

The Battle of Camp Bastion Helmand, Afghanistan

By Anthony C Heaford

Last updated December 2021

The Taliban's devastatingly successful attack on Camp Bastion's airfield on 14/15 September 2012 was a low point in British and United States military history, and amongst many contenders was one of the lowest points of the entire Afghan campaign for the NATO coalition. The Taliban's surprise attack resulted in the US Air Force's biggest combat loss of aircraft since the Vietnamese Tet Offensive of 1968 and the deaths of two US Marines, Lieutenant Colonel Raible and Sergeant Atwell.



Camp Bastion Airfield Damage



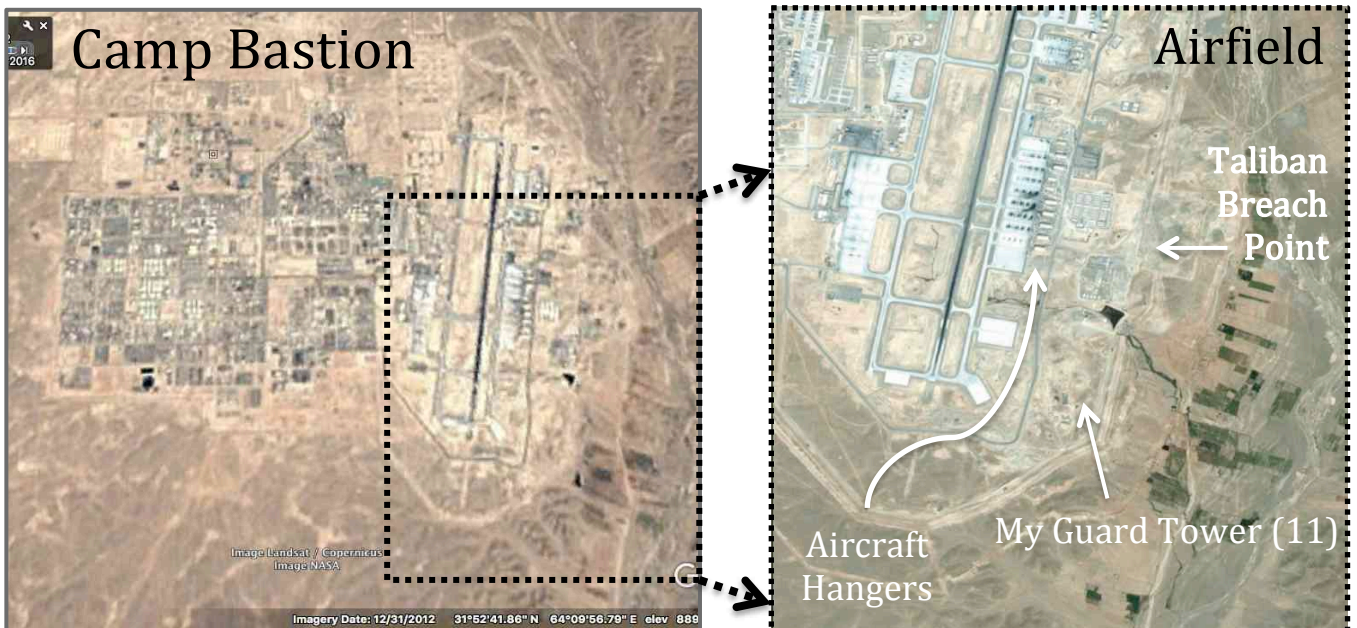
Lt Col Chris Raible



Sgt Brad Atwell

Camp security had been a British responsibility, one we'd refused to share with NATO coalition partners. Our commanders had declined numerous offers of help to secure the already known to be insecure base. Yet despite being short of vital kit (night vision goggles) and willing sentries, British officers remained resolute – it was their camp and only their soldiers could guard it.

I was a forty-two year old British army reserve vehicle mechanic on my first operational tour. My view of Camp Bastion's airfield was from guard tower eleven on the southeastern edge of the camp, where I voluntarily completed many twenty-four hour guard duties that summer.

