



Bearing witness to horror

Narrated by Sian Williams

Video transcript

“Bearing witness to horrifying events can leave a lasting mark... on anyone.

As a BBC journalist, I reported on many moments of great human tragedy. I saw the terrible impact events like the 1989 Hillsborough stadium disaster had and the Pakistani earthquake in 2005 had on the lives of survivors. It made me realise what a long-lasting effect traumatic experiences can have.

Almost 100 years ago fellow journalist, Philip Gibbs, made the same connection after seeing the effect modern warfare had on soldiers on the Western Front during World War One.

He described seeing ‘strong, sturdy men, shaking ague, mouthing like madmen, figures of dreadful terror, speechless and uncontrollable.’

Soldiers first started showing these disturbing symptoms in September 1914, just a month into the war.

Previously fit young men, with no outward sign of injury, were losing their sense of smell, sight and taste. Some could not stop twitching, while others couldn’t speak. Many were plagued by nightmares or relived battlefield experiences again and again when awake.

In 2014 we can recognise the symptoms of conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. But back then so little was understood about mental health that some army generals regarded it as ‘damn nonsense and sheer cowardice.’

But some doctors sent to assess the men disagreed. They found that incessant artillery bombardments, exhaustion and intense moments of terror, could profoundly affect the most hardened soldier.”

[Images courtesy of Getty Images and Mary Evans Picture Library. Footage courtesy of BBC and Pathe]