

Perry O'Brien (left) and Daniel Paulsen, US army medics who witnessed atrocities in Afghanistan

# PATRIOT MISSILES

After Vietnam, American veterans testified to the atrocities they witnessed. Now soldiers who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan are about to do the same. Ariel Leve reports. Portraits: Nina Berman



S

ome of them will be okay. They will live with the secrets. They can dissociate from what happened in combat because it was part of the job. It was what they signed up for. They will keep the secrets out of duty – the silence is part of a code, and they honour that code above all else.

But for others, the secrets they keep are like a poison, slowly releasing toxins of shame and remorse. Who can they tell anyway? They talk to each other – other veterans who have seen what they've seen, done what they've done, and who can relate to the burden of carrying these secrets for the rest of their lives.

In 1971, the protest group Vietnam Veterans Against the War gathered at a hotel in Detroit. More than 100 veterans talked about atrocities they had witnessed in southeast Asia.

The event lasted for three days and was named Winter Soldier after Thomas Paine's famous article. "These are the times that try men's souls," he wrote of the terrible winter of 1776, when Washington's ragtag, demoralised army turned the tide of the War of Independence.

The Vietnam vets, spurred on by the court martial of Lt William Calley, who had ordered the infamous My Lai massacre, wanted to turn a tide too – against public opinion, to demonstrate that the execution of hundreds of innocent villagers in 1968 was not an isolated incident as so many believed. The Winter Soldier event received little coverage in America, but was the subject of an internationally acclaimed documentary of the same name.

This month, for four days in Washington, DC, beginning on March 13, there will be a second

## 'I still believed everything we were force-fed – weapons of mass destruction... we thought we were doing a good thing'

Winter Soldier gathering – 37 years after the first. Organised by the protest group Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW), US veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan since the 9/11 attack on New York will testify about their experiences. They will present photographs and videos, recorded with mobile phones and digital cameras, to back up their allegations – of brutality, torture and murder.

The veterans are not against the military and seek not to indict it – instead they seek to shine a light on the bigger picture: that the Abu Ghraib prison regime and the Haditha massacre of

The US marine Jason Washburn will speak at the Winter Soldier gathering in Washington later this month



**'WE SAW STREETS FULL OF BODIES. I'M TALKING VILLAGES, NOT MILITARY ENCAMPMENTS'**

**JASON WASHBURN, 28**

veterans, they are the most credible sources of information. They say they were put in immoral and often illegal positions. They will speak about what they saw, and what they were asked to do.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

Jason Washburn, 28, grew up in San Diego, California. He always wanted to do something to make a difference, and he enlisted in the US marines in December 2001. He wasn't itching to go into combat, but he wanted the training.

He fought in the initial invasion of Iraq in 2003 where, he says, he met little resistance. Most people were surrendering.

"There were massive amounts of artillery strikes before we even invaded. We saw the results of that. Streets full of bodies – women and children – body parts, extremely indiscriminate. I'm talking about rolling through villages here, not military encampments."

He was told there was a military structure in one village. "I didn't see it. I didn't see any army uniforms. Or weapons. All I saw was civilians."

Washburn speaks slowly and with obvious discomfort. This was his introduction to Iraq.

"I still believed everything we were force-fed: weapons of mass destruction and possibly even a nuclear weapon. We felt, like, we're going to go in, overthrow this evil dictator and give these people some peace, finally. We thought we were doing a good thing."

Over the course of his three tours, there were more home raids than Washburn can remember. He explains how it worked. "Usually it was ➡➡➡➡➡ 27

**‘YOU PUT IT OUT OF YOUR MIND WHEN YOU ARE OVER THERE, AND THEN YOU COME BACK AND REFLECT’**

**KELLY DOUGHERTY, 29**

based on a tip – we’re told someone in the home is an insurgent. We would pick up people who had nothing to do with anything, keep them locked up until they came up with something.”

He is glad that he didn’t witness some of the techniques used to get them to talk. “That’s not something I want on my conscience.”

It was not a scientific process. Most tips came from people with personal grudges. Washburn and his platoon would kick down the doors in the middle of the night. He was warned not to be complacent. There could be weapons in the children’s beds. In all of the home raids, too many to count, he never found children with weapons. They would take the father away and they never knew what would happen after that.

