

REVIEW ARTICLE

TAKING THE LONELY WALK IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN¹

T Beukes

Centre for Military Studies, Stellenbosch University

Hunter, C. *Eight lives down – The story of a counter-terrorist bomb-disposal operator's tour in Iraq*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2008. Paperback, 511 pages, ISBN 978-055215517

Hunter, C. *Extreme risk – A life fighting the bombmakers*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2010. Paperback, 354 pages, ISBN 978-0593060179

Rayment, S. *Bomb hunters – In Afghanistan with Britain's Elite Bomb Disposal Unit*. London: Harper Collins, 2011. Paperback, 282 pages, ISBN 978-0-00-73952-9

Abstract

Eight lives down, *Extreme risk* and *Bomb hunters* all contain the personal accounts of British soldiers who served as bomb-disposal operators during the recent armed conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The books were not written as scholarly works intended for an academic audience. Serious students of contemporary armed conflict nevertheless would find them useful reading material. The books should be particularly useful to scholars with a professional interest in asymmetric warfare or the emerging role of improvised explosive devices in contemporary armed conflict.

Introduction

The three books discussed here address essentially the same subject. They contain personal accounts by British Army bomb-disposal operators² about their

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efforts to counter the threat of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) during the recent armed conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The trio complement each other. Although the

books are aimed at the (British) public, serious students of contemporary armed conflict should find them worth reading. This review explains why.

Chris Hunter's work

Eight lives down is Chris Hunter's first book and *Extreme risk*, his second. Both can be categorised as military memoirs. *Eight lives down* focusses on Major Hunter's tour of duty with the British Army in Iraq during 2004. The subtitle of the book is *The story of a counter-terrorist bomb-disposal operator's tour in Iraq*.³ This is an accurate single-line summary of the book. The author served the first half of his tour as an ammunition technical officer (ATO), dealing with the IEDs himself. He spent the second half of the tour as a weapons intelligence officer, working to counter the networks of bomb makers and planters. *Eight lives down* is more than merely an entertaining war story about the adventures of an ATO during the Iraqi conflict; the book provides a realistic picture of counter-IED (CIED) operations in Iraq, as painted by a participant.⁴

Unlike *Eight lives down*, *Extreme risk* addresses Hunter's military career as a whole. He joined the British Army in 1989 and resigned his commission in December 2006.⁵ Hunter served in a number of different operational theatres, including Northern Ireland, Bosnia and the Middle East. He spent most of his 17 years in the military as an ATO. The subtitle of *Extreme risk* is given as *A life fighting the bomb-makers*.⁶ This is an accurate description of Hunter's military career. As in the case of *Eight lives down*, one can view *Extreme risk* as a book about CIED operations. The significant difference between the two is one of scope – *Eight lives down* focusses on Hunter's Iraq tour only, while *Extreme risk* deals with the whole of his military career. Hunter is certainly qualified to write with authority about IEDs and CIED operations.

Hunter wrote both *Eight lives down* and *Extreme risk* in a narrative style similar to that of a thriller. The stories are gripping, tense and fast-moving, describing the adventures of a protagonist (one of the good guys) who routinely risks his life fighting the bad guys (the bomb makers and bomb planters). This style is typically associated with books written for the entertainment of the general public. There are indications that Hunter had something in mind in addition to entertaining his British readers, however. Each chapter of both books starts with a short, topical quotation. Hunter uses these quotations to comment and criticise indirectly. In this respect, the quotation used at the beginning of *Eight lives down* is especially significant. The source of the quotation is given as "A report on Mesopotamia",

written by TE Lawrence ('Lawrence of Arabia') and published in the *Sunday Times* of 22 August 1920. The quotation reads:

The people of England have been led, in Mesopotamia, into a trap from which it will be hard to escape with dignity and honour. They have been tricked into it by a steady withholding of information. The Baghdad communiqués are belated, insincere, incomplete. Things have been far worse than we have been told, our administration more bloody and inefficient than the public knows. It is a disgrace to our imperial record, and may soon be too inflamed for any ordinary cure. We are today not far from a disaster.⁷

The similarities between the situation that TE Lawrence described in 1920 and the one that Hunter faced in 2004 are obvious. It is evident that Hunter is commenting on the situation in Iraq as he experienced it. Hunter clearly intended not only to entertain his British readers, but also to inform them about the situation that he and his comrades faced in Iraq.

