

Operation Telic Looking Back

The re-building of the Basra Wall at the National Arboretum has provided an opportunity for relatives of the Britain's war dead from the 2003 to 2009 Iraq campaign, former comrades and ordinary members of the public to pay their respects.

Its location in the lush Staffordshire countryside could not be more removed from its original home outside the British divisional headquarters building at Basra airport. It is not a very scientific way to gauge public opinion, but talking to the visitors engenders a range of responses. A group of army veterans from Northern Ireland's Troubles in the 1970s and 1980s were dismissive, branding Iraq as "Blair and Bush's war". "Why did we get involved in that? It was just politics", said one old soldier. A visiting group of young army officers from a nearby military barracks were more reflective. One officer was able to pinpoint several of his comrade's names on the wall and recount how they died in great detail. The experience of serving in Iraq had clearly troubled him.

The reactions at the Basra Wall illustrated how Operation Telic left major scars on the British armed forces, its soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen, as well as their families and Britain's military and political establishments. Much the trauma caused by the Iraq experience was never fully explored or faced immediately after the withdrawal from Iraq because of the immediate escalating of the British role in Afghanistan meant there was little time to dwell on Operation Telic.

As can be expected, the senior British officers who oversaw the capture of Basra and then handed back the city to the Iraqis have very mixed emotions about the experience. A phrase many of them use is that the campaign "did not end on the terms we wanted". I found no senior officers involved in the Iraq campaign were was prepared to say it was a resounding success. All the ones I have spoken to say the campaign could have been conducted in a better way. Graham Binns, who led 7 Armoured Brigade into Iraq and they handed the city back to the Iraqi military in 2007, in his usual blunt Yorkshire fashion, summed it up this way. "If we do it again we should do it differently."

The perception that Iraq did not end in a way that could be easily defined as a British success has seeped into public and political consciousness, creating a suspicion and caution about future foreign military

engagements. This culminated in the August 2013 House of Commons vote against military engagement in the Syria crisis.

How Britain senior military officers inter-acted with their political masters during the Iraq campaign clearly left a lot to be desired. General Brims expressed concerned that many senior officers, including himself, were not forceful enough in communicating the problems that the British Army was facing in Iraq to government ministers.

“Not all of us communicated as well as we could. Did we engage successfully with Secretary of State for Defence [Geoff Hoon]?” recalled Brims. “We gave him huge briefing notes but not pithy points to make recommendations to cabinet.”

“The majors and lieutenant colonel of today’s British army say that senior officers are too often seen as military toadies of politicians and that we did not dig our feet in,” he said. “They may have a point.”

He wondered if the politicians of the 2003 to 2005 era really understood what they were told by commanders in Iraq. “The politicians did not understand us.” He said. “Nor did the senior civil servants and special advisors understand us. It is all about communications.”

The role of senior British officers in the decision to go war and subsequent prosecution of the occupation has largely gone unexamined. They are largely considered figures of little influence, with blame for the failures in Iraq being squarely directed at the “neocon” Americans such as the Coalition Provisional Authority administrator Paul Bremer and hawkish defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who directed the war and occupation. Blair, Gordon Brown and other British politicians are blamed for leading Britain into an illegal war, telling lies about weapons of mass destruction, not having a plan to rebuild Iraq, not buying enough equipment to protect the troops and then not looking after wounded soldiers when they returned home. Faceless Ministry of Defence bureaucrats get more blame for not supporting frontline troops by delaying the purchase of life saving equipment, not granting asylum to loyal Iraqi interpreters and treating the families of dead and wounded soldiers as “legal threats to public money” rather than human beings.

It is indeed correct to say that the views of Britain’s generals had little sway on Donald Rumsfeld and Bremer’s decision to disband the Iraqi army and ban former Ba’ath party officials from government jobs. British

generals also played no role in Blair's political calculation to join President George Bush's invasion of Iraq. The leadership of the British armed forces, however, did play a crucial role in deciding how the war would be fought and how the occupation was conducted. In these aspects they were not hapless bystanders to a car crash but key players in Whitehall debates and eventual decision making in the field.

