

An Arm and Two Legs

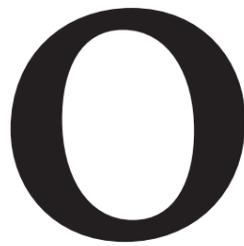
What you can see in this picture: British photographer Giles Duley, a year after he stepped on a land mine in Afghanistan.

What you can't see: extraordinary courage; indomitable spirit; refusal to accept defeat. Tim Lewis hears the story of a former Esquire colleague's fight for survival against terrifying odds

Portrait by
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Giles Duley
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On 7 February 2011, Giles Duley woke up a little after 7am, dawn light streaming through the translucent walls and ceilings of the communal tent. It had been

a freezing night — who knew Afghanistan got this cold? — but the cloudless skies were giving way to a perfect, electric-blue winter's morning. He rolled around in his sleeping bag to warm up and considered his options for the day.

An immediate front-runner was to hunker down where he was. A group of soldiers would be going out on patrol, but, unlike them, no sergeant would berate and bully him if he stayed in bed. As a freelance photographer, he didn't even have a boss back in the UK to answer to. He hadn't taken a day off in nearly two weeks, following the gruelling daily tours that might last anything between two and eight hours, and his legs and shoulders pleaded for a rest. He was 39, after all; double the age of many of the grunts he was shadowing from the 1st Squadron of the 75th Cavalry Regiment of the US Army. He could lie in, edit the pictures he had taken already and shoot some more around the combat outpost: informal shots of the men who stayed behind shovelling sand and rocks into the Hesco containers that made up the perimeter fortifications and killing the mind-numbing hours between the brief interludes of terror.

He was still, he acknowledged, shaken by what happened the previous day. He had been out on patrol with six Americans and six Afghan National Army soldiers when the group came under fire. This itself was unremarkable, it happened most days. In fact, Duley had actually started to prefer being shot at to the quiet moments when you were endlessly scanning the horizon for a dispiritingly invisible enemy. At least you knew where the Taliban were now and, as you sprinted for a ditch, adrenaline jammed through your system, breaking the tension.

When this particular attack began, incoming rounds whistling into the ground around them, he followed an Afghan soldier who was returning fire from behind a wall. He snapped a couple of photographs, then he balanced his left hand on the ground. Something didn't feel right and he looked down and saw a metallic, circular object nestled in the shrubbery: it was a Russian anti-tank mine, a "dinner plate" mine. He froze, sure that he was about to die. Slowly swivelling his head, he imagined an insurgent sitting nearby putting together two wires to detonate the explosive. When that didn't happen, he tapped the soldier on the shoulder, pointed to the spot, and the pair hastily retreated.

It was the most terrifying moment of his life. Back at the base that evening, he wrote in his journal that he didn't think he would make it out of this assignment alive. He was convinced something would happen: the attacks were too relentless, the dangers so ubiquitous. Yet, perversely, his standing at the camp had received a significant boost. Embedded journalists are often a nuisance for soldiers, but Duley had passed a test of sorts that afternoon: after the firefight, the Americans blew up the mine, removing an obstacle that any of them might have set off on another day. The sergeant leading the patrol speculated that perhaps they disturbed the Taliban setting up the device and, as the men slapped Duley on the back, his chest beat with a mixture of pride and deep unease: "Wow, that was close!" he thought excitedly; but also, more quietly, "Fuck me, that was close..."

Duley looked across from his bunk and noticed that his neighbour was staring at him; the bed was occupied by the camp's sniffer dog, a huge Alsatian that, after he had once given it some of his rations, now eyed him compulsively day and night. Duley turned in his sleeping bag to face the other way. His mind wandered to the Superbowl, which had

been played overnight between the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Green Bay Packers. Although he'd grown up in Somerset, he loved American football, and he'd been excited to watch the game with the troops, each of whom was allocated two beers for the occasion in an otherwise dry camp. But ultimately the satellite feed had jammed — and there was no internet connection in this remote corner of southern Afghanistan — so they had to abandon the party. Duley calculated that it had been the first time he had missed the Superbowl since he was 14.

