

A Million Bullets - The Real Story of the British Army in Afghanistan
by James Fergusson.
Bantam Press 2008.

It has been remarked many times over the last year or so that the struggle against the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the impact of failure by the coalition troops there, with an inevitable rollover effect on the tribal areas of Pakistan and then Pakistan as a whole, is of far greater significance to the West in the long term than the attempt to pacify and stabilise Iraq.

In A Million Bullets, the journalist and long-time observer of events in Afghanistan James Fergusson describes in commendable and enthralling detail the latest engagement by British forces in a country that has all too often been the graveyard for its regiments.

Fergusson has interviewed extremely widely, and what comes across is an intimate, personal account of the experiences of individual soldiers in a harsh environment fighting an unrelenting and ferocious enemy. A Million Bullets also tells a familiar tale of struggles between soldiers and bureaucrats, of the inadequate nature of kit and supplies, and of the psychological traumas inflicted by battles whose viciousness and intensity no one outside the theatre can possibly understand.

Fergusson also has a personal investment in the story he tells, because his wife's cousin deployed as part of the Helmand battle group, and his direct experiences in a number of operations were an eloquent microcosm of the army's commitment overall.

A Million Bullets is a gripping read, admirable on many levels, not least for the way in which it allows real soldiers' voices to be heard, undiluted by embedded journalists and MoD spin doctors: anyone with an interest in the Afghanistan campaign, or a desire to find out what really happens when deskbound politicians send our troops overseas into a combat zone should read this book.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh