

Reflections by a former military surgeon

Colonel (ret'd) David Vassallo FRCSEd, DHMSA, MA, L/RAMC

Have you ever considered joining the Regular or Reserve Defence Medical Services, or becoming a military surgeon, or wondered what is so special about military medicine that the Defence Medical Services continue to attract the highest quality medical and nursing students, as well as already qualified doctors, nurses and allied health professionals? This is a personal view, prompted by a chance meeting with an elective medical student at a Level 1 trauma centre in South Africa, and adapted from an article later published in 'Medical Student International Magazine' in spring 2004.

I come from Malta, a small island in the central Mediterranean that was heavily besieged by the Axis Powers for over two years (1940 – 1943) during the Second World War – earning a reputation as the most heavily bombed place on earth. Thousands of men from the Royal Navy, the Army, the Royal Air Force and the Merchant Navy gave their lives so that Malta (and on a personal note, my parents and grandparents) could remain free. Their sacrifice also enabled Malta to carry the fight to the enemy. Some 1500 civilians lost their lives during the siege. These included my wife's 33-year old cousin with her three young children, killed by bomb blast at the entrance of an air raid shelter on Easter Sunday, 5 April 1942, during a month in which 5,500 tons of bombs fell on the island – and in which Malta's gallantry was recognised by King George VI with the award of the George Cross. The George Cross has graced Malta's flag ever since. Many thousands more servicemen and civilians were injured in the bombing, and were ardently cared for in civilian and military hospitals.

Freedom does not come lightly, nor does one forget a debt written in blood. Neither is freedom bought for ever, or maintained without vigilance. The words carved on a 2017 memorial to HMS Olympus (a submarine of the 10th Submarine Flotilla in Malta which was lost, with 88 men, to a mine on leaving harbour on 8 May 1942) say it all: 'Peace is not bestowed, it is achieved through sacrifice'. I grew up deeply conscious of this, in a world still beset by strife.

After moving to England as a medical student in 1978 and qualifying as a doctor in 1981, I closely followed the events of the 1982 Falklands Conflict. The next year, I joined the Territorial Army (now the Army Reserves) as a junior general surgeon. The Cold War was still very much on, and I trained to care for servicemen wounded in conflict, the modern-day successors of those my forebears had cared for during the Second World War. Subconsciously I was acknowledging Malta's debt. After five enjoyable years in the TA, I transferred to the Regulars in February 1989. The Regular Army promised (and indeed provided) excellent training opportunities, a rewarding career, good pay and pension, with the lure of travel and plenty of variety in my work, and importantly, just as in the TA, the camaraderie of keen and highly motivated individuals. And though the Berlin Wall fell on 9 November 1989, with Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev formally declaring an end to the Cold War on board ship at the Malta Summit on 2-3 December 1989, I still had ample opportunity thereafter to care for the victims of war, starting with the Gulf War of 1990-1991. I followed this with multiple deployments to Bosnia and Kosovo, Sierra Leone, and Iraq and Afghanistan, actively participating in a military medical revolution as the UK's Defence Medical Services transformed in conflict, before I retired in 2018.¹

¹ Vassallo D. Military Medical Revolution – How the UK's Defence Medical Services transformed in conflict, 1990-2015. (Hardback available only through the Museum of Military Medicine,

I found that the servicemen and women I met had the same ethos as their predecessors, and I was proud to be part of this tradition. But there was more to it. I saw in my medical and nursing colleagues the same willingness and commitment as had been evident in Malta in wartime: they cared passionately, in often arduous and dangerous circumstances, not just for service personnel but also for the civilians - men, women and often children - caught up in conflict. The latter are the most powerless, helpless and innocent victims of war, and as a father myself I was most moved by their plight.

We cared equally for our enemies too, regardless of race or religion. In the words of a famous German surgeon (Langenbeck), 'A wounded enemy is no longer an enemy, but a wounded human being in need of help'. Langenbeck wrote those words during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871, and they ring equally true today. As medics we wear the Red Cross armband, and fly the Red Cross over our field hospitals and medical units, on deployment. The UK, together with many other nations, respects and holds true to the tenets of the Geneva conventions, which makes the very occasional, unrepresentative lapse (as by some individuals in Iraq in 2003) all the more shocking to the rest of us.

Not surprisingly, as a military general surgeon, I have been based most often at a field hospital, usually helping care for young servicemen injured or taken ill in the cause of duty, each having been willing to give his life for his mates and country, even if sometimes maligned, as well as honestly trying his best to make a dangerous bit of the world a safer place. They rightly deserve the best care possible, abroad and back in the UK, and the military medical services strive to deliver that.

Yet I have derived most satisfaction, and perhaps achieved longest lasting good, when I found myself caring for injured civilians, and co-operating with non-governmental organisations on their behalf. I am still in touch with two Kosovar Albanian casualties of war who, as children the same age then as my own daughters, had been multiply injured and left for dead during a massacre of 14 women and children of their two extended families by a Serbian paramilitary unit (the Scorpions) in Podujevo on 28 March 1999. Three months later they were brought to our small British field hospital unit (22 Field Hospital), traumatised and subdued, seeking specialist help for the residual effects of their injuries, after NATO forces moved into Kosovo to stop the genocide. With the aid of a simple telemedicine system that I had helped develop for the British Forces,² we managed to evacuate them, and two other wounded Kosovars, to specialist hospitals in Manchester for further surgery and specialised care, which turned their lives round. These two young girls went on to testify bravely in war crimes trials in Belgrade against the perpetrators, participants also in the Srebrenica massacre, bringing them to justice, and earning the girls and surviving members of their family the newly established Anne Frank Award for Moral Courage in 2003 by doing so.³ I am humbled whenever I think of the tiny but catalytic role I played as a military surgeon in their story.⁴⁻⁵

<https://museumofmilitarymedicine.org.uk/product/military-medical-revolution-how-the-uks-defence-medical-services-transformed-in-conflict1990-2015>

² Vassallo DJ. Telemedicine kept simple. *Images in Paediatric Cardiology*. 2000 Apr-Jun; 2(2): 1-16.
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3232484/>

³ Awards: War Victims Pick Up Moral Courage Prize, 19 November 2003
<https://www.cypnow.co.uk/other/article/awards-war-victims-pick-up-moral-courage-prize>

My bedrock in all this has been my wife; I could not have carried on my career in the military medical services without her continuing love and support. She has put up time and again with me packing my bags and embarking on yet another foreign adventure, sometimes at short notice. It has not been easy for her, or for our daughters, God bless them all.

I have seen how men use bullets, bombs and fire to wreak horrendous damage on others. War is evil, its effects are often indiscriminate, and it can only very rarely be justified. Even then it remains but the lesser of two evils, and still poses an existential threat to mankind (I write this on the eve of the 76th anniversary of the first atomic bomb explosion at Hiroshima). If I cannot prevent war, at least I feel I have managed, by becoming a military surgeon and a member of the Defence Medical Services, to mitigate some of its effects, and in a small way help truth and justice triumph over evil.

I would like to end by dedicating this small chapter to all the families and victims of war, especially the children, and to those who care for them.

⁴ Voices of Kosovo in Manchester <http://www.vokim.org>

⁵ Bogujevci // Visual History – A Homage To All The Families And Victims Of War <https://docs.rferl.org/sh-SH/2013/12/17/27109dc0-30aa-4241-b4f7-4d9ff9f0737f.pdf>