



**DURHAM**  
AT **WAR**



## **DIARY OF WILLIAM ROBERTS**

18/944 Private William Roberts

'B' Company, 18th Battalion Durham Light Infantry

### **Volume 3**

**26 October – 14 December 1916**

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[Durham County Record Office](#) and Durham at War volunteers have assisted with the transcription and editing so that this diary can be shared with a wider audience online during the First World War centenary.



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**26 October 1916** *(continued from previous volume)*

Just got in when we were heavily bombarded. I was on guard at Company HQ in support line. Fiercely shelled again during the night.

**27 October 1916**

Heavy bombardment by both sides. Our guns always firing much faster and longer than the Germans. Night still on guard. Much quieter.

**28 October 1916**

Our guns which are always bombarding heavily, seem to be going stronger than ever this morning. Relieved by C Company about midday and went back into reserve. I was on guard at the entrance of the communication trench which ran from the road just on the right of Hebuterne. On one side of the entrance was the canal, and on the other side stood a crucifix. What thoughts would pass through our heads as we stood there. The night passed fairly quiet. Several raiding parties came in, but heard various accounts of their doings, which one was right I cannot say.

**29 October 1916**

Wet day. Relieved of guard at 1pm and went to a dug-out in reserve line. Night carried C Company rations down. Some of our men were out on patrol trying to catch prisoners, but did not meet with success.

**30 October 1916**

Relieved by York & Lancs about 1pm and we looked some queer sights. Unwashed, unshaven & covered with mud we marched

to a large farmhouse, about 5 miles back near the village of Coigneux. The place is large enough to billet the battalion, and my platoon was in what at one time would, I think, have been the farm hands' bed-room, but now fitted with wire beds, which are a treat to us after dirty dug-outs and draughty shelters. 11am to 12 on cleaning roads. 4pm left on a working party for the trenches, but had not got far when a cyclist



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came for us to go back.

### **31 October 1916**

Cleaning the yard up a bit this morning. Picked for training in a raiding party. So excused the night working party for the trenches. The working party did not return till 2am next morning.

### **1 November 1916**

Had a bath at the army baths, platoon orderly.

### **2 November 1916**

Paraded with raiding party and practised crossing no man's land. Short parade again in the afternoon.

### **3 November 1916**

Practised entering trenches on raid.

### **4 November 1916**

Practised again entering trenches and a short parade again during the afternoon.

### **5 November 1916**

Have been missing working party on account of training for raiding but had to go on a working party to trench

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near Hebuterne at 8am. Arrived back about 2pm. Went to a service of Holy Communion held here at 6pm and a short service at half past six.

### **6 November 1916**

Parade for raiding from 9–11. Went to a concert at Souastre, a village about a mile away.

### **7 November 1916**



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Left for the trenches at 6am, and as we slept in till half past 5 everything was in one big rush. The trenches were in a terrible state, past the knees in mud and water. Went into support line. I was one of the company runners, so went into Company Head Quarters dug-out where I took messages up to Battalion HQ in Hebuterne.

### **8 November 1916**

It had been raining heavily and the trenches had slipped in, in several places, and the mud was much deeper than yesterday. Had only about one journey up to HQ. Very few shells came over and I was thankful to be able to get into a dug-out from the wet and mud.

### **9 November 1916**

Relieved by C Company. It took us several hours to get up the communication trench to the reserve line; several chaps stuck fast, and had to leave their boots behind. Got a good dug-out and had very little work.

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### **10 November 1916**

Still fairly quiet had not much to do. Again had a good night's sleep.

### **11 November 1916**

Relieved about 10am by West Yorks and marched back to a hill-side near Sailly where we were crowded into rough built dirty dug-outs. The one I am in now with a chum is about 5 foot long, by 3 wide and about 4 high.

