

Meaning making of Afghanistan deployments and the subsequent withdrawal: Views of UK military personnel



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Executive summary

Background

In August 2022, the King's Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR) began a collaboration with the Imperial War Museums (IWM) to jointly pursue a unique project - Voices of Service. Together they undertook a study to interview over 100 UK Armed Forces personnel who had been involved in the conflict in Afghanistan 2003-2021, pursuing the dual aims of preserving the voices and experiences of those who fought in that conflict, while simultaneously undertaking an academic analysis of their perceptions and experiences regarding the conflict and subsequent withdrawal.

The audio records of those interviews are now a part of the permanent collection at IWM, to be preserved, curated, and made available to the public and future generations of researchers. This report contains the outcome of the qualitative analysis by KCMHR of a subset of those interviews. Three core questions guided the analysis: how participants make meaning of their service in Afghanistan in light of the withdrawal; how these perceptions are influenced; and what are their current and ongoing concerns regarding the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The IWM interviewed 135 participants. From these interviews, 24 were selected for qualitative analysis by KCMHR. Participants selected for this analysis included both men and women, all Service branches, regulars and reservists, and covered all three operations to Afghanistan (HERRICK, TORAL and PITTING). Those parts of the interviews which were relevant to the goals of the analysis were then extracted and analysed using standard qualitative methodology.

Our findings were diverse. Some participants felt that a lack of clarity of strategic goals made success difficult from the outset; some felt that withdrawal was either inevitable or necessary, while others that continued presence should have been pursued if the mission was to be successful. Operations in Afghanistan and the withdrawal were reflected upon using the lens of whether it was "worth it". For some, this involved a weighing-up of lives lost compared to tangible benefit to Afghanistan and the UK. Another component was ethical, asking whether the actions of the UK Armed Forces were morally justified given the full information regarding the situation there.

Key to evaluating the conflict was fulfilment of mission aims. Some had positive views, as they had themselves contributed to operational successes; this was more usual among participants of Operations TORAL and PITTING, where mission goals were relatively clear, and less common among those who deployed in the combat phase (Operation HERRICK) who were less clear on the mission aims.

Some participants accepted that there were limits to what could reasonably be achieved in Afghanistan; others believed the conflict unwinnable from the start (particularly due to the historical context of conflict in Afghanistan). An important factor in meaning-making were the losses, both of comrades and of the Afghan people, and in some cases a feeling of betrayal linked to apportionment of blame for these losses and for the uncertain future for Afghanistan.

In reaching their conclusions of whether the conflict in Afghanistan was "worth it", some utilized a lens of their own professional goals and achievements; others were moved by the connections they forged to the country and its people; for some the experience of deployment was personally rewarding, while others

choose to avoid ruminating on their experiences at all, a coping strategy which potentially puts mental health and wellbeing at risk.

Looking beyond the conflict, participants raised concerns that the lessons from Afghanistan might not be remembered; for them, taking part in this study and having their words entered into the IWM archive represented an important step in preventing this. Participants also expressed concerns regarding the health consequences of the conflict, in particular regarding Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Thus, the key recommendations of this study are:

1. **Service personnel should be encouraged to make meaningful assessments of their deployments:** Our findings show that being able to find worth and have a more positive attitude about Afghanistan could be a protective factor against poor mental health. If this is the case, Service personnel should be encouraged to make meaningful assessments of their deployments.
2. **Future research should investigate how interpretations of worth relates to mental health outcomes:** Research should examine how different interpretations of worth could lead to different mental health outcomes, and whether increased meaning-making is associated with Post-Traumatic Growth in Service personnel who deployed to Afghanistan.
3. **The importance of meaning making should be stressed to Service personnel through the chain of command, and could be integrated into pre-deployment training and post-deployment decompression:** This skill would encourage individuals to consider why they are deploying and would be particularly useful in incidences like the withdrawal where potential crises of meaning could occur. This would allow Service personnel to develop and understand strategies for reconciling positive meaning with negative events.
4. **Provide opportunities to discuss their experiences are important in meaning making, e.g. through therapy modalities which support meaning making:** Narrative Exposure Therapy was originally developed to treat refugee populations and has been an effective intervention for survivors of war and torture. It would be pertinent to determine the effectiveness of this intervention in a military context before integrating it into current therapeutic programmes.
5. **Continue to collect, archive and publicly recognise the experiences of Service personnel through oral histories:** This project in collaboration with the Imperial War Museums highlights the benefit participants gained from participating in the oral histories. Continuing to collect, archive and publicly recognise the experiences of Service personnel through oral histories is important.
6. **Better support from the military is needed for continuous care, and checking-up on individuals who deployed to Afghanistan should be made:** One recommendation by participants was to systematically check-in on individuals who deployed to operations in Afghanistan, particularly Operation PITTING. Additionally, current military systems do not allow for seamless transfer of records when relocating or moving regiments.

Introduction

Following the 2001 September 11th attacks, the Bush presidential administration gained support for war in Afghanistan from the United Kingdom (UK) (Wildman & Bennis, 2010). The United States (US) and UK were further aided by the remaining North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) countries in this conflict (NATO, 2021).

Afghanistan was deemed a base for terrorism; therefore, the primary goal for the US, and in turn UK and NATO, was to remove the Taliban from power (Bird & Marshall, 2011), though there was initially no explicit intention to rebuild the state (Dodge, 2013). However, this left Afghanistan with unstable state structures, and it was quickly realised that Afghanistan needed to be rebuilt (Barfield, 2008). Therefore, the goal for NATO forces evolved from strictly preventing terrorism, to state building. This involved the reconstruction of political entities such as supporting a new Afghan government and funding and upskilling the Afghan National Security Forces with hopes for them to prevent terrorism on their own accord in the future (Ahmed et al., 2023).

Between 2002 and 2021, 150,610 British Service personnel were deployed to Afghanistan (Walker & Mills, 2021). Amongst those individuals, 600 experienced life changing injuries and 457 personnel were killed (Depmsey, 2021).

Operation HERRICK was the combat portion of operations in Afghanistan and began in 2002. From 2006 onwards, there was an increase in the death toll of UK personnel which peaked at over 100 deaths in 2008 and 2009, dropping below 50 deaths in 2011 and decreasing from then. Serious and very serious injuries to UK military personnel and civilians similarly peaked in 2009 (with a combined total of over 150) (Dempsey, 2021).

Research using the data from the 2011 British Social Attitudes survey found that the British

public had doubts about the aims and success of the Afghanistan mission (Gribble et al., 2015). Combined with the spike in casualties, criticisms of the operations in Afghanistan became more prevalent and public support reduced (Fenton, 2017). In 2011, the Prime Minister in post, David Cameron agreed to end combat operations by 2015 following public backlash (BBC, 2015).

