BEREAVEMENT RESULTING F

Suddenness and youth intensify grief, human conflict is tragic, there is anger, the delay or lack of a funeral, and the need to feel that the sacrifice has been constructive and achieved a worthwhile end.

by

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"The mourning process is essential in man's adaptation to change. When the change is a massive one, as in war or natural disaster, the mourning process may not follow the usual course. It may become complicated or may never end; the psychological representations of the loss may never be converted into psychological gains." V. D. Volkan.

The Falklands War is the most recent military as opposed to police action in which British forces sustained casualties (Northern Ireland is looked at in the next section). Even only four years later it is difficult to obtain access to bereaved families, partly because so many have moved away, and partly because administrations are protective. However I gained valuable insights from sympathetic chaplains, and a few direct interviews which served to confirm their views.

Many individual reactions are recorded in *"Another Story—Women and the Falklands War"* by Jean Carr.* This book contains much valuable material from bereaved people and many challenges to official procedures and our antiquated charity laws.

Bereavement brought about under circumstances of armed conflict has a heightened impact of great severity, made more complex by being tragic, unnecessary, cruelly violent, and the result of deliberate human activity. Discovering a consistent pattern of reaction is not possible, or even desirable, considerng the range of individuality involved in these experiences. Some will react one way, some another, to different aspects of bereavement. Thus two widows who feel similarly about burial arrangements might feel differently about, say, aftercare; two who reacted alike on hearing the news might react unalike to memorial services. What we can do is to look at the fields of experience generated by these circumstances, fields in which we should expect reactions, albeit of different kinds. It is worth bearing in mind that these reactions should be transient in any case, and that their ultimate purpose is to bear the mourner along to the establishment of a new identity, or adjustment to the new life-situation. So in a way the precise nature of the reaction is of less importance than that the reaction occurs, that something is happening, that construction is under way.

Anticipation

As with training accidents in H.M. Forces, living with the risk is no preparation for death in battle when it actually occurs. To suggest to a young widow that when she married a soldier she should have realised it could happen would be no help at all. Cerebal acknowledgement of this truth in peacetime, in marriage preparation, in drawing room conversation with insurance agents, is shallow at best compared with the depth of preparation experienced by those whose loved ones undergo protracted illness prior to death. Parkes, in "Individual responses to violent death" (Cruse Conference, September, 1983), notes significant differences between those who have an enforced preparation thrust upon them and those whose bereavement results from accident or war. Adjustment takes much longer, denial persists for longer, reproach is more intense, anxiety states deeper. These are normal features, but the violent circumstances and lack of preparation intensify them greatly. Even when hostilities break out, anticipation is avoided: "I thought there would not be a shooting war", "I thought he would not be in the firing line", (he might not have been: there are other ways of dying in a war), "I just didn't think it could happen to him". Having said this, one respondent contrasted her son's instant death from a shell fragment with her mother's protracted death over ten weeks of agony, and found herself coming to terms more readily with the former.

News of a death in battle used to be communicated by telegram, and in the two World Wars the arrival of a telegram from the War Office sometimes did not even have to be opened. It was abrupt and impersonal. Nowadays a more human approach is favoured and the news is brought by a person. This



is a mixed blessing in that the informant is put in an awkward position. He might be unfamiliar with this function and express things badly, or he might become "type-cast" and avoided as the harbinger of doom. Families officers and chaplains are especially prone to this hazard. Perhaps the telegram had certain advantages. Great care is taken to verify casualties and that requires time. Meanwhile the news media, hungry for information, will have reported the loss of a ship or the involvement of a unit with casualties, so that by the time actual news arrives at the door nerves are already stretched and tension abundant. Often, letters from the deceased would continue to arrive for several days or more, constituting a painful confusion which makes the reality more difficult to establish. Similarly, letters sent to the deceased which arrived, perhaps having been written, after his death would be returned unopened, giving a sense of uncompleted business, of last greetings not arriving: at least with protracted illness a leavetaking is possible. This sort of thing happened in both World Wars. In the Falklands the mail facilities were much improved, and despite the hurt caused by letters as I have indicated, there was appreciation for such letters as had come and gone and fulfilled their proper function before the death.

ROM WAR AND TERRORISM

Coupled with the suddenness of the death and its unnatural age range is the lack of a funeral. Funeral ritual is commonly acknowledged to be very important, even if an ordeal, in giving a definite start to the mental process of establishing the reality of the death. Often the next of kin of battle casualties are denied this. It was common tradition for British casualties serving overseas to be buried where they fell, and the presence in many parts of the world of war grave cemeteries, immaculately maintained, testifies to this. The penalty is paid by the next of kin who are denied the benefits of a funeral and, later, a grave to be the focus of continued mourning, both of which are of great help to a sound adjustment. There are some widows from the last war who still find great difficulty accepting their husbands' deaths for this reason. The widows who had the opportunity to visit their husbands' graves in Burma on Remembrance Day 1985 found themselves giving expressions to emotions long held in abeyance.

