

TRAUMATISED DIGGERS THE NEVER-ENDING LEGACY OF WAR

Of the eight major conflicts of the 20th and 21st centuries, Australia is the only country to have participated in every one of them. We have been in the Boer War, World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the two Gulf wars, and Afghanistan.

Australia is unique in its enthusiasm to fight war on distant shores. The explanation is simple. Successive Governments have used troop deployment to curry favour with first Britain, then the United States. Our leaders see it as a premium on an insurance policy that may need to be claimed one day. In some hypothetical situation of threat to Australia, they imagine the great protector will pay up, come to our aid, and make the Australian lives lost and ruined over decades worth the price.

In the meantime, the propensity to fight other people's wars has unleashed a silent plague. The recent accounts of Australian soldiers who have committed suicide, or tried to, is the tip of an iceberg. Lifelong mental health problems are likely to plague many of the men and women who return from overseas duty. Many will never be the same again.

How war can emotionally cripple combatants and blight their families is never a consideration, it seems, when governments send the troops off in a blaze of patriotic fervor. It should be. There is enough evidence now to show war is more likely to break, than make, the man. Certainly it puts servicemen - and now women - at risk of psychological problems that can last a lifetime.

Major research on the health of Australian veterans of the first Gulf War shows their mental health years later was strikingly worse than that of other defence force personnel not deployed to the Middle East. They were much more likely to suffer post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression and problem drinking.

The study, published by the Department of Veterans Affairs, and undertaken by Monash University and others, found the risks escalated with the number of difficult military experiences. Rather than the soldiers becoming battle

hardened, more exposure heightened their risk of psychological problems.

How enduring these problems can be is highlighted in another study commissioned by the Government - of Australia's Korean War veterans. More than 50 years after their wartime experiences, the veterans were significantly more likely to suffer psychological problems than a control group. They were also three times more likely to suffer alcohol-related problems. Only 18 per cent felt "pleased about their life" compared with 40 per cent of other elderly men. Again the problems were worse among those who experienced heavy combat, and among the lower ranks.

The problems of returned Vietnam veterans are well publicised, though often attributed to their poor reception on homecoming rather than to their experiences in combat. The Federal Government is funding a health study of the veterans' children due to concerns the psychological problems of the fathers have rebounded onto the next generation. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has already reported these children are at three times higher risk of suicide than the general population.

Many baby boomers could testify to how their father's experience in World War II reverberated down the years. These men were the strong, silent types who seemed to get on with life. But families bore the brunt of their black moods and difficult behaviour. Decades later the children might discover the roots of their father's temper, drinking problem, anxiety attacks, depression or nightmares were buried deep in his wartime experience.

Australia has been extraordinarily lucky recently in the low casualty rate among its troops. But the troops have not escaped damage. Mental illness, rather than injuries, is already proving to be the biggest threat to our soldiers in Iraq. *The Sunday Age* newspaper reported more have been discharged on mental health grounds than have been hurt in combat. Australia has also been involved in peacekeeping operations that expose troops to atrocities and Feelings of helplessness.

Of the 900 who had served in Somalia, at least 20 per cent had serious mental health problems, a 1997 study found.

Hundreds from the East Timor deployment have lodged compensation claims with the Department of Veterans Affairs. From blaming "nervous breakdowns" among troops on predisposition and cowardice, the Australia military has progressed to trying to provide the right help.

The best cure is prevention. With peacekeeping there is often a pressing moral reason to participate. But Australia's eagerness to send

troops abroad should be tempered by the knowledge that the human cost of war is not counted in coffins alone. We know infinitely more about the effects of war than we did a century, or even 30 years, ago. We know war can profoundly affect those who fight, and their families, for decades after the peace is declared.

Of the 7000 deployed each year on six-month stints to the Middle East, Afghanistan, East Timor and elsewhere, many may never be quite right again. They suffer a much higher rate of psychological problems and alcohol damage than the norm.

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