

How Soldiers of Conqueror Armies Also Suffer

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Soldiers of conqueror armies are often congratulated and praised by the leaders of their countries, but does anyone really care to ask them what they feel in their hearts? Does anyone really care to find out what impacts all the killings and cruelties of war have on their mind and heart?

If they can be sure that they fought for a very noble cause then it would be easier to recover from any adverse impacts, but if their battlefield experiences further confirm their suspicions regarding the futility or even the injustice of the war which they were asked to fight, then adverse impact on them is really acute and long-lasting as they think repeatedly that the large number of deaths and disabilities caused by the war were without any justifiable reason at all.

A poll of the Pew Research Centre (November 2019) found that 64% of the USA veterans who fought there felt that the Iraq invasion was not justified, while 58% and 55% of the veterans felt the same in the context of the invasions of the Afghanistan and Syria interventions, respectively. This poll found that the percentage of veterans returning from fighting abroad who felt emotionally distressed and traumatized by their war experiences was 47% in the post 9/11 phase, increasing significantly from the earlier phase.

There are nearly 18 to 20 million veterans in the USA (the data in this article on veterans is in the context of US veterans). Many years after they fought in wars, mostly in far-away places, many of them have continued to suffer from the after-effects of what they did and what they saw, apart from the injuries and the disabilities they suffered or the diseases they acquired from being exposed to toxicity of weapons, ammunitions and bombs. A large number of them have suffered from mental health problems. Some of their more common problems include Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), increased suicidal tendencies, substance abuse including excessive alcohol consumption, violent behaviour (also towards family members), difficulties in adjustment, unemployment and homelessness. Several problems keep coming up years later.

A RAND survey highlighted that 48% of veterans of far-away wars (particularly Afghanistan and Iraq) experienced stress in family-life while 47% had sudden outbursts of anger. This and other surveys reveal about 20% of them suffer from PTSD and major depression. According to a paper on Veterans and Mental Health Issues (NIH-StarPearls) written by Catarina Inoue, Evan Shawler et al, over 6000 veterans have been dying by suicide every year (while other estimates place this closer to around 8000 per year, or 22 per day). This paper says that the suicide rate in the US armed forces doubled during 2000-2012. In 30% of suicides among military personnel and 20% of deaths caused by high risk behaviour, substance abuse was involved.

While these and other deeply worrying statistics have been around for quite some time, these have not been adequately and strongly linked, as these should be, to making a very strong case against war. If soldiers on the conquering side, the invading side suffer so much and for so long (and of course the soldiers and civilians of the weaker side, the victim side suffer even more), then if both sides are suffering so much, then isn't it time to say a strong 'no' to all wars?

The soldiers of the invading armies are given very cruel tasks by their governments. But beneath their helmets and uniforms they too are human beings with fears and feelings. This war will affect them in two different ways. Firstly there is the risk of personal injury and exposure to many toxic weapons. Secondly, there is the less visible but nevertheless perhaps even more significant risk of how their minds and hearts will be affected on a permanent basis when they have performed the very cruel and unjust responsibilities that have been assigned by their governments. After all these young men and women have absorbed some ideals in their family and educational institutions and before being sent here they were encouraged to think of themselves as liberators. When they see that their actual responsibility is highly unethical and cruel, this is bound to have a very disturbing impact on the minds of these young soldiers of the invading army.

Speaking of their experience of two earlier wars (most discussed in the present context), the veterans of the US armed forces said in a statement, "In the last Gulf War, as troops, we were ordered to murder from a safe distance. We destroyed much of Iraq from the air, killing hundreds of thousands, including civilians. We remember the road to Basra - The Highway to Death - where we were ordered to kill fleeing Iraqis. We bulldozed trenches, burying people alive. The use of depleted uranium weapons left the battlefields radioactive. Massive use of pesticides, experimental drugs, burning chemical weapons depots and oil fires combined to create a toxic cocktail affecting both the Iraqi people and Gulf War veterans today. One in four Gulf War veterans is disabled.



American POWs recently released from North Vietnamese prison camps, 1973 (Licensed under the Public Domain)

“During the Vietnam War we were ordered to destroy Vietnam from the air and on the ground. At My Lai we massacred over 500 women, children and old men. This was not an aberration, it’s how we fought the war. We used Agent Orange on the enemy and then experienced first-hand its effects. We know what Post Traumatic Stress Disorder looks, feels and tastes like because the ghosts of over two million men, women and children still haunt our dreams. More of us took our own lives after returning home than died in battle.”

