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Red One

A Bomb Disposal Expert on the Front Line

Written by Captain Kevin Ivison GM

Published by Phoenix

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RED ONE

A Bomb Disposal Expert on the Front Line

CAPTAIN KEVIN IVISON GM



PHOENIX

A PHOENIX PAPERBACK

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1. BUILD UP

I was born in Shrewsbury in May 1981 and lived in military quarters and barracks in Shropshire and York before the whole family – Mum, Dad, my sister Sarah and I – left the UK in 1984 for five years on the front line of the Cold War in Germany.

Dad was an infantryman – a Warrant Officer Class Two by the time his 25-year-career ended – and I spent much of my remarkably happy childhood clambering over armoured vehicles, firing rifles and running over assault courses. I loved it. The Army felt natural, like family. It was home.

Nevertheless, the streets of Al Amarah, fighting in Iraq or becoming a bomb disposal operator were beyond my imagination as aged 8, I looked out of the window of my school in Germany and saw soldiers with heavy packs sprinting past, their faces covered with camouflage paint and creased with pain.

Every couple of months a long snake of 432 Armoured Personnel Carriers (APC) would rumble past, hundreds of tonnes of armour shaking the classroom, rattling the windows and causing my heart to race. From the commander's hatch of the lead vehicle a man with a face covered in mud would appear, always wearing the same green helmet covered with twigs and leaves, his goggles encrusted with dirt, his skin tainted by worn-in camouflage paint and eyes that looked as if he hadn't slept for days. As I waved excitedly, Dad would throw up a mock salute in return, his unmistakable smile breaking through the

layers of paint, filth and tiredness. He was returning from exercise and I wouldn't have seen him for at least three weeks.

I listened intently when Dad returned from exercise to our tiny flat in Paderborn to tell me that he had once again beaten the Russians, that he had personally accounted for the destruction of a least a dozen enemy armoured personnel carriers with his precision mortar fire, and that we could sleep safely once again. The 50,000-man British Army of the Rhine (BAOR), Dad told me, was all that stood between the massive Soviet forces – constantly poised, ready to strike – and Britain.

The first time I ever saw a Russian in real life, he was pointing a rifle at my mother. We had travelled to Berlin in 1988 to peek behind the Iron Curtain when my mum had opened the car door at Checkpoint Charlie in order to relieve the stifling summer heat. That sound, the metallic clatter of rifle working parts slamming into position, seemed to last a lifetime as the guard screamed at her to get back in the car. Even my Dad, in full dress uniform, could do nothing as more rifles swung towards us. I was 7 years old but already had a very strong sense of right and wrong; pointing a rifle at a woman trying to cool her children down was wrong, and the frustration of my inaction burned inside me.

Life as a child in BAOR was to live a life under threat. The Cold War simmered constantly without ever boiling over, but the conflict with the Provisional IRA exploded with regular, predictable certainty. Even in Germany, hundreds of miles from the streets of Belfast, the Provisionals haunted us with their bullets and bombs: I knew how to check for booby-traps under a car ten years before I learned to drive one.

Some of my starkest memories are of terrorist acts. For a 7-year-old, the hours locked indoors as bomb disposal teams combed the area outside our flat after another warning were thrilling; watching my father stare at the television as the news

relayed yet more stories of soldiers being shot, blown up or butchered, was not.

Looking back, I was always going to join the Army; it just took me a few years to realize it.

My childhood had been militarily nomadic, moving from home to home as my father's Army career led us from my birthplace of Shropshire to York, Germany and finally Lancashire. At secondary school I briefly flirted with the idea of becoming an illustrator, an actor, a lawyer or an engineering apprentice, but these romances were all short-lived. I had no idea what I wanted to do, but I knew that most normal jobs just didn't fit the bill. Something was missing; I needed to be passionate about my chosen career.

My father left the Army in 1994. For the next two years I barely thought of soldiers, tanks or guns, until I attended an Army awareness day organized by my school. Within minutes of arriving at Fulwood Barracks in Preston, however, I was hooked, the sight of armoured vehicles and soldiers, the smells of camouflage netting and green tents and the sounds of bullets cracking through the air taking me straight back to my childhood. I had grown up with the Army and hadn't even realized how much I had missed it.

'Mum, I'm joining the Army!' My 15-year-old face was alight with excitement. My mother, having only recently seen her husband retire, and terrified of losing her son to the military, wept the tears of someone who had waited for this inevitable but nonetheless painful day to arrive.

