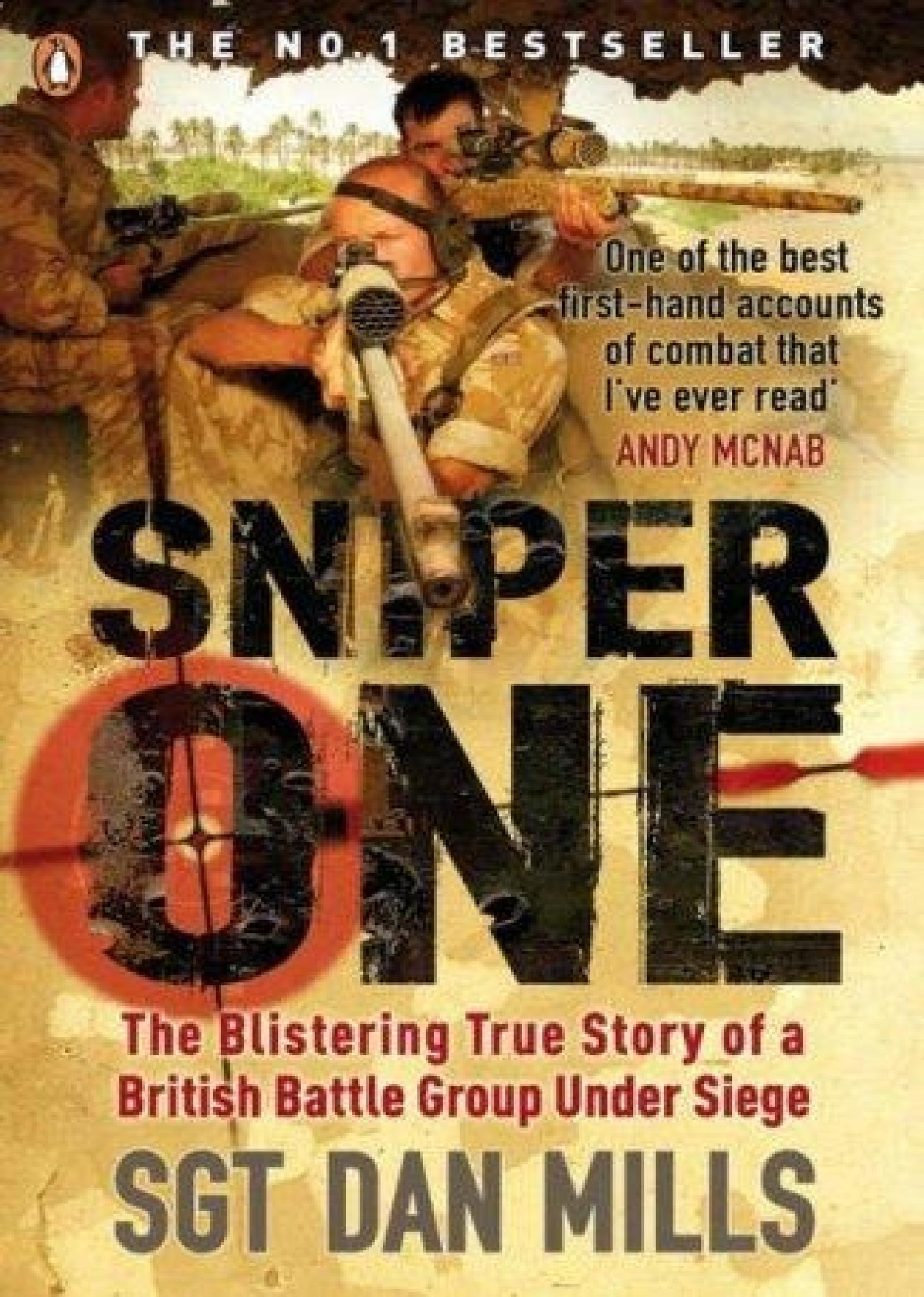




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SNIPER ONE

The Blistering True Story of a
British Battle Group Under Siege

SGT DAN MILLS

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SNIPER ONE

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On Scope and Under Siege with a Sniper Team in Iraq

Sgt. Dan Mills

St. Martin's Press  New York

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www.stmartins.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mills, Dan, 1968–

Sniper one : on scope and under siege with a sniper team in Iraq / Dan Mills.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4299-3342-1

