



The Curator's View - Afghanistan: Reflections on Helmand

Amanda Mason: My name is Amanda Mason. I'm a Senior Curator in the Contemporary Conflicts Team here at IWM. The Contemporary Conflicts Team is a dedicated team of curators whose role is to look after the collections relating to all conflicts, involving Britain and the Commonwealth, from 2001 onwards.

John Kerr: Hi I'm John Kerr. I'm a curator in the Contemporary Conflicts team. And for this exhibition, Reflections on Helmand, I've been helping with the selection and preparation of video clips for use on the screens within the exhibition.

Helen Mavin: I'm Helen Mavin. I'm a curator in the Contemporary Conflicts Team and I specialise in digital photography. So, what happens when people come in, they give donations of photographs to support the collection, because we actively collect contemporary material. Sometimes I interview those people or I help to process and ingest and catalogue all of the photographic material coming into the museum.

Amanda Mason: Afghanistan is a new exhibition looking at the experience of the war in Afghanistan from a British perspective. It focusses mainly on the arrival of the British in Helmand in 2006, the decision to deploy there and the impact their arrival had. We realised that 2016 marked 10 years since the British arrived in Helmand Province Afghanistan. We thought that was such a significant event that we should do something to mark it and look in depth at that particular period. So that's why we decided to put this exhibition on now. And we really made the British arrival in Helmand the focus of the exhibition. Although British forces actually went into Afghanistan in 2001 and remained there afterwards with a peace keeping mission, it was really only in 2006 when they went into Helmand that the war escalated and really came into the forefront of people's awareness - when reports were seen on the news of really fierce fighting. So we thought we'd really look at that in detail, look at what they were doing in Helmand, but also look at what they were doing beforehand, and what changed in 2006 really, that changed the nature of their experiences in Afghanistan.

Preparation

Amanda Mason: When we started developing the exhibition, then myself as a curator, I'll start surveying everything we have in the collection already - any of the new material that comes in and really start reading as widely as possible on the subject and listening to the new interviews that we get in, as soon as we get them.

John Kerr: The museum has a large film and video archive which ranges all the way back from 35mm film through various tape formats to digital born. Most of the material that was used in the exhibition was originated on video tape and therefore it had to be digitised before it could be used within the exhibition.

Helen Mavin: *The exhibition covers a period 2001-2014 and we have been collecting photographs from within that period. And it's interesting because within that time digital photography and digital cameras have progressed quite a lot. So nowadays you can have a camera on your phone that's better than your camera would have been in 2001. So one of the things we have to deal with is looking at the quality. There may be some amazing photographs that we have from that early period but we have to be quite careful how we use them. They might look quite good on AV, on a screen, but we can't really blow them up without distorting them and making them pixilated. So we can't display them on a wall for example. And actually for some of these photographs, if they are digital and they're born digital, depending on how the donors used them, it will be the first time that they've ever been printed.*

John Kerr: *Film is and video are just wonderful things to work with because there's just so much there and you never know what there's going to be. That does make selection for the exhibition a little more problematic because there's so much of it. As a place of official deposit we've got rather a lot, particularly from the army - so it's a bit of a challenge finding short clips that will be relevant for the exhibition.*

Collecting

Amanda Mason: *Any exhibition we're doing on contemporary conflict we need to do quite a lot of proactive collecting, because we are still at the stage where we're very much building our collection. So for this particular display, once we knew roughly what subjects we were going to be covering, our Head of Contemporary Conflict went out to people like the MOD, Ministry of Defence, Department for International Development, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and spoke to our partners there and talked to them about the sort of material we were looking to collect. So anyone who served in Afghanistan, or was working there in a civilian capacity - so those people would be aware of what we're trying to do and to ask people to get in touch with us and to hopefully be interviewed or give us any material they might have from their time there.*

Helen Mavin: *The photographs that we collect for the exhibition and for the archive come from a number of different sources. The Imperial War Museum is actually the designated archive for the official Ministry of Defence photographs, so we hold those and we collect those and we can use those for research purposes and exhibitions. And when it comes to new exhibitions, if we don't have the content already in the collection we do try to reach out to people who were involved, both civilians and service personal, who may have been in conflict zones and affected by the conflict. And also get their photographs and their collections as well.*

So, if people approach us and offer us photographs what we try and do is have an interview with them when they deposit them because with digital photographs it's quite different from if people have physical prints in an album. In albums people tend to write little notes next to them, you know exactly what they are - you don't get that so much with digital collections. So, it's good to bring those donors in and interview them and talk them through the photographs at the same time so they can tell us exactly what's going on in those photographs. And also any reflections they might have on what period that was in their service or different things - and sometimes stories come out that are quite interesting about different events as they happened.

Advantages

Amanda Mason: *One of the advantages in looking at conflicts that are relatively recent is that we can ask people who were there exactly what they experienced. We can find the people who made decisions and the people who were at the sharp end on the ground. We can interview a whole range of people and ask them exactly what it was like and what their experiences were and ask them anything we might*

want to know about the conflict - as well as ask them if they've got any material that they might want to donate to the museum and really help us build the collection.

Helen Mavin: *When we collect these photographs a lot of them, and a lot of the ones that we'd like to put on display do contain photographs of service personal and other individuals. So once we've made the decision about what we'd actually like to put on display we do need to go through the Ministry of Defence and they do an 'Operational Security Clearance Check', which basically means that we're ok to put it on display and we're not endangering anyone's lives.*

Why does it matter?

Amanda Mason: *It is the museums remit to cover contemporary conflict and we do now have a dedicated team specifically to look at this particular subject. It's an added responsibility in some ways, when you're dealing with a conflict that is very recent, because you have to be aware of people's feelings - any sensitivities - particularly conflicts where so many people were killed. But I think it's really important that we proactively collect because we really need to build a really in depth collection - so that in future years visitors will be able to come here and find as much out about say, the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, as they can do about the First World War.*

Helen Mavin: *It's really important that the museum continues to put on contemporary displays like Afghanistan: Reflections on Helmand because a lot of the impetus comes from the media and sometimes it can be quite muddling for people - and contemporary conflict continues and there's so much going on. But when we do retrospectives like this we can really try and organise the timeline so people have a much greater, and hopefully broader, understanding than they would have done just from watching the news and reading the news online.*

John Kerr: *Exhibitions like this are important because you never know what is going to happen next and the world is such a volatile place - you've got to keep looking back at what has happened in the past and hopefully learn lessons from it for the future.*