She sniffed as she mopped at her tears:

'Me and your dad will support you whatever you decide to do, but for God's sake at least join as an officer.' She carefully explained that officers started at a higher rank, had the potential

to earn more money and appeared to have an easier, more glamorous life.

I was sold.

That night, the stack of war memoirs that my dad had collected over the years was piled up by the side of my bed and I began to read. My thirst for information was unquenchable; personal accounts of the Falklands War, the Gulf War and the Troubles in Northern Ireland left me spellbound into the early hours.

The Falklands War set my imagination on fire; this was the rawest of wars, attrition by two infantry-based armies meeting at close quarters, often within bayonet range, victory achieved only by the brutal application of force and extreme violence of a kind I could barely comprehend. It was the rawness of the combat that kept me turning the pages, man versus man, my skill against your skill, my strength against your strength. This wasn't a war of high technology; battles were not won by Tomahawk Cruise missiles, stealth fighters or pilotless drones; this was filthy, exhausting, bloody combat of the most basic kind, the kind that had barely changed since the evolution of mankind.

Just as fascinating as the battles were accounts of the long periods of inaction, of waiting. Many writers described the incessant shelling from Argentinean mortars and artillery on dug-in British troops, and its effect on their minds. Initially these attacks caused terror and confusion, then the soldiers seemed to cope by developing an almost apathetic attitude, a complacency towards the menace posed by these barrages. But even an instrument as sophisticated as the human mind could only take so much, the mortars gradually chipping away at the courage of those on the receiving end. Men became irritable, angry, sometimes very quiet and occasionally cracked under the increasing pressure of endless fear they named shell shock.

I wondered how it was possible to deal with such sustained onslaught? If some of the finest fighting troops in the world could become ineffective after this kind of mental torture how on earth would I cope?

The first Gulf War in 1991 already seemed more distant, less personal and more clinical in its application of force. This was a war of science, of technology and of the 'Smart Bomb'. Half a decade earlier I had watched in awe as the news showed high explosive missiles entering pre-selected windows in target buildings, after skimming along the ocean for hundreds of miles. Was this the new kind of combat? Had soldiers been removed from war, replaced by circuit boards and infrared seeker heads, relegated to the occasional skirmish to mop up a woefully under-equipped enemy who was quicker to surrender than fight?

The images of Apache gunships, F-117 Nighthawk stealth bombers and Patriot missiles were seen through the grainy, green-tinged night vision cameras that characterized the war. This was a very different kind of combat, but it was no less enthralling.

Northern Ireland was different altogether and held the most fascination for me. My father had served in Northern Ireland for a large portion of his career and had often told me of his experiences. The near misses, such as the time he tripped over a can of paint, only to see the wall behind him sprayed with a long line of bullets; the blowing up by terrorist bombs of members of his battalion and the constant threat posed by the Provisional IRA; the never opening a car door without first searching underneath it for bombs.

The Troubles was a war on my doorstep, and due to my Irish Catholic roots, one that felt much more personal than the

others. I was sickened by the brutality of the terrorists' attacks – such as at Warrenpoint, when eighteen British soldiers were killed by an IRA bomb, and the Remembrance Day killings in Enniskillen – and I was also amazed by the ineptitude of the British strategy to win peace. Internment seemed to be the most effective way that I could think of to energize the extremist Republican population.

As I read of the Shankhill Butchers who abducted, tortured and slashed their way through at least thirty lives, and the harrowing killing of the two Royal Signals Corporals who mistakenly drove into a Republican funeral, I tried to understand the hatred that defined this conflict.

The Troubles were about more than just a border, religion or which side of the peace wall a family lived. There seemed to be too much hatred, too much history and too much blood spilt to ever imagine a peaceful outcome. This was my first foray into the world of lies, deceit, bullets and bombs that is terrorism, and the aim of winning over a population rather than just beating them into submission. This kind of conflict seemed to be the most intellectually taxing of all. No one would carpet bomb Belfast, no smart bombs would be dropped through Londonderry windows, but still the battle had to be won.

From my reading I saw that there appeared to be two kinds of courage: the fiery courage that was seen during the attacks on Tumbledown and Mount Longdon, and the colder, calmer courage required to survive mentally through mortar bombardments and long patrols through the rolling, deadly, fields of South Armagh. Courage was an indefinable, immeasurable quality that was highly prized but barely understood. What on earth made a man better in combat than the person next to him? How did people perform incredible acts of bravery when the odds seemed hopelessly stacked against them?

