

NATIONAL WINNER
WOMEN'S HISTORY



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WOMEN IN WWI

The Experience of Shell Shock in WWI Nurses

Individual Research Essay

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Word Count Without Descriptor & Bibliography: 1300 Words

Total Word Count: 2529 Words

This essay explores the stigmatisation, under-awareness and under-treatment of nurses suffering from shell shock (PTSD) in WWI. It covers the working conditions of nurses serving overseas, the trauma they received as a result of their environment and their work, and the lack of treatment and awareness for women's shell-shock.

*“Now must we go again to our world
Full of grey ghosts and voices of men dying,
And in the rain the soundings of last posts,
And Lovers’ crying;
Back to the old, back to the empty world.”*
-Nurse Wedderburn Cannan¹

Over 2000 Australian nurses, 59% of whom were under 30,² served overseas during World War One (WWI). Most of these nurses served in hospital ships, as ambulance drivers, in trenches, and in clearing stations on the Western Front, where they were exposed to shelling, gas attacks and other atrocities similar to those that the soldiers faced. This was in addition to seeing horrific injuries and deaths in soldiers and fellow nurses - whether they be strangers, friends or family. However, nurses, usually female, were, and still are, rarely thought of in relation to shell-shock (now known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD)³ in historical literature, despite being in the same conditions as male soldiers. Sister Alice Kitchin wrote of her time nursing, “It is all too dreadful and every day we hear of someone we knew being killed or wounded.”⁴

The vast majority of nurses serving overseas worked in horrendous conditions. Paul. E Stepanky wrote, “What makes the nurses of World War I gallant is that so many of them were able to bracket their encroaching horror - with its undercurrents of anger, depression and numbing - and simply function as nurses in a nurse’s hell.” A ‘nurse’s hell’ was created from the constant shelling and attacks, and the severely lacking conditions in the trenches that made sterilizing anything - let alone wounds - borderline impossible. This all too often lead to life-threatening infections that could’ve been easily avoidable in a hospital environment. Most nurses lacked vital nursing supplies, even down to rudimentary painkillers. Sister Claire Trestrail writes about the wounds she saw nursing, “No words can describe the awfulness of the wounds. Bullets are nothing. It is the shrapnel that tears through the flesh and cuts off limbs.”⁵ Russian nurses were known to fill wounds with salt and iodide to stop infection. Some nurses, particularly American, were trained in psychiatric work to help soldiers suffering from shell shock (now known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD), but were rarely considered themselves.⁶ Many nurses did not get rotated out⁷- unlike most soldiers who were able to switch in and out of the front lines and into

¹ Cannan, M. W. (1976). Grey ghosts and voices. n.p.: Roundwood Press.

² DVA (Department of Veterans' Affairs) (2020), Roles of Australian women in World War I, DVA Anzac Portal, accessed 27 July 2020, <http://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/ww1/personnel/australian-women>

³ Close, J. (n.d.). Vera Brittain and the Shell-Shocked Women of World War One. Retrieved from <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofBritain/Vera-Brittain/>

⁴ Australian War Memorial. (2013). Devotion: Stories of Australia’s Wartime Nurses. Retrieved from <https://www.awm.gov.au/sites/default/files/Devotion.pdf>

⁵ Australian War Memorial. (n.d.). Great war nurses. Retrieved from <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/nurses/ww1>

⁶ Unknown Author. (2017). Nursing and medicine during world war i. Retrieved from <https://ceufast.com/blog/nursing-and-medicine-during-world-war-i>

⁷ Australian War Memorial. (2013). Devotion: Stories of Australia’s Wartime Nurses. Retrieved from <https://www.awm.gov.au/sites/default/files/Devotion.pdf>

more minor positions 'away from the action'.⁸ Those who were able to be rotated out got the rare experience of what most WWI nurses signed up to do: travel. Matron Grace Wilson describes her travels in Egypt, "[we] rode camels across the desert to Sahhar; watched the moon rise in front of the Sphinx, [and] had our fortunes told in the sand". In 1916 some nurses received officer status and badges but were only paid about half of what their male counterparts received.⁹

