DAREDEVIL MARINES Words ADAM THORN

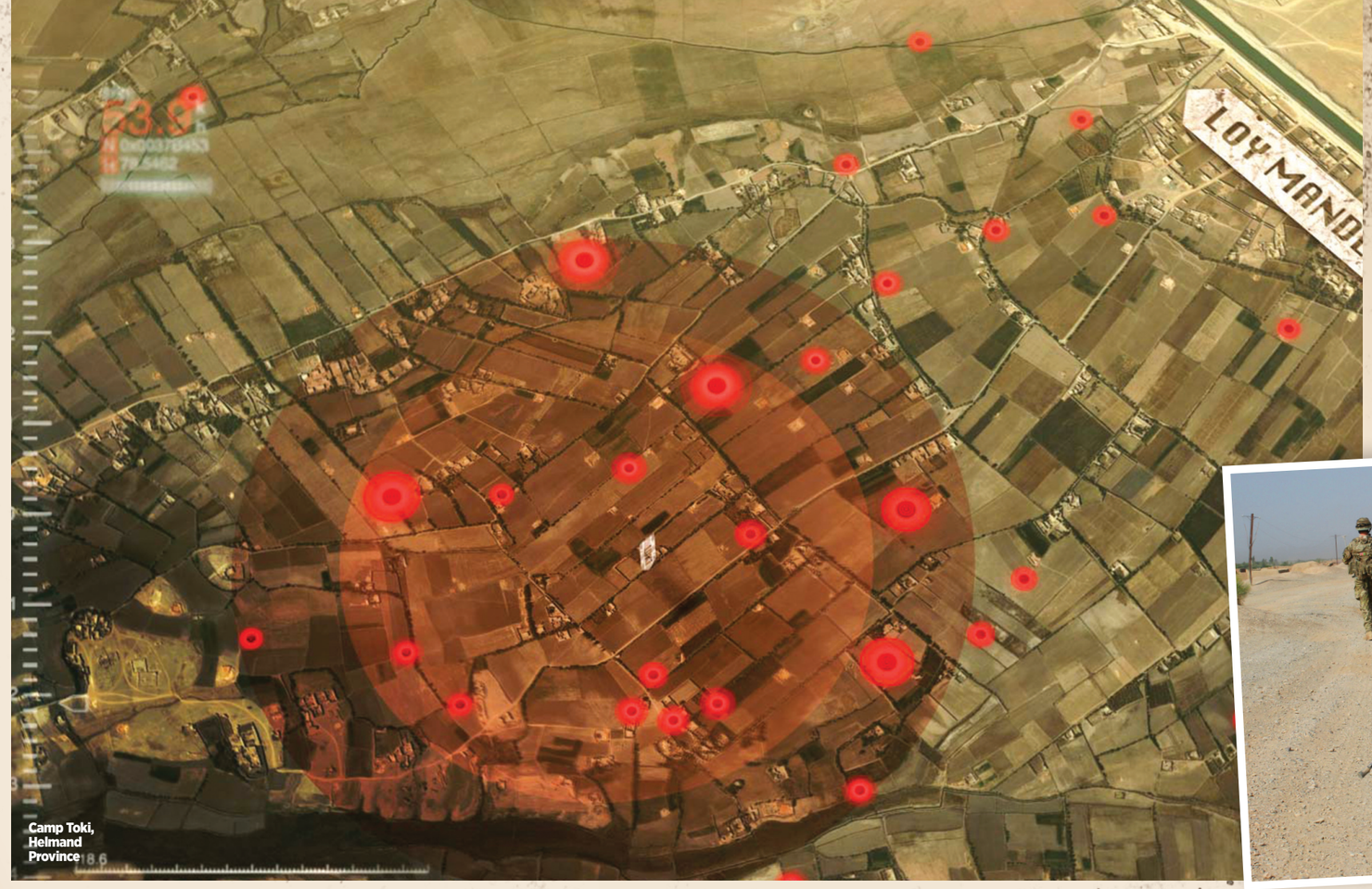
WOULD YOU WALK THROUGH A MINEFIELD EVERY DAY FOR YOUR COUNTRY?

Meet the Royal Marines who were human bait for The Taliban, after being dumped in the middle of Afghanistan's most dangerous square mile...

It's just gone 6am in the morning, and while wading through the thick long grass in scorching heat, blearly-eyed cameraman Chris Terrill is concentrating intently on the feet of the man in front of him. And with good reason. He's been sent out on patrol with the Royal Marines deep in a square mile of Afghanistan littered with deadly Taliban mines. "It doesn't matter where you are in the line," he says, wearily. "It may not be the weight of the first footstep that triggers the blast, nor the second or third. It's just luck. Or rather, bad luck. The Marines refer to it as Afghan roulette."