By the time Washburn served in Haditha he was on his third combat tour. He was there on November 19, 2005, the day of the massacre when 24 unarmed Iraqi civilians were killed, including women and children.

“My squad was doing medivacs out of the town. I was not there to witness the shooting, but I know many marines who were.”

It was a squad in his unit that went on the rampage after their vehicle was hit by an improvised explosive device (IED).

“I have a lot of feelings about this incident. A friend of mine from my first two tours was in that squad. He was the guy they gave immunity to to testify against the squad leader.

“The people on the ground are looking at serious prison time. Like life. The people who were giving orders were only relieved of command. And I don’t think that’s right.”

Washburn says Haditha was not an isolated incident. “It’s the one that just happened to be uncovered.”

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

The establishment view is that war is hell and terrible things happen for the greater good. That killing is necessary. That there are those individuals acting on their own who will always smear the honourable actions of the military – men like Washburn, traumatised by war, who are emotional casualties whose testimony is to be mistrusted.



**Kelly Dougherty, Iraq veteran turned anti-war campaigner.**  
**Below: a Vietnam veterans’ protest flyer from 1970**

---

## ‘Everything that we were doing seemed almost designed to create more terrorists – to turn people against America’

---

Some regard him and the Winter Soldiers of 2008 as traitors for daring to question their commanders and for prosecution of the war.

But there are too many like Washburn to shout down. Many of the orders that combat soldiers were given were not written – but they were understood. At the Winter Soldier event, veterans’ stories will be corroborated by other veterans; backed up by the volume of testifiers who have witnessed the same things – in different units, years apart and in different countries.

There will be up to 100 veterans and, at present, 80 of them have submitted

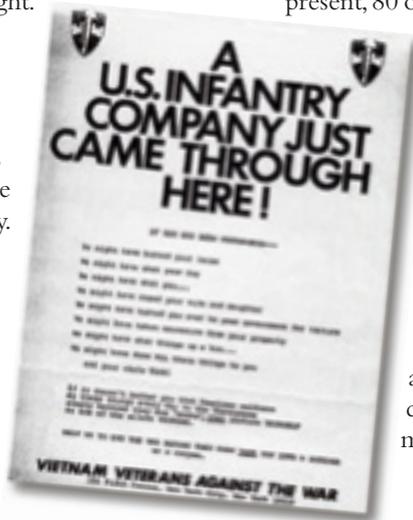
testimonies. Most will be enlisted men and women: privates and sergeants. They have been made aware of the consequences of taking part. Not just that they are likely to be denounced by their fellow veterans, but the psychological and perhaps legal consequences they may face by admitting

to witnessing, or even perpetrating, war crimes. The National Lawyers Guild, an organisation of civil-rights attorneys, has volunteered to offer advice. Mental-health professionals will also be on hand to offer counselling. Organisers stress that the goal is to hold the policy makers accountable, not their immediate commanding officers. Nobody is permitted to name anyone below the rank of captain.

After the hearings, all the testimonies will be entered into the congressional record. There will be a live video stream on the web. There will also be panels of journalists and scholars to provide context and history.

Perry O’Brien, who served as a medic in Afghanistan in 2003, is one of the Winter Soldiers on the verification team, which will ensure the testimonies are watertight, lest falsehood undermine the message. The order that O’Brien’s team is hearing most from the testifiers is the “shovel order”.

“Anyone carrying a shovel or any sort of implement that could be used to bury an IED could be considered a target,” he says. “After dark, you can shoot anyone who is outside. Or anyone who puts anything on the side of the road can be considered a target. You won’t find it in writing, but it’s an order indicated to soldiers.” ➤➤➤



If not in writing, how can it be proven? “If we have enough soldiers testifying, it will be.” Washburn says the most dangerous job in Iraq “has to be a taxi driver”. He tells two stories of taxi drivers being shot, both innocent victims. One driver was deaf and didn’t hear the command to halt. The other was at a checkpoint in the Haditha area.

“It was the mayor of one of the towns who was driving, and he was shot and killed. They found out after they shot him. My squad had to apologise to the family. We paid reparations. I don’t know the exact amount. But let’s see: money or a dead husband and father and mayor? People weren’t happy about that.”