He made up his mind: he'd go on patrol. Had he stayed up all night watching the game, maybe that would have been an excuse, but he felt that he was starting to earn the trust of the soldiers and taking the same risks they faced cemented that bond. He climbed out of bed, slipped on his thermals, and went in search of coffee.

How had he got here? It was a question Duley had asked himself at least once a day since he arrived in Afghanistan. There was a rigidly practical answer: six months before, in the summer of 2010, he had approached the US Army and asked to be embedded with one of their combat units. He specifically requested to be stationed near Sangsar, a village long associated with the Taliban leader Mullah Omar and an area where the movement had plotted its advance across the country in the Nineties. In recent times, this dirt-poor agricultural area known by the Americans as "the heart of darkness" had become one of the conflict's most dangerous and intensely fought-over battlegrounds, with both factions aware of its spiritual — if not strategic — significance.

Duley started to prefer being shot at to endlessly scanning the horizon for an invisible enemy

Duley's request was processed without too much fuss. As a commercial photographer, he had worked extensively for magazines such as *Rolling Stone*, *Elle*, *Vogue* and, for a period around 2003, he was a regular contributor to *Esquire*. He then became well-known for his humanitarian work, photographing rebel soldiers in Angola, acid-burns victims in Bangladesh and street kids in Ukraine. Afghanistan, though, would be something different in his 20-year career. Duley had taken to describing himself as an "anti-war photographer": he was interested in

documenting the fallout of a conflict, how it affected real lives, not glamourising the combatants. But increasingly he had started to feel like a hypocrite: he talked about war, but he had never really experienced it. His crash course would be three months in one of the world's most fiercely contested hot spots.

He could not be accused of taking the easy option, but then he never did. Growing up in the Seventies and Eighties, he was a singular child or, less charitably, a pain in the arse: not exactly a rebel, but stubborn and unyielding. His father, an engineer who owned a factory outside of Yeovil, decided that he must have inherited his obstinacy from his great-great grandfather, Thomas Woolgar, a notorious character who was the last person in British naval history to be beaten with the cat o' nine tails. Woolgar had deserted during the Zulu War because of the lack of action on the seas, enlisted with the army and then, after fighting with distinction, returned to the navy and was flogged for insubordination. When Duley learned of his long-gone relative, he began to refer proudly to his "fuck-you gene".

At the age of 12, Duley became obsessed with noughts and crosses and he would stay up all night attempting to devise an algorithm to win the game. Eventually he conceded

He decided to go for a cigarette. As Duley turned, he felt an unmistakable click under his right boot

defeat: no matter how smart you are, you can't win noughts and crosses, only lose it. This realisation hit him hard. He started to question whether we could, in fact, control any aspect of our lives. If you like a girl, but she's not interested in you, what can you do? If a stranger decides to attack you in the street, how can you be happy? Only years later, in his mid-thirties, would he be fully reconciled with the discovery, at which point he tattooed XOX in the inside of his right wrist.

At school, he acquired a reputation as an oddball. If his English teacher asked the class

to read, say, *Absalom, Absalom!* by William Faulkner, Duley would read every book that Faulkner had written except the set text. If he was instructed to cut his hair, he would pointedly grow it, even though he disliked his long hair. When it came time to choose a musical instrument, he picked not the guitar or piano or drums, but a bassoon. He was determined to leave school after his GCSEs, but his parents requested he stay on and take A levels. He didn't see the point, but respected their wishes, studied hard and diligently sat the exams. But when the results arrived, he simply never opened the envelope — and it remains sealed to this day. The fuck-you gene was a formidable opponent.

