DURHAM AT WAR

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John Walcote Gamble

The letters of Second Lieutenant John Walcote Gamble, 14th Battalion, Durham Light Infantry, Durham Light Infantry, from a typescript letterbook

letters

9 October 1915 – 23 May 1916

Durham County Council

21st. I.B.D., A.P.O. S17, B.E.F.

Jan. 26th, 1916.

The above weird-looking collection of figures and letters is now the address which will find me.

I had an awfully nice time at Le Touquet hospital. They make one very comfy, and give one every luxury, and the Duchess is topping. I am now at a convalescent base, and do nothing but take gentle walks and eat - especially the latter, as I found that when I left hospital, I had lost a stone of my fighting-weight. I am beginning to feel more like my old self again, and am going before a medical board on Saturday, and shall then know what is in store for me. There does not seem to be much chance of me getting home, so I'm anxious to get back to my regiment, who are awfully short of Officers.

Cheers! I have this morning received my first correspondence for 3 weeks! And it was the mighty post bag of two letters, both written a week ago to-day. They had a very fine welcome too. There must be scores of letters etc. chasing me round from Ypres, 12 Casualty Clearing Station, and the Duchess of Westminsters Hospital at the Le Touquet, which is also known as No. 1. Red Cross. And letters get most awfully held up and delayed when they are trying to work their way through the mazes of an Expeditionary Force - readdressed! You can't imagine then

9 October 1915

Royal Pavilion Hotel,
Folkstone

Going over tonight.
It's been a superb day here, cloudless and lovely. The sea is quite calm. I think Folkstone one of the best spots I've been to. Saw two air ships come over, apparently from France – thought they were zeps at first.

A large transport went off a short time ago with a great number of Scottish troops on board. Great enthusiasm.
Will write from France.

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13 October 1915

14th Durham Light Infantry
British Expeditionary Force
France

The above is my address as it should be written at present. We are close behind the firing line now with the 14th at a place called A……..s. Sorry I can't tell you what it is, but I'll put it in the 'style censor' and perhaps you may deduce.

This battalion got very badly knocked about in the big advance. In the journey up to the front, I was very much struck by the close proximity of the peasants to the firing – right in the danger zone; and quite a lot of natives are still carrying on their daily routine in this town, although it is shelled daily. (They're strafing us now as a matter of fact). The train too ran up into the station. We did not come all the way in first Class compartments however. The last 15 miles were done on a cattle truck, which we enjoyed immensely, as it was a lovely afternoon, and we had the luck to see from the distance some awfully good fun in the air.
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When we were about seven miles behind, we saw numerous little puffs of smoke wafting through the air, and gradually disappearing; and at first we were not sure but imagined they were the result of bursting shells. Soon this proved to be the truth; for as we approached nearer, not only could we hear the guns, but could actually see flashes which were causing these globes of smoke. Then we perceived an aeroplane moving – just a spot in the sky – with these little flashes and the resultant smoke all round it. It was quite exciting. Shells were bursting on every side of the plane, but it seemed impossible to hit it. Then suddenly, there was a burst of firing away to the right, where exactly the same thing was going on, and still a third engagement on the right. All the aeroplanes got away safely, but some seemed to have awfully narrow escapes, and it was jolly good sport watching.

It was almost dark when we reached our destination, and we could see huge flare bombs going up, over in the trenches, quite close, which lit up everything.

We are going up into the ditches tomorrow. I wish my French was better. I'm speaking it (that is, trying to) all day long. Manage to understand, and make myself understood however.

The YMCA huts out here are wonderful. Although there are none right up here, I saw several down at the bases, and they are awfully good things. One seemed to be able to get anything there, especially cigarettes, and the men (and the officers) appreciate them no end.

This town which was once one of France's beautiful places presents a very miserable aspect now. The lighting was knocked out long ago; there are few windows left; and shell and bullet-marks everywhere; no sanitation either, except military, which is not nice.