This was a daily journey for Chris though, who is no ordinary cameraman. He is the only civilian ever to be awarded the Green Beret – given to recruits who complete the 32-week Royal Marine training programme and gruelling commando tests. This achievement means he's the only journalist to have been trusted to live with the famed 42 Commando's L Company in Helmand's most bloody corner. During their six months there, several men where killed and more than 70 left with life-changing injuries. And it's no wonder. Their mission was to act as human bait, drawing out insurgents crawling all over the area, distracting them from vital work being completed in the nearby town of Loy Mandeh. *loaded* meets the troops who gambled with their lives walking through the world's most dangerous minefield.

"Travelling to Checkpoint Toki by road was a sure-fire way of committing suicide," Chris tells *loaded* while explaining why a helicopter's vital to reach the base. "If a Taliban ambush didn't get you, then a deadly roadside bomb would have done – the place was riddled with them. Small ones that take your legs off and bigger ones that would turn you into what the Marines called pink mist." While much of Helmand Province – the area of Afghanistan allotted to the British Military – had been secured, L Company's base was near an area still swarming with insurgents desperately trying to protect one of the few pockets of Taliban strength remaining. For the enemy, this was to be a last stand.



Camp Toki, Helmand Province

Bombs exploding near the Marines' compound

A routine patrol

"The larger bombs turn you into what the Marines call 'pink mist"

brothers in farms

And while you may assume L Company's checkpoint would undoubtedly be a cutting-edge, hi-tech base, some of Britain's most elite soldiers were instead holed up in what was essentially an old farmer's compound. This camp, nicknamed "Rorke's Drift", was set deep in Taliban heartland in the Nad e Ali (north) district of Helmand and was pretty much cut off from the outside world. Home to only around 50 British commandos at a time, this was a 'base' whose best defence was dry mud walls that were ill equipped to keep out the wind and rain, let alone Taliban-propelled grenades that frequently flew into their path. That threat of explosives being lobbed into the middle of the compound was a real one so the Marines, weary of late-night attacks, would routinely move their tents and sleeping bags, in the hope of dodging flying shrapnel.

Most of Chris' patrols with L Company were designed to ambush the spies and fighters burying IEDs (improvised explosive devices) intended to maime and slaughter British troops as they patrolled the surrounding countryside. What makes this already-terrifying prospect that much worse was the almost Kamikaze-like tactics the Royal Marines deployed: to march out in full view of Taliban soldiers, hoping to draw their fire. In other words, making themselves human bait. Marines were, in effect, reduced to becoming a shiny distraction for the enemy. "The Marines' job was to tie the enemy down and keep them busy whilst important development work could take place in the village of Loy Mandeh barely a mile to the north," explains Chris. "The Taliban, left to their own devices, would have disrupted this work by either direct attack and by intimidating the locals – so they needed to be kept away at all costs. L Company was the lure – the red rag to the Taliban bull." And being that "red rag" was an intense, never-ending job. "Every day, there would be a five or six-hour patrol, starting at dawn," Chris adds. "Firstly we had to make sure we were seen, in order to draw Taliban fire.

Chris Terrill

"One of the greatest threats are the Taliban spies – known as the dickers – watching your every move and reporting it by radio to the other fighters who will lay mines or launch an ambush," he adds. "On one occasion we got an intercepted message from the Taliban that said 'kill the cameraman.'"

crossfire traffic

Sergeant "Taff" Hunter also knows the threat all too well. The 36-year-old from Swansea manned a checkpoint in the area and understands the risks L Company faced as they decided to effectively taunt the enemy into a reaction. "When you get four months into a tour you get frustrated that things are always on their terms," he tells *loaded*. "What we decided to do was to start pushing into areas where they weren't expecting and provoke a reaction. We took the fight to them."

But it's The Royal Marines' determination never to kill an innocent man that gives a terrifying twist to procedures. Already exhausted troops try to survive an agonising wait, sometimes in full view of the enemy. "This is an insurgency, not a Second World War battle," declares Chris. "The Taliban don't wear uniform, they look like everybody else. They wear turbans and beards like the local population, so this a difficult situation, because if you're shot at you're not sure if it's a bullet," he pauses, "or a grenade."

Lance Corporal "AJ" Orchard, assault engineering specialist, tells *loaded* about how frustrating those this can be. "They [the insurgents] wear the same clothes as the civvies, so identifying them is difficult. Sometimes it's a case of going on a hunch, but we'd never attack anyone that we're not 100 per cent sure is an enemy. You're out there thinking: 'He's not answering me right', or 'You don't suit this area' and following up those leads. You have a lot to think about. Has an IED been laid? Are they going to contact you through different areas? You tear your hair out."

