



The army wouldn't take him.

Dean Evans in his army cadet uniform aged around 12 (left), and in Tal Tamr, Syria, in April 2015. He failed medicals for both the British army and French Foreign Legion



So he made his own way to Syria

This summer Dean Evans became the second British citizen to be killed fighting Isis in Syria. What drove a dairy farmer from Warminster to the frontline? Matt Blake reports

A

t 9.48am on Thursday 21 July this year, Dean Evans sent his stepfather, Steve Howell, a text message. "Alright?" it read. "Just letting you know I'm OK."

It was the first time Howell had heard from the 22-year-old in nearly a month. But then, he was in Syria, on the frontline in the war against Isis, and his mobile signal was patchy at best. "I was just relieved to hear he was well," Howell says. But that night, Evans became the second British citizen killed in Syria while fighting Isis.

Evans's final hours weren't spent in a military-grade tank with RAF air cover or advanced medical support; he was fighting with a multinational group of ill-equipped militiamen loyal to the People's Protection Units (YPG) of Syrian Kurdistan, a guerrilla group in which officers are elected by troops, and men and women fight side by side. A dairy farmer from Warminster, Wiltshire, Evans had smuggled himself into Syria on his own, having been recruited by Kurdish activists on Facebook. He had no proper body armour, and fought with a black-market rocket launcher that could jam at any moment.

Evans was one of an estimated 40 Britons who have travelled to Iraq and Syria to fight Isis since August 2014. To date, none has been prosecuted for doing so, although the Foreign Enlistment Act 1870 makes it illegal for any Briton to join a foreign army at war with a state at peace with the UK. More young British men continue to travel there, offering their lives to what might be considered someone else's war.

Howell is comforted by a single image: that Evans fell in a uniform. It didn't matter which one. "All Dean ever wanted was to be a soldier," he says. "His country wouldn't let him, so he sought a way to get a uniform..." He pauses. "Even if it killed him."

Howell is sitting on the sofa with his wife, Tracey, in the living room of their home in a picturesque market town near Warminster. A tough but affable man, he spent 20 years as a firefighter, and is heavily tattooed and stocky. It's a week since he learned of Evans's death, and already the room looks like an improvised shrine. Framed photographs of Dean cover almost every surface - buried in sand on a beach aged eight; in his army cadet gear aged 12; posing with the local football team aged 14. Most, though, show him cuddling his mum, Joanne. He looks slight and sweet and happy in all the pictures. All except one: at his mother's funeral, aged 17 and a half. "He was never the same after her death," Howell says.

Evans was born on 7 October 1993, into a military family, in a military town. He was a small, skinny child who suffered with asthma and eczema. His mother split from his father, a British army soldier, when he was six, and met Howell two years later.

It was at around the age of six that Evans began playing soldiers in the garden, and a boyish fascination soon grew into full-blown obsession.



PHOTOGRAPH BY JON TONKINS FOR THE GUARDIAN. PREVIOUS PAGES: COURTESY OF STEVE AND TRACEY HOWELL; UYGAR ONDERSIMSEK/MOKU

'He was so proud to put on that uniform. It made him feel invincible. He'd spend weekends practising survival skills'

'The army recruiter was obnoxious. He said, "You've got asthma." He said being a cadet was boys' games,' says Evans's stepfather Steve Howell

"We'd put on uniforms and make dens every day," says his best friend, Jake, 23. "Dean loved everything about the military and outdoor survival. He collected warfare books, kept a second world war medal collection under his bed and owned all the Ray Mears and Bear Grylls DVDs. He was the only kid I knew who watched war documentaries for fun."

The moment he turned 12, Steve and Joanne enrolled Evans in Warminster cadets. Wilderness training, weapon skills, tactics, tracking: he couldn't learn quickly enough. "He was so proud to put on that uniform," Howell says, holding Evans's cherished cadet epaulets. "It made him feel invincible. He'd spend whole weekends in the garden, always in uniform, practising survival skills." He remembers once when, aged 13, Evans tried to camp the night outside. "He lasted until 2am, when he got hungry," Howell chuckles. "We only know because he set off the smoke alarm trying to cook toast. Joanne got up and made him a cheese sandwich."