(Code)
"Arriving roughly midnight, entailed nothing terrible indeed, except rotten explosive shells". = Armentieres

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20 October 1915

I cannot say how delighted I was to get your letter this afternoon. Except for a letter from Cannock Chase, it was the first I have had from England since I came out.

I am afraid this letter will be rather a rigmarole, but under my present momentary position, I think it is excusable. I am writing by the flicker of a weak French candle in a wee dug-out, which is anything but palatial. A couple of monstrous rats seem to object to my presence; so does one Fritz or Frederic or Hans, or any other Bosche name by which he is known. This show is over-ridden by vermin, rats, mice and Germans. The two smaller specimens are most irrepressible, and I am trying to show my affection for the two uninvited guests by occasionally dropping this pencil, and making furious lunges at them with my stick. They don't mind, but frisk about, squeaking, and they'll soon be off to fetch their pals, for their nightly meal of my rations, equipment, and – if they had their way – the tender parts of my body.

The other "vermin" is some sniper. He's got two good shots right on to this hole now. Perhaps there's a glimmer of some sort escaping. He was fairly on the mark last night, and he was helped by flare lights. These are fired like cartridges from a pistol. They go fairly high up in the air and explode, making a brilliant and searching light, descending slowly into our lines.

Of course there are plenty of snipers both sides, and they don't by any means have it all their own way, but I object strongly to this particular marksman. I can't locate him either. He may be potting straight across – which is only 40 yards away, he may be firing cross-fire, or he may be up a tree somewhere behind the line.

We've not been much troubled with shells today; although they put about five in one spot on the parapet this afternoon, and made a beastly mess of it. A party is going out to mend it shortly.

We seem to have bigger guns than they have, at this part of the line, and certainly we put across many more shells than they send over – but on the whole things are quite quiet here.

We never get more than three hours sleep at a stretch in the trenches, and never undress – fairly good food, although I shall never want to eat anything that resembles red plum jam after this. I say resembles – because I can't swear that the stuff we get so much of is made of plums – but it tastes as much like plums as gooseberries – and more than most other fruits. It is extremely cold here, and I am not properly warm even now, with the following wrapped round my person in various ways:- two pairs of socks, gum boots, putties, body belt, two vests, thick shirt, woollen white sweater, tunic, British warm overcoat, woollen muffler, and cap comforter. Ah yes – naturally there is something else – but naturally one wears breeks with such a rigout.

This part of Belgium was badly knocked about in the strafing a year ago, and many towns and villages behind the lines are in a deplorable condition. You can scarcely imagine what a village, containing say a good church, and a lot of houses and cottages round about, looks like after a long period of strafing, and I certainly am not journalistic enough to describe it. It must be seen to be understood.

In one place a Roman Catholic Church is so much destroyed that there is nothing left but the belfry, which gives the peculiar impression that it is suspended in the air, and is just waiting for the next shell to bring it down with a crash.

There is a great deal in combining a complete indifference to bullets etc. with extreme caution in the trench business, because one soon becomes accustomed to the flying projectile and is inclined to become careless. But I think we are keeping well down, as we have had no casualties in two days. Brother Bosche also keeps himself well concealed, and I haven't even seen one properly yet – only occasionally and quick glimpses of a cap.

I'm as fit as I have ever been in my existence, and quite contented with life; but can you suggest how to get rid of six hundred thousand million rats? It beats me! And they don't make nice pets, although they may mean well. Oh, for the Pied Piper of Hamlin or some such place! I think we shall have to politely request the Germans to gas us, and get out our respirators and helmets for a few hours, so that they may

exterminate the beasts. Even then I supposed they would create an unpleasant odour. Some problem! I suppose the only thing is to make friends with the little fiends until we get away from here. The next place may be more free from them. Give my salutations to all, and ask them to write. A letter here is just a God-send!

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23 October 1915

I almost leaped out of the trench for sheer joy when I saw your parcel, for I had been wondering if I was ever going to hear from home. It seemed an awfully long time, but apparently it takes at least five days each way, and there must be a great deal of delay at the Army Post Office bases. Receiving a parcel when in the trenches is an unparalleled glad sensation, and like everything else out here, has to be experienced to be properly comprehended; and everything contained inside was a treasure!

