

THE HUMAN COST OF WAR---A DRAMATIC READING OF THE RECORDED STORIES OF U.S. IRAQ VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES

FIRST PERFORMED AT THE AMESBURY FRIENDS MEETINGHOUSE, FRIEND STREET, AMESBURY, MA ON SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 2009 AS PART OF THE CELEBRATION OF THE OPENING OF THE AMESBURY PEACE CENTER.

Script

We are delighted if your group would like to use this script to put on a dramatic reading of the Human Cost of War. There is no copyright on this material, but we would appreciate it if you would acknowledge: 1) that the script is based on the Pennsylvania Program, Middle Atlantic Region of the American Friends Service Committee project, "The Human Cost of War: Listening to Veterans and their Families From Recruitment to Post-Deployment;" and 2) that this script was first developed and presented by the Amesbury Peace Center. In addition, all performances should be free to the public.

For more information about the Human Cost of War project, contact PA Program of the American Friends Service Committee, 7514 Kensington Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15221. Tel. 412 371-3607. Emil: Scilla Wahrhaftig at swahrhaftig@afsc.org – website www.afsc.org/pittsburgh.

For more information about the dramatic reading of the Human Cost of War, contact the Amesbury Peace Center, afpeacecenter@comcast.net or call Sam Baily at 978 255-1133.

Introduction: Narrator. We are presenting a chronological story of the Human Cost of War in five parts: the recruitment of soldiers, pre-deployment, deployment, post-deployment, and an open-ended section on what we can do to help these veterans.

To do this we have developed six composite characters, each one incorporating the words of a number of different soldiers and their parents. Our characters are Male Soldier 1 read by John Schuchardt, Male Soldier 2 read by Rob Burnham, Female Soldier 1 read by Laura McManamy, Female Soldier 2 read by Denise de Simone, Parent 1 read by Barbara Haack, and parent 2 read by Paul Brailford..

At the close of the formal presentation, the audience will have a chance to comment on and discuss the issues raised.

One note. We have toned down some of the most offensive swearing in the script. It is not hard, however, to imagine what the original language was.

And now let us turn to our dramatic reading.

I. RECRUITMENT

Narrator

The first section of our reading focuses on recruitment.

People enter the military for many reasons, including patriotism, always wanting to be a soldier, interest in new experiences and helping others. Some people joined for economic reasons. While others saw it as a way to help support their families, to earn education benefits or to get citizenship.

PARENT 1

Many of them are so young ... [They] still think they are playing video games. They don't realize there is no replay button.

PARENT 2

I do have sympathy for the younger soldiers who don't have the capacity to reason through their enlistment in the army. It is just sad that 18 years old is considered mature enough to make those life and death decisions in society. I think it is wrong and recruiters prey on individuals from predominately bad economic backgrounds.

FEMALE SOLDIER 1

I was very idealistic and had this image of honor and duty and protecting the people that lived here.

PARENT 1

He joined [the National Guard] because he believed in the ideals of this country.

MALE SOLDIER 2

I pretty much graduated high school and straight into the military I went. Walked right in, said "I want to join, leave as soon as I can and be a scout." They said, "OK" and two weeks later I was in Fort Knox.

MALE SOLDIER 1

I enlisted when I was 17. I always thought I wanted to do this because my family had all been in the military. Every generation of my family, since they have been here...

FEMALE SOLDIER 2

The army is the only one that treated women equally. At that time when I talked to the Marines and Navy, women were not allowed to handle a weapon and they had to take make-up classes. The army was the only one that let you handle weapons and not take a make-up class.

MALE SOLDIER 2

In high school I was kind of a dorky kid with only 1 or 2 friends. I had a recruiter come up to me while in the lunch room, a marine recruiter in

his dress blues with his medals shining. He starts out just talking, not even about the military. [He] knew everything about me, knew my name, knew the classes I was attending and wasn't attending.

MALE SOLDIER 1

And the Army said to me, if you join the Air Force they'll make you a test guy. And if you join the Army, we'll let you jump out of airplanes, and you'll have a good time. And I said, "Sign me up."

