



BG Research Online

Gregory, D. (2025) *Home Away from Home? Life on British Tactical Bases in Afghanistan*. RUSI Journal. ISSN 0307-1847

This is an author accepted manuscript of an open access article published by Taylor & Francis in its final form on 27th March 2025 at

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03071847.2025.2477709?scroll=top&needAccess=true> and made available under a [CC BY 4.0 Deed](#) | [Creative Commons licence](#).

This version may differ slightly from the final published version.

[title]Home Away from Home? Life on British Tactical Bases in Afghanistan

Derwin Gregory

[Abstract]

When the UK Armed Forces deploy overseas, they operate out of static locations known as operational bases. Historically and through to the present day, troops on deployment engage with a range of ‘placemaking’ activities, including displaying photos, creating murals, and building furniture. The British military also provide troops abroad Deployed Welfare Package, including radio, TVs, and live entertainment. Previous research indicates that by creating a ‘home away from home’, tactical bases provide both a physical and mental sanctuary for American troops. Derwin Gregory shows that certain ‘home’ comforts can be detrimental to the operational efficiency of deployed British troops, whilst placemaking activities merely provided a goal-oriented activity to prevent boredom. [/abstract]

To achieve mission success, British military operations overseas require access to a wide range of infrastructure. The United Kingdom’s Ministry of Defence defines infrastructure as any physical structure that society requires to operate, such as buildings, roads and power supplies. For protracted, drawn out operations, the military has a greater reliance on infrastructure to ensure operational effectiveness. When British forces are deployed abroad, troops typically operate out of static locations, known as ‘operational bases’, which are either classified as a ‘main base’ or a ‘tactical base’. Within the operational base is essential infrastructure intended to support the efficient functioning of the base, which in turn ensures the operational effectiveness of the deployed units. Whilst main bases are large, complex facilities constructed for strategic reasons, such as at theatre points of entry or

to support air operations; tactical bases are primarily designed to support military needs, such as dominating key terrain.¹

The British military sub-divide tactical bases into Forward Operating Bases (FOBs), Patrol Bases (PBs), and Checkpoints (CPs), with the classification determined by the function of the base, rather than its infrastructure. FOBs are intended as locations from which troops can plan, prepare, coordinate, conduct and recover from a tactical operation. In addition, FOBs are locations from which indirect fire weapons are used, or helicopter operations are supported. PBs are static bases from which small-scale foot or vehicle-based patrols are launched, whilst CPs are used to control the flow of people and material along a specific route.² As tactical bases are constructed for specific reasons, the landscape of bases correlates to changing military objectives, centres of population, and the pre-existing transportation infrastructure.³

Although significant research has been published on ways to make tactical bases more efficient and effective,⁴ there have been limited studies into the living conditions on tactical

¹ Ministry of Defence (MoD), *Operational Infrastructure* (Ministry of Defence Joint tactics, techniques and procedures 4-05 version 2, 2012), pp. 1-3, 1-4, 3-1, 3-2, 3-3.

² MoD, *Operational Infrastructure*, pp. 3-3, 3H-1.

³ Eugene Palka, 'Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and the use of Forwarding Operating Bases (FOBs)', in Erik McDonald and Thomas Bullards (eds), *Military Geosciences and Desert Warfare* (New York, NY: Springer, 2016), pp. 205–19.

⁴ See Davin Bridges and Timothy Bosetti, 'Establishing a Base Camp Assessment Program for a Forward Operating Base', *United States Army Medical Department Journal* (April-June, 2009), pp. 76–80; G Cave, W Goodwin, M Harrison, A Sadiq, and T Tryfonas, 'Design of a Sustainable Forward Operating Base', *6th International Conference on System of Systems Engineering, Albuquerque* (2011), pp. 251–57, DOI: 10.1109/SYSOSE.2011.5966606; O Hawksley, J Jeyanathan, K Mears, and R Simpson, 'A Survey of Primary Health Care Provision at a Forward Operating Base in Afghanistan during Operation HERRICK 10', *BMJ Military Health* (Vol. 157, No. 2, 2011), pp. 145–49. DOI: 10.1136/jramc-157-02-04; Austin Hill, Robert Landeg, Kyle Snook, Kendrick Vaughn, and Daniel McCarthy, 'Developing Innovative Strategies for Defending Military Forward Operating Bases', *IEEE Systems and Information Engineering Design Symposium, Charlottesville* (2008), pp. 135–40. DOI: 10.1109/SIEDS.2008.4559699; Ryan Kelly, Giovanna Oriti, and Alexander Julian, 'Reducing Fuel Consumption in a Forward Operating Base using an Energy Management System', *IEEE Energy Conversion Congress and Exposition, Denver* (2013), pp. 1330–36. DOI: 10.1109/ECCE.2013.6646859; Bhanuchander Poreddy and Benjamin Daniels, 'Mathematical Model of Sub-system Interactions for Forward Operating Bases', *IE Annual Conference Proceedings* (2012), pp. 1–10; Bhanuchander Poreddy and Steven Corns, 'Dynamic Mathematical Model Framework of Complex Utility and Logistics System Interactions Using Object-oriented Approach for Forward Operating Bases', *Engineering Management Journal* (Vol. 28, No. 2, 2016), pp. 99–108. DOI: 10.1080/10429247.2016.1116133; Valentina Prado, Thomas Seager, Abigail Mechtenberg, and Erin Bennett, 'A Systemic Thermodynamic Analysis of Fuel Consumption at Forward Operating Bases', *Proceedings of the IEEE International Symposium on Sustainable*