Now I'll answer the four questions in the first paragraph of your letter:-

1. I never felt better. Am thankful to say that my training has left me full of vigour, which is so necessary for business.
2. I have no semblance of a cold whatsoever now.
3. When I get any sleep (and three hours is the maximum) I turn into a dirty little dug-out, in all my clothes, and pull a blanket and a great coat over myself. Of course before we came into the trenches, I had a bed at a fairly comfortable, if not dilapidated billet.
4. I get plenty of food, but is chiefly rations just the same as is served out to the men:- Stale bread, cheese, heaps of jam, bacon, bully beef and biscuits – supplemented by things which are sent out to any of the officers in our Company Mess (there are six of us) – such as cakes, and also a few extras which we are able with difficult to get from villages nearby, such as tinned fruit, tinned salmon or sardines and vegetables.

A three-days-old newspaper usually drags through, but I shall always be glad to get papers of magazines of any description.
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We are in these “alleged” trenches for a week, and hope to get relieved on Sunday night. They are more breastworks than trenches, and are by no means sound. We spend all spare time strengthening and repairing them.

At one point we are right up close to the Germans, and can hear them quite plainly at times. It rained hard last night, and the “ditches” were in a frightful mess this morning – literally over the boot-tops in mud everywhere.

I think, considering that the British have held them for many months, that the regiments who have been in before, I ought to have seen it, that they were well-drained, bomb-proof and comfortable long ago; I suppose the explanation is that one regiment only occupies this part of the line for a short period at a time, and they don’t like wasting time improving trenches for someone else’s benefit. The last lot that the 14th were in, were absolutely top-notch. Properly drained, boarded and concreted, and in every way comfortable and safe; but, you see a territorial brigade had been there for two months, and had taken real pains to get their quarters jolly good. These were Durham Terriers too, who were there before us, and of course the Durham always do things well! Bow-wow!

I met a number of old 16th officers at the billets there, who went out to replace casualties in the Terriers, months ago. Was awfully pleased to see some of them again, and they were looking very fit. There had been one rotten loss though. RH Callendar, who played for Derby two seasons ago. He went to a Durham Battalion out here, and when explaining a hand-grenade to a number of officers and non-commissioned officers behind the line, sent the thing off by accident, and smashed up the whole party, killing himself. It was a rotten piece of bad luck. Callendar was a topping fellow.

The socks are excellent, and came at a most opportune moment. Of course we don’t bring all the valise full of kit, (which you all helped me to pack) up to the firing line. That is left well behind, and we only bring what we can carry in our packs. Now, I didn’t put an extra pair of socks in when we took over here, and however many socks there may be in my valise (whether odd or even) I was badly in need of a fresh

pair up here, and one of those you sent are already comforting my tootsies. It's getting jolly cold in the night, especially to the feet. The white sweater I brought is invaluable and so is the large muffler.

It's really time I stopped now. Thanks again for the topping parcel.

(Code)
"Poor lot of elderly Germans. Snipers though every rotten time." = Ploegstreet

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28 October 1915
I have just come out of the trenches after an eight days spell, and the rest is more acceptable.

They were not at all nice trenches, and the last two days we spent there were "the limit". It began to pour with rain, as it can only come down in Flanders, and in 10 minutes I was wet through. It didn't cease for the 48 hours we were in, and was still pouring its store of discomfort in liquid form when we were relieved.

Well, as I remarked, they were distinctly bad trenches, and the drainage was probably the worst; in an hour, they refused to receive any more water, in two hours, the mud was over the ankles, and by the next morning, without any exaggeration at all, it was just over the knees.

I never saw such a parade of filthy, mud-larking ragamuffins in all my life, as we looked when we got right out, and onto a road again. Everything was mud!

There's the maxim about a peck of dirt, but I guess I put at least two pecks away during this spell. It was impossible to keep it away, and I'm getting quite an appetite for soaked bread (with rain) and blancmange au noir (mud).
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Even the jolly old rats (the adjectives don't do them justice) could not keep clean, and they too had mud all over their coats. It got into my dug-out too – ugh! Imagine muddy rats, when between the blankets.

