

DEREK ELAND

‘In Our Own Words’

When I was first given the chance to become a war artist in Afghanistan it was a question of how to bring a new perspective to the conflict, one which is dominated by the relentless toll of deaths and the hyper-reality of the head-cam video.

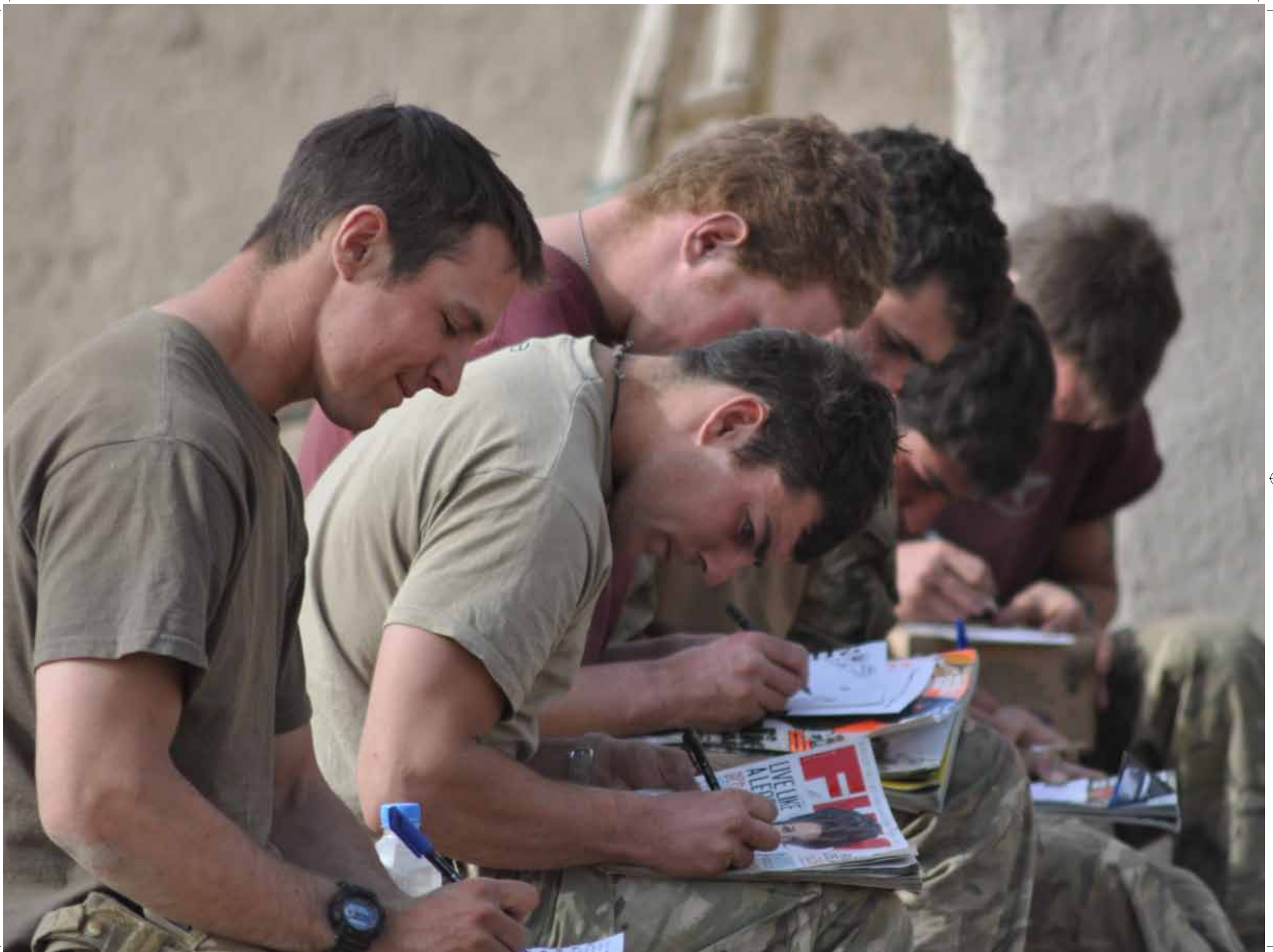
I wanted to get inside the heads of soldiers in this war zone - what it feels like to ‘be human’ in this demanding place. In a digital age I decided to collect handwritten accounts at the front line. I didn’t want stories written after the event: I was interested in honest, raw and immediate accounts. I asked everyone I met in on the front line in Afghanistan, Afghans as well as Westerners, to write a postcard about their experiences and thoughts. These stories were collated in three ‘Diary Rooms’.