bases, and the effects this has on the troops. The main attempt to understand the impact of the conditions on FOBs on troops, was a 2006 study by Leonard Wong and Stephen Gerras on US FOBs. It was the conclusion of Wong and Gerras that the: ‘Forward Operating Base (FOB) has become the “home away from home” for the American soldier. It has evolved to a place where many of the stresses, frustrations, and discomforts commonly thought endemic in the combat soldier’s life are mitigated’.⁵ The analysis by Wong and Gerras indicated that for US troops, FOBs provided not only physical sanctuary, but also a respite from the stress of deployment: the soldiers involved in their study appreciated the creature comforts, and found that FOBs renewed their fighting spirit.⁶

The work by Wong and Gerras focused on tactical bases operated by the US military in Iraq, whilst the aim of this study is to examine whether their conclusions can be replicated on British tactical bases. This article examines the living conditions of British troops deployed to tactical bases in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2020. The analysis is predominantly based on the significant number of published memoirs of British troops reflecting on their experiences deployed to Afghanistan.⁷ In addition, the article is based on

Systems and Technology, Chicago (2011), pp. 1–6. DOI: 10.1109/ISSST.2011.5936866; Jason Railsback, ‘Force Protection of Forward Operating Bases in Baghdad’, *Engineer* (October-December 2003), pp. 14–18.

⁵ Leonard Wong and Stephen Gerras, *CU@ the FOB: How the Forward Operating Base is Changing the Life of Combat Soldiers* (Pennsylvania, PY: Strategic Studies Institute, 2006), p. v.

⁶ Wong and Gerras, *CU@ the FOB*, p. v.

⁷ see Alexander Allan, *Afghanistan: A Tour of Duty* (London: Third Millennium Publishing, 2009); Nick Allen, *Embed: With the World's Armies in Afghanistan* (Stroud: Spellmount, 2010); Doug Beattie, *Task Force Helmand: A Soldier's Story of Life, Death and Combat on the Afghan Front Line* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2009); Max Benitz, *Six Months without Sundays: The Scots Guards in Afghanistan* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2011); Patrick Bishop, *3 Para* (London: Harper Perennial, 2010); James Cartwright, *Sniper in Helmand: Six Months on the Frontline* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military, 2015); Richard Dorney, *The Killing Zone: One Regiment under Fire on Afghanistan's Front Line* (London: Ebury Press, 2012); Craig Douglas, *Fire Mission: The Diary of a Firing Sergeant in Afghanistan* (Rugby: Close to the Bone, 2019); Mark Evans, *Under the Bearskin: A Junior Officer's Story of War and Madness* (London: Coronet, 2017); James Fergusson, *A Million Bullets: The Real Story of the British Army in Afghanistan* (London: Corgi Books, 2009); Mick Flynn, *Bullet Magnet* (London: Phoenix, 2010); Damien Grahame and Paul Lewis, *Fire Strike 7/9* (London: Ebury Press, 2011); Toby Harnden, *Dead Men Risen: The Welsh Guards and the Defining Story of Britain's War in Afghanistan* (London: Quercus, 2011); Kim Hughes, *Painting the Sand: One Man's Fight against the Taliban Bomb-makers of Helmand* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2017); Geraint Jones, *Brothers in Arms* (London: Pan Books, 2019); Adam Jowett, *No Way Out* (London: Pan Books, 2018); Richard Kemp and Chris Hughes, *Attack State Red: A Landmark Tour of Duty in Afghanistan* (London: Penguin Books, 2013); Russell Lewis, *Company Commander* (London: Virgin Books, 2012); Antony Loveless, *Blue Sky Warriors: The RAF in Afghanistan in their Own Words* (Yeovil: Haynes Publishing, 2011); Ed Macy, *Apache: The Blazing True Bestseller from the Heart of*

non-structured conversations with two veterans, one who served in Afghanistan and the other in Iraq, as part of an art therapy project funded by the Imperial War Museum (IWM) 14-18 NOW Legacy Fund.⁸ In contrast to Wong and Gerras' conclusion that tactical bases provide a 'home away from home', this small study demonstrates that, for the two British veterans that participated in the project, tactical bases were not seen as 'home', but an extension of the mission, and where it was not possible to destress in comfort. Although the results may not be statistically representative, this article will demonstrate that further research needs to be conducted into the positive and negative impacts attempts to create a 'home away from home' can have on deployed troops.