### **12 November 1916**

Had rather an uncomfortable night as we were cramped up, and had no room to stretch out so in the morning we moved to a shell store on the road side. 11am went to the trenches to carry football bombs, passing the batteries, which were bombarding heavily. The village was being shelled as we reached it, and one shell fell at the church corner just as we had passed. Carrying our bombs from the village to the support line we were up to the knees in water. Our guns were shelling heavily all the time and the Boshes were sending a few over in return.



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### **13 November 1916**

Reveille at 5am. I stood to, in reserve, as the East Yorks went over on the right of Hebuterne, but learnt that they had to retire after reaching the Boshes'

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third line, as the division on their right had failed to advance. We stood to all day, packed up ready to move at 20 mins notice, but were not called upon. Heavy bombardment by our guns all day.

### **14 November 1916**

Left at 10am and marched to shelters built of waterproof sheets in a field, between Courcelles and Bertrancourt. Our guns bombarding very heavy this afternoon. Large number of aeroplanes up.

### **15 November 1916**

Very cold day, could not get warm, with extra blanket and fur coat.

### **16 November 1916**

Another cold day. Have not been in any working parties from here as I am standing to as a Company runner.

### **17 November 1916**

Frosty. Moved from here at 11am and marched to the farm near Courcelles where we were about 8 days ago. Billet in a large barn and C & D Company who were here have taken our place.

### **18 November 1916**

Went on one or two messages, as I was on duty as a Company runner.

### **19 November 1916**

Took a message to our HQ near Courcelles. Came back by Bus, the village we spent a lot of time in before the 1st of July. There was a short service in our billet at 6pm.



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Feeling a bit fed up this

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afternoon I wrote the following poem:

I'm longing for my dear old home  
In the land I love so well  
To see the plover on the moor  
The pheasant in the dell,  
Could I but leave these windswept plains  
For the home to me so dear  
But though my thoughts are ever home  
That home has sent me here

I'm longing for the wooded hills  
The rippling winding streams  
To see the trout, the wild duck there  
The peaceful homeland scenes  
Could I but leave these battle plains  
For the land to me so dear  
For though my heart is in that land  
Twas it that sent me here

I'm longing for the garden fair  
Where my heart and hands had worked  
And where the fairest flowers bloomed

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And the songsters shyly lurked  
Could I but leave these barren plains  
For the garden to me so dear  
But though my heart that garden pleased  
Twas it that sent me here

I'm longing for the bright eyed girl



Again to stroke her golden hair  
To see again the lovely smile  
To kiss her cheek so fresh and fair  
Could I but leave these muddy plains  
And have her always near  
But though she has my heart my thought  
It is for her I'm here

I long to see the dear old Church  
Where every week I went  
And there inside the old grey walls  
A few quiet hours spent  
Why should I dread the battle field  
Why should I ever fear  
It is the Church I'm fighting for  
The Church has sent me here.

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These are some of the thoughts that passed through my head, as I sat in the old farm building, thinking of the happy Sunday I had spent.

### **20 November 1916**

Set on a working party to help the Royal Engineers to build some huts near Saily.  
Did not get back till about 4pm.

### **21 November 1916**

Trenches again. Left to take over about 12 on the left of the Hebuterne sector where we relieved the East Surreys. I was in a dugout at company HQ for duty as a runner. We were holding the third line, only being held by a few bombing parties and machine guns, and could only be got to at night over the top as the communication trenches were impassable. I had to go with an officer, visiting the posts at night, and a terrible job it was as the ground was one mass of huge shell holes, and the trench also was thick with mud.



## **22 November 1916**

Fairly quiet. Saw 2 taubes send one of our battle planes down. The German planes, being much faster, swooped down on ours firing his machine gun, and forcing ours to descend. Night, the Boshes fired a terrible lot of mines onto our advance line and trench.

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Going down later with an officer, we found the place almost battered to pieces and some of the large holes were about 8 foot deep. Luckily they had fallen on a part of the line not held by our men, but it had given them a terrible shaking, as they had fell quite near.