During Jason Washburn’s first Iraq deployment in 2003, his unit was told to capture a “rabble rouser”. “We kick down the door and all we find are a few women holding babies and a couple of kids. We were ordered to take the babies away and put sandbags on the women’s heads, tie their hands behind their backs, put them on their knees facing the wall.

“Here I am zip-tying these women, and my buddy is standing next to me holding these babies asking what do I do with these kids? We stood there, like, oh shit, what do we do? The squad leader came in and started shouting ‘Everybody is bagged and tagged – everybody!’ So we did it.” The babies were put down on the floor. After a few hours everyone was untied.

Inappropriate and immoral actions weren’t just aimed at Iraqi civilians. There was frequent hazing – the mistreatment of soldiers by their comrades. Some were exercises in pure humiliation, common in most military units, like singing I’m a Little Teapot while others stand around laughing. But some were brutal physical punishments, such as callisthenics in a sleeping bag with a gas mask on in scorching heat.

“It’s one thing to do 20 push-ups. It’s another to burn us to the point of exhaustion in combat theatre. There were guys that tried to speak out about it and that made it worse. That would get punished more.”

The futility of speaking out was bolstered by knowledge that complaints would get as far the commanding officer of the company and no further. “They kept everything in-house.”

Another incident he describes was a step beyond hazing. He and another marine had had a disagreement. The punishment was that they were tied together – and sent out on patrol.

“Outside of the camp, in a war zone tied together, patrolling? Insane,” he says.

Washburn’s anger comes from a feeling of betrayal. “I thought I was signing up to do something honourable.

“What happened at Abu Ghraib,” Washburn says, “those orders came from the top. If the policy makers and the commanders can dehumanise their own troops, why wouldn’t they dehumanise the Iraqi people?”

☆☆☆☆☆

So far, the most vocal opposition to the Winter Soldier event has not been from the

**The Iraq veteran Logan Laituri was afraid of being isolated by his platoon if he spoke out**



**‘WHAT MADE ME FEEL WORSE WAS NOT DOING ANYTHING... I SURVIVED AT THE EXPENSE OF IRAQIS’**

**LOGAN LAITURI, 26**

shall see, there are ways to encourage illegal actions other than direct orders.

Hegseth suggests that speaking out might have more serious consequences: homes in the Middle East have internet access, this kind of information will reach them and affect the attitude towards US troops still over there. But Perry O’Brien doubts that speaking out will foster more anti-American sentiment in Afghanistan and Iraq than the killing of civilians and the dismantling of the infrastructure. After serving in Afghanistan for eight months, there was a slow revelation that triggered his shift.

“Everything that we were doing seemed almost designed to create more terrorists.

## Washburn and another marine had had a disagreement. The punishment was they were tied together and sent on patrol

government but from pro-war groups such as Vets For Freedom, the largest veterans’ organisation in America.

Their executive director, Pete Hegseth, a veteran who served in Baghdad and Samarra with the 101st Airborne Division, has criticised the Winter Soldier event. In an article in The Washington Independent, he asks: “Did your company commander tell you to shoot women and children, or to maximise casualties? No! We don’t do that. To talk about systematic brutality is essentially indicting the military as being complicit in war crimes.” But, as we

To turn people against America. I couldn’t understand how we were liberating anyone. But I could understand how an Afghan person who was ambivalent about America could easily become an extremist based on their interaction with American soldiers.”

Resolute pro-war organisations such as Gathering of Eagles are gearing up, getting ready to make their presence felt. They are chartering bus loads of protesters to show up at the event to confront and harass the “traitors”.

The veterans who will be testifying at Winter Soldier are prepared for their integrity ➡➡➡

**Right: Rusty Sachs, a Vietnam veteran who testified in the first Winter Soldiers documentary**

and credibility to be called into question. Before anyone can testify, they must go through the verification process and be interviewed by a team of combat veterans whom they hope will be able to instinctively detect lies. IAW is particularly vigilant since Jesse Macbeth joined in 2006 and represented them publicly at various events. Macbeth's accounts of military service as a veteran of Iraq were false, which he admitted in federal court in 2007.

Since then the organisation has demanded proof of service, and every member must have a DD-214 – their Pentagon-issued personal-service record, which proves where and with whom they have served.