Everything changed in June 2011, after his mother's death. "It was an undiagnosed heart condition," Howell says. "She died in my arms in seven seconds." Evans had to be pulled off a cadets training weekend on Salisbury Plain so Howell could break the news. "The worst part was that he never got to say cheerio. It was the only time I ever saw him cry. It was as if his guiding light had gone out. She always told him, 'Deanie, you were born to wear a uniform. If your heart says be a soldier, follow it.'"

Three months later, before his 18th birthday, Evans travelled to Salisbury Army Careers Centre to sign up. It did not go well. "The recruiter was obnoxious," Howell says. "He said, 'They won't take you, boy - you've got asthma.'" Evans said it was only mild and that he'd been a cadet, to which the recruiter sniffed, "Nah, that's boys' games."

The knockback was devastating, made worse when three of his closest friends from the cadets were accepted. In July 2012, Evans thought he'd found a solution: the French Foreign Legion. He flew to France for a three-week trial. Steve and Tracey drove to Gatwick to pick him up afterwards. "He was heartbroken," Tracey says. "He didn't »

want to talk about it. All he'd say was that he'd failed the medical because of his asthma."

Evans focused on work, getting jobs on a handful of dairy farms, including five months on a farm in Germany. He enrolled on a farming course at Warminster College, got his driving licence and bought a secondhand Ford Focus. Then, in early 2015, three years after his Foreign Legion disappointment, Evans told Howell he was thinking of travelling around Germany and Poland to see the war graves, the Berlin Wall and Auschwitz. Howell thought it a good idea: "I knew he was into all that, and he wasn't a troublesome lad. Why would I be suspicious?"

He left on the morning of 8 March. Despite having made Evans promise to text when he landed, Howell heard nothing for four days. He was worried. Then his phone beeped. He can still recite the message verbatim. "Hi Steve, it's Dean," it read. "Just to let you know I'm in Syria. I joined YPG. I was always going to do this all along. Sorry."

Evans arrived in Syria on 14 March 2015. Police analysis of his laptop would later reveal he had contacted the YPG through its Facebook page, where they pledge to "wage war against all forms of fascism and capitalist hegemony that try to enslave people and destroy nature".

He flew from London to Düsseldorf, then to Berlin and on to Sulaymaniyah in northern Iraq. There, he was picked up by Kurdish rebels and smuggled through the desert into Syria. YPG commanders placed him in the Lions of Rojava brigade, a unit comprising mostly foreign volunteers, and gave him a nom de guerre: Givara Rojava, inspired by Che Guevara.

The moment he arrived, Evans knew he'd found his war. Burned-out cars, buildings colandered by bullets: it was like a film set. He'd never been to war, let alone shot at someone in anger. But the men around him were his age and united by common purpose, much like the boys he'd trained with in the cadets. "Back home you have



UYGAR ÖNDER ŞİMŞEK/MOKU; COURTESY OF STEVE AND TRACEY HOWELL

'Snipers on both sides worked all night and hardly slept. Dean seemed a calm, nice person - with a Kalashnikov'

Photographer Uygur Önder Şimşek spent 12 days in Syria with Evans, on the right above, and other YPG fighters. Below: Evans with his stepfather, Steve, and mother, Joanne, in 2008. Joanne died when Dean was 17

a lot of worries, about cars, money, social things, but here it doesn't matter," he told a reporter in Syria that April. "Here you just have one goal that's shared through everyone: defeating Daesh."

Paid only in food, Evans spent the next three months fighting alongside Kurds, eastern Europeans, Americans and other nationalities in the besieged city of Tal Tamr, near the Turkish border. That April, a Turkish photographer, Uygur Önder Şimşek, spent 12 days with Evans's unit, working on a story about the YPG. "When I arrived, both the YPG and Isis had dug in, their lines about 300m apart," he says. "Most days were calm, so they'd eat, talk, have tea, play chess, read, cook, listen to music, clean their guns and do regular guard duties. But at night a lot was happening - unexpected attacks, shooting mortars. Snipers on both sides worked around the clock. They hardly ever slept. There was no electricity or running water. Sometimes they'd risk enemy snipers and run into a house in

no man's land just to take a warm shower."

Like the others, Şimşek describes Evans as a quiet soldier who observed more than he spoke. "He seemed like a calm, nice person - with a Kalashnikov," he says.

Evans would later tell Tracey about his life in Syria (Howell couldn't bear to ask): scavenging for edible food in deserted shops, seeing comrades blown up, dysentery, decomposing bodies, desert heat, flies, long days, sleepless nights, fear. He also talked of all the new friends he'd made. He never talked about the killing.

