

Sergeant Terry Bryan, CGC Royal Horse Artillery

AS spring turned to summer and the blistering heat of August set in, the mood on the streets of Basra became darker still, just as it was doing further north.

At around 3pm on August 9, a small group of soldiers found themselves stuck in a satellite base a short distance away from the main UK camp in the city. They were surrounded by an increasingly volatile crowd, and fears grew for their safety,

Eventually, it was decided to send other troops out to cover their extraction.

Terry Bryan led a two multiple patrol to help bring the men in.

However, before they reached their destination, they drove into a clever and carefully-planned ambush.

So began a nightmare ordeal that saw their vehicles destroyed by an enormous weight of rocket-propelled grenades and machine gun fire; Sgt Bryan and his RHA multiples were forced onto unfamiliar streets and into a running battle with hordes of insurgents.

Desperate, they broke into a building; surrounded, and shooting attackers at point blank range to keep them at bay, their ammunition started running dangerously low.

A quick reaction force was sent out to rescue them but, with communications patchy, and the enemy now trying to set the building alight, Bryan and his men, some of them teenagers, began to fear the worst.

I was born in Derby and lived there and in Nottingham as a boy. I never intended to join the Royal Artillery - I actually wanted to

become a chef, so my plan was to join the Catering Corps. But the guy in the recruiting office was a gunner and he convinced me that the RA was the place to be.

I joined as a 16-year-old, so the Army is pretty much all I've known.

I was 33 years old when I found myself out in Basra with the Regiment on Operation TELIC 4.

We were based in a fairly small camp, I think it was a former Iraqi naval officers' academy, in the middle of the city centre. This was one of several camps the British Army had established in Basra; it gave us a bit of a toe-hold, a focal point. Most of the regiment was there - around 500 people.

When we first arrived, in April 2004, Basra was relatively friendly. I mean, it was the most hostile situation most of us had ever been to, so you were wary, but on the whole it was not bad.

Initially, our task was to set up and oversee the training of the border police down at the docks. They were impressive, the Iraqi recruits. These were brave guys, who faced a lot of intimidation, and many of them had travelled a fair distance to get there. They were reshaping their own country and I had a lot of respect for them.

We also did low-level patrolling, close to camp, no more than a few Ks outside our gates. The idea was to suppress insurgent activity and stamp our authority on the area while letting the friendlier locals know we were there and approachable if there was a problem. We wore helmets in vehicles - when you're in a military vehicle, even on exercise, you always wear a helmet, because you can get bashed and jolted - but on foot patrol, we'd be in berets or floppy hats. Helmets step up the ante, like you're bringing it on. We'd stop and talk to the locals, through the interpreter, and play with the kids. We got contacted now and then - vehicles I was in took a couple of rounds, an RPG once - but mainly it was a case of being mortared in camp in the

evenings. We were very lucky, given the amount of mortars we had, that no-one got badly injured. We sent patrols out at night time to deter them, targeting suspect areas where we knew they were firing from, but it was next to impossible to catch them at it. They have a range of around 800 metres and they're very portable. You can put one on the back of a truck and cover it with a tarpaulin, or hide it in someone's yard. And once they were fired they were gone. They were virtually guaranteed to get away.

You quickly adjusted to the level of threat to the point where you would sleep through the mortar explosions, no problem. The amount of work we were doing during the day, we were shattered.

I'd get up 6.30ish each morning. Work started soon after but you couldn't have lain in bed if you'd wanted, it was just too hot, especially as the summer approached. We were getting temperatures in excess of 50 degrees centigrade. As we got into June and July, things did start to step up a bit. We were constantly being briefed about the situation up north, and there were patterns - if certain things happened elsewhere, you knew copycat incidents would filter down to us later.

On the day in question, Bryan was sent to escort a police General to a meeting a kilometre away, in a multiple of two armoured Land Rover 'snatch' vehicles. On the way back to camp, it was clear something was awry.

Things weren't normal. Usually, there were people milling around - workers, people looking for a job, street vendors, food stalls, taxis, buses, donkey carts. Today, none of that, a real noticeable lack of people on the streets, which immediately got alarm bells ringing. It's as important to notice the absence of the normal as it is the presence of the abnormal. Anyway, we altered our patrol route on the way back, just to be on the safe side.

They got back safely and, after a quick meal, Bryan went to his bunk. He was awoken an hour later, and told to make his way to the Ops Room for a brief on a patrol.

It was a dark little room, the communications and intelligence gathering centre, where what's going off on the ground was monitored. There were six or seven people in there - the Ops officer, Capt Amber Tyson, the Battery Commander, Maj Paul Bates, and a watch keeper and a couple of gunners.

