ANDREW MARR:
And his story is a powerful reminder of the toll which the long war in Afghanistan, eleven years now, has taken on the armed forces. Hundreds of British troops have died there and they’re going to be remembered today, along with the fallen of course from the two world wars; many other conflicts as well. A little earlier, I spoke to the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir David Richards, about some of the challenges ahead - notably what might happen in Syria. But first he told me what Remembrance Day means to him.

GENERAL SIR DAVID RICHARDS:
I would like to just emphasise that while we remember all those people and mourn them and we remember particularly their families and friends, it’s time I think also to remember what they’ve achieved and celebrate the freedoms they allowed other people. You think of the Second World War, places like Sierra Leone, Afghanistan even. I know it’s controversial. Lots of people are living better lives because of the efforts of these people. So I tend to balance my sense of grief with some sense of celebration for what they’ve achieved for us.

ANDREW MARR:
Yeah, I mean you mention the Second World War and that for most people was unequivocally the good war. It was an existential battle against evil. And people are less sure about something like Afghanistan where we are going to be pulling out in 2014 and the question is what do we leave behind us there? Do you think that we will be able to, that government will be able to say this was a war worth fighting or do you think there will be ambiguity for a long time?

**GENERAL SIR DAVID RICHARDS:**
Well, first of all, if you look at why we went in, it was because of the AQ threat that was emanating from there, and in that narrow sense there’s no doubt there have, we’re certain, been no attacks launched on this country or other Western nations from Afghanistan since 2001. So I think that’s worth hanging onto when there’s a lot of people sadly round the world who would still seek to do that. So we’ve squeezed out that opportunity and saved I think, as a result of that, probably a lot of British and other lives. More widely, I think that the armed forces are very committed to this operation and I think we can pull it off.

**ANDREW MARR:**
We’ve lost about a quarter of the soldiers killed from so-called green on blue from Afghans who we’re supposed to be training up to defend their own country turning round and killing our people. Now soldiers expect to die, but losing a quarter this year like that must cause some problems for morale, surely?

**GENERAL SIR DAVID RICHARDS:**
It does. It’s only a quarter this year …

**ANDREW MARR:**
Yes.

**GENERAL SIR DAVID RICHARDS:**
…and it’s very important to hang onto that; and because our overall casualty levels are down, which is a good thing, it looks a bigger threat and issue than it probably is. What I’d just like to say on this because it’s really important and there is some misunderstanding about it, most of those who are doing this to us are actually
members of the Taliban or have been got at by the Taliban. So when people say this is the Afghan army and police doing it, it’s actually the Taliban using a tactic that’s very effective. They’re very good at playing on our minds because of the impact it has in the minds of people like you and many people who are of influence, including our politicians. But actually it’s about 0.02 per cent, we roughly assess, of the overall 350,000 in the Afghan army and police. So it’s a very important psychological tactic, but only about 4 per cent of our casualties have actually been caused through that way.

ANDREW MARR:
When I had Philip Hammond, the Defence Secretary, in the seat, he was suggesting that perhaps 4,000 to 5,000 troops may come home next year. Is that doable? Is that what you’re prepared to … preparing for?

GENERAL SIR DAVID RICHARDS:
Well I watched that interview very carefully, Andrew. You slipped in the term 4,000 and he didn’t correct it.

ANDREW MARR:
He didn’t dissent.

GENERAL SIR DAVID RICHARDS:
No, but he was already answering your next point. And what he said is he expects us to draw down by many thousands - thousands, but not, I emphasise, as much as I think you took away from that interview.

ANDREW MARR:
So not 4,000?

GENERAL SIR DAVID RICHARDS:
No, that is not the intention. We still await the plan from General John Allen and we’ll have to see what NATO and principally, I’m you know being candid, the US decide to do; and we will make sure we conform with that plan, as we always have, because we can’t go wrong if we do that.
ANDREW MARR:
But you can get that sort of number out? Not 4,000 but several thousand out?

GENERAL SIR DAVID RICHARDS:
Yes, I mean there’s going to be a substantial reduction by the end of next year and the plans are already laid to achieve that, and I think it will be in the thousands and we will be out of the combat role, as everyone knows, by the end of 2014. The key is to make sure the Afghan confidence levels are retained because we need them, apart from anything else, to look after us as we draw down. So it’s very important that we get this right and continue to do as we are.

ANDREW MARR:
And there seems to be quite a mood in Washington that things have to be speeded up, the war is at an end, Obama wants to get his people back as soon as possible?