But the most unpleasant time was on the midnight watch, which was from 12-4am – just the time when man is supposed to be at his worst – with rain trickling down one's neck, slipping all over the trenches, and dodging bullets and keeping a good look out, and the men up to scratch. They strafed some, too, the night before we came out – knocked the dug-out next to the one where the officers fed to smithereens, and had the cheek to push over the parapet in one or two places. They got a good few men, too.

The people who relieved us were most unspeakably fed up with the state of affairs and didn't mind telling us either. They had just come from some top-hole trenches, which, they said were nothing short of palatial. Of course the trenches vary very much in different places.

A German aeroplane was brought down close to us yesterday, and we captured the pilot. He was only 17, and wore the Iron Cross. He was slightly wounded through the head, but his observer was killed.

Another Taube came along immediately after and dropped a bomb, doing no damage, but it was immediately driven away by one of our aeroplanes.

Am enjoying being out of the trenches, resting, more than anything for a long time. It is glorious to be able to go to sleep for a whole night. We expect to return on Sunday, and shall in all probability go to better trenches than the last lot, for which I shall be very thankful.

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31 October 1915

Sunday

This is a miserable country just at present, without doubt – Floody Flanders is what I heard one man terming it the other day. I don't think we have had five hours fine weather for over a week, and even in rest billets it is impossible to keep clean and dry. At present, we are in a large farm:- one of the numerous groups of buildings, which provide the only variation on the dull flat landscape.

All these farmsteads are on the same principle, built in a square, with a filthy pond in the middle. One side is the living part, containing sleeping and eating rooms all on the ground floor; two sides are large and roomy barns, (where we stow the men), and the fourth side is usually a pig-stye and chicken roost. The liquid forming the pond is an odorous mire, which the quacking ducks seem to delight in – the chief use of which, for us, is for threatening to immerse unruly soldiers in. It would undoubtedly be 'some' punishment, and I shall not forget for some time, the look of utmost dismay and abject misery of one of the poor French peasants here. He was trying to be polite to one of our sergeants, who mistook one sentence for an insult. A slight push, and old Bonhomme was in! He was the funniest picture imaginable when he dragged himself out.

Thanks awfully for the tip about cayenne pepper. If the rats are still so desirous of becoming intimate and socialistic in the next trenches, I shall certainly pepper them.

We expect to go back into action on Tuesday. We've had a jolly good rest, but it would have been much more enjoyable if we had had any semblance of decent weather. I guess we are in for the deuce of a wet campaign this winter.

We have just got a new commanding officer here – thank goodness! but I wish they had sent out old Grimshawe. He's one of the dearest white men who ever breathed.

If ever you don't hear from me for a considerable time, don't worry, as I may be in trenches or on some expedition where it is impossible to send correspondence.

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2 November 1915

Tuesday

This must only be a wee note as we are frightfully busy, getting ready for the trenches. I never knew before what it was to RAIN! The whole country is flooded, and really one cannot put down one's foot anywhere, whether in a farmyard, field, road or lane, without sinking at least over the boots in mud and water. There'll be some fun in the trenches, especially if there's a scrap on.

Did I tell you we had the King here last week? He had a big review, and the troops didn't half cheer. Guess it would penetrate to the firing line, and "old Bosche" would be getting the wind up, and expecting an attack. The din caused by the men's enthusiasm, however, rather upset the King's horse, and old Georgie came off. I believe he's still laid up.

It was quite a juvenile red letter day yesterday. One can get a bath at a town near, and I went in and had one yesterday – a real good hot tub – first since I came out. Also discovered a hairdresser, who cropped off my flowing locks, which was a great relief – and to top all, the ration jam changed from plum to apricot.

