RUNNING HEAD: When two worlds collide

When two worlds collide: A story about collaboration, witnessing and life story research with soldiers returning from war

David Carless, PhD and Kitrina Douglas, PhD

Leeds Beckett University

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David Carless is a professor of narrative psychology in the Institute of Sport, Physical Activity and Leisure at Leeds Beckett University. Through a range of arts-based, narrative and performative methods, his research explores how identity and mental health are developed, threatened, or recovered in sport and physical activity contexts.

Kitrina Douglas is an ambassador for the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE), a member of the National Anti-Doping Panel for sport and director of the Boomerang-project.org.uk. Her research at Leeds Beckett University explores identity development, physical activity, and mental health through narrative and arts-informed methodologies.

Correspondence:
Professor David Carless
Institute of Sport, Physical Activity & Leisure
Leeds Beckett University
Fairfax Hall
Headingley Campus
Leeds LS6 3QS, UK
d.carless@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

Abstract

The story we share here stems from our research with British military personnel who are adapting to life with a physical and/or psychological disability after serving in the Iraq or Afghanistan wars. Throughout our research, we have struggled to answer the kinds of questions that plague qualitative researchers: How might we gain insights into intense, traumatic, even life-changing experiences? Should we be inviting individuals to recount or revisit such potent moments from their lives? What interpretive framework might we draw on to make sense of what are sometimes senseless experiences? How can we share any ensuing understanding with others without diluting, diminishing or disrespecting the lives of soldiers or their families? The story we share here – which responds to Denzin's (2003) challenge to reanimate life and Erickson's (2010) provocation to do so with greater modesty, visibility, and reflexivity – offers one answer to these questions.

Keywords: evaluation, military, narrative, reflexivity, trauma

When two worlds collide: A story about collaboration, witnessing and life story research with soldiers returning from war

Soldiers' experiences of war are often shrouded in secrecy as – historically – war veterans rarely describe too closely what happens in the field of battle. On the surface there may appear to be good reasons for such candour, such as shielding partners, wider family and communities from the horrors of war. Yet, drawing a veil over the atrocities of war by not talking about them should not be taken to mean these experiences are forgotten – 'out of sight' does not mean 'out of mind.' This point is well made by Bessel van der Kolk (2014) when he describes the devastating consequences for combat veterans who live with trauma – and a story they cannot share. These include profound isolation, shame, guilt, aggression or violence, amnesia, disassociation, flashbacks and re-enactment. Symptoms like these, van der Kolk observes, are often met with inappropriate mental healthcare and lack of understanding from others. Equally troubling is the distance that some clinicians maintain from delving too deeply into the experiences of returning veterans (van de Kolk, 2014, p. 189). It seems that even in contexts where we might hope for silence to be broken and for a trusting therapeutic relationship to develop, narrating embodied experiences of war and related distress can be impossible.

Yet, receiving appropriate care, emotional and psychological support, and realising recovery depends – to some extent – on both telling and being heard. That is, individuals need to communicate aspects of their experience to others who are willing and able to witness, acknowledge and respond. Additionally, versions of these personal stories need to be made available as a cultural resource to challenge the dominant narrative about soldiers and their supposed ability to 'cope,' following war, with physical and/or psychological difficulties and transition into civilian life. The dominant narrative about soldiers is too frequently based on a mythical character: *a 'man' who never breaks down, who is mentally and physically tough, strong*

and powerful. While, for a time, it may be helpful for some individuals to think of themselves as a strong impenetrable force, this allusion is difficult to maintain in the face of sustained disability, shock and trauma. At these times, soldiers may feel pressured to conform to a cultural script of *still* being mentally tough and physically strong, while living (and often re-living) a personal embodied story of vulnerability, weakness and shame.

While, historically, military organisations around the world have been slow to recognise, acknowledge and respond to the trauma personnel can face through active service (van der Kolk, 2014), recent years have seen the beginnings of a tide change. Increasingly, investments have been made and collaborations established to support the mental health, recovery and transition of returning soldiers. Researching the effects of these interventions, however, is not without problems, risks and challenges. One challenge concerns political pressure on funders to demonstrate intervention effectiveness in a way that meets the dominant 'evidence-based' criteria of our times (namely quantitative, statistical 'proof'). Another concerns the pressure on charities and public bodies to direct the bulk of their investments towards the project itself, rather than research or evaluation. This being the case, questionnaire or survey methods (erroneously considered by some as 'quick and clean') are often preferred to rigorous qualitative methods perceived as time-consuming and therefore costly. As such, these projects run the risk of being no more than 'drive through research' (Kovach, 2014), rightly criticised by the interpretive, feminist community for a failure to invest in research relationships, for researchers being removed from the community investigated, for giving little consideration to what would be advantageous for the individual and group concerned, and of caring too much about the funder and too little about participants.

