



It's been a few years since archaeologists started working with traumatised veteran soldiers, and much has been learnt. Richard Bennett describes the success of a project that uses heritage to promote wellbeing

SAVING LIVES: BREAKING GROUND HERITAGE

Physical and psychological injuries are commonplace among those who are or were members of the Armed Forces. How can we help those affected by sometimes life-altering challenges and limitations to return as functioning and contributing members of society – not just for economic reasons, but for the continued professional and psychological development of the veteran community?

Breaking Ground Heritage (BGH) was set up in 2015 to see what it could do. It began as a way for injured veterans to take part in archaeology, and help those who might want a new career working with heritage. Since then the project has developed wider ambitions. Our primary mission now is to use heritage-based projects to promote physical and psychological wellbeing.

Richard Osgood, senior

archaeologist for the Defence Infrastructure Organisation, is one of the key architects of the pioneering Operation Nightingale (see “Archaeology as rehabilitation,” Jan/Feb 2012/122, and “Recovering Spitfire P9503: Exercise Tally Ho!” May/Jun 2014/136). This originally looked to BGH to provide logistical support and assistance – offering good career development for myself, as I first became involved in archaeology. I benefitted immensely from my time working with an excavation at Barrow Clump, Wiltshire (News Sep/Oct 2012/126), and many other projects that Osgood ran. The experience gave me the motivation and drive to do whatever was in my power to undertake the task of reintegration. It saved my life

Three years later, BGH is the primary provider of heritage-based projects to



Above: Removing human remains from an Anglo-Saxon grave at Barrow Clump, Wiltshire

the military community (serving, veteran and dependants), and our role with Op Nightingale has developed. It is now a partnership: Op Nightingale facilitates projects on Ministry of Defence (MOD) estates, and we provide participants and all things pertaining to them. This complementary arrangement enables the MOD to continue supporting veterans in a capacity that also maintains its estates (the training areas that most of the participants anyway know like the back of their hand).

At BGH we realised early on – through our own personal recovery pathways or through observations of participants on projects – that something was happening here that we couldn't understand. Something was enabling participants to move forward with their lives, some for the first time since leaving the military. This got us thinking. How could we explain the individual experiences on these projects that might be leading to this positive wellbeing? We developed outcome surveys and measurements, and started to look at projects in different ways, initially focusing on the internal social dynamics of the group.

Watching and talking to the participants led us to understand the project's fundamental building block: the "community group". Everyone in this community had shared experiences, not of combat per se, but of military life and the elements that being a member of the tribe entail: a shared language, unique traditions, inter-tribal allegiances and knowing how to interact with each other with characteristic banter and black humour. At first this tribal instinct

concerned us, as it might exclude other groups. Military social structures are very much "alpha" based, another potential barrier.

The MOD (and thus Op Nightingale) contracts out its larger archaeology projects to commercial units who bring along professional archaeologists. Archaeologists and squaddies are probably poles apart from each other in any walk of life, but the two communities (the archaeological, and the military or BGH) have become



Right: Father and son digging at Barrow Clump

intertwined. Our concerns about potential lack of inclusions never materialised – and neither did the alpha structure. The societal rankings on BGH projects have always been equal, regardless of service rank, arm of service or disability. This surprised me: in 17 years in the Royal Marines, I had never known a military community act in this way. We have discovered that the BGH community is very inclusive. It is also based around peer support, where BGH members, new and old, quickly interact like lifelong friends.

During my first excavation at Barrow Clump, I turned up on site knowing only one other participant, who had arrived not long before me. Within five minutes I received a torrent of banter about my service in the Marines, which I would have expected only from those whom I knew best. This was not abuse – far from it – this was a way of showing that I had been accepted into the



Above: Cultural immersion experience – Pario Gallico shares the results of bronze age cooking at Barrow Clump



Left: Barrow Clump therapy – tree sculpting with clay, taught by Briony Clifton of the National Trust

Below: Exercise Joan of Arc – geophysics training on a first world war battlefield site at Bullecourt, France



group (or this is what I tell myself), and this now serves as an indicator for BGH staff to the overall health of a group. If there is ever a time with no banter, or if there is someone excluded from the banter, this is an indicator that there may be a problem. The groups as a whole are very perceptive and can, for the most part, empathise with someone who has poor mental health; 95% of our participants have disclosed mental health problems in some form.

I have heard participants, sometimes having been a member of the BGH community for only a few days, say more times than I can reliably recall, “That was the first time I have told anyone that”. Although on the face of

it such a remark appears positive, it really isn't. Most of these participants have been through quite extensive therapy, yet had felt unable to speak to clinicians about these traumatic events. I am guilty of this myself, as I have been in therapy for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other relatable mental health issues since 2014. I still have not felt able to confide my demons to people outside the BGH community, even though I know that I need to in order to start my own recovery process.

Karen Burnell and colleagues have conducted some fantastic research on veterans' experiences of social support (see end note). These veterans were involved in conflicts such as the second world war, Korea, the Falklands and



later wars. The individual narratives, which span several decades, suggest something I have recognised through my own personal experiences. The research suggests that service personnel who have witnessed psychologically traumatic events will generally protect their family, friends and wider society from these traumas by not sharing their experiences with them. In response, sufferers' families and friends will generally buffer them from any exposure to experiences that they feel might cause a negative psychological response.

