

THE LONELY WALK, IRAQ 2003
FAMILY OF J BELL



“They warn you it’s a lonely walk. I’m feeling it, it’s the most alone I have ever felt in all my life. My senses are heightened and I’m taking it all in”

Before writing my third bravery book, *George Cross Heroes*, 12 years ago, I attended a bomb disposal course. Because so many George Cross medals have been awarded to bomb disposal experts, I wanted to obtain an insight into the difficult and hazardous job they faced.

My host for a day of continuation training at Merville Barracks, near Colchester, Essex, was Warrant Officer Justin Bell – along with his comrades from 621 EOD (Explosive Ordnance Disposal) Squadron, part of 11 EOD and Search Regiment, RLC. I was hugely impressed by Bell’s knowledge and his calm approach to his job. He and others like him display what I call ‘cold courage’, in that they know the huge dangers they regularly face but are happy to risk their own lives to protect others.

The course lasted all day. In the morning, I learned about conventional munitions work (CWM): how to dispose of potentially deadly devices, whether it is a rusting World War Two bomb or a sophisticated new hand grenade. I also saw live explosives detonated on a demolitions range – quite scary enough, even before I was told that the typical IEDs (improvised explosive devices) encountered in countries such as Afghanistan are 40 times larger than the ones I experienced.

In the afternoon, I moved on to even more high-risk improvised explosive device disposal (IEDD) work, carrying

out my own fingertip search of a lifelike ‘device’ – a memorable experience.

After losing his battle against cancer, Bell died in the summer of 2019. He was just 47 and left behind a widow and their two children. Before he died, he had been working on his autobiography, which has now been published, thanks to the commitment of Bell’s friend, Jane Harvey-Berrick, a journalist and editor. Using information gleaned from that book, this is my personal tribute to a special man.



ON THE GROUND IN AFGHANISTAN, 2006 FAMILY OF J BELL

Speed is death

Bell was one of three children but his parents split up when he was young. He had a difficult relationship with his mother and was forced to leave home, aged just 15. After enlisting in his local regiment, the Royal Anglians, he was soon encouraged to become an ammunition technician. This he did, passing his training with flying colours.

His early training came from veterans of Northern Ireland and, as Bell put it, “what they didn’t know about bomb disposal wasn’t worth knowing”. Bell displayed a patience that was key to his role. As he stated: “When you’re looking for the tiniest indication of the bomb, you don’t rush. We’re like the opposite of fighter pilots – they have to tell everyone they’re a pilot and they say speed is life. We don’t tell anyone what we do, and speed is death.”

Bell also described vividly the pressures of the early training: “It’s hard going: just the constant standing, kneeling, then lying, then back to standing as you examine the scene from different aspects, while wearing 80lbs of Kevlar. It means you are drenched in sweat. Your visor mists up, even though you have a battery-mounted fan on the top, which blows hot air over it. It’s designed to stop it steaming up, but it doesn’t work well. I always used to tuck some rag behind the blast plate. Every few minutes I would lift the visor to wipe it clean. This had the added benefit of enabling me to view the scene

BELL WITH A 'WHEELBARROW' ROBOT IN AFGHANISTAN, 2006. EOD TEAMS ARE OFTEN ASSISTED BY ROBOTS, BUT THEY COULD NOT FULLY REPLACE A HUMAN TECHNICIAN
FAMILY OF J BELL



without looking through the visor, too – although it meant you weren't protected if something unpleasant happened.

"It takes you a little over two hours to get to the weapon. The closer I get to it, the more the anticipation increases that I'll spot the device... I'm consumed in my own little world of my personal battle."

Bell passed his training course, as did his good friend – identified only as Steve. Soon he was working on his first real incidents with 'wheelbarrows', robots used to tackle suspected devices and designed to protect lives. "They warn you it's a lonely walk. I'm feeling it, it's the most alone I have ever felt in all my life. My senses are heightened and I'm taking it all in." In fact, somewhat embarrassingly, his first 'device' turned out to be a police surveillance camera.

Soon, Bell was working in Northern Ireland at the height of The Troubles – it was 1991. In one of his first incidents, the IRA attacked a barracks using a lorry packed with 2,500lbs of homemade explosives. Three soldiers were killed and Bell was flown to the scene in a helicopter. "They were killed as they were evacuating the building, making a last-minute sweep to ensure everyone was safe. I will not describe what I saw but the smell has never left me."

It was a stark lesson of the dangers that Bell was constantly facing on tour.

I'm hyper alert, fuel-injected on adrenaline. I can feel every pulse but, as mad as it sounds, I'm calm. I would not want to be anywhere else"



A QUICK PAUSE BEFORE 'A BURN'. PREPARING TO DESTROY MUNITIONS IN IRAQ, 2003 FAMILY OF J BELL

Bombs and bridges

Next, he was based at Hereford in the rank of corporal before more tours of Northern Ireland and more advanced training. In one incident, again in Northern Ireland, he described approaching a device that was feared would blow up a road bridge.