In the wake of the Argentine invasion of the Falklands in 1982, there was as crucial meeting in the House of Commons office of the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. A gaggle of government ministers and senior civilian advisors all seemed to be in total despair and were struggling to come up with any response. The First Sea Lord Admiral Henry Leach arrived in his uniform, radiating confidence and calmly told Thatcher that a task force could sail to recapture the islands in a matter of days and that Britain needed to respond firmly the Argentine invasion to recover its honour and place in the world. The die was cast and the following day, Thatcher told the House of Commons that the fleet was to sail to the South Atlantic.

In the summer and winter of 2002, there was no "Leach Moment" but once it became clear the Prime Minister was minded to get involved in US-led military action, the heads of Britain's armed services were pushing the Blair to send the largest force possible. One officer involved in this process described the mood in this way, "when you get invited to the World Cup Final, everyone wants to be in the team even if you know you are going to get smashed six nil by Germany or Brazil - you just don't want to miss the chance for your ninety minutes of fame and glory, even if you know it is going to end in tears."

The last half of 2002 saw this push to maximise their role being played out by service chiefs and their staffs in London. The Royal Navy were pretty blatant in their push to get a large naval task force included in the operation, against the wishes of the Chief of Joint Operations, Lieutenant General John Reith. While the army's keenness for the Turkey operation to give it a leading role in the northern front ultimately ended in tears and led to the short notice, switch to the southern option. This had serious consequences, including making the logistic preparations sub-optimal, consigning the British Army to a supporting role in the operation, fixing Britain in the so-called "Basra Box" for the subsequent occupation and compressing dangerously preparations for the occupation phase.

Once the final decision was made in January 2003 to begin deploying British forces to Kuwait to execute the 'southern option', it unleashed a

head long rush to get 46,000 troops, their equipment and supplies to start line in the desert in time to go to war with the Americans. In less than two months, three brigades, a naval task force, special forces and the air component were all dispatched from their homes bases. This was a major logistic exercise, which just about succeeded. All the major combat units arrived in time, along with their main weapon systems and ammunition but risks had to be taken with large amounts other equipment and supplies. The British commanders and logistic planner played a very poor hand well but shortcomings in the distribution of body armour and chemical weapon protection equipment meant frontline troops did not have enough of these items at the start of the war. Fortunately, the British Army's luck held out and the Iraqis never had chemical weapons and only one soldier was killed because of a lack of body armour. The army's Challenger tanks and Warrior armoured fighting vehicles were up armoured in time so British frontline troops in Basra were largely protected from Iraqi fire and none of these vehicles were penetrated by enemy fire.

During the combat phase of the invasion of Iraq, British commanders and troops achieved almost all of the objectives set for them by their political masters in London and their American allies. British officers and troops were able to secure themselves senior positions across the US-led invasion force, with commanders, staff officers and troop contingents assigned to every part of the US military hierarchy in the Middle East. This was a major feat and was aimed at fulfilling Prime Minister Blair's overarching objective of gaining "influence" within the American military machine. How much influence was actually achieved is open to question and was largely dependent on the relationships between individuals on the ground and the contribution British forces could make to the US war effort. British air, naval, chemical weapons detection and special forces gained high levels of influence on their American counterparts but relations between the British and US land commands was problematical. The British Army and US Marine Corps had a strong relationship because 1 (UK) Armoured Division was working directing for I Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF), which highly valued the work the British were doing screening the eastern flank of the Marines drive on Baghdad. The US Army's V Corps had little to do the British Army, so senior British officers had little influence on the decisive battle for Baghdad in April and its chaotic aftermath that ended up defining the course of the occupation. This was the price of the delays in committing to the Turkey option.

