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Operation 'Herrick IV' will be remembered as one of the most controversial operations the British Armed Forces have undertaken in recent history. Much has already been written about the mission. Most of the key players, including General Sir Richard Dannatt and Colonel Stuart Tootal, as well as other participants have written accounts of this mission. There have also been several journalistic accounts.

James Fergusson's book A Million Bullets is one such journalistic example. He has had extensive experience covering Afghanistan, and he does not fail in using his knowledge of Afghan culture in his analysis. The title refers to John Reid's unfortunate phrase at the start of the campaign that he would be perfectly happy if the British ended the mission not firing a single shot. Fergusson recognises that Reid's suffered unfair treatment by the media and that his quote was taken out of context. Nevertheless, the book shows how complacent the British political and military establishments were, and how the campaign turned out to be something very different to what was originally envisaged.

Originally published in 2008, with a paperback published in 2009, the book describes the Afghan conflict from Fergusson's perspective. It covers the places he visited and the interviews he conducted with politicians, generals, Afghans, soldiers and airmen, and with members of the Taliban at the end.

In the introductory chapter, Fergusson gives an overview of the political and social context. He also writes about his own motivations for writing his book and describes his growing pessimism about Britain's involvement in Afghanistan as the mission went on. In the first chapter he visits Kandahar and the Afghan National Police. What comes across very clearly was the inadequacy of the Coalition assistance to the ANP. Indeed, policemen had received little training and the Coalition had not devoted the resources to this important part of Afghanistan's reconstruction.

Fergusson then looks at the battle for Now Zad, and in particular the Gurkhas' experience. There had been occasions where the Taliban had threatened to overrun the outpost. But again the limitations of the Afghan National Police come to the fore, as he describes the Gurkhas' suspicion that rogue police was giving intelligence to the Taliban. Fergusson especially highlights the growing respect the British were having for the Taliban as professional fighting

men. In short – the Taliban knew what they were doing tactically. Furthermore, their tactics were evolving and were becoming more sophisticated. The book then looks at the experience of the Royal Fusiliers. What was most striking was the numbers of soldiers that wanted to leave the army after the operation.

Chapter 4 examines Britain's strategy. He first discusses the controversial decision to deploy British forces to platoon houses in the north. Fergusson then neatly summarises the key problem with the British government's implementation of the 'Comprehensive Approach': there was no comprehensive approach and there was no real joined-up implementation on the ground between the different agencies. There was little co-operation between MOD and DFID, and there was no agreed counter-narcotics strategy between the UK and US. One interesting observation Fergusson made was that ISAF's decision to put Britain into Helmand province was always going to be flawed given the history in that region. He argues convincingly that this fact hardly helped in the effort to win 'hearts and minds'.

Fergusson then looks at three key British platform types – the Chinook helicopter, the Apache helicopter, and the CVR(T) armoured vehicles. In terms of vehicles, the British were using old, tired equipment that kept breaking down. Clearly Britain's force structure and equipment (especially armoured vehicles) at that stage was not suited to war in Afghanistan. This was reinforced during the interview with Adam Holloway MP later in the book.

Fergusson moves on to examine the second controversial aspect of the deployment - the Musa Qaleh deal and the withdrawal of British forces from that area. In the last chapter Fergusson describes his fascinating meeting with a Taliban commander.

The book covers a lot of ground. It combines analysis of the strategic and political issues surrounding the deployment, with accounts from the front line. The key problem is that the book lacks coherence – it jumps around too much between different aspects of the mission. Those who want to read an operational and tactical narrative of events will find other works more useful.

Nevertheless, it is still a must have book for those interested in Afghanistan. The book represents a change in general thinking that was becoming apparent in 2008. Ambitious talk about creating western style democracies was being replaced by limited and more realistic objectives. Deployments based on offensive operations and attrition was gradually being replaced by a more nuanced, politically driven approach to counter-insurgency. Fergusson's discussion at the end about the possibilities that elements of the Taliban can be reasoned with is interesting, although it is extremely unlikely that the hard core leadership and Al Qaeda will seek to integrate with other groups in Afghan politics and society.

Overall, A Million Bullets provides a useful introduction of the key criticisms of the 2006 Helmand deployment. His interviews certainly provide interesting material and his insights are thought provoking. Since the book's publication, we now know that the British combat operation in Afghanistan has an end date. We can only hope that the situation in 2015 will at the very least provide some justification for the sacrifices described in this book.