

*Life Writing and Human Rights Conference: Genres of
Testimony 11th July 2011, Kingston University London*

Abuse, Trauma and the Modern Battlefield – Studies on Service Personnel

Christopher Hamerton, Director of Legal Studies,
Centre for Abuse & Trauma Studies,
Kingston University

Abuse, Trauma and the Modern Battlefield – Studies on Service Personnel

Today's presentation examines four areas:

1. *The Modern Battlefield, Victimization, and Human Rights;*
2. *Research Focus: The Persian Gulf War 1991 and Gulf War Syndrome;*
3. *Methodology;*
4. *Narrative and Testimony – Veterans, Families and Medical Scientists.*

1. The Modern Battlefield, Victimisation, and Human Rights



*'Died, some pro patria,
non "dulce" non "et décor".
Walked eye deep in hell
believing in old men's lies,
then unbelieving
came home,
home to a lie,
home to many deceits home to old lies and new infamy'.
Ezra Pound (1918)
Epitaph to the dead and survivors of Chepilly*

7/15/2011

3

Life Writing and Human Rights

Mechanised Warfare, Industrialised Killing, and Disenfranchisement



- Classical history - the soldier as unassailable.
- The Thirty Years War (1618 - 1648) – troop illness dismissed as 'heimweh' (homesickness).
- The American Civil War and 'mind wounds' – *'No category short of lunacy could account for their symptoms and many were either sent to an asylum for the rest of their natural lives, dispatched on the journey home where, left to fend for themselves, they died of hunger or exposure, or were hanged as malingerers'* (Holden, 1998)
- World War I – Cowardice, shell shock or 'hysterical paralysis.' The veteran as welfare case emerges.
- Into the Modern era – Combat fatigue & combat stress.
- The Veteran as victim?

7/15/2011

4

Life Writing and Human Rights

Victimology and Human Rights



- Victimology (sub-discipline within criminology) – *from victim typology and victim precipitation to state actors, structural powerlessness, reaction and resistance.*
- *'[victimology should encompass] victims of police force, the victims of war, the victims of the correctional system, the victims of state violence, the victims of oppression of any sort' (Quinney, 1972). (see also Fattah, 2004, 2006).*
- *'those of past, present, or future generations who are injured as a consequence of change to the chemical, physical, microbiological, or psycho-social environment, brought about by deliberate or reckless, individual or collective, human act or act of omission' (Williams, 1996)*

7/15/2011

5

Life Writing and Human Rights

2. Research Focus: The Persian Gulf War 1991 and Gulf War Syndrome



- 2 August 1990 – 28 February 1991.
- UN Coalition (UNC) of 34 countries formed following Iraqi annexation of Kuwait totalling 956,600 troops.
- The TV War – 24 hour coverage and virtual reality.
- Coalition air assault commenced on 17 January (5 weeks – targeting both military and civilian infrastructure) followed by a ground assault on 23 February (5 days).
- Iraqi Scud and Frog ballistic missile attacks on Coalition forces (44 missiles) and Israel (42 missiles), amidst constant fear of chemical and biological attack.
- The 'shrill signature' of the war (constant gas alarm activation on UNC bases and in the field).

7/15/2011

6

Life Writing and Human Rights

Immediate Aftermath of a Modern War



- 3500 Iraqi civilian fatalities (air attack), 35000 Iraqi military fatalities (Osbourne-Dapont, 2003), Coalition military fatalities 234 (Johnson, 2001).
- Wide use of depleted uranium (DU) munitions by UNC.
- Oil well fires – 700 oil wells fired in scorched earth retreat by Iraqi forces.
- Oil spill – (23 January 1991) 400 million gallons of crude oil dumped into the Persian Gulf (largest spill in history).
- Aj Jahra (Highway of Death) Massacre - 1400 retreating vehicles attacked over a distance of 60 kilometres in the final hours of the war (night of 27 February 1991).

