

MAJOR SEAN BIRCHALL

IX Company 1st Battalion Welsh Guards

KILLED IN ACTION 19 JUNE 2009

The Ministry of Defence has confirmed that Major Sean Birchill, from the 1st Battalion Welsh Guards, was killed in Afghanistan on 19 June 2009 was killed by an explosion whilst on patrol in Basharan, near Lashkar Gah, in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. One other soldier was injured in the incident.

At about 1100hrs, Sean was leading a routine patrol to deliver supplies and check on his men in the check points around Basharan. As the patrol, consisting of three armoured vehicles, made its way from one check point to another an Improvised Explosive Device was detonated against the second vehicle.

Despite immediate assistance from the patrol medic, sadly Major Birchall died as he was being extracted to the Helicopter Landing Site.

Major Sean Birchall was the Officer Commanding Number IX Company, 1st Battalion Welsh Guards. IX Company is based in Lashkar Gah, the Provincial Capital of Helmand Province. Early in IX the Company's time in Afghanistan Maj Birchall led them on a large operation where they operated alongside the Afghan Army to drive the Taleban out of a village called Basharan which is 10km North West of Lashkar Gah. Under Maj Birchall's inspired leadership the Company distinguished itself on this operation and subsequently Basharan became part of the Company's "patch." IX Company was therefore responsible, together with the Afghan Security Forces, for protecting the people of Basharan and helping them to develop their village.

Maj Birchall was born on 23 June 1975 in Vanderbijlpark, RSA, but moved back to the UK six months later. He was educated at St Peter's Catholic Comprehensive School, Guildford, and later at Plymouth University, where he was a member of the Exeter University Officer Training Corps. He attended the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in 1999, and was commissioned into the Welsh Guards on 11 December 99. He served as a Platoon Commander both on ceremonial duties in London and on exercise in the jungle of Belize. After a stint as the Regimental Signals Officer he returned to the Belizean jungle in charge of jungle warfare training. Following Staff College in 2006-2007 he worked in the Permanent Joint Headquarters, Northwood, but was

brought back from that job early to command the newly formed IX Company in Afghanistan.

Sean was enormously proud of the Regiment - a Welsh Guardsman through and through. He was a highly capable officer, and excelled at all he did. He was devoted to the men under his command, and they had enormous respect for him. He had a very bright future ahead of him in the Army. He will be sorely missed by all who knew him. Sean leaves behind his wife, Joanna,

and their 18-month old son, Charlie.

Lieutenant Colonel Rupert Thornloe, Maj Birchall's Commanding Officer, said:

"The Battle Group has been stunned and saddened by the tragic death of Major Sean Birchall, OC Number IX Company, following an Improvised Explosive Device strike near Basharan on Friday. Sean had all the qualities of the outstanding professional soldier - fitness, coolness under pressure, and tactical flair. His character was defined by his tremendous and infectious enthusiasm - I do not think he had a negative bone in his body.

"I remember Sean joining the Welsh Guards in 1999 - we had talent-spotted him at Sandhurst as a future star and we pulled out all the stops to persuade him to join us. It worked and from the very beginning it was clear that Sean was going to be a marvellous Welsh Guards Officer - his professionalism and competence were matched only by his generosity of spirit and his commitment to the welfare of the Guardsmen. Those under his command greatly admired his military competence and his legendary physical fitness and they warmed to his cheerful, upbeat manner. Sean always led from the front and his soldiers would have followed him anywhere.

"When we planned our deployment to Afghanistan we decided to split our two Companies into three smaller ones. The third Company was formed from an amalgam of different manpower and we named it Number IX Company after the Lead Company of the 2nd Battalion Welsh Guards (which had been put into suspended animation at the end of the Second World War). Composite Companies are notoriously difficult to command and Sean was a natural choice to come back to us early from a desk job to command it. In no time his dynamic leadership gelled IX Company into a happy, cohesive team - full of purpose and self belief. Soon after they deployed they found themselves playing a key and distinguished role in the first offensive operation of the summer - a role in which, under Sean's leadership, they excelled.