ISBN-10: 1-4299-3342-9

1. Iraq War, 2003—Personal narratives, British. 2. Mills, Dan, 1968– 3. Snipers—Great Britain—Biography. I. Title.

DS79.76.M475 2008

956.7044'38—dc22

2008020438

First published in Great Britain as *Sniper One: The Blistering True Story of a British Battle Group Under Siege* by Michael Joseph, an imprint of Penguin Books

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Chris Rayment and Lee O'Callaghan, who didn't make it home

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank: Rowland White, for his faith, foresight, advice and enthusiasm from the word go; Tom Newton Dunn for the mountain of hard work, skill and dedication that made it all happen; and Carly Cook for her keen eye and excellent suggestions.

Sue for her unfailing support while I was in Iraq, and Sandra for her support and patience during the research and writing. Chris Mulrine and Adam Somers for when my memory began to fail me, Defence Public Relations (Army) for their honest advice, Rebekah Wade at the *Sun* for releasing Tom, and Mark Spicer for giving me the bug.

My daughter Elizabeth for watching over me, and my son Morgan and daughter Alexandria for giving me a reason to come home.

The men of fighting Y Company; in particular Captain Simon, Ian and Dalebert. Finally, all the chosen men of Sniper Platoon who I had the extraordinary privilege of leading and fighting alongside. Keep your heads down.

Dan Mills, January 2007

When you go home tomorrow, don't expect anyone to know what you have been through. Even if they did know, most people probably wouldn't care anyway. Some of you may get the medals you deserve, many more of you will not. But remember this. All of you are now members of the front-line club, and that is the most exclusive club in the world.

Lt Col Matthew Maer
Commanding Officer,
1st Battalion, the Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment
Camp Abu Naji, October 2004

SNIPER ONE

Prologue

18 April 2004

'Gunman top window,' screamed H.

H was the first to spot him, from his position of height as top cover on the back of Daz's Snatch Land Rover.

As soon as I heard the call, my eyes darted to the gunman. The moment you hear a gun is trained on you, you scan for targets. And there he was, in the top window of the sinister three-storey building inside a well-fortified compound. Unusually for buildings in Al Amarah, it had a fresh coat of white paint and bars across every window.

As my eyes found him, he began to slide an AK47 through the iron grille. The metal barrel glinted in the bright sunlight as the gunman moved slowly from side to side. He couldn't seem to decide which of the nine of us he wanted to aim at first.

I was already walking backwards to my Land Rover, the other vehicle in the small patrol, which was parked up 50 metres further down the road. But Daz's vehicle was just 15 metres across a road from the compound's front gate. If the gunman was anything like a decent shot, we were all sitting ducks.

He was in animated conversation with a couple of his other stooges; one older, one younger. All of them were bearded, dressed in black dish dashes and wore green canvas chest rigs. They seemed to be jabbering away, I could almost hear them weighing up the situation: 'Shall we, or shan't we?'

Then the compound's heavy gates slammed shut with a loud metallic clunk. The four angry blokes with the same heavy Islamic beards who had been shouting at Daz and I had abruptly scrambled back inside.

They're thinking what I'm thinking. This is going to kick off. I know it.

It was only the first time we'd been this far away from base. But I'd done enough tours of Northern Ireland to realize what was going on here.

The mood was changing very rapidly from bad to terrible. My brain scrambled to keep up with the pace of events. I had already decided to get the fuck out of there and told the boys to mount up. Now it looked like we'd run out of time already.

Immediately and involuntarily, my pace quickened as I continued to walk backwards. I wanted to turn round to look where I was going, but I didn't want to take my eyes off that clown in the top window.

Fuck it. How did we get into this mess so quickly?

I couldn't turn and run to the Snatch, because that would mean we'd lose face in front of these nutters, whoever the hell they were. And the British Army doesn't do that. But I also knew it was no time to hang around.

Don't get excited, Danny Boy. Keep the heart rate slow and concentrate, you're no good to anyone panicking like a big girl.

'I've got eyes on,' shouted Smudge.

'Seen,' said Ads, along with a couple of other blokes a second later.

It had taken no more than four seconds for the three other top cover boys in the two Snatches to focus their Minimis on the top window.

Good. At least the boys are all wide awake. Then again, it wouldn't have said much for my training if they weren't during a drama like this.

