Hidden Battles: Veterans Living With the Consequences of War

November 10, 2011 at 9:18 pm by Mickie Lynn

Documentary about bringing war home.

Last Thursday I saw a film called “Hidden Battles.” It had a really strong impact on me and on everyone in the audience. This fairly brief but intense documentary followed the lives of five veterans of very different wars and showed how they struggled to come to terms with their combat experiences after they returned home.

What made this film, released in 2011, so powerful was the vivid look at the internal struggles that manifested and continued long after these men and woman left the battlefield. The universal cost of war and the long suffering that took place after killing another human being was examined through the experiences of an Israeli officer, a Palestinian member of Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, a woman Sandinista rebel, a US Vietnam Veteran, and a US veteran of the war in Somalia.

Documentary maker, Victoria Mills, included scenes and recollections from their original battles and then followed their lives after they returned home. We saw intimate details of their lives at intervals. In every case we came to understand just how deeply their response to killing another human being continued to haunt them. Some of them returned to the scene of the battles. This was healing in many ways. One of them moved to a peaceful place in another country where healing could take place for him and his family. One of them took on the task of helping other veterans to cope with homecoming. Several of them chose creative or artistic careers or avocations that helped them to heal.

How do I know how others responded to the film? There was a discussion facilitated by John R. Ostwald, a columnist for the Troy Record newspaper who also teaches psychology at Hudson Valley Community College. He’s a Vietnam era veteran who studied the healing of PTSD with Dr. Edward Tick who’s well known for his work with traumatized veterans.

There were two major reactions from audience members who hadn’t gone to war. One was extreme sadness at the suffering of not only the veterans but of their families and those that they loved. I was
specially saddened by the effects on the children and the way that the trauma was passed on down the
generations. There were several combat veterans in the audience. One was in his 70’s and had fought
in Vietnam. He hadn’t realized until fairly recently that he was suffering from PTSD when it was
pointed out by another vet. He spent several months in treatment in a VA setting and is now doing
much better. Another was a Gulf War Veteran who still struggles with his trauma but also helps other
veterans and works to end the current wars and prevent others.

Another strong reaction to the film was anger at the waste of human lives and the damage done by
sending our citizens to war without a real need or basis for such wars. One fact that came up in the
discussion was the fact that our current wars have been going on longer than WWII and Vietnam
combined and that the soldiers who are coming back are very traumatized and often suffering from
traumatic brain damage as well.

A recent report indicated that over 2 million US military have served in the wars in Iraq and
Afghanistan but when they return to the US they are often injured and don’t receive the care that was
promised to them. One third of these veterans come home with serious medical conditions such as Post
Traumatic Stress Disorder, amputations, and Traumatic Brain Injury. But even though President
Obama increased the budget for the Department of Veterans by $25 Billion over 5 years in 2009 the
programs are still not adequate for wounded warriors. There are still long waits and bureaucratic
hurdles for care.

This morning I listened to part two of a series on Making Contact called Veterans of Occupation from
Iraq to Wall Street. Here’s the link to the whole presentation. Segment two, (minute 29 to the end) has
the facts and stories about returning veterans while the first part tells about vets joining the growing
street

Vets Occupy Wall Street, twitter photo

Not only do vets have to deal with trauma and injury but they often find that they’re isolated because
those at home don’t understand their experiences. The journalist who narrated the second segment,
Aaron Glantz, also talked about the trauma for journalists returning home after witnessing violence
and death all around them. He found that continuing to tell other people’s stories was healing for him.

So here are a few facts about veterans returning from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars:

More than 200,000 veterans sleep homeless on the streets of the United States on any given night.

Vets of Iraq and Afghanistan are becoming homeless more quickly than those from previous wars.

More than ¼ of returning veterans suffer from either or both PTSD or TBI and less than ½ are getting
the care that they need.

In 2008 more than 18 US veterans committed suicide each day, and that’s only those tracked by the VA
system. In 2011 the number of active duty and veteran suicides continues to increase. Most states
aren’t tracking these deaths.

There are many veterans who come home but don’t end up in the VA system. They land either in a
work setting, school setting, at home with family, or on the streets. So different support systems are
badly needed in each setting. In one story of “tragedy, hope and triumph” a great program available at
a few colleges is described. It’s called “boots to books” and provides a chance to share experiences,
community, counseling and other supportive services for vets in college. Sounds like an excellent
model that needs more funding.

