

‘Stumbling on Civvy Street’: The re-adjustment of white South African war veterans to life in post-war society, 1918-1928

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Abstract

The First World War ended in November 1918. As the ink dried on the last treaty in August 1920, the conflict was officially resolved in legal terms. However, this legal finality did not extend to the lives of the soldiers of the war. Their stories of broken lives, shattered marriages, lost careers and opportunities highlighted the fact that the effect of the war lasted well beyond armistice. During the war, some effort had been made by the Union of South Africa to accommodate ex-servicemen, which led to the founding of the office of the Commissioner for Returned Soldiers, the War Special Pensions Act (No. 29 of 1916),¹ the office of the Military Pensions Commissioner, and the Governor-General’s Fund. Through mutual co-operation between these institutions, a variety of schemes were launched to see to the re-integration of the ‘returned soldier’. Such ventures aimed at making ex-servicemen a productive part of the Union workforce, but did little to assuage ex-soldiers’ other needs and future deprivations. In the early 1920s, the atmosphere of mass pride and gratitude to those who had fought for country and empire began to dissipate and a different battle for ex-servicemen began to unfold. Society began to forget, financial aid was reduced, limbless men battled with ideals of masculinity, and the reality of finding and holding down a job was felt more acutely. The former valiant Springboks were being alienated from different spheres of life in the Union. In comparison with other Empire Dominions, South Africa’s loss of life in wartime was relatively light. Yet, for the great majority of soldiers, to have survived was not to have been left unscathed. Some paid their own price with scarred bodies and shattered minds in the form of wounds, amputations and psychological disorders. For the fallen, the war was over. However, for the surviving ex-servicemen, another war began: that of dealing with readjustment to civilian life. The study on which this article is based considered the extent to which men were able, given their altered bodies and minds because of warfare, to reintegrate into post-war society.

Keywords: First World War, South Africa, ex-servicemen, returned soldiers, Union Defence Force, UDF, shell shock, amputations, Governor-General’s Fund, St. Dunstan’s Hostel for blind soldiers

1. Introduction

After demobilisation, returning soldiers were hailed by cheering crowds. A euphoric festivity of peace celebrations enveloped the world, and in 1919, local committees were appointed to organise these events.² The administrator of the Province of the Cape of Good Hope, NF de Waal, wrote a message to ex-South African servicemen³ congratulating them for doing their duty and the righteousness of it. The pomp and pageantry echoed as he declared, “You [ex-servicemen], our Heroes, have seen eye to eye with us in realising the danger to Humanity, to our Country, to the World; you have manfully donned

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your armour and met the enemy in the gate; you return to us as Conquerors.”⁴ However, this outpouring of mass pride and gratitude to those who had fought for “King and Country” soon began to dissipate as life gradually took on its civilian routine in the early 1920s, and a different battle for ex-servicemen began to unfold. “The battle of life is [was] often far harder than anything the Western Front could throw up.”⁵ Many men were probably unaware of the defined yet covert contract into which enlistment translated: the handing over of one’s body and mind to the state, thus allowing the government to dispose of it as it saw fit both during and after the war.

Today, increased scholarly interest in the health of men and the medical side of war is becoming part of the essential history of 1914–1918. Yet, much of the literature on this global conflict, such as that of Emily Mayhew, still reduces discussion to body counts, casualties, medical personnel and services.⁶ Alternatively, historians – such as Peter Barham, Fiona Reid and Peter Leese – only concentrate on specific war-related illnesses such as shell shock.⁷ Comparatively few sources consider what the effect of war was on men’s bodies and minds and those that do, tend to be centred on feminist studies.⁸

Furthermore, from a South African perspective, there continues to exist a serious lack of accounts regarding the experiences of the First World War, and even more so of life in the inter-war years. As one British scholar has observed, for instance, “We need more diversity in the ‘greater’ war story.”⁹ Similarly, the South African military historian, Ian van der Waag, has noted that the history of campaigns such as those in German South West Africa (GSWA) and in East Africa had often become lost in the far more common story of the Western Front.¹⁰ The more worrying repercussion of this void is that writing on ex-servicemen has been moved even deeper into the shadows of current historiography on this war, since the commemoration of the centenary has fostered an emphasis on writing on those forgotten “sideshows” of the Great War from a South African perspective.¹¹ Literature on South African soldiers and post-war society, particularly after the First World War, is therefore meagre to non-existent. Probably the closest source is that of Neil Roos, which concentrates on veterans of the Second World War.¹² This void in the historical writing contrasts significantly with sources produced on American, British, French, German, New Zealand and Australian ex-servicemen.¹³ In effect, this bypasses the unique South African case, where society was stratified along lines of race, class, religion and language, notwithstanding the fact that this volunteer group of men was far smaller than those of other Dominion armies. Thus, returned soldiers were not only easily forgotten in the Union in the 1920s, but also today, by historians. It is therefore difficult to apply theoretical tools developed in literature on other cases to the Union, and thus a unique framework was necessary to analyse this national situation. The lack of secondary sources led to this article largely consisting of primary sources pieced together as best as possible to provide a continuous and complete narrative of ex-servicemen and post-war society.

In the light of these shortcomings in the literature, it is the aim of this article to try and add to writings on the First World War where gaps exist and where knowledge and understanding are either absent or, at best, partial. As a result, the study on which this article reports, considered and explored the state of ex-servicemen’s bodies and minds after they had completed their wartime service beyond the domestic borders of the Union. This exploration included a comparative analysis, since it considered the effect of war on fighting South African soldiers in three markedly different campaigns. The first troops arrived in GSWA in 1914, and the majority remained until the end of hostilities in 1915. This was followed by the posting of two expeditionary forces to Europe and East Africa in that year. The different geographical locations of these three campaigns meant exposure to varying climates, environments, food, clothing, types of warfare and contracting different diseases and wounds. All of these factors had distinctive bodily and mental effects. Those who volunteered for service were drawn

from all geographical locations, economic and social classes. The study considered only the combatant, or white, South African soldiers of these three campaigns. Incorporation of the experiences of auxiliary troops, which included black, coloured and Indian men, would have been a complex and also a lengthy undertaking, since their army circumstances were markedly different, and even their treatment when suffering from disease or wounds was in a segregated sphere, away from white troops.¹⁴

Between 1916 and 1918, the majority of Afrikaans speakers fought in the East African campaign, whilst the forces of Europe were primarily drawn from the English ranks of the Union. These men were volunteers drawn from civil society; yet, they assumed a new identity after training and fighting in three different campaigns. In the post-war period, men strove to reclaim their previous identities as members of the general population. However, in many respects, as this article will show, men's bodies and minds assumed a new identity, that of 'ex-servicemen,' 'returned soldier,' 'ex-combatant,' or even 'victim' and not that of mere civilians as they were in pre-war society, as Hynes, Cohen, and Koven argue.¹⁵

To this end, it would be necessary to redefine firstly who these men were, for many of their bodies were altered. Many were diseased, suffering from shell shock, being scarred and physically disabled. Various individuals and institutions aimed to restore men's bodies to their former state.¹⁶ In order to determine whether ex-servicemen were able to readjust to civil life, various factors need to be considered, namely financial compensation in the form of pensions and compensation awarded by the Governor-General's Fund, the value of vocational and employment schemes and socio-economic factors. This will include factors such as the 1922 Rand Strike as a practical example, family life, remembrance, and veterans' associations, such as the Memorable Order of Tin Hats (MOTH).

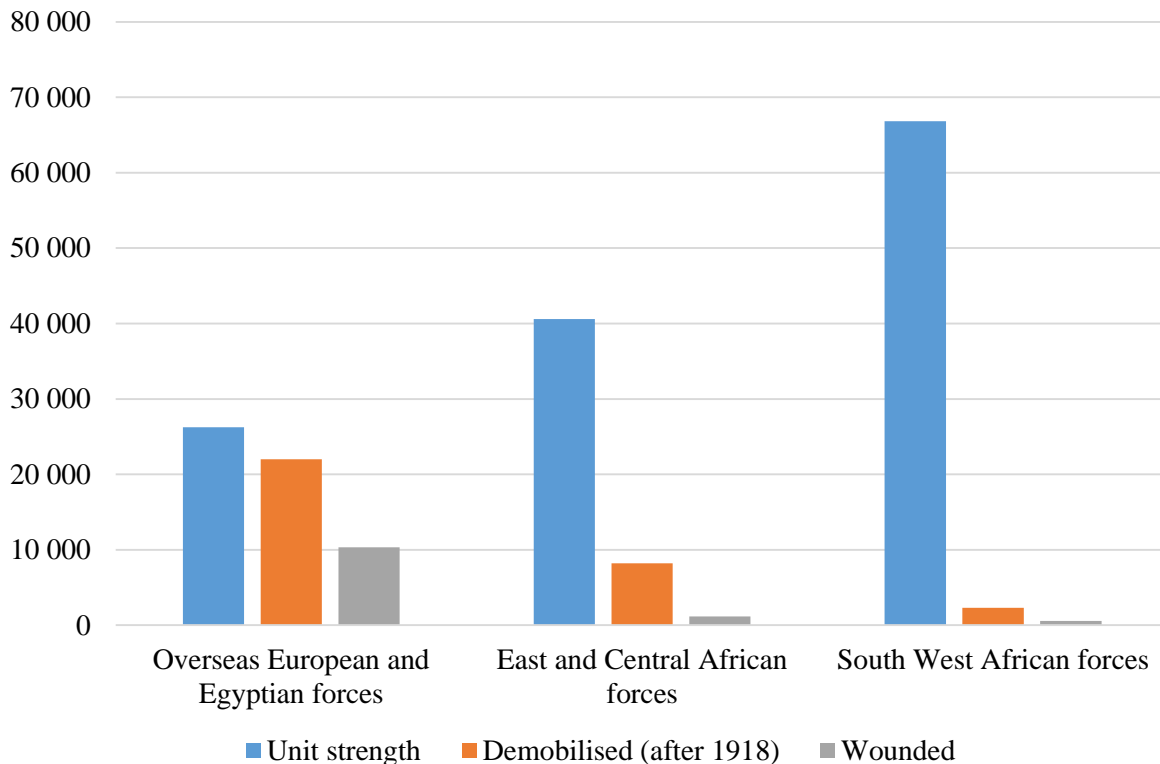
2. Demobilisation 1914–1919

The decision for South Africa to participate in what was then referred to as the 'European War' and later the 'Great War', was not an easy decision. The result of the difficult interplay between Whitehall and Pretoria was the agreement made by the Botha government to secure limited strategic objectives in bordering GSWA from 1914 to 1915.¹⁷ On 21 September 1914, Botha announced to the press that only volunteers would be recruited for German South West Africa.¹⁸ Following the suppression of an armed Afrikaner insurrection in April 1915, another British appeal was made for South African forces to move further afield, to join campaigns in both Europe and in German East Africa.¹⁹ By early 1915, the Union government realised that the GSWA campaign was drawing to a close, which would saddle the state with a large number of unemployed men. Pretoria was, therefore, rather content "to have [these men] at the front" rather than on their hands.²⁰ Thus, in July 1915, the decision was taken to raise an overseas expeditionary force for Europe, and in November 1915, to send another such force to East Africa. With this objective, the recruitment drive was launched on 21 July 1915, as the victorious Springboks were demobilised after the GSWA campaign, and continued until armistice in 1918.²¹

