

# Letters from the First World War, 1915



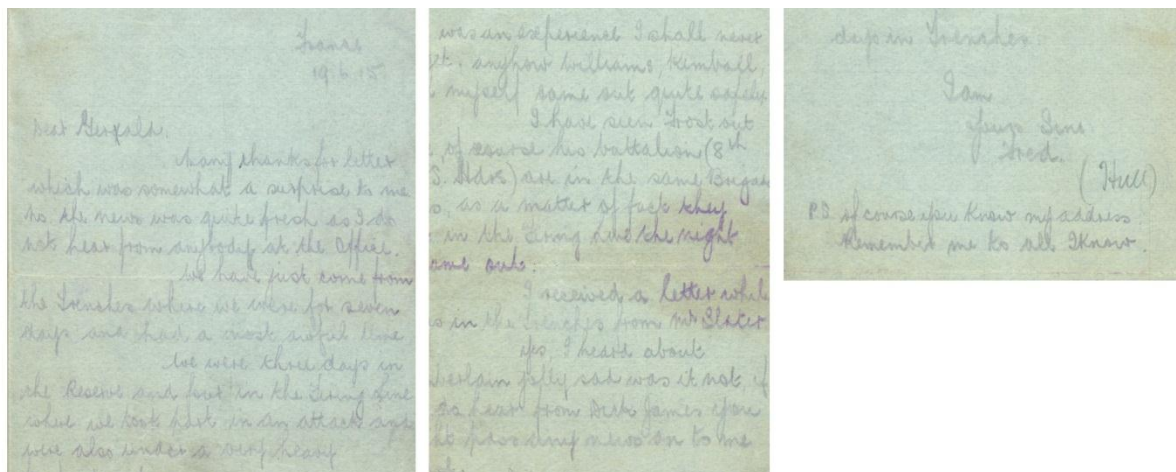
These are some of the many letters sent by staff of the Great Western Railway Audit office at Paddington who had enlisted to fight in the First World War. Here you will find all the letters and transcripts from this collection that relate to the soldiers' experience of the trenches. (RAIL 253/516).

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**Trenches: 'a most awful time'**

Richard Frederick, Hull, 19 June 1915, France. **Born:** 4 June 1892, **Joined GWR:** 25 July 1908, **Regiment:** 1/6 Seaforth Highlanders, 1st Highland Infantry Brigade, **Regiment number:** 2161, **Rank:** Lance Corporal, **Died:** 1974

**Transcript**

Dear Gerald

Many thanks for letter which was somewhat a surprise to me. No the news was quite fresh as I do not hear from anybody in the office.

We have just come from the trenches where we were for seven days and had a most awful time. We were three days in the Reserve and put in the firing line where we took part in an attack and were also under a very heavy bombardment.

I am sorry to say we had many casualties thirty five killed and one hundred and thirty eight wounded and I can assure you it was an experience I shall never forget. Anyhow Williams, Kemball and myself came out quite safely.

I have seen Frost out here, of course his battalion (8<sup>th</sup> Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders) are in the same brigade also, as a matter of fact, they were in the firing line the night we came out. I received a letter while I was in the trenches from Mr Slater. Yes, I heard about Chamberlain, jolly sad

was it not, if you do hear from Dick James you might pass any news on to me...

Shall be glad to hear from you. I could write more, only am a wee bit tired after seven days in trenches.

I am yours sincerely, Fred Hull.

P.S. Of course you know my address. Remember me to all I know.

### Trenches: 'a noisy business'

R.C.S. Frost, 15 July 1915, France. **Born:** 30 January 1888, **Regiment:** 8<sup>th</sup> Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders; Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, **Regiment number:** 1998; 300470, **Rank:** Private; Second Lieutenant, **Died:** 1962.

France  
15/7/15

Dear Mr Hunt,

Many thanks for your welcome letter containing so much interesting news from the office. I wrote to Standew just before receiving your letter, but no doubt a few more lines will be acceptable.

Reamont seem to be doing the best of us all. I saw Williams and Hull about three weeks ago in a small town near here. Of course the Germans and Argyle always come about together, but we don't meet very often.

I am glad to hear the old section is still in being, and not like the German Empire is fast becoming a thing of the past! and hope your chosen survivors will be allowed to keep the flag flying until the war is over.

I have been in the front line several times, and at four different places, besides being in the support trenches at others. I hear the

is called a Mobile Division which accounts for our gipsy life in France.

Our best line in the front line for our days and six in the reserve, was the most successful of all.

It had been a quiet place for two months, until the day after our occupation when the British exploded mine under some workings of the Germans near the trench. To prevent them blowing our trench up. Well! that woke them up and the following Saturday they retaliated by opening rapid fire early in the morning. However we were ready for them and quickly replied, so they then bombarded us, which to say the least of it was a noisy business. That eventually ceased and rapid firing was quickly in progress again, followed by another, and another, which our guns again put a stop to. The whole affair lasted an hour and less minutes, and although we believe an attack was intended, the Germans did not leave their trenches, opposite

to us. After putting our boards in order again which took some time, on the parapet was blown down for about three yards near us, and a shell burst among a lot of our men, scattering them and the machine in all directions, besides the bottom of the trench being littered with hundreds of empty cartridges, we proceeded with business as usual, also to show the Germans the article that we were still there.

Only a hundred yards separated the two trenches, so it was always a case of "Bolt down" and they never were good shots, as we found out to our cost when they smashed the top of a house in two passages within half an hour one morning.

At present the division is resting, and I and two friends have erected a nice house under an apple tree on a farm. It is quite cozy, in fine weather, but last night it was raining hard for several hours, so we had to shut a little window to an old barn. There is

plenty of fruit about here, but the walls suffer a very bad.

Last Sunday morning we enjoyed our first hot bath since our arrival here. An old deacon Jimmy has been turned into baths for troops, also under a tent, we washed and disinfected, and a little around there. Tents, such are provided for washing up, and two large tubs filled with cold water to plunge into afterwards.

I have not got any troops yet, but have been waiting for some time, so expect soon to be on the original section.

I must close now to get the letters away, hoping Mr Taylor, Mr Woodhouse, and yourself are keeping well, and with kind regards to you all

Yours very sincerely  
R.C.S. Frost



### Transcript

Dear Mr Hunt

Many thanks for your welcome letter volunteering so much interesting news of friends at the office. I wrote to Standew just before receiving your letter, but no doubt a few more lines will be acceptable.

Beaumont seems to be doing the best of us all. I saw Williams and Hull about three weeks ago in a small town near here. Of course the Seaforths and Argylls (regiments) always move about together, but we don't meet very often. I am glad to hear the old section is still in being, and not like the German Empire is fast becoming a thing of the past! And hope your three survivors will be allowed to keep the flag flying until the wanderers return.

I have been in the firing line several times, and at four different places, besides being in the support trenches at others. I hear this is called a mobile division which accounts for our gipsy life in France.

Our last turn in the firing line, for six days and six in the reserve was the most exciting of all.

It has been a quiet place for two months, until two days after our occupation, when the British exploded mines under some workings of the Germans near their trenches, to prevent them blowing our trench up. Well! That woke them up and the following Saturday they retaliated by opening rapid fire early in the morning.

However we were ready for them and quickly replied, so they then bombarded us, which to say the least of it was a noisy business. That eventually ceased and rapid firing was quickly in process again, followed by another shelling, which our guns again put a stop to. The whole affair lasted an hour and ten minutes, and although we believe an attack was intended, the Germans didn't leave their trench, opposite to us. After putting our trench in order again which took some time, as the parapet was blown down for about three yards near me, and a shell burst amongst a lot of beef tins, scattering them and the contents in all directions, besides the bottom of the trench being littered with hundreds of empty cartridges, we proceeded with boiling water for tea, also to show the Huns by the smoke that we were still there. Only a hundred yards separated the two trenches, so it was always a case of "bob down" and the enemy were good shots, as we found out to our cost when they

smashed the top glasses in two periscopes within half an hour one morning.