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4 November 1915

Your letter and your topping good parcel both arrived at tea-time today. My delight on opening the parcel was simply unbounded, and the confectionery was immediately planted on the table, and attacked by six hungry people with the utmost vigour. Two other packages rolled up at the same time, and we've had a great tea today, and shall do tomorrow too, being Guy Fawkes day. Please thank Mrs F very much indeed for the most excellent cake, half of which is already stowed away in welcome and comfortable billets (Little Mary!)

The powder you sent is going to be very useful as we are now back among the rats, and I'm hoping it will do some fearful execution.
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I will if possible, send you a casualty list of the 68th – 1068th Battalions of the Verminshire Regiment.

One does appreciate the re-appearance of the sun, after it has been sulking behind heavy rain clouds for 18 days. When it suddenly comes to itself, and objects to its obscurity and commences to drive away the frowning clouds, which send down a spiteful little shower to demonstrate their ill-feeling, it cheers us, drenched soldiers, immensely. And when, after a brief contest with the moist old-devil – Rain – it bursts through with a brilliant bayonet charge, and sends the enemy blowing away in haste, it is greeted by many a broad smile, and a "Bonjour old sport". Our great hope is that it will now hold the position it has gained, for we jolly well deserve some of its benevolence after what we've just been through. The natives seem to expect these protracted periods of bad weather. They merely pull the great hood of their cloaks over their heads, put on their wooden clogs, and gaiters, and carry on unconcernedly. They never attempt to clean themselves, nor their places of habitation, and exist in a continuous layer of mud.

Things are extremely quiet here again, but owing to things which I'm not allowed to mention in correspondence, I should not be surprised at a big push in this district within a month or so. I only hope we're in it.

I had always understood that the German was a very methodical and systematic person. I am beginning to believe that he's got these characteristics so moulded into him that it is almost a failing. It is a great thing to be well organised, and have a good routine, but he carries it almost to stupidity.

Now, we all know that the German usually takes a heavy meal at mid-day. Right – at about 12 o'clock daily, the strafing will die down to almost nothing; everything is fairly peaceful until about 3pm, when he invariably opens his afternoon show with the guns and machine guns; and the Infantry seem to wake up too. It's too obvious that they have a gorge, with only a few sentries on the look-out, and probably some of them have a digestive forty-winks after their meal. But we know when their weakest time is

– at mealtimes – We also know exactly what time he feeds. He's too methodical in a lot of things.

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20 November 1915

Did I give you the latest parody on "Little Grey Home in the West". I don't think so. However, here it is – it's not original, but it has hit the tone absolutely, and is popular here -

"There's a shallow wet trench near Houplines
'Tis the wettest there ever has been,
There are bullets that fly,
There are shells in the sky,
And it smells like a German "has-been".

My dug-out's a haven of rest
Though it's only a tumbled-down nest,
But with "Johnson's" around
I must keep underground
Till the golden sun sinks in the West".

It's a fairly mild attempt at our last spell in the trenches.

The water in the front line was everywhere a foot or more deep; it was intensely cold; the hail came across with such force, that it seemed to be mixed with bullets, and I'm sure many men must have thought they were shot by hail-stones. The harder we pumped, the deeper the water seemed to become. If we had left it undisturbed, we should have been frozen in, and Bosche was rather active with his artillery.

We discussed various ways of using or abusing the liquid devil. One bright idea was to cut a trench through from our line to theirs, make it fairly deep, run in the water, and torpedo them!!!
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Another, to make a number of fires in buckets, and hang them up in our dug-outs, which of course were half-full of water. After a time surely the water would boil and we could get hot baths!!

Boats and swimming races were dismissed as frivolous, but the idea of skating about the support trenches was seriously considered!!

There were great rejoicings when we were relieved yesterday morning at dawn, although we had quite an exciting time getting out.