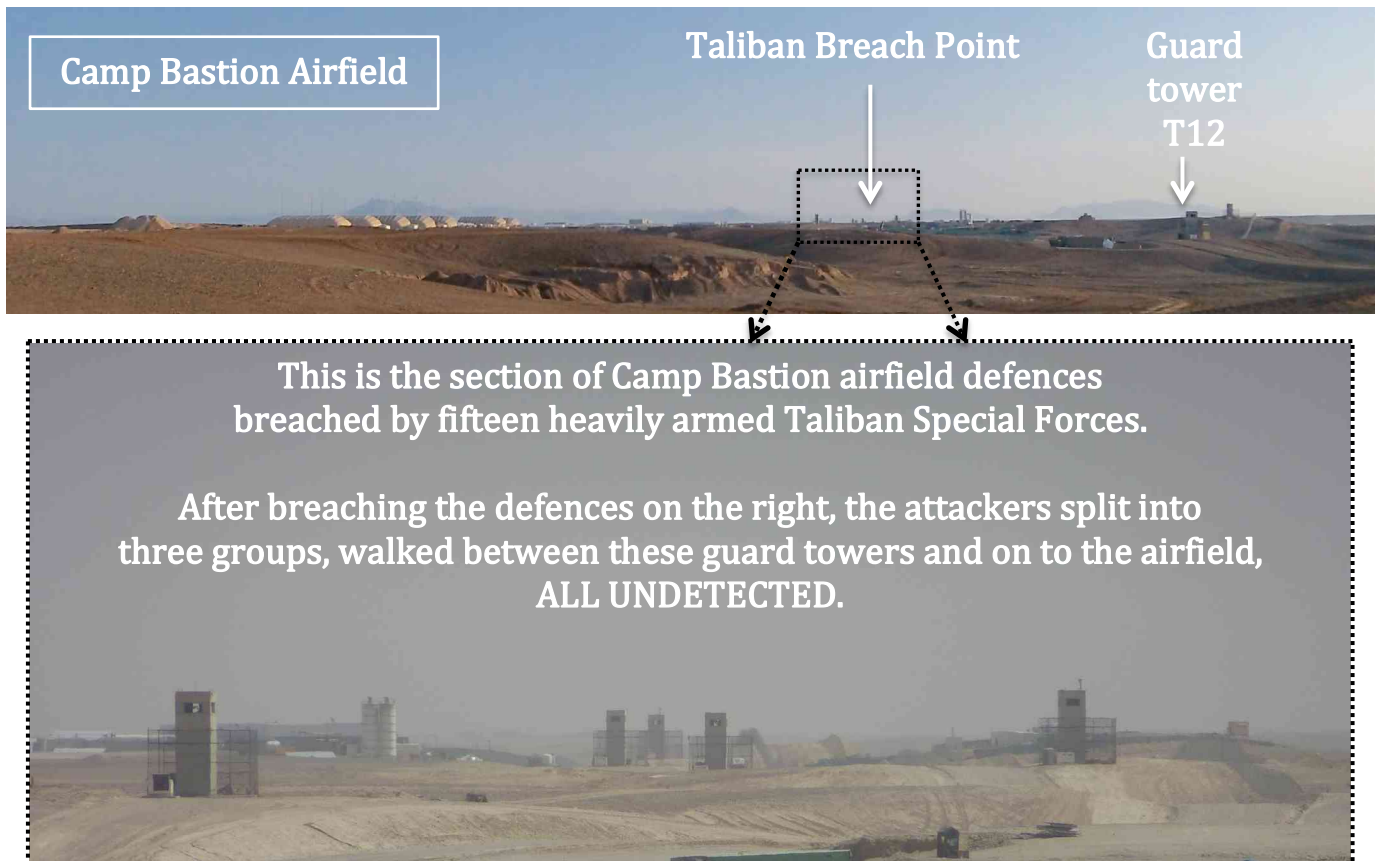


My first and last guard duties in tower eleven were 20/21 April and 06/07 September. I recall both duties clearly because they were the two scariest days of my entire tour – my fear being of my own commander's dereliction of duty rather than any fear of potential enemy action.

I hope this report will expose the ongoing cover-up of the catastrophic failures and criminal activities of British commanders that cost our American allies so dearly.