At present the division is resting, and I and two friends have erected a wee bivouac under an apple tree on a farm. It is quite cosy, in fine weather, but last night it was raining hard for several hours, so we had to beat a hasty retreat to an old barn. There is plenty of fruit about here, but the water supply is very bad.

Last Sunday morning we enjoyed our first hot bath since our arrival here. An old disused brewery has been turned into baths for troops, also under clothing is washed and disinfected, and kilts ironed there. Fifty tubs are provided for washing in and two large vats filled with cold water to plunge into afterwards.

I have not got any stripes yet, but have been studying signalling lately, so expect soon to be in the signal section.

I must close now to get this letter away, hoping Mr Taylor, Mr Woodhams, and yourself are keeping well, and with kind regards to you all.

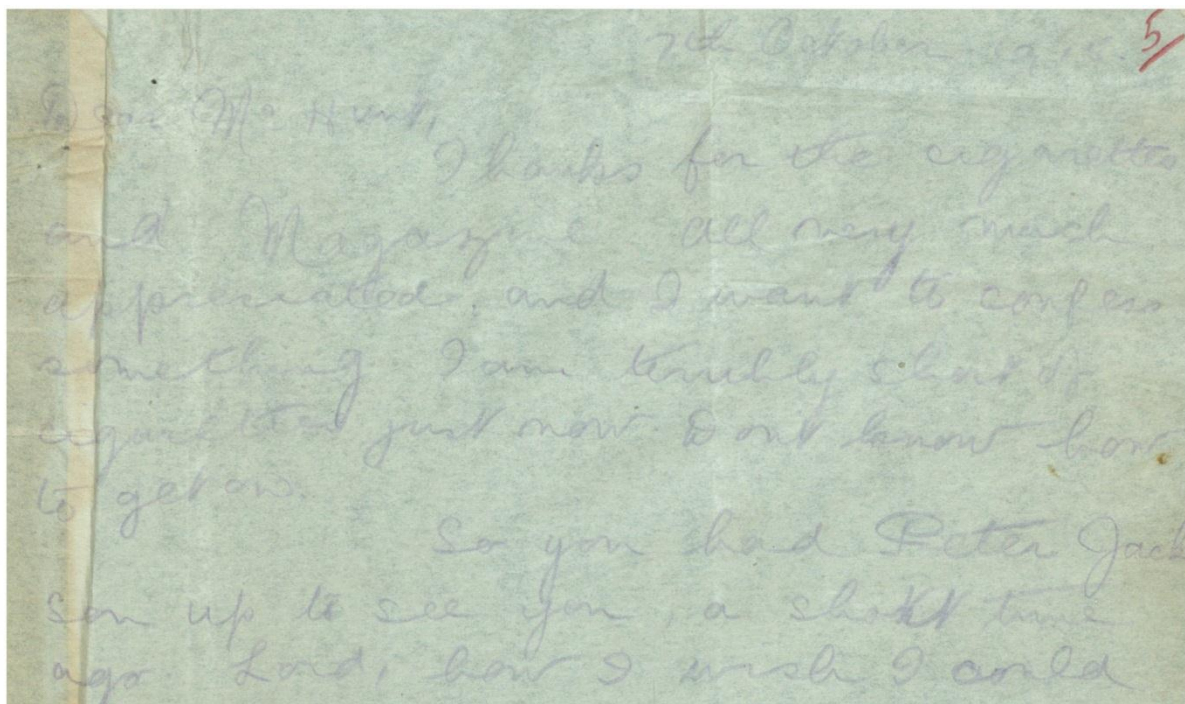
Yours very sincerely,

'Frosty'



**Trenches: 'an interesting souvenir'**

Gilbert Williams, 7 October 1915. **Born:** 18 April 1894, **Regiment:** 1/6 Seaforth Highlanders, **Regiment number:** 2175, **Rank:** Private, **Died:** 1967. **Note:** Williams also fought in Second World War, and returned from war on 15 November 1948

**Transcript**

Dear Mr Hunt,

Thanks for the cigarettes and magazine, all very much appreciated and I want to confess something. I am terribly short of cigarettes just now. Don't know how to get on.

So you had Peter Jackson up to see you a short time ago. Lord, how I wish I could get up to London. Some of our chaps have leave but this advance seems to have put a stop to it. That's the only reason I am sorry for the long awaited advance. God knows it was really time we did do something if only to relieve the pressure on Eastern front. We are in this part of the line and are still sitting tight worse luck. I wish they would get a move on here as well. It has cost us a good many casualties, but I think

the Germans, what with the bombardment they got and the counter attacks they delivered must have lost many more than us.

I have got an interesting souvenir. It is part of the framework of a German aeroplane, the fourth which our airmen have recently brought down in this neighbourhood. The machine gun in one of our planes had killed the German pilot and the machine getting out of control exploded, or at least the engine did, and the whole aircraft crashed to earth. God, it was an awful mess. Both the pilot and observer were killed, the former being bashed out recognition, but the latter survived the fall but died shortly afterwards. Our airmen seem to be the masters of the Germans now, although the taubes seem to be the faster machines, our men seem to have much spirit and initiative.

About a fortnight ago I saw a fleet of fourteen of our planes cross over our lines on a raiding expedition. They were in close formation, and the Germans sent up a rain of shells without doing any damage. The raid was very successful, I believe, two transport trains full of German reinforcements being wrecked, a large station destroyed.

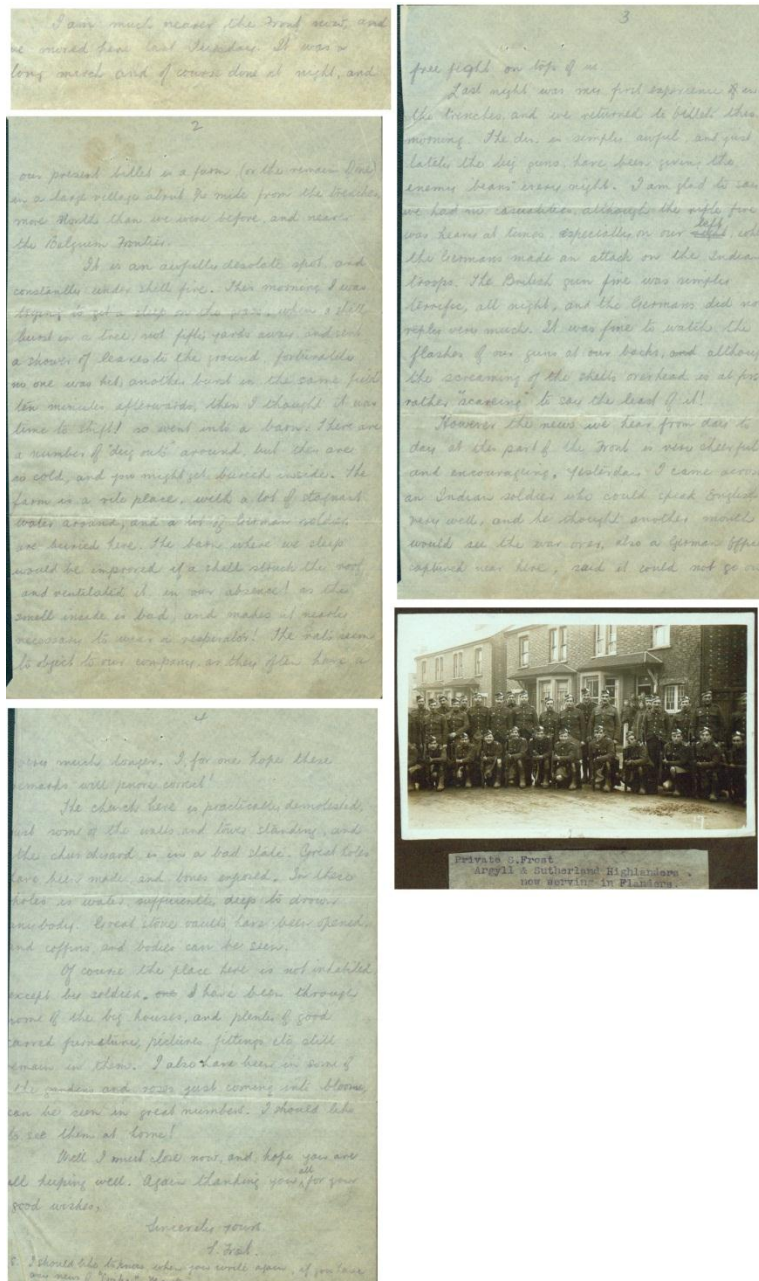
Well that's about all from me, let me hear from you soon. How is everybody up there? Best regards to all the section,

