

INTRODUCTION TO HELMAND

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Guerrilla warfare has been a part of conflict since societies first began forming. Indeed Sun Tzu, the Chinese military theorist, sketched out some of the enduring principles of guerrilla warfare in his work *The Art of War* in 400 BC. The term 'guerrilla' is Spanish in origin and means 'little war'. As a military tactic the practice of guerrilla warfare was largely one of common sense. At its heart were largely military methodologies that allowed a minority (the weak) to take on and fight the majority (the strong). Critically it was often the response of the strong rather than that of the weak that set the parameters for success or defeat. The strong were invariably required to confront a modus operandi that was unconventional in nature, unanticipated or whose effect was underestimated. More often than not conventional orthodoxy would have to be addressed and changed, often in the midst of a struggle, if the weak were to be repelled, subdued or defeated.

As nations developed, became recognisable states and established territorial identities, so the guerrilla imbued his campaign with revolutionary fervour that addressed political doctrine, social and economic elements. In guerrilla warfare the population is the prize that both the insurgent and the counter-insurgent seek. For this reason there has always been particular emphasis on the role of propaganda, psychological operations and information operations, as they are integral components of a guerrilla campaign. The advent of the Internet, global communications and rapid urbanisation has served to increase the potency and ability of both the insurgent and counter-insurgent to deliver a 'message' to a worldwide audience. Both are seeking to influence (positive, benign and negative messages all have a role) a wide audience. In the aftermath of the Second World War and as the grip of the Cold War strengthened, a major shift in guerrilla warfare occurred. A number of 'little wars' were fought, more often than not sponsored by the key protagonists in the Cold War. The clash of political ideologies led to guerrilla warfare adopting a predominantly revolutionary hue and the insurgent and his opponent the counter-insurgent entered everyday language.

Inherently political in nature, insurgencies have at their heart a struggle to coerce and control an indigenous population sufficiently well to allow the insurgent to gain power, to gain authority, to exercise his will. Insurgencies invariably start small and gather momentum, provided the population supports the insurgent and allows him to gain mass. And such is the stuff of successful insurgencies. Ranged against the insurgent is the counter-insurgent, who may represent the government or the authority that the insurgent is trying to remove. The counter-insurgent can be indigenous to the country or can be outside powers seeking to ensure the insurgent fails in his ambition. Sometimes the insurgent only manifests himself when his land has been occupied by an invading power. If war is a continuation of politics by another means, then insurgency represents the point at which politics, military intent and the population – or, more widely, societies – coalesce. Insurgency represents war amongst the people.

Strip away the politics, the strategic purpose, the operational design, the clash of military machinery, and insurgency and its bedfellow – counter-insurgency – are fundamentally about individuals in often epic struggles of will, ideals and ideology. It is, more often than not, those that have the strength of purpose to continue, often against overwhelming odds, that succeed. Those who persevere, endure setbacks, regenerate, adapt, plan for the long term, maintain patience, who influence, who never give up, are those who win out. Uniquely these characteristics apply as much to the insurgent as they do to the counter-insurgent. Each adapts to the other, each learns from the other and each seeks to outwit and defeat the other.

In the midst of the fury, the chaos, the friction and the complexity of counter-insurgency are people, not machines. They are the tools (the means) of the institutions, forces and departments that make up the organizations that conduct insurgency or counter-insurgency and the means by which that policy, strategy, plans, tactics and objectives are delivered. Be it the ragged, poorly equipped insurgent or the trained, well-equipped counter-insurgent they are the means of implementation, the deliverer of

outcomes, the link between success or failure. And for these reasons the general population become the key element, whose consent, often unknowingly, becomes the battleground. The population find themselves in the midst of these competing forces for whom the population is the centre of gravity. For successful counter-insurgents the requirement is to be population – not enemy – focused yet at the same time to seek to destroy the insurgent without killing the innocent. It is a devilishly difficult and complex process. In modern insurgencies the counter-insurgent is also expected – or required – to conduct his battles within the rule of law, to obey strict rules of engagement, to seek absolutely to limit collateral damage, to provide assistance and medical care to wounded insurgents, to imprison them humanely. The insurgent, however, operates outside the norms of western liberal democracy yet is globally networked, willingly outsources terrorist activity and is adept at news management and the business of getting a clear, coherent message across. The message is indeed the medium. A modern insurgent also utilises indiscriminate killing as a means towards an end and taps into the globalisation of organised crime that has accompanied the growth and globalisation of markets. For both insurgent and counter-insurgent the population is indeed that most precious of prizes.