During my month on the front line the Diary Room walls filled up with hundreds of handwritten stories, mostly on the coloured cards, but sometimes on scraps of paper, cardboard ripped from ration boxes or scribbled on blank medical forms. One soldier took an empty packet of semolina and wrote ‘Yummy’ on the side. A female medic wrote what it was like to treat her first casualties and save their lives, a chef described cooking and distributing Christmas dinner to hundreds of soldiers scattered about the front line, a bomb disposal expert described what it felt like to go to Afghanistan as a battle casualty replacement for someone who had been injured. Some of those who wrote stories went on to be killed and seriously wounded.

What evolved became an enormous collective self-portrait. Their stories.











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THE MEDICAL OFFICER'S CONUNDRUM:

"PROVIDED ALL GOES WELL AND ACCORDING TO PLAN
THEN THE DOCTOR IS DESTINED TO BE BOXED..."

THE YOUNG SOLDIER WAS BROUGHT TO ME FOLLOWING AN IED BLAST. HIS INJURIES WERE SERIOUS THOUGH THE MEDIC IN HIS PATROL HAD ALREADY SAVED HIS LIFE. ALL I COULD ADD TO THIS WAS A REASSESSMENT OF HIS INJURIES AND AN OFFER OF STRONGER ANALGESIA. HE DECLINED THE LATTER AND LAY IN SILENCE ON THE STRETCHER AMONGST THE DUST.

I DIDN'T NEED TO ASK MANY MORE QUESTIONS - HIS EYES TOLD THE WHOLE STORY - AS WIDE AS POSSIBLE AND CONVEYING SUCH A SENSE OF BEWILDERMENT, UNCERTAINTY AND TERROR THAT I SHALL NEVER FORGET THEM.

CAPT ATKINSON
MEDICAL OFFICER
D Coy 2 PARA.

D.
EVERY DAY A BANG HAPPENS.
Some small, some large,
some so big it shakes you
in your bed. I didn't know
which BANG was the one
which blew my mates legs
off. SAD DAY, in shock for
most of it. On the ground,
few days later going to
live in Afghans compounds,
one next to two craters
with med kit scattered
around the scene, plus blown
off pieces of uniform in
trees. 4 months until I
can celebrate surviving,
A lot of Brews to drink
- too. PEE MAXFIELD 2 PARA

People back home hear
about the deaths out
here but they don't
hear about the injuries
Soldiers get or hear
about the unsung heroes
the medical team in
barracks who do a
job second to none

When I went home on RTR
People asked me have you ever
seen the Taliban and I told
them I have been fired at
loads of times but only ever
seen 1 Taliban with a weapon
they are like ghosts.

This tour has been a sobering
and maturing experience. Its
certainly increased the wrinkles
and li creases in my face
which has resulted in me
lookin 28 and im 20.

Most of all its made me appreciate
the little things that we take
for granted.

I miss my girlfriend 😞

and small things like driving my
car or going to the shops.

Its made me appreciate hard work
and changed my train of
thought and my view of life
and death completely.

We are on borrowed time,
so use it wisely!!

BIG
MIKE

AIRBORNE!!

I have a friend who is a primary
School teacher in the UK. She spoke of
me to her students and with that
I received 10 letters from children of
all ages. They wrote how proud they
were to fight to me, that I and my
colleagues were doing a great job for
our country. To receive such letters
reinforces my hope that society
in Britain is still proud of it's forces
and are willing to show them how
proud they are!

My first contact
was very exciting
and scary at the
same time the rounds
cracked over my head
and landed in front
of me they kicked
up dust I knew they
were close all I
wanted to do was
make sure my water
was on I had a look
every one was fine
then I started firing
my weapon I the
enemys direction
then mortars came
in the ground
shock it was one
of the coolest days
of my life.

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DEREK ELAND is a British artist whose work is about what it feels like to 'be human' in stressful and demanding situations. His stories have been exhibited in a number of galleries worldwide and are currently being published in a blog at: <http://inourownwordsafghanistan.blogspot.co.uk>. Also visit: www.derekeland.com.