Yours very sincerely, Gilbert Williams



**Trenches: 'awfully desolate spot'**

R.C.S. Frost, 22 May 1915, France. **Born:** 30 January 1888, **Regiment:** 8<sup>th</sup> Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders; Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, **Regiment number:** 1998; 300470, **Rank:** Private; Second Lieutenant, **Died:** 1962



**Transcript**

... I am much nearer the front now, and we moved here last Tuesday. It was a long march and of course done at night, and our present billet is a

farm (or the remains of one) in a large village about  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile from the trenches, more north than we were before, and nearer the Belgian frontier.

It is an awfully desolate spot and constantly under shell fire. This morning I was trying to get a sleep on the grass, when a shell burst in a tree, not fifty yards away, and sent a shower of leaves to the ground. Fortunately no one was hit, another burst in the same field ten minutes afterwards, then I thought it was time to shift! So went into a barn. There are a number of dugouts around, but they are so cold, and you might get buried inside. The farm is a vile place, with a lot of stagnant water around, and a lot of German soldiers are buried here. The barn where we sleep would be improved if a shell struck the roof, and ventilated it, in our absence! As the smell inside is bad, and makes it nearly necessary to wear a respirator! The rats seem to object to our company as they often have a free fight on top of us.

Last night was my first experience in the trenches, and we returned to billet this morning. The din is simply awful, and just lately the big guns have been giving the enemy 'beans' every night. I am glad to say we had no casualties, although the rifle fire was heard at times, especially on our left, where the Germans made an attack on the Indian troops. The British gun fire was simply terrific, all night, and the Germans did not reply very much. It was fine to watch the flashes of our guns at our backs, although the screaming of the shells overhead is at first rather 'scaring' to say the least of it!

However the news we hear from day to day at this part of the front is very cheerful, and encouraging. Yesterday I came across an Indian soldier who could speak English very well, and he thought another month would see the war over, also a German officer captured near here, said it could not go on very much longer. I for one hope these remarks will prove correct!

The church here is practically demolished, just some of the walls and tower standing, and the churchyard is in a bad state. Great holes have

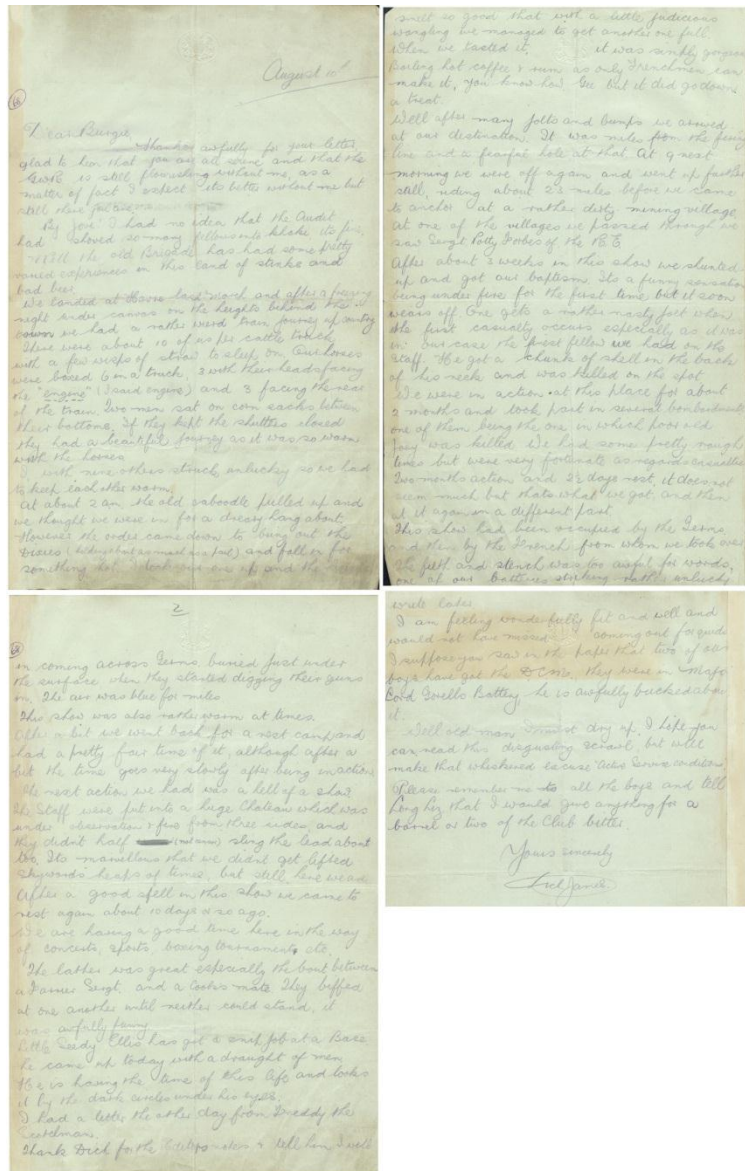
been made and bones exposed. In these holes is water sufficiently deep to drown anybody. Great stone vaults have been opened, and coffins and bodies can be seen.

Of course the place here is not inhabited except by soldiers. I have been through some of the big houses, and plenty of good carved furniture, pictures, fittings etc. still remain in them. I also have been in some of the gardens, and roses just coming into bloom can be seen in great numbers. I should like to see them at home!

Well I must close now, and hope you are all keeping well. Again thanking you all for our good wishes. Sincerely yours, S. Frost

### Trenches: 'being under fire'

Richard James, 10 August 1915, France. **Born:** 8 January 1894, **Regiment:** Royal Field Artillery, **Rank:** Corporal, **Died:** 1969.



### Transcript

Dear Burgie,

Thanks awfully for your letter, glad to hear that you are all serene and that the G.W.R. is still flourishing without me, as a matter of fact I expect it's better without me but still there you are.

By Jove! I had no idea that the Audit had shoved so many fellows into khaki, its fine. Well the old Brigade has had some pretty varied experiences in this land of stinks and bad beer.

We landed at Havre last March and after a freezing night under canvas on the heights behind the town we had a rather weird train journey up country. There were about 10 of us per cattle truck with a few wisps of straw to sleep on. Our horses were boxed six in a truck, three with their heads facing the 'engine' and three facing the rear of the train. Two men sat on corn sacks between their bottoms. If they kept the shutters closed they had a beautiful journey as it was so warm with the horses...

At about 2am the old caboodle pulled up and we thought we were in for a dreary hang about, however the order came down to bring out the dixies... and fall in for something hot. I took our one up and the liquid smelt so good that with a little judicious wangling we managed to get another one full. When we tasted it, it was simply gorgeous. Boiling hot coffee and rum as only Frenchmen can make it, you know how. Gee but it did go down a treat.

Well after many jolts and bumps we arrived at our destination. It was miles from the firing line and a fearful hole at that. At nine next morning we were off again and went up further still, riding about 23 miles before we came to anchor at a rather dirty mining village...

