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Abstract

During the First World War, British officers, primarily upper class, struggled to adapt to trauma within the boundaries of social expectations. Viewing the combat experience and letters of Jack Peirs during the battle of Passchendaele offers insight into how officers experienced the war, explained it to their families, and coped with trauma.

Keywords

Trauma, WWI, HJC Peirs, emotion, Passchendaele, social expectations

Disciplines

Mental and Social Health | Military History | Trauma

Comments

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Jack Peirs, Third Ypres, and Control

Soldiers during the First World War had immense physical and emotional trauma to cope with. Jack Peirs, although an officer, was no different. During his service he was witness to innumerable horrific events and traumatic situation. By examining the role of the 8th Battalion, The Queen's Royal West Surrey Regiment in the Battle of Third Ypres, or Passchendaele, and by examining the letters he wrote immediately before and after the action one can gain an understanding of what Peirs saw and how he coped with the events he had been thrust into. Most importantly, his letters offer insight into the social expectations of the British officer class and how they attempted to cope with fear and trauma while maintaining control and emotional reticence.

On July 27th, 1917, Peirs wrote letters to each of his sisters. In these letters he tries to calmly assuage any fears his family had. Peirs was certainly aware of the impending offensive and the sheer carnage that would ensue. In his letter to Cecily, his only mention of going into action soon is when he writes, “we shall be going into the line in a day or two & I went up to have a look round yesterday, in the early morning when things were quiet.”¹ His letter to Odile is devoid of mention of going back into line, and his letter to Gladys only briefly mentions that he will be going into line, which he immediately follows with discussion of how he “incidentally got drenched, but it was only a passing storm & the weather is fine again & I trust it will remain so.”² As he would serve as commanding officer of the Battalion during the attack, Peirs was doubtlessly stressed about leading his unit into a large offensive as well as certainly being bogged down in logistical preparations such as taping out the line of attack for his men. Rather than unloading that stress onto his sisters, he instead downplayed the danger he was in by stating he scouted the line when it was quiet,

¹ “27 July 1917 – To Cecily.” The First World War Letters of H.J.C. Peirs. <http://jackpeirs.org/letters/27-july-2017/>

² “27 July 1917 – To Gladys.” The First World War Letters of H.J.C. Peirs. <http://jackpeirs.org/letters/27-july-2017-to-gladys/>

mentioned he thought the weather would get better soon (it would not), and regaled them with humorous stories of balloonists and Chinese labor parties.³ By calmly mentioning his foray to the front and then deflecting with other comments, Peirs is working to demonstrate that he has control of the situation. Upper class British society, and therefore the British officer class, had social expectations of composure and control. Additionally, Alexander Watson states that “outward displays of confidence and composure by leaders provided a comforting sense of control for subordinates, thus reducing the subjective impact of danger.”⁴ Although he was writing to family members and not speaking with other soldiers, the same principles apply. Demonstrating to his sisters that he is in control and only temporarily inconvenienced by things out of his control, such as rain, Peirs was living up to social expectations and assuaging the fears of his family. Additionally, demonstrating control is not only a way to assuage the fear of others, but also one’s own fears. S.J. Rachman argues that “there is a connection between our ability to control potentially threatening situations and the experience of fear. In the face of threats, if a person feels unable to control the probable outcome, he or she is likely to experience fear.”⁵ Thus, writing these letters could have helped Peirs to convince himself that he was in control of the situation as much as possible, calming his own fears.

On July 31st, the battle of Passchendaele began after a lengthy preliminary bombardment that began on July 16th. Unfortunately, despite the fact that the bombardment had been extended three additional days, German defenses remained largely intact.⁶ The attack was scheduled for 3:50 AM, and at 3:54 AM the leading companies of the 8th Queen’s began their attack, leaving their trenches near Klein Zillebeke, Belgium.⁷ Following a creeping

³ Ibid.,

⁴ Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 110.

⁵ Ibid, 29.

⁶ Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Passchendaele* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 86-87.

⁷ The Queens Royal West Surreys War Diaries, July 1917, 2.

barrage, the Battalion soon took their objectives of Jehovah Trench as well as Jordan Trench.⁸ They were under heavy shell fire throughout, and since the units on their flanks were unable to seize their objectives, the 8th Queens suffered high casualties. At the beginning of July, the unit numbered 868 men and 34 officers.⁹ Total killed, wounded, and missing sustained from the 31st of July to the 1st of August included 293 men and 12 officers, meaning that they sustained over 30% casualties.¹⁰ Although some of the missing would eventually straggle back, these were still tremendous losses. Throughout the battle they were subjected not only to shellfire, but also to rain. An officer of the King's Liverpool Battalion recorded that between the 1st and 4th of August there were 40.7 millimeters of rainfall. Rainfall that month was nearly double the August average of 70 mm.¹¹

The evening of August 1st, the 8th Queens was relieved by the 9th East Surreys.¹² Having returned to the Micmac Camp for rest, Peirs again wrote letters to his family. In these, he struggled to tell his family about the battle while also avoiding censorship. More importantly, he struggled to relate the events he had seen in a way that was appropriate. He potentially wanted to express the horrible events but knew that it was not acceptable either to censors or to British society to truthfully tell the story. Additionally, he certainly would not have wanted to terrify his sisters or his parents with graphic retellings. His first letter following the offensive was written on August 2nd, likely shortly after his arrival. The rather brief note written to his mother reads:

6 a. m & I am about to go to bed but I just write to let you know that I have been in & am now out of the great strafe all serene. The Battn. did well & took all its objectives. I was in command as the C. O. stayed out. The weather is vile & the trenches we have made absolutely filthy. I am covered in mud & must wash.¹³

⁸ Ibid, 2-3.

⁹ Ibid, 1.

¹⁰ Ibid, 4.

¹¹ Prior and Wilson, 97.

¹² The Queens Royal West Surreys War Diaries, July 1917, 4.

¹³ "2 August 1917." The First World War Letters of H.J.C. Peirs. <http://jackpeirs.org/letters/2-august-1917/>

This letter is the most honest view into Peirs' emotions following the battle. He is exhausted, soaked, and horribly shaken up from commanding his unit through awful conditions. As shaken as he is, he still attempts to control the situation. He makes sure to tell his mother he is alright and mentions how well his men performed. Rather than discussing enemy fire, he instead focuses on how bad the weather was.

By August 3rd, Peirs began writing in more depth, having settled back down and partly recovered from combat. His letters were now longer, calmer, and more controlled. He wrote letters to his father and two of his sisters, and in sharp contrast to the short note to his mother, the three letters are longer, more coherent, and more similar to his letters before the battle. Peirs' letter to his father has the most detail about the battle, voicing frustration at the units on his flanks, but rather than writing gruesome details he describes German machine gun fire as "playfully dusting us whenever we moved."¹⁴ Instead, he fills his letters with details of loot taken from German positions and complains about the rain. Writing his sister Gladys he states "this infernal rain is getting too much of a good thing & it absolutely declines to stop. I have never seen anything to equal the condition in the trenches we have just left," though optimistically adds that "there is a heat wave in America & it may reach here & dry us up a bit."¹⁵ Although he could not control the weather, his optimism about it that was also seen before the battle is his way of attempting to express control over it.

His letters following the battle fit within the social expectation of emotional reticence. Just as officers were expected to appear in control, they were also expected to keep their emotions in check. Peirs lets very little emotion through, even while he scrawled out a quick letter to his mother on August 2nd. Laura Root's writings on class consciousness in the British army explain the importance of emotional reticence. She attributes it to the "upper middle-

¹⁴ "3 August 1917 – To Father." The First World War Letters of H.J.C. Peirs. <http://jackpeirs.org/letters/3-august-1917-to-father/>

¹⁵ "3 August 1917 – To Gladys." The First World War Letters of H.J.C. Peirs. <http://jackpeirs.org/letters/3-august-1917-to-gladys/>

class background and public-school education. There, boys who would later become officers were taught to “repress outward signs of emotion, if not to suppress the entire emotion itself.”¹⁶ Peirs was suppressing his trauma not only to spare his family gruesome details but also because suppression was the norm for upper-class British men. Root argued that suppressing emotion often led to increased psychological problems and weaker mental fortitude, though it seems that Peirs did not suffer from that as much as some other officers did.¹⁷

Peirs’ letters surrounding the beginning of the Third Battle of Ypres offer insight into how officers in the First World War coped with trench warfare, uncertainty, and danger. Working within the social confines of his class and rank, H.J.C. Peirs was expected to maintain control and suppress his emotions. On the one hand, these two expectations could help a soldier cope with trauma temporarily. However, soldiers who either lacked Peirs’ fortitude or experienced greater trauma sometimes faced increased mental breakdowns when they found situations they were unable to control or were worn down by suppressing emotions. Peirs’ letters show how control and suppression along with sharing funny anecdotes and talking about normal life in letters to his loved ones helped him to process and psychologically survive the experience of Third Ypres.

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¹⁶ Laura Root, “‘Temporary Gentlemen’ on the Western Front: Class Consciousness and the British Army Officer, 1914-1918” *The Osprey Journal of Ideas and Inquiry*, (Vol 5, 2006), 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*,

“3 August 1917 – To Gladys.” <http://jackpeirs.org/letters/3-august-1917-to-gladys/>

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