

Shell Shock to Palali Syndrome

In war, there are no unwounded soldiers

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Palali is a well-known area in the Jaffna Peninsula in the Northern Sri Lanka. Palali has an important airport that serves as the main lifeline in the North. A large number of soldiers travel to the Northern Peninsula through the Palali Airbase. During the Eelam War, Palali Air Base played a key role (like the Tan Son Nhut Air Base during the Vietnam conflict) providing essential food items, medicines and ammunition to the troops. Throughout the Eelam War, many battle casualties were transported to Colombo via Palali. Therefore, Palali is a part of the combatants who fought in the Eelam War for nearly three decades. Palali is in their memories, sometimes in their intrusions. Palali has become a symbol and metaphor that recounts combat trauma in Sri Lanka. Palali represents the symptom complex of battle stresses that has been experienced by the new generation of combatants. It has developed in to a syndrome. Palali syndrome describes various clinical and psychosocial ailments experienced by the Sri Lankan combatants and in the final score how it affects the society at large.

Shell shock to Palali Syndrome was a long and agonizing path for the soldiers who fought numerous battles. These battles were fought in different countries under different circumstances. But in every battle the combatants experienced the gruesome realities of war. Combat trauma made dramatic transformations among the soldiers. Some were healthy transformations and some transformations were extremely detrimental. Shell Shock and Palali Syndrome describe the destructive effects of combat trauma on soldiers, their family members and the society.

In the early years of World War 1, Shell Shock was believed to be the result of a physical injury to the nerves. The term Shell Shock was coined by the British Pathologist Col. (Dr.) Fredrick Mott. He regarded Shell Shock as an organic condition produced by miniature hemorrhages of the brain. Shell Shocked soldiers exhibited symptoms of extreme fear, shaking, psychogenic blindness, psychogenic paralysis and sometimes aphonia.

Sheffield (2001) indicates that front line soldiers of the WW 1 were constantly exposed to artillery barrage and mortar attacks. It is estimated that 60% of deaths in World War I were caused by shrapnel. During World War I, 10% of British battle casualties were categorized as having some form of shell shock or neurasthenia. Jones et al., 2007 was of the view that Shell shock was largely free from stigma when used in the early phase of World War I because it was perceived as a wound, or a neurological lesion.

In 1915, Col. (Dr.) Fredrick Mott believed that shell shock was a neurological, lesion, a form of commotion cerebri, the result of powerful compressive forces. However, some experts expressed the view that the symptoms were more psychological than organic in origin. Mott examined the brains of two men dead of commotion cerebri (shell shock) and found no visible external injury to the brain. In addition, the Medics in 1915 found increasing numbers of soldiers who had been close to a detonation without receiving head injuries presented at casualty clearing stations with puzzling symptoms. They suffered from amnesia, poor concentration, headache, tinnitus,

hypersensitivity to noise, dizziness, and tremor but did not recover with hospital treatment. In October 1917, Salmon reported that shell shock was responsible for one-seventh of all discharges from the British Army

The Army was less sympathetic to the ordinary soldiers with Shell Shock. According to the classified reports during the World War 1 306 British and Commonwealth soldiers were shot on the orders of General Douglas Haig and other senior officers. In contrast, the US Army executed none of their soldiers. Between 1914 and 1918, the British Army identified 80,000 men as suffering from Shell Shock.

Private Abe Bevistein

Private Abe Bevistein was 16 years old when he was shot by a firing squad at Labourse, near Calais. He had been found guilty of deserting his post. Just before his court martial, Bevistein wrote home to his mother: "We were in the trenches. I was so cold I went out (and took shelter in a farmhouse). They took me to prison so I will have to go in front of the court. I will try my best to get out of it, so don't worry."

Private Harry Farr

After two years of fighting on the Western Front Private Harry Farr became mentally and physically exhausted. There was no energy left for him. He refused to fight at the Battle of the Somme. Private Harry Farr was charged with cowardice after a 20-minute court martial. He was executed at the age of 25 in Oct 1916. Before Private Farr's death, he spent 5 months in hospital being treated for shell shock. In August 2006, the British Defense Secretary Des Browne announced that with Parliament's support, there would be a general pardon for all 306 men executed in World War One. After 90 years of Private Harry Farr's death he was pardoned and formally honored on a war memorial. Pte. Farr's 94-year-old daughter Gertrude Harris received an official pardon letter from the Defense Ministry.

