

RIFLEMAN WILL ALDRIDGE
C COMPANY 2nd BATTALION THE RIFLES
MAY 23, 1991 – JULY 10, 2009



IF THE WEEK which claimed the life of Dane Elson and the other men on his repatriation flight was bad, then July 10, 2009 was a particularly black and infamous day – a date which is seared into many memories.

It was 4am, and the men of 9 Platoon, C Coy, 2 Rifles were preparing to patrol out from their base, FOB Wishtan, in the blood-soaked streets of Sangin. The early start meant they could be out and about before the mercury started climbing too high, and while Taliban ‘dickers’ might still be slumbering, or on their way to morning prayers.

Wishtan, a few hundred yards along a dusty track known as Pharmacy Road from Sangin’s main base, FOB Jackson, was called ‘The Devil’s Playground’ by some. It had been bought and paid for in British lives, and, with typical squaddie humour, many of its veterans liked to wear *Wishtan you were here?* t-shirts.

The area was a maze of alleys and wadis and little rat-runs, with enemy IED teams spoiled for choice as to where to plant their bombs. Over recent weeks, there had been several late night explosions, when Taliban bombers had blown themselves up in error as they tried to lay their devices, but more careful and cunning insurgents were bound to have set a trap somewhere. The only question was where.

There was every possibility of ambush, too. The poppy and wheat harvests of May – done the old-fashioned, back-breaking way, with scythes and donkey carts – were long since completed, and the fields in the green zone had been sown with curry beans and maize. With

the sun beating down on the fertile earth, and the irrigation channels flooded, the sweetcorn shot up. You could almost see it grow, day-by-day, and it was already high enough to offer decent cover-from-view for anyone who wanted to have a pop. In denser parts of the green zone, it was not at all unknown for British troops literally to walk into their enemy, and to engage them at distances of a few metres. Equally, the Taliban were quite likely to take a few shots from a hundred metres away and disappear into the foliage. With an AK47's 7.62mm round travelling at around 700 metres per second – twice the speed of sound – a well-aimed shot meant you were dead or injured before you even heard the crack of the rifle. Even if it missed, and the round zipped harmlessly overhead, you had no chance to react before the shooter dropped out of sight, either into the maize or to blend in with local non-combatants.

Commanded by a young Old Etonian, Lt Alex Horsfall, the patrol – partly designed to reassure locals, partly to put the insurgents on the back foot, and partly to familiarise some reinforcing troops with the lie of the land – was a mixture of seasoned soldiers and the relatively new.

Cpl Jonathan 'Jay' Horne, from Walsall, was one of the former. Due to turn twenty-eight the following day, he had overcome a heart murmur to join the Army in 2004. He was a veteran of Northern Ireland, Kosovo, Iraq – where he had been injured by a roadside bomb in 2006 – and Afghanistan. One of the company's big leaders, he was a very competent and tough but caring NCO. That and his wicked Black Country sense of humour made him highly popular among the men, who fought to get into his platoon. Cpl Horne was the father of two girls, nine-year-old Frankie-Jane, and Jessica, born not three months earlier. 'He was a big family man,' his mother would later say. 'He loved his kids, and adored his wife. We used to call them the Posh and Becks of Walsall, because he was always buying her presents.'

Somehow, Jay Horne always managed to wangle his way into the Corporals' Mess football team; no-one else thought he was as quite good a player as he himself did. Perhaps his fitness was the key. 'He would pass his spare time in the gym lifting "big boys' weights" and admiring his body in the mirror,' said 9 Platoon Serjeant Jamie Moncho. "'The body of a God" he would call it – it was a matter of some debate!'

Rfn Daniel ‘Simmo’ Simpson was the platoon signaller. The twenty-year-old from Croydon, later described as ‘a big, hard, bouncer-lookalike’ and a ‘South London geezer’, was a keen Arsenal fan – though he’d had trials for West Ham – a handy boxer, and an even better shot. He could carry the weight of ten men, and often did, according to his ops officer, Capt Ed Poynter. His fellow riflemen loved him for his bad dancing, good jokes and endless *joie de vivre*. He was the father of an eight-month-old son, Alfie.

Rfn James Backhouse, a gritty eighteen-year-old Yorkshireman from Castleford, and one of four brothers, was lead scout. It was a dangerous and demanding role, with multiple threats to consider, but the young soldier’s sharp eyes and brain made him a natural. A keen rugby player and footballer, he harboured ambitions of becoming a PTI. ‘It would have been right up his street,’ said Lt Col Rob Thomson, CO of the 2 Rifles battlegroup. ‘He had lungs big enough for the rest of his platoon.’

Rfn Joe ‘Murph the Smurph’ Murphy was an eighteen-year-old light machine gunner from Castle Bromwich in the West Midlands. An excellent young soldier, he was best known for his love of Aston Villa and his brilliant drawing. After a night on stag, his artwork – proclaiming his footballing allegiance – was often clear for all to see.