You see we usually empty about half-a-dozen communication trenches along the line, but on this occasion, only one was really safe from drowning casualties. It was an extremely tedious business getting a battalion out by one route, and we could not get started until after the appointed time, owing to the relieving people meeting with similar difficulties. So it was just about broad daylight when we found ourselves at a three-shafted junction in rear of the supports, with a column of troops in each of the other trenches, and confusion prevailed. The trench was narrow, and undoubtedly, someone had to go back, and there were heated expostulations. Some of the men wanted, and even commenced to get out and walk past along the parapet (a very dangerous thing, although we were by this time 700 yards back) and then suddenly – a Taube appeared, flying towards us – observation stunt-looking for targets for his artillery. Everybody realised the danger, for he was bound to see us, if we did not do something quickly. Eventually the officer who was in charge of the party in front of us, reluctantly retired, and we doubled out into the small village, which lies between the trenches and the town. The Bosche must have seen us, but he was attacked by two of our machines, and shrapnel was bursting in front of him, so he had great difficulty in getting the information back, and by the time the shells started coming over, we were fairly clear, and did not suffer much; but the battalion behind us caught it horribly.

After such a horrible period as we've had in the trenches, the men were very cheery at the prospect of getting back to billets, and getting dry, warm and clean; and we'd just got them nicely settled down in what had been a splendid hospital, and were

settling down ourselves to a huge hot breakfast in the officers' billet (a huge house near-by) when- Oh Hades!! – They started a big bombardment on this part of the town. They hit the hospital and the road outside, and the men were rushed into cellars.

It must have been awfully big stuff they were sending over, as it made a tremendous report, and did a lot of damage, but for some inexplicable reason, we went on with our meal. They put one in the garden, which shook the window-panes out of every frame in the house, and made an orator 20 feet wide; they hit the conservatory with a tremendous shattering of glass, but luckily that was at the other side of the house.

After it was over, we went out and viewed the damage. It's really as indescribable as it is terrible. The first shell which dropped in the road killed a French woman, a child and knocked down two tram posts. One went into our battalion headquarters, smashed the typewriter, destroyed many papers, and scuppered the sergeant major and two sergeants.

They are making an awful mess of this once magnificent town. If it were not for these Herr Von Krupp specialities, the rest in billets would be most comfortable. All the time in the trenches we are at high tension, and this last time never attempted any sleep – there was nowhere to sleep – and now we simply let go – I've done practically nothing but laze about, eat and smoke, and exert nothing – especially not the brain.

Iveson and I did a stroll out last evening to try and find a café which we had heard a great deal about. We had tea there, and it was a surprisingly elegant and up-to-date place. The furniture, decorations, music, attendants, and food were all reminiscent of a good London café. It was rather strange finding this place, among the ruins of other shops and establishments, but it was very pleasing. It was packed with officers of various regiments just out of the trenches, and we met a lot we knew. It is teatime now, and I am going to wander round there for tea.

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30 November 1915

Well, we've now left the district where I got my baptism of fire etc. and where we spent quite a considerable time in and out of the trenches, and have trekked up north, coming to a rest behind one of the hottest spots on the front (Ypres). We are doing some re-organising and re-equipping for a day or two before going into the scrapping up here, and I believe it is "some" scrapping too, at this spot.

When we came out of those trenches for the last time on Saturday, we spent a night in the same old town (where the shelling and the tea-shop are the chief characteristics) and we were to start off early next morning.

There was no strafing at all during the night, but we were just forming up in the yard at the men's billet, the same hospital as before, when the Bosche started. I'm quite convinced that they must have had information from spies of the movements of our troops, because they commenced shelling the hospital and the surrounding buildings, including the hHeadquarters and officers' billets, at the exact moment for damage.

The first shell came whining over, without any manners at all, and rudely smashed into the hospital roof, with the deuce of a bang. We immediately commenced a hasty but orderly retirement into the cellars, but during this lowering of soldiers and possibly of dignity, they sent some very nasty ones in. You know, these high explosives don't play the game at all. They give no decent warning or challenge – just the sudden and ominous whizz – just time to instinctively duck your head, and then – crash! One of these "gentlemen" hit an outhouse only 10 yards from where I was standing at the moment, and Oh Hades! didn't it shake me up. I was covered with falling debris, splashed from head to foot with mud and a yellow substance out of the shell, and didn't quite know where I was for a moment or two.

