

CHARITY WORKER ON DODGING MISSILE ATTACKS IN RACE TO REMOVE DEADLY EXPLOSIVES FROM BATTLEGROUND

# MINES, ROCKETS AND REVENGE IN THE KILLING FIELDS OF IRAQ

■ Derek Alexander

**A charity worker leading the fight to clear deadly landmines in Iraq has told how he dodged Iranian missiles after an army general linked to terror attacks was assassinated.**

Frank Philip has spent the year avoiding danger in the war-ravaged state while clearing explosives with the HALO Trust.

But the Montrose-born ex-serviceman found himself in the line of fire when Tehran tried to avenge the death of powerful Qasem Solemani, who was killed in a US drone strike.

The 61-year-old revealed how some of his team drove past the smoking wreckage of Solemani's convoy after it had been destroyed at Baghdad airport in January.

Iran soon started launching their own rockets into the region, forcing Frank to relocate.

Frank, who is now in the Kurdish region of Iraq, said: "It has been an unusual year for us."

"We had a bad start with the Iranian-American tensions over the death of Major General Qasem Solemani."

"Some of my guys actually drove past the burning vehicles, coming out of the airport after returning from their Christmas leave."

"We'd been instructed not to go into Baghdad because the Iranians had vowed to respond, so we made the decision to relocate to Erbil in the north."

"Of course, no sooner had we got here than the Iranians launched their ballistic missile strikes against American bases in Anbar."

**LETHAL WEAPON**

Iranian missile found by Frank's team



**LIFESAVERS**

The HALO team. Right, Ain al-Asad US military base, where Frank was stationed, after Iran launched counter strikes



## Ex-soldier's heroic work in country scarred by war

province and at Erbil airport, right beside where I am at the moment.

"That wasn't expected and made for a fun start of the year for us."

"To be fair, I didn't even notice but my daughter phoned me up in the middle of the night and told me I'd been attacked."

Solemani was head of the Revolutionary Guard Corps' ruthless Quds Force. Under his leadership, it had directed terror attacks on US and UK troops throughout the Middle East.

Frank said his death signalled an escalation in attacks on US bases in the area.

**He added: "It was bad for a long period of time. There were constant attacks against contractors for the US troops, with logistic convoys getting hit on the main supply routes."**

"There was a lot of indirect fire happening – usually rockets, rather than mortars. There's no getting around it is a hostile environment. You've also still got the remnants of IS causing trouble not far away from some of the areas

where we are operating. We paid very close attention to the security situation but we haven't yet had to suspend our operations because we work closely with the Iraqi authorities."

Former army hero Frank is HALO's programme manager in Baghdad. The charity, based in Thornhill, near Dumfries, started demining in the region in 2018 and this year passed the milestone of clearing over 1000 deadly traps, including 700 improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and 400 unexploded grenades and mortars.

They reached the landmark figure despite their work being suspended because of coronavirus.

Frank said: "Covid restrictions have meant our operations have been a bit stop-start."

"All our operations were suspended when the Iraqi government put the country into lockdown."

"We kept people in place during the height of the pandemic so that when we did get the green light to go back to work in mid-June, we could do so with the minimum of delay."

"And despite the stop-start nature of this year,

we've removed the threat of over 1000 explosive weapons. The standards of IED we are pulling out the ground are like a 20-litre jerry can with a fuse, a power source, and a switch, which is a pressure plate normally."

**"They are designed to make a big bang and if something that size detonates underneath you, there's only one result."**

"You see a lot of limbless people in Iraq, mostly to do with violence over the last 30 years."

"A young shepherd was killed close to where we are working in Ramadi earlier this year, and five children playing with a mortar bomb in Fallujah were killed close to one of our sites last year."

The UK Government is a key donor to the UN Mine Action Service's demining efforts in Iraq, having provided £15.7million since 2018.

British aid is supporting all three of HALO's demining projects in Iraq's Anbar province.

Dad-of-three Frank served 30 years in the army with regiments including the Gordon Highlanders. He was awarded an MBE in 2004 for planning and

implementing the military response in Scotland to the firefighters' strike in 2002.

He's been based in Baghdad as HALO's programme manager since 2017.

Over the past year his HALO team has cleared 750,000 square metres using armoured machines, destroying IEDs and unexploded grenades, mortar bombs and artillery shells.

He said: "I think one of the most spectacular things that happened this year was on July 4."

"Our villa is right in the centre of Baghdad, and I was sitting at my desk and there was this sound like a jet going overhead and then it just stopped."

"The Americans were test firing the new C-RAM system – a counter-rocket, artillery and mortar defence designed to shoot down any incoming missiles."

"I'm sure there was no accident about the date and it made for some 4th of July fireworks display all afternoon."

"Maybe it was just as well because actually that night there was a rocket attack on the Green Zone and the C-RAM system was effective and brought the rockets down."



**SUPPORT**  
Diana raises awareness of plight

## A final crusade for brave Diana

Princess Diana launched the HALO Trust's landmine campaign in Angola.

Raising awareness of the threat posed by the devices was her last crusade before she died in a Paris car crash in 1997.

Her son Prince Harry retraced her footsteps last year and wore the same body armour and protective visor she did.

He detonated a landmine in Dirico, in the south-east of the country.

The Duke of Sussex also met a landmine victim who reduced Diana to tears during her trip to the country, torn apart by a civil war.

The woman revealed she had named a daughter after his late mother.



## World leader with a lifesaving remit

HALO was founded in Afghanistan in 1988 and works in 27 countries and states.

Some 8000 people worldwide are killed and injured by landmines and other explosive devices, 78 per cent of them civilians.

The UK Government has committed £272million in humanitarian support to Iraq since 2014, providing health-care services to over 4.3million people, and safe drinking water, toilet and shower facilities to more than 3.5million people.

The Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office has spent £16.9million to help Iraq respond to coronavirus.

Minister for the Middle East James Cleverly said: "HALO Trust is a Scottish charity that is a world leader in demining. I am proud that the UK Government is working with it to help rid Iraq of these deadly explosives."



**PROUD**  
Cleverly

**HOTBED**  
Shia Muslims mourn after killing of general, above. Top, his bombed car in flames on the road. Right, Frank Philip



**"I didn't even notice. My daughter called to tell me I'd been attacked"**

**RUTHLESS**  
Solemani

