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Trauma From the Trenches

In writing “Combat Trauma in the American Civil War” John Talbott's purpose was to convince the reader that Civil War soldiers experienced what we now call PTSD. Talbott uses many historical sources like diaries, journals, and letters to portray the conditions of war that caused trauma responses and what these responses looked like. These references provide descriptive, anecdotal evidence that survivors of war struggled with PTSD.

Talbott can convey the brutal conditions of the American Civil War by comparing them to that of World War I. This is achieved mainly when the author compares the trenches dug and used during combat in which soldiers lived in close quarters and were unable to escape the battlefield. Later Talbott references how British soldiers were treated for shell shock, the British soldiers cited the feeling of helplessness as being more traumatic than the routine horrors they faced. These Experiences are similar to that of a Civil War infantryman who wrote in his hometown newspaper describing an area of land in which no man dares to pass. Using Shocking imagery to describe the grotesque amount of death and destruction going on around him. The soldier is understandably being negatively affected by the environment around him. Using these references, Talbott can convince the reader that the conditions of both wars were similar enough to illicit the same mental trauma. When describing the conditions of the Civil War trenches, Talbott uses choice words like ‘imprisons’ and ‘escape’ as a reference to the helplessness Union soldiers were quoted as feeling during The Civil War. By drawing on how these conditions affected soldiers’ mental health, Talbott successfully demonstrates that the conditions that led to shell shock in one war should cause shell shock in the other. This comparison is an easy way to guide the reader to conclude that Civil War veterans endured conditions that would lead to PTSD, as seen in WWI veterans.

A great example of PTSD from earlier during The Civil War is an account from historian Stephen Sears’ writings where he talks about the traumatic episode that General George B. McClellan went through during the Peninsula Campaign. During the end of the Seven Day Battles, McClellan had left the field to flee the horrors of what he had just endured. This event was out of character for McClellan, and Stephen notes that the general was physically and mentally drained because of the sheer stress of combat. The example of McClellan fleeing is very effective, as it shows how a seasoned, experienced general would still flee from a tremendously traumatic event. Stating that he fled near the end of an almost weeklong series of battles shows how determined this general was before the horrors of war got to him. McClellan’s fleeing was not a coincidence as he was suffering from mental trauma, something that academic assessments of his leadership often fail to include.

Talbott uses many different resources regarding the civil war and experiences that many of these soldiers faced during this time, comparing them to other soldiers’ experiences from more recent wars. He uses these obvious and direct comparisons to easily and successfully convince the reader that Civil War Soldiers experienced Shell Shock, or as we know it today PTSD. Near the end of the article, almost every other paragraph is an excerpt from newspapers, letters, or other historical means. Leaving it impossible for the reader to take anything away from the article besides the conclusion that PTSD was experienced by many soldiers during and after the Civil War.

I have seen firsthand account of how our modern view of PTSD affects us and, more importantly, how we treat and diagnose individuals with PTSD. My Great Grandfather who had died about 5-6 years ago had severe PTSD after surviving the Holocaust in Poland. Because of our modern understanding and attitude surrounding PTSD, my family knew that sharing these traumatic experiences was deeply hurtful, and keeping these stories private didn’t make him weak or cowardly. The more we know about PTSD and the effects of war on the human mind, the more we can adapt and help those around us who have suffered from extremely traumatic experiences like war.