How would I cope?

Even in my mid teens I knew there would be only one way to answer that question. The only thing of which I was absolutely certain was that I had found my calling – my passion.

My route to Sandhurst took in a two-year spell at Welbeck College, an Army-funded boarding school for those intending to pursue a career as an army officer. It fed my appetite for long sports afternoons, leadership training and interaction with the military units that visited frequently. My love for all things military, sporting and adventurous surpassed my love of all things academic by some distance, and I barely scraped through each term, never rising above the bottom quarter. Thankfully my grades were just good enough for entry to Sandhurst and I was awarded a place starting in January 2000.

Before Sandhurst, and seeing an opportunity for a spot of adventure, I arranged a three-month attachment to my father's old battalion, the 1st Battalion, The Queen's Lancashire Regiment (1 QLR) who were based in Omagh, Northern Ireland. Only a year had passed since a huge car bomb exploded in the centre of the town, killing twenty-nine people, and reminders of that day were everywhere. The shock of it still reverberated through 1 QLR and the locals who had suffered and were still suffering as a result of it.

Within a month of arriving and immersing myself in the rhythm of life in an infantry battalion I had noticed that one building in camp was off limits to all but a select few. Sirens frequently blared across the barracks as the bomb disposal team sped from this building in their Tactica armoured vehicles. Myths surrounded the nerve, courage and capabilities of these men, known universally as 'Felix' or ATO. They lived alone, separate from the remainder of 1 QLR, emerging from their compound only for emergencies and seemingly accorded God-like status from the battalion and wider Army.

There were only six ATOs in Northern Ireland, and no one

else was deemed capable of taking on the Provisional IRA's best bomb-makers. The ATO's word was law. It mattered little if he was a sergeant and the infantry incident commander was a warrant officer, captain or colonel – during bomb disposal operations he outranked them all.

I frequently found reasons to walk past the secluded ATO compound. It was adorned on the outside with items I knew to be improvised mortars such as the infamous Provisional IRA Barrack Buster with its devastating high explosive payload. Through the wire fence it was possible to see strange-looking robots being contorted into obscure shapes by operators clutching remote controls. Others ferried thick green suits from the back of the Tactica to the offices – suits I had seen on television being worn by bomb disposal men. I was seeing a very different side of the Army to life in an infantry battalion. There was no shouting or parades; just a very close-knit team doing what they had to do.

I couldn't leave Omagh without finding out as much as I could about these men, so I found myself volunteering to join another group of potential officers as they visited the many different areas of the battalion. I sat still, barely moving, as the ATO described the threat from IEDs in Northern lreland, including a Barrack Buster which had been fired at Bessbrook Mill in South Armagh. Entranced, I whistled involuntarily as he showed pictures of the aftermath of the Omagh bomb and recent car bombs in Belfast.

The ATO explained that he not only led the team but was also responsible for walking down the road and defusing the bombs – 'The Longest Walk'. There was no delegation; no one else in the team could fulfil that role, only the main man. The buck started and stopped with him.

This was the stuff of Action Man or James Bond; one man responsible for dismantling, with his own hands, car bombs,

mortars, anything the terrorists could dream up, pitting his wits against those of the terrorist. This was not a war of attrition but one of cunning deceit; often the various factions of the IRA would plant multiple IEDs or fake devices specifically to lure an ATO to the area before taking him on with another bomb. Whenever the Provisional IRA killed a bomb disposal man it was not only a political victory – until he was replaced they would have the opportunity to cause mayhem.

This intellectual combat had evolved to a point where devices often concealed other, smaller, booby traps inside them, or where the bodies of people who had been murdered were used to disguise bombs concealed nearby. This was chess, with the highest possible stakes.

ATOs typically served for six months in Northern Ireland and returned home for a year or so before being called back. Although only the most able and experienced operators deployed to the Province, the men they were facing, the bombers, were born and bred into terrorism and had even greater experience. A grudging respect had developed between these two bitter enemies as each tried to outmanoeuvre the other.

Although undoubtedly brave, ATOs did not run forward with bags of grenades or bayonet the enemy, full of adrenalin, or in last-ditch efforts to save their own lives. This was the same cold courage that allowed men to operate under heavy fire in the Falklands. Each step, each action, was planned meticulously, in full awareness of its potential consequences. Many ATOs had died performing this work and many more had been maimed. The lucky few had been recognized for their work, with two George Crosses, twenty-nine George Medals and nearly three hundred other awards for bravery being awarded since the Troubles began.

