

Heartsick PTSD in the Civil War

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Post-traumatic stress disorder is not a new phenomenon exclusive to modern warfare. It has, no doubt, been around since mankind first murdered his fellow beings on a field of battle. No matter how hardened one may have been from living a primeval existence, the mass scale terror, morbidity, and gore had to leave a psychological wound.

In World War I and into World War II, they called it Shell Shock. Before, that, in the Spanish American War, the American Civil War, and the Crimean War and Colonial Wars of Great Britain they called it "Soldier's Heart".

Soldier's Heart was first believed to be a syndrome or set of symptoms similar to heart disease. Those symptoms included fatigue upon exertion, shortness of breath, palpitations, sweating, and chest pain. It was usually treated with a predecessor drug to modern cardiac drugs, with varying levels of success. The condition was named Da Costa's syndrome after surgeon Jacob Mendes Da Costa who investigated and described the disorder in 1871.

But the condition was not recognized as a neurological problem until well into the 20th Century. Due to this lack of understanding, returning soldiers afflicted with this wound of the "heart" were often criticized. Unfortunately, they were looked down upon as shirkers of their duty, traitors, and cowards.

The following account told by one Mr. Labouchere to the *Harrisburg Telegraph* in 1885 illustrates how devastating, and prevalent, it must have been. He is speaking of the elite British regiment, the Coldstream Guards.

The Disease of "Soldier's Heart".

"The Brigade of Guards, who approach most nearly to the ideal wooden soldier, suffer most from heart and lung diseases, and they also follow out most closely the drill regulations," says Mr. Labouchere. "I remember a few years ago watching a particularly smart young sergeant of the Coldstreams drilling a squad of recruits. His own well set up figure, and the strict way in which he made his men hold themselves, must have been a treat to a soldier's eye. Apparently he was the very picture of rude health, being broad-chested and deep-voiced. Feeling interested in him, I conversed with him after the drill and on various subsequent occasions. Judge of my surprise when a short time ago I was addressed by a weak-voiced, broken-down man, who turned out to be my friend the smart sergeant, lately discharged as suffering from 'soldier's heart.'"

In researching GAR celebrations and memorials, one often comes upon the term “soldier’s heart” in the context of veterans honoring their comrades’ bravery, fighting spirit, and compassion. With a “soldier’s heart” elevated to these true and noble heights I find it difficult to believe that the “soldier’s heart” syndrome or disease was always considered cowardly or traitorous by those who served and were there in the trenches with the afflicted men. Consider the closing remarks of this unknown Memorial Day speaker in 1879, as reported by the *Brooklyn (New York) Daily Times*.

“I have thus far spoken of honor to the brave dead, to the memory of our sleeping comrades. Surely it is not alone my privilege, but my right so to do. With you I marched to face the foe, to fight, perhaps to die—so went we forth; thank God, it was not to die; hence, with a soldier’s heart, a soldier’s impulses I speak. While we honor as far as we may our dead, suffer me to suggest that there are duties we owe to the living, to each other; there are obligations the nation owes to us all, but especially to the maimed, the crippled, and the infirm; duties and obligations ...”

By the Spanish-American War of 1898, there were commercial nerve medicines available for purchase by the general public. These agents were touted as tonics that would restore vitality and resistive power essential to health and manly vigor. Obviously, the possibility of unseen wounds to the nervous system was being recognized. The following is a testament printed in the *Pittsburgh Press* in November of 1898. The medicine referred to was distributed by the Dr. Miles Medical Company of Elkhart, Indiana.

The Quality That Wins

“... 1st Lieut. Emil Plonsky, 2nd Wis. Vol. Inf., who was recently sent to his home in Fon du Lac, Wis., on sick leave, sends the following letter: ‘For several years prior to 1896 I suffered greatly from indigestion, nervous headache and inability to sleep at night. I tried all the leading physicians in this section without receiving benefit and then began taking advertised remedies, but with no better results. At last a friend recommended Dr. Miles’ Nervine and I began with that. To my surprise and delight I was able to sleep soundly the first night, and from that time on my condition improved steadily. The headaches disappeared, my appetite returned, I was no longer nervous and irritable, and I could get through with a big day’s work without feeling fagged out and exhausted as I used to. After I went to the front last spring with my regiment I was attacked with typhoid fever, and I believe it would surely have gotten the best of me but for the strength I obtained from Nervine. I am taking it again now and also Dr. Miles’ Restorative Tonic and soon expect to join my regiment.’”

The article goes on to state that “soldiers are not the only ones who need clear heads, steady nerves and strong bodies. In the great battles of life the (consequences) are none the less deadly. Every day brings its fierce unceasing strife; every night leaves its multitudes of dead and dying.” Thus,

the readership was urged to visit their authorized druggist and obtain the product to settle their own nerves.

One of the most compelling accounts that I read concerning an ex-soldier suffering from soldier's heart is taken from an historical fiction novel. Before you balk, understand that a good novelist does not conjure things out of thin air. In historical fiction much research is conducted, and the following scene is probably based on an actual soldier somewhere and the village in which he resided.

From **An Extravagant Death** by Charles Finch

"(Stevens) wore white socks up to his knees in the very old colonial American fashion, as Lenox had noticed some men still did here, and held a tray of coffee cups on one arm.

'Coffee,' he said, glancing around and nodding courteously but briefly.

'Thank you, Stevens.'

He set down the tray, which had small posts of cream and sugar on it, and then pulled some papers from a pocket. 'Crime report and afternoon newspapers.'

'Very good. Set them there.' Stevens withdrew, and when he was gone, Welling said, confidentially, 'Took the war hard, Stevens. He was only sixteen when he went in. Soldier's heart. The town found him a place—a right hero he was in those battles, so they said. Awful things they saw. We saw.'

'You served, Mr. Welling?' said Lenox.

"That I did, sir.'

Lenox glanced after Stevens, striding away across the broad room. He knew the term, at least by report. There were numerous veterans of the civil war here, it was said, who had a strange lingering emotional aftereffect, what medical men referred to as *soldier's heart*. Apparently it meant nightmares, long periods of diffidence, and even violence on occasion; mingled with the strongest recollections of the war at random, even inappropriate moments."

We can only surmise that not all soldiers inflicted with unseen battle wounds of the mind were shunned and considered cowardly in the years immediately following the Civil War. For every report of that being so, there were others who probably knew all too well that the battlefield could damage one mentally and emotionally and were grateful they survived that infirmity. That's always the way it has been with controversial subjects. There are two sides to every story.

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