To identify these 'average' ex-serviceman is a near impossible task. Many ex-servicemen united under a common banner, such as the MOTHs, the British Commonwealth Ex-services League South Africa (BESL) and The Comrades of the Great War. Even so, they proved to be a weakly united camp since the same divisions that plagued the country applied to this group. Furthermore, the Union was only able to mobilise approximately ten per cent of its white male population, whereas New Zealand offered up 42 per cent for war service.²²

Thus, the presence of veterans' associations was naturally less felt in South Africa than in other Dominions, such as the Anzac remembrance culture of Australia and New Zealand.²³ With the cessation of hostilities, steps were immediately taken to organise an efficient system to demobilise returning

troops from the various theatres of war.²⁴ However, this was only men who were still considered to be soldiers at the time of armistice in 1918. As can be seen from Graph 1, the number of returned soldiers was much higher. Many of the soldiers who served in GSWA volunteered for service in Europe and East Africa. The exact figure of ex-servicemen, or the number of men who volunteered for further service in 1915, is unclear. However, when the number of fatalities is deducted from the overall unit strength of the forces in various campaigns, it can be roughly estimated. Between 1914 and 1919, approximately 26 000 men returned from Europe, a little more than 40 000 from East and Central Africa, and 67 000 from German South West Africa.



Graph 1: The number of wounded and demobilised soldiers, 1915-1919²⁵

After armistice, 22 000 were demobilised from Europe, 8 200 from East and Central Africa, 560 of the garrison in German South West Africa, and 6 500 South Africans who had fought with Imperial contingents. Thus, the majority of troops who fought in Europe returned after armistice, whilst in the case of East and Central Africa, the majority returned while the war was still raging on. A significant proportion of these men were invalided to the Union suffering from disease in 1916, yet some of these men regained their health enough to do further service in Europe. Naturally, the majority of troops fighting in GSWA were demobilised at the completion of the campaign in mid-1915, yet many did further service in the other theatres. Furthermore, before the decision was made to raise an expeditionary force, many South Africans volunteered for duty in Imperial contingents. Many ex-servicemen, even though the exact figure is unknown, also returned after demobilisation camps were closed. Some studied at universities in Europe after the war, and others, as will be discussed, had to receive medical treatment and vocational training in England before returning to South Africa. These soldiers had sustained serious illnesses and injuries on the Western Front, and to a lesser extent in East Africa, and were evacuated ‘outside’ the theatre of war to the South African Military Hospital located in Richmond Park, Surrey, and other specialist hospitals in England.²⁶

A Demobilisation Board, under the presidency of the Chief of General Staff, was formed at Defence Headquarters. The purpose of this board was to settle the details of demobilisation, which had been underway before hostilities ended, together with the Imperial system and against the backdrop of local conditions. Under the supervision of the Board, regulations were drawn up not only for the process of demobilisation, but also to bridge the gap between the termination of soldiers' military statutes and their return to civil society and employment. Extensive logistical planning was necessary since Springboks were scattered across various theatres of war and were returning in different states of health and ability. The plan concentrated on the expeditious release of soldiers, swift transport home or to some other destination, an opportunity for every soldier to avail himself of the administrative machinery devised to help him resettle into civil life, and to see to the needs of those soldiers' wives, children or other dependants who may have had to be repatriated to South Africa.²⁷

Some of the first 1919 arrivals were large numbers of troops from Europe. This Union–Imperial service contingent was sent to the dispersal camp at Maitland in Cape Town along with soldiers of the same contingent who were in Cape Town at the time.²⁸ Repatriation of Springboks who served in Europe reached its height in April, and the bulk of this contingent was disposed of by August 1919. Its lengthy repatriation was due partly to the fact that Imperial authorities were requested to return troops in clusters of 2 000 men at a minimum of one-week intervals to prevent overcrowding and delays. As a result, the numbers to be accommodated would not have exceeded 4 000 men.²⁹

The second contingent consisted of those arriving from East Africa, Egypt and elsewhere overseas by the East Coast route, and those belonging to the contingent in Durban. The last two categories included soldiers returning from Central Africa who were dispersed at Roberts Heights in Pretoria and those troops of the Union–Imperial service contingent stationed or serving at Potchefstroom at the time of demobilisation. Soldiers demobilised from Central Africa arrived at the end of February 1919, and those from East Africa and Egypt by mid-July 1919.³⁰

Usually, medical inspections were carried out upon arrival at the port of disembarkation, otherwise at the dispersal camp by a board of two medical officers. The rest of the passage through dispersal camps involved the handing in of arms and equipment, except for greatcoats, blankets and 'necessaries', such as kit bags and combs, as well as complete forms and documents for the termination of service and return to civil life. Pay accounts also had to be settled: soldiers received 28 days' paid leave or furlough after demobilisation, a war gratuity, as well as a £4 clothing allowance to purchase civilian clothes.³¹ Some soldiers who were designated as unwell or unfit earlier in the demobilisation process were already medically boarded prior to arriving at dispersal camps. However, staff officers asked each soldier who passed through the dispersal camps whether they were considered physically incapacitated due to service. If a soldier was not medically boarded before, this served as a second opportunity to receive treatment. Such soldiers' dispersal was suspended and after being brought before a medical board were not discharged unless they were considered to be 'fit'. Soldiers with artificial limbs were also checked before being dispersed. At the end of this process, soldiers were issued with pamphlets, which offered some guidance on re-entering civil life.³² Thereafter, ex-servicemen were entrained back to their homes with transport and meal tickets.³³

3. Identifying the ex-serviceman

3.1 Facially disfigured

The ex-servicemen referred to in this article can be divided into six categories: the facially disfigured, the physically disabled, the neurotics, the ill, the blind and those who carried the usual emotional scars

of war. The number of facially maimed ex-soldiers in the Union has never been precisely documented. An old list of the Gillies archive that has only recently been moved to the Royal College of Surgeons only referenced ten men from the infantry brigades in Europe and East Africa.³⁴ Yet, perhaps even if pure conjecture, leaflets found at the South African National Museum of Military History indicate that there were more such men.³⁵ Men wounded in this way have, until only relatively recently, been considered a ‘hidden history’ of the war.

In general terms, it has been estimated that 50 per cent of facial wounds were fatal, while many survivors were left permanently disfigured by damage caused by flamethrowers, shrapnel or shell fragments. Such wounds were so severe that it could be said that they have ‘lost their face’.³⁶ Pte S Carey of the 1st SAI (South African Infantry Brigade) was admitted to Queen Mary’s Hospital in Sidcup, England, on 27 July 1916 after sustaining a gunshot wound to his chin and lip (see Figure 1) and was finally considered strong enough to have surgery in October, performed by the well-known surgeon, Harold Delf Gillies. He was only discharged almost exactly a year later. Facial reconstruction involved the excision of scar tissue, reproduced as flaps, a central chin flap was also elongated through incisions that were used to form the central part of the new lip, as well as flaps from each side made of mucous membrane.³⁷



Figure 1: Pre- and post-operation photos (Carey)³⁸

Such procedures were not restricted to Europe, for there were also cases in East Africa. Victims were transferred to England, where they could receive treatment and recuperate. For instance, Pte D Beattie, who served in the 8th SAI regiment,³⁹ part of the 2nd SAI, was first transferred to Devonport Military Hospital in England and then transferred to Queen Mary’s Hospital, Sidcup, on 9 October 1919. Pte D Beattie (see Figure 2) sustained a gunshot wound to his left cheek, which also caused a

fracture in his chin and jaw, resulting in the loss of some bone. When admitted to hospital, he was in a weak mental and emotional state and did not want to have anything done to repair his face for two months. Thus, he only underwent surgery on 15 January 1920 and was transferred several months later, in May, to the South African Military Hospital.⁴⁰



Figure 2: Post-operation photos (Beattie) ⁴¹

Therapy for facial wounds was aimed at making the face as whole as possible and required months, if not years, of treatment since it was not unusual for a patient to undergo twenty different operations. Despite these, the facially disfigured soldier-patients often still looked like ‘Frankenstein’s monsters’ or gargoyles, as soldiers often referred to themselves.⁴² Again, Pte B Miller of the 2nd South Africa Infantry Regiment in France, was admitted to Queen Mary’s in March 1918 for gunshot wounds to his left cheek and fractured facial bones. He underwent five surgeries until he was finally transferred to the South African Military Hospital in October 1919. The outcome (see comparative images, Figure 3), was considered to be ‘satisfactory’. Reconstruction also involved excisions and production of numerous flaps, bone grafts and the fitting of dentures.