Rfn William Aldridge was also there that day, and was thus achieving his life’s ambition. Nicknamed ‘Baby’ by his protective mates, William was the youngest soldier in the platoon, if not in all Helmand. In fact, he’d been too young to deploy on active service with everyone else, and had kicked his heels with the rear party back at Ballykinler until he’d turned eighteen on May 23. He’d boarded the flight to Afghanistan just six weeks earlier with the biggest smile imaginable.

‘He was jovial and happy, but naturally quite quiet at first,’ said his boss, Alex Horsfall. ‘But he was inquisitive, and he was very competent. Soldiers like that, especially if you’re fresh out of training. You do get some gobby soldiers who rattle the cages of the corporals, but William was quite the opposite.’

Two days earlier, William had telephoned his teenaged sweetheart Zeta Price. ‘I promise you I’ll be okay, babe,’ he’d told her. ‘I promise you I’ll be back. Love you.’

He dreamed of a distant future in which he would undertake selection to the SAS. Apart from anything else, if he succeeded he'd be based closer to his beloved mother, who lived in Bromyard, Herefordshire.

But in the here-and-now, it was another difficult patrol in the relative early morning cool of Helmand.

* * *

WILLIAM WAS BORN in 1991, when his mother, Lucy, was twenty-three.

'I was a single parent,' she said, 'but I had a very close family network, and William was just a joy. He was a very happy little boy. He had an idyllic upbringing, we lived rurally, and he went to a tiny village school, so he grew up with that sense of family, of belonging, and of being there to help others. I think that formed the type of person he became. He was very caring, and that quality stayed with him right up to his actions on the day his life was taken.

'At his funeral, his old primary school vicar mentioned what he called "William's noble ability to help others." William would often come home from school with the children no-one else wanted to play with. I'd often find the house full of the less-popular children. That was William. He made friends easily, and he always maintained his friendships.

'He wanted to please. He was always polite, and he respected his elders although he was confident with them. I think this was because he was the first-born grandchild. He didn't have any cousins or siblings until much later. He was as happy talking to somebody in their seventies as he was talking to someone of his own age or younger. He was also a very affectionate little boy. If I got the occasional opportunity to go out for an evening, and was getting glammed-up, he'd say, "Mummy, you look *beautiful!*" It made my heart swell, and it demonstrated that he was appreciative of people and things around him. He took notice of details.'

William was an outdoors boy – his mum was a cub scout leader, and he loved going off camping, and cooking over an open fire, and it was no surprise when he joined the Army Cadets, aged eleven. Lucy

Aldridge had 'very mixed feelings' about that. 'I was one of those mothers who didn't like their children playing with toy guns,' she said. 'But boys have an imagination, and they watch the TV. William would spend many a happy hour in his grandmother's orchard, playing with sticks and pretending he was a member of the SAS. At school, his history teacher used to say, "If only he'd apply as much enthusiasm to the Industrial Revolution as he does to the First and Second World Wars!" He was just so focused on military history, and the Army was always in his mind.'

As soon as he reached sixteen, William said he wanted to attend the Army Foundation College in Harrogate, a course that would lead to life as a soldier.

'I argued a little bit with him,' said Lucy, 'but I knew that it was what he loved, and what he wanted. I felt it was my responsibility to support him in achieving his dreams. It wasn't about me, it was about him, and, if I did anything right as a parent, I brought him up to be independent, to know what he wanted, and to strive to achieve it. He could have gone on to university if he'd wanted to, and the Army recruitment office looked at his projected exam results and mentioned officer training. But he wanted to be one of the boys, in the thick of it, and he wanted to earn his rank.'

The Army careers officers tried to steer William towards the REME, to give him a post-service trade, but, to him, soldiering meant infanteering.

'He knew he'd be on the front line,' said Lucy, 'but he had fantastic field and survival skills. You could have given William a knife and piece of string, and he would have gone into the wilderness and survived. That was what fascinated him.'

So it was that, in September 2007, after sitting his GCSEs and spending a final summer holiday as a boy at home, William went to the Army Foundation College.

At first, he was a little homesick.

'He'd never spent so much time away from home before, and it played on his mind a bit,' said Lucy. 'He missed his two little brothers, George and Archie. As a little boy, he'd often said, "Mum, can I have a little brother or a sister?" I used to say, "Well, it's not quite as simple as popping along to Tesco, sweetheart, and picking one off the shelf."

So when George came along, he was absolutely overjoyed. He'd been an only child for twelve years, and he just threw himself into being involved in his brother's life. He would change his nappies, he'd bottle feed him. Occasionally, I'd feel I really could do with putting my feet up for half an hour. William would say to me, "Mum, you go along and have a rest, and I'll look after George." He'd be happy to take on the responsibility, despite his age. Archie, the youngest, was only two when William joined the Army, and they were very important to him.'

After a while, William settled in at Harrogate.

'All the lads are in it together,' said Lucy. 'They find their own little pecking order. They find out what their strengths are, and they play to them. William made some incredible friendships there. I think that's one thing that's special about the military: the friendships they make are stronger than any in civilian life, and they're life-long. He passed out the following August, aged seventeen. I was so incredibly proud of him. He'd done what he set out to do. That would make any mother proud.'

