Matters of Life (and Death)

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WATCHING events unfold in the conflict zones of Iraq and Afghanistan, it is worth remembering that the TV reportage we see depicts mainly the human cost in terms of civilian lives (which is as it should be - anything else would be criminal ignorance) and military actors. In the latter case, however, it is sometimes forgotten that while ordinary soldiers are the visible combatants, it is their masters - the generals, and even more so, the politicians - who decide the terms on which battles are fought. That too, usually from the comfort of some faraway capital!

The United States Army has long been notable for certain kinds of irregularities - not least the frequency of incidents of so-called "friendly fire" (possibly the most obnoxious euphemism ever developed!) and prisoner abuse (such as the Abu Ghraib scandal). It also has a high proportion of post-conflict troops suffering from psychological problems, some studies estimating this figure to be as high as 30 %, for reasons that include the relatively lower age and limited experience of American soldiers, and their longer tours of duty compared to British soldiers.

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By contrast, the British Army has always prided itself on high standards of professionalism and performance among its troops, considered to be some of the best in the world. Yet there now appears to be a degree of consensus that the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have taken a heavy toll on the armed forces. So much so, that in December 2006, General Sir Mike Jackson, the former head of the British Army, warned that troops were being put at risk by underfunding and "overstretch", criticising British defence ministers for failing to recognise that the pressures on the ground had grown beyond initial expectations.

However unwelcome Sir Mike's comments may have been to the politicians overseeing the conflict, the fact remains that it is hard to ignore the contrast between the arrival of British soldiers in April 2003, when they were greeted as liberators in Basra, to the grim situation in May 2006, when five British soldiers died as a missile brought down their helicopter. The latter incident featured as a backdrop a crowd of cheering Iraqis who had witnessed the shooting down of the helicopter. Something has clearly gone terribly wrong over that three-year period, and the ones who are in the firing line - literally paying the price for those mistakes - are the soldiers on the ground.

Under the circumstances, the comment made a few months ago by the British Defence Secretary, Des Browne, now rings profoundly hollow " Day-on-day, the local forces are coming into control of this area because of the training that we have been able to give them". He added that British commanders in Iraq had assured him that "calm and control had been restored in Basra" (UK Independent). Famous last words...

One recurrent controversy relates to the suitability of equipment provided to British soldiers on recent missions. For example, the standard issue army rifle, the (SA80 A2) has been dogged by problems relating to salt water and sand hampering its operation. Despite subsequent upgrading, complaints persist.

It has also been pointed out that 25% of British soldiers killed by hostile action in Iraq were travelling in "snatch" Land Rovers, vehicles designed for conditions in Northern Ireland rather than the arid environment of Iraq. Furthermore, while these vehicles are bulletproof, they provide no protection from improvised roadside bombs, which are a major threat in the current context.

On a similar note, a Parliamentary report last April expressed "deep concern" that British troops going into Helmand province, the most dangerous part of Afghanistan, might lack adequate air cover during combat. This concern stemmed from the fact that the RAF Hercules transport aircraft assigned to protect soldiers were themselves vulnerable to ground attack, because "resources had been a constraint" in fitting defences for these aircraft (UK Independent).

Even more worrying have been allegations that British soldiers in combat zones have been inadequately supplied with equiptment. The case of the first British soldier to die in Iraq, Sgt Steven Roberts, is illustrative of these concerns. An inquest found that Sgt Roberts, who was killed in a "friendly fire" incident, died because he was clad in makeshift armour that he had constructed by stuffing pieces of padding into his army fatigues and sticking them together with black masking tape! Three days prior to his death, the soldier's enhanced combat body armour (ECBA) had been taken back by the army,