Many nurses suffered great psychological trauma as a result of their work. If nurses couldn't bear the trauma of war, they were sent home and in most cases received little to no psychological help, as the battlefield was 'no place for women', leading to the idea that the women had bought it on themselves by signing up for the war.¹⁰ In *Testament of Youth*, nurse Vera Brittain wrote that she had suffered hallucinations, delusions, nightmares, and insomnia,¹¹ all very common symptoms of shell-shock (PTSD). Men's mental health and stability was placed above all else, as they needed to return to the battlefield as quickly as possible, meaning 87 percent of British troops returned to front line service within a month, despite many of them not being mentally sound enough to continue their daily lives, let alone combat.¹² This lack of consideration for women's, and particularly nurses' mental health led Brittain to attribute her symptoms to 'over fatigue and excessive strain'. The term 'civilian war neuroses' was coined to differ soldier's shell-shock (PTSD) from non-fighting roles, but many modern historians argue that it was essentially a diagnosis to differ men's suffering from anyone else's. Brittain wrote, "No-one, least of all myself, realised how near I had drifted to the borderland of craziness."¹³ Some modern historians argue that men controlled, albeit usually unknowingly, what was and wasn't suffering. This was due to the fact that women's shell-shock was blamed more on their emotions than their lived experiences, with women's ailments being thought to be caused by women naturally being more emotional and leaning more easily towards delirium.¹⁴

Despite this clear evidence of women in WWI suffering from shell-shock, almost no nurses received help for their trauma. Their 'civilian war neuroses' (PTSD) was rarely treated. Women were often told that they couldn't mentally handle the war and were given no further treatment, simply being sent home and having their symptoms blamed on their 'natural tendency towards

⁸ Conti, L. Easton, M. Carrodus, G. Smith, R. Wilson, A. (2019) Oxford Big Ideas Humanities and Social Sciences. South Melbourne, Victoria. Oxford University Press.

⁹ Australian War Memorial. (2013). Devotion: Stories of Australia's Wartime Nurses. Retrieved from <https://www.awm.gov.au/sites/default/files/Devotion.pdf>

¹⁰ Groch-Begley, H. (2014). The forgotten female shell-shock victims of world war i. The Atlantic. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/09/world-war-ones-forgotten-female-shell-shock-victims/378995/>

¹¹ Close, J. (n.d.). Vera Brittain and the Shell-Shocked Women of World War One. Retrieved from <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofBritain/Vera-Brittain/>

¹² Groch-Begley, H. (2014). The forgotten female shell-shock victims of world war i. The Atlantic. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/09/world-war-ones-forgotten-female-shell-shock-victims/378995/>

¹³ Close, J. (n.d.). Vera Brittain and the Shell-Shocked Women of World War One. Retrieved from <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofBritain/Vera-Brittain/>

¹⁴ Keown, B. (2018). "everything seems wrong:" the postwar struggles of one female veteran of the first world war. Nursing Clio. Retrieved from <https://nursingclio.org/2018/11/29/everything-seems-wrong-the-postwar-struggles-of-one-female-veteran-of-the-first-world-war/>

hysteria’¹⁵. While nurses’ service and work was celebrated in war-affected countries, it was almost purely ceremonial. They were rarely given compensation for their work, as nurses couldn’t apply for a disability pension until 1920, and it was all too often not enough to live on.¹⁶ Vera Brittain wrote about the lack of treatment for her trauma in *Testament of Youth*: “Had I seen an intelligent doctor immediately after the war, I might have been spared the exhausting battle against nervous breakdown which waged for eighteen months.”¹⁷ Many doctors, however, referred to shell shocked soldiers as ‘mental cases’ or ‘dotty’ in their notes.¹⁸ Nurse Pat Beauchamp wrote in her book *Fanny Went To War*: “My troubles, I am sorry to say, began from [the end of the war] onwards. England seemed unprepared for anything so unorthodox as myself, and the general impression borne on me was that I was a complete nuisance. There was no recognised hospital for ‘the likes of us’ to go to...”¹⁹ This was despite the fact that Beauchamp was decorated along with other members of F.A.N.Y, a group of female ambulance drivers.²⁰ Beauchamp wrote about her trauma after seeing some soldiers ‘blown to pieces’ by a bomb: “[I] shall never forget, and, in fact, cannot describe... I leave the details to your imagination, but it gave me a sudden shock to realize that a few minutes earlier those remains had been living men walking along the road laughing and talking.”²¹ The internationally famed ‘Anzac Legend’ of stoicism and bravery in the face of horrors would’ve led many soldiers, particularly Australian, to not speak up about their own struggles with trauma, especially as ‘shell-shock’ was still an incredibly stigmatized illness, even among male soldiers.²² Around 80,000 cases of ‘shell-shock’ were reported by the British Army,²³ 0.9% of the total British soldiers sent to WWI (8,904,467)²⁴, despite an estimated 30% of American Vietnam War veterans having experienced PTSD in their lifetime²⁵ showcasing undertreatment and underreporting, even among male soldiers. Elaine Showalter wrote in her