After about three weeks in this show we shunted up and got our baptism. It's a funny sensation being under fire for the first time but it soon wears off. One gets a rather nasty jolt when the first casualty occurs especially as it was in our case the finest fellow we had on the staff. He got a chunk of shell in the back of his neck and was killed on the spot.

We were in action at this place for about two months and took part in several bombardments, one of them being the one in which poor old Joey was killed. We had some pretty rough times but were very fortunate as regards casualties. Two month's action and 2½ days' rest, it doesn't seem much but that's what we got, and then at it again in a different part.

This show had been occupied by the Germs and then by the French from whom we took over. The filth and stench was too awful for words, one of our batteries striking rather unlucky in coming across Germs buried just under the surface when they started digging their guns in. The air was blue for miles...

The next action we had was a hell of a show. The staff were put into a huge Chateau which was under observation and fire from three sides. And they didn't half sling the lead about too. It's marvellous that we didn't get lifted skywards heaps of times, but still here we are. After a good spell in this show we came to rest again about 10 days or so ago.

We are having a good time here in the way of concerts, sports, boxing tournaments etc. The latter was great especially the bout between a Farrier Sergeant and a cook's mate. They biffed at one another until neither could stand, it was awfully funny.

Little Seedy Ellis has got a snip job at a base. He came up today with a draught of men. He is having the time of his life and looks it by the dark circles under his eyes...

I am feeling wonderfully fit and well and would not have missed coming out for quids. I suppose you saw in the paper that two of our boys have got the Distinguished Conduct Medal. They were in Major Lord Gorell's Battery; he is awfully bucked about it.

Well old man I must dry up. I hope you can read this disgusting scrawl, but will make that whiskered excuse 'active service conditions'. Please remember me to all the boys and tell Long Liz that I would give anything for a barrel or two of the club bitter.

Sincerely, Dick James



**Trenches: 'canaries in cages'**

R.C.S. Frost, 6 July 1915, France. **Born:** 30 January 1888, **Regiment:** 8<sup>th</sup> Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders; Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, **Regiment number:** 1998; 300470, **Rank:** Private; Second Lieutenant, **Died:** 1962

The trench  
 of ours is a model in its own way, being fairly safe, and connected by good communication trenches. The C.O.'s house <sup>is</sup> sand bagged & fitted with window, curtains, and window box with pansies in it. It is furnished with table and chairs also a large mirror. Of course this is quite a "one occasion" affair and don't imagine we are here town planning with model dwellings etc! But it will show you how soldiers can adapt themselves to circumstances. At the back of our trench is ripening corn and plenty of wildflowers in bloom. We have also canaries in cages in the trench! but these are used by the miners for testing the air in the mines after the explosion, to see if it was possible to finish off their job.

captured from the Germans a short time ago and during the day we were kept busy with sand bags etc and at night of course had to especially watch the enemy. When in the reserve or support trenches fatigue work has to be done every night, & such as carrying food, ammunition, material for the engineers etc to the front line, so you can guess it is nothing but continual "hot" work.

**Transcript**

... This trench of ours is a model in its own way, being fairly safe, and connected by good communication trenches. The Commanding Officer's house of white sandbags is fitted with window, curtains, and window box with pansies in it. It is furnished with table and chairs also a large mirror. Of course this is quite a 'one occasion' affair and don't imagine we are here town planning with model dwellings etc! But it will show you how soldiers can adapt themselves to circumstances. At the back of our trench is ripening corn and plenty of wildflowers in bloom.

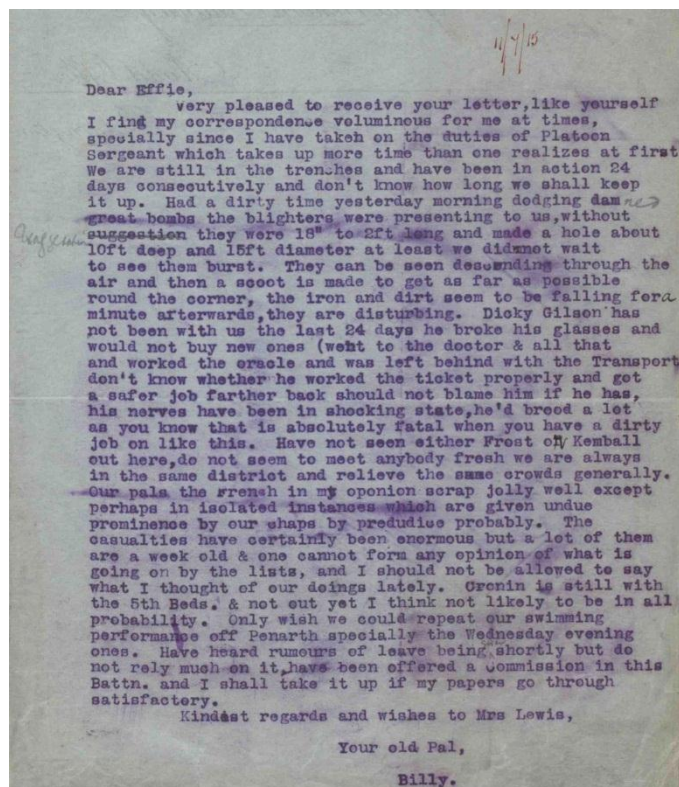
We have also canaries in cages in the trench! But these are used by the miners for testing the air in the mines after the explosion, to see if it was possible to finish off their job. [Censored line] captured from the Germans

a short time ago and during the stay we were kept busy with sandbags etc. and at night of course had to especially watch the enemy.

When in the reserve or support trenches fatigue work has to be done every night, such as carrying food, ammunition, material for the engineers etc. to the firing line, so you can guess it is nothing but continual 'bob' work (odd jobs).

**Trenches: 'dodging damned great bombs'**

William Albert Hastings, 11 July 1915, France. **Born:** 17 March 1888, **Regiment:** 4<sup>th</sup> Seaforth Highlanders, **Regiment number:** 2092, **Rank:** Sergeant, **Died:** 1937

**Transcript**

Dear Effie,

Very pleased to receive your letter, like yourself I find my correspondence voluminous for me at times, especially since I have taken on the duties of Platoon Sergeant which takes up more time than one realises at first. We are still in the trenches and have been in action twenty four days consecutively and I don't know long we shall keep it up. Had a dirty time yesterday morning dodging damned great bombs the blighters were presenting to us without exaggeration they were eighteen inches to a two feet long and made a hole about ten feet deep and fifteen feet diameter at least we did not wait to see them burst. They can be seen descending through the air and then a scoot is made to get as far as possible round the corner, the iron and dirt seem to be falling for a minute afterwards,

they are disturbing. Dicky Gilson has not been with us the last twenty four days, he broke his glasses and would not buy new ones (went to the doctor and all that and worked the oracle and was left behind with the Transport, don't know whether he worked the ticket properly and got a safer job farther back, should not blame him if he has, his nerves have been in a shocking state, he'd brood a lot as you know that is absolutely fatal when you have a dirty job on like this. I have not seen either Frost or Kemball out here, do not seem to meet anybody fresh as we are always in the same district and relieve the same crowds generally.

Our pals the French in my opinion scrap jolly well except in the isolated instances which are given undue prominence by our chaps by prejudice probably. The casualties have certainly been enormous but a lot of them are a week old and one cannot form any opinion of what is going on by the lists, and I should not be allowed to say what I thought of our doings lately. Cronin is still with the 5<sup>th</sup> Bedfordshires and not out yet, I think not likely to be in all probability. Only wish we could repeat our swimming performance off Penarth 'specially the Wednesday evening ones. Have heard rumours of leave being given shortly but do not rely much on it, have been offered a Commission in this Battalion and I may take it up if my papers go through satisfactorily.