It was not considered possible to give these men a proper place in society, since the sight of them “often turned one’s stomach”.⁴³ Doctors and nurses who dealt with such cases were also affected, as F Albee observed,

the psychological effect on a man who must go through the object of horror to himself as well as to others, is beyond description [...] It is a fairly common experience for the maladjusted person to feel like a stranger to his world. It must be unimagined hell to feel like a stranger to yourself.⁴⁴

And as M Guyatt argues, the facially disfigured were never celebrated as ‘war heroes’, as was the case with physically disabled ex-servicemen.⁴⁵ By and large, these men worked ‘inside’ as housekeepers, gardeners and cooks, while ‘outside’ society hardly knew of their existence.⁴⁶

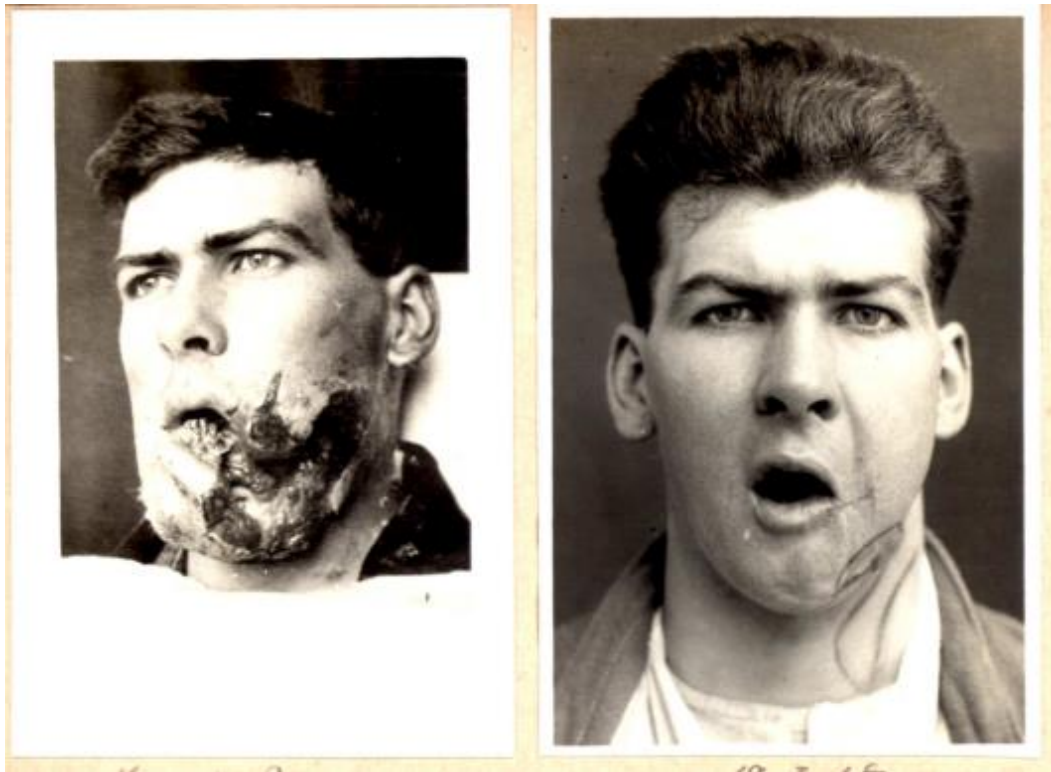


Figure 3: Pre- and post-operation photos (Miller)⁴⁷

3.2 Physically disabled

The exact number of physically disabled is unclear; however, it can be suggested that there was a significant portion. As Graph 1 indicates, the number of wounded in the European campaign was over 10 000 men, which stands in stark contrast to the East African campaign with 1 000 wounded, and the German South West African campaign with fewer than 600. This does not say that being wounded automatically implied physical disablement; it does however take into account the establishment of vocational training programmes, coupled with schedules in the War Special Pensions Act. According to the “level of disability”, there must have been a fair number of ex-servicemen with disabilities. Much was done in England, but also in South Africa, for the physical reconstruction of limbless servicemen.⁴⁸

The Victorian work ethic that still influenced society was integral to the concept of rehabilitation, especially since a powerful association existed between working-class masculinity and the ‘decency’ of skilled labour.⁴⁹ After the war, affected ex-servicemen were in receipt of artificial limbs, mobility aids or other surgical appliances, as prosthetics became a distinctive kind of war-related material culture to create a perception of not only completeness, but also normality.⁵⁰ In May 1918, an inter-Allied conference was held in London to compare different approaches to address the issue of the vocation of disabled soldiers.⁵¹ It was emphasised that the intention behind the newly established schemes at the South African Military Hospital was to awaken men, whilst still recovering, to an interest in their productive future. Recovering soldiers, who were well enough, could undertake extensive training courses at classrooms nearby. The primary purpose was to prepare them for a civil career upon their

discharge from the army, whilst simultaneously being restored to the best possible physical condition through hospital treatment. This would enable them to become self-supporting members of the community, notwithstanding their otherwise impaired physical state.⁵² Figure 4 shows some typical patients who attended the training programme.⁵³



Figure 4: Learner-patients at the South African Military Hospital, Richmond Park ⁵⁴

This event also served as propaganda to back the last phase of the war effort. A significant display was presented of a variety of prostheses, together with photographs and films of disabled men undergoing treatment and retraining. The exhibition advertised “the best artificial substitutes known to science”,⁵⁵ technology working in conjunction with the hospital workshop, to “afford the veteran healthy occupation while in hospital”⁵⁶ as well as to help him gain a “definite future in civilian life.”⁵⁷ Through this, artificial limbs were presented as the very materiel of effective wartime rehabilitation, promoting the medical–material reconstruction of man, and articulating the mission of rehabilitation schemes: helping disabled ex-servicemen to reclaim their proper role as “able-bodied workers and breadwinners”.⁵⁸ Thus, with the use of artificial limbs, “physical agility and manliness were re-inscribed into the prosthetically remade body.”⁵⁹

The Union did not have the necessary facilities for the manufacturing of modern artificial limbs or facial masks. In wartime, resources were urgently required in Europe, and cases affecting the Union were also few.⁶⁰ Adverts for British prosthetic limb makers were placed in the *Springbok Blue Magazine* associated with the South African Military Hospital (see Figure 5). However, after 1918, the return of amputees to the Union led to the local repair and adjustment of artificial limbs. Replacements required the moulding of a plaster cast of the stump, which was then sent to London.⁶¹ Aid and other

contributions for the wounded originated from a myriad and even unlikely places. For instance, African Chiefs in Natal had their men produce almost 9 000 walking sticks for wounded soldiers by 1917. These were handed to the Patriotic League and Red Cross Society for distribution.⁶²



Figure 5: Prosthetic limb advert ⁶³

In early 1916, shortly after the South African Military Hospital was opened, the question was raised over dealing with permanently disabled men of the Imperial–Union Contingent. Negotiations with the War Office followed, in which the Committee of the South African Hospital and Comforts Fund played a significant role.⁶⁴ The result was the establishment of a Vocational Training School in Richmond in February 1917. Disabled Springboks from both the European and East African campaigns were admitted there for treatment and possible vocational training. This, in effect, helped to bring these broken men to the notice of South African authorities at an early stage of convalescence.⁶⁵

A number of other vocational training programmes were offered to returned – and especially disabled – soldiers after demobilisation in South Africa as well. The primary aim of these programmes was to give ex-servicemen the means to re-enter the labour market and thus to obtain financial independence. Such vocational schools were established at Maitland in Cape Town, in Durban and at Roberts Heights in Pretoria, and were well attended after demobilisation. These vocational training programmes were financed primarily by the Governor-General’s Fund and supplemented by government. Disabled soldiers were encouraged to enrol by the offer of the highest rate of disablement pension while training.⁶⁶ Those awaiting repatriation were also granted special permission to enrol in business houses and colleges whilst overseas as preparation for civilian life, instead of following the routine of camp life.⁶⁷



Figure 6 (above): Workshop at South African Military Hospital, Richmond Park



Figure 7 (right): Woodwork class

The costs were carried jointly by the South African Hospital and Comforts Fund and the Governor-General's Fund. The Union government relieved the Imperial government of all financial responsibility by bearing the cost of allowances and pay while men underwent training.⁶⁸ Disabled soldiers underwent training in workshops in an assortment of trades, including becoming proficient as metal turners and fitters, toolmakers, brass finishers, dynamo and switchboard attendants, cabinet makers, clerks and cinematograph operators.⁶⁹ Figures 6 and 7 show examples of some of the workshops at Richmond Park.⁷⁰ In *The Springbok Blue*, a special section on "How to become a ventriloquist", even appeared.⁷¹ Classes were taught by professional instructors and workshops were registered with the City Guilds and periodically inspected by experts.⁷² In total, 274 officers and 9 142 other ranks, of which 7 085 belonged to South African contingents, were treated at the hospital and 393 were trained there from 1917 until the hospital closed in 1921.⁷³ Vocational training programmes were also launched by businessmen such as Bernard Oppenheimer of the mine magnate family. In July 1917, he initiated a scheme to train disabled soldiers in diamond cutting in Brighton, England, which led to the opening of the Bernard Oppenheimer Diamond Works on 1 April 1918.⁷⁴

With absorption into vocational training programmes, the act of trying to overcome a war disability might have shown that a man had bravely done his duty, but this did not automatically award him the identity of a 'hero', as may have been the case earlier in the conflict. In order to assume this identity, "he also had to do everything he could to be whole again", to be a man, and an economically independent man taking care of his family.⁷⁵

3.3 The sick and neurotic

The difference between 'sick' and 'wounded' was important to the ex-servicemen in assuming a changed and new identity. The changed definition stipulated that one was either sick or wounded *not* as a result of fighting, and 'wounded' meant one was either sick or wounded *for sure* due to service. Sympathies towards a 'sick' body were less, because one could get 'sick' without there being a causal

link between this affliction and war. As a result, ‘sick’ printed on medical documents did not merit a special pension, since it was not considered a disability.⁷⁶

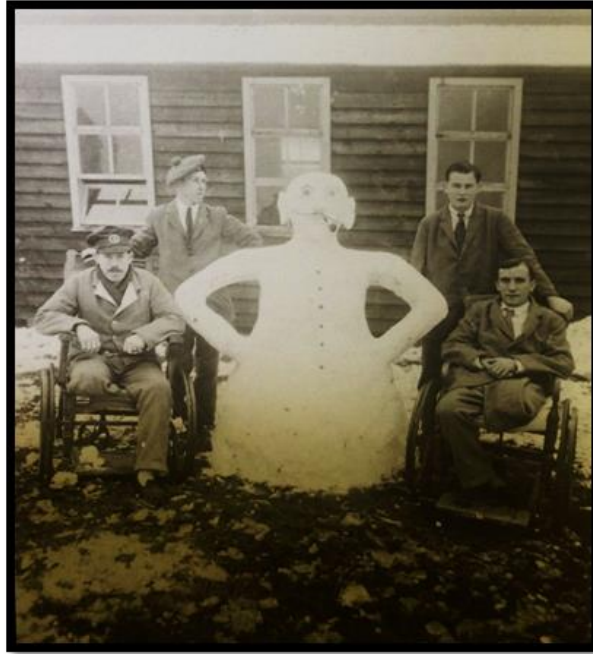


Figure 8: Students taking a break from training in a workshop at the South African Hospital, Richmond Park

Naturally, lingering diseases had a marked effect not only on men’s bodies and minds and pensions, but also on their economic prospects. An ex-soldier who contracted trench fever in 1918 was in hospital for over a month and then served as a member of staff at army headquarters. In September 1919, he was pronounced medically fit and discharged. After demobilisation, he secured mine employment on condition that he passed the Phthisis Board, but he was unsuccessful and was instead declared permanently unfit. Upon applying for numerous other jobs, he was denied a position as he was “five years behind the times”,⁷⁷ the time he spent serving in the war. After these struggles, the disgruntled ex-soldier wrote to *The Star*, stating,

I wonder if those of your readers of John Buchan’s articles⁷⁸ realise that men who took part in those scenes which he [Buchan] so ably describes, are walking about looking for work [...] Patriotism has brought to me the following benefits (3) The pleasure of seeing my wife going out to earn a living.⁷⁹

His sense of male pride as a breadwinner had been crushed.

