

War Protest, Heroism, and Shellshock Siegfried Sassoon: A Case Study

Siegfried Sassoon volunteered for military service shortly before Britain declared war in August 1914. While serving with the prestigious First and Second Battalions of the Royal Welch Fusiliers, both regular army battalions with long and honorable histories, Sassoon received the Military Cross, was recommended for the Victoria Cross, and was cited for bravery in battalion dispatches. He was nicknamed "Mad Jack" because of his exploits in the trenches. But on 6 July 1917, one week overdue from sick leave after a shoulder wound, Sassoon refused to report for duty, writing that he would not perform "any further military duties" as a protest against the government's refusal to state their conditions of peace (177). Enclosed with the letter was a longer statement which was read in the House of Commons and published in the London *Times*, in which Sassoon elaborated the reasons for his "act of willful defiance of military authority." He was protesting "the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed" and the unnecessary prolongation of the war, which had been changed by the politicians from one of defense and liberation to a war of aggression and conquest (173-74).

Sassoon prepared for martyrdom. He expected to be court-martialed and imprisoned and hinted at the ultimate punishment—the death sentence. Instead he was ordered to appear before a medical board which diagnosed shell-shock and ordered him to Craiglockhart Hospital for treatment¹—an embarrassing denouement for Sassoon, who equated shellshock with cowardice. In his later writings on the war, especially *Siegfried's Journey*, which is both an explanation of and an apology for his protest, Sassoon would argue against the verdict, justifying his actions and emphasizing their courage.

Although Robert Graves observed that the happy warrior became the bitter pacifist (275), in reality, Sassoon, while a war protester, was not a pacifist. His refusal to fight was short-lived. Shortly after arriving at Craiglockhart, he expressed guilt at having deserted his men and was soon asking to be returned to the fighting in France. W. H. R. Rivers, the psychologist who treated him, noted that Sassoon differed from the pacifists in that it was the seeming hopelessness of the war which concerned him and that he would be willing to continue fighting if he saw any prospect of a rapid decision. "He recognizes that his view of warfare is tinged by his feelings about death of friends and of the men who were under his command in France" (qtd. Fussell 135). Although he spoke on behalf of pacifist groups in the 1930's, he accepted the necessity of war in 1939 and even wrote two short, conventionally patriotic poems.²

Sassoon was not, in fact, protesting war in general, but this particular war, a protest which, in part, grew out of his own increasing bitterness at his comrades'

suffering and which was triggered by reports in pacifist journals of Britain's insincerity in negotiating peace terms with Germany. But human motivation is complex. As I will show, Sassoon was emotionally debilitated by the war and by his own need to present the fearless face of the happy warrior when, in fact, each return to the front required a desperate battle to suppress his fears. Suffering from a temporary loss of will and an inability to return to war which had temporarily shattered his by-now fragile courage, Sassoon displayed all the symptoms of shellshock.

Shellshock, originally coined to connote the medical effects of shell concussion, quickly became a common, catch-all term embracing a variety of neuroses and psychoses caused by the stress of war. Witnesses before the Parliamentary Committee investigating shellshock suggested that it was "nervous breakdown due to strain" (16), or "a state of mind or body engendered or perpetuated by fear" (17). One emphasized mental stress as the most frequent cause of shellshock (28), while another pointed to the "wear and tear of a prolonged campaign of trench warfare with its terrible hardships and anxieties" as the cause (5). One witness defined shellshock as "the sapping of morale by sudden or prolonged fear which subordinated a man's power of will to his instinct of self-preservation and ultimately reduces him to a state wherein he cannot control his emotions" (29); another identified shellshock as a condition "born of fear. Its grandparents are self-preservation and the fear of being found afraid" (31). Most agreed that fear was a major factor and noted anxiety among officers at even experiencing fear or appearing fearful before others (13, 47, 70).

Mental breakdown was more frequent among officers, possibly because they were responsible for the men under them as well as for themselves and were required to inspire their men with their own enthusiasm and courage. The personality type most prone to shell-shock was the idealistic, high-strung, sensitive individual who tried to hide his own terror. With the growing fear of danger, courage was forced; and the desire for escape grew stronger; the only acceptable means of escape was death. Those most obsessed with fear might perform reckless acts, a sign that a breakdown was near. An order to return to the front from leave caused a sudden development of fear, and the individual was torn between his ideals and the instinct of self-preservation. Duty required that he return; feelings of incompetence argued against; feelings of cowardice flooded him with shame.³ The description easily applies to Siegfried Sassoon.