PARENT 2

In 1997 in the floods on the Susquehanna River he was helping to sand-bag the river. He was working for the National Guard people [who] were very nice. He liked them. He was a very helpful type person. He liked to feel he was doing something important and significant. I think they began to talk to him about joining.

PARENT 1

My son said he was going there to help [the people of Iraq], not to kill.

MALE SOLDIER 1

Prior to going back to school I had approached the army out of more or less some macho sense of adventure. If you look at the recruiting data most white guys who join do it because of that.

MALE SOLDIER 2

My buddy and I sought out a recruiter because we knew a couple of other friends who went in on the buddy system, and we decided we wanted to do this as well. The buddy system was supposed to mean we would be stationed together. Of course, that did not happen.

FEMALE SOLDIER 1

This would get me out of my small town experience.

PARENT 2

He had a wife and baby to take care of so money was tight.

PARENT 1

The recruiters, they were not interested in my son per se, but he was there and was willing to go. So they just waited until they needed him to fill a quota. '

PARENT 2

He was promised money for recruiting. That bonus never happened. My son would get other guys to volunteer [for the army] and he never saw anything for that.

FEMALE SOLDIER 2

National Guard told me there were better educational benefits ... 100% funding ... halfway through college and I ran out of money. And the Air

Force offered me money because I had a good SAT score. So I took, essentially, a mortgage on my life to pay for college.

II. PRE- DEPLOYMENT

Narrator

The second section we present is Pre-Deployment. This period is bracketed by the time from signup through basic training up to being sent into the field as a soldier.

Not knowing when soldiers would be deployed caused frustration and stress for families and veterans. The soldiers' preparations varied, including mentally preparing themselves for what was ahead, exploring options for not going and enjoying the camaraderie of peers. What stood out for the families was the agony of uncertainty.

The military trains soldiers by squelching individuality in order to build a team, and relying on muscle memory in order to survive. There was a wide variance in the training and preparation soldiers received.

PARENT 1

And I remember he would call me - he would go to the armory, and he would see a list. He'd call me and I'd say, "Oh my God are you sure you are on the list." He'd call me a day later and say, "Its OK, I'm not on the list." New list. There was this back and forth. I was on a bus and he called, "I'm not on the list." I asked, "Is this the final list ?" Then, coming back - he was on the list. That was right before Christmas.

PARENT 2

We found out that he was to be deployed on the front pages of the news. Neither our son nor we knew yet.

FEMALE SOLDIER 1

You really have to think of the family and friends and what that will do to them. For them to just wait wait wait ... Just do it when you say you will do it, so you don't put me through so much pain and stress. I am very frustrated at the military for that. It took two months to actually deploy.

FEMALE SOLDIER 2

First thing I did was I made a will and a living will- went to the bank, got a power of attorney done. Made sure my husband knew where all the papers are - made a list of doctors, shot records for the kids.

MALE SOLDIER 2

It was stressful when you can't see your parents before you go to war and you could possibly ... die.

FEMALE SOLDIER 1

Now I'm from Pittsburgh PA, and I was living in Maryland. I didn't get too much support from friends and family. It was pretty rough. The hardest thing was, me being deployed and everybody's family was there as we were getting on the bus to leave, I had not one person there for me. That was hard for me.

FEMALE SOLDIER 2

Actually I had a lot of fun down there. It was the first time with the unit, and we really bonded, and I met a lot of great people.

MALE SOLDIER 1

You are very military and when guys come out of the Reserves and National Guard units, it is kind of a culture shock, because they haven't been deployed since World War II, and they had this culture of apathy, and it was a very relaxed environment and not professional.

MALE SOLDIER 2

Then I was thinking about refusing and going to jail but I didn't know how realistic it was .. .! thought to myself, "As a soldier refusing to go, they are going to put me in the jail" I was terrified of jail, so I went to Iraq.

PARENT 1

Dear God, let all this be over. If it is going to happen, just let it happen and be done.