Tactical bases play an important part in the daily life of deployed troops: it is within these defended bases that troops spend their off-duty time. The tactical base not only provided physical protection, but it was also where the troops lived, ate, slept, worked and relaxed. By highlighting the basic living conditions, this article aims demonstrate that not all British troops were obsessed with home comforts, and that tactical bases were viewed as 'home away from home'. In-theatre attempts by troops to improve their base were not driven by a desire for 'comfort', but rather as a goal-oriented activity to prevent boredom. During the non-structured interviews with the two British veterans, the veterans also raised the potential of a detrimental effect on their operational effectiveness caused by the intrusion of components of 'real' home into their deployed life. Undertaking further research into this

Afghanistan (London: Harper Perennial, 2009); Ed Macy, *Hellfire* (London: Harper Press, 2009); Andy McNab, *Spoken from the Front: Real Voices from the Battlefields of Afghanistan* (London: Corgi Books, 2010); Jake Scott, *Blood Clot: In Combat with the Patrols Platoon, 3 Para Afghanistan, 2006* (Solihull: Helion and Company, 2008); Ewen Southby-Tailyour, *3 mmando Brigade: Helmand Assault* (London: Ebury Press, 2010); Steven Stone, *Front Line: A Soldier's Story* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015); Chantelle Taylor, *Battleworn: The Memoir of a Combat Medic in Afghanistan* (Bloomington: iUniverse, 2016); Stuart Tootal, *Danger Close: The True Story of Helmand from the Leader of 3 Para* (London: John Murray, 2010); Andy Tyson, *The Prodigal Para: An Afghan War Diary* (Glasgow: Zazana Press, 2017); and Simon Weston, *Helmand: Diaries of Front-line Soldiers* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2010).

⁸ The two British veterans who took part in the art therapy project were the only veterans who responded to a public call for participants.

topic could have the potential to improve welfare for deployed troops, improve morale, assist in decompression, and support acclimatising troops back to 'normal' life.

The main infrastructure within British tactical bases in Afghanistan comprised of military equipment, offices and headquarters, medical facilities, logistic support, in-theatre training facilities, utilities, domestic, and welfare facilities.⁹ The focus of this articles is the domestic and welfare facilities on the tactical bases, as it is these components which are directly linked to the troops living conditions. Domestic facilities can in turn be sub-categorised as sleeping accommodation, kitchen and dining facilities, and ablutions.

Tactical Bases in Afghanistan

British troops deployed to Afghanistan would generally arrive at Kandahar Airfield before moving to Camp Bastion, the main base of operation in Helmand, for in-theatre acclimatisation. Facilities at main bases were generally better than those at tactical bases, and Camp Bastion was sometimes referred to as 'Slipper City' because of the porcelain loos and hot showers (Figures 1 and 2).¹⁰ In addition, troops stationed at the larger bases, such as Camp Bastion and Kandahar Airfield, had access to a wide range of eateries, such as Pizza Hut, Costa Coffee, and Tim Hortons (Figures 3).¹¹

From Camp Bastion, some troops would then be transported, by road or air, to tactical bases throughout Helmand Province. Each tactical base was unique, which reflected tactical considerations, operational history and the individuals stationed in them. There were,

⁹ MoD, *Operational Infrastructure*, pp. 3-10.

¹⁰ Douglas, *Fire Mission*, p. 5.

¹¹ Barry Alexander, *On Afghanistan's Plains* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), p. 215. Camp Bastion was also known as 'Butlins' or 'Army Training Regiment (ATR) Bastion' as reference to the various shops and eating facilities. In addition, Main Operating Base (MOB) Lashkar Gah was referred to as 'Lash Vegas' as the living conditions there were generally better than in FOBs (BBC, *Afghanistan's Battlefield Slang*, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-29757988>), accessed 11 November 2024.

however, standardised components common across the bases including defended sangars, modular structures, tents, and large open spaces for the operation of equipment and vehicles (Figure 4). Surrounding the tactical base were typically HESCO concertainers, which were collapsable wire mesh containers, lined with a heavy-duty fabric, and filled with earth, designed to protect against small arms and explosives (Figure 5).