I also heard on this morning’s news that the percentage of veterans in New York State that are
unemployed is currently 12%, well above the 9% general rate and that more programs are needed to provide jobs for returning veterans.

In the Making Contact segment about veterans there was a quote to the effect that it’s easy to honor the dead since it takes no money or ongoing commitment but honoring the living and wounded veterans takes real patriotism and effort. I think that both forms of honoring and remembering are important but the need to care for our returning veterans is the most vital task. Also needed is passionate and ongoing work to end these unjustified and endless wars that kill, maim and injure our soldiers and also require them to serve in hellish situations over and over again in a way that’s never happened before.

Posted in Afghanistan, Cost of war, Enlisted men/women, Iraq, Pakistan, Peace Through Art, Vietnam, War, effects of military violence, people with disabilities, post-traumatic stress disorder | 13 Comments

SUICIDE
Army Faces Upsurge in Suicides
Hal Bernton, The Seattle Times August 19, 2011
Hal Bernton reports: "During the past two years, the Army has embarked on wide-ranging efforts to reduce suicides. At Lewis-McChord, those efforts include repeated mental-health evaluations for soldiers. Despite these programs, the Army suicide rates remain high. During the first seven months of 2011, the Army investigated 109 deaths throughout the service that may have been suicide, compared with 91 during the same time period in 2010. July's suspected suicides hit a record."


The number of suicides (of US soldiers) in 2010 was 407 to those killed in action of 455. Harper’s Magazine (April 2011)

Book: Philipps, David. Lethal Warriors: Uncovering the Tragic Reality of PTSD.

FROM VETERANS FOR PEACE
2. About PTSD _ Nominated for an Oscar_ Poster Girl From: VFP
6. Effects of Deployments on Military Families From: James

POSTER GIRL FILM
Introduction
The story of Robynn Murray, an all-American high-school cheerleader turned “poster girl” for women in combat, distinguished by Army Magazine’s cover shot. Now home from Iraq, her tough-as-nails exterior begins to crack, leaving Robynn struggling with the debilitating effects
of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Shot and directed by first-time filmmaker Sara Nesson, POSTER GIRL is an emotionally raw documentary that follows Robynn over the course of two years as she embarks on a journey of self-discovery and redemption, using art and poetry to redefine her life.

*Poster Girl* documentary (female hero PTSD on return home)(film directed by niece of Ralph Nesson, Fayetteville, AR)

Washington GIs and Veterans are headed to Texas
IVAW webmaster@ivaw.org via uark.edu to jbennet

Dear James,
Preparing to Expand Operation Recovery Campaign to "the most troubled base in the military"
Last weekend, members of IVAW's Seattle and Joint Base Lewis-McChord chapters held a training where they learned outreach techniques for reaching active duty soldiers. This is the first step in our preparations to expand our Operation Recovery campaign to **end the deployment of traumatized troops to Joint Base Lewis-McChord, WA.**
Lewis-McChord is a military base that is plagued by the effects of untreated Post Traumatic stress and other war traumas. There are multiple active investigations into suicides and acts of violence by service members stationed at Lewis-McChord. In 2011, it had the highest suicide rate in the military. All of this points to a serious lack of accountability by the leadership and a culture of denial at the base. It is also the inevitable effect of sending troops on multiple deployments to war zones in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2011 the military paper, Stars and Stripes, rated Lewis-McChord as the most troubled base in the military. [http://www.stripes.com/joint-base-lewis-mcchord-rocked-by-scandal-1.130065](http://www.stripes.com/joint-base-lewis-mcchord-rocked-by-scandal-1.130065) So GIs and the surrounding community there weren't surprised that **Benjamin Barnes, Iraq war veteran accused of killing a Mount Rainier park ranger and wounding four others had been stationed there.** See this MSNBC article on the connection between Joint Base Lewis-McChord and Barnes.
Next month, Washington IVAW members are headed to Fort Hood, Texas, to visit IVAW's active duty chapter there. They will learn about how the Operation Recovery campaign is being implemented at the largest military base in the United States, and take lessons to apply back home at Joint Base Lewis McChord.
If you made an end-of-year donation to support our continued efforts to expand Operation Recovery from Fort Hood, Texas to Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington, we thank you. If you haven't yet given, any donation you make before January 15 will be matched dollar-for-dollar by another donor. Thank you for your continued support.
In Solidarity,
Iraq Veterans Against the War

END PTSD NEWSLETTER