By Alex Shone, UK Defence Forum Research Associate in Residence

Sean Rayment is an experienced conflict journalist who has undertaken assignments from locations ranging from Iraq and the Balkans to Africa. Bomb Hunters covers his experience as embedded journalist with the Joint Force Explosive Ordnance Disposal, part of the Counter-IED Task Force. For two weeks the author lived alongside the operators from this group and observed first-hand the dangers of their work. Sean Rayment's book presents a very frank portrayal of Afghanistan that does not shy from the more contemporary realities of the conflict that have only recently begun to emerge. This book does touch on very controversial topics, particularly equipment and personnel shortages.

However, these issues are all secondary to attention Rayment pays in illustrating the personalities of the bomb hunters. These personalities come alive from the book and by the end will be strangely familiar to the reader by their various nicknames. This is a different addition to the recent flux of intrigue surrounding bomb disposal from the public and is critically written by an outsider to the trade. The result is a very personal and subsequently readable account into the world of high threat EOD (Every Ones Divorced). Writing about this trade as an outsider means that any ring of 'kiss and tell' is removed from the book and the stark realities of the war are laid bare.

The book provides an excellent and very accessible appreciation of the IED ambush and tactical minefield. It opens with an account of an event taking place on the 16th August 2009 in Sangin. This event, Rayment goes onto point out, was recorded as the most outstanding act of EOD ever undertaken in Afghanistan. Staff Sergeant Kim Hughes arriving at the scene of a terrible IED incident cleared five devices (thirteen in total were located) in forty five minutes. Three of the devices cleared were done by a Category-A procedure which meant that no protective suit was donned, no cordon was established and no remote vehicles could be used.

Staff Sergeant Karl "Badger" Ley, now Sergeant Major, holds the record of defeating 139 devices in a six month tour. In one job, he suffered injuries to his right hand while disarming a device under fire. Yet he continued to disarm the remaining devices to enable a crippled convoy to escape the killing ground. This is one exceptional case within a military trade, where such acts appear to be a 'norm'. What Rayment is most astonished by is the modesty of these people who very much play down the danger that they face. Ley boils down the risk as being down to different comfort zones saying, Firefights terrify me. Give me an IED to defuse any day.

One however, cannot read this book without reflecting on the political issues and the question of bomb disposal operator's tours is currently very topical. The compelling testimony from the bomb hunters themselves makes a good argument to reduce tours for bomb disposal operators from six to four months. Rayment outlines the nature of the IED threat excellently and so we the readers are left in no doubt as to the scale of the pressure under which the operators are under. In the British Army, operators are embedded at the battlegroup level, in other words, one operator per 1500 men. By comparison, in the US Army it is at the platoon level; one operator per 30 men.

For the bomb disposal operators in Afghanistan, the odds are incredibly stacked against them. As one operator points out to the author, it is not only about being good at the job but being lucky. This would seem to be one of the key conclusions of the book. Plenty of people who were good and indeed exceptional at the job have been killed; but it is those who are lucky who survive. The incredible fact is that the bomb hunters all recognise this reality and yet continue to roll the dice and take on the bomb makers.