Since 2011, we have been part of a team commissioned to evaluate the effects of a 5-day sport and adventurous training course aimed at supporting recovery and personal development of military personnel (Carless, 2014; Carless & Douglas, 2016; Carless, Peacock, McKenna &

Cooke, 2013; Carless, Sparkes, Douglas & Cooke, 2014; Douglas & Carless, 2015). These personnel are adapting to life with a physical impairment (such as limb amputation/s or impairment from gunshot or an improvised explosive device), chronic illness, and/or psychological disability (often diagnosed as anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder) in the wake of the Iraq or Afghanistan wars. As researchers working on a large commissioned evaluation, we feel acutely the kinds of contractual, economic and political pressures described above. We are obliged to work to tight deadlines and budgets, to provide those who fund our work the evidence they seek in the form they expect. But, at the same time, we remain committed to 'ethically responsible activist research' (Denzin & Giardina, 2010, p. 17). We believe this kind of research is needed in the settings we work. The story we share here, then, stems from our desire to be transparent about the methodologies we have developed, refined and used within what is a challenging context.

Throughout our work, we have struggled to answer the kinds of questions that plague qualitative researchers: How might we gain insights into intense, traumatic, even life-changing experiences? Should we be inviting individuals to recount or revisit such potent moments from their lives? What interpretive framework might we draw on to make sense of what are sometimes senseless experiences? How can we share any ensuing understanding with others without diluting, diminishing or disrespecting the lives of soldiers or their families? How can our work meaningfully contribute to the lives of the soldiers we meet, their families and others like them? The following story explores these kinds of questions and responds to Norman Denzin's (2003) challenge to 'reanimate' life – our own as well as each participant's. Here, the desire to 'reanimate' life provokes us to reflect on how our own life stories and values emerge, merge and intertwine with those of the participants. It calls us to interrogate how our past experiences and positioning (for example, concerning the military) positioned us in particular ways as we entered the field. Rather than our methodology being an intellectual exercise for academic purposes, we

aspire to Erickson's (2010) provocation to write with greater modesty, visibility and reflexivity, in order to affirm the dignity of those whose lives we research and reveal some of the complexities of their lives and histories, without sacrificing the unique stories and relationships that developed.

When two worlds collide

At school … 1980-something

It was a glancing blow to the shoulder, backed up with, 'Cadet, get in fucking step!'

But he didn't move. Was there something to prove? This Cadet wasn't sure, but if ever 'stubborn' took an embodied form, *he* was *it* was at that moment. So he stood his ground, looked Lance Corporal Fikes in the eye and muttered under his breath, 'Asshole.'

The muffled abuse was lost beneath two falling, entangled bodies, rolling across the makeshift school parade ground. The marching up-and-down, at least for today, was over.

*

'It's not a big deal, really,' Mr Noble, a maths teacher, said in the small, impromptu staff meeting, trying to put the 'problem' in context. 'They're 15-year-olds, flexing their growing egos.' He chuckled, sat forward in his chair, placed his elbows on the table and his chin in his hands. The move, and his flexing biceps, somehow showed the absurdity of the situation on the parade ground. It was summer, and Mr Noble's short sleeve shirt meant the muscular show was not lost in on his colleagues. Mr Noble, you see, along with being a mathematics teacher, was a UK power-lifting champion. He didn't need to raise his voice. His muscular form spoke volumes about discipline, sport and the ethos of the school.

Unlike one of the English teachers, who wanted, still, to make a point. ‘He’s too big for his boots that boy, he needs to knuckle down. The cadets are good for him, teach him some discipline…’

‘With all due respect Mr Jenkins,’ Mr Noble cut in, ‘marching, shooting and playing soldier doesn’t suit all boys. Which is why we have other voluntary service work they can do.’ Mr Noble sat back, this time placing his veined hands on the table.