The boys' reactions calmed me down a bit. Anyway, weapons aren't exactly uncommon in this desolate and forgotten corner of Iraq. Even grannies are known to walk the city's streets with AKs slung over their backs. None of this means it's going to go tits up.

I had got to within ten metres of my Snatch, and all we needed was a few more seconds to get into the Land Rovers and shove off home sharpish. No problem.

That's when the grenade came hurtling over the compound wall. We all saw it at once. Half a dozen voices screamed 'Grenade!' simultaneously.

Then everything went into slow motion. The grenade took an age to travel through its 20 metres of flight through the air. A dark, small oval-shaped package of misery the size of a peach.

On its upward trajectory, the handle sprang off, landing separately on the pavement with a light tinkle.

Then, a small cracking sound. The handle's release allowed the hammer inside the grenade to spring down hard onto its percussion cap. That ignited the gunpowder fuse, which began to burn furiously creating enough heat to ignite the high explosive charge.

My second-in-command Daz was the last to see it. He had been standing behind his Snatch with his back to the compound. As he turned round, the still ticking grenade just cleared the Land Rover's roof and hit him square in the chest with a dull thud.

Daz was left momentarily frozen to the spot, open-mouthed with shock. It bounced off his body armour's breast plate, and down onto the pavement before slowly rolling into the road and right under the Snatch itself.

In a desperate scramble, everyone else instinctively threw themselves down and covered their faces.

Another whole second of total silence.

Then *BOOM*.

A blinding flash of light, a pulsation of shock wave and deafening bang; all at once. Shrapnel flew in all directions; hundreds of red hot tiny pieces of metal whizzed through the air, pinging off the metal gate, the stone walls and my Snatch. Simultaneously, an instantaneous whirlwind of dust and detritus whipped across the filthy street, coating anyone within 10 metres with a thin layer of grime and spots of engine oil.

All I could hear was a ringing in my ears, worsened by an immediate secondary echo as the furious tirade of noise bounced off the surrounding walls and back down our battered ear canals.

At last, silence again. So I dared to look up. It had gone off right under the Snatch's bonnet, blowing the engine compartment to pieces.

Fuck, that was close.

For a few seconds, it looked like we'd got away with it. I looked up again to see the Snatch on fire. But nobody was screaming, and everyone was still on their feet.

The next thing I heard was Daz.

'Fuck. I'm hit, I'm hit. Fuck it,' he shouted again and again.

He half ran half hobbled down the pavement towards me and my Snatch. With a massive release of adrenalin squirting into his nervous system, it had taken him a few seconds to realize what had happened.

Both trouser legs were heavily ripped, and a dozen claret-coloured blood spots had started to grow on the Combat 95 desert camouflage material from his belt to his boot soles. As he hobbled, blood also began to leak out of his right boot and leave a small trail of red on the road behind him.

He made it ten metres before he stumbled off the pavement and sank to the ground right in the middle of the road. His body had obviously told him it wasn't going any further.

Remembering his first aid drills, Daz rolled onto his back and started to wave his legs around in the air to restrict the flow of blood out of his wounds.

'Fuck, fuck, fucking bastard,' he carried on, as he shook them about violently.

Unfortunately, Daz had decided to collapse in full view of every available firing position inside the compound.

I looked over to it. Most of the building's window grilles were now filling up with gunmen and at least a dozen AK barrels were pointing at us. And just as he started the upturned beetle impression, the rounds started to come in. The gunmen had taken the grenade's explosion as their cue to open fire.

Jesus fucking Christ, we've just entered another world here.

The seriousness of our predicament hit me like a smack in the face. This was for real, and it could only get worse.

Bullets smacked into the road all around Daz, kicking up small puffs of dust. They also pinged off both Snatches' armoured sides. They were spraying off whole mags on fully automatic straight at us. One whizzed just over my head with a crack as it split the air. Totally undisciplined fire, but there was enough of it to cut us to pieces.

Daz lying in the open air like that painted the perfect target for the gunmen. We had to get him out of there, but that meant running right into the bullet storm.

Shit and bollocks. No time for any more thought. I sprinted from the Snatch and, with Ads beside me, made the 30-odd-metre dash to Daz in record time.