This suggests that any psychologically traumatic event an individual may have undergone might stay unreconciled. In contrast, veterans were able to discuss their psychologically traumatic experiences with the individuals that had shared the experience: BGH research is starting to indicate that it is this shared military connection rather than the joint experience of an event that counts. Furthermore, this bond didn't seem to diminish through time. The sufferers of psychological traumas were able to reconcile the traumatic memories and psychological distress through narratives with peers. Perhaps this

Above: Face to face with traumatic history at Bullecourt, with support from the team

Right: Veterans built a two-thirds replica of a M11 Mat tank from Bullecourt for public outreach work

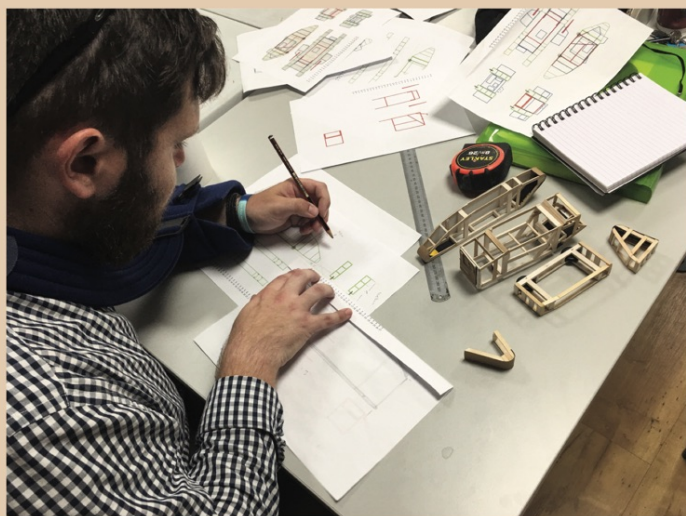
may be a simplistic explanation, but this research was like music to our ears. It corroborated what we had observed happening on our projects, and goes some way to explain the "that was the first time I have told anyone that" scenario.

During Exercise Joan of Arc which took place in France, we were conducting excavations on a first world war battlefield when a member of our team was confronted with a scene not too dissimilar from what he had witnessed in service, leading to the primary cause of his PTSD. The discovery of a tank track initially gave him feelings of elation and joy, as he was a former member of the Royal Tank Regiment. He's also an avid military historian of anything tank related, especially from WWI. With the removal of the track for conservation, however, it soon became apparent that there were human remains below.

They were not crushed, as you might

expect from a 28 ton metal box. The bodies had been covered with a poncho and given a hasty field burial, and the track was probably placed over them to act as a grave marker. These two historically independent events of a tank and the two soldiers' bodies were enough to make him revisit the traumatic events that he had long since repressed, naturally invoking in him the flight response. Due to the nature of this project we had deployed to France with a very capable psychological wellbeing lead, Kayleigh Taylor, former head of the Help for Heroes Hidden Wounds Team and now working for Wiltshire Improving Access to Psychological Therapy Service.

Taylor is experienced in working with these sorts of reactions, and was able to help this individual understand what he was witnessing. He returned to the site at his own request to watch the continued archaeological excavation.



He then managed to build up the courage and confidence to ask if he could help recover the two soldiers' remains. During the process of cleaning up the skeletons for recording, he later admitted that he spoke to them, reassuring them that they had been found and that we wouldn't lose them again. This event that mimicked his own traumatic experience occurred while he was immersed in a group of his peers, his own community. Taylor had long been accepted as a part of this group and had gained his trust, breaking down those initial barriers as we have previously discussed, and enabling this incredible outcome.

There is, however, still plenty of work to do. Recent government



Above: Excavating a first world war training trench on Perham Down, Salisbury Plain, watched by men who were there and never returned home

results that the BGH/Operation Nightingale partnership has managed to achieve.



Above: Good to talk – Kayleigh Taylor with a veteran at Chisenbury iron age midden, Wiltshire

statistics show an alarming increase in the number of military suicides. The interpersonal-psychological theory of suicides in the military community, discussed by Carl Andrew Castro and Sara Kintzle (see end note) proposes that they occur when three factors are met: a strong perception that an individual is a burden to others; a high sense of not belonging, of isolation; and an acquired ability to enact lethal self-harm. It is already recognised that the latter is present in the military community, leaving two final contributing factors to suicide.

Data show that before exposure to BGH 70% of participants describe overwhelming feelings of social isolation. Post-project surveys show a significant reduction in this self-declared isolation. We haven't obtained enough data to look at burdensomeness. If we instead look at self-declared feelings of being valued, we find 100% of participants declaring a low sense of value before exposure to BGH. Afterwards, higher levels of such feelings are expressed by all

Right: Learning to excavate human remains at Rat Island, Hampshire, exposed by a storm in 2014 and thought to be from 18th-century convicts or soldiers from prisoner of war ships

participants. By engaging groups that have a heightened risk of suicide, who also present with possible indicators of suicide, we can reduce the risk to the individual significantly through projects of this kind.

The future is looking very bright for Breaking Ground Heritage. Wellbeing is becoming more than an afterthought in heritage, not just in the UK but in Europe and America too. This year BGH will be talking about the work we

See "Coping with traumatic memories: Second World War veterans' experiences of social support in relation to the narrative coherence of war memories," by K Burnell, P Coleman & N Hunt, *Aging and Society* 30 (2010), 57–78; "Suicides in the military: the post-modern combat veteran and the Hemingway effect," by CA Castro & S Kintzle, *Current Psychiatry Reports* 16 (2014), 1–9. Richard Bennett is the founding director of Breaking Ground Heritage ■



have been doing at the European Association of Archaeologists in Barcelona, Spain, and the Participation in Cultural Heritage for Mental Health Recovery conference in Ghent, Belgium. We are also liaising with academics and institutions across the globe to help others develop projects that can deliver the same successful