The Battle of Camp Bastion, by Anthony C Heaford

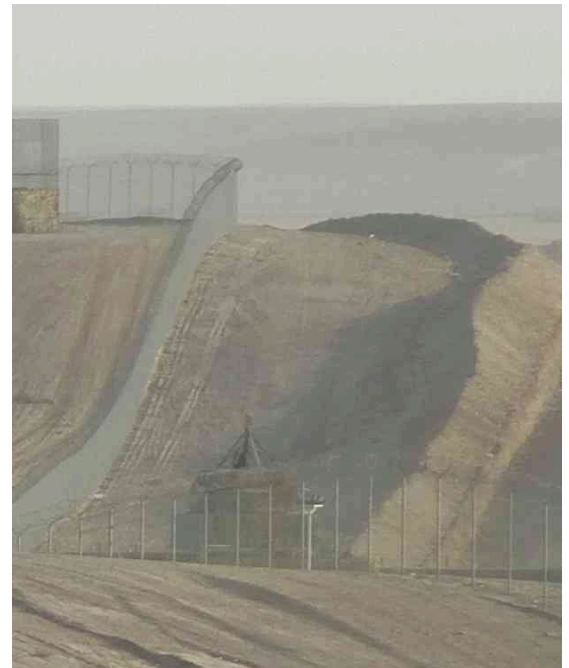
This was the view looking north from guard tower eleven, showing the route used by the attackers:



Moving from right to left across the photo above, the fifteen attackers evaded coils of razor wire, scaled a raised earth berm and then crossed ten metres of open ground before being forced to pause at the perimeter fence. They stopped long enough to cut a hole in the chain link fence and then entered the base, accessing the airfield by walking between our guard towers, all undetected – well almost all anyway.

During interrogation the one surviving Taliban attacker revealed that tower seventeen had shone a torch at them as they entered the base, as per this quote from the US Forces Command investigation:

"The attackers had been informed Tower 17 would be unmanned, but the detainee reported Tower 17 trained a light towards the attackers once they were inside the perimeter. However, the attackers were able to move into a small wadi, and Tower 17 did not react further."



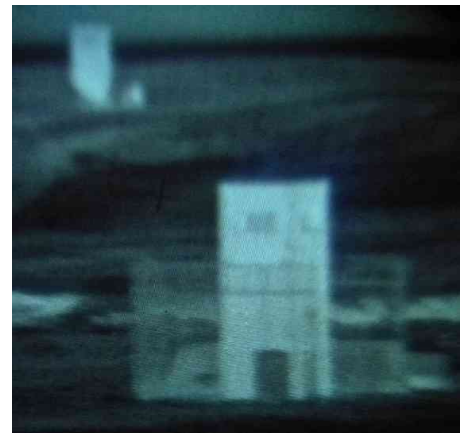
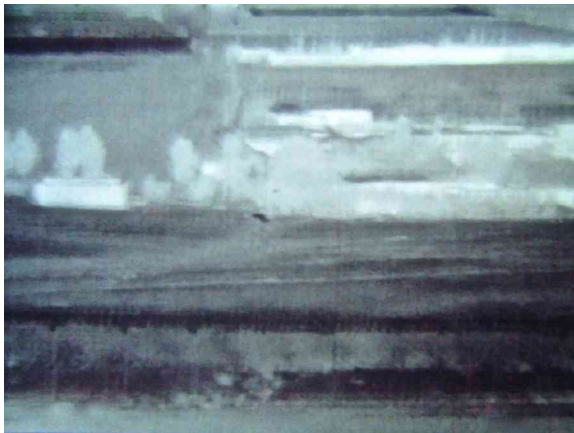
This quote highlights two critical security matters:

- By shining a torch the sentry showed both alertness and notable courage, a torch being a perfect aiming marker for any enemy attackers.
- The Tongan guard towers were not issued with night-vision equipment; a widely known fact that was ignored by both the British parliamentary inquiry and the US Forces Command investigation.



Night Vision Goggles and the Tongan Guard Towers

These comparison images were taken through night vision goggles (NVG) from tower eleven. They show the effective range (over 800-metres) and the intensity of the image enhancement provided by our NVG. The actual images seen through the NVG were far, far clearer than these photos portray.