His athletic career followed a similar pattern. He might have been a boxer or played rugby, both sports he excelled at, but he took up American football instead, playing first for a local team and then joining the Bournemouth Bobcats, one of the dominant outfits in the nascent Budweiser Premier League at the time. He was a cornerback, small but fast and determined, and the Bobcats' American coach thought he had a shot at making it at a US college. The day after his A levels finished, Duley flew to the States to begin tryouts. No one took the little English

guy too seriously and at the first couple of sessions he didn't get a second look. At the third, he decided to take a different approach: instead of turning up in a tracksuit, he wore a pinstripe suit; when there were breaks in the game, he would jog to the sideline and sip tea from a Thermos. He overheard one coach say, "Who the fuck is that asshole?" but at least he had been noticed.

The University of Southern Mississippi looked set to offer him a place, but one day, when he was doing repairs on his Ford van in a multi-storey car park in San Francisco,

it kicked itself into reverse. Duley believed that his friend was working under the van and a deaf boy they had just met was standing behind it, so he dived in to push the foot brake with his hand. He wasn't quite quick enough: his legs were trapped between the driver's door and a concrete pillar and he popped all the ligaments in his right leg (in the event, his friend had already moved and the deaf kid was looking in the right direction and stepped aside). He returned home for surgery and was told by doctors that he'd have problems with his knees for the rest of his life.

He was laid up in hospital when his godfather died and bequeathed him an Olympus OM10 camera and the autobiography of the British photojournalist Don McCullin, *Unreasonable Behaviour*. Sport had been Duley's life to this point, but he was gripped by the stories of post-war gangs in London and living among US soldiers in Vietnam. When he reached the part where McCullin's Nikon F was smashed by a sniper's bullet in Cambodia in 1970, just as he raised it to his eye to take a photograph, the 18-year-old Duley began to imagine a new life for himself.

You can be embedded in Afghanistan and have an existence not so removed from normal life: hot showers, fast internet connection and breakfasts of croissants and French coffee. The combat outpost near Sangsar was not like that. There was no running water, no electricity, no email. A one-time Mujahideen hideout during the war against the Soviet Union in the Eighties, it now consisted of three identical tents — one for 12 US soldiers, one for 12 Afghans and one for "transients", maybe a visiting bomb-disposal expert or a journalist — and a row of what the Americans called Porta-Johns. The 1st squadron were on a rotation where they would spend two weeks here, before retreating to the larger, safer Forward Operating Base (FOB) Wilson, and being replaced by the other half of their unit, but Duley had made it his permanent base.

Food was MREs: officially Meal, Ready-to-Eat; unofficially Meals Rejected by the Enemy or Materials Resembling Edibles. The freeze-dried packets — 24 options from beef teriyaki to meatloaf with gravy; it all tasted broadly the same — were heated by a water-activated reaction that tended to impart a nauseating tang of chemicals. Sides might include peanut butter, crackers and Skittles, and soldiers had taken to tossing them all in with the main course. Even the army recommends that you eat these for no more than 21 days straight.

Duley was not quite at 21 days, but that morning he couldn't stomach an MRE and instead gunned three coffees and five Marlboro reds. "Breakfast of champions!" he thought to himself. He changed into his

kit and Type IV body armour, a ceramic shell that is the highest level of protection available and which the US military insists on for Afghanistan. He looked at the groin protector that had been thrown in free: he had not worn it yet, because it made it harder to climb over the vines that grew in this corner of Afghanistan, but because he was feeling edgy, he put it on. He packed his backpack with water, two energy bars and two Canon EOS 5D cameras.

At the briefing, just before 9am, platoon sergeant Chris Metz set out the day's mission. The 75th Cavalry are a Reconnaissance, Surveillance and Target Acquisition (RSTA) unit, which essentially meant that their job was to head out on foot and engage the Taliban. In Iraq and initially in Afghanistan, US troops would typically patrol in armoured vehicles; in recent times, in an effort to appear less threatening, and because the terrain had become more difficult and remote, they had dismounted. That day, the nominal objective was to investigate a small mud compound from where the squadron had been shot at yesterday, not far from Duley's Russian anti-tank mine. Duley knew better than to ask if the operation had any kind of big-picture significance: soldiers, he'd worked out, had no interest in the long-term success or failure of a mission. Their concern was doing what they were told and keeping their friends in the unit alive.