## **23 November 1916**

Ran a few messages. As I was carrying the tea through the village at night, the road was being swept by machine gun bullets, which wizzed past quite close to me. Went again to the front line, through the mud and deep shell holes.

## **24 November 1916**

Quiet day. Round the trenches again at night.

## **25 November 1916**

Relieved by D Company in morning, and went back into a cellar of a large house in the village. The place, a fine chateau, would once have been the home of a wealthy man, and a very pretty home too, with its large conservatory at the back but the only trace left of it now was the iron frame, over which an old vine was still clinging. Night ran two short messages.

## **26 November 1916**

Village shelled more than usual today. A runner's job in the village of Hebutterne is not to be envied.



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### **27 November 1916**

Boshes got a shell into the chateau this afternoon, but

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the strong cellar we were in hardly shook with the shock. Relieved by West Yorks about 4pm and marched back to Rossignol farm, where we have been billeted twice before.

### **28 November 1916**

Cleaning up.

### **29 November 1916**

7am on working party up to Hebuterne, where we had to carry wire and stakes from the village into the trenches Arrived back at 1pm. The place is much quieter than what it was a week or two ago, and never a shell came in while we were there.

### **30 November 1916**

On the same job as yesterday.

### **1 December 1916**

Went to Field Hospital at Comines to have my teeth attended to, but they would not draw any. Only had one stopped.

### **2 December 1916**

Afternoon went up to trenches with officers commanding B Company.

### **3 December 1916**

Left for trenches on the left of Hebuterne at 9am. Being short handed I was on duty with the platoon, and at night went down to the advance line on sentry duty. It was terribly cold standing in the wet trench.

### **4 December 1916**

Still in the advance post, which could only be reached after dark. Spent a fearful day



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and very cold, and could not stand upright or move about much for fear of been observed.

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Relieved after dark, had rest of night off.

#### **5 December 1916**

Off duty in dug-out. Night again went down to advance line. Quiet but fearfully cold.

#### **6 December 1916**

Left advance line before dawn. Relieved by A Company about 3pm, went back to dug-out in the chateau at Hebuterne. On guard there to give alarm if needed.

#### **7 December 1916**

On guard till 5pm then had a night's sleep.

#### **8 December 1916**

Working in a communication trench in the morning. Gas guard at night.

#### **9 December 1916**

Relieved about 11am by West Yorks and our Company and C Company went back to Sailly, leaving A & D in Hebuterne. Sailly has been shelled a lot, and we took over a billet in a cellar. After settling down I went in search of fire-wood, which I took from the bedroom floor of a house nearby, only to have some of it pinched when I left it for a few minutes. Came on to rain heavily, but we are comfortable and dry.

#### **10 December 1916**

Went down at 11am to Hebuterne to collect old wires in a trench there. The village was shelled heavily.

#### **11 December 1916**

Working at the gum boot store here in Sailly, washing boots. Several tanks over this morning, and the guns on the right of



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the village were shelled heavily about noon. Received a plum pudding in a parcel from home which we boiled for supper and enjoyed very much.

### **13 December 1916**

Our Company and C Company changed over with the other two at Hebuterne. Left Saily early and went to Couin to see about my teeth. Had nothing done to them, got back to Hebuterne just before dark and found my platoon in a cellar. Of the house which once stood over it there was not a trace left. For sleeping it was a tight fit, and water was dropping from the roof, but I slept well most of the night.

### **13 December 1916**

Stayed in blankets till about 10am. Working on new dug out from 1 till 5pm. During the night the Germans sent a few sharp bursts of shell fire into the village.

### **14 December 1916**

Stayed in blankets again till after 10. Not on any working party. Village shelled almost all day. None dropped near our cellar, we were very comfortable, plenty of blankets and a big fire burning. Night Germans sent heavies into village in reply to our bombardment, and as they were too near us to be comfortable we moved into a deeper cellar, until things quietened down



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