A study of Sassoon's wartime experiences and of his diary entries, as he became increasingly involved in the fighting, reveals a man who prided himself on his courage, who concerned himself with the men serving under him, who performed recklessly in the field, but who was finally overwhelmed by the ugliness of the war, the deaths of friends, and the fear of his own death. In the summer of 1917, Sassoon finally broke. His instinct for self-preservation overpowered his desire to do his duty and serve bravely. He escaped a return to

France by protesting the war. A courageous and honest act, Sassoon's protest equally evolved out of his inability to return to the front. The medical board diagnosis of shellshock was not mistaken.

Although Sassoon volunteered in August 1914, he did not arrive in France until fifteen months later in November 1915 and would not serve on the front lines until March 1916. Not yet actively involved in the fighting, he filled his diary with heroic posturings and a yearning for a hero's death. "I want a genuine taste of horrors, and then—peace.... I must pay my debt. Hamo went: I must follow him" (22).⁴

But the realities of war impinge. On 19 March 1916 a close friend is killed; from the end of March until July, when he is hospitalized with fever and invalided home, Sassoon is in and out of the front lines. Now he has his chance to prove himself. "I want to get a good name in the Battalion, for the sake of poetry and poets, whom I represent" (51). He wants people to see that "poets can fight as well as anybody else." He talks of the exhilaration of creeping in front of the trench wire and of his own recklessness: "They say I am trying to get myself killed. Am I? I don't know" (54). He is recommended for and later receives the Military Cross for his actions in bringing in the dead and wounded on 25 May (65-67); on 30 May he records a "narrow squeak" when a bomb falls about a yard away from him (69). Having now experienced the realities of war, Sassoon confines his diary entries to simple statements about the fighting. Gone is the heroic posing colored by chivalric Victorian war imagery. Although still determined to prove his courage, he no longer regards war as the great adventure. "O this bloody war!" he says in a June entry, and "the war will go on and on till we can't stick it any longer" (73-74).

At the start of the battle of the Somme, Sassoon's battalion is assigned to the Mametz Woods area. He takes part in wire-cutting parties preparatory to the attack. Although placed in reserve, he captures a German trench with bombs and is recommended for the Victoria Cross. However, he misses most of the fighting. Forced into inactivity, he can only watch as casualties mount. Marching to position, the battalion passes dead bodies, laid side by side along the road. Among the dead are thirty from Sassoon's battalion. In addition to the deaths of those with whom he serves, he receives the erroneous news that his friend Robert Graves has been killed (80-99).

Sassoon's perception of the war is changing. The reality of the dead and wounded differs from his earlier sanitized poetic imaginings. The deaths of those around him, combined with the dangers to which he is regularly exposed, force him to face the very real possibility of his own death.

Hospitalized on 23 July and invalided home, Sassoon escapes the fighting for the rest of the year, not returning to France until February 1917. He feels guilty at forsaking the battalion, and his bitterness at the war increases during the fall and winter of 1916. Many of the officers with whom he served are

already dead; he receives word of additional deaths during his leave. Their names appear in his diary. The idea of fighting and dying is no longer either desirable or acceptable. In a brief fictional piece written in August, Sassoon's officer-protagonist wonders "how he could avoid being sent out again" (100). In December Sassoon writes that "the thought of death is horrible, where last year it was a noble dream" (109). He is upset by the attitude in England where "people still say the War is 'splendid', damn their eyes" (105). His poetry becomes increasingly bitter. During this period he meets Ottoline and Phillip Morrell, important members of Britain's pacifist movement.

By January 1917, facing imminent return to France, he vacillates between visions of heroic self-sacrifice and a fear of death colored by bitterness at the war. On 10 January: "It is blood and brains that tell; blood in the mud, and brains smashed up by bullets" (117); 16 January: "I hope I shan't get myself killed in 1917" (119). On 21 January he returns to the idea of self-sacrifice (122), yet when the Medical Board passes him for active duty he writes that they have signed his death warrant, adding, "I'd got another chance given me to die a decent death" and "the wings of death are over me once more" (127-28). By 6 February, tired and depressed but accepting the inevitable, he returns to France and immediately contracts German measles. Confined to the hospital, he writes that "my own terrors get hold of me and I long only for life and comfort, and the weeks before me seem horrible and agonizing Yet I should loathe the very idea of returning to England without having been scarred and tortured once more" (133).