I can state categorically that unless all the guards were asleep it would have been effectively impossible for fifteen attackers to approach the base, breach the defences, then walk between our guard towers and on to the airfield without detection, ***assuming*** all the guards had NVG that is. But such an assumption about the NVGs (which could easily be made from reading the official British inquiry & US investigation) is wrong.

Within hours of the attack it was common knowledge amongst British soldiers that the Taliban's airfield breach succeeded because the British Commonwealth Tongan soldiers assigned to guard that section of the fence did NOT have NVGs. The surviving attacker's claim of tower seventeen shining a torch towards them proves the Tongan guards were not asleep either. They were alert enough to hear a disturbance and courageous enough to react by shining a torch towards the attackers, but ultimately they were too ill equipped to be able to see the intruders.

British commanders had given the Tongan soldiers a permanent duty – weeks on end - of guarding that section of the airfield perimeter, unenviably occupying the guard towers closest to the base's sewerage treatment pool.

In contrast British national soldiers were assigned just 24-hour guard duties and had two sets of NVGs (one thermal and one infrared) in each tower.

Therefore it must be concluded that the British commander's decision NOT to equip the Tongan guards with NVGs (a dereliction of duty) was the principle reason fifteen heavily armed Taliban were able to breach the perimeter defenses of NATO's main operating base in Helmand.

Ignored Warning Signs of the Impending Attack

“Absence of Normal Activity and Presence of Abnormal Activity” is a military mantra, used to remind personnel of easily visible warning signs of a possible attack, whether they’re based in a static guard tower or when patrolling in an operational area. An example of this is if when patrolling through a normally busy village, personnel observe empty streets and closed shops. That would be described as a “Combat Indicator” – an easily visible sign of a likely enemy ambush or the presence of a hidden improvised explosive device in said street.

On my guard duty of 7th September 2012, just seven days before the attack on Camp Bastion, I saw multiple “Combat Indicators”, most of which I photographed and which are shown below.

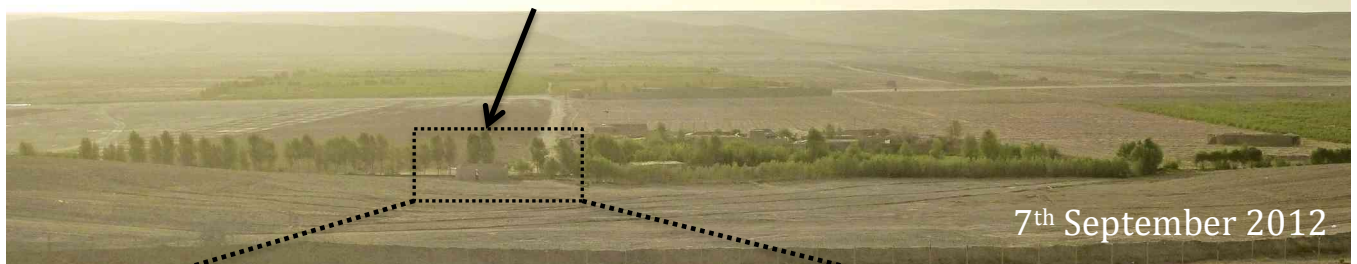
Looking east, directly opposite guard tower eleven was the principle compound in the valley besides our airfield, containing the mosque that served the collection of buildings in the valley. From my first guard duty in April and up until August it was a hive of activity: vehicles coming and going, significant pedestrian activity, and its occupants tending the surrounding fields.

Normal activity at the principle compound that summer:



Absence of normal activity at the principle compound on 7th September:

An old man walking an unusual route in the early morning - seemingly deliberately to be seen by us - was the only activity I saw at this principle compound over the entire 24-hour duty



The Battle of Camp Bastion, by Anthony C Heaford

Normal activity at the second principle compound that summer:



A complete absence of normal activity at the same compound on 7th September:



The remaining half dozen compounds to the south of the principle compound appeared unoccupied but again on 7th September that changed, when there was a definite presence of the abnormal there.

Normal activity around the southern compounds that summer - none:



Abnormal activity around the southern compounds on 7th September:



Three men appearing (unconvincingly) to construct a new compound besides the other seemingly unoccupied ones, and a lone figure loitering in the doorway of the compound furthest to the south.