Once committed to action, British commanders and troops fought hard and in almost all engagements came off better than their Iraqi opponents. The British battlegroups fought aggressively and they succeeded in their aims of keeping the Iraqis off balance. Throughout the combat phase, there was considerable tension between battlegroup commanding officers, back by their brigade commanders, and the division commander, Major General Robin Brims, over the tempo of the drive into southern Iraq. The frontline commanders wanted to push forward aggressively and exploit the success their troops were having against the poorly armed and disorganised Iraqi resistance. While General Brims and other senior officers were more cautious and thought that the British division could achieve its objectives, as set by I MEF commander, by just being in place outside Basra. Brims was also concerned about preventing his division getting bogged down in street fighting in Basra until the outcome of the US drive on Baghdad was certain. The General had delegated authority to decide on the timing of the final assault on Basra, making this a classic case of the “loneliness of command”.

The role of the Royal Air Force and Special Forces in supporting the US-drive on Baghdad and operations in western Iraq are often overlooked by the Basra-centric nature of much media coverage of the war. British officers were involved in planning and directing the air and special forces elements of the campaign. These operations had significant impact on the outcome of the US drive on Baghdad, with the push into western Iraq from Jordan undermining the Iraqi defence of their capital at a critical moment in the battle.

The British Army must also face questions over its planning and preparations for the occupation of southern Iraq. Events leading up to the occupation were out of the army’s hands – US policy in Baghdad and British government decisions limiting the size of the garrison – but it was responsible for the preparation, training and deployment of the follow-on British occupation force in Basra. This force was thrown together at a few weeks notice despite the army having six months notice to prepare and 19 Mechanised Brigade ended up being the least prepared, equipped and trained of any of the British brigades to deploy to Basra. Many of the army’s problems were self-inflicted. Perhaps the biggest failing was the unwillingness of senior officers to question the line from London limiting the size of the garrison. Commanders in Iraq were told the size of the force they were getting, not asked what they needed to do the job. It was only after Basra was ablaze in August did commanders feel confident to ask for more troops.

Once the occupation got underway, it was more than two years until the army seemed to get a handle on what was really happening in southern Iraq. Much of what it did was templated from its successful operations in Kosovo. Nothing summed up the army's lack of focus on making the operation a success than its attitude to the appointment of commanders and the deployment of headquarters. From the autumn of 2003 ad hoc divisional headquarters were routinely deployed and so generals had to command staff whom they had no experience work with. This was not rectified until 2005. For a key period in 2003 and 2005, British brigadiers were lucky to have three months in command in Basra. The army seemed to think it was more important to give its senior officers vital ticks for their promotion, rather than ensure continuity in command. There has been much criticism of the British Army's six month tour policy and recommendations that senior officers should spend a year in post in operational theatres. In Iraq - at the crucial point in the campaign - only two brigadiers completed six month long command tours in Basra, with six more brigadiers only serving three month long tours.

The centre piece of British strategy in Iraq was the training and mentoring of the country's security forces. Although British Army had run training programmes for foreign armies successfully in many countries, the scale of the task in Iraq was of a magnitude that had never been faced before. While the political and social environment this training effort was being conducted in had also never been faced before. Not surprisingly there was never a considered view of how to approach this problem, even within the British Army, let alone across the British government. Largely by default, the military in Basra ended up running the project and it never seemed to get any traction or momentum. Frustration at lack of progress meant that when every new British general and brigadier arrived in Basra, they could not resist the temptation to tinker and turn the training programme on its head. Consistency was lacking. It was not until 2007-2008 that British operations in Basra had any consistency across six month-long brigade tours.

When the political situation changed in mid 2006 and the Iraqis started to re-assert their political independence, the training requirements changed but the British military were slow to move from providers of basic training to military partners, working side by side, with the Iraqis. The debate over embedding advisors crystallised this and show that some senior British policy makers could not adjust to the new environment.