GENERAL SIR DAVID RICHARDS:
I sense that, but I think we’ve got a plan that will deliver what we need, which is an Afghan National Security Force - police and army - that are able to take on a reduced insurgency. But a very important part of this is a political process. And I know we’ve talked before about the need to bring the Taliban at some stage into the solution. President Karzai’s determined to do it, the Pakistanis want to do that, and there’s a lot of Taliban (it would appear) who also want to.

ANDREW MARR:
Are you comfortable with losing 20,000 soldiers from the regular army and sort of replacing that with an increased army reserve - we used to call them the TA - of around 30,000?

GENERAL SIR DAVID RICHARDS:
Well in pure numbers terms, we actually end up - in theory anyway - with a bigger army - 30,000 versus 20,000 - because those 30,000 will …
They’re reserves?

**GENERAL SIR DAVID RICHARDS:**
They are all reserves but they’re all, as part of the new contract which we’re devising and talking to people about at the moment - we’ve got til 2015 to get this right - they will have an obligation to serve when required, about every one year in five. But the TA have done brilliantly and will continue to do brilliantly, I have no doubt, but we’ve now got to integrate them fully. So I’m comfortable with it and we had to create head room for many more new technologies like cyber, all the unmanned air vehicles, space in the future. If we just stuck rigorously to, as we’ve always been …

**ANDREW MARR:**
(over) The bayonets?

**GENERAL SIR DAVID RICHARDS:**
Yes, I’m afraid … you know we’d still be going to battle on horses.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Syria’s President Assad has just said that in effect the West can’t intervene militarily in his country because it would create a domino effect, it would be hugely destructive. Is he right? Is there a sort of overwhelming military reason why the West can’t intervene there from your perspective?

**GENERAL SIR DAVID RICHARDS:**
It would be a huge effort. I don’t think there’s any great intention of doing it at the moment, we’d be very cautious about it. The humanitarian situation this winter, I think, will deteriorate, and that may well provoke calls to intervene in a limited way. But no, I mean there’s no ultimately military reason why one shouldn’t and I know that all these options are quite rightly being examined, but we’re some way off doing that.

**ANDREW MARR:**
(over) So if … Yeah, but if we had a utterly horrendous humanitarian situation this winter, it is not inconceivable, it is not impossible to intervene at least in some part of Syria to try to protect people?
GENERAL SIR DAVID RICHARDS:
I think that’s true - that it’s not impossible - and obviously we develop contingency plans to look at all these things. I think the key thing …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) So there is a plan, there is a way that it could be done if that’s what the political masters said?

GENERAL SIR DAVID RICHARDS:
Yes of course, and it’s my job (amongst other people in my sort of position) to make sure these options are continually brushed over, to make sure we can deliver them and they’re credible. But I think the main thing for now that we’re all focusing on is to contain the crisis, so that it doesn’t spill over into countries like Lebanon, Jordan; and Turkey obviously is a NATO ally and very important to us. So that’s our primary focus, but that would also accommodate a humanitarian crisis because we could help deal with that through that primary mechanism.

ANDREW MARR:
So in your waters, do you think that we will be seeing British military involvement around the borders of Syria, both on that containment and possibly also on the humanitarian side?

GENERAL SIR DAVID RICHARDS:
It’s certainly something that we’ve got to look at, and we’ve got limited assistance because there are allies of ours going to Turkey and Jordan at the moment. We have small numbers of people routinely deployed there. So we’re keeping our awareness levels very high and in the meanwhile we’re preparing plans to make sure that when some disaster happens, we’re able to deal with it. But I think the main thing right now, if I may, is the international community and the political leaders …

ANDREW MARR:
Sure.
GENERAL SIR DAVID RICHARDS:
… need to decide what they want to do. Then people like me can develop plans to meet those requirements and at the same time the people inside Syria must agree.

ANDREW MARR:
Must understand too. And on a sort of parallel track, it’s been said that it would be inconceivable to engage in military operations against Iran. Would that still be your view?

GENERAL SIR DAVID RICHARDS:
Well President Obama and the Prime Minister have said nothing is off the table. It would be fraught with risk, but nothing is off the table, so I have to continue to keep that one alive as well.

ANDREW MARR:
General, you have a very busy day. Thank you so much for coming in and talking to us ahead of Remembrance … the Remembrance ceremony itself.

GENERAL SIR DAVID RICHARDS:
Thank you very much.

INTERVIEW ENDS