

THE WORLD'S

TOUGHEST

On a warm afternoon last August, John Harding was sitting in his mobile field hospital stirring a cup of coffee, a cigarette between his fingers, when the little boy was brought in on a stretcher. A combat medic in the under-siege city of Manbij, northern Syria, John had spent the morning treating a conveyer belt of Kurdish soldiers wounded in street battles with Isis. But the boy was no soldier; his name was Hamid and he was six years old. Which is exactly why the sniper had shot him.

Hamid had been playing in the rubble of a neighbour's bombed-out home, a few streets from John's casualty collection point (CCP), when a bullet fired from the rooftop of a nearby building hit him in the chest just to the left of his heart. It carved downwards through his pulmonary artery and burst out through his back. He'd folded to the ground, his young life rapidly ebbing away.

"When I got him, they'd already taken his T-shirt off. He was wearing sandals and little blue trousers," John tells me over Skype. "I set him over my lap and tried to apply a chest seal to plug the wound, but it kept falling off from all the blood." John held Hamid down throughout the hour-long ambulance ride to the nearest hospital, in Kobani, as the child tried to remove his oxygen mask and the chest seals covering the holes in his small torso. As the boy's young parents watched, John inserted a chest drain to pump the blood that was pouring into his chest cavity back into his veins. Then Hamid's heart stopped beating. "I did CPR on him for an hour and 20 minutes before we finally called it. Now I see his face in every child I meet in Syria. I try not to think about him – it's too painful."

Isis shoots kids in Syria. And this shot had its desired effect. "At Manbij, Isis started deliberately targeting children to destroy our morale," explains John. "Forget the gore, the danger, the dying soldiers screaming in pain – kids are the hardest part of this job. You have to just find somewhere quiet to have a little sob, then it's straight back to work. There are always more wounded people who need treating." →

DOCTORS

On the frontline with the medics risking their lives to combat Isis

WORDS: MATT BLAKE

THIS IMAGE DOES NOT DEPICT THE YPG OR ANY OF ITS ASSOCIATES AND WAS USED SOLELY FOR COSMETIC PURPOSES

➔ Another day, another death in Syria. For John and his crew, this is nothing new. A former British soldier turned combat medic, John, 53, commands the Tactical Medical Unit (YBT), a team of eight British and American combat medics with the People's Protection Units (YPG) of Syrian Kurdistan. As the only dedicated frontline medical unit in the YPG's 50,000-strong militia, their job is to provide battlefield medical care to soldiers in only the fiercest fights against Isis.

The last such battle was at Manbij in 2016, three months of carnage that left some 400 YPG fighters dead and many more wounded. It's claimed Isis lost up to 10 times as many before it was flushed from the city. The YBT worked up to 20 hours a day splinting bones, stitching wounds and making dying men more comfortable. "We treated several hundred," remembers John. "Only half of them lived."

HARD CHOICES

Not everyone can cope. John recalls one new US recruit during a callout to treat a Kurdish fighter who'd stepped on a mine. "This guy was full of bravado, saying all he'd ever wanted was to be a combat medic," he says. "Then he saw his first casualty - left leg blown off above the knee; just his fibula swinging free like a snapped twig. His right foot was wrenched backwards, held to the bone only by cartilage and skin, and shrapnel was in his chest, left arm and neck." While John and another medic got to work, the American stood there watching. "He couldn't even remember how to put on a bandage," says John. "If you think it's for you and you come over, you'll find out very quickly."

Being a combat medic requires far more than the ability to tie a tourniquet, administer an IV or saw off a leg. It takes self-belief and an exceptional tolerance for gore and human suffering. It's also, in a way, a bloody handshake with Death. In combat medical circles, this is known as The Choice. "We'd sometimes be faced with multiple casualties, limited supplies and moments to decide who to treat first," says John. "We need to be dispassionate; some would say cold, but the truth is we can't save them all. So we make the hard, calculated choice. Later, when we're alone, we deal with the nagging doubts that become our demons."

Tough but kindly, John wears his life on his face. Across his forehead lie deep furrows, the trenches of those battles, perhaps. The men call him 'Pops', because of his age and avuncular nature; it's scrawled across his helmet above a pair of swivelling eyes, drawn on in Sharpie. Attached to his ammo belt is a cuddly toy snake, which he says he found in Manbij and has become his lucky charm. "Oh, that's Combat Snake," he chuckles. "He tells me what to do in battle. You've got to have a sense of humour to survive a war."

John admits he loves the thrill of war, and recalls times he's found himself laughing hysterically with comrades in battle. He spent nine years in the British military before becoming a mechanical engineer. He's now on his second tour of Syria. "People who are drawn to war are not normal," he says. "If you don't feel it, you can't understand. We're just different."



THE YBT TEAM (JOHN, BOTTOM RIGHT; OZKAN, FAR LEFT; SHAUN, STANDING FAR RIGHT; TOM, STANDING SECOND FROM RIGHT)

Why Syria, I ask. "The first time I came [in March 2015], I didn't know much about the Kurds. I wanted to kill Daesh," he says. "I came out for four months, got into a few good scraps and came home. I got into a relationship that went really well for a while. Then it didn't. So I came back out." John fell in love with the Kurdish people and developed sympathy for their fight for an independent state. "I'm not here to kill Daesh particularly," he adds. "Well, I am. But also, the Kurdish people deserve to be free. Free from Turkey; from oppression. They deserve a place to call their home. People who come here have got to believe in the ideology - they've got to believe in what they're doing."

The team he commands is mostly new to this fight - some to fighting at all. Ozkan Odzil, 30, is a British Kurd who ran his father's north London off-licence until he left for Syria last September. "I felt our government wasn't doing enough to stop an oncoming genocide," he says. "Then I found out they were taking volunteers here and decided I'd come to defend my people."