Tradition

In the case of the Falklands the original intention was to observe this tradition. There were battlefield burials which were temporary until a proper cemetery could be prepared after hostilities. This sort of funeral is important for the morale and mourning of the survivors of the unit which suffered the casualties. In this case battlefield burials took place under the scrutiny of television cameras and were broadcast to the whole world. Many were taken aback at the rough and ready nature of the occasion, and soon the cry was heard for 'proper' funerals to occur back home. As a result of this pressure, next of kin were offered the option of repatriation of the body or a trip to the eventual cemetery in situ. The debate caused confusion to the mourners, and the decision was one which people in that situation are seldom called upon to make. The response was roughly half and half. Both facilities were of great benefit to the families. For some the choice could only be to make the trip, in the case of burial at sea on the grave ships, for instance the *Sir Tristram*. A chaplain who accompanied the trip observed enormous outpourings of grief at positions of sinkings, and attributed this to suspended grieving due to the lack of a funeral. There were similar observations at the Falklands cemetery, and at the funerals of the repatriated bodies. Another chaplain was disturbed at the almost primitive degree of reverence that was accorded the physical remains as a result of the repatriation and was concerned that too much emotional and spiritual importance would be attached to them and the burial ground, so that mourning and adjustment might be impeded. However, it was found that there was healing in both the trip, which became a pilgrimage, and in the repatriated funerals. Also, families were afterwards satisfied with the decisions they had made, despite the unusual pressure under which they were made.

"There is no point in telling a man or a family that the sacrifice was meaningless. There is a point—a necessity—in helping people create a meaning for a sacrifice if they find, after it is over, that the reasons for going were not good enough. People do not fear death so much as they fear meaningless death." (E. J. Leiberman MD).

The manner in which the death occurred and the circumstances surrounding it can be important to the mourners, who sometimes desire specific details about it. A measure of comfort is derived from death coming about cleanly, swiftly and in fair open combat, as distinct from lengthy suffering due to severe wounds, or death sustained in "dirty" actions, such as the dishonouring of a white flag, or fire, or in battle-related accidents, such as the SAS helicopter crash which resulted from a low-level birdstrike. Where the soldier has been denied a "fair chance" the next of kin feel greater outrage. The Welsh Guards and their bereaved families and their chaplains had a very hard time after the losses in the Fitzroy/Bluff Cove disaster when so many perished in the burning Royal Fleet Auxiliary vessels, as compared with the Parachute Regiment whose casualties fell in open combat, bad enough though that is. Where the death has been accidental or "unfair" relatives feel denied the fullness of pride of memory associated with action against a hostile enemy, even though their loved ones are certainly included in the roll of honour. It is not quite the same, they feel, and much assurance by supporters is required in order to surmount this.

Some families spoke in terms of it being less difficult to adjust so long as they could feel that their husband's or son's life was given for a worthy purpose, in order to achieve something worthwhile. In the last war this was obvious enough. In the case of the Falklands it was hard to identify the land itself as meriting this high price, but most felt that the principle involved, the moral dimension, did. In this regard some felt that politicians were insensitive in debating publicly whether the sacrifices were worthwhile. Confusion and hurt were caused to those who mourned the sacrifices, who in the main did not appreciate the political niceties underlying such debate, and felt that what they had given was not appreciated. They preferred to think that such sacrifices as theirs are what enables such debate to exist at all. The fact that the Argentinian Junta did not threaten United Kingdom home territory is beside the point in this thinking, for it is the principle that is involved, and when the blood of a loved one has been spilt mere political debate seems petty and shallow by comparison.

It is worth emphasising that the Forces have no political affiliation: their loyalty is to the country as personified by the Monarch whose authority is exerted through Parliament. Party squabbling about the wrongness of committing troops to a situation does little to comfort the bereaved families of fallen servicemen. It carries within it the suggestion that the deaths were for nothing, and the bereaved want very desperately to believe that they were for something, something right and worthwhile, that could not have been achieved otherwise. It was for this reason that the conciliatory tone of the first memorial service was too strong for many of the families: "If we are such good chums why did he die fighting them?" Feelings were too strong, too fresh. The wounds of the bereaved were too open. The sentiment was of course worthy and right, it just came too soon for some. The second memorial service, in 1985, to dedicate the Memorial Tablet, achieved better

(continued overleaf)

integration, where the passage of time gave the bereaved a better chance to absorb and assimilate thoughts of reconciliation. This feeling has now produced a solidarity with the Argentinian bereaved, and the Falklands Families Association went to honour the Argentinian Cemetery during its trip to the Falklands in 1985.

