

Highlanders look forward to their homecoming

By Sarah Rollo



Forres soldiers Highlander Alan Burnett (Left) and Corporal Stephen Corrigan take time to speak with an Afghan local during patrol in Lashkar Gah. Photo [Copyright MoD](#)

SOLDIERS FROM Moray are preparing to return home after a six-month tour of duty, battling not just insurgents but the intense heat of the Afghan sun.

In a special ‘Northern Scot’ report, members from the 4th Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland reflect on six months in Helmand.

For the past 24 weeks, their patch has been an area of Afghanistan’s Lashkar Gah district that stretches 25km from North to South and 70km from East to West.

Working as part of Operation HERRICK, The Highlanders have been responsible for providing security in the area, working alongside the Afghan National Police (ANP).

Regular patrols and deliberate operations to disrupt insurgents are among duties they have carried out, all the while building relationships with local people.

That has involved navigating difficult terrain, from uneven tracks to wide and deep irrigation ditches at high altitudes, both on foot and in 4 SCOTS’ armoured vehicles.



Elgin’s Darren Angus, part of A Company’s recce platoon, has become used to daily patrols, as well as those carried out under the cover of darkness
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Highlander Darren Angus, from Elgin, said it has been an interesting six-month tour.

The 24-year-old, part of A Company’s recce platoon, said: “We’ve been up in the middle of the night, working under the cover of darkness, so we could begin ops just after first light when the insurgents did not know we were there.

“Other times, we’ve been out all day carrying out patrol after patrol so we could stop the insurgents being able to move around the area and lay IEDs (improvised explosive devices), launch attacks or intimidate locals.”

That patrol only lasted a few hours, but at times the soldiers have taken part in operations that last up to a few weeks.

For longer patrols, the men and women must live out of compounds, with only the kit that they can carry.

Patrolling in the Afghan desert in the summer, as the Jocks have done, has been arduous, with the soldiers carrying 40 kilos of kit as well as their body armour and helmet, despite temperatures rarely dropping below 40 degrees.

Highlander Daryl Rennie (23), from Keith, says it's been tough. "When I first arrived it was starting to get really warm.

"The weight of the kit and not being used to the heat meant we were pretty slow, but we got used to it really quickly; we had to.

"I enjoy going out on foot patrols because you get to interact with locals much better than you can in a vehicle," he said.

Since deploying in April, part of their work has been conducting Vehicle Checkpoints (VCP) to disrupt insurgents attempting to smuggle weapons or IEDs along key routes into Lashkar Gah city.



Daryl Rennie from Keith, said the heat has been tough, but the Highlanders Quickly acclimatise. Photo [Copyright MoD](#).

Hldr Rennie added: "The ANP conduct the searches because they have much better local knowledge than we do and so are able to identify insurgents or people from out of the area.

"We then provide an outer cordon of security to keep the ANP safe while they carry out the searches."

When not on patrol, the 4 SCOTS soldiers live in bases dotted across the area of operations.

Corporal Stephen Corrigan, from Forres, and Lance Corporal Steven Shepherd, from Huntly, are serving with B Company and have spent the last six months living at Check Point Balusan, one of the smallest and most austere bases in 4 SCOTS' area, which they share with the ANP.



Lance Corporal Steven Shepherd, from Huntly, spent the last six months living at Check Point Balusan, one of the smallest and most austere bases in 4SCOTS area. Photo [Copyright MoD](#).

LCpl Shepherd (25) said after several months, they're used to the conditions.

"It's small and very basic and the only way in and out is on foot or by helicopter. So all our supplies, from food and water to ammunition and kit has to be specially delivered. The base gets targeted quite often because it's so remote but actually, we all enjoy living there – the banter and camaraderie is great."

Cpl Corrigan (29) added: "We have a couple of laptops and there is an internet connection so it makes it quite easy to stay in touch with home. There's a gym too, which we all use when we have some downtime. Living with the Afghans has been an experience but we get along very well, despite the different language and culture."



Colour Sergeant Alistair Hendry, of Lossiemouth, says there has been a "significant reduction" in the amount of insurgent activity. Photo [Copyright MoD](#).

Colour Sergeant Alistair Hendry (37), from Lossiemouth, joined other members of his company at another small checkpoint known as Yellow 14, situated outside the provincial capital.

CSgt Hendry said that thanks to the combined efforts of the local police and other Scots soldiers, there has been a "significant reduction" in the amount of insurgent activity.

That has helped boost the confidence of the local people in the area, and their belief in the capability of the Afghan forces to do the job that British soldiers have been doing until now.

"It has been challenging at times, but considering we speak different languages and have different cultures, we've got on really well and together we've achieved a lot in a short space of time," said CSgt Hendry.

"They're very keen to learn and over the last six months we've seen a big improvement in what they're able to do themselves."

It is the second stint in Afghanistan for CSgt Hendry, who said he has become used to spending time away from his family on operations.

"My daily duties have involved the day-to-day running of the ops room, which has meant making sure everyone knows exactly what's going on," he added, pointing out that includes establishing where the patrols are taking place and what the risks are. "It also means responding to incidents and getting the guys on the ground the support they need, if required."

The soldiers have only a short while left in Afghanistan before they return to their base in Fallingbommel, Germany.

CSgt Hendry said he is now looking forward to being reunited with wife, Sheena, and children, Rhona and Archie.

At the end of the year, the family is planning to return to Moray for a well-earned break and a chance to spend time together with friends.

Another Moray man, 22-year-old Highlander Alan Burnett, from Forres, said everyone is looking forward to heading home.

“It has been a very busy and tough tour, especially because of the weather. After six months of being in 50 degree heat, I think we are all keen to get home to the Scottish climate.

“And of course, it will be good to see our families and catch up on everything that’s been going on while we’ve been away,” he said.