An odour of burning flesh hit his nostrils. He couldn't see below his waist, but he knew it wasn't good

The first rule of going on patrol was that it was OK to be scared, you just couldn't show it. As they stepped through the razor wire that surrounded the outpost, Duley knew he was in danger of betraying this code. He had started to detest this initial phase of a patrol. Before you could reach any kind of cover, the group had to cross a large field, utterly exposed to attack. The earth had been recently ploughed

by farmers, so an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) would be almost impossible to spot. It was still cold and mud clogged up your boots as you walked. The soldiers dispersed immediately, so that there was no easy target for a sniper. Duley knew that he could be shot before he even realised: bullets travel at around 2,000mph, much faster than the speed of sound, so at this distance he would be dead a full second before the shot was even audible. He tried to make himself as small as possible and concentrated on following the footsteps of the soldier in front to minimise the risk of stepping on a mine.

The patrol reached the compound just after 10am. A group of children had been playing in the dirt outside, but they scarpered as the Americans approached. At this point, the patrol split into two: half went to blow up a small copse of trees, to make it harder for attackers to creep up on the base; the rest stayed behind to investigate the compound.

Duley remained with the latter group and for the first time that day he realised he was feeling calmer. Sergeant Metz was in discussion with his counterpart in the Afghan National Army: from what Duley could make out, the Afghans, who were supposed to be leading the patrol, wanted the Americans to conduct the search of the compound. Evidently, they believed it was overrun with booby traps, while Metz protested strongly that it was their

responsibility. As they argued, two soldiers swept the area with mine detectors.

This was fairly typical of the Afghans, Duley thought. In one sense, they were utterly fearless: there was one guy nicknamed "Commando" who would just stand up in the middle of a firefight, pop his rocket-propelled grenade on his shoulder and take aim at wherever the attack was coming

from. But they were also indisciplined. The previous week, Duley and an American soldier had been forced to dive into a ditch as an Afghan opened fire behind them with a heavy machine gun, shredding a bush just above where they had taken cover. They were also known for wandering back together in a group chatting when they returned from patrols, a lazy mistake that would be an open invitation to a Taliban marksman.

The Americans had formed a perimeter around the compound. After 10 minutes, Duley decided to go for a cigarette with one of the soldiers, 20 metres away. As he turned, he felt an unmistakable click under his right boot.

The first time that Giles Duley stepped on a mine was in a village called Chifolo in Angola in 2008. Following a 27-year civil war that finally wound up in 2002, the southern African republic is thought to be the most heavily mined country on Earth, with an estimated 10 million land mines. On this occasion, the device was so old and rusted that it didn't detonate. Duley was working there with the mine-clearing charity MAG, so, his heart beating through his bulletproof vest, he called over an operative who neutralised it.

The trip to Angola was the first time he had taken photographs in almost three years. He'd had to buy a camera to even go there, because he had no idea where any of his equipment was. The exile was, for the most part, self-imposed. In the early 2000s, he had achieved a degree of success that most commercial photographers would be rather happy with. On a good day, he might be paid a few thousand pounds to photograph Christian Bale for Disney; he had an apartment and studio in London; he was married to a Canadian model, whom he had met on a fashion shoot. Life was, objectively, not at all bad. But, over time, he had become deeply disillusioned. He thought back to the work of Don McCullin that had inspired him to become a photographer, then he looked at the glossy, retouched pictures of the *Big Brother* starlet he had just taken and wondered how he had managed to become so lost. He might as well have been a wedding photographer.

He set about dismantling his life, sabotaging his own career. He moved to Hastings on the Sussex coast, he stopped taking pictures, he separated from his wife, he started working in a pub. And then, in 2007, just when his reinvention was almost complete, he signed up for the Marathon des Sables, a six-day, 150-mile foot race that crosses the Sahara desert in 40°C heat. Duley had not run much since he damaged his knee ligaments in the US, and that did not significantly change now. The furthest he ran before the race was 10 miles — the longest stage of the Marathon des Sables that



year was 48 miles — and the closest he came to tactics was training when he was drunk, after a shift at the pub, because he figured it might compare to running when you were severely dehydrated.

