

# Overcoming the trauma of war

The SRPBA is proud to support the work of Combat Stress in Scotland

**N**owadays, it is no longer called “shell shock”, a name first coined back in the trenches of Flanders during the First World War. Rather, clinicians now refer to “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder” or PTSD, a debilitating and sometimes life-threatening condition that can affect servicemen and women long after combat is over, often many years after their military career has ended.

But the end result is nearly always the same. Vivid flashbacks, night sweats, an inability to sleep, panic attacks, aggressive and other behavioural problems, sometimes accompanied by hypervigilance.

All too often, sufferers think they are going mad and, unable to sleep, resort to alcohol and/or drugs to obtain some desperate relief.

Eventually they lose their job, their family and their friends and wind up living alone and isolated, with only the odd nocturnal visit to the supermarket to obtain supplies. Or as one veteran of the first Gulf War so succinctly put it: “You don’t have to be killed in Basra to lose your life.”

Yet a walled garden at the Scottish Agricultural College in Ayrshire is now being used to help these same individuals regain confidence and some of their wrecked lives, thanks to the safe environment and enclosed comradeship that it provides.

The idea (not a new one, having largely been forgotten since the First World War) comes from Anna Baker Creswell, a horticultural therapist from Northumberland, who, entirely on her own initiative, obtained a lease on the site exclusively for ex-soldiers, sailors and airmen.

Over the last three years, under her (deliberately) understated leadership, they have got to work and restored paths, ponds, vegetable and flower beds and part of the national poppy collection.

They have also learned the tranquillity that fishing in the nearby River Ayr can provide and are currently engaged in restoring a huge Victorian greenhouse



*The walled garden at Hollybush is giving war veterans a welcome retreat*

called the Stovehouse, as part of a probable three-year project.

The simple secret of success is the enclosed and safe nature that is created by the high surrounding walls. Men and women who still fear the crack of the sniper’s bullet or robed suicide bomber can, at last, properly relax and enjoy each other’s company, while working entirely at their own pace.

The vegetables (and any fish caught!) are eaten at nearby Hollybush House, a treatment centre established in 1985 by the charity Combat Stress for respite and treatment of seriously mentally damaged ex-servicemen.

The Stovehouse restoration, in addition to testing building skills, will permit further growth, including fruit and, of course, extend the working day and season. Meantime, thanks to being in the open air and hard physical labour, individuals find that they enjoy far better and natural sleep patterns, probably for the first time in years.

Working together, they rediscover the

energising and inspiring comradeship which was lost when they scattered from the Services. They are also able to exchange descriptions of their symptoms and comfort each other.

For those who may have small garden plots at home, they learn new skills which will apply throughout the seasons and window box and potted plant skill learning is encouraged as well.

More recently, serving soldiers in the local regiment (see caption) have started to look into what the garden is providing and have been lending a hand, at the same time as beginning to learn about the difficulties some, but not all, soldiers may encounter as a result of combat.

Indeed, it is beginning to be recognised in the military once again as the result of major war that the real enemy stalking our troops out in the Middle East may be “silence”.

The earlier someone speaks out about mental anguish the better, as there is then a chance that the condition may not become chronic. Either way, however, Gardening Leave is now well established as a godsend – indeed, a literal lifesaver! And think what other walled gardens might achieve.



Visit [www.gardeningleave.org](http://www.gardeningleave.org)  
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