In 2014, we saw the end of combat operations in Afghanistan and the beginning of Operation TORAL (Imperial War Museums, 2021). The number of British troops significantly reduced during this non-combat period with the aims to (1) protect NATO advisors and government officials, (2) respond to emergency situations and (3) train the next generation of Afghan National Security Forces (Knuckey, 2021).

The 20 years leading up to the withdrawal of International Security Assistance Force, Afghanistan (ISAF) saw progress in areas including the economy, healthcare, education and life expectancy (BBC, 2021b; Romei, 2021). However, given the amount of international financial aid and support, the progress was slower than expected. A key reason for this was due to the systemic corruption at all levels of the Afghan Government (Carroll, 2011; Ramez et al., 2019; Romei, 2021). Furthermore, corruption was echoed in media narratives as a reason why Afghanistan ended in a failure and the US were criticised for allowing the corruption to continue (Azizi, 2021; Magnay, 2021).

According to the peace agreement extended by President Joe Biden, Allied Forces began withdrawing in August 2021 (NATO, 2022). At the same time President Ashraf Ghani fled the country and we saw the collapse of the Afghan government (Murtazashvili, 2022). Shortly after, the Afghan security forces surrendered to the Taliban allowing them to swiftly make their way to Kabul (NATO, 2021). As such began Operation

PITTING, a non-combatant evacuation operation, to evacuate British and eligible Afghan nationals (Royal Air Force, 2021). The collapse of Afghan security forces was in part due to their inability to be successful independently of Allied Forces, the corruption of their government leaders and the demoralisation experienced when the Taliban came with clear purpose and strategy (Boot, 2021; Schroden, 2021). Due to the quick collapse of the Afghan government, media outlets described the events as “messy”, “chaos and a “catastrophe” (BBC, 2021a; BBC, 2021c).”

The legitimacy of operations in Afghanistan have been questioned since the withdrawal. Connah (2021) stated that Afghanistan, and the ‘War on Terror’ more widely, was unjust because militaries cannot successfully impose democratic models onto unwilling states (Downes & Monten, 2013). Thus, the Afghanistan mission was never meant to be ‘won’.

The media echoed the questions of legitimacy and presented the narrative which queried the worth of Afghanistan (Brady & Debusmann, 2021; Gardner, 2021). The media reflected on the financial cost, as well as the cost of lives.

Now the dust has settled, and the Taliban Government have stabilised, the societal repercussions of the withdrawal (such as the reversal of women’s rights) can be seen. Recent media reports showed that women have less rights than they did prior to 2002 (Chalabi, 2023). This has had a snowball effect on its economy with women unable to work (Ng, 2023).

Research prior to the withdrawal in August 2021 exploring the experiences of Service personnel and their reflections of their time in Afghanistan is limited. Instead, research has focused on mental health and wellbeing outcomes of contemporary deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. There has been no exploration on the reflections of Service personnel and veterans after the events of August 2021.

An in-depth investigation, using qualitative research, of how Service personnel and veterans reflect on their deployment(s) to Afghanistan, especially given the events of the withdrawal, was needed to enhance current understanding and guide the development of support for Service personnel who have deployed on operations with mixed outcomes. The current study aimed to explore how individuals deployed to Afghanistan made meaning of their experiences, specifically in the context of the withdrawal in August 2021. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do participants make meaning of their deployment(s) and their Service, in light of the withdrawal?
2. What influences these perceptions?
3. What current concerns do participants have regarding the withdrawal?

Methods

Study design

This research was undertaken as part of a wider collaboration with the Imperial War Museums (IWM) who created 135 oral history interviews for their archives. Of those oral history interviews, a qualitative research design using secondary data was used where we explored the experiences of 24 individuals who had deployed to Afghanistan on Operation HERRICK, TORAL or PITTING.

What is an oral history?
Oral history is a conversation between two people about the past which they consider to be of historical significance which is intentionally recorded for public record (Shopes, 2011). This method is used to preserve the voices, memories and perspectives of people in history (Sommer & Quinlan, 2018).

Recruitment

Participants who had deployed with the British military on Operations HERRICK, TORAL and/or PITTING were eligible for inclusion. Recruitment was open to all genders.

To promote recruitment, the project was advertised via existing IWM relationships, social media, and individuals were approached via their regimental association. Further promotions included a collaboration with the internal comms teams of the Ministry of Defence (MoD), Veterans in Defence, RAF, Army and Royal Navy. Prior to study involvement, participants received the study information sheet and provided written consent. Participants were reimbursed for their travel, but no other compensation was given.

Participants

A total of 135 participants were interviewed between November 2022 and June 2024 for the purpose of archiving at IWM. 134 participants consented to have their interviews used by King’s College London for the purpose of the research project. Of the 135 interviews, 15 interviews were selected randomly with the criteria that they contained relevant content regarding the withdrawal. These 15 participants had only deployed on Operation HERRICK. A further nine interviews were purposively selected as these participants had deployed to Operations TORAL and/or PITTING. This was to ensure all three operations in Afghanistan were reflected in the research. Amongst the 24 oral history interviews which were selected for analysis, 22 were from men and two were from women (Table 1).

Table 1. Participant demographics (n=24)

Gender	
Men	22
Women	2
Branch	
Royal Navy	1
Army	19
Royal Air Force	4
Engagement type	
Regular	21
Reservist	3

Data collection

An oral history interview schedule was developed in collaboration with IWM and King’s College London. The topic guide comprised of two sections: (1a) participants experience of their individual deployments prior to Afghanistan (if relevant), (1b) participants experience of their

individual deployments to Afghanistan and (2) participants reflections on how they feel about Afghanistan now given the context of the withdrawal in August 2021, see Table 2. Example questions included: What did you know about Afghanistan before you deployed? What was your understanding of the mission at the time? How did you feel about your deployment(s) to Afghanistan now looking back on it? What were your thoughts in August 2021 when the final international troops withdrew from Afghanistan?

Table 2. Interview topic guide

1. Demographic information.
2. Military history.
3. Experiences of non-Afghanistan deployments.
4. Experiences of Afghanistan deployments.
5. Reflections looking back on Afghanistan.
6. Thoughts regarding the August 2021 withdrawal.

One-to-one oral histories were conducted online and in-person, held at one of the IWM locations or on a military base. Interviews were recorded digitally. Interviewers were all trained in the oral history techniques.

As the oral history interviews were collected with archiving of the whole Afghanistan experience in mind, entire interviews were not relevant to the research component. The research assistant familiarised themselves with entire interviews and identified areas implicitly and explicitly referring to withdrawal. There was generosity in the areas identified for withdrawal to allow for wider context. These sections were transcribed verbatim for analysis and anonymised to protect participant identity. The purpose of taking sections of the interview was to focus on the research questions. Given the nature of oral history interviews whereby participants spoke to their deployments outside of Afghanistan, or not pertaining to the withdrawal, sections were taken to focus on the research questions.

