

David W Fletcher

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Siegfried Sassoon [1886-1967], *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1930; London: Faber Paperbacks, 1965), 236 pages, no preface, no index.

“This book is the second part of Sassoon’s fictionalized autobiography, which follows *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* and precedes *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*. [Book Jacket].

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Chapter I. Spring 1916 in the trenches opposite Mametz.

Sassoon [under the pseudonym 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Sherston] receives a message to proceed from the Front to the Fourth Army School at Flixecourt, between Amiens and Abbeville, for a month’s refresher course. The course itself is practically useless, but rather served as “a holiday for officers and NCOs who needed a rest” (9). At the school, conditions seem “miraculous” after time in the trenches. Approximately 300 officers and NCOs receive training on strategy (8), the art of sniping (9), the use of gas (11), and the *Manual of Bayonet Training* (11). Sassoon enjoys fresh air, a good bath, the “horsehood of England,” time with young Allgood (who is killed later), and the assault course demonstration by the men for the English and French generals (13-15). Sassoon states his purpose in writing: “It is my own story that I am trying to tell . . . those who expect a universalization of the Great War must look for it elsewhere. Here they will only find an attempt to show its effect on a somewhat solitary-minded young man” (13).

Chapter II. The Second Battalion “out of the line” at Morlancourt.

Sassoon returns to his unit and dwells upon something he put out of mind while at the Army School: the Raid. The unit returns to the line at 71 North and Sassoon prepares to raid along with his men on this occasion. Colonel Kinjack does not allow the young officer to participate but reminds him, “Your job is to stop in our trench and count the men as they come back” (25). The four parties of five men each conduct the incursion (quite descriptive account,

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25-27), with the only result as “two killed and ten wounded” (28). Sassoon concludes, “Nothing important had happened on the British Front that night, so we were rewarded by a mention in the G. H. Q. *communiqué*. ‘At Mametz we raided hostile trenches. Our party entered without difficulty and maintained a spirited bombing fight, and finally withdrew at the end of twenty-five minutes.’ This was their way of telling England. . . . Curiously enough, I hadn’t yet seen a German. I had seen dim figures on my dark patrols; but no human faces” (29).

Chapter III. From the trenches to Kensington and back to his battalion at Bussy.

Sassoon reflects on feelings of fellow soldiers, the “smouldering sunset,” rats in the trenches, and an unexpected time of leave from the Front (30-35). He relates conversations with Aunt Evelyn whereby he catches up on family news among other niceties he enjoys while on leave (35-42).

Chapter IV. Summer 1916, back to Morlancourt, then the Somme offensive [somewhere near Mametz].

The author gives details by certain hours of the first two days of the battle, excerpts from “a small shiny black notebook [of his] pencilled particulars” (54-56). He remarks about the casualties [about 100 but only a dozen killed], the need of the men for rest, the peculiar feelings he experiences, the sunset (several times), the enemy dead, war booty or souvenirs, and Quadrangle Trench (63-69). On the arrival of reinforcements, the remnant of the battalion retire some twelve miles westward to Heilly, a camp by the river Ancre, “a much pleasanter place than the Somme battlefield” (70). After a couple of days, the unit reenters the lines near Mametz to engage the enemy in the Battle of Bazentin Ridge. Sassoon relates his experiences behind the lines (74-81). This very long section ends with this note about his soldiers: “Soon they had dispersed and settled down on the hillside, and were asleep in the daylight which made everything seem ordinary. None the less I had seen something that night which overawed me. It was all in the day’s work—an exhausted Division returning from the Somme Offensive—but for me it was as though I had watched an army of ghosts. It was as though I had seen the War as it might be envisioned by the mind of some epic poet a hundred years hence” (84).

Chapter V. Rest at La Chaussee, then convalescence at New Zealand Hospital, Amiens, and No. 2 Red Cross Hospital, Rouen, more rest in England, then back to the Front.

A very high fever knocks Sassoon out of the war temporarily, and he finds himself eventually at Oxford where life carries on pretty much without distraction (91-93). In recovery, he enjoys reading, quaint conversation, and the “stuffy” side of British formal society. Negative news from his battalion does not distract from his pleasure in an extension of sick leave into October (98-102).