Different wounds and illnesses were not only treated differently in medical terms, but also morally. ‘Pity’ was unequally divided, for the wounded were regarded with more understanding than the diseased. In response to the sarcastic comment in *The Star*, its unsympathetic editor asked whether he had contacted any of the returned soldiers’ organisations, whose wounded men represented valour and sacrifice as opposed to the sick and the mentally ill.⁸⁰ The permanently diseased struggled to be recognised as war invalids.⁸¹ When a malarial infantryman, Charles W Shackleton, was invalided to South Africa from East Africa, he visited the beachfront at Durban in ‘civvies’, while still weak from

the “blinkin [*sic*] fever”.⁸² There, he ran into his old comrade, Somers, who was also invalided. On their stroll, they were stopped by a woman, who exclaimed, “You two young men ought to be jolly well ashamed of yourselves.” They “gaped at her”, and Shackleton looked at Somers, and replied, “Well I’ll be damned.”⁸³

The majority of soldiers fighting in East Africa were invalided to the Union for being sick before 1918.⁸⁴ As one soldier noted, “It is hard that those of us who have served should not have something to distinguish us from slackers and rebels.” As in England, white feathers were given by women to men not in uniform.⁸⁵ As a result, invalided ex-servicemen were issued with silver war badges or King’s badges for services rendered. The intention was that these were to be worn on the right breast when in civilian clothes to prevent any patriotic civilians mistaking men for not doing their duty.⁸⁶

The pre-war significance of chest ailments on the Witwatersrand mines, such as tuberculosis (TB) was recognised, with TB described as an “occupational disease”.⁸⁷ After the end of hostilities, there were a significant number of sick ex-servicemen, suffering from ailments such as bronchial catarrh, who had to undergo further treatment.⁸⁸ The Union was required to institute special measures to care for ex-soldiers suffering from TB, as in 1919 there were an estimated 30 000 of these cases.⁸⁹ Here, there was clear government recognition of the need of these diseased ex-servicemen in particular, perhaps given the industrial background.

The issue of psychological damage was highly complex. There was also difficulty identifying between hysteria, shell shock-sickness, neurasthenia or one of many other classifications. Diagnosis of mental trauma varied, and was even influenced by rank, with soldiers of lower rank often identified as suffering from hysteria, whilst an officer coming from the same social class as the physician was more likely to be diagnosed with neurasthenia, believed to have resulted from the stress of war. As a result, every neurotic was seen as ‘sick’ and not wounded, and often war was seen as the trigger for already present weak nerves.⁹⁰

South African ex-servicemen suffering from war neurosis have not been well documented. It was common practice to place these men in existing mental hospitals, which may have provided inadequate treatment since staff would have had no previous experience of war-related mental trauma. Although the exact number of men is not known, some of their stories can be found in their estate papers. One such ex-soldier was Pte AJH Rohland, who was admitted to a mental hospital in Pietermaritzburg in September 1918. He was paid a pension of 15/- per week as well as a hospital allowance. There were other cases where wives had their husbands committed under the Mental Disorders Act of 1916. In April 1919, as the wife of Lt EJE Sherrell explained in her application,

[her husband] goes about in a state of undress, fires a revolver through the window [...] destroys clothing. Spends money recklessly and foolishly. Urinates from the veranda, in view of the public. Abstracted butter from a box in the possession of a hawker and ran away with some.⁹¹

The physician also believed that it was the best course of action to have her husband committed, since he went “about the house in a semi-nude state [...] is getting weaker [...] only speaks when spoken to [...] retention of wine”,⁹² and when he was taken away by the ambulance, he did not make the connection that he was going to hospital, but rather for a “joy ride”.⁹³ Although none of the court proceedings stipulated that he was suffering from shell shock or other such injury, the connection was made that his state had altered since he returned home.⁹⁴ For each serviceman, the re-emergence into post-war society held its own particular hurdles.

3.4 Blind ex-servicemen

Vocational training programmes were geared towards restoring men with lost limbs, but not at restoring those with missing sight. Those ex-soldiers who were blinded were sent for training at St. Dunstan's Hostel for Blinded Soldiers and Sailors located in Regent's Park in London.⁹⁵ The aim was for men to receive medical treatment and thereafter to undergo preliminary and occupational training. Some were not only blind, but also maimed. For instance, someone with artificial hands was taught to become a telephone operator. Interest in hobbies, such as gardening, was also encouraged.⁹⁶

After St. Dunstan's, men underwent further treatment in the Union, since it was felt that it would help them with the re-adjustment process to be with their families, as well as saving funds. Cases connected to the Governor-General's Fund were dealt with by the After-Care Committee and was often equipped with a poultry farm and furnished house.⁹⁷ Apart from receiving proceeds from other funds, such as the Ex-Service Fund, inaugurated by Captain Sir Beachcroft Towse, St. Dunstan's Blinded South African Soldiers also raised their own funds by selling hand-woven articles such as baskets.⁹⁸ However, such training was a racial and a gender issue for the Union's social context, since this was usually a job confined to African women and girls.⁹⁹

The intention behind all training was that blinded ex-servicemen would emerge without "indulgences of self-pity, but as animated by an aggressive determination to show the world that he can hold his own in the vocation he has chosen".¹⁰⁰ There were some remarkable cases of recovery from what the war had done. Sgt RW Bowens, who was wounded and blinded in the Third Battle of Ypres, was one such remarkable exception. His face was remarkably reconstructed through numerous surgeries, but his sight could not be repaired; thus, he was sent to St. Dunstan's for rehabilitation and training.¹⁰¹ After learning Braille, he studied law at Cambridge and returned to South Africa where he opened a practice as an advocate in 1922. Thereafter, he pursued a career in public life as a Member of the Legislative Assembly for the Cape Province, was a founding member of the South African National Council for the Blind, and was awarded the Churchill Travelling Fellowship amongst a myriad of other accomplishments.¹⁰²

4. Economic

4.1 War pensions

The end of the war saw a change in the nature and scale of responsibilities borne by government, which in turn led to a significant expansion in the scope of support offered to ex-servicemen by the state. This can be categorised broadly into three main areas, namely the return of ex-servicemen into the workforce and poverty relief for those who could not be assimilated; compensation and assistance to the war disabled, and lastly support for the dependants of those men.¹⁰³ In order to expand support offered by the state, an increase in administrative government bodies was necessary. One such institution was the Information Bureau founded in October 1914, which was responsible for investigating claims for gratuities and pensions.¹⁰⁴

The notion of financial compensation for ex-servicemen and dependants on such a scale and in such a variety of circumstances, was a new concept in the early twentieth century, despite the Defence Act of 1912 making some provision for financial relief in the case of death, injury or disease while a soldier was on active service.¹⁰⁵ These initial pensions pertained to soldiers fighting in GSWA.¹⁰⁶ However, as late as March 1915, the Defence Department had not yet decided on the amount to be awarded; thus, ex-servicemen were only finally discharged as unfit after the amount had been decided

on.¹⁰⁷ The result was that, until March 1915, government decided on the amount to be paid on a discretionary rather than a statutory basis.¹⁰⁸ Finally, it was decided that a widow's grant of £70 and £16 for each child would be paid through the Treasury.¹⁰⁹

Financial support given by the state varied between the different campaigns due to legal and financial complications, linked to terms of deployment and Imperial or Dominion financial responsibilities and Army Orders.¹¹⁰ The outcome was that claims from members of the South African Imperial contingents were dealt with by both the War Office and Chelsea Commissioners in London and by the Record Office in the Union.¹¹¹ As administrative difficulties arose in determining troops' pensions, a War Special Pensions Act dedicated to soldiers in all theatres of war was passed in 1916.¹¹²

However, owing to the need to expedite cases, the office of the Commissioner of Pensions Board and the Military Pensions Board in Pretoria were approved in January 1916 to deal with Union 'Imperial servants'. Both boards worked jointly on claims and consisted of both Imperial and Union representatives who decided on a first Imperial and second Union supplementary award.¹¹³

The 1917 Royal Warrant significantly altered the manner in which pensions were assessed by introducing them as compensation for specific types of physical impairment. This policy reflected the belief that men had value to the state as units of labour, with the primary aim to increase industrial capacity by encouraging men to work to their fullest physical capability.¹¹⁴ In various 1917 amendments to the Union War Special Pensions Act, the Nationalists were opposed to what they saw as the burden of Union payments. As a result, it was decided that disability pensions were to be used to encourage men to work to support themselves, rather than to rely on government funds. To this end, disability pensions were based on set schedules of disability, with the consequence that government no longer awarded pensions on a discretionary but rather on a statutory basis.¹¹⁵

The state appointed medical pensions boards in the main urban centres, which had to examine ex-servicemen to determine their degree of disability. This was followed by re-examinations to establish whether a man's health had improved enough to place him on a lower scale of disability pension. Men who had to travel to these Board centres were given a subsistence allowance by the Military Pensions Commissioner.¹¹⁶