Assigned to the 2nd Battalion, RWF, he continues to vacillate during March and April 1917, but once the battalion begins moving up to the line, "the 'happy warrior' stunt cropping up as usual" (149). He is determined to stay and try to become a hero. In April, the battalion moves into position preparatory to the Battle of Arras. On the line, rations are short—only one meal a day. Sassoon is suffering from insomnia and acute awareness of the dead and wounded. He expects to die. However, wounded in the shoulder while leading a bombing raid on German trenches, he remains with his men until they are withdrawn (153-55). The return to action has revived his courage, but now it is back to the hospital and to England. In the hospital, still feeling "warlike," he sees himself as the "hero." But, under "Things to remember" he lists "dead men and living lying against the sides of the trench—one never knew which were dead and which living" (156-57). Relieved at escaping the war, he is filled with guilt at being alive and out of danger. Home in England on sick leave, he wakes from "the usual beautiful dream about 'not going back,'" but knows that he will be "sent out again to go through it all over again with added refinements of torture.... Something in me keeps driving me on: I must go on till I am killed" (162). On 16 May, he receives casualty reports of the First and Second Battalions: 2nd RWF—ten killed, fifteen wounded in six weeks; 1st RWF, April through May

18 at Bullecourt—350 casualties (169).

The summer of 1917 marked the crisis. Three years before Sassoon had enthusiastically embraced war as the great adventure, an antidote to boredom, as escape from dissatisfaction with his life, and a stage for heroic self-authentication. But no longer. By now he has seen friends maimed and killed. He has seen their bodies lying alongside the road, reminders of his own mortality, a mortality emphasized by his recent wound. Sick leave condemns Sassoon to isolation from his comrades and to inactivity—time to think, to brood, and to imagine. He had always been afraid; had always been distressed at even feeling fear. But in the past, he had always been able to suppress his terror and rebuild his courage for a return to France. Now, worn down by the war, he cannot.

In *Siegfried's Journey* and in the novel *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, Sassoon describes his months of convalescence: he alternates between the family home and London, brooding on his duty to return to his post alongside his comrades, attempting unsuccessfully to restructure his heroic self. He could honorably escape a return to the front by accepting a job in England. But, as desperately as Sassoon needed escape, his sense of self-worth demanded heroism. Unable to return and seek heroism on the battlefield, the heroism of martyrdom beckoned: on 21 May he said that he had better return to the First Battalion as soon as possible “unless I can make some protest against the war” (171).

In July, encouraged by the Morrells and their supporters, Sassoon, war hero and war poet, issued his public protest and escaped from the war while preserving his self-respect. He was appalled by the medical board's diagnosis of shellshock, a label he equated with cowardice, and by his friends' reactions. They told him that he was disgracing himself, was intellectually wrong, was misguided.⁵ Disconcerted by their disapproval, guilt-ridden at having deserted his comrades, Sassoon now does an about-face. Still insisting on the integrity and bravery of his protest, he now resolves to return to the fighting and share in the misery, writing friends that he will demand a written guarantee that he be sent to France (190, 192-93). He even argues, in Byzantine fashion, that, if they pass him for General Service, “they admit that I never had any shell-shock, as is quite out of the question for a man who has been three months in a nerve-hospital to be sent back at once if he really had anything wrong” (190). But despite his pronouncements, fear of the war and his ability to perform remain: after passing the Medical Board and while waiting reassignment, he is caught up in an air-raid which “gave me an awful fright,” and concludes, “I don't think I'll be any good when I get to the war” (197).

Posted in February 1918 to the 25th Battalion stationed in Egypt, Sassoon is unhappy at being assigned to a territorial rather than a regular battalion; however, there is “less chance of getting killed” (205). The war in Palestine is

neither as grim nor as destructive as in France, and his diary entries are relaxed. Much relieved, he writes, "Here I can start afresh" (224). But in April, the battalion knows it is being transferred, probably to France. Sassoon's torment begins anew: "If I am killed this year, I shall be free. Selfishness longs for escape, and dreads the burden that is so infinitely harder to carry than three years, two years, one year ago.... *I will not go mad*" (emphasis added; 238).