Kindest regards and wishes to Mrs Lewis,

Your old Pal,

Billy

**Trenches: 'had a game of football'**

Ernest William Bratchell, undated, France. **Born:** 28 July 1893, **Joined GWR:** 3 February 1908, **Regiment:** 1/3 (City of London) Battalion (Royal Fusiliers), **Regiment number:** 2176, **Rank:** Private, **Died:** 1969

No 11 Platoon, C. Company  
3 Batt. London Regt.  
Brit Expeditionary Force  
France

Dear Burgie

Was very glad indeed to get your letters although your news in regard to Joe comes as a shock. It was the first I had heard of him since he arrived in France in spite of the fact his Regiment being quite close. Am afraid the 9th and few days following were rotten days for a good many Batts. our lot as much as any. We have been "in" since the 8th and have had a fairly trying time. we were reinforced during this week, not before time as we were down to our last 200. Can't tell how sorry I am to hear about Joe as you say he was "one of the best". I hope you chaps have not been annoyed at my not answering your very welcome letters. I don't pride myself much on writing good letters though and opportunities are also hard to find. As you know I had a bit of a knock at house Chaffell but have quite got over that and am now in the best of health and spirits. I have

across both Tom Phillips and Peter Lewis in different drafts of the London Scottish while down at Rouen both of them have now had some experience on the job at least. Thanks Mr Drew very much for making enquiries till him I occasionally wish something to be on the old job again the quiet life will do for me after this. No I did not get Dick magazine or better expect it went astray while I was in hospital. Thanks him very much for sending them will you. Had a game of football about 2 weeks ago with a RGA Battery the field being a serious drawback I think it was a Cabbage patch. Still we managed to get a good game in and most important of all won. The weather here has on the whole been very good just lately only getting an occasional days rain. Last night we had a sharp thunderstorm a new experience it has at least the effect of shutting all the other disturbances of our rest up. so we did not grouse. Much obliged for

all the information re the other fellows am glad most of them are getting on so well. Presch seems to have come out top dog the job alone from other companies seems to be a passing one. leaving out the fellows in Scotland will miss close my spirit. Please remember our to Dick Mr Smiley, Rauls & Drew. The boys both then and yourself are like myself OK.

Yours faithfully  
E.W. Bratchell



**Transcript**

Dear Burgie,

Was very glad indeed to get your letters although, your news in regard to Joe [Chamberlain] comes as a shock. It was the first I had heard of him since he arrived in France in spite of the fact his regiment being quite close. Am afraid the 9th and few days following were rotten days for a good many battalions, our lot as much as any. We have been "in" since the 8th and have had a fairly trying time we were reinforced during this



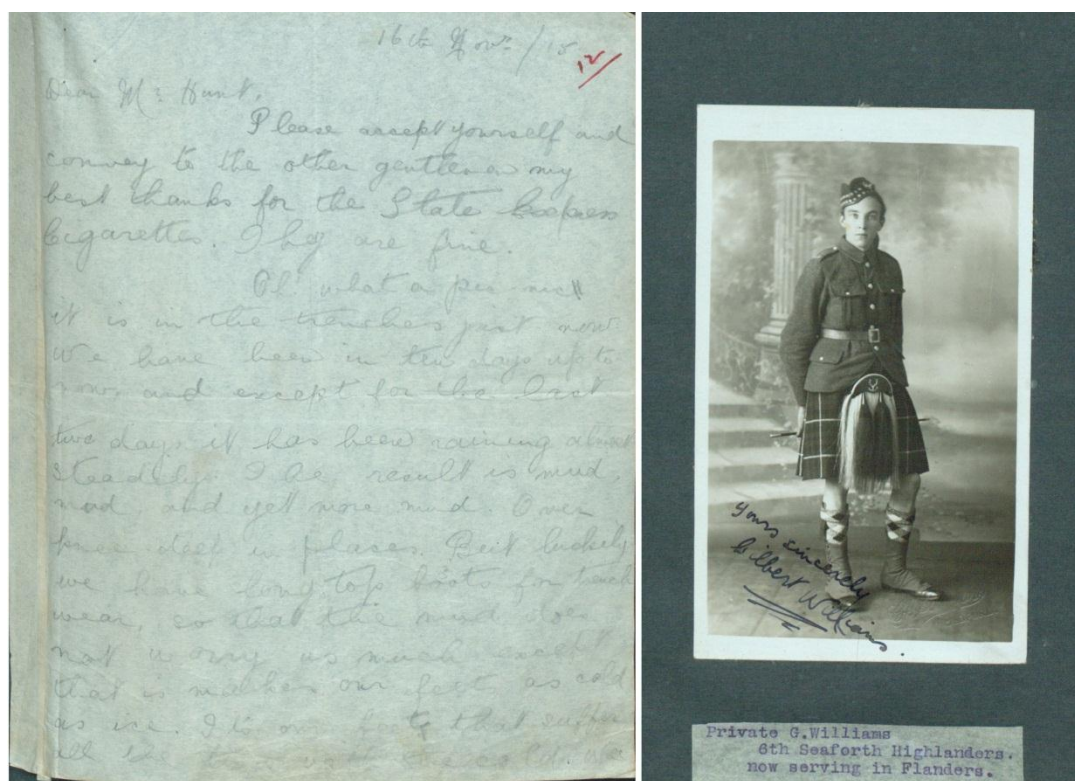
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E.W. Bratchell



## Trenches: 'handling a Maxim'

Gilbert Williams, 16 November 1915, France. **Born:** 18 April 1894, **Regiment:** 1/6 Seaforth Highlanders, **Regiment number:** 2175, **Rank:** Private, **Died:** 1967. **Note:** Williams also fought in the Second World War, returning from war on 15 November 1948



### Transcript

Dear Mr Hunt,

Please accept yourself and convey to the other gentlemen my best thanks for the State Express cigarettes. They are fine. Oh what a picnic it is in the trenches just now. We have been in the trenches 10 days up to now, and except for the last two days it has been raining almost steadily. The result is mud, mud and yet more mud, knee deep in places. But luckily we have long top boots from trench wear, so that the mud does not worry us much, except that is making our feet as cold as ice... We have been issued with fur jackets so we can keep our bodies warm.

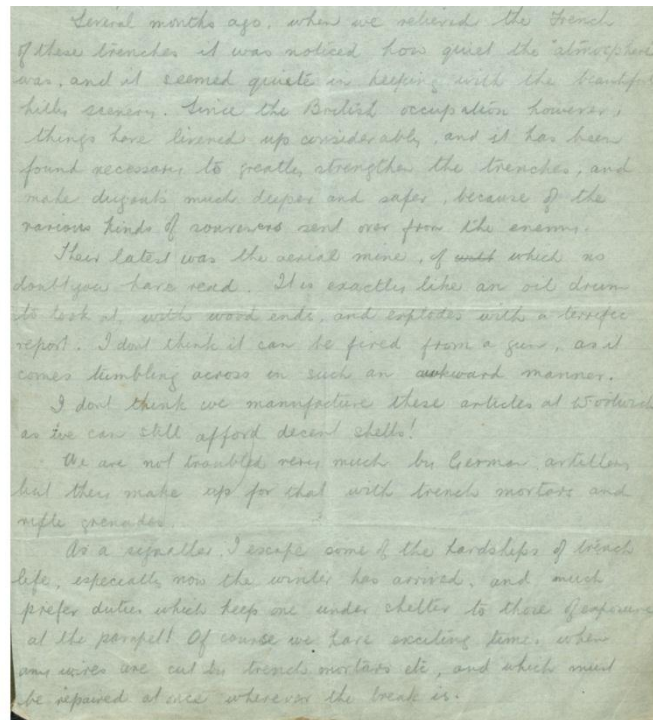
Just now the whole countryside is covered with snow and moving objects are distinguishable a long distance off. For instance this morning when I was on duty with the gun I could see the Germans walking down a road away behind their lines. I had several bursts at them with the gun but they were out of range. Made me damned mad I can tell you seeing the blighters and then not being able to lay them out.