PARENT 2

I am learning that his being deployed is like dying of cancer - stages of disbelief, sleepless nights, denial, anger, frustration and acceptance.

PARENT1

I looked at him thinking this person who I love so much and I've been so proud of because he has such a good heart with children, he's disassociated. He's becoming what they want him to become. He wasn't rallying ... he was just like he was narrowing. He was going to do what they wanted him to do.

FEMALE SOLDIER 1

Oh, boot camp, that was the healthiest I've ever been in my life.

MALE SOLDIER 2

Kill Kill Kill. Everything was kill. It was real gung-ho because of 9-11. You train with live ammunition. They prepare your body for going over there. Hiking miles, 25 mile hikes early in the morning. Jumping with live fire. Reading your compass and being ready to go. It was real intense for me.

FEMALE SOLDIER 1

Mentally it was the first time away from home, I was 17, and it was pretty scary.

MALE SOLDIER 2

The process they use to basically break you down and turn you into a soldier or a killer is basically a dehumanizing process. They take everything that makes you distinct and pull it out of you, you aren't allowed to express individuality.

MALE SOLDIER 1

Then this E7, a sergeant 1st class comes out and starts giving us a briefing telling us how we can't trust these [fucking] (damed) hajjis. These hajjis aren't out to help us etc etc. Every time he used the word hajjis, he used [fuck] (a swear word) before it. He ends with a scenario. "There is one of the [fucking] (damned)hajjis in the road, and your convoy is coming down the road and the kid won't move. What do you do?" A guy says, "Stop." And, [the sergeant] says, "[Fuck] (Hell) no! You just got your whole convoy killed in an ambush." Another guy yells out, "Turn down another road ... " "No time. What [the fuck] do you do?" So someone yells out, "Run him over??", unsure of what they were saying. And he says, "Damn right!"

FEMALE SOLDIER 2

It didn't really strike me as being odd until I heard this Colonel talk about these [fucking] (damned) hajjis. I realized that it isn't the grunts that do this, come up with this racial dehumanization on their own, it is pushed down from above. It goes back to that conditioning. Basic training target comes up [and] you are conditioned to put that target down. If you look at it as a human being, you can't pull that trigger, because it is a person.

FEMALE SOLDIER 1

If you aren't disillusioned there [in basic training] - I mean that is when you find out what the army is, there is no hope for you.

MALE SOLDIER 2

The biggest concern for us was dealing with Iraqis. We knew we were invading this country and you would imagine someone would give you help on understanding. We didn't even know what the Iraqi military looked like. We all knew that in previous wars you were at least given a briefing on what the opposing army looked like in terms of rank and uniform, and we got nothing. The fact that there were some free Iraqi forces sent in with us, we didn't even know that, not even to mention cultural or linguistic training.

III. Deployment

Narrator

Part three is devoted to the experiences of deployment, that is actually being in a war zone.

Soldier's survival depends on behaving as if anyone could be the enemy. The soldiers kept the reality of their lives from their families. Meanwhile families, especially wives, did not feel free to talk about the frustrations of their lives at home. Some soldiers had the added stress of questioning the validity and morality of the war.

FEMALE SOLDIER 1

Seeing one of "us" go down was so earth shattering, and that was where having the coping mechanisms like eating, or watching movies, or working out, helped.

MALE SOLDIER 1

The camaraderie that you build in the military is powerful, much more than any friendship that you experience in high school; because you go through hell in the basic training.

FEMALE SOLDIER 2

It was very important to me how American soldiers made this change from "liberators" to "conquerors". It became very clear early on. It was a lot because of the attitude soldiers had toward Arabs before entering Iraq.

MALE SOLDIER 2

Deployment to me was just another day. Everybody wants to go home. But when you see what you are doing and see the improvements it makes it all worth it.

FEMALE SOLDIER 1

By the time I left, everyone knew there was no sense in getting killed for stupid US policy. The only thing to do was just make it through any way you could.

