

Of Military Suicides and War Resisters

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In 2012, 349 active duty U.S. military personnel committed suicide, with projections slightly lower for 2013. Those verifiable suicides don't include intentional accidents, terminal mistakes, or other indirect means of suicide. Figures for attempted suicides are many times higher and ignored. A rising suicide rate is reflected in veterans' suicides with recent marked increase in fatalities among younger veterans.

The statistics for veteran suicide are based on data from twenty States only and are given as 22 per day. These don't include suicides outside knowledge of the Veterans Administration Hospitals, such as homeless vets, wanderers, victims of rape and others who want to nothing to do with the military. Nor do they include figures from slow suicides of drug abuse, alcoholism, extremes of diet and behavioural patterns, violence. Suicide in the military sector may be epidemic. It's hard to separate this from the wars of aggression the U.S. is engaged in.

What the media and military avoid with puzzlement at the increasing suicide death toll:

Wounded military people and veterans aren't receiving adequate medical and psychological care. Suicide costs the military less than long term health care.

All soldiers are wounded. Defense Department statistics imply many suicides rise simply from personal problems, yet the suicides take place within a structure where the soldiers blame themselves for the failure of their support system.

Those participating in criminal wars enter a torment. Most signed up to affirm something good, and with that stripped away, lose self-value. In contrast, people fighting wars of liberation don't commit suicide, though some (ie. "suicide bombers") sacrifice their lives to further the tactical interests of their group.

Suicide is one alternative to serving in a war that is a crime against humanity so it's reasonable to avoid both.

Officers are better paid and better treated so their suicide rate is much lower than among enlisted people. It would lower the number of suicides to increase non-officer salaries and family benefits while the soldier is alive.

Paying public works alternatives to the military should be developed so that the vast numbers of unemployed youth will have alternatives to earning a living by killing people.

Military training is predicated on stripping enlisted people's sense of self worth. It's a leftover policy from class rule. A soldier knows the military is more interested in its objectives than survival of any soldier so a suicidal cycle starts with enlistment. This

problem wouldn't exist if the military were only for defense of the homeland.

Training should include teaching non-compliance with illegal orders. This is necessary to protect the soldiers within criminal wars, and helps remove the sense of helplessness which leads to terminal acts.

To lower suicide rates people who become conscientious objectors or find any particular war against their personal code, should be released from service.

The military should allow soldiers to unionize so their interests can find representation outside of the chain of command.

Political action is a good antidote to suicide; on separation from the service veterans should move into political education and radical action. This concept has grown steadily since the first Veterans against War organizations of the 1960's.

Military services should never be contracted to private security firms. Military service in foreign or private U.S. security firms should be criminalized. Under current law there is no 'legal' justification for killing outside of a State's application of the death penalty, or in certain circumstances (ie. declared wars) service in the U.S. military. Privatization of killing, like death squads, separates the soldier from the people and community which he or she ultimately relies on for support, stability and mental health.

War resistance

More U.S. military people commit suicide each year than are known to desert to Canada. Why is that ? Well, death is inclusive to everyone, while Canada continues to deport contemporary deserters to U.S. military prisons. One or two resisters have found safe haven through legal cases and appeals against the orders to remove them. Polls have shown a majority of Canadians supports war resisters, but in 2010 Parliament failed to pass bill C-440 amending the Immigration act in their favour. The Harper government continues to deny refuge and asylum. Aside from known cases there are unknown numbers of resisters.

Among the deported were Robin Long, Clifford Cornell, and Kimberley Rivera. In the U.S., sentenced to 14 months, Kimberley Rivera gave birth in prison Nov. 26th, and was released Dec. 12th, after serving 10 months. In reporting her release, the U.S. military paper, Stars and Stripes, noted her dishonourable discharge doesn't necessarily mean she won't be able to find work. Jeremy Hinzman, an upfront conscientious objector, after numerous complex legal battles received a permission to stay in Canada on humanitarian and compassionate grounds. The UN Human Rights Commission has shown ongoing support for the rights of conscientious objectors. Yet on long term AWOL from the U.S. Army, Rodney Watson, under government warrant, enters his fifth year of sanctuary asylum in the First United Church of Vancouver. Many legal cases have been won by resisters, then appealed by the government and legal cases of war resisters such as Joshua Key remain under consideration as though waiting for politicians to wake up. Some cases are rarely mentioned, as though notice might upset an applecart.

The issue of war resisters isn't comfortable as it was during Vietnam. Draft resisters had escaped military training and were essentially civilians, buffering the inclusion of militarily trained deserters. Current resisters signed up to fight and were trained. Some have combat experience in wars so mixed with the brutality against innocent civilians that no one wants

to think about it.

Both Canadian society and the war resisters are trying to escape the same wars. But the war resisters, even with experience of war crimes in Iraq or Afghanistan, have asserted their conscience and moral right to stand with humanity.

To deny them denies the few humanitarian pretexts Canada has for participation in wars the resisters have rejected. Canada participated with armed forces in the initial invasion of Iraq (1991). It deferred in the second (2003) but supplied support. It participated fully in Afghanistan. While the legal accounts will be settled by history, current civil war in Iraq, the ongoing civilian death toll, the destruction of civil society, and early evidence of U.S. and allied intention to destroy an entire society, present a challenge to the Convention on Genocide.

Unsuccessful attempts to call British and American leadership to account for genocide have clarified an international system of law which refuses accountability. Yet the Genocide Convention stands without statute of limitation, a primary law, applicable when peoples finally tire of the slaughter of innocents, and as our judicial systems evolve with a clearer sight toward justice.

So deserters honouring international law on a personal basis are a thorn to neo-conservative policies internationally which rely on perception-management of the public to cloud the law, allowing corporate war economies to proceed with their crime in one country after another.

As in the Vietnam conflict those able to escape participation in inhumanity deserve respect, support, understanding and thanks, for trusting that it would be better in Canada, for respecting the beliefs of generations of Canadians among others. They should be asked to stay, to give some living voice to a generation learning how to respond to criminal wars. The War Resisters Support Campaign has declared the week of January 12 through the 19th, "Let Them Stay Week 2014". For the resisters it may be a cold comfort, but at least a moment of Canada's humanity amid so many lives trained to kill.

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