Taking an arm each, we dragged him just as quickly face downwards back behind my vehicle and out of the direct line of fire. He screamed out in total agony as his wounds rubbed against the tarmac, but there was no other way to do it.

Somehow we reached the Snatch without taking any more hits. But still my two top covers, Louey and Smudge, weren't returning any fire. They'd trained for this moment all their military lives and they had two bloody great Minimis in their hands. But they were still in shock at what they had just seen.

Seeing anyone blown up in front of your eyes isn't pretty, let alone a good mate. The two twenty-year-old privates were scared out of their wits, and they weren't going to hang around up there in the full face of that bullet storm for any longer.

All nine of us were now sheltering in or behind the Land Rover, which had become a dirty great big bullet magnet for the gunmen. We hauled Daz into the back of it, as its armoured sides gave him just a tiny bit more cover from ricochets behind us.

Inside, I got the chance to give him a quick once-over examination.

He was in a proper mess. The shrapnel had pepper-potted both his legs with

puncture holes from the top of his thighs right down to his desert boots. There were around a dozen serious wounds in his flesh. His right foot in particular had been torn up very badly, and was just a mess of ripped boot and blood, bubbling and congealing through his matted and shredded white sock.

Inside the puncture holes a host of different-sized grenade fragments that had torn through his skin were still embedded, along with any other debris from the gutter that the blast had picked up on its way into him. The pain must have been excruciating.

He gave off a strong smell of gunpowder and burnt meat. His face had also lost a lot of colour. His eyes were all over the shop, and he was going in and out of coherence.

'You stupid jack bastard, Daz,' I said, in an attempt to keep his spirits up. 'You could have collapsed in cover rather than in the middle of the fucking road, mate.'

He managed to pull a smile. For a man in that shit state, he took the criticism well. But his time was swiftly running out and we were pinned down.

Bullets were still pinging off the Snatch's sides with sharp high-pitched twangs thanks to the regular bursts of automatic fire from the compound in the background.

Welcome to Al Amarah.

I had some decisions to make – and fast. It had well and truly kicked off, and we were slap bang in the middle of it with our dicks hanging out.

1

We first heard we were going on a rainy November morning in Tidworth.

The battalion's brand new CO got up in front of the lot of us to announce it. His very first words to us were: 'Good morning. My name is Lieutenant Colonel Matt Maer. I'm your new Commanding Officer, and in twenty weeks' time we'll be deploying to southern Iraq.'

It was the normal overly dramatic crap new officers come out with, because they hope we're impressed by it. It worked though – we were. We were going to Iraq.

By the time we'd get out there, it would be a year since Saddam Hussein had been deposed. The Marines and Paras were long gone, and by then southern Iraq was rarely even on the TV. But we didn't give a toss. It was gleaming news. For once, we were going somewhere interesting.

In his speech, Colonel Maer also added, 'It will be a tour like no other.' And not one of the 600 soldiers in that room had any idea at the time how true those words would prove to be.

For the next few days, our camp on the Hampshire/Wiltshire border was total madness. The phones didn't stop ringing. Soldiers serving away from the battalion were trying every trick in the book to get back off postings from all over the place. Others who had recently applied to sign off were desperately trying to steal the paperwork back again and tear it up. Nobody wanted to miss this one.

It was the firemen that had done us out of the invasion. We missed out on being part of one of the largest deployments of British forces since World War Two because of their poxy strike. The government used troops in 1950s Green Goddesses as the emergency response while the pay dispute was going on. So while 43,000 of our colleagues were storming southern Iraqi beaches, we were saving cats from trees in Hampshire. It was pathetic.

There were some proper obscenities exchanged too when we drove past the firemen's picket lines. None of this car horn honking from us.

'Toot if you support the fire fighters,' they'd shout.

'Fuck off and get back to work, you lazy bastards,' we would reply. 'You wankers stopped us going to Iraq.'

If that wasn't bad enough, we'd narrowly missed getting Gulf War One too. Back in 1991, the battalion was so convinced we'd get the call up for it, it had started to pack up equipment in shipping containers. We'd even started painting all our vehicles sandy coloured. But then the war finished too quickly and they didn't need us.

The Paras robbed us of a chance to go to the Falklands too. We were all ready when the MoD flew them all the way back from a training exercise in Belize so they could go instead.

The truth is, the 1st Battalion, the Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment (PWRR) never went anywhere.