A risk management plan was developed due to the potentially distressing topic of military deployments to a conflict zone. Participants were provided with a signposting booklet of resources to assist them in finding support appropriate to their current and future issues. In cases where participants demonstrated distress such that they might be in serious immediate danger of harm to themselves or others, a risk protocol was produced which involved immediately contacting emergency services. In less acute cases, issues were escalated to the consultant psychiatrist on the project. Only one individual required escalation for consideration through the risk protocol officers, and in that case it was decided that no further action was necessary.

Ethical approval

Full ethical approval was granted by the King’s College London Research Ethics Subcommittee (Ref HR/DP-22/23-33922).

Analysis

Oral histories were analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) to search for patterns across lived experiences. A suitable method given our research questions related to people’s experiences and views around Afghanistan. Thematic Analysis was also deemed an acceptable method given the analysis of specific sections of the interview to allow for more detailed accounts of the withdrawal.

A period of familiarisation was undertaken which involved listening to and reading the interviews and transcripts, making notes of potential codes. Initial codes were generated with the intention to code particular features of the withdrawal within the data set. Initial themes were generated, considering how different codes combined to form overarching themes. This was an iterative process, and themes were revisited and refined through discussions within the research team until the write up was finalised. Findings are

presented in three sections according to the research questions. NVivo14 software was used to manage the data (Lumivero, 2023).

Reflexivity statement

All authors and interviewers from the Imperial War Museums have never served in the Armed

Forces. It is possible that interviewer and author characteristics and pre-conceptions of the military and/or the withdrawal in August 2021 may have influenced the way the interviews were conducted, as well as the analysis. To minimise the possibility for bias, authors continually reflected on their personal perspectives.

Findings

Overview of general opinions

Contradictory opinions were shared by participants concerning the withdrawal. Whether participants held positive or negative opinions, participants reflected upon how long the UK military should have been involved in Afghanistan and what an 'ending' should have looked like.

Some participants agreed that withdrawal from Afghanistan was needed, regardless of the outcome because Allied Forces had stayed too long and they could not continue to stay in Afghanistan. Others, who agreed with a withdrawal, stated it should have only happened if it was done well.

In contrast, some participants believed that the presence of British Forces in Afghanistan should have remained, as it had in South Korea, Germany and Japan following the Second World War. The international commitment to Afghanistan at the time was relatively small but necessary for long-term change to occur.

*“Generational change requires generational commitment.”
(Richard, Operation TORAL)*

“That’s the sort of timeline that [real] societal and cultural change needed if it was to occur

in Afghanistan.” (John, Operation HERRICK)

Furthermore, participants expressed that the British military should not have invaded Afghanistan in the first place if there was no guarantee it would be left in a better position.

*“Unless you are prepared to win the peace as well as win the war you shouldn’t be going on these military adventures.”
(Robert, Operation HERRICK)*

Diverse opinions were also shared by participants regarding Operation PITTING. Some participants stated they were proud of the Service personnel deployed on the operation and thought they did a great job.

“We achieved [the Operation PITTING] plan and we left in good order with a really good reputation.” (Dan, Operation HERRICK, TORAL)

Despite arguing that Operation PITTING went well, participants did acknowledge that it was a chaotic end to British operations in Afghanistan.

Conversely, there were participants who believed Operation PITTING was conducted poorly.

“Just the utter chaos of it all, just seemed incredibly cruel.” (Max, Operation HERRICK)

1. How do participants make meaning of their deployment(s) to Afghanistan and their Service considering the withdrawal?

Ultimately, participants framed their reflections on withdrawal, and the broader consequences of NATO's/the UK's military's operations in Afghanistan, around the rhetorical question of '*Was it worth it?*'. This question was raised by participants and appeared to be central to their meaning-making, echoing the questions asked by society about whether the conflict was justified.

Worth carried different meaning for each individual. It could infer a cost benefit analysis in terms of what was lost and gained and whether that was worth it. Equally, it proposed a moral component about whether the actions could be justified given what is currently known about Afghanistan.

The lens through which participants approached the question '*Was it worth it?*' was influenced by factors such as which operation they deployed on and whether they deployed in a combat or non-combat role. As such, these findings showed polarities in the assessment of worth; different participants used the same consequences (e.g., loss of life) to justify that Afghanistan was both worth it and not worth it.

Worth was determined by participants reviewing what they knew and understood at the time and

integrating it into what they knew now, looking back; their sense-making process was retrospective.

Three themes were identified to further explain participants' working through the question '*Was it worth it?*': 'reflections upon professional performance'; 'reckoning with sacrifices and apportioning blame'; and 'future of Afghanistan' (Table 3).

1.1 Reflections upon professional performance

Reflections on professional performance contributed to participants' assessments of worth because they considered the attempted efforts of the military, unit and individuals in ensuring success in Afghanistan. Furthermore, participants reflected upon the professional benefits to which deploying to Afghanistan afforded the military and individuals who deployed. There were three subthemes: 'fulfilment of mission aims'; "we did as best as we could"; and 'opportunities to deploy and improving as a military Force'.

1.1a Fulfilment of mission

Fulfilment of the mission was pivotal in participants' understanding of worth because whether participants believed they fulfilled the mission aims of either the wider NATO/UK military operations in Afghanistan or their personal role factored into their assessment of worth. Participants who perceived they contributed to successes during the operations in Afghanistan were more likely to consider the overall conflict in Afghanistan worth it.

There were varying views between individuals who had deployed on Operation HERRICK and those who deployed on Operations TORAL or PITTING. Participants deployed on Operation

HERRICK (which was a combat operation) were less clear of the mission aims. Participants expressed that the mission aims were constantly changing, unclear or lacking.

“Whether [the mission aim] was counter drugs, counter the poppy, whether it was women’s emancipations, whether it was ridding the country of the Taliban as revenge for 9/11, whether we were there to protect the British streets from terror and from drugs [...] it was just unclear.”
(Josh, Operation HERRICK)

In contrast, participants who were deployed on Operations TORAL and PITTING were more likely to consider Afghanistan worth it because they had clear mission aims and were successful in their delivery. Operation TORAL was a non-combatant mentoring operation and Operation PITTING was an evacuation mission.

Furthermore, the lack of clarity in mission aims made it difficult to define what success in Afghanistan would have looked like. Some participants viewed Afghanistan as worth it because they were successful on a smaller scale such as protecting the streets of London.

“I think if we had our mission was just to stop attacks like September 11th then we won it very quickly” (Ben, Operation HERRICK)

Participants who showed acceptance of the limits of change they could create in Afghanistan were more likely to consider the operations worth it.

Other participants stated they would only consider Afghanistan to be worth it if a better and sustainable country was the result of the operations.