It is evident from this statement of war veterans, who have seen and experienced present day military invasions more than anyone else, that –

- So dangerous are present day weapons that even the winning side of a one-sided war is likely to suffer heavy physical damage.
- Even in one-sided wars, soldiers of the stronger side are habitually asked by superiors to inflict massive unbearable cruelty and kill without any need for killing.
- All this cruelty is of course terrible for the victims but it also leaves permanent scars on the victors, on soldiers who are forced to inflict these cruelties.

Thus last aspect, frequently ignored, is very important for understanding the enormous costs of war for the victors. As the veterans of US armed forces have clearly said of the Vietnam experience,

“More of us took our own lives after returning home than died in battle.”

The parents of many American soldiers going to war are aware of these risks, as is evident in several statements released by the organisation ‘Military Families Speak Out before the Iraq invasion.’ One parent Stephen Cleghorn said, “If we go to war in Iraq, the loss of innocent civilian lives will be high and horrific ... The soldiers in the area will know what they

have done. They will see it with their own eyes or they will see it in the eyes of their fellow soldiers.” Nancy Lessin and Charley Richardson have said about their son, “We don’t want him to be wounded or die. We don’t want him to be forced to wound or kill innocent Iraqi civilians. That would kill a part of him – and a part of us.”

This then, is the invisible cost of war. Reader’s Digest has described the suffering of a child, Kim Phuc at the time of bombing of Trang Bang (Vietnam) by US planes (R.D. November 1997),

“The bombs, canisters filled with napalm, had smashed into ground behind Kim and instantly ignited. The jellified gasoline, designed to stick to and incinerate anything it touches, splashed onto Kim’s back. Her flowered cotton shirt and pants – even her sandal – combusted. She was engulfed in a cloud of smoke and fire as napalm peeled away the skin from her back and left arm. Terrified, Kim kept running. At first she could feel nothing. Then she felt as if she had been thrown onto an open fire. In horror she saw the skin drop off her arm like clothes off a doll. As she ran naked down the road that led out of the village, she began screaming, “Too hot! Too hot! Please help!”

This magazine also noted the impact of this suffering on the sensitive mind of the pilot who caused this suffering: “Now he stared at the picture of Kim Phuc, her agony caught for eternity. His own son Louis was about the same age. He could almost smell the child’s burning flesh.

“... Later he kept his role in the bombing of Trang Bang secret, locked deep within his soul. It surfaced in the form of a nightmare. First Plummer would see a picture of Kim, with arms outstretched and mouth frozen in a silent scream. Then the image would widen to include Kim’s brother and cousins running alongside her. Finally, he would hear their screams, louder and louder until he felt surrounded by the accusing children. To drown his guilt, Plummer began drinking heavily. In July 1973 he married for the second time, but he still kept his secret. No one can understand, he thought. John Plummer’s drinking cost him his marriage in 1979. It was a vicious circle; he drank to put the bombing out of his mind, but the drinking made him more obsessed.”

Apart from tormenting the sensitive mind forever, war – time cruelties can also have a somewhat different impact. In order to come to terms with the cruelties inflicted by them, some soldiers deliberately train their minds to become very insensitive to human suffering. This insensitivity later enters into their close personal relationships and can destroy them. Spousal abuse has been reported to occurring at a very high rate in US Army- much higher than the civilian rate.

A person (or group or nation) who inflicts injustice and injury on others, will either live with a guilt complex (if he wants to retain some sensitivity) or else he’ll have to reduce himself to a level of insensitivity that will prevent him from feeling small but precious joys of everyday life and this in turn is bound to adversely affect his closest relationships including those with his family members. Thus relationships of conquest, destruction and dominance are not only destructive, these are also self-destructive. This link should be effectively established to make a very strong case for peace in various contexts.

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Featured image: A U.S. Army Soldier from the A Company, 1-503rd Battalion, 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team, conducts a patrol with a platoon of Afghan national army soldiers to check on conditions in the village of Yawez, Wardak province, Afghanistan, Feb. 17, 2010. Partnership between the U.S. Army and the Afghan national army is proving to be a valuable tool in bringing security to the area. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Russell GilchrestReleased)

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