

David Cotterrell: londonist.com : War + Medicine

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Prepare to squeam. The latest offering from Wellcome Collection examines battlefield treatment from the Crimean War to modern conflicts. The glories of military triumph are set aside to show often in graphic detail the suffering and battles of the wounded individual.

An absorbing film installation by David Cotterrell opens the exhibition. Theatre (note the triple pun) puts you in the boots of an injured soldier inside a Hercules transporter plane. Crew and medics move about you in a high-definition projection, but cannot be heard over the otherworldly hum of the craft's four engines. The effect is mesmerizing, and left us feeling aloof and alienated like a shell-shocked evacuee.

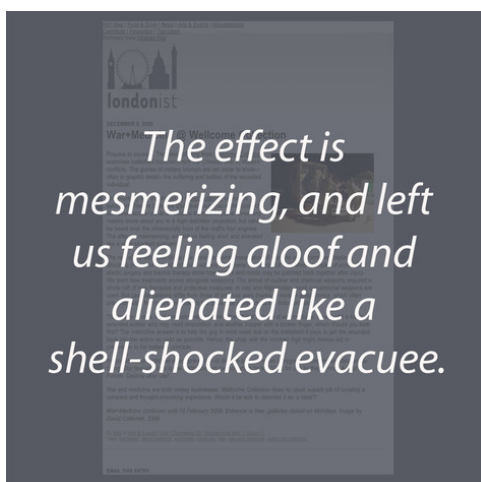
The rest of the exhibition sticks to a more traditional presentation of cabinets and information displays. Shocking images of blasted and burnt soldiers bring home the horrors of war, while examples of prosthetics, plastic surgery and trauma therapy show how bodies and minds may be patched back together after injury. We learn how treatments evolve alongside weaponry. The arrival of nuclear and chemical weapons required a whole raft of new therapies and protective measures. In Iraq and Afghanistan, more conventional weapons are used. But casualty patterns differ from those of previous wars thanks to modern body armour, which often prevents death from nearby explosions but gives little protection to the limbs and face.

The gallery is at its most interesting when tackling the ethical aspects of war medicine. Faced with a badly wounded soldier who may need amputation, and another trooper with a broken finger, whom should you treat first? The instinctive answer is to help the guy in most need, but on the battlefield it pays to get the wounded back into the action as soon as possible. Hence, the chap with the crooked digit might receive aid in preference to his battered comrade.

It's not all about battlefield injury; prevention of disease and promotion of hygiene among troops also get top billing. Our favourite item is the WWII condom packet, which barks: "Only for use by the German Armed Forces. Destroy after use".

War and medicine are both messy businesses. Wellcome Collection does its usual superb job of curating a coherent and thought-provoking experience. Would it be sick to describe it as 'a blast'?

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