He 'absolutely loved' his brief time in the Army, she said.

'It was everything that he wanted it to be. He was outdoors; he was testing himself. He passed his field medic's course. He enjoyed the training and the demands on his fitness when they were on tabs and exercises, even though it was exhausting. He rang me one day, and said, "Mum, I have discovered that it is possible to breathe through your arsehole." By that he meant that, when you feel that you have given all you can give, and your lungs are burning, you can still push yourself that bit further.'

In December 2008, William joined his unit in Northern Ireland. His first choice had been 5 Rifles – a mechanised infantry battalion, which operates the Warrior armoured fighting vehicle – but he was offered and accepted his second choice, 2 Rifles. The battalion went to Afghanistan shortly afterwards, William joining them once he reached eighteen – the British Army does not allow soldiers to serve on the front line below that age.

For Lucy Aldridge, it was a moment of truth.

'William had made me confront all of my fears,' she said. 'I am a complete pacifist, and the possibility of my own child taking a life preyed heavily on my mind. But he said to me, "Mum, I'm not joining

the Army to *kill* people, I'm joining to *protect* people." That was the role he felt he would be fulfilling: protecting those who couldn't protect themselves. He said, "I'm doing this for you, I'm doing it for George, and I'm doing it for Archie, because someone has to make the world a better place."

'He tried to stop me worrying. He said, "If you hear on the news that a soldier has been killed, it's not me, because you would have had the knock on the door. So please don't sit there watching the news every day."

'And he was fulfilling his dream. On his Facebook profile, it says, "Hi, I'm Will. I'm in the British Army. 2 Battalion the Rifles is where I belong." His Facebook profile still exists, by the way, and his friends still leave messages. I occasionally write something on it, usually around the anniversaries.'

* * *

BY THE TIME William Aldridge arrived in theatre, his mates were already heavily engaged in fighting the Taliban.

It hadn't always been like that. Sangin had long been a highly-contested area, but it had been reasonably quiet at the beginning of the tour.

'Quite early on, a peace deal was brokered between the Taliban and ISAF,' said Lt Alex Horsfall, 9 Pl commander. 'It enabled the Taliban to deal with the poppy harvest, and it was good for us, too, because we then had the chance to patrol and get to know the area, without facing too much risk of attack. They were still keen to test us, so they would plant fake IEDs to see how we would react, and at night we'd get a few opportunistic shots fired over our heads. But there was nothing threatening. We were in our base, we were in charge.

'This went on for a month and a half. It was weird, because everyone started to get a bit restless. Some of us were thinking, *Come on! This is supposed to be a highly kinetic area.* No-one seemed to want to come and fight. I remember one of the guys said something along those lines to me, and I said, "Just wait. In a few months you'll wish you'd never said that."

It was a horribly prophetic warning.

Alex Horsfall was confident in his men, though – as many young officers do – he occasionally doubted his own ability.

‘Some platoon commanders rocked up in Afghanistan never having met any of their men,’ he said. ‘But I’d deployed to Kosovo with 9 Platoon not that long before, so I knew most of them very well. They were a good, generally happy bunch, with some strong NCOs – we were, after all, considered the top platoon in the company. For my part, I didn’t know if I was going off to do something that was within my capabilities, but that wasn’t a bad thing because I spent more time thinking about how I was going to command than I did worrying about people who might try to kill me.’

When they heard they were going to Sangin, the Riflemen were jubilant.

‘We all knew what we were in for,’ said Horsfall. ‘But I don’t recall people saying, “Oh shit! We’re going to Sangin.” Rather, it was a mixture of glee that we were going somewhere exciting, and a little bit of apprehension. We felt we’d been given a wonderful challenge, in that we were by ourselves with our own area of responsibility. We moved patrol bases a few times, but for the most part we were in FOB Wishtan. This was an urban area that ranged from some quite nice-looking compounds to sheer poverty. The compound walls could be as high as twenty feet, and that often stopped us from going to the left or right of the roads we were moving along. This had the effect of channelling us, and the Taliban seized on this opportunity quite effectively: if they were able to channel us, why not use IEDs? And they did so, very well.’

After the brief phoney war of the poppy harvest, the soldiers slowly started finding more IEDs, the rounds began to fall closer to the FOB, and the ANA were being targeted more. The Taliban mined the streets, and the walls and the doorways of compounds. When they saw that British soldiers were using ladders to allow them to get over walls – and to avoid the doorways – they placed devices on top of walls. Sometimes, the insurgents – who were fighting a hearts-and-minds campaign of their own, of sorts – would tie purple ribbons to alert locals to the presence of an IED planted in a given location. Other times they would tie ribbons where there was no bomb in order to channel patrolling troops towards an ambush zone. Or they would

build convincing dummy devices, or simply block off alleyways, to achieve the same result.

