

2016

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### **Recommended Citation**

Barrett, Matthew "Absolutely Incapable of 'Carrying On:'" Shell Shock, Suicide, and the Death of Lieutenant Colonel Sam Sharpe." Canadian Military History 25, 1 (2016)

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# “Absolutely Incapable of 'Carrying On'”

## Shell Shock, Suicide, and the Death of Lieutenant Colonel Sam Sharpe

MATTHEW BARRETT

*Abstract: This article examines Canadian social and medical responses to nervous breakdown and suicide in the First World War through the case study of Lieutenant Colonel Sam Sharpe, a Member of Parliament and commander of the 116th Battalion. An historical analysis of Sharpe's experiences and reaction to war trauma provides wider insights into how shell shock and military suicide represented a potential threat to prewar masculine ideals. Medical and political interpretations of Sharpe's breakdown initially aimed to preserve social stability and validate the war's moral justifications but contradictory understandings of shell shock ultimately made for a complicated and unstable process of commemoration.*

But it is awful to contemplate the misery and suffering in this old world [and] were I to allow myself to ponder over what I have seen [and] what I have suffered thro [sic] the loss of the bravest [and] best in the world, I would soon become absolutely incapable of “Carrying on.”<sup>1</sup>

LIEUTENANT COLONEL SAM SHARPE, a sitting Member of Parliament and commander of the 116th Battalion, wrote the above message to Muriel Hutchison, the widow of one of his officers,

<sup>1</sup> Sam Sharpe to Muriel Hutchison, 21 October 1917. Letter courtesy of the Ontario Regiment Museum (Oshawa, Ontario).

on 21 October 1917 just prior to the battle of Passchendaele. Seven months later Sharpe jumped to his death from a Montreal hospital window on 25 May 1918. He had just returned to Canada from England where he had been recovering from the strain of nearly eleven months active service on the Western Front. Sharpe was one of the thousands of Canadian officers and soldiers who suffered mental stress injuries during the First World War. Commonly included under a broad definition of shell shock, the nervous debility and breakdown of soldiers represented a significant military and medical problem as well as a destabilising challenge to traditional gender and class assumptions. The suicide death of a prominent colonel and politician had the potential to undermine a cultural belief system that defined ideal masculinity through stoic strength, self-discipline, and willpower.

After assessing Sharpe's professional and political background and detailing the psychological effect of his wartime experiences, this article connects the specific case study to medical and societal attitudes concerning masculinity, leadership, shell shock, and death. This case study examines the context and circumstances surrounding Sharpe's breakdown and suicide in order to identify the influence of political ideology, public perceptions, and personal relationships in shaping reactions to war trauma. Rather than destabilise a concept of ideal masculinity or weaken a belief in willpower, medical responses to Sharpe's case attempted to preserve social stability by interpreting his breakdown and death as conforming to the cultural expectations for a male leader of his status and position. The flexible and uncertain nature of shell shock and mental injuries allowed medical authorities to identify Sharpe as a genuine example of nervous collapse in contrast to other shell shock sufferers deemed illegitimate due to perceived malingering or inherently weak character. Complex and contradictory perceptions of shell shock and nervous breakdown, however, made for the problematic commemoration of a psychologically wounded officer. Public memorialisation initially incorporated Sharpe's death into a wartime mythology that emphasised the necessary sacrifices and moral justifications of the conflict. Within a few years, a postwar public and political desire to purify the memory of tragedy and loss all but eclipsed remembrance of Sharpe and served to obscure the subversive implications of mental damage and self-destruction.

**POLITICAL IDEOLOGY AND PUBLIC SERVICE**

Born on 13 March 1873 in Zephyr, Scott Township, Ontario, Samuel Simpson Sharpe was a graduate of Osgoode Hall and a prominent barrister and solicitor in the town of Uxbridge. He was a leading citizen in Ontario County with deep community and family ties through his marriage to Mabel Edith Crosby, granddaughter of businessman and political figure Joseph Gould.<sup>2</sup> Sharpe's social status as a middle-class professional signified an expected duty to assume an active role in public life and perform civic responsibilities. As Andrew Holman argues, legal professionalism in Ontario small-towns served "as a potential source of cultural and political leadership."<sup>3</sup> Sharpe's involvement in the Methodist Church, business associations, sports clubs, and the militia conferred a sense of prestige, influence, and authority. A committed militiaman, he joined the 34th Regiment at the age of sixteen, received a commission in 1894, and later advanced to the rank of major. In the October 1908 federal election, Sharpe was elected Conservative Member of Parliament for Ontario North.

When the Conservative Party assumed power in 1911, the Borden government considered Sharpe for Minister of the Militia and Defence before the cabinet position went to rival Sam Hughes, six-term Member of Parliament (MP) from neighbouring Victoria County.<sup>4</sup> In the House of Commons, Sharpe clashed with Hughes over militia policy and expressed frustration with the minister's abrasive style. In one testy exchange in February 1914, Sharpe questioned whether the minister's favoured Ross Rifle would be suitable for active combat. Hughes replied that his chosen rifle had yet to prove itself because "we have never had a chance to have a crack at anybody since they were adopted."<sup>5</sup> A year later, Hughes' Ross Rifle would get its crack on the battlefields of France; as would Sam Sharpe.

<sup>2</sup> Hector Charlesworth, *A Cyclopaedia of Canadian Biography* (Toronto: The Hunter-Rose Company, Limited, 1919), 100.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Holman, *A Sense of Their Duty: Middle-Class Formation in Victorian Ontario Towns* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), 53.

<sup>4</sup> *The Canadian Who Was Who*, vol. I (Toronto: Trans-Canada Press, 1934), 463.

<sup>5</sup> House of Commons. *Debates*, 12th Parliament, 3rd Session. (6 February 1914), 518–519. Although a good target rifle, the Ross proved unsuited to battlefield service as it jammed with mud or dirt. The controversy was one of several factors that led to Hughes' dismissal from cabinet in November 1916.



Samuel Simpson Sharpe,  
Conservative MP for Ontario  
North, c. 1915. [Library of Congress  
LC-B2-2631-9]

When the British Empire declared war on Germany in August 1914, Sharpe hoped to obtain an overseas command but was initially overlooked when the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) organised at Valcartier, Quebec. Past disagreements with the militia minister proved a critical obstacle as Sharpe complained to Prime Minister Borden that “crazy” Hughes was “determined to humiliate me” and “ruin my life.”<sup>6</sup> Although initially made second-in-command of the 2nd Battalion, Sharpe was soon, in his words, “kicked out” at Hughes’ direction. Admitting that “the worry and anxiety are terrible,” Sharpe feared potential disgrace in the opinion of his constituents and the entire country.<sup>7</sup> His failure to join the First Contingent prompted Thomas Gowans, Liberal editor of the *Uxbridge Journal*, to mock, “There was only one officer who flunked and ran home,

<sup>6</sup> Sharpe to Borden, 18 September 1914, Robert Borden Papers, MG 26H C-4214, 12486.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 12487–12488; Tim Cook, *The Madman And The Butcher* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2010), 64; Ronald G. Haycock, *Sam Hughes: The Public Career of a Controversial Canadian, 1885–1916* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press), 1986), 184.

and that was the member for North Ontario.”<sup>8</sup> Illustrating the significance of protecting a reputation against implied cowardice, Sharpe sued Gowans for defamatory libel and forced a retraction.<sup>9</sup>

By November 1915 the Ontario North MP finally secured the militia minister's authorisation to form the 116th Battalion from Ontario County. As Sharpe had vowed to Borden during the Valcartier dispute, “I want to go to the front, and I want to go with my own Regiment.”<sup>10</sup> Nearly all the officers belonged to the 34th and many of the one-thousand volunteers were constituents in Sharpe's parliamentary riding, which included the town of Uxbridge, the townships of Brock, Mara, Rama, Scott, and Thora, as well as the villages of Beaverton and Cannington. One of a dozen parliamentarians appointed to command a battalion, Sharpe also represented the typical background and social status of most Ontario infantry colonels. He belonged to the educated, professional middle-class and held important community and political connections through Parliament, business, family, fraternal organisations, and the militia. Analyzing the recruitment system in Ontario, Paul Maroney states such officers comprised the local elite and were well-positioned to leverage their reputation and prestige to raise a unit.<sup>11</sup>

The 116th commander claimed that a military uniform symbolised the highest form of public service and felt his position as an elected representative made his own active participation in the war all the more vital. In an open letter to the citizens of the county, Sharpe declared, “We are fighting for an empire worthy of our best and

<sup>8</sup> “Editor Committed on Charge of Libel,” *Toronto Globe*, 19 April 1915, 11.

