

128 British service personnel have been killed in Afghanistan since operations began in October 2001.

Five mums united in grief for sons lost in Afghanistan

EXCLUSIVE
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AS their paratrooper sons' coffins were carried from the military plane on to the runway, five bereaved mothers clung to each other.

They had never met before. They each had close family members there to offer comfort. But these five mothers, the only women in the world who could truly empathise with each other's searing heart-ache, were instinctively drawn together.

It is almost six months since Privates Nathan Cuthbertson, 19, Daniel Gamble, 22, and David Murray, 19, were killed by a suicide bomb in the Upper Sangin Valley, Helmand Province. Days later Lance Corporal James Bateman, 29, and Private Jeff Doherty, 20, died in a Taliban gun attack, also in Helmand.

Their deaths were deeply felt losses for the 2nd Battalion The Parachute Regiment and also marked the gruesome milestone of 100 British fatalities in Afghanistan.

Since then, every day has been black for their grieving mothers. But, out of such horror, an unbreakable bond has been forged.

Carla Cuthbertson, 35, of Sunderland, says: "We struck up a bond immediately. When our boys came back home, we each held hands even though our partners were there. I knew I had mothers either side of me who knew what I was going through.

"When we lost our lovely Nathan, well-meaning people said they knew how I felt. But no one did. Others, just as well-meaning, avoided me because they don't know what to say, and I don't blame them for that.

MISTAKE
"I try to be strong for my husband Tom, and he does for me.

"Our youngest boys try to have sleepovers with friends and family as they can't bear to hear me breaking my heart in the middle of the night, so I put on a brave face for them just as they do for me. But with the other mums we can talk freely about our feelings and our boys. We know we can pick up the phone and offload."

But Carla admits that, far from healing in the months since she lost Nathan, she has found it increasingly difficult to cope without her son.

She says: "It's getting harder. At the beginning, I kept thinking, 'There's been a terrible mistake. Nathan will be home soon.' Now I know all the other boys are back and he's not. Every time I shut my eyes I see him.

"Little things set me off. I can pick up a tin of beans in the supermarket, think 'Nathan likes these,' and suddenly I'm in floods. But I know there are four other women who are going through the same and who will help pick me up on black days, and I'll do the same for them.

"I tried bereavement counselling but didn't think it helped much. How could a complete stranger begin to understand what I was going through? I don't need counselling - I just need the four other mums to talk to.

"We have a bond, a sad bond, but one that can never be broken. I couldn't have got through these past months without them."

Carla's two younger sons Connan, 15, and Blaine, 14, want to be paratroopers like the brother they miss so much. She has mixed feelings about that and can share her fears with Daniel's mum Georgina Gamble.

Georgina, 49, from Uckfield in East Sussex, has two other sons Matthew, 24, and Jason, 18, who have already started the recruitment process to join the paratrooper regiment.

She says: "Daniel knew Jason was going to follow in his footsteps and it made him proud. He'd be doubly proud to know that Matthew wants to do the same thing.

"The brothers were so close, and Daniel had a bond with the comrades who died with him and that was like brotherly love. Now their mums have a friendship like sisterly love.

"It was strange, but as soon as we saw each other we hugged and cried. The bond was almost automatic and our understanding of

We don't need counselling...all we need is each other



MOVING TRIBUTE
The tragic repatriation of James Bateman

each other's feelings is innate." Georgina, head of a beauty school, finds tremendous release in talking to the four other mums.

"On the worst days, I wake up and don't want to get out of bed," she says. "I want to hide because I know anything could set me off - seeing a family walking down the road together, a song on the radio I last heard when Daniel was still alive, a newborn baby.

"Other days I feel guilty as something made me laugh. But the other mums reassure me they've felt the same and I'm quite sane.

"Maybe I should be moving on. But I think of Daniel every waking moment. No one's going to tell me how to grieve for him.

"I miss him so badly. Knowing his friends' mums are suffering the same, and knowing I can be honest with them, is so cathartic. It eases the pain I know will never go away."