‘I’ve got an idea,’ chipped in Mr Motford, the PE teacher. ‘He and Rooty could help me out with maintaining the kit, there’s masses to do. That would be a good volunteering role for two young men.’

And so it was. A fifteen-year-old boy called David was excused serving time in the school cadet force to maintain sport kit. But he never lost that feeling – a wary dislike of everything military. From the marching up and down, to the ‘banter,’ to the uniform, it brought waves of unprocessed emotion.

Phone call, a Sunday afternoon, 25 years later

[The sound of the phone is off, but the phone is lighting up. Kitrina picks up]

David: Hey

Kitrina: Ah. What’s up?

David: I don’t want to go

Kitrina: I see

David: The environment, squaddie humour, aggression, competition, homophobia, sexism, so-called jokes – I haven’t had to deal with that shit since…

Kitrina: You got thrown out of the cadets at school?

David: Actually, I was gonna say my summer job in the Officer’s Mess at the marine camp [pause and a slight laugh]. Which was actually just as bad.

Kitrina: Oh yes, I forgot about that

David: Yes [a longer pause] I feel…

Kitrina: Uncomfortable? Boyfriend, out, long hair … and you'll be expected to look straight, not get upset with gay jokes, play the game, be a 'bloke,' wear a tie even? Oh, and feel alone again.

David: I feel sick

Kitrina: Well, might I suggest you are exactly what the project needs? Someone who will be sensitive to things that can't be said, to what goes unseen, to the vulnerabilities of the soldiers? Maybe you have the type of empathy these guys need?

David: That's not very comforting

Kitrina: Write it all down, sweetie

[A car horn sounds in the background]

David: My lift's here

Kitrina: Gimme a call when you get there. I'm here. If its really bad I'll come and get you – any time. I won't turn my phone off.

Unknown fears

Speak from our past

Layered onto the child

Moulded, now, into the man

Hidden in folds

Giving shape to dread

Suspicion … terror

Dare we name them?

Wheelchair basketball, Monday afternoon

Have you ever seem a man in a wheelchair perform a pirouette? Spin on the spot, 360-degrees, at speed and then stop, as they say, on a dime. Then, roll backwards, tip the front up and balance on two wheels, laugh, spin again. Now, give him a ball, and put him on a basketball court.

Imagine that same man – dirt in his mouth, his eyes, his teeth and hands bloody, legs missing, genitals exposed through torn fatigues, broken skin, lying motionless on an Arab desert floor, thousands of miles from his home, unable to move – when the thought flashes across his mind: 'I CAN'T FUCKING MOVE!'

Fast forward. Through the months of rehab, pain, lies, humiliation, lost hope, fear. *Sat* at home, alone, drugged up, angry, lost. And no one comes to visit. A month passes, two months, three months, four, a year … apathy … another year.

The clash of iron, the noise, the exhilaration, the possibility, fun, laughter, blokes ribbing each other, speed down the court. Lungs bursting, perspiration flooding, adrenaline pumping, a body that recognises, remembers, the feelings, they were good, weren't they? They were lost, weren't they? And here they are – again. Dare a man … believe again?

Beer talk, Tuesday evening

Empty pint glasses littered the table. Evidence of a long evening or, perhaps, only evidence of seasoned drinkers.

'My round lads,' Colin announced as he began to collect the empties.
'Yours was a Stella?' he said to Al. 'John Smith's,' he nodded towards Liam, then, 'Guinness and Guinness too I believe?' He carried on until orders were placed and, defying gravity with the number of empty glasses he held in his arms, made his way to the crowded bar.

In between the 'Mine's a Stella, ta,' beer orders, Al explained the reason for his current physical inactivity, finishing with, 'I can do fuck all to be honest.' And then, as if to provide

proof, he rolled up his trouser leg, removed his shoe and sock, and exposed a long, red bulging scar. ‘Now that,’ he said, pointing at the fault line running down blotchy white skin, ‘is just the start of it.’ He continued describing ‘the problem’ while rotating his leg to give everyone a panoramic view, ending with, ‘It’s a fuck!’

The climbing coach was more optimistic. ‘Well, we can adapt the harness to take pressure off your leg...’

Matt, another soldier, rescued a glass displaced by Al’s leg across the table and raised his eyebrows. Then, twisting his head to look more closely at the exposed wound, said, ‘Mate, I *dream* of having a scar like that on my ankle!’ David, along with the rest of the group laughed at the thick, black irony: Matt, you see, had lost both his legs.

Liam, putting his glass a little too firmly on the table, instantly drew all eyes towards him. Looking at Al’s scar, he followed the crash of the glass with, ‘So, your ankle doesn’t work? That’s a hell of a lot better than your dick not working.’

Colin’s return from the bar coincided with an awkward silence following Liam’s point. But with four pints precariously nestled in his huge hands he needed to deliver his booty. He looked at Scott, who tilted his head and shrugged, unable to put into words what just happened. Like most English men he could talk about beer though, and looking Colin in the eye, smiled awkwardly and accepted the gift. ‘Ah, just the ticket, thanks mate.’

A call from the TV interrupted the uncomfortable silence: ‘You lot! Arsenal, get your arses over!’ In less than thirty seconds, David and Scott were left alone, accompanied only by two tall glasses, one of Guinness the other of Bombardier bitter, the bubbles of which entertained David on their route to the surface, as he watched their course. Scott filled in the silence as the two men sat side by side, away now from the rest of the group.

‘I shouldn’t be here really,’ Scott said sitting back a little. ‘Those guys,’ he said looking toward the group already shouting at the TV screen, ‘I was there six months ago. And I’m lucky.

I've met lots of guys much worse situations than me. I shouldn't be taking up a seat on this course when there's others need it more.'

David didn't have anything to day, so to gain thinking time he took another carefully measured sip of his Guinness while nodding his head. Scott too, took a lengthy sup from his pint and, while looking into the golden challis, began unfurling other bits of his life.

'I've caused a lot of trouble since I've been back you know,' he nodded, placing his beer on the table very carefully, but not taking his eyes off it. 'Two years its been, but it doesn't really feel like it cause,' he breathed a deep heavy sigh and lowered his voice and sat forward again, closer to David, 'cause I'm always thinking about it, running over events in my head, again and again.'

David looked up from his pint, took a sip and then carefully placed his glass back on the table, turning it half a turn as was his ritual, to kiss each time from a fresh lip of the glass.

'And everyone's pushing you, you know, *how many hits have you've got?* That's what its like. They don't get it. *How many d'you kill?* I'm like, "Fuck-off!" They don't understand. In one contact I got three confirmed kills and four injured. After, I was, like, "Yeah! Get in there!" We were celebrating, the adrenalin's going, you know, "I got 'em, I got the Afghan's," who'd just killed five of our guys.'

David didn't much like what he was hearing, but there was something about the way this tale was being told, its message, that bit-by-bit inched him into the story. This wasn't about glory. It was shame. Vulnerability. Pain. A man who had begun to see differently. It was about two men – sat side-by-side, nursing pints in a bar – *both* starting to see differently.

'But then they told me there was a ricochet.' This time Scott looked at David. Was Scott checking to see if David was paying attention? Was he looking for reassurance to carry on? David was attending alright. He hadn't taken his eyes of Scott – he was watching his every move, every

gesture, every glance, change of tone. ‘One of my rounds, went off a wall. It killed a little girl in a school.’

David recognised the weight of what was being shared, the knotted ball of pain, anger, confusion, regret, and sadness but he didn’t really understand why, in his body too, he was feeling such complex emotions, contradictions. And as he listened wondering, how does he live with that? How do *we* live with that?

Phone call, late Tuesday night

David: Hello

Kitrina: Greetings

David: Sorry about not answering earlier

Kitrina: No worries, I guessed you were OK and doing something important

David: Just had to get my thoughts down

Kitrina: I see. What thoughts were those?

David: I had a beer in the bar after dinner, well a couple actually, and one of the soldiers, Scott, just … he wouldn’t stop talking

Kitrina: Well that’s good isn’t it?

David: Well, yes. And no. It sort of happened before I was ready really. One minute we were in a group talking about tomorrow’s canoeing, and then suddenly the others went off to watch the football and we were alone. My recorder was in my bag, and I felt really awkward about stopping him and going over protocols or whatever. It just seemed completely wrong! There was no time to go back to what we said in the introduction yesterday, to make sure he understood how we collect our findings, and it was just … it was pretty heavy what he was telling me about his life. But it was all really relevant to our work.

Kitrina: So what did you do?

David: What could I do? To be really honest, it had already been a really long day, I'd been on the go since seven this morning. I was knackered and wanted to go to bed. Starting to hear someone's story at ten at night is not such a good thing for me.

Kitrina: So?

David: So I listened. *Supported the telling* you would say. Tried to bear witness, *become a container for his story*. Then, surprise surprise, I couldn't sleep when I got back to my room – it was hopeless with his story in my head. So, I paced around a good bit, made a cup of mint tea, paced some more, forgot about sleeping and tried to remember everything he said, write it down as if he were there telling me. That's what I was doing when you called earlier – and why I didn't answer.

Kitrina: Ah. And how are you getting on?

David: Not so well – the phone keeps ringing!

Kitrina: I was only…

David: I know you were sweetie – that was a joke. You know, being here is tough, hearing these stories, it's challenging alright. And then there's the whole research-participant thing, power imbalance, ethical challenges. In the back of my mind I'm asking myself if I'm coercing people, thinking about what they may see looking at me, what they expect out of all of this, I'm trying to perceive any pressure they might feel. Then there's the culture here and, of course, the delicate act of sharing – how *they* might want to be represented.

Kitrina: Like I said before you left, this is why someone like you *should* be there – to be respectful, caring, aware. What have you learned from all those doubts? Is it making a difference to what you'll do now?

David: Well… I'm thinking about abandoning the whole idea of recording interviews and the belief that transcriptions will somehow be more accurate than what I experience *with* the soldiers. The thought of stopping the conversation to pull out a recording device when someone starts to

share something important – its not just that it will ruin everything but its disrespectful, formulaic, makes others adhere to *our* conventions. We've already told them what we're doing here during the first session, we've told them what we are interested in, we've been through all the 'ethics' forms we're required to complete. The way the most important exchanges happen – spontaneously – to say 'stop!' or 'can you repeat that so I can record it?' would just lose the moment, the intimacy, it would intrude. It'd be ridiculous really. It just doesn't feel right.

Kitrina: So what does feels right?

David: Well, listening and engaging when *they* want to talk. You know, really hearing. Working out what to do on a one-by-one basis, being led a bit more, not just by the individual but by what the culture throws up. What I'd like to try is to write this story – about Scott, based on what he shares – and see what he makes of it. As I'm reading it now it seems like a good way to do research – but I don't know for sure.

Kitrina: Not that you ever will!

David: Quite. But it might be dangerous. What I'm wondering is – and tell me if you think this is daft – is this a more respectful way to acknowledge another person's experience? *To not record it… but to absorb it.*

Kitrina: That's a refreshing change for a contracted evaluation, David. But is this a part you are playing or are you *really* interested in their stories now?

David: You know what, before I came I thought I'd be playing a role, just doing my job. I didn't think I could ever care about someone whose job it is to kill people. Now I'm here… I was just sat next to a guy who I only just met yesterday and he started telling me stuff he says he doesn't talk about with anyone. About a picture he can't get out of his head. You see, he killed a little Afghan girl and he sees this kid, wearing bracelets, in his head, day and night. Part of me hates what I'm hearing and just thinks, '*Well what the blood hell do you expect!'* But what should *we*

expect telling young men to go to war? So, yes, I am affected. And then there's the proximity of our bodies, the vulnerability he revealed, the *way* he told this story.

Kitrina: What do you mean, the *way* he told his story?

David: Well, I can't describe it. Part of me hates everything he stands for: war, glory, power, violence, the brutality of domination. But he seemed broken. I found myself wanting to put my arm round him, to say, *'It's gonna be alright.'* But, at the same time, I don't *want* it to be alright! It *should* cause him concern, what he's done. It *should* cause us deep, deep concern sending young people like him off to fight in wars – to do what they do and be done to by others. I keep getting that film *A Few Good Men* in my mind and the scene where Jack Nicholson's character snaps and screams, 'You want the truth? You can't handle the truth!'

Kitrina: So what are you going to do now?

David: Well, at the moment, writing this story seems the most faithful and honest way to respond

Kitrina: What does – was Scott his name?

David: Yes

Kitrina: What does he think about it?

David: Gimme a break! I've only just started writing it so I don't know yet! I'll see him at breakfast but that won't be a good time to chat. I think there may be time at the volleyball or the canoeing tomorrow afternoon. If not, then at dinner maybe. And we can take it from there.