The first eighteen months of the British participation in the occupation of Iraq also saw considerable tension among senior officers over the degree

to which UK forces should support their American allies in their growing fight against the Sunni insurgency in central Iraq. There was a feeling among many officers, including several of the senior British Military Representatives in Baghdad that campaign success could only come if the American effort in the infamous Sunni Triangle was successful. This was ran headlong into the reluctance of Blair's government to become deeper involved in Iraq. The war was being sold to an unhappy public and disgruntled members of parliament as the successful handing over to local Iraqi security forces to allow the rapid withdrawal of British troops. Getting deeper into Iraq and sending troops to fight in Baghdad just ran against this narrative. This tension reared its head first in May when General Sir Mike Jackson pitched for the dispatch of 16 Air Assault Brigade to Baghdad try to put a lid on the looting engulfing the Iraqi capital. The Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Mike Wakler, did not even put the idea to ministers because he knew the result would be negative.

The same tensions came to a head in October 2004 when the Americans requested British help in the assault on the insurgent held town of Fallujah. Blair reluctantly agreed to insistent requests from field commanders in Baghdad and Basra to allow the Black Watch to deploy to central Iraq. The political, media and public back lash meant senior service chiefs were told in no uncertain terms that there would be no more British military excursion outside of the Basra box. This was the root of the growing divergence of British and US policies in Iraq. The Americans were now aware in no uncertain terms that the British would not be joining them in what they considered the decisive phase of the Iraq war. Low profile special forces and RAF air support continued to be provided to the Americans in Baghdad and this was very welcome but it was not the same as the public presence of large numbers of conventional troops on the ground. The messy British exit from Iraq began here.

On the streets of Basra during 2005 and into 2006, the British Army struggled to come up with a response to growing Iraqi political sovereignty. A line of British generals never really got a handle on how to deal with the increasingly complex and confused political landscape of post-sovereignty Basra and Maysan. The Shia population of southern Iraq were overwhelmingly opposed to the presence of British troops in their country and the elected Iraqi politicians reflected this view with considerable vigour, repeatedly refusing to co-operate with what they termed "occupying forces". Many of southern Iraq's political leaders were in league the militia groups that were starting to take an increasing

toll on British troops. When British commanders used their powers of self defence to strike back at the militia, it only fuelled the unpopularity of the British and spurred Iraqi politicians to distance themselves even more from the occupiers.

Into this toxic situation, came the new Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki who had a visceral hatred of the British because of his grandfather's involvement in resistance to British occupation of Iraq in the 1920s. He was closely allied with many of the anti-British politicians and militia groups in Basra and in 2006 and 2007 he repeatedly used his power of veto over British strike operations against high profile militia commanders. When a British operation raided a police station linked to his militia allies, Maliki went ballistic and threatened to withdrawal all co-operation with British forces in Basra.

Due to this political context any idea that British forces could launch a US-style 'surge' to root out Basra's militia fighters was a non-starter, as a succession of frustrated British generals and brigadiers discovered during 2006 and into the spring of 2007. The reluctance of senior commanders take an aggressive stance against the militia through out this period caused much resentment among British troops in Basra and led to many of these generals being branded appeasers, or worse, for not being willing to strike decisively against those responsible for the deaths of so many British soldiers. The high level linkages between Maliki and the Basra militia was so sensitive that intelligence about it was - and still is - highly sensitive that senior commanders were not allowed to distribute it to their troops. Even today, senior officers who served in Basra are heavily restricted by the Ministry of Defence from making reference to this information in public. This issue has left many senior officers who served in Iraq at this time bitter that they are unable to articulate and justify decisions, such as withdrawing forces from downtown Basra and negotiating with militia commanders, that were controversial at the time and appeared to tarnish the reputation of the British Army.

In such circumstances, the policy of British disengagement from downtown Basra could not come soon enough. The fact that the prime minister of Iraq, who the British were nominally supporting with so much blood and treasure, was then in cahoots with the militia who were waging a war against the British Army in Basra was not a sustainable situation or one that could have been sold to the British public, if it had ever emerged at the time.

