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Dear Sirs,

I wrote last over two months ago and as you would expect much has happened in the intervening period. Most positively, the Manoeuvre Battlegroup transferred its two bases in Central Helmand – Patrol Base Lashkar Gah Durai to the Afghan National Army and Main Operating Base (MOB) Price to American Forces. I will describe the events surrounding these operations in detail later-on but thankfully we got out in good order with limited interference from the enemy. Our second focus over the winter was the preparation for the dissolution of Task Force Helmand (TFH) and our move to Regional Command (South West) where we will be a UK Battlegroup (BG) working to a US Marine Corps One Star Headquarters, an exciting prospect. To do this the BG grew and changed shape, again more later. Finally, in introduction, Assaye Company completed Exercise OLIVE GROVE in Jordan successfully, including a visit from CGS - a daunting prospect for the Adjutant who had only recently stepped into the breach as the Company Commander.

The operation to extract from Lashkar Gah Durai and PRICE started as soon as we arrived. Given it as a specified task in our mission we realised this activity could not be left until a final flurry at the end. The challenge was considerable: all told there were 661 twenty foot containers worth of equipment to extract – the equivalent to one and half RORO ferries! And significant ground works was required to dismantle some of the structures which had been constructed over the years. And so, for the last few months the Quartermaster (QM), Major Gary Tait, our Engineer, Captain Alex Wright, and their teams have been clearing the mountain of 'stuff' accumulated over the past HERRICKS so the bases were stripped to fighting order before the final recovery began.

The BG ran two sequential operations over two weeks to protect the bases in their final days. For the first operation, the recovery of LASHKAR GAH DURAI, the arrival of D Company was a significant bonus and they moved quickly to takeover the base security to allow me to use our Warrior Company to protect it in depth. The Warriors were supported by the Danish Tanks to provide a potent force to dissuade the insurgent from attacking us as we left. This protection was needed as the enemy took advantage of the reduction in our 'eyes' in the final week to probe. Some excellent work by the Warrior Company thwarted a suspected bomb attack and the Danish Tanks provided a reassuring ring of steel around the base. The final collapse was going smoothly until a late request by the Afghan National Army to retain some of the base meant some swift re-building by some Engineers. But, at midnight on 8th March, D Company commanded the last convoy of 71 vehicles and 241 people from Lashkar Gah Durai and TFH's eastern most outpost was closed.



The Danish Tanks leaving to go on patrol during the operation to close Patrol Base Lashkar Gah Durai.

The closure of MOB Price in Gereshk was a little easier following our adventures in Lashkar Gah Durai and passed off without significant incident. The QM's preparatory work, to reduce the requirement for road moves, the most risky part of the operation, by using innovative methods of extracting equipment, paid -off. He pioneered the first use by a UK BG of a new unmanned helicopter, CRUAS, to provide a night-time cargo capability. In all CRUAS made 73 trips to MOB Price and significantly reduced our road move requirement so the last convoy from the base required only 10 trucks. Something that was unthinkable at the start of the Tour.



Highlanders in the last stages of the closure of MOB PRICE living under ponchos.

The change from TFH's Manoeuvre BG to Regional Command (South West's) Manoeuvre BG has gone smoothly and as I write we are on the eve of our first operation in the new construct. This, we believe, is the first time a UK Battalion has been under a US Marine Corps (USMC) Brigade Headquarters since 2004 when the Black Watch were commanded by the USMC in Camp DOGWOOD – it is obviously a Scottish thing. We have welcomed two squadrons from 9/12Lancers and a company from 2 RANGLIAN into the BG, but, said goodbye to the Estonians and A and C Companies from 3 MERCIAN. Our role remains broadly the same: to protect the forces which remain in Central Helmand including Camp Bastion and provide support to the Afghan Security Forces in depth.

Our focus has not been solely operations. Exercise OLIVE GROVE in Jordan was a huge success and provided respite and focus for those soldiers in Germany. It was a simple exercise which concentrated on low level infantry skills and CGS was enthused by just how uncomplicated it was after the sophisticated tuning of pre Afghanistan training. The soldiers had the chance to work with the Jordanian Forces and see some of the delights of that fabulous country, particularly Petra and Wadi Rum. For a young soldier, that the Battalion has been to Kenya, Jordan and deployed to Afghanistan all in the last 9 months must be exciting and we hope these opportunities will continue into 2015 and beyond.

Back in Afghanistan, the Regional Corps Battleschool (RCBS) under the watchful eye of B Company continued to impress with its excellent training and pragmatic attitude. The media focus was on them when the Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition visited. Mr Miliband talked to the Afghans running the training and was taken aback when an Afghan Colonel in response to his question – and what can I do for you - replied buy me 10 sheep for Nowruz (New year). This provided us with the justification we needed to ease some sticky application processes and I am

pleased to report the sheep were delivered on time for the Nowruz Feast. The RCBS team celebrated the New Year with their Afghan friends with a football and volleyball match both of which unfortunately we lost. But 4 SCOTS did, however, win the large joint UK/US March and Shoot coming first, second and fourth (an aged CO's team) proving we may not be as big as the US marines but we can march faster and shoot straighter.

Finally and most recently, we commemorated the founding of the Royal Regiment of Scotland with a parade, BBQ and potted Regimental History speeches. Individuals with previous connections to an antecedent Regiment gave a short speech to the assembled Battalion on a particularly famous battle honour which features on the current colours. The QM (Ex Royal Scots) and OC D Company (ex Black Watch) chose two Battle Honours, Gulf War 1991 and Iraq 2003, on which they could speak with first hand experience and this made the event more memorable and significant for the younger soldiers on the Tour. More poignantly, the parade gave us a chance to remember those members of the Regiment who lost their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan with a simple ceremony.



Highlanders on parade to mark the Royal Regiment of Scotland Formation Day.

We now enter our final two months on Tour. The Battalion will have a significant number of troops forward, some 340, over this period – more than at any time on the operation so far – in a wide variety of roles. But such has been the nature of HERRICK 19 that we will have deployed, by the end, over 500 soldiers to Afghanistan and given over 200 their first operational experience and medal – an excellent investment for the future. Our contribution to the Afghans and ISAF in these last two months will be important and we must set our successors up for success – so, I think we will be busy!

Happy Easter and I will write again before we depart.

James