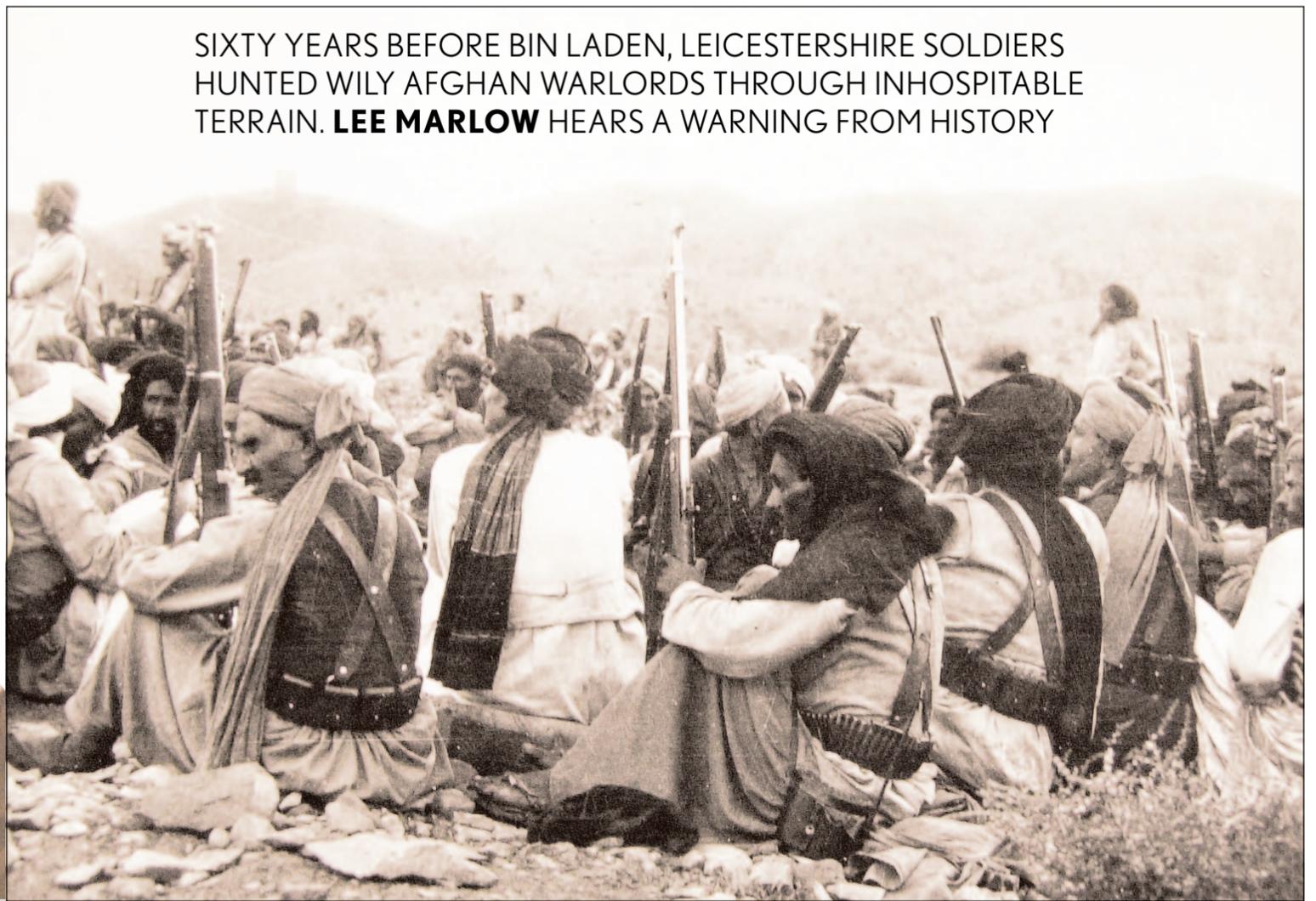


**MEMORIES OF WAR:** Phil Dixon when he joined the First Battalion Leicestershire Regiment in 1936. Right, Afghan tribesman at Razmack



SIXTY YEARS BEFORE BIN LADEN, LEICESTERSHIRE SOLDIERS HUNTED WILY AFGHAN WARLORDS THROUGH INHOSPITABLE TERRAIN. **LEE MARLOW** HEARS A WARNING FROM HISTORY

**T**he television is on almost constantly in the front room of Phil Dixon's Melton home, beaming familiar pictures of war-torn Afghanistan from his Dutch-made TV. For the past month, the 80-year-old has watched little else but dusty mountain ranges, bomb sites and stick-thin tribesmen with wiry beards and tattered clothes, brandishing old rifles.

His thirst for war news is understandable. Phil left school at 14. A year later, he was a boy soldier on active service in the foothills of Afghanistan with the First Battalion Leicestershire Regiment, 17th of foot.

It was 1938, the Second World War at least 12 months away.

"We were there to police India," recalls Phil. On and off, the Leicesters had spent the best part of 100 years protecting India and Afghanistan from the covetous Russian empire.

