Did Civil War Soldiers Have PTSD?

One hundred and fifty years later, historians are discovering some of the earliest known cases of post-traumatic stress disorder

The wounded soldiers above were photographed at a hospital in Fredericksburg, Virginia, between 1861 and 1865. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs division)

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Gallagher and others also warn against viewing 1860s Americans through too contemporary a lens. As a rule, Civil War soldiers were more religious than Americans today, more imbued with notions of honor and glory, and less inclined to share their pain or seek help for it. They returned to a society without a Veterans Administration or G.I. Bill or modern pharmacology. These and many other factors "make it very hard to apply 21st-century diagnostics to 19th-century data," says Stephen Goldman, a neuropsychiatrist who has treated veterans and is writing a book about the impact of war on soldiers in the Civil War and other conflicts.

Even so, there are striking instances of Civil War soldiers afflicted in ways that appear similar to the experience of veterans today. PTSD didn't enter the medical lexicon until 1980, but its symptoms—including flashbacks, panic attacks, insomnia and suicidal thoughts—turn up frequently among Civil War soldiers, particularly those who entered asylums. In *Shook Over Hell*, historian Eric Dean examined the records of 291 Civil War veterans admitted to the Indiana Hospital for the Insane and found cases like Elijah Boswell, who "Sobbed & cried & imagined that some one was going to kill him," screaming "the rebels was after him."

Others were brought to the asylum because they barricaded themselves in rooms, awake all night with weapons at the ready. A veteran who narrowly survived an artillery barrage would shout at his wife, "Don't you hear them bombarding?" Another, shot in the side during the war, was described upon admission as sleepless, suicidal and convinced "he is bleeding to death from imaginary wounds."

Asylum records also give painful glimpses of families struggling to understand and help shattered loved ones. Patient files from the Government Hospital for the Insane in Washington, now known as St. Elizabeths, are filled with letters to the superintendent, like this one from a shopkeeper in Pennsylvania. "If brother is in any way conscious of passing events, I should like him to know that I have his oldest son Jimmy with me in the store, that he is a good boy and smart." A Massachusetts woman wrote of her father, "If he does know anything at times please tell him his daughter has written to you about him and also give him my love."

The brother of John Hildt, the Michigan soldier who lost his arm and sanity after the Seven Days Battle, wrote a letter in their native German, in hopes "he will recognize any thing I say to him. He is John Hildt Corporal Co K 1st Michigan Vol." Hildt's family also sought a pension for both his physical and mental disability. The latter claim was denied, the pension office wrote, due to "lack of proof" that Hildt became insane due to his wartime service and wounding.

Doctors were more sympathetic but unable to do much for the veterans in their care. Treatment consisted mainly of "moral therapy," a regime of rest and light labor in the hospital gardens, which perched atop what was once a peaceful and bucolic hilltop in Anacostia. Doctors also administered opiates, stimulants and "tonics," such as a punch made of milk, eggs, sugar and whiskey. All this may have provided temporary relief to patients. But most Civil War veterans who entered the asylum never left it.

One file includes a photograph of the patient, in old age, still wearing his uniform four decades after being admitted at the end of the Civil War with "Acute Suicidal Melancholia." Often, the last item in a patient's file is a telegram like the one sent to a Massachusetts woman in 1900. "Your husband died this afternoon. Shall we bury here? Answer?"

Hundreds of Civil War soldiers are among those buried at St. Elizabeths, in two cemeteries that were little visited and became overgrown in the course of the 20th century. Now, this too has changed as families rediscover long-forgotten forebears and come to visit their graves.

"A lot of the old stigma is gone," says Jogues Prandoni, a volunteer at St. Elizabeths who helps families research their forebears and locate graves. "People hear about troubled veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan and want to know about and honor ancestors who may have suffered in the same way."

Among the many genealogists he's guided is Marti Bourjaily, a Coloradan whose family tree includes an lumberman from Maine and young volunteer in an infantry regiment that fought at Antietam, Gettysburg and other major battles. Edward Leard was wounded in the eye, deserted several times and suffered a mental collapse after returning to Maine at war's end. Sent first to a state hospital, he was transferred to St. Elizabeths and died there at the age of 54 with $18 to his name.

The surviving records don't reveal much about Leard's affliction. But Bourjaily wonders if he was like her own father, who stepped on a land mine at the Battle of the Bulge, watched a friend die while trying to save him and was "pumped up on morphine" before returning home, where he drank heavily and "ranted" about his wartime experience throughout her childhood.

"They didn't have phrases like 'post-traumatic stress disorder' in the Civil War, they just thought these shattered guys were sissies, the sort that George Patton would have slapped across the face," she says. "Soldiers come back different people, that was true with my dad and I'm sure it was with Edward Leard. I want to reach out to this man and tell him how sorry I am that he had to go through hell."

Gail Palmer, a retired newspaper reporter in Florida, has also come to view the Civil War and her own family through fresh eyes. She took up genealogy while caring for her Alzheimer's-afflicted mother—"I decided to join her back where she was, in the past"—and anticipated researching the many prominent people she'd been told about, dating back to the Revolution. "No one ever mentioned Oliver Perry Chappell," she says.

An infantry captain from New York, Chappell fought in several battles before being wounded and captured at Chancellorsville and sent to a Confederate prison. Upon his release, he wandered and struggled, changing jobs and spouses and becoming indigent before entering the Government Hospital for the Insane, where he died in 1885. Palmer learned of his fate only after finding an application for a soldier's tombstone in his name, which led her to the asylum.

"I was stunned," she says. "All I'd heard about were my wealthy and successful ancestors who belonged to yacht clubs and the DAR and appeared in the society pages."

This lineage includes three other great-grandfathers who served in the Union Army. Palmer says all of them appear to have settled down and prospered, and her research has led her to suspect that Oliver Chappell's instability predated the Civil War. "I'm not real confident how together he was in the first place, but how together are any of us?" she wonders. "We might skate through life if nothing terrible happens, but we fall apart if it does."

Whatever Chappell's mental state, Palmer is proud to welcome him back to the family. She's taken what she calls a "pilgrimage" to St. Elizabeths and the National Archives to learn more about her great-grandfather and has posted her research on Ancestry.com.

"Oliver's the most interesting ancestor I've got," she says. "Maybe, finally, we're far enough away from the Civil War to tell the painful stories that families like mine covered up."

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About Tony Horwitz

Tony Horwitz was a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who worked as a foreign correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal* and wrote for the *New Yorker*. He is the author of , and the digital best seller . His most recent work, , was released in May 2019. Tony Horwitz died in May 2019 at the age of 60.

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