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Chapter VI. Fall/Winter, 1916/1917, at Clitherland Camp, then Liverpool, or thereabouts, and so forth.

Sassoon rambles about more time spent in England while he awaits word from a medical board as to whether or not he is fit for general military service. A certain Durley relates his recent experience of battle at Delville Wood on September 3 (110-114). Sassoon is approved to return to duty on the Front.

Chapter VII. February 1917, at Rouen.

The author reports to the 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Base Depot at Rouen, where he spends about ten days with the German measles at No. 25 Stationary Hospital (120). He notes, "I was losing my belief in the War, and I longed for mental acquiescence—to be like young Patterson, who had come out to fight for his country undoubting, who could still kneel by his bed and say his simple prayers, steadfastly believing that he was in the Field Artillery to make the world a better place. I had believed like that, once upon a time . . ." (123). He spends some time in the town, at the Hotel de la Poste, the Cathedral, before his departure.

Chapter VIII. With the Second Battalion of the Flintshire Fusiliers after a harsh winter experience in the Clery section of the Somme Front, resting at Camp 13 somewhere near Morlancourt, April 1917.

Sassoon's company goes by way of Corbie to Villers-Bocage, then to Beauval, Lucheux, Doullens, Saulty, and finally Basseux, to take up positions for the Battle of Arras (134-145). His brigade attacks the Hindenburg Line near Fontaine-les-Croiselles, but Sassoon's unit remains in reserve. When they move up into the line near St. Martin, they number only about sixty but must cover a sector of 600 yards (153). The young officer is quite descriptive: "Out in no-man's-land there was no sign of any German activity. The only remarkable thing was the unbroken silence. . . . I stumbled down a shaft to the underground trench . . . there were fifty steps down the shaft; the earthy smell of that triumph of Teutonic military engineering was strongly suggestive of appearing in the Roll of Honor and being buried until the Day of Judgment. . . . By ten o'clock I was above ground again . . . it was a yellow corpse-like day, more like November than April, and the landscape was desolate and treeless. What we were doing was quite unexceptional; millions of soldiers endured the same sort of thing and got badly shelled into the bargain. Nevertheless I can believe that my party, staggering and floundering under its loads, would have make an impressive picture of Despair (154-156). The chapter concludes with the discussion of plans and execution of an attack (underground and above ground) on the Hindenburg Line during which Sassoon suffers a bullet wound from a sniper (157-171).

Chapter IX. In convalescence at a London hospital.

The author details his retrospective “outlook” on the war and his involvement in it. “I began to feel that it was my privilege to be bitter about my war experiences; and my attitude toward civilians implied that they couldn’t understand and that it was no earthly use trying to explain things to them” (172). He talks about his visitors, experiences in the hospital ward, and his conflicting thoughts. News about the Front seems distant, hopeless, and even vague.

Chapter X. In and about London.

Sassoon takes a turn towards an antiwar position. He write, “I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority, because I believe that the War is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it. I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this War, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purposes for which I and my fellow soldiers entered upon this War should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to change them, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation. I have seen and endured the sufferings of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust. I am not protesting against the conduct of the War, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed. On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practiced on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize” (204, 218). He is dealt with gingerly by his military command and the review establishment. He receives a medical discharge for shell-shock and is sent to Slatford War Hospital, Edinburgh.

Questions for Discussion

1. What parts of Sassoon's memoirs are authentic, and what parts are fabrications? Since the author gives no clear clues about the distinction, how is the reader to judge the work overall?
2. Does the work—*Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*—as a whole elicit verisimilitude?
3. From Sassoon, what can be learned for certain about trench warfare and especially significant battles like the Somme?
4. Does Sassoon view British society at the time of the Great War as hypocritical? How does he feel about officers in general?
5. In some sense, can *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* be called a parody? Why or why not?
6. At the beginning of chapter eight, Sassoon makes the following statement: "Although the War has been described as the greatest event in history, it could be tedious and repetitional for an ordinary Infantry Officer like myself" (129). Is Sassoon to be viewed as "an ordinary infantry officer," or is this just a form of self-defacement for literary effect?