

## EDITORIALS

## Suicide among Falkland war veterans

Responses should be based on sound statistics not misleading sound bites

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The media sound bite, “more Falklands veterans have taken their own life than were killed in the war” has been in common use for about a decade. A recent report from the Ministry of Defence Defence Statistics (Health) has shown it to be incorrect—95 suicides have been recorded among Falklands veterans, whereas 237 deaths among UK Armed Forces personnel occurred during the campaign.<sup>1</sup> The report also found no overall increase in the suicide rate of Falklands veterans compared with the general population of the United Kingdom. So where did this false statistic come from, and why was it so misleading?

The claim that more Falklands war veterans have committed suicide than were killed in action was first made in 2002, the 20th anniversary of the war. A report in the *Mail on Sunday* gave a figure of 264 suicides compared with the accepted figure of 237 UK military personnel killed in action (plus 18 deaths among coalition forces).<sup>2</sup> The source was reported as the South Atlantic Medal Association, the principal group for UK Falkland veterans, although the association denied this. Only six months earlier the *Guardian* had reported a figure of around 100 suicides among Falkland veterans.<sup>3</sup>

However, the sound bite became ubiquitous, with the figure of 264 suicides appearing consistently over a decade in a wide range of media outlets,<sup>2 4-9</sup> peer reviewed scientific journals,<sup>10</sup> online blogs,<sup>11 12</sup> political party conferences,<sup>13</sup> and even a popular trivia book.<sup>14</sup> Nobody seems to have pointed out that more suicides must have occurred in this group during the most recent decade. And neither has anybody mentioned that the comparison between the absolute number of suicides and those killed in action is meaningless because it does not take into account the number of suicides that would be expected in the population in general (irrespective of veteran status).

But the Falklands veterans are not alone in their falsely reported high risk of suicide. During the Vietnam war, 58 220 US service personnel were killed.<sup>15</sup> The first time a claim was made that the number of Vietnam veteran suicides exceeded that number

seems to have been in 1980, in a manual on the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>16 17</sup> This number was soon picked up by the media and soon increased—for example, the claim that more than 100 000 veterans committed suicide was made by a university lecturer in a network television news broadcast.<sup>18</sup> Although there is no complete population sample or appropriate control group for all Vietnam veterans, several good studies have calculated the most likely true number of suicides among large representative samples of Vietnam veterans.<sup>16 19 20</sup> As expected, the number of suicides has steadily increased over time. For example in 1990, the estimate was 8941 suicides,<sup>16</sup> whereas the most recent estimate, which used rates calculated in 2004, suggests that the figure is around 20 000.<sup>20</sup> Thus it is incorrect to repeat, as many do, that “more Vietnam veterans have died from suicide than were killed in the war.”

An effect of service in Vietnam on suicide, even a substantial one, could possibly be concealed because the correct comparison is between the true rate of suicide and the rate of suicide in people who have not served in Vietnam. What such studies show is that there was an initial non-significant rise in the rate of suicide among Vietnam veterans in the first five years after discharge. However, over the full course of the follow-up, suicide mortality rates were lower than expected compared with the general male population in the United States, although not significantly so.<sup>19 20</sup>

Similar monitoring of suicide rates has occurred in the UK in those who served in the 1991 Gulf war. Forty seven soldiers were killed in combat. By 31 December 2012, 197 veterans had taken their own lives according to the latest published statistics<sup>21</sup>—more than four times the number killed in combat. Yet there do not seem to have been any claims that “more than four times the number of Gulf veterans killed in the war, have taken their own lives,” which in this case would be correct. Ministry of Defence Defence Statistics (Health) has been monitoring, analysing, and publishing, the numbers of suicides in this group and in military personnel from the same period

who did not serve in the Gulf for many years. These data, reported annually, clearly show no significant excess of suicides directly attributable to service in the 1991 Gulf war.

It is important to note that veterans do seem to differ from the general population regarding cause of death in the first few years after serving in a conflict. In the first five years after discharge, Vietnam veterans had a slightly increased risk of all cause mortality compared with the general US population. This higher risk seems to be mainly due to external causes of death (including road traffic incidents).<sup>20</sup> A similar, but non-significant, pattern is seen in British veterans of the Gulf war. This may reflect an inability in a subpopulation of veterans to adjust to the stresses of life back home and the relative risks of day to day activities. Veterans may have become used to risky situations and continue to exhibit risky behaviour in civilian life, which would make them more prone to being involved in road traffic incidents. This is consistent with a reported increase in risky driving behaviours, such as not wearing a seatbelt, seen in UK forces deployed in Iraq.<sup>22</sup>

We may never know how and why the meaningless and misleading sound bite about absolute numbers of suicides among Falkland veterans arose. However, it rapidly caught the popular imagination of press and public alike, encapsulating a growing sense of disquiet and unease about the treatment of ex-service personnel, and this eventually led to the generation of the Military Covenant (which outlines the nation's responsibilities to our Armed Forces personnel).

It is right that we should worry about the longer term social and psychological consequences of military service.<sup>23 24</sup> This concern should not diminish, but it should be based on sound statistics, not catchy sound bites.

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