

Criminal orders from an incompetent British command in Afghanistan

by Anthony C Heaford - 3rd August 2017

It was in the cool of the Afghan night as we prepared for a 4 a.m. departure from Camp Bastion on a combat logistic patrol (resupply convoy) that we were called over for a final briefing. It included route changes, new intelligence of the threats we faced, and orders to stone children, fire mini-flares directly towards them and to threaten them with loaded pistols.

All the children circled in red in the photos below would have been legitimate targets of these escalation of force orders. Those circled in yellow would have been categorised as 'collateral damage' if one of our mini-flares had hit them, because of their proximity to a 'legitimate target'.



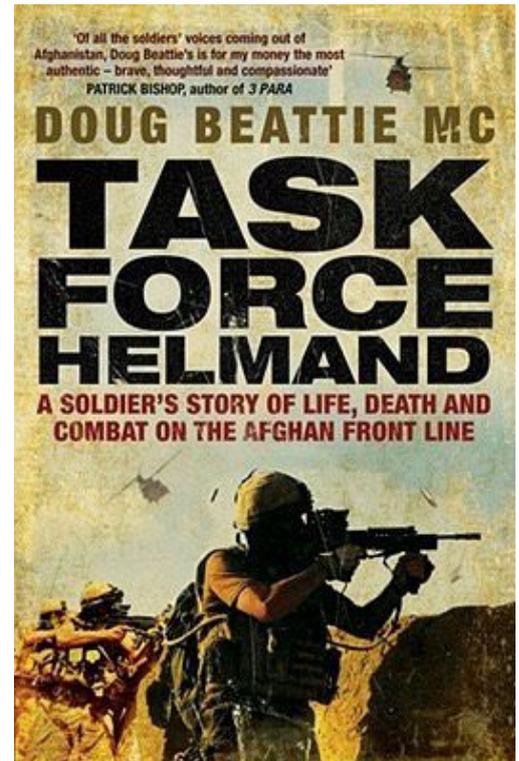
The only legal uses of such incendiary munitions are as day-time signal flares or for night-time illumination, and in both cases there's only one direction to fire them – up. The standing order for this patrol, given to a gathering of over one-hundred mixed rank soldiers, was to fire the mini-flares “so they bounce off the ground besides them”. ‘Them’ being unarmed Afghan children - stone throwers and children trying to steal unsecured kit off the moving vehicles.

[Link to a two-minute youtube video showing the inaccuracy of mini-flares](#)

One man who can give testament to the dangers of incendiary munitions is Doug Beattie MC, a former Captain in the Royal Irish Regiment and a veteran of some of the most intense combat in Afghanistan. He was serving in Helmand in May 2008 when an Afghan Father brought his daughter to him. Her name was Shabia, she was seven-years old and had been playing in fields when a white phosphorus shell fired by the British to create a smoke screen had landed besides her. First the red-hot shrapnel cut in to her body, before the white phosphorus the shell contained splashed on her too – burning her hair and scalp. The shell hadn't been aimed at her - it hadn't been aimed at anything in particular in fact. It was fired to produce a smoke screen, intended as a warning that 'the British were here'.

Despite our being 100% responsible for her injuries, instead of evacuating her to the world class hospital in Camp Bastion she was left to die at a thread bare Afghan hospital where they had neither the skills or facilities to treat her. She died the next day. To compound the pain of her family, because her death was considered 'incidental to legitimate operations' this meant the family were not entitled to compensation.

Doug Beatty would later write of this incident in his book 'Task Force Helmand':



“It made me embarrassed. And ashamed; of myself and of the army and of my country”

Rules of Engagement

Mission Directive, issued by Brigadier Doug Chalmers:
(now Major General)

Operate in Accordance with The Law - Live our values.

Stay true to the values we hold dear.

This is what distinguishes you from our enemies.

Know your Rules of Engagement.

Do not break the law. **Do not retaliate.**

Do not abuse the powers you have,
or the force you have on call.

You will undermine our position if you do.

Do not accept it if others act illegally or cross the line.