You can't realise the power one seems to possess when handling a Maxim. Personally I feel as if I could lay out the whole German army. We fire about a couple of thousand rounds every night into Fritz's trenches just to keep them quiet. They (the Germans) have been trying to find the gun, both with their Maxims and with shells, but up to now, they've not succeed. Kind regards to everybody. Yours very sincerely,

Gilbert Williams.

**Trenches: 'souvenirs sent over'**

R.C.S. Frost, 3 November 1915, France. **Born:** 30 January 1888, **Regiment:** 8<sup>th</sup> Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders; Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, **Regiment number:** 1998; 300470, **Rank:** Private; Second Lieutenant, **Died:** 1962

**Transcript (extract)**

...Several months ago, when we relieved the French of these trenches it was noticed how quiet the 'atmosphere' was, and it seemed quite in keeping with the beautiful hilly scenery. Since the British occupation however, things here have livened up considerably, and it has been found necessary to greatly strengthen the trenches, and make dugouts much deeper and safer, because of the various kinds of souvenirs sent over from the enemy.

Their latest was the aerial mine, of which no doubt you have read. It is exactly like an oil drum to look at, with wood ends, and explodes with a terrific report. I don't think it can be fired from a gun, as it comes tumbling across in such an awkward manner.

I don't think we manufacture these articles at Woolwich as we can afford decent shells! We are not troubled very much by German artillery, but they make up for that with trench mortars and rifle grenades.

As a signaller I escape some of the hardships of trench life, especially now the winter has arrived, and much prefer duties which keep one under shelter to those of exposure at the parapet! Of course we have exciting times, when any wires are cut by trench mortars etc. and which need to be repaired at once wherever the break is.

Just lately I am having a lot of experience at making and fitting fireplaces in dugouts. We generally use biscuit tins to hold the fire and rummage among old houses in the village nearby for pieces of piping to take the smoke out, usually through the entrance as it is impossible to cut a hole through the roof on account of the sheet of iron. Fuel for burning is generally a problem but a small supply of coke is allowed and we add to it all kinds of wood etc. When sitting up at night it is surprising what good time we keep when waking up the next fellow to carry on, if there is no fire, but if a good fire is on, we get quite generous, and don't mind allowing the next man an extra hour or so to sleep!

We have had several days of rain this week, which doesn't tend to improve life in the trenches, or out. On our journey to billets last Saturday night, we took a road through a wood constructed by the Royal Engineers. It wasn't quite finished, and in places was ankle deep in water, so our march was more of a paddle. Parts of this wood, which is in a valley had been purposely flooded, so the road had to be laid on faggots and will be a piece of work when finished.

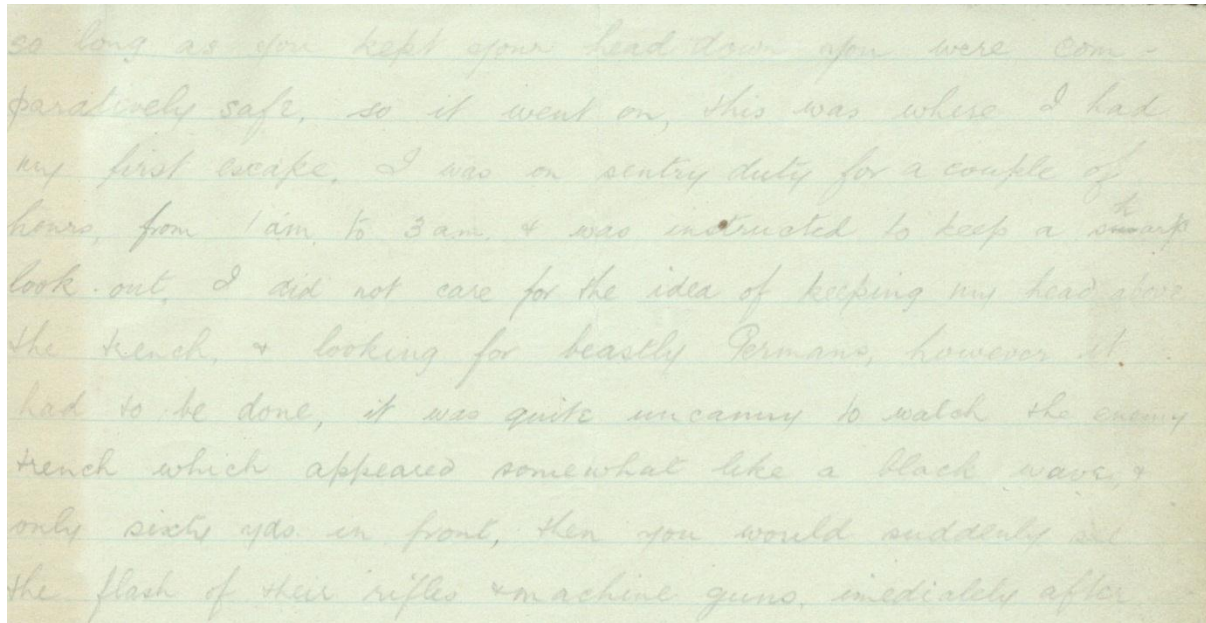
We are fortunate in having dry billets, with beds raised above the floor and a small fire. Sheep skin coats have been issued to us, and are very warm. There is a fellow here now imitating a monkey and holding out a small cup to an audience seated on the beds, while another chap is playing an accordion! All we need now are top boots (tall rubber waders or gum boots designed to try and avoid the problem of trench foot) to paddle through the trenches! There is plenty of water about but very little

to drink or wash in. It is a fine place for people who are good at finding excuses for not washing! But there are very good hot water baths here, only it isn't any good having a bath unless one really needs it, on account of the colour of the water!!

We do very well though, for food and clothing both of which are good, and well supplied, and considering the many distant places it is sent from, it speaks well of the splendid way our Navy is doing 'its bit'...

## Trenches: 'swept continually with shells'

Edward Henry Cecil Stewart, undated, France. **Born:** 13 November 1891, **Regiment:** 1/5 Grenadier Company, London Rifle Brigade, **Regiment number:** 1167; 300717, **Rank:** Private, **Died:** 1 July 1916



### Transcript

#### Extract

... As long as you kept your head down you were comparatively safe, so as it went on, this was where I had my first escape. I was on sentry duty for a couple of hours, from 1am to 3am and was instructed to keep a sharp look out. I did not care for the idea of keeping my head above the trench and looking for beastly Germans, however it had to be done, it was quite uncanny to watch the enemy trench which appeared somewhat like a black wave and only sixty yards in front, then you would suddenly see the flash of their rifles and machine guns immediately after would come the report and nasty thuds on the sandbags which you might be resting against. I fired about five shots at their flashes (the only target to aim at) then another two shells which lodged in the parapet either side of my head leaving about 2 to 3 inches between me and certain death. I thought that near enough but it turned out that it was to have something nearer



than that. Our casualties here amounted on the average, to about two per day killed, of course, we thought it terrible at the time at least I did.

Early April saw us relieved by another division and we were sent a few miles back for a well-earned rest, which consisted of physical drill and a run before breakfast. The remainder of the morning being spent in platoon drill musketry drills. After dinner we put the "cap on" our rest (why so called I do not know) by having a route march for two hours. We spent a few days like this and were dispatched with all possible speed to Ypres, here we went in to support the Canadians and spent a most unpleasant eight days, during which time we lost several hundred men, nearly all my friends who came out in the same draft and were killed or wounded, we had to retire, the best part being that the Germans did not find this out until two days after when we were more or less safely bivouacking in a very pretty wood. We stayed here for about a week; then we got to work again, digging reserve trenches just behind the front line, building up parapets which had been demolished by the enemy's high explosive shells and such like, working all night and getting what sleep we could in the daytime. One morning we were awakened by the most awful din, it seemed as though hell had broken loose, shells were falling like summer rain. And people have often told me in the course of conversation it was raining shells and I admit I took it with a grain of salt, could not be possible I thought, but such I was surprised to find was possible and actually taking place there about 3.30am. This bombardment started and about half an hour later, I, with three others, were ordered to start reinforcing. We went up in fours, it being considered safer that way, half a mile over open ground we had to do, this being swept continually with shells, to give you a slight idea I can say the previous night, just in front of our reserve trenches was a beautifully green field, and the next morning it was as much as one could do to see any grass at all, simply one mass of craters, varying in diameter from ten to twelve paces.