<sup>9</sup> Gowans claimed to have been roughed up by Sharpe and his men in a street confrontation. Reprinted from the *Uxbridge Journal* in “The War in North Ontario,” *Toronto Globe*, 28 August 1914, 4. In a press interview, Hughes expressed approval of Sharpe's alleged methods in “rawhiding the cowardly critic.” “Col. Hughes' Vigorous Reply to Insinuations,” *Toronto Globe*, 4 September 1914, 9. At the same time, Hughes confided to Borden, “Personally, I have suspected him of being a sneak towards me for years” and accused Sharpe of wanting “a safe position.” Hughes to Borden, 21 September 1914, Borden Papers, MG 26H C-4214, 12510.

<sup>10</sup> Sharpe to Borden, 18 September 1914, Borden Papers, MG 26H C-4214, 12489.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Maroney, “The Great Adventure: The Context and Ideology of Recruiting in Ontario, 1914–1917,” *Canadian Historical Review* 77, no. 1 (1996), 65. Indicating the personal nature of organising a battalion, Sharpe's officers included sons of prominent county officials as well as two nephews, Major Carson McCormack and Major H.V. Gould. His original second-in-command, Major Robert Burns Smith, was the son of fellow Conservative MP for Ontario South, William Smith.

bravest.”<sup>12</sup> Admitting that the history of the British Empire had been “marred occasionally by crimes of oppression and rapacity,” Sharpe nevertheless asserted that centuries of imperial rule “made for the peace, the happiness and the civilization of the world.”<sup>13</sup> Believing that the dominion had shared in the privileges of the empire, he argued Canadians held a corresponding responsibility to come to its defence. Sharpe’s perspective on the inseparable relationship between Canada and Britain reinforced Carl Berger’s argument that “imperialism was one form of Canadian nationalism.”<sup>14</sup>

As Mark Moss argues this brand of British Canadian imperialism also reflected a dominant political ideology that merged patriotic nationalism with martial manliness.<sup>15</sup> Before the war Ontario politicians, social reformers, clergy, and educators sought to instil in male students values of self-sacrifice, manly strength, and moral virtue. Sharpe contributed to the construction of this masculine ideal through his endorsement of public school education and the cadet movement as means to improve boys’ character and self-discipline. He stressed the need for the militia to “attract men of better character and better education.”<sup>16</sup> By encouraging cadet training, militia duties, and sport activities, imperialist-minded civic leaders like Sharpe further hoped to develop every boy’s mind and body in preparation for an adulthood of patriotic public service and, if necessary, military service.<sup>17</sup>

In an April 1915 lecture entitled “Inculcating the Spirit of Patriotism in our Public Schools,” Sharpe urged, “bringing forcibly to the impressionable minds of the young people the glorious achievements of the British arms.”<sup>18</sup> Although he cautioned against promoting an excessive militaristic spirit and argued “Canada’s destiny lies along the paths of peaceful pursuits,” Sharpe maintained

<sup>12</sup> “Ontario County Unit Near Full Strength,” *Whitby Gazette and Chronicle*, 2 March 1916, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Sam Sharpe, “Patriotism in the Schools,” in *Proceedings of the Fifty-Fourth Annual Convention of the Ontario Education Association, April 5-8, 1915* (Toronto: Warwick Bros and Rotter, Ltd, 1915), 343.

<sup>14</sup> Carl Berger, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism, 1867-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 259.

<sup>15</sup> Mark Moss, *Manliness and Militarism: Educating Young Boys in Ontario for War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> House of Commons. *Debates*. 11th Parl., 2nd Sess. (30 April 1910), 8566.

<sup>17</sup> Moss, *Manliness and Militarism*, 102, 117.

<sup>18</sup> Sharpe, “Patriotism in the Schools,” 344.





Sharpe addressing the 116th Battalion before going overseas, Oshawa, Ontario, 1916. [Oshawa Public Library LH2146]

that it was the duty of every male citizen to take up arms in the crisis.<sup>19</sup> As he explained during the recruitment campaign, “Boys must be made to realize, that it is not length of years that makes life worthwhile, but the quality of service.”<sup>20</sup> By spring 1916, the 116th had been recruited to full strength. Witnessing the departure of the battalion from Uxbridge, prominent author and local resident Lucy Maud Montgomery recorded, “Poor fellows. I wonder how many of them will ever return.”<sup>21</sup>

#### AT THE SHARP END

After leaving Canada from Halifax on 23 July 1916, the 116th Battalion arrived for training in England. Like nearly all of the newly disembarked battalions in summer 1916, Canadian military authorities drafted a large portion of the original volunteers into

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> “Ontario County Unit Near Full Strength,” *Whitby Gazette and Chronicle*, 2 March 1916, 1.

<sup>21</sup> Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterson, eds., *The Selected Journals of L.M. Montgomery: Volume II: 1910–1921* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), 184.



frontline units. Through Sharpe's influence, and military necessity on the front, the 116th was, however, the last late-war infantry battalion to retain its designation when deployed to the battlefields of France in February 1917. Reinforced with soldiers drawn from various broken-up battalions, including the 126th (Peel) and the 157th (Simcoe), the 116th still contained, in Sharpe's words, "a goodly proportion of Ontario [County] boys."<sup>22</sup> Remarking on the unique distinction of the 116th going to the front as a whole unit, a 157th officer speculated, "They must have some pull."<sup>23</sup> Battalion chaplain John Garbutt meanwhile thought the "very unusual" decision was "a great compliment to our ... men and officers."<sup>24</sup> Attached to the 9th Infantry Brigade of the 3rd Division in the Canadian Corps, the 116th replaced the 60th (Victoria Rifles), which had been unable to sustain replacements from its home province of Quebec. Lieutenant Colonel F.A. Gascoigne of the 60th dismissed the substitution of his battle-hardened unit by a "green one."<sup>25</sup> The removal of a well-respected battalion caused many soldiers in the brigade to initially resent the arrival of Sharpe's "Baby Battalion."<sup>26</sup>

The 116th's first experience in battle occurred during the assault on Vimy Ridge in early April 1917. Although not involved in the initial advance against the German fortifications, the battalion sustained casualties from heavy enemy bombardment. In mid-July, Allied command ordered the battalion to conduct a major nighttime raid against German trenches near the village of Avion in preparation for the offensive against Hill 70 and Lens. Sharpe personally carried out reconnaissance of the enemy positions and barbed wire emplacements. On 23 July 1917, exactly one year after leaving Canada, the 116th advanced through machine-gun fire and tear gas to reach the German lines where they engaged the enemy in hand-to-hand combat. The successful raid contributed to Canadians'

<sup>22</sup> Reprinted in "Col. Sharpe's Last Message to People," *Toronto Daily Star*, 25 March 1919, 4.

<sup>23</sup> Cecil Frost to parents, 10 January 1917, R.B. Fleming ed., *The Wartime Letters of Leslie and Cecil Frost, 1915-1919* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), 112.

<sup>24</sup> Rev. Garbutt to Dr. Garland, 8 January 1917, Canadian Letters and Images Project; Turner to Perley, 26 February 1917, Borden Papers, MG 26H C-4317, 39243.

<sup>25</sup> War Diary, 60th Battalion. "Farwell Address," 29 April 1917, RG9 III-D-3, v. 4942, LAC.