Anger is an important part of grieving and one might suppose that in war the enemy would present a large target for it. From time to time we still hear bitter comments about the Germans and the Japanese. In the case of the Falklands some vented their anger on those who started it, calling forth a response which caused a loved one's death. But Argentina and her government were by no means the only targets for anger, the reaction is not always so rational. Other targets featured, usually an authority, who by exercise of power should have ordered things differently. God, the ultimate authority, featured, so did our own government, so did the media. This anger diminished with time, and bitterness was surprisingly absent after two to three years, insofaras chaplains could detect from those with whom they still had contact. Strangely, at no time did I hear of anger targeted upon the Argentinian Forces who actually conducted the hostilities. There is a strange feature in war whereby combatants on opposite sides develop a bond, a kinship born of shared danger, an understanding of each others' terror and relief.

Grief for comrades

On the battlefield casualties cause bereavement to the affected unit as well, which is why honourable burial, even if temporary, is desired. Battle-hardened men can stand by a grave and weep openly with their comrades, in pride and affection, and without shame. Chaplains, themselves bereaved in that situation, found this profoundly moving and very real, and it drives home the absurdity of our tear-denying conventions. Having this opportunity for release, the surviving soldiers can find sufficient heart to press on. The same is true of a ship's company. Thus a dead pilot and a dead Argentinian were buried at sea with equal honours before one particular ship felt "right" again and could proceed. Men need to be given space to grieve. Even in battle conditions this is not denied. To do so would create a morale penalty that could cause a mutiny. For some relatives this space for grieving is very limited, as in the case of elderly grandparents who can be so easily forgotten, and older parents who perhaps "lived through" the son who is now dead. One is reminded of Volkan's words which opened this article, for their adjustment will come very hard, if at all.

The suddenness of the death of young men, the tragedy of it being caused by other human beings, the delay or complete lack of a funeral, these are the things that impede adjustment following bereavement through war. But I am still struck by the words of the mother of the soldier who was hit by the shell fragment, and this is three years after the war: "He died doing what he enjoyed and had chosen to do—soldiering. He joined without telling us. But he went and did as he was trained. Yes, it was hard when the others came home and he did not, and yes, I miss him most dreadfully and still have a bit of a weep now and then. But at least he did not die in a mindless accident, like a car or something; *that* would have made me bitter. He died on the anniversary of his Baptism, and he is buried at the church he was baptised in. His life is complete, and his death was not for nothing, it was for a purpose, and I take great pleasure and pride in his memory."

Much of what has already been said applies to bereavement resulting from terrorism. I separate it because I want to isolate its particular features and because it includes a civilian dimension. In the terrorist mind the politician, the diplomat and the soldier are all lumped together as representatives of the hated regime, so they are all in the same boat as regards this particular area of risk. There are three main features of this form of bereavement — shock, mutilation and senselessness. Additionally there are complications of bitterness and outrage, revulsion and incomprehension which make matters uncommonly difficult for the mourners.

When death results from terrorist acts there is lack of public honour and fear of political volte-face. Lack of purpose in the death complicates grief. A strong temptation, to be avoided if at all possible, is bitterness.

To continue the story of the soldier, what was said about the importance of the death being purposeful and constructive is denied in the victim of terrorism. It is always a "dirty" situation, never a clean fight, and the death achieves absolutely nothing. This is the most difficult feature for the bereaved to come to terms with, and they will grope for or even invent a story which will invest the death with some meaning.

I am at pains to emphasise to troops going to Northern Ireland the importance of their task in defending the populace, but it requires a lot of imagination for some soldiers to consider territory to be their own country when they are obliged to cross water to get there. I am an Ulsterman, so the weakness of this argument is apparent to me, and my personal appreciation of the security effort is great, and consideration of terrorist activity looms large in my thoughts.

However, internal security operations do not figure in the soldier's mind as being his proper job. He has been trained differently, and finds internal security frustrating and unrewarding, no matter how successful and important it might actually be. So, when he falls victim of these operations it cannot be said that he was doing the job he chose and loved. Nor can the death be represented as achieving anything in terms of contributing to victory or lessening the threat. Nor is such a death surrounded by national gratitude and honour as in a proper war. Here is a grey, drab area where there is no proper enemy, for he is unseen, nor consistent national backing; it is as if the nation as a whole would prefer to ignore such activity.

from War and Terrorism

Bereaved parents and widows are even treated to the spectacle of their loved ones' murderers being championed by well-known public figures or the policies of those murderers being espoused as just demands. Healthy as this might be for the democratic process, it is very confusing for those families who are trying to invest some meaning and importance into the death in terms of serving one's country, so that they can proceed with adjusting to it. The political world speaks with forked tongue, it seems to them. Always at the back of their mind is the thought that the Government will give in and concede the field to the terrorist, as a result of political pressure or change of policy, most likely resulting from a change of party in power. Casualties previously sustained would then become meaningless mockeries.