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Command Directive, issued by General David Richards:

(now a Baron in the House of Lords)

This is a tough, difficult campaign which will go on testing everyone involved.

We know that it can be brutal, physically demanding, and at times it will be hugely frustrating. You should prepare to face moments of outrage and despair.

*But you must not give in to the pressure. Do not break the law. **Do not retaliate.***

So why was I receiving orders to throw stones at children, fire mini-flares towards them, and to threaten them with loaded pistols?

The intention of these orders was to stop stone throwing children and those attempting to steal unsecured items off our vehicles as the convoys crawled along narrow village lanes through those children's home villages.



We were an obvious curiosity for the children living in these mud brick Afghan villages - their most common reaction was to wave and offer outstretched hands hoping for sweets to be thrown to them. Throwing them items from our ration packs had been common practice throughout the occupation – giving children the boiled sweets and other unwanted food items. This led to our patrols becoming a magnet to the children, driven by curiosity and a hope for sweets.

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Whilst I wouldn't describe this as deliberately creating a human shield, I will say I always felt safest when there were children nearby. Regardless of whether they were throwing stones or not, their presence was the best 'indicator' that we weren't about to get ripped apart by an Improvised Explosive Device (IED). I've heard similar sentiments from veterans of Northern Ireland relating to their fear of snipers. Regardless of that proximity to the children being intentional or not, these are the realities of a conflict zone and especially counter-insurgencies.

And kids will be kids - especially ones living in a War torn conflict zone. Some threw stones at our vehicles as we drove through their villages; about 20% of the children I saw that summer threw (or would have thrown) stones at me. For the majority of that 20% it was just a game, kids being kids - some as young as three or four copying their elder siblings. But there was a minority who were more determined, more 'coordinated' and determined to steal anything that wasn't tied down - but even to these children is still seemed more 'sport' or a challenge than anything more malign.

Once a boy of about ten managed to run alongside our twenty-plus tonne armoured recovery vehicle as we drove through his village and steal the L-shaped battery cover plate. He had managed to release two wing-nuts securing the plate, spinning them off long threads whilst running just inches from wheels that would have squashed him like butter into the hard baked earth. If I could of seen him my orders were first to throw stones at him, then fire a mini-flare at the ground besides him before finally threatening him with a loaded pistol. Whether we should've then escalated to actually shooting the child was a point left open in this pre-dawn briefing.



There was only one child I saw who had vehement hatred showing in his face as he hurled stones at us. I'd guess he was about fourteen years old, the eldest of all the children I saw doing this. I caught his eye as we passed and I will always wonder what particular incident had fuelled his hatred for us, specifically for me at that moment.

I was only hit once by a stone - landing precisely on the centre of the bridge of my ballistic goggles; a perfect shot that got me right between the eyes and did knock me off my perch. The stone had come from two boys stood together who I'd glimpsed in an open courtyard a moment before being hit. Uninjured (just a little dazed), I reached up and gave the two boys a thumbs up for a good shot. As I climbed back on to 'my perch' I saw the two boys bent double with laughter, caused by my light-hearted reaction I think.