In such circumstances, and in such terrain – narrow, claustrophobic streets, full of dead ends, corners, and cut-throughs, facing an enemy who is utterly indistinguishable from the civilian population – even the best-trained, best-equipped and most watchful soldiers will come to grief eventually.

On June 29 a twenty-year-old Sapper from 33 Engineer Regiment became the first Wishtan victim of this deployment when he lost three limbs to an IED which had been planted under the threshold of a compound doorway. Early in July, the enemy mounted a complex attack on the FOB itself, firing from several points and leaving one soldier badly injured. Despite that, the men of 2 Rifles remained confident.

‘It was generally starting to spice up,’ said Horsfall, ‘but we were still very much on top of things. We were finding the IEDs before they were finding us, and we genuinely had control of the situation. Our patrolling was slow, but methodical. We were usually greeted by friendly faces, although they were averse to talking about the Taliban – and the Taliban were everywhere. We’d talk to the locals and see if there were any serious issues we could help with, but in hindsight we probably ended up talking to quite a few Taliban without knowing it.’

Many local people seemed happy that the British were there, because the security they brought was preferable to the cruelty and barbarism of the Taliban. But it was a fleeting security. The British could patrol, but they didn’t have the numbers to hold the ground. All the insurgents had to do was blend into the background; then, once the soldiers had returned to base, they ruled the roost once more. It was a small-scale example of the oft-quoted Taliban maxim, that the west had the watches but they had the time.

‘It was only by continual patrolling that we could achieve anything,’ said Horsfall. ‘We’d patrol perhaps twice a day, and each patrol would be eight to ten hours long. We were doing this all the time.’

‘By the time William joined us, there’d been a fairly rapid escalation. We’d be very fortunate if we went out and did not encounter one or multiple IEDs. We had one EOD [*Explosive Ordnance Disposal*] team for the entire company, and they were working their socks off. At the

beginning, we'd find an IED, mark it, and get the EOD people out to clear it. As things got worse, we just had to mark and avoid them. The quantity of IEDs just could not be dealt with. As a result, our patrolling was very slow. The Taliban would watch to see how we reacted to events, and then improvise to take advantage of that. They knew we used [Vallon] metal detectors, so they started using devices with very low metal content. At least one pressure plate was made of graphite, which conducted electricity but couldn't be detected.'

By July 10, the Taliban had refined both their devices and their tactics to such an extent that they were able to lay a near-perfect trap for Lt Horsfall, Rfn Aldridge and the rest of 9 Pl.

'The company from the upper Gereshk valley had just moved into Wishtan, to increase its size,' said Horsfall. 'We were to take some of them on a familiarisation patrol. The ANA would be joining us during the patrol, but we'd given them more time to get organised. With hindsight, I believe that an ANA soldier must have leaked our plans, because it seemed like the Taliban knew our exact movements. We were heading into an area that we didn't visit often, and yet they had planted a pretty well-thought-out IED minefield.

'Just the day before, we'd had the biggest attack so far on the base. We were attacked from four or five positions with small arms and RPGs, and Cpl Walker was shot in the shoulder and had to be evacuated. We were just over four months into the tour, and until that point we [2 Rifles] had had no serious casualties.

'As we left the base, I just thought, *okay, this is going to be a fairly standard patrol*. There was a chap living in a nearby wadi who we suspected of manufacturing IEDs, and we wanted to pay him a visit with the ANA to let him know that we were keeping a beady eye on him. We didn't have any proof of his involvement, so we couldn't do more than that. But the main purpose of the patrol was to familiarise some of the commanders from the new company.'

They moved out of Wishtan in three sections and headed in the general direction of the Wishtan Bazaar road, tracking it through back streets which should have been safer. Before long, the Vallon man held up his hand. He'd found a buried device.

'We marked it, recorded it, and moved on by another route,' said Horsfall. 'Then we found another one. We tried about three different

routes, and each of them had potential IEDs. I was with the lead section, and we ended up climbing over a wall into a compound. I'd just sent another section down into a little valley, with the intention of sending them up the other side to some slightly higher ground from where they could give us overwatch. I remember seeing them going into some dead ground, and thinking that we should move around a little bit so we could keep them in sight. At that point, there was an enormous bang as the first of the IEDs went off.

It is perhaps impossible for anyone who has not experienced an IED blast to understand the fearsome power and havoc they unleash. In an instant, an IED produces a devastating and superheated shock wave which moves outwards at – depending on the size of the charge – a pressure of several hundred tonnes per square inch, and a temperature of perhaps 2,000°C. It takes with it loose stones, dust, bits of rifle and body armour in a haze of semi-molten shrapnel which travels at many times the speed of sound. The whole thing is accompanied by a giant bang, and followed by a momentary silence – the product of damage, temporary or permanent, to the hearing of nearby survivors. The air is filled with rubble falling back to earth and then a choking cloud of dust. It is massively, bewilderingly disorientating.

This first explosion devastated the command chain.

'It hit myself as platoon commander, and the incoming company commander who was with me,' said Alex Horsfall. 'It also hit a section commander and a rifleman who was a section second-in-command. And it hit the interpreter.'

