

MAG – 007 – The Piper

Content Warnings

- **Discussions of:** Suffering, murder, gore
- **Mentions of:** Shell shock, trauma, body horror, mass death, chemical warfare, existential dread, hospitals
- **SFX:** High pitched tone

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill Presents The Magnus Archives Episode Seven The Piper

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro - Continues]

JONATHAN SIMS

Statement of Staff Sergeant Clarence Berry, regarding his time serving with Wilfred Owen in the Great War. Original statement given November 6th 1922. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

JONATHAN SIMS

(Read a loud from the archived witness statement of Staff Sergeant Clarence Berry)

A lot of people call me lucky, you know. Not many came through the entirety of the war in one piece. And if you discount the burns, then I did indeed do just that. Even fewer spent all four years at the front, like I did. I was never sent for

treatment for shell shock or injury, and even my encounter with a German flamethrower only ended up with me in a front line hospital at Wipers. I was still in that field hospital when the fighting started at the Somme, so I suppose that was lucky too. Four years... I sometimes feel like I'm the only one who saw the whole damn show from start to finish, as though I alone know the Great War in all its awful glory. But deep down I know that honour, such as it is, has to go to Wilfred. You wouldn't have thought it from his poems, but all told his time at the front totalled not much over a year. Yet he got to know the war in a way I never did. He's certainly the only person I know that ever saw The Piper.

I grew up poor on the streets of Salford, so I joined the army as soon as I was old enough. I know you've heard the stories of brave lads signing up at 14, but this was before the war started, so there wasn't such a demand for manpower and the recruiters were much more scrupulous about making sure those enlisting were of age. Even so, I was almost too skinny for them to take me and barely made the required weight. But in the end I made it through and, after my training, was assigned to the Manchester Regiment, 2nd Battalion, and it wasn't long before we were shipped off to France with the British Expeditionary Force. You seem like educated sorts, so I'm sure you read in the papers how that went. Soon enough, though, the trenches were dug and the boredom started to set in. Now, boredom is fine, understand, when the alternatives are bombs, snipers and gas attacks, but months at a time sitting in a waterlogged hole in the ground, hoping your foot doesn't start swelling, well... it has a quiet terror all its own.

Wilfred came to us in July of 1916. I'm not intimately familiar with his history but he clearly came from stock good enough to be assigned as a probationary Second Lieutenant. I was a Sergeant at the time, so had the job of giving him

the sort of advice and support that a new officer needs from a NCO with two years of mud under his nails. That notwithstanding, I will admit taking a dislike to the man when I first met him – he outranked me, and most of the others in the trench, in both military and social terms, and he seemed to treat the whole affair with an airy contempt. There's a sort of numbness that you adopt after months or years of bombing, a deliberate blankness which I think offended him. He was unfailingly polite, far more so than I was accustomed to in the Flanders mud, where the conversations, such as they were, were coarse and bleak. Yet under this politeness I could feel him dismiss out of hand any suggestion that I gave him or report that I made. It came as no surprise to me to when he mentioned he wrote poetry. To be perfectly honest I expected him to be dead within a week.

To Wilfred's credit, he made it almost a year before anything horrendous happened to him, and by the following spring I'd venture to say that we might almost have been able to call each other friends. He had been composing poetry during this time, of course, and occasionally would read it out to some of the men. They generally enjoyed it, but personally I thought it was dreadful – there was an emptiness to it and every time he tried to put the war into words it just sounded trite, like there was no soul to what he had to say. He would often talk about his literary aspirations, and how he longed to be remembered, to take what this war truly was and immortalise it. Were I prone to flights of fancy, I daresay I would call his words portentous. When he talked like that, he had an odd habit of trailing off in the middle of the conversation with a tilt of his head, as though his attention had been taken by a far-off sound.

