

**Documenting Shell Shock: Developments in the Public Perception of  
Psychological Trauma in the United States, 1915-1922**

Laurel Myers

## Chapter One: Modern Warfare's New Disease



Photo of Eric Skeffington Poole, undated.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Eric Skeffington Poole enlisted in the B Battery of the Honourable Artillery Company in October of 1914, two months after Great Britain declared war on Germany to enter the Great War. He served as a driver for seven months before being transferred to the 14th Battalion of the West Yorkshire Regiment, where he was appointed to a commission as a temporary second lieutenant. He did well in his position; an attestation form detailing his services in the Territorial Force dated May of 1915 noted his character as “very good”.<sup>2</sup> In May of 1916, he was relocated to France to serve in the 11th Battalion

---

<sup>1</sup> Cefrg. “Second Lieutenant Eric Skeffington Poole: Shot at Dawn: CEFRG: Great War.” CEFRG, August 21, 2022. <https://cefrg.ca/blog/second-lieutenant-eric-skeffington-poole-in-the-great-war/>. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Territorial Force Attestation of Eric Skeffington Poole, May 03, 1915. *Shot for Desertion*, The National Archives, Kew, Richmond. <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/medicine-on-the-western-front-part-two/shot-for-desertion/>. Accessed 10 November 2022.

of the West Yorkshire Regiment. The Brigade began fighting in the Battle of the Somme two months later, and Poole's conduct during the fighting was considered to be satisfactory.<sup>3 4</sup>

The following day, July 7th, Poole and his battalion were camped near Becourt Wood Chateau during a period of heavy rain, intense artillery fire, and enemy shelling. Lambert's aforementioned report described how "the noise and vibration were found to be very trying by all ranks." Poole became especially affected by the shelling, he said.<sup>5</sup> While Poole was present when the battalion moved to Fricourt that same night, he was reported missing the following morning, initially believed to be either lost or killed during the skirmish. However, it was later revealed that Poole had actually been admitted to No. 58 Field Ambulance. Doctors diagnosed him with shell shock, a relatively new and little understood ailment affecting front line soldiers.<sup>6</sup>

After spending the next seventeen days at the No. 20 General Hospital in Etaples, he was then sent to the Canadian Convalescent Home at Dieppe (Poole was born in Nova Scotia and served with the 63rd Regiment of the Halifax Rifles for two years before moving to England with his family around 1905) to spend the remainder of his recovery.<sup>7</sup> During an examination by consulting physician Sir James Fowler, he declared

---

<sup>3</sup> R.S. Lambert, Brigadier General to Headquarters, 69 Infantry Brigade, Nov. 25, 1916. *Shot for Desertion*, The National Archives, Kew, Richmond. <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/medicine-on-the-western-front-part-two/shot-for-desertion/>. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Service record of an executed officer: Eric Skeffington Poole. First World War Exhibitions, The National Archives, Kew, Richmond. <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/firstworldwar/people/poole.htm>. Accessed 10 November 2022

<sup>5</sup> R.S. Lambert, Brigadier General to Headquarters, 69 Infantry Brigade, Nov. 25, 1916.

<sup>6</sup> Service record of an executed officer: Eric Skeffington Poole. First World War Exhibitions, The National Archives.

<sup>7</sup> Extract from Poole's testimony at his Court Martial trial, November 1916. *Shot for Desertion*, The National Archives, Kew, Richmond. <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/medicine-on-the-western-front-part-two/shot-for-desertion/>. Accessed 10 November 2022.

that Poole was unfit for duty due to tachycardia. Fowler, alongside the commanding officer of the convalescent home, ordered that Poole be sent to temporary base duty. Shortly after being moved to the temporary base, Poole was reevaluated by another physician and declared fit for duty.<sup>8</sup>

Second Lieutenant Poole rejoined the 11th Battalion in late August or early September, now placed in command of the C Company platoon shortly before they were set to resume action in the Somme. On October 2nd, the Battalion moved up to Martinpuich and, while in the trenches, endured another period of intense rain, gunfire, and shelling. Despite these hardships, Brigadier General Lambert praised the 11th Battalion in his report, writing that “the state of discipline of the battalion has been excellent throughout. It has been repeatedly in successful action at the Somme and officers and men have behaved with much gallantry.”<sup>9</sup> This spirit took a turn, however, when three days into the operation, as the platoon moved to the frontline trenches at Flers, Eric Poole wandered away from his unit, leaving no one in charge of his troops. He was apprehended by military police on October 7th and arrested on October 10th. He was court martialed for desertion in early November.<sup>10</sup>

Poole went on trial on November 24th, 1916. Several witnesses called to the stand argued in his defense, suggesting that his altered mental state made it so that he didn't realize the severity of his desertion. Captain Riddell of the 11th West Yorkshire Battalion stated that “I think that in times of stress or while under shell fire the accused's mental condition is such that he might very well have great difficulty in coming to any decision

---

<sup>8</sup> Corns, Catherine and Hughes-Wilson, John. *Blindfold and Alone: British Military Executions in the Great War*. London: Cassell Military Paperbacks, 2015. Kindle. p. 6384.

<sup>9</sup> R.S. Lambert, Brigadier General to Headquarters, 69 Infantry Brigade, Nov. 25, 1916.

<sup>10</sup> Service record of an executed officer: Eric Skeffington Poole. First World War Exhibitions, The National Archives.

and might become so mentally confused that he would not be responsible for his actions.”<sup>11</sup> 11th West Yorkshire’s Lieutenant Dawson, a friend of Poole, came to a similar conclusion: “With his poor mental equipment the effect of shell shock on him is very great, I submit that under these circumstances you cannot find the accused capable of framing the intention necessary to prove desertion.” In response to another witness who had called Poole’s behavior “eccentric”, Dawson told the court that “this is only a kind word for a graver mental defect.”<sup>12</sup> A separate witness who had seen Poole on the day of his apprehension attested that “He seemed to me to be in a very dazed condition and from conversation which I had with him I came to the conclusion that he was not responsible for his actions. He was very confused indeed.” During his cross-examination, the same witness claimed that Poole had been in a similar state of confusion when he saw him in August, two months prior to the incident.<sup>13</sup>

Poole himself testified that his shell shock clouded his judgment and ability to make decisions— he claimed the affliction caused him to “at times get confused” and “have great difficulty in making up my mind.” The medical board assessing Poole, however, determined that, although “his mental powers are less than average,” he was “of sound mind and capable of appreciating the nature and quality of his action in absenting himself without leave.”<sup>14</sup> Poole was found guilty of desertion and, on December 10th, 1916, he became the first British officer to be executed during World War I when he was shot to death by firing squad in Poperinghe, Belgium.<sup>15</sup> Field

---

<sup>11</sup> Corns, Catherine and Hughes-Wilson, John. *Blindfold and Alone*. p. 6342.