Capt Tyson did the briefing. Apparently, there was a patrol of around eight guys holed up in a small camp a bit further into Basra. A hostile crowd had built up outside and the guys were going to extract. They were in soft-skin Land Rovers and our task was to assist in their extraction, protecting them if anything flared up. Specifically, we would cover two junctions a minute or so from their position; junctions are obviously dangerous points because you have to slow down and turn and you are vulnerable to ambush as you do so.

The plan was that we'd radio in when we got to the junctions and they would then extract. It all seemed reasonably straightforward.

I'd rounded the boys up before I went to the Ops Room - *Get some water down your necks, lads, get your kit together, throw some water on your face, look lively* - and by the time I got back they were all in the vehicles, ready to go. There were four vehicles, split into two pairs for the task. There were four guys in my vehicle and five in the other which would travel with me. This was commanded by my good mate Olly - Sgt Matt Oliver, whom I've known for years and years. Olly wasn't actually scheduled to come out with us, but he'd been lying around getting bored and had decided to come along for something to do. I had enough time to brief the lads, and then the word came through to go.

The other two Rovers left first and radioed when they were in position. Bryan's pair of vehicles then left, heading along the wide dual carriageway, which had an 18 inch concrete barrier dividing the lanes. The soldiers kept an eye out for occasional breaks in the barrier so they could whip round and escape if they were ambushed.

We knew where each break was. Our intention was to get to the junction, turn through the break there and point back towards camp before deploying out of the vehicle and patrolling on foot until the extraction happened. However, as we got to that break and slowed for the turn, we realised there was no longer any break there: it had been closed off by big oil barrels.

Simultaneously, the firing started: it was as though someone had turned a switch on.

I'd experienced nothing to prepare me for it. I know it's a cliché, but it was literally like a hail of bullets hitting the vehicle. *F***! What's happening?*

The guys on top cover came down straight away and closed the hatch and I tried to assess the situation. I could see men firing at us from the tops of buildings, from windows and shop doorways, from behind walls, all over. There were dozens of them, as close as 30 or so metres away. They would run out of a doorway, hose us down with half a magazine or loose off an RPG, and then run back inside. There was no way we could return fire: we'd have been killed very quickly if we'd opened the doors, given the intensity of fire. I could hear hundreds of AK rounds, ticking on the windscreen, the sides and the back of the Land Rover, interspersed with the distinct thud of heavier calibre rounds, probably from a Dushka anti-aircraft weapon. RPGs were hitting us and exploding. But the armour was holding out and, strange as it sounds, I felt quite safe in the vehicle.

We're still moving at this point and I've got my head in a map, trying to plan our extraction route. I can't turn back, because we'll be sitting targets while we turn. I can't reverse, because there's very little rear visibility and, again, we'd be sitting ducks for 300 or 400 metres back along the road and sooner or later one of those RPGs is going to cause some real damage. I can't go right because of the concrete and the oil drums and I can't drive off left, because we've been contacted on the waste ground there once before and I know the Land Rover will get bogged down with the weight of the armour. The only thing we can do, my instant reaction, is to gun it and drive forward out of the killing area.

We were trying to radio for help, but the radio had been damaged and we couldn't contact HQ. We had a patrol mobile phone, but you can't get a decent signal in an armoured vehicle. I could still speak on the short distance radio to Olly in the other vehicle so I told him to follow. (*The other multiple had also been contacted, but they had managed to return fire and extract themselves.*) The road ahead was straight, with a few roundabouts and side streets further on. There were other breaks in the central reservation ahead, too; I thought if we drove on out of the contact area we could find a safe point, get out of the vehicle and phone a sitrep in.

But as we headed on, the junctions and gaps in the road had all been blocked off. We just kept driving, and they kept shooting. I'd gone around two kilometres by this point, with heavy contact the whole way. Clearly, the whole thing had been very well-planned - the angry crowd to lure us out, the break in the barrier closed off, and hundreds of armed men ready to take advantage. Finally, we came to a roundabout. All the exits were blocked and we were forced to drive round it. As we did so, the vehicle was hit on the left side by an IED which blew away the left front wheel. So now we're travelling on three wheels, tyres shot away, still under heavy contact, rounds rattling and

pinging off us non-stop, as they have been since it started. I saw that Olly's Land Rover had been hit with an RPG and was on fire at the front.

It was at that point that I started to worry a bit. Still, there's always squaddie humour. I was talking to him on the radio and I remember grinning to myself and thinking, *I bet you're wishing you hadn't volunteered for this.*

I was also still frantically studying my map and listening to my driver, a mature, very bright, very professional young South African gunner called Frank Haman, giving me a constant update on the activity and the state of the road. He was amazingly calm; suddenly, he said: 'There's a break off to the left. I know where I am now... the former Ba'ath Party HQ.'

