

## Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan, 2001–2014

By Theo Farrell

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Reviewed by Carter Malkasian

For years, the British enjoyed a reputation of counterinsurgency excellence. Their campaigns—Malaya, Kenya, Oman, Northern Ireland—were hailed as successes in this difficult form of war. Afghanistan, however, turned out to be painful for the British. They committed a peak of over 9,500 troops, eventually drawing down to a few hundred by the end of 2014. They faced numerous battlefield reverses. Eventual successes were overshadowed by the arrival of 20,000 U.S. Marines. Britain's counterinsurgency reputation came out of the campaign tarnished.

Many books and articles have been written criticizing British government and military decisions. Mike Martin's *An Intimate War* (Oxford University Press, 2014), Frank Ledwidge's *Losing Small Wars* (Yale University Press, 2017), and Emile Simpson's *War from the Ground Up* (Oxford University Press,

2016) loom especially large. Still, there has been no comprehensive history, especially for Americans less interested in British political debates than an explanation of what happened and why. Theo Farrell's *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan, 2001–2014* is just that.

Farrell is the former head of the renowned Department of War Studies at King's College London, and is now an executive dean at the University of Wollongong in Australia. Farrell traveled to Afghanistan repeatedly throughout the course of the war. He was able to review military plans and post-operational reports and interview over 200 British officers and officials. He also collected a small sample of Taliban opinion. All serve as rich sources for the book.

Farrell shows that the British experience was not one of unremitting blunders. Certainly, the beginning was tough. After engaging in a variety of counterterrorism operations and development activities from 2001 to 2005, the largest British troop commitment started in 2006 in Helmand Province. The British went in overly optimistic and neglectful of Afghan memories of their empire. They compounded the problem by removing the drug lord provincial governor, Sher Mohammed Akhundzada, turning part of his tribe against them. Tactically, the British settled on an overly militarized approach and failed to focus on protecting the population. By the end of the year, the situation had gone so badly that the British withdrew from three districts—Musa Qala, Sangin, and Nowzad—in three controversial ceasefire agreements.

Over time, the British adapted. They introduced new equipment, deployed more helicopters, and developed new counter-improvised explosive device techniques. Counterinsurgency tactics improved. Battalions were assigned to districts for their entire tours in order to develop “an intimate knowledge of the ground, the local nationals, and the pattern of life” rather than rotated through positions throughout the province. Firepower was restrained in order to minimize counterproductive civilian casualties. A focus on protecting

the population was asserted in late 2008. Farrell assesses, “By 2010, British forces had achieved significant results in Helmand, creating the security for governance and development to flourish in many parts of the province.”

A great strength of *Unwinnable* is the author's detailed coverage of the British effort in Nad Ali, a critical district next to Helmand's provincial capital. This front has gone woefully understudied. It is perhaps Britain's greatest tactical success in Afghanistan. While the U.S. Marines cleared southern Helmand and Marjah, the British were clearing Nad Ali and the adjacent sector of Babaji. Americans cannot understand the outcome of its effort in Helmand without understanding Nad Ali. Indeed, U.S. Marines are helping Afghan soldiers and police fight there today. Farrell's is the first account to explain the full history of what happened in Nad Ali across 7 years and the deployment of multiple British battalions.

While fair to British tactical and operational successes, Farrell contends the overall strategy was misguided, as his title implies. The main reason is “political absenteeism and military hubris.” His text makes clear that a large part of this was poor knowledge of Afghanistan and a resistance to learn. British policymakers and generals had the scantest of knowledge on Afghanistan yet insisted on moving forward without regard for facts that challenged their preconceptions. They disregarded reports of Taliban strength and studies that called for caution and taking time to deepen their knowledge and did not recognize the popular antipathy toward Britain. They even neglected future President Nad Ali's warning that if they “go in fighting . . . there will be a bloodbath.”