MALE SOLDIER 1

The guys I was really close with were the guys that took serious issue with what was going on. For every one of them, there was another guy that was just as adamant about supporting whatever the war. There was even a period of time where people were very concerned that there would be physical problems because of their opinion ... guys started sleeping with their weapons. It became this mini-gang prison atmosphere inside this war that made the relational aspect very complicated.

FEMALE SOLDIER 2

They implemented policy to punish soldiers that made relations with Iraqis.

FEMALE SOLDIER 1

There was a lot of stuff which soldiers did which was just wrong. I saw soldiers fire on civilians; I have seen them execute wounded Iraqis trying to surrender. This isn't even to mention all the theft that took place ... These things are just incredibly wrong and it is so obvious. You can't ignore it, but a lot of guys lack moral courage to step forward and address these issues because there can be serious consequences if you do.

FEMALE SOLDIER 2

This one day, this family was driving down a road, but there is a traffic control point there. Vehicle is speeding up and this kid makes a split second decision on what he has to do, and he thinks that vehicle is a threat. He pushed the trigger on his 50-caliber machine gun and puts like 200 rounds in less than a minute. When it is over, they drag out the bodies; a mother, a father, and two kids, boy was four, the daughter was three. That night I was briefed by the general like always. Flicking the slides, like always, this colonel turns in his chair to a division level staff and says "If these [fucking](damned) hajjis learned to drive this [shit] (stuff) wouldn't happen."

PARENT 1

When my son sat there and told me - This one really stood out in his mind. They went into this town, and [my son] said, "Mom, kids were riding bicycles on the street. It was business as usual. They were living. Nobody knew they were in the middle of a war.

And we go into this town shooting whatever.

This child on a bicycle, 5 years old ... got shot in the head." My son grabbed this child and tried to get help. The military would not help. It took 2 hours for that child to die. He sat with that father cradling both of them."

MALE SOLDIER 2

The change occurred over time. There were many instances in Iraq which made me rethink the military tactics we used ... One day when we were in Iraq we were on a patrol and driving down a road known for roadside bombs. I was a sergeant and a truck commander, so I was sitting in the front passenger seat of the Humvee. My gunner told me he spotted two children to our right in the farm field, and it looked like they are doing something suspicious. I looked and said they are two kids, don't worry about it. We kept going and nothing happened. A week or two later another convoy, not my unit but an MP unit, was traveling through the area [and] was hit by a roadside bomb. So everyone who was in the immediate area was detained. They detained the two boys we had seen two weeks previous. On those two kids, they found a notebook with the info of every convoy that had passed through the area. We came to the fact that they were selling this information to people in Iraq to feed their families. This is when I first realized that no one is innocent in war, and [that] I can never not trust what my men say, no matter what or how I feel about it.

MALE SOLDIER 1

But I learned early on not to tell my mom what was happening. I learned early on not to tell her we were mortared or anything.

PARENT 2

I think that, for here, for me, it was pervasive in my life ... my mind was constantly straying to what was happening. And any reports on the news of bad things that went on! would check CNN four to five times a day from my computer ... So I could say I was obsessed with the whole situation.

PARENT 1

It was fear, fear of war, fear of leaving loved ones, fear of dying. Fear just enveloped our home. While he was gone for those 15 months, the whole time my family lived in fear.

FEMALE SOLDIER 1

My dad would watch the news all the time and my mom would avoid the news all the time and yelled at my dad for watching the news all the time. And I would call and I would NEVER tell them what was going on. I would just say I'm ok, I drove today.

PARENT 2

The only phone call I ever got from my son was on an Iraqi's cell phone. He was standing duty at a gas station and this Iraqi was talking to my son. He offered him this cell phone to call. So my son called and all I could think about was, "I am on some Iraqi's phone." But I was grateful.

IV. POST-DEPLOYMENT

Narrator

The next section is post deployment, when soldiers return home.

The soldiers' transition back into a society which is unscathed by the war that has consumed their lives is very challenging for both veterans and their families. It is painful for veterans to be separated from intimate comrades on whom they depended for their lives and with whom they shared the adrenaline rush that comes with being in a war zone. The nation is unprepared for the specific issues that women veterans face. Some veterans choose not to go back into their home communities, finding community with organizations such as Veterans Against the War.