Dinner, Wednesday evening

'Hey Scott,' David said sitting down opposite Scott in the canteen. He wanted to come straight out and say, 'I need you to read a story I've written about you' but he was nervous about asking and more than a little uncertain. There were numerous ethical concerns running through his mind – he imagined Scott could not have expected to see these fragments of his life assembled on the page, in a whole. David also recognised that if he'd got this story down faithfully it could

be an emotional journey for Scott. In between mouthfuls of lasagne and shared laughs about canoeing, David walked to the cliff edge of the question… and jumped.

'Scott, you *are* aware why I'm here aren't you?'

'Yeah mate, it's cool. I read the thing you gave us… Doc!' Scott laughed, piled another fork with lasagne and swallowed it up.

'And you know you've been telling me about your life?' Scott nodded and continued eating. David sighed and opened his laptop. 'Well, I've kind of written down what you've been telling me, pieced it together, and sort of put it into a kind of story. And I'd like you to read it. Well, I *need* you to read it.'

Scott stopped chewing and stared at David. David couldn't tell what Scott was thinking. All he was aware of was that Scott was a fighting machine who could probably kill him, with his bare hands, in five seconds flat. He was a man who had put people in hospital – for no reason, he'd said. He would just 'flip out' if he became annoyed. And now, David wondered, might this story provoke Scott? Cause him to 'flip out'? Scott put down his knife and fork. To David, Scott was bull with potential to charge at any moment. But, having done so much fieldwork over the years with Kitrina, he took assurance from the knowledge that if she were there she would most probably see something quite different. And so, despite his fear, David continued.

'I'm wrestling with how best to do my job, how to talk about what I've witnessed this week, Scott. How best to include our conversations in the evaluation – whether to include them even. But I think this story – your story – is important. Or might be. And I won't know 'til you read it and until we've talked about what *you* want and what would be best for you.'

Scott nodded, pushed the tray and his half-finished dinner aside and opened his hands to receive the laptop. David walked around no man's land, crossing some invisible divide to the other side of the table, where he placed his cherished new MacBook, with a decade or more of work entombed in its networks, into the hands of a man who sometimes 'flips-out' when he gets

angry. Then David pulled up a chair and sat quietly, watching every eye move, every hesitation, Scott's mouth forming words in silence, his face becoming flushed, his fist becoming taught, his hand wiping sweat from his forehead, a big breath.

If this were a Tarantino movie, five minutes in would signal the moment when the music would reach its crescendo, a violin would screech, a burst of gunfire would erupt, and blood would squirt across the screen accompanied by shrilling yells. The laptop would be hurled into the air, exploding into a million pieces as it crashed against a concrete wall. Despite the bubbling pot of emotions David was feeling, he tried to remain calm and contain his concerns. When he was unable to qualm his fears any longer he interrupted Scott to ask: 'How are we doing so far?'

Phone call, Wednesday night

Kitrina: So what happened? What did he say?

David: I can tell you his exact words. I can still hear him. He turned slowly away from the screen, looked me straight in the eye, Kitrina, and said: '*We're doing very well so far.*'

Kitrina: Wow. Amazing. Or, phew!

David: I know. He suggested a few changes, like, you know, technical details, the ammunition and the number of rounds he carried. But, Kitrina, he said he was *really* happy with the story. He seemed *so* sincere. It was a very powerful – intimate even – moment. It was like everything fell away – all the bullshit, the barriers, façades. For a moment, we shared something *so* profound. It was like seeing into – or touching – each other's fear.

Goodbye

Got a call just today

Some old friend had passed away

Sorry that they couldn't stay

Gotten lost and went away

Standing outside by your door

I call your name, reply no more

Silence falls upon the floor

Feels like a quiet roar

I just called to say goodbye

Didn't call to tell you why

I just called to say goodbye

Goodbye to you, goodbye to you

David pressed pause on his iPod as he entered the room but the song, written by a musician friend, was still playing in the foothills of his consciousness. *I just called to say goodbye, didn't call to tell you why*. He scanned the room, filled now with two groups of soldiers, military officers, coaches and research staff. The C.O. called the group to order and said a warm but official 'thank you' to the coaching team, staff and those on the course. David wasn't really listening. The song filling his head had filtered out all the chatter and his radar honed in on Scott. Within the emotions of the song, he was physically aware again of how he felt hearing Scott's message to him the previous evening: *'I've been changed by being at Battle Back ... telling my story. I had no idea how important that could be ... mate, its changed my heart.'* David stared across the room, across an invisible sea of dead bodies, across the vision – now in his mind too – of a little girl wearing bracelets, across the ethical minefield that was his world, into what might

come next … in his research and in Scott's life. As he did, the C.O. finished, the group broke out and Scott walked directly to David, pulled David's body towards his and just hugged.