Some tactical bases in Afghanistan were not necessarily purpose built, but rather repurposed pre-existing infrastructure.¹² FOB Inkerman, for example, initially began as a large farming compound constructed on a desert hillside near Sangin, Helmand Province. When occupied by the Royal Anglian Regiment in 2007, the compound was surrounded by a baked mud wall that had broken down in places as a result of incoming fire. Within the 150m-by-150m open compound, troops slept on camp beds beneath camouflaged nylon sheets stretched across stakes in the ground.¹³ Within bases that occupied pre-existing infrastructure, it was also common for Afghan structures to be taken over and occupied by the military for accommodation, or tactical requirements (Figure 6).¹⁴

Whichever tactical base British troops were deployed to in Helmand Province, they were all faced with the dust, sand and heat.¹⁵ For the Royal Anglian Regiment in 2007, [bq]‘fine grains of dust and sand got everywhere – into clothing, boots, weapons, sleeping bags, hair, food, everything. That was when there wasn't any wind. When there was it got into everything and a lot more besides. And of course there was the heat, the almost undendurable [sic] 50 degrees by day that barely seemed to diminish at night, when the troops would lie

¹² See Emily Boak, ‘From Conflict Archaeology to Archaeologies of Conflict: Remote Survey in Kandahar, Afghanistan’, *Journal of Conflict Archaeology* (Vol. 14, No. 2-3, 2019), pp. 143–62. DOI: 10.1080/15740773.2019.1731144.

¹³ Kemp and Hughes, *Attack State Red*, p. 280.

¹⁴ Bishop, *3 Para*, p. 111.

¹⁵ See Benitz, *Six Months without Sundays*, p. 87 and Lewis, *Company Commander*, p. 219.

sweating on their camp-beds, often unable to sleep for long despite their almost constant state of exhaustion'.¹⁶ [/bq]

Over the course of the operational life of a tactical base, the infrastructure did not necessarily remain constant. As shifts occurred in operational requirements, or as a result of attempting to improve living conditions, British military infrastructure within Afghanistan was constantly changing with bases expanding, contracting and evolving.¹⁷

Tactical Bases' Domestic Facilities

Located within the compounds of British tactical bases were the domestic facilities required to support the troops. Domestic facilities comprised of sleeping accommodation, kitchens and dining facilities, ablutions, laundry, gymnasium, welfare, stores and administrative facilities. Typically, at a tactical base that was occupied for a prolonged period, improvements would gradually be made to the domestic facilities.¹⁸ The rest of this article will focus on the sleeping accommodation, kitchens and dining facilities, ablutions, gymnasiums, and welfare on British tactical bases in Afghanistan. By exploring the domestic and welfare conditions, the following section will contextualise preconceptions that tactical bases acted as 'home away from home'.

Sleeping Accommodation

¹⁶ Kemp and Hughes, *Attack State Red*, p. 281.

¹⁷ See Boak, 'From Conflict Archaeology to Archaeologies of Conflict', p. 147. It is also important to note that tactical bases might have accommodated international teams concurrently or consecutively: a British tactical base might not always have been operated by the British military.

¹⁸ MoD, *Operational Infrastructure*, p. 3-1.

Sleeping accommodation varied across British tactical bases in Afghanistan. At FOB Zeebrugge in 2008, accommodation was in a semi-derelict pre-existing building within the tactical base's compound. Within the structure, which had no running water and intermittent electrical power, each individual marked out a small area which was big enough for their bed, mosquito net, personal kit and weapon (See Figure 7).¹⁹ At other tactical bases, tents would be erected in which soldiers could arrange rows of cots (see Figure 8).²⁰

Once an area for their cot and equipment had been marked out, some individuals would then personalise their space by hanging up photographs of family members, creating privacy by suspending towels or flags, or erecting more storage in the form of handmade shelving or shoe racks.²¹

Kitchen and Dining Facilities

The importance of food to the morale and efficiency of combat troops has been recognised since at least the 1940s.²² For British troops deployed to tactical bases in Afghanistan the quality and nature of the food varied from ration packs, which might include pork casserole and brown biscuits, through to freshly cooked pizza, chips, curry, and fresh bread, eggs, fruit and vegetables.²³

¹⁹ Beattie, *Task Force Helmand*, p. 50.

²⁰ Benitz, *Six Months without Sundays*, p. 144 and Tyson, *The Prodigal Para*, p. 76.

²¹ Benitz, *Six Months without Sundays*, p. 144.