It was an especially bloody phase of the war, and Evans had distinguished himself amid the violence, rising from infantryman to sniper to rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) gunner. "Even when fighters with an actual military background cowered under fire, he'd put his head above the trench to shoot," Arges Artiaga, a Spanish former soldier in both his national army and the French Foreign Legion, tells me over Skype from Spain. "He was there to destroy Isis, that was his passion, and he never deviated from that." Artiaga remembers one night when Evans had a particularly crippling bout of dysentery. "Yet when I ordered him to go to hospital, he refused" »

and stayed on post until his shift ended.”

Heval Serdar, a Dutch fighter who asked to be known only by his nom de guerre, was Evans’s best friend during that time in Syria. Now back home, he talks fondly of Evans, recalling his love of energy drinks in battle, his “dry British humour”, how he could quote entire chunks of his favourite TV show, the US Office. He was always telling people to “chill”. “We were like brothers,” he says on the phone from Holland, “but we never talked about home. After all this time together, you know what we mostly talked about? Computer games. Though I always got a feeling Dean was looking for answers. Then again, wasn’t everybody out there?”

Months passed, and Howell waited. He and Tracey were assigned a case worker from special branch, but they say he seemed to know less than they did. “He had more questions for us than we did for him,” Howell remembers. A team from Wiltshire police searched Evans’s bedroom and seized his laptop and bank details. “They wanted to know who Dean had gone to join,” Howell says. “They wanted to know if he’d been radicalised.”

Then, in May 2015, Howell received a text: “Can I come home?” Evans arrived back in Wiltshire on 26 June. Howell says he was detained by police at the airport for about nine hours. “He wasn’t very happy about that,” Howell says, “but said he had nothing to hide and told them what they wanted to know.”

Their lives together resumed. “He told us all that he wasn’t going back after what he’d seen,” Howell says. “He got his job back on the farm and was talking about buying land in Australia. We thought he’d got it out of his system.” Looking back, though, there were signs that Evans would return. “Whenever Isis was mentioned on TV, his face would change colour, like it turned his blood,” Tracey says. “It was like he became a different person whenever Isis came up.”

“He’d practise his Kurdish, too,” Jake says. “It was when he started saving his money again that I realised he wouldn’t be home long.”

They noticed that Evans now wore a pendant, green with a red star. “He said they were the colours of the Kurdish Women’s Protection Unit [YPJ],” says his friend Elly, 23, who was at primary school with him. “He said a female soldier he knew in Syria had given it to him, and that he wanted to go back to see if she was OK. He never had a girlfriend at home, so to get emotionally attached to a woman would have been a big deal for him.”

Meanwhile, the war in Syria was entering a bloody new phase. The Kurds, backed by US airstrikes, were gaining ground and confidence. They had flushed Isis from large swaths of Syria’s north and were heading for the city of Manbij, a strategic outpost key to severing Isis’s last supply line from Turkey. Evans never lost touch with his friends in the YPG, and he kept finding out that more were dying. “He said he couldn’t just stand by while his friends were being killed,”



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‘He wanted to see if a female soldier he knew in Syria was OK. He didn’t have a girlfriend at home so it was a big deal’

‘He was there to destroy Isis, and he never deviated from that’: Tal Tamr, in Syria, where Evans spent three months

Jake says. “To him, they’d become like family.”

When Evans went back to Syria on 28 January this year, he told the police he was planning to go. The police tell me that they gave Evans “strong advice” not to, and told him that the Foreign Office cannot offer consular service to UK nationals who travel to Syria. Still, he wanted to leave.

This time, Howell gave him a lift to the airport. “I didn’t want him going without us clearing the air,” he says. “I just had a terrible feeling it would be the last time I’d see him.” They hugged, which Howell says they’d never done before - “He thought hugs were a sign of weakness” - and Evans handed him a letter. It was a will. It said: “I, Dean Evans, leave this letter with my stepdad, Steve Howell, as I get ready to leave for Syria. I am going back to Syria to rejoin my brothers and sisters of the YPG... After watching Steve break after my mum died, I have decided to write down my thoughts and wishes. If I am killed in Syria, it is my wish that I stay in Syria with my brothers and sisters of the YPG who are my friends. I want my name added to my mum’s

headstone. Steve has been my dad for 13 years and I know he will do what I have asked him to do. I leave everything to him.” As he handed his stepfather the envelope, Howell asked if he was afraid of dying. “No,” Evans replied. “I’d much rather live a short, exciting life than a long, boring one.” Then he added: “I know that when I die, I will walk straight into the arms of my mum.” Six months later, he was dead.