At this time, the growing British involvement in Afghanistan led to service chiefs in London to recommend to the Prime Minister that the UK's main military effort be switched to the new theatre of war.

The lack of British appetite to remain in Iraq, however, ran up against the new US 'surge' policy that was rolled out during the first months of 2007. As a result to maintain good relations with the new American commander in Baghdad, General David Petraeus, the British remained in downtown Basra for another four months and sustained heavy casualties.

A number of American retired generals and commentators with close links to Petraeus, such as Jack Keane, Bing West and Michael Gordon, have characterised the British retreat from Basra as a 'defeat'. Senior British officers who served in Iraq at this time strike back, saying that a surge type 'victory' as eventually achieved by Petraeus in Baghdad was just not possible in Basra. Given that 'enemy' who the British were supposed to 'defeat' were the allies of the Iraqi Prime Minister who the Americans were supporting in Baghdad, a military solution to Basra was a non-starter. This situation was understood by US commanders in Iraq at the time, who were equally frustrated by Maliki's sabotaging of British operations in Basra. General George Casey and his successor, Petraeus, both provided US troops and specialist assets, including attack helicopters, drones, special forces and intelligence operatives, to help the British execute Operations Sinbad and Zenith to pull out of downtown Basra.

The involvement of Maliki's allies in Basra in running death squads and torture prisons and his sabotaging of British attempts to close them down, made many British officers cynical about the Iraqi prime minister's claims that he launched Operation Charge of the Knights in March 2008 to free Basra from the militia's "reign of terror".

How did the British armed forces perform in Operation Telic? Iraq was Britain's longest and most costly overseas campaign since Malaya emergency in the 1950s. It is clear that the government ministers, service chiefs and military bureaucracy did not appreciate how long the campaign would drag on or its intensity. The potential for the Iraq campaign to irrevocably damage the reputation of the British armed forces was also not fully appreciated. The US military had seen how defeat in Vietnam had impacted on their reputation and hence willingness of politicians to fund them, as well as the public appetite to support foreign wars, and were determined to avoid a similar situation as a result of Iraq. The US military leadership turned to Petraeus' surge as a way to avoid 'defeat' in

Iraq. Britain's senior military leadership, saw the possibility of success in Afghanistan as the way to compensate for the lack of an apparent success in Iraq. Victory in Afghanistan eventually proved to be just as elusive as success in Iraq.

In the first two years of the occupation there was not really any understanding about how British forces could extract themselves from Iraq. Senior military commanders were working on the basis that they would be pulling their troops out of Iraq in a matter of months. This attitude pervaded all thinking about how the campaign should be conducted, preventing long-term thinking or serious campaign planning being undertaken until into late 2004 or early 2005. As a result, the main drive was to accelerate troops withdrawals, the purchase of better equipment and the building of infra-structure to allow troops to better operate in Iraq's extreme climate was never considered a priority. Deploying to Iraq became an end-in-itself for many officers and their units, as a means to demonstrate their military prowess, get their subordinates promoted, sustain funding of pet projects and attract new recruits. Mission success seemed to be a secondary issue.

The spring of 2006 and the arrival of the new Chief of Defence Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup, seemed to shake the Ministry of Defence out of its lethargy. The British armed forces were placed on a campaign footing, money was found for improved training, new vehicles, hardened buildings, drones and other protective equipment. Reinforcements were sent to temporarily cover the withdrawal of troops from their city centre bases. The rising casualties and the determined resistance being put up by the militia was a real reality check for many in the British Army.

By late 2006 and early 2007, British units in Basra were fighting an all out war with the militia, using innovative tactics and equipment that was a generation ahead of those available only a year before. Drones, attack helicopters, C-RAM anti-rocket weapons, electronic jamming equipment and surveillance balloons were all being used by British battlegroups in a complex urban battlefield, against an elusive and highly skilled enemy.