²² See Bruce Arnold, “‘Your Money ain’t No Good o’er There’: Food as Real and Social Currency in the Pacific Theater of World War II”, *Food and Foodways* (Vol. 25, No. 2, 2017), pp. 107–22. DOI: 10.1080/07409710.2017.1311160; John Edwards, Michael Kipps and James Thomson, ‘British Military Feeding – The Influence of Food Habits and Food Preferences on Combat Nutrition’, *International Journal of Hospitality Management* (Vol. 7, No. 3, 1988), pp. 251–64. DOI: 10.1016/0278-4319(88)90024-2; Derwin Gregory and Carola Wayne, “‘I do Feel Good because my Stomach is Full of Good Hotcakes’: Comfort Food, Home and the USAAF in East Anglia during the Second World War”, *History* (Vol. 105, No. 368, 2020), pp. 806–24. DOI: 10.1111/1468-229X.13081; James Landis, ‘Morale and Civilian Defense’, *American Journal of Sociology* (Vol. 47, No. 3, 1941), pp. 331–39. DOI: 10.1086/218913; and Phillip Rutherford, ‘On Arms and Eggs: GI Egg Mania on the Battlefields of World War II’, *Food and Foodways* (Vol. 25, No. 2, 2017), pp. 123–41. DOI: 10.1080/07409710.2017.1311161.

²³ Fergusson, *A Million Bullets*, p. 79; Jones, *Brothers in Arms*, pp. 66, 198; Lewis, *Company Commander*, p. 35; Loveless, *Blue Sky Warriors*, p. 52; McNab, *Spoken from the Front*, p. 152; and Weston, *Helmand*, p. 32.

When deployed abroad to an active conflict zone, troops have to engage in domestic work alongside performing their military functions.²⁴ Kitchens in tactical bases in Afghanistan ranged from a large tent erected at FOB Inkerman, makeshift huts constructed from chicken wire fencing wrapped in hessian at ANP Hill, to a pre-existing concrete building at Now Zad.²⁵ Within the kitchens, cooking facilities varied widely from deep fat fryers and ovens to gas hobs, and disused ammunition containers with a HESCO grill constructed by the troops and heated by an open fire (Figures 9 and 10).²⁶ Dining facilities also ranged widely from tents in the more established and larger tactical bases, to facilities built by the troops which included plywood tables in the open air, and lean-tos.²⁷

Ablutions

Essential for the maintenance of the health of troops stationed in tactical bases were the ablutions. Ablutions comprised of toilets, washing facilities and, where available, showers. ‘Urinals’ were constructed from tubing that was buried into the ground at a 45° angle and colloquially known as ‘desert roses’, while some male troops would also urinate against trees within the compound if there were any.²⁸ Although chemical portaloos were available at some of the larger bases, most toilet cubicles were basically constructed by

²⁴ François Miville-Deschenes, *The Soldier Off Duty: Domestic Aspects of Military Life at Fort Chambly under the French Regime as Revealed by Archaeological Objects* (Ottawa: Minister of the Environment, 1987), p. 9 and Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 122.

²⁵ James Cartwright, *Sniper in Helmand*, p. 111; Lewis, *Company Commander*, p. 35; and Loveless, *Blue Sky Warriors*, p. 52.

²⁶ Jones, *Brothers in Arms*, pp. 66, 198 and Loveless, *Blue Sky Warriors*, p. 52.

²⁷ Benitz, *Six Months without Sundays*, p. 87 and Hughes, *Painting the sand*, p. 196. Occasionally in the height of summer, leaving a ration pack in direct sunlight would provide enough heat for the food to be edible, and heat water sufficiently for tea (Jones, *Brothers in Arms*, p. 66).

²⁸ Hughes, *Painting the Sand*, p. 77 and Jones, *Brothers in Arms*, p. 66. The term ‘desert rose’ dates back to at least the Second World War when it was used by British troops serving in North Africa (see John Myers, *General Montgomery’s Eighth Army (The Desert Rats) part 2* (WW2 People’s War, 2006), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/57/a8737257.shtml>), accessed 11 November 2024.

troops out of plywood:²⁹ the nature of these cubicles varied from holes over long drops, to wooden planks on top of oil drums or plastic bags.³⁰ In some tactical bases, troops tried to improve the ablutions such as in 2008 at PB Argyle where a wooden chair was placed over the long drop.³¹ Despite being able to locate toilets by the strong odour they emitted, and being plagued by swarms of flies, and not always having doors,³² toilets could provide troops moments of privacy.

Showers were rarely available on a tactical base, but when they were they were typically solar showers.³³ At some bases, solar showers would have to be taken in the open (Figure 11), whilst at others, troops might have access to a small tent, similar to shelters used at festivals, to provide limited privacy.³⁴

Welfare Facilities

To support the wellbeing and health of British troops deployed abroad, welfare facilities are a Ministry of Defence requirement and can range from a radio to live entertainment. Welfare facilities are also important as they help to sustain operational effectiveness by maintaining troop morale, however, they do not seek to recreate or match the levels of amenities enjoyed in the UK.³⁵ At Level 1 ‘Austere bases’, which provide only the minimum of life support to maintain basic health and tactical command and control, the Ministry of Defence states there will be no, or minimal, welfare facilities. Within Level 2

²⁹ Douglas, *Fire Mission*, p. 40 and Jones, *Brothers in Arms*, p. 65.

