

One Among Millions: The Military Career of R C Sherriff

The story of playwright R C Sherriff's service in the Great War with the 9th Battalion, the East Surrey Regiment

Interviewees:

Michael Lucas (ML): author of *The Journey's End Battalion: the 9th East Surrey and R C Sherriff in the Great War*

Zoe Karens (ZK): the R C Sherriff Project Archivist, Surrey History Centre

Roland Wales (RW): author of *How Like it All Is*

With Thanks to The Surrey History Centre: Mike Page, Di Stiff

Camera David Rafique

Producer Jane McGibbon

Director Grant Watson

Pursued by a Bear Productions

Michael Lucas: R C Sherriff, was a clerk, an insurance clerk in 1914, and he tried to, join the army and obtain a commission. But he was, refused a commission on the face of it because he'd not gone to the right school. But it also looks because, his school hadn't got, a, an army, the equivalent of an army cadet force today, so as far as I can see he had no military training whatsoever.

Zoe Karens: So it took him several attempts before he was able to enlist, and when he manages it he goes as, as a cadet, to the Artists' Rifles, to their camp in Romford in Essex. And as a cadet he's, he lives in a hut with, various other cadets, and he's learning about trench diggings, also attending lectures, and so on. And also he does learn about engineering, as well, which possibly, is a reason why, later on, he was in charge of a, engineering tunnelling working party.

Roland Wales: At the end of summer, in 1916, he passes the officer test, in the Artists' Rifles, and he gets gazetted to the East Surreys in September. And he's there, in Dover, for about three weeks, before finally at the end of September, he is shipped off to France; and then he's sent to the, he's originally gazetted to the Third East Surreys but when he gets to France he goes to the Ninth East Surreys, pretty well as soon as he goes out.

ML: And, initially he found it, a quite fascinating, and bizarre experience. He arrived when the battalion had just moved to, were just moving to Vimy Ridge for a short while, and he wrote his series of articles, about his initial impressions.

ZK: He was actually in the reserve line, initially, and already he mentions in a letter that he's disgusted by war, which is interesting, and he can hear the noises of the shelling from the front, from where he is. He's in a shed, with lice and rats, although he does reassure his mum that the food is, is OK. But shortly after that, by the tenth of October, he is in the front line, and he's serving his first terms of duty.

RW: There's a sequence of letters he writes to his mum, while he's in France, saying look, you know if I get killed, don't worry. You know three things are going to happen: either I'm going to come back alive, and OK, or I'm going to get wounded and come back, or I'm going to get killed. And, you know if I'm alive that's great, and if I get wounded well we'll deal with that, but if I get killed well, you know you mustn't grieve, lots of other people are, are in the same boat, lots of other mums are in the same boat, you know, and there's money in the bank and if, if I die, I, I hope that you'll go and buy that, you know, cottage in Selsey and, you know, that you and Bundy go down there. So there's real, he's grappling with a real sense of mortality there.

ML: And, very soon he, found that he was, transferred to the engineers, which he quite, quite liked. There was a, a lot of tunnelling going on, and he was able to get away from normal regimental duty with supervising the men who were assigned to the, the tunnellers.

ZK: It's interesting that even though that's a bit removed from where all the action is really happening, they're still getting some shelling, and on, in mid-November he writes a letter where he says that he's now finding the shelling much more stressful than he did, beforehand, before he came to this, working party job. And he says he actually feels ashamed of how he feels, so he's getting this sense of guilt, inadequacy, is, has started.

RW: He works on the lines then until Christmas, but then in Christmas there's a new colonel but he's not happy with Sherriff because he feels his men are scruffy, and badly dressed and that he should come back to the trenches. So he comes back to the trenches and he's back in time for new year, when he gets shelled mercilessly on New Year's Day. And thereafter, he's into the cycle of, of, they have a week in the trenches, a week in reserve, and then a couple of weeks at rest and then back in again. That was how the British army operated.

ML: Sherriff increasingly found, that he was, he found the stress of being under fire, hard to take, and he hoped that these feelings would reduce in time, but in fact they increased. And

he came back from the tunnellers after Christmas 1916, and within a few weeks he was, sent, sent off sick, with, with neuralgia.

ZK: The first surviving reference we've got to Sherriff's neuralgia is in a letter dated the twenty-fifth of January, 1917, and that's the first surviving incidence we've, we have, now, where he refers to it. And it's this point, when he's actually sent on sick leave, for about a fortnight, at a hospital in, still in France; he didn't get referred back to England, but, he remains there for about two weeks. And while he's, he's on the sick leave, he writes, particularly to his mum, that he, he can't forget the stress of thinking about being on the front line, and he dreads going back to the front line. And, it's, at this point that I, I think the trauma kind of reaches a new pitch.

ML: And so he managed to keep going until he, was wounded, and what happened was, a field gun shell hit the top of a pillbox that they were passing, and Sherriff put out his hand and found that his face was covered in blood, and he was afraid that his face had disapp-, that much of his face had gone. And his company commander sent him off with his orderly to, to the dressing station to be seen to; but in fact, his wounds look more serious than they were, because the fortunately for him, the shell had burst upwards, and what he'd been hit with were, lots of splinters of concrete from the pillbox; and so he was relatively lucky to be sent back to England with those injuries. And he went then through a series of medical boards but never actually returned to France, he was employed in England, training troops for the front.

RW: And he was, he was perpetually in terror but you can quite understand that, and he still did his job, he still went there, he still was in the trenches when he was getting bombed, and he still fought in, in Passchendale. So he, if anything it's more heroic, to do it in the face of, such terror. So, I don't think he had anything to feel guilty about, but it seems, that he did.

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