The spring thaw had just recently passed when it happened, and we were on the offensive. Our battalion was near Savy Wood when the orders came down – we were to attack the Hindenburg Line. Our target was a trench on the west side of St. Quentin. It was a quiet march. Even at this stage there was often still some excitement when the orders came down for action, even if it was usually stifled by that choking fear that you got when waiting for the whistle. Yet that morning there was something different in the air, an oppressive dread. We'd made this attack before and knew that the change from the valley exposed us to artillery fire. And artillery was always the scariest part of it for me. Bayonets you could dodge, bullets you could duck, even gas you could block out if you were lucky, but artillery? All you could do against artillery was pray.

Even Wilfred felt it, I could tell. He was usually quite talkative before combat. Morbid, but always talkative. That morning he didn't say a word. I tried to talk with him and raise his spirits, as is a sergeant's duty, but he just held up his hand to quiet me, and turned his head to listen. At the time I didn't know what it was he was hearing but it kept him silent. Even when we crested the ridge, and the rest of us tried to drown out the deafening thrum of artillery with our own charging cry, even then he made no sound.

The ground shook with the impact of the mortar shells, and I ran from foxhole to crater to foxhole, keeping my head low to avoid the bullets. As I ran, I felt a shooting pain in my ankle and pitched forward into the mud. Looking down, I saw I'd been caught by a length of barbed wire, half-hidden by the damp upturned soil. I felt a surge of panic begin to overtake me and frantically tried to remove the wire from my leg but only succeeded in getting my hand scratched up quite badly. I looked around desperately to see if there was anyone else nearby who could help. And there, not twenty yards in front of

me, I saw Wilfred standing, his face blank and his head swaying to some unheard rhythm. And then I did hear it – gently riding over the pulse of mortars and the rattle of guns and the moans of dying men, a faint, piping melody. I could not have told you whether it was bagpipes or panpipes or some instrument I had never heard before but its whistling tune was unmistakable and struck me with a deepest sadness and a gentle creeping fear and in that moment I knew what was about to happen.

I looked at Wilfred, and as our eyes met I saw that he knew as well. I heard a single gunshot, much louder than any of the others somehow, and I saw him go stiff, his eyes wide. And then the mortar blast hit him and he was lost in an eruption of mud and earth. I had plenty of time to mourn him, lying in that dreadful hole until nightfall, when I could free my leg as quietly and gently as possible before crawling back to our trench. It was slow going; every time a flare went up I could only lay motionless and pray, but the good Lord saw fit to let me reach our line relatively unscathed. I was quickly bundled off to the field hospital, which was overburdened as always. They didn't have much in the way of medicine or staff to spare, and certainly no beds free, so they washed my wounds with iodine, bandaged them, sent me on my way. Told me to come back if I got gangrene. I did have a look around the place to see if I could find Wilfred, but there was no sign of him to be found anywhere. Asking around the trench, no-one had seen him return among the wounded, so I began to reconcile myself to the fact that he was dead. He wasn't the first friend I'd lost to the Germans nor even the first I'd seen die in front of me, but something about that strange music that I heard in the moments before that explosion lingered in my mind and left me dwelling on Wilfred in many a quiet moment.

It was probably about a week and a half later I heard shouting from the end of the trench. It was a scouting party who had been reconnoitring the river that flowed near Savy Wood. Apparently, they had found a wounded officer lying in a shell hole there and brought him back. I made my way over and was astounded to see that it was Wilfred. His uniform was torn and burned, he was covered with blood and his eyes had a distant, far off expression to them, but he was most definitely alive. I rode with him back up to the field hospital, along with the Corporal of the squad who had found him. Apparently he had been lying in that hole for days, ever since the battle. They'd found him there, half-dead from dehydration and fatigue, covered in the gore of another soldier. Whatever shell had created the hole he'd ended up in had clearly annihilated some other poor soul and it was in his gory remnants that Wilfred had lain for almost two weeks. I waited outside the hospital tent while he was being treated. The doctor came out shortly, a grave look on his face. He told me the Lieutenant was physically unharmed – something I considered at the time nothing short of a miracle – but that he had one of the worst cases of shell shock the doctor had ever encountered and would have to be shipped back to England for recuperation. I asked him if I could see him, and the doctor consented, though he warned me that Wilfred hadn't said a word since he'd been brought in.