Phone call, Saturday, back home

Kitrina: How are you feeling?

David: Exhausted. Emotionally. Glad to be home – being there drains me. Hearing what they've been through drains me. And I'm so uncertain what we should do next…

Kitrina: How do you mean?

David: Well, these guys' experiences… they are so… quashed. We never hear about them. The news reports who died and who was injured. These guys – the ones who carry the emotional consequences of it all – aren't on the curriculum, they're off the radar, so people don't have a clue what's going on. I feel we should be doing more, you know, to get these stories out there, to make sure they're heard. Standing with our participants. And shouldn't we be writing about what its like for *us,* in the field? Writing about the realities of doing this kind of contracted work, being transparent about the difficulties, the costs and the potential benefits, to help prepare other researchers. And then what about…

Kitrina: …the evaluation you've got to write?

David: Yeah. I can finish my contribution to the report alright – I want the funders to know the project is worthwhile, that the coaching team do an amazing job. That part's not so difficult. No, its, you know… I'm left with a feeling like I'll never see those guys again, and they most probably need to move on, whatever that means, but, I wonder… their stories… are they gonna just die? Disappear? Scott trusted me!

Kitrina: What did you say to Scott? How did you leave things?

David: Well, the last thing he said to me was he was like a jigsaw puzzle that was all separate pieces. But now, the puzzle is half done. The idea that his story might help someone else seemed

important to him. But as for him doing more or being more involved, well, he's still only *half done*. He needs to carry on with his recovery and, practically, he needs work. He's gonna be out of the Army shortly and without a job. But he said he didn't want to be a taker. I said to him I thought his story, we could try to publish it, the exact version he'd read and amended, try and get it used, you know, *out there*. We could use it with students. And there would be no pressure on him to do anything further if he didn't want to. That sort of appealed to him I think. You know, it seems to be important to all the guys I spoke with that their stories make a difference, achieve something, help someone. Or at least have the potential to make a difference – that something can come of all this pain and suffering.

Kitrina: David, you know that song of yours that goes, '*If I took this heart ache and planted it this evening, could there tomorrow be something wild and strong and free?'* Sorry if I got your lyrics wrong, but that sentiment – that this is all such a mess of heartache, loss, tragedy. He can't ever repair the loss for that little girl. Or the hundreds like her. Or the pain of her family – and all the other families. Or the dark places that these guys go to after things like this. But *you* can take that seed he offered you. That's what you must do: plant this heartache so that something else might grow. Could you take what you have of Scott's story, and get it out there, give it a chance to grow? Would that be a respectful way to stand with him, honour the events – evil and good – as they unfold in our lives? I may get hammered for saying this, but it seems we should not shy away from telling these stories sweetie. Get Scott's story out.

Scott's Story

One hundred and thirty-three pounds. That's the weight of kit I was carrying in Afghan. It's like I was carrying my ex-wife around everywhere! I'm a machine-gunner, so add it up: the weapon, kit, sidearm, water – which I'd usually dump to save some weight and then drink someone else's. Plus twelve-hundred 762 rounds – enough for twelve minutes firing. I carried

mine in tins, which adds to the weight. You don't have to, but it keeps them clean, saves muck getting in the chain, or rounds getting out of line, which jams the weapon. So the extra weight is worth it, I reckon – you don't want your weapon jamming.

Courage in restraint, they call it. I'm pretty good at the job – I used to come out top in range competitions. Maybe I should go back to it – they need good gunners. But I don't know if I can after what's happened.

I got a lot of hits in contact. That's what everyone always wants to know since I've come back. They don't get it. 'How many d'you kill?' I'm like: 'It's none of your business.' They don't understand. In one contact I got three confirmed kills and four injured. After, I was, like, 'Yeah! Get in there!' We were celebrating, the adrenalin's going, you know, I got 'em, I got the Afghan's – who'd just killed five of our guys. But then they told me there was a ricochet, one of my rounds, went off a wall. It killed a little girl in a school.