The Battle of Camp Bastion, by Anthony C Heaford

Presence of abnormal activity on 7th September:

This image taken early on the 7th September shows a nomad encampment on the near side of the valley, and a camel train on the far side of the wadi (a small river canyon) that ran down the centre of the valley.

The nomad encampment was directly opposite our Camp's eastern entrance and for that reason alone I deemed their presence there as suspicious. This was all absence of normal / presence of abnormal activity from the perspective of an observant guard tower occupant. Looking at each matter in isolation:

- Normally busy compounds appearing deserted
- Construction of new compounds besides unoccupied compounds
- A lone figure observing the airfield from a derelict compound
- Nomads camping and a camel train passing opposite the camp's eastern entrance

- could be considered normal activity within the patchwork of Afghan life. But viewed collectively - all within a twenty-four hour period, coinciding with the biannual rotation of 10,000 British personnel in Helmand (a hugely vulnerable time) – they proverbially screamed “Combat Indicators” to me.

This image, also taken in the early morning of 7th September, looking northeastwards from tower eleven, shows several things:

- An absolute shambles of unguarded construction work running from the public road that ran parallel to the airfield, continuing right up to our defences
- The embanked entrance track leading to the camp's eastern entrance & onto the airfield
- A lone female using the perimeter security track as a jogging track, showing our complete naivety / ambivalence to the fact that there were enemy forces on the other side of that fence willing to sacrifice their lives to kill or inflict damage on us.



A close-up of the top right-hand corner of the image above shows a motorcyclist on that public road and a herder tending his flock.

The shepherd was again *the presence of the abnormal* given that I'd never seen such

activity in that area. But more significantly that location is almost exactly where the fifteen Taliban attackers assembled seven days later prior to launching their attack. The proximity of the unsecured construction work to the public road is also very clearly visible in this close-up image.



Presence of abnormal activity on 6th September:

Anyone outside of a compound after dark in rural Afghanistan could be considered abnormal activity; it simply wasn't done outside of exceptional circumstance or specifically nocturnal agricultural activity. So when I saw a lone figure crouching in a roadside drainage ditch directly opposite my guard tower at about 21:30 hours on the 6th September, I became instantly alarmed. I couldn't see a weapon and they posed no immediate threat but my instant thought was "We're being probed". I thought our enemies were testing the alertness, reactions and capabilities of the airfield guard towers. Firing an illumination flare seemed the most appropriate reaction to me, demonstrating that they had been seen and that we would react to such unusual activity. But even that simple action presented a problem; standing instructions for guards that summer were:

"Don't fire flares because it disturbs the neighbours"

Those neighbours were the Afghans who'd decided to build compounds besides our base, a few hundred metres from a busy military runway. Despite that standing instruction I considered the lone figure I'd seen reason enough to illuminate the valley with a flare and so I radioed the guard commander with my request. I believe the guard commander used our overhead surveillance assets to view the activity before he replied to my request, telling me *"No, don't worry about it"*.

But my concerns remained. I suspected the guard commander had seen or thought the lone figure was from the nomad's tents and was just using the ditch as a toilet facility, none of which corresponded with what I deemed to be normal activity. The lone figure was over a hundred metres from the nomad's tents and I'd seen local relieving themselves in fallow fields in broad daylight that summer. Walking over one hundred metres in darkness to relieve them self in a drainage ditch simply didn't make sense. I continued to observe the activity. Upon leaving the ditch the figure appeared to move surreptitiously before disappearing into a thicket on the far side of the road. My concern at this point caused me to question the guard commander's instruction *"Not to worry"*. I radioed the guard commander a second time, relaying the new movements to them before again asking permission to illuminate the valley with a flare - a request again denied. I became terrified; it was clear to me our defences were being probed and it was becoming blatantly apparent to me that base security was superseded by our commander's desire not to *"disturb the neighbours"*.

Another standing instruction repeated to the British guards manning the airfield guard towers that summer was:

"Don't worry about it, Mohammed Daoud [Noorzai] controls this valley."