The 1919 Act was the pinnacle of state generosity towards First World War pensioners.¹¹⁷ In the light of the public cost of post-war reconstruction and of competition for employment, the balance was further tipped against ex-servicemen dependent on the state for their livelihood. Pressure from the Treasury and other sources, such as the Nationalists, to reduce government spending forced many to look to other organisations, such as the Governor-General's Fund for financial assistance.¹¹⁸ Town magistrates took up cases, often appealing to the Commissioner of Pensions or the Commissioner of Returned Soldiers. Thus, the magistrate of Carnarvon wrote on 24 July 1928 to appeal for aid for the orphaned children of the late Lt EB Walton, pleading, "God alone knows what is to become of them."¹¹⁹

Other examples illustrating dissatisfaction included an article written by a veteran about 'Titus', a slacker, and a girl who gave 'Titus' a white feather for not participating in the war. She had later married a soldier, who was killed, and had to "rear a child on a pittance (called a war pension)" insufficient to cover living costs.¹²⁰ Newspaper articles also appeared occasionally complaining of late or insufficient payment of pensions to ex-soldiers and dependants.¹²¹

Furthermore, ex-servicemen of the German South West African campaign complained that they received less for serving in the war than those who had served in the expeditionary forces. This difference was due to differential amounts for different campaigners as indicated in the Defence Act and the War Special Pensions Act. One South West African campaigner claimed in 1920 that, according

to the Financial Secretary, the Imperial Government had spent £1 000 000 sterling, “who were the recipients? Returned soldiers got none of it! There was no war gratuity for G.S.W. [German South West] Africa. Why Not? Honours and decorations galore to Generals and Officers, sympathy and thanks from General Smuts to privates!”¹²²

A common thread that emerged from all accounts was the commonly held perception by ex-servicemen that both society and government did not do enough financially to support them. Many grievances were lodged against the Information Bureau and the Military Paymaster based on insufficient funds or of payments being late.¹²³ Yet, no less predictably, there were men who chanced their hand at getting compensation on dubious grounds, claiming for conditions which medical boards found were not attributable to active service.¹²⁴

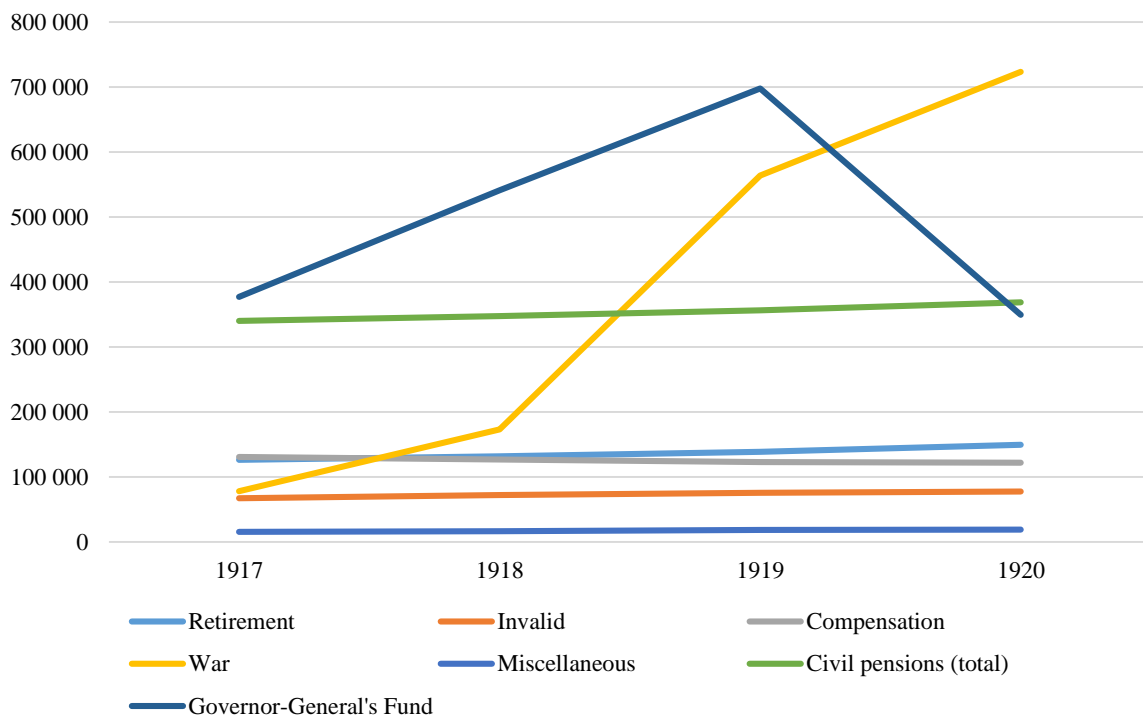
4.2 The Governor-General’s Fund

The limitations of state support saw the founding of benevolent organisations that existed independently, yet worked alongside the state and other institutions, to look after the welfare of the returned soldier and his dependants. The most influential of these was the Governor-General’s Fund. In August 1914, Annie FB Botha, wife of the prime minister, and the acting Governor-General, Lord John H de Villiers, proposed that a fund be inaugurated in the Union to relieve distress caused by the war.¹²⁵ The new Governor-General, Lord Sydney C Buxton, offered his full support and served on the executive committee.¹²⁶

This new fund was intended as a national war fund. Approximately 120 local administrative committees in various towns and districts of the Union headed by mayors or magistrates were raised under central financial supervision.¹²⁷ The executive committee also had a close association with the BESL to which the fund paid out a monthly grant that the association could dispose of in the interests of ex-servicemen.¹²⁸

These local committees included the Mayors’ Fund, Patriotic Funds, Widows and Orphans Fund and the War Relief Fund. Subscriptions raised and donations made to local funds were advertised in newspapers.¹²⁹ Local subscriptions and organised fundraising events took the form of musical concerts, dances, the selling of bouquets, charity flags and even a children’s book depicting goblins as recruiting officers, “for the fatherless children of the fallen South African Soldiers and Sailors”.¹³⁰

The Fund offered different forms of relief since the raising of the first overseas Union contingent in 1915. These included a guaranteed minimum allowance, supplementary military allowance and fixed allowance to dependants in especially needy circumstances. In such cases, grants were still awarded to ensure an adequate means of livelihood, even if it meant an improvement in living standards from before the war. Special needs grants were also awarded, for instance medical and maternity services, clothing, funeral charges, and insurance premiums and grants to cover necessities lost with the sinking of the *SS Galway Castle*.¹³¹ Grants for the dependants of fallen soldiers were geared towards assisting single mothers who had to support a family. Such payments included housing and education for children at the Buxton and Louis Botha Hostels, outfits for children and courses of instruction in dressmaking, nursing and other business pursuits.¹³² Special grants to non-disabled ex-servicemen were usually geared towards settling them in employment, such as purchasing farms, stock and implements, electrical businesses and coffee stalls.¹³³



Graph 2: Government pensions and Governor-General's Fund financial assistance to ex-servicemen 1917-1920¹³⁴

By the end of hostilities, the Union housed all kinds of committees, associations and organisations in both the governmental and public sphere with overlapping aims, all concerned with the welfare of returned soldiers and their families, and the re-absorption of ex-servicemen into civilian life. As a consequence, many initiatives were not officially run by the government or the Governor-General's Fund, but as a shared effort.

As noted, many ex-servicemen felt that the authorities were not doing enough. Equally, it was arguably far from being all doom and gloom at the beginning as can be seen from Graph 2, which indicates the various categories of pensions paid by government between 1917 and 1920 after the implementation of the Pensions Act in 1916. Between 1917 and 1918, there was a gradual increase in the amount of pension money paid to ex-servicemen and dependants, yet not significantly more than to civil servants. However, after 1918 there was a considerable increase. By 1920, the Treasury was disbursing more than £700 000 for war pensions, which was nearly half more than all the civil servant pensions combined. The Governor-General's Fund also reached its highest level of generosity in 1919 when it offered more financial assistance than the state. Ultimately, though, this was short lived as financial assistance declined rather rapidly thereafter, and by 1928, the expenditure of the Fund stood at £71 452.¹³⁵

4.3 Employment schemes

In August 1918, a government conference was held to consider how best to deal with returned soldiers.¹³⁶ Its aim was the planning of a central control to ensure co-ordination between numerous relief bodies. This led to the founding of the office of the Commissioner for Returned Soldiers, a special branch of the Defence Department, on 1 September 1918. By then, it was expected that "the difficult problem of the returned soldiers" would be of "grave public concern."¹³⁷

In November and December of that year, Returned Soldiers' Advisory Boards were appointed in the main Union centres, an amalgamation of representatives from local organisations and public bodies, including the then redundant war recruiting committees, local chief magistrates, and district staff officers.¹³⁸ These boards were further divided to deal with employment and to handle pension grievances. In total, 54 Returned Soldiers Employment Committees were set up in large towns, the majority of which operated on a voluntary basis, since only 14 were funded by the government. Elsewhere, magistrates and post offices stepped in to fill the gap.¹³⁹

A number of other steps were taken to aid resettlement. One was the creation of training farms at Vlakfontein, Riversdale, Oakdale, Indwe, Hatbeespoort and Beginsel. In addition, returned soldiers were admitted to various agricultural colleges at government expense. These included Cedara, Elsenburg, Glen, Grootfontein and Potchefstroom.¹⁴⁰ At Elsenburg, the war years saw a marked decrease in the number of diploma students with fewer than 10 from 1915 to 1917, while in 1920, there was a significant increase due to returned students who enrolled.¹⁴¹

Government assistance was also extended to men who had served a term of apprenticeship prior to active service, or those who enlisted immediately after school.¹⁴² Returned soldiers under this category were paid an allowance from public funds to increase their earnings. Furthermore, money was voted to enable those whose studies were interrupted by enlistment to obtain a higher education. Other arrangements for re-settlement involved apprenticeships on private farms and other practical trades. Firms and farmers in turn received benefits if they took in returned soldiers.¹⁴³ Other avenues included the opening of the Eastern Vlei Returned Soldiers Relief Works, as well as the Umgeni Relief Works in Durban.¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, advertisers in the magazine for the MOTHs, *The Home Front*, employed numerous returned soldiers.

