Lunch with the FT Life & Arts

War zone surgeon David Nott: ‘Life is all about taking calculated risks’

The doctor who’s saved countless lives through his work in Ukraine and Gaza on operating under fire, the challenges of PTSD — and his belief in God

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A few days before I meet David Nott for lunch, he is in Kharkiv, operating on victims of Russian drone strikes. A few days later, when you read this, he’s in the West Bank, teaching doctors how to suture blood vessels and bowels.

Nott’s work as a surgeon in conflict zones has probably saved thousands of lives. Many people call him a hero. But the man waiting for me is not from Hollywood casting. He is gentle, shy and wide-eyed. Sitting at a long table, he looks more likely to sell raffle tickets than to tell war stories. His soft voice barely registers over the clatter of the brasserie. He has the hesitant air of, if not exactly a rabbit in the headlights, perhaps a rabbit in a French restaurant.

“One of the translators in Kharkiv said, ‘The only person who doesn’t know who David Nott is, is you,’” he tells me, smiling. “And I think that’s true. I sometimes live in this world of looking at what I have achieved, or what has been achieved on my behalf by other people, and it doesn’t seem to be me.” When teaching fellow surgeons, he wonders of himself: “Blimey O’Reilly, how do you know all this?”

Nott came to prominence after 2013, when he testified first-hand to the brutality of then Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad’s siege of Aleppo. His memoir *War Doctor* was a bestseller. It detailed his ingenuity under fire and his many brushes with death.

The book also gave one of the most famous accounts of Elizabeth II’s empathy. At a lunch at Buckingham Palace, some 10 days after he’d returned from Aleppo, Nott was too traumatised to make conversation. The Queen understood, and asked her staff to bring dog biscuits, so they could spend the rest of the meal feeding her corgis instead. (Did they ever meet again? “No.”)

For the past 10 years, through the David Nott Foundation, the good doctor has

focused on spreading his knowledge. His team are among the very few foreign medics who have dared to go to Kharkiv since the war started. On his recent visit, a drone landed some 100 metres away, bouncing him out of his hotel bed on to the floor. As Ukrainian machine guns fired back, Nott had “this awful feeling that the Russians were coming”.

You sort of never get over it [PTSD]. But what allows you to get over it is being active

So did he get more than he bargained for? Not at all. “It was a wonderful trip! . . . People I’d taught three years ago came to visit me again.”

Patients were “coming with massive fragmentation injuries, holes in them everywhere. We operated day and night on people who were blown up by grenades [dropped by drones] . . . There was a man who had his foot blown off. You can either just amputate the leg and that’s the end of it. But to preserve the leg and reconstruct it is a fabulous thing. We had 30 surgeons in the operating theatre watching.”

The operation involved placing a flap of skin from the good leg on to the damaged leg. This way the foot could heal, using the blood supply from the good leg. (A simple skin graft would fail because it would lack the blood supply.) The legs will remain joined, then “three weeks today we can divide the flap and release his leg again. It’s second world war plastic surgery, but it really sorts people out.”

Nott, 69, is drawn to war by a mixture of adrenaline, altruism and intellectual curiosity. His first humanitarian mission was to Sarajevo in 1993. He spent time in Haiti, Darfur and with British troops in Afghanistan in 2010. “We thought we were at the pinnacle of trauma.”

Instead, war deaths have risen, not least in Gaza and Myanmar. For many people, the horror is overwhelming. Nott manages to approach it with urgency and equanimity. “Trauma doesn’t peak, no. And there’s always something to teach someone in any war

zone.”

In war zones, you have to package patients up quickly because they keep arriving. Colbert treats its diners similarly. A waiter with “stay free” tattooed on his fingers briskly takes our orders, and pours us sparkling water. I mean to ask for wine, but the moment flashes by. Soon I am too engrossed in Nott’s stories to need it.

His dad was an Indian-Burmese doctor, his mum a Welsh nurse. Because of their work, he says, he was initially brought up by his grandparents in idyllic rural Wales. “It was very peculiar, because I didn’t know my parents at all. My mother came back [from her training in Newport] every few months. I thought she was one of the family, I didn’t think she was my mother.”

Aged roughly five, “I remember really looking at [my father] for the first time, and thinking, gosh, is that my dad?” When his parents took him to live in England around then, “I was probably traumatised.” A decade or two ago, one of his aunts told him that his parents “didn’t really want you, David”. “It was a real shock to the system.”