The Ba'ath Party HQ seemed like a sanctuary to the soldiers. A former British base, it was now full of Iraqi Defence Force troops. With both vehicles badly damaged and options limited, it offered reinforcements and solid walls for cover.

There was this amazing sense of relief. I thought, *Maybe we're going to get out of this, after all.* Then the contact started up from the building itself. Guys in uniforms were shooting at us now - we'd stopped the vehicles, almost, but we were still being hit from all sides. We pressed on but it was getting pretty desperate; 10 or 15 metres later, both vehicles effectively conked out and came to a halt. They were both on fire, and obviously going nowhere.

The thing about being in a vehicle is that you're relatively safe, though less so, obviously, when you can't move and there's 200 people outside trying to get in and kill you. But now we had to get out. It was a hard decision, though in a strange kind of way I preferred being out in the open. A Land Rover is a target, it draws fire; on foot, or lying

down, you're harder to hit. For a moment, I worried about the vehicles falling into militia hands. Then I thought, *F*** it, at the end of the day I've not got a lot of choice here.* We needed to get somewhere safer and I couldn't do that in the Land Rovers.

I told the lads we had to debus. They were all very young and inexperienced - most had only been in the Army a year to 18 months - but as soon as I said that the doors were open and they were out into the firefight, all in good defensive positions around the two vehicles, well-dispersed and laying down suppressive fire. Really impressive, given their inexperience. Almost immediately one of the lads killed one of the attackers. This guy was dressed in a police uniform, stood there, reloading an RPG launcher. Although he was quite a distance away, the young gunner dropped him, a nice shot.

At that moment I remember thinking that we were going to have to take lives, a lot of them, to stand any chance at all of surviving this.

Everything was happening at once, at about 100mph. The hardest thing was trying to work out where we were so I could send my sitrep on the patrol mobile. I was very disorientated and I found it hard to gather my thoughts. While I was crouching there, trying to clear my head, an RPG round came in and hit the wall a few feet above my head, showering me in crap. I looked down, and I could see rounds sparking all around us, sending up little dust clouds in the dirt. We were massively, massively outnumbered. But there was a glimmer of hope: they didn't like us returning fire. They were fine shooting at us in the Land Rover from a doorway in the distance, but once we'd got out of the vehicles and started carrying the fight to them, they weren't so happy. A few of them were running off and the fire from the others was getting more inaccurate and wild. The lads saw this, and it boosted their morale.

I'd managed to get through to the Ops Room by now. Normally, I'm very friendly and chatty on the phone - *Hello! I'm here... be back*

in 10 minutes... cheerio!' - that sort of thing. So when the captain answered the phone and saw it was us from the caller display, she was very relaxed. 'Hello, Terry! How are you?'

I just shouted, 'F***ing contact!'

It probably sounded really garbled; I was having trouble speaking because my mouth had gone horribly dry and sticky, like when you wake up after a massive drinking session. I couldn't get my words out properly, I was gagging for something to drink, just to wet my throat. Everyone else was the same, it must have been the adrenaline.

In the background, even above the noise of the firefight, I could hear her shouting, 'Contact! Everyone be quiet!' and everything went quiet in the ops room. 'Where are you, where are you?'

I still didn't know. All I knew was that we had been hit down the road from the point where we'd been sent and we were now some distance away, still under a huge amount of fire. 'Not sure, but I'll tell you shortly. I've been hit by everything, it's a well-conducted ambush, there are hundreds of them out here. I've lost the vehicles, I can't stay here, I intend to move on.'

By now, the enemy, realising they hugely outnumbered us, had become more confident again. They started getting closer, still firing RPGs and pouring hundreds of AK rounds our way. You could hear them cracking overhead, smacking into the vehicles and walls nearby. It felt like it was only a matter of time before one or more of us was hit.

Bryan led his troops on a fighting withdrawal along a dirt track, temporarily losing the enemy. But they were soon contacted again.

We were standing in the open and I could see easily 100 of them coming at us from two or three angles between 9 o'clock and 6

o'clock. With the lads laying down short, two-round bursts of suppressive fire, I headed off for a scout around with the medic. As we ran off, we saw a couple of blokes running towards us, firing. Instinctively, we shot them and laid them down. I didn't feel anything at the time; to be honest, I wasn't thinking much about what I was doing - it was just happening. We saw a building, a semi-detached house with a driveway down one side and the garden enclosed in a wall topped with a metalled fence, and called the rest of the patrol up. We entered the garden, hoping to hide, but we'd been seen and guys started coming over the wall at us. We were shooting them at a distance, literally, of five and six feet. Now we were very vulnerable - one grenade could have taken a lot of us out. So we kicked the door of the house in. Inside, there was a father and mother and three kids, daughters of around six and nine and a baby. The parents were shouting at us, screaming and crying, yelling out of the windows. They must have been terrified. We rounded them up and got them into their cellar, for their own safety. I sat Frank Haman there, where he could cover the back door and also make sure the family didn't get out. We quickly cleared the house. On the outside of the building was an external staircase leading up to a balcony and then into the bedrooms, and there was obviously a danger that the attackers could get into the house that way. In fact, one of my guys was clearing the upstairs and, as he walked in to one of the rooms, a guy stood on the balcony and threw a grenade into the room. The soldier saw it happen, pulled the door shut and shouted 'Grenade!' When it exploded, he opened the door again and shot the guy, who was busily spraying the room with automatic fire. Once we were sure both floors of the house were cleared, the blokes took up the right defensive positions, covering doors and windows where they could look out.

