

THE LAST BASTION NEWS

ALISTAIR BUNKALL



Deserted Camp Bastion

In 25 years of news camerawork, GTC member Paul Francis has filmed in most of the world's hotspots, including multiple trips to Afghanistan. These shoots have been consistently fraught with danger and difficult terrain, and yet it was with a sense of poignancy and some sadness that, as the last British TV cameramen in Helmand, Paul documented the final pull-out of British troops from the vast Camp Bastion.

This assignment had got off to a very bad start...

In Kabul - with no bags

Since 1989, when I joined BBC News covering breaking stories around the world, I have on occasions had to soldier on with the odd bag or box of technical equipment missing on arrival at a foreign airport, but this time things were worse.

My flight had been delayed leaving Heathrow but BA and Emirates staff were waiting for me on my arrival at Dubai airport and pulled out all the stops to whisk me through the vast concourses onto my connecting flight to Kabul. I only wish the same treatment had been afforded to my baggage. On arriving in Afghanistan, everyone else collected their bags from the rather primitive baggage carousel and continued on their journeys. My boxes and bags were nowhere to be seen. So there I was, separated from the satellite Bgan kit, my personal body armour, tripod and all other essential technical equipment, not to mention my personal bag containing my clothes and so on.

All I had with me was my PMW-400 camera, Li-ion batteries (thanks to the new transportation regulations, I had been carrying these in my hand luggage) and a basic FCP X editing kit that I've always hand-carried on flights in case of

just such an eventuality. This was going to be a real challenge on a four-day embed in Helmand Province with the British and US military, filming their handover to the Afghan forces and subsequent pull-out from Camp Bastion.

I was to be the last British TV cameraman to film with the final few hundred soldiers leaving the huge base for good. I'd also been elected the pool cameraman-editor-producer for not only BBC Defence Correspondent Jonathan Beale, but also ITN and Sky correspondents John Irvine and Alistair Bunkall. We would be syndicating our coverage to all our respective affiliates around the globe, so just about the whole world's broadcasters. No pressure then!

It was vital that I manage to purloin some technical gear from somewhere in the couple of hours remaining before flying to Helmand at 06:00 the next morning for the start of the embed. Luckily, the BBC has a Newsgathering Bureau in Kabul, so I raided their kit and took their tripod, Bgan and minimal other kit to cobble together a working system.

The toughest of environments

Afghanistan has undoubtedly been one of the most challenging countries in which to work over the last decade. In my career as a news cameraman I have been 'lucky'

enough (if that's the correct adjective) to be asked to go on assignment to a fair number of the world's hotspots. I have covered the downfall of President Ceausescu in Romania in 1989; both Gulf Wars; the Balkan conflicts in Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo; South Sudan, Angola, Somalia, Pakistan, Egypt, Israel, the West Bank and Gaza; and latterly three trips to Ukraine and Crimea. In July 2014, whilst being shelled in Sloviansk just to the east of Donetsk, I had my camera taken from me at gunpoint by Russian-backed rebels, who accused the team of being Ukrainian spies. I've also done my fair share of more peaceful everyday assignments over the past 25 years allowing me a bit more time to be creative.

In Afghanistan though, everyday existence on military embeds throws up some major challenges – from coping with talcum powder-like sand finding every route into the £30,000 camera and lens; to hauling equipment on and off helicopters with gravel and dust from the landing-zone spraying up like a smokescreen all around you, while at the same time being pelted with stones catapulted outwards by the chopper's downwash; to being disgorged out of the back of a Chinook or Merlin into an unknown corner of Helmand littered with IEDs and concealed Taliban. Back on terra firma you may then find yourself out on patrol either getting soaked by torrential rain, wading waist-deep across a wadi (an Afghan river that can one moment be dry, the next flowing furiously and swollen full) or alternatively baking in the sweltering sun weighed down with 14kg of body armour capable of withstanding high-velocity 7.62mm rounds. To compound this, the wet dust on the equipment then bakes solid in the fierce sun. All nightmares for professional cameramen, whether they own their equipment or just cherish that which is entrusted to them.

Learning from each other

Of course, these acts of nature have contributed to the excellent solid construction of the compound walls surrounding most rural Afghan houses, many of which have existed for hundreds of years and have lasted many times longer than the average new-build home in the UK. Afghans have many things they could teach us about existence but this time it's been the turn of the British and Americans to help train and create an Afghan National Army (ANA) fighting force whom I have witnessed being pretty gutsy in the defence of their own country against Taliban insurgents.

I've been coming and going from this most desolate but also stunningly beautiful country for some years now and although I'm always relieved to leave, at the same time this

is tinged with sadness; somehow I always look forward to my next trip and especially to meeting up with the wonderful people I have become acquainted with there.

Afghanistan will continue to endure its problems of course, but I do believe that day-to-day life has become safer, especially for the population of Helmand. Imagine the reality of not being able to leave your house to go shopping in the street outside for fear of the Taliban; or not being able to sleep, frightened that they will come knocking in the middle of the night; or most poignantly the impossibility of young women attending school to further their education. Everyone's hope is that coalition forces will not have to return there any time soon.

“ You may find yourself out on patrol either getting soaked by torrential rain or wading waist-deep across a wadi or alternatively baking in the sweltering sun weighed down with 14kg of body armour capable of withstanding high-velocity 7.62mm rounds.



Top: C-130 Hercules flight to Camp Bastion
Bottom: Troops arriving safely in Kandahar airbase

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It felt just like the US withdrawal from Saigon must have done back in 1975 for Brian Barron, the BBC correspondent there, and I felt very privileged to be the last TV cameraman filming this historic event.

