

They shall grow not old

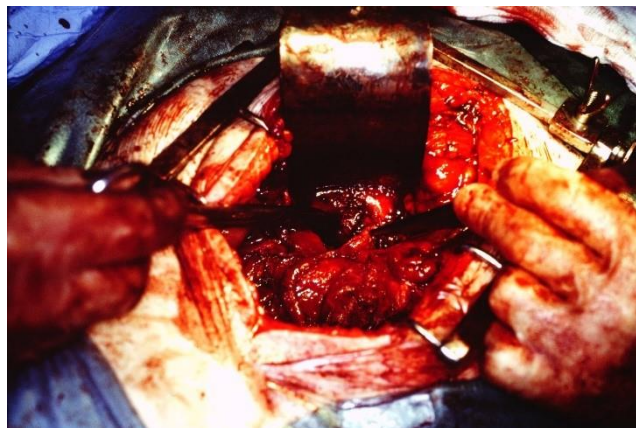
“Sorry sir. I cannot survive this. It’s too much; it’s too bloody much”. The anguished young Guardsman had interrupted me as I explained what I proposed to do in order to try and save him.

On the morning of 13 June, the Scots Guards were moved by helicopter from their position at Bluff Cove to an assembly area near Goat Ridge, west of Mount Tumbledown in the Falkland Islands. Guardsman C.C.T., a dispatch rider from the 1st Welsh Guards, was mortally wounded by Argentine shellfire directed from Tumbledown. He was brought into our Field Surgical Team (FST) in a terrible state. He was still alive when he arrived, but had lost both feet, his legs were at unnatural angles, and he was bleeding to death internally. It was a very severe blast injury. There was some hope for him, if I could arrest the bleeding, but this young, brave soldier knew there was no hope. He knew that better than I did.

His haunting words are not ones that I can ever forget, nor do I really want to, because they epitomised the spirit of the soldiers, who know when they have been injured beyond recovery and can accept their own death, even at their tender ages, with the same courage that they had faced the enemy. He was right. He had massive intra-abdominal and pelvic bleeding. His vena cava, the main vein in the body, had ruptured beyond repair and he died on the operating table.

As I closed his abdomen, I realised that I was never going to be as immune to the injuries of these young men as I hoped to be. I could divorce myself from the sufferings and the injuries whilst I had to do something about them, but in the dark moments, in the quiet moments, it got to me. It may be the case that his parents or family read this account and recognise this young Guardsman, who I have anonymised. He died bravely, with no hope, but no pain, on my operating table.

When I had finished sewing him up, I went on to my next casualty, who fortunately would recover from his comparatively light wounds. This patient was a young Argentinian and he looked about 15 years old. He had been wounded by a fragment which had entered his upper right abdomen, and he was stable as I opened him up. Fortunately, the fragment had missed all the important anatomy; there was no bile, faeces or much blood for that matter. He had a small hole in the substance of his liver which I closed with a circular suture, and no exit wound that I could ascertain. I assumed that the penetration of his abdominal wall had taken the sting out of this injury. I left a drain in for safety's sake and closed him up. He was shipped off back to Argentina. The padre knew the Spanish word for liver, so I wrote a note to accompany him, saying "*Higado – OK*".



Damage to Argentine soldier's 'Higado' Falklands War 1982

I would dwell many times on these surgical cases throughout my life and even now, nearly 38 years later, the impact has not significantly diminished. Indeed, as I have grown older, the emotions are harder to contain, as my resistance to the awfulness of the human cost of this and other conflicts I have been involved in has been markedly degraded with the passage of time. Having now retired from a busy civilian surgical practice, which occupied me almost to the exclusion of what had gone before, I have had more time to think and

reassess, sometimes relive a little of my past, and it is not a place that I am altogether happy about revisiting. These recollections and others have been compartmentalised for many years, but now that they have been reopened, I don't think I will ever be able to fully close them again. I have heard too many agonised screams and cries of despair and attended too many funerals, burials and remembrance services.

I have got on with my life, with my career, with my family because I have had to, but that is not to say that I have not been afflicted, like so many of my service colleagues, with that other described cause of mental anguish, 'survivor's guilt'. This is an insidious thought that resurfaces now and again, to punish me and others who came back, whole and healthy, though never the same. Why did I survive when 255 servicemen didn't? What marked me as different? I have had 38 years more life than them, 38 years more experience of the ups and downs of this world, the good and the bad, the pleasures and the pain. I did not have to fight for my life (medics are non-combatant but will fight to protect their patients). I just had to rely on serendipity and in truth, the fighting skills of those that I was there for, to try and save.

'They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old: Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn. At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them¹'. I know that I will.

Editorial note. The author of 'They shall grow not old' is Lt Col David Jackson RAMC, retired consultant general surgeon. This piece was originally published as the Introduction to his memoir 'Surgeon in the Raw', co-authored with Nicola Jackson (Mereo Books, 2020). It is reproduced here with his permission and with the agreement of Andy Cockeram, Chairman, British Modern Military History Society (BMMHS). It will be published in the forthcoming BMMHS 'Glimpses of War' special Falklands edition to coincide with the 40th anniversary of the Falklands conflict.

A review of 'Surgeon in the Raw' is available on the Friends of Millbank website, at <https://www.friendsofmillbank.org/books/>

¹ Robert Laurence Binyon, CH (August 10, 1869 – March 10, 1943)