The house was small and very controllable, easy to defend, which was good. Downstairs was fairly open-plan - a small kitchen, which

we'd come into when we first entered the building, a big main sitting room and a small spare room. Upstairs there were a couple of bedrooms and a bathroom. There was the balcony to consider and two entry doors downstairs but the house was made with thick, breeze block-built walls which would stop rounds and we were a lot safer inside than outside.

I was still trying to work out where we were. Looking back, we must have headed in a circle after leaving the vehicles, because the house was basically next door to the Ba'ath Party HQ, though unfortunately it wasn't until later on we realised that that was what it was. At first, it was just a big building visible through a large, floor-to-ceiling window.

We could see men leaning over the walls of this building, shooting in at us, just spraying the upper rooms. At that point, strangely, I was shooting back but not wanting to hit them. I know I'd laid men down but I really didn't want to kill anyone else. I just wanted to frighten them off. So I was aiming near to them, hoping they would get the message and p*** off. But they didn't. They'd pop up, spray five or ten rounds from the hip, and pop back down again. Eventually, that realisation - that we were going to *have* to kill people - returned. One guy was just a few feet away, firing at me from behind a chest-high wall. The rounds were peppering all around me but, almost miraculously, missing. I thought, *I'm going to have to take this boy out*. I looked through my sight, aimed and fired. But I missed him, I don't know how - like I say, he was no more than 10 feet away. I saw the bullet hole appear in the wall and thought, *Surely he's not going to be so stupid as to come back up in the same spot, is he?* I kept my rifle trained on the spot, lifting the barrel slightly, and, sure enough, up he popped. He brought his weapon up but I got there first. I shot him in the head and he fell away.

In a brief lull, Bryan took a moment to assess the situation inside the house. The majority of his soldiers were upstairs, with better lines of sight and arcs of fire. He checked on everyone; amazingly, with thousands of rounds fired at them, no-one was injured. By now, they had been in the house for 10 minutes, and it was 45 minutes since the first contact. The fire was increasing, with RPGs and grenades being used in an attempt to break through the walls of the house.

I spent time with the guys upstairs, just telling them little things like to move away from the window, and stand two or three feet inside to make yourself less visible and a smaller target. The guys didn't really want to kill anyone, either. We were having to, but we really just wanted them to leave us alone, just go home to their wives and kids so we could go back to our mates.

Then I went downstairs. I had to crawl down on my belly because of the floor to ceiling window. Down there it was getting really hairy. People were trying to get in through the back door, coming in waves, two or three of them at a time, and Frank was just calmly knocking them back. The door would open and Frank would shoot a guy and kick the door shut. A second later, the dead man's mucka would be there, dragging the body away and picking up his rifle to have a go himself. Frank would have to shoot him as well and shut the door again.

Another lad, Dan Cavid, was assisting him in keeping them at bay, but inevitably this meant they were neglecting the front door. So I took up a position covering that, just in case. That was lucky, because then they did start trying to get in that way. They had popped the bonnet of a car up and were hiding behind it, getting up and spraying rounds into the room, blindly and indiscriminately because it was dark inside, and quickly getting back down. I knocked two of them away,

but I could hear it was getting more intense upstairs again. I tapped Dan on the shoulder and said, 'Look, you're going to have to cover this front door here, I need to get back up there.' He was straight over there; I was really impressed with him and all of them, they were doing brilliantly.

I crawled back up the stairs. I'd given the patrol phone to Olly and when I got to the top I found him reclining on a settee at the top of the stairs, on the phone, looking like he was chatting to his mate on a day off back home. I had to laugh. It was like, 'Make yourself comfortable Olly. Have you noticed we've got a few problems here?'

Obviously, he was onto the Ops Room. That phone was our lifeline: our only link with any potential rescuers. They were getting together a QRF in Warriors and Olly was trying to help them figure out where we were and how they could get to us. Under fire and in a built-up area it wasn't going to be easy for them to get to us. What made it worse was ammunition was now becoming a concern. We'd each started out with 120 rounds of 5.56mm. We had two Minimi gunners with 200 rounds each, we had a few grenades and, in my day sack, I had a further 200 or so rounds. As I distributed these, I could hear the conversation Olly was having. It didn't sound good. He was looking at me, shrugging his shoulders... it didn't look good, either. We'd given them a grid and reference, which pinpointed us down to the house, in theory, but there wasn't a lot of confidence. We got the feeling they wouldn't be able to find us, which was about as low as I've ever felt. Once we ran out of ammunition, or if they attacked in even greater numbers... well, that didn't bear thinking about.