Members are asked to complete a detailed questionnaire. Under the heading Killing or Wounding Noncombatants, Prisoners or Unarmed Combatants, they are asked: "Did you witness or participate in any of the following: civilians hurt or killed at checkpoints? Purposeful killing of civilians or unarmed combatants? Killing or wounding of prisoners? If yes, was this unit SOP [standard operating procedure] or common practice?"

Some other headings include: Mishandling and Mutilation of War Dead; Torture or Abuse; Rape, Sexual Assault or Harassment; Theft or Fraud.

When the testimonies begin on March 13, we shall discover how damaging or revelatory their stories will be. Perry O'Brien has confidence in the process. "Someone coming into our organisation and trying to pretend they observed something they didn't – they can only maintain that for so long."

Once the stories are told, each is to be researched by interviewing other members of the soldier's unit. The verification team has recently decided that anyone fabricating their experience or pretending to be a veteran will be handed over to the authorities and charged with violating the Stolen Valor Act, a law signed by President Bush in 2006.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

Perry O'Brien admits that he had hero fantasies. He was born on March 24, 1982, and grew up on a small island off the coast of Maine. After two years studying philosophy at university, he decided to enlist in the army as a medic in 2001 – two weeks before 9/11. It was a coming-of-age-ritual, influenced by the movies. He had the romantic idea that he wanted to save lives.

He did not come from a military background. His father works at a hardware store and his mother writes and illustrates children's books.

In January 2003, O'Brien was deployed to Afghanistan for eight months. While he was there, he had many experiences that made him uncomfortable. Several times he witnessed an Afghan civilian die on the operating table after treatment from a mobile military surgical



read biology at the University of Colorado.

On January 10, 2003, she received a call; she had been transferred to a military police unit – and she was being deployed to Iraq. Dougherty was opposed to the war and surprised by her deployment.

In February 2003, she arrived in Kuwait and then moved to Iraq in March. Her unit was stationed in the south near Nasiriyah, where she often did convoy escorts and patrols.

"You put it out of your mind when you're over there. And then you get back and reflect on it..."

"The soldiers and marines are just doing their jobs, doing what they were trained for or what they were told to do when they got over there. Things that seem really horrible just become routine – and they are implicitly or explicitly condoned, or encouraged, by the commanders and the policy makers."

---

## 'Things that seem really horrible just become routine – and are implicitly or explicitly condoned by the commanders'

---

unit. Rather than prepare the corpse for the family, O'Brien witnessed the surgeons and the medics use the body to practice on.

"One doctor said, 'Come up and feel his heart!' This is what a heart feels like."

Half the platoon, if not more, participated. Daniel Paulsen, 27, was there and corroborates this story. There are photos as well. Someone had grabbed O'Brien's digital camera and taken photographs of the heart and the medics walking around and poking it. These photographs were taken for fun.

Eventually the chest of the corpse was closed up. "It was a total violation of our medical oath to use a corpse for medical training," says O'Brien. "What's particularly terrible is that these were all doctors that had practices back home – they were familiar with the law and the Hippocratic oath. There was such a huge disconnect between the way they treated Afghans and the way they treated American patients.

"When Americans died, the corpses became these sacred objects that were treated with tremendous care. There was this solemn funerary attitude around them. When an Afghan died, it was [as if they were] treating them like they weren't human. My goal is to expose that these things are happening. And that they are the result of military leadership – part of an unofficial policy of dehumanisation."

In 2004, while still on active duty, O'Brien attended a protest at Fort Bragg. There he met Mike Hoffman (a founder of IAW) and joined the organisation shortly after leaving the army. He felt relieved. "Suddenly I knew that I wasn't the only veteran who was questioning what I had seen and done."

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

Kelly Dougherty, 29, is a co-founder and executive director of IAW. In 1996, she enlisted in the National Guard as a medic while she

The offices of IAW in Philadelphia are humble but busy. The group now has more than 700 members in 49 states, Washington, DC, Canada and on military bases overseas.

I meet Logan Laituri there one afternoon and we sit down over a soft drink to talk. He has a gentle and sensitive manner. His enlistment wasn't a patriotic stand, but more of a pragmatic decision. He didn't know what else to do.

He became a paratrooper in the 82nd Airborne Division in Fort Bragg. "I had no accomplishments outside the military. I didn't feel that I would be missing out on much."