<sup>12</sup> Corns, Catherine and Hughes-Wilson, John. *Blindfold and Alone*. p. 6350.

<sup>13</sup> Corns, Catherine and Hughes-Wilson, John. *Blindfold and Alone*. p. 6327.

<sup>14</sup> Extract from Poole’s testimony at his Court Martial trial, November 1916. *Shot for Desertion*, The National Archives, Kew, Richmond. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Service record of an executed officer: Eric Skeffington Poole. First World War Exhibitions, The National Archives, Kew, Richmond.

Marshal Haig, who confirmed Poole's sentence on December 6th, sought to make an example of Poole's case for officers who might think their position grants them some sort of immunity. He wrote in his diary that "Such a crime is more serious in the case of an officer than of a man, and also it is highly important that all ranks should realize that the law is the same for an officer as a private."<sup>16</sup>

By the end of the war in 1919, 345 more men were executed by the British Army, with 284 of those executions being the result of charges of either desertion or cowardice. While it is unknown how many of these soldiers may have been affected by shell shock, we do know that the disease continued to be brought up as a defense in other court martial trials throughout the war.<sup>17</sup> With an estimated ten percent of all soldiers wounded in the Great War suffering from shell shock, it seems unlikely that the tragic and seemingly avoidable death of Eric Poole could have been an isolated incident.<sup>18</sup> With the emergence of modern artillery, so too emerged this new threat to the collective mental and physical health of all frontline soldiers— in cases like Eric Poole, where the evidence for shell shock seems overwhelming, why wasn't this burgeoning epidemic taken seriously?

To answer this, it is important to understand the ambiguity surrounding the earliest discussions of the disease. The term shell shock was first used in February of 1915 by English physician Charles S. Myers in *The Lancet* medical journal six months after Great Britain entered the global conflict. He attributed the multiple sensory impairments experienced by British Expeditionary Forces— the loss of sight, smell,

---

<sup>16</sup> Corns, Catherine and Hughes-Wilson, John. *Blindfold and Alone*. p. 6412.

<sup>17</sup> Corns, Catherine and Hughes-Wilson, John. *Blindfold and Alone*. p. 10326

<sup>18</sup> Alexander, Caroline. "The Shock of War." *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 2010. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-shock-of-war-55376701/> Accessed 10 November 2022.

taste, hearing, and speech— to the physical shock of exploding artillery shells.<sup>19</sup> In the following months, the term was cited as the cause of a variety of ailments affecting soldiers, including paralysis, memory loss, delirium, and “shattered nerves”.<sup>20</sup> At the time of Poole’s execution in 1916, Myers had assessed around two-thousand British soldiers suffering from shell shock.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the popular use of the phrase both in medical journals like *The Lancet* and in newspapers more widely accessible to the general public, the definition of shell shock— along with its symptoms, causes, treatments, and curability— remained somewhat inconclusive and even at times misrepresented. Whether or not the disorder was the result of physical injury or was instead caused by psychological trauma would not be defined until years later when more research, information, and individual case studies about the topic became available.

During the war years, this ambiguity would lead to accusations of malingering, cowardice, or, in extreme cases like Eric Poole, soldiers being executed for cowardice or desertion. Contradicting information regarding what shell shock was, what symptoms it entailed, whether it was caused by physical injury or psychological distress, and effective treatment options all painted a muddy picture of how governments, militaries, and medical professionals were supposed to deal with this emerging mental health crisis. For veterans trying to reintegrate back into civilian society following the end of the war, the devastating memory of trench warfare and the lingering psychological traumas it caused cast a dark shadow on the many nations trying to heal from the global conflict.

---

<sup>19</sup> Charles Samuel Myers, ‘A Contribution to the Study of Shell Shock,’ *The Lancet*, 185, 4772 (1915), 316–20.

<sup>20</sup> “Go Mad Under Fire: Soldiers Driven Insane by Big German Guns,” *The Daytona Daily News*, January 06, 1915, p. 9. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Corns, Catherine and Hughes-Wilson, John. *Blindfold and Alone*. p. 1403.

Trauma-based issues like violence and self-harm defined the experiences of many World War I veterans upon their return home, issues only fueled by the widespread mismanagement of shell shock treatment and the public misconceptions surrounding the disease both during and after the war.<sup>22</sup>

The prevailing stigmas of the time surrounding mental illness and insanity added an additional layer of shame, guilt, and emasculation to this recovery process, further complicating the shell shocked soldiers' willingness to seek treatment upon repatriation.<sup>23</sup> Hysteria, after all, was historically viewed to be an inherently feminine affliction indicative of mental and emotional instability.<sup>24</sup> Despite the efforts of some medical professionals like Charles S. Myers to distance shell shock from the term hysteria, opting for physical explanations or labels of "neurasthenia" to avoid the unwanted stigma of what historian George L. Mosse dubs "enfeebled manhood", not everyone took the same careful approach.<sup>25</sup><sup>26</sup> Newspapers and medical journals both frequently likened the diagnosis of shell shock to that of hysteria, challenging the

---

<sup>22</sup> "KILLS WIFE, ENDS OWN LIFE.; Soldier's Crime Laid to Insanity, Result of Shell Shock." *The New York Times*, 11 September 1920. The New York Times Archives. <https://www.nytimes.com/1920/09/11/archives/kills-wife-ends-own-life-soldiers-crime-laid-to-insanity-result-of.html>. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Annessa C. Stagner, "Healing the Soldier, Restoring the Nation: Representations of Shell Shock in the USA During and After the First World War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 49, no. 2 (2014): 255–74.

<sup>24</sup> Tasca, Cecilia, Mariangela Rapetti, Mauro Giovanni Carta, and Bianca Fadda. "Women and Hysteria in the History of Mental Health." *Clinical practice and epidemiology in mental health : CP & EMH*. U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2012. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3480686/>. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Mosse, George L. "Shell-Shock as a Social Disease." *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 1 (2000): 101–8. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/261184>. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Joanna, Park, Joanna, Louise Louise, and Andreas K. Demetriades. "Hysteria, Head Injuries and Heredity: 'Shell-Shocked' Soldiers of the Royal Edinburgh Asylum, Edinburgh (1914–24)." *Notes and Records: the Royal Society Journal of the History of Science*, March 2, 2022. Accessed 10 November 2022. <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsnr.2021.0057>. Accessed 10 November 2022.



established concept of mental illness as gendered while also perpetuating the connection between shell shock and emasculation in the public mind.<sup>2728</sup>

With an abundance of incorrect assumptions tainting public discourse on shell shock beginning in 1915 and lasting throughout the war years, it becomes more clear how soldiers like Eric Poole— soldiers accused of malingering despite showing seemingly obvious symptoms of trauma— may have been victims of the spread of misinformation. By the time Field Marshal Haig decided to make an example of Poole’s execution in 1916, his decision to crack down on malingering was likely influenced by the many stories of faked shell shock disseminated in the press. Newspapers were one of the main perpetrators in this regard, publishing stories questioning the validity of the disease or, alternatively, suggesting that the ailment could be easily cured with a quick stint in the field hospital or a session of hypnosis.

