



INVISIBLE WOUNDS

Like many former soldiers, Michael York and Simon Smith struggled with drug and mental health problems after leaving the army. **Laura Brooks** asks whether the authorities are doing enough to help veterans cope with life on civvy street.

Michael York was 19 years old when he went AWOL from the British Army in 1990. He had just returned from a year in Cyprus as a UN peacekeeper, where he frequently witnessed at first hand graphic injuries, rape and deaths of civilians and soldiers caught up in the bitter divisions between the island's Turkish and Greek communities. Like Michael, many of his fellow soldiers were deeply affected by their time in Cyprus: two of his comrades committed suicide soon after returning to their base in Germany. Michael says they were offered no psychiatric help to deal with the traumatic scenes that they had seen.

During the 51 weeks he was AWOL from the army, Michael became addicted to the sleeping tablets he had been prescribed to help him deal with insomnia. Now aged 38, Michael has been clean for a year after going on a drug rehabilitation programme, marking the end of a 15 year struggle with heroin addiction.

"Taking drugs was my way of coping with things I had seen," Michael tells *Druglink* from his rehab clinic in Kent. "It's viewed as weak to ask for help in the army and there was nothing on offer to help deal with it. It's easier to just keep it bottled up."

Michael's experiences with mental illness after leaving the army are not uncommon. In February, Lance Corporal Johnson Beharry, Britain's highest-decorated serving soldier, criticised the government for neglecting veterans with mental health problems. He said: "It is disgraceful that an ex-serviceman or woman has to go to the NHS. The

government should have something in place. I don't think the government is doing enough." Although he suffers constantly with pain from his injuries, Beharry refuses to take painkillers out of fear of becoming dependent on them.

A report carried out by the National Association of Probation Officers (NAPO) in September last year indicated there are high numbers of former service personnel either serving sentences in prisons in England and Wales or under probation. An overwhelming majority had been convicted of offences relating to drug or alcohol issues.

In 2006 Danny McKee, a 29-year-old soldier who started using heroin after suffering flashbacks from serving in Iraq, was jailed for three years after threatening a drug dealer with a gun stolen from his barracks. The court heard former public schoolboy McKee, who suffered from PTSD, received no counselling after returning from frontline service searching potential suicide bombers and being ambushed by insurgents in Iraq.

A Ministry of Defence (MoD) report conducted by the Defence Analytical Service and published in March found nearly 4,000 soldiers were identified as suffering from mental disorders in 2007, of which 435 were assessed to have drug problems and 180 were diagnosed with PTSD. A survey published last year, carried out by the King's Centre for Military Health Research in 2006, showed that of over 10,000 service personnel and veterans questioned, one fifth reported some symptoms of anxiety or depression, and four per cent reported symptoms of PTSD.

It found soldiers deployed to Iraq experienced around twice the ill health problems than those not deployed. Yet while soldiers can receive good care for PTSD if it is diagnosed while they are still in the army, some suffer for years before they come forward for help.

Combat Stress, a charity that treats ex-service personnel for psychological and addiction problems, says that the average length of time between a soldier leaving the army and then seeking help for PTSD is 14 years. "When people are under pressure, they are taught by the army to self-medicate, and that used to come in the form of alcohol. Maybe more people are turning to drugs now. I'm sensing, from those leaving nowadays, an increase in the use of serious drugs like heroin, and that bothers me," says Clive Fairweather of Combat Stress.

At the time of writing, there are currently 12,300 UK army troops deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq. Four thousand of the troops stationed in Iraq are due to return home over the next few weeks, and undoubtedly, many of these soldiers will require professional psychological help to deal with things that they have seen.

Michael believes army culture made it harder to ask for help, by undermining the trust that soldiers had with their seniors, when counselling was offered to those who were addicted to drugs while in the service. "I know of people who went to get help because they were addicted to drugs, and they were told that they faced prison sentences for their actions," Michael says. "Seeing the way that they had been treated...it made it even more impossible to ask for help."