There was also a financial incentive. "Every soldier knows that you earn a crap-load of money in combat. Above and beyond my pay cheque I earned \$800 a month – and all that's tax-free. And everything is paid for in Iraq. You can save every single penny. That's a lot of money you can save for your future."

He was deployed to Iraq in January 2004, having switched to the 25th Infantry Division. When Laituri got to Samarra, they kicked down the doors of a building and found a police officer in uniform. "Through his interpreter he was telling us that he'd been waiting, and he had all the records. I thought to myself it was great initiative and it displayed insight.

"We handcuffed him and someone took it upon themselves to punch him in the stomach – what made me feel worse was watching it and not doing anything about it."

As he talks, Laituri seems visibly troubled that he stood by watching this man beaten up. And he admits that so many of his feelings of being in Iraq are wrapped up in what he didn't do: "What I saw happen and I didn't say or I didn't correct. I survived at the expense of Iraqis. I could have said something."

But the fear of being isolated from the platoon prevailed. Beating up prisoners, abusing ➤➤➤

the bodies of Afghans, innocents shot dead in the crossfire of fear and threat – these things get lost in the mayhem of war – but other acts, if they become institutionalised, can “try the souls of men” and cannot be so easily dismissed.

Laituri was in Fort Irwin, California in May 2006 during a pep talk at the National Training Center. He alleges that a commander made a speech to his company, and that he “made it clear to us that if an innocent person was shot he would stage a scene to protect us”.

The explicit message was: “We would make sure there was a weapon found at the scene.” Units go into combat believing that they will be protected from any repercussions. They feel like they have a licence to kill and often they do.

In 2007, the officer was relieved of his command after a death on June 23 last year in the vicinity of Kirkuk. He is not currently a suspect and was never charged – but two soldiers who were under his command have been charged

idea is that when you get back [from combat], anything that you did the book way can be spoken about – but not what was done the real way.”

It isn’t just between the book way and the real way, he says, it’s become between the honourable way and the immoral way.

Perhaps even more tragic is that now, for many, these lines have blurred. “People join the military wanting to be honourable. They follow a code of conduct – they have to. It’s what separates them from mercenaries.”

The common denominator that links all of these veterans’ stories is a profound disillusionment about the war. All of these soldiers signed up with a belief that what they were doing was noble. Despite the lessons of Vietnam, or maybe because of them, they wanted to participate.

“The book way was we treat everyone the same...” Perry smiles and taps his foot three times.

“You are ordered to do things that are clear violations of our conscience and what we know to be moral. It’s not even what’s

## ‘You are ordered to do things that are clear violations of what we know to be moral’

with premeditated murder. Last month a top army sniper testified in military court – under immunity – that he had ordered a subordinate to kill an unarmed Iraqi man, then planted an AK-47 assault rifle near the body to back up a false claim of returned fire.

But who is ultimately responsible, the individual or the officer? The combatant or the culture? And why is it always the junior ranks who are charged?

☆☆☆☆☆

On a February morning at a cafe in Brooklyn, New York, Perry O’Brien is explaining the difference between the “book way” and the “real way”, and the significance of the “three-stomp signal” that is used to differentiate between the two.

“If someone is giving a briefing and they stomp their foot three times after what they are saying, it means ‘disregard what I just said’. For instance, ‘Make every effort to avoid civilian property damage,’ stomp stomp stomp – [means] ignore that. The

prescribed by the Geneva conventions. It’s what every human being knows to be right and wrong. We’re asked to do things that violate that and told it’s about the war, but you can never tell anyone because we need to protect them from that.

“I think that certainly it’s our duty to protect American civilians from the physical reality of wars. That’s our goal. To prevent the American public from having to participate in war and get hurt and put their lives at risk. That’s what we volunteer to do.