"Sean was hugely proud of his beloved Number IX Company, and rightly so - they are widely admired here and their reputation is very much the product of his energy, leadership and vision. Like many others I find it impossible to imagine that this irrepressibly warm, energetic and positive man can no longer be with us. He really was an inspiration to those of us who were lucky enough to have known him. The unselfish and positive manner in which he led his life could not contrast more starkly with the nihilistic cruelty of the people who took it from him. Our loss, as a Regiment, is enormous. But it is as nothing compared to that suffered by Sean's family. Our thoughts and prayers are with them at this dreadful time. I want to end by saying that we remain resolute and determined to see through the mission that Sean played such a massive part in helping us to deliver. He would expect nothing less."

Warrant Officer Class II Andy Campbell, Maj Birchall's Company Sergeant Major, said:

"Major Birchall was the consummate professional in everything that he did. Never one to rest on his laurels, he excelled in leading from the front, never asking anyone to do anything that he was not prepared to do himself. He ensured that every member of the Company, regardless of cap badge, was welcomed and understood the history of where the Company came from and what they had achieved. He instilled a great deal of pride in all of us.

"Major Birchall was the right man to bring IX Company together and will be remembered by all who met him as an exceptional soldier, inspired leader and most importantly a good man. It was my honour and privilege to serve with him. IX Company has lost a brave man and a good friend.

Major Henry Bettinson, a fellow Company Commander, said:

"I remember when Sean first arrived in the Prince of Wales' Company in London in 1999 - I was the Second in Command of the Company. The Commanding Officer at the time, Lt Col Ford, was keen that all new officers conducted State Ceremonial before we left London for Aldershot in early 2000. Sean was duly sent to the Tower! He had a photograph taken there by his family of him dressed in bearskin, greatcoat, sword and gloves at the top of the steps just after the Ceremony of the Keys. It is a fine photograph and one that he was rightly proud of.

"Sean had an intensity about him in everything he did. Physically very fit with uncompromising standards, he was wholly dedicated to leading his men and was utterly professional. His first Platoon Sergeant was one Sgt Monaghan (now the Regimental Sergeant Major). They formed a very close knit team and we in Company Headquarters knew that there would be no problems in that Platoon. In 2000 the Prince of Wales' Company managed to 'escape' to Belize for six weeks to take part in Ex TROPICAL STORM, a dismounted company-level jungle exercise. Sean led his Platoon with real zeal and helped many of his men to realise that jungle warfare is no black art; more a theatre that requires greater personal discipline, accurate navigation and quicker reactions to tactical situations. Sean was then selected to become the Regimental Signals Officer. He passed his course with distinction and joined the Battalion in Bosnia for its first tour in 2002. Communications were difficult throughout the widely dispersed Battle Group; but he is remembered for energetically driving around the Area of Operations with his Regimental Signals Warrant Officer struggling to keep up.

"He always held an aspiration to attend Special Forces Selection. But he was courting a girl called Jo. He spoke of her fondly and was conscious that attending Selection might jeopardise the relationship. They married and Sean was then posted to a newly created job as a Training Officer in Belize for two years. These were glorious times that allowed him to combine soldiering in the jungle with domestic stability. Whilst he was 'under the canopy', the Battalion was shocked to hear that a cooker had exploded in his face. He was flown to Florida for reconstructivesurgery that was entirely successful. Only the smallest of scars on his nose reminded those who knew about the incident.

"Sean was to return to Florida some years later on a brief attachment to the United States Armed Forces Central Command (based in Tampa). He then attended the Intermediate Command and Staff College where he excelled. A high profile posting to the Permanent Joint Headquarters followed before he was brought back to the Battalion early to command Number IX Company in Afghanistan on Op HERRICK 10. Although he only first met his new Company as it arrived in Camp Bastion, his typically dynamic leadership generated tremendous esprit de corps in short order and within weeks they were playing a key role in the first major offensive operation of the summer. He will never be forgotten and lives on with us who had the good fortune to know him."

