

TIME TRAVELLER'S DIARY: A New Type of Illness: Shell-Shock and the Great War

By Erika Mazanik

Curator, Aurora Historical Society

World War One introduced a new type of warfare, with men left in the trenches, constant shelling, shooting, and explosions, this was the first time that soldiers had been exposed to such terrors for an extended period of time. This led to a new type of injury that had not been anticipated: Shell-shock.

Shell-shock was identified as a problem early on in the war, as early as 1915 officers were instructed to look out for it; however, it was not fully understood what it actually was. It was originally thought to be a physical injury, caused by the rattling of the brain in the skull during heavy fire, hence the term 'shell-shock'.

As the war went on, more and more reports of shell-shock were being reported, even by men who had not actually been near a specific shell attack. These men were considered to be 'weak' and sent back to the front. There was very little understanding about mental health at the time, and men were needed to fight. Medical officers assessing cases of shell-shock were instructed to label files with an 'S' or a 'W'.

'W' meant that they had been near a shell attack and were considered wounded, and therefore were treated as any other injured soldier. If no shell attack was found, they were labeled with 'S' for shell-shock, and were not entitled to a wound-stripe or pension, however even if they had been near an attack it was very difficult to prove shell-shock.

It is not known how many soldiers from the First World War experienced shell-shock, as reporting was limited, and many did not want to reveal themselves to be 'weak.'

William John Mugford

There was at least one Auroran who was deemed medically unfit and sent home due to shell-shock. William John Mugford was a shoemaker working at Sisman Shoes in Aurora when he enlisted with the 127th Queens York Rangers in December 1915 at age 24. Dr. Hillary deemed him fit for service and he was sent overseas in spring 1916. For the next two straight years he was under heavy shell-fire almost constantly. Over time he became more nervous, jumping at small noises, and was constantly in fear that something was going to happen.

He underwent medical examinations and while his superiors were understanding about his varicose veins, from which he also suffered, they reported that they 'could find no evidence of organic nervous disease... there is no disability from a neurological point of view to prevent him from returning to his former occupation.' They reported that while he was medically unfit to return to service, he did not need treatment. His record was marked with an 'S' and he was discharged in January 1919.