On arrival in Morocco, his iPod broke and he lost his fags in a sandstorm, and when the race started, within a mile, he didn't know how he was going to continue. After eight miles, his knees had swollen up and he'd broken three toes coming downhill. But he developed a coping mechanism: he told himself, "I don't think I can do all of this, but I reckon I could do another mile. After a mile we'll reassess, and if we need to quit we'll quit then. But surely we can do one more mile?"

This strategy somehow worked until the penultimate day. It was just a marathon that day, and two miles from the finish, it suddenly occurred to Duley that he might actually complete the race. He collapsed in the sand, he began to sob theatrically and he could not move. At this moment, a British squaddie came running up behind him, grabbed him by the collar and bellowed in his ear, "Come on, you dirty cunt! You're not stopping here, son." Duley was hauled back to his feet and ultimately finished the event in 397th place out of 750 entrants. Most of all, he proved to himself that whatever you imagine your limits to be, you are nowhere close to reaching them.

The race became the spur for him to return to photography. This time, he would only photograph stories he believed in. He would fund his trips himself, instead of relying on a commission from a newspaper or magazine, so there was no pressure to shoot images in a particular style. His way of raising money was typically idiosyncratic: he worked as a carer for a man with debilitating multiple sclerosis, living with him for 24 hours a day, for up to three months at a time. He hated the job, but it was well paid, and when friends, who were growing a little concerned, asked him about it, he'd say: "Would you be prepared to go to prison for two years if at the end of those two years you got the life you'd always wanted?"

DAVID BOWERING



So when he trod on the mine in Angola, on that first six-month assignment, Duley did not for a moment question the risks he would have to take in his new line of work. After years of feeling dead, he had suddenly never felt more alive. Sure, he had nowhere settled to live, his marriage was over, his savings were gone — but didn't that mean that he now had nothing to lose?

Have you ever jumped off a pier into the freezing cold sea? It felt a little like that. Your breath is taken away and you are momentarily disorientated. You don't immediately feel pain, but you know it can't be far away. There was white light, searing heat, a few moments floating elegantly through the air. An eerie silence, but maybe that was because the explosion had caused temporary deafness. This all seemed to last for a few seconds, even though it couldn't have, and then Duley landed with a thud on his right side, a short distance from where he had stood on the pressure plate of the IED. "Bollocks!" he cried out at the top of his voice.

He gazed directly upwards and it was strangely beautiful. There were the bare limbs of a tree, a vibrant blue sky, but then he noticed bits of material and possibly bits of himself in the branches. Were those his boxer shorts? Surely not. He looked at his left hand: the white bones of his fingers were skeleton clean, the flesh blasted away by the upward force of the explosion. The skin around them was flayed and frayed. Large chunks were missing from underneath his arm and his whole body smouldered. An odour of burning flesh hit his nostrils. He couldn't see below his waist, but he knew it wasn't good. He thought immediately, "This is it. I'm going to die." He had seen people with leg injuries in Africa and he knew how quickly they slipped out of consciousness. He

After inspecting the area for secondary mines, the platoon medic applied tourniquets to Duley's limbs and stuffed his wounds with bandages; lifted onto a stretcher, Duley was carried to a Black Hawk helicopter

remembered a man shot in the leg who died within 20 minutes and he knew he was much worse than that.

It wasn't all bad, he recognised. He was conscious and he could still think clearly. His eyesight appeared unaffected and he slowly ascertained that his right hand was mostly intact. "I can still be a photographer," he rationalised. "I can still work."

Sergeant Metz snapped him back to the present. "We're coming to you, Giles, we're coming," he

said. "Don't panic, but we have to check for secondary IEDs." Often the Taliban will bury another mine to catch the people who rush to help. A soldier ran over with a metal detector and scanned the area. "Hurry!" screamed Duley. It wasn't the pain so much, he just wanted someone beside him.