Warrant Officer Class I (Regimental Sergeant Major) Michael Monaghan said:

"I am deeply saddened by the news of Maj Birchall's death and my immediate thoughts go out to his family during this very traumatic period. I had the enormous privilege of being Maj Birchall's Platoon Sergeant when he first joined the Battalion. Even during this early start to his career he demonstrated that he was an exceptionally talented officer and I knew that he would later go on to have a very successful career. He was everything you could wish for in a Platoon Commander and it gave me great pleasure seeing how he excelled at commanding one of our company's on Op Herrick.

"The greatest memories I will have of him were his dedication to the soldiers that were under his command and the fact that you could not wish to serve with anybody who was more of a gentleman. He was an absolute pleasure to be around; every time we met I would be greeted by a big smile and the feeling that he was happy to see me and he was always willing to give up his time for a chat. Maj Birchall will be sorely missed by me and everybody that knew him. His death will be a huge loss to the Welsh Guards."

Sergeant Jack Owen, also from IX Company, said:

"I have known Maj Birchall since my first days in the Army as he was my platoon commander when I joined as a young guardsman. Major Birchall was an uber keen soldier who demanded first and foremost that his men were fit to fight, which saw us up and down Aldershot's many high features on a daily basis. Once the work for the day was done there was always time for banter and a laugh in which his relaxed form of leadership kept morale high in the platoon. Major Birchall's enthusiasm always saw him leading from the front during every exercise always encouraging us to perform to the highest of standards, naturally making the guardsmen want to work for him, not because they had to.

"Nine years later when I found out I was joining IX Company, and that Maj Birchall was in command, I was happy knowing that he would lead us well in a difficult environment. In the short time that IX Company was reformed Major Birchall has instilled a fierce pride in the Company. Leading us in on an advance to contact, always first into the sangar to return fire in contact and never expecting anyone to do something that he would not do himself. Major Birchall was sadly killed doing what he did best, leading from the front. Major Birchall will be remembered as an outstanding leader of men, who took massive pride in his personal soldiering, his company and his men. His legacy will live on within the men of Number IX Company. Gone but never forgotten."

Guardsman Steven Matthews, from IX Company, said:

"Major Birchall was an outstanding Company Commander and great soldier. He loved his job and the boys and he was a fine role model for us all."

LIEUTENANT PAUL MERVIS

OC 10 PLATOON, C COMPANY, 2 RIFLES BG

Killed in action Friday 12 June 2009

Lieutenant Paul Mervis, born on 30th September 1981, grew up in London and was educated at King's College Wimbledon. He then spent a gap year in China and Israel before going on to study philosophy at University College London. Summer holidays were invariably spent in Africa in the Namibian bush. Post graduation, his passion in geo-politics and travel led him into the world of journalism where he was involved with The Week and The Spectator. But it wasn't long before his thirst for adventure drew him into the British Army. Paul was one of the very first officers to commission into the newly formed RIFLES in April 2007. After the testing Platoon Commander's Course at Brecon, he was posted to 2 RIFLES as the Platoon Commander of 10 Platoon and he was straight into the mix.

He led his Platoon with distinction on a demanding TESEX before deploying with the Battle Group to Kosovo, where he thrived on his first operational tour. He was in his element in the diversity of that place and it soon showed that he was an operational soldier who relished overseas deployments. 2 RIFLES then entered an intensive period of pre-deployment training for HERRICK 10 and, for Paul, the operation could not come soon enough. Paul's unique character and leadership forged a very special Platoon. Every exercise and training serial, whether Platoon, Company or Battalion, was tackled with the vigour, thoroughness and professionalism of someone who cared passionately about his Riflemen and who was prepared to strain every sinew in preparing for the demands of operations in Helmand. During his first two months of the tour, based out of FOB GIBRALTAR as part of Battle Group (North), Paul Mervis was at the forefront of all his Company's operations. He fought hard and led his Platoon through tragic times, when Rifleman Thatcher was killed in action he was a rock to those he commanded. It was typical of the man that he led from the front in one of Afghanistan's most demanding and dangerous districts. Tragically, Lieutenant Paul Mervis was killed, whilst on a foot patrol, by an explosion north of FOB GIBRALTAR on 12 June 2009.