In 2007 and 2008, the British Army leadership in southern Iraq were forced to innovate and overhaul their operations at pace that was not present in the early phases of the occupation. The British Army changed how it operated but it took a long time for this process to gain any momentum and many soldiers were killed or wounded in the process.

The response to the chaotic start to Operation Charge of the Knights showed the new capabilities of the British Army in action during a high pressure crisis. It eventually proved to be a major turning point, with the British eventually working hand-in-hand with the Americans to rescue Iraqi forces caught in a debacle of Maliki's own making. This operation saw a few hundred British troops using US-style embedded mentoring teams, special forces raids, drone, close air support and artillery fire to operate across Basra in a way that only a year before would have required several thousand British troops. The political context of the operation had been transformed by Maliki's decision to dump his militia allies, but it also showed that the tactics and technology of the British Army of 2008 had progressed dramatically over the previous four years.

During the course of Operation Telic, almost every member of the British Army and Royal Air Force served in Iraq in some capacity or deployed to a neighbouring country to support the operation.

As a result, the participating individuals and units amassed a huge amount of combat experience. Many individuals experienced more violence in the space of a six-month long Operation Telic tour than in the whole of their previous military careers. Many units severed multiple Operation Telic tours. Although the level of casualties was at the time seen as high, the subsequent operation in Afghanistan, made those experienced in Iraq seem modest. The psychological impact of the sustained exposure to combat in Iraq has left a legacy of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) on veterans.

A major issue for many Iraq veterans is the perception, common amongst the public and politicians that the campaign was not a success and that the hardships they endured and fatalities suffered by their units were in vain or have been forgotten.

The Ministry of Defence and the British Army have not helped this issue by their refusal to date to grant battle honours to units that participated in major combat actions during the occupation period. The fierce battles fought by the Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment (PWRR) in Maysan in 2004, the Black Watch in Operation Bracken and the Rifles in Basra Palace in 2007 were all classic actions that warrant recognition.

The ham-fisted legalistic reaction of the Ministry of Defence to court cases brought by human rights activists adds to the feeling that the British government is ashamed of the actions of British troops in Iraq. The fact that British government is even considering a claim for compensation

brought by the leader of the Basra militia - a man with the blood of dozens of British troops on his hands - for alleged ill treatment while in British custody cannot be understood by many Iraq veterans.

These legal actions against the British government have only gained momentum and credibility because of failings by the military legal authorities to establish a functioning system of redress for ordinary Iraqis injured or killed by the actions of British troops. A lack of candour and willingness to promptly pay small amounts of compensation just stored up trouble. These disputes are now being played out in the on-going inquiries into Iraq abuse.

There is no doubt that many of these alleged abuses did in fact occur. Baha Mousa was beaten to death in British custody. So-called 'street punishments' occurred in 2003 and 2004. Civilians were wounded by British fire on many occasions. The British Army is sometimes described as a 'blunt instrument' and some of its actions in southern Iraq reinforced this perception. Several incidents can be attributed to sadistic or psychologically damaged individuals losing control, but the vast majority are the result of the 'friction' that inevitably arises from using military force in close proximity to a civilian population, such as road traffic accidents, collateral damage from heavy weapons or mis-identification of targets during confused fire-fights.

In such circumstances, the use of a legalistic approach to apportion guilt to individual soldiers must be questioned. Other countries have adopted truth commissions as a means of getting participants in conflicts to opening talk about their role as a means of reconciliation. This way the relative's abuse victims could get what is termed 'closure' over what happened to their relatives without the alleged perpetrators being branded 'war criminals'. It would seem to be too late to adopt this approach in Iraq but it might have some validity as the British campaign in Afghanistan draws to a close.

Many British veterans of Iraq are highly critical of the decision by the Blair government in 2006 to switch its main effort from Iraq to Afghanistan, saying it spread Britain's limited military resources too thinly which prevented success in either theatre. How this decision was made is subject of much controversy within the British military and the process is criticised for being based on short term motives, such as the tactical situation in Afghanistan and the need to give the Blair government a political quick fix to the unpopularity of the war in Iraq.