³⁰ Jones, *Brothers in Arms*, p. 65; Jowett, *No Way Out*, p. 53; and Loveless, *Blue Sky Warriors*, p. 51.

³¹ Taylor, *Battleworn*, p. 52.

³² Alexander, *On Afghanistan's Plains*, p. 97; Douglas, *Fire mission*, p. 40; and Southby-Tailyour, *3 Commando Brigade*, p. 9.

³³ Southby-Tailyour, *3 Commando Brigade*, p. 9 and Hughes, *Painting the sand*, p. 77. If the solar shower bag was left out for too long, the water was unbearably hot.

³⁴ Taylor, *Battleworn*, p. 123.

³⁵ MoD, *Tri Service Operational and non Operational Welfare Policy* (Ministry of Defence Directorate Service Personnel Policy JSP 770 version 10, 2014), p. 54.

‘Year-round bases’, which require the minimum conditions for the base to operate all year round, the base is entitled to a Deployed Welfare Package.³⁶ Under the Deployment Welfare Package, the Ministry of Defence provides welfare facilities based on the following priorities: telephones and internet, and physical training facilities; post, TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, board games, books and pastoral support; retail and communal recreational facilities; and finally live entertainment.³⁷

Within tactical bases, welfare facilities took on a wide range of different forms including table tennis tables (Figure 12), volleyball courts (Figure 13), gym equipment, TVs, computer consoles, and areas set aside to relax in (Figure 14).³⁸ The focus on physical training welfare facilities in tactical bases allowed troops to keep fit and let off steam. Volleyball, table tennis, and gyms were the preferred sports, as these could be undertaken within a small area, thereby, not increasing the size of the bases perimeter. On tactical bases, troops would supplement welfare facilities by constructing their own, such as a table tennis table, gym equipment, board games, and furniture, out of material they had access to on base.³⁹

Despite the Ministry of Defence’s priority to provide troops access to telephones and the internet under the Deployment Welfare Package, some veterans have indicated that telephones could negatively impact their wellbeing whilst deployed. Instant verbal communication with home meant communications could often turn to the mundane, such as utility bills or gossip. The domestic nature of these conversations could cause homesickness, anxiety, stress or distract them from their mission. In addition, if a conversation was cut short

³⁶ MoD, *Operational Infrastructure*, pp. 3-11, 3I-3, 3I-4, 3I-6.

³⁷ MoD, *Tri Service Operational and non operational Welfare Policy*, p. 54.

³⁸ Benitz, *Six Months without Sundays*, p. 144; Douglas, *Fire Mission*, pp. 26, 182, 195, 215; Harnden, *Dead Men Risen*, p. 103; Hughes, *Painting the Sand*, p. 108; and Kemp and Hughes, *Attack State Red*, p. 280; and Tyson, *The Prodigal Para*, p. 211.

³⁹ Alcohol was also available on bases in Afghanistan and each nation had different rules about the amount of alcohol troops could consume on deployment. Although in the British military, the General Officer Commanding had the discretion to permit a ‘two-can-rule’, The Armed Forces (Alcohol Limits for Prescribed Safety-Critical Duties) Regulations 2013 brought in an alcohol limit of 9 micrograms of alcohol in 100 millilitres of breath for anyone handling and using a firearm.

by Operation *Minimise*,⁴⁰ some veterans have stated this could cause anxiety as they fixated on the mental anguish the person they were speaking to was going through, not knowing what had happened in-theatre. Some veterans have expressed a preference to communicate with home through 'blueys' or email.⁴¹ Written communication allowed them to take time in formulating their letter and provided them reading material when they received a response.⁴²

Discussion

Tactical bases operated by the British military in Afghanistan typically had very basic living and welfare facilities. Attempts to turn tactical bases into a 'mental sanctuary' by creating a 'home away from home', either through activities led by troops or the Deployment Welfare Package, did not universally succeed. One veteran, for example, reported not even feeling safe in their bedspace:

[bq]For my evening repose, the hammock served me well and became an unlikely comfort, especially from dusk to nightfall. I hated the dark in Helmand; any fleeting feeling of safety during daylight hours dissipated as darkness fell, attacks and incidents becoming more likely. Senses heightened, waiting for and expecting something to kick off. But the hammock provided a great escape, almost taking me to a different place, a calmer place. Almost. Staring at the black sky showered with stars, more than I have ever seen anywhere else.