“It’s a terrible thing to be a part of something which was ultimately unsuccessful, something that you’ve poured your heart and soul into and seen so many bright young people killed and maimed, for what ultimately, was for nothing.”
(Josh, Operation HERRICK)

The extent of knowledge participants had on Afghanistan varied from very little to a comprehensive understanding of prior British, American and Russian involvement dating back centuries. Amongst those who had knowledge of Afghanistan’s history, they recognised and saw the countries complex history.

“You could just see a population that had been subjected to decades of conflict.” (Rosie, Operation HERRICK, TORAL)

“We’re not the first here, we won’t be the last.” (Garrett, Operation HERRICK)

Due to the historical context of failed conflicts in Afghanistan, some participants believed Afghanistan to be an unwinnable war.

“And I don’t think we were ever going to win that war because [Afghanistan] has its way of ruling itself.” (Kate, Operation HERRICK)

Furthermore, participants believed in the premise behind the operation and what they were doing at the time. They thought they did a good job whilst there and were justified in their actions.

“I believe in what we were doing at the time, so I don’t agree with

those that think it was a waste of time and we shouldn't have sent [British troops].” (Adam, Operation HERRICK, TORAL)

“You could question why we were there in the first place, but the reality is, we were there and actually in a lot of ways we needed to be there.” (Robert, Operation HERRICK)

1.1b “We did as best as we could”

Some participants reflected that whilst in Afghanistan, they did the best that they could, given the resources and information available to them at that time. To the best of their ability, participants improved the lives of people in Afghanistan and saw positive changes, even if they were only small or temporary.

Participants drew attention to temporary and specific positive impacts that the UK military operations had. For example, digging wells, or building bridges, increasing security and protection against the Taliban and improving the rights of women. Some of these impacts went unrecognised given the unsuccessful nature of Afghanistan in the end.

“There was no doubt in my mind that for people who lived in Musa Qala [District Centre], their life was better because we were there, because we created that security bubble.” (Russ, Operation HERRICK)

“And if girls got to go to school for twenty years, even if they can't now, at least there's a generation that did. [...] You can be comfortable that at the time we were doing the right thing.” (Lewis, Operation HERRICK, PITTING)

On top of lacking clear aims, Operation HERRICK was also criticised for its inability to stick to the first principle of war¹: the selection and maintenance of the aim. With hindsight, participants attributed the unsuccessful nature of Afghanistan to the delineation from the principles of war.

“There's always been a question about whether we maintained the initial aim, there's a principle of war, the selection and maintenance of the aim. It never really felt to me like we managed that [...] it always felt like we were changing, whether it was about the Taliban or whether it was about drugs, or whether it was about rebuilding a nation state. None of those things were the real reason we went in the first place and so I think there's a good reason why that's a principal of war and you've got to stick to it.” (Lewis, Operation HERRICK, PITTING)

Furthermore, some participants focused specifically upon their own professional conduct. Some expressed their comfort in knowing that

¹ The principles of war are guidelines used by militaries to maximise the chances of success.

they personally followed the rules of engagement². This proposed a moral component whereby they exercised restraint and any actions that could be construed as negative remain justified because they operated within the constraints given to them.

“I still don’t regret it.” (Garrett, Operation HERRICK)

Therefore, it was viewed to some that operations in Afghanistan were worth it, even though they were not sustained.

1.1c Opportunities to deploy and improving a military Force

Another perspective on the positive impacts of the Afghanistan conflicts were the opportunities provided for the UK military to become more professional which shaped it to what it is now.

“There is no doubt in my mind we were turning the best light infantry in the world. Pound for pound, there was no one as good as us [...] it reached an absolute zenith of professionalism for the British Army.” (Russ, Operation HERRICK)

Likewise, participants expressed gratitude and enjoyment for being able to deploy and go on operations, unlike previous generations. In turn, participants were able to progress in their military careers.

“Selfishly as well, it was also an opportunity for British armies, soldiers and officers, to go out

and do operational tours and to do a job, rather than simply be back at base.” (Garrett, Operation HERRICK)

1.2 Reckoning with sacrifices and apportioning blame

Reckoning with sacrifices involved the apportioning of blame and threatened the justifications for worth of Afghanistan.

1.2a Apportioning blame

The interviews revealed contradictions in who was responsible for the outcome of the withdrawal. US, UK and Afghan Governments and politicians were blamed for the decisions made. US politicians were criticised for setting a date to withdraw despite not having a plan. This was believed to be for increased votes during the elections.

One criticism of the UK Government was the lack of inter-agency cooperation which led to decisions about Afghanistan remaining isolated. This was attributed to bad leadership and poor military decision making which focussed exclusively on Helmand Province and not Afghanistan holistically which was seen as a mistake.

“You then don’t understand the critical wider moving parts in what you are doing.” (Freddie, Operation HERRICK)

² Rules of engagement referred to order detailing how military action may be used.

Some participants believed that British operations in Afghanistan were not primed to be successful, even prior to the withdrawal.

The Afghan government was blamed for being corrupt which had implications for military operations going on in Afghanistan.

“There was an overreliance on key individuals in the [Afghan] government who even from limited knowledge were corrupt. So, a lot of the money that ended up going in there was either misplaced or misappropriated and no one was ever held accountable for it because it was deemed too politically sensitive.” (Robert, Operation HERRICK)

Furthermore, the Afghan security forces were criticised for not making the most of the opportunity they were presented with to learn from the Allied Forces. They were blamed during the withdrawal for not being able to hold the Taliban off.

In contrast, some participants acknowledged that the task given to the Afghan security forces was too difficult and the expectations of them too high.

“I think on reflection that aspirations [of the Afghan security forces] were high and in reality, it was always going to be difficult to help them along, and then to sustain it.” (Rosie, Operation HERRICK, TORAL)

The data showed an absence of blame on the Taliban. Instead, participants commended the Taliban and respected them because they were there fighting under the same pretence as the British military were, just for different reasons.

“There was a degree of mutual respect from what [the Taliban] were doing, and the kind of respect that, on one level, they’ve got a cause, they believe in the cause, they’re fighting for their cause.” (Garrett, Operation HERRICK)

1.2b “A complete betrayal of the Afghan people”

Afghans risked their lives, and their families, going against the Taliban and aligning themselves with Allied Forces. They did it for the better future that was promised. As a result, individuals in the Afghan security forces, interpreters and civilians, including children, lost their lives and were injured throughout the counterinsurgency. The sacrifices of Afghans were deemed pointless.

“A complete betrayal of the Afghan people.” (Max, Operation HERRICK)

Furthermore, for participants there was the loss of what could have been for Afghanistan and its people. This made it difficult for participants to reconcile the necessity of the operations with the outcomes. For example, Robert (HERRICK) earlier stated that the British military needed to be in Afghanistan but when considering the sacrifice of the Afghan people found it difficult to reconcile.