LIEUTENANT COLONEL ROB THOMSON - COMMANDING OFFICER 2 RIFLES BG said

"Lieutenant Paul Mervis was utterly irrepressible. There was no more committed officer in the Rifles and the Riflemen adored being under his command. He was one of those leaders who, out here, was always first onto the objective. He had taken the fight to the enemy at every turn and it had not been without a cost - Rifleman Thatcher was in his Platoon and his beloved 10 Platoon had already had two other Riflemen wounded in action, including his Platoon Serjeant. It was a cost which hurt him to the core but it did not deter him. He adored platoon command and the richness of its challenge and there was nothing he would not do for one of his Riflemen. In the Mess, most of us could not keep up with him. He was always the first to grab the wine list in a restaurant, opining that only he knew the best clarets. He was the officer who sent my children the highest on the trampoline and they loved him for it.

"But Paul was not just a fun-lover, he was full of enquiry and was a deep thinker - about soldiering and about life. Out here, he had established a model relationship with the Afghan National Army in his Forward Operating Base - he had an enviable ability to encourage, cajole, inspire and motivate them. He read more about Afghanistan than anyone as we prepared for this tour and his empathy for the people of this fascinating country was exemplary. He had been

due to move on soon to train recruit Riflemen back in Catterick which he would have done brilliantly but it is a measure of the man and his passion for those he commanded that, since our arrival here, he had, on every occasion we met, asked if he could stay on. He was already planning to return to Afghanistan next year.

"His mother and father were so proud of him and all that he had selflessly achieved and our thoughts and prayers must be with them and Paul's brother and sister at this unimaginably awful time. But this will be some solace - their son, Paul, died in command, at the front of his platoon, leading it on operations fighting in a just cause for the benefit of impoverished Afghans. He would want nothing more than for us to get back up onto the ramparts, with the bugle sounding, to let the enemy know that we are coming back."

MAJOR ALASTAIR FIELD - OFFICER COMMANDING C COMPANY said

"Paul Mervis was a one in a trillion. I have never met a more passionate and engaging young officer in my twelve years in the Army. His thirst for knowledge was unquenchable. You knew when 'Merv' was out of the Mess when the periodicals and Amazon parcels he had ordered piled up on the post table! I could not have wanted more of him as a Platoon Commander - less perhaps the odd ironed shirt. Full-on, intelligently so, he was caring and understanding in the best way. He had a sharp intellect and immediately got the bigger picture faster than most of us and did so without a trace of arrogance. He also had that ingredient of plain old presence and leadership which only a few genuinely possess. The reputation Paul had personally engineered for his Platoon was enviable in the Battalion. No one signed off under his command - a true testament to the high morale he had created. We could all see his longer term potential, both on the staff and later in command. Sadly his raw talent will not have the chance to flourish. Our thoughts and prayers are with his beloved parents and his brother and his sister."

CORPORAL STEVE CHILDS - PLATOON SERJEANT 10 PLATOON said

"No words that I can say will ever be enough to sum up the character of Mr Mervis. I know that, if it's possible, you will be looking down on us with Thatch, throwing the banter around with your cheesy smile in tow. Perhaps his greatest characteristic and what we will all remember most was how passionate he was - I have never seen a Platoon Commander who did so much to look after his men. He had our utmost respect as a Platoon Commander, but perhaps more so as a genuine friend. Mr Mervis achieved so much in his short life. I assess the thing he was most proud of, however, was commanding the men he loved. Mr Mervis was rightfully proud of what he had achieved by commanding 10 Platoon. He died doing what he loved, surrounded by us all who looked up to him. May your soul rest in peace. You will never be forgotten."

LANCE CORPORAL JOE ELLS - SECTION COMMANDER said

"It's difficult to write about someone who had such a strong and unique character. The 'Merv-dog' was no like no other officer, he was always joking and laughing like one of the lads. He wasn't just a platoon commander but a friend too. He loved 10 Platoon and his men to bits and it broke his and our hearts that he would be leaving us in July for a new job. Mr Mervis left us this morning surrounded by his men. He will always be part of 10 Platoon - tough Riflemen

who were proud to be led by him. Rest in peace, Mr Mervis. Always 10!"