"We got there in October, the weather changed in a matter of days," he recalls.

The Russians never showed up, but the Leicesters were caught in the cross-fire of the warring Afghan factions.

Dusty, primitive roads were soon knee-deep in snow. The Afghan tribes retreated deeper into their intricate labyrinth of cavernous homes and the ill-equipped troop of British soldiers were left to "picket" the inroads into the North West frontier, from Bannu to Razmak, keeping lines open for food and supplies.

It was treacherous enough in the summer, but the freezing Afghanistan winters, where

# Allied forces BEWARE

temperatures would plummet to minus 57C, made it even more difficult.

But even the cold weather couldn't kill the flesh-eating Afghan insects.

Phil and his Leicester buddies Buck O'Hara and Joe Kernick used to dip the legs of their beds into paraffin to stop the termites creeping into their sacks.

But, like their troops, the Afghan bugs devised other ways of engaging the enemy.

"They'd crawl up the walls onto the ceiling and position themselves above our beds," he recalls.

"Then they'd drop down and suck your blood. We were always covered in bites.

"They were only tiny bugs but if you found them in the morn-

ing you could squash them like ripe berries, they were full of blood," he recalls.

On camp, there was no hot water and the toilet was based outside the settlement. They were allowed to use the toilet just once, at 8am, every day.

If they couldn't go then, they'd have to wait until 8am the next day. There was no toilet paper. Indian soldiers used pebbles or their billycans - the same cans they'd drink out of at dinner time, while Brits had the luxury of crumpled pages of the Indian Statesman newspaper.

"When the war finished, back home in Leicester, people were moaning about all kinds of things," he recalls. "I could never understand it. They had nothing to moan about really."

But the biggest conundrum for British soldiers in 1930s Afghanistan was knowing who to trust, who was friend and who was foe.

"Afghanistan was, and still is, a country of warring tribes," says Phil. "You could talk to members of one tribe one day, and they'd take pot-shots at you the next. The Afghan warlord we faced was Faquir of Ipi (a retired engine driver, apparently). He was like Osama bin Laden. But the place was crawling with them. They were everywhere.

"There's never been a ruling government in Afghanistan. It was a continual battle, one tribe fighting another tribe, and nothing has really changed.

"When I see it on CNN today, it's exactly the same.

"I see Colin Powell on TV and I wish I could tell him what I know. The terrain there is every bit as bad as Vietnam.

"Those mountain ranges, it's not like Snowdonia, you know."

On December 2, 1939, the Leicesters left for Agra, India, and handed over duties to the Suffolk Regiment. "We had 14 months there," says Phil, "but we were glad to get out of it."

■ In 1942, Phil was captured by the Japanese in Singapore.

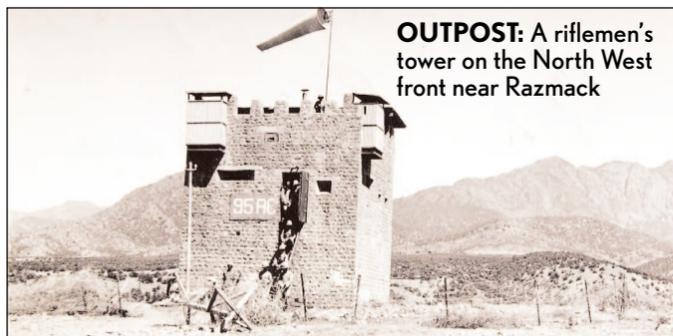
He worked on the 415km Burma railway and was then forced to make munitions for Mitsubishi in Japan.

When he was liberated, he weighed just six stones. He's never bought a Mitsubishi appliance since. "Well," he asks, "would you?"



PICTURE: LIONEL HEAP / 650964-16

**VETERAN:** Mr Dixon today



**OUTPOST:** A riflemen's tower on the North West front near Razmack

## 'We were the forgotten army in Afghanistan'

**THEY** were the forgotten army fighting a forgotten war, 6,000 miles from home.

"That's what irritated me about it all," says Bill White, 84, of Leicester, who was also stationed in Afghanistan in 1938 with the First Battalion Leicestershire Regiment.

"You never read anything about the Leicesters in

Afghanistan," recalls Bill. "No-one knew we were there."

Only the Indian Statesman carried regular reports of skirmishes which would merit a sparsely detailed paragraph back home.

"We had two men skinned alive out there," says Bill. "I don't know how it happened but they were cap-

tured by the Afghanistan tribesmen, tortured and skinned. Terrible. We lost 26 men in Afghanistan but no-one seemed to care."

Bill, the son of Leicester's Pearly King and Queen, fought alongside his school chum Len Clarke, who both originated from the West End.

When the Russians in-

vaded Afghanistan in the 1980s, Bill was on the hunt for a bookmaker.

"I wanted to put a £100 bet on the Russians losing.

"The conditions are terrible, you never know where they're going to pop up.

"This time, I hope it's different. But even with all the modern equipment, they've got a hard fight."