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Heroes

David Bailey and Dylan Jones

David Bailey in Afghanistan by Dylan Jones

Camp Bastion, Afghanistan, May 2010:

'Tina, lean in a bit, girl. Go on, do me a favour. Is that a nickname? You're a funny looking chap, aren't you?'

Looking more than a little like Dennis Hopper in *Apocalypse Now*, a bright green bandana wrapped around his forehead to keep the sweat out of his eyes, David Bailey starts shouting at one of the ten burly male soldiers in front of him.

'That looks good, that looks good. That looks great, boys. I wouldn't want to pick on you lot, well maybe one at a time. With one hand tied behind my back. You look all right, actually. Funny, and they told me you were an ugly bunch.'

Bailey clicks away, standing up straight, shoulders pulled back, as though he were still doing his National Service. He served in Malaya and Singapore in the 1950s, and his ability to understand army life as well as interact with the troops has made him an instant hit here in Camp Bastion.

'OK boys, we're done,' he says, finishing off another roll of film. 'I'm going to take a half hour's break and then I want you back here in your underwear.'

Strewn across the sandy floor of the makeshift studio is a mish-mash of military paraphernalia. Rifles, pistols, machine guns, sandbags, helmets, high explosive grenades, phosphorous grenades, body armour, protective clothing, sunglasses, first aid kits, boxes of ammunition, small paintbrushes (all soldiers carry them to dust

potential IEDs) etc. Bailey had shot a still life of all this earlier in the day, and he was keeping it there in case he wanted to revisit it.

Bailey had been in Bastion for only three days yet had already taken hundreds of photographs. In the following 96 hours he would end up taking thousands more. He was here on assignment for British GQ, to take photographs of the troops for the magazine, and then to auction them, with all proceeds going to Help For Heroes, the British charity launched by former Royal Green Jacket Bryn Parry in September 2007 to help provide better facilities for wounded British servicemen and women.

For Bailey, this had been his own personal mission.

‘I’d wanted to go to Afghanistan for two reasons. Firstly I wanted to photograph the troops, as I think they are genuinely heroic people, and deserve to be celebrated. They are real heroes. Paradoxically, I also wanted to go because my two boys, Sascha and Fenton, are both at an age when they could easily decide to join up. They could be going there and getting destroyed by IEDs, shot by snipers, or burnt in a helicopter. I just didn’t want them to go, and so I went to show them that they shouldn’t even think about it. I hoped me going might be enough for them.

‘I started thinking about when I was in Malaya at the age of 18, and how unfair it is that these young kids were all going off to Afghanistan and getting themselves hurt, coming back with no arms, no legs, no genitals, having to spend the rest of their lives in wheelchairs, being pushed around with no dignity and no balls. So I wanted to do something for them, to raise some money for them. We do so many charities at the studio that I’m not sure about – every day someone calls up for a picture that can be put in an auction, or wants me to donate my services for free – that I thought I should actually get involved in a cause I really do care about. Which is why I chose Help For Heroes.’

It was Bailey’s idea to go to Afghanistan, and in March 2010 he asked me if (a) I’d be interested in it as a story for the magazine, and (b) if I’d go with him. The answer to both questions was an immediate yes.

Unsurprisingly, it turned out that Bailey was something of an expert on the subject anyway, and I remembered that when he had been photographing London Mayor Boris Johnston for GQ a couple of years ago, they had talked about little else.

‘I’d been following the war closely ever since the coalition went into Afghanistan in 2001,’ he says. ‘I was never convinced about such a complex counterinsurgency effort against Al-Qaeda and its Taliban supporters, but I’d followed it extremely closely. It’s my pet subject, the Great Game. I’ve probably read more books on the subject than anyone I know – Kipling, Peter Hopkirk, Lutz Kleveman, George MacDonald Fraser, the Younghusband Expedition, the lot. It’s involved everything from Russia trying to take India, the consequences of that, and the British expedition to Tibet during 1903 and 1904. I’ve always loved Indian history, so I suppose it was natural that I would become so interested in the Great Game.’