7/15/2011

7

Life Writing and Human Rights

The Emergence of Gulf War Syndrome: Causative Factors



- The complex environment (Persian Gulf battlefield) – *'the most toxic war in military history'* (Keeble, 2004).
- Chemical weapons (mustard gas, sarin, tabun, botulin & mycotoxin) used on 15 occasions between 1983 - 1988.
- UNC military vaccination programme (including experimental anthrax and botulinum vaccines with squalene adjuvants), plus the widespread use of NAPS tablets (pyridostigmine bromide) in the field.
- Widespread use of organophosphate pesticides.
- Heavy metal poisoning from oil well fire fallout.
- Radiological poisoning from DU.

7/15/2011

8

Life Writing and Human Rights

The Social Discovery of Gulf War Syndrome (GWS)



- The 'cakewalk' conflict and public apathy.
- By early 1992, widespread reporting of chronic multi-symptom illness amongst Gulf veterans (UNC and Iraqi) and fears over transmissibility and birth defects.
- Veteran 'hysteria' and 'dishonour' (Showalter, 1998).
- Governmental denials and accusations of cover up - the '*Spiral of Denial*' (Cohen, 1997).
- 250,000 of 700,000 US UNC troops deployed suffer from GWS (US Institute of Medicine, 2010).
- Malformation in pregnancy - 50% higher in GW veterans than non-GW Veterans (Doyle et al., 2004).

7/15/2011

9

Life Writing and Human Rights

3. Methodology



- Contact made with the Gulf Veterans Association (GVA) in Newcastle (allied to the RBL). Once ethical assurances (along BSC guidelines) were provided access was given to the GVA member database in order to select and approach a randomly chosen sample.
- 200 requests for interview were sent leading to 78 depth interviews in the subject's home (a half day was allocated to each subject and 65 UK locations visited).
- Of the 78 subjects, 72 were veterans reporting GWS (63 male, 9 female), 4 were widows, 2 bereaved parents.
- A smaller survey of 9 senior medics / scientists with experience of the condition was undertaken.

7/15/2011

10

Life Writing and Human Rights

The Depth Interviews

- Semi-structured questions (60) were used to explore individual veteran experiences.
- Veteran question themes included service background, Gulf War service, post Gulf War service, support structures, present circumstances, group solidarity, and socio-political perceptions.
- Semi-structured questions (37) were also used in the medic / scientist questionnaire with such themes as personal expertise, causation, accountability, funding experiences, and possible treatments.
- Emotions and fieldwork – from war veterans to war victims.

4. Narrative and Testimony – Veterans, Families, and Medical Scientists.

"I'm not a clinician, but the damage to the nervous system could certainly be caused by exposure to nerve agents, and organophosphates, and the NAPS tablets, its a combine, that they could cause some of the symptoms, particularly associated with the autonomic nervous system, and the peripheral and central nervous systems, but I know of no single agent that could encompass all of these, the different expressions of illness that we see in Gulf War veterans which range from neurological, immunological, to skin to lung, to this all encompassing fatigue that many of them talk about."

(Subject M8 – Professor of Environmental Toxicology)

Public Awareness

"I think eight years after the war, most people have forgotten about us. When I talk to ordinary people that I meet in the course of my ordinary working life, and, if I go to church and talk about Gulf War illness people say to me 'I didn't think there was a problem', they don't know, there is a lot of 'well it happened so long ago, I thought it had all been sorted', that's the attitude that most people have - it's not an off-hand thing, it's just a question of surprise, and of course with the present conflict now raging with Serbia, then the last thing anyone else wants is just to be reminded of other things."