The ATO saw my wide eyes and ended on a flourish:

'So my job . . .' he paused for effect, 'is to get in there before these things explode, and make them safe.'

I could barely take it in; the responsibility, complexity and challenge of counter-terrorist bomb disposal seemed unimaginable. And yet I knew this was everything I had ever wanted. I had made up my mind: I would move heaven and earth to become an ATO.

The steep steps which led to Old College at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst loomed in the distance as my parents dropped me off at the Academy where I would spend the next year of my life. Aged 18, I was the youngest Officer Cadet in my intake by some margin; everyone else seeming so old, so well rounded and so much more relaxed about the experience. To me, it was everything.

In my platoon some had already had other successful careers: one had left a lucrative job in the City to pursue a life of adventure, most had come straight from university and only a few of us did not have degrees. I was a boy in a man's world.

Thirty per cent of the formidable Sandhurst training was delivered outside, on exercise, where we slept under thin plastic sheets, practised our navigation and fieldcraft and began to learn some of the most basic skills of soldiering. I learnt how shell scrapes were dug in frozen earth to protect us from artillery fire; how four-man fire teams worked together to gain ground on the enemy; and I also learned how much I hated the cold.

The drum beat of the General Purpose Machine Gun (GPMG) sounded from the distance as we patrolled towards the enemy position. This was Exercise Bayonet Point – live firing, Sandhurst style – and my heart was pumping with excitement. With only one kilometre left on our march it was

impossible not to be mesmerized by the occasional beauty of warfare. Ahead of us, in a long Welsh valley – for the next few hours occupied by a Russian Motor Rifle company – was our prey. Soon, we would descend into the chaos of combat: layers of confusion, noise, adrenalin and fear; but now, for a few minutes at least, we could afford to enjoy the spectacle before us.

Brief muzzle flashes lit individual firers a fraction of a second before bright red tracer arced like refracted light through the pitch black night, its lazy, looping trajectory in stark contrast to the hellish effect it had on its goal, smashing through sand bags, bricks and wooden targets. This elegant light show was interrupted every few seconds as a round struck a rock and ricocheted straight upwards, reaching for the sky, before the tracer burned out and disappeared from view.

The light of a 51mm illumination mortar hung over the battlefield for a few seconds as the detonation of PE4 explosive echoed around the valley. We were now much closer: only 200 metres to go and the smell of smoke and cordite had rolled down the valley to our holding area. In a few minutes we would be unleashed, would storm up the valley with barely time to think before regrouping at the other end.

'All this and you get fucking paid, too, gentlemen.' Colour Sergeant Hupp stood directly behind the platoon drawing the acrid smell of gunpowder into his lungs. Only a Guardsman could patrol 10 kilometres and still look immaculate. 'Now get ready. This is the closest you are going to get to war until you find yourself in some godforsaken shithole somewhere. Take it in, learn from it and . . .' (he leaned forward, out of sight of the other Sandhurst Directing Staff who hovered nearby, and lowered his voice) 'fucking enjoy it.'

The valley had rested between platoons, but now, as a Schermuly flare erupted into the night and we were launched forward, it filled with life again. The rattle of SA80 rifles pierced

my eardrums as men to my left and right engaged the enemy and loosed off long bursts into the darkness. Fire teams sprinted forward into that darkness and were covered by huge weights of fire from elsewhere in the platoon.

Bayonets that until this week had been used exclusively on the parade ground now glinted in the fraction of a second before they were pushed, with real, poisonous rage, into sand-filled mannequins. Exercise or not, this was terrifying stuff: live rounds, real people in the darkness, with GPMGs spewing fire above and to our sides as PE_4 plastic explosives detonated all around us.

I was struck by the ironies of combat: how could it be that so much was shouted but so little understood? How can so many bright men make such a hash of something we expect people with little or no education to do perfectly every time? Why did the loudest, most outgoing men in the platoon withdraw into themselves during this chaos? What was the difference between the men and women who could handle this kind of anarchy and those that were immediately overwhelmed by it?

Apart from my hatred of the cold I had learned something else on exercise: I liked it. I loved the mayhem and confusion of battle and managed to keep a clear head when others seemed to buckle. My secret, as yet unspoken to my Platoon Commander or even close friends, was that I wanted to find that kind of action again. I wanted to find war.

In the rare moments at Sandhurst when we were not either on the parade ground or on exercise, lectures were given on contemporary military operations and on leadership. Bosnia, Kosovo and Northern Ireland provided the context for instruction and we sat open mouthed as videos of the Balkans and Northern Ireland played on the huge screens in front of us.