This was one of the hardest things for America to learn after defeat in Vietnam, and in our own case I hear the name of Aden muttered from time to time. There is, then, in the emotions of those bereaved by terrorism, the complication of suspicion of political fickleness which adds to the already strong sense of insecurity. Some bereaved families have received letters from members of the public in Northern Ireland, expressing sympathy and gratitude, and of course this can be very helpful in assisting the bereaved invest the death with meaning.

Bitterness

The struggle to avoid bitterness is much more of an issue than in open war. Terrorists inflict death with great and calculated cruelty, suddenly, with a certain amount of randomness, and to no purpose other than to generate publicity for their own cause. The temptation to be bitter is very great. But most recognise the pitfall: that ultimately bitterness will destroy only oneself, it will not hurt the murderer, it will only impede one's own adjustment and continued life. Also it will distort judgements that require clear thinking, such as how to relate to the people of Northern Ireland, or the Republican people of Ireland, or to the rights and wrongs of the Northern Ireland issue. It can be said that a great deal of the trouble has in fact been perpetrated by too many looking at things through the eyes of bitterness and revenge. There is no point in adding to it.

The struggle is observable in the case of Northern Ireland civilians, and families of security force casualties, and the other civilian victims of terrorist acts. It figured large in the case of a politician whose wife died in an incident directed at himself. He knew that the struggle to avoid bitterness would be the hardest part of the whole experience, but he feels he has succeeded. He has not changed his political views on Northern Ireland, nor his emotional views towards the people of Northern Ireland. Thus he feels he has denied the terrorist an important point, and hitting back in this way, limited though it is, provides a sense of lessening the pointlessness of the death. He had a degree of preparedness for an incident to occur; the security required around politicians nowadays makes them well aware of the risks inherent in the job. But the risk is not supposed to be borne by the family. His own guilt about this was lessened by the fact that he did nearly die himself in the same incident, and had a long and painful struggle back to health. This struggle was a constructive channel for the overall anger and frustration he felt. The pain, both emotional and physical, continues to ease gradually as time passes.

The wife of a diplomat who died in a terrorist incident found that the suddenness and shock intensified her bereavement. Everything had an additional dimension provided by the violence, and adjustment was all the harder. Her knowledge of Ireland and the issues was not great at the time and she put herself to gaining an understanding. Eventually she sponsored humanitarian and community work in Northern Ireland, as her contribution to disarming the hatred that had cost her so dear. She did not become an expert on the Irish "question" but did become passionately concerned with the human issues involved. This achieved two things: first, it helped her to avoid the bitterness which would consume and destroy her if she gave in to it, she had seen it happen to others: second, it was a worthy memorial to the work her husband would have desired to achieve had he lived, and thus invested his death with meaning. She attributed this concern and activity to her happy marriage as well as her own restlessness and need to be active, normal features of her personality which were accentuated by her experiences. It might be what Edgar Jackson calls "identification" in "Understanding Grief" (p. 60 ff) but as he says, "a certain amount of identification is essential and desirable". In this case it was particularly constructive and fruitful. She continues to be busy and concerned for the bereaved, She is not the type to sit still or be overwhelmed. The temptation to bitterness was strong, but she avoided it on grounds of sheer practicality rather than from specific motives of Christian forgiveness, admirable though these are.

These two people, the politician and the diplomat's widow, indicate that the particularly dreadful circumstances of bereavement brought about by terrorist activity are profound but that nevertheless it is possible to find a framework of meaningfulness within which to place the death, and to find a means of overcoming the temptation towards bitterness which despite its draw leads only into a dead end.

The features which spring to the fore as requiring particular awareness from supporters of those bereaved by terrorism are the suddenness, the shock, the feeling that the death was useless, and the temptation of bitterness. This latter point should be distinguished from the normal anger component of grief which will be intensified under these circumstances. Those bereaved in this way face a long, dark road, but it can be travelled. Above all, to those travelling that road, to those caught in exhaustion or despair, those who care should be prepared—when they can—to extend the thought of hope for the future.

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"You can never forget the past, but the human spirit is such that you learn to live with it." (Rt. Hon. John Wakeham, MP.)

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From the paper MILITARY BEREAVEMENT, Mid-Service Clergy Course, Jan. 1986. With acknowledgement to St. George's House, Windsor.