A land settlement scheme included not merely the Union, but also other Empire countries and newly acquired territories after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles.¹⁴⁵ In an address before armistice day, the governor of British East Africa called upon men to settle in the former German East Africa region, not only for the sake of the "simple natives", but also for British explorers, so that those who had made the "enormous sacrifice and blood and treasure [...] ought not count for nothing".¹⁴⁶ Yet, some fraudulent schemes also crept in, and some South African ex-servicemen who acquired farms suffered, to the extent that warnings were printed in newspapers.¹⁴⁷

Government assistance in farm training and apprenticeships ended with the last new admissions at the end of December 1920. The office of the Commissioner for Returned Soldiers, was dissolved late in 1921 and all local Returned Soldiers Employment Committees by 1930.¹⁴⁸ Yet, thereafter, there were still struggling ex-servicemen having to rely on pensions or handouts from bodies which were increasingly stringent by the late 1920s.

4.4 The 1922 Rand Strike

Throughout the war years, ex-servicemen trickled back into unemployment from the front. A war recruiting committee noted in June 1917, "they must try and prevent the returned soldier from having a grievance, because if he had, he ceased to be a recruiting agent."¹⁴⁹ By that time, an Employment Committee already existed in Johannesburg due to the significant unemployment rate amongst ex-servicemen. It had already registered 1 260 unemployed ex-soldiers, 40 per cent of them "farm hands pure and simple [...] thirty-five per cent were unemployable."¹⁵⁰ One group, who called themselves "The Chestnuts" since they were all chest wound cases, found themselves at the declaration of armistice,

all “miserable. The awful truth smote us - we mattered not at all. The war was over. We were out of everything. Shortly we would be out of work.”¹⁵¹

In December 1918, the Commissioner for Returned Soldiers stated optimistically, “I assume that generally the larger employer of labour [i.e. the mines] will have kept open places for their men.”¹⁵² But, in wartime, conditions on the mines had altered significantly. Mine owners had tried to dilute costly white labour with cheaper black workers, and the proportion of Afrikaans mine workers had increased substantially, due to many loyal English speakers volunteering for active service, thereby creating a shortage of white mine workers. Yet, at the end of hostilities, many of these English, as well as some Afrikaans speakers, returned to the Witwatersrand and to a gold mining industry enduring a profit crisis.¹⁵³

Against the backdrop of a global depression in 1921 and the sliding gold price, the key issue of the 1922 Rand Strike was the attempt by white workers to prevent employers from replacing some of them with cheaper African labour; thus, competing black workers were singled out as the enemy.¹⁵⁴ The uprising that took place on the Witwatersrand, with Johannesburg as its centre, began in January and lasted until March.¹⁵⁵

The revolt took on a violent quasi-military character, with many aspects of the strikers’ organisational conduct reminiscent of warfare, while the state responded with ground and air power that was perhaps usually only seen in wartime. From the manner of those who waged the Rand Strike, it can be deduced that a significant number were post-1918 ex-servicemen. There was a Returned Soldiers’ Commando, and memorials to the war dead were found at numerous mines. According to one striker, Bertie Lang, ex-servicemen were everywhere in the movement of 1922.¹⁵⁶ Of the approximately 20 000 strikers, one policeman estimated that between 10 000 and 15 000 were organised into commandos.¹⁵⁷ It was estimated that of the men participating in the mines uprising, some 90 per cent had seen service. They included ex-servicemen from Britain who had also made their way to the Witwatersrand in search of gainful employment, or who had immigrated to South Africa “for the restoration of their health”.¹⁵⁸

As the trade union leader at City Deep mine in Johannesburg, Belsazar van Zyl, noted, “a lot of us... fought in the Great War” and some of those miners had “distinguished themselves”, “men who did their duty in Flanders and German East [Africa]...we have men with Military crosses, and other honours”.¹⁵⁹

The significance of these commandos was that both the experience and legacy of men’s time at the front transcended the ethnic divide in unexpected ways. Furthermore, it indicated the enormous influence of the war on men who “returned to a society which fêted them and an economy which bore down upon them”.¹⁶⁰ As one ex-soldier, writing from the diamond centre of Kimberley, justified the actions, they “credited the Union with our lives (every life to the mothers, fathers and wives worth the wealth of the world to those who lost them), surely it isn’t too much to ask that our means of livelihood should remain undefiled”.¹⁶¹ For many men, in a way, their bodies were still that of a soldier despite the signing of armistice three years previously. While society perceived their bodies as those of ‘ex-servicemen’, many still saw themselves as soldiers.

5. Social

Leading a normal life after the war did not only depend on obtaining financial security. Ex-servicemen also struggled with more personal issues such as building a family. Some returning soldiers found happiness at home, whilst others returned with a war bride by their side.¹⁶² However, those with missing

limbs saw themselves as only half a man, in a sense feminised, and thus gave up hope of a family of their own. The mutilated no longer corresponded to the muscular and virile image of the ‘Victorian man’.¹⁶³ The war, as Ana Carden-Coyne and Joanna Bourke argue, changed the perception and view of the male body.¹⁶⁴ However, as Leo van Bergen further argues, this changed identity in certain respects also meant the loss in feeling coupled to the mind. Until the emergence of a post-war society and the struggle with ideals of masculinity, emotions and feelings were seen as ‘feminine’. However, with the loss of one or two hands, men were also robbed of such emotions, since this was felt and expressed through touch.¹⁶⁵ One ex-serviceman who lost a leg expressed his emotions in a poem, wishing for the feeling of icy cold water in a morning tub.¹⁶⁶

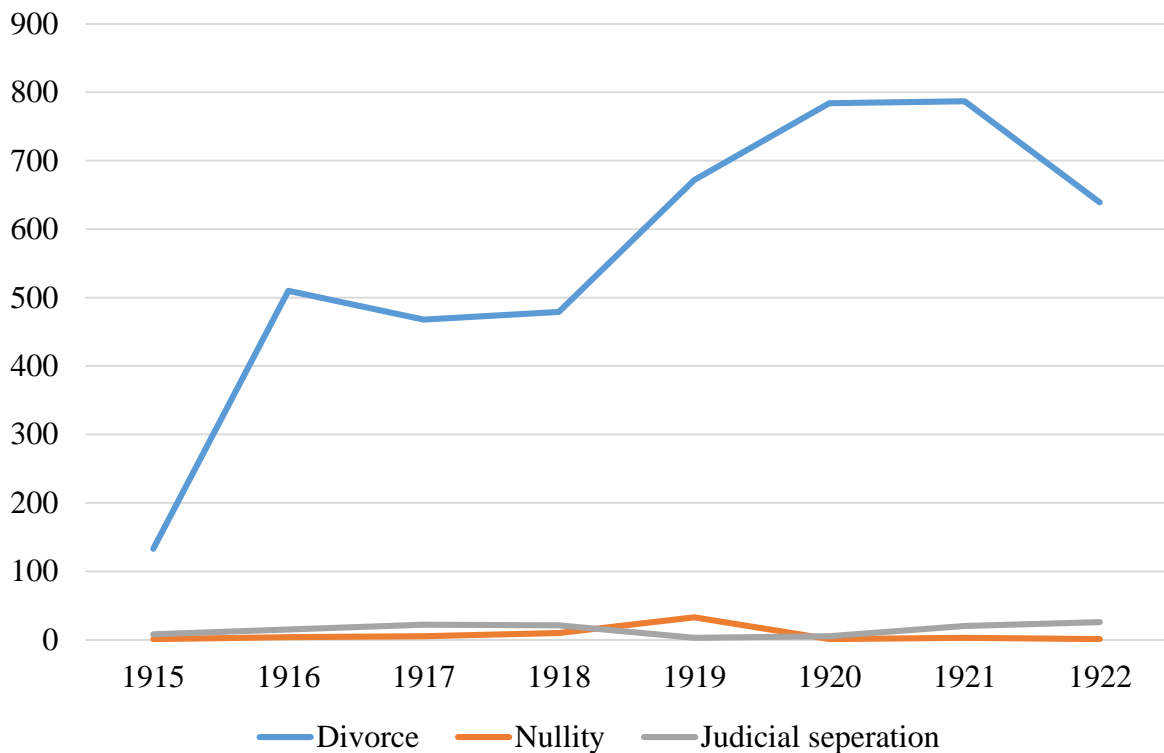
Furthermore, it was still widely believed – even by Louis Botha – that the offspring of a maimed ex-serviceman would be born minus a limb.¹⁶⁷ The shared view between limbless patients was “despondent” and almost “bitterly pessimistic” on the topic of matrimony.¹⁶⁸ The argument was, what “self-respecting man” with only one leg, would propose when the girl might “well marry a man with two”, it would be “an impertinence thus to ask a sacrifice of one who expected an offer of happiness”.¹⁶⁹

For married men, the situation was not necessarily always much better. A lengthy four-year absence had distanced and estranged them from their families.¹⁷⁰ Other kinds of estrangement included some who suffered from disabilities in the form of neurasthenia or disfigurement, which caused men to become alienated from their loved ones.¹⁷¹ Financial hardship as a result of disability and the reliance on ‘charity’ challenged ex-servicemen’s masculinity and also their role as a good father, husband and ultimately breadwinner, which precipitated feelings of alienation. In some cases, the distancing of men suffering from war neuroses from their families was deliberate, according to the Weir Mitchell Treatment method. According to this treatment, physicians thought that men would recuperate better if they were not surrounded by their families, yet it arguably only estranged men further from their families and quotidian life.¹⁷²

Frustration and also the humiliation of having to rely on financial aid or emotional support grew from role reversals, which challenged the ideal of the independent man. Medical, financial and emotional dependence on others, such as wives and parents, placed ex-servicemen in a position akin to that of a child.¹⁷³ Women’s frustrations could be seen in a comment placed in *The Star* by the wife of a returned soldier from German East Africa:

I know what sacrifice is. Patriotism does not pay in hard cash and never will. To be patriotic is to sacrifice everything to a great ideal. Suffer for the same cause [...] I also had to work for my husband as the results of fever prevented him from doing so, Christ had a great ideal and it nailed him to the cross.¹⁷⁴

