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COLUMNIST OF THE YEAR (FAILED)

THE room fell silent. A trooper, probably in his late teens and clearly very nervous, stood up in front of an audience of 200 or more and told his story.

Unscripted but without hesitation, he painted a picture of his patrol setting out in 40° of Afghan heat, down a ditch in Helmand Province.

Next to take up the narrative was a corporal, probably in his early twenties, more assured but clearly unused to speaking in public. You could have heard a pin drop.

He talked of the weight on his back, the silence in the air, the constant stage of

THREE BRAVE VOICES SPOKE VOLUMES

readiness. Then boom . . . an explosion. The final voice in the human tapestry came from a smartly dressed, intelligent young man – he too was a corporal, with what I thought was a Black Country accent. He told how an IED had blown him off his feet and how he thought he had emerged in one piece.

He hadn't. We, the audience, knew that. We were looking at a man with no legs in a wheelchair. He had paid the price that allowed us to sleep safely in our beds. It

was the most moving explanation of personal sacrifice I and the rest of the audience had ever heard.

When he finished, the audience rose as one to cheer and applaud a man whose life will not be the same but for us will always be a hero.

His lieutenant colonel stepped forward and explained that, although they love their work and they volunteered for it, they simply didn't always have the resources to deal with the inevitable consequences

of war. That is where you and I come in. Next time you see a bucket for The Rifles – Care For Casualties, do think of the brave corporal with no legs.

And do dismiss the argument that upset me from a local woman who declined to put money in the bucket because she said they knew what they were signing up to.

How anybody could have that view after hearing those three brave speeches is quite beyond me.