I had gone about half the required distance when a shell fell only a yard from where I was, the force of the concussion [explosion] pitched me several yards to my left and I came down rather heavily, however I reached the first line without any further mishap, where we had to stay

until midnight when we had to be relieved again owing to not having enough men to hold the trench. Our honours were one V.C. (Victoria Cross), two D.S.O. (Distinguished Service Orders), one Military Cross and one or two D.C.M. (Distinguished Conduct Medals).

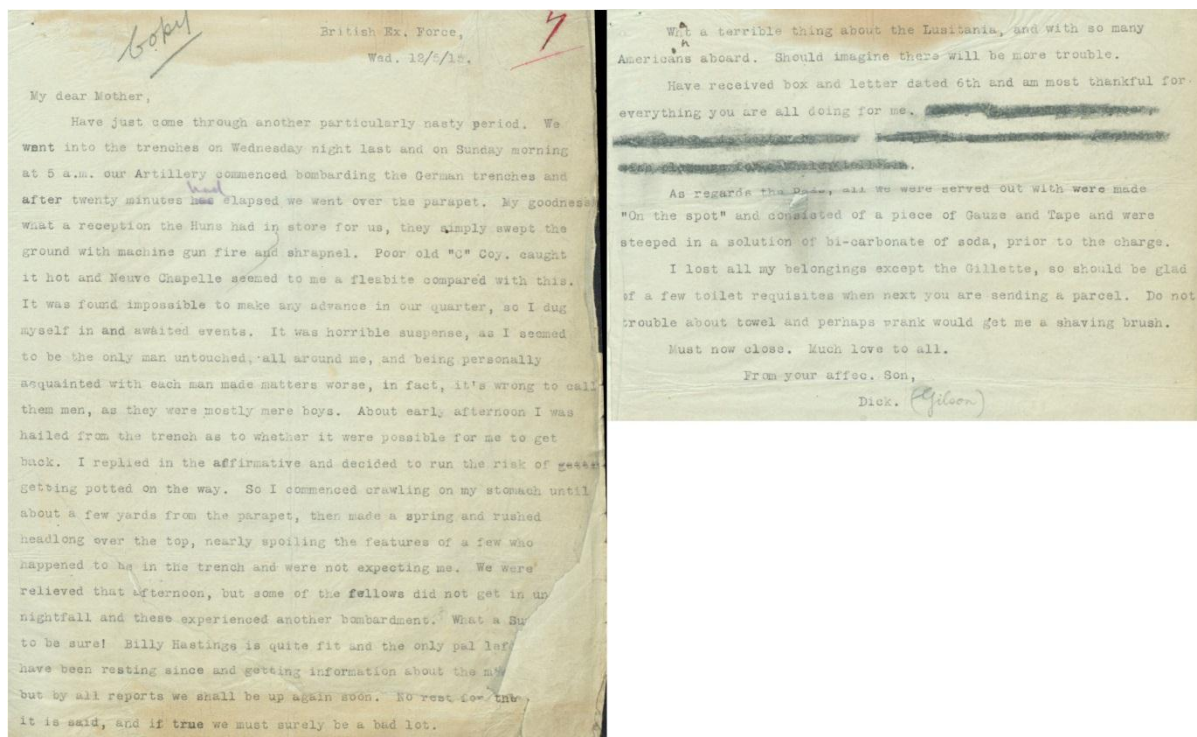
The next day I paraded sick, my back paining me so much that I could not stand straight for a week after. I am now back with the regiment who are on the line of communications. We are having leave shortly and if possible will pay a visit to the Audit office. Have you any news of Chichester?

Yours truly,

(Rifleman) E.H.C. Stewart

**Trenches: 'they were mostly mere boys'**

Richard Gilson, 12 May 1915, France. **Born:** 20 September 1887, **Regiment:** 4<sup>th</sup> Seaforth Highlanders, **Regiment number:** 2076; 200415, **Rank:** Acting Colour Sergeant, **Died:** 1961

**Transcript**

My dear Mother,

Have just come through a particularly nasty period. We went into the trenches on Wednesday night and on Sunday morning at 5am our Artillery commenced bombarding the German trenches and after 20 minutes had elapsed we went over the parapet. My goodness what a reception the Huns had in store for us, they simply swept the ground with machine gun fire and shrapnel. Poor old 'C' coy. caught it hot and Neuve Chapelle seemed to be a fleabite compared with this. It was found impossible to make any advance in our quarter, so I dug myself in and awaited events. It was horrible suspense, as I seemed to be the only man untouched, all around me, and being personally acquainted with each man made matters worse, in fact, it's all wrong to call them men, as they were mostly mere boys.

About early afternoon I was hailed from the trench as to whether it was possible for me to get back. I replied in the affirmative and decided to run the risk of getting potted on the way. So I commenced crawling on my stomach until about a few yards from the parapet, then made a spring and rushed headlong over the top, nearly spoiling the features of a few who happened to be in the trench and were not expecting me. We were relieved that afternoon, but some of the fellows did not get in until nightfall and these experienced another bombardment... Billy Hastings is quite fit and the only pal left. We have been resting since and getting information about the (illegible) but by all reports we shall be up again soon. No rest for the wicked it is said, and if true we must surely be a bad lot.

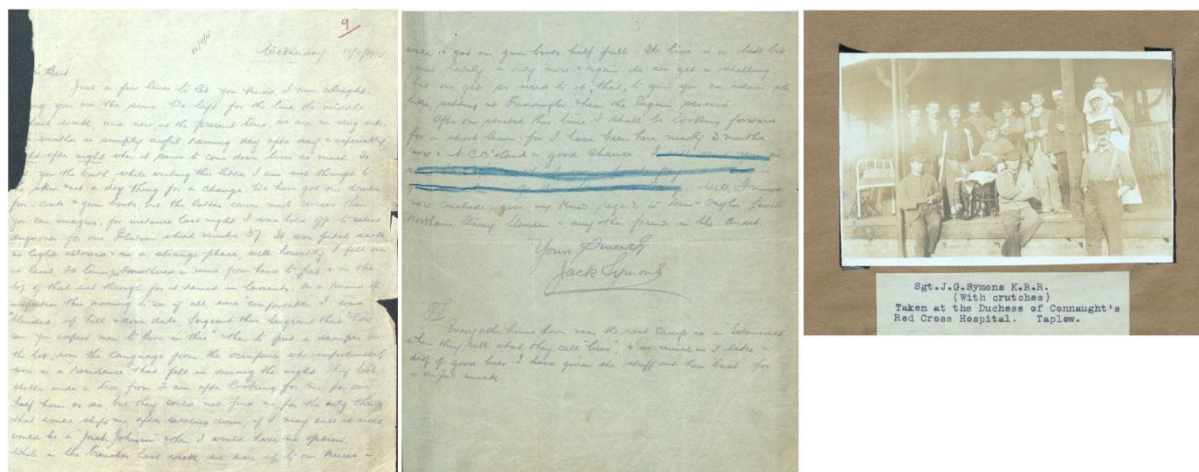
What a terrible thing about the Lusitania, and with so many Americans aboard. Should imagine there will be more trouble. Have received box and letter dated 6<sup>th</sup> and am most thankful for everything you are all doing for me. (censored.)