¹⁵ Groch-Begley, H. (2014). The forgotten female shell-shock victims of world war i. The Atlantic. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/09/world-war-ones-forgotten-female-shell-shock-victims/378995/>

¹⁶ Keown, B. (2018). “everything seems wrong:” the postwar struggles of one female veteran of the first world war. Nursing Clio. Retrieved from <https://nursingclio.org/2018/11/29/everything-seems-wrong-the-postwar-struggles-of-one-female-veteran-of-the-first-world-war/>

¹⁷ Close, J. (n.d.). Vera Brittain and the Shell-Shocked Women of World War One. Retrieved from <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofBritain/Vera-Brittain/>

¹⁸ Reid, F. (2019). War psychiatry and shell shock | international encyclopedia of the first world war (ww1). Retrieved from https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/war_psychiatry_and_shell_shock

¹⁹ Beauchamp, P. (2000). *Fanny goes to war*. n.p.: Creative Media Partners

²⁰ First Aid Nursing Yeomanry. (n.d.). Wwi medals | wwi | fany (prvc) - princess royal's volunteer corps. Retrieved from <https://www.fany.org.uk/medals>

²¹ Allitt, M. (2018). “a male department of warfare.” female ambulance drivers in the first world war. Nursing Clio. Retrieved from <https://nursingclio.org/2018/11/20/a-male-department-of-warfare-female-ambulance-drivers-in-the-first-world-war/>

²² Conti, L. Easton, M. Carrodus, G. Smith, R, Wilson, A. (2019) Oxford Big Ideas Humanities and Social Sciences. South Melbourne, Victoria. Oxford University Press.

²³ Groch-Begley, H. (2014). The forgotten female shell-shock victims of world war i. The Atlantic. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/09/world-war-ones-forgotten-female-shell-shock-victims/378995/>

²⁴ Royde-Smith, J.G, & Showalter, D.E. (2020). World War I. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-I/Killed-wounded-and-missing>

²⁵ National Center for PTSD. (2018). How Common is PTSD in Veterans? Retrieved from https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/common/common_veterans.asp

book *The Female Malady* “If the essence of manliness was not to complain, then shell-shock was the body language of masculine complaint.” Showalter also found that many medical professionals dismissed male shell-shocked soldiers, blaming their afflictions on ‘effeminacy and homosexuality’.²⁶

The experience of shell-shock/civilian war neuroses (PTSD) in nurses serving overseas during WWI is still rarely considered in historical literature and was undertreated, underreported, and under-diagnosed. It is certainly worth considering how many more medical advances might’ve been made with psychologically sound nurses working after the war, had the major issue of stigmatisation, under-treatment, and the belief that shell-shock was a purely male issue been better handled. With the aid of modern historians and the slowly growing research into nurse trauma/PTSD in WWI and in other wars, current nurses serving in war zones may begin to receive more recognition and better psychological help.

Where there was life, there was hope, and we won.
-Sister May Tilton²⁷

²⁶ Showalter, E. (1987). *The female malady*. n.p.: Viking Press.

²⁷ Australian War Memorial. (n.d.). Great war nurses. Retrieved from <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/nurses/ww1>

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Beauchamp, P. (2000). *Fanny goes to war*. n.p.: Creative Media Partners

A primary source of a female ambulance driver and the experiences she had in her work and the trauma she suffered from them., as well as her thoughts on the care, or opportunities for psychological care she received. It is an autobiographical account of her experiences in the war, but may be biased towards the triple entente alliance.

Cannan, M. W. (1976). *Grey ghosts and voices*. n.p.: Roundwood Press.

This source gave me a poem about the experience of WWI nurses going back to society of the war. The poet was a nurse in WWI. The book was an autobiographical book completed in Cannan's last few years of life, but was published 3 years after her death.

Secondary Sources

Allitt, M. (2018). "a male department of warfare:" female ambulance drivers in the first world war. *Nursing Clio*. Retrieved from <https://nursingclio.org/2018/11/20/a-male-department-of-warfare-female-ambulance-drivers-in-the-first-world-war/>

This article gave me background information on Pat Beauchamp's book Fanny goes to War which is referenced in this essay and the work that F.A.N.Y did in WWI. It was also crucial in finding information about social norms in the WWI era. It may contain bias to a feminist agenda. The author is an associate lecturer at the University of York and has completed a PhD relating to WWI medicine among other things.

Australian War Memorial. (2013). *Devotion: Stories of Australia's Wartime Nurses*. Retrieved from <https://www.awm.gov.au/sites/default/files/Devotion.pdf>

This source gave me many primary sources from diaries and letters of Australian nurses and provides some basic facts for context. It gave me information on the nurse's working conditions and holidays and their motives for going to the war. I do not see any reason for this to be biased.