We're the county regiment for London and the southern Home Counties. And although only officially formed in 1992 in an amalgamation during army cuts at the

end of the Cold War, we're still the senior English regiment of the line. That's thanks to our forebears, who trace back to as early as 1661 and the defence of Tangier. Our nickname is The Tigers, and that too comes from another famous forebear, the 67th Foot, because they did twenty-one years of unbroken service in India. One unit or another that we are related to has fought in virtually all the major campaigns in which the British Army has ever taken part. Then, for some reason, about fifty years ago it all stopped.

We're not flash, and we'd hardly been in the news in the last thirty years before that – except of course when we took on Princess Diana's name during the amalgamation. But that all ended soon enough too when she died five years later. None of that is to say that we weren't a bloody good fighting force of men, and one of which I was proud to be a member. A lot of the line regiments were just like us. None of us had been given the chance to prove our worth for so long, the MoD had begun to think we didn't have any worth.

I was thirty-six years old. I'd been a soldier for eighteen years and a sniper for ten. I'd done six tours of Northern Ireland, one of Kosovo, and one of Bosnia – and I still hadn't fired my rifle in anger once. Anyone who had been to Northern Ireland in the 1980s and 1990s had their hair singed by a few IRA bombs. But not actually being shot at by an enemy standing right in front of you, and not getting the chance to shoot back, used to make me question whether I could ever call myself a real soldier.

I grew up in a village near Slough in Berkshire, the second child of four. I joined the army as a boy soldier aged sixteen in 1984 after some recruiter popped a leaflet through my letterbox, and I joined the Queen's Regiment – my local county regiment – because that's what the sergeant at the recruiting office told me to do. Service is a bit of a family tradition with us. My younger brother is an engineer in the army too. And my sister was a signaller until she got out to join the police. Our dad was a fireman, and served alongside two of his brothers in the same fire station. My mum was a BT operator, and my grandfather was in the Royal Engineers.

I've been married and divorced twice and I've had three children – two daughters from the first and a son from the second. The army and marriage don't go particularly well together because you're never really there. I got out in 1998 for eighteen months because I hated being away so much. But when I realized I hated civvy street even more, I signed up again.

I've never been much of a barrack room soldier who enjoyed all the dressing up and all the formalities that go with that. In fact, my idea of hell would be to be a guardsman outside Buckingham Palace. But I've always loved being out in the field, doing the job I'm paid to do. That's why I became a sniper. It's about taking professional soldiering to another level.

As the commander of the battalion's Sniper Platoon, I'd be the first to admit that I've got pretty high standards. I certainly don't suffer fools gladly. But if they're good soldiers, I'm fairly relaxed and give them a lot of rope.

We were all well aware that Iraq was all about nation building now, not war fighting. But we were still over the moon. We were just chuffed to bits that, for once, we were going to get our turn. It wasn't the Balkans and it wasn't Northern Ireland. Who knows, we may even finally get the chance to use the blinking weapons we'd trained so hard with for all those years.

The patch the battalion had been allotted was Maysan, the northernmost extremity of the poor Shia south under British control. Its capital, which would be my company's responsibility, was the town of Al Amarah. I'd never heard of the place, but it sounded properly Iraqi and that was good enough for me.

The battalion consisted of four companies. Three of them, A, B and C, cut about in tracked Warrior armoured personnel carriers, because we are an armoured unit. And then there was us, Y Company – the battalion's 106 support weapons experts. Y Company itself was organized into four platoons: mortars, anti-tanks, reconnaissance and snipers.

I had only recently returned to the battalion from doing an instructor's job at the Infantry Training Centre in Catterick. And as soon as we got the news about Iraq, it was my responsibility to get the platoon battle ready for a serious operational deployment. I'd been a qualified sniper for twelve years and had served in the platoon on two tours previously. Now I was in charge of it – my dream job.

Sniping is one of the hardest jobs in any infantry unit. It's one of the toughest trades to qualify for, and British Army snipers are the best in the world. That's the other reason why I wanted to be a sniper. I wanted to be the best.

The platoon was fifteen-strong in total, all of them qualified snipers: one sergeant (me), three full screws (corporals), three lance jacks (lance corporals) and eight toms (privates).

