

At the end of 1945, British demobilised over 750,000 service personnel. This number doubled two months later after Japan's surrender. By 1947, about 4.3 million men and women returned to 'civvy street'. The process was not without controversy. Frustration at the allegedly slow pace of release led to a number of disciplinary incidents in all branches of the armed services in the winter of 1945–6.

Thousands returned home with injuries, both physical and psychological. For many it would take years to recover as they tried to find their place back into old communities, or in the case of some Commonwealth forces into entirely new nations. Some ex-military personnel would never recover. The impact on their loved ones, family and friends, was devastating.

The US poet Thomas McGrath wrote this poem, *Homecoming*, in 1946.

After the cries of gulls and the fogbound island;
After the last accident, the last suicide, the last alert;
After we broke the ties of separation;
After the ship, projection of desire, and the homeward passage;

When the country opened up like a child's picture book,
(The hills were coloured by our loneliness, lakes by years of exile)
Until geography began to reassume its civilian status
And the slight smell of death was lost in the untroubled darkness;

Then we were troubled by our second coming:
The thing that takes our hand and leads us home –
Where we must clothe ourselves in the life of a stranger
Whose name we carry but can no longer know –
Is a new fear born between the doorstep and the door
Far from the night patrol, the terror, the long sweat.

And far from the dead boy who left a long time ago.