“The sense of loss is one that’s based on what potentially could’ve been for the Afghan people and now is not. And that’s the hardest thing.” (Robert, Operation HERRICK)

1.2c Loss of UK peers

The loss of UK peers played a role for participants in assessing the cost-benefit analysis of the mission. Participants weighed up the positive impacts they perceived on Afghanistan with the loss of lives.

The ending to the Afghanistan mission was thought to be negative despite the positive impacts mentioned above. For example, Russ (HERRICK) previously acknowledged that operations in Afghanistan were thought to be beneficial for the British military but when reflecting on the loss of lives, he found it difficult to justify.

“Had [Afghanistan] not come to an end it did last summer then I think ultimately it would have been seen as an overall net positive for the Army [...] but to then see it in the way that it did, and to weigh that up against the 400 odd people who were killed there makes it pretty difficult.” (Russ, Operation HERRICK)

Furthermore, participants questioned why they deployed given the withdrawal and the lives lost.

“I just think the [UK] human cost was too much. I don’t think it was worth it.” (Teddy, Operation HERRICK)

In contrast, some participants made meaning out of the lives lost in Afghanistan because negating the worth of Afghanistan implied that individuals died for nothing. For example, when sharing about his friend who died in Afghanistan, one participant expressed that it had to be worth it.

“I would be being disrespectful to him as an individual [...] to say it

wasn’t worthwhile.” (Adam, Operation HERRICK, TORAL)

Participants spoke to the risks of injury and death that they knew about before joining the military, but also before deploying to Afghanistan. It is with this acknowledged risk that the deaths remain justified and worth it as participants took personal accountability for the risks that they put themselves in.

“We were all volunteers, nobody conscripted us to go to war [...] And yes, it’s sad that a lot of those troops did pay the ultimate price.” (Kate, Operation HERRICK)

When considering the lives lost to answer the rhetorical question of ‘Was it worth it?’, it was not only those killed while deployed that factored into the decision-making process.

1.3 Future of Afghanistan

Some participants considered their time in Afghanistan to be worth it because of the temporary peace they provided to the country and its people. This is despite the positive impacts that have since been reversed such as females’ opportunities to get an education. Amongst these participants, some believed that their involvement could be attributed to a better future for Afghanistan. Participants thought that their actions would influence a generation of younger, more educated Afghans who would want change and create it for themselves

“There’s a younger generation who grew up under [the International Security Assistance Force], and grew up under that time, which would’ve experienced violence and disruption but equally would’ve experienced a

freedom that they probably don't have right now. And I do wonder whether, in time, that hunger and desire, comes to the fore and the Taliban find they can't contain it.”
(Garrett, Operation HERRICK)

There were also individuals who, given the Taliban regime and the historical lack of success in Afghanistan, could not envision it with a positive future.

“I don't know how [Afghanistan] can work again.” (Rollins, Operation HERRICK)

Furthermore, there were participants who disagreed with the positive sentiment of having provided temporary peace. Participants criticised the sentiment and thought it was an excuse used to justify the withdrawal outcomes. When reminiscing with someone else, one participant shared that the other person thought it was a positive thing that the British military had given Afghanistan 20 years. However, the participants perception was that this person's expectations for Afghanistan were so low and that only giving a country 20 years for it not to be sustained could not be seen as a positive impact.

“Twenty years. And someone said to me the other day that at least they had 20 years girls had been able to go to school. Christ almighty, to have your expectations dashed because of our inability to invest in the place properly, to ensure.” (Freddie, Operation HERRICK)

2. What influences these perceptions?

Thus far, it has been shown how participants made meaning of their deployment(s) to Afghanistan by answering the rhetorical question ‘Was it worth it?’. The second research objective sought to understand what influenced their perceptions.

Four themes were identified to describe the process with which people arrived at these opinions: ‘professionalising experiences’; ‘connection to Afghanistan’; ‘personal reward’; and “don’t think about it too much”.

2.1 Professionalising experiences

Professionalisation of experiences was prevalent whereby participants spoke of their personal involvement in Afghanistan in terms of their jobs. This could be because the mechanism of critically appraising was not encouraged during their deployments and has continued after.

“If you start thinking about the political aspects [...], the highest level of whether we should be in a country or not, then it compromises your ability to command.” (Harry, Operation HERRICK)

Instead, participants focussed on the task they were given to do.

“We don’t get involved with the politics of the mission, we’re just sent to go.” (Kate, Operation HERRICK)

The professionalisation of their experiences, and lack of critical appraisal, has continued into how they reflected on the withdrawal. Participants who professionalised their experiences during or after Afghanistan were more likely to think about worth in terms of operational outputs. For example, one participant spoke about worth in terms of operational outcomes stating the positive impact the British military had in Afghanistan.

“And then on a mission level [...], even for a short period while we were in the places we were operating, 99.9% of them, we were a net good benefit for the people immediately in those areas [...] I generally feel positive about [Afghanistan].” (Harry, Operation HERRICK)

2.2 Connection to Afghanistan

Individual experiences of Afghanistan differed and while some participants viewed it as a job, others felt a deeper connection and love for the country.

“And so, we all felt, in different ways, a really personal connection to the people there and I suppose the country as a whole.” (John, Operation HERRICK)

Some participants spent formative years in Afghanistan, leaving a strong and positive impression behind.

“[Afghanistan] was a very formative experience for me and something that stayed with me since that time to now. It’s been one of the most singularly influential periods of my life and I took away a lot of positives.” (Robert, Operation HERRICK)

Even after the operations were over, the mark that Afghanistan left on some participants was still present.

“And I stopped in every single church and said a prayer for the people in Afghanistan. But, if I’m being honest with you, it hasn’t really made me feel any better. I still feel absolutely awful about it.” (Josh, Operation HERRICK)

The connections participants had with Afghanistan extended to the Afghan people, namely interpreters, where participants shared the stories of Afghans who were successfully evacuated. These relationships have continued in the UK and participants have remained friends with the interpreters, and their families. At the time of interviewing, there were participants still working to have their interpreters evacuated who had been hiding in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries.

In contrast, there were participants who did not maintain relationships with their interpreters because they wanted to move on from Afghanistan.

“I didn’t keep in touch deliberately. It sounds terrible in a way but [...] [an interpreter] I worked with every day. I knew his ambition would be to escape if it happened. I don’t know if he did.” (Ben, Operation HERRICK)

Individuals who did not keep personal connections with Afghan people still showed concern for them in the events of the withdrawal.

2.3 Personal reward

Participants expressed positive attitudes about deploying to Afghanistan and described the experience as “enjoyable” (John, Operation HERRICK). However, of those who thought about Afghanistan in a positive light, some who deployed multiple times shared that towards the latter tours they did not enjoy it anymore due to fatigue.