Having reconfigured the backdrop, Bailey was back behind the camera, this time photographing a large group of marines. 'Great,' he says, to no one in particular, 'Fifty years after I started and I'm still taking school pictures.'

The marines shuffled about, almost looking forward to Bailey's abuse. Which was just as well, because it soon comes.

'Oi you, Rudolph, what's the matter with your nose?' he continues. 'Oi you, blue eyes, you look like Frank Sinatra. A bit... Hey, you at the back, if you keep moving about I'm going to airbrush you out... It's like the Road to Camp Bastion. I almost expect Bob Hope and Bing Crosby to come round the corner at any minute... God you've got nice eyes – what are you doing later? Go on, smile, knock yourself out!'

Bailey is not exactly Milquetoast.

'That's it boys. Now, give me your name, and email address and rank and we'll email you a picture. And don't forget to include any criminal convictions.'

'I'll be here all day.'

'Yeah, I figured that.'

Bailey always gets the last laugh.

This is Bailey's stage, and he's right in the middle of it, in full soliloquy. Although he usually doesn't have such a large audience. His banter is incessant – and terribly funny – and groups of soldiers crowd around him to watch and listen to him work. They watch, but don't utter a word in case Bailey chooses them as his next victim. He is treated like a rock star, with soldiers young and old coming up to him asking for autographs or offering to help (by the end of the trip he had acquired three full-time assistants, including a squadron leader and a wing commander who we brought with us from Kabul). In our seven days in Bastion he had his picture taken nearly as often as he took pictures himself, and it would be fair to say that his visit was something of a morale booster. Lots of soldiers wanted him to take a picture of them on their phone so they could say they own a Bailey original ('Just don't stick them on eBay,' he says, smiling). At one point five people were taking his picture and two video film crews were behind him ('Go on, take your picture. Be like a Japanese tourist and take 300 pictures of the same thing'). One of the cockier sergeant majors berated Bailey for talking too much, to which the photographer responded with a typical salvo of profanity.

'Jesus, were you born swearing?' asked the sergeant major.

We had various MOD briefings in London before we went, most of which involved political and diplomatic sessions with various civil servants. Towards the end of the last session, where we had pretty much worked out what we were going to do on the trip, one little chap started describing what life in camp was like – the heat, the facilities, the smell, the sleeping arrangements, the food etc. Right at the end of the session he said, 'Now, I ought to warn you that some of the soldiers swear

quite a lot, and that it's quite a ribald, profane atmosphere.' He obviously doesn't know Bailey used to be in the Air Force, nor that for Bailey profanity is akin to breathing.

'Really?' Bailey said, trying to keep a straight face. 'They swear a lot? Well, they might learn a fucking thing or two then.'

We were given a huge list from the MOD of things we needed for the trip, including sleeping bags, pillows, sunglasses, malaria pills etc. The list went on for four pages. In the end we needn't have taken any of it, as when we got there we realized that it was all available in the Camp Bastion NAAFI. 'In the end, having taken it, and having lugged it all the way from London, I didn't really use the sleeping bag as it was too hot,' said Bailey. 'It was forty degrees during the day, and not much cooler at night. I just put my feet in. It was too much like a body bag for my liking, anyway. "Oh dear, I don't think I want to get in this!"

'Wearing the body armour was strange as it was so heavy. I'd only ever worn it before on manoeuvres with the police in Lincolnshire, so wearing it was something of a novelty for me. They certainly didn't have it when I was in the Air Force in Singapore as no one had body armour then. All I had was a beret.'

A few days after we arrived back in London, Bailey said, 'I loved the troops, and thought they were all great. Although I'm not a great warmonger, I thought all the guys, and all the girls, were just the most wonderful people. I met so many dedicated and brave young people at every rank. I went out of my way to be nice, to ingratiate myself, as I wanted it to be fun. They really don't want a smart outsider coming down there and taking pictures. I can be one of them because I was one of them. I hate the idea of being Lady Bountiful. That wasn't the reason I went at all – the reason I went was to raise some money. I didn't go as a dignitary. When dignitaries used to visit us in Singapore they all had special food – we had to pretend we had special food every day! – and they were kept away from what was really going on, and I suspect a little of that happens in Afghanistan. I'm not sure I learned anything from my visit – it just confirmed what I already knew, which is that I hate war and I hated the idea of all these great kids being killed.