FEMALE SOLDIER 1

Post-deployment was silent ... terribly silent.

FEMALE SOLDIER 2

That initial shock hit everyone really hard. And, whenever we do get together, it is a consistent thing saying, "It [sucks] (It's terrible)," and, "We miss being together."

MALE SOLDIER 1

I missed the experience of having a purpose each day, but really did not enjoy it. I am puzzled about why I want to go back. Maybe the adrenaline rush and the camaraderie that developed. These guys would do anything for you. You only had each other.

MALE SOLDIER 2

The support structure is no longer there that they had while they were deployed. The people you have laid your life down for, the people whom you have rescued, the people you have slept in the trenches with, eaten meals with, the individuals you have spent twelve months to a year and a half with day and night, all of a sudden are not there.

FEMALE SOLDIER 2

The military now has a post-deployment phase where every soldier fills out a 3 page questionnaire with all sort of different questions, such as, "Are you drinking excessive alcohol? Are you having nightmares? Have you suffered trauma? Are you cutting yourself?" You understand cutting right? The pain is so great in your head, that it is released by causing pain somewhere else ... So this questionnaire asks about all sort of mental combat struggles, both physiological and psychological. And if you answer any of the questions with an affirmative, then you are flagged, which basically says you can't go home right away. So that tells you that everyone will lie so that they get to go home ...

MALE SOLDIER 1

You really have to gear yourself up to go to the VA. It really drains you. I have had days set aside to go to the VA and fill out the paperwork and I just couldn't do it. It is so exhausting. It is all this red tape and sitting around and waiting and fill out this form, and go here and fill out this form, and oh, you didn't fill out this form correctly....It is so frustrating.

MALE SOLDIER 2

At the VA, at the hospital, you have to figure out how the system works before you can use it right and they don't give you any clues, they don't teach you anything. It's trial and error. You've got to figure it out on your own and you better hope your pretty good at doing that because you'll be figuring it out for the rest of your life if you're not.

FEMALE SOLDIER 1

Family, they know I am different. I don't talk to them as much, the occasional phone call or email. It is hard for me to be around them because I am not the same person they remember.

PARENT 2

Since he is back, he is combative. He had no job to come back to, and his wife was pregnant. They live with me and have the 'pride' of living with Mommy. He bought a very fast car and has a need for speed. While he has talked to me, he can't talk to his wife. She has become very nervous.

MALE SOLDIER 1

I ended up staying in another brother's apartment for most of it, avoiding most of my family and spending my time drinking and doing drugs in that apartment, because it was the easiest way to deal with the whole thing.

MALE SOLDIER 2

I think I was really lucky. The two things that enabled me to make a smooth transition [were] faith and family. I had a very strong faith and strong church community and family, so I had that when I came home. My experience was the guys who had the most trouble were the guys that didn't have this support.

FEMALE SOLDIER 2

Initially the community [at home] was very welcoming. But, after you become political, that is when the unconditional support falls.

FEMALE SOLDIER 1

It was freedom being back here. A lot of the stress of being in the unit left my system and I got to get back to being a civilian.

PARENT 1

He has trouble sleeping and he is uneasy in large crowds. Before, he would look people in the eye. Now he looks at their hands to see if they are armed. Eventually he got a dog for protection and company because he felt uneasy being alone.

MALE SOLDIER 2

Those were probably the worst 30 days of leave I have ever had in my entire life. I hated being in a vehicle. I hated driving, which I still have a problem with today. I can't drive [but] it has gotten easier to ride in a vehicle. I didn't want to do it and my family didn't understand it. The first question my oldest brother asked me was "Did you kill anybody?" and that set the pace from that point on.

FEMALE SOLDIER 1

They're not going to be ready for the women when they come back

because everybody always thinks about the guys. There are a lot of women over there that see an awful lot of stuff. The whole system back here is not ready and it's going to be a real wake up call.

