

LTC Peter A. Wasilewski Scholarship Essay

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During the United States' involvement in World War I, many American soldiers experienced trench warfare, segregation, and shellshock. In trench warfare, there were hundreds of long stretching trenches in Northern France. Men would spend months in these trenches, with the front rarely moving. Segregation between blacks and whites was still ruling over America when the United States began their involvement in 1917. Therefore, the military was also segregated. Shellshock was a battle wound that could not be seen externally, but rather internally. The men that suffered from it during and after the war, experienced hallucinations and a weakened memory.

Trench warfare was a brand new idea to the American soldiers coming into the Great War in 1917. They had never encountered so much rain, and nowhere to escape from the rain. The rain would collect in the trenches where the American soldiers stood, causing disease and deformity, such as trench foot. The military issued boots and socks were not enough to protect from the pools of rain down in the trenches. These trenches stretched for many miles in Northern France, lined one after another for miles. The land that was in between the enemy trenches and the American trenches was called no man's land. Sounds of artillery blasted throughout all hours of the day, making it harder to sleep. "The cold rainy weather and the wounded men were so many they could not be cared for," a statement written by Paul B. Hendrickson, soldier in the trenches of Northern France. There would be piles of dead bodies lining roads and trenches. Between 1917 and 1919, medical technology was far behind the need; if medics could reach the wounded in trenches, there would be too many of them to save. The American soldiers were exposed to the elements, shots being constantly fired, and poor medical services.

Segregation was in full swing during the late 1910's, not only at home, but at war also. African-Americans were put into separate regiments, such as the 367<sup>th</sup> regiment and the 306<sup>th</sup> battalion. These men had to endure prejudice while also fighting the Central Powers. Everything was separated between white and black people because black people were seen as

second class citizens. Undifferentiated from back home, whites and blacks had separate facilities, there were signs that would say “No Negroes Allowed” or that African-Americans could only go to some places after a certain time. The segregation between the troops kept the white and black soldiers from intermingling, or even trying to coexist. Colored troops would serve equally and fight just as hard, but that was not enough to break the cultural norm of segregation. African-American soldiers did not have equal rights or anything to prevent prejudice, only Jim Crow laws that took away more civil rights. However, the 367<sup>th</sup> regiment was determined to prove the “white boys” wrong. They taught the white men that were over them that they should be respected and treated like regular American soldiers. Even with the continuous mistreatment of African-Americans they still continued to serve their country with hopes that they would one day gain the respect that they had been waiting for.

Shellshock was built up stress caused by trauma of World War I. Many American soldiers suffered from it, some were discharged while others were sent to French hospitals. With bomb shells being thrown constantly overhead, the jolts caused many head issues and concussions. Most of the American soldiers with Shellshock could not remember the accident in which they were involved and at most they could remember the sound made before the shell arrived. Shellshock caused hysteria and visions of battle. Many soldiers would relive battles, such as the Second Battle of the Marne and Cantigny, in their dreams or visions. The psychological effects of World War I lasted not only during the war, but also long after. The general nervous system was the most effected, the soldiers’ bodies would have convulsions similar to that of epilepsy. American soldiers who did not end up with shellshock knew someone in their unit that did. With many shells being used every battle, it was not uncommon to see soldiers with the stress caused, shellshock condition.

In conclusion, the experience of American soldiers during World War I was difficult. They encountered rough weather and health care in the trenches, segregation among the black and white soldiers, and the psychological disorder, shellshock. The United States emergence from isolationism in 1917 lead to a huge impact on drafted men from America. Soldiers, drafted or volunteered, were changed for life after participating in the Great War.