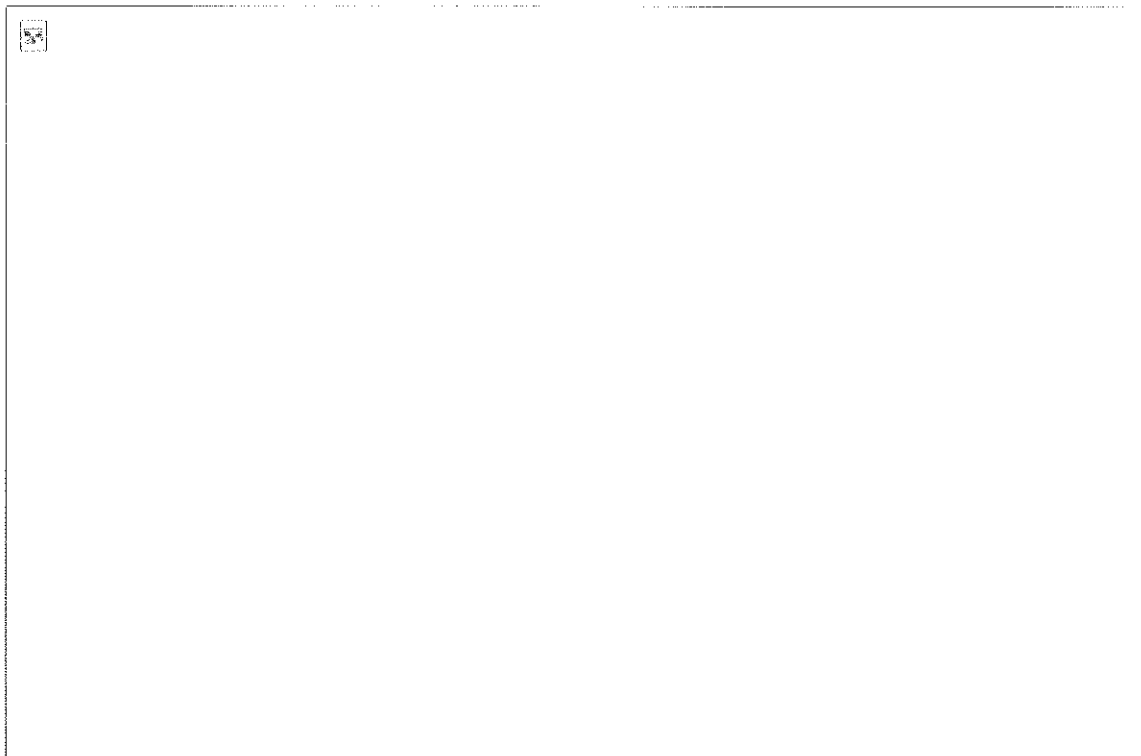


# TIMES ONLINE

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## Minister Bill Rammell admits failures over soldier training



The Government admitted today that four soldiers killed in Afghanistan had been failed after highly critical comments from the coroner at their inquest yesterday.

The military training received by Corporal Sarah Bryant - the first female casualty of the Afghan conflict - and three SAS reservists was "not as good as it should have been," Bill Rammell, the Armed Forces Minister, said.

But Mr Rammell disputed claims that the four would not have died if they had not been riding in a vulnerable Snatch Land Rover - saying that the roadside bomb they ran over had been so powerful that it would have had a "devastating impact" on any vehicle available at the time.

After a six-day inquest at Trowbridge Town Hall, coroner David Masters recorded verdicts of unlawful killing for Corporal Bryant, 26, of the Intelligence Corps, and special forces reservists Corporal Sean Robert Reeve, 28, Lance Corporal Richard Larkin, 39, and Private Paul Stout, 31.

The four died when they hit an improvised explosive device near near Lashkar Gah, in Helmand province, on June 17, 2008.

Mr Masters said that the three reservists had not received sufficient training in how to detect IEDs before leaving for Afghanistan in December 2007 and noted a "theatre-wide shortage" of Ebex mine detectors. He said that he would relay his findings to the Ministry of Defence to help prevent future loss of life.

But Mr Rammell insisted that changes had been made since then and said that the vehicles now used by British service personnel were the "best anywhere in the world".

Mr Rammell told GMTV: "The coroner has made serious and searching questions of the Ministry of Defence and particularly of our training regime that existed at the time.

"The hand-held devices were available and were on this vehicle but I accept that the training regime was not as good at that stage as it should have been.

"I would want to make clear that this was at a stage in 2008 when the Taliban were changing tactics to the all-pervasive threat that we face today from improvised explosive devices. In response to that we have hugely changed."

He said that £1.7 billion had been spent on 1,800 "new and better protected vehicles", describing it as "a transformation of the way that we respond to IEDs".

Mr Rammell also defended the use of the Snatch Land Rover, saying: "Given the size and scale of this improvised explosive device that the Taliban planted that killed our soldiers, it was of such a scale that it would have caused devastating impact on any of the vehicles that we had in Afghanistan at that stage."

The victims were in the Land Rover with a fifth soldier, the sole survivor, referred to at the inquest as Soldier E.

Their patrol had been instructed to provide vehicle checkpoints to help police disrupt enemy lines of communication and recapture prisoners who had escaped from a prison in Kandahar.

They were then ordered to join another unit and deal with an enemy casualty.

Post-mortem examinations showed Lance-Corporal Larkin, from Kidderminster, died of injuries to the chest and abdomen following an explosion. Corporal Bryant, from Chicksands, Bedfordshire, Corporal Reeve, from Brighton, and Private Stout, from Liverpool, died of blast wounds caused by an explosion.

Mr Rammell said: "My thoughts are very much with the families of these four incredibly brave soldiers who were serving our national interest."

Asked about acquiring new vehicles, Mr Rammell said money was not the issue but the length of the design phase for new technology to be introduced. "I get frustrated that it takes so long but it does," he said.

He cited Gordon Brown's planned announcement about 200 new armoured vehicles being commissioned to replace the Snatch Land Rovers, saying: "The kind of vehicle we are now going to be providing is the best anywhere in the world. I can emphatically say that we have the best equipment that we can make available.

"The Chief of the Defence Staff, Sir Jock Stirrup, recently said the equipment we have is the best in his 40 years experience in the armed forces. Does that mean that in every circumstance we can guarantee against the loss of life? No we can't because we are at war."

The coroner's verdict came as an embarrassing public criticism of the military's shortfalls just days after the Prime Minister insisted he had met all requests for equipment in Iraq, Britain's other major defence commitment.

Families of the dead soldiers urged the Government to listen to the coroner's comments regarding the use of Snatch vehicles on the frontline as well as the poor supply of EBEX mine detectors for training and use on the ground.

"We hope the lack of resources and shortcomings in training and planning, which have been exposed in the evidence we have heard, will not be repeated," said the relatives of two of the special forces soldiers from the 23rd Special Air Service Regiment, a Territorial Army unit.

"We hope that the MoD will heed the recommendations of the coroner and that, by reason of the changes they make, no other families will have to stand in the position in which we stand today," they said, speaking through their lawyer, Adam Wilson.

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