Metz and the platoon medic made it over and immediately readied Combat Application Tourniquets for each of his limbs. It was astonishing how much blood had already leaked out into the earth. The medic ground his own knee into the top of Duley's left thigh, between the wound and his heart, slipped on the tourniquet and cinched it until the bleeding stopped. This was, bizarrely, the first thing that really hurt. They stuffed the wound cavities with Kerlix gauze bandage and injected him with morphine. Combat doctors used to talk about the "golden hour" with trauma injuries; now they referred to the "platinum 10 minutes". If he were to survive, the actions taken now would be crucial.

"Am I going to die?" Duley asked the medic.

"No, you're going to be fine," he replied.

Duley thought, "Well, he's going to say that, isn't he?" He was lonely, scared, but he remained determined to stay as calm as possible. He wondered if he might have some profound pronouncement to make — now would certainly be the time — but nothing came to mind.

Sergeant Metz again pulled him out of it, asking him about American football. "I'll take you to a game next season," he assured him. "I promise you'll be well enough for that, don't worry. Do you have a girlfriend?"

"Yes," Duley lied. Before he came out to Afghanistan, he'd been on a few dates in London with Jen, a mental-health research student. He had the impression he was slightly keener than she was and the fact that he was preparing to leave for a war zone had, frankly, stifled much chance of romance. He hoped she wouldn't be angry with him for jumping ahead like that, but he didn't want to die single. In fact, just saying they were together provided some comfort; he felt at least someone else was pulling for him.

Now they had to wait for the Medevac helicopter to take him to hospital. Metz, the medic and two soldiers lifted Duley onto a stretcher. His heart sank as he realised from where they were holding the stretcher that he could not have much below the waist. If there was any doubt, one of the stretcher bearers involuntarily blurted out, "Oh God!" when he saw him.

"Have I got my balls?" Duley asked Metz. The sergeant nodded; the groin protector had done its job.

"Can you make sure my stuff is packed up and sent back to the UK?" he continued. It was amazing just how practical you could be in these situations.

Again Metz nodded. "Don't worry about that. We've stopped the bleeding. Do you want a cigarette?"

"God yeah," Duley replied. Metz lit it and, because Duley couldn't move his arms, put it in and out of his mouth. He managed a pained smile between inhalations, "This has to be the best cigarette ever."

Two Black Hawk helicopters scooted in low and fast and landed beside the compound. The Taliban often take this opportunity to launch an attack, so the pilots barely slow down the rotor blades. Duley was jolted around agonisingly, dust whisked up into his face and deep into his wounds, and finally he was loaded into the Medevac. "Sorry for ruining the patrol," said Duley to Sergeant Metz, but the noise swallowed his reply. The doors closed and they took off again. It could have taken no more than two minutes, executed with the precision of a Formula 1 tyre change.

Now flight medics Cole Reece and Charles "Mo" Williams went to work.

In a year on the Medevac, they had never seen someone with injuries as severe as Duley's survive, but they kept that to themselves. They just set about ensuring as little blood as possible was lost, putting in a drip and plunging a generous adrenaline shot

Loaded into a helicopter, medics jabbed an adrenaline shot into Duley's heart as he was taken to a Kandahar hospital. These shots were taken by another photographer who was working with the Medevac team

into his chest, *Pulp Fiction*-style. Up until now, Duley had been determined to remain as calm as possible; now he became convinced that if he lost consciousness, he would never wake up again. He didn't pray or cry out for his mother, like they sometimes do in war films. He might have expected to experience a flashback of his life to date, but instead he had something closer to a flash-forward: he thought about Jen and how he really wanted to see her again; he rued the work that he had not yet completed; he imagined what it would be like to have kids; he pictured himself as an old man.