He became a reclusive child, suffered racist insults and struggled at school. He failed his A-levels: “I think I got D, D, E, O. It was terrible.” When his classmates told him he couldn’t help being thick, he became determined. “I thought, I’m going to prove to people that I’m not thick.” He made it to university, where he blossomed. “I know I’m not the world’s brightest, but I’ve got humanity and I’ve got understanding. Nothing comes easy to me.” I notice his eyes have reddened with tears.

His sea bass arrives on a bed of olives and green beans. My tagine is a little bland, and I’m grateful for the side of chips.

Menu

Colbert
50-52 Sloane Square, London
SW1W 8AX

Nott’s humanitarian instinct was awakened when, as a trainee, he saw the 1984 film *The Killing Fields*. He was a technically good vascular surgeon, one former colleague

Sea bass £27.25
Tagine de légumes £19.95
Pommes frites x2 £11.90
Sparkling water x2 £11.90
Pot of coffee £10.50
Cover charge £5
Total inc service £98.72

recalls — but what set him apart was his sensitivity. He lacked the ego sometimes associated with surgeons. When he took up overseas missions, he thrived on the variety and the need to improvise. He found himself doing operations he barely knew. Once, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, he followed a London colleague’s instructions for a whole hip and leg amputation, sent by text message.

Nott also showed incredible bravery. In 2014, in Gaza, he was about to operate on a seven-year-old girl when he was told the hospital would be bombed in five minutes. He and the anaesthetist refused to leave, and saved the girl’s life. He has attended everyone who needed help: from an Isis fighter in Syria to pregnant girls from Darfur who had been victims of rape as a weapon of war.

Syria, where so many children died, was a low point. How did he get over the post-traumatic stress disorder? “You sort of never get over it. But what allows you to get over it is being active. A lot of people who suffer from PTSD and [end up committing] suicide, they just look at a brick wall and think about what’s happened to them.

“Like Winston Churchill said, ‘If you’re going through hell, keep going’.” (The attribution is disputed.) “PTSD is like going through hell, but you’ve just got to keep going. You can get treatment, you can talk to people, but the person who helps you most is yourself. Nobody will help you unless you help yourself in life. When people around you are saying you’ve got to have a break, no — keep going!”

War zones change; so do the medical challenges. Tourniquets can stop catastrophic haemorrhages, but they can only be applied for up to six hours before the muscles in the arm or leg start to die. In Ukraine, some people with tourniquets can’t escape because drones are waiting to kill them. “There are so many people [in] Ukraine now with tourniquet syndrome, because the tourniquet’s on for more than six hours. They’re all getting very high arm amputations, leg amputations.”

They're all getting very high arm amputations, leg amputations.

He mulls banning drones, as expanding dumdum bullets were banned in 1899. But “the rule of law has gone in war. Even if drones were banned, no one would listen. People just don’t care any more.”

The Geneva Convention states that all hospitals should be protected. Every human being needs help when they’re injured, no matter what side they’re on

Gaza is even worse. After a mission to Rafah in early 2024, Nott described Gaza as “like no war zone I have ever witnessed” — citing, for example, the lack of oral antibiotics. What he didn’t mention is that he himself had become “quite poorly”: his way of saying that he’d nearly died.

“I got pneumonia. I got a really bad chest infection to the extent that I couldn’t even walk up the stairs.” He was staying in a house whose windows were blown out. “It was like -5C, with the wind coming through. I couldn’t breathe. I didn’t get the right antibiotics . . . My lips were blue. I thought, ‘I think I’m going to die.’”

His wife “went mental” and phoned “every person she could think of”. Nott was evacuated via Egypt. “I was lucky to get out.” Around that time, the World Health Organization warned that in Gaza, diseases could kill more than bombings. “Your mind has to be resilient to go to war zones. But you have to be physically resilient as well, and I’m not as physically resilient as I used to be.”

Nott’s experience allows him to advise doctors that sometimes, because of a lack of resources, they can’t act. “Hearing it from me is better than someone going in, thinking they can do something.” There would be no point doing the Kharkiv foot reconstruction in Gaza, because the patient needs to be immobilised for three weeks: “If he had to be evacuated very rapidly, he’s going to be dead.”