As soon as I stepped inside the medical tent I was overwhelmed by the sweet scent of decaying flesh and the moans of pain and despair. The sharp smell of the disinfectant brought back unpleasant memories of chlorine gas attacks. Still, I eventually found my way over to Wilfred's bed and, sure enough, there he was, staring silently out at the world, though with an intensity that alarmed me. I followed his gaze to a bed nearby, and there I saw a private I didn't recognise. His forehead was slick with sweat and his chest rose and fell quickly,

then abruptly stopped. I realised with a start that a man had just died, and nobody had noticed except Wilfred.

I tried to engage him in conversation, rattled off a few meaningless pleasantries. “How are you doing, old man?” “Heard you had a bit of close call.” “Glad you found yourself a crump-hole.” All that sort of nonsense. None of it seemed to produce any reaction in him, and instead he turned to me and after a long while he simply said: “I met the war.” I told him that he certainly had, not many walk away from something like that and lying in that hole for so long, surrounded by all the death... Well, he had definitely met the war and it was rotten bloody business. But Wilfred just shook his head like I didn’t understand, and to be honest I was starting to feel like I didn’t, and he told me again that he “met the war”. He said it was no taller than I was. It struck me that perhaps he was describing some dreadful mirage that had come upon him as he lay in that wretched place, and I asked him to tell me what the war looked like.

I remember exactly what he said. He told me it had three faces. One to play its pipes of scrimshawed bone, one to scream its dying battle cry and one that would not open its mouth, for when it did blood and sodden soil flowed out like a waterfall. Those arms that did not play the pipes were gripping blades and guns and spears, while others raised their hands in futile supplication of mercy, and one in a crisp salute. It wore a tattered coat of wool, olive green where it was not stained black, and beneath, nothing could be seen but a body beaten, slashed and shot and until nothing remained but the wounds themselves.

I had heard quite enough by this point, and said so to Wilfred, but if he heard me he gave no indication of it. He told me that the war, “the Piper”, had come

to claim him, and he had begged to remain. The thing had paused its tune for but a moment, and with one of its arms it reached out and handed him a pen. He said he knew it would return for him someday, but now he too would live to play its tune. The way he looked at me at that moment was the same way he'd looked at me before the shell hit, and for a moment I could have sworn I once again heard that music on the breeze.

I left almost immediately after that, and was later told that he'd been shipped back to Britain, to recuperate at Craiglockhart. The other men grumbled about officers' perks and a nice holiday for the Lieutenant, but they didn't know what he'd been through, and I found it very hard to envy him myself. At one point I asked some of the squad who brought him back whether he'd been holding a pen when they found him, but they told me he hadn't. The only thing they'd found nearby were the tags of the dead man among his remains. A man named Joseph Rayner. And for a long while that was that. Wilfred was back at home recovering and taking on lighter duties, while I slogged on through the mud of Flanders. I had a few close calls myself – including the flamethrower that marked me so distinctively. Could have been worse, of course; if the rain hadn't almost liquefied the mud of no man's land I'd have gone up like a lucifer. I did start to notice something among the troops, though. Every time we lined up to go over the top I would watch them, look into their faces. Most of them showed naught but the starker fear, of course, but a few of them seemed distant. The whistle would startle them back to themselves and with wide eyes they would surge forward. I had seen this before all that business with Wilfred but had always assumed it was simply the mind trying to choke down the likelihood of its own death. Now when I watched, I found I could not help but notice the slight tilt of the head, as though gently straining their ears to hear a far-off tune. Those men never made it back to the trenches.

You know the phrase “to pay the piper”. I thought on it a lot through those many months – the debt of Hamelin, who for their greed had their children taken from them, never to be returned. Did you know Hamelin is a real place in Germany? Yes, not too far from Hanover as I recall. We had a prisoner once from there – I wanted to ask him about the old fairy tale and what, if anything, he knew of The Piper. The poor soul didn’t speak a word of English, though, and died from an infected shrapnel wound a few days later. He spent his last minutes humming a familiar tune. That night, as we scrambled through mud and broken metal in another futile attack I began to wonder: were we the children stolen from their parents by The Piper’s tune? Or were we the rats that were led to the river and drowned because they ate too much of the wealthy’s grain? Still, those are musings for poets, among whom I do not number. I did keep up with Wilfred’s work, though, and was startled to see how much it had changed since he left. Where once it could have been dismissed as frivolous, there was now a tragedy to it that flowed from the words. Even now I can’t hear Exposure without being back in that damned trench at wintertime. And the public clearly felt similar, as one of the few newspapers we actually got through to the line had an extensive article praising his first collection. Despite all this, there was something about it that sat uneasily with me.