Headphones in and music on, but not too loud to drown out any

⁴⁰ Operation *Minimise* was the suspension of all non-essential external communication following an in-theatre causality. This restricted the spread of information until the MoD had informed the family.

⁴¹ Blueys are letters sent through the British Forces Post Office (BFPO).

⁴² Author's non-structured interview with Veteran Participants during art therapy sessions held at Bishop Grosseteste University between January and May 2023; *Veteran Voices from Behind The Bastion: Exhibition Catalogue*, Friday 9 June – Sunday 20 August 2023, unpublished exhibition catalogue, p. 18.

kerfuffle that might break out. Reflecting on that day's sh!t show and hoping that tomorrow we'll all be safe. But let's get through tonight first. Staring across Lashkar Gah Main Operating Base, I could always see the perimeter HESCO, lit up like a Christmas tree, blinding lights shining outward from the base. A stark reminder that we were sitting ducks, and it was open season for the Taleban.⁴³

Attempts were made by the troops to improve living conditions on tactical bases, such as personalising their bedspace and building furniture. Any preconception that comfort is a primary driver for troops when upgrading in-theatre facilities has been challenged by this research: troops regarded the bases' primary function as to support them in accomplishing their mission. The reasons behind placemaking activities were not to create a sense of home, or to turn the tactical base into a 'home away from home'; instead, they should be viewed through the theoretical lens of 'trench art'.

Trench art has been defined as any 'object made by soldiers, prisoners of war and civilians, from war material or any other material as long as object and maker are associated in time and space with armed conflict or its consequences'.⁴⁴ Although most scholarly research on the history of trench art has focused on the transformation of small objects designed to kill into domestic artefacts, such as inkwells, clocks, and vases, some work has also focused on murals, arborglyphs, and lovers' tokens.⁴⁵ The experience of British troops in

⁴³ *Veteran Voices from Behind The Bastion*, p. 6.

⁴⁴ Nicholas Saunders, *Trench Art* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military, 2011), p. 20.

⁴⁵ see Wayne Cocroft, Danielle Devlin, John Schofield and Roger Thomas, *War Art: Murals and Graffiti - Military Life, Power and Subversion* (York: Council for British Archaeology, 2006); Holly Furneaux, *Military Men of Feeling: Emotion, Touch, and Masculinity in the Crimean War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Dawid Kobińska, 'Living Monuments of the Second World War: Terrestrial Laser Scanning and Trees with Carvings', *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* (Vol. 23, 2018), pp. 129–52. DOI: 10.1007/s10761-018-0462-5; Dawid Kobińska, 'Trench Art between Memory and Oblivion: A Report from Poland (and Syria)', *Journal of Conflict Archaeology* (Vol. 14, No. 1, 2019), pp. 4–24. DOI: 10.1080/15740773.2019.1632034; Nicholas Saunders, 'Bodies of Metal, Shells of Memory: "Trench Art", and the Great War Re-cycled', *Journal of Material Culture* (Vol. 5, No. 1, 2000), pp. 43–67. DOI: 10.1177/135918350000500103; Saunders, *Trench Art*; and Nicholas Saunders, 'Bodies in Trees: A Matter of being in Great War Landscapes', in Paul Cornish and

Afghanistan suggests that any attempt at constructing furniture, sporting facilities, or any other item made by a deployed member of the military or civilian, should be regarded as trench art. In Dusselier's study of objects created by Japanese-Americans in US Concentration Camps during the Second World War, the material culture was all defined as art. Dusselier argued that the primary driving force for the interned Japanese-Americans was to create objects that provided physical comfort.⁴⁶ In contrast, the primary driving factor behind British troops deployed to Afghanistan making trench art was to relieve boredom, as it provided a temporary respite from the mission by focusing their attention on a specific task. Construction of art, in the form of objects that provided physical comfort, allowed troops to 'escape' through a goal orientated task: the fact that the finished product provided a 'home comfort' was a bonus.⁴⁷

The construction of objects which provided a home comfort, did not negate the danger and anxiety faced by British troops: it was the actual process of construction that provided the troops an escape.⁴⁸ For British troops, tactical bases were not 'home'; they were spaces that supported them in completing their mission. For the duration of their deployment, home was elsewhere, it was not in the here and then.⁴⁹ The only space that provided some troops a temporary escape from reality was the toilet, as the toilet offered privacy. The toilet of the

Nicholas Saunders (eds.), *Bodies in Conflict: Corporeality, Materiality, and Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2013).

⁴⁶ Jane Dusselier, 2012. 'The Art of Survival: Remaking the Inside Spaces of Japanese American Concentration Camps in Cultural Heritage and Prisoners of War', in Gilly Carr and Harold Mytum (eds.), *Cultural Heritage and Prisoners of War: Creativity behind Barbed Wire* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), pp. 82, 94.

