



From **JULIE MCCAFFREY** in Camp Bastion, Afghanistan

# EXCLUSIVE: NHS MEDICS IN AFGHANISTAN

**I**n a network of tents in the heart of Helmand's scorching desert, 85 devoted NHS medics fight to ensure the squaddies risking their lives on Afghanistan's battlefields get better care than anything seen in many NHS hospitals at home.

The Daily Mirror is the first newspaper given full access to the military hospital within the British Army base of Camp Bastion.

Here we capture first-hand the tireless, dedicated work of the doctors and nurses tending to our soldiers.

They have witnessed sights they hope never to see again. They feel the relief of seeing broken young soldiers' lives saved and the devastation of breaking news of lost limbs and lost comrades.

They treat the physical wounds of warfare but also offer invaluable emotional support in a place where the realities of battle are ever-present.

A wipeboard in reception is a stark reminder of the tragedies seen here. Under the Wards column, two patients are listed. Under the column entitled Morgue there are three.

The staff, all NHS workers, are members of the Territorial Army's 208 Liverpool Field Hospital Volunteers. They have given up much to be here at Camp Bastion.

They have sacrificed months away from partners and children to do this gruelling job under the blazing sun and the constant racket of machine-gun fire and mortar blasts from the practice fields.

Colonel Andrew Whitton, 49, has left his wife, four-year-old son and GP surgery in Lancaster to spend three months as the commanding officer of the field hospital.

He is rightly proud of the care he and his colleagues are providing.

Col Whitton says: "The treatment here is far better than most people imagine. Injured soldiers can have eight consultants around their beds which wouldn't happen in the UK because consultants are usually operating or in clinics.

"And the technology is cutting-edge. Soldiers can be rushed from accident and emergency to the operating table in as little as six minutes - far faster than the process back home."

When soldiers are injured in gunfights, by landmines or bomb blasts, staff here are alerted by radio from the field where combat medical teams are already treating casualties.

Chinook helicopters scramble with Medical Immediate Response Teams to air-lift the injured to the camp. In those precious minutes senior doctors and nurses at the hospital stand by for their arrivals at the A&E, a tent beside the landing pad.

The wounded are flown in and stripped of weapons. Staff then work swiftly to resuscitate, stop the bleeding and do damage-control surgery.

Their aim is to save life, limb and eyesight, - further treatment is best done at home.

As soon as the soldiers are stable, they are evacuated by the RAF north to the city of Kandahar, then by Tri-Star jet to the UK where they are met by a critical care team.

The two soldiers wounded in the "friendly fire" attack at 6.30pm on Thursday had left the hospital for the UK by dawn the next day.

"For some soldiers, the last thing they remember is putting on body armour before going on to the battlefield," says Col Whitton.

"The next thing they know they've woken up in Selly Oak hospital in Birmingham with their family around them. It's extremely disorientating. Our nurses try to keep diaries



## It is so sad to hear young lads talking about their friends who've been killed

**NURSE GEORGINA MYLES**



**HUMBLING: Lt O'Neill**

of their progress and visitors so the soldiers don't feel they've lost days of their lives."

Within the hospital, zip-up tent flaps serve as ward walls between the intensive care, rehab gym, resuscitation area and welfare room.

There are benches for the walking wounded and those suffering illnesses such as diarrhoea, vomiting or insect bites. There's even a GP surgery.

Plastic coverings on concrete floors keep out desert dust and have to be thoroughly cleaned at least twice a day. MRSA isn't a problem here.

Working in this environment for the past eight weeks has had a huge impact on intensive care nurse Georgina Myles, 35, a single mother from Wigan, Lancs. She says: "The experience has changed

me. You couldn't come back from here unchanged. I'm apprehensive about going back to work because if a colleague moans about mundane things I might feel like grabbing them, shaking them and saying, 'Don't you know how lucky you are? How safe you are?' Working here can upset you at times.

**W**HEN soldiers start to recover they suffer short-term memory loss so we have to gently tell them, over and over again, that we're sorry but they've lost a limb, or a friend.

"We're the first people they see and they need to discuss it with us. But it's so, so sad to hear young lads talking about their friends being killed.

"Whenever I think I've had a hard day, I remember how much harder it is for the injured soldiers and the families who get that dreaded knock on the door.

"I can't imagine what they go through. And I can't dwell too long because I know



**PROUD: Colonel Andrew Whitton**

**Pictures: EMMA CATTELL**

I have to crack on." Georgina discussed her decision to come to Afghanistan with her 13-year-old son Hal, who is being looked after at home by her mum Jean.

She says: "He was anxious but I reassured him I wasn't going out on the front line. He also understands why I was keen to come, to experience a new adventure and test my skills.

"Hal's proud of what I'm doing out here. And

so am I. It's an experience I won't forget for the rest of my life and I'm grateful for it."

Lieutenant Berni O'Neill, from Liverpool, agrees that treating the squaddies is often a humbling experience.

She says: "The soldiers are always so appreciative. Even when we tell them we've had to amputate a leg, they say 'thanks for saving my life'. They are so brave in what they

do, so courageous in withstanding the pain of the terrible things that happen to them.

"We all miss our friends and families, but never complain. Seeing what the soldiers go through puts everything into perspective."

However, as in any hospital where staff work the line between life and death, black humour helps lift spirits. On the Rehab sign, the "no, no, no" graffiti hasn't quite been rubbed clean.

And they still laugh about the story of the medic who caught a huge camel spider in a plastic bag, anaesthetised it and posed for a photo with it on their leg - only to scream when the bug suddenly came to life.

But perhaps most of all, the military hospital staff hope their presence here somehow reassures the soldiers' families.

Captain Joan Welsh, 48, from the Wirral, Cheshire, has three sons between the ages of 19 and 25 serving their country in the RAF. Naturally, she fears for the safety of her boys.

But seeing the swift and skilful medical care in Army bases means Capt Welsh, normally a senior sister on the operating theatres at Clatterbridge Hospital, feels reassured.

She says: "Every mother of a serving son worries because all we know about goes on in Afghanistan and Iraq is what we see on television.

"But to those parents back home, please know that your sons and daughters are receiving the best medical care they could ever get. I promise."

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**HARVEST: Poppies**

## Heroin trade hits 'frightening levels'

**By OONAGH BLACKMAN Political Editor**

**HEROIN** production will rise dramatically this year after Afghanistan's opium crop reached a record high.

A United Nations report yesterday said opium was at "frightening levels". It singled out Helmand

province, where UK troops are fighting the Taliban, as the world's biggest source of illicit drugs. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime says this year's opium

harvest will be 8,200 tonnes - up 34 per cent from 6,100 tonnes in 2006.

It means the country now produces 95 per cent of the world's opium, a huge embarrassment to the British government, which

has taken the lead in trying to thwart opium production.

The fighting in southern Afghanistan is blamed for the increase, along with a lack of incentive for farmers to grow anything else.

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