Horsfall had lost his left leg and three fingers from his left hand. He had a broken jaw, arm and eye-socket, and had gaping flesh wounds all over his body, and was momentarily stupefied by the noise and the shockwave. Worse, though, the blast had killed eighteen-year-old Rfn James Backhouse.

'A daisy chain of three or four IEDs had hit us, and they were in a circle,' said Horsfall. 'A few of us were within the circle itself. I don't know if James had been standing right on top of a bomb, or if the one that was nearest him was more powerful, but it killed him outright. At that point, we also came under fire from three or four different angles, and the section that had moved down the valley started returning to where we were.'

'My serjeant, Jaime Moncho, was to the rear of our section, but he immediately came forward, and he took over command at that point. He was not only in a firefight but handling an enormous number of casualties. He was, quite rightly, decorated for his action that day.'

[Sjt Moncho was later awarded the Conspicuous Gallantry Cross, second only to the Victoria Cross, for his 'supreme courage'.]

'A quick reaction force left the base to help us, and that included the sergeant major with a quad-bike trailer for some of us who were more seriously injured. At that point, we had serious casualties – me among them – and we'd lost one rifleman. I suppose there were a few people in shock and thinking, *Jesus, what the hell has happened?* This was the first time we'd lost someone to an IED. But we were still on top of the threat. The Taliban are not renowned for their accurate shooting, and we carry far greater firepower anyway.'

Except in the direst of circumstances, movement was always slow in Helmand. Patrols never went from A to B: they went from A to Y, to G, to P, to B, taking the hardest and most unfeasible route, never the obvious one, the Vallon men doing their level best to find the hidden bombs. This necessary caution meant that, an hour or more after leaving the front gate, the patrol was still only about three hundred metres from FOB Wishtan. Now they needed to get back as quickly – and safely – as they could.

'The decision was made to call a helicopter in to the compound to pick up the casualties,' said Horsfall, 'but when we started sweeping it for IEDs we kept finding more and more of them. It became clear that a helicopter couldn't get in, so we decided to get back to the PB and call the helicopter in there.'

'This was where I became very lucky. I was in a very bad way – I know the doc, Cpl Thomas, had shoved a tracheotomy into my throat – and because of that I probably got priority treatment over those with lesser injuries. Cpl Thomas grabbed William Aldridge – who had nasty shrapnel wounds himself – and told him exactly what to do with me.¹⁸ He and another rifleman were trying to patch me up as best they could, applying tourniquets and so on. I know they had to force me down, because I was being a terrible casualty and wriggling a lot. Then they put me into the sergeant major's quad-bike trailer for the journey back to Wishtan.'

'We left the compound through a hole in the wall, and from there a road went back up to the base. Behind us was a group of guys, including William, carrying some of the other casualties on stretchers. He was helping even though he was himself injured: huge credit to him for carrying on.'

All this was taking place with enemy rounds pinging overhead from various murder-hole firing positions in the nearby compound walls, and with the air thick with dust, the sounds of injured men, and the smell of blood and explosives.

Unfortunately, the Taliban had planned their attack with some skill, predicting which route the British troops would take back to the FOB.

'The quad-bike had to take a fairly wide berth around the corner of the compound,' said Horsfall, 'but the guys behind us probably cut the corner, and in doing so they set off another series of daisy chain IEDs buried in the wall at pretty-much head height. That took out four more guys, including William. [*These were Rfn Dan Simpson and Joe Murphy, and Cpl Jay Horne. William died later, at Camp Bastion.*]

'It was carnage. People were picking up body parts and bits of kit, and we were still being engaged with small arms fire.'

More troops had to come out from Wishtan to help – some running out in their shorts, not taking the time to don body armour or helmets, so desperate were they to get to their mates. Eventually, of the 110 men who had been at the FOB that morning, only five remained at the base – four on the wall defending it, and one in the ops room, trying to co-ordinate the rescue effort and liaise with FOB Jackson and HQ.

'Jay's body had been blown over a wall,' said Alex Horsfall, 'and I'm told that it was only when everyone else had got back to the base that they realised he was missing. So the guys went out again to try to find his body and bring him back. That meant sweeping for more IEDs, but they managed to lift him out of the compound. It took three helicopters to evacuate the casualties, and they were also carrying the dead in body bags.'

The next thing Horsfall remembers is waking up in Selly Oak Hospital in Birmingham, and the nurse telling him that he had been in an IED incident.

'The opening three days in Selly Oak, I was so high on ketamine and morphine that I didn't realise I'd lost a leg, and I didn't realise I'd

lost any of the riflemen,' he said. 'I was dreaming of Afghanistan, and that I was still in charge. I remember my father telling me that Rfn Simpson had been killed, but I assumed he was wrong because I'd seen him five minutes before in an hallucination. So it took a while to understand the gravity of the situation.