“I just couldn't have been bothered with another six-month tour in Afghanistan but, you know, that's what it was.” (Alex, Operation HERRICK)

The juxtaposition of experiences in Afghanistan was further described by participants as the best and worst times.

“And you mention some of the [forward operating bases], and you can see people's eyes light up and they start talking about where they were. Which is hilarious considering it was probably the worst times of our lives, but it was also the best times of our lives.” (Kate, Operation HERRICK)

One factor which contributed towards participants' enjoyment of their deployments to Afghanistan was camaraderie. Even years after the deployment's participants remained friends with those they had served with.

“I think the bonds of friendship and trust that were forged there,

they will last a lifetime.” (Robert, Operation HERRICK)

2.4 “Don't think about it too much”

One mechanism to cope with the events of the 2021 withdrawal some participants exhibited was avoidance. Participants thought the way Afghans who worked for the UK military were treated was poor and they did not want to think about it.

“Yeah, it's not something to be proud of but it's nothing to spend too much time thinking about.” (Mike, HERRICK, TORAL)

One participant who professionalised their experience expanded on their reason for avoiding the events of the withdrawal, stating it was to protect their mental health. Further highlighting that lack of critical appraisal from their time deployed continued into how they appraised the withdrawal.

“I've tried not to [think about the political aspect of the withdrawal] since leaving [the military] too much because I could end up becoming extremely bitter, extremely unhappy and depressed.” (Harry, Operation HERRICK)

These participants who avoided thinking about the withdrawal recognised that Afghanistan ended on bad note. However, their avoidance of the negative aspects allowed them to remember their time in Afghanistan in a positive light.

Another mechanism was compartmentalisation where participants ‘put Afghanistan in a box’ and left it there. This helped participants to be able to move forwards with their lives. One participant

recalled the advice they were given, explaining that deploying is your job, not something you need to think about once it is over.

“The minute you walk up the ramp on the plane it’s not your fight anymore and you don’t need to worry about it.” (Mike, Operation HERRICK)

Despite being given this advice, it was not something the participant was able to fully do. Therefore, the participants’ account of the withdrawal events were more negative and shone a light on Afghanistan not being worth it.

Other participants were able to compartmentalise Afghanistan and also deemed the events worth it because they were able to focus on the positive impact they had, instead of reconciling everything that happened in Afghanistan with the events of the withdrawal. Participants described the mechanism of compartmentalisation using the analogy of a three-foot box.

“I often think about time and space as my little three-foot box, as long as I know what is going on in my little three-foot box around me then I am probably going to be okay.” (Adam, Operation HERRICK, TORAL).

3. What current concerns do participants have regarding the withdrawal?

With the operations in Afghanistan over, participants demonstrated different ways of imagining a future for Afghanistan. Since the withdrawal, Afghanistan has been under Taliban governance and inquisitions of the operations and the withdrawal have been filed with outcomes pending. So, what does this mean for participants now? The analysis identified that participants were reckoning with the future via two themes: ‘lessons from Afghanistan’; and ‘health consequences’.

3.1 Lessons from Afghanistan

One concern participants had regarding Afghanistan was that it would be “forgotten” by the defence sector following the unsuccessful nature of the operation. To forget would be a waste of the time committed to Afghanistan.

“I hope [Afghanistan] doesn’t get swept under the carpet which has already happened with Iraq because that didn’t end well

either [...] I suspect Afghanistan will go the same way which is a real shame.” (Russ, Operation HERRICK)

There were two key reasons participants felt remembering the events of Afghanistan were important: recognition and learning lessons.

Recognition of the operations in Afghanistan were highlighted as important for participants in remembrance of the experiences of the thousands of individuals who deployed to Afghanistan. It allowed participants to feel valued for their service and sacrifices. To forget about Afghanistan would be to undermine the experiences of those personnel.

“There’s thousands and thousands of servicemen and women who served in [Afghanistan] and their experiences are really important to capture and make sure they’re not forgotten.” (Russ, Operation HERRICK)

The second reason referenced lessons being learned from Afghanistan. Participants wanted answers as to how things ended up so wrong and they wanted to be able to prevent such events happening again.

“If you want to forecast what might potentially go wrong in the future, have a look into the past and see what happened there.” (Robert, Operation HERRICK)

To prevent Afghanistan from being forgotten, participants noted it was important to create records.

“That’s why I wanted to participate in [this oral history interview], to create some kind of record as my experience of being

on operations, out in Afghanistan.” (Robert, Operation HERRICK)

Participants were thankful for the opportunity to be part of the oral history project and share their experiences, with hopes that people in the future would listen, understand and learn from them.

3.2 Health consequences

One mental health concern raised by participants was post-traumatic stress disorder, both their own experiences and that of others. Notably, concerns stemmed from the delayed onset following a traumatic event and thought it could be triggered by the events in August 2021.

“PTSD, it can be eight to 12 years [...] which for a lot of HERRICK people is about now. So there’s a lot more people surfacing with PTSD from the HERRICK generation.” (Kate, Operation HERRICK)

Participants urged the defence and healthcare sectors to prepare for the possibilities of post-traumatic stress disorder. Suggestions for improvement by participants included identifying and supporting individuals who deployed to Afghanistan, particularly those who deployed on Operation PITTING because of the horrendous things they saw.

“And undoubtedly people who went out to coordinate and oversee Operating PITTING to get people back have been scarred, terribly scarred by what they witnessed, and what they had to do, decisions that had to be made, just generally about who was and

who was not going to get out [of Afghanistan] but also the suicide bomb at the airport and the devastation that caused.” (Alex, Operation HERRICK)

Therefore, the recommendation was to systemically check on individuals who deployed to Afghanistan, especially given the nature of relocation in the military and criticisms of the lack of continuity of care between posts.

Furthermore, the opportunity to talk about Afghanistan were reported as important.

“It’s been a brilliant exercise to come in and talk about [Afghanistan] so thanks a lot for having me.” (Craig, Operation HERRICK)

Talking allowed participants to process the more difficult situations they witnessed or experience. This ultimately had a positive impact on mental health which tied in with the recognition of operations in Afghanistan.

Discussion

Research to date regarding the impact of deployment to Afghanistan has focussed on the mental health consequences. This study is one of the first to qualitatively explore meaning making of deployments to Afghanistan in light of the withdrawal. The findings were divided into three sections following the research questions.

Overview of general opinions

There was a diverse range of opinions regarding the withdrawal. Some participants stated that a withdrawal was necessary, but it needed to be done well, and in their opinion it was not. Other participants explained that the UK military presence could not stay forever, regardless of the outcome and this was consistent with reflections of US Service personnel (Brady & Debusmann, 2021). Alternatively, there were participants who thought the UK military presence in Afghanistan should have continued, as it has done in previous wars and countries like Germany. Participants believed that more time was needed for generational change to occur which was consistent with a case study highlighting the importance of dialogue between two generations of women in Afghanistan to continue the intergenerational peacebuilding (Yaftali, 2023).