We didn't need to say much; you'd had those six RMPs wasted in the police station up in Al Majar al Kabir and I could see us getting overrun and then either shot, or worse... maybe dragged through the streets by our feet behind vehicles, paraded, tortured, beheaded on the TV, that sort of thing. The same thing was going through Olly's mind

and the feeling that unfortunately we weren't going to get out of here was starting to build. Neither of us wanted to fall into the hands of this mob. We decided that, if we were going to be overrun, we would take our own lives rather than fall into their hands. We'd shoot the young lads and then do each other. We were absolutely certain about that.

In between all the fear and panic, there were some bizarre moments.

One of the young lads was shouting, 'I need a p***, I need a p***.'

We shouted back, 'Well, just p*** on the floor.'

He looked around. 'I can't,' he said. 'It's someone's bedroom, this.'

We were like, *Full marks for your consideration, but have you seen what's happening outside?*

Next to where Olly was lounging on his sofa was a shower room. He'd not long ago been in there himself for a wee. 'Use the shower,' he said.

'I can't,' said the young lad. 'That's a shower.'

We looked at each other and cracked up. *Just p*** in your trousers, for God's sake.*

But he wouldn't do that, either. In the end, he went in the shower.

It was hysterically funny at the time; in fact, we seemed to spend half the time laughing, strangely. The rest of the time I was terrified.

Sgt Bryan's citation makes great mention of his devotion to the young men under him, saying: "In debrief, his soldiers stated that his leadership and support was fundamental in maintaining their self-belief and will to win. As the battle wore on, junior members of the patrol became concerned that relief was not coming as time was slipping by; unbeknown to them, the patrol tasked to recover had itself come under heavy attack. Bryan was everywhere, absolutely determined that his position

would not fall. Having been heavily involved in close-quarter fighting himself in the early stages, he now took time to be with each of his men at their fire positions, lending a hand in the fierce firefight and encouraging the young soldiers, pushing them to another level and reinforcing their belief.”

I did another round of all the lads to check they were OK. They were just cracking on but there were still all these people outside. I suddenly remembered our grenades. I crawled out onto the balcony. For the first time, I got a really good view of outside and a clearer picture of exactly how much s*** we were actually in. A lot, was the answer. It wasn't a pleasant sight. Crouched down behind the balcony wall, I could see there were absolutely loads of them, firing at us from all directions: they were a mob, really, and they looked to be psyching themselves up to storm the house. I lobbed a grenade into the middle of them. Then I popped up and sprayed them down before getting back inside, crawling along the balcony on bits of rubble and glass and shrapnel and getting myself downstairs. I was really thirsty, so I took a drink out of the kitchen tap. I remember thinking, *This is going to go through me like a Lamborghini later on*, and it did, but I needed something to drink. *F*** it, I could be dead in five minutes anyway.*

I checked the boys downstairs and went back upstairs; Olly's still on the phone, trying to confirm that the Warriors are definitely on their way, whether they'll get to us in time, and I'm back out on the balcony.

I peered down, with my head as close to the wall as I could get - my helmet, which protrudes an inch or two out over your skull, stopped me getting flush up against it. As I did this, I noticed a guy aiming a rifle at me, he must have seen me coming. In that moment, he fired. One of the bullets came between my face and the wall, just above my ear and underneath the overhang on my helmet. Very lucky

- three inches to the right, and it would have gone straight through my helmet and then my skull and that would have been game over. As it was, I felt it go past and heard a massive crack as it hit the wall and showered my face with loads of concrete and dust, filling my left eye with grit and crap. I couldn't see properly - I was disorientated, so I stood up, which sounds crazy, I know. I was staggering around on the balcony trying to get this stuff out of my eye, in full view of all these people below me. Out of my good eye, I saw a guy throw a grenade up at me. I barged back through the door and, as I got halfway in, it went off. The shrapnel hit me on the arm and in the inside of the thigh, right by my bollocks - it felt like a really stinging kick. The floor shook with the blast and the shockwave smacked me down; I looked up to see our medic, Cpl Ryan James, lying motionless in front of me. My first thought was that the poor bastard had taken the full force. 'I don't believe it... the f***ing medic's been hit,' Olly was saying. 'Who's going to sort us out when we get blown away?'

But as we watched, he sat up, grinned and gave us a thumbs-up; he'd just been winded. So naturally we start ripping into him. 'Get up and start fighting, you lazy bastard... any excuse to lie on your belly and get your head down, you medics!'