Sean Rayment's work

Sean Rayment's *Bomb hunters* complements Chris Hunter's accounts. Rayment was the defence correspondent of *The Sunday Telegraph* at the time he wrote the book. He has written for a number of other British newspapers as well, covering armed conflict in Africa, the Balkans (Bosnia) and the Middle East (Afghanistan and Iraq). Rayment was embedded with British troops in Afghanistan and Iraq on many occasions. Before entering journalism in 1991, he served for five years in the Parachute Regiment, ending with the rank of captain. Rayment did the research for *Bomb hunters* as an embedded journalist during several visits to Afghanistan between 2008 and 2010. During those visits, he not only conducted interviews with British ATOs, but also accompanied them on several missions.⁸ Based on his experiences, Rayment writes with authority about CIED operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Given his profession, it is not surprising that Rayment wrote *Bomb hunters* in a journalistic style, clearly meant to inform rather than entertain. Rayment's style nevertheless has something in common with that of Hunter. The journalist did not write as an uninvolved and distant observer. Instead, he reported as a close and involved observer – an insider rather than an outsider. As reporter, Rayment integrated the roles of observer and participant, relying on experience gained during both his military career and his career as conflict journalist. He recounts not only what the soldiers told him, but also what he saw for himself and what he thought

about it. Rayment, unlike Hunter, deliberately places his observations in a broader context and explicitly criticises both the military high command and the British government. Right at the beginning of his book, for instance, Rayment comments on his air transport into Afghanistan:

Hopefully the aircraft's engines are in better shape than the passenger cabin because that is well and truly knackered. If the TriStar was a civilian plane, I'm pretty sure it would be grounded. Parts of the interior are held together by a 3-inch-wide sliver masking tape and the toilet doors have a certain tendency to fly open while in use – "The in-flight entertainment" some wag commented – but, frankly, it's good enough for 'our boys' flying off to war to fight for Queen and Country ... It's what happens when armed forces have been underfunded for decades.⁹

The underfunding of British armed forces as well as the shortage of mission-critical equipment and personnel are constant themes throughout Rayment's book. The same two themes may be found in Chris Hunter's account as well.

Censorship

Readers should keep in mind that the books by Rayment and Hunter were subjected to military censorship. Rayment mentions that independent travel in Helmand Province (Afghanistan) at that time was so dangerous that a Western journalist simply had no alternative but to embed. Journalists were not allowed to embed with the British Army before signing the "Green Book", however. Signing meant that the journalist accepted a contractual obligation to have his or her work scrutinised by Ministry of Defence (MoD) censors before publication.¹⁰ The threat of censorship was not an idle one, as can be attested by Toby Harnden, author of *Dead men risen: The Welsh Guards and the real story of Britain's war in Afghanistan*. The entire first print run (24 000 copies) of that book was pulped as a result of security issues emerging after the official MoD review process had been completed.¹¹

Utility to scholars

At this point in the review, it should be clear that *Eight lives down*, *Extreme risk* and *Bomb hunters* were not written as scholarly works intended for an academic audience. Scholars with a professional interest in contemporary armed conflict nevertheless should find the books useful. At least two reasons can be

offered in this regard. The first reason concerns the utility of personal accounts to scholars and researchers. Collecting information about armed conflict by reading the personal accounts of participants is a valid *modus operandi* for literature-based research. The books all contain the personal accounts of British soldiers who served as bomb-disposal operators during the recent armed conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The value of these personal accounts lies in the fact that they provide access to observations made by people who actually participated in CIED operations. The second reason concerns the fact that the books provide useful information on a number of subjects important to scholars who take a professional interest in contemporary armed conflict. Such scholars enjoy a certain advantage (compared to the casual reader) when it comes to interpreting the personal accounts in *Eight lives down*, *Extreme risk* and *Bomb hunters*. Scholars' academic background should enable them to fit the personal accounts easily into a larger (theoretical) frame of reference. The three books should be particularly useful to military theorists and academics who take a professional interest in (i) asymmetric warfare and (ii) the emerging role of IEDs in contemporary armed conflict.¹²