Two things I crave for are the glorious sunsets and the panoramas of the snow-capped Hindu Kush Mountains that can be seen for miles. I never tire of looking out of the window on the flight into Kabul as Afghanistan has some of the most spectacular scenery in the world.

Embedded

So, back on the embed, after the flight from Kabul to Bastion on a Hercules C-130 transport plane, we set off on a whirlwind tour of the vast base, some 4 x 6kms in area. We were given a confidential briefing by the top brass as to how the pull-out would happen, then had just two hours to hoover up most of the shots and pieces to camera (PTCs) that would fill the bulletins when the embargo was lifted 36 hours later after the

last troops were safely back on the ground at Kandahar airbase and had all been accounted for. At dawn the next day, in preparation for the embargo being lifted the following day, I set up the Bgan satellite dish and pre-fed the general shots that wouldn't compromise operational security and the secrecy of the plan that the generals and brigadiers had been drawing up for some time. To those of us in Bastion, it felt just like the US withdrawal from Saigon must have done back in 1975 for Brian Barron, the BBC correspondent there, and I felt very privileged to be the last TV cameraman filming this historic event. When the final US Marine Corps Hueys and British Chinooks arrived at Kandahar, escorted by Apache attack helicopters, it was an amazing sight, just like a scene from the film *Apocalypse Now*.

Anything that had any monetary value or could assist the opposition had been packed into planes shuttling backwards and forwards between Kandahar and Bastion, including everything from auxiliary ground power units for the planes, tow trucks, fork lifts and, on our last flight out, the final boxes of blood and plasma from the Bastion field hospital that had finally closed its doors for good. Its medical staff had saved countless lives and pioneered medical life-saving procedures that 10 years ago hadn't even been thought of.

Experience counts

In preparation for assignments like these, every three years we go through a Hostile Environments training course concentrating on Combat First Aid and awareness of different environments, ordnance and scenarios that might be encountered in different situations. But there are some things that only experience brings; for example, wearing goggles to protect your eyes when boarding a helicopter; carrying dry bags and plastic bags to protect the camera and lens from being sandblasted; carrying a headtorch for trips to the ablutions after dark; having earplugs handy for the noisy plane and chopper flights; and being able to differentiate between essentials and 'nice to haves' that sometimes have to be ditched to lighten the load.

Keeping track of time

I've learned the value of leaving your MacBook clock on UK time in order to keep the edit buzzing along and ensure packages are fed in time for the news bulletins. Afghanistan is 4.5 hours ahead of London time, which can get a little confusing when you've not had enough sleep. Covering news can be a pretty exhilarating experience but if you aren't prepared there are many potential pitfalls along the way.

With tight deadlines and 'today's news being history tomorrow', good shoot-edits need equipping not only with good HD acquisition equipment but also with a quick and reliable editing platform. To this goal, BBC News Field Operations have put together a Final Cut Pro X conversion training course for the newsgathering camera crews, along with equipping them with the latest MacBook Pros that can have software updates pushed to them in the field from the London Operations team, as and when appropriate. We have put a lot of work in with various potential software suppliers over the past couple of years testing different versions and running numerous workshops. In the middle of 2014 we arrived at the point where we were able to announce that we were going to upgrade our edit software from Final Cut Pro 7 to FCP X. I have been using this for over a year now, soak testing it around the world, doing fast edits for the BBC News at Six and Ten o'clock programmes, and it is performing



Sending video footage back via Bgan satellite terminal from Camp Bastion

extremely well, able to ingest nearly every format thrown at it and to output speedily in the correct format appropriate for real-time baseband playout or with our own in-house developed Jupiter File Exchange (JFE) FTP software. We are continuing the dialogue with the Apple application developers in Cupertino, California to further enhance the application in terms of speed and features appropriate not only for news but also to benefit the wider editing community.



Top: Filming final flag ceremony, Camp Bastion
Bottom: UK union flag lowering

A long career with one employer

So, nearly 34 years after starting out as a camera trainee in BBC Wales at the Llandaff Studios (now up for sale), before moving on to Outside Broadcasts for four years at Kendal Avenue (demolished a while back), I am one of the lucky ones to have been with one employer for my whole career. And just this year, after too long a gap, BBC News is now spearheading the broadcast industry by once again taking on Technical Apprentices. A few weeks ago I had the privilege while running a FCP X course to see the benefits to both sides of recruiting keen youngsters. One of my 'trainees' was a recently appointed apprentice and he brought a fresh face to the course with lots of ideas and enthusiasm. Long may this continue in an industry that has sadly neglected training for far too long.

And in a nice twist I am now back based at the Park Western News Operations hub at Kendal Avenue – the place I left 25 years ago in 1989 in my move to become a news cameraman.

Fact File

GTC member Paul Francis has been a cameraman for 34 years and a news cameraman since 1989. He is now Global Lead, BBC News Field Cameras & Editing.

Twitter: @manuelfocus

See some of the Camp Bastion news reports:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-29776438>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-29776437>

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Producers now favour Depth of Field
After discovering a 1940's film with everything in focus.

Tricasters fully booked

Milliband & May surprise partners in the new Strictly Come Dancing Show

Getting together for the first time public David and Theresa said they were looking forward to the Lat but would have to polish up on the Ballroom.

Coldest winter since 2013 Looms

Mini now added to hire stock

Broadcast Pay now higher than local councils (just)

TV staff can now expect average pay of over £500,000 thanks to new negotiations. Top executives are now in line with council CEOs on an average of £2million per year, plus incentive bonuses based on attendance & meetings per month.

Better pay equals better programmes a spokesman said. If you want the best people then one has to pay the best pensions.

*not true - few still available call 01932 570001