When I took over the platoon, I'd decided it needed some shaking up. So I ran a reselection course which gave me a chance to bin all the blokes who weren't up to scratch. Literally dozens applied, because it's the best job in the unit. I could afford to be pretty ruthless, and really get the very best. By the time I had finished with them, they were a gleaming bunch of lads too. I'd hand-picked the fourteen best killers in the battalion.

The difference with being a sniper is you can see the man's face when you kill him. You can see everything about him, because you've probably been studying him for minutes, or even hours. So when you pull the trigger you have to be able to separate yourself from the knowledge that you're taking a life. There's no point in putting someone through eight weeks of highly physically and mentally demanding training if when the moment comes, all he's going to do is think about the wife and kids the target might have at home. He may well be a father of eight, and have four grandparents to feed too. But he's the enemy and that's that. Tough shit.

You can't teach people how they're going to feel when it comes to that moment. Which is why selecting the right character for the job is so important. If they're half decent soldiers, they should be fairly good shots anyway. So you look for mental toughness and stamina above anything else.

A sniper has to be a bit of a hunter at heart. He has to enjoy the tracking down and the kill. You can't be thick either, because there's a lot of information to learn and a fair few calculations to carry out. Just judging distance well is a bloody hard thing to do.

Pulling the trigger and hitting the target is only one small element of it. You've also got to be good at getting in and out of the right place without being seen. Otherwise, you're going to get killed too. That means putting up with a lot of discomfort and pain. You're going to be lying in a hole full of water for days on end. Or in a cramped attic, or an exposed rooftop. You've got to be used to being wet, tired, miserable and dirty.

And you're going to have to have a dumper truckload of patience.

We soon became a very close-knit bunch. Snipers always stick together because we think we're better than everyone else. We also encourage resentment. Sniping is a black art that few understand and even fewer are any good at, and that bothers them. But it just made us closer as a unit. A lot of the boys were so proud of who they now were, they went out and got a tattoo of the sniper's classic logo, a pair of crossed rifles with an S above them, on their biceps.

We never used anything other than first names for each other. None of that 'sir' bollocks for us. Everyone in the platoon had a nickname. Mine was 'Monk' on account of my thinning pate. The cheeky sods. The average age of the platoon was twenty-four, so the blokes were a few years older and more mature than the average squaddie in a rifle company.

We also look different to everyone else. Our precision weapons immediately stood us apart. The main tool of our trade wasn't the regular army's 5.56mm calibre SA80 assault rifle, but the 7.62mm L96 – a single-shot, bolt-action sniper rifle. It's known as the 'long'.

We also prided ourselves on dressing scruffily. Even in barracks, we'd walk around without rank slides and looked generally unkempt, because that's how we performed our special trade. We would patter around with our shirts hanging out, sleeves not rolled up and our hair and sideburns worn long. And we didn't wear twisters in our trousers, which meant they extended down to cover most of our boots.

But we were scruffy for a good military reason. We don't like washing our field clothes because we've got to smell like the ground we're operating in. If you try and hide out in the long grass stinking of Persil, you won't last for very long. And gaping big black leather boots aren't great camouflage, unless you're trying to hide on top of a tarmac road.

That makes us loathed by the Regimental Sergeant Majors the world over. They don't like snipers because we tend not to give much of a shit about the things that really bother them. RSMs want everyone to be as smart as a pin, with shiny buttons and boots. But we're not interested in that, because it doesn't make you shoot any better.

Snipers have two textbook roles in modern warfare. The first is reconnaissance. Along with the Recce Platoon, snipers are the eyes and ears of the battle group. We obtain intelligence by either covert or long-distance observation, to build up a picture of the enemy's strength and movements. Sometimes hard information can be a lot more powerful than firing bullets. You can report back tank or troop positions, and get them destroyed by artillery without even giving your position away.

The second is to take out priority targets. Our job is to cause disruption to the enemy's battle plans and the way that they're fighting in the best way we can. Top of the list is always the enemy's command elements, their senior officers. That leaves them leaderless and sows confusion. The lowest priority is the humble soldier, because losing one or two of them won't have any effect on the enemy attack. But if they're the only targets that pop up, then you'll kill them all the same.

We're trained to operate anywhere, from behind your own lines, no man's land or even well behind enemy lines to disrupt the rear. We're always the first out, and the last in. But gone are the days of the lone sniper out in the middle of nowhere doing his