

Siegfried Sassoon

Siegfried Sassoon was one of the great poets from [World War One](#). The poetry from the likes of Sassoon and [Wilfred Owen](#) seemed to many to be an apt summary of the horrors that many had experienced during the war. Siegfried Sassoon was born on September 8th 1886 in Kent. Born into a reasonably well-off family, Sassoon was educated at Marlborough College and Clare College, Cambridge University where he studied Law and History. However, he left university before graduating but had discovered a love for the poetry of Tennyson and Yeats. Up until the outbreak of the war, Sassoon spent his time living a life of leisure – fox hunting, playing cricket and riding point-to-point. Encouraged by Edward Marsh to write poetry, Sassoon moved to London to immerse



himself in literature. He rented out an apartment and in July 1914 met [Rupert Brooke](#) there. Though he was short of money and soon in debt, it was the type of experience that he was looking for.

However, the war changed all this.

Sassoon enlisted on August 2nd [1914](#). He joined the Sussex Yeomanry. However, while training he had an accident riding a horse that resulted in a badly broken right arm, which delayed his move to the front. After recovering from this, he was given a commission in the Royal Welch Fusiliers (May [1915](#)) and as a 2nd Lieutenant he served with both the 1st and 2nd Battalions. His poetry from this time tends to be patriotic and comments on the nobler aspects of war. In later years he was to criticise these poems as being too glorifying.

The death of his brother at [Gallipoli](#) in November [1915](#) and a good friend, David Thomas in March [1916](#), brought home to Sassoon the full impact of war. However, rather than adopt a passive approach, the two deaths seemed to have spurred Sassoon on to what can only be described as acts of revenge. He went out on patrol in No-Man's-Land when no patrols were planned and such acts of recklessness led to him gaining the nickname 'Mad Jack' from his men. Sassoon wrote about longing to meet a German patrol and attacking it with grenades and cudgels.

Such dangerous acts were only curbed by Sassoon being sent to the Fourth Army School at Flixécourt for four weeks. These four weeks away from the front line calmed down Sassoon. In late June 1916, he was awarded the Military Cross for his bravery and leadership in bringing back to British trenches men who had been

wounded in a raid on a German [trench](#). The death from his injuries of one of these men, Corporal O'Brien, deeply affected Sassoon who had known O'Brien for some time.

Sassoon played no part in the [Battle of the Somme](#), which started on the day after he received his Military Cross. His unit was held in reserve at Kingston Road. Sassoon caught trench fever and was sent home by a sympathetic doctor who had just read about his MC in 'The Times'. After convalescing at home, he was passed fit on December 4th and sent back to France in February 1917. However, within two days he caught German measles and spent ten days in a hospital in Rouen. Sassoon's unit was held in reserve for the Battle of Arras but he was wounded at Tunnel Trench during the Battle of Scarpe where a German sniper shot him between the shoulders.

It was during this period of convalescence that the patriotism and enthusiasm that he had shown in the early years of the war started to disappear. He wrote poems that condemned senior officers and the way they ran the war. Sassoon also wrote his 'Declaration' in this time and sent it – a statement of wilful defiance – to his colonel. Fully expecting to be punished for this, he was only saved by Robert Graves who also served in the Welch Fusiliers. Graves managed to persuade the higher echelons of the Welch Fusiliers that rather than punish Sassoon, they should offer him support. As a result he was sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital in Scotland (which Sassoon called 'Dottyville') suffering from shell shock. While here Sassoon wrote a lot of poetry and also met [Wilfred Owen](#) who was also convalescing. It was Sassoon who encouraged Owen to continue with his efforts. After four months convalescing at Craiglockhart, Sassoon was deemed fit enough to return to General Service.

After a short spell in [Palestine](#) (January to February 1918), Sassoon was posted to France where he served on the front line. Despite being a company commander, he continued to show some of the recklessness that he had shown in 1915. Along with a corporal he attacked a German position at St. Floris and was wounded in the head (July 13th 1918). He was invalided back to England to convalesce. Sassoon was given indefinite sick leave and, despite maintaining his commission, he never went on active service again.

In March 1919, Sassoon resigned his commission and left the army.

Most of his war poems were comments on what life was like at home in England amongst those who were not experiencing the horrors of the war in France and Belgium. In particular he saved some of his greatest criticism for those who he believed were profiting from the war though a few of his poems were openly critical of those who commanded the army.

After the war, Sassoon spent a great deal of time writing his autobiography. The six volumes took from 1928 to 1945 to complete.

He died on September 1st 1967.

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