<sup>26</sup> [E. P. S. Allen], *The 116th Battalion in France* (Toronto: Hunter-Rose Co., Ltd., 1921), 15-16.

overall reputation as effective shock troops and earned praise from Corps Commander General Arthur Currie, which Sharpe claimed “helped to mitigate our grief in respect to our losses.”<sup>27</sup> The 116th killed or captured over one hundred Germans, but the victory came with a high human cost. Describing the casualties after the raid, Sharpe remarked, “However, it is a stern game and we must be prepared to make the sacrifice.”<sup>28</sup> In a letter to his wife Mabel, who had travelled to England, Sharpe projected the ideal temperament for a man in the midst of combat, enthusing, “The boys are splendid and all face the issues of death with a calmness that is magnificent.”<sup>29</sup>

Included among over thirty Canadians killed was Uxbridge resident Lieutenant Thomas Wilson Hutchison who had served with Sharpe for several years in the 34th Regiment. During the enemy counterattack at Avion an exploding shell seriously injured Hutchison in the company of Sharpe. The colonel, who was unwounded by the blast, rendered first aid and called for a stretcher party but Hutchison died two days later on 25 July.<sup>30</sup> Writing to Hutchison’s widow, Muriel, on 21 October 1917, Sharpe not only conveyed his sympathies but also struggled to cope with the death of his fellow officer and friend. “We all do miss dear old Hutch so much!” he confessed, “No man in the Batt’n was more popular or more beloved by everyone—he occupied a unique position in that respect. He was so soldierly, so thorough—nature’s nobleman in every sense of the word.”<sup>31</sup> The twenty-six year old Hutchison had married Muriel Pirt Vicars on 14 June 1916 just over one month before leaving Canada. While awaiting the battalion’s departure from Canada, Sharpe and his wife had hosted an officers’ dinner in honour of Hutchison and his new bride.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Mark Humphries, ed., *The Selected Papers of Sir Arthur Currie: Diaries, Letters, and Report to the Ministry, 1917–1933* (Waterloo: LCMSDS/Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008), 47; War Diary, 116th Battalion, “A Narrative of Operation on Night of 22/23 July, 1917,” RG9 III-D-3. v. 4945, LAC.

<sup>28</sup> Reprinted in “Col. Sharpe’s Unit Praised by Gen. Currie,” *Toronto Globe*, 14 September 1917, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Reprinted in “Letter by Col. Sharpe Held by Courts as Will,” *Toronto Daily Star*, 19 December 1919, 5.

<sup>30</sup> War Diary, 116th Battalion, “Supplement to the Narrative of the Raid,” 5 September 1917.

<sup>31</sup> Sharpe to Hutchison, 21 October 1917.

<sup>32</sup> “Col. And Mrs. Sharpe’s Dinner,” *Toronto Daily Star*, 11 July 1916, 8.



Officers of the 116th Battalion in Uxbridge, 1916. Sharpe is front row, second from right. Lieutenant Hutchison is back row, centre. [Uxbridge Historical Centre Museum and Archives]

In contrast to the morose tone of Sharpe's letter to Muriel, in Canada, politicians, journalists, civilians, and returned soldiers celebrated the colonel as a patriotic war hero. Sharpe's brother Bert stressed "when his men go in the trenches, he goes with them and stays there until they come out."<sup>33</sup> On 22 November 1917, Unionist supporters in Ontario North endorsed Sharpe's re-nomination for the upcoming federal election. Speaking on behalf of the candidate to assembled delegates and voters, Sergeant Matt Wayman of the 116th delivered a special message from the front, "where my commanding officer is still carrying on."<sup>34</sup> For Wayman, the choice between the Laurier Opposition and the newly formed Unionist Government was simple: either "to quit before the Germans or to back the men at the front."<sup>35</sup> Laurier Liberal candidate Frederick Hogg reiterated his party's stance against conscription to heckling from the crowd. On 26 November, Prime Minister Borden joined pro-conscription Liberals in Uxbridge to show bipartisan support for the Unionist ticket. Speaking beneath a banner, reading, "Vote for Sharpe, he is

<sup>33</sup> Bert Sharpe, "Col. Sharpe and Conscription," *Toronto Daily Star*, 2 June 1917, 19.

<sup>34</sup> "Returned Man Speaks in Support of his C.O.," *Toronto Daily Star*, 22 November 1917, 10.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

fighting for you,” former Liberal Ontario South MP, Frederick Luther Fowke, called on voters to make the contest “as nearly unanimous as possible.”<sup>36</sup> In the election result on 17 December, Sharpe defeated Hogg 3,123 votes to 1,568.<sup>37</sup>

Despite Wayman’s assurance that his colonel was “still carrying on,” the depressed attitude Sharpe had expressed in the Hutchison letter indicated the growing instability of his strained mental state. Sharpe remained in command of his unit until the end of December 1917 when he was recalled to England in order to take a senior officer’s course at Aldershot. In one of his last messages to the people of Ontario County from the field, Sharpe expressed great reluctance to part with his men, writing, “The next few weeks will see much heavy fighting in France and I do not feel like leaving at this junction.”<sup>38</sup> Major George Randolph Pearkes, who assumed command of the 116th, recalled, “everybody knew he wasn’t going to come back.”<sup>39</sup> Shortly after receiving the Distinguished Service Order from the king at Buckingham Palace, Sharpe suffered a nervous breakdown and was admitted to the Canadian Convalescence Hospital at Buxton. Troubled by war dreams and worried over the welfare of his men, a despondent Sharpe “felt he was losing his grip on himself.”<sup>40</sup> After two months of rest treatment, massage, and moral suggestion in hospital, Sharpe was released on compassionate grounds and returned to Canada with his wife in mid-May. He explained to Overseas Minister Edward Kemp, “The doctors say it will be sometime before I am myself again.”<sup>41</sup>

Instead of returning directly home, Sharpe stopped at Montreal for rest in the Royal Victoria Hospital while Mabel continued toward Uxbridge. He had earlier admitted “to the worry of meeting the electors [and] answering their questions about their boys.”<sup>42</sup>

<sup>36</sup> “Liberals Aid Old Opponent: Join Premier in Speaking for North Ontario Unionist,” *Toronto Globe*, 27 November 1917, 1, 3.

<sup>37</sup> “13th General Election, 1917,” in *Sessional Papers of the Dominion of Canada*, vol. 4 (Ottawa: Thomas Mulvey, Printer, 1920), 68–69. Sharpe received the overwhelming share of soldier vote (443 to 16).

<sup>38</sup> Reprinted in “Col. Sharpe’s Last Message to the People,” *Toronto Daily Star*, 25 March 1919, 4.

<sup>39</sup> University of Victoria, Reg Roy collection. Pearkes interview 13, 9 November 1965.

<sup>40</sup> Sam Sharpe Service File, RG150, Box 8807-52, LAC.

<sup>41</sup> Sharpe to Kemp, 17 April 1918. RG9 III-A-1, v. 330, 10-S-173, LAC.

<sup>42</sup> Sharpe to Kemp, 10 April 1918. RG9 III-A-1, v. 330, 10-S-173, LAC.

On 25 May 1918, in the absence of a nurse, Sharpe jumped to his death through a window of the Ross Pavilion on to the concrete pavement fracturing his skull. As Quebec news bulletins reported, the colonel had been ill with a “nervous affliction and insomnia” since treatment in England.<sup>43</sup> Sharpe’s case mirrors the findings in Patricia Prestwich’s study of suicide in the French Army during the First World War. Based on the French experience, those who died by suicide were generally older infantry officers in their late-thirties or forties. Most of the deaths occurred behind the lines or on the home front while on leave in barracks or hospitals.<sup>44</sup>

Examining the context surrounding Sharpe’s reaction to war trauma provides important insights into the types of stresses for a man of his social position, rank, and experience. Patrick Brennan identifies the crucial importance of studying the psychological pressures endured by CEF commanders when assessing leadership and battlefield performance. Mental overstrain from frontline command and military administration were significant challenges for even the most motivated colonels and generals.<sup>45</sup> In addition to the obligations of a commanding officer, Sharpe also assumed responsibilities as a father figure and an elected representative. As Craig Mantle argues, the ethic of paternalism in the CEF defined effective and honourable leadership through the duty of each commander to put the needs of his men first.<sup>46</sup>

Reverend Garbutt commented that Sharpe showed an unusually high interest in his men’s physical, mental, and moral welfare.<sup>47</sup> When the 116th Battalion departed Uxbridge in spring 1916, a banner stretched across the main road read, “God Bless Our Soldier Men, Send Them Home Safe Again.”<sup>48</sup> The 1921 battalion history stated

<sup>43</sup> “Col. S. Sharpe Met an Untimely Death,” *Quebec Chronicle*, 27 May 1918, 1.

<sup>44</sup> Patricia Prestwich, “Suicide and French Soldiers of the First World War: Differing Perspectives, 1914–1939,” in John Weaver and David Wright, eds., *Histories of Suicide: International Perspectives on Self-Destruction in the Modern World* (Toronto: UofT Press, 2008), 135–155.

<sup>45</sup> Patrick Brennan, “‘Completely Worn Out by Service in France’: Combat Stress and Breakdown among Senior Officers in the Canadian Corps,” *Canadian Military History* 18, no. 2 (2009), 5–14.

<sup>46</sup> Craig Leslie Mantle, “Stripes, Pips and Crowns: A Preliminary Study of Leader-Follower Relations in the Canadian Expeditionary Force during the First World War, 1914–1918,” PhD thesis, University of Calgary, 2013, 36–95.

<sup>47</sup> “Chaplin’s Tribute to Dead Command,” *Toronto Daily Star*, 25 March 1919, 4.

<sup>48</sup> J. Peter Hvidsten, *Uxbridge—The First 100 Years* (Port Perry, ON: Observer Publishing, 2010), 164.

the colonel's principal objective was "to get through the 'baptism of fire' with as much glory and as few casualties as possible."<sup>49</sup> Acting Prime Minister Thomas White eulogised the forty-five year old childless Sharpe in 1919 as having "displayed an almost fatherly regard" for the men under his command.<sup>50</sup>

While he may have been a courageous colonel and a conscientious leader, Sharpe's lack of prior combat experience made him particularly susceptible to mental injury. As one of the only late-war county battalion colonels to lead his troops in the field, Sharpe was also one of the most inexperienced unit commanders in the Canadian Corps during the 1917 campaign. Unlike veteran field officers who had risen through the ranks, Sharpe and his senior officers were as unaccustomed as their men to the dangers and difficulties of trench warfare. Sharpe's law partner in Uxbridge, Major Henry Porter Cooke of "A" Company, lasted only a few months on the front until he was evacuated sick in June 1917. After being gassed, Cooke was found to be "jumpy" and a medical board determined his condition was "in all probability of a nervous origin."<sup>51</sup> Within six months on the front, only one of Sharpe's original company commanders remained on duty.<sup>52</sup> By December 1917, Sharpe's nephew, Major Harold Victor Gould, suffered a breakdown which forced him from the field as well.<sup>53</sup>

During the seven months between the first casualties at Vimy Ridge and Sharpe's October letter to Muriel Hutchison, the 116th Battalion lost nearly one hundred men. By the time Sharpe left France at the end of December 1917 following the battle of Passchendaele the unit had sustained over forty further deaths. Of the total dead in the 116th under Sharpe's command, twenty-six were volunteers recruited from Ontario County and six also belonged to the 34th Regiment.<sup>54</sup> Reacting to the deaths of fellow militia officers Lieutenants John James Doble, William Kitchener Kift, and Henry Lawrence Major after Vimy Ridge, Sharpe explained to his

<sup>49</sup> [Allen], *The 116th Battalion in France*, 17.

<sup>50</sup> Canada. House of Commons. *Debates*, 13th Parl., 2nd Sess. (20 February 1919), 3.

<sup>51</sup> H.P. Cooke Service File, RG150, Box 1946-16, LAC.

<sup>52</sup> [Allen], *The 116th Battalion in France*, 28.

<sup>53</sup> H.V. Gould Service File, RG150, Box 3676-15, LAC.

<sup>54</sup> 116th Battalion deaths: 17 February to 21 October 1917 (98); 22 October to 31 December 1917 (44); 1 January to 25 May 1918 (24, including Sharpe)

sister “Old Ontario County is paying its toll in the great struggle.”<sup>55</sup> In another personal loss, a cousin, Charles Simpson Lennox, died during the Avion raid.<sup>56</sup> As the number of original Ontario County troops dwindled due to breakdown, injury, and death, replacements arrived from Toronto and other parts of the country. Pearkes thought his predecessor “had personal courage but lacked leadership. And he was too inclined to play favourites and to try and save the people that he had originally recruited.”<sup>57</sup> New reinforcements consequently only highlighted the absence of dead friends, constituents, and fellow militiamen. During the months away from his battalion in hospital, Sharpe could only ponder the deaths of his “best and bravest” whom he had personally recruited, such as Lieutenant Hutchison.

News of Sharpe’s sudden death shocked the citizens of Uxbridge and Ontario County who had assumed their colonel was recovering and were awaiting his return. His body was transported from Montreal to Whitby in order to lie in state at the county council chambers before arriving in Uxbridge for a public service officiated by Garbutt, the original 116th chaplain. The military funeral on 29 May 1918 attracted thousands of civilian mourners, army officials, returned soldiers, and government dignitaries. In describing the ceremony, a local newspaper noted, “Col. Sharpe lay in his flag draped bier, and even in death looked the fine brave hero that he was.”<sup>58</sup> On 9 June, the 116th held its own service for its former commander.<sup>59</sup> Writing in her journal, L.M. Montgomery, who had voted for Sharpe in 1917, conveyed the sense of many in the community when she attributed the colonel’s suicide to a mind “insane from shell-shock.”<sup>60</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Ted Barris, *Victory at Vimy: Canada Comes of Age*, (Toronto: Dundurn, 2007), 173.

<sup>56</sup> “Lt.-Col. Sam Sharpe Was Said to Be Missing,” *Whitby Gazette and Chronicle*, 2 August 1917, 1.

<sup>57</sup> Pearkes interview 13, 9 November 1965; Reginald Roy, *For Most Conspicuous Bravery: A Biography of Major-General George R. Pearkes, V.C. Through Two World Wars* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1977), 65–66.

<sup>58</sup> “Honors for Col. S. Sharpe,” *Newmarket Era*, 31 May 1918, 3.

<sup>59</sup> War Diary. 116th Battalion, 9 June 1918.

<sup>60</sup> Rubio and Waterson, eds., *The Selected Journals of L.M. Montgomery*, 247.





Sharpe's funeral in Uxbridge, 29 May 1918. [Uxbridge Historical Centre Museum and Archives]

### INTERPRETING SHELL SHOCK

By 1918, the phrase “shell shock” had entered the public vernacular as a catch-all to describe affected soldiers’ emotional and physical symptoms, which ranged from insomnia and depression to tremors and limb paralysis. The difficult-to-categorise phenomenon provoked social and medical debates over the nature of war trauma, mental resiliency, and nervous breakdown. Disagreements over whether the condition was innate or acquired reflected uncertainty over the root cause. Some doctors pointed to the physical concussion of shell explosions or to nervous overstrain following trauma while others attempted to locate the problem in the individual psychological disposition of each soldier.<sup>61</sup> Shell shock represented both a serious military manpower problem as well as a potential challenge to a

<sup>61</sup> Tom Brown, “Shell Shock in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914–1918: Canadian Psychiatry in the Great War,” in Charles G. Roland, ed. *Health, Disease, and Medicine: Essays in Canadian History* (Hamilton, ON: Hannah Institute for the History of Medicine, 1983), 310–313; Tracey Loughran, “Shell Shock, Trauma, and the First World War: The Making of a Diagnosis and Its Histories,” *Social History of Medicine* 22, no. 1 (2009), 83–88; Ben Shephard, *War of Nerves Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 109–112.

traditional Victorian and Edwardian model of ideal masculinity. In the rich historiography on the topic, historians have studied how prevailing cultural attitudes towards gender and class shaped the political meanings and interpretations of shell shock.<sup>62</sup>