FEMALE SOLDIER 2

"I can't live in this pain...I'll promise you that I'll live this long, until [my son is] in college, but I don't know that I can do this for much longer than that.

MALE SOLDIER 1

At training you are taught that if you cry you are considered weak, if you complain you are weak. You have been going through training and combat learning to suck it up. They are calling you all sorts of names, such as pansies, and that is the nicer word. You are taught 'be a man'. That same idea also goes for the women. Suck it up. Then suddenly, during post-deployment, they are telling you to share your emotions and how you feel. So the struggle is, that if you go to the VA or mark anything on the 3 pages, you are betraying everything you were taught.

PARENT 2

He took time off before going back to work and so he slept a lot, and I think that was sort of just decompression and maybe a little depression or whatever else comes out of coming from that. He was more irritable in some ways, but he was also really apologetic in a lot of ways.

PARENT 1

It is a strain on the families. Divorce rates are higher among Iraq vets than the general population. People are coming back with lots of problems, PTSD. We know about the people that are getting blown up. We know, because of the technology, a lot are alive that would have been dead in previous wars; but they are alive without legs or arms or have brain damage, the parts of the body the technology couldn't prevent them from losing. So the strain is on the family ..

PARENT 2

What makes me mad is the promises that were made to them. All these promises made when they go into the military - before they are sent overseas. Even now; the Marines tell you that the army stands behind you. We don't farm our injured soldiers out. We don't put them out to pasture, [but] that's exactly what they do. Even as he was lying there on his back they kept on making promises ... All I know is that the day he was discharged he tried to commit suicide again. He had felt he wasn't worth anything and now he is in a wheelchair to boot!

PARENT 1

They have stepped up a lot, but I think they need to incorporate more of the family. The spouses and the kids should receive more services about dealing with the person coming back. .. If you have a man or

woman who's been gone for a year or sometimes two years and the kids grew and you come in and try to assume previous roles, it could pose a difficult situation. They, as a unit and a family, need more counseling.

V. What People Can Do

Narrator

Our final section focuses on what the veterans think that people here in the States can do to help them.

MALE SOLDIER 1

I think that the one thing that would be helpful during deployment would be combat stress centers. What do you do when the guy loses it over there because they aren't going home, or a guy on medication for PTSD already? This is a huge issue and is something that the army hasn't dealt with. Now they did put these combat stress centers where they say, "OK the guy has had too much, you can send him here." But the system isn't good enough and there aren't enough of them.

FEMALE SOLDIER 1

If those civilians have a neighbor whose family is deployed—check on them. Just simple little things. Ask them if they want a cup of coffee.

MALE SOLDIER 2

Well, I think the public should have a welcoming stance and embrace returning veterans and view them as persons. Honor their personhood.

FEMALE SOLDIER 2

The public needs to be patient with everybody that's coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan. In Vietnam you had a border between the combat zone and the rest but in Iraq the whole thing is a combat zone and you are subject to attack. It's kind of urban war that you don't want to have. So everybody coming back is going to be stressed out.

NARRATOR

At the Homeless Veterans Shelter where many of the interviews for the project took place one of the staff had the following to say:

What I do when I go out into the streets or during our drop in center daily worship is show I care. The veterans know that here we have a warm meal, clean clothes and showers if they need them. They know that we care about their physical being and this helps them open up and let us help their spiritual being as well as some much greater issues in their lives. So the best illustration would be to build a bridge, a bridge of trust. Once you have this bridge built you can grow a much greater bridge, the spiritual bridge, bring God into the conversation. Relationship is everything. Now I can get a combat

soldier to open up very quickly, obviously because of my connection as a former soldier. Even for when it comes down to their deathbed, they want someone to know their story, they want to know their life mattered and they need proof. And by telling their story of combat it gives purpose.

NARRATOR

And finally, we conclude with Male Soldier 1 explaining how he feels to staff member.

Male Soldier 1

The vets need to be listened to and they need to be understood and they need help, that's all I could tell you; they have a lot of issues.