I watched as British Warrior armoured fighting vehicles were blown up by anti-tank mines and as our soldiers came under fire from militia dug into snow-covered hilltops – all to the tune of Dire Straits 'Brothers in Arms'.

The soldiers screaming in agony on the huge screen before me could have been me, my friends, my father. The emotional attachment to soldiers forged in my early childhood magnified tenfold the horror of seeing British soldiers in distress. I wanted to get out there so much that it hurt. I wanted to 'do my bit', to *make a difference*.

As we marched around the Old College parade ground, the sound of 'Highland Cathedral' played by the pipes and drums of the Royal Scots added an inch to our stride and allowed the tension of the Commissioning Course to ebb away. Slow marching up the Old College Steps to 'Auld Lang Syne', I wondered whether all the theory or the hours shivering in Sennybridge Training Area would ever be put into practice. The Army had troops in Northern Ireland and the Balkans, but there seemed little possibility of a Falklands or Gulf War in the near future.

Immediately after the course I was plunged into my first real taste of the Army. As a troop commander at 29 Regiment RLC I led a troop of twenty Movement Controllers. To be a 'Mover' was to be that most loathed of military creatures: not only was he responsible for operating airports, seaports, railheads and acting as a paramilitary travel agent, he was also responsible for transmitting the errors, failures and incompetence of the RAF to the many thousands of soldiers who required their services.

But regimental life was everything I had ever dreamed of: sport was frequent, Friday afternoons always free and I quickly discovered that I loved dealing with soldiers. Simultaneously exasperating, brilliant and always challenging, I enjoyed nothing more than leading men and women.

Although much time was spent away on exercise, life in camp had many benefits. The Officers' Mess was superb fun for a young officer but I, like every other new subaltern, would not be welcomed into the mess until I had passed its bizarre induction ceremony. I soon found myself being placed on top of a 6-feet high set of Jenga and having an evil multicoloured concoction poured into a plastic glass and thrust into my shaking hands.

As I balanced precariously on top of the swaying tower, drunken hands slowly, clumsily, pulled pieces away as onlookers howled loudly. Before long, gravity had won the day and I came crashing down, legs and arms at peculiar angles, slightly winded, before another drink was thrust into my hand and the tower rebuilt. It was a healthy regiment, morale was high and in between periods overseas a fantastic atmosphere reigned in the mess. Life was great; as far as I was concerned the recruiting brochures had been spot on!

However, one September day the atmosphere changed. I walked into the Officers' Mess TV room and noted a scrum of people sitting on chairs, the floor and standing still at the back. The room was silent, tepid mugs of tea held in hands that remained motionless, and cigarettes burnt to their end, unsmoked. Eyes were transfixed by the images that flashed across the screen in front of us; the same footage replayed again and again. Heads slowly shook as we began to understand the enormity of the events playing out before us. It wasn't just the images of the airliner flying into the tower that had shocked us all, it was seeing people jumping to their deaths. Talking heads and news broadcasters espoused a myriad of theories as to the perpetrators, the casualties and the reason for the attack. That day – 11 September 2001 – would change the world, the British Army and my life dramatically, even if at that time I had little idea exactly how.

I knew only one thing for sure. We were going to war.

*

By November, UK forces had secured a foothold in Afghanistan and images of the Special Boat Service (SBS), who had taken Bagram airfield, north of Kabul, from the Taliban, filled the news. I scented my opportunity. I lobbied hard and wide that I should be the one to lead the movements team into Afghanistan. Other than my enthusiasm there was no compelling reason why I should have been selected above my contemporaries, but it worked. I finally left camp at midnight on 31 December 2001. Big Ben chimed over the radio as we boarded the bus to Brize Norton, where we were to board the C-130 that would take us to Afghanistan.

Moments after bumping down on to the runway in Kabul, the tail ramp of the C-130 opened and the smells of Kabul rushed in, cloaking us with the tang of smoke that hung low across the city, colouring the air and marking our faces. Artificial lights lit up long deserted relics of the Afghan/Soviet conflict in every corner of the airfield. Taking centre stage, the rear third of a Boeing 747 lay stricken in the centre of the taxi area; behind it, the terminal had been perforated with small arms fire and was testament to the ferocity of the fighting during the occupation. Overhead, a procession of American B-2 bombers, which constantly pounded Taliban positions, was returning to base.