The personal accounts of Hunter and other bomb-disposal operators are most illuminating when considered in the context of asymmetric warfare. In this context, for instance, references to personnel and equipment shortages, to combat tours being too long and to the relentless pressure of a high rate of operations, acquire additional significance. These references can be seen as indications of strain as the British government and its military struggled to meet the demands of an armed conflict characterised by great asymmetry. Both Hunter and Rayment blame the shortage of critical personnel (especially ATOs) and equipment on years of underfunding and neglect. The shortage of specifically ATOs can be linked directly to a breakdown in recruitment caused by cuts in defence spending during the years preceding the Afghan and Iraqi conflicts.¹³

The great disparity between the bomb hunters and the bomb makers/planters illustrates well the asymmetric nature of the Afghan and Iraqi conflicts. The magnitude of that disparity can be seen clearly when one considers relative costs and relative training requirements. The IEDs used in Iraq and Afghanistan were inexpensive weapons, costing about \$30 per unit in 2011.¹⁴ This contrasts sharply with the cost of IED countermeasures. Between 2003 and 2011, the United States, for instance, had spent about \$17 billion on anti-IED equipment and \$45 billion on mine-resistant vehicles.¹⁵ Furthermore, the IEDs were simple enough that they could be built and emplaced by people with very little training. Recruiting and training an ATO, on the other hand, takes up to seven years – the same time it takes to train a doctor.¹⁶ Another indication of the magnitude of the disparity may be

found by comparing the time required to dispose of an IED with the time required to assemble and deploy it. In a chapter titled “The asymmetric war”, Sean Rayment describes how he accompanied a bomb-hunting team of 30 men on a route-clearing mission and how they needed more than five hours to locate and clear a single IED from an old Taliban firing point.¹⁷ Typical Afghan IEDs, on the other hand, could be assembled in a matter of minutes and were being produced on an industrial scale. Rayment mentions several interviews with bomb hunters who told him that the technology of the typical Afghan IED was very simple and posed little challenge. They regarded sheer numbers as the actual IED threat in Afghanistan – the devices were simply being assembled and emplaced faster than the bomb hunters could clear them.¹⁸

Table 1. Coalition IED fatalities in Afghanistan, 2001–2013¹⁹

Year	IED fatalities	Total fatalities	IED percentage of total
2001	0	4	0.00
2002	4	25	16.00
2003	3	26	11.54
2004	12	27	44.44
2005	20	73	27.40
2006	41	130	31.54
2007	78	184	42.39
2008	152	263	57.79
2009	275	451	60.98
2010	368	630	58.41
2011	252	492	51.22
2012	132	312	42.31
2013	33	73	45.21
Total	1370	2690	50.92

It is illuminating to consider the book by Hunter and the one by Rayment in the context of the emerging role that IEDs play in contemporary armed conflict. One would do well to read the books while keeping in mind the significance that a scholar like PW Singer attaches to IED use in the Iraqi and Afghanistan conflicts. Singer notes that, before the two conflicts, IED use was limited and without strategic consequences. In Iraq and in Afghanistan, however, IED use helped neutralise the overwhelming (conventional) military advantage of the US-led coalition. IED use attained strategic significance in the Afghan and Iraqi conflicts, since it directly affected the course and outcome of the hostilities.²⁰ An indication of IED effectiveness can be found in the table below. A weapon system responsible for

almost 51 per cent of the casualties suffered by the coalition forces in Afghanistan is a strategic one by any measure.

Reading the personal accounts in *Eight lives down, Extreme risk* and *Bomb hunters* makes it easy to understand how IEDs were employed with strategic consequences. These accounts include numerous references to the psychological, tactical and operational effects of IEDs. The personal accounts also illuminate the nature of the struggle between the bomb removers and the bomb makers. They depict a struggle that may be described as adaptive and co-evolving, with both sides innovating in an effort to gain a technical or tactical advantage.