If insurgency at the point of conflict is fundamentally about human endeavour and the human spirit then it is also, by extension, about willingness to endure sacrifice, live with austerity and hardship, put up with failures, live with setbacks or celebrate success – in whatever form it appears. It involves patience, for insurgencies are not defeated in years but decades. It requires application, adaptation and constant innovation from those individuals involved in the conduct of the fight. Successful counter-insurgencies are invariably conducted by those who militarily are able to get the balance, be it kinetic or non-kinetic, or the application of resources right. More often than not it is those armies or cross-government institutions that constantly adapt – sometimes radically – who eventually succeed. In doing so they become 'learning organisations' that rapidly identify mistakes, acknowledge them, adjust training regimes and seek to apply the right resources to the 'adapted' solution. Because so much is dependent on the human dynamic and the skills and experience of individuals, considerable time is spent on identifying who they are, what made them successful and how individual success can be replicated, encouraged or improved.

Fundamentally, successful counter-insurgency requires clear political end-states, the will to succeed and moral authority. Ambiguity of strategy, competitive rather than creative tension between inter-governmental departments, discord amongst allies, poor multinational organisational structures all serve to undermine clarity of purpose and unity of command. There are no absolute military solutions to counter-insurgency, only inexact political ones. And getting all of this right is no easy thing. To enter the world of successful counter-insurgency requires acceptance of continual and rapid change as tactics are modified, organisations reorganised, technology absorbed, public support buttressed and attended to. Few insurgencies last the lifetime of the government of the counter-insurgent. Democracy sees to that. So policies shift, the political dynamic changes, good ideas are abandoned, bad ones put in place, better policies adopted, poor policies rejected. Changes to approach are managed to avoid irrelevancy, irrelevancy is maintained to avoid change. Under the pressure of seemingly obscure and competing demands, one can often forget how implementation at the sharp end is conducted, what it takes to get anything at all done in complex, unforgiving environments with populations who seem ungrateful, hostile, belligerent and afraid. Success in conducting counter-insurgency is often less to do with getting what you want but wanting what you've got. That way at least you plan and execute with the certainty of available resources rather than wait for resources to be more certain before you plan and execute. Crucially it makes you more innovative, proactive and adaptable. This is an important consideration for the individual fighting at the coalface. Modern counter-insurgency constantly seeks to devolve tactical responsibility downwards, in order that commanders and individuals can be empowered. It is they, after all, who are in daily contact with the population, the environment and the enemy. At this level decentralisation is the key because people are the means of delivery.

Critically no two insurgencies are the same. Each is unique in its scope, design, impact and consequence. In Afghanistan the insurgency is unique in that the insurgent was formerly the government (although the term government is probably inappropriate for the former Taliban regime). This is very rare – it may even be a first – but it does mean that there is a population in Afghanistan that can vividly recall the brutality and excesses of the Taliban. It is not often in an insurgency that

fifteen-year olds can remember not being able to fly a kite, listen to music or if they are female, be denied an education.

If counter-insurgency as a form of warfare has at its heart people, what is the role of, the demands on, and the actuality of life as a soldier – the counter-insurgent – in these circumstances? What are the soldiers in the vivid, brilliant, mesmerising images of this book doing in the harsh, uncompromising environment of Helmand? What are they enduring daily, what efforts are being undertaken on an hourly, daily basis, to make those unsteady progressive steps in countering the insurgent?

When 52 Brigade were warned in the autumn of 2006, that they would be the Brigade HQ around which the Helmand Task Force would be organised, it was, to say the least, a surprise. 52 Brigade had not conducted an operational role since the Second World War, and from its vantage point of Edinburgh Castle had been focused on regional issues in Scotland and on the units under its command. The story of how the Brigade assembled the Task Force, converted itself into an operational brigade, trained itself and the wider Task Force, deployed and fought as part of the counter-insurgency against the Taliban insurgency will be told elsewhere, but the story of those who fought can be told here by capturing the very essence of those individuals. It was reputedly Orwell who noted that 'people sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf'. These are those individuals. Words are not necessary such is the intensity and instant familiarisation that the images in this book engender. But what lies behind these extraordinary images? The subjects of these photographs should first and foremost be viewed not as soldiers but as husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces, cousins. Only then should they be viewed as soldiers, fighting men, commanders, warriors, officers and combatants. Why? The former category ensures that kith, kin and lives led are the factors that are remembered, the latter ensures that the means, the ends, the results are enshrined. In these images we seek to bring out the human dynamic of those people who have experienced the hardship, the austerity, the danger and who are, by extension, the representatives of those who came before them and those who will come after them. The eventual outcome of the insurgency in Afghanistan is uncertain and known to no one. All counter-insurgencies are a mass of uncertainties, contradictions and seemingly frequent tipping points that favour one side or the other. The people, landscape and images that have been captured by the 52 Brigade war artist Robert Wilson in this magnificent book are all in the conflict eco-system that makes up a complex counter-insurgency. The effects are etched onto rock, desert, clothing and faces. The results imprinted in the textures, colours, moods and grain of Robert Wilson's superb studies. As the commander of the Helmand Task Force I could not have asked more of a war artist. Indeed for those members of the British Armed Forces who have served in Helmand I hope the images represent and provide a lasting legacy of the extraordinary experience you undertook.