The mountain ranges, on top of which the silhouettes of rusting tanks and artillery pieces were still clearly visible, loomed out of the darkness. I had struck gold, finding conflict within a year of commissioning and in one of the most beautiful countries on the planet.

Although we had little food, no heating and only solar showers that had to be thawed during the day to be used, morale was high and the days long and rewarding. Frequent meetings at the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) HQ

in the centre of the city meant that fascinating daily trips through the centre of Kabul became routine. Although the country was at war, the city was lively and seemed never to slow. The markets that sold bread, stews and spices battled with each other for local custom, while the rug, antique and jewellery sellers jostled for the attention of the many foreigners who rolled around the city in 4 x 4 vehicles and lived in an opulence that few Afghans could imagine.

Most Afghans I spoke to were as polite, hospitable and friendly as any people I have ever met. They were as interested in my culture as I was in theirs and during my down time I would walk to the small market outside the airport and talk of Afghan history and the Soviet occupation with anyone I could find. In addition to their pleasantness, many Afghans shared another trait: fatigue. They were tired of war, tired of death and tired of their country's constant occupation. They delighted in reminding me that this was not the first time the British had been here and said that they hoped we would have more success this time.

Upon my return to the UK I found that I had been selected to attend the ATO course starting in November. I was overjoyed to have passed another hurdle on my way to becoming a bomb disposal operator and even happier when I saw that six other members of my Troopies course had also been selected. Amongst the prospective ATOs were Charlie Yorke, who had arrived at Sandhurst after working in the family engineering business and seemed about as focused an individual as any on the course. Then there was Mickey Eason, a bluff Northerner who was an atypical Sandhurst Officer cadet with his deep Yorkshire accent, and Carl Newsome, a good-looking Scot who was quiet, worked out religiously and was as nice a man as you could wish to meet.

As I arrived at the Royal Military College of Science, Shrivenham (RMCS or 'Shriv') in November 2002, ready to be handed my pliers, night vision goggles and black overalls, I eyed the fellow students in the way a boxer does at the weigh-in. We would spend the sixteen months of the course living together, working together and ultimately fighting for the same jobs, with the better performing students having their pick of the best.

To my slight disappointment, the first six months comprised mainly academic instruction on maths, physics and chemistry in addition to more applied lessons on explosive technology. Hours were spent crawling over Russian tanks and inside helicopters as we began to understand how armies used technology to kill each other.

It quickly became apparent that there were two types of ATO. The 'Depot Donkeys' who passed the ATO course but failed the Improvised Explosive Device Disposal (IEDD) section tended to spend their careers managing ammunition supply and storage, whereas the 'Bomb Gods' who passed the IEDD phase were posted to 11 Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) Regiment. These were the guys and girls who whizzed around the country with blue lights flashing as they dashed from incident to incident, defusing anything from Second World War hand grenades to terrorist bombs.

Only the latter group, the Bomb Gods, would be destined for great things within the ATO world. It was this group alone that could attend the 'High Threat' IEDD course and only the very few successful candidates (only about 20 per cent passed) would deploy to Northern Ireland to take on the most sophisticated IED threat in the world at the time: that posed by the Provisional IRA. No one would choose to be a Depot Donkey and each of us fixed our eyes on the prize of being a Bomb God.

Now, at the very beginning of the ATO course and having already passed several hurdles to reach this point, the chance of becoming a bomb disposal operator seemed more distant than ever. I was determined to focus on work and work alone for the next sixteen months. The rewards were too great for me to focus on anything else; the sacrifice would be worth it.

Then I met Beth. My friend Jack and I were celebrating buying a flat together when he looked across the bar and recognized two girls with whom he had been to school. Armed with a bottle of Moet et Chandon and the confidence of inebriation we sidled across. Before introductions were over I was already smitten with Beth. She was everything I wanted in a woman: very good looking, funny, independent and fiercely intelligent. By the end of the night, we had agreed to meet for dinner and I had already started to fall in love with her. She was studying at Oxford University, only a short trip from Shrivenham, and we spent afternoons enjoying picnics at Christ Church College or walking through the winding paths that snaked alongside the Isis, itself teeming with young couples punting up and down the river.

By the time I left Shrivenham, Beth and I were already deeply in love and my thoughts began to waver from chasing the all-action postings that I had imagined to more stable jobs where I could spend more time with Beth, building a life together. But it was no good. Even as the course progressed my desire to see war up close grew greater and greater. Surely I didn't have to choose between Beth and the Army. Surely I could have both. Besides, I wanted to do tough exciting tasks. I wanted her to be proud of me.

