



Australian veterans' health: Gulf war

The Gulf War began in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990. The United Nations sanctioned retaliatory military action led by the USA and Saudi Arabia. A coalition of 34 countries, including Australia, contributed around 956,600 troops.

- Australia's contribution of over 1800 troops from August 1990 to September 1991 was relatively small.
- It consisted almost entirely of navy personnel whose job it was to help enforce sanctions in the Persian Gulf. Australia also contributed a RAN clearance diving team and medical teams.
- 75 Australian personnel were sent to northern Iraq at the end of the war, to assist on a humanitarian mission.

Gulf war veterans speak about their health

PHILIP STEELE: *"Anxiety, depression, anger. I've developed rashes, general fatigue. Every now and then I bleed from my anus. I bleed from my nose, my mouth."*

GRAHAM BERTOLINI: *"Until going to the Gulf, I was perfectly fit, healthy, had no medical problems. I've suffered from a lot of effects, ranging from fatigue, through to heart problems, muscle and joint pains . . . a lot of rashes and unexplained skin blemishes."*

(Interviewed on ABC 7.30 report, 2004)

Injuries and deaths in the Gulf War

With hardly any combat fighting, only 40 days of air warfare and five days of ground warfare there were 193 Coalition deaths.

There were no Australian military deaths or injuries reported.

Long-term health consequences

In comparison to immediate casualties, longer-term impacts on Australian Gulf War veterans have been numerous.

The most widespread physical health problem reported has been chronic fatigue syndrome, with up to 66% suffering from this condition.

Fatigue has also been one of the major symptoms associated with the controversial Gulf War Syndrome, which affects up to 30% of Australian Gulf War veterans. Gulf War Syndrome denotes patterns of multiple unexplained symptoms reported by Coalition veterans onwards from the late 1990s.

These include nausea, mental disorder, digestive problems, breathing difficulties and skin ailments. The legitimacy and potential causes of the syndrome as a coherent condition have been subject to heated debate. It has been variously linked with exposure to chemicals, dust, smoke from burning oil wells, vaccines or pathogens. Incomplete records and the range of symptoms have made it difficult to find a definitive answer.

Some studies have questioned the extent to which Gulf War Syndrome is a physical reality for many Australian veterans. Self-reporting of lung and neurological symptoms has sometimes failed to match medical examination outcomes. It may be that media reports on the "Gulf War Effect" have resulted in some degree of over-self diagnosis.

Gulf War Syndrome is not currently recognized under the Veterans Entitlement Act but many veterans and many experts remain adamant it is a legitimate condition.

Other long-term consequences may not yet be known.

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Mental health consequences

In studies of Australian Gulf War veterans, conducted by Veterans' Affairs and others, the most striking finding is the development of significantly more psychological disorders in the time since the Gulf War, than in a comparison group of soldiers who did not participate.

About one third developed these disorders, including 15% with alcohol abuse problems, 10% with depression, and 6% with anxiety disorders, including 4% with post traumatic stress disorder.

Symptoms of these psychological conditions are commonly included in descriptions of Gulf War Syndrome.

Australian veterans were involved in few direct-combat encounters during the war due to their principal postings on naval vessels, but anxiety and mental disorders in this group can be traced back to the sustained fear or threat of an attack. While boats were not subject to any direct assaults, dives by Iraqi air force jets within weapons release range occurred, which were psychologically disturbing.

Many veterans claim that there are increased rates of suicide amongst Gulf War veterans. This has not been substantiated by any Australian research to date.

Major-General (ret'd) John Cantwell

Major-General Cantwell chronicles the psychological effects of several decades of war experience in his autobiography "Exit Wounds".

"I was one of only one or two Australians that were involved in the combat phase of the first Iraq war in 1991 . . .

[the destruction of the first layer of Iraqi defences]... certainly worked. It was pretty brutal, and it managed to kill by burial, alive and dead, hundreds, perhaps thousands of Iraqi soldiers and I did find that troubling. And one of the images of a hand reaching out of the sand, of a buried Iraqi was one of the images, the many images that I carried from that war."
(ABC Lateline, Sept. 2012)

Note on evidence

Two factors limit the drawing of final conclusions on health effects of this war. Firstly some diseases, including many cancers, take many years to develop. Secondly, the small numbers of veterans make it harder to be sure that any pattern of disease is due to participation in the war.

Medical Association for Prevention of War
www.mapw.org.au



Kuwaiti oil wells set ablaze by Iraqi forces, March 1991. UN Photo/John Isaac

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PTSD results from intense negative experiences, including threatened and actual physical harm, major loss of personal freedom or infringement of personal principles. Long-term symptoms include avoidance of reminders of the event, and distressing unwanted recollections – vivid flash-backs or nightmares. Sufferers remain emotionally on edge, unable to enjoy normal social interaction. Their symptoms include sleeplessness, anxiety, irritability, depression and mood swings, as well as social withdrawal and alcoholism.

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