

DUSTY WARRIORS: MODERN SOLDIERS AT WAR

Richard Holmes

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Richard Holmes presents some insight into the events following the controversial Allied invasion of Iraq during early 2003. The events surrounding the insurgency after the premature declaration of victory in May 2003 by the former US President George W Bush forms the backdrop to the publication. At the heart of the publication reside the experiences of one particular British unit, the 1st Battalion, The Princess of Wales Royal Regiment (1 PWRR), which deployed to Iraq during April 2004.

In essence much of the narrative turns upon the personal experiences of C Company of this battalion - a focus that brings a salient human face to the action as described by the author and those involved. The publication, however, covers and provides insight into much more than the tactical events and the violent uprising that raged in the British Sector in the south of Iraq.

An interesting aspect in the book is the way in which the PWRR emerged from the British regimental system and this in itself offers a glimpse of the changes, some of them quite disturbing, which the British military system is increasingly exposed to. At the heart of the insights offered by Holmes one detects a frustration by those that have to make it work with a military system that is being stretched in order to cope with political demands. From a recruitment and training perspective, so it appears, the going is increasingly difficult and often at odds with a civil society not always holding the military in high esteem and portraying traits which are even more

in conflict with military culture. The two opening chapters set an almost historical and institutional backdrop to the discussions about the later operations in Iraq. As such the reader is taken along a pathway that depicts the intricacies (both military and civilian) involved in readying a British combat unit for operations in a distant theatre.

This book follows a chronological flow that takes the reader through the preparations of the unit and its soldiers, the deployment to Iraq, employment in the theatre of operations, and their eventual return, together with a close human reflection on their experiences while in theatre. Although the broad unfolding of the preparation, deployment, employment and demobilisation is offered from typically higher level (Battalion Commander, Company Commander) perspectives, much attention was given to personal experiences of the junior ranks during their operations in their sector. In a sense, the author managed to build a narrative that comprises both a broader theme of British forces in a seemingly unpopular war, and the personal experiences of soldiers (privates in particular) who seem to be doing their utmost to serve professionally in a combat unit of the British Army.

The larger part of the narrative focuses on the operational experiences of 1PWRR in the southern Maysan Province of Iraq. Here British forces had to do battle with a growing insurgent threat under the “fog of war” conditions that Von Clausewitz warns against. The province itself (in the words of Lt Col Matt Mear, Officer Commanding 1PWRR) was an “independent, insular, introspective, violent province” that neither fully welcomed the regime of Saddam Hussein, nor the coalition forces. The narrative by Holmes goes to some length to point out the somewhat anarchic state of affairs facing the British contingent, but of interest remains the perception that it all stems from a traditionally restless province, which with the fall of the Saddam regime merely accentuated existing fissures.

Four chapters are dedicated to the experiences of 1 PWRR as they entered and rotated through their area of responsibility. These chapters comprise multiple verbatim exchanges and opinions of soldiers that express their frustrations, relief, anguish and emotions of losing colleagues due to injuries or death. A golden thread runs through the narrative and depicts the operational experiences – uncertainty, boredom, high intensity battles, and even the aloofness of the soldiers at times to what was going on around them. Although these narratives at times seem to drag on or reflect similar expressions over and over, their importance lies in the focus on junior soldiers who are rotating through the military system and on their way back to civilian life at the end of the tour.

Quite a section of the narrative covers the politico-military interface in conveying the duality of operations. Doing good and playing constructive

humanitarian roles feature alongside the heat of battle in an unforgiving climate. Here the political side of things features side-by-side with military matters in a conflict of which the contours are difficult to draw and perhaps even more confusing to the junior soldiers whose primary concerns were most probably to survive and help their fellow soldiers to do the same.

One of the most interesting sections is the reflection upon experiences at the end of the deployment. Extensive narratives of commitment and personal loyalties to each other, rather than the system, are contrasted to British society to which so many of the soldiers had to return. It appears that these experiences, military discipline, comradeship, personal loyalties to each other, and forged ties through fire and emotions do not sit comfortably with emergent (or even reigning) trends in current British civil society. British society from which the privates are drawn and have to return to, rarely display the traditional family structures and safety nets for young people which are desirable. Neither does British life reflect the personal commitment, self-sacrifice and mutual trust all traits that are so important to soldiers and military life during operations. This schism becomes obvious in reading the text, but of significance is the satisfaction of the officers with their soldiers and their actions under fire.

In spite of the negative, or “the few rotten apples in an otherwise sound barrel” (as expressed by the then Chief of the British Army) the difficulties and the wrongdoings are not ignored or denied. Important though, the ills and excesses are not denied, nor defended blindly, but acknowledged and set on the record together with how the British military attempts to deal with the negative or more abusive side of what they do. Although not surprising or perhaps even predictable, the emphasis is placed upon the traditional schism between soldiers’ and civilians’ lives, their worlds and difference in ethos. Albeit a reality, it appears that the British military system is heavily scrutinised and the going found tough in the Iraqi theatre. This challenge, however, is not due to bad soldiers or soldiering, but perhaps more about a reflection of British society and political decisions being at odds with these of the armed forces.

The publication covers a very wide spectrum of military affairs, and perhaps just somewhat too stretched for the average reader. The extensive narratives of individuals tend to become somewhat predictable, and are perhaps pushed to its limit. The thematic flow of the publication is good while the long introduction and extensive reflection at the end have both a positive and negative effect on the reader. For the dedicated reader involved or schooled in the intricacies of the “bigger picture” surrounding contemporary military operations and within the context of the publication these might be good. For the average reader where the focus or attraction

is most probably upon the experiences in theatre and less about the intricacies of the politico-strategic architecture that eventually make such deployments possible, these narratives could become boring. The publication nonetheless offers an extensive outline of just how complicated military operations had become even for a traditionally professional military as the British in the early 21st century.

Finally, the publication is well illustrated with relevant maps of Iraq, the Maysan province, as well as outlays of the small cities and settlements where 1PWRR operated. Photos taken during the period of deployment are also displayed which provide good images of the conditions and people involved in the war. The glossary assists to decipher the traditional military slang, acronyms and preferences for 'army talk' that normally emerges and is passed on between rotating units. The publication includes 1 PWRR Honours and awards that show the empathy of fellow soldiers to those who were injured and died during the period of deployment.

Dr Francois Vreĳ, Faculty of Military Science, Stellenbosch University.