Once he recovered himself, he showed me his other hand. In it was a grenade. He'd been in the process of following me out onto the balcony, having seen I was in a bit of bother, and was planning to grenade the crowd.

I said, 'Pass it us.'

He said, 'I can't.'

'Ryan,' I said, 'Pass us the f***ing grenade.'

He said, 'I can't... I've pulled the pin.'

We all started p***ing ourselves laughing - thank God he'd not let go of the bloody thing in the impact, we'd all have been screaming in agony or dead.

He crawled over to me, laughing, and passed it to me, being careful to hold it so it didn't go off. I made my way painfully back out onto the balcony and lobbed it into the mob below.

That gave us a moment's respite.

However, there was some seriously bad news. The phone, our lifeline, had gone off for some reason, and Olly couldn't get it to work again. Now we had no way of talking to the QRF. Without that link to the outside world, and the opportunity it gave us to direct the rescue team in, we were almost certainly dead men. Olly nearly hurled it against a wall in frustration but I put my hand up to stop him. We were looking at each other, close to tears. We sat down next to each other, didn't say many words, just counted enough rounds for the lads and ourselves out into our pockets. Olly was cursing the phone. He was going, *'If this was a f***ing Nokia I could work the f***ing thing.'*

Most of the patrol phones were Nokias, but for some reason this was a Siemens.

I said, 'Chuck it here.' I had a Siemens myself. As long as the battery wasn't dead... a minute later, we were back onto the Ops Room. Talk about relief. Even better, they told us the QRF was on its way. I started to think that if we could just hold out, maybe we'd get out alive.

Back downstairs, they had a new problem.

Some of them had set alight the car that was in the drive and had rammed it in the front doorway, trying to burn or smoke us out. But while it filled the house with smoke and it was getting red hot down there, it also meant they had closed off one potential way in for themselves, a way in we no longer had to worry about or cover. And it also provided a new column of black smoke to attract the attention of the QRF, so we passed that on ASAP.

Time passed and I found myself back up on the top floor, looking for targets, knocking them down, trying to make every shot count and cursing myself for shooting to miss earlier. We were down to our last grenade, I think, and were very low on ammunition - 20 or fewer rounds per man. I was worried about the Minimi gunners - they'd only had two or three hundred rounds to start off with and you could fire all of them in a few seconds if you weren't careful. One squeeze of the trigger was 30 or so rounds. But they had proved themselves a vital tool for suppressing the attackers and I didn't want to lose them. I remember at one point kneeling next to one of the Minimi lads, Gnr Jason Bambridge, when a guy appeared and started coming towards us. Bam Bam pressed the trigger and the rounds just literally cut this guy in half.

Then Olly shouted that the QRF had arrived in the area and were looking for us. I went out on the balcony again to see if I could hear them - the Warrior has a very distinctive sound. Somewhere over the sound of the shouting and screaming and firing, I could faintly hear the sound of a Warrior. I nipped back inside and shouted to the lads, 'I can f***ing hear them, they're coming!'

As morale lifted, Sgt Oliver tried to guide the QRF in. But although they were close, they couldn't pinpoint the building that held the Artillery soldiers.

Ultimately, I felt that the only way we would be able to attract their attention was to go to them. So I went down the balcony, past the burning car, through the garden and out into the street, in amongst the Iraqis. I think they were quite surprised to see me, but they soon started firing. It was bizarre - none of them hit me. It was like slow motion. It was very dusty out there, and I could see rounds impacting and kicking up little dust spouts all round my feet... I'm thinking, *How are they not hitting me?*

There were bodies everywhere but a lot of them had legged it when the Warrior arrived - they were firing their co-axial machine gun and the guys in the turrets were firing too - and within moments the enemy were only a dozen or so strong, the rest had run off or been killed.

Sgt Bryan ran back into the house to round up his soldiers as the reinforcements debussed to engage the enemy. With blue-on-blue incidents in his mind, he decided to leave via the back door, approaching the Warrior through the side alleyway. Initially, he had trouble persuading the troops to leave the house.

The boys didn't want to go. They felt safe in the house, they were comfortable with the cover they had and the level of contact they were facing. They'd only seen what was in their little arcs of fire - they had no idea what was outside.

'Come on, we're going.'

'Yeah, right, OK.'

No one moves.

'F***ing come on, we're leaving!'

Eventually I got everyone downstairs and lined up. I opened up the cellar door and asked the family inside in my broken Arabic if they were OK. 'Shlownak?'

'Naam zayn,' he said. Yes, good.

Then Frank said he'd seen some of the Iraqis messing around outside the back door earlier. Maybe it was booby-trapped?