Furthermore, participants criticised the use of military intervention if Afghanistan was not going to be left in a sustainably better situation (Connah, 2021).

Equally, opinions regarding Operation PITTING varied. Participants shared that the withdrawal

was chaotic, but some believed it was still handled well from an operational standpoint because they successfully evacuated people from Afghanistan (Cawley & Dunlop, 2021). However, other participants described the events negatively which aligned with how the media was presenting the withdrawal at the time (BBC, 2021a; BBC, 2021c; Madi et al., 2021).

How do participants make meaning of their deployment(s) to Afghanistan and their Service considering the withdrawal?

Participants brought up the rhetorical question ‘Was it worth it?’ which mirrored the question society has asked (Gardner, 2021). The findings showed that the assessment of worth was complicated, and participants valued different factors in their understanding of worth. This was consistent with a news article interviewing four US Afghanistan veterans which shared similar polarities to the data in this study (Brady & Debusmann, 2021).

Participant narratives of the mission aims for Operation HERRICK echoed the goals set by the US: removing the Taliban from power and state building which included supporting a new Afghan government and improving women’s rights (Ahmed et al., 2023; Dodge, 2013). However, the clarity of these mission aims was not shared by participants who thought the mission aims were unclear and/or lacking (Willasey-Wilsey, 2021). Furthermore, Operation HERRICK was criticised for its inability to stick to the first principle of war which participants thought was pivotal for success (Evans & Evans, 1997). Alternatively, participants who deployed on Operations TORAL and PITTING were more likely to consider their deployments

successful because they had clear mission aims and achieved them. This was unlike Operation HERRICK where it was difficult for participants to define what success looked like in Afghanistan. Some participants considered success to be on a smaller scale whereas others stated that the only acceptable version of success would be a sustainable and democratic Afghanistan (Dodge, 2021; Kagan et al., 2011).

Participants believed they did the best that they could and this acceptance of the limits of change they could create in Afghanistan led them to believe their deployment(s) were worth it. Attention was drawn to specific positive impacts they their deployment(s) had on Afghanistan such as improving the rights of women, allowing them to work and get an education. These were successes that went unrecognised, either because they were less visible to the public or because they were undermined by the Taliban takeover. Participants reported they were comfortable with their actions and followed the rules of engagement so were happy with their performance. This was in light of atrocities they knew to otherwise be happening (Jones & O'Grady, 2023). The extent of knowledge participants had on Afghanistan varied from nothing to a comprehensive understanding of prior British, American and Russian involvement (Ferris, 2006; Fremont-Barnes, 2014; Gibbs, 2000). Amongst participants who had prior knowledge of Afghanistan, it was recognised that it was unlikely there would be success given the unwinnable nature. This was consistent with the analogy that Afghanistan is a "Graveyard of Empires" (Manchanda, 2019; Miller, 2016). Although, the term has been criticised suggesting a negative connotation that Afghanistan will never get better (Manchanda, 2019). Furthermore, participants reported believing in what they were doing and why they were going at the time. Participants' understanding of the limits allowed them to appreciate the worth of the smaller impacts they made, opposed to having an all or nothing view of success.

Another perspective on the positive impacts of the Afghanistan conflicts were the opportunities that operations in Afghanistan provided for the UK military (Imperial War Museums, 2014). Likewise, participants expressed a gratitude to be able to deploy which came with opportunities for promotions in their personal careers.

Participants blamed a diverse group of parties for the negative withdrawal outcome. Similar to the media apportioning of blame, there were controversies as to whether the US were at fault for the decision to withdraw in Afghanistan (U.S. Department of State, 2023), the UK for their poor leadership (Nevett, 2022) or the Afghan government for being corrupt (Azizi, 2021). Additionally, participants blamed the Afghan security forces for not utilising the opportunity that Allied Forces presented them with to upskill and maintain democracy independently of international aid. Although, there were participants who did not blame the Afghan security forces stating that there was not much else they could do given the corruption up the chain of command (Magnay, 2021).

The blame participants expressed was largely felt for the sacrifice Afghan participants made, as well as the country as a whole. Similar to media reports, participants described the withdrawal as a betrayal against the Afghan people (Nevett, 2022). Likewise, participants commented on the loss of their UK peers. This factor played a key role in assessing the cost benefit analysis of Afghanistan. Some participants stated that Afghanistan was not worth it because of the lives lost, the only justifiable reason would be a sustainable Afghanistan. Participants questioned why they were in Afghanistan. This sentiment was shared by family members of those who were killed in Afghanistan who now thought the sacrifices were for nothing with the country descending further under Taliban control (BBC, 2021d). However, there were participants who said it had to be worth it because otherwise the lives lost were for nothing. Also, participants argued that those who were killed knew the risk

they were putting themselves in and willingly did so.

Some participants shared that their time in Afghanistan was worth it because of the positive impacts they had. This was despite knowledge that there has been a reversal on many of these impacts. Amongst these participants, some believed that providing better lives for the Afghan civilians would result in them wanting to replicate that future for themselves which could later be attributed to the work they carried out. This sentiment was agreed by news articles which said that 70% of the Afghan population was under the age of 25 years, who have largely only known life under ISAF engagements, and will change the future (Doucet & Zubaide, 2020). The intolerance to a Taliban Government has been seen recently where women have protested new Taliban laws (Mukhtar, 2024). Although, consistent with the notion of Afghanistan being a “Graveyard of Empires”, some participants do not see a positive future for Afghanistan (Manchanda, 2019; Miller, 2016). This view supported the predictions made by United Nations experts who see a “bleak” future for Afghanistan (United Nations, 2022). Furthermore, there were participants who disagreed with the sentiment that at least the Allied Forces gave the people in Afghanistan 20 years, stating it was a reflection of the low expectations the Allied Forces had, as opposed to being a positive impact.

What influences these perceptions?

Participants meaning making was complex showing the relationship between what was considered worth it and not. The findings highlighted that participant arrived at different conclusions of worth. For example, there were participants who recognised the positive impacts they had on Afghanistan and stated that Afghanistan was still not worth it because of the lives lost and the negative outcome. Equally,

there were participants who thought the opposite and that Afghanistan was worth it because people gave their lives to a cause they believed in which had positive impacts at the time. The following section highlights what could influence participants different arrivals of worth.

Participants expressed the deep connections they made with Afghanistan and the Afghan people. It was these deep connections with intimate knowledge of the Afghan sacrifice that people arrived as a conclusion of worth. Likewise, media interviews with Service personnel showed that many were calling more interpreters to resettle in the UK (Beale, 2021; Fenwick, 2023). Alternatively, there were participants who expressed wanting to move on from Afghanistan and thus losing connections with Afghanistan.