This was the guard command's standard reply to the multiple concerns I raised that summer; Mohammed Daoud Noorzai was the governor of Washir District in Helmand (where Camp Bastion was situated). The worst instances of this delusional attitude I witnessed were during my first and last guard duties in tower eleven. The latter was their refusal to allow me to illuminate the valley with a flare as described above. The former was during my first guard duty in April. Just two weeks into my first operational tour with the British army I found myself protecting opium harvesting from interference by our allies - the local Afghan forces.

During an initial guard tower briefing we were told that allied Afghan forces were harassing the farmers in the valley besides the airfield. Our orders were to call the Quick Reaction Force if any Afghan security personnel even entered the valley. Upon observing the farmer's activity it was clear what they were doing - harvesting opium in a poppy field less than two hundred metres from our perimeter fence. When two senior officers visited the guard tower I repeated the briefing we'd been given before pointing to the opium harvesting and asking if the officers could see what they were doing. Their response was galling - they both began laughing whilst moving quickly to the observation platform exit. Between sniggers, their last words as they disappeared from view were:

"We can't see anything"

Warnings From Our American Allies Ignored

I wasn't the only person concerned about the activity besides the airfield that summer. These quotes are from the declassified US investigation into the Taliban's attack:

"[The US Commanding Officer of Task Force Belleau Wood] and the [Regional Command South-West] both assessed that the [Camp Bastion] Complex was increasingly being probed. Personnel from [US 3rd Marine Air Wing], including Major General Sturdevant, felt they were being observed externally, and [US Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 211] submitted reports to [US 3rd Marine Air Wing] regarding their concerns of external observation. Finally, the individuals that we interviewed consistently expressed concern about the vulnerability and security threat posed by the villages and poppy fields increasingly encroaching on the eastern and south-eastern perimeter of Camp Bastion."
<https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/142/USCENTCOM%20Bastion%20Attack%20Investigation%20Redacted%2015-6%20Report.pdf>

The British parliamentary inquiry in to the attack quoted one US commander as saying:

"We literally had poppy growing right up against the perimeter fence. That was another thing that Major General Gurganus tried to take action on, but he wasn't able to accomplish that. It was because the Afghans had to do it. We weren't allowed to. The biggest external threat to the base came from there"
<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmdfence/830/830.pdf>

It is therefore clear that the most senior British commanders were deceiving our US allies with regards to the poppy cultivation besides the airfield. Not only were British forces preventing Afghan forces from stopping the opium production there, we were irrigating the poppy fields too – with water purified to European drinking standards inside our base:

Figure 2. Land Under Agriculture, Camp Bastion, Helmand



"The February 2014 image shows water stored inside [Camp Bastion] as well as the [airfield] run-off subsequently used to irrigate poppy along the perimeter wall of the base. The March 2015 image [after British and NATO forces had departed] shows the lack of storage water and run-off and a substantial drop in land under agriculture, including poppy cultivation."

<https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW112-Effective-Monitoring-and-Evaluation-in-Conflict-Affected-Environments-Afghanistan-Post-2014.pdf>

The Battle of Camp Bastion, by Anthony C Heaford

Another matter that British commanders deceived our allies about, and another abandonment of basic military doctrine, was the issue of soldiers sleeping on guard duty. Again on my first guard duty in an operational theatre I was informed of this during my initial guard briefing in tower eleven. After briefing us about situational matters, such as Afghan forces harassing the [opium producing] farmers besides the base, the Royal Air Force (RAF) Regiment sergeant gave us all a firm warning about sleeping on guard duty.

Clearly livid with frustration, the RAF Regt. guard sergeant said that we probably already knew about the soldiers recently caught neglecting their guard duty going unpunished by the senior command. He went on to say that while the senior command may consider this normally Court Martial offence as a minor infraction, he personally would go to great lengths to punish anyone he caught neglecting their guard duty.

A senior security contractor present at the weekly garrison commander's meetings has since revealed the reasoning and politics behind this abandonment of basic military doctrine, as detailed below.

