As the War Widows Association with their bouquet of white chrysanthemums leads the UK's national annual commemoration for the war dead at The Cenotaph in London, Elayne Jude, Senior Research Associate of the U K Defence Forum, reviews They Were Soldiers: How the Wounded Return from America's Wars - The Untold Story by Ann Jones published Dispatch Books/Haymarket Books, 2013

This book is an important and timely document. It follows US soldiers from the moment of death or 'catastrophic injury', back to the field hospital at Bagram, on to the regional medical centre at Landstuhl, Germany, home to hospital and lengthy rehab, or the dolorous journey in a metal casket to Dover Air Base; and on, to the long-lasting consequences of deployment, for the soldiers, their families, and their nation. It's a lucid, clear-eyed and compassionate piece of long form investigative journalism, as disturbing to read as it is impossible to put aside, its emotional impact amplified by its refusal to grandstand or manipulate. Quietly, steadily, with impeccable and remorseless logic, the author debunks the mythologising of soldiering by a pathologically militarised culture; America, our cousins.

The devastation is in the details. Ann Jones refuses to look away from those scenes we would rather not confront. Military morticians prepare a body for repatriation; 'expert make-up personnel restore the face, if any'. A legless patient asks a nurse to put pillows under the blanket where his legs should be. The field surgeon. haunted by his very first patient: a young kid, as so many are, legs gone, testicles eviscerated, penis hanging by a flap of skin, which he has to amputate and throw it into a surgical waste container.

Based on interviews with serving and former soldiers, their families, caregivers, doctors and therapists, on military bases, military hospitals and private houses, from Kabul to Kansas, the book proceeds from the appalling individual heartbreak of particular cases to a dissection of military culture and the American addiction to warfighting. Ms Jones takes apart the sanitising language of military injury and death, for language is an essential building block of the stoic mask overlying the private horror.

Why, for instance, is rape in the military - an American scandal whose bad news stories just keep on coming - referred to as MST, or Military Sexual Trauma, when trauma is not the event itself, but the effect ? Why are the young children of serving personnel described in DoD press releases as making sacrifices, when a sacrifice implies a level of volition generally unavailable to infants ? Why the campaign to rename PTSD, not a disorder, implying some kind of malfunction, but the manlier 'injury' ? Why are soldiers 'fallen', implying death as graceful as a

Homeric warrior ?

At the mini-metropolis of Bagram, PR minders relay breathless inspirational tales of the soldiers for whom Disney and Craig Avenues are named; but their heroic deaths in combat against global terrorism are actually the results of prosaic accidents. Even a piece of medical apparatus called a Smeed is named for a hero; except, it turns out, it's simply an acronym for a Special Medical Emergency Evacuation Device. The myth making is relentless, like the water conjured up by the Magician's Nephew, spilling out faster than it can be mopped up.

At the core of the book is the issue of accountability - from soldiers, citizens and institutions. The question of guilt is examined at every level, from the private soldier who has committed questionable acts, to the pharmaceutical companies manufacturing expensive and potentially dangerous opiods to medicate his conscience, to the private contractors such as Blackwater and Halliburton, receiving huge government contracts despite convictions for incompetence, plain theft, and worse.

The mass diagnoses of PTSD coincided with a shift in treatment of US veterans from talk-based therapy to psychotropic; from confession to chemistry. Therapists encouraged their traumatised patients to share in a non-judgemental, value-free atmosphere. This apparently benign approach removes from those who feel they have committed dishonourable, wicked or murderous acts, the possibility of owning one's own behaviour, and the catharsis that comes with it.

A recent private conversation with a former British commander and a leading expert in veteran trauma stressed the importance to soldiers in overcoming their demons the notion that they had done their duty, that they had done what was right. But in conflict out of control, many soldiers find themselves doing what cannot be justified or condoned. What comfort for them, when they cannot take responsibility for what they have done; what peace can they find, unshriven ?

Ann Jones questions the blanket tolerance encouraged by the US State for soldiers who have come home still at war, whether it is in their best interests that their behaviour go unchallenged by their families and friends, as per the official line. She describes a wonderfully Stepford-like workshop, at Walter Reed Medical Centre, for partners and caregivers - overwhelmingly female, wives and mothers - for it is usually women who pick up the pieces. On the whiteboard is the motto: Only when your soldier is happy, can you be truly happy.

The workshop leaders nudge the attendees, young wives who scarcely knew their husbands before his deployment and scarcely recognise him now, towards the right response. Is your soldier uncommunicative ? Give him his space. Does he isolate ? Give him his space. Does he refuse sex ? You've guessed it. Does he demand sex you're not comfortable with ? Give him your body !

Finally one young woman springs up and says, "Thank you. This has helped me make my mind up for sure. I'm going to get a divorce". She has no children, a job, a college degree; she has real options. But many of the others, ill-educated, already mothers, knowing no other life but this, stay in their seats and earnestly try to co-operate. Like their boy-husbands, recruited from the poor South, the post-industrial rustbelt, the inner city projects, their options are limited, and the US Army is the only way out.

Describing her painstaking tracking of the violence that comes home with the troops - the rapes, battery, murders perpetrated on, in this order, wives, girlfriends, other veterans, random strangers - Ann Jones writes:

'You won't find these cases in your local news unless you live in Blissfield, Ohio, or Gilroy, California, or somewhere near Fort Carson or Joint Base Lewis-McChord, but you can Google "veterans' homicides", or "veterans' crimes", and write a chapter like this yourself, if you can bear the work'. Well, no. I don't think I could bear it. And I'm deeply grateful to a braver soul than mine, for doing this dark and necessary work.

Back for a moment to Bagram, to the soldiers charged with packing up the belongings of the dead to return to their families. For one, it's essential that she recover and return every last scrap; photographs, watches, electronic toys, the lot. Another feels that her duty is to (unofficially) censor any item the wife or mother might be upset by - extreme porn, drug paraphernalia, anything that might present a final image of something more fleshy than heroic perfection.

On Remembrance Day, we can choose to indulge ourself in an orgy of sentimentality, the uplifting words of They Shall Not Grow Old, the glitter of spur and stirrup, the solemn thrill of pageantry; what former Laureate Andrew Motion calls our British talent for 'glorious sadness', and Philip Larkin, more curtly, calls 'wreath-rubbish in Whitehall'.

Or we can seek a dirtier, more profound truth, away from the impassive faces of the old guard, and think of the boys vomiting from terror as they go out on patrol, crying for their mothers when their limbs are shredded by explosions, beating their wives to death and blowing their own brains out back home, and ask ourselves what every detective asks over the corpse: Cui bono ?

'...These dead soldiers now serve rhetorically as an incitement to continue the fight so their sacrifice "shall not have been in vain." There may be a rare American, inside or outside military service, who can state with certainty what we now fight for, but when soldiers fight only because soldiers before them have fought, when soldiers die only because soldiers before them have died, then war truly becomes an endless loop.'