As the next phase of the ATO course began at the Army School of Ammunition in Banbury, I worked far harder than I ever had at school or college and soon I was a walking encyclopaedia of ammunition facts. I was far from being the

brightest on the course, but no one worked harder than me and from a dismal start my name began to creep up the all-important rankings which, along with the IEDD course, would determine our postings.

Meanwhile my relationship with Beth was bliss. We had started to plan together, to talk about the future. She was heading for a Magic Circle law firm in London, I was doing well on the ATO course and would probably be able to choose my posting. And as there was one available in London, everything seemed set.

Not a single day went by without me telling her I loved her. Nothing made me happier than simply holding her hand and looking into her eyes. We were infatuated and I knew that I had her support in my role as an ATO. I would go to London for two years and gain some experience, pass the High Threat course, deploy to Northern Ireland and then aim for the role as ATO to the Special Forces. For the first time in my life there was a plan, and I could not think of a better person to spend my life with.

The IEDD course was the very last phase of the ATO course. Everything hung on it, to the extent that we would receive our postings the day we finished the phase. If we passed, we would probably go to 11 EOD Regiment; if we failed, a life of counting ammunition boxes awaited. The thought of not passing was unbearable. As we arrived at the Felix Centre for our five-week course, we were under no illusions as to how important IEDD was to our future careers.

'99 per cent boredom and 1 per cent terror.' Captain Doug Gregory stood before us, a veteran of over twenty-five years as an ATO. He had done it all: Northern Ireland, Special Forces and now Chief Instructor of the UK's counter-terrorist bomb disposal training school.

'Most of the time in this game you will be sat around doing sweet eff all, but when you are called you have to get it right every single time.'

This was our gentle introduction to bomb disposal. Fourteen faces looked stunned.

'But good luck and enjoy it.'

'No pressure then,' said a voice from the back after Doug had left the room. We laughed quietly and nervously.

Practical lessons followed the theory lessons on the principles and philosophies of IEDD, the role of each team member and the conduct of an IEDD task. The course wasted no time in sending us outside on practice tasks where we would deploy in teams within the small village constructed for the purpose. In amongst the many houses were pubs, petrol stations, a post office and even a car showroom.

On arrival, our priority was to establish what had happened, where it had happened and what had already been done about it. Scenarios, based on real tasks, ranged from dealing with simple incendiary devices like those constructed by animal rights groups, through to the most sophisticated devices the Provisional IRA had deployed in Great Britain. Although the explosives were not real, the pressure definitely was. Often we would arrive at a task only to find that we had been brought into an unsecured area where a secondary device had been placed to kill the bomb disposal team.

Tasks with secondary devices generally led to the death of the entire team: they were difficult, complex and required first class skills and intuition to overcome. I hoped that my time would come, that I would get to test myself for real and, most of all, that I would be equal to the challenge.

The final week was test week. There were four tasks, three of which we had to pass in order to qualify as IEDD operators. One by one my fellow students failed: some could not handle

the pressure and just broke on task, some did not possess the technical skills to succeed and a few lacked the command skills to operate.

I passed.

Fifty per cent of the course had failed and would have to re-sit the course or accept their fates counting bullets. The relief was massive, as I was virtually assured of one of my top three postings in the UK with 11 EOD Regiment. I had made it. Beth was over the moon and it seemed as if my efforts had been worth it. Overall I had finished second on the ATO course and could not wait to receive my posting.

But on judgement day I was posted to Germany. I was considered too young to stay in the UK and was banished abroad. Beth was heartbroken, but we were doubly determined to make our relationship succeed.

In Germany, life in camp was straightforward, with few bomb disposal callouts and little prospect of the Soviet 3rd Shock Army rolling towards us at any time soon in order to shake things up. In addition to the welfare of my soldiers, one subject occupied my mind: the High Threat IEDD course. This course was extraordinarily difficult to pass and was the biggest hurdle between me and the sexier ATO jobs in Special Forces or Intelligence and my ticket to real action. The thought of spending two years in Germany waiting for the Provisional IRA to mount another attack depressed me; here I was, stuck in the middle of nowhere, while the Army engaged in two bloody conflicts thousands of miles away – which was where I wanted to be.

