

# *Voices of the First World War: Shell Shock*

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The First World War was the first time that the psychological trauma of warfare was formally recognised both by doctors and society at large. The condition became known as 'shell shock'. While moving up to the trenches during his first time on the Western Front, NCO Frederick Holmes witnessed someone suffering from it.

*We stayed the night in a building without a roof, there were four walls. And there I saw my first shell shock case, a fellow lying, crying and shaking like an aspen. It was pitiful really. I asked somebody what was his trouble and they said he's a shell shock case and he was just waiting to be transported down, home. It was a terrible thing, I didn't realise it was as bad as that. I thought it was pretty terrible but at the time I was... still had that adventurous spirit and I wasn't afraid.*

Shell shock could manifest itself in a variety of ways. Clifford Lane, of the Hertfordshire Regiment, remembered one example.

*Every time I went over the top – I should say almost every time – somebody went insane. Only one person probably, you know, but I can see them now coming along, singing you know, they're absolutely lost their control of everything. I can remember one man coming along with two men – one either side holding his arms – singing 'Under the old apple tree.' He was blaring it out, top of his voice. And almost every time I've seen men taken out of the line, but there weren't many. But people being dazed, lying on a firestep you know after a bombardment, dazed, that was quite common.*

An inability to stop shaking and trembling was one common symptom of the condition. Alfred Griffin of the King's Royal Rifle Corps remembered an instance of this.

*Some of the men that'd been out there a long time – there weren't many – and they had been through that Somme battle, they were really ought to have been repatriated and put on a train. Because we had a sergeant signaller in charge of the signallers who, as soon as he got within shelling distance, he went white. And he, well, the CO didn't used to take him up when he didn't want to embarrass him too much. As soon as he got up within the, you know, where you have got to duck from shells and that, he fell out – a bad stomach – and the stretcher-bearers used to take him back. But he should've been sent back to England. He'd been through it all. Trembling like a leaf, he couldn't keep a limb still. But I mean it wasn't cowardice.*

Stretcher-bearer James Brady found that speechlessness was another way in which a man could be affected.

*Well I remember, when I got to the main dressing station I saw a strange object sitting on a boulder at the entrance to the marquee. He was caked with the brown mud or clay from head to feet and he was silent and he wasn't moving. And I went to him, as one did, to see if one could help. He was completely concussed; he was dumb with shock and he couldn't speak to me. And he just reminded me of a statue in a garden. He was just a soldier who was completely shattered and shell shocked and I went in and called one of the doctors to come out and they took him in. But he'd been sitting there apparently a long, long time and no-one seemed to have taken much notice of him.*



Men suffering from shell shock would be carried away by stretcher. © IWM (Q 2477)

Shell shock could be triggered by a range of causes. The term itself derived from the idea that repetitive shelling was primarily to blame. The periods of intense shelling that occurred during the war were certainly what British private Donald Price saw as the reason men became shell shocked.

*Well I just thought it was a failure of life itself, the failure of the mind to take the enormous depression that it had got. Not for a minute but for probably two or three days on the run. If you are standing under a bombardment for so long and you're seeing fellows going up in the air and you've got to stick it for a couple or three days it isn't funny. And something in some people's got to go and it went in some people. I don't think they were cowards at all; any man that went up there if he was a coward he wouldn't have gone, he'd have done anything not to go up there. But*

*once he'd got up there, you are not going to tell me that a fellow was a coward cos he couldn't stand this. I mean people just don't understand what a barrage is, you know. The din, the row, the swishing of the shells you could hear them coming. You'd hear shells coming towards you and you'd know very well it's going to burst here or there. And not one shell but hundreds of shells over the area and all of a sudden you might find yourself alone; everything else has gone west...*

George Jameson thought the main reason that men suffered from shell shock was the Germans' use of trench mortars, known as minenwerfers.

*Well it took a long time, it took quite towards two years, I should think, of the war before that began to sink in to the powers that be. And it came about, I think, to a large degree because the Germans had a weapon they called a minenwerfer. And one of those you'd be out in the trenches and if one of those landed somewhere near, it blew a hole about the size of this room and the trench vanished completely, and everything that was there vanished. And if the Germans did this minenwerfer business very regularly, it so shattered the nerves of the troops that they had to be withdrawn they were just shell shocked, jittering; they were no good. And that was, when that started to happen it was then begun to be realised that troops that were subjected not to actual wounds and things but simply to the devastating effects of gun blast on top of them repeatedly shook their nervous systems to such an extent that they were no good, they couldn't think straight.*

Some men were really shaken by a near miss. Stan Small of the Devonshire Regiment described an instance of this.