Their mission on the night Evans died was the same as it had been for 38 days: to drive Isis from Manbij. Freeman Stevenson, a 22-year-old American fighter in Dean’s battalion, tells me that spirits were high at the pre-battle briefing. “All the guys were going through the usual banter - ‘See you in hell’, ‘You’re gonna get shot tonight’, ‘You’re gonna get blown up’ - you know, soldier stuff, like when actors tell each other to break legs.”

Evans was typically quiet. “I’ll admit it, I was scared,” Stevenson says, speaking on the phone from the frontline near Manbij in August. “But then Dean, with his hands in his pockets, piped up, ‘Guys, stop saying that. Everyone’s going to be fine.’ It was the last »

I saw of him. A few hours later, he was killed.”

Stevenson didn't see Dean fall, but heard what happened from those who did. “Dean's unit was pinned behind a wall on a city street. Bullets were flying, men were screaming; it was chaos. They had to keep moving.”

A Kurdish soldier ran to a building and kicked open the door. “It was booby-trapped,” Stevenson says. “He got a blast of shrapnel in the face and went down.” Dean dropped his rocket launcher and grenade bag, and ran into no man's land with a Kurdish female fighter named Erîn.

It was a 30m dash across open ground. When they reached the man, he was glued to the ground by fear. There was an argument, confusion. But the man wouldn't budge. That's when an Isis rocket streaked out of a window above. “It exploded right between Dean and Erîn, engulfing them in smoke,” Stevenson says. “When it cleared, both were dead. Incredibly, the guy they ran out to get made it back alive. They'd stayed out there a moment too long.”

In the Kurdish forces, Evans had found a purpose that the British army denied him and that farming couldn't give him: the war in Syria offered him a chance to do something meaningful with his life. “It wasn't about killing people,” Howell says. “It was about putting

himself between innocent people and terror.”

More than that, Howell thinks, it filled a void. “After losing his mum, Dean felt so lost and alone, but when he put on a uniform, he felt whole. He felt people would look at him and respect the fact that he was doing something he believed in. Why not?” Then he adds: “We've heard people say, ‘What a waste of a life.’ It's not a waste of a life. He died fighting for a cause he wholeheartedly believed in. Without people like Dean, people wouldn't be able to live like they do today. They are fighting for humanity.”

Twenty-five days after Dean's death, Manbij was finally liberated. It was one of the costliest battles of the war so far: up to 400 YPG fighters, including six foreign volunteers, were killed and many more wounded. “They locked 4,000 Isis fighters inside the city and offered them an ultimatum: surrender or die,” Macer Gifford, a 29-year-old British volunteer who was there, told me in a London bar last month. “Their commanders wouldn't allow civilians to leave or their fighters to surrender, so they fought to the death.”

Evans, he says, was one of the first casualties of a shift in the power balance. “The fight has stepped up a gear since Manbij,” he says. “The violence there was a test for what Aleppo already is and

Raqqa will be - brutal. Each building becomes a fortress, each street a sniper's alley. Isis use human shields. Cities are very difficult to get back.”

Once it was rare for a foreign volunteer to die; now, Gifford says, an average of six are killed and 10 wounded in a single operation. “It's going to be more aggressive, more violent as Isis enters its death throes.” This has not stemmed the flow of foreign volunteers offering their lives to the fight. “I stopped at a YPG training camp on my way home in August, and I met a lot of Brits,” Gifford says. “For people like me who grew up post-9/11, this is our Churchillian moment. We want to fight back against Islamic fascism, protect innocent people and fight for democracy. We want to come home with a sense of fulfilment.”

But fulfilment isn't what fighters describe when they return from war. A few weeks after I spoke to Heval Serdar, Evans's Dutch friend from his first trip to Syria, he phoned me from Holland. He wanted to talk. “I feel tremendous guilt,” he said. “I left Dean to die. I'm here eating hamburgers, listening to music - the freedoms my friends are dying to protect.” The line crackled. “Once you've seen what Isis are capable of with your own eyes, it's impossible to live a normal life, knowing they're still there. I have to go back - for Dean, if not for myself.” ●

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