

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.

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

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