CORPORAL SEAN KIRKHAM - SECTION COMMANDER said

"Mr Mervis was in a league of his own! A top 'Boss', who always put his Riflemen first. He was also like a father figure to us. His leadership was the backbone of the Platoon after Rfn Thatcher was killed. He has left us doing what he loved and was brilliant at - commanding 10 Platoon. Working with 'Merv-dog' was always fun. He would invariably have a big smile on his face or be trying to crack a joke. You could

hear his laugh anywhere in the FOB - usually it was at someone else's expense. He will be sorely missed by me and all of the lads of Mighty Ten. You inspired us and it has been a pleasure working with and knowing you. Rest in peace, my friend. Gone but never forgotten."

RIFLEMAN STUART ELLIOTT said

"Mr Mervis wasn't just our Platoon Commander, he was part of our 10 Platoon family. He also managed to be a good friend to all us too. He will never be forgotten for the natural leader he was. He had time for everyone and would go out of his way to help anyone he could. We all now think he has joined up with Thatch on the re-org - 2 great friends re-united, giggling like 2 little school girls! Mr Mervis had strength in depth. This was evident when Thatch left us. He stayed strong, leading his men from the front. We will now do this for him and make him proud."

WARRANT OFFICER 2 SIMON THOMPSON - COMPANY SERJEANT MAJOR C COMPANY said

"Mr Mervis was larger and louder than life itself. From a Rifleman's perspective he was the model Rifles Officer. Yes, he was scruffy and at times allowed the Platoon Commander/Rifleman relationship to become a little more relaxed than perhaps The Royal Military Academy Sandhurst had taught him but, in my twenty years in the Army, I have never met, nor am I likely to meet, a man who cared so much about his men.

"He fought the corner of every single one of his men, striving to get the best course or job opportunity. He would telephone me whilst on leave to let me know that one of his Riflemen had a compassionate problem at home or when a Rifleman had missed his flight back to Northern Ireland."

LIEUTENANT ANDY HUXTER - PLATOON COMMANDER C COMPANY said

"Paul Mervis was the epitome of a larger than life character. Arriving at the Battalion with a dislocated shoulder having fallen off St Paul's Cathedral set the tone for his Army career. He knew and could share a joke with what seemed like everyone in Battalion. He invested in and cared for his men more than could be asked for, working all the hours of the day to make sure their best interests came first, all of which was done behind closed doors and not seen or known of by many. He was an

intellectual, deeply read and widely knowledgeable. Nothing could change his character or approach to life. The more you got to know Paul, the more complex and the more likeable a person one would find him. His motivation could never be questioned because you knew that his men were always at the forefront of his mind. Paul was the best and most loyal of friends. He leaves a huge gap in our lives but also so many happy memories. We will miss you more than you could ever know. Be at peace.

I don't know how to sum up Merv in one line, he was the life and soul of the Mess, clearly loved by all who knew him, and rightly so. Professionally he was the best. He made me feel so welcome in the Mess and was a true friend to me, I could talk to him about absolutely anything. He was a credit to The Rifles and will never be forgotten."

PRIVATE ROBERT MCLAREN THE BLACK WATCH

3RD BATTALION, THE ROYAL REGIMENT OF SCOTLAND

Killed in Action Tuesday 11 June 2009

Private Robert McLaren was killed in action on 11 June 2009 in Kandahar Province. 20 years old and fresh out of infantry recruit training; Robert was from Kintras, by Fionnphort on the Isle of Mull. He was schooled at Bunnessan Primary and then Oban High School . Robert joined the Army in November 2007 and trained first at the Army Training Regiment in Winchester and then as a Royal Engineer in Surrey. He ultimately decided to pursue a career as a Scottish Infantryman. He attended and comfortably passed the Combat Infantryman's Course at the Infantry Training Centre, Catterick. He passed out of Seven Platoon on 3rd April 2009 and was posted to The Black Watch, 3rd Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland on operations in Southern Afghanistan .