His eyelids were heavy, he had never felt so tired, but he was sure that if they closed, that would be it. He managed to scream, "I'm not fucking dying in Afghanistan!" Then, like a mantra, he repeated: "I'm not fucking dying in Afghanistan! I'm not fucking dying in Afghanistan!" He realised that he wasn't scared, he just didn't want to die in this place, in this way. He wasn't ready for it and every sinew in his body strained to survive.

"You're a fucking hell of a fighter, do you know that?" said Williams, as the helicopter swept through the mountains towards Kandahar. "You're fucking great!"

"I want to thank you guys," said Duley.

"We're here for you," replied Sergeant Reece, rooting through his kit for more medication to sedate him.

"Am I going to live?" asked Duley.

"Fuck yeah, you're going to live," said Reece. "Hell yeah!"

Duley groaned, and the helicopter touched down soon afterwards at the Nato Hospital at Kandahar Airfield. It was not quite midday. He was paler now, almost translucent from all the blood that had drained out of him. A small military ambulance carried him from the Black Hawk to the trauma department, where a dozen doctors, nurses and surgeons were waiting for him. Astonishingly, considering the amount of pain and drugs he had been exposed to, Duley was still awake and thanking or apologising to everyone he came across.

The hospital, which is owned by Nato but run by the US Navy, deals almost exclusively with trauma injuries. Around three-quarters of their patients arrive directly from combat, the majority of them the victims of insurgent-made bombs, and most will be patched up and shipped out within 48 hours. When it comes to an immediate response to the absolute worst a war dishes out — IEDs, burns, gunshot wounds — there is no one better than the surgeons here. If Duley had suffered his injuries while standing outside one of the best hospitals in the UK he would almost certainly have died. Here, he had a fighting chance.

Duley was wheeled inside, through the 2ft-thick, rocket-resistant concrete walls, into a medical facility that was reassuringly modern, so long as you blocked out the regular



Despite losing all of his limbs except his right arm, Duley has returned to photography

sirens that indicated an attack outside. He was designated an Alpha, hospital terminology for the most critically wounded patients. A doctor in camouflage scrubs urgently made enquiries about his vital signs and what treatments Duley had received to this point. The main danger would be loss of blood or infection in one of the wounds. The Taliban will sometimes pack their IEDs with rocks, nails, even toys or human waste in an attempt to make the injuries as messy as possible.

An intensive-care nurse, a genial Canadian called Captain Ray Hartery attempted to keep him alert: "What did

you have for breakfast, Giles?" he asked.

"Three coffees and some cigarettes," replied Duley, his speech beginning to slur. Hartery laughed; Duley winced.

In Duley's case, it became clear that his body armour had done its job, but any exposed area was completely shredded. He was lifted from the stretcher to a trauma bed and surrounded by medics cutting away the tattered remains of his clothes, taking his temperature and blood pressure — an astonishingly composed 120 over 80 — and hooking up IVs to replace lost blood. There was a dash to the 64-slice CT scanner, for a

full-body X-ray, and then he was back into one of three operating suites. The room smelled of dried blood and nail-polish remover, from the iodine they liberally spray on wounds.

Duley's grip on consciousness finally started to dwindle. An anaesthetist said something to him that he didn't quite catch. Finally, he could hold on no more. He passed out.

Epilogue

Giles Duley lies half-upright in bed in London's Charing Cross Hospital, his right thumb hovering over a clicker that every five minutes allows him to self-administer a shot of morphine. It is September 2011, seven months since he lost his right leg below the knee, his left above the knee and his left arm was amputated above the elbow and pain is a constant these days, a background rumble. You can almost imagine his internal countdown to the next hit: four minutes 32, four minutes 31... He is recuperating from an operation that grafted a chunk of skin, fat and muscle from his left thigh onto his leg stumps. Antibiotics and fluid are being run intravenously into his neck and oxygen is

might be overstating it: he regards them more like filling in forms for a job application; an uncomfortable but necessary inconvenience. What is bothering him most now is the stifling heat from the Bair Hugger and his salt-and-pepper hair is slick with beads of sweat. "It's often the small inconveniences that really irritate you and get you down," he says. "It's funny, your legs are chopped off and all the rest of it, but what's really bothering you is that crease in the sheet. That's what is keeping you up all night: the bloody crease!"