These myths surrounding shell shock weren’t officially dispelled until Great Britain’s publication of the *Report of the War Office Committee of Enquiry Into “Shell Shock”* in 1922, which rejected the claim that shell shock was a “physical disturbance” and instead concluded that “the wear and tear of a prolonged campaign of trench warfare with its terrible hardships and anxieties” in itself could trigger the symptoms of shell shock.<sup>29</sup> The first definitive and highly publicized instance in which the world saw a more contemporary understanding of shell shock as we know it today, the *Report of the*

---

<sup>27</sup> “Loses Taste and Smell Following Explosion,” *The Bridgeport Evening Farmer*, March 02, 1915, p. 10. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Houston, W.R. “War’s Amazing Effect of Nerves of Soldiers.” *New York Times* (1857-1922); Mar 25, 1917; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times*. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Parliament Command Papers, *Report of the War Office Committee of Enquiry Into “Shell Shock,”* HMSO, 1922. The National Archives, Kew, Richmond. <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/medicine-on-the-western-front-part-two/war-office-report-on-shell-shock/>. Accessed 10 November 2022.

*War Office Committee of Enquiry Into "Shell Shock"* established the medical precedent of shell shock being what we would now define as a post traumatic stress disorder.

This study is designed to investigate the evolving public perceptions of shell shock beginning in 1915 and concluding in 1922, the year of the *Report of the War Office Committee of Enquiry Into "Shell Shock"* publication, through the unique lens of the American newspaper reports. Geographically separated from the destruction taking place in far-off Europe until entering the war in April of 1917, the United States becomes a compelling case study for the dissemination of information (and misinformation) regarding a little understood but widely discussed disease. The printed press allows us to understand not only how misinformation surrounding shell shock was spread throughout the United States, but also how that misinformation may have directly impacted the experiences of U.S. soldiers upon repatriation.

An estimated 15,000 to 76,000 American soldiers were diagnosed with shell shock during and after World War I— a wide range reflecting the varying diagnostic standards and general ambiguity surrounding the disease.<sup>30</sup> By examining how stories of these shell shocked veterans were delineated in the press, we can also begin to understand the ways in which the victims of shell shock embodied a physical reminder of the collective trauma produced through modern warfare, despite the seemingly invisible nature of their disease. The war's wounded shaped the fabric of many recovering nations across the globe in all aspects of society— at home, in medical discourse, and in government legislation— reflecting the lingering sense of collective trauma, grief, and national mourning that defined the early 1920s both in the United States and around the world. In a way, these psychological scars represented an

---

<sup>30</sup> Annessa C. Stagner, "Healing the Soldier, Restoring the Nation: Representations of Shell Shock in the USA During and After the First World War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 49, no. 2 (2014): 255–74.

extension of horrors of war seeping into what was supposed to be a time of peace and recovery; though the war itself ended in 1918, the legacy of shell shock would continue to haunt the interwar period for years to come.

### 1915: The Year that Shell Shock Hit the Press

Even before Myers coined the term shell shock in *The Lancet* in February of 1915, newspapers began to take note of the mysterious new phenomenon affecting frontline soldiers. The earliest mentions of shell shock in the American press seem to agree that the condition can be understood as exhibiting signs of bodily injury despite showing no indication of physical harm, likely due to an internal wound. It was also understood that these ailments were a direct result of a soldier being in the presence of an exploding artillery shell. In the January 1st, 1915 publication of *The Democratic Advocate*, an article titled “Phenomenal Cases: Shock From Shell Fire Has Remarkable Effect on Soldiers,” describes the emerging concern among doctors and military personnel: “Cases have, for instance, occurred, and these are not a few, in which soldiers have been absolutely incapacitated, rendered utterly helpless, in fact, without having as much as a scratch to exhibit to the doctors who are rendering such invaluable and heroic service to the armies in the field. And the notable feature of such cases is that they are practically all due to the nervous shock produced by the shell-fire.”<sup>31</sup>

Newspaper publications also indicate that early understandings of shell shock were often incorrectly associated with clinical insanity. A January 6, 1915 article in *The Daytona Daily News* highlights the lack of understanding surrounding the rapidly

---

<sup>31</sup> “Phenomenal Cases: Shock From Shell Fire Has Remarkable Effect on Soldiers,” *The Democratic Advocate*, January 01, 1915, p. 6. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

increasing hospitalizations of combat veterans— “Insanity and nervous prostration are claiming large numbers of the allies who have lain for weeks under German fire in the trenches about Ypres. The insanity wards in the big government hospitals at Netley are filled to overflowing and all the hospitals in the south of England have many patients who suffered absolute nervous collapse and have been sent back to England for treatment.”<sup>32</sup> This stigma was challenged, however, during the summer of 1915 as legislation like Cecil Harmsworth’s Mental Treatment Bill in England fostered a shift away from the perceived negative connotation of shell shock in relation to a soldier’s mental state. *The Lakeland Evening Telegram* notes how the bill sought “to remove the stigma of insanity from soldiers temporarily deranged as the result of nervous exhaustion has been made public. Under its provisions, a soldier or sailor whose mind is unbalanced by wounds, shock or similar courses, can be treated without being certified insane.”<sup>33</sup> Like in the case of hysteria, the Cecil Harmsworth’s Mental Treatment Bill reflected how medical professionals and governments alike sought to create a clear distinction between shell shock and other mental health diagnoses in an attempt to protect soldiers from the negative stigmas attached to mental illness. These changes in attitudes— and, in turn, legislation— surrounding the mental health in the military also illustrated the ever-evolving understanding of shell shock and trauma in relation to modernized warfare. Though it would take several more years to develop both a concrete definition of the condition and the resources to help those suffering from it, we can start to see how the emerging prevalence of shell shock as a public health issue in

---

<sup>32</sup> “Go Mad Under Fire: Soldiers Driven Insane by Big German Guns,” *The Daytona Daily News*, January 06, 1915, p. 9. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>33</sup> “Bill To Be Passed Which Removes Stigma of Insanity From Unbalanced Soldiers,” *The Lakeland Evening Dispatch*, May 15, 1915. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

the beginning years of World War I had the ability to transform public opinion on mental illness.