But Nott is angry at the targeting of medical facilities. “It’s not just Gaza. The hospital in Kharkiv was bombed. Health is used as a weapon of war — if you take out a

hospital, you take out treatment for tens of thousands of people, and you make those people suffer more badly and try and leave . . . The Geneva Convention states that all hospitals should be protected. Every human being needs help when they're injured, no matter what side they're on."

Nott could easily have been killed by now, but he still travels to war zones, flies planes (he is a keen pilot), skis and cycles a Brompton around London. "Life is all about taking calculated risks. If you never take any risks, you never do anything. That is my mantra."

Does it help that he believes in God? He wonders aloud about science and faith, the Big Bang, the fact of light in the darkness. "Religion, I do think about it a lot. We all need a belonging, don't we? To belong to a religion is a nice thing to do. I go to the Welsh church every Sunday.

"You always need somebody to look after you. When your mother and father unfortunately pass away, who else is there to turn to apart from God? So He is there for me . . . You must think I'm a bit mad, don't you?" But I don't.

In 2014, when he thought he was about to die in Gaza, Nott found the nerve to email a researcher he'd enjoyed meeting. Elly became his wife, and set up and ran his foundation. They have two young daughters. "I want to live as long as possible for them. You hear of children whose fathers have died in their teens — it's affected them most of their lives."

What does he tell his daughters when he goes to war zones? "I say, you're allowing me to go out and help people. You could sit there and cry and say, 'Daddy, please don't go.' But you don't." He has brought them up to believe "the best thing that you can do in your life is to help somebody else". He tears up again. "What's happened to me?" He doesn't know if he would take the risks that he once did of, say, operating in a hospital about to be bombed.

The foundation is his vehicle for spreading training. Last year its income nearly doubled to £3.5mn. "I very rarely say anything political now, because it will affect the foundation." His prized possession is a silicon human replica called Heston, on which Nott can demonstrate around 50 different operations, and which he's taken to 17 countries. He is humble but confident. When doubting doctors question his methods, "I will say, 'OK, you tell me how you'd do it, and I will tell you why that's wrong.'"

One of his friends described him as childlike. 'I think I've never grown up,' he laughs. 'That's brilliant . . . A child is always optimistic, isn't he?

He has a day job as a consultant NHS surgeon at St Mary's Hospital in London. That brings its own stresses. "I wake up at 4am when I've been operating on people, and I check my phone, because I'm expecting the worst. When something does go wrong, I'm badly affected by it — I can't sleep, can't do things . . . It's very difficult with families of patients who die under your care. I want to show them that I cared a lot about their husband or wife, I really cared." He wants to call the family of a patient who died a year ago, "but I don't feel that I can do."

He intends to keep working as long as he can. But where? The fall of Assad "was the best news I've ever heard . . . But I feel like I've almost done my bit." It's time for Syrians to build on his work, while he turns elsewhere. "Myanmar, for example, is a forgotten war." He plans to go there, the country of his father's birth, for the first time this year.

We drink black Americanos. Nott is puzzled by the accompanying small glass of water. "That's not gin, is it?"

For his first mission, to Bosnia, he had to pay a colleague to cover his NHS shifts. Does he now permit himself some luxuries? He says not. "When I met Elly, I had £30 in the bank. I had spent all my money on humanitarian things . . . And she still married me." Who paid for the wedding? "She did!"

The tables around us have washed in and out, but Nott seems in no hurry. He imparts some war zone advice. Never look anybody in the eyes at a checkpoint. Be wary of what is around you. Never take photos. An exception is medical photos. Doctors regularly message him on WhatsApp with cases. He shows me some photos of a horrendous leg injury, before surgery. "Did they do the right thing? Yes!"

I tell Nott that one of his friends described him as childlike. "I think I've never grown up," he laughs. "That's brilliant, I have to remember that one. A child is always optimistic, isn't he?"

As he straps on his rucksack, I realise that here is a man who has seen it all, and refused to be cowed. He has made choices he can defend. So he does need to not compartmentalise the good and bad, the civility of the restaurant and the inhumanity of the field. "It all merges into one . . . My brain is here and it's there and it's everywhere . . . Some people are having a terrible time. It's nice to appreciate that you're having a nice time here. You can't divorce yourself and be a different person . . . If you have nightmares, then you're thinking about yourself. Feeling sorry for yourself won't help them at all."

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