It was not uncommon for women to break down emotionally and physically from the strains of this new life.¹⁷⁵ This could possibly explain the statistics for the dissolution of marriages from the mid-war period until after its conclusion. Unfortunately, statistics do not distinguish between figures for ex-servicemen and civilians; yet, the increases at significant war dates could indicate some correlation. As can be seen from Graph 3, divorce figures increased by more than 250 per cent from 1915 to 1916 and by about 280 per cent from 1918 to 1919. This could indicate that some marriages with returned ex-servicemen could not be saved. Divorces peaked from 1920 to 1921, and dropped after that. Overall, looking at the total dissolution of marriages, it is clear that there was a drastic increase in divorce from 1916, the mid-war period, but reaching its highest point during 1919 to 1921, the end of demobilisation and the start of the re-adjustment period.¹⁷⁶



Graph 3: Judicial separations, 1915–1922 ¹⁷⁷

Between 1913 and 1958, the nullification of marriages also peaked in 1919. None of the other years saw such a surge. While the nullification of marriages was granted under five conditions, two of those could possibly explain this quick increase in a single year. Under Roman-Dutch Law, marriages could be nullified if a wife fell pregnant and her husband was not the father.¹⁷⁸ This was a concern for soldiers, as a typical letter home asserted, “You seem to be having a good time [...] I know you will be careful in the selection of your make [*sic*] friends as there are a good many men who think that a soldiers [*sic*] wife is fair game”.¹⁷⁹ The other condition that could explain this increase was in the case of ‘insanity’, under which shell shock would have been classified.¹⁸⁰

Considering divorce cases in the records of the Supreme Court can certainly be suggestive of divorces associated with the war. One case, that of Bertha Bussio (née Menthey) vs Francois Bussio (married in 1903), may serve as an example. “On his return after [...] peace [...] his drinking habits, violent language and threats caused [his wife] great unhappiness.”¹⁸¹ Similar was the case of Florence Evelyn Robinson vs William McIlwane Robinson (married in 1908). The ex-serviceman was an engineer of the South African Railways, and left for service in Flanders in January 1917, returning in July 1919. In August 1917, Evelyn received a cable from France stating that he was “mentally ill”, while during this period, she received a “number of affectionate letters”.¹⁸² Yet, when he returned, “he drank a bottle a day [...] Some of the bottles I threw away as I was ashamed for them to be seen.”¹⁸³ Furthermore, he often proved violent, “he also came at night and took the children out of bed.”¹⁸⁴ One night he got home and she pretended to be asleep “he dragged me out of the child’s bed by my hair and said, “Get into your bed you bitch” [...] that night my husband was very violent and abusive.”¹⁸⁵

5.1 Alienation and dissociation from communities

Even the communities to which ex-combatants once belonged had been permanently altered as a result of many who would never return and left their own scars and gaps in a civilian society. Particularly in patriotic Natal, where a significant proportion of civil servants volunteered, as one employer wrote over the loss of one of his employees, it left “a sense of personal loss”.¹⁸⁶ Moreover, some men’s bodies were never located and it was only after the cessation of hostilities that men were declared as either “killed in action” or “died of wounds”, with their place of burial being indicated as “somewhere in France” as was the case with WD Brook.¹⁸⁷ The wife of Pte J Rodgers wrote to the Advisory Board for Returned Soldiers “begging” in 1920 that her husband’s account be settled since she and her three children were “starved”.¹⁸⁸ Such estranged sentiment could actually be exacerbated by the patterns of remembrance which developed through the memorial movement and Armistice Day.¹⁸⁹ These tended to pay tribute to the honourable dead, and gave comfort principally to mourners, rather than former soldiers from their community, as in Botha’s 1919 message not to “forget the heroic fortitude of the noble dead”.¹⁹⁰ However compelling, such speeches were concerned with the veneration of the “glorious dead”, rather than the crippled living.¹⁹¹

It appears as if there existed more than one form of remembrance: that of the various sectors of the home front, and that observed by veterans, which caused some ex-servicemen to feel even more distanced from host communities. As Old Bill Evenden, founder of the MOTH movement stated, “This Armistice remembrance takes place only once a year, but to the great body of Moths remembrance is always – while life lasts.”¹⁹² Although few first-hand accounts exist on what the war and the loss of comrades meant to surviving soldiers, for many veterans the emotions associated with loss stayed fresh even decades later, whereas for others, it was only remembered on Armistice Day. In an account of “One day during the war”, an ex-serviceman wrote:

many of the best friends we had are gone and, since it was with them that we always promised ourselves we should sit down and talk, it is now necessary to think some new tale [...] bereft of all reference to the intimacies of far off days [...] when one comes to do that one is assailed by a sense of how “so and so” would have appreciated that point or laughed at this. But then “so and so” is dead [...].¹⁹³

Noel McAllister Pollock, headmaster of Pretoria Boys High School between 1950 and 1955, who fought and was wounded in German East Africa, wrote on the fiftieth anniversary of the armistice: “The war took an entirely undue toll of the gentle and sincere, the able and the kindly and the generation which suffered, lost much more in talent and worth than was reflected in the mere numbers of the fallen.”¹⁹⁴ It is evident how this commemorative speech by an ex-serviceman contrasts with those of others: it was a reminder not only of the dead, but also of the sacrifice of the living.

Not only was there a difference in remembrance, but also in how others remembered the fallen and the war. Some ex-servicemen considered community remembrance as a form of accusation and associated it with a sense of survivor’s guilt. Ex-servicemen felt that, like the fallen, they had also paid the price of body and mind. They thus wanted to feel accepted by the civilian population and to be celebrated as survivors and heroes. This led to many ex-servicemen feeling a sense of “otherness.”¹⁹⁵ As a returned soldier wrote to *The Star*, “We soldiers do not want charity, but practical appreciation of what we have done.”¹⁹⁶ Charity was instinctively associated with the lower classes and poor whites, and thus seemed beneath the patriots of the Somme.¹⁹⁷ As another veteran wrote at another level, “You would never think of the 1,000,000 brave dead as “ordinary”, would you? [...] you can’t call a Moth—and this applies to all war veterans – “ordinary” because he is a “walking fluke.” It is a fluke he is alive. It is a fluke that he returned.”¹⁹⁸

It is difficult to discern the patterns of sentiment amongst South African war veterans due to the fissiparous nature of the Union, with its highly stratified population. What we have are glimpses, as one soldier wrote, “But those of us who have lost friends know well that much of the richness and beauty of life passed with them for ever from our lives.”¹⁹⁹ In a sense, ex-servicemen remembering comrades was a private affair, only shared and talked about with other veterans who would understand. This can be highlighted by contrast with the grandiose legacy of remembrance of the Battle of Delville Wood, which can be termed a shared ‘commemoration battle’ between the different Union factions.²⁰⁰ For survivors of the Delville onslaught, the earth marked an unfathomable private place. Clusters of these veterans made pilgrimages for fallen comrades, starting in 1917 and in 1918.²⁰¹ A discontinuous tradition evolved over the years as veterans returned to this wooded enclave.²⁰² It was not unusual to find photos in personal albums of the graves of comrades from various fronts.²⁰³

As Capt. AJ Molley wrote in the war years, “God help the Mothers, Wives [*sic*] and sisters and sweethearts that have got to listen to some of the G.E.A. [German East Africa] warriors on their return home.”²⁰⁴ Many could not understand the war as ex-servicemen did, and numerous civilians simply wanted to forget the war. Ex-servicemen also felt distanced from communities by more than merely some forms of remembrance, for some ex-combatants returned with both physical and psychological scars of the war, a legacy for decades thereafter. These effects could be seen at old boys’ cricket matches at Pretoria Boys High School. Amputee batsmen required runners, as well as overreacting to loud sounds as a consequence of shell shock.²⁰⁵ Students who attended the school did not understand these effects, and would drop a desk lid in order to trigger a nervous reaction from a veteran teacher in class for their own amusement.²⁰⁶

According to the wife of a returned soldier, in a speech given at Selborne Hall by the anti-war socialist, Colin Wade, he had asserted, “that soldiers in uniform wore a hang-dog look; anyway, all he had seen had a hang-dog look as though from shame for the part they had taken in the late war”. In response, she wrote, “I protest against Mr. Wade’s insulting remarks- a man who slept safely o’ nights whilst real men were fighting his battles making great sacrifices and suffering untold hardships. They have proved their manhood. Has Mr. Wade proved his?”²⁰⁷ A veteran expressed a similar sentiment, “I have heard it said in my presence [...] ‘Why all this fuss; this should all be forgotten.’ I have at times found it hard to keep my tongue still and my temper down.”²⁰⁸ Another ex-serviceman told of an experience on an overfull tramcar in Durban when one female passenger commented to another about the ill manners of a “tired looking-fellow” who wore a MOTH badge and occupied a seat whilst she had to stand. Upon hearing the “buxom woman’s” remarks, he got up and offered her his seat. She took the seat and the man “hobbled over”, declaring, “Bit thick ...’aving [*sic*] to stand up on half a leg!”²⁰⁹ The root of this problem, according to one veteran, was “a matter of discrimination and *understanding*”.²¹⁰ The lack of understanding, economic and emotional support gave rise to disgruntled sentiments by ex-servicemen since many felt that “Unflinchingly and unrepining [*sic*], they offered their heritage of full and splendid life, and trod the dark way of death without dismay.”²¹¹

5.2 ‘Commonwealth commonalities’: Veterans associations

A post-war associational culture of South African ex-servicemen emerged, yet not on the same scale as in New Zealand and Australia. The mushrooming of associations and clubs throughout the Empire-Commonwealth led to a Commonwealth Conference of delegates and in the founding of the BESL in 1921.²¹² The chief concern was to protect the interests of the war-disabled, securing pension rights, and the welfare of dependants of the fallen.²¹³ To some of those in government, such organisations were being “used by officers and other ranks [...] for the purpose of exploiting their alleged grievances”,

while others saw such Leagues and organisations as valuable, since it was “much more desirable to deal with such institutions than that the soldier should go to legal firms”.²¹⁴