Australian War Memorial. (n.d.). *Great war nurses*. Retrieved from <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/nurses/ww1>

This source gave me primary sources, particularly quotes relating to wounds of soldiers and the thoughts of the nurses treating them. I do not see any reason for bias in this source due to it being a collection of primary sources.

Close, J. (n.d.). Vera Brittain and the Shell-Shocked Women of World War One. Retrieved from <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofBritain/Vera-Brittain/>

This source gave me information on the social norms of the WWI era and the social commentary of shell shock of the time, versus looking back on the prejudice against women's suffering. The author is a freelance writer in history. The commentary on the sources may be biased towards a feminist agenda.

Conti, L. Easton, M. Carrodus, G. Smith, R. Wilson, A. (2019) Oxford Big Ideas Humanities and Social Sciences. South Melbourne, Victoria. Oxford University Press.

This source gave me information on how nurses worked and their rotations and shifts. It is a textbook and is approved for the Western Australian curriculum.

DVA (Department of Veterans' Affairs) (2020), Roles of Australian women in World War I, DVA Anzac Portal, accessed 27 July 2020, <http://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/ww1/personnel/australian-women>

This source gave me information on the ages of the over 2000 Australian nurses who served overseas in WWI. I see no reason for why this would be biased. It seems to be reliable as it is information from the Department of Veteran's affairs.

First Aid Nursing Yeomanry. (n.d.). Wwi medals | WWI | fany (prvc) - princess royal's volunteer corps. Retrieved from <https://www.fany.org.uk/medals>

This source gave me information about Pat Beauchamp's medals, a female ambulance driver referenced in this essay. It comes directly from a website from the organisation that Beauchamp served in. I see no bias in this article.

Groch-Begley, H. (2014). The forgotten female shell-shock victims of world war i. The Atlantic. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/09/world-war-ones-forgotten-female-shell-shock-victims/378995/>

This source gave me information on the social stigma and under-recognition of women's shell-shock in the WWI era. It gave me information on the treatment of women with shell-shock. The author has a B.A in history for Vassar College and is pursuing a PhD in Modern History and Women and Gender History. It may be biased towards a feminist agenda.

Keown, B. (2018). "everything seems wrong:" the postwar struggles of one female veteran of the first world war. Nursing Clio. Retrieved from <https://nursingclio.org/2018/11/29/everything-seems-wrong-the-postwar-struggles-of-one-female-veteran-of-the-first-world-war/>

This source gave me information on why medical professionals and society in the WWI era thought women had shell-shock and the treatment and compensation women got for their service as nurses. The author is a lecturer at the University of Pittsburgh in Gender, Sexuality and Women's studies. It may be biased towards a feminist agenda.

National Center for PTSD. (2018). How Common is PTSD in Veterans? Retrieved from https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/common/common_veterans.asp

This source gave me basic information on the percentage of American Vietnam War soldiers who developed PTSD after their service. It is from America's Department of Veterans Affairs and provides facts while not having commentary on these facts, so I see no reason for why there might be bias.

Reid, F. (2019). War psychiatry and shell shock | international encyclopedia of the first world war (ww1). Retrieved from https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/war_psychiatry_and_shell_shock

This source gave me the thoughts of doctors on soldiers suffering from shell shock and the stigmatisation of people who were being treated for shell shock. It is an encyclopaedia and seems to be reliable. The author holds a PhD from the University of the West of England and written many articles about shell shock.

Royde-Smith, J.G, & Showalter, D.E. (2020). World War I. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-I/Killed-wounded-and-missing>

This source gave me basic information on casualties in WWI, particularly on the British side. Both authors are experienced WWI writers and as this is an encyclopaedia and is not providing commentary on these facts, so I do not see any reason for why this might contain bias.

Showalter, E. (1987). The female malady. n.p.: Viking Press.

This source gave me information on the prejudiced misconceptions from medical professionals about the causes of shell-shock and provided an interesting quote on how shell-shock and its symptoms were viewed in general society. The author is an American literary critic and has taught at many American universities. It may be biased towards a feminist agenda.

Unknown Author. (2017). Nursing and medicine during world war i. Retrieved from <https://ceufast.com/blog/nursing-and-medicine-during-world-war-i>

This source gave me information on the working conditions of nurses and the difficulties of completing medical tasks in a trench environment. The source is a blog and does not say its Author. The website seems to be an educational website for nurses and is accredited by the American Nurses Credentialing Center's Commission on Accreditation (ANCC).