Downloaded from http://jramc.bmj.com/ on March 26, 2018 - Published by group.bmj.com

Threading the needle: when embroidery was used to treat shell-shock

Jonathan Davidson

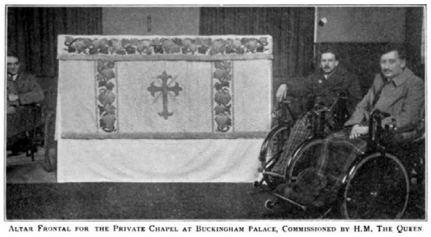
INTRODUCTION

The use of embroidery to provide comfort for victims of trauma goes back several hundred years. An early example is provided by Mary, Queen of Scots, who found "great solace" in prolonged captivity as she dealt with what her doctors called "grief of the spleen" (or *obstructio splenis cum flatu hypochondriaco*).[1] Later applications of needlework included its use in the military context for a variety of purposes, mostly in the form of embroidered badges as symbols of admired qualities like loyalty, courage, ferocity and strength, or to denote membership of a particular unit. The design and use of such badges is often subject to strict regulation. Less well known is the therapeutic application of embroidery to survivors of combat trauma. What follows is a historical account of this practice, with emphasis on World War I and a consideration of its place in current practice.

WORLD WAR I

The merits of occupational therapy, including embroidery, for shell-shocked survivors of combat were described by Williamson in 1917,[2] and it was later reported to thwart 'melancholy'.[3] Among the first to advocate for, and teach, embroidery for shell-shock was Louisa Pesel (1870–1947), an internationally known pioneer in the use of needlework.[4] After a term as director of the Royal Hellenic School of Needlework in Athens, Pesel returned to her home town of Bradford, where in conjunction with the Abram Peel Neuropsychiatric Hospital, she taught embroidery to soldiers returning home from action at the front. Pesel favoured Greek and Middle Eastern motifs in her designs. A well-known example of the work of these soldiers is the altar frontal, originally made for use during worship in the Abram Peel Hospital and now part of the Bradford Cathedral collection (Figure 1). Subsequently, Pesel moved to Winchester where she led a team in the creation of over 500 kneelers, stall cushions and alms bags, many of which are still in use. Pesel was a prolific author and lecturer, and her influence was considerable.

Figure 1 Bradford Cathedral altar frontal. Included by permission of Jacqueline Holdsworth (http://needleprint.blogspot.com/2010/02/louisa-pesel-shell- shocked-soldiers.html).



ALTAR FRONTAL FOR THE PRIVATE CHAPEL AT BUCKINGHAM PALACE, COMMISSIONED BY H.M. THE QUEEN

Figure 2 Buckingham Palace altar frontal. Included by permsssion of HL Tyler (http://www.ernestthesiger.org).

The stage and film actor, Ernest Thesiger (1879–1961), himself a wounded War War I veteran, was an ardent embroiderer and saw its potential as a form of therapy and source of income for disabled veterans. Thesiger favoured Queen Anne or Chippendale chair designs, which he provided to his clients, with the encouragement that such designs would find a ready market. Thesiger joined forces with other like-minded individuals to found the Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry (DSEI) as a way of promoting the recovery and employment of war veterans.[3] After a slow start, the DSEI gained momentum and attracted royal patronage, with support from Queen Mary, the Prince of Wales and the Queen of Spain. Queen Mary accepted an altar frontal for use in the private chapel at Buckingham Palace (Figure 2), the Prince commissioned a historical map for his home, and the Queen of Spain received a stool cover. In 1933 the present Queen, Elizabeth II, received a small blue bag inscribed with her initial 'E' and a crown on the front.[3] Other commissions included an order for the Haig banner at Ypres Memorial Chapel. Thesiger remained actively involved as an instructor in the DSEI programme (Figure 3), which continued to function into the 1960s, when the DSEI gave an embroidered chair to Princess Margaret on the occasion of her wedding, and in 1961 sent a representative to the funeral of Ernest Thesiger.

Figure 3 Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry (DSEI) logo. Included by permission of HL Tyler (http://www.ernestthesiger.org).

St Paul's Cathedral has borne important witness to World War I embroidery. In 1919, a five-panel altar frontal was dedicated to the cathedral. The creation of this frontal was the result of an initiative by the Royal School of Needlework and the concerted efforts of 133 disabled soldiers in hospitals across England. The panels depict the Eucharistic chalice as a symbol of suffering and two palm fronds to symbolise victory. The tapestry covered the altar until World War II, when it was put in storage and largely forgotten. It was subsequently restored and displayed as part of the cathedral's centenary commemoration of the war, along with a list identifying all 133 soldiers who made the frontal[5] (Figures 4, 5, 6).

Needlecraft was not limited to the World War I wounded in the UK. It found favour in Australia and New Zealand, where important collections of World War I artwork now exist at the TePapa Museum in Wellington and the Australian War Memorial Museum in Canberra. Among many examples, the work of Albert Biggs is mentioned here. Biggs enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force and fought at Gallipoli and later at Lagincourt, where he earned the Military Medal. It was at Lagincourt that Biggs sustained severe injuries which left him unable to use his right hand and impaired the function of his left knee. Biggs spent 1 year in a French hospital, then at Tooting, where he was encouraged to take up 'fancy work', as embroidery was

Psychiatry, Duke University Medical Center, Durham, North Carolina, USA

Correspondence to Professor Jonathan Davidson; david011@mc.duke.edu

Downloaded from http://jramc.bmj.com/ on March 26, 2018 - Published by group.bmj.com

Figure 4 St Paul's Cathedral altar frontal. Copyright, The Chapter of St. Paul's Cathedral. Included by permission, Simon Carter.

then called. On return home, Biggs spent another 2 years at Randwick Hospital (4AGH). Biggs' instructor noted that embroidery helped patients '*to forget that have any great disability*'.[6] The Australian War Memorial contains four examples of Biggs' work, one of which displays Australia's coat of arms (Figure 7), a theme that he perhaps chose in affirmation of his identity. Other motifs included gold daisies and red berries, a Union flag and the following quotes: '*For England home and away*' and '*Australia will be there*.' As Brayshaw observed, creating these masterpieces represented a triumph over the odds since Biggs was unable to use his right hand.

