

# HEART OF CONFLICT

## SHELL SHOCK

World War One is sometimes described as the first ‘modern’ war. It was certainly the first mechanised killing in the theatre of war; the machine gun, tanks, airships, bombs, gas and shells. That mechanisation led routinely to levels and speed of slaughter not experienced before. Like other conflicts to follow, slang was invented to describe and conceal simultaneously; a ‘Jack Johnson’ was a large crater left by an ‘Ypres Express’, Flying Pigs, Hissing Jennies and ‘turtles’ (grenades). This dark ‘trench humour’ hid a lot of fears. But the reality – despite comradeship, morale boosting games of football and not an inconsiderable amount of rum – was horrific.

Sadly, even though it was only 100 years ago, much information has been lost forever because the men and women who returned from the front simply did not or could not talk about their extraordinary efforts, experiences and suffering.

Many, however, came back changed forever from both physical and mental scars at a time when medical remedies were still basic and virtually nothing at all was known about shell shock. During WW1 the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) dealt with an estimated 80,000 cases. Even after the war 20,000 men were still recorded as suffering from shell shock.

Originally, medical units started to record cases of ‘nervous and mental shock’. The term ‘shell shock’ came later when doctors thought such reactions were brain damage due to a shock wave from an exploding shell nearby – a physical injury, perhaps even nerve damage. Symptoms varied but included paralysis, blindness, deafness, loss of appetite, anxiety attacks and depression. Despite initially sending the casualties of shell shock back to the trenches, the cases kept coming. Medical units were also reporting cases of shell shock when the soldier had been nowhere near an explosion.

Tragically, mental and emotional stress was not then recognised as a genuine and significant illness, so when no physical cause could be found it was often callously treated as cowardice. A total of 306 British and Commonwealth soldiers were court martialled and shot as cowards; a good number of these were probably suffering from what we now call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

In 2006 all these men finally received a posthumous pardon after a very long and bitter campaign by their descendants. There is now a Shot at Dawn memorial, showing a young man in a blindfold tied to a stake, in the National Arboretum in Staffordshire.

## Charles Myers

An experimental psychologist during the war who volunteered to go to France, Myers wrote an article for the Lancet in 1915 where the term ‘shell shock’ was first seen outside of the military. He did not, as previously thought, actually invent the term. Rather it seems to have been a term invented by the soldiers themselves. Myers was among the first to consider that the effects of shell shock were not physical as first thought, but manifestations of suppressed mental trauma. This was because outward panic or fear could lead to a soldier being court martialled for cowardice and as a result shot by firing squad.

Myers was instrumental in getting the more serious cases returned to England to specialist treatment centres, almost certainly saving more soldiers from the firing squad. Following the war, Myers opened a clinic in what is now part of Plymouth University where he pioneered occupational and cognitive treatments to help victims of shell shock.

Written by W. Norton/Bridging Arts