As he details his experiences of the last few months, it is easy to recognise the obdurate teenager who refused to open his A level results and the single-minded man who wouldn't give up on the Marathon des Sables even as his knees were wrecked and his feet were turned to mush. There is the 45 days he spent in a coma at Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham straight after the incident, his family being told on more than one occasion that he would not make it through the night. What it felt like to wake up and realise the extent of his injuries. Then there are the relentless series of challenges and medical procedures he has had to endure to start his life again.

"Have I got my balls?" Duley asked. The sergeant nodded; the groin protector had done its job

being fed in through his nostrils. His lower body is draped with a Bair Hugger, which pumps warm air through a hose into a blanket and is designed to prevent a blood clot of the kind that almost killed him four days ago.

A Champions League match featuring Chelsea plays soundlessly on the room's TV monitor; as he presses the morphine clicker, his right wrist flexes and you notice a tattoo of XOX on the underside. Duley has had at least 20 operations since he returned from Afghanistan — he has lost count exactly — and he has come to treat them how you or I might think of a dental appointment. In fact, that

Astonishingly, you can't fail to notice that his dark wit and easy charm, so evident when I first met Duley on an *Esquire* assignment with the Kings of Leon almost a decade ago, are obviously unaffected too. He is quick to refer to 7 February 2011 as "the luckiest day of my life". He could have died instantly, he could have been paralysed by being thrown against the tree, he might not have had access to the experienced medical professionals who kept him alive. A couple of weeks before the blast, the Medevac helicopters moved to a new station that was 10 minutes from where he was injured instead of a half hour.

He might not have worn the groin protector.

When asked to select a word that defines his life since the blast, Duley keeps returning to "surreal". As he has gone through rehab and made accelerated progress on his new prosthetic legs, he has become an inspiration to many and even a minor celebrity. Last November, there was an exhibition of his humanitarian photographs at a gallery in London and Paddy Ashdown wrote the foreword to the catalogue. In January 2012, he was invited to speak at the House of Commons and he followed it in March with a presentation at a TED conference. A thrash-metal band from the Isle of Wight called Specialbunch has written a song in his honour (sample lyric, sung angrily: "They tried to stop him with a mine/I'm glad to say he's doing fine!"). He started going out with Jen — if you can believe it, she sent him an email a couple of days before he went out on patrol saying that she felt the same way he did, but he didn't read it because there was no internet connection at the outpost.

Duley is not entirely comfortable with all of these developments, though he is proud to be a muse for metallers. He had never asked to be famous, it was not like he had auditioned for *The X Factor*, and sometimes he finds the attention overwhelming. "I feel like a bit player in my own life sometimes," he admits.

He can become cynical about the renewed interest in his work; after all, he had been shooting these stories for three years and no one had shown much desire to publish them before his limbs were blown off. As a fiercely independent person, he hates having to rely so much on friends and family. Also, he is now deeply in debt: had he been a triple amputee in the military, or anything other than self-employed, the payout could have been £1m, but he has not received any compensation. And he still finds it deeply upsetting to see himself in a full-length mirror.

But, over the course of spending time with Duley over a few months, I never find that his spirits dip too low for too long. On 7 February, 2012, he celebrated his "bombiversary". He had planned to go out for dinner with his family, but instead he was back in hospital again undergoing a rather nasty operation on his bowels. It was, however, the last major procedure before his life would return to something close to normal — finally, after 12 months, the end was in sight, the nightmare was almost over. A few days later, I received a text message. "It's my last full day in hospital and to be honest I'm feeling so overwhelmed," he wrote. "I've had breaks from hospital but I've always known I was going back, it's all felt like one long procedure, and I've just pushed as hard as I could to get to the end, not really allowed myself to think beyond that. Now it's all over! I know I'll have ops and rehab ahead, but for the first time I feel like I've made it. Amazing feeling! G." 📧