Hunter's account clearly shows that he (and his fellow ATOs) encountered increasingly sophisticated IEDs, including an advanced anti-armour device that was used successfully against a Warrior infantry fighting vehicle (IFV). Hunter recognised it as a classic Hezbollah anti-armour, off-route mine that had previously been encountered in southern Lebanon only. He took the incident as confirmation of intelligence reports that Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) personnel had been sent by Iran to train bomb makers in Basra.²¹ Hunter regarded this discovery as significant, remarking:

This is serious. There have been mutterings about LH and the Iranians in Basra for some time now. If they are here, and they've brought their technology with them, we're royally f... The insurgency has just been taken to the next level.²²

The Hezbollah mine represented a new phase in the conflict, not only because it was an effective anti-armour design, but also because the mine belonged to an IED specifically designed to vaporise all firing circuit components, thereby preventing any forensic analysis by the opposing side. Forensic data play a vital role in any CIED effort to trace those who made and planted the bombs.²³ The new mine meant, amongst other things, that the Sunni and Shia militants in Iraq were reacting to Coalition tactics by improving their IED technology.

Another indication of the co-evolving nature of the struggle between bomb removers and bomb makers/planters may be found in Hunter's description of the IED incident on day 20 of his tour. During that incident, the bomb-disposal team's remotely controlled robot (of the "Wheelbarrow" type) froze during its approach of the IED because its radio-control mechanism had been inhibited by jamming. The Wheelbarrow was the preferred tool for inspecting and disrupting IEDs, since it allowed ATOs to perform their tasks without risking life and limb. The inoperable Wheelbarrow forced Hunter to approach the IED in person and place a disruptor weapon by hand. Hunter concluded that exposing himself had been the bomb

planter's intent all along. After this incident, the ATO and his team preferred communicating with the robot by fibre-optic cable. This was the first time that Hunter and his team had been subjected to electronic counter-measures (ECM) by the insurgents. British bomb-disposal teams had started using both ECM and Wheelbarrow robots against the IEDs they encountered during the conflict in Northern Ireland. Both had met with considerable success during that conflict.²⁴

It is interesting to compare the contest between bomb removers and bomb makers/planters in Afghanistan to the struggle between the same opponents in Iraq. An ATO, interviewed by Rayment in Afghanistan, gave an account similar to that by Hunter of always being watched closely by the opposition whenever he disarmed IEDs. These observers were looking for any procedural vulnerability that could be exploited when planting the next IED. The ATO told Rayment:

It's infuriating watching them sitting with their backs against a compound wall 40-50 metres away, just watching what the operator is doing. They will watch what actions I carry out on that device and they will try to think of ways to catch me out. They will look at areas I may or may not have searched. And you know what they are thinking: he didn't search there – maybe I should place an IED in that area. So I have to be very careful all the time, constantly changing my drills and making sure I don't set patterns – it's basically a game of chess with serious consequences for the loser. I always have to stay one step ahead.²⁵

From Rayment's account, it is clear that the contest between bomb removers and bomb planters in Afghanistan differed from the situation in Iraq in at least one significant respect. In Iraq, Hunter and his comrades faced opponents who adapted and evolved primarily by improving their IED technology. In Afghanistan, however, IEDs were typically simple (low-tech) devices, according to Rayment. The conflict journalist mentions only one significant technological advance in the IEDs employed in Afghanistan – from IEDs with a high metal content to devices with little or no metal content. High metal content IEDs were easy to find with the Vallon metal detectors used by the British Army. The Vallon, however, could not detect IEDs with low or no metal content. Such IEDs were extremely difficult to detect and their existence was initially kept secret from the British public.²⁶

The Taliban, unlike the Shia and Sunni militants in Iraq, did not continually improve their IED technology, but instead developed increasingly sophisticated IED ambush tactics. Rayment reports that the Taliban had studied British tactics to the point where they could accurately predict how British troops

would respond when ambushed. They knew, for instance, that the British standard operating procedure was to call for helicopter evacuation whenever a soldier was seriously wounded. The Taliban also knew what a good helicopter landing site (HLS) looked like. This enabled them to mine obvious landing sites close to the primary ambush site.²⁷

Conclusion

At this point, it should be clear why a serious student of contemporary armed conflict would find *Eight lives down*, *Extreme risk* and *Bomb hunters* useful reading material. The books should be particularly useful to scholars with a professional interest in asymmetric warfare or in the emerging role of IEDs. Some of them might even consider it a bonus that the books are entertaining to read.