Many military and medical officials drew on nineteenth-century understandings of mental disease, hereditary weakness, and degeneration to diagnose soldiers afflicted by nervous symptoms. Contemporary theories of mental illness portrayed certain men with alleged weak moral fibre and character defects as unsuited for the stress of combat. Rather than cause psychological problems, traumatic experiences in battle were often assumed to only trigger a latent susceptibility for nervous breakdown.<sup>63</sup> Reflecting beliefs about the feminine nature of hysteria, some medical officers attributed cases of shell shock and nervous exhaustion to the sufferers' perceived cowardice, effeminacy, or weakness. Examining the construction of shell shock as a social disease, George Mosse observes, "War was the supreme test of manliness, and those who were the victims of shell-shock had failed this test."<sup>64</sup> Influenced by perceptions of racial and class superiority, some medical commentators further believed that working-class and ethnic minority recruits would be susceptible to breakdowns while an educated officer class would be immune. The reality that combat stress did not discriminate between different classes, ranks, or education levels seemed to destabilise certain assumptions about the essential nature of masculine resiliency. Ted Bogacz argues that the contradictions of shell shock "shattered" British prewar military values, but it is important to also trace the

<sup>62</sup> Cultural and gender histories of shell shock include, Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830–1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985); Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain, and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Laurinda Stryker, "Mental Cases: British Shellshock and the Politics of Interpretation," in Gail Braybon, ed., *Evidence, History, and the Great War: Historians and the Impact of 1914–18* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003), 154–171; Tracey Loughran, "A Crisis of Masculinity? Re-writing the History of Shell-Shock and Gender in First World War Britain," *History Compass* 11, no. 9 (2013), 727–738.

<sup>63</sup> Loughran, "Shell Shock, Trauma, and the First World War," 83–85.

<sup>64</sup> George Mosse, "Shell-Shock as a Social Disease," *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 1 (2000), 104.

persistence of an idealised conception of masculinity through the course of the war.<sup>65</sup>

While shell shock was often portrayed as the antithesis of the Victorian and Edwardian masculine construct, historians have identified the important ways shell shock was also reconfigured in an attempt to preserve a cultural belief system rooted in traditional manly values. Michael Roper notes that the war prompted a reassessment of prewar assumptions concerning courage and fear, but commentators sought to “modify rather than abandon the tradition of stoic manliness.”<sup>66</sup> Jay Winter suggests that the very term shell shock served to validate soldiers’ disorders in ways that more stigmatised and feminine diagnoses like hysteria could not.<sup>67</sup> Chris Feudtner argues that the language and ritual of shell shock provided men with the ability to display feelings of misery and despair under certain circumstances without being thought as weak, malingering, or cowardly.<sup>68</sup> Mark Humphries reveals how it could be deemed acceptable for “real men” to break down following a long period of stress on the frontline or after a traumatic experience but those who collapsed too quickly, exaggerated their symptoms, or failed to demonstrate appropriate resolve made their masculinity suspect.<sup>69</sup>

According to some medical commentators, the same qualities that seemed to make good commanding officers, namely intelligence, conscientiousness, and strong principles, also seemed to make them more vulnerable to debilitating mental stress.<sup>70</sup> Prior to the war, overstrained businessmen and politicians—the same group of middle-class professionals who filled senior officer ranks in the CEF—

<sup>65</sup> Ted Bogacz, “War Neurosis and Cultural Change in England, 1914–22: The Work of the War Office Committee of Enquiry into ‘Shell-Shock,’” *Journal of Contemporary History* 24, no. 2 (1989), 247–248.

<sup>66</sup> Roper, “Between Manliness and Masculinity: The ‘War Generation’ and the Psychology of Fear in Britain, 1914–1950,” *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 2 (2005), 356.

<sup>67</sup> Jay Winter, “Shell-Shock and the Cultural History of the Great War,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 1 (2000), 9.

<sup>68</sup> Chris Feudtner, “‘Minds the Dead Have Ravished’: Shell Shock, History, and the Ecology of Disease-Systems,” *History of Science* 31, no. 4 (1993), 403–404.

<sup>69</sup> Mark Humphries, “War’s Long Shadow: Masculinity, Medicine, and the Gendered Politics of Trauma, 1914–1939,” *Canadian Historical Review* 91, no. 3 (2010), 517–518.

<sup>70</sup> Edgar Jones, “The Psychology of Killing: The Combat Experience of British Soldiers during the First World War,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 1 (2006), 232.

received a diagnosis of neurasthenia due to a belief that sufferers had exhausted a finite amount of nervous energy. As Humphries and Kellen Kurchinski note, in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, neurasthenia could be “quite fashionable” as a sign that the patient led a strenuous, modern lifestyle with important civic and career responsibilities.<sup>71</sup> When certain battalion commanders began to display similar neurasthenic symptoms such as depression and anxiety after months in the trenches, medical officers understood the problem through this prewar model of civilian medicine.<sup>72</sup> Although Humphries and Kurchinski find that the diagnosis of Canadian shell shock and neurasthenia patients was not determined by rigid class distinctions, rank and social standing still influenced how political, military, and medical leaders as well as the public perceived prominent individuals who showed “nerves.”<sup>73</sup>

According to Colonel Jack Currie, Conservative-Unionist MP for Simcoe North, suffering a nervous collapse was emblematic of strength and patriotism because it was the best evidence that a soldier had experienced actual combat conditions. In a 1919 House of Commons speech, he highlighted the example of his Ontario North colleague who “went to the trenches and would not leave them until his health broke down and he was a complete wreck.”<sup>74</sup> Commenting on Sharpe’s death in Montreal, Currie declared, “no wonder, when he spent two years and a half [sic] constantly within the sound of the guns, constantly in the midst of great carnage.”<sup>75</sup> A founding officer of the 48th Highlanders in 1891, Currie had commanded the 15th Battalion at the second battle of Ypres in April 1915 before a controversial incident led to his dismissal. “His nervous system having been completely shattered in the campaign in Flanders,”

<sup>71</sup> Mark Humphries with Kellen Kurchinski, “Rest, Relax and Get Well: A Re-Conceptualisation of Great War Shell Shock Treatment,” *War and Society* 27, no. 2 (2008), 98; Janet Oppenheim, “*Shattered Nerves*: Doctors, Patients, and Depression in Victorian England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 144; Shephard, *A War of Nerves*, 9

<sup>72</sup> Patrick Brennan, “Completely Worn Out by Service in France,” 7–8; Brown, “Shell Shock in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914–1918,” 318; Loughran, “Shell Shock, Trauma, and the First World War,” 83.

<sup>73</sup> Humphries with Kurchinski, “Rest, Relax and Get Well,” 95.

<sup>74</sup> House of Commons. *Debates*, 13th Parl., 2nd Sess. (17 March 1919), 549.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

Currie returned home following allegations that he had been drunk behind the lines during the German gas attack at St. Julien.<sup>76</sup>

Currie's opinion of Sharpe illustrated the mutability of shell shock and nervous breakdown as signs of either masculine strength or weakness. Early in the war, Currie had believed "red-blooded" Canadian troops were incapable of mental exhaustion while the cowardly Germans often showed "nerves." In his 1916 memoir, *The Red Watch*, which attempted to justify his actions at St. Julien, Currie claimed, "I did not feel at all nervous, as a matter of fact after a person has been under shell and rifle fire for a few days he ceases to be nervous. Nerves are for those who stay at home."<sup>77</sup> After defending himself against public accusations of cowardice and incompetence, by 1919 Currie had moderated this rhetoric to admit "many of our bravest men have succumbed to mental trouble."<sup>78</sup> Politicians like Currie adopted a flexible interpretation of combat stress and breakdown because the unacceptable alternative was to admit that prominent officers including Sharpe and himself had either behaved cowardly or lacked the mental self-discipline to persevere.

Canadian neurologist Major George F. Boyer, one of the doctors who treated Sharpe at Buxton, separated legitimate cases of nervous exhaustion from supposed cowards and malingerers. In a November 1939 paper recounting his experience treating psychoneurosis and neurasthenia during the First World War, Boyer emphasised the crucial importance of the sufferers' mental make-up and self-control in dictating treatment methods. Describing a "real case" of nervous breakdown, Boyer outlined the expected behaviour and temperament for a patient of Sharpe's prominence and social position:

He has, as a rule, served two or three or more times the duration of arduous conditions than the more common anxiety case. He is driven by duty. The will is willing and impels, but the frame fails. He needs,

<sup>76</sup> John Carson to War Office, 22 June 1915. RG9 III-A-1, v. 126, 6-C-63, LAC; Andrew Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers: The 1st Canadian Division at War, 1914-1915* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 161-162; For more on the aftermath of the dugout incident see "Chapter 8: Another Currie" in Robert Sharpe, *The Last Day, The Last Hour: The Currie Libel Trial* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 117-130.

