

6. Shell Shock

World War I created immensely stressful conditions for soldiers. Terrifying weapon advancements, combined with horrific conditions in the trenches, created overwhelming burdens on the men fighting. That burden proved too great for some, causing mental breakdowns which were referred to as “shell shock.”

Shell shock was caused by the heavy explosions and constant fighting associated with the war. Troops suffering from shell shock often agonized from headaches, dizziness, amnesia and tremors. They struggled to sleep, and occasionally, their ability to walk and talk were affected. Some men appeared helpless and nonresponsive, while others were consumed with vicious panic and terror.



Soldier suffering from shell shock

Treatment for shell shock varied greatly. The most common form of treatment was to remove the victim from the front-lines to provide relief from the trauma of war. Since the condition was largely misunderstood, some victims were viewed as cowards and faced trial for desertion. Trauma induced by the intensity of warfare is still an issue for modern soldiers. Today, shell shock would most likely be diagnosed as a type of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Corporal Henry Gregory recalls witnessing shell shock for the first time:

“I was in this Field Hospital that I saw the first case of shell-shock. The enemy opened fire about dinner time, as usual, with his big guns. As soon as the first shell came over, the shell-shock case nearly went mad. He screamed and raved, and it took eight men to hold him down on the stretcher. With every shell he would go into a fit of screaming and fight to get away. It is heartbreaking to watch a shell-shock case. The terror is indescribable. The flesh on their faces shakes in fear, and their teeth continually chatter. Shell-shock was brought about in many ways; loss of sleep, continually being under heavy shell fire, the torment of the lice, irregular meals, nerves always on end, and the thought always in the man's mind that the next minute was going to be his last.”



Shell shock victims receiving treatment

Source: “Shell Shock.” BBC, 10 Mar. 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/shellshock_01.shtml.