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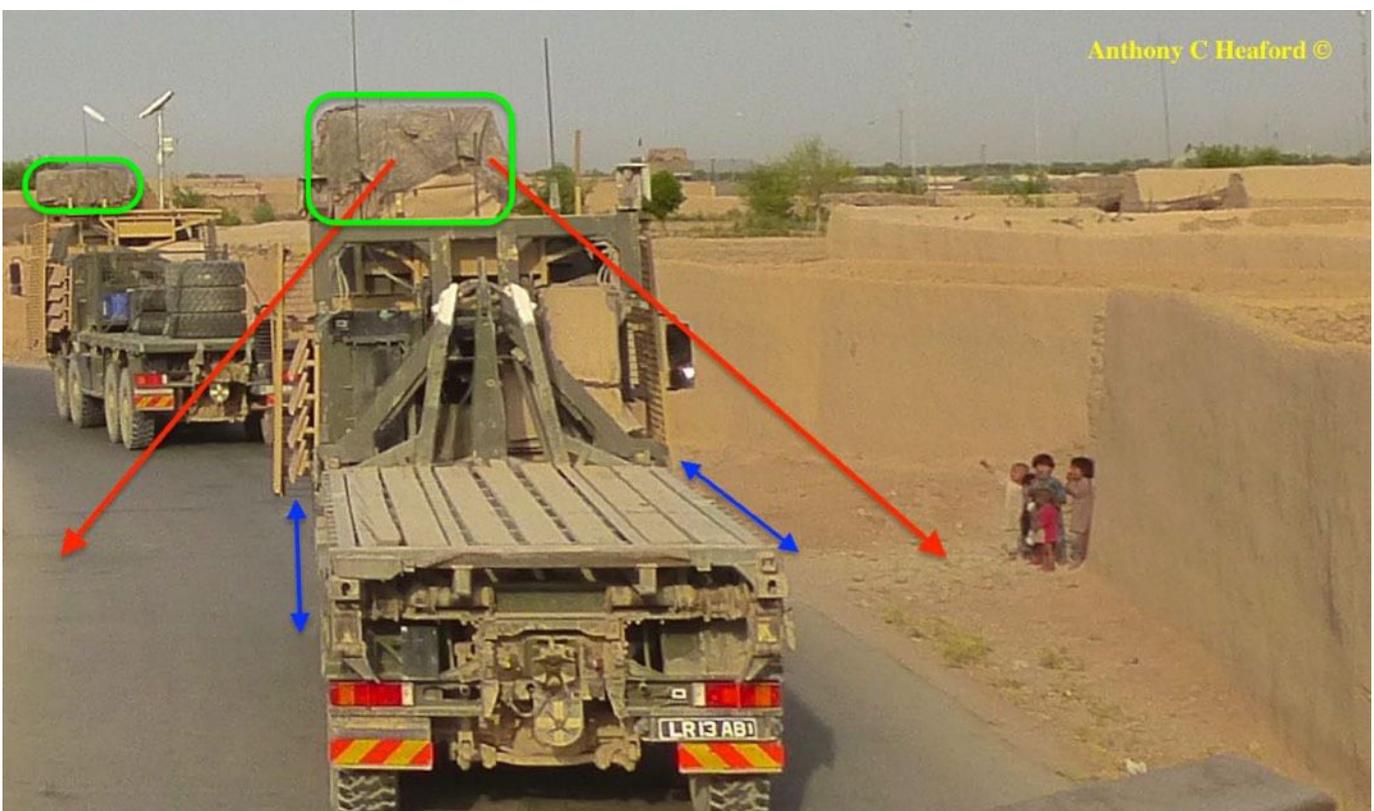
Another time three young children waited besides the road with stones in hand - they'd stoned the vehicle in front and they were ready to stone ours too. When we were about fifteen metres away my driver and commander were amazed to see the children drop their stones and start waving and smiling at our vehicle instead. The vehicle commander asked me what had caused them to do that, so I told him - I'd waved and smiled at the children first.



Refusing an Order

On each of the five patrols I was asked to do 'top-cover' duties I was ordered by my own platoon to take bags of stones to throw at children who threw stones at us and those who came too close to our vehicles. I initially questioned this order and later refused it, stating that I thought it pointless, dangerous, against the mission directive and illegal - breaking both our Rules of Engagement and the Geneva Convention.

I was formally punished within my platoon for refusing to throw stones at children; I was humiliated on parade by a junior officer who accused me of endangering British soldier's lives. Of those judging me most had never left the confines of Bastion and few did a top-cover duty themselves that summer. The recovery mechanics who I was providing top-cover for asked me to do two further patrols with them - I had their confidence and they had mine. They had no objection to my refusal to throw stones at children having seen my alternative tactics work.



My principle objection to the order was that it was pointless and self-defeating, only endangered our lives and those of the children more. As top-cover I operated the belt-fed machine gun mounted in the armour plated cupola (outlined in green above) on the cab's roof, and acted as a lookout to each flank and towards the vehicles in front and behind. In the photo above the red arrows indicate the approximate limit to the line of sight from the cupola to either side of the vehicle. The blue lines show where thefts from vehicles happened - from cabinets and tool racks on the vehicle cab exterior and along the chassis.

