



Scenes after a recent battle (Somme)

'Memoirs of an Infantry Officer' by Siegfried Sassoon:

For a few minutes the hollow was full of the subdued hubbub and commotion of troops getting into their equipment. Two battalions had been called out; The Royal Irish moved off ahead of us. As we went up the lane toward Mametz I felt that I was leaving all my previous war experience behind me. For the first time I was among the debris of an attack. After going a very short distance we made the first of many halts, and I saw, arranged by the roadside, about fifty of the British dead. Many of them were Gordon Highlanders. There were Devons and South Staffords shires among them, but they were beyond regimental rivalry now – their fingers mingled in blood-stained bunches, as though acknowledging the companionship of death. There was much battle gear lying about, and some dead horses. There were rags and shreds of clothing, boots riddled and torn, and when we came to the old German front-line, a sour pervasive stench which differed from anything my nostrils had known before. Meanwhile we made our continually retarded progress up the hill, and I scrutinised these battle effects with partially complacent curiosity. I wanted to be able to say that I had seen “the horrors of war”; and here they were, nearly three days old.

A Description of going ‘over the top’

'Regeneration' by Pat Barker:

He raised the cigarette to his lips, and said, *'All right. Your watch is brought back by a runner, having been synchronized at headquarters'. 'A long pause. 'You wait, you try to calm down anybody who's obviously shitting himself or on the verge of throwing up. You hope that you won't do either of those things yourself. Then you start the count down: ten, nine, eight . . . so. You blow the whistle. You climb the ladder. Then you double through a gap in the wire, lie flat, wait for everybody else to get out – those that are left, there's already quite a heavy toll – and then you stand up. And you start walking. Not at the double. Normal walking speed.'* Prior started to smile. *'In a straight line. Across open country. In broad daylight. Towards a line of machine-guns.'* He shook his head. *'Oh, and of course you're being shelled all the way.'*

No Man's Land

Letters from Wilfred Owen:

This heralded his first trench tour, on the St. Quentin front. On January 16 he wrote: “I can see no excuse for deceiving you about these last 4 days. I have suffered seventh hell. I have not been at the front. I have been in front of it. I held an advanced post, that is, a ‘dug-out’ in the middle of No Man’s Land. We had a march of 3 miles over shelled road, then nearly 3 along a flooded trench. After that we came to where the trenches had been blown flat out and had to go over the top. It was of course dark, too dark, and the ground was not mud, not sloppy mud, but an octopus of sucking clay, 3, 4 and 5 feet deep, relieved only by craters full of water. Men have been known to drown in them. Many stuck in the mud and only got on by leaving their waders, equipment, and in some cases their clothes. High explosives were dropping all around, and machine-guns spluttered every few minutes. But it was so dark that even the German flares did not reveal us. Three-quarters dead, I mean each of us $\frac{3}{4}$ dead, we reached the dug-out and relieved the wretches therein. I then had to go forth and find

another dug-out for a still more advanced post where I left 18 bombers. I was responsible for other posts on the left, but there was a junior officer in charge. My dug-out held 25 men tight packed. Water filled it to a depth of 1 or 2 feet, leaving say 4 feet of air. One entrance had been blown in and blocked. So far, the other remained. The Germans knew we were staying there and decided we shouldn't. Those fifty hours were the agony of my happy life. Every ten minutes on Sunday afternoon seemed an hour. I nearly broke down and let myself drown in the water that was now slowly rising over my knees. Towards 6 o'clock, when, I suppose, you would be going to church, the shelling grew less intense and less accurate; so that I was mercifully helped to do my duty and crawl, wade, climb, and flounder over No Man's Land to visit my other post. It took me half an hour to move about 150 yards. I was chiefly annoyed by our own machine guns.

