me a wave and I waved back while the boss finished his conversation then replaced the spare headset that was connected to the main sangar and hill radio network.

'Your department I think, Sergeant. The hill is reporting that the Afghan National Police are outside the gate. Firstly I haven't given them permission to be there and secondly they are abusing a tied-up dog.' He knew all about my dogs, having stepped over Fizz on numerous occasions to get into the gym back at our base in Plymouth.

'Check it out and get them back inside and be diplomatic!'

'No problems Boss - on my way.'

I ran back over to my grot to get rigged up as even a quick stroll outside required full body armour and equipment. I couldn't go out single-handed, so along with Hutch I grabbed Dave, another one of our more experienced corporals.

Dave had earned the right to be a section corporal after completing his Junior Command Course prior to us deploying to Afghanistan. It was a job he relished. He loved nothing more than getting on with the job of being a Royal Marine and then partying afterwards with the ladies, or so he liked to boast anyway - most of the lads would testify that Dave's chatting-up techniques left a lot to be desired. From talking to him in the sangars, I knew Dave had grown up with dogs and, like me, had a soft spot for them.

We geared up as I hurriedly explained the situation and made our way around to the west gate. With my headset now attached to my left ear I could hear the hill watchkeeper talking urgently to the main building watchkeeper.

'0 this is Hill. The lads say that the ANP are getting quite nasty with that dog. What do you want us to do? Over.'

'Hill this is 0. Wait out and keep an eye on 20C who is making his way out there. Over.' As troop sergeant 20C - pronounced 'Two Zero Charlie' - was my call sign.

'0 this is Hill. Roger. Hope he gives them a good kicking. Out.'

I told Hutch and Dave that we had the hill playing over-watch but we still covered each other religiously as we headed out of the compound. Hutch knelt to provide semi-cover behind a mud wall at the corner of the alleyway that led from the gate as Dave and I ran across the small patch of open ground to the front. Dave then went to ground to

adopt a good fire position while Hutch caught up and we both moved on to the next piece of cover.

Even though we were two streets away we could hear the sounds of a very angry dog barking.

I didn't really have a plan.

The ANP had been tasked by the Karzai Government to bring stability back into Afghanistan, but the truth was they were poorly paid and not very well trained. They weren't very popular with the locals either. For their protection the ANP shared our compound, which infuriated the local people - we had had complaints that at times the ANP had threatened them for money and food, allegedly, but we had no way of proving it.

As we made our way forward, I knew I had to remain professional; after all we were here to save the people of Afghanistan, not the dog population. I had to play it cool. I couldn't create an incident between us and the ANP, who were supposedly on our side. But there was no way I was going to tolerate animal cruelty. Especially not while I had a big gun.

We moved patrol-like along the edges of the alleys lined with mud walls until we broke out into a clearing. Hutch took up a position covering the scenario in front of us.

As I continued forwards Dave walked by my side. This again was something we'd learned in Afghan training, an all-important part of the politics in this part of the world. Having a leader walking side by side with a bodyguard conveyed confidence; it was a small show of strength.

Twenty feet away, in the middle of the open ground, was a white pickup truck. Sitting on top of it was the ANP commander, dressed in his long flowing olive-green robes. His second in command was standing in the back of the truck bed with an RPG launcher balanced on one shoulder. As I moved into the open ground, their eyes followed me unemotionally.

I soon saw what had been causing the commotion. On the open ground in front of them both, two of the commander's young sidekicks were pulling on opposite sides of the biggest dog that I had ever seen. The white-and-grey-haired giant was at least four feet high and had a head the size of a grizzly bear, with teeth to match. Its lips were curled up in one of those 'get near me so I can rip your head off' snarls.

Straight away I noticed that the dog had been relieved of its ears. I had read about this practice. It was a sign that the dog was used for one of Afghanistan's most popular sports - dogfighting.

I had Googled Afghanistan and its culture prior to the deployment. Dogfighting had been one of the more distressing aspects that I had found. It was a centuries-old tradition, commonplace among the tribal clans. Owning a victorious dog could bring an owner a great deal of money and respect among his peers.

The images on the Internet had not been pleasant. It wasn't anything a pet owner would want to be involved with. The large-breed dogs had no choice but to attack each other - resulting in a bloody frenzy. It was fight or, potentially, die. The dogs would have their ears and tail removed with a knife - without any anaesthetic - so that no superficial wounds would be inflicted as the result of a torn ear or tail and the fights could then last longer. Dogs were in abundant supply in Afghanistan and extremely far down on the welfare list. (Although to be fair, human life wasn't exactly that far up it.)

The irony of all this was that when the Taliban came to power, not only had women been banned from all forms of education, but they also banned dogfighting as they deemed it un-Islamic. With the Coalition Forces removing the Taliban from power in Kabul in 2001, the void in Government had allowed the back-street spectator sport to flourish once more. One step forward, two steps back.