<sup>77</sup> J. A. Currie, *The Red Watch: With the First Canadian Division in Flanders* (London: Constable and Company, Ltd., 1916), 200.

<sup>78</sup> House of Commons. *Debates*, 13th Parl., 3rd Sess. (19 September 1919), 310.

and may have to be made, to accept evacuation. His ideal is high, but his capacity has its limitations and he has usually exhausted it. He convalesces slowly. His ideal directs his conduct. He is a co-operative patient. He confesses his symptoms with reluctance, he often reproaches himself for the loss of a comrade in some real or assumed error in judgment or action. He is worthy of the best his officers and physicians can give. Constitutionally, he is of that stuff whose ideals are hard on his emotions and his emotions and sentiments are hard on his ideals.<sup>79</sup>

According to Boyer, a long-serving soldier who had spent his reserve of nervous energy in a leadership role and was reticent to both report symptoms and seek treatment represented an admirable type. A true neurasthenic acquired the temporary condition through frontline service and could not be dismissed as effeminate or cowardly, thereby ensuring masculinity and reputation were preserved.<sup>80</sup> By contrast, Boyer felt a “hysterical reactor” either lacked the willpower to improve or deliberately willed ill health to avoid military duty. “He is usually shrewd, alert, evasive, egotistic, a poor adjuster,” Boyer claimed, “often nurses a grievance—a man with a conduct sheet.” Whereas a “real case” benefited from thoughtful dialogue and firm encouragement over mawkish sympathy, Boyer argued the hysteric “is ‘cured,’ only to relapse.”<sup>81</sup>

The reality that a senior officer like Sharpe had broken down was not necessarily the most troubling issue from a medical and societal perspective. The larger threat shell shock posed to traditional gender and class assumptions was the apparent inability of some individuals to overcome temporary nervous collapse by becoming permanent psychologically disturbed casualties.<sup>82</sup> Mosse observes that by defining shell shock as a disease, military and medical authorities implied “true” sufferers could be cured.<sup>83</sup> Feudtner stresses that the disease was conceived as an “ongoing individual psychological battle” within the mind of each officer and soldier.<sup>84</sup> Fiona Reid notes even compassionate doctors assumed a good soldier should recuperate

<sup>79</sup> George F. Boyer, “The Psychoneuroses of War,” *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 43, no. 1 (1940), 55.

<sup>80</sup> Humphries, “War’s Long Shadow,” 511, 516.

<sup>81</sup> Boyer, “The Psychoneuroses of War,” 55.

<sup>82</sup> Humphries, “War’s Long Shadow,” 530.

<sup>83</sup> Mosse, “Shell-Shock as a Social Disease,” 104–106.

<sup>84</sup> Feudtner, “Minds the Dead Have Ravished,” 403.

quickly and the very term breakdown meant men could be mended.<sup>85</sup> Recovery depended on the foresightedness of a potential nervous casualty to recognise the problem through a long struggle and to rely on individual determination to persevere. Rather than undermine a traditional emphasis on manly strength and self-discipline, this interpretation of nervous collapse seemed to confirm the fundamental belief that strong personal character and internal fortitude could overcome any psychological debility including inner doubt and fear.

Indeed, when Sharpe wrote to Muriel Hutchison, "were I to allow myself to ponder over what I have seen [and] what I have suffered," he framed his mental trouble as a choice. He identified depression as a test of willpower and perseverance by suggesting as long as he did not dwell on the horror and deaths he had witnessed he could control negative emotions and despondency. Sharpe indicated if the effort to turn his mind away from the misery of war failed, he expected inevitable collapse. From the perspective of Sharpe and his doctors, the final breakdown in early 1918 fit the cultural expectations of a commanding officer because it occurred away from his men and only after months of professed struggle. Within several weeks at Buxton, doctors believed Sharpe had improved and, as Boyer recorded, "He understands the effect of his experiences in France and realizes his 'nerves get' him at times."<sup>86</sup> Acknowledging and confronting the trigger for a mental breakdown was presumed to help restore the patient's confidence, self-knowledge, and self-control.<sup>87</sup> Through techniques of persuasion and suggestion, Boyer believed neurasthenic soldiers "will be better able to cope with disturbances ... after their complexes have been 'dug up' and 'aired.'"<sup>88</sup> The heroic narrative arc of recovery and perseverance through self-awareness and willpower however did not easily provide for circumstances when a patient instead succumbed to suicide.

<sup>85</sup> Fiona Reid, *Broken Men: Shell Shock, Treatment and Recovery in Britain 1914–1930*, (London: Continuum, 2010), 64, 161, 166

<sup>86</sup> Sharpe Service File.

<sup>87</sup> Brown, "Shell Shock in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914–1918," 319.

<sup>88</sup> George F. Boyer, "The Treatment of the Psychoneuroses," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 11, no. 9 (1921), 680.



**INTERPRETING SUICIDE**

While shell shock had earned a degree of honour and legitimacy in the wartime public imagination, suicide remained a largely taboo subject as a violation of Christian ethics and societal norms. By the early twentieth century, historians note a shift toward greater public sympathy for suicide due to secularisation in society and the medicalisation of mental illness.<sup>89</sup> Studying public perceptions of suicide in late nineteenth century Ontario, Janet Miron stresses that responses nevertheless “defied simple acceptance or complete decriminalization.”<sup>90</sup> In Sharpe’s case, initial news reports acknowledged he had jumped to his death, but subsequent sources tended to understate the suicide. The *Toronto World* called the death a “sad accident,”<sup>91</sup> a 1919 biographical sketch stated he had “succumbed ... to a nervous disorder,”<sup>92</sup> and a 1938 obituary for Mabel noted that her late husband “went overseas and to his death as a result.”<sup>93</sup>

Due to the silences that often accompany the topic, determining the level of military suicide within the Canadian Corps during the First World War is problematic. An unknown number of suicidal deaths may have been misattributed, unreported, or occurred during the confusion of battle. Furthermore suicide remained stigmatised as a violation of military law. Viewing self-harm as a discipline problem, section 38 (2) of the *Army Act* made attempted suicide an offence punishable by court martial.<sup>94</sup> In his study on self-inflicted wounding in the CEF, Humphries emphasises how self-harm represented a direct challenge to military authority and state control over soldiers’

<sup>89</sup> For social and cultural studies of suicide see Olive Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987); Victor Bailey, “‘This Rash Act’: Suicide Across the Life Cycle in the Victorian City (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Michael MacDonald and Terence Murphy, *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Terri L. Snyder, “What Historians Talk About When They Talk About Suicide: The View from Early Modern British North America,” *History Compass* 5, no. 2 (2007), 658–674.

<sup>90</sup> Janet Miron, “Suicide, Coroner’s Inquests, and the Parameters of Compassion in Ontario, 1830–1900,” *Histoire sociale/Social history* 47, no. 95 (2014), 577.

<sup>91</sup> “Ontario County Pays Honor to Col. Sharpe,” *Toronto World*, 27 May 1918, 12.

<sup>92</sup> Charlesworth, *A Cyclopaedia of Canadian Biography*, 101.

<sup>93</sup> “Widow of the Late Col. Sam Sharpe Dead,” *Stouffville Tribune*, 3 March 1938, 1.

<sup>94</sup> War Office, *Manual of Military Law* (London: HMSO, 1907), 298.

bodies.<sup>95</sup> Ironically, whereas a man who attempted suicide might be punished, a suicidal soldier who succeeded could, under certain circumstances, be regarded with compassion and sympathy.