As previously noted, the term shell shock often served as more of an umbrella term for a wide variety of seemingly unexplainable medical abnormalities stemming from exposure to exploding artillery shells. Many of these symptoms involved the loss of one or more senses— *The Richmond Times-Dispatch* explains how French surgeons reported the “reduction of vision, loss of hearing, loss of smell, loss of taste, loss of memory and paralysis of various physical functions” in afflicted soldiers.<sup>34</sup> *The Bridgeport Evening Farmer* newspaper similarly describes how a soldier with no visible injury to his body lost his sense of smell and taste, unable to distinguish the difference between sugar, quinine, acid, and salt. The article raised the question, however, of how this soldier could have lost his sense of smell and taste while his sense of hearing remained in tact, despite his close proximity to the shell when it detonated: “It is, therefore, difficult to understand why hearing should be unaffected and the ill results confined to the senses of sight, smell, and taste. The close relation of these cases to those of hysteria appears certain.”<sup>35</sup> Though not widely understood as a psychological condition yet, this question does allude to shell shock’s eventual diagnosis as traumatic stress rather than an ailment caused by physical, internal injury.

Other phenomena attributed to shell shock were changes in mobility, including temporary paralysis and “hypnosis of battle”. Temporary paralysis as a result of an exploding artillery shell, commonly referred to as “shell shock paraplegia“, manifested itself in the inability to move certain limbs or other parts of the body for a prolonged

---

<sup>34</sup> “Strange New Diseases Caused by Battle,” *The Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 25 1915. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>35</sup> “Loses Taste and Smell Following Explosion,” *The Bridgeport Evening Farmer*, March 02, 1915, p. 10. Accessed 10 November 2022.

period of time lasting anywhere from days to weeks.<sup>36</sup> Hypnosis of battle, on the other hand, is described by *The Richmond Times-Dispatch* as an altered mental state in which “the victim is incapable of walking unless pushed or led by the hand, but when placed on his feet stands erect and motionless, with the head bent forward and eyes half closed. He cannot be awakened, but is not in a state of coma.”<sup>37</sup> These descriptions also bear similarity to “psychic knockout”, a term coined by Sir William Osler “in which the victim remains in a stuporous state, with loss of memory and complete speechlessness or stammering”.<sup>38</sup> All of these maladies— in addition to decreased coordination in walking gait and balance— provided very visible examples of how the trauma of trench warfare impacted those who fought on the front lines. The question that remained, however, was whether these changes were triggered by a physical or psychological disturbance.

While it was widely understood in 1915 that the impact of exploding artillery shells caused shell shock in soldiers, there was much discussion around what exactly was taking place in their bodies that would explain this affliction. In an attempt to explain the emerging medical crisis in familiar terms, doctors came up with a variety of physiological explanations for why soldiers were experiencing seemingly inexplicable and unconnected symptoms. *The Richmond Times-Dispatch* cited a number of these medical arguments, including the idea that bursting shells were “causing disintegration of the nerve endings and other parts of the nervous system”, causing internal injury that would temporarily strip a soldier of his sensory abilities. Other explanations included in the article were that the blinding light emitted by a detonated shell would cause

---

<sup>36</sup> “Shock of Battle Causes Rare Ills,” *The Madison Daily Leader*, June 22, 1915. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>37</sup> “Strange New Diseases Caused by Battle,” *The Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 25 1915. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>38</sup> “Shock of Battle Causes Rare Ills,” *The Madison Daily Leader*, June 22, 1915. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

“traumatic amblyopia” leading to the temporary loss of vision, that deafness was due to overstimulation of the auditory nerves, and that paralysis was the result of air pressure bursting the blood vessels in a soldier's body, causing apoplexy in the brain or pulmonary hemorrhages in the lungs.<sup>39</sup> These beliefs would eventually change, however, as the war continued to leave thousands suffering from shell shock who had never been exposed to shelling. It would eventually become evident that the term shell shock was not limited to those exposed to artillery shell explosions at all, but could be applied to anyone participating in traumatic combat situations.

Other medical arguments about the causes of shell shock as documented by American newspapers included the belief that certain people were more susceptible to its maladies. *The Richmond Times-Dispatch* claimed that the aforementioned “hypnosis of battle” was experienced most often by young men from cities and soldiers who are locked in a stalemate firefight, and also that “fatigue and the lack of food incident to long marches, or failure of the provision trains to reach men, are the chief predisposing causes.”<sup>40</sup> Sir William Osler also concluded that tobacco consumption could impact how severely a soldier is impacted by shell shock; he is quoted in *The Madison Daily Leader* as saying “among the convalescents many cases of rapid pulse and slight anemia are, I believe, due to tobacco.”<sup>41</sup>

As shell shock became an increasingly public concern, medical professionals sought different avenues of treatment. One of the most popular of these methods was hypnosis; *The Lakeland Evening Telegram* noted how “Hypnotism is being tried with

---

<sup>39</sup> *The Richmond Times-Dispatch*. May 30, 1915. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>40</sup> “Strange New Diseases Caused by Battle,” *The Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 25 1915. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>41</sup> “Shock of Battle Causes Rare Ills,” *The Madison Daily Leader*, June 22, 1915. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

some good results in the treatment of soldiers who have broken down under the shock and strain of the battlefield.” It then went on to detail the hypnosis process— the patient sat down, was instructed to clear his mind of all other thoughts than “the single subject of his cure”, and was affirmed by the hypnotist that their affliction was indeed cured. The steps were then repeated as many times as necessary.<sup>42</sup> The popularity of hypnotism was again reflected in a July 30th publication of *The Bridgeport Evening Farmer* newspaper, which praised its effectiveness in treating English troops: “Practically every British hospital for soldiers now has on its staff one or more physicians trained in administering hypnotic treatment. According to medical correspondent of the Daily Mail, the results obtained have in many cases been little short of miraculous.”<sup>43</sup> Individual success stories involving hypnotism were also published in papers— the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* described a twenty-five year old corporal who lost his memory after having an artillery shell explode two yards away from the trench in which he was stationed. “Hypnotic treatment was tried on him with the object of restoring his memory”, the article claimed, “While in the hypnotic state he was told of things that had happened to him after his trouble and questioned about them. Under the treatment his memory improved significantly.”<sup>44</sup>

Newspaper publications promoted the idea that music had a sort of healing power as well. As bands, vocal groups, and other musical acts visited hospitals housing wounded troops, the familiar melodies of popular songs would sometimes spark the

---

<sup>42</sup> “Treating Soldiers By Hypnotism,” *The Lakeland Evening Telegram*, April 26, 1915. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>43</sup> “Hypnotic Suggestion Used to Sooth Soldiers’ Nerves,” *The Bridgeport Evening Farmer*, July 30, 1915, p. 9. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>44</sup> *The Richmond Times-Dispatch*. May 30, 1915. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.