Tom, a well-spoken 22-year-old computer-science graduate from west London, who asked to be known only by his first name, has similar motivations. "I followed this war since it began and I got fed up of people going, 'Yeah, isn't it awful, someone should totally do something about that,'" he says. "People are being massacred and raped and having their



THE TEAM IS PREPARING FOR ACTION IN RAQQA

"WHEN WE'RE ALONE, WE DEAL WITH THE NAGGING DOUBTS THAT BECOME OUR DEMONS"



THE MEDICS PRACTISE FINDING VEINS



THE YBT HAS TO BEG FOR MEDICAL SUPPLIES

homes taken away from them. Everyone deserves a homeland. So I came out to help."

For Shaun Pinner, 43, a former soldier with the Royal Anglican Regiment with two tours of Bosnia and three of Northern Ireland under his belt, the choice was a little more personal. "It's a time in my life I felt I wanted to do something good," he says. "I'm no spring chicken, but I'm fit and have a good skill set I could offer that I hadn't used for some time. I'd love to say I wanted to solely be a revolutionary or an idealist, but that's not the case. But once I got here, I got sucked in to supporting the Kurds, and the YBT is a good ethical fit for me."

STAYING ALIVE

"The first rule of the YBT is, do not get shot in the face," laughs Tom when I Skype the team in early February. "The second rule is, do not get shot in the face. You know what the third rule is?" John's voice chimes in from somewhere off camera, "Superior firepower is the best form of preventive medicine."

In other words, the YBT go into battle armed to the teeth. After all, when the sh*t hits the fan, it's the medic who's expected to run headlong into the blades. That's why, on the battlefield, they work in pairs. Of the eight, four are medics and four are *parastinas*, or

'protectors'. Thanks to his military experience, Shaun is the only British *parastina*. "Our main role is to keep the medics alive," he says. "No medic goes to battle without a *parastina* by his side. It can get pretty hectic, but security always comes first. A medic can't do anything if he's dead."

But while the YPG enjoys air support from the US military, arms and supplies are another matter. "The YPG is the most effective fighting force against Isis in Syria," says John. "But the West is reluctant to arm it with modern weaponry because of pressure from Turkey."

Turkey's conservative Islamist government views the YPG as an extension of the outlawed PKK - which has been involved in armed struggle against the state for decades - and has carried out dozens of air strikes on Kurdish positions. John and the team beg, borrow and beg some more for medical supplies. "We're having to raise funds through charitable donations," says John. "It's hard. Before the YBT, the YPG had no medics on the frontline, so whether you lived or died was down to the rate of bleeding, times the distance to the nearest medical facility. They had soldiers dying of gunshots to the calf, for f*ck's sake. Nobody should die of that. My dream is to ensure every YPG battle group has its own medical unit."

"War is 99 per cent boredom and one per cent terror": John quotes the well-known adage, and it certainly applies here. Living in a converted cowshed on an abandoned dairy farm, they spend their days training Kurdish soldiers in battlefield first aid and rigorously honing their own skills in medicine, weaponry

and warfare. There's little else to do but smoke cigarettes, drink tea and forage for nicknacks to make their cowshed a home. That, and check Facebook a lot. "We're very proud of this cowshed," jokes Tom, giving me a Skype tour of the building. "It's hands down the best cowshed I've ever lived in." There's a munitions room, a kitchen and a yard where a handful of skinny chickens scratch about. They've turned the old feeding troughs into weapons storage and have adopted a stray cat called Dizzy. On the wall in one of the sleeping quarters is a painting of St George fighting a dragon. "We liberated that from an abandoned Assyrian Christian village that had been ransacked by Isis," explains Tom. "It reminds us Brits of home."

WAITING FOR ACTION

The trouble is, their dragon is 180 miles away in Raqqa, Isis's de facto capital and setting for what's expected to be the group's last stand. The YBT has been told it'll be sent to Raqqa when it's needed most - after the coalition Syrian Defence Forces break into the city itself. At the time of writing, the SDF is carving through Isis-held villages in the surrounding countryside. If Raqqa were London, they'd be somewhere near Slough.

It is frustrating for most of the team. The most exciting moment of their tours so far was getting into Syria in the first place. "I've dodged drones, completed river crossings in the dark, was nearly compromised by an Iraqi patrol on the border, been attacked by dogs and walked miles to get to be with the YPG," says Shaun, who spent 10 years with a hazardous waste management company after leaving the British Army. "We'll hopefully get into Raqqa soon."

The others share his frustration. "I've been a little disappointed I've not been able to do anything except training," says Ozkan. "It's been four months now and we're ready. We can't wait to get in."

It can't be long before they get their fight. And Raqqa promises to be a bloodbath. With a population of more than 220,000, it is three times larger than Manbij, and Isis has had four years to build and dig - the ground is said to be riddled with fortified tunnels, and the buildings booby-trapped to the last. Thousands of civilians are also known to be held captive inside the city, and - if Isis sticks to form - will certainly be used as human shields. "They've got no more cities left," says John. "They'll want to defend Raqqa to the death."

In late February, I send John a message to see how they're getting on. "We've been told to get ready," he replies. "It could be any day now. It's not a matter of if, but when."

Isn't he a little scared? "No. I'm excited," he says. "Of course I get frightened in battle, like everybody; when you hear those bullets flying past you, you want to make love to the ground. It's only afterwards when you get the rush."

But if anyone asks him how they can join this fight, he has some advice. "To some people at home, war like this may seem like an exciting game of *Call Of Duty*," he says. "But it is not. War is scary and it's horrible. If you get shot here, you can't respawn. Here, the score sheet is written in blood."