"You do not shoot unless you are shot at. And that 'shot' could be a bullet or RPG"

Because of these dangers these daily journeys were planned with intense precision. Mornings started with the lads being briefed on which route they'd take. Care had to be taken to make sure paths were changed daily, to avoid making them an obviously target, while commanders had to play a game of military chess by trying to second-guess the enemy's thinking in where they would lay the IEDs. Taliban and Royal Marine commanders were in effect playing a deadly form of managerial mind games that would terrify Mourinho or Ferguson. As they left the compound they marched in strict single file, with each man trying to exactly match the footfalls of the person in front.

a man's best friend

Yet as the marines advanced through the bushes, the only thing separating them from a grizzly demise were men armed with detectors, or often, sniffer dogs. Corporal Mick McConnell, seconded to the marines from the Royal Air Force Police, and his mutt Memphis were tasked with the worst job of all: taking the first terrifying steps on any patrol. As the men at the front waded through the long grass and water-filled

PHOTOS: CORBIS

britain's most dangerous missions

War isn't just a case of pulling the trigger and lobbing the odd grenade...

Longest bombing run in history

During the Falklands war in 1982, the RAF launched a secret mission: they flew a Cold War-era Vulcan bomber an astonishing 8,000 miles south to the Falklands and bombed Port Stanley's runway – destroying it.

WWII Russian convoy run

The mission was to help get vital supplies to the Russians after the Soviet Union had been invaded by the Nazis. Convoys of ships steered a dangerous course from Britain through the icy Arctic to help quell the German's advance.

SAS Libyan rescue

Over 150 workers were rescued by the SAS (and SBS) last year from a Libyan desert as two RAF Hercules aircraft pulled off a high-risk evacuation of Brits holed up in camps, who were under threat from deadly armed gangs.

An RAF Hercules

ditches, they'd lay bright white markers showing the others where to place their feet. "When the Marines went forward to find IEDs, I would use Memphis to give them more confidence," Mick explains. "He would go through and pass the patrol, so when we came up to a dodgy area like a crossroads or a tree line he would go and search through. The dog is not aware of the dangers... if he was he wouldn't do it!"

But with the Royal Marines looking for a battle, they are as likely to be engaged in a firefight as they are to encounter a group of IEDs. Chris recalls one such encounter. "We had patrolled towards a known Taliban haven, yet the ordinary farmers started to disappear from the fields and refused to engage with us as they normally did. 'The atmospherics are deteriorating', said one Marine over his radio. 'Terry's around!' We took immediate cover in a nearby compound before we came under fire. Grenades were landing just short of our position. They were being fired from a tree line 100 metres away. The Marines responded immediately, unleashing hell. I have never seen such a massive rate of fire: machine guns, sniper rifles, assault rifles and 66 mm rockets. After a prolonged battle all the enemy were killed. The marines took no casualties."

Yet not every trip ends so well. Dog handler Mick McConnell returned from Afghanistan not after completing his deployment, but because he got unlucky. Speaking to *loaded* mid-way through his treatment, he remembers the moment well. "We were walking out from an early-morning patrol, and while we had carefully chosen the route, the Taliban second-guessed us, changed tactics and moved the IEDs out from the tree line and into the middle of the field... where it detonated on me."

Troops are often used as bait to lure the Taliban out

"The dog thinks it's a game and is not aware of the dangers. If he was, he wouldn't do it!"

Mick though, is philosophical about his injuries. "I'm quite lucky in the sense that it was only a small explosive, and it just partially went off." But the "lucky" moment caused him serious injury. "I have fragmentation in my legs, but my main injury is my left heel which is totally shattered. I'm learning to walk on it again, they've put pins in it but it will take a year or two to see if I can use it fully again. Once I get my mobility back they will reduce the pain relief. If I cant handle the pain they will take the foot off." Mick may have lost his own game of "Afghan roulette", but his brave attitude is typical of all the men of L Company – trained never to wallow in pity or feel sorry for themselves and always to remain cheerful in the face of adversity.

So would *loaded* walk through a minefield every day for our country? We don't know, and hopefully won't have to find out any time soon. In the meantime though, just be thankful these couragous lads will, using themselves as human bait in one of the planet's most bloody of wars. ■ **loaded**

Channel 5's Royal Marines Mission Afghanistan is available on DVD from Amazon, and to download from iTunes. Head over to loaded.co.uk now for your chance to win one of 10 copies of the DVD.

Meticulous planning of operations

British troops and the local Afghans