'Bastion was so well organized, I couldn't believe it.

Nobody moaned, and in seven days I didn't hear a single bitter comment about the camp, the living conditions, or anything at all, come to that. They just got on and dealt with it. Even the deaths of people they knew. Soldiers tend to moan, as they get bored, as you tend to spend more time being bored than anything else. But not these guys. I'm not convinced everyone knew exactly why they were there, but then I guess it's always like that in war situations. Lots of people were positive about the mission, and about "courageous restraint", but then you always have to be positive about the mission, or else you're doomed. That's the only way you can do it. You have to adopt a positive view or else you'd find it very difficult to do it, to get up every morning and fight.'

There were some dissenting voices, though. Underfunding is still a huge issue, no matter what promises were mentioned in the defence review, no matter how many Snatch Land Rover Defenders get decommissioned. And some troops are disappointed that the media coverage focuses on Wootton Bassett aspect of the war. 'We don't want sympathy, we want respect,' said one Apache pilot. A few even suggested that Bob Ainsworth, the former Defence Secretary, was considered an idiot even by Gordon Brown, but most were positive about the current administration.

Camp Bastion is the main British military base in Afghanistan, and the largest to be built since the Second World War. It was built in early 2006, northwest of Lashkar Gah, in a remote desert area, right in the middle of Helmand. Four miles long and two miles wide, the camp has an airstrip and a hospital, and is the engine room for the repair and replacement of equipment, as well as being home to the 15,000 (and counting) men and women stationed there. Every day over 500 planes or helicopters come in and out of Bastion, making it the fourth busiest UK-run airport. There are so many helicopters flying above and around you – UK, US, ISAF, CIA, UK special forces, etc. – that every day becomes like an airborne ballet.

At 35 square kilometres it is the size of a small city. There is a Pizza Hut, an enormous NAAFI, coffee bars, an Indian restaurant, a church, post office, makeshift gyms, and the constant hum of generators and air-conditioning units. It takes hours to drive around the perimeter. There are car parks full of Tatas, Fords and Toyotas, and Bastion is so big it even has roundabouts. Everything here is about numbers. They serve 4,000 meals a day in four mess tents (queuing one lunchtime, Bailey said, 'This is harder to get into than the Ivy Club'), and drink half a million litres of Kinley bottled water a week ('A quality product of the Coca-Cola company'). The troops watch hundreds of hours of satellite television, and buy Pamela Anderson posters in their thousands from the NAAFI. There are 300 bags of post every day, and the NAAFI sells 5,580 cans of Coke every week (almost all of which is brought through Pakistan in convoys). The numbers are staggering. There is even a well: army engineers bored down 150 metres to tap into water that naturally springs from the desert, and over 22 million litres have been extracted. They even have a water bottling plant on base, as well as a sewage plant. (Camp Leatherneck, the US base within the Bastion perimeter, even has its own newspaper, *The Daily Tombstone*.)

Bastion is the logistics hub for operations in Helmand. It supports the military forward operating bases, patrol bases and checkpoints spread across Helmand province, and is where the bulk of the Americans and British come when they are entering or leaving the country after their six-month tour of duty (soldiers tend to be six pounds lighter when they leave). It is also where ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) train the ANA (the Afghanistan National Army), and has one of the largest, best-equipped military hospitals in the country ('My wife Catherine said that if anything happened to me then at least the medical equipment was much better than it is in Harley Street,' said Bailey drolly). The medics in Bastion refer to Sundays as 'Holy Shit Sundays', as they are considered the darkest day of the week. Taliban fighters are most likely to strike on Sundays after stopping for Friday prayers and planning their attacks on Saturday.