

2 MERCIAN (Worcesters & Foresters) deployed to Afghanistan as the Operational Mentoring Liaison Team (OMLT) Battle group on 27 Mar 2009 for a 6 month operational tour and is due to return in late September. This is the Battalion's 3rd tour of Afghanistan in 5 years, and it is part of 19 (Light) Brigade. One soldier tells a typical tale of service on operations.

Staff Sergeant Griffiths is half way through a six-month tour in Helmand Province, attached to The 2nd Battalion The Mercian Regiment. The Regiment's job in Afghanistan is to provide mentoring to the Afghan National Army, taking part in joint patrols and operations. Most of SSgt Griffiths' time is spent mentoring the Combat Support Services transport Sergeant Major of the Afghan National Army (ANA).

Travelling huge distances to resupply units all over Helmand, one of the biggest challenges Combat Logistics Patrols (CLP) encounter are the IEDs planted by the insurgents at every turn. Every soldier hopes to avoid them, but on the 15 May, a routine patrol ran out of luck.

SSgt Griffiths said: "We had to go out at short notice to deliver essential engineer stores so that we could fortify an Afghan National Police checkpoint which was about 400 metres away from the forward line of enemy troops."

Four hours into the journey the insurgents struck in force: "We came under small arms fire from several directions. For some reason the ANA's escorts decided to push forward and leave the CLP in the killing area. We frantically tried to locate the firing points but we couldn't find them. Just as we thought we were really in trouble we saw there was another ISAF call sign up ahead. As we forced our way through the hail of bullets, the insurgents began to fire Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs) at us."

Miraculously, the patrol got through the ambush and took cover behind the other ISAF patrol, who provided them with covering fire.

"My heart was thumping with the adrenaline. I remember sitting in the dead ground, lighting a cigarette and watching the RPGs burst 10m from our position. All I could think about was my three-year-old daughter back home."

On arriving at the ANP checkpoint, SSgt Griffiths' team worked throughout the night filling up sandbags until 1am the following morning. After a few hours sleep the CLP set off again, moving away from the checkpoint just as dawn broke.

This time the Jackal was close to the front of the patrol leading the Afghan soldiers across rough terrain on roads not much bigger than the vehicles themselves. But as they reached one of the ANP checkpoints along the route, the police rushed out to warn them that the Taliban had just planted an IED up ahead. Before the troops had time to make the device safe it detonated.

"It was a massive explosion but thankfully no one was injured. After the explosion my survival instincts kicked in and I just began to laugh. I guess it was nervous laughter. The device could have killed any one of us."

The team quickly took control of the situation, securing the area with their ANP counterparts. On hearing from the ANP that the enemy were planning to put down sniper fire and indirect fire on their position, the patrol moved away as quickly as possible, cutting a new route through the desert.

But SSgt Griffiths is upbeat about the experiences: "I'm really enjoying my time here. It's exciting and a bit of an adventure every day. Our role is vital to make sure supplies continue to reach the people who really need them, so it's rewarding work."

"We always knew as an Operational Mentoring Liaison Team that we would eventually come under some sort of contact but it was the not knowing when, where or how. That patrol was our first real test and we know it won't be our last within Helmand."

SSgt Griffiths is part of 31 Close Support Squadron based in Abingdon in Oxford, has been attached 2 Mercian, having volunteered to be mobilized to Afghanistan after having served in Iraq, Northern Ireland, Kosovo and Bosnia.

SSgt Claire Griffiths is originally from Fulham. She is mother to 3-year-old Nicole Griffiths who is currently at home in Wantage, Oxford, with Claire's husband, Sgt Simon Griffiths.