memories of a soldier suffering from shell shock. This was the case for a British soldier attending a concert at his hospital whose experience in the French trenches had left him in a “psychic knockout” state. *The Guthrie Daily Leader* newspaper noted that “He could understand nothing, babbled meaninglessly and had to be treated like an infant. He was still blind when taken to the concert.” The familiarity of the song being sung by a concert party, however, seemed to resonate with the soldier: “The word ‘mother’ recurred in the song and the soldier caught at it. When the song was finished, he was still muttering the word to himself. But it proved the key to his memory. He began to recall detached incidents about himself and later recovered both his mind and his sight.”<sup>45</sup>

Other treatments for shell shock included simply removing the afflicted soldier from an environment that would remind them of the ongoing war. “Most of the cases show decided improvement as soon as the men get into new surroundings”, said a January 6th, 1915 article in *The Daytona Daily News*, “Physicians get such patients away from hospitals as speedily as possible, so that they may be more free from military surroundings and reminded less frequently of their experiences in the field.” The article claimed that this change of environment greatly improved the psyche of the patients, and that the men were ready to return to the front lines again “as soon as they get a grasp on their nerves.”<sup>46</sup>

American newspapers discussed the topic of shell shock extensively throughout the year 1915, indicating a significant public interest in the mysterious new disease

---

<sup>45</sup> “Word ‘Mother’ Brings Back His Memory,” *The Guthrie Daily Leader*, October 29, 1915, p. 6. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>46</sup> “Go Mad Under Fire: Soldiers Driven Insane by Big German Guns,” *The Daytona Daily News*, January 06, 1915, p. 9. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

sweeping Europe's armies. The prevailing attitude at the time, however, was that shell shock was caused by a physical disturbance of the body, attributable to a person's preexisting conditions or habits, and could be easily cured using a variety of short-term methods like hypnotism, music therapy, or a change of scenery. There was little discussion or concern regarding the potential lasting consequences of modern warfare's new disease. This downplayed approach to recovery would become increasingly problematic, however, in the years to come, as the United States would soon be faced with the unforeseen necessity of long-term rehabilitation efforts for their own shell shocked veterans.

**Chapter Two: America Marches Closer to War, 1916 - April 1917**



Hurley, Frank, "Morning at Paschendaele," 12 October 1917.

<https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/morning-at-paschendaele-frank-hurley/OAFfwGdl6iANEQ>

“It is really worse than death, this ‘shell shock,’ for the patient goes through such agony of the mind, and then come intervals of sanity in which he realizes the hopelessness of the future... Over in America such things must sound unreal, but they are only too true when it’s a case of one’s own brothers and cousins and friends.”

-A Scottish woman in London writing to a friend in Philadelphia, 1916. Her younger brother was killed in the Mesopotamian campaign, while her cousin suffered from a severe case of shell shock he is unlikely to recover from.<sup>47</sup>

One year after Charles S. Myers put a name to the mysterious symptoms plaguing frontline soldiers, cases of shell shock within combat troops continued to skyrocket— by 1916, it was now estimated that over forty percent of casualties were related to shell shock.<sup>48</sup> Each diagnosis created new questions and uncertainties about how best to address this increasingly unmanageable crisis— with the constant need to physically remove droves of soldiers from the front lines for recovery, how could the war effort possibly be sustained? For military leaders and medical professionals, a focus on “curing” shell shock and returning soldiers to the front as soon as possible became vital to staying in the war.

As the United States documented the European war from afar, these notions of “curability” remained at the forefront of the public conversation on shell shock. Much of the language and themes that appeared in the earliest reports of shell shock in 1915

---

<sup>47</sup> “Record of One Family,” *Evening Public Ledger*. [volume] (Philadelphia [Pa.]), 16 Dec. 1916, p. 10. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>48</sup>Bodmin Keep Museum. “Shell Shock and War Neuroses,” Trauma to Treatment Exhibition, First World War. <https://bodminkeep.org/museum-history/exhibitions/trauma-to-treatment/world-war-one/shell-shock-war-neuroses/> Accessed 10 November 2022.

therefore remained in the media spotlight as the war progressed into 1916. Popular treatments that garnered attention early in the war for their miraculous ability to “cure” soldiers of their maladies— namely music therapy, changes in scenery, and hypnosis— continued to be seen on the pages of American newspapers in the year after Myers’ initial *Lancet* publication.

One such mention of music therapy comes from a May 7th, 1916 article titled “Frightful Dreams of Wounded Soldiers” from the *Evening Capital News* in Boise, Idaho. The article reported on the findings of Major Fred J. Mott, an army surgeon working under the Fourth London General War Hospital who boasted music as “the most effective agency in restoring to sanity minds unbalanced by shell-shock.” Mott recalled the case of one shell shocked soldier who— despite his mind being “a complete blank... reflected in a dazed, mask-like expression” and his inability to remember his own address or recognize photos of family members shown to him by doctors— managed to whistle along to both “God Save the King” and “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary” when Mott began the tune. Knowing the soldier was a talented musician prior to his hospitalization, Mott led him to the piano and encouraged him to play the songs they had whistled together. “He looked at me,” Mott wrote, “and again I noticed a glint in his eye and a chance [sic.] of his blank expression indicative of association and recollective memories.” The soldier proceeded to play the songs for the next thirty minutes “without a single discord.” Eight months later, the soldier had begun to recover other memories regarding his personal life— Mott attributed these developments to the healing power of music and its influence on associative memory.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> “Frightful Dreams of Wounded Soldiers,” *Evening Capital News*. (Boise, Idaho), 07 May 1916, p. 18. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

Another “treatment” element that remained consistent between 1915 and 1916 was the push to remove soldiers from environments that could trigger traumatic memories of war, while still avoiding extended stays in hospitals and convalescent homes. Like in the 1915 reports from Chapter 1, when it was imperative that “physicians get such patients away from hospitals as speedily as possible”, newspapers published the following year agreed that such environments would be detrimental to the recovery of the soldier. One article published out of Clarksville, West Virginia argued that a soldier “must be sent back from the front to recover his balance. If he goes to a noisy convalescent home a sudden whistle will be agony to him. A tire bursting in the street will make a nervous patient jump out of bed.”<sup>50</sup>

Not all of the early treatment methods for shell shock held up quite as well as music therapy or a simple change of scenery between 1915 and 1916. While hypnosis was publicly lauded early in the war for its healing abilities, its legitimacy as a medical treatment began to dwindle as the war dragged on and doctors conducted more case studies on soldiers experiencing symptoms of neurosis. This change in public perception is reflected in a March 22nd, 1916 issue of the *St. Croix Avis.*, which described a study conducted by Charles Myers in which twenty-three cases of men suffering from shell shock were treated using hypnosis.<sup>51</sup> Myers divided the results into the following categories: “apparently complete cures” (26%), “distinct improvement” (26%), “failure to hypnotise” (35%), and “no improvement after hypnosis” (13%).<sup>52</sup> While this study

---

<sup>50</sup> “How War ‘Bruises and Frays’ Nerves of Soldiers,” *The Sunday Telegram*. [volume] (Clarksburg, W. Va.), 09 April 1916, p. 22. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>51</sup> *St. Croix Avis.* is from the U.S. Virgin Islands, but the article is sourced from a January 15th publication of *Daily Mail*.