'There was a wonderful chap there called Rfn Percival who'd been injured and flown back earlier, so I started talking to him. It was difficult for him, because those five guys who died were very much his best mates. They meant a lot to me, too, I'd got to know them hugely well, but I was their platoon commander, whereas he'd been through training with them, and had seen them almost every day of his adult life.'

* * *

WILLIAM ALDRIDGE WAS the youngest British soldier to die in Afghanistan.

In the two weeks before his death, Lucy Aldridge repeatedly dreamed that she was witnessing her son being blown up by an IED.

'I had a sensation of my own body burning,' she said, 'and I would wake up in a hot sweat. The smell of burning and feeling of dust in my mouth was so vivid. I was never truly asleep when I was having this dream, but, just at the point of being able to see William's face, I'd wake up. I would see more than one explosion, and it scared the life out of me. I made an appointment to see my doctor. He told me I was projecting my fears. It was quite natural, he said, and he prescribed me some sleeping pills. But to me, that didn't explain why I was able to taste, smell, and hear names being called. I still remember those names, and the shouts and screaming. There was an acrid smell that I couldn't get rid of.

'Just before he died, William telephoned me. I was in a hell of state, dreading going to bed because of the dream. But, strangely, I didn't have the dream that night. Then he phoned again in the morning. There was his voice on the end of the phone, but I didn't feel that it belonged to him. I said, "Is that you, Will? Because it doesn't sound like you. Are you okay?"

'As he was talking, I just felt that something was not right. I couldn't

put my finger on it then, and I still can't. I could hear the words he was saying, but I wasn't really listening to them. He said he was sorry he'd not been in touch a bit more. "You must have been out of your mind with worry," he said, which I was. I tried to lighten the mood a little, and actually made him laugh. I'd stubbed my toe the day before and broken one of the smallest bones in my body in three places. I said, "I'm glad that you're okay, but your mum's been in the wars."

'He said, "What are you *like*, mum? You seriously need someone to look after you."

'He said they were having a tough time at the patrol base. Resupply was difficult. They were low on ammunition. They were even sending a local out to the market to bring back water. He sounded extremely tired. He didn't sound like himself. I actually found it hard to believe that it was William I was talking to. He sounded totally different compared to conversations we'd had before he deployed to the patrol base. I remember saying, "Is everyone okay? Has something happened, Will?"

'He said, "No, no. I'm just absolutely dog-tired. We've been out on patrol every day."

'I was alarmed. Although I had obviously been concerned throughout for his safety, at that time none of the families knew exactly how dangerous Sangin was. And it's probably just as well that we didn't. The Army told me later that the patrols were about gaining hearts and minds among the local people, and I believe they did help to bring some of the locals back to the area. But in that last phone call William said, "Mum, I don't know why we are here. Every now and again, you see someone herding goats or something like that but otherwise there *are* no locals. It's like a ghost town."

'Whenever we spoke, I told him that I loved him. And he was never afraid to say that he loved me. Even if his mates took the mick, he would say, "Mum, I love you." And we both said we loved each other in that last phone call.

'I said, "Keep your head down and stay safe. I love you, sweetheart." For some reason, I then said, "No heroics." We have a little in-joke from when he first became a teenager. I'd bought him a t-shirt with the words, *I hear you, but I'm not listening*. That was our joke. His stock response when we joked like this was, "Yeah, yeah!" That indicated,

"I hear you, but I'm not listening." His very last words to me were, "Yeah, yeah!" in reply to my, "No heroics."

I knew that, if the opportunity arose, William would be William, and as it turned out, he was. If that day happened a million times over, the result would be the same, because William would have given his life for his friends every day of the week, and that's precisely what he did. He didn't care about his own injuries.

Two days after that last phone call, someone knocked at the door. I peered out of the window and saw a man and a woman on the doorstep, and I knew before I even opened the door what they were here to tell me.

I was told William's funeral would be on a particular day, and I said that it wasn't a good day, because it was my stepfather's birthday, but it had to be then because there were four other men. It had to be orchestrated by the military. I could have said that I didn't want a military funeral, but in a sense I was glad that somebody was advising me, and holding my hand through that process.

William was cremated, and I delayed the burial for quite a while until the rest of the regiment returned from Afghanistan. Then fifty guys came over from their base in Northern Ireland, and they participated in the whole process. It was very moving. One soldier had been nominated to place Will's ashes in the ground. Another held the tree we were planting, while a third man backfilled the hole in the ground. What happened next, though, was just a natural phenomenon. The guy who was filling the hole was tapped on the shoulder, and he handed the shovel over, and in turn each of the men who were there played a part.

Then I did what you do with squaddies: I put a few hundred pounds behind the bar of the local pub, asked them to put on some hot pork rolls, and let them drink and eat. It gave me an opportunity also to meet and talk more freely with some of the young men who had served with Will. The burial ceremony had the effect that I wanted, which was to allow the lads to say goodbye.

In all, The Rifles lost thirteen men on the tour, out of the sixty-nine British fatalities on Herrick 10.

