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Thousands of British troops wounded in Afghanistan

More than 1,000 British troops have been wounded in action in Afghanistan since 2006

By Sean Rayment

2/20/2010

Figures released by the Ministry of Defence also disclose that up until the end of 2009, 168 troops are classed as having suffered the loss of limbs, parts of limbs or eyes, in battle with the Taliban or from improvised explosive devices (IEDs)

According to a charity, at least 84 of these have lost arms or legs, including 24 who have had two limbs amputated and eight who are triple amputees.

The latest figures demonstrate the pressure facing staff at Selly Oak Hospital in Birmingham where the vast majority of the Afghan war injured are treated.

A recent report by the National Audit Office disclosed that such was the demand for beds by British troops that more than 200 civilians were transferred to hospitals around the country to make room for extra military casualties.

Last year was the bloodiest to date in the current campaign with 109 fatalities. A further 508 soldiers and marines were wounded in action, more than double the number of the previous year.

Government figures for this January alone show that 47 troops have been wounded in action, more than half the number for the whole of 2006, the year in which the insurgency began in Helmand, in southern Afghanistan.

The figures underline the increasing dangers troops face while serving in the country, where the use of IEDs by the Taliban now accounts for 80 per cent of injuries and fatalities suffered by British troops.

Commanders expect the number of troops being killed and injured in Helmand to increase in areas where the Taliban are still active.

The possibility also exists that insurgents may begin to move back into areas which have been seized by British and Nato troops during Operation Moshtarak.

The offensive, which has now entered its second week, managed to expel the Taliban from large parts of the central Helmand valley, although US Marines are facing tough resistance in the area of Marjah, which is infamous for the manufacture of large numbers of IEDs.

But despite the increase in attacks and the severity of the injuries, British troops now have a greater chance of surviving serious wounds than ever before.

Doctors have even begun to classify some of the most seriously injured troops as "unexpected survivors" and between 2006 and 31st July 2008, the latest date for which figures are available, 75 members of the armed forces fell into this category.

Lieutenant Colonel Tim Hodgetts of the Royal Army Medical Corps and who is also the Defence Professor of Emergency Medicine at the University of Birmingham, said that advances in surgery, the battlefield medical skills of soldiers and the fitness of troops, were all helping to keep severely injured servicemen and women alive.

Col Hodgetts said: "There are around 70 individuals who are classed as unexpected survivors.

"These are patients with multiple limb amputations or higher limb amputations who have dumped their blood volume at the scene (of the attack) and who arrive at the hospital moribund but alive.

"Once you get onto the cusp of what is achievable in medicine, when you are at the ragged edge of physiology, you will get some people who will survive and some people who will not.

"What we have definitely done is push the boundaries. There are soldiers surviving today who would not have done a year ago because of the advances that we are making."

In total, the number of troops injured whilst serving in Afghanistan since 2001 stands at 3,408, although this includes personnel not wounded in action. Since 2001, 1,109 have been hurt in fighting, the vast majority since 2006.

The figures relating to amputations have been released by the British Limbless Ex-Serviceman's Association (Blesma).

Rates of recovery for amputees has also increased because of a growing expertise of the injuries being sustained in Afghanistan, by staff at Headley Court, in Surrey, the armed forces rehabilitation centre.

Lance Corporal Jack Ritchie looks set to return to combat duty less than 12 months after losing his leg in an IED blast in Helmand last August.

He first walked just three months after the explosion and last week began running on a carbon 'blade' prosthetic leg. He hopes to rejoin his regiment, the Scots Guards, which deploys to Afghanistan next month for a six month tour.

LCpl Ritchie said: "There's nothing to stop me going back to join the Scots Guards for the later part of the tour. The Battalion have told me that if I'm fit, there is a place for me in Afghanistan.

"I've been told that is a realistic timetable and that I am on target to achieve it."

The 21-year-old from Carnoustie told how he was hit on August 8 last year after volunteering to serve with the Welsh Guards at their base near Chah-e-Anjir.

He said: "We went to clear one compound and knew the enemy was getting very sophisticated in its use of IEDs. There was a big explosion and I got thrown about 10 feet up in the air with a load of debris.

"I tried to roll over but I couldn't move. I looked down and saw my boot with my left foot still in it at about 90 degrees to my left."

The soldier was transferred to the field hospital at Camp Bastion before being flown home to Selly Oak hospital, where he spent seven weeks before being discharged to begin his rehabilitation at Headley Court.

LCpl Ritchie said: "With the prosthetic leg I've got at the minute there is no problem getting back to Afghanistan and deploying to a forward operating base.

"Going on foot patrol is a slightly tougher challenge, but we'll see how it goes."

The latest soldier to be killed while fighting in Afghanistan was yesterday named as Lance Sergeant David "Davey" Walker.

LSgt Walker, who was 37 and a member of the 1st battalion Scots Guards, was killed by enemy fire whilst taking part in a foot patrol during Operation Moshtarak on Thursday.

The death of the soldier, who was married with children, brings to 263 the number of British troops killed in Afghanistan since 2001.

Three British soldiers have now been killed since the start of the current offensive and more than 12 have been injured.

