

*Dear Hannah and Sophie,*

I was busy sorting out the washing and unpacking after a holiday in Greece when I heard of the death of your father, Lieutenant-Colonel Rupert Thorneloe, aged 39. Whenever casualties in Iraq or Helmand are mentioned, my antennae are primed. Fears of hearing a familiar name are rarely justified but this time, they were.

We met your parents at a party some months ago. Your father was heading to Afghanistan soon afterwards and, like every professional soldier, was clearly looking forward to taking his troops of the 1st Battalion Welsh Guards on operation.

It is every soldier's goal to lead his men into battle and the men at the party, some of whom had served in the Army but seen nothing to compare with the action faced in Afghanistan, talked to him animatedly about what he might expect. A little envious, perhaps. Above all, he said that he was concerned to bring his troops back safely, and at the same time was anxious about leaving you and your mother at home, aware of the risks.

It did not seem fair to question your mother about whether she was frightened of what might happen or whether she had considered that he might not return. Instead, she and I discussed you and your sleeping habits and whether our toddler upstairs was screaming because she was afraid of the dark or of being in a strange house with lots of noise. Mundane maternal worries.

I was nervous, though, because 30 years ago my father, David Blair, was killed in action in Northern Ireland by the IRA. Like your father, he was proudly commanding his regiment, the 1st Battalion Queen's Own Highlanders. He was on a short tour of Ulster before being posted to Hong Kong.

He died, along with Lance Corporal Victor Macleod and 16 other soldiers from 2 Para, at Warrenpoint on August 27, 1979. Soldiers had been killed by a roadside bomb and he had gone to investigate. Nineteen minutes after the first blast, a second bomb was detonated, killing my father and several others. He had just turned 40 and is still the most senior British Army officer to have died in Northern Ireland.

Both tall, good-looking men in their prime, our fathers seem to share a lot in common. Virtually the same age, old boys of the same school, Radley College, and now two of just eight commanding officers to have died on operations in command of their units since 1948.

Of course, they also shared a family. You are younger than my brother and me, who were then aged 8 and 10, but our loss is the same. Your father was also clearly deeply loved, admired and respected by his men and by all around him, from his guardsmen to General Sir Richard Dannatt, the Chief of the General Staff.

Many brave men and women are dying in Iraq and Afghanistan today. But few are picked out, like our fathers, for such scrutiny. In part it is their bravery, in part it is because, as leaders of men, they have paid the ultimate price. And they are young. They have become heroes overnight, even if that description is one which, in life,

they would almost certainly have denied. All those who knew your father say that he had a brilliant career ahead of him, that he would have reached the top, and that, in the words of Bob Ainsworth, the Defence Secretary, he led his men with “energy, care and pride”.

In your grief, none of these tributes will carry any meaning at the moment. You will probably barely understand that your father, whom you love more than any man in the world, is never going to come home and sweep you into his arms again. That he will never be sharing family holidays or walks with you. That he will not be there to turn to for advice when you are a teenager and want to know what A levels or university to choose. That you will never be able to send Father’s Day cards to him.

Your mother will be desperate to hold you to her, not wanting to let you out of her sight — not even at bedtime — in a way that will continue long after the immediate pain has passed and even after you have left school and are well into adulthood. But your mere presence will support her in her struggle to carry on.

In years to come, you will be proud to know that your father died leading his men, and that they loved him. Talk of whether Viking armoured vehicles, like the one that was carrying him, offer adequate protection against roadside bombs will likely be irrelevant, because nothing will bring your father back.

Like those men who killed my father, your father’s killers are unlikely ever to be caught. But I hope that you may also come to realise that not all Afghans are the Taliban and that many of them appreciate British efforts, including those of your father and his troops, to restore their country to the safer place it is trying to become.

In some ways, we are luckier than most. The regiment is still an extended but close-knit family. For 30 years it has protected and cared for our family and I am certain that the 1st Battalion Welsh Guards will do exactly the same for you and your mother.

Having died so young, at the height of his career, Rupert Thorneloe will always be remembered. For decades to come, old soldiers will want to meet you and regale you with tales from when they and your father were on operations together, and tell you how much they loved him.

One day, you will take comfort from this and from the knowledge that, wherever he is, he is looking out for you. And will do always.

*Yours, Alex*