

## WAR IN IRAQ: HEARTS AND MINDS

## Where water may win the war ... but

**GETHIN CHAMBERLAIN**  
WITH THE  
BLACK WATCH  
IN SOUTHERN IRAQ



TAM O' Shanter perched atop his head, pistol secured in its holster on his belt, steel-rimmed glasses pushed back on to the bridge of his nose, Lieutenant-Colonel Mike Riddell-Webster, the commanding officer of the Black Watch, is striding through the crowded market place in the centre of the town of Az Zubayr. Yesterday, this street was thought still too dangerous to drive down in a soft-skinned Land Rover, but the CO has decided - enough is enough.

After days of sitting back and watching his troops come under attack from militia men armed with mortars, AK47s and rocket-propelled grenades, he has decided that he and his men are not going to be forced to hide behind the safety of the armoured plates of their Warriors any longer.

The order has gone out that the Black Watch is going to patrol the streets of Az Zubayr. On foot. The dozen or so officers and infantrymen chosen to accompany him on the first sortie into the town have been told that they can keep their helmets on if they wish, but he will be donning his "Lo.S" with the distinctive red hackle of the Scottish regiment. A quintessential British moment.

It is 8am and already the town is teeming with people pouring in from all around in their battered trucks laden with tomatoes and their carts towed by donkeys.

Men stand in huddles, talking and watching other men standing in huddles. Women in their black chadors carry empty plastic containers towards the place where the water bowlers park up. There are children everywhere, dark-haired, dark-eyed, dirty but cheerful.

It is a fine morning, the temperature already soaring to the high 20s. On the streets, Warrior crews keep watch over the entrances to the town. Challenger tanks stand on the open ground that sprawls in front of the market place, guns pointed into the open country beyond.

Out of the gate stride the British officers, the CO in the lead, chatting earnestly to the man by his side, divisional staff officer Lt-Col Roger Warren, a fluent Arabic speaker. They stroll forward side by side, heading towards the blue-domed mosque, past the place where the mortars fell and scattered the crowd gathered for the first attempt to distribute aid last week, heading straight for the centre of the town.

Those gathered round the trucks of tomatoes look up, bemused, as the men approach, but the CO does not break his stride. Hand outstretched, he greets the first wary Iraqis on the edge of the gathering. The crowd parts, engulfing the men, the soldiers given the thankless task of protecting a man apparently determined to place himself at maximum risk trying to hold back the curious throng.

Hands in his pockets now, the CO listens as Lt-Col Warren addresses the crowd. They are not there to hurt anyone, he tells them, they are there to help the people of the town. Around them, the crowd is growing in



Lt-Col Mike Riddell-Webster abandons his helmet and dons the red hackle to lead a Black Watch patrol through the streets of Az Zubayr to meet Iraqis.

Picture: Gethin Chamberlain

number, children pushing between the men, eager to see these strange foreign soldiers in their unfamiliar hats who have appeared in their town and driven out the other army.

Now the crowd has found its voice. They talk all at once, gesturing with their hands, pointing to their mouths. Water is the most important thing, Lt-Col Warren tells the CO - they say they want water. It is coming soon, the CO assures them. We understand, he tells them. The men jabber at him again. The electricity is broken, they say. A team of engineers is on its way to fix it, the CO replies. He wants to know if there are any water engineers in the crowd, someone who can tell him where the pumps can be found, how to switch them back on.

Lt-Col Warren translates, but the men are talking over each other, each with his own point to make. A man with a luxuriant moustache in pristine white jellabah shoves his way to the front. People have been taken prisoner by the British, he says. The British are too aggressive, with all their tanks and their guns. He is angry, little flecks of spittle glistening on his moustache, shouting and waving his hands. The people are afraid of all the troops, he says.

Hands on hips, the CO leans his head forward to listen to the translation, Lt-Col Warren breaking off to shush the crowd. Finally, he looks up. There is no

need to be afraid of us, he tells them, once the shooting has stopped we are here to be your friends. They must learn to trust the British, they are there to help.

But the men are not convinced. They are still afraid because the British are here, they say. The big boss of the water engineers is afraid of the British, he is afraid to come out. Everyone is desperate for water.

We are surrounded by a mass of humanity, all clamouring for water. Each newcomer says the same thing. They need water, they must have water. They have not had water to drink, or wash for days. The heat and the smell of so many bodies crushed together tells its own story.

Lt-Col Warren listens, interrupting occasionally, soaking up their anger. They are still afraid, he tells the CO, whatever I say to them. They are afraid of us and they are afraid of what will happen to them if we go away. They say that the old regime is not gone away, just moved to Basra. When the British leave, he explains, the people fear that the Baath Party will be back.

The CO tries again. There will be no problem and there is no need to be afraid as long as the militia go away, he says. The old regime is not coming back. We are here to stay. There has been regime change. They have had a difficult regime for 30 years, but now they are gone. He catches



An Iraqi POW in the custody of a Desert Rat trooper

the eye of the nearest soldier and a path is cleared, those behind the CO eased aside to allow him passage, on again towards the centre of the town.

The heat is stifling as they make their way past the mosque, with its blue-grey marble entrance and arched wooden doors, the finest building in the town, the crowd singing and clapping, trailing in their wake like disciples following some new prophet.

Picking their way through a group of men pumping up tyres at the roadside, a young boy trying to run ahead stumbling, the CO grabbing his arm, steadying him. On past a barber's shop, the men inside staring out, smiling at Lt-Col Warren's

shows no signs of injury. You were lucky, he tells him. My men were being shot at, he says - a week ago, there was war and we were fighting.