<sup>52</sup> “Hypnotism For Shell Shock,” *St. Croix Avis.* [volume] (Christiansted, St. Croix [V.I.]), 22 March 1916, p. 4. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

dismantled some of the prior assumptions about the effectiveness of hypnosis, as the highest percentage of soldiers were unable to fall under hypnosis at all, other reports suggested that efforts to hypnotize soldiers actually had negative effects on their psyche. A November article from Connecticut's *The Bridgeport Evening Farmer*— the same newspaper who had claimed hypnosis as “little short of miraculous” less than a year before— described how “in some instances it [hypnosis] has caused the men to live over again their terrible experiences, and in one instance after a man had been awakened he implored the physician to stop the treatment as he had just seen his pal's head blown from his body by a shell.”<sup>53</sup><sup>54</sup>

The new year also brought new and inventive theories about how to rid soldiers of their shell shock. *The Bridgeport Evening Farmer*, for example, reported on how “it is claimed that shell shock and trench nerves can be cured by the use of a revolving wheel which brings before the eye a constant succession of different colors.”<sup>55</sup> Other newspapers, such as the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, republished stories from London that suggested a type of water treatment involving “baths with continuously flowing water” could heal a soldier of even the most extreme shell shock symptoms: “A soldier who went into the bath a raving maniac was held down by rubber bands, and emerged cured and able to walk out after eleven days of continuous treatment.”<sup>56</sup> While not a cure, some reports showed that doctors also administered opiates to lessen the severity of soldier's afflictions, especially those continually reliving the traumas of trench warfare.

---

<sup>53</sup> “Hypnotic Suggestion Used to Sooth Soldiers' Nerves,” *The Bridgeport Evening Farmer*, July 30, 1915, p. 9. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>54</sup> “Shell Shock,” *The Bridgeport Evening Farmer*. [volume] (Bridgeport, Conn.), 10 Nov. 1916, p. 14. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>55</sup> “Shell Shock,” *The Bridgeport Evening Farmer*, p. 14. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>56</sup> “Flowing Water Baths Cure For Shell Shock,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*. [volume] (Honolulu [Oahu, Hawaii]), 11 Nov. 1916, p. 18. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

One such newspaper explained how “many of the shell shock patients are haunted by the voices of their dying comrades and can only be quieted by opiates.”<sup>57</sup>

Some newspapers began to take a humorous approach to stories concerning shell shock recovery. One story that originated in the *London Observer* but circulated in several American newspapers listed a number of odd, seemingly inexplicable ways in which cases of shell shock were instantly “cured” by sudden, often surprising occurrences. The list included “grew excited over a game of cards”, “fell downstairs”, “had a tooth pulled out at the dentist’s— without anesthetic”, “underwent a flashlight photograph”, and “put the wrong end of a lighted cigarette in his mouth.” At the end of the list, the article noted that “the card cure, on the whole, seems the least painful.”<sup>58</sup> Another story, titled “Practical Joke Cures Dumbness,” described an instance where an Australian soldier in a French hospital suffered from loss of speech as a result of shell shock. Encouraged by a physician and a group of fellow soldiers to enter a hammock suspended over a riverbank, the other men cut the ropes of the hammock as the shell shocked soldier dozed off. Falling into the water below, the Australian soldier let out a verbal response— “who the h— did that?”— for the first time since exhibiting symptoms.<sup>59</sup>

A July 10th, 1916 newspaper out of Pendleton, Oregon observed how “the news dispatches tell only of the general results of the fighting but presents little of the detail resulting from personal experience.”<sup>60</sup> That made it all the more impactful when, instead

---

<sup>57</sup> “Shell Shock,” *The Bridgeport Evening Farmer*. [volume] (Bridgeport, Conn.), 10 Nov. 1916, p. 14. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>58</sup> “Regaining Lost Speech,” *The St. Joseph Observer*. [volume] (St. Joseph, Mo.), 09 Dec. 1916, p. 2. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>59</sup> “Practical Joke Cures Dumbness,” *Elko Independent*. [volume] (Elko, Nev.), 28 Aug. 1916, p. 2.. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>60</sup> “Horrors of War Told in Letter Received by Relative Here of Soldier in Europe.” *East Oregonian* : E.O. (Pendleton, OR), 10 July 1916, p.1. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.



of second hand, impersonal retellings of the experiences of unnamed soldiers or doctors, newspapers included accounts directly from those who were most affected by the war. Frank Jewett, a soldier in the Canadian army, provided one such account to the *East Oregonian* in which he disclosed some of the grim details of his experiences during the Third Battle of Ypres. “Talk about shells,” he wrote to his uncle. “Hundreds of thousands were hurled at us. In fact, all the enemy’s guns were turned on the trenches we were holding, and they were ripped to pieces and leveled to the ground. Dead were lying everywhere.” Bleeding from his nose, mouth, and ears after the barrage, Jewett and the other remaining members of his battalion— just as battered and beaten down by shelling as he— decided to retreat and run for safety shortly thereafter. At the time he penned the letter, he was still in the hospital recovering from shell shock and deafness, but assured that he was “one of the luckiest fellows alive.”<sup>61</sup>

Occasionally, soldiers suffering from shell shock would share their stories through spoken rather than written word. The *Daily Capital Journal* published in Salem, Oregon featured an article in their July 8th, 1916 issue promoting an upcoming lecture by Lieutenant Charles W. Niemeyer, a British officer from the Forty-Fifth regiment, during which he would discuss his experiences at the front. Niemeyer, who had fought in the Battle of the Mons, Battle of the Marne, Battle of the Aisne, and the First Battle of Ypres, “was confined to the hospital for several weeks because of shell shock” before being sent back to the front, where he “later got in the way of the German gas which affected one lung so that he was rendered unfit for trench service.” He was one of eleven survivors of the 780 men in his regiment who had been sent to fight in

---

<sup>61</sup> “Horrors of War Told in Letter Received by Relative Here of Soldier in Europe.” *East Oregonian* : E.O. (Pendleton, OR), 10 July 1916, p.1. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

France.<sup>62</sup> Though Niemeyer's lecture was unique in the fact that it was delivered by someone actually afflicted with shell shock, there were many other lectures held across the nation by various organizations who sought to spread information about the disease that was so frequently talked about but little understood. A June 17th, 1916 article from the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* advertised one such meeting held by the United Services Medical Society, during which they are scheduled to discuss the paper "Shell Shock and Nervous Injuries." The article noted how the conditions to be discussed at the meeting were "practically unheard of until the present war."<sup>63</sup>