Michael was homeless for a few weeks after going AWOL, before he found his own flat. His mother reported his whereabouts to the police – something that damaged Michael's relationship with her until only recently – and he was court marshalled. Michael was sentenced to 9 months in prison when he was 20 years old. "No one was interested in finding out the reasons about why I had gone AWOL, they just wanted to punish me for what I had done," says Michael.

After Michael left the army, he found he was not eligible for resettlement benefits, and had little idea of what to do next with his life. He ended up living in a bedsit in his hometown of Blackpool. "I had never heard of PTSD and I needed something to make my 'daymares' go away."

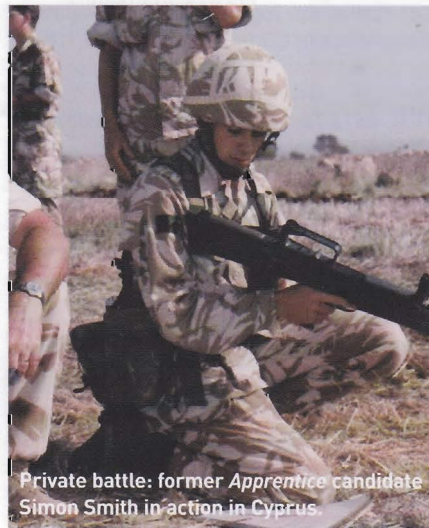
Michael began using heroin when he

was 22, and for the next 15 years, he held down short-term jobs and carried on using heroin, methadone, cannabis and ecstasy. He was, and still is, unable to sleep for more than four hours a night, something that he attributes to a 'coping strategy' that he has developed. "I don't sleep long enough to have dreams about the things I saw," Michael says.

Drug use by veterans as a way of coping with civilian life is not always linked with a way of coping with stress during active service. Simon Smith, 37, who appeared in last year's series of BBC show *The Apprentice*, was in the army for seven years as an infantry soldier in Northern Ireland and Cyprus, and a surveyor who located artillery in Bosnia.

Like Michael, Simon saw some violent and bloody scenes, but never suffered with PTSD. "I haven't been through what they've [people who suffer with PTSD] been through," says Simon. "Whatever way you look at it, I never shot anybody, I never killed anyone. I may have been responsible for blowing a few people up, but that was because I was in the artillery. But we did

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that from 25 miles away, you're not up close and personal with it."

After leaving the army in 1998, Simon began using cocaine casually. But by 2002, he was spending £200 a week on the drug and his marriage was over. "I got into drugs because I missed being in the army. For me it was a replacement thing and part of a feeling that you belong to something again. I didn't have the army security blanket around me. That camaraderie that your mate would give you his last Twix bar...the real world isn't like that. And once you're outside the wire, you're cut out. For a lot of guys leaving the army there is nothing for you when you get outside. They need somewhere to go where they can talk to people that actually understand what they are talking about."

Smith decided to get off drugs after one too many scary experiences. "One evening I went out and took four grams of cocaine and six ecstasy pills. I was absolutely off my head," said Simon. "I knocked some champagne off of a table, and had a gun pulled on me. I was on prescription anti depressants as well at the time – I thought I was manically depressed, I didn't realise it was paranoia from the cocaine use. I got back to my house and flushed everything down the toilet, and sat in my room, rocking backwards and forwards for two days. I did it the hard way. I didn't go to any counselling, I just stopped taking everything. I wish I had got some help, because it wasn't easy."

To improve its services to veterans, the MoD says there are currently six pilot sites in the UK that focus on diagnosing and treating mental illnesses and substance problems among veterans. The Community Veterans Mental Health Project, sponsored by the Veteran's Association, has been running for 20 months, although the MoD is so far unsure as to what will happen next. The MoD says soldiers receive training to increase awareness of mental health issues and stress management throughout their careers, particularly prior to and after deployment. In addition, the families of personnel returning from deployment are also given advice.

Although substance misuse and mental health problems suffered by army veterans are being addressed to some extent, there is clearly scope for improvement. Veterans who have risked their lives to ensure the safety and well-being of others should not have to suffer in silence, or feel as though the only option available to escape the mental trauma is by turning to drugs.