I said to Ryan the medic, 'I'm going through there, stand at the back, if it's booby-trapped and it goes off just f***ing drag me out to the Warrior.'

Then there was a knock at the gate outside, a voice said, 'British Army, we're here.'

I shouted, 'Move back from the door!' and then kicked it down. Nothing happened, except that it opened.

I ran out and through the gate and got eyes-on with the call sign that had come to get us. The Iraqis had rammed cars in like a queue down the very narrow alleyway so we had to climb over the roofs to get out of there. I told Olly to go first, and count everyone into the Warrior, and I counted them out. We all got safely in the back, all lying on top of each other - they're not built to take that many people, and the guys who'd got out of it extracted on foot. I signalled to the commander that we were all in and we moved out. The rebels had regrouped and were starting to attack the vehicle. But we made it out OK.

Within 15 minutes, the Warrior was back at camp. Amazingly, no-one from the RHA had been hurt apart from Bryan, who suffered minor shrapnel wounds and a sore eye (though, tragically, Pte Lee O'Callaghan, a top cover on one of the QRF Warriors, had been killed).

The doc cleaned out my eye and then I went to be debriefed myself. Everyone was really, really high - like you'd been out on the town and had five pints, you're not totally minging out of your head but you're just high. Everyone was getting stripped off and banging these bottles of pop down themselves like it was going out of fashion, some in tears, me included, hugging each other. It was obvious we'd all just shared something massive.

They tried to debrief us but we were all speaking at 100mph so eventually they sent us to the cookhouse, where we got some food, we were starving and we wolfed it down. And we sat around, talking about nif-naf and trivia, while our mates stood around watching us, like we were freaks in a circus or something: *F***ing hell, I can't believe you're still here!*

In Foreign Fields

We went for showers, checked and cleaned our weapons and kit, re-bombed-up, and tried to wind down.

About 10 or 11pm that night, I couldn't sleep, I lay there, sat up, Olly was opposite me.

'I can't sleep.

'Neither can I, mate.'

'Let's go and get a brew.'

So we took our webbing and weapons and went to the TV room where we had the slightly surreal experience of watching Al Jazeera news footage of our Land Rovers on fire. There were Iraqis dancing all over them, firing at the fuel tank, and, in the background, you could hear our firefight going off. About 3am or 4am, Maj Bates, the Battery commander, came in. He sat quietly with us for a while, and then asked us to round the other troop commanders and multiple commanders up and meet him in the Ops Room in 15 minutes. It turned out we'd all been given a new mission - to set up VCPs on the main artery routes out of town to stop movement of weapons or terrorists.

I was in disbelief, a bit. At first, I thought he was joking, to be honest. I thought maybe we'd be given a bit of time off to recover, if only to get some rest. But the worst thing of all was when the Doc told me I couldn't go, that I had to give my eye and the wounds time to recover. My lads were being told they had to go out and risk their lives again, and I wasn't with them. I felt really bad about it, really bad. They were out for a few days and I hated it, felt really guilty. I just wanted to be with the lads.

I also felt really scared and vulnerable - our little area of the camp was empty, so I'd walk the corridors and there was no-one about, just the Doc and his medics and a few other people. I didn't feel we were able to defend ourselves. We got mortared one day around lunchtime and that really affected me. I was fearful of leaving the block to go for a shower or to the toilet, because it meant exposing myself to danger

outdoors. I felt sick with fear. I actually stripped off in the corridor and poured bottles of water over myself instead of going to the showers.

Here I was, some people were calling me a hero - something I hate being called, by the way - and inside I felt like a scared little kid. It was bizarre.

I think I was dwelling on what had happened, lost inside my own thoughts and memories of the incident. I needed someone to talk to or something to do, but there was no-one there and nothing to do. It was a difficult time, till the lads came back.

Three or four days, later the Doc told me I was going to the logistics base on the edge of town to hospital. They took me in a Snatch vehicle accompanied by Warriors to The Hotel, and from there I was airlifted to the hospital. I remember sitting in the back of the chopper looking out the back door thinking again how vulnerable we were. We got to Shaibah Log Base and they came out to meet us with wheelchairs, going 'Sit down, sit down!'

I'm like, *No, I can f***ing walk*. I didn't want sympathy and I felt guilty being there too, because there were guys there who were seriously injured, had lost parts of their bodies and were being medevac-d back to the UK. All I had was some grit in my eye and some metal in my arse. Mind you, it could have been worse. One lad there had hurt himself coming down a water slide on operational stand-down in Kuwait. No matter how bad I felt, I felt ten times better than him.

I spent two days there before they said they were not going to operate - the shrapnel in my arm would come out in time and the bit in my leg wasn't dangerous. I couldn't get back to camp, though, because there was a lockdown on unnecessary vehicle movements. But as luck would have it, the Battery was nearby on the edge of town and some of my mates turned up to see me. So I was able to leave with them and join the operation for a couple of days, until it collapsed and we all moved back into camp.

