

The doctors at Headley Court told me my soldiering days were over," says Colour Sergeant Thomas O'Donnell of the reconnaissance platoon of the Scots Guards. Thomas, from Pollok, was caught in enemy fire at Nad-e Ali in Helmand in 2010 while pointing out to his platoon commander the whereabouts of some freshly laid IEDs. A round smashed his femur, splitting his knee in two. After a year in rehab at Headley, suffering many complications and losing two inches off his left leg, CSGT O'Donnell's first walk unaided was down the aisle with his daughter Siobhan at her wedding. Now he's getting ready to go back.

Elayne Jude of Great North News Services joined 4 Mechanised Brigade as they completed their last exercise before deploying to Afghanistan. During it, Brigadier Bob Bruce summed up their mission, and their mood: Continuity, and confidence. (Pictured: L Sgt Scott Small & Guardsman David Nelson (c) 17dragons Photography)

Nowhere is this more apparent than among 1 Scots, and the Scots Guards, who will make up part of Task Force Helmand. "Around half of the six and a half thousand troops of the Task Force have deployed before, some several times," said Brigadier Bruce, former Commander of 1 Scots. "They are returning in different roles, in higher rank, to face new challenges." 4 Mechanised Brigade will be the first task force to begin the drawdown of British troops in Afghanistan. The Brigadier, paying tribute to the work of their predecessors, plans to build upon it and hand over to the following brigade a country which is further down the line towards controlling its own destiny. He defines three core tasks: To continue enabling Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to take control of their areas; the lowering of the International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF's) profile; and setting the conditions for the next roulement, or brigade rotation. How does he define success? "No stop-start." With withdrawal set for 2014, the goal is smooth transition and handover to the Afghans. The Brigadier plans to send home 500 of his people by the end of the year, mostly combat troops.

"There's been a big change in focus since my last tour," says CSGT O'Donnell. "It's a different mindset. This tour will be fascinating because we'll be able to see how much we've achieved." The reconnaissance platoon is the elite of the Scots Guards, based at Catterick, Yorkshire. Normally 24 strong, numbers have been boosted for this tour to 40, against the trend of gradual withdrawal and reduction, highlighting the importance of the platoon's task. Every member goes through a rigorous reselection process, every year. For Lance Sergeant Scott Small, also from Pollok, after 15 years of service it will be his last year in the platoon - making way for the next generation, like Guardsman David Nelson, from Airdrie, about to deploy to Afghanistan for the first time. (Both are pictured above)

1st Battalion of the Royal Regiment of Scotland, 1 Scots, based at Dreghorn Barracks, Edinburgh, is the result of the 2006 amalgamation of the Royal Scots and the King's Own Scottish Borderers. Uniquely among British regiments, the Regiment retains the distinct identities of the historic units which it comprises. 1 Scots is the Brigade's Advisory Group, and will take the lead in mentoring the Afghan National Security Forces, working, as the Afghans say, shalabashana - shoulder to shoulder.

For the younger soldiers facing their first tour, like Private Euan Webster, from Edinburgh, point man, who walks in front of his patrol seeking out IEDs, and Private Martin Kidd, sharpshooter, from Galashiels, the sense of confidence which the Brigadier emphasises comes with an intensive eighteen month preparation. The training includes language and cultural awareness, working with Afghans in the

UK beforehand. There is confidence in the kit, perhaps the best any British army in the world has ever had. Most of all, confidence comes with absolute faith in your comrades. "I wanted to join a regiment with an outstanding reputation," says Lieutenant Ollie Wilson, deploying for the first time in September a year after joining 1 Scots. His grandfather was with the King's Own Borderers, so there is a strong link to the present day battalion. "I really got on with the soldiers. A big draw for me was the camaraderie." Much as the troops look forward to seeing the fruits of this long campaign, saying goodbye doesn't get any easier. "I take the coward's way out," says LSGT Small, father of Euan, who will turn 7 after he goes, and Kyla, 4, born at the end of his last tour. "Just before I leave, very early in the morning, I sit by their beds, kiss them, and say goodbye, knowing they'll drift off again." Will they remember, or will they think it was a dream? "They'll remember." In the best regimental tradition, the Scots look after their own. CSGT O'Donnell, facing demobilisation after his injury, was found a place back in the team. Nicknamed Buzzard, he now controls air operations for his platoon and once more stands ready to deploy. A few months after his injury, O'Donnell's son, also Thomas, decided to follow his father into the Guards. Shortly after, daughter Siobhan's husband Neil, formerly of the Royal Logistics Corps, switched regiments to join the Guards family. The promise of loyalty, the camaraderie, despite all the risk and pain of parting, is irresistible.