"Inside the helmet, you are insulated from the world: you are conscious of your breathing – every exhalation briefly fogs up your visor; the whirl of the fan in the helmet blowing air over your face, and clearing each breath almost as quickly. You feel everything, each pull of the cables attached to your equipment, each step you are conscious of the ground beneath. I move my head constantly, examining the world around me in a conscious scan, looking for trouble. I know from looking at the robot's camera pictures that the device is almost certainly a hoax but that doesn't mean there isn't something else down there to catch me out. I'm hyper alert, fuel-injected on adrenaline. I can feel every pulse but, as mad as it sounds, I'm calm. I would not want to be anywhere else."

This device was a hoax, designed to cause traffic chaos, and so Bell and his team headed back to camp for "tea and medals". Bell spent his 30th birthday working in Northern Ireland, just as he had his 20th birthday, too.



DECONSTRUCTING A DEVICE, AFGHANISTAN, 2006
FAMILY OF J BELL

RIGHT: BELL RECEIVING QGM FROM PRINCE CHARLES IN 2005.
"I'M NOT REALLY THAT SHORT", HE SAID, "HRH WAS STANDING
ON A BOX!" FAMILY OF J BELL

For much of his tours, he and his men had to pull dead taxi drivers out of their vehicles – men killed by terrorists in tit-for-tat murders. "The risk was that they had been killed to bring the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) into an ambush or bomb," Bell wrote of the murders by the IRA that required his attendance. He dealt with many small devices, car bombs, pipe bombs and the like, as well as bigger ones, command wires, mortar attacks and land mines. Over the years, he and his comrades were constantly the target of IRA terrorists seeking to kill them by luring them to bombs or hoax devices.

Bell wrote about the nightmares he suffered from after dealing with "the under-car job, the burning pub and the railways". He said: "I dreamed I'd lost both my hands under the car and woke up crying." However, along with the night sweats and panic attacks came the rewards, too. "At the time, I saved myself by concentrating on the little girl I'd saved who would now grow up to have a life. It was worth everything to know I'd made a difference. She'll be 18 about now. The little boy [saved during] my first tour would be 31," he wrote.

Next came a tour of Iraq in 2003, during and after the Second Gulf War. Once again, the work was challenging and incredibly dangerous. In fact, Bell lost one of his closest friends, Staff Sergeant Chris Muir, 32, killed carrying out bomb disposal work in southern Iraq on March 31, 2003. Bell would have shared the thoughts of Muir's widow, Gillian, who said: "I know that Chris was very proud to wear the badge of an ammunition technician, and I take small comfort from the knowledge that he died doing the job that he loved."

Chris Meadows, who also served with Bell in Iraq, later said of his friend and comrade: "Although Troll [Bell's nickname] set high standards, they were not anything he wouldn't have done himself, or had done himself." Yet the tour of Iraq left its mark on



Bell, by then in the rank of staff sergeant: two other comrades had been killed and he had nearly been killed himself.

Green Zone WISWO

As Bell put it: "The risks taken day after day must have had an effect." He began drinking more than was good for him and suffered from depression.

However, he carried on working and, in September 2005, he was decorated with the Queen's Gallantry Medal (QGM) for his bravery in dealing with World War One high-explosive mortars that had been found in Southampton on September 22, 2004. He received his award from the Prince of Wales at his investiture.

In 2006, Bell was promoted to warrant officer and he also embarked on a tour to Afghanistan, serving with the Weapons Intelligence Section. "As the warrant officer running the detachment, I'm christened WISWO – it reminds me of a magician," Bell wrote.

Initially the deployment was going to be in the Afghani capital, Kabul, but then this changed to Helmand Province – the southern region known for its fertile and cultivated 'Green Zone' area and for the vicious sieges and firefights between British troops and insurgents there. It was, of course, a hotbed of bomb, mine and IED incidents, too – each a preferred tactic of the Taliban. Bell and his men had to deal with suicide bombers, endless IEDs and much more during a gruelling tour of duty there.

FURTHER READING



Troll: My life in Bomb Disposal by Justin Bell QGM is out now. Edited by Jane Harvey-Berrick, it is available in paperback and eBook form from Amazon and other outlets. Justin Bell served in the British Army for 23 years, most of those as an EOD operator. The book is the story of his tours served in Northern Ireland, Iraq and Afghanistan – the adventures, the camaraderie, the hard truths and painful costs of a dangerous and stressful job. But also the jokes, the pranks and the stark humanity of a man who made "the lonely walk" many, many times.

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Bell completed 23 years in the Army, almost all of it serving as a bomb disposal operator. He retired in 2011 to spend more time with his family.

In 2017, Bell was diagnosed with brain cancer. He died in the summer of 2019 while still working on his memoirs with Jane Harvey-Berrick. She completed his autobiography with the blessing of his widow. Harvey-Berrick ends the preface to Bell's book with the words: "His future was stolen, but his memories live on." •

GEORGE CROSS HEROES



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book, *George Cross Heroes*, was first published in 2010 and is available in hardback and paperback – to

find out more about the book, visit www.georgecrossheroes.com. Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum, London – see www.iwm.org.uk/heroes – and details about his VC collection can be found at www.lordashcroftmedals.com. For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit www.lordashcroft.com or follow him on Twitter and Facebook @LordAshcroft.

