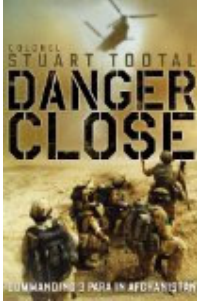


Danger Close: Commanding 3 Para in Afghanistan **Colonel Stuart Tootal DSO OBE**

(From the the War Books Review)



Under the command of Lt-Colonel Stuart Tootal, 3 PARA Battle Group spearheaded the British advance into Helmand in April 2006. The six-month tour of duty conducted by the paratroopers, along with their support units, has already gained legendary status, the British soldiers logging up 498 separate contacts with the enemy and covering themselves with battle honours in the process.

Among a number of accounts of the fighting, Tootal's story is of special interest, as he was at the centre of just about everything that happened during the campaign. When he was not liaising with his superiors, he was planning and then conducting operations in the field. A strong-minded, hands-on CO, he took full advantage of the benefits provided by aerial mobility and vastly improved communications. He gives a good impression of what it was like to be at the heart of the action, not least the tension of being crammed into a CH-47 Chinook awaiting takeoff and the gut-wrenching moments of a hot landing, each soldier a helpless prisoner inside a tin tube with Taliban RPGs and machine-gun rounds whistling around them.

As well as fighting the Taliban, Tootal had to contend with two fundamental problems that bedevilled his entire time in Afghanistan: not enough 'boots on the ground' to fulfil the expanding duties assigned to his battlegroup and a shortage of essential equipment, above all sufficient helicopters to safely transport his men in and out of battle. These frustrations are aired in this account, revealing the fighting man's disdain for red tape and the easy life led by those in the air-conditioned enclaves behind the lines. With commendable self-control Tootal describes the refusal of higher command to release a winch-mounted Black Hawk helicopter to rescue desperately wounded paras trapped in a mine field by the Kajaki dam, which, in turn, led to further casualties and the death of Corporal Mark Wright (who was awarded a posthumous George Cross in an attempt to rescue his wounded comrades).

The book reveals Tootal's compassionate regard for his men and the real anguish he experienced when troops were killed or wounded; amongst other he writes movingly of the deaths of Wright, Private Damian Jackson and VC winner Corporal Bryan Budd. And while on a brief R&R stint in Britain, he visited his wounded soldiers at a civilian hospital at Selly Oak, Birmingham, only to be outraged by the poor treatment they were receiving. It was a wider knowledge of these failings that led to a public outcry and the setting up of the Help for Heroes charity and 3 Paras' own Afghan Trust.

At one level *Danger Close* is an eloquent plea for better equipment for those in the firing line and better treatment for those wounded, but it is also a fascinating story of commanding a battalion in battle. It seems destined to become one of the classic works from this latest of Britain's wars in Afghanistan.

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