Popular reassessment of nervous breakdown as a potentially legitimate casualty resulted in a growing awareness that sufferers gripped by severe depression or confusion were not always accountable for their behaviour.<sup>96</sup> A possible connection to suicidal actions in turn impacted how governments approached granting honours and pensions to soldiers' surviving families. As Peter Barham points out, during the course of the war British pension boards demonstrated a greater readiness to grant funds to dependants when a soldier's suicide was deemed with "reasonable probability" to be a direct result of wartime conditions. Reflecting the persistence of prewar cultural mores, pension officials nevertheless reserved the right to withhold funds in cases of misconduct and where the suicide had been committed to avoid justice or military duty.<sup>97</sup> Although not focused on the issue of military suicide, historians Desmond Morton, Glenn Wright, and Terry Copp identify how the question of "attributability" was similarly a central concern for Canadian pension boards in deciding the legitimacy of cases involving shell shock and suspected self-inflicted injury.<sup>98</sup>

Addressing concerns that widows and families of soldiers who had died by suicide might be denied support, Major W.A. Burgess, medical advisor to the Board of Pensions Commission, reported to a House of Commons special committee in 1920, "the benefit of the doubt is given to dependents in every case. It must be a very clear cut case where it [a pension] is refused."<sup>99</sup> At least in public

<sup>95</sup> Mark Humphries, "Wilfully and With Intent: Self-Inflicted Wounds and the Negotiation of Power in the Trenches," *Social history* 47, no. 94 (2014), 373.

<sup>96</sup> Caroline Cox, "Invisible Wounds: The American Legion, Shell Shocked Veterans, and American Society, 1919–1924," in Mark S. Micale and Paul Lerner, eds., *Traumatic Pasts: History, Psychiatry, and Trauma in the Modern Age, 1870–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 297–298.

<sup>97</sup> Peter Barham, *Forgotten Lunatics of the Great War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 129–133.

<sup>98</sup> Desmond Morton, *Fight Or Pay: Soldiers' Families in the Great War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004), 147–150; Desmond Morton and Glenn T. Wright, *Winning the Second Battle: Canadian Veterans and the Return to Civilian Life, 1915–1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 56–57; Terry Copp and Mark Osborne Humphries, *Combat Stress in the 20th Century: The Commonwealth Perspective* (Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2010), 81–93.

<sup>99</sup> House of Commons. *Journals*. 13th Parl., 4th Sess. vol. 57 (26 April 1920), 217.



Lieutenant Colonel Sharpe, commander of the 116th Battalion [Ontario Regiment Museum]

rhetoric, Canadian pension officials and parliamentarians espoused a basic belief that the suicide of a soldier ought to be considered a war-related death barring evidence to the contrary. For her part, Mabel Sharpe received the annual allowance of a lieutenant colonel's widow. In October 1917, her husband had reassured her, "I have left lots for you, and you will get a pension of \$1,500 a year in case I am killed in service."<sup>100</sup> Given prevailing belief in his brave conduct on the front as well as his prominence as an officer and politician, there seemed to be no question Sharpe's death was attributable to service on the battlefield.

In public eulogies and commemorations, the people of Ontario preferred to represent the colonel as a heroic casualty of war rather than a broken, desperate man. The managing editor of the *Toronto Globe*, Stewart Lyon, praised Sharpe's courage and leadership, asserting, "He gave up his life as truly 'on the field of honor' as

<sup>100</sup> Reprinted in "Letter by Col. Sharpe Held by Courts as Will," *Toronto Daily Star*, 19 December 1919, 5; "Will's Interpretation Ends in Legal Dispute," *Toronto Daily Star*, 8 October 1919, 4.

if he had fallen in action.”<sup>101</sup> According to Lyon, who had earlier reported on the Avion raid as a war correspondent, Sharpe’s nervous breakdown and sudden death confirmed that he was no mere “political colonel” who had sought “cheap and easy glory.”<sup>102</sup> A posthumous biographical sketch similarly portrayed him “As truly a victim of the great struggle as if he had been killed in action.”<sup>103</sup> When a bronze statue was dedicated to honour Lieutenant Colonel Harry Baker, the only Canadian MP killed in battle, the *Globe* reminded readers “Sharpe’s death was the result of service in France.”<sup>104</sup>

Jonathan Scotland identifies how Toronto press reporting of soldier suicide immediately after the war revealed a general acceptance that such deaths were considered a consequence of traumatic war experiences.<sup>105</sup> When Lieutenant Charles Vesta Victoria Coombs of the 116th shot himself in London, England on 26 December 1919, a correspondent for the *Globe* stated, “Everybody feels that it is as if he had died at the hands of the enemy.”<sup>106</sup> Coombs had reported being gassed and “knocked out” by a shell explosion during the Avion raid. Exhibiting a noticeable nervous tremor, he was diagnosed with neurasthenia and spent over a year in and out of hospital before being attached to the British War Records Office.<sup>107</sup> The *Globe* went so far as to praise the officer “who feared not to end the life which battle wounds had made unbearable.”<sup>108</sup> Recasting suicide as analogous to combat death allowed the press to portray soldiers who killed themselves as battle-wounded heroes. Sympathetic press coverage implied, unlike a perceived hysteric shell shock patient who never recovered, a soldier who ended his life preserved his masculine reputation. Describing how suicidal men sought to follow

<sup>101</sup> [Stewart Lyon], “The Last Measure of Devotion,” *Toronto Globe*, 27 May 1918, 6.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> *The Canadian Who Was Who*, 464.

<sup>104</sup> F.C. Mears, “Fallen Solider M.P. Honored in Bronze,” *Toronto Globe*, 27 December 1923, 1. George Harold Baker was Conservative MP for Brome and commander of the 5th Canadian Mounted Rifles. He was killed at the battle of Sanctuary Wood on 2 June 1916.

<sup>105</sup> Jonathan Scotland, “Soldier Suicide after the Great War: A First Look,” *Active History* (24 March 2014), available: <http://activehistory.ca/2014/03/soldier-suicide-after-the-great-war-a-first-look/>, [Accessed 1 May 2014].

<sup>106</sup> Harold Steevens, “As if He Had Died at the Hands of the Enemy,” *Toronto Globe*, 29 December 1919, 2.

<sup>107</sup> C.V.V. Coombs Service File, RG150, Box 1961-36, LAC.

<sup>108</sup> Harold Steevens, “Capt. Coombs Rests in a Soldier Grave,” *Toronto Globe*, 3 January 1920, 2.

the expected “script of masculinity” during the First World War era, John Weaver observes “to endure mental or physical anguish truly required bravery, but courage also was claimed by individuals who chose death.”<sup>109</sup>

At the same time, the image of psychologically damaged and suicidal soldiers threatened to destroy the perception of an honourable and just war that four years of propaganda and political rhetoric had created.<sup>110</sup> Tracing how medical and social responses to shell shock sought to reinforce societal stability, Tracy Loughran argues that wartime psychological theories of insanity, which tended to root the cause in the mental make-up of each soldier, “absolve[ed] the war of ultimate responsibility for breakdown.”<sup>111</sup> Studying public responses to suicide in Ontario, Miron points out “If an individual challenged social ideals by committing suicide, then the community and its sense of well-being could be re-established through the notion of temporary insanity.”<sup>112</sup> Unlike in chronic cases of shell shock and neurasthenia, an explanation of *temporary* insanity allowed commentators to understand how the deaths of heroes like Sharpe and Coombs were war-related without admitting that either man possessed an inherently weak nervous system, or that the conflict was fundamentally immoral.

Influenced by anti-war sentiment or disillusionment following massive casualties on the front, Sharpe’s suicide might have appeared to some a destabilising indictment of the war as wasteful and unnecessary. Yet rather than undermine confidence in the war as a virtuous defence of civilisation, initial public and political reaction to Sharpe’s death served to reinforce a narrative of heroism and victory. Articulating the wartime mythology of crusading virtue and noble sacrifice, Liberal House Leader James Robb, MP for Châteauguay—Huntingdon, declared Sharpe had “unsheathed his sword and went forth to do battle in the cause of freedom and justice.”<sup>113</sup> The *Toronto*

<sup>109</sup> John Weaver, *Sadly Troubled History: The Meanings of Suicide in the Modern Age* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009), 272. For similar conclusions in the context of the American Civil War see Diane Miller Sommerville, “‘A Burden Too Heavy to Bear’: War Trauma, Suicide, and Confederate Soldiers,” *Civil War History* 59, no. 4, (2013), 453–491.

<sup>110</sup> Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997), 53–54.