Pam Murray, 42, from Carlisle, took



JOYCE DOHERTY



Private Jeff Doherty, aged 20, shot by the Taliban, June 14

GEORGINA GAMBLE



Private Daniel Gamble, aged 22, killed by a suicide bomber, June 8

VERONICA BATEMAN



Lance Corporal James Bateman, aged 29, shot by the Taliban, June 14

CARLA CUTHBERTSON



Private Nathan Cuthbertson, aged 19, killed by a suicide bomber, June 8

PAM MURRAY



Private David Murray, aged 19, killed by a suicide bomber, June 8

Picture: CARL FOX

comfort in the fact that her son David died alongside his best pal Nathan. And now she finds comfort with his mother.

Pam says: "David and Nathan enlisted together, went through Harrogate training college together, and went to Ayia Napa on holiday. Nathan stayed at my house and David went to Sunderland to visit Nathan.

GUILTY

"When they first told me David had died, they wouldn't tell me the names of the other two boys who died with him. When I saw on the news it was Nathan, for a moment I breathed a sigh of relief. At least he died with his best friend by his side.

"But then I felt horribly guilty because I knew his family was torn apart like mine.

"And yet when I spoke to Carla she said she had felt the very same. Maybe it's inevitable that Nathan's mum and I would get on so well too, just like our boys."

Christmas shopping is especially painful for Pam, who works as a mental health co-ordinator and has three daughters -

Carrie, 24, Stacey, 22, and Eleanor, seven. "David was my only boy," she says. "I can be out buying presents for the girls, but still find myself looking at boys' things and picking up something David would like.

"Then I realise that he won't be home for Christmas. Or ever. The tears come and I just can't shop anymore. But I'll phone Carla or Georgina and before I've even finished explaining what happened they'll say, 'I know exactly how you feel.'

"When I'm with the other mums, we get on so well I think, 'Isn't it a shame we didn't meet when our boys were still here? We would have had such fun.'

"And sometimes I think, 'We're all such nice families - why did this happen to us?' But maybe it's because we are nice families that we had such special, strong, dedicated and brave boys who have made the country, and their mums, so proud."

Joyce Doherty felt that she was the only mother in the world to feel such all-encompassing grief when her son Jeff was

Five women, from five corners of the country, with five broken hearts, now friends

killed in a Taliban ambush. But as soon as she saw Carla, Georgina, Veronica and Pam at RAF Lyneham during their sons' repatriation ceremony, her feelings of isolation vanished.

Joyce, 34, of Southam in Warwickshire, explains: "The instant I saw the four other grieving mothers I knew I'd found people I could relate to. And I have felt that same relief each time we've met, whether it was the memorial service or the medal ceremony, which are all emotional hurdles.

I look around, see those other mums beside me, and know that no matter how terrible I'm feeling, they understand."

Joyce, who runs a haulage company and taxi firm with her husband Jeff, has three other children Shanna, 14, Fintan, seven, and one-year-old Honey.

"Looking after JJ's little sisters and brother keeps me busy and means I can't run away and hide when grief becomes too much," she says. "And the other mums help encourage me to keep going because every day is an uphill battle because we miss and think of JJ so much.

"We help pick each other up, help keep each other strong or are simply just a listening ear. There is a real friendship there. If any of us could take away each other's pain, we would. We wish that we hadn't met under such horrendous circumstances, wish we hadn't had to suffer so much to find new friends. But we are all so glad we've been there for each other."

Veronica Bateman's son James rang

home to say that three comrades had been killed but to reassure his family he was OK. Four days later he was killed.

Veronica, a nurse from Salisbury in Wiltshire, says: "Georgina, Pam, Carla and Joyce have been so incredibly supportive to me. We can talk so openly with each other, so I now know that they also cry at the slightest trigger, that they also think, 'Why my son? Why did he have to be picked? What can life throw at me now?'"

SICKNESS

"They also think of being pregnant with their lost sons, of nurturing them as little boys through sickness and happy times, seeing them mature and letting them go.

"Without knowing that the other mothers were experiencing exactly the same emotions, the same trials, I worry I might have gone out of my mind.

"At least our friendship is something positive to come out of this awful time. Five women, from five corners of the country, with five broken hearts, now friends."