Wilfred returned to the 2nd Manchesters in July of 1918. He was clearly much changed from his time away, and seemed to be in good enough spirits, though we talked little any more, and when he looked at me, I saw in his eyes a fear that he was quick to hide. The war was grinding towards a close at this point. There was a fatigue that could be felt everywhere; even the enemy machine guns felt slower and more begrudging in their fire, but this charged our commanders to spur us on to more and more aggressive actions. Some

desperate attempt to push Germany into a surrender, I suppose, and our attacks grew to a crescendo.

On the first day of October, we were ordered to storm the enemy position at Joncourt. I remember that the weather that day was beautiful – a last day of sunshine before autumn pressed in. We charged with some success, as I believe the German artillery hadn't been lined up correctly, and for the first time since his return I found myself fighting alongside Wilfred. I can say without a word of a lie that across all the war I never saw a soldier fight with such ferocity as I saw in him that day. I hasten to add that that statement is not given in admiration – the savagery I saw in him as he tore into a man with his bayonet... I'd just as soon forget it. As he charged, he howled a terrible battle cry and, just for a moment, I could have sworn that I saw him cast a shadow that was not his own. I read in the paper he won the Military Cross for that attack.

It was a month later that I woke up to find him sitting next to my bed. He stared at me, not unkindly, though there was something in his eye that put my ill at ease. "Almost over now, Clarence," he said to me. I said yes, it did seem to be all coming to an end. He smiled and shook his head. He sat there quietly for some time, at one point a flare burst in the sky outside, and enough of that stark red light came through the dugout's makeshift doorway for me to see that Wilfred was crying. I knew he was listening to The Piper's tune. He asked me if I heard it, and I told him no, I didn't, and I wasn't sure I ever really had. He nodded, and said he didn't know which of us was the lucky one, and neither did I. Still don't, really.

Wilfred Owen died crossing the canal at Sambre-Oise two days later. There wasn't meant to be much, if any, resistance, but some of the soldiers stationed

there returned fire. I found myself crouching behind him as the Captain, who had been shot in hip, was pulled to safety. As we prepared to charge, Wilfred stopped all at once and turned to me with a smile on his face. At that moment I saw a trickle of blood start to flow from an opening hole in his forehead. I feel like I should make this clear – I have seen many people get shot. I know what it looks like and how a bullet hole appears. But here, the bullet hole simply opened, like an eye, and he fell to the ground, dead. It was told to me later that it was on that day the first overtures of peace were made between the nations, and the Armistice was signed almost exactly a week later. We were shipped home soon after.

I believe it was not merely on that day, but at that very moment, when Wilfred fell, that the peace was finally assured. No-one can convince me otherwise. Did The Piper spare him before? Did it simply use him, later to cast him aside? I don't know, and I try not to think about it overmuch. I have a wife now, and a child on the way, but I still get nightmares sometimes. The parade for Armistice Day passed by my house last year, and I had to shut my window tight when the military band marched past. It wasn't a tune I cared to hear.

JONATHAN SIMS

Statement ends.

Well, if further evidence was needed of my predecessor's disorganisation, here we have it. A statement from 1922 filed among the mid-2000s. Obviously there's not much research or further investigation to be done into a case almost a hundred years old, especially when it involves so well documented a figure as Wilfred Owen. Still, an interesting enough tale, and I feel like I

recognise the name ‘Joseph Rayner’ from somewhere, though for the life of me I couldn’t say where. I’ve had the case returned to its proper location in the archives

Recording Ends.

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Outro]

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