And the reason I continued to refuse the order to stone children was because I found a far better tactic to stop the children stoning is or stealing off our vehicle - by pointing a camera at them as shown in the following photos.

Forgotten Doctrine

I will admit that if the tactic of throwing stones at the children had worked I would have done it. The children should not have been near the vehicles, and certainly not throwing anything at us. My primary concern was of a hand grenade being mixed in with the dozens of stones and rocks that would rain down on the cupola as we passed 'vulnerable points'. My secondary concern was of a suicide attacker climbing the ladder like bar-armour to attack us via my cupola. This was a conflict zone with very many skilled, well equipped and determined insurgents wanting us dead at any cost. If my hitting a few errant kids with stones would have even slightly reduced the risk of any of those threats I would have done it.

But the tactic didn't work - the kit thieves were out of sight anyway and the stone throwers were just a distraction. On an ability level the Afghan children would beat us at stone throwing EVERY time, with their numbers (there was only ever one top cover) and accuracy. I even considered buying a catapult and paintball capsules from the internet (Amazon did deliver to Camp Bastion) to use instead of stones, but I found a far easier solution on my first patrol - a camera. I discovered very quickly that as soon as the children saw a camera they would drop their stones and walk away - the first photo in his report shows one such incident, as do these photographs:



A boy of about fourteen years watches two younger boys throwing stones at our patrol



A lookout alerted them to my camera and they immediately stopped throwing stones.

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Realising I had taken their photo they all turn and walk away.

And this photo shows a courtyard where there were three stone throwers - as soon as they saw my camera two ducked behind the wall and the third can be seen walking away here:



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In total I stopped three groups of stone throwing children by pointing my camera at them - as shown in the photos here. I have since found out that this tactic is in fact British army doctrine and has been for over forty-years. It was a method learnt in Aden and Malaya, practiced in the Northern Ireland conflict and perfected in the Hong Kong riots of the 1980s. Official escalation of force orders for the British army in response to civilian disturbances are:

1. Issue PPE – personal protective equipment, principally visors and riot shields
2. Negotiate – try to de-escalate the situation peacefully
3. Photograph – capture evidence of criminal activity for later prosecution
4. Dispersants – the use of tear gas to attempt to disperse the crowd
5. Non-lethal projectiles - baton rounds, rubber bullets, bean bag rounds
6. Lethal force – the use of live rounds to kill / disable the rioters.

In Helmand in 2012 this escalation of force doctrine had been shortened to:

1. Non-lethal projectiles - throw stones at the children
2. Lethal force – fire mini-flares at them before threatening them with pistols

These abbreviated Rules of Engagement did not work. If they did work we would not have been having stone throwing fights with Afghan children or having parts stolen off our moving vehicles in the summer of 2012, six-years after our arrival in Helmand and just as David Cameron was about to declare 'mission accomplished'.

Whilst I never saw anyone actually firing a mini-flare as directed, I heard numerous reports within my own platoon of children being injured by soldier's stone throwing - one report I heard first hand - a soldier in my own platoon bragging - was of the child's nose 'exploding' across his face as it was struck by a large stone.

My driver did attempt to stop the theft of our battery cover by threatening the thief with his pistol but the driver's nose was broken by a stone as soon as he'd opened his door wide enough for a stone to be thrown through by the Afghan child waiting ready for him to do just that. Despite a bloodied nose and surely being dazed and in pain the vehicle didn't swerve or slow, maintaining our place in convoy. He was following the order we'd been given to try to stop our kit being stolen, an order that skipped the first four stages of escalation in the British army's own doctrine.

Despite me disagreeing with the policy & escalation of force orders against children, I 100% support my drivers actions noted in the paragraph above. Due to lack of effective orders to keep children away from our vehicles the driver used the only option available to him. This was not only to stop items being stolen off the vehicles, it was to prevent the danger of magnetic bombs being attached to our vehicles. My driver risked his life to protect mine; the fact that his only option to do this was by threatening children with a pistol was not his fault - it was due to a terrifyingly incompetent command that gave him no other option.