(Lieutenant Wilfred Owen M.C was killed in action on 4th November 1918-one week before the end of the War)

Mines (1)

Jack Firebrace lay forty-feet underground with several hundred thousand tons of France above his face. He could hear the wooden wheezing of the feed that pumped air through the tunnel. Most of it was exhausted by the time it reached him. His back was supported by a wooden cross, his feet against the clay facing towards the enemy. With an adapted spade, he loosened quantities of soil into a bag, which he passed back to Evans, his mate, who then crawled away in the darkness. Jack could hear the hammering of timbers being used to shore up the tunnel further back, though where he worked, at the face, there was no guarantee that the clay would hold.

The sweat ran down into his eyes and stung them, making him shake his head from side to side. At this point the tunnel was about four feet across and five feet high. Hack kept sticking the spade into the earth ahead of him, hacking it out as though he hated it. He had lost track of how long he had been underground. He found it easier not to think when he might be relieved, but to keep digging. The harder he worked, the easier it seemed. It must have been six hours or more since he had seen daylight, and even then not much of it, but a thin green haze across the lowlands of the French-Belgian border, lit by the spasmodic explosion of shells.

Birdsong by Sebastian Faulks

Mines (2)

The mines were driven far under the ground into a blue clay. At the heads of the deeper ones the men enlarged chambers where they could rest and sleep without needing to go back above the ground. They bore the stench of their packed unwashed bodies for the sake of the warmth and safety. Any minute was better that was not spent beneath the endless dripping sky; no night was unbearable that offered shelter from the freezing winds that stiffened their waterlogged tunics and trousers into icy boards. The smell was hard to breathe, but it was no better above ground where the chloride of lime seemed not to relieve but to compound the atmosphere of putrefying flesh, where the latrine saps had been buried or abandoned and men preferred to inhale the toxic smoke of braziers than the smell of faeces.

Effects of Mud

It had been raining for three weeks, drizzling, then surging into a steady downpour, then lifting for an hour or so until the clouds came in again over the low horizon of Flanders in its winter light. The men's coats were saturated, each fibre of wool gorged on water, and their weight added twenty pounds to what they carried. They had marched up from their billets into the rear area and already the skin on their backs was rubbed raw by the movement of the webbing beneath the load. Repetitive marching songs and chants had brought them to the support lines, but then as darkness fell they saw it was another three miles to the front. Slowly the songs and conversations died as each one concentrated on lifting his feet from the mud that began to suck at them. Their worlds narrowed to the soaked back of the man in front.

The communication trench was filled with orange slime that covered their boots and puttees. The closer they went to the front line the more it began to smell. Within half a mile it had become no more than a zig-zagged cesspool, thigh-deep in sucking mud that was diluted by the excreta of the over-run latrines and thickened by the decomposing bodies that each new collapse of trench wall revealed in the earth beneath.

Birdsong by Sebastian Faulks

Aftermath of First Day of Somme

Price was reading the roll call. Before him were standing the men from his company who had managed to return. Their faces were shifty and grey in the dark.

To begin with he asked after the whereabouts of each missing man. After a time he saw that it would take too long. Those who had survived were not always sure whom they had seen dead. They hung their heads in exhaustion, as though every organ of their bodies was begging for release.

Price began to speed the process. He hurried from one unanswered name to the next, Byrne, Hunt, Jones, Tipper, Wood, Leslie, Barnes, Studd, Richardson, Savile, Thompson, Hodgson, Birkenshaw, Llewellyn, Francis, Arkwright, Duncan, Shea, Simons, Anderson, Blum, Fairborther. Names came pattering into the dusk, bodying out the places of their forebears, the villages and town where the telegrams would be delivered, the houses where the blinds would be drawn, where low moans would come in the afternoon behind closed doors; and the places that had borne them, which would be like nunneries, like dead towns without their life or purpose, without the sound of fathers and their children, without young men at the factories or in the fields, with no husbands for the women, no deep sound of voices in the inns, with the children who would have been born, who would have grown and worked or painted, even governed, left ungenerated in their fathers' shattered flesh that lay in stinking shellholes in the beet-crop soil, leaving their homes to put with only granite slabs in place of living flesh, on whose inhuman surface the moss and lichen would cast their crawling green indifference.

