

One hundredth British military death in Iraq

Harvey Thompson
3 February 2006

A British soldier was killed in southern Iraq on January 31, taking the total death toll of UK military personnel in the country to 100 since the US-led invasion in March 2003.

Corporal Gordon Alexander Pritchard, 31, who served with the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards, died from injuries sustained in an explosion from a roadside bomb in Umm Qasr in the British-occupied Basra province. Umm Qasr, Iraq's biggest port, was one of the first cities to be captured by British forces in May 2003. Since then, it has largely avoided the kind of violence seen in Baghdad and, to a lesser extent, in the city of Basra.

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) confirmed that the blast occurred at 8:34 a.m. local time and also injured three other soldiers, one seriously. Pritchard was commanding the lead Land Rover in a three-vehicle ration and water run when the explosion went off. His parents, Jenny and Bill, said in a statement, "He was a loving son, and a very proud family man, and he will be deeply missed by us all." Pritchard had followed family tradition by serving with the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards.

Tuesday's fatality was the second British Army loss in just over 24 hours. Lance Corporal Allan Douglas, 22, of the 1st Battalion the Highlanders, died after being wounded by sniper fire when his patrol came under fire in Maysan province, southeast Iraq, on January 30. Douglas was on his first tour of duty in the region.

Following news of his son's death, Allan's father, Walter, told the Scottish *Daily Record* and UK *Daily Mirror* newspapers that his son had not wanted to go to Iraq. "Allan was against the war. He couldn't see the point of it. But he thought it was his duty to be there and he had no choice. The lives of 99 young men have now been lost—and all for nothing," he said.

Diane Douglas, Allan's mother, told the BBC it was a "damn disgrace" that young people were being killed in Iraq, adding, "I don't think Tony Blair should have put any young kids out there."

A spokesman for Prime Minister Tony Blair said he was "deeply saddened" by the recent deaths and all fatalities

of service personnel. But he emphasized that this would not influence the perspective of British forces in Iraq—which currently amount to around 8,000 troops—staying in the country for "as long as necessary."

Blair stressed there would be no turning back either in Iraq or Afghanistan. "Our response [to the 100th death in Iraq] has got to be not to walk away from the situation but to redouble our efforts to make sure the people of Afghanistan and Iraq achieve the democracy they want," he told Reuters Television.

Blair met and was photographed with Corporal Pritchard at the Shaibah logistics base, near Basra airport, during his surprise visit to Iraq on December 22 last year.

In an indication of the political sensitivity of the milestone, Defence Secretary John Reid took the unusual step of announcing the 100th death to reporters outside MoD headquarters.

Many bereaved parents are directly blaming the government for the deaths of their loved ones in Iraq. Reg Keys, whose son Thomas was one of six military policemen killed in an ambush over two years ago, said the milestone figure was "absolutely dreadful."

"We have had 100 chances to learn our lesson. It just goes on and on," Keys said. "These deaths were 100 percent preventable. These lads are dying for a falsehood. Their oath of allegiance has been betrayed. This was not what they went to war for. They are not the world's police ... as long as we are there, there will be a steady trickle of coffins coming back."

Rose Gentle, whose 19-year-old son Gordon was killed by a roadside bomb in Basra in June 2004, branded the deaths as "scandalous." She added, "How many of our boys are going to die before we say enough and put an end to this bloody illegal war? One hundred lives is such a dreadful waste. That's 100 families devastated by this war. My heart goes out to all of the families and friends affected."

Speaking on the opposition to the occupation of Iraq, Rose Gentle, who stood as an independent antiwar candidate in the last general election against Adam

Ingram, the Armed Forces minister, said, “Soldiers in Iraq have told me they don’t want to be there. They want to come home. They have told us to step up our campaign of resistance to this government’s war policies. We must act now, bring the troops home and end this illegal occupation.”

Despite the mounting death toll and latent popular anger in both Britain and the US, all indications are that the trajectory of London and Washington is in the direction of more bloodshed and carnage in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Defence Secretary Reid last week announced a major new deployment of British troops on a three-year mission to southern Afghanistan, where US forces are now being targeted by suicide bombers. British forces there will rise from around 1,000 presently to a peak of 5,700. Commenting on the possible “over-stretch” Tim Ripley, who writes for *Jane’s Defense Weekly*, said, “When you spend your holidays from Afghanistan in Iraq, that is where you stretch your army to breaking point.

“You’re talking about them coming back from Iraq and going straight to Afghanistan and then going back again. And that puts a real strain on whether these people want to stay in the army.”

The British Army is in line to peak at around 14,000 troops deployed to the two countries by the middle of this year. According to defence analysts, that would be easily manageable for a short period—Britain sent 45,000 troops to the Gulf for a few months during the 2003 invasion of Iraq—but the strain would start to show by the end of this year if the missions were to run on.

Long-term missions tie up three times the number of soldiers deployed, since for each unit in the field one will have just returned and another must be training to take its place.

“You’ve got to multiply those numbers by three to get the effect on the army,” said Charles Heyman, editor of the annual handbook “Armed Forces of the UK.” “You add the two (missions) together and you’ve got almost half the trained strength of the British army committed,” Heymann added.

As significant as total numbers of troops deployed is the strain on key “low density, high demand assets” like air transport, logistics and the specialized high-mobility units needed for a remote, landlocked country like Afghanistan, according to Ripley.

“It focuses on a very narrow slice of the army which has really been put under pressure. When will they get a respite?”

When the plans for an expanded role in Afghanistan

were being drawn up last year, British officials had planned for a significant troop reduction in Iraq. A memo signed by Reid and leaked last July described Britain drawing its Iraq force down from 8,500 to just 3,000 by the middle of 2006. That scenario now seems much further away. Brigadier Patrick Marriott, commander of the main UK force in Iraq, said in December that he did not think any British withdrawals could even be considered until after local elections there in the next few months.

In both Afghanistan and Iraq the dangers for British troops have increased substantially since the middle of last year.

Commanders say southern Iraq has become more dangerous over the past eight to nine months as guerrilla fighters have developed deadlier forms of roadside bombs and resistance to occupation has grown. Marriott said his troops now spend 60 percent of their time just defending themselves, limiting their ability to train Iraqis to take over their role.

In Afghanistan, the British troops will join an expanding NATO force. Taliban attacks across the country have become more frequent, and the guerrillas have begun carrying out suicide bombings in the last few months, a new tactic for the area. British commanders say their forces will have “robust” orders to allow them to strike back when they are attacked.

Of the 100 fatalities in Iraq, the MoD classes 77 soldiers as having been killed in action and 23 as having died from illness, non-combat injuries, accidents or unknown causes. At least 230 British troops have been injured. Just over 4,000 people, including Iraqis and British civilians as well as servicemen and women, have been evacuated to the UK for medical treatment.

As of February 1, 2,248 US troops had died in the conflict. The occupation forces refuse to calculate the number of Iraqi civilian deaths. Estimates have varied between 35,000 and 100,000 deaths since the US-led invasion.



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