He walks on, unconvinced by their entreaties. This is the street where D company faced a real battle, he recalls. They were being hit with rocket propelled grenades from all sides. It is not so surprising that there was some damage. They want compensation, but that's not the game he is in, he tells them.

He walks on, past sandbagged bunkers next to bags of grain, bundles of herbs stacked high on shop counters, brightly coloured jars of spices, pyramids of baby milk, bags of rice and lentils, bottles of Pepsi and orange fizzy drinks emblazoned with Arabic script, past tables set out in the street selling batteries and lighters and socks and cigarettes and plastic watering cans and all the assorted oddments that can be found in markets anywhere in the world.

Past piles of vegetables laid out on the side of the road, the onions, scallions, tomatoes, potatoes, covered in clouds of flies that rise up as they walk by, past dozens of large silver fish, gutted and stinking in the heat, through mounds of rubbish lying in the gutters and across the pavement, past low mesh pens of chickens, past a stall grilling kebabs over charcoal, the smells merging into each other, becoming one. They have

greetings, past more trucks loaded with tomatoes, past an old man sitting in the shade of a shop wall.

Next to a shattered shop-front, they stop, and the crowd gathers round again. Bricks have fallen on to the pavement and the windows are gone. It was a barber's shop, Lt-Col Warren explains. They say it was hit by a tank shell.

Down the lane, there are ducks waddling through the rubbish piled outside the buildings. Further along, a restaurant, its windows shattered.

The men want compensation. One says his car was destroyed by a tank. He was in it, he says, but he survived. The CO looks him up and down, but the man

plenty of food, the CO says, slightly exasperated, they don't need more food.

Yesterday, when the army drove down the street, many of the shops were still closed up, but now they are open again, life is returning to normal.

A man stops him, tells him everything is good, or would be, if only they had water. Be patient, the CO says, be patient.

He asks what the man thinks of the town, wants to ask him what he thinks of the regime but Lt-Col Warren warns there are too many people around for the man's own good if he answers honestly. The man tells him it is a peaceful area but people are afraid. Everyone is afraid of you, he tells the British officers, pointing to the rubble left by the fighting. The fighting is over now, the CO says.

On and on, past a cobbler working next to a pile of battered shoes, past a barrow selling cigarettes - 50 cents, the man tells the CO, or 2,025 dinar, a fair price.

And then at the end of the street, a hospital. In its courtyard, lined with pink-painted concrete balustrades, a rare tree offering some shade, casting shadows over the sandbagged foxholes dug in front of the single-storey building.

Inside, lines of women, clutching babies, waiting to be seen by the one doctor who is here. He is angry, frustrated. No one can help him, he says, he

helps himself. In his smart grey trousers with a neat crease, his cardigan and clean shirt, he is working behind a table across the doorway to the consulting room. He has told the soldiers he needs water and electricity but everything else he has. This is a medical centre, he has to see more than 100 people a day. He is the only GP here. He is exhausted, he says.

The CO says army doctors will be available, but the doctor tells him there are Iraqi doctors but they are in Basra and can't get to the hospital. He is calming down. He says his name is Dr Basl and that if there is an engineer who can help then that might be good. The CO says things will get better and Dr Basl wonders whether that is a promise. He apologises for having nothing to offer his visitors to drink. He says he knows the British like their tea, but he has none.

Outside, the CO gets on the radio, calling for engineers and for water to be brought to the hospital. A child trots past, pulling an empty can on a piece of string as a toy.

The CO walks on down the street, past more people clamouring for water. The crowd is drifting away and the CO turns to survey the town and he says what is on his mind: "Water is everything now. It is win or lose in this town. We are going to win or lose this by getting them water."

## Black Watch doctors distribute medicines hoarded by regime

THOUSANDS of boxes of children's medicines seized by British troops on a raid on a militia headquarters in the town of Az Zubayr, near Basra, are being given out to parents by army doctors in the town in an attempt to win over the local population.

British troops found enough medicines, including antibiotics and treatments for

pneumonia and tapeworm, for 10,000 children when they searched a health centre last week which had been taken over by the Baath Party and militia in the town.

Now they have decided to try to get the medicine, which had been left in a storeroom, into circulation by setting up their own clinic in a temporary military compound in

the town. Three army doctors have been made available to see children who are being brought to the compound by their parents, and British military officials hope that the move will convince the local population that they are there to help.

One of the first cases brought into the hospital involved two women and two

young children whose car had hit a land mine.

Both women had serious leg and foot injuries and a piece of shrapnel had severed a muscle in an arm. The youngest child, an 18-month old baby, suffered minor facial injuries and the other child, a boy aged about nine, had shrapnel wounds to his legs and arms. Yesterday,

Lance Corporal Fred Simpson, one of the army medics who treated them said: "The shrapnel had come through the floor of the car and the ladies both had foot injuries from the shrapnel. They were both very shaken up and one of them was in severe pain. The young lad was more shocked and dazed than worried by the injuries."

He said the mine, believed to have been laid by the Iraqi army, was a "jumping jack" which is catapulted up to waist height before exploding to cause maximum injury rather than to kill.

British doctors have also treated a number of injured Iraqi soldiers. But attempts to recruit Iraqi doctors and translators have

hit problems because people say they are scared of reprisals from the Iraqi regime.

Lieutenant-Colonel Kevin Beaton, senior medical officer with the Black Watch battle group, said he was concerned that those who were helping the British could face death. "There are absolutely petrified of helping," he said. "The militia are definitely still out

there, they have got a grip on the psyche, almost in a Northern Ireland type of way."

He said he was concerned for the safety of one young man who had volunteered to act as a translator in the British health clinic. "I just hope he doesn't get topped for talking to us," he said.

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