

The Lucky Ones

My entire life, I've been told I'm lucky. Lucky to have grown up in a loving household, lucky to have carried a Ross Rifle that didn't jam up in the muddy trenches, and lucky to have survived the War. I guess I am lucky, if lucky means forced to bear the guilt of taking dozens of lives. I am lucky, if lucky means unable to sleep because every time I close my eyes I'm transported back to that battlefield. So yeah, I guess I am lucky.

During my deployment at Vimy, I saw horrors I pray to forget. The problem is, I can't forget. I can't forget the faces of the soldiers I fatally shot. I can't forget the mutilated bodies of my friends lying on the battlefield. I can't forget what I've done. Some days, I find myself unable to feel and in these periods of numbness, I can't feel sorrow, fear, or despair. Other days an influx of these terrible feelings returns and I'm forced to relive my time in Vimy over and over in a vicious, unforgiving cycle.

At the time of the War, I was diagnosed with shell shock. Not even medical experts understood that wounds weren't just physical, nor did they understand how to treat shell shock. They brushed this condition off, perhaps treated by shock therapy or, if you were lucky, the less barbaric treatment of talk and physical therapy. However, these treatments were simply to get soldiers back on the front lines and didn't have a goal of long-term rehabilitation in mind. Men who were emotionally distressed to the point of being unable to walk, speak or function, including me, were deemed cowards or insane. We weren't cowards, nor insane, we were victims.

When I arrived back home, a small part of me believed I was still back in those vile trenches. The War had been over for years, but I was not done fighting. I couldn't sleep. I'd often wake up, teary-eyed, confusing my bedroom for a battlefield and my wife for an enemy soldier. Eventually, I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and began therapy. Talking about my experiences at Vimy helped me immensely on my long road to recovery. Seventy-two years after Canada claimed Vimy Ridge, my battle was finally over. I died a proud Canadian veteran in recovery of PTSD. I was survived by my beautiful wife who stood by my side despite the hardships we've faced. Without her, my lifeline, I probably would've faced a more gruesome end.

My entire life, I've been told I'm lucky. At first, I didn't realize it, but now I do. I am lucky. I am lucky I sought help for my PTSD. I am lucky I had a loving wife who supported my recovery. I am lucky that I didn't have to fight this battle alone. I am one of the lucky ones.

In Canada, approximately 10% of all war-zone veterans experience PTSD. An even smaller fraction of these veterans have a similar, happy ending. Too many veterans have met tragic ends because their PTSD remained undiagnosed or they did not seek treatment. Especially during these unprecedented times, it is important to reach out for help. The COVID-19 pandemic has been hard on everyone, but is notably harder for veterans suffering from PTSD. This pandemic creates more stress and PTSD triggers. Social isolation will make seeking treatment increasingly difficult. Today, it is more crucial than ever to seek help, and ensure others seek help, for PTSD.