In France, his anxiety escalates. "I must never forget Rivers. He is the only man who can save me *if I break down again*. If I am able to keep going it will be through him" (emphasis added; 246). The battalion is posted to the area where Sassoon last served before his war protest. Here, during the battle of Arras the year before, 80% of the officers and a number of the men in his battalion were killed (255). Reminders of friends now dead are everywhere (248, 258, 263-64). Sassoon's self-control weakens; old terrors resurface. One day he feels "stronger and more confident than ever" (259); on another, "jumpy and nerve-ridden" (261). He must be the hero before his men, but "in the darkness of the night my soul goes down into the valleys of death, and my feet move among the graves of dead youth" (269). Obsessed with fear, he tests his courage through reckless behavior, one sign of impending breakdown. A subaltern in his battalion provides us with an eerie description of Sassoon spending his nights crawling around no-man's-land with a few bombs in his pocket (Pinto 81). Luckily for Sassoon, his war ends before he breaks. On 13 July, he is wounded and hospitalized. Clinging to the shreds of his courage, knowing the difficulties of regaining mastery over his fears if he goes home again, he is obsessed with remaining in France to recuperate before returning to his company. "I had lived myself into a feeling of responsibility for them" (275). Perhaps he questioned his ability to do so again.

But home and security beckon. "I am weakening in my proud, angry resolve; all my tenderness is fading into selfish longing for safety." He is returning to England in a few days, "and I know it's wrong... [but] I know that I shall go there, because it is made so easy..." (275-76). And so the war ends for Sassoon.

For much of the war, Siegfried Sassoon described himself as the "happy warrior." But after three years of war, this decorated hero who proved his courage in the trenches of France and who prided himself on his bravery, emerged as a war protester, a forerunner of the soldier-protesters of later eras. His protest was not self-serving pretense. He was tormented by a war which created terrible sufferings among his fellow-soldiers, a war which he became convinced the British government could end and would not. But he was also afraid: afraid of returning, afraid of dying, afraid even of appearing afraid—afraid of being found lacking. Through the early years of war he had successfully repressed his fears, but by 1917, worn down physically and mentally, unable to resuscitate his courage, Sassoon was close to the breaking point—perhaps even broken. Unable to return to the front, Sassoon cast about

for an honorable solution to his dilemma, one in accord with the moral precepts of duty, responsibility, patriotism, and courage—virtues inculcated in him as a member of the country gentry. A safe job in England, which he had obtained,⁶ did not meet his standards, but a protest against the war, which placed him in a different type of danger and even offered the prospect of martyrdom, protected his image of self while allowing him to escape a situation with which he could no longer cope. That he was suffering from shellshock does not invalidate the sincerity of his protest; that his protest was sincere does not prove wrong the diagnosis of shellshock. Rather, his inability to suppress his instinct for self-preservation allowed his bitterness at the war to surface. And so the war hero became the war protester. Sassoon did return to active duty; but, as became evident when his battalion was posted to France, where fear again threatened to overwhelm him, he would never be the same.

NOTES

1 In *Good-bye to All That*, Robert Graves describes his role in having Sassoon brought before a medical board rather than being court-martialed and imprisoned. Although he agreed with Sassoon's sentiments, he believed that Sassoon's protest would accomplish nothing and was bitter at the pacifists for using him. Anxious on Sassoon's behalf and believing him physically unable to endure imprisonment because of his health, Graves was able to convince the military to bring Sassoon before a medical board. He himself gave evidence concerning Sassoon's state of mind, including his hallucination of corpses on the pavements in Piccadilly (256-64). Robbie Ross had promised help from friends in the War Office if Graves had not succeeded (qtd in Sassoon 182).

2 The two poems are "The English Spirit" and "Silent Service" which were published in *The Observer* in 1940 (Thorpe 38).

3 MacCurdy 9, 15, 21-24, 31; Wittkower and Spillane 3-5, 15-17; Culpin 35, 53; Hargreaves 87; Miller 112. See also *Report of the War Office*, especially 29, 71.

4 Hamo was Sassoon's younger brother who died at Gallipoli.

5 See selection of letters reprinted in Sassoon 178-181. Approval comes only from Ottoline Morrell.

6 Sassoon was accepted as an instructor in the Cadet Battalion at Cambridge.

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