Shell shock and desertion during the Great War

* Shell shock was first diagnosed as an illness in 1915, but doctors struggled to find a way to cure it. They tried rest, hypnosis, counselling and even electric shocks through the brain. Many men just needed time away from the front line to recover. Unfortunately, when they did get better they were often sent straight back to fight.
* Their symptoms returned and they sometimes ran away – unable to handle the situation any longer.
* Commanding officers were keen to maintain discipline, and when these men were caught they were charged with desertion or cowardice.
* In total, Britain shot **306** of its own soldiers for cowardice and desertion during the Great War

*Aaron Wilkes; Technology, War and Independence*

Extra information

* Shell shock - now called post-traumatic stress disorder - was first recognised in print by Dr Charles Myers of the British Psychological Society in 1915. By the end of the war the army had dealt with more than 80,000 cases.
* 'Even the ancient Greeks knew about what they called 'war exhaustion', whether it was physical or mental,' says Dr Boynton from the Royal Free and University Medical School.
* 'This condition would make soldiers behave erratically or hysterically, or go to the other extreme and become catatonic. Some who had run away claimed they could no longer stand the noise, and we know that if the eardrums take a constant pounding, the discomfort is too painful to bear. Thousands of men were terrified, but this is different. This is about inability to cope.
* 'Many of these men later proved they were brave by refusing to be blindfolded for their executions. They stared down the barrels of the guns which would kill them. That's not cowardice. That's courage.‘
* Dr Boynton believes those in the firing line would also have suffered. 'It was an extremely powerful form of bullying, having to kill your own friends,' she says. 'It sent out the message that you could be next.'