Life returned then to something approaching normality - we were back down the port, with the border police, though less often, more just checking to see that they were carrying on with their training, which they were. I was quite moved, actually, because the Iraqis who knew what had happened to us were really concerned about me, which I hadn't expected. They were very nice.

And we were soon back out on foot patrols around the camp. I remember going on my first patrol and shaking like a leaf - we hard-targeted out of the base and went to ground and I just lay there, trembling. I was terrified but I thought I couldn't show it because I had all these young lads looking to me. My breathing was so shallow, I was panting. But after a little while, 20 minutes or so, I sank back into it and felt comfortable again. The first night patrol was similar, on edge, because obviously you can see less, but then I just relaxed and was OK. But I found I had become very aware, very conscious of everything - very careful just crossing a road, turning a corner, coming to a junction.

Sgt Bryan's citation is very clear as to why he was awarded such a prestigious medal. "They were ambushed by overwhelming numbers and firepower. They were in contact for the best part of two hours and engaged in a hard-fought, dirty, close-quarter battle that all but expended their ammunition and sapped their physical and emotional strength; memories of the massacre of an RMP patrol in Maysan Province came flooding back. The quite exceptional leadership, professionalism and individual bravery of Bryan stood out that day. He is a quiet man, a communications specialist by trade but, in a particularly dangerous and dynamic situation, he demonstrated outstanding skill and personal qualities. He held his men together as they fought for their lives. In doing so, significant damage was inflicted upon a determined enemy and his patrol maintained their defences until assistance

arrived. He is also a modest man, but eight others owe him their lives and his gallantry and leadership speak for themselves.” That modesty is clear.

When the tour was finally over, we went on holiday. But I couldn't relax. I really felt on edge all the time. Little things. It was around November 5 and the noise of fireworks going off, kids throwing them in the streets, was terrifying. I found myself diving to the ground, you'd be lying there, literally on your belly, shaking. My perspective on life changed. I'd go shopping with my wife, and see people arguing over parking spaces, or mums getting cross with their kids, and just think, *You are ridiculous*. I just flipped, I said to my wife, ‘What the f*** are this lot bothered about? Do they understand how little some people value human life?’ I would sometimes look at civilians - this is back then, less so now - and think, *When I was shooting people and grenading them, and nearly dying myself, you were probably down the pub, or watching telly, or deciding between a Mars bar and a Twix... you just have no idea what it's all about*. I had a real attitude. Even, to an extent, with other service personnel. There were places in the main camp at Basra where you were out of range of mortars and RPGs so you were completely safe. They didn't have a Scooby what it was like out past the gate.

I had a tough time, but it pulled me closer to my mates and I think I finally came to terms with it when my CO called me in and told me about this award. That made me think, *Yeah, this really was something big that happened, big enough for me to get some kind of recognition. So it's not surprising it plays on my mind*.

And it was a year after it all happened that I finally put it to bed, really.

Still, I felt guilty about the medal. No-one else in my patrol got the recognition I thought they should have. Why me, and not them? They risked their lives the same as I did. I know that's the nature of medals,

but you still feel bad. Last night, I went to a Sergeants' Mess dinner, and one of the guys waiting on was Frank Haman, my driver and the guy who kept the attackers at bay at the back door of the house. I'm shaking my head in disbelief, that this guy fought next to me in combat, killed people, came close to death himself, and now he's serving food and drink to people who haven't even seen action. In a way it seems wrong, but that's the reality of Army life. And Frank wouldn't have had a problem with it at all, he's such a loyal person.

It's your mates and your family... I'd like to thank my wife Lorraine, and the kids Bradleigh and Jasmin, and our baby girl, Tili-Mai. I've put them through a hell of a lot since we've been together. I'd like to thank the lads of 1 PWRR who came out for us, too. They did an outstanding job that day, and lost one of their own in saving our lives. I didn't thank them at the time because of all the adrenaline and stuff, but if you're reading this now, lads, from the bottom of my heart and on behalf of the other RHA boys, thank you.

Most of all... the nine of us who were there that day - myself, Sgt Matt Oliver, Cpl Ryan James, LBdr Shaun Lebeter, Gnr Jason Bambridge, LBdr Dan Cavid, Gnr Jealous Muteedzi, Gnr Franklin Haman and Gnr Baker, there's a bond between us you'll never break. There will always be in the back of my mind the fact that I've seen and experienced things which other people won't. I think about the incident every single day. I see the faces of the guys I shot. I feel bad about killing people, and it's not a nice feeling, though I feel better as time goes by.

In the end, you have to move on. I did what I did and I had to do it, it was them or me.

I'm a soldier, this is my job, that's the way it goes.