As regards the pads, (masks of cotton pads which served as gas masks), all we were served out with were made 'on the spot' and consisted of a piece of gauze and tape and were steeped in a solution of bicarbonate of soda, prior to this charge. I lost all my belongings except the Gillette (razor) so should be glad of a few toilet requisites when next you are sending a parcel. Do not trouble about towel and perhaps Frank would get me a shaving brush. Must now close. Much love to all. From your affectionate son,

Dick

## Trenches: 'up to our knees in water'

Jonathan George Symons, 10 November 1915, France. **Born:** 22 August 1875, **Joined GWR:** 28 October 1889, **Regiment:** 13 County of London Regiment (King's Royal Rifles Corps), **Regiment number:** 6389, **Died:** 1941



### Transcript

Dear Bert,

Just a few lines to let you know I am alright, hoping you are the same... At the present time we are in dugouts. The weather is simply awful, raining day after day and especially night after night... To tell you the truth, while writing this letter I am wet through to the skin and not a dry thing for a change. We have got our winter fur coats and gum boots, but the latter cause more curses than you can imagine, for instance last night I was sent off to select dugouts for our platoon, which is number 37. It was pitch dark, no light allowed and in a strange place, well honestly I fell over at least 20 times got smothered in mud from head to feet and on the top of that wet though for it rained in torrents. On a round of inspection this morning to see if all were 'comfortable' I was 'blended' up hill and down dale, 'Sergeant this' and 'Sergeant that'.

How can you expect men to live in this, and then to put a dampener on the lot, was the language from the occupiers who unfortunately were in a residence that fell in during the night. They took shelter under a tree from 2am after looking for me for half an hour or so, but they could not find

me, for the only thing that would shift me, after settling down, if I may call it that, would be a 'Jack Johnson' and then I would have no option.

While in the trenches last week John and I were up to our knees in water and got our gum boots half full. The line is a bit quiet lately and only now and again do we get a shelling, but one gets used to it. That, to give you an idea, is like sitting at Paddington and hearing the engines screech.

After our stretch this time I shall be looking forward for a short leave for I have been here nearly three months now and we stand a good chance. Well I must now conclude...Yours sincerely

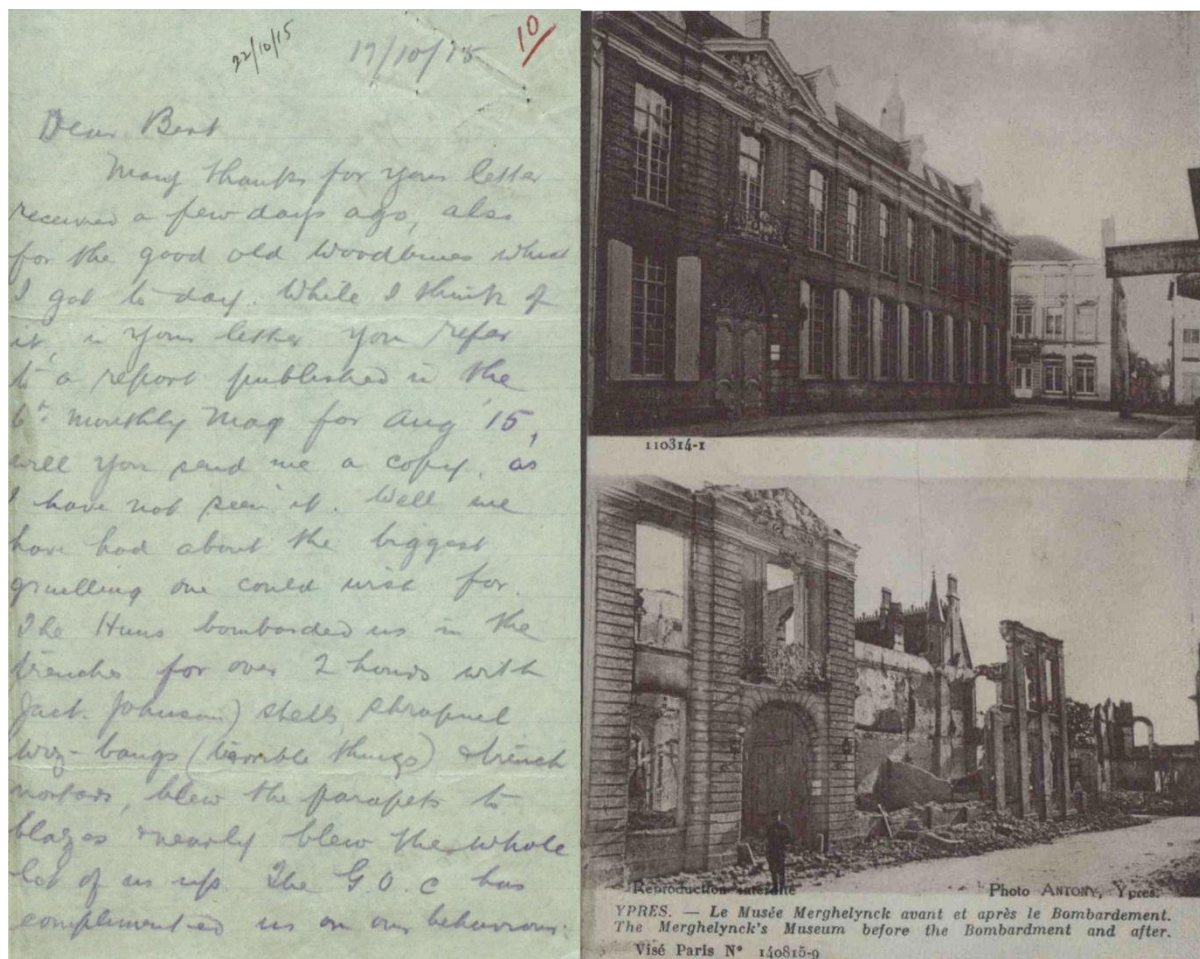
Jack Symons

P.S. Every other home down near the rest camp is an *Estaminet* (small French café) where they sell what they call 'beer', and as much as I like a drop of good beer I have given the stuff out here 'best' for is awful muc.



**Weapons: 'the biggest gruelling'**

Jonathan George Symons, 19 October 1915, Belgium. **Born:** 22 August 1875, **Joined GWR:** 28 October 1889, **Regiment:** 13 County of London Regiment (King's Royal Rifles Corps), **Regiment number:** 6389, **Died:** 1941

**Transcript**

Dear Bert,

Many thanks for your letter received a few days ago, also for the good old Woodbines which I got today. While I think of it in your letter you refer to a report published in the 6<sup>th</sup> monthly Magazine for August '15, will you send me a copy, as I have not seen it.

Well, we have had about the biggest gruelling we could wish for. The Huns bombarded us in the trenches for over two hours with Jack Johnson shells, shrapnel, whizz bangs (terrible things) and trench mortars, blew the parapets to blazes nearly blew the whole lot of us up. The G.O.C has complimented us on our behaviour.

the parapets to blazes and nearly blew the whole lot of us up. The General Officer Commanding has complimented us on our behaviour. We are now resting at a place called Vlamertinghe, just south of Ypres and a couple miles North of Poperinghe [Poperinge] in Belgium. We deserve a rest for we have spent thirty-nine days in dugouts and the trenches (except three days) and needless to tell you we are very crummy, which tends to spoil the rest we are having. I never thought I was going to another phase of them after South Africa. I was in Poperinghe (where I met Jackson a few weeks ago)...

The beauty of it out here is we can stand a pal a drink, and also have one with him. I suppose shall have to wait for my increase, being an absentee from the office, anyway they can add it on to my salary as soon as they like for I shall then be able to pay more income tax. I enclose a few postcards. They are showing in each card before and after, or during and after the bombardment of Ypres, so you can guess what the place looks like. Well Bert in conclusion I must tell you that one of our Sergeants who is on leave, posted this in London for me, that's why I am able to give you a few details. Kind regards to all friends in the Audit,

Your sincere friend,

Jack Symons.