1916 also saw the emergence of shell shock as a theme in mainstream literature and writing. Though poetry about the war had begun to be published as early as 1914, mentions of shell shock didn't appear in the works of major trench poets until later in the war.<sup>64</sup> Certain works of fiction, however, were already beginning to incorporate the disease into their storylines by 1916. One prominent example of this is noted science fiction author Edwin Balmer's "1917?"— a weekly serial depicting an imagined future where the European powers declare war on the United States— which was published in the *Chicago Tribune* beginning in 1916 and then reprinted in newspapers across the nation.<sup>65</sup> The mention of shell shock appeared in nearly every episode, as Balmer's vivid writing brought the horrors of war into the living room of his readers in excruciating detail. "The shell shock that must have terribly shaken this frail, brave little form," one

---

<sup>62</sup> "Will Tell Experience In European War," *Daily Capital Journal*. (Salem, Oregon), 08 July 1916. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>63</sup> "Medical Lessons of War Will Be Told at Meeting on Tuesday," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*. [volume] (Honolulu [Oahu, Hawaii]), 17 June 1916, p. 8. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>64</sup> "World War I: Poetry by Year," *The Poetry of World War I*, Poetry Foundation. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/70139/the-poetry-of-world-war-i>. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>65</sup> "'1917?': The Biggest Story Ever Printed in America," *Evening Times-Republican*. [volume] (Marshalltown, Iowa), 04 March 1916, p. 3. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

excerpt from the November 4th, 1916 episode read, “the awful, constant bruising of the fabric of the body, the shredding of the soul...”<sup>66</sup> For many Americans, “1917?”— though a work of fiction— was likely the closest they had felt to experiencing the gravity of the Great War since it started two years prior. Balmer’s unsanitized descriptions of shell shock served to give life to the American public conception of shell shock in a way mere newspaper reports couldn’t, bridging the physical gap between the United States and a seemingly far-off and isolated Europe with the power of storytelling.



Balmer, Edwin. “1917?” *The Ogden Standard*. [volume] (Ogden City, Utah), 10 June 1916, p. 3.

*Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

<sup>66</sup> “1917?” *The Irish Standard*. [volume] (Minneapolis, Minn. ;), 04 Nov. 1916, p. 7. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

The year 1916 saw the topic of shell shock discussed thoroughly in the American press, whether it was debating treatment methods and the potential for curing patients, trying to elicit a laugh through an otherwise painful and grim subject, or giving voice to those soldiers suffering from the disease. However, as the disease impacted more and more young men, newspapers also served to promote and popularize dangerous associations of shell shock with cowardice and malingering. A November 10, 1916 article in *The Bridgeport Evening Farmer* demonstrates how the lingering uncertainty surrounding the nature of shell shock as a psychological affliction fueled harmful stigmas around the disease: “Just as in civil life traumatic neuroses have been a cloak for deception,” the article suggested, “so in military operations ‘shell shock’ has become a potent source of malingering... all the symptoms are easy to counterfeit, and when it became generally known that men with so called ‘shell shock’ would be sent to the base the strain proved too much for a considerable number of men.”<sup>67</sup> Unbeknownst to the writers at *The Bridgeport Evening Farmer*, Eric Skeffington Poole was only a few weeks from the beginning of his court martial trial when their article was written and published. He would be dead within a month. This article reminds us that the perpetuation of these misinformed accusations had deadly consequences for Poole and others left most vulnerable by the traumas of war.

As the conflict entered 1917 and the United States grew ever closer to entering the European war, the “curability” of shell shock continued to be a central theme in newspaper reports as the world desperately sought answers for the enigmatic epidemic sweeping through their armies. The February 9th, 1917 article “Shocked Out by Shell Explosions” contained reports from London suggesting that “hypnotism is occasionally

---

<sup>67</sup> “Shell Shock,” *The Bridgeport Evening Farmer*. [volume] (Bridgeport, Conn.), 10 Nov. 1916, p. 11. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

successful, and rather good results are being obtained in other cases by simply placing the patient under chloroform.” The story claimed that one soldier— left without his ability to speak or hear for three months after exposure to shelling— “was placed under light anaesthetic” in the form of chloroform and, while unconscious, began to utter noises for the first time since his diagnosis. He then began to form words and continued speaking after regaining consciousness, apparently curing his loss of speech.<sup>68</sup> Other newspapers lauded the effectiveness of massages and fresh air in curing soldiers of the disease. “Massage is working miracles,” said one *New York Tribune* article from April 1st, 1917, “and the cures in the milder cases have been greatly shortened. The patients are sleeping out in tents, not because there are no wooden huts, but because the doctors are agreed that the more fresh air, however cold, the better.”<sup>69</sup>

Overall, the prevalence of these kinds of optimistic reports indicated a broad desire to be able to manage and control a disease that otherwise seemed out of control, both in terms of surging case numbers and the fact that doctors still hadn’t definitively figured out what actually caused shell shock in soldiers. These feel-good stories of miraculous recovery were commonplace in the press, as they intended to assuage the fears of the public, especially as it became more and more evident that the United States would be sending their own sons to the front in the coming months. One such story was that of a Sergeant Harvey who, after being unable to speak for weeks following his exposure to an exploding mine in France, went to the cinema to view a film depicting the Battle of the Somme. Upon his return to the military hospital in Nottingham where he

---

<sup>68</sup> “Shocked Out By Shell Explosions,” *New Britain Herald*. [microfilm reel] (New Britain, Conn.), 09 Feb. 1917. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>69</sup> “Shower Baths Comfort Tommy In Winter Ordeal on Somme,” *New-York tribune*. [volume] (New York [N.Y.]), 01 April 1917. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

was a patient, “he went to bed and dreamt the whole representation over again, including a most realistic mine explosion, and when he awoke he had partially recovered the use of his paralyzed organs.”<sup>70</sup> A similar story out of the *Glasgow Herald* which was republished in American newspapers recounted the story of Private George Ferguson, who regained his ability to speak after dreaming of being back on the front lines: “He saw the incidents of the battle re-enacted, and dreamt that a big German was towering over him about to run him through with his bayonet. The excitement of the dream was enough to cause Ferguson to raise himself in his bed and shout aloud.”<sup>71</sup>

While the majority of American reports on shell shock and allegedly miraculous recovery came from the Allied nations of Great Britain or France, there were also occasionally stories out of the Central Power countries, demonstrating the broad scope in which shell shock affected all nations involved. One such report out of Karlsruhe, Germany, published in late March of 1917, told of the misfortune of a German soldier named Michael Wienmann. Wienmann had been left shell shocked and unable to speak following his exposure to shelling on the Western Front. “Despondent and hopeless,” Wienmann tried to take his own life at a Loerrach military hospital— “the disheartened man jumped from a window of the hospital and was picked up unconscious, but the surgeons who examined him found he had only suffered a few painful bruises. When he opened his eyes again he uttered a cry of joy. His speech had returned.”<sup>72</sup> While this story and its subsequent publication in U.S. newspapers illustrated the same “curability” outlook that defined earlier reports on shell shock— the idea that all it took to rid a

---

<sup>70</sup> “Dramatic Recovery of Speech,” *The Hays Free Press*. [volume] (Hays, Kan.), 27 Jan. 1917.

*Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>71</sup> “Kwery Kolumn,” *Evening Capital News*. (Boise, Idaho), 11 March 1917. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>72</sup> “Finds Voice Trying to Die,” *The Washington Times*. [volume] (Washington [D.C.]), 31 March 1917. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

soldier of his ailment was a short stint of treatment or a startling event to rewire their system— it also reflected a deeper issue regarding the mental health of soldiers suffering from war trauma.

Despite stories like Michael Wienmann prompting American audiences to recognize the severity of shell shock as a life-threatening disease, many newspapers still didn't take the topic seriously. In the same manner in which many 1916 articles poked fun at the absurdist ways soldiers recovered their lost senses or memories, early 1917 articles continued to use shell shock as a point of humor. A short quip which became popular in newspapers between January and February of 1917 joked that “in the trenches they worry about shell shock, in this country about the shell out shock when the first of the month bills come around.”<sup>73</sup> A similar joke that circulated in a number of newspapers around the same time read that “A discussion of the mysterious nervous malady known as ‘shell shock’ suggests that Wall street is slowly recovering from a recent attack.”<sup>74</sup>

There were also still many examples of newspapers publishing stories that both directly and indirectly diminished the credibility of shell shock as a legitimate disease. The article “Germans Assume Garb of Dead to Escape Fighting”, published in February of 1917, told of how shell shock was used as a way for cowardly German soldiers to escape from the front. They donned the uniforms of dead French soldiers, allowed themselves to be “captured” by their own unwitting army, and pretended to be shell shocked so that they wouldn't have to speak: “The masquerading Germans refused to

---

<sup>73</sup> “In the trenches they worry about shell shock...,” *The Denison Review*. [volume] (Denison, Iowa), 31 Jan. 1917. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>74</sup> “Wall Street Attacked,” *Norwich Bulletin*. [volume] (Norwich, Conn.), 24 Jan. 1917. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

talk, feigning shell shock, and were sent to the rear, then to the prison camp, where their identity was undiscovered until after several months.”<sup>75</sup> Other articles, while not outwardly discrediting shell shock as an excuse for malingering, used dismissive language that could have negatively altered the public’s perception of the disease. An April 2nd, 1917 article from *The Topeka State Journal* contained an update from France from Dr. Kellogg Speed, an associate professor of surgery at Northwestern University who was serving as a British army surgeon in a French field hospital. Though Speed claimed that shell shock caused ten percent of all casualties at the front, he also described the affliction as “nothing but nerves.”<sup>76</sup> Another article, this one about Canadian troops, boasted about their high spirits and good health: “The health of the men is splendid; in fact, with the exception of shell shocks that some men suffer from, they are in the pink of condition...”<sup>77</sup> The notion that this could be true— that “the health of the men is splendid” despite the fact that so many of them were suffering from debilitating symptoms of trauma— minimized the significance and impact of shell shock on the overall health and wellbeing of soldiers.

Prior to 1917, the American press and doctors alike were still uncertain about whether or not shell shock was caused by a physical or psychological disturbance. Many of the reports up to that point had considered instances of physical, shelling-related trauma to be shell shock in the same way that instances in which soldiers were never exposed to shelling were. There was little to no differentiation between the two and they

---

<sup>75</sup> “Germans Assume Garb of Dead to Escape Fighting,” *The Bridgeport Evening Farmer*. [volume] (Bridgeport, Conn.), 10 Feb. 1917. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>76</sup> “War Might Not Be Over in 5 Years Dr. Speed Thinks,” *The Topeka State Journal*. [volume] (Topeka, Kansas), 02 April 1917. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>77</sup> “With the Brave Canadians,” *The Birmingham Age-Herald*. [volume] (Birmingham, Ala.), 04 March 1917. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.



were oftentimes used interchangeably. For example, a 1916 report by Dr. Fred J. Mott, the same army surgeon who helped a soldier regain his memory through whistling “God Save the King”, spoke to the notion that shell shock was the result of the compression of air caused by falling shells. Mott argues that this pressure was then “transmitted to the fluid about the base of the brain and causes shock to the vital centres of the floor of the fourth ventricle. This would cause in turn instantaneous paralysis of the heart and breath-control centres of the brain.”<sup>78</sup>



Illustration of the believed effect of shelling on the human body.<sup>79</sup>

However, as the war progressed, this understanding began to shift and a differentiation between physical and psychological trauma began to emerge. The article “New Army Disease, Shell-Shock”, originally written by Dr. Kellogg Speed in *Leslie's Weekly* and subsequently published in the *Grand Forks Herald*, described a newly developed distinction between “psuedo” and “true” shell shock. “One is the pseudo

<sup>78</sup> “Science’s Newest Discoveries About Shell Fire and Bullet Wounds,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. [volume] (Richmond, Va.), 19 March 1916. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>79</sup> “Science’s Newest Discoveries About Shell Fire and Bullet Wounds,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. Accessed 10 November 2022.

shell-shock following the course outlined in men of unstable equilibrium, deprived of food and made to fear for their lives; the second class is true shell-shock occurring in men who really sustain blows of falling sand bags, and planks, or are buried in the upheaval of earth following shell explosion.”<sup>80</sup>

While this article does indicate an important development in the medical understanding of shell shock as doctors began to recognize— at least in part— that there was an underlying psychological component to cases of shell shock independent of physical injury, it also served to reinforce negative associations of the less understood aspects of the disease. Labels like “pseudo” and “false” shell shock, as it was called later in the story, suggested that psychological trauma was somehow less real, and therefore less legitimate, than its physical counterpart. This language served to not only invalidate the psychological component of shell shock, but also to further stigmatize mental illness as something spurious. This kind of thinking, however, would not last long, as the traumas of mechanized war were about to hit much closer to home than ever before. The “pseudo” shell shock article was published on April 6th, 1917— the day the United States entered World War One. As the American public sent their sons to the front, they would soon realize that, as one grieving sister wrote, the reality of shell shock “are only too true when it’s a case of one’s own brothers and cousins and friends.”<sup>81</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> “New Army Disease, Shell-Shock,” *Grand Forks Herald*. [volume] (Grand Forks, N.D.), 06 April 1917. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>81</sup> “Record of One Family,” *Evening Public Ledger*. [volume] (Philadelphia [Pa.]), 16 Dec. 1916, p. 10. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 10 November 2022.