

When 'The Boys' Came Home, The War Came With Them

I was a boy in the 1950s, forty long years after November 11, 1918, Armistice Day, when the unimaginable carnage of the First World War finally ended. As a kid, I knew very little about my great uncle, who, by way of a grenade thrown 100 years ago next month, met his death in some battlefield gully in France. What I knew is that he'd been killed in the Great War, and that my parents had better attend Decoration Day rallies in the cemetery south of town. If they didn't, my Grandma, a woman with a jolly sense of humor, would go on a tear of silence because that doughboy who didn't return was her only sibling.

His image in my mind was indistinct. When I was ten, all I knew of "the war to end all wars" was an old man who walked up the street toward town to pick up his mail. When he did, he jerked, shook madly. I don't know that I ever saw him fall, but his impossible gait made him memorable and scary. I still see him.

My father, who'd been to war in Japan, explained that old man's erratic walk as "shell shock," a phrase that handily delivers its own definition. My father told me the man was in the First World War, on some battlefield somewhere, in some trench maybe, where he came too close to artillery shells, to hundreds of them maybe, so many there got to be no more room in his memory.

That scared me. So did the man.

Shell shock is a catch-all term for a variety of physical maladies--loss of hearing, loss of sight, loss of coordination--effects especially evident, long ago, in World War I vets. Experts consider it a form of PTSD; but such lingering physical handicaps--the man I saw for too many boyhood years stumbling up the sidewalk had left the war behind a half-century before. He

and others like him were left behind uniquely it seems by what happened in those trenches of death.

In England, early in the war military officials were wary of the term "shell shock." Some soldiers, after all, seemed incapable of returning to the front even though they showed no scars, no bloody war wounds. Before the numbers grew to be significant, "shell shock" seemed an excuse for sheer cowardice.

It took little more than a year for the Brits to see many thousand such emotional wounds. To believe "the boys" were posing became not only callous, but impossible.

The veterans themselves often referred to the cause as "windage," a peculiar emotional wound created by the physical concussion of enemy shells that showed in effects totally unrelated to flesh wounds, a phenomenon they thought understandable from the way an explosive kills fish in a pond.

Last weekend, I listened to man, dressed like a doughboy, who stood behind tables he'd set up in the hospital barracks at historic Ft. Snelling, in front of a range of devices U. S. medical units have used from the Civil War to Afghanistan.

What was there on the table was a striking: a gas mask from the trenches of France in 1917, alongside skeins of pink and yellow yarn, an odd juxtaposition as memorable as the lion lying down with the lamb. Brightly colored yarn and a gas mask.

"Shell shock," that docent said, could be controlled sometimes by finding means by which a vet could "forget" what he'd suffered, kept busy with something to keep his hands moving and mind—and heart—engaged. If doctors could divert a soldier's absorbed attention from whatever battlefield

trauma wouldn't stop looping in his mind, there was hope, the possibility of healing, of self-control.

Knitting, that man said, was found to be especially curative. Knitting.

A striking image, don't you think?--a room full of shaky battle veterans like my uncle, men who'd been in the thick of war, a circle of heroes sitting around on wicker chairs or rockers, in silence, a skein of yarn in each of their laps, knitting needles twirling in their fingers. Therapy. Getting healed.

The lion lies down with the lamb.