LIEUTENANT COLONEL STEPHEN CARTWRIGHT - COMMANDING OFFICER 3 SCOTS BG said

Private Robert McLaren has been cruelly taken from us after only 4 weeks of active service in The Black Watch, 3rd Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland. The Battalion was conducting an offensive operation against the insurgents in one of the most dangerous parts of the southern Afghanistan . His Company had been engaged in close combat with the insurgents for several hours and Robert had displayed enormous physical courage during this battle for one so young. He gave his life for his friends with his selfless commitment, moving forward in the face of a determined and ruthless enemy.

From the moment he arrived he threw his heart and body into everything he was asked to do. He completed three large operations with his Company and he made an immediate positive impression with his Junior NCOs. Fit, keen to learn and easy company, Robert had so much going for him and was so proud to be on operations so soon in his career. Any death in this close knit Battalion delivers an emotional body blow, but the loss of this young man so soon after joining us has hit us particularly hard. He has died in the service of his country, his Regiment and for his friends in his platoon. On behalf of everyone in the Black Watch Battalion,

I send my deepest condolences to his parents and wider family for their most tragic loss. He will be sorely missed by his many friends in the Battalion and we will never forget him. We march forward on this most difficult task knowing that Robert would be urging to do just that. Nemo me impune lacessit.

MAJOR MATT MUNRO- OFFICER COMMANDING ALPHA (GRENADIER) COMPANY

Robert McLaren will be remembered as a trusted friend, a brave highland Jock and an enormously talented and decent man. His sudden death is a huge blow to all of us who were privileged and fortunate enough to soldier with him. Quietly confident, steady and assured he was an old head on young shoulders. Thoughtful and reflective, he had a ready smile, a wicked dry sense of humour and an easy manner. Though he soldiered with us for barely a month he immediately won the respect and admiration of all of his brother Jocks; he made a tremendous impact in the short time that he served with us in Alpha (Grenadier) Company.

Robert was a clever man who well understood the big picture; he was a 'canny' Jock who was as comfortable when robustly defeating the insurgent as he was compassionate when interacting with Afghan civilians. He was in his element here in Afghanistan . On his first operation, just a month out of recruit training he left an indelible impression on his brother Jocks when in his first contact he fearlessly and decisively engaged insurgents at close range. He was killed two weeks later by an improvised explosive device as once again; under accurate and sustained fire he pushed himself forward to support his imperilled colleagues. This was typical of the man who without hesitation, question or thought for his personal safety, repeatedly pushed himself to the fore.

Our grief is seemingly overwhelming but nothing compared to that which his family must be suffering. They are in our thoughts and prayers. If Robert were still with us I am clear that as a proud and determined Grenadier he would be urging us forward. Robert will be sorely missed but never forgotten. Nemo Me Impune Lacessit.

LIEUTENANT ROBERT COLQUHOUN - OFFICER COMMANDING 2 PLATOON

Quiet and mild mannered, with a ready smile, Robert made friends quickly and had gained the respect of his peers within days of his arrival. This calm and pleasant manner belied a determined and mature young man who was committed to his friends and the task in hand. No soldier has impressed me so much in such a short amount of time.

Always pushing himself forward to get a new angle to defeat the enemy and support his friends, he acquitted himself throughout his short time with 2 Platoon with bravery and skill. His final action exemplified this: with his section pinned down by accurate rifle fire from two sides and the target of indirect rocket attacks his instinct was to thrust forward once again to improve his position and relieve pressure on his comrades. His selfless commitment is consistent with the highest qualities of a soldier and testimony to his fine upbringing and excellent training.

Killed taking the fight to the enemy, he will ever be remembered with a smile on his face, ready and willing to do what was necessary to get the job done. Committed, fearless and courageous,

his measured steadfastness set him apart from his peers. Had his life not been cruelly cut short Robert was destined for great things and all who knew him will miss him greatly. We are the richer for having known him and our thoughts and prayers are with his family as they come to terms with their loss. It was an honour to have led such a fierce, brave, loyal and proud highland soldier. Robert McLaren, I salute you.

CORPORAL SAMISONA BOILA - SECTION COMMANDER

Rab was up for anything. He was keen and enthusiastic doing the job he loved and it was a pleasure to work with him. I am filled with respect for his bravery. He will be greatly missed by the boys who knew him.

