

From Major General R M B Nitsch CBE



## Headquarters Support Command

Steeles Road  
ALDERSHOT  
Hampshire GU11 2DP

Telephone Civil: 01252 347001 Military: 94222 2001  
Facsimile Civil: 01252 347003 Military: 94222 2003  
E-mail SpComdHQ-GOC@mod.uk

Reference: 09\_01\_01

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8 January 2014

## THE MENTAL HEALTH OF ARMED FORCES' VETERANS

1. Over the past few months there has been a general drip of negative publicity about the mental state of Armed Forces' veterans and contemporary surveys have indicated that as many as nine out of ten members of the public believe that service leavers commonly have some kind of physical, emotional or mental health problem that is a result of their military service<sup>1</sup>. Support Command has been looking at this issue for some time<sup>2</sup>. Our research, recently corroborated by a Study commissioned by 42 (NW) Bde jointly with the HNS NW conducted by the Universities of Salford and Chester<sup>3</sup>, shows that the negative publicity and perception is unjustified.

2. **General Position.** The majority of personnel do make a successful transition to civilian life<sup>4</sup>, although a small percentage struggle. The general position is as follows:

- a. Veterans<sup>5</sup> are generally robust people who are likely to suffer the same range of health/welfare issues as the general population.
- b. The vast majority of Service Leavers (SL) housing needs are met on transition to civilian life and the majority of SL obtain gainful employment.
- c. A small minority of Veterans do experience difficulties post-Service, these tend to manifest themselves on average 10 years after discharge.
- d. The adverse outcomes (common mental health problems, unemployment, social isolation, encounters with the criminal justice system) present at a rate less than that in the general population.
- e. Adversity is more common in the untrained and Early Service Leavers (ESL) cohorts. Vulnerability is associated with pre-service adversity (childhood disadvantage, history of anti-social behaviour) rather than a consequence of Service life or combat experience.

3. **Specific Issues.**

- a. **Mental Health.** The mental health of Veterans is broadly similar to that of the general population, notwithstanding that their military career provides a very specific backdrop and context to some presentations. A career in the Armed Forces is not

<sup>1</sup> The Armed Forces & Society – The military in Britain through the eyes of Service personnel employers and the public.

Published May 12 available at: <http://lordashcroftpolls.com/2012/05/the-armed-forces-society>

<sup>2</sup> [20121122-Hindering or Helping Heroes-SpComd\\_ColMed.pdf](#)

<sup>3</sup> Universities of Salford and Chester commissioned by Comd 42(NW) Bde and NHS NW.

<sup>4</sup> Prof Sir Simon Wessely King's Centre for Military Health Research - KCMHR

<sup>5</sup> Veterans – "those that have served in HM Armed Forces for at least one day, either as a Regular or Reservist" Armed Forces Covenant

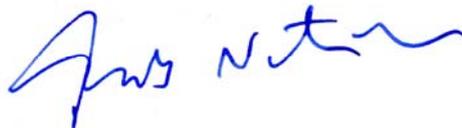
associated with an overall increase in risk of developing a psychiatric or mental health disorder. There is, so far, no evidence to support the assertion that we are sitting on a time-bomb of PTSD among Regulars who have served in Iraq or Afghanistan. Contrary to media assertion, the overall suicide risk appears no greater for Veterans than for the general population.

b. **Criminal Justice.** The long gap<sup>6</sup> between discharge from Service and custody of those<sup>7</sup> who do offend makes it difficult to associate any direct causal link between service in the Forces and imprisonment. There is limited evidence from which to identify any particular reason for Veteran offending which distinguishes Veterans from other offenders. What is clear is that the conventional problems associated with criminal behaviour such as drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness, a poor ability to deal with emotions, low educational attainment and financial pressures, appear to be as common among ex-Servicemen in custody as it is among the general prison population. Despite the UK male Veteran population accounting for 9.1% of the population, Veterans account for only 3.5% of the prison population. However, for the few Veterans that do come into contact with the criminal justice system violence and sexual crimes are notable occurrences with the misuse of alcohol an important recurring factor.

c. **Vulnerable Veterans.** Counter intuitively; it appears that those who serve the shortest time find the return to civilian life the hardest. There is some evidence that ESL experience more mental health problems than those who served for longer. The higher prevalence of susceptibility to mental health problems amongst ESLs, in many cases, accounts for their premature departure from the Armed Forces. For a few ESL the impacts of the various negative pre-Service vulnerability factors, placed on hold whilst in Service, reassert themselves post transition. This may account for the clustering of poor health and social outcomes in the ESL cohort.

4. Please feel free to publicise and use the above evidence as you see fit.

Yours sincerely,



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<sup>6</sup> 59% of veterans in prison are convicted and incarcerated over 10 years post discharge

<sup>7</sup> The proportion of ex-servicemen who offend is very small in proportion to the total of those discharged from the Force (0.057% of the UK Veteran population).