I had missed the second Iraq War due to the ATO course. In the ATO community there was much talk of our actions in Iraq. We had lost a Staff Sergeant early in the war when he had been killed defusing a cluster bomb, but we had been lucky since. 'High Threat' ATOs were already in theatre and I learned

that in a town called Al Amarah, a war was raging. The Princess of Wales Royal Regiment Battle Group (PWRR Battle Group) were in the thick of the action and the ATOs were taking incredible risks against IEDs to keep the Battle Group alive.

I wanted in. I wanted to deploy immediately, and fantasized about passing the High Threat course and getting out there as soon as I could.

Not possessing a natural gift for IEDD, I trained hard to sharpen my skills and to soak up as much experience as I could before the High Threat course. However, my confidence took an extra dip as on day one, Captain Doug once again addressed us:

'The pass rate for this course is about 30 per cent, for those of you here for the first time it is about 20 per cent – but good luck.' This guy really had a way with words.

Beginning with instruction on searching for sophisticated booby traps and using complex 'hook and line' arrangements to remove mortars from culverts and wheelie bins dug into the ground, the course was intense physically but less cerebrally demanding. We spent hours clambering through streams and up rivers, and wriggling through sewage pipes attaching ropes and pulleys to large main charges so that we did not have to remove them by hand. If we made a pattern of moving things ourselves, the enemy would booby trap them and kill us. It was important to achieve as much as possible whilst still keeping distance between ourselves and the bomb.

The course progressed to advanced search techniques. Looking for and disabling victim-operated devices was demanding and required hours spent in the claustrophobic EOD suit which restricted vision and movement and would protect us against only the smallest devices. Any more than a hand grenade and we would certainly die if we were close up. We learnt how to search for metal IEDs dug in beside railway

tracks, under concrete floors and in all environments: urban, rural, dry and wet, both at night and by day.

Gradually our skills were put into use in practice tasks with one member from each team being tested as his colleagues looked on. On one occasion I had finished my task – a simple command wire to a high explosive main charge – and was clearing up. The DS – our instructor – stood by longer than usual and more gathered nearby as I wound in the command wire. I pulled and pulled until I felt it snag. Then from the leaves piled 20 metres away I realised I had been pulling a second main charge, an artillery shell, towards me for the last few minutes.

'We'll call that a fail and chalk it up as a good lesson to learn,' said Staff Sergeant Davis, stifling his laughter as the bomb rolled slowly towards me.

Despite this explosive faux pas I passed the course and was now a qualified High Threat bomb disposal operator. This was my ticket to the action, to what I'd always dreamed of. Beth, however, seemed much less happy.

'You passed? That's great news for *you*.' I barely noticed her concern as I gathered my kit and prepared to deploy to Northern Ireland. I had focused so intently on my career that I had not seen how our relationship was breaking apart. We were rarely together, and when we were I thought only of making the grade as a High Threat operator.

If I had spent more time thinking about her it would have come as no surprise when, only two weeks into my deployment, Beth ended our two-year relationship. It was just too difficult for her. I lived in Germany and would spend the next six months in Londonderry as she built a life in London. We spent too much time apart and she needed more. Before I put the phone down she had tried to soften the blow.

'I love you and if you ever need me I will always be there for you.'

As I stared out of the window, I knew my life had been turned upside down. The plans, ambitions and life I thought we would have together were no more. I had chased my ambitions too hard and had lost the girl I loved because of it.

Not long afterwards, petrol bombs lit up the Londonderry night as stones turned my EOD van into a bass drum. We were being hammered. This crowd hated us, hated the police and did not care that the pipe bomb I was hunched over had been meant for them. A female PSNI officer had been attacked with a golf club seconds earlier and my own team was sheltering in the van as flames licked all around the road.

I lifted my visor, took in the scene and smiled. I was the ATO in Londonderry and had been tasked to Strabane at 3 a.m. in the morning. Seven years ago this area would have been covered by the ATO Omagh. I had made it. A brick skidded along the floor and struck me in the shin as I knelt. I didn't care. I was living my dream.

However, only a few days later my phone rang and it was Keith, my boss from Germany, sounding as chirpy as ever.

'I've got a bit of a proposition for you, one I think you may like.'

My ears pricked up.

'What would you say if I offered to cut short your Northern Ireland tour and get you out to Iraq? You would do four months in each theatre.'

I was enjoying every second of my time in Northern Ireland. There was nothing more exhilarating than charging through the city defusing pipe bombs, getting petrol bombed and returning to the PSNI bar to wind down. This was everything I had wanted ever since my first visit to Omagh all those years ago. But there was really no decision to make.

'I'd bite your fucking hand off.'