I can't believe I just told you that. I don't talk about that with anyone. Why have I just told you that? It took me months and months to tell my CPN that. But I still can't get it out of my head. There's a film with a little Afghan girl in it, wearing these bracelets. I mean, I never saw the girl I killed, I don't know what she looked like. It was an accident. I know that. I never actually saw her. But I keep seeing this image of the girl from the film in my head.

I've caused a lot of trouble since I've been back. I can tell you it's two years since I've been back, but it doesn't really feel like it 'cause I'm always thinking about it, running over events again and again in my head. It could have been yesterday that I was there. It's not that I *try* to think about it, and I know I couldn't have done anything different to change what happened. But it just keeps running over and over. Then suddenly I'll find myself flipping out. You know, someone will cut me up on the road and I'll go into a rage, I'll follow them, chase them, 'til I find where they live. I've hurt people. I've put people in hospital since I've been back – for no reason. I've just flipped out. I'm thinking: this isn't normal, there's something wrong with me. My CPN,

they didn't believe there was anything wrong with me for ages. I realised I was ruining my life, ruining other people's lives, and that I needed help before I ended up in prison. So I went back and pretty much flipped out with them too. Then my CPN admitted, yeah, something's not right, you need help.

So I got help and now I have strategies to try to deal with it. I still wake up some nights soaked in sweat, wondering what just happened. I don't ever remember any of my dreams, but when you wake up like that it's pretty obvious you've just had a nightmare. So I'll get up and go out for a walk or a jog, on my own. Then I'll come back a different person. Or I'll feel it coming on and just take myself off for a bit. And, as a last resort, I have diazepam which seems to work. I think it's just a placebo – because I know its there and I can actually take it, I feel like I'm able to do something to make it OK, so I calm down.

I reckon the two years on my own – though it's been hard in other ways – has helped me. It's easy to go right in with a solution before you really know what the problem is. Sometimes it takes time to work out what the problem really is. It took me a long time to realise that little girl was going round my head. You know, I had to get those images out of my mind. They're still there, but before they were kind of there somehow without me knowing it. Now, at least, I know it, so they're not in there all the time. A while back, I couldn't have talked to you like this. I was like a jigsaw puzzle that was all separate pieces. But now, the puzzle is half done. I'm halfway there.

The last month has really transformed me – two weeks at the Personnel Recovery Unit and this week here on the Battle Back course. Before, I wasn't bothering about myself. I wasn't shaving, my beard was out here, and my hair was long, just a mess. I went AWOL. I did different jobs. I didn't care about myself. You know, I'd be at home with my brother, nothing to do, we'd be bickering, blah, blah, this and that. And then, my wife leaving me at the time I needed her most. But lately, I've had the chance to just get away – a change of people, a different place. Like

here at dinner now, we're all here together, we've all been through the same stuff, we all understand, you see. So I can relax, not worry about stuff. But when you're on your own for a year or more with nothing to do – that on its own is enough to drive you crazy, you know.

Getting into these kinds of environments, like here at Battle Back, has really helped me feel confident in myself again. It's brought a bit of structure – things to do – that's missing if you're at home. And the climbing – that was so much fun. I just loved it. If it carries on like this, I'll have a smile right round the back of my head by the end of the week! I haven't felt this good for a couple of years, I'd say. That day on its own has made me feel positive about things – things I can do that I wouldn't have thought I could do anymore. I got back to myself as I used to be. And while I was climbing, I just got lost in it while I was doing it. The usual thoughts and images went away. I was just thinking about what I was doing at that moment.

The big thing for me now is how I sustain the good stuff after this week. What can I do to stay in this head-place I'm at now? That's what I'm a bit worried about. I'm 27 and I've got to think what I can do next. I've got ideas for a couple of businesses. I want to work on them with my brother and sister – I think that would be good for them too. And I'm lucky, very lucky. I've met lots of other guys in much worse situations than me. I don't even think I should really be here this week, taking up a seat. I'm not a taker, you know, I'm a giver. I don't want to take when there are others that maybe need it more. But maybe there's something I can give, to help other guys, in some way. I don't know what that's gonna be, but, you know, maybe…

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