The British army's doctrine was hard learnt over thirty-years of combating rioters in the 1960s, 70s and 80s in Aden, Malaysia, Ireland and Hong Kong. So was this one wayward officer giving these orders, or a single rogue platoon maybe? I don't think so.

This quote from acclaimed journalist and documentary maker [Ben Anderson's](#) book '[No Worse Enemy](#)' suggests not. Ben quotes a British soldier he was on patrol with in Afghanistan, who was describing how they kept civilian cars away from convoys:

“Sometimes we have to use mini-flares, which we fire about ten feet in front of the [civilian] vehicle. That generally does the trick.”

That offensive use of mini-flares against civilians in Afghanistan is also reported first hand by British soldiers when out on patrol in at least one youtube documentary, confirming this was a common, widely known & widely used tactic by British forces over a number of years.

Command Failure

Accountability must start at the very top. Hanging lower ranks out to dry for command failures, as has been done before and is still done today, is pointless and unjust.

In March 2015 I informed Anna Soubry MP (the Minister of State for Defence Personnel at the time) of the following:

***"To clarify the orders I am questioning:
Firing mini-flares towards and throwing stones at Afghan children."***

Ms Soubry MP replied:

"I have been given assurances [from the Ministry of Defence] that stone throwing is not an endorsed policy and this has been made clear in a direction through the chain of command."

Ms. Soubry did not directly address my mini-flare allegations, and effectively dismissed my allegations by challenging me to "prove it".

The next photo puts her reassurances over stone throwing in to context; it is from the British army's official Helmand blog, a major portal for potential recruits. ["ISAF slaves and naughty locals"](#) Official British Army Blog, 7th Dec 2011



"The guy on the front gate took great pride in showing me his 'naughty local' rock. He was even more chuffed to tell me that it should have Version 2 written on it, as Version 1 has already been used! Brilliant!"

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I believe it was ex-General David Richards (now a Baron in the House of Lords) who issued the following directive:

***“... you must not give in to the pressure.
Do not break the law. Do not retaliate.”***

If this directive was issued from the most senior officer within our armed forces, ex-General Richards, why was it not followed? The ex-General must show what he did to actually **ensure** this directive was followed, which it clearly was not.



And it was Brigadier Doug Chalmers (now Major General) who issued this mission statement:

***“Do not break the law. Do not retaliate.
Do not accept it if others act illegally
or cross the line.”***

Again, this is nothing but empty rhetoric that was printed in a glossy brochure produced specifically for our tour and discarded by most before deploying, if read at all. If the Brigadier's mission statement could be so blatantly ignored (not one of the hundred-plus soldiers at that pre-dawn briefing spoke up about the legal/illegal use of mini-flare munitions), should we not now ask how far the Brigadier's command truly extended? Did he know what was going on?

The Brigadier is now a Major General, serving as the 'Deputy Commander-Strategy and Sustainment, Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve'. This is despite it being under Chalmers' command in 2012 that the US Marine Corp lost an entire squadron of Harrier Jump Jet due to gross British incompetence after we failed to secure a chain link fence. Fifteen Taliban WALKED between British guard towers protecting the air field before launching their attack.

Accountability

In lieu of a responsible or accountable command at any level of the British armed forces, parliament, government or police (military & civilian) I presented my allegations to the International Criminal Court (ICC) of the Hague in November 2015. In April 2017 I was informed by the ICC that my testimony had been added to a collection of similar charges made against the British military in Afghanistan and that these items were then under a preliminary examination by the court.

Accountability Update

Under unprecedented threats of sanctions, travel bans and assets freezing from the United States government (Mike Pompeo specifically), the ICC's courageous Chief Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda was forced to resign in 2021 and all investigations into crimes committed during NATO's invasion and occupation of Afghanistan were dropped.

Photographer & Report Author:

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Six month tour of Afghanistan, April to October 2012. Based in Camp Bastion.