"They weren't just saying goodbye to Will," said Lucy. "They were saying goodbye to all the men they'd lost. The guys never really get to say goodbye when someone dies on operations. They just have to get

on and do their jobs. Then they come home, and all they can do is visit their friends' graves.

'Some of the lads told me more about the incident after they returned. They said that, in all the chaos after that first blast, William was the calmest man there, and although he was the youngest man in the patrol he was telling everyone else that it would be okay. He had belief in himself, and he had faith. I never brought William up religiously, but he was a Christian, and it meant something to him. He was one of the few people I know who actually enjoyed religious education at school, bless him!

'Since the burial, the lads who William served with have kept in touch, and some of them call me mum, which is lovely. A couple of them will send me a Mother's Day card, for William.'

Unsurprisingly, her eldest son's death hit Lucy extremely hard.

'The only thing one can liken it to is the murder of a child,' she said. 'It's sudden death, and violent, and, for a mother, it has to be the hardest thing in the world to come to terms with. You knew your child for nine months before they were even brought into the world. You had a bond that, even in death, is unbreakable. But you feel so helpless. Because your child is a physical part of you that has been taken. When a child dies, a part of you dies with it.

'You do understand that there are risks involved in your child joining the military. Of the tens of thousands of British troops who have deployed to Afghanistan, there have been a relatively small number of deaths. But for the families, their lives have been shattered beyond recognition.

'Somehow, I had to explain to Archie and George, who were four and six at the time, that they would never see their big brother again. It took me two weeks to find the words, but I had to do it. They knew that William was a soldier and spent a long time away from home, so they were quite used to waving goodbye to him. But when they saw him walk back through the door again, they'd go absolutely mental and jump all over him. William referred to this as "the 24-hour love factor". They also knew that he had gone to a country called Afghanistan, because I'd shown them on the globe. I'd told them that he was going there to help the people of that country. I knew they could understand about helping people.

‘When I explained his death to them, I said, “You understood about William going to help other people in another country? Well, he’s been chosen to do an even more special job, because he needs to help even more people, and that job is to be an angel.”

‘They were only babies, but I wanted them to attend the funeral, because I felt that seeing the coffin would at least give them some understanding of the “forever” aspect of what had happened, because children don’t have the same understanding of time as adults do. George, the older of the boys, seemed to be more affected than Archie. At the funeral, he asked me if William was in the coffin. I said, “Yes. William’s shell is in the coffin, sweetheart. But it’s just his body.”

‘I tried to keep the details of Will’s death from Archie and George, but they were going to hear something. George said to me one day, “Mummy, William was killed by a bomb, wasn’t he?”

‘So I said, “Yes, sweetheart.”

‘He said, “When a bomb goes off, there’s fire, and water puts out fires, so if I’d been there with a bucket of water, he wouldn’t have died.”

‘I just couldn’t believe that my six-year-old believed he could have done something to prevent his big brother’s death. He was attempting to shoulder that burden, and I think that was what made me realise that I had to pull myself out of the depths of grief that I was suffering and be a better mother. Because otherwise I was going to lose another child. My life had been totally shattered. After a loss like this, you can’t ever be the same person again. But I had two much younger children, and I’ve tried really hard to give them their childhood back. It was taken from them, and they didn’t deserve that. I’ve worked really hard at being the best mum I can be.

‘I enrolled the boys in out-of-school activities, and one of the activities they’ve taken up is tae kwan do. Their big brother used to do ju jitsu, so I thought I would encourage a martial art. That way they would do something that was following in his footsteps. And they love it.

‘With some of William’s death-in-service money, I bought a little caravan in North Wales so that I have a safe haven for the boys. We’d go there to try to find our feet again without William. We still go when we can, and the boys can play on the beach in total freedom. No-one

knows us there, and nobody knocks on the door. We have a place where we can escape to.

'I remember every anniversary in William's life and his death, including his repatriation, his funeral, and his burial. But the only one that I really encourage the children to celebrate is his birthday. To them, birthdays are happy occasions. I've worked really hard to keep all the negative things away from them, so that they can have their childhood back.

'When you're grieving, it's quite a selfish emotion. You don't do it intentionally, but everything turns inward and, although other people are grieving around you, you can't understand their grief because it's such a personal thing. We all carry our own scars of our loss, and it can make relationships very difficult. I understand why couples sometimes split up, or wives and mothers-in-law sometimes have issues. No-one has written a handbook for this journey, and nobody can tell you how to deal with it.

'I felt a great draw to be wherever William is, if he is somewhere else. If I didn't have my two other children, then I wouldn't be here. I had a wobble just over a year ago. I took an overdose and I ended up in hospital. I can't explain why I did that. I'd struggled very early on with the conflict between wanting to be here for my other two children, and just wanting to be with William. I tried not to give in to an overwhelming feeling that, *I can't do this!* For a long time, I felt I was on automatic pilot as a mother to George and Archie.

'I had an enormous sense of guilt. It wasn't just the guilt that comes from wondering if things would have been different if I hadn't signed the piece of paper giving my consent for Will to join the Army. I questioned every decision I'd ever made as a parent. Did I do the right thing? Did I *say* the right thing? Am I going to let my other children down?