Two men, standing close to me, were wounded, and when I could see anything, I observed a man who had been coming out of the building, staggering about like one drunk, and just on the point of falling. However he was ever alive and able to stand is really a miracle, for when we carried him to a place of safety we discovered no fewer

than seventeen wounds in various parts of his body, and suffering severely from shock.

They shelled for nearly three hours, and we had to keep under cover until it was over. Considering that the shelling started when we were in Mass, the casualties were not very heavy. Our chief objections were the horrid untidy mess they made. We had been to a great deal of trouble making the billets spic and span for the next battalion which was coming in, and all our spotless rooms were filled with smoke, fumes, and debris.

We had cleaned up our kit and equipment too, and mine was hopeless after that near shell – dirty dogs!!

I'm just going to practise my wonderful and fluent (?) French on the farmer's wife to try and get a feed, as we've no rations at present. We always get the same at these places – ponderous omelettes, home-made bread and butter, weak beer and café-au-lait – not so bad when you "avez faim".

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9 December 1915

I am sending off at the same time as this two picture postcards, which may or may not get through. If they do you'll know where I am (Ypres). I thought we had a pretty rotten time in the last few places we were in, but our new abode is fairly awful – a real hot pot – and both time and inclination for writing are at a minimum.

In spite of the water and other discomforts in the old positions, we had at least a certain amount of dug-outs, where we could obtain temporary protection and shelter; but the trenches here are worse by far than the last little lot, and there are no habitable dug-outs. One has to live in the "ditch" all the time, when "up there", the communication trenches are just impossible, which means that to get to the front
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line, one has to go over the open. There is scrapping on all the time, and the shells we used to get down at PI …… seems toys to what are used up here.

Oh! Let us be joyful!!!

I shall not forget the 7th December for quite a considerable time. I must tell you first, that there is a town (Poperinghe) about nine miles behind, which in spite of occasional strafings and continual air-raids is quite a good place, and can be jolly gay, too. It is crammed with our troops, and every regiment in the BEF seems to be represented there. They are well catered for, and by jove, they want it, when they come out of the firing-line anywhere near here. There is a cinema show, a good one with Sir Charles Chaplin SA (silly ass) radiating amusement daily, a first-rate perriot-troupe who call themselves the “Fancies”, and are run by a number of officers assisted by a couple of French girls; and a place where one can get a real good feed – a great asset!

Righto! On Tuesday we had arranged another little reunion with a few more of the old 16th [battalion] officers, who had just come from the front line to this excellent place, at about the same time as we got back, and we had some little programme fixed up – tea together at 4.30, then the “Fancies”, and then a convivial dinner. What an evening to conjure with, and what a treat it was going to be; oh, how we would talk of – Crash! went all our plans and fond ideas! At 4 o’clock, gloom and despair entered at least five of our party’s hearts, before we had even met the others for tea. Man proposes, War disposes! I guess that I have never before equalled the language to which I gave way during the next 12 hours.

Three hundred men to be got up to the firing line by 7.30 for some rotten old job. We got them out as quickly as possible, fixed up a train to run as near as they could to Ypres, and when we got a move on it was pitch dark – and the rain – ugh! not ordinary stuff, nor extra-ordinary stuff, but great cold sheet of it, descending with the velocity of an 18 pounder. The party was divided into five sub-sections of 60, (each an officer’s party), but as I was senior, I was nominally responsible for the lot.

Guides were to have met us, to take us up to the firing-line, as it was to a different part from where we had previously been, and was a very puzzling route and out of the other side of the town; but owing to heavy shell-fire, the armoured train could not get through, and we had to get out before we got to Ypres, of course, missing the guides.