Participants had positive reflections on their time in Afghanistan from the perspective of enjoyment and camaraderie. This was similar to reflections from US and UK Service personnel who deployed to Afghanistan and described the experience as one of the best of their lives, despite all the negative experiences that go with deployment too (Altman, 2021; Perkins, 2018).

Professionalisation of experiences was prevalent where critical appraisal was absent for participants who spoke about their experience more as a job opposed to a pivotal experience in their life. Participants noted not involving themselves with the politics of the mission, instead focussing on the task at hand. Therefore, they were not questioning the tasks they were completing or the wider mission (Politico, 2021).

Some participants used avoidance to cope with the events of the withdrawal which allowed them to think of Afghanistan in a more positive light. However, research of US Service personnel has shown that avoidance coping strategies have been linked with PTSD and alcohol abuse in Service personnel who deployed to Afghanistan (Bartone et al., 2017; Thomassen et al., 2018). Furthermore, participants compartmentalised

their Afghanistan experiences, storing them away and moving on with other aspects of their lives.

What current concerns do participants have regarding the withdrawal?

Now that operations in Afghanistan are complete, participants have thought what a future would look like in terms of the repercussions and what needs to happen next.

Participants showed concern for Afghanistan being forgotten by the defence sector, as happened to Iraq (Wehner, 2010). They were worried the thousands and thousands of experiences by Service personnel who deployed there would be “swept under the rug” and those experiences undermined. Furthermore, participants wanted answers as to why things ended badly in Afghanistan, and they wanted confirmation that lessons would be learned to prevent similar failures in the future. Reasons for taking part in the project revolved around Afghanistan not being forgotten and participants expressed the importance of creating records. This supports preliminary research which found that oral history interviews could be used as a form of intervention and benefit participants giving them a space to talk and be listened to (McCarthy, 2010).

Participants expressed concern for increased mental health disorders as a result of the withdrawal. Post traumatic stress disorder was most frequently discussed in regards to its delayed onset (Andrews et al., 2007). Research has shown that probable PTSD in serving and ex-serving personnel has increased from 2014/2016 to 2022/2023 (Sharp et al., 2024). One potential explanation for the rise in probable PTSD could be military or non-military traumatic exposures experienced since 2014-2016. This could include the events of the withdrawal which have been described as one of the most challenging

deployments to Afghanistan (Cawley & Dunlop, 2021). Although, more research would be needed to determine whether the events of the withdrawal, for both spectators and individuals who deployed, influenced mental health. Furthermore, participants spoke about their concerns regarding increased rates of suicide following the events of the withdrawal.

Strengths and limitations

This study represents the first qualitative research study exploring the reflections of UK Service personnel, who deployed to Afghanistan, in light of the withdrawal. The research provides further insight into how participants make meaning of deployments from operations with mixed outcomes which can inform future support for Service personnel. The use of oral histories as an interviewing technique for research allowed participants to create connections with the interviewer and potentially share information they otherwise would not have shared with the knowledge that their voice would be preserved for future generations. Furthermore, with the primary reason of interviewing being archiving the oral histories this may reduce social desirability bias. However, despite continuous efforts to recruit a more varied sample in terms of the operations participants deployed on, limitations of the research include the homogenous sample of predominantly men who deployed on Operation HERRICK. We recognise the restricted range of narratives on which our findings are based. For example, we were limited in our ability to create typologies between different operations due to the lower numbers of participants who had deployed to Operations TORAL and PITTING.

Further research is needed to investigate the experiences of Service personnel who deployed on Operation PITTING, including participants who deployed to multiple operations in Afghanistan, to be able to compare the meaning making of

participants with different experiences. In addition, the interviews focused on participants' experiences on deployment and feelings regarding the withdrawal. Future research is needed to understand the participants' own mental health and whether this impacted their perceptions of worth.

Recommendations

The key implications and recommendations are:

1. Our findings show that being able to find worth and have a more positive attitude about Afghanistan could be a protective factor against poor mental health. If this is the case, Service personnel should be encouraged to make meaningful assessments of their deployments. Research with US Service personnel has shown that meaning-making is a key coping mechanism and part of the post traumatic growth process (PTG) (Larner & Blow, 2011).
2. Future research should see how different interpretations of worth could lead to different mental health outcomes and whether increased meaning-making is associated with PTG in Service personnel who deployed to Afghanistan.
3. The importance of meaning making should be stressed to Service personnel through the chain of command, and could be integrated into pre-deployment training and post-deployment decompression. This skill would encourage individuals to

consider why they are deploying and would be particularly useful in incidences like the withdrawal where potential crises of meaning could occur. This would allow for Service personnel to develop and understand strategies for reconciling positive meaning with negative events.

4. Opportunities to discuss their experiences are important in meaning making. This could be done through therapy modalities which support meaning making. Narrative Exposure Therapy was originally developed to treat refugee populations and has been an effective intervention for survivors of war and torture (Raghuraman et al., 2021; Siehl et al., 2021). It would be pertinent to determine the effectiveness of this intervention in a military context before integrating it into current therapeutic programmes.
5. This project in collaboration with the Imperial War Museums highlights the benefit participants gained from interviewing. Continuing to collect, archive and publicly recognise the experiences of Service personnel through oral histories is important.
6. One recommendation by participants was to systematically check on individuals who deployed to operations in Afghanistan, particularly Operation PITTING. Current military systems do not allow for seamless transfer of records when relocating or moving regiments. Therefore, better support from the military is needed for continuous care and ongoing contact with individuals who deployed to Afghanistan should be made.

Conclusion

The experiences, perceptions, and reflections of the interviews of the UK Armed Forces personnel interviewed in this study demonstrated a diversity of opinion; however, some common threads have become clear. While opinions conflicted regarding the goals of UK forces in Afghanistan, and whether they should have withdrawn from Afghanistan at the time they did, participants generally viewed their conduct and professionalism during the conflict and withdrawal positively. While some felt that UK Armed Forces should not have been involved in Afghanistan if their presence would not remain to facilitate lasting change, others accepted the inevitability of the withdrawal, and emphasized the positive impacts that they were able to make, even temporarily. Ultimately, these threads coalesced around the question “was it worth it?”; individuals took different approaches to this assessment, including their own professionalism and achievements, those of the UK forces in Afghanistan, loss of life, and the consequences for Afghanistan and its people with whom they had forged a bond.

For some, the legacy of Afghanistan manifested as avoidance of addressing the conflict and the withdrawal, which brings with it risks to mental health and wellbeing. Participants emphasised the importance of learning the lessons of Afghanistan, and concerns that they would be forgotten. These concerns motivated them to take part in the oral history interviews, and have their experiences added to the permanent record of the conflict. Overall, facilitation of meaning-making for those who deployed, and evidence that lessons learned would be carried forward, are important processes for those who return from conflicts and should be supported by those responsible for the wellbeing of those who fought.

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