'After my suicide attempt, I was referred to a psychiatric nurse for counselling, and she basically ended up saying to me, "I can't even relate to what you've been through. I would be patronising you if we continued."

'I ended up pulling myself out of my grief. I just had to switch it off. I know that means I haven't fully grieved for William, but I still have to carry on living for my other children.

'Parents are supposed to inspire their children, but my son always inspired me, and he continues to do so. I often find myself thinking, *What would William say? What would William have thought of that?* Because he had something profound to say about most things. He'd kick my arse if I wasn't here to look after his little brothers. He knew that I could get very passionate and very stressed about things. One of his favourite sayings was, "Mum, you need to take a chill pill." I find these little things now just pop into my head when I'm getting a bit uptight.

'I don't believe that the invisible umbilical cord between a mother and her child is ever severed, even through death. William's still advising me. He had such a mature head on his shoulders. He said to me just before he went to Afghanistan, "Mum, I love you to bits! You're so passionate about injustice and other things that matter to you, but you'll never change anything if you don't have an audience."

'I've followed his advice, and I'm very pro-actively campaigning for the rights of service personnel. For example, I helped to persuade the MOD that the standard will form needs to be modernised. I worked with other bereaved families to persuade the MOD to recognise the role that RAF Lyneham played in repatriating those who died in Afghanistan. There will soon be a memorial garden and a permanent display in a museum outside the base.

'I also do what I can to raise money for Forces charities. I've done five parachute jumps with military amputees, even though I'm scared of heights. I think William would laugh his socks off at that! I've allowed the boys to be a part of it all because these are very positive activities. I spent £20,000 of William's death-in-service payment to set up a foundation in his memory to support bereaved military families. All of this has given my life some purpose.

'I have mixed feelings about Afghanistan. When a country asks for assistance, we have to think long and hard about how we would feel if we were in the same position. I believe we would want help. But I think the whole campaign was mismanaged. There wasn't a big enough budget, and there were just so many things that went so horribly wrong.

'But whether the campaign is won or lost, I know that William didn't die in vain. He was running a relay, and he handed the baton

to me. He said, "Run with it! Do something! I told you to find an audience and a platform!" That's what he has given me.'

* * *

FOR ALEX HORSFALL, lying in his Selly Oak bed, the hardest thing was the sense that not only had he failed to bring his men home safely, he had left others behind to do his fighting.

'I knew the tour was getting harder and harder,' he said. 'People continued to die and be badly injured.'

Indeed, his own replacement, 2nd Lt James Amooore, was himself blown up a fortnight later. In Amooore's case, the explosion bent the barrel of his rifle back on itself, hurled him thirty feet into the air, and wrecked his legs, jaw, and left hand. Shrapnel left him partially sighted. Incredibly, after spending what must have seemed like an eternity in intensive care and learning to walk again, he went back to Afghanistan for more. Such astonishing bravery was, if not commonplace, then certainly not unheard of.

Later promoted to captain, Horsfall has since left the Army. But he will never forget William Aldridge and the others who died that day.

'The tenth of July is a date I remember even more clearly than my own birthday,' he said. 'I still think about it and dream about it – not in an emotionally-damaging way, but it's always a fresh memory.'

That terrible day claimed another life in May 2011, when Rfn Allan Arnold – a very good friend of William Aldridge – hanged himself in a copse near his sister's house while on leave. He was twenty. Rfn Arnold's mother, Nickie Smith, later told the BBC that her son rang home from Afghanistan after the incident.

'He informed me his closest friend had died,' she said. 'He was crying. There was nothing that I could do to make it easier for him, I couldn't cuddle him, I could just listen.'

Alex Horsfall and his men still keep in touch and meet up now and then; one of those occasions was at Allan Arnold's funeral. Another was while working on a BBC documentary about the platoon.

'I managed to get a few of the guys back together,' he said, 'and we ended up having a wonderful, black-tie piss-up. It's always good to see and hear from them. I email them from time to time, and we keep in

touch on Facebook. I have a slight feeling of guilt, not because I consider myself responsible for what happened, but because it was my responsibility to get my people back in one piece. That has always been at the back of my mind. I thought I'd have a fair amount of explaining to do to the families, but they have all been thoroughly supportive, and that's really helped me.

'I got to know William better than a lot of the platoon because, for a brief period at one PB, we were just half a platoon, and he was one of the guys I had. We weren't hugely busy at the time, but we did run out of water at one point, so I remember William and me trying our best, with our Bear Grylls survival skills, to create a water filter. We got some water from a nearby well and filtered it through this thing we'd made. We both had a good swig, and then immediately regurgitated it, because it tasted of cow urine.

'He was the youngest British soldier to die in Afghanistan. I don't think he realised how young he was, probably because he picked up the nuances very quickly, even though he joined us after we'd been there for a while. He was a very competent and confident young man. You never had to ask him to do the same thing twice. He was joyful and always had a smile on his face. I have great memories of him.'