For Britain, the financial, political and human costs of the Iraq war were staggering. By the time last combat troops left in 2009, it had cost the British taxpayer some £8 billion for military operations and £250 for economic, humanitarian and other civilian aid. Iraq crippled the British Prime Minister Tony Blair's political career and effectively drove him out of Westminster politics. The war cost the death of 179 British military personnel and another 222 seriously injured, including many who lost limbs. Some 315 British personnel were admitted to field hospitals after being wounded in action and a further 3,283 suffered non-battle injuries or serious illness in Iraq.

The number of Iraqi casualties caused by British operations is far harder to gauge due to the chaotic nature of medical services in the country. It is possible to piece together some figures from a variety of sources. From the kills claimed by British units across Iraq during March and April, it would appear that somewhere between 1,000 and 2,000 Iraqi soldiers and para-military militia fighters must have lost their lives and hundreds more were wounded. Civilian casualties during the first Battle for Basra in 2003 are hard to estimate but the respected non-government organisation, Human Rights Watch, presented credible evidence that several dozen civilians were injured and handful killed in British artillery fire and US air strikes in and around Basra.

During the occupation period it is equally difficult to track Iraqi casualties. In answer to a British parliamentary question, the defence minister Adam Ingram reported that 200 "enemy combatants" were killed and another 80 injured by British troops between 1st May 2003 and 26th November 2004. A further 17 combatants died and another 22 were injured in other incidents, for example being killed when roadside bombs they were planting prematurely detonated. Ingram then said some 144 civilians were killed and 192 injured during incidents involving British

troops, which included people caught in cross fire or run over in accidents involving British vehicles.

During Operation Charge of the Knights in 2008, police and health workers in Basra reported said at least 236 people were killed and 600 wounded in the fighting, with at least 50 civilians among the dead.

These two periods saw the heaviest fighting of the occupation but there was also a steady drip of Iraqi casualties between 2004 and 2008. On top of these figures must be added the insurgents killed in central Iraq by Special Forces raids, RAF Tornado GR4 air strikes and drone engagements controlled by RAF personnel. The SAS are alone attributed with killing some 350 to 400 insurgents during their operations in and around Baghdad.

This results in a cumulative total of Iraqi militia and civilian casualties than can be attributed to British forces during the occupation that must run towards or even exceed 2,000, with at least as many wounded.

For the old soldiers at the Basra Wall and many other critics of Britain's involvement in the Iraq war, this cost was clearly not worthwhile. From even before the start of the war, their voice has been dominant one in British public discussions about the conflict. A decade on few British politicians and media commentators are now prepared to support the Iraq war, even through both the country's two major political parties support the war and 412 members of parliament voted in favour in the 18th March 2003 vote authorising military action.

When the final British troops left Iraq in 2009, British political, economic and military engagement with the country came to an abrupt end as the London government switched all its focus to Afghanistan. This reinforced the view among Iraq veterans that their efforts and the sacrifices were being forgotten. Many also saw this as being short sighted and not in Britain's long term political, economic and military interests in the Middle East. Iraq's oil wealth, with its linkages to important Gulf allies and strategic position near to Iran all offered long term benefits to the Britain. Iraq had the potential to generate a return on all the investment Britain main in it, whereas Afghanistan in effect was nothing more than a drain on money, resources and lives, say military critics. What ever the political controversy over the decision of Tony Blair's decision to back the US invasion of Iraq, the rush to disengagement from the country in the end undermined Britain's long term interests and locked directed Britain up a blind alley in Afghanistan.

General Brims and Binns, who played such a decisive role in the occupation of Basra in 2003, by quirks of fate turned out to have second careers working in Iraq after their retirement from the British Army. Their continued engagement in Iraq, is unlike many of their military contemporaries, government officials or journalists who found themselves moving rapidly on to the war in Afghanistan.