(Subject V44 – Former Major RAMC)

7/15/2011

13

Life Writing and Human Rights

Combat Stress and PTSD

"After the war ended we were pretty much flown back to our base straight away, you know, as if it had never happened. I had my first proper panic attack about a week after we got back and the nightmares started to get worse. Always the same from when we were in the desert and I was the one sat next to the door in the Warrior (armoured personnel carrier). When you're told to get out you do it without thinking really fast, and as I'm quite small I got pushed over and landed on a body that had been in the sand for some time, been ran over by tracks. I tried to push up but I sank into it, right through it. I see him every night."

(Subject V26 – former Private RRF)

7/15/2011

14

Life Writing and Human Rights

Combat Stress and Physical Illness

"I joined the army at seventeen and spent my best years as a soldier, worked in bomb disposal, served in Northern Ireland and the Falklands, but the Gulf War was different. I say to my wife now that the army loved us to death in that war, it was a fiasco with all the vaccinations and the tablets. I had seven injections in one go and polio on the tongue. Every time there was an air raid we were being told to take the tablets, and people were panicking taking handfuls. I've not been the same since, I used to be a ski instructor, now I can't even get up the stairs on my own. A few mates have ended it, and I don't blame them for a second."

(Subject V16 – former Sergeant REME)

7/15/2011

15

Life Writing and Human Rights

Battlefield Conditions

"When you're in tanks you just can't wait to get out, so after each battle we would go and look over the shot up Iraqi vehicles for souvenirs, but there was nothing left except the shell covered in dust, this was the DU residue, radioactive we found out afterwards. Then there was the tents covered in pesticide and the idiots making us eat and do PT with the oil wells burning in the background, choking with the fumes. When my baby, a little girl, was born in April 1993 [with severe birth defects], they took her away straight after, we didn't get to hold her. I knew that it was because of the Gulf chemicals, I knew straight away."

(Subject V68 – former Corporal RTR)

7/15/2011

16

Life Writing and Human Rights

Aftermath of the Aj Jahra Massacre

"It's hard to describe unless you see it, experience it I mean. I just think the brain shuts down, and something else, someone else, takes over. There were bodies everywhere, hundreds, thrown around like dolls, broken toys. But there were also cars with whole families in that looked intact all just sat there, kids in the back, but dead. A lot of the Iraqi officers had taken their families to war with them and they had all died. It's the silence that I remember and the smell, that never leaves you. When people ask I don't say I was a soldier because I was a bin man, picking up the rubbish afterwards. No honour in that, is there?"

(Subject V55 – former Sergeant REME)

7/15/2011

17

Life Writing and Human Rights

Accountability

"In one respect, issues like this go beyond party politics. Our local MP is a good man and I know he is sympathetic to what Gulf vets are going through, but this goes much higher within the bureaucracy, certainly beyond party politics. The truth might get out eventually, but not in my lifetime or yours. Meanwhile, what can you do, put up with living a half life, putting your partner through hell, terrified that the next thing that you go down with might be the one that kills you. You hear about former colleagues dying of rare diseases, having terribly deformed children, homeless, committing suicide; these were fit, vibrant, young people."

(V4 – former Captain QARANC)

7/15/2011

18

Life Writing and Human Rights

The Value of Testimony

"I think that the whole area of Gulf research must be multi-disciplinary, and I think that when the story is told at the end it will require people drawn from sociology, psychology, from medicine, from fundamental chemical, bio-chemical, pharmacological research, to put together the whole story, and immunology particularly - so there will be immunology, neurology, of all of those people who contribute to telling the story, someone will have the privilege of pulling the report together and it will be a high privilege I think, but it will need people of great integrity, and people who will not be side-tracked, and will not accept easy answers."

(Subject M3 - Professor of Medicinal Chemistry)

Summary

- The changing status of the war veteran.
- Victimisation and secondary victimisation.
- The importance of participant testimony and the development of narrative 'from below.'
- Modern weaponry and environmental damage.
- The myth of clinical combat intervention.
- Collaborative research between medical science and the social sciences.
- *'War stories aren't really anything more than stories about people.'* Michael Herr (1977) *Dispatches*.