Now, to find one's way through this town, (now world famous for its ruins), all buildings have the same desolate appearance, and all roads in the same wrecked condition, a maze of flooded and broken-down trenches, and up to a certain mentioned spot in the firing line, would surely have been an achievement by day, and with the aid of maps. But, in the blackest darkness, pouring rain, no guides nor maps, and with 300 men to keep together it was really the devil's own job! Didn't enjoy it a scrap! We started by falling into great shell holes recently made by Jack Johnsons; running into piles of masonry etc. from house which had been blown right across the road by high explosives; then, ammunition waggons, ambulances, guns, and transport of every sort came smashing in between the lines, splitting up the party, and breaking communication. Getting clear of traffic, we promptly got shelled, and sleet came up to reinforce the by no means weakened rain; and it seemed as though, we should never find our destination.

Eventually about 7.15pm, we ran into an old major with a party on the look-out for us, who informed me what the job was, that we were out for. Oh! nothing really wonderful. Only to get out half-way between the Bosche lines and ours, as a covering party for something – the deuce knows what – and to be ready for a scrap. He also very kindly told me that the road we were just going on was swept by machine-gun fire, which he need not have done, for I soon discovered it.

Eventually, wet through and through, men grumbling, everybody most frightfully cold and fed up (we'd had no tea, mind) we arrived, with almost relief at 8.30pm, and proceeded to take up our position, when – up comes a staff officer, and declares the show off. "Weather too atrocious, don't yer know". All very fine from a brass hat's point of view, but what about the poor old Infantry, who'd come 10 miles for the job? Why, simply, about turn and quick march – not just back to the ruined town, nor to

the rail-head (there being no train for the return journey) but a filthy march right back to Poperinghe – 13 and a half miles from the actual spot where we were.

I mustn't attempt to describe that night march back or the language of both officers and men – impossible to do it!

Nor must I tell you how many casualties we found we had suffered, when we got safely back at 2am, and we hadn't fired a shot, or seen a Bosche, or anything. Finis – an incident in modern warfare. Please give me ancient or medieval.

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12 December 1915

After that nasty night I talked (or rather whined about) in my last letter, we got a couple of days in Poperinghe, and I went to that topping show "The Fancies". It was really great, and they did a potted "Tonight's the night", which brought down the house.

And now we are back amongst it! Not half! If you received the postcards you'll know where I am, and it is impossible to describe the weird haunted atmosphere and utter desolation of the town.

There is scarcely a building left standing now, and any that have not been hit by more than one shell, are considered really aristocratic. There is one huge round crater in the Grand Place which must be at least 35 yards in diameter, and must have been caused by two 17 inch Jack Johnsons dropping in the same spot.

They are still sending in these (the biggest shell ever known and only used here), and soon they will reduce the place to an unrecognisable heap, if they keep it up. These big shells create a noise similar to half-a-dozen express trains racing at full speed as they are going over, and then one holds one's breath a second, for the
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sound of the explosion, which comes with a booming detonation, like a glorified earthquake.

My present position is not exactly in the front trenches, but I have two platoons, and am holding a sort of fort or defence a little way behind. It is an isolated position, and I have just had a sumptuous and satisfying dinner, consisting of bully-beef, bread, biscuits and jam, which are the only things which can be got through to here, and as it is impossible to go to “bye-bye” here, I am trying to write letters. I haven’t been able to get any sleep for 48 hours owing to the horrible noise of the guns, but it is not worrying me a wee bit, and I’m still absolutely fit, merry and bright – I have had to stop this for a few moments owing to getting called out. One horrible shell has dropped right amongst a group of men. I must go and see them to the dressing station. It’s rotten! I’m afraid I’m not giving you very detailed accounts of our movements etc. but you see it is absolutely forbidden, and I can tell you the whole story when I come home. This letter will probably be delayed getting through owing to my being temporarily detached at this fort, but will try and get it sent through to Headquarters in the morning.

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17 December 1915

I hope this will reach you before Xmas day. They tell me that they cannot guarantee letters getting through, if dispatched later than today. However, here’s wishing you all a very happy Xmas. I shall be think of you all day.

I have not received any letters for some days, owing to the rotten place I’ve been in, but expect there’s a little pile of correspondence waiting for me somewhere.

Your parcel struggled through to me on the 14th (I shan’t forget that day), and came like a little oasis of comfort and joy on a desert of strafe, noise and horror. The 