

## ANDY OPPENHEIMER

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Kim Hughes

### PAINTING THE SAND

One man's fight against the Taliban bomb-makers  
of Helmand

336pp. Simon and Schuster. £18.99.

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From the very beginning of *Painting the Sand*, Kim Hughes's disturbing account of operations countering IEDs (improvised explosive devices) in Afghanistan, we are propelled into the grimy action of Helmand in 2009, where the British Army are fighting a war "against an enemy with no concept of defeat". This is a vital point for the whole sorry exercise of the campaign in what Hughes calls the "world's biggest shithole": every IED, every casualty is the enemy's victory; the Taliban are committed to expelling intruders over generations, as per their maxim "You have the watches, we have the time". They can "make a bomb out of two pieces of wood, hacksaw blades, some wire, a Christmas tree light and about 10kg of homemade explosive". And where you can't tell ordinary civilians from enemy operatives, much depends on on-the-ground intelligence.

In Afghanistan Hughes was mostly without the type of equipment we're used to seeing bomb squads use; "without the luxury of a bomb suit . . . the best you can hope for at the end of six months is to be alive", and in fact the heat was too great for him to wear one and do the job effectively. Instead, he operated with "nothing but the kit on [his] back". The book is gut-wrenching in many parts, with no detail spared about explosions that take life and limb of several of his comrades. "What's left of me gets mopped up and flown home in a box . . . A few minutes of useless fame before the next pissed up celebrity steals the headlines." Red circles are painted around the bodies of victims; these mark IEDs still to be cleared. The terrible conditions are palpable: you can smell the shit and feel the heat.

We learn the details of how IEDs maim and kill, and take a layman's science class on explosives. We also learn all about finding and destroying IEDs – from the point man, who either finds bombs or steps on them, to his specialist EOD (explosive ordnance disposal) team, whose task is often lengthy. Sometimes there is "clearance op": an Incident Control Point is cleared so that Hughes can approach the device(s) with "paintbrush, trowel, snips (pliers), pistol, and metal detector". Another team member carries the EOD weapons (disruptors) and firing cables as well as ECM (electronic countermeasures) to deny the enemy targeting information and provide a "security bubble" in which the bomb tech can work. Few soldiers think that they will be killed themselves, so we observe them checking each other's safety rather than their own: they look after each other.

Hughes often disrupts dozens of IEDs in one day – lying chin down to the device, first flicking away sand with a paintbrush, and with little more than hooks, lines and a "needle" – a disruptor with an explosive charge on one end and, on the other, a "flying scalpel": a set of blades that can be fired at cables and cords to sever the bomb circuitry. He and his team have to adapt to changes in the Taliban's IED construction and emplacement constantly, with subsequent operations becoming more varied

and dangerous. Devices are never lifted out of the ground – "none of that *Hurt Locker* bullshit". They are blown in place.

For Hughes, entering the British Army was a family tradition, but it was also more than that. As a child he had been physically abused by his stepfather; at school, he was the "thick kid with the girl's name" and felt "useless and undervalued" – until he put on a uniform in the mid-1990s. Then he became "a different person". The army offers everybody an equal chance. Having developed a keen interest in explosives – taking fireworks apart in his bedroom – by 2000, it became clear, soon after he joined the Army, that he had an aptitude for bomb disposal; and the Army came good on its promise "to turn you into something you couldn't possibly have imagined".

In 2005, Hughes worked in Iraq, where mobile phones for remote detonation and shaped charges – explosives specifically shaped to maximize their explosive energy, heat and penetrative power – were just some of the insurgency's TTPs (tactics, techniques & procedures). The Iraqi insurgency made use of advanced military-grade explosives and deployed hundreds of radio-controlled IEDs; explosively formed penetrators, designed to penetrate armour; sticky bombs (grenades that contain adhesive and can be attached to tanks); and a panoply of person- and vehicle-borne suicide devices. The Taliban, however, use trained fighters and paid locals to emplace hundreds of roadside and under-surface pressure-plate devices using ammonium nitrate and potassium chlorate explosives.

Hughes went through various gruelling courses to learn and practise all elements of bomb disposal, from basic Improvised Explosive Device Disposal to the High Threat course, taught at the renowned Felix Centre at Kineton, which he had to pass in order to serve in Afghanistan. He was now on the way to becoming one of the country's most decorated bomb disposal experts. On the advanced High Threat course he trained in winter, then had to apply his skills in the baking heat of Helmand. In Afghanistan, IEDs were ubiquitous and less sophisticated than those Hughes had encountered in Iraq – but no less deadly. Hundreds of pressure-plate devices were laid, often made "by a kid somewhere in Helmand"; these were set off by footfall – treading on or off them brought two hacksaw blades together – or remotely, by mobile phone or command pull. One detonator was found to be made from a Bic biro.

In 2008, there were just two British Counter-IED teams in Helmand. As bombs were cleared, the Taliban planted more, and began reducing the metal content so that the IEDs couldn't be detected, then specifically targeted the EOD operators, watching how they responded to intelligence – some of it dubitable – about device emplacement. Every operator "remembers their first bomb, just like you remember your first proper kiss: you've come of age". Hughes's came in May 2009: "I retrieved my paintbrush and slowly, methodically, almost grain by grain, began to sweep away the sand, like an archaeologist uncovering a prehistoric fossil . . .". Hughes had found his calling: "I didn't even think of the task as a challenge, it was just fun". Against relentless death-defying operations, Kim's "crumbling" marriage is almost a counterpoint, at just past half-way through the book. "In the world's biggest shithole I had a purpose. In my own

house I felt unwanted and useless", he writes – echoing that oft-repeated alternative meaning of EOD: "everyone's divorced".

Posted to the "Town Called Malice" – Sangin – Kim and his Brimstone 42 unit encountered a "cluster fuck": a minefield – with multiple casualties scattered. Here Kim had to skip the usual procedures and dismantle devices by hand, one by one; they had nuts, nails and bolts; no power packs – all were connected to a central power line, so the Taliban could arm the whole belt of IEDs by simply reconnecting the battery at its heart.

For this extraordinary "Category A" action Kim Hughes was awarded the George Cross. His book – which concludes with the Taliban making a comeback, compounded by the rise of Isis – offers invaluable insight into modern-day conflict where IEDs continue to be the terrorist and insurgent weapons of choice, and into the level of courage involved in dealing with them.