WORLD WAR II

Embroidery played a more limited role during World War II. The so-called '*Penelope Kits*' were produced on a commercial scale by WM Briggs, to be made available only to servicemen and women, and more for recreation than formal therapy. There have been two striking accounts of prisoners of war using needlework to cope with the hardships of captivity. While space precludes going into detail here, the stories of Sergeant Morris Larkin and Major Alexis Casdagli are

Figure 5 St Paul's Cathedral. Parrot. Copyright, The Chapter of St. Paul's Cathedral. Included by permission, Simon Carter.

Figure 6 St Paul's Cathedral. Remembrance book. Copyright, The Chapter of St. Paul's Cathedral. Included by permission, Simon Carter.

instructive on the ways in which creative activity of this type can be used to deal with extreme adversity.[7]

IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRENT PRACTICE

There is much about needlecraft that suggests it should be beneficial in PTSD. For example, it can be engaged in individually or in a group, both of which offer different benefits. It affords the opportunity to focus attention away from personal ailments and fears, and through the finished product, to confer a sense of worth or even income. Others have noted how embroidery can assist with reducing arousal, regulating emotion and drawing the mind away from self-absorbed thoughts into the fingers. In a controlled study of healthy young adults, Conner *et al*[8] found that the act of creating led directionally to improved affect and flourishing. Creative art activities are now included in the management of PTSD, such as the Healing Arts Programme at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Centre,[9] although needlework is neither offered in this programme, nor in the federally funded National Endowment for the Arts Military Healing Arts Partnership,[10] but it would be a natural fit. It is interesting that, while needlework has been almost entirely the province of women, male veterans of World War I embraced it too. This now overlooked activity may yet find a place in the treatment of PTSD for men and women.

Figure 7 Embroidered Australian coat of arms by Albert Biggs. Credit Australian War Memorial Museum.

Contributors JD conceived the idea and wrote the article.

Competing interests None declared.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; internally peer reviewed.

© Article author(s) (or their employer(s) unless otherwise stated in the text of the article) 2018. All rights reserved. No commercial use is permitted unless otherwise expressly granted.

Check for updates

To cite Davidson J. *J R Army Med Corps* Epub ahead of print: [*please include* Day Month Year]. doi:10.1136/jramc-2018-000922

J R Army Med Corps 2018;**0**:1–2. doi:10.1136/jramc-2018-000922

REFERENCES

1 Fraser A. *Mary Queen of Scots*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1973.
2 Williamson RT. Remarks on the treatment of neurasthenia and psychasthenia following shell shock. *Br Med J* 1917;2:713–5.
3 McBrinn J. 'The work of masculine fingers': the Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry, 1918–1955. *J Des Hist* 2016:epw043.
4 University of Leeds International Textiles Archive. Louisa Frances Pesel (1870-1947). http://ulita.leeds.ac.uk/history-of-ulita/pesel/ (accessed 1 Sep 2017).
5 Art from War. https://www.stpauls.co.uk/news-press/latest-news/art-from-war-descendants-of-wwi-soldiers-sought-for-st-pauls-commemoration (accessed 21 Jan 2018).
6 Brayshaw E. How embroidery therapy helped first world war veterans find a common thread 25 April 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/apr/25/how-embroidery-therapy-helped-first-world-war-veterans-find-a-common-thread (accessed 14 Dec 2017).
7 Goggin MD. Stitching (for) his life: morris william larkin's prisoner of war sampler. *The Journal of Modern Craft* 2013;6:147–63.
8 Conner TS, DeYoung CG, Silvia PJ. Everyday creative activity as a path to flourishing. *J Posit Psychol* 2018;13:181–9.
9 IOM (Institute of Medicine). *Treatment of posttraumatic stress disorder in military and veteran populations: Initial assessment*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2012:261.
10 Hutter V. Personal communication to the author. *Email* 2018.

Downloaded from http://jramc.bmj.com/ on March 26, 2018 - Published by group.bmj.com

JRAMC

Threading the needle: when embroidery was used to treat shell-shock

Jonathan Davidson

J R Army Med Corps published online March 6, 2018

Updated information and services can be found at:
http://jramc.bmj.com/content/early/2018/03/06/jramc-2018-000922

These include:

References This article cites 3 articles, 1 of which you can access for free at:
http://jramc.bmj.com/content/early/2018/03/06/jramc-2018-000922#ref-list-1

Email alerting service Receive free email alerts when new articles cite this article. Sign up in the box at the top right corner of the online article.

Notes

To request permissions go to:
http://group.bmj.com/group/rights-licensing/permissions

To order reprints go to:
http://journals.bmj.com/cgi/reprintform

To subscribe to BMJ go to:
http://group.bmj.com/subscribe/