Endnotes

¹ The title is a reference to the fact that a bomb-disposal operator approaches the device alone, while the rest of the team remains at a safe distance. One of the chapters in Rayment's book is titled "The lonely walk".

² The official designation is "Ammunition Technical Officer" or "ATO".

³ Hunter, C. *Eight lives down: The story of a counter-terrorist bomb-disposal operator's tour in Iraq*. London: Transworld, 2008, 4.

⁴ Hunter's actions in Iraq earned him the Queen's Gallantry Medal, awarded by HM Queen Elizabeth II. Cf. Hunter, C. *Extreme risk: A life fighting the bombmakers*. London: Transworld, 2010, i.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. i, 297.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. iii.

⁷ Hunter, *Eight lives down ... op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁸ Rayment, S. *Bomb hunters: In Afghanistan with Britain's Elite Bomb Disposal Unit*. London: Harper Collins, 2011, 273. See also: Anon. "Sean Rayment, Defence and Security Correspondent". *The Telegraph*. <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/sean-rayment/>> Accessed on 14 January 2013.

⁹ Rayment *op. cit.*, pp. 2–3.

¹⁰ Hunter, *Eight lives down ... op. cit.*, p. 10; Hunter, *Extreme risk ... op. cit.*, p. viii. Rayment *op. cit.*, pp. 8–9.

¹¹ Harnden, T. "How I fought the MoD to get my Afghan book published". *The Telegraph*. <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newsvideo/8377247/Toby->

Harnden-how-I-fought-the-MOD-to-get-my-Afghan-War-book-published.html> Accessed on 14 January 2013. See also: Ireland, J. “I watched the MoD pulp 24,000 copies of *Dead Men Risen*”. *The Telegraph*. 14 March 2011.

<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/8381810/I-watched-the-MoD-pulp-24000-copies-of-Dead-Men-Risen.html>> Accessed 14 January 2013.

- ¹² This is not an exhaustive list of subjects. The subjects mentioned are merely the most significant two (in this reviewer’s opinion). The three books can be mined for information about other subjects, such as the effects of frequent and lengthy deployments on the family life of an ATO. Chris Hunter’s account also records the damage that frequent and prolonged absences did to his relationship with his wife and two daughters.
- ¹³ Hunter *Eight lives down ... op. cit.*, pp. 369–370. Rayment *op. cit.*, pp. 2–3, 63–64, 165–168, 177–178.
- ¹⁴ Martin, R. “The IED: The \$30-bombs that cost the US billions”. *NPR*. 18 December 2011. <<http://www.npr.org/2011/12/18/143902421/in-iraq-fighting-an-improvised-war>> Accessed on 13 December 2012.
- ¹⁵ Singer, PW. “The evolution of improvised explosive devices (IEDs)”. Brookings Institution. February 2012. <<http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2012/02/improvised-explosive-devices-singer>> Accessed on 9 February 2013.
- ¹⁶ Rayment *op. cit.*, p. 63.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 116–147.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 8, 84, 85, 145, 146, 253, 254.
- ¹⁹ Anon. “iCasualties | Operation Enduring Freedom | Afghanistan”. iCasualties.org. <<http://icasualties.org/OEF/Index.aspx>> Accessed on 12 July 2013. According to an article in *The New York*, the iCasualties website is published and maintained by Michael White. In this regard, see: Cohen, N. “Close watch on casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq”. *New York Times*. 21 November 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/22/business/media/22link.html?_r=0> Accessed on 12 July 2013.
- ²⁰ Singer *op. cit.*
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 452–455.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 454.
- ²³ Hunter, *Eight lives down ... op. cit.*, pp. 107, 108, 453; Rayment *op. cit.*, pp. 48–49.

²⁴ Hunter, *Eight lives down ... op. cit.*, pp. 213–222; Hunter, *Extreme risk ... op. cit.*, pp. 89–91.

²⁵ Rayment *op. cit.*, p. 69.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 59, 60, 66, 128, 144, 145.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 61, 65–69, 73–76.