“But I don’t think we’re protecting America if we’re not telling our stories and keeping what we do secret.” ■

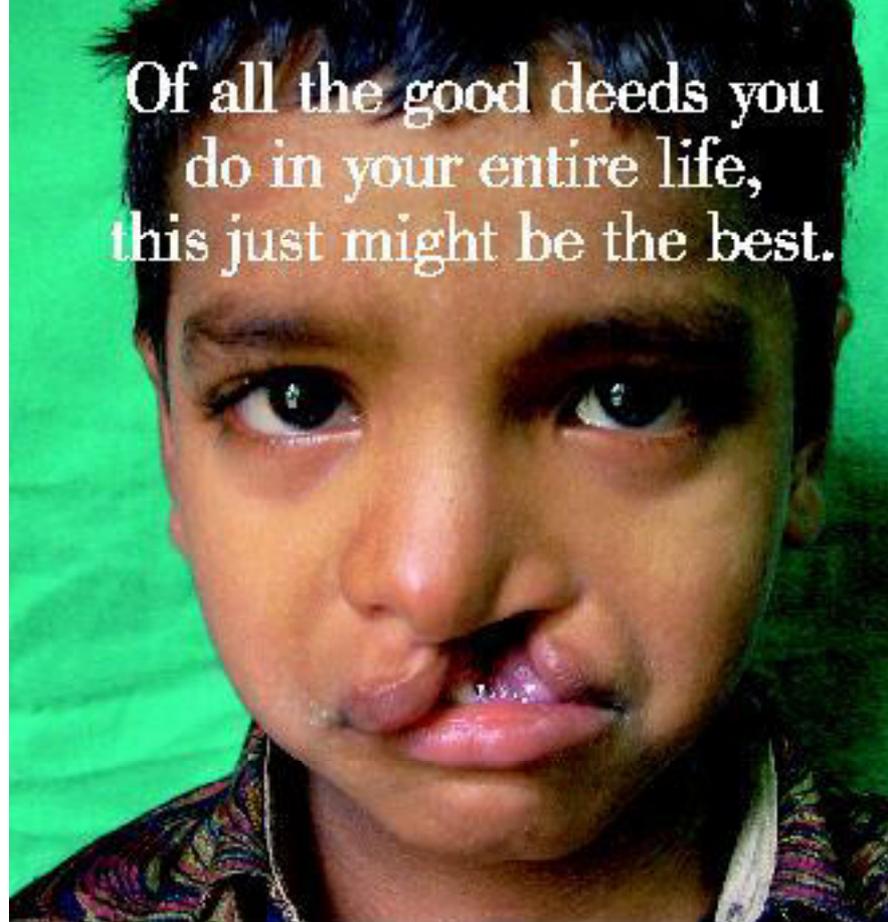
For more features by Ariel Leve from The Sunday Times Magazine, go to



He slid beneath his desk and crawled along the floor

[www.timesonline.co.uk/arielleve](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/arielleve)

Of all the good deeds you do in your entire life, this just might be the best.



Today, millions of children in developing countries are suffering with cleft lip and palate. Condemned to a lifetime of malnutrition, shame and isolation. The good news is virtually all of these children can be helped. The Smile Train empowers local surgeons to provide life-changing free cleft surgery – which takes as little as 15 minutes and costs as little as £150.

It gives desperate children not just a new smile – but a new life.

### I want to give a child a second chance at life.

- £150 Provides cleft surgery for one child.
- £200 Provides medications for one surgery.
- £75 Helps towards training a local surgeon.
- £\_\_\_\_\_ We'll gratefully accept any amount.

Mr/Mrs/Ms \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Postcode \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_ Telephone \_\_\_\_\_

Charge my gift to my:  Visa  MasterCard  Maestro  
Card No. \_\_\_\_\_

Valid From \_\_\_\_\_ Exp. Date \_\_\_\_\_ Issue No. \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

My cheque is enclosed, made payable to The Smile Train UK

Send this coupon with your donation to:  
The Smile Train UK, PO Box 588,  
Northampton NN4 6UH

2006/1 1002081/07



Gifted at:  I am a UK taxpayer and would like The Smile Train to receive tax on all donations I have made with the best rate possible and any donations I make in the future. You must pay a percentage of Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax at least equal to the tax that the child's recipient or your donation is the appropriate tax year. (UK 20p for each £1 you give up to 5 April 2008 and then 45p for each £1 you give on or after 6 April 2008)

Make a secure donation online:  
[www.smiletrain.org.uk](http://www.smiletrain.org.uk)



100% of your donation goes towards programmes – 0% goes towards overheads\*

\*All non-programme expenses, such as overheads and fundraising, are paid for with start-up grants from our founding supporters.

Charity no. 1114748

© 2006 The Smile Train