Farrell describes how British officers made key tactical errors because they did not understand Helmand. In 2006, British commanders infamously diverted from a plan to defend the population in central Helmand that had been written by a team of officers and civilian officials who had studied the province. Instead, the commanders scattered British forces into rural districts to fight the Taliban. British forces became besieged

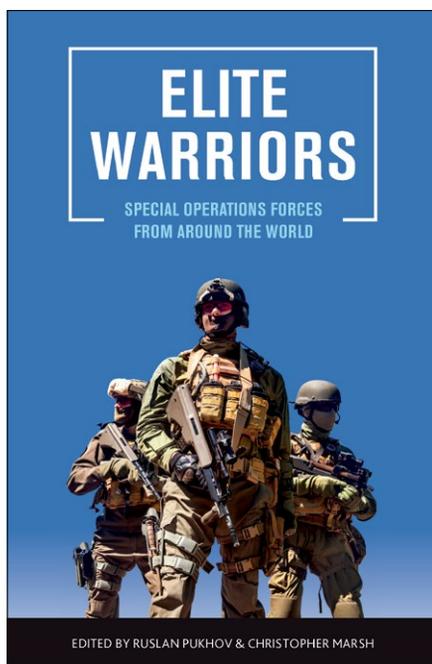
in far-flung “platoon houses” and suffered heavy casualties. Farrell debunks a decades-old argument that pleas from President Hamid Karzai and Provincial Governor Mohammed Daoud had forced the British commanders to move off the original plan. He tells how the British commanders never even read the plan and decided on their own to get into a fight in the hinterlands. Brigadier Edward Butler, the British commander in Helmand at the time, dismissed the original plan as “pretty light on the military Line of Operation . . . drawn up by people who did not properly understand the Brigade’s skill sets and capabilities.” Years later, of course, Butler’s successors fell back on defending central Helmand, just as the original plan had advised. Farrell’s case will surely draw great controversy.

What should we take from this? The United Kingdom was caught in the same dilemma that the United States has faced again and again in Iraq and Afghanistan. For the outsider, intervening in an insurgency or a civil war is a learning experience. The imperative to work with the people demands knowledge of society, culture, politics, and history, in all their complexity. Yet learning takes time. Outsiders face an unavoidable dilemma of making decisions with incomplete knowledge or making no decisions at all. Every decision stands a reasonable chance of being a misstep. Friction is inevitable. What Farrell reminds us is that at any decision point we should listen to the knowledge that does exist and not dismiss it because it complicates what we want to do.

With its broad scope and detail, *Unwinnable* is akin to an official history in the finest of British historical tradition. In fact, whenever the official history does come out, it will find itself in stiff competition with Farrell’s work. JFQ

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### Elite Warriors: Special Operations Forces from Around the World

Edited by Ruslan Pukhov and Christopher Marsh  
East View Press, 2017  
\$79.95 263 pp.  
ISBN: 978-1879944992

Reviewed by Bruce McClintock

Special operations forces (SOF) have existed in some form and played roles in warfare since the advent of conventional military operations. For example, in biblical times, King David had a special forces platoon. World War II brought growth, greater recognition, and prestige for special forces like the British Commandos, Special Air Service, and the American Office of Strategic Services. The last two decades have witnessed explosive growth in various forms of unconventional or SOF.

In *Elite Warriors*, Ruslan Pukhov and Christopher Marsh aim to provide accessible, high-quality comparative research on the elite SOF of 14 countries. They achieve some of their lofty objectives and add value to the important field of literature on special operations. Marsh,

editor of the *Special Operations Journal* and professor at the U.S. Army School of Advanced Military Studies, opens the book by discussing the modern (post–World War II) proliferation of SOF and claims that many countries “seek to gain the status and capabilities” that come from possessing such specialized units. He then briefly describes the intent of the book—to fill the gap between “a vast body of literature that focuses on single cases of heroism, or at best, histories of single units” during a select period.

To help fill the gap, *Elite Warriors* provides descriptive chapters on the SOF forces of 14 countries in the following order: Russia, Ukraine, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Turkey, China, Singapore, Columbia, and Algeria. The book claims a format commonly used by the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST), the Russian think tank co-founded and directed by Pukhov. CAST regularly employs a team of highly capable research analysts to provide summaries on a variety of topics—usually focused on Russia’s defense industry and national arms procurement program. *Elite Warriors* claims that each of the chapters provides a “brief historical background to that country’s special operations forces, then quickly moves to the present time, offering the reader a very comprehensive overview of the many units that exist, the missions which they are designed to address, and examples of some of the missions they have conducted.” Marsh states, “Encyclopedic in nature, it is filled with a wealth of information on the special operations forces of the countries included.”

Most chapters do include some form of historical discussion, a detailed organizational listing for known units, and some information on equipment used, as well as training and education. However, the diversity of contributors creates inconsistency in the format as well as the style of the different chapters. If read cover-to-cover, the inconsistency in the chapter organization is readily apparent, as is the level of detail available for various countries. The chapter on Iran, for example, provides good detail on the weapons used by Iranian SOF and provides basic