

AFGHAN WAR HELL: 'THEY SAID THE PILOT WAS SHOT ... NOT A GOOD MOMENT'



ABOVE: *Fit Lt Ian Fortune was shot in the head as he tried to evacuate injured soldiers*

12th September 2010

By Neil Chandler

A HERO surgeon has told how a helicopter mercy mission was targeted by the Taliban in a vicious firefight.

Soldiers loading wounded comrades' stretchers on to the chopper had to drop their pals and fire back as the machine was riddled with bullets.

One round even hit the pilot in the head as he prepared to fly the six injured men out.

But surgeon Lt Col Rob Russell and his team of medics survived unscathed after flying into the middle of the shoot-out dubbed "The Alamo" by battle-scarred US Marines.

His task was to save the lives of the wounded as a 14-hour firefight raged near Nad Ali in Afghanistan's lawless Helmand Province.

Lt Col Russell, 44, heard enemy rounds thudding into the RAF Chinook helicopter as it landed close to the injured men.

As stretcher bearers sprinted to the chopper they suddenly dropped their wounded to return fire against Taliban fighters.

They managed to load the casualties but after taking off, pilot Flt Lt Ian Fortune, 28, was hit by the last of ten bullets that caught the helicopter.

Luckily, the round smashed through two Perspex visors and struck a steel rail at the front of his helmet before bouncing off and embedding itself in the cockpit wall.

Lt Col Russell, a married dad of three, was the senior surgeon in the four-man Medical Emergency Response Team.

He said: "We knew there was a lot happening on the ground as we were held in the air for quite a while. Eventually we were told it was safe to go in.

"About 30 yards from the helicopter, the people carrying the stretchers dropped to the ground and started returning fire.

"We could hear rounds hitting the outside, which is fairly well-armoured, fortunately.

"We got the casualties on board. There were two stretcher cases. Unfortunately one, a US Marine, was dead.

"I moved on to a US marine who had been shot in the thigh. I had seen the other four casualties run on so I felt I didn't need to worry about them until I had dealt with the stretcher cases.

"At this point, the nurse who is the member of the team who has communications with the flying crew tapped me on the shoulder and said, 'The pilot's been hit boss, I'm just going to see how he is'.

"That was not a good moment." Flt Lt Fortune was still controlling the aircraft but was bleeding heavily from a gash in his cheek from the shattered visor.

A nurse tried to dress it but was told, "No, I'm fine. I won't be able to see to fly".

Lt Col Russell, from Stamford, Lincs, said: "The nurse went forward to assess the situation and I stayed with the American. He came back and said it was under control.

"I saw Ian's flight helmet later. My reaction was 'Well we were lucky' – with a lot of expletives thrown in!"

The drama happened on board Bravo November, an RAF Chinook which has also seen combat action in the Falklands and Iraq.

Crews flying it have earned three Distinguished Flying Crosses. The doctor and his team were airborne again just days later.

He said: "Soldiers put themselves in harm's way every time they go out on patrol. That's their duty, filling this role is part of ours."

Lt Col Russell also revealed how the latest British battlefield dressing – Celox – is saving troops' lives. He explained: "It's a gauze bandage impregnated with an haemostatic agent that makes blood clot. It stops bleeding very quickly."

The Lt Col will tomorrow start passing on skills he has learned during four years on the battlefield to National Health Service colleagues at a major conference at Selly Oak, Birmingham.