One such association, based on the United Kingdom model, was the MOTHS, founded in 1927 by the then cartoonist of the *Natal Mercury*, Charles Evenden, better known as ‘Moth O’ or ‘plain Evo’.²¹⁵ The vision behind the order was ‘remembrance’ instead of forgetfulness in a time when such memories began to dim. The order was to be a body of ex-servicemen holding up the ideals of ‘Sound Memory, True Comradeship and Mutual Help’. The order consisted of Units (shellholes), grouped under District Dugout control, and these in turn under Provincial Dugouts under Headquarters situated in Durban.²¹⁶ According to the founder, the Order was “avowedly apolitical” and could cross ‘racial’ barriers, implying English and Afrikaans speakers.²¹⁷

The MOTHS were joined by comradeship and a mutual understanding of ‘what it was like’. According to Neil Roos, the politics of MOTH membership were fostered in response to a post-war society which neither understood nor acknowledged ex-servicemen’s experiences.²¹⁸ In an account of the musical concert at Selborne Hall, attended by the Transvaal MOTHS, its author noted, that they “had recovered the old spirit of the trenches, and all social and class barriers were blown to smithereens before the *esprit de corps* that united” them.²¹⁹ This camaraderie further conjured up the ‘good ole’ times’ in that terrible war by using familiar army terminology such as ‘shellholes’ and ‘dugouts’. Adverts or summations of MOTH events would read, ““Fall in” at 20.00 hours”, “to be followed by ‘gunfire’”, ““go over the top””.²²⁰ The choice of familiar shared words helped to unify the MOTHS further. Ironically, such associations kept the ideal of military service and patriotism alive, which tended to glorify war experiences and cultivated an image of masculinity, which so many felt had been lost with their reintegration into society. It was these ideals, albeit more hushed than in World War I, which were used to encourage enlistment in 1939.²²¹ The MOTHS represented a specific reaction of local servicemen to a society that ‘did not understand’. It was more distant from the establishment than, say the BESL, and its rituals were aimed specifically to recast and re-emphasise bonds formed in a place beyond words. Hence, its heavy emphasis on symbolism – the candle, the upturned rifles, the dimming of the lights, the MOTH salute. But, as important, the MOTHS provided a cross-class network, which helped youngish men find their way in a seemingly uncaring civilian world.²²²

Another unifying factor was a common suspicion of the state which had failed to care for them as promised, and the position of slackers in a post-war society that had forgotten them.²²³ The slackers, were usually young, healthy men who did not enlist for war service or participate in the war effort and usually gained financially from remaining on the home front. The rivalry with the “slackers” had been a continuous theme throughout the war. Figure 9 illustrates this sentiment towards this group of men.²²⁴ A speech made to returned soldiers by TG Jones, an ex-sergeant, was presumably misunderstood for stating that the Police Force was “a refuge for slackers”. In response, a short paragraph appeared on “A slander?”, and thus this to-and-fro battle continued.²²⁵ Such grievances were amplified after the war, as

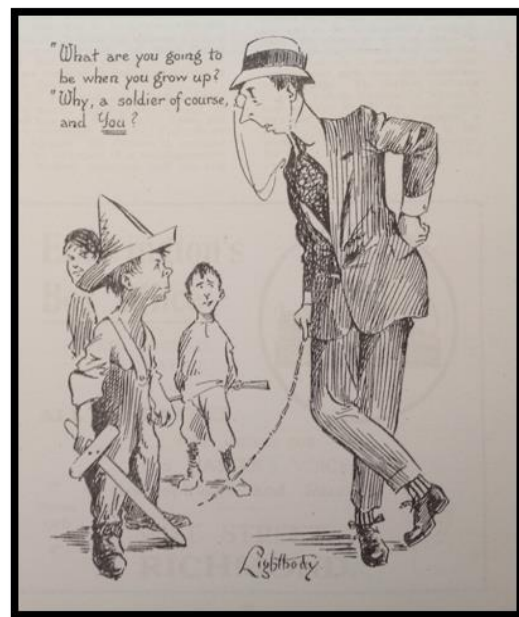


Figure 9: A Slacker

in one article, “A social historian” and veteran, questioned what had become of those “dear fellows who did *not* go to war, just because they did not want to go?” He continued, “the slackers are alive and prosperous” and as far as he could discover “not one is doing badly”.²²⁶ He continued to draw on the dissimilarities in the post-war chronicles between the slackers and the soldiers, since that was the only two camps that existed. The first difference was that the slackers had:

no wounds, no nerve affections, no wasted years, no opportunities of promotion lost, and no violent deaths [...] There are [...] no such stains as suicide, unfortunate marriages, unemployment or poverty [...] In 1914 he was poor; in 1918 he was not. In 1914 he ordered about only an office boy: in 1918 he had the power to give ex-soldiers the sack.²²⁷

In response, the MOTHS preached mutual help as a form of remembrance. This took root in the erection of MOTH cottage schemes providing accommodation throughout the Union for needy or aged ex-servicemen gratis or at a low cost. Financial aid was also given in a variety of other forms, including educational bursaries to the children of fallen servicemen.²²⁸ The MOTHS also offered discounts for household goods, advertised in the Moths’ Shopping Guide in *The Home Front*. Others who could not be lured by weekend kinship were attracted by phrases such as a ‘joy night’ for the Vryheid Dugout where “Posh rations will be dished out”.²²⁹ Despite such marketing schemes, other ex-servicemen preferred to live independently of this fictional ‘comradeship’ in peacetime and thought it best to forget this period and rather to try to carry on as before the war, in a state of enforced amnesia. One such case was that of Joe Samuels, the last South African survivor of the Battle of Delville Wood, who survived into the late 1990s. As Bill Nasson wrote, “Sammy’s tale was that of an unusually isolated war veteran”,²³⁰ he had no desire to reconnect with other ex-servicemen; rather, an “infernal horror” of his experience had kept him from joining a veterans association and he had little desire to read literary reconstructions of that time. Instead, he wished to keep those experiences “locked up”.²³¹ A few months of war, a brief moment compared to a lifespan, later came to shape these men’s entire lives more than any other of their experiences.

6. Conclusion

The criteria for being an able-bodied man differed between the state and ex-servicemen. According to the state, the dismembered body could be repaired to restore male self-confidence and pride.²³² However, ex-servicemen held a contrasting view of themselves, a frustration that became further entrenched as society began to forget. The Springboks who had been praised as valiant patriots came to be distanced from the rest of the Union, and felt themselves having become mere shadows of their former selves. With the cessation of hostilities, the belief in returning to a better civilian life than before the war proved false. Some men once again battled with a claim to a masculine identity, even more so for those who suffered disfigurement. This was coupled with remembrance patterns that saw to the emergence of war memorials across the Union that served the ‘cult of heroes’ whereby only the venerated dead were enveloped.²³³

With the outbreak of the Second World War, some of those who lived through the Great War, and knew its cruelties, felt as if it was a case of *déjà vu* – they had seen it all before. Those who had had a personal connection with the previous world conflict remembered the wrecks that came home – gassed, mutilated, blind, shell-shocked, limbless, or otherwise damaged. With this came a reminder of inadequate welfare provision and the slow struggle to recover from a warped national life.²³⁴

The end of the First World War saw the unveiling of a plaque to the fallen members of the Mountain Club of South Africa on Table Mountain in 1923, several monuments of the Somme

commander, General Lukin, the Delville Wood Memorial garden in the Cape Town Company's Gardens, the war memorial on Frog Rock in Mossel Bay, the inception of the Comrades Marathon,²³⁵ and many other such reminders.²³⁶ Yet, there is not one known, permanent public monument in South Africa today acknowledging the sacrifices endured by its *survivors* of the Great War, a memorial to the living, who had also given the essence of their lives. Today, internationally, popular fiction such as that of Pat Barker, and films have pushed the 'cause' of the returned World War soldier into public consciousness and discussion.

Yet, in the early twentieth century, the plight of often broken men was poorly understood. In many respects, as this article has tried to show, reintegration into post-war society with altered bodies and minds and the assumption of a new identity, was another kind of war. For those alienated ex-servicemen, the war continued beyond the dates, 1914–1918, emblazoned on war memorial plaques. The ex-soldier neither won this war nor did he endure it in the same way as he had done on the actual battlefield.

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- ¹ In 1916 the first War Special Pensions Act (Act 29 of 1916) was passed, which made special provision for the payment of benefits and awards to men on active service and their dependants. Further Acts were passed in 1917, 1918 and 1919. The War Special Pensions Act of 1919 (Act 42 of 1919) was the most important legislative enactment in regard to military pensions.
- ² Durban Archives Depository (hereafter TBD Archives), Town Clerk, Durban (1884–1940) (hereafter 3/DBN), 4/1/2/824, 180C, Peace celebrations – Minutes of Committee, 1919.
- ³ In order to stay true to the 'discourse' of the period under discussion, some of the terms used at the time being written about have been maintained. Therefore, the nomenclatures used in this work, such as white, Indian, South African (English, Dutch, Afrikaans, British), Boer, non-white, coloured, broken men and disabled, are purely descriptors to aid the reader in understanding the definitions of the period.
- ⁴ Anon. *The celebrations of peace: Official programme and souvenir booklet*. Cape Town: Cape Town Peace Celebrations Committee, 1919, 45.
- ⁵ Anon. "Hats off to Ian Fraser". *The Home Front*. October 1928. 3.
- ⁶ E Mayhew. *Wounded: A new history of the Western Front in World War I*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013; E Mayhew. *Wounded: From battlefield to Blighty, 1914–1918*. New York, NY: Random House, 2013. For other sources on this theme, see Anon. *The fourth dimension: The untold story of military health in South Africa*. Pretoria: Government Printer, 2009; Anon. *Militêre geneeskunde in Suid-Afrika*. Pretoria: Government Printer, 1984; I Whitehead. "Third Ypres: Casualties and British Medical Services, an evaluation". In PH Liddle (ed.), *Passchendaele in perspective: The third battle of Ypres*. London: Pen & Sword, 1997, 175–200; IR Whitehead. *Doctors in the Great War*. London: Leo Cooper, 1999; NF Basson. "Die geskiedenis van die Kaapse Burgermag-Mediese eenhede, 1889–1939". Unpublished MA thesis, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, 1988; B Hugo. *Betty Friend: A nurse in France*. Pretoria: Alkantrant, 1986; HFB Walker. *A doctor's diary in Damaraland*. London: E. Arnold, 1917.
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Hemingway’s *A farewell to arms* (1929), *Apocalypse now* (1979), *The killing fields* (1984) and *We are
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