

Z Ward
Parkside Mental Hospital
Adelaide, South Australia
January 15th, 1919

Dear Mother,

I am scared. Your letter brings me comfort knowing father has set out for the Asylum, but I shall continue to fear the sunrise each day until he arrives.

In the trenches, one learns to be at ease with the roar of cannon and the cries of the dying - soon it becomes the silence that terrifies the most. This Asylum is as if the worst silence of the war were eternal. Noise provides much satisfaction to me; owing to it drowning out the violent memories that occupy a wandering mind. Over there, the roar of a Taube overhead or the constant wail and drum of shells falling to earth keep you anxious but busy from your thoughts so that they may not trouble you. But now, mother - mother I am scared.

Some nights during the silence I hear noises I cannot explain but for the devil. I lay on but a bundle of sheets, a comfort compared with what I had in the trenches, but I feel less at home than I did there.

Sleep is a friend I have not known for a week, awake each hour until the first light creeps through the steel barred windows and the warder's footsteps echo through the hall. Mother I fear my own thoughts. I cannot help but dwell on the dead. Henderson, McGrady, Peters, Johnson; I see their mangled faces and ruined bodies when I close my eyes and they never leave me. Each time the key turns in the lock I scramble; and each time there is the crash of the heavy steel door I jump from my skin. Perhaps this is penance. I made a promise; he is dead now, and now the devil has bestowed on me fearful silence and fitful worry for all eternity. I may not be rescued.

Forever,
Your son
Albert

Writer's Note - Shellshocked Soldier

The war left a lasting impact on society, and even those who were mostly able to return to daily life successfully were forever changed by it. The ward saw its fair share of murderers, lunatics, and delusional criminals, but it also had plenty of people perhaps not entirely deserving of the harsher criminal treatment they experienced there. The newspaper reports of Gallipoli veterans being housed in the Z-Ward is interesting because of our (at the time) limited understanding of PTSD, or shellshock. These soldiers were not necessarily violent, but it's not hard to see how medical professionals at the time could easily think they could be violent. As such, there were probably many soldiers deserving of far better treatment ending up in poor conditions in criminal wards suffering simply from PTSD and serious trauma.

The character is based on a newspaper report of Gallipoli veterans in the ward. I envision him as a very young boy, perhaps 20 years old. He had gone to war very young and unprepared. It changed him, and he returned driven mad with shellshock, although not violent. He mostly dwells on his own condition and wants nothing more than to return to his family.

**This series of letters was written by Sam Kuhl, a Flinders University student, who was on placement with the National Trust of South Australia. They are works of fiction informed by history and should be read as such. All names and addresses have been made up.*