Secondary Witness

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/iain-reid-4632111b/> Iain Reid's career began with the Scots Guards in 1976. His twelve-years military service covered much of the counter insurgency conflict known as *The Troubles* (during which he experienced and dealt with some of the most horrific of events). Reid's military service included eighteen-months with the Intelligence Corps as an Intelligence Analyst. Having reached the rank of sergeant, Reid left the army in 1988 to begin a seventeen-year career with the Kent police force. Again serving as an Intelligence Analyst, he spent eight-years specifically dealing with crime and terrorism offences (anti terrorist branch), gaining practical experience of both.

Utilizing his twenty-nine years professional military and police service Iain Reid then became an independent security and investigations professional, deploying as a private military contractor to Iraq, Kuwait and Afghanistan. And that was how he found himself attending the weekly garrison commander's meetings in Camp Bastion in 2011 and 2012, to where the following quotations refer:

"I used to attend the Friday morning GSM [Garrison Sergeant Major's] briefing in [Bastion]. People being caught [sleeping] on stag going unpunished with the RMP [Royal Military Police] CSM [Company Sergeant Major] going ballistic and clearly stating that being caught asleep on stag in an Operational Zone was a Court Martial offence and receiving zero support. Another instance was an incursion that was spotted by ISTAR [overhead surveillance] assets and not the sentry(s)... As for the tales of horror reference tagging-on [active guard duty], they are unfortunately true. The GSM was of the opinion that people caught sleeping on stag should be given a 'Firm talking too'. I had to arm lock and pin down the RMP CSM (metaphorically speaking) on more than one occasion."

"It [Bastion garrison weekly meeting / Friday] was usually a discussion of such weighty matters as sleeves up or down, shirts tucked in or out and a weekly bun-fight of the '10 best reasons why my men can't do sangar guard duty'. Sleeping on sentry was topic raised by the RMP commander almost weekly, him being of the opinion that offenders should be subject to Court Martial. The garrison commander however thought a 'stern talking to' would sort that problem."

"Unfortunately it was a 'mind-set' issue, [Bastion] was 'never going to be attacked' and forcing people into Sangars when they could be stuffing themselves with KFC and Pizza whilst 'chilling' was the overriding factor. The GSM was fighting a losing battle and there were quite few WOs [Warrant Officers] around that table who were complicit and quite happy for him to do so as long as they looked good in the eyes of their guys. Couple that with the totally slack attitude to being caught asleep on stag, failing to observe / detect incursions through the wire prior to the attack (and lack of any disciplinary action) and you have a major cluster-fuck just waiting to occur. To be honest, I'm surprised it didn't happen years ago."

The Battle of Camp Bastion, by Anthony C Heaford

"People didn't pull their weight and were ably assisted by their Senior-NCOs [Non-Commissioned Officers] and WOs. As stated in a couple of threads I had to attend the Friday Morning GSM's meeting. Slagging off aside, I sat and listened as the same, tired old excuses were dribbled out by people who should damn well know better as to why 'their lads' couldn't possibly get their arses in a [guard tower] for two hours, whilst the GSM was virtually reduced to begging for [personnel]."

"It got to the stage when I was out there [Afghanistan] that 'Sleeping on Sentry' in a War Zone was, by the GSMs definition, something to be dealt with by a 'stern talking to' rather than the Court Martial that it deserved,"

"So not unlike the two or four man teams breaching BASTION for months before the Taliban got stuck in??? [Sarcastic rhetorical response>] Nah, they were only stealing vehicle batteries and the sentries weren't really asleep / non-existent, were they? Insert pathetic Regimental excuse here"

These damning statements from the most qualified of witnesses, Mr. Iain Reid, validate a lot of my own testimony regarding the senior British commander's dereliction of duty when it came to securing Camp Bastion.

Conclusion

The testimony, photos and witness quotes presented here should be enough to justify new British and American inquiries into an attack that cost two men their lives and caused the USA its biggest combat loss of aircraft since the Vietnamese Tet Offensive of 1968.

There's enough evidence here to justify a criminal investigation of British commanders too.

The British command's delusional denial of responsibility is best summed up by retired British Royal Marine officer Lieutenant General Sir David Capewell, KCB, OBE claim that our complicity in the production of opium besides Camp Bastion (shown below) was "a minor tactical error" when in reality it was a criminally duplicitous, mission defeating, strategic catastrophe.