⁴⁷ Author's non-structured interviews with Veteran Participants during art therapy sessions held at Bishop Grosseteste University between January and May 2023.

⁴⁸ British troops also passed the time at the tactical base by participating in Operation *Bronze* (sunbathing), Operation *Head Down* (sleeping), and Operation *Massive* (exercising) (Jones, *Brothers in Arms*, p. 132). The US Army Techniques Publication (ATP) *A Leader's Guide to Soldier Health and Fitness* states that sleep is a biological need which should 'be viewed as being as critical as any logistical item of resupply' (Headquarters, Department of the Army, *A Leader's Guide to Soldier Health and Fitness* (Department of the Army: Washington, 2016), 2-1).

⁴⁹ Author's non-structured interviews with Veteran Participants during art therapy sessions held at Bishop Grosseteste University between January and May 2023.

tactical base was one of the only places to physically and literally (assuming there was a door) shut out the outside world:

The horrors of the desert toilet; the gift that keeps on giving. The honk-box, the sh*t-pit, the TURDIS. It takes commitment to lock yourself in a boiling hot plastic box in the desert heat. It's over 50C outside, hotter inside. The sickening smell of over-use. You could barely breathe and didn't really want to. It was suffocating, overwhelming, honking, overpowering. BUT...it was one of very few places to get five minutes privacy, give your head a wobble, grasp the situation, shed a tear, shout in anger, scream in frustration, read a Bluey in peace. Think, boil, sweat and gag. Filthy, disgusting, baking, stinking, but amazing in equal measure. Five minutes privacy. What price privacy? It's something most of us take for granted during normal times. Helmand, 2006; desperate times, desperate measures.⁵⁰

Conclusion

Most contemporary, historical, and archaeological studies have identified military bases, or military installations, away from a troops original home, as a 'home away from home'. Deployed troops are regularly observed to engage in a range of 'placemaking' activities, including creating murals, building furniture and erecting signposts. Placemaking activities should not necessarily be regarded as a way to improve living conditions, but rather as a task with an identifiable goal that briefly provides the troop an escape.

⁵⁰ *Veteran Voices from Behind The Bastion*, p. 8.

As this article has raised questions over the preconceptions that tactical bases need to be turned into ‘home away from home’, further research is required into the welfare needs of deployed troops. Further studies on the link between living conditions and wellbeing have the potential to improve the welfare provision of deployed troops by ensuring more appropriate, tailored resources are provided for individual tactical bases. The provision of living conditions that are appropriate to the needs of the deployed troops also has the potential to improve morale, assist in decompression, and support troops acclimatising back to ‘normal’ life.

It is also important to note that research into the living conditions of deployed troops must be conducted at a maximum scale of a country’s armed forces. Wong and Gerras have presented research which argues that US troops regard FOBs as ‘home away from home’, whilst this study has challenged this notion for British troops. By conducting further small-scale studies of this nature will ensure the development of tailored best practice, for example, welfare provision requirements for Ukrainian troops in *blindazh* (dugouts) is likely to be different to the needs of the British Peace Support Team in Africa.⁵¹

This article has challenged the notion that British tactical bases provide a space to mitigate the stress of deployment: these are not ‘home away from home’, rather these are spaces which provide some form of physical protection from the hostile environment beyond the HESCO barrier. There might be no running water or electricity, no beds or chairs, and the tactical base might be dirty and dusty, ‘but no one joined the Paras [and the British military]

⁵¹ For reports of living conditions of Ukrainian troops in *blindazh* see Monica Ellena, ‘Along the Frontline in Ukraine’s Unforgiving Winter’, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 15 January 2024) <<https://iwpr.net/global-voices/along-frontline-ukrainians-unforgiving-winter>>, accessed 12 November 2024; *Irish Times*, ‘We live like kings’: Go inside a Ukrainian Mortar Dugout on the Zaporizhzhia Frontline’, 5 September 2023, <www.irishtimes.com/video/world/europe/2023/09/05/we-live-like-kings-go-inside-a-ukrainian-mortar-dugout-on-the-zaporizhzhia-frontline/>, accessed 12 November 2024.; and Tim Mak, ‘What It’s like to Spend a Winter in the Trenches, According to Ukrainian Soldiers’, NPR Weekend Edition Sunday, 22 January 2023, <www.npr.org/2023/01/22/1150646986/what-its-like-to-spend-a-winter-in-the-trenches-according-to-ukrainian-soldiers>, accessed 12 November 2024.

to be comfortable'.⁵² It is clear from this initial assessment that significantly more research needs to be conducted into the impact of tactical bases on the welfare of deployed British troops and those from other nations.

⁵² Bishop, *3 Para*, p. 111.