Shell Shocked Sri Lankan Combatants

During the World War 2, a small contingent of Sri Lankan soldiers attached to the British Army served in Italy, Singapore, Egypt and Burma. Some were exposed to active combat or witnessed the horrors of the WW2. Some historical data suggest that a few Sri Lankan veterans suffered from Shell Shock during the WW2. The renowned Sri Lankan novelist Mr. W.A Silva narrates the plight of a shell-shocked local soldier in one of his short stories.

The veteran film director Dharmasena Pathiraja's 1981 movie Soldadu Unnahe (A Combatant) was a story about a Sri Lankan village youth who joined the British Army during the World War 2 and fought against the Axis Forces. After the war, he returns home with vivid combat memories. There were no welcome home signs for him. His mind was filled with combat related intrusions and the old veteran was alienated from mainstream society. He becomes a homeless man and lives among the vagrants.

War Neurosis

During the World War 2 traumatic reaction to combat was identified as War Neurosis or Combat Fatigue Syndrome. Nearly 10% of US Servicemen developed combat exhaustion in the WW2. Over 1363,000 soldiers were given medical discharges and 39% had Chronic Fatigue Syndrome.

One US Soldier of the WW2 wrote after killing a Japanese soldier who tried to throw a grenade at him. *"I had just killed a man at close range," "That I had clearly seen the pain on his face came as a jolt.... The expression on that man's face filled me with shame and then disgust for the war and all the misery it was causing."*

Section 8

During the Korean War, the term section 8 was widely used to describe causes of psychological combat trauma. Those who had been diagnosed with section 8 were dealt with in a very situational manner. Alexander L. Smith –a Korean War veteran from Virginia Beach believes that all combat veterans returned home after the mission in Korea with some degree of emotional issues. When I returned to Straight Creek, Ky., I, too, went through emotional ups and downs and would walk for miles on railroad tracks trying to get my mind straight says Alexander L. Smith. For many years, I would occasionally have nightmares about seeing the swollen bodies of American soldiers lined up on the side of the road awaiting transfer back to the states, the sound of Russian T-34 tanks, or the sound of bugles and banzai attacks. Most of those feelings have gone now, having been replaced with stage four cancer.

Vietnam Syndrome

The term PTSD or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder emerged soon after the Vietnam War. PTSD has been found in 15% of 500,000 men who were in Vietnam. There are estimated 50,000 veterans suffering from full-blown symptoms of PTSD. At least half a million Vietnam veterans lead lives plagued by serious war related readjustment problems.

Since 1969 I relive with my experiences in Vietnam says Private DXXX whom I have met at the Coatesville VA Philadelphia in 2006. As an African American soldier in Vietnam, we had to fight two war fronts he further said. During the Vietnam era, racial tensions were aggravating and some Officers treated us with utmost racial prejudice. Hence, we were fighting the enemy and the racial injustices. Therefore, it became a two way battle front for us Private DXXX revealed.

Palali Syndrome

A new form of battle stress began in Sri Lanka mainly after 1983. Many Psychiatrists point out that a number of psychiatric illnesses have been increased as a result of the Northern Conflict. For a combat soldier in World War 2 who served for 4 years the average time spent in actual combat was approximately 40 days. In Vietnam, soldiers spent an average of about two thirds of their 12 or 13-month tours over 250 days in combat. But in Sri Lanka a large number of soldiers have spent 10-15 years in combat with short intervals.

For nearly three decades, Sri Lanka experienced a social calamity following an armed conflict and people were deeply traumatized. The echoes of the war trauma will affect Sri Lanka for generations. Although the origin and the history of this conflict was very complicated and carries

many versions and explanations, after all it is a collective trauma for the Islanders. The North and South suffered from this conflict creating a large number of physically and psychologically traumatized victims. The combatants who experienced the war firsthand became profoundly affected by the physical and psychological consequences of the armed conflict. Many became the victims of the Palali syndrome.

Palali Syndrome describes post traumatic reactions and post war re-adjustment problems experienced by some Sri Lankan combatants. It narrates the psychological aftermath of the Eelam War in Sri Lanka. Even though the Eelam War is over combat trauma is still hounding the Sri Lankan society rising as social violence, political violence, political extremism, criminal activities, domestic violence, suicides, homicides, alcohol and drug abuse, cruelty to children and various other forms.

Shell Shock to Palali Syndrome: You Tube Presentation ([contains graphic images](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SN6cqq1vGu0))

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