Rising numbers of British troops losing limbs in Afghanistan war, report shows

Ian Cobain

The number of British servicemen who have lost limbs after being wounded in Afghanistan is rising, according to official statistics seen by The Guardian. Fifty-four men lost at least one limb while serving in armed forces in the country last year, more than the total figure for the previous three years.

The proportion of those who have become multiple amputees is also increasing, with almost half of last year’s casualties suffering what is described as “traumatic or surgical amputation” of more than one limb.

The statistics, compiled by the Defence Analytical Services and Advice Centre, a division of the Ministry of Defence (MoD), appear to reflect both the Taliban’s increased use of sophisticated roadside bombs to target British-led forces, and the developing skill of military medics in treating injuries that might have proved fatal in the past.

However, they do not include casualties this year, during the build-up to the launch of Operation Moshtarak, the drive by Afghan, US and 4,000 British forces against the Taliban in central Helmand.

Last month there were warnings from the National Audit Office (NAO) that hospitals treating the wounded from Afghanistan were close to capacity and under mounting pressure. The main field hospital in Afghanistan at Camp Bastion was said to cope with casualty levels, but operating close to capacity.

The NAO warned that Selly Oak hospital in Birmingham, where the MoD has a contract to treat seriously wounded troops, might have to displace civilians to make way for extra military patients.

The number of servicemen being treated at the military rehabilitation centre at Steadley Court in Survey has also grown rapidly.

According to the NAO, in 2008, there were 171 patients, 254 with battle injuries, treated at either Selly Oak or Headley Court, or at both centres.

Last year, there were 362 patients, 410 with battle injuries. The NAO concluded that treatment for wounded troops was “highly effective”, a fact that was underlined by the number of patients medically known as “unexpected survivors”.

The audit officer’s report was followed by warnings from MPs on the Commons public accounts committee last week that although the care of seriously injured servicemen is of a high standard, the MoD “does not have sufficiently detailed and robust contingency plans” should Selly Oak become full.

The MPs added: “Given the UK’s long-term commitment to Afghanistan, patients will continue to arrive at Steadley Court and its facilities are likely to come under mounting pressure.”

The statistics show that 105 British servicemen suffered amputations after being wounded in Afghanistan between April 2008 and the end of last year. Of the 54 who suffered amputations last year, 26 lost two or more limbs.

There were complaints in the past that the MoD was not disclosing to the public the number of troops who have lost limbs in the conflict.

Although the ministry is now making more detailed casualty statistics available, there remains some sensitivity over the large number of troops who are suffering life-changing injuries.

Journals are effectively banned from Selly Oak, and one army officer has been quoted as saying that many of the injured are being questioned by personnel who are so severe that they are “politically explosive”.

The MoD statistics also show that 376 servicemen and women were seriously or very seriously injured in Afghanistan between the beginning of 2002 and the end of last year.

Of these casualties, 158, almost half, were wounded in 2009. A further 12 suffered similarly vertiginous injuries in January this year.

As of March 22, 276 British soldiers have lost their lives in Afghanistan. Some 108 died last year alone.

“In one thing dominated my early years, it was the legacy of the Great War,” wrote consultant Bob Ellis in Fen Tiger, his memoir of growing up in the 1920s in rural Cambridgeshire. “You could often to be found in conversation with village postman Jim Eke who had suffered exactly the same injury at Ypres.

Both were well aware that the gableless children tired to make them chat because they “sounded funny”.

Today’s unhappy reminders of the fighting in Afghanistan are in just this tradition, which stretches back through British history to the “sturdy buggers” - injured veterans of French wars - who prompted the country’s last version of social services legislation.

To keep these men from causing trouble, Elizabeth passed the 1597 Act for the Relief of the Poor which introduced taxes to pay for compulsory, patchy-labour schemes.

Neglect persisted, however, and campaigners for better treatment of today’s injured soldiers regularly draw on famous arrangements for Napoleonic veterans and particularly the national disgrace of the treatment of the injured from the first world war.

Poet Wilfred Owen, who died in the last week of the conflict, foresaw what might have happened to him had the bullet which killed him simply taken off his leg and wrecked his face.

He wrote in D dazzled (1917): “I sat in my guilty suit of grey, / Legless, shabby, short at elbow. / Owen described how the amputee would never again feel the faint warmth of girls whose eyes “touched him like some queer disease” and “passed from him to the strong men that were whole”.

The second world war saw massive amputations and huge advances in plastic surgery by doctors such as Archibald McIndoe. His skillful reconstruction and realistic prostheses ended much of the self-isolation of earlier victims. But visits to the US today will still encounter maimed Vietnam veterans begging in the streets, and Linus Weston has devoted his life since his crucial burns suffered during the Falklands conflict to reminding us that the toll of injury does not stop on discharge from hospital. Martin Wainwright

### Unhappy tradition

Today’s wounded are an echo of the men maimed in all our past wars