PRIVATE MARK METHVEN - FRIEND

Robert was quite a man: he made friends quickly, he was a great soldier to work with, and always knew what he was doing and did it to the best of his ability. He will be missed but always remembered. Rest in Peace.

PRIVATE SIRELI ULUILAKEBA - FRIEND

Rab was a quiet but hard working guy. He joined The Royal Regiment of Scotland because he wanted to do this job, and I think he deserves respect for all he has done since he got out here. A good friend and a willing ear, he is in my thoughts and prayers.

PRIVATE AMPHON SUPHAREE - FRIEND

Rab was a quiet boy when he arrived, but got on well with the guys and he was a switched on soldier. Even though he was new, he was welcomed and everyone had respect for him. He was not just a good guy, but a great soldier. He did his job with pride and he was always up there whatever was asked of him. I am honoured to call him my friend and will always remember him as part of our team.

PRIVATE JOHN EASSON - FRIEND

Robert pushed himself to the limit always giving his best. Committed and reliable, I couldn't have asked for anyone better to watch my back. A good friend and a brave soldier he'll be sorely missed.

2nd June 2009

Rifleman Cyrus Thatcher

2nd Battalion The Rifles

Rifleman Thatcher, aged 19, joined 2nd Battalion The Rifles in December 2007 and deployed almost immediately to Salisbury Plain on a Battle Group exercise with 10 Platoon, C Company.

Even as a new and junior Rifleman, he showed great promise from the outset. He won a battalion award for valour at the end of the testing exercise for preventing a counter-attack during a particularly tricky operation clearing a wood block.

His all-round qualities were confirmed when Rifleman Thatcher was selected to go to the Infantry Training Centre in Catterick as a mentor to new recruits. He was an exemplary role model. In summer 2008 he deployed on his first operational tour to Kosovo on Operation VALERO, where he thrived. On return, he threw himself into pre-deployment training as his company prepared for Afghanistan.

Life was full-on and he was involved in every turn of the training wheel. He performed brilliantly on the Battle Group's final exercise before deployment. At a particularly difficult moment on the confirmatory exercise, he stood up as a section commander, leading his fellow Riflemen through a wood clearance with great confidence and skill.

He deployed in April 2009 to Afghanistan as a General Purpose Machine Gunner, a testament to his strength and fitness. He had already been identified as a potential section second-in-command. He had set his heart on promotion or joining the Sniper Platoon after Afghanistan; he would have excelled whichever path he took for, quite simply, Rifleman Thatcher was a Rifleman of immense promise.

Rifleman Thatcher came from Caversham in Reading. His passions were Manchester United, all things football, and spending time with his two brothers and his parents.

Rifleman Thatcher's parents, Robin and Helena, and brothers Zac and Steely, gave the following tribute:

"Cyrus was a much-loved son and brother whose loss we will never recover from. He loved his job and was proud to serve his country. We will always be immensely proud of him. He will forever be in our hearts and minds."

Lieutenant Colonel Rob Thomson, Commanding Officer 2nd Battalion The Rifles, said:

"Rifleman Thatcher was one of a tremendous gang of young Riflemen who joined us in between Iraq and Afghanistan. He had a heart for adventure; his prize for valour on our testing exercise back in February 2008, within three months of joining the battalion, was a tandem freefall jump from 12,000 feet.

"As he received the prize, it was all he could do to utter that he hated aeroplanes - passionately so. To his huge credit, he jumped and, not only that, he ensured that his family was there to record the event for posterity. His grin when he returned to tell us all about it was a picture. And in Kosovo, his first operational tour, he thrived on the diversity of that country and the task in hand.

"He was one of the very best - a real thinking Rifleman whose questions were always perceptive and on the money; those questions proved to me that his rivers ran deep. Less

experienced than some but you would never have known. He was one of those few who genuinely had a rucksack full of potential.

"He was fiercely proud of all he had achieved and was the live-wire in one of my strongest platoons. He lapped up the skills we require for this place and, under the most demanding of circumstances, he was standing tall. He knew he was making a difference for the benefit of the Afghan people.