After retiring from the army in 2008, Brims went on to be vice chancellor of Irbil university in Kurdistan. He is up beat about the country's future prospects. "Iraq has changed a lot," he said. At long last the oil is flowing and they have a huge amount of money. Whether everyone will stop squabbling over how to share it out is another matter. Iraq could be prosperous, definitely a good opportunity, it has got wealth."

"[Britain's military engagement in] Iraq ended in a way we did not wish, but our presence was not wholly bad," he said. "It ended when the Iraqis took control, that was a good thing."

The former commander of the Desert Rats, Binns, went on to be chief executive of Aegis Defence Services and regularly travelling to Basra to oversee security in the Rumaylah Oilfield outside the city. He has no doubt that the citizens of Basra are better off than they were under Saddam Hussein's rule. "The removal of Saddam was worthwhile," he said. "Basra now is a vibrant, energetic, dirty, chaotic, Middle East city, where people are making a life for themselves. There is a huge amount of development in oil fields. Had we been able to put Iraqis in charge of process in charge more speedily this would have happened sooner."

Britain's defence secretary in October 2014, Philip Hammond, told the House of Commons Defence Committee that the "public appetite for expeditionary warfare is pretty low, based on the experience of 10 years in Iraq and Afghanistan. It would be realistic of me to say that I would not expect, except in the most extreme circumstances, a manifestation of great appetite for plunging into a prolonged period of expeditionary warfare any time soon."

Mr Hammond compared Britain's attitude with that of the US public following the Vietnam War, when America undertook a "clear disengagement" from international affairs.

The Vietnam comparison is also been drawn by many senior officers who served in Iraq, particular in reference to public, media and political concern about casualties.

“This is a problem for us,” commented Robin Brims, who led 1 (UK) Armoured Division into Basra in 2003. “Force protection takes over the mission. We are now casualty averse, like the Americans were in Bosnia. This is a problem for the next generation of military commanders. How do we persuade politicians to have the political stamina if we are prepared to use the military?”

The Iraq campaign has also seen an undermining of the concept of mission command within the British military. This relied on commanders on the ground being given general instructions and then left to work out for themselves what to do. It had been a bed rock of the British Army’s way of war for many generations but the inability of army to craft a consistent strategy in Iraq has led to the Ministry of Defence in London, via the Permanent Joint Headquarters, to draw back more responsibility and control from field commanders. The proliferation of video conferencing, drone imagery and email communications have given ministers and senior officers in London the ability to interfere in minor tactical decisions. This micro-management has been evident in Afghanistan, Libya and in Indian Ocean counter piracy operations in recent years. The moves by Mr Hammond to prevent senior military officers to talk in public or to the media without his personal permission is a further indication that mission command has fallen out of fashion in the British military.

The aftermath of the Iraq campaign, however, suggests the British government and military establishment is not good at learning lessons from the experience. The British Army has carried out four studies into its performance during the war. All of them were classified secret to ensure they would never be published. The first two, which covered the invasion period and first two years of the occupation period, were leaked to the media and were used in research for this book. A third was de-classified under the Freedom of Information Act only after a long campaign by a newspaper. The final and most comprehensive study - based on a major exercise of hundreds of participants of all ranks and the complication of thousands of documents, led by a senior brigadier - still remains classified secret and it will probably never be made public.

Senior Ministry of Defence officials made deliberate attempts to prevent serving and retired members of the armed forces and ministry civilian

officials speaking to me during the preparation of this book. The Secretary of State for Defence Philip Hammond personally banned me from interviewing senior serving officers.

These are hardly the action of an institution trying to learn from its experiences.

The continued delay in publishing the Chilcot Inquiry adds to the feeling that British government and military establishment just wants to forget the Iraq campaign. I hope this books goes some to the way to keeping interest in Operation Telic alive and informs future generations so the mistakes of the past are not repeated.

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