Of 800 men in the battalion who had gone over the parapet, 155 answered their names. Price told his company to dismiss, though he said it without the bark of the parade ground; he said it kindly. They attempted to turn, then moved off stiffly in new formations, next to men they had never seen before. They closed ranks.

Birdsong by Sebastian Faulks

Opening of the Battle of the Somme

The mine went up on the ridge, a great leaping core of compacted soil, the earth eviscerated. Flames rose to more than a hundred feet. It was too big, Stephen thought. The scale appalled him. Shock waves from the explosion ran through the trench. Brennan was pitched forward off the firestep and broke his leg.

We must go now, thought Stephen. No word came. Byrne looked questioningly at him. Stephen shook his head. Still ten minutes.

German fire began at once. The lip of the British trench leapt and spat soil where machine guns raked it. Stephen ducked. Men shouting.

'Not yet.' Stephen screaming. The air above the trench now solid.

The second hand of his watch in slow motion. Twenty-nine past. The whistle in his mouth. His foot on the ladder. He swallowed hard and blew.

He clambered out and looked around him. It was for a moment completely quiet as the bombardment ended and the German guns also stopped. Skylarks wheeled and sang high in the cloudless sky. He felt alone, as though he had stumbled on this fresh world at the instant of its creation.

Then the artillery began to lay down the first barrage and the German machine guns resumed. To his left Stephen saw men trying to emerge from the trench but being smashed by bullets before they could stand. The gaps in the wire became jammed with bodies. Behind him the men were coming up. He saw Gray run along the top of the trench, shouting encouragement.

He walked hesitatingly forward, his skin tensed for the feeling of metal tearing flesh. He turned his body sideways, tenderly, to protect his eyes. He was hunched like an old woman in the cocoon of tearing noise.

Byrne was walking beside him at the slow pace required by their orders. Stephen glanced to his right. He could see a long, wavering line of khaki, primitive dolls progressing in tense deliberate steps, going down with a silent flap of arms, replaced, falling, continuing as though walking into a gale. He tried to catch Byrne's eye but failed. The sound of machine guns was varied by the crack of snipers and the roar of the barrage ahead of them.

He saw Hunt fall to his right. Studd bent to help him and Stephen saw his head opening up bright red under machine gun bullets as his helmet fell away.

His feet pressed onwards gingerly over the broken ground. After twenty or thirty yards there came a feeling that he was floating above his body, that it had taken on an automatic life of its own over which he had no power. It was as though he had become detached, in a dream, from the metal air through which his flesh was walking. In this trance there was a kind of relief, something close to hilarity.

Ten yards ahead and to the right was Colonel Barclay. He was carrying a sword.

Stephen went down. Some force had blown him. He was in a dip in the ground with a bleeding man, shivering. The barrage was too far ahead. Now the German guns were placing a curtain of their own. Shrapnel was blasting its jagged cones through any air space not filled by the machine guns.

All that metal will not find room enough, Stephen thought. It must crash and strike sparks above them. The man with him was screaming inaudibly. Stephen wrapped his dressing around the man's leg, then looked at himself. There was no wound. He crawled to the rim of the shellhole. There were others ahead of him. He stood up and began to walk again.

Perhaps with them he would be safer. He felt nothing as he crossed the pitted land on which humps of khaki lay every few yards. The load on his back was heavy. He looked behind and saw a second line walking into the barrage in no man's land. They were hurled up like waves breaking backwards into the sea. Bodies were starting to pile and clog the progress.

There was a man beside him missing part of his face, but walking in the same dreamlike state, his rifle pressing forward. His nose dangled and Stephen could see his teeth through the missing cheek. The noise was unlike anything he had heard before. It lay against his skin, shaking his bones. Remembering his order not to stop for those behind him, he pressed slowly on, and as the smoke lifted in front of him he saw the German wire.

It had not been cut. Men were running up and down it in turmoil, looking for a way through. They were caught in the coils where they brought down torrents of machine gun fire. Their bodies jerked up and down, twisting and jumping. Still they tried. Two men were clipping vainly with their cutters among the corpses, their movement bringing the sharp disdainful fire of a sniper. They lay still.

Birdsong by Sebastian Faulks