"As his Commanding Officer, I count it a privilege of the highest order to have known Rifleman Thatcher. His life was one of such promise and he is sorely missed. But I know that our sadness is nothing compared to that of his dearly loved and hugely supportive parents and proud brothers.

"His family is right at the very centre of our prayers at this unimaginably difficult time. Rifleman Thatcher would have been the first to tell us to get back up 'on the ramparts' and that is where this Battle Group is and will remain."

Major Alastair Field, Officer Commanding C Company, said:

"Rifleman Thatcher was an outstanding 19-year-old Rifleman who simmered with potential. Readily accepted and respected by all ranks, Rifleman Thatcher was arguably one of the best Riflemen in my Company. He had it all - a fit, strong and intelligent exterior and a caring but wicked sense of humour beneath. A ray of morale always shone through, whatever the weather and circumstances. No job was too tough. His Platoon, Company, Battalion and the wider British Army has lost a rising star and personality."

Lieutenant Paul Mervis, Officer Commanding 10 Platoon, said:

"There are many good men out here but 'Thatch' was one of the best. The darker and colder the night, the bigger was his smile. The hotter and longer the day, the louder was his laugh. His sense of humour trumped all adversity, whether it was an infectious giggle when morale was low or a practical joke. He was always there to provide solace for the men.

"His attributes as a soldier were exemplary. He had the world at his feet. He was on line for the next Junior NCO [Non-Commissioned Officer] cadre despite his age and experience. He was utterly reliable.

"Perhaps what I saw more than others was his deeply caring and thoughtful nature. Whether it was giving or sharing his welfare parcels with his friends or the sympathy he showed for the local Afghans he met on patrol. We have lost a good man, one whom I will never forget."

Serjeant Leon Smith (spelling of sergeant with a 'j' is unique to The Rifles), Platoon Serjeant 10 Platoon, said:

"Rifleman Thatcher was a ray of sunshine within 10 Platoon. Always giggling and joking, making the blokes smile. As a Rifleman, he was a pleasure to work with; reliable, trustworthy and giving

others a hand when they needed it. The Junior NCOs could rely on him and, more so, me.

"It would only be a matter of time on patrol, going firm in a compound, or on exercise somewhere in the UK, that you would hear his laugh - usually at a joke he had just cracked. I am going to miss that laugh and that Rifleman. Rest in Peace, my brother."

Lance Corporal Joe Ells, Section Commander, said:

"Rifleman Thatcher came to my section and, almost from the start, he managed to combine real competence as a good, reliable soldier with a wicked sense of humour.

"I have known him too long and have been through too much with him to open up now. All I want is that he is remembered for the laughter, the jokes and the rippings. You are a mate and will never be forgotten."

His friend Rifleman Stuart Elliot said:

"It was an honour to have known Cyrus and to have fought with him on the battlefield. It won't be the same without him and I know his friends, family and loved ones will miss him greatly.

"He was a great friend and never failed to keep morale high. Whenever times were hard, you could count on him to be cracking the jokes. He gave his life doing what he loved.

"When he first joined the platoon, he was quiet and shy but it didn't take him long to show his true colours for the rascal he really was. He soon started the practical jokes and that is the way we will always remember him; his memory lives on - forever.

"He made me promise that people would remember him the way he was, not to feel sorry for him but to remember the good times, the times he was always laughing and the jokes he made.

"Goodbye my brother, rest well, for one day we will meet again to continue the jokes. Your friend, Elliott."

His friend Rifleman Francis Malou said:

"I don't know where to start or what to say but what I know is that we will miss you a lot. We will never forget you, we will always remember you. You were more than just a friend in the platoon. You were always there when people felt down, you cared about people. You never wanted any return on the kindness you and your family provided.

"When I wasn't receiving any parcels, your parents sent me some to keep me going. For that I thank you.

"May your soul rest in peace, may God be with you. We will always love and remember you for who you really are. Mate, when we meet again, the fun will really begin. Goodbye 'Thatch' mate, it was an honour to know you."

