As the tenth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq nears, Sean Rayment's review of "Losing Small Wars" by Frank Ledwidge, an account of why Britain fared so badly in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, is pertinent.

"Losing small wars" is an excellent book – almost, he says. It provides a devastating, highly readable critique of why Britain's armed forces have fared so badly in two of the country's most recent and controversial conflicts: Iraq and Afghanistan.

Of the many military books that have saturated the market in recent years, few have been so precise as this one. It spells out in specific, and at times painful, detail why the British Army was humiliated in Iraq – a process which was set in motion just months after US and British troops decisively destroyed the Iraqi military machine.

Anyone with a passing interest in world affairs will be aware that the problems in Iraq stemmed from a failure to plan for the post-war phase and to appreciate the difficulties therein. But what *Losing Small Wars*
does so well is to bring the catalogue of errors to life in graphic detail.

Under British control, Basra, the capital of southern Iraq, descended into bloody chaos and the author explains why such a catastrophe unfolded. A former barrister, who has served in Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan, Ledwidge writes fluently and easily from a position of perfect hindsight, which can be slightly irritating. But there are some additional deficiencies in his book – the most problematic of which is the claim that British troops never left their bases in Iraq or Afghanistan – an assertion that implies some sort of collective cowardice.

For example, in chapter two, the author casually states: "The huge majority of service personnel in Iraq and later in Helmand, never left the safety of the highly secure bases in which they lived."

Such a claim is not only wrong but deeply insulting to the majority of British troops who have served in Afghanistan and have seen friends and colleagues killed and seriously wounded fighting the Taliban.

I have been an embedded journalist on numerous occasions in Helmand, visiting dozens of bases, and have never once come across a unit, no matter how small, that never went on patrol.

Indeed, a quick glance of the casualty statistics on the Ministry of Defence's website shows that more than 370 British troops have been killed in Afghanistan and thousands more have suffered appalling injuries because they do leave their bases every day to patrol the local area.

The author forgets that every military campaign has its ups and downs, its highs and lows. Setbacks, failures, along with successes and victories are part of the fabric of combat. As one senior officer told me: "Britain has an expeditionary Army. We often get things wrong before we get them right."

It is too soon to say whether the war in Afghanistan has been won or lost, especially as "winning" was never the desired outcome.

As Brig Mark Carlton-Smith, who commanded 16 Air Assault Brigade, observed in 2008: "It is not about defeating the Taliban, it's about reducing the insurgency to a level that is manageable."

But these are minor faults in what is otherwise a first-rate book. I support the author's notion that it is a national scandal that despite the failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, no senior officer has yet been held to account.

As stated in *Losing Small Wars*, the British Army is now facing its "Horse and Tank" moment. The recent Strategic Defence Review should have been an opportunity for Britain's armed forces to reinvent itself. Time will tell whether the right strategic choices were made.

* Sean Rayment is the Defence and Security Correspondent of *The Sunday Telegraph* and the author of
Bomb Hunters
(Collins). His latest book is "Tales from the Special Forces Club". This review is (c) Telegraph first appeared on 25 July 2011

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