*I went up the line one night, you see, well we'd only just taken up this positions, our men had only just gone in the line and I had the rations on my wagon. And while they were taking up positions in the trenches not only that they had to put out in the front; you've got to put out some two or three men dug a hole in the ground, you know, for observation. Well they'd done that and it was a Bristol man who was there and he was going out to get into this here trench, advanced place, like. So they was charged you see, throwing hand grenades. And one pitched in front of him, but it never killed him. But it gave him shell shock. He were no good afterwards, he had to be sent home – no good. You've lost your nerves look, no you were no good. When you've once lost your nerves, you've had it.*

For some of those who suffered from shell shock, it was impossible to hide the fact. But if the effects were temporary, as they were for British officer F. Jourdain, they could be kept from others.

*I wondered what was happening because anything that went off, bang, over there somewhere made me jump. And I suddenly realised I'd got this thing called shell shock, which I'd never believed in before. Simply I think because of all these shells going off quite close to one, there was a lot of concussion about it. And I realised this and I didn't know what to do because I wasn't going to tell anybody about it and I didn't tell anybody about it. Fortunately after I should say three days, or it may have been more, but something like that, it disappeared. But was I relieved because I mean you felt, 'Am I coward or what?' I mean, this is dreadful I mean*

*anything that goes pop makes one dither. And of course that is what shell shock is, I think. People always thought it was cowardice, you see. Because people got shell shock in a front line trench – perfectly legitimately no doubt – and would start, I suppose they got dithery, but at any rate anything that went off bang alarmed them. And eventually they presumably got home; it was one way of getting home. You see, people if they realised, like I did, that there was something wrong you'd do your best to hide it. Because you're scared thinking that you're being a coward.*

For others, the effects of their intense experiences lasted longer. Joseph Clements was wounded on the Western Front in 1916 and sent back to Britain to recover. He was kept there after shell shock set in, and never returned to the front line.

*I began to feel this business coming on more, more so than usual; this shell shock. I was walking down with a pal of mine down to what they called The Hard at Gosport where the ferries started from. We were going down to a photographer's shop and we had to cross a road to go down to this side road. And looking back to my left, coming towards me was a tram – the old trams were still going then. And it was about 100-150 yards away, just coming round the bend there. And I stood in the middle of that track and I couldn't move, just couldn't move... And my mate had got across to the other side, looked back and saw that I was stuck there and he came back and gave me a pull and started me off again. So I got across. And then we, of course, we went into the photographer's; photographs taken; 'What's your name?' I had to go outside and bring him in to tell the person my name! And that's how it affected me. It got very... pretty bad at times.*

Shell shock was an unfamiliar condition to many. As a result, the treatment received by its sufferers could vary greatly. William Collins, of the Royal Army Medical Corps, explained how it was dealt with at the front.

*I never saw a panicky soldier, I saw them when their nerves had broken and given way. I mean, they were just laying, gibbering idiots. I've seen a soldier laying on a stretcher, gibbering like an idiot just from the shell shock, being blown unconscious. As a rule they were either charged with malingering or sent down to hospital and it depended on the officers they were dealing with.*

As a rule, obvious shell shock cases were removed from the front line. Depending on the severity of their condition, they would either be given work behind the lines or hospitalised. Harry Forrester found himself in a ward full of men suffering from shell shock while he was in hospital in Ireland in late 1916.

*Eventually they took me out into the big ward, where most of the patients there were shell shock people from the war. Now a shell shock person, he can be very quiet and he can be very violent; he can do all sorts of things. It was a big ward; it held about, what, 20 people, 25, something like that. There was an old orderly a real old soldier, been in Army since Adam was a lad. He was bald-headed and he used to sneak about with a torch at night. He put his hand on one of these shell shock cases and the whole hospital was in turmoil. This bloke went completely barmy, oh! the place was turned upside down. He went, he threw this about and that about, this shell shock case. So of course, so the old orderly was never allowed to be the orderly anymore after that.*



"Open air" wards at 4th London General Hospital at Denmark Hill. A neurological section was established there in 1915. © IWM (Q 27819)

As a new medical phenomenon, it took time for shell shock to be recognised and understood by the medical profession. The war saw significant changes in psychiatry and the way psychological conditions were handled. Mrs Bird worked at Colchester Hospital, where some shell shock cases were treated.

*We had quite a few shell shock patients and of course some who were reliable were allowed to go out on their own, to have tea in the town and do a bit of shopping. One boy in particular, when I was in the telephone exchange, used to like to come down and talk to us. The sergeant in charge knew this and didn't attempt to stop him in any way. But one day he was missing and of course the military police had to be called out. Eventually they found him and that put an end to his little journeys out and to his visits to us.*

The men who weren't afflicted by shell shock, but witnessed its effects, viewed it in a number of different ways. Edwin Bigwood, of the Worcestershire Regiment, described how he felt about it.

*What we felt; we'd rather lose a leg, be wounded, anything but to have shell shock. We were all afraid of shell shock. Oh, it hit the nerves and the fellows that'd come out their fingers would be waving about like tissue paper. They never really recovered in mind, you know, a lot of them. We felt sorry for them, anyway. I should imagine the medical profession must have too because they*

*were tragic cases, very tragic. We dreaded that – all of us dreaded that more than being wounded; we didn't mind being wounded it was the dread of being shell shocked.*

Shell shock was also viewed with scepticism. Many at the time and since have speculated that those affected by it were faking the condition to get out of having to fight. Royal Fusilier William Holbrook summed up his thoughts on this.

*Some of them were terrible they were really, to see them crying. It would make you feel ill yourself to see fellows crying, calling out for their mother and all the things like that. Especially if there had been a terrific burst, shellfire, near them. Oh yes we saw, that was not uncommon. Not so much the screaming out crying, you know, it was beginning to get their nerves and they couldn't keep themselves. Oh they were shaking all the time and wild looking, you know, that type. These people say that – I was reading some time ago where some general said, 'There's no such thing as shell shock.' He ought to have, he should have been there. I mean it's ridiculous to say things like that. You get a man, even if he was a strong man, you get a terrific burst from a shell within say three or four yards of you, you know. It does, it does upset them. Shell shock, oh my god yes.*

It was also said that those suffering from shell shock were in fact cowards. British private Walter Grover didn't believe this – but also didn't want to be accused of cowardice himself.

*You can't wonder at it, people cracking up. We had some chaps in our regiment that cracked up with shell shock. They called it cowardice but it wasn't that at all. Nobody knows the effect of a barrage: you are under shells coming over, you could see it out of the corner of your eye these shells coming down and people blowing up and the shells coming down and blowing everybody to pieces. You can understand some chaps, they're not all built the same and some couldn't stand it. We had one fellow in our line and he was as right and as nice as you could wish to meet out of the line and he frankly admitted that, when the shells burst near him, he was like a jelly; he just couldn't stand it. Then they called it cowardice but it wasn't that at all it was just the way he was made. I was afraid, oh yes, I'll admit that, I'll admit that. But what I didn't want to see other people to see I was afraid, that was the thing. Everybody was afraid, but you didn't want your pal to see it.*

Shell shock could affect men of any rank, age or level of experience. Norman Dillon, of the Tank Corps, remembered one relatively senior officer that he came across.

*One day we were going forward in an attack of some sort, I forget where it was, the Somme or somewhere. I came across a major who was sitting on a pile of sandbags and looking away from the front. He looked perfectly alright. I said, 'Are you hurt, sir?' He said, 'No, there's nothing the matter with me,' he said, 'but I can't move. I just simply can't move.' He'd come to the end of his resources and he couldn't walk. He was not frightened, wasn't yelling or trying to run away he was just stuck and he had to be carried away on a stretcher. I suppose he came to and they got him in hospital. It was what used to be called shell shock; in other words, it was battle fatigue.*

It wasn't simply the case that those who were new to warfare would suffer from shell shock – as British NCO Harold Bashford discovered prior to an attack on Oppy Wood in April 1917.

*Our platoon sergeant, my goodness he'd got a string of ribbons there, an old timer. I saw he'd obviously sought courage from the rum bottle because, as far as I remember, he was left behind when we went over. As far as I remember – and that's all I shall say – I don't remember seeing him. It's a fallacy, I believe, that experience gives you more courage. In most cases, it is quite the reverse. Each time you are subjected to dangerous situations, you become more apprehensive. Animals and humans are endowed with fear for their protection.*

The effects of shell shock could be far reaching, and many never recovered. Thomas Olive explained how his wartime experiences manifested themselves back in civilian life.

*I used to have little breakdowns now and then and my wife used to be very frightened. It more or less used to happen at night, when I was in bed. I used to spring up off the bed, you know; it used to frighten her. My daughter, incidentally, is terribly nervous, she's terribly nervous. My wife says it's all my fault. Well I had shell shock, you see. I got blown up, you see, and it affected my whole system. I got a pension for about oh, what was it, about 9 shillings a week.*

Some of those who suffered from shell shock were able to cope with it after the war, and even found that it lessened over time. But others – such as Bertram Steward's friend – were never able to readjust.

*The strain of continual bombardment – continual, not just one bomb and then a quarter of an hour and another one but continual bombardment all the time pounding and pounding away. Now I think that's what people didn't understand, they heard of people having shell shock but what happened was everybody had shell shock who went through that sort of thing. It manifested itself in different ways. One of my friends who went out there, when he came back after the war he was accustomed to shut himself up in his home or in his garden and he wouldn't come out at all and nobody could get him to. He finished up – he was a great athlete, a good boy at school – he finished up in a lunatic asylum and died only within a year or two of the finish of the war.*