<sup>111</sup> Loughran, “Shell Shock, Trauma, and the First World War,” 87.

<sup>112</sup> Miron, “Suicide, Coroner’s Inquests,” 598.

<sup>113</sup> House of Commons. *Debates*, 13th Parl., 2nd Sess. (20 February 1919), 3.

*Daily Star* likewise explained he “gave his life as a result of his gallantry in the cause of freedom.”<sup>114</sup> Examining British Canadian attempts to stress the utility of the conflict, Jonathan Vance argues commemorations and eulogies produced popular myths designed to purify the memory of violence and destruction.<sup>115</sup>

Writing to Mabel on 21 October 1917 shortly before the battle of Passchendaele, Sharpe had affirmed his faith in the moral, patriotic sentiment that later informed postwar remembrance:

If it should be my fate to be among those who fall, I wish to say I have no regrets to offer. I have done my duty as I saw it and have fought in defence of those principles upon which our great Empire is founded, and I die without any fears as to the ultimate destiny of all that is immortal within me.<sup>116</sup>

On the same day that Sharpe had confided his doubts to Muriel Hutchison about the sacrifice of so many lives, the message to his wife represented an attempt to infuse death with a meaningful higher purpose. Imagining that all of the war dead had recognised and accepted their necessary sacrifice helped the grieving public cope with the great loss of life. Confident in the righteousness of the cause, public tributes depicted fallen Canadian troops as happy warriors who had been “brave to the last, smiling to the end.”<sup>117</sup> Despite efforts to include Sharpe in this postwar mythology, the circumstances surrounding his death made for a complicated and unstable process of commemoration.

## FORGOTTEN AND REMEMBERED

In his message to Muriel, Sharpe had hoped, “After the war, we must have a memorial erected in memory of these brave men who have died that we might live.”<sup>118</sup> On 27 June 1920, over one

<sup>114</sup> “Dead Dad’s Colonel, Wreath From Child,” *Toronto Daily Star*, 29 May 1918, 2.

<sup>115</sup> Vance, *Death So Noble*, 7–8, 56.

<sup>116</sup> Reprinted in “Letter by Col. Sharpe Held by Courts as Will,” *Toronto Daily Star*, 19 December 1919, 5.

<sup>117</sup> House of Commons. *Debates*, 14th Parl., 3rd Sess. (3 March 1924), 49; Vance, *Death So Noble*, 109.

<sup>118</sup> Sharpe to Hutchison, 21 October 1917.

thousand citizens gathered in Uxbridge to pay tribute to “Ontario county’s gallant heroes.”<sup>119</sup> In the local Methodist Church, former Ontario Premier William Howard Hearst and Mabel Sharpe unveiled a memorial tablet for her late husband. In the religious setting amidst patriotic celebrations of valour and heroism, no one differentiated Sharpe’s death from his men in the 116th who had died in France on “the field of honour.” The notion that a respected parliamentarian, a courageous colonel and a recipient of the Distinguished Service Order had succumbed to nervous collapse due to hereditary weakness or innate cowardice would have destabilised the mythology of heroic soldiers as well as threatened traditional masculine values. Medical and social reassessment of shell shock and neurasthenia offered the public an understandable explanation for how a brave soldier who had demonstrated daring on the battlefield could suffer mental damage culminating in suicide.

Yet an interpretation of shell shock that sought to preserve a prewar moral code and include Sharpe as a wartime casualty also excluded others deemed to have failed in adhering to prescribed masculine behaviour. Medical theories which separated “real cases” from supposed malingerers reinforced a belief that most breakdowns could be attributed to defects within an individual’s character. By contrast, commentators during the war and immediately after perceived Sharpe as a genuine example of war trauma because his breakdown seemed to follow the cultural expectation of stoic masculinity premised on willpower and strong character. As a result, for a moment after the war, Sharpe’s death could be interpreted to reinforce rather than weaken faith in the necessary sacrifice and moral justifications of the conflict.

However, as the collective Canadian memory of the war coalesced, public awareness of Sharpe and shell shocked veterans became obscured if not forgotten by a desire to highlight redemption and salvation over tragedy, mental damage, and self-destruction.<sup>120</sup> While the 1918 *Globe* eulogy described Sharpe’s death “as if he had fallen in action,” the words “as if” acknowledged his death had not truly occurred in battle and thereby implied a continued distinction

<sup>119</sup> “Col. Sharpe Honored by Ontario County,” *Toronto Daily Star*, 28 June 1920, 3.

<sup>120</sup> Vance *Death So Noble*, 36; Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 52–76; Barham, *Forgotten Lunatics*, 368.



with the war dead.<sup>121</sup> By the mid-1920s, a notable silence fell over the death and even the existence of Sharpe. When Arthur Meighen declared at the 1924 dedication of the Harry Baker statue, "it has been the lot of Canada only once" for a parliamentarian to "die a patriot's death," he evidently had not thought to include Sharpe.<sup>122</sup> As later Canadians sought to justify the necessity and utility of the war, the lessons Sharpe's experience seemed to provide were too complex and nuanced to exist comfortably within the popular myths described by Vance.<sup>123</sup> Canadians instead preferred less problematic symbols and figures to venerate in order to discourage close scrutiny of the war's contradictions that had resulted in an ardent war supporter and believer in a just cause dying by suicide.

In his 1919 tribute to Sharpe, Jack Currie stated, "I trust that a place will be found to erect some monument to his memory," but the 116th commander would not be formally commemorated in the halls of Parliament for nearly a century.<sup>124</sup> In 2016, Erin O'Toole, former Minister of Veterans' Affairs and Conservative MP for Durham, unveiled a relief plaque of Sharpe's likeness to be installed in Parliament. O'Toole, who represents much of Sharpe's original riding, felt his predecessor's "memory was essentially erased from history."<sup>125</sup> In the context of current efforts to destigmatise operational stress injuries within the Canadian Armed Forces, O'Toole explains "We're using him as a teaching aid to say that we've come a long way since Sam Sharpe's time, but we have a long way to go."<sup>126</sup> With suicide deaths in the Canadian Armed Forces having surpassed mission deaths during the War in Afghanistan, this historical case study of Sharpe calls our attention to the persistent problem of balancing mental health awareness and

<sup>121</sup> [Lyon], "The Last Measure of Devotion," 6.

<sup>122</sup> House of Commons. *Debates*, 14th Parl., 3rd Sess. (3 March 1924), 49.

<sup>123</sup> Vance, *Death So Nobel*, 266.

<sup>124</sup> House of Commons. *Debates*, 13th Parl., 2nd Session, (17 March 1919), 549.

<sup>125</sup> Port Perry artist Tyler Briley designed the bronze memorial relief bust of Sharpe's portrait; Quoted in Steve Paikin, "The Canadian MP who won an election from the frontline," *Steve Paikin's Blog* (22 December 2015), available: <http://tvo.org/blog/current-affairs/the-canadian-mp-who-won-an-election-from-the-frontline>, [accessed 23 December 2015].

<sup>126</sup> House of Commons. *Veterans Affairs Committee*. 41st Parl., 2nd Session, (12 May 2015).



Erin O'Toole, Conservative Member of Parliament for Durham, unveils relief bust memorial of Sharpe, 2015. [Courtesy of the office of Erin O'Toole]

suicide de-stigmatisation with commemoration and recognition.<sup>127</sup> If remembrance of Sharpe eventually became too problematic for the popular memory of the First World War, how will future Canadians interpret the service and sacrifice of modern soldiers and veterans who died by suicide?

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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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<sup>127</sup> For further discussion on the contemporary issues of de-stigmatisation, commemoration, and contagion see Matthew Barrett and Allan English, "Fallen on the Field of Honour?: Attitudes of the Canadian Public towards Suicides in the Canadian Military ~ 1914-2014," *Canadian Military Journal* 15, no. 4 (2015), 22-29.

The author would like to thank Allan English, Craig Mantle, Adam Montgomery, and the anonymous reviewer for their suggestions and insights. He is also grateful to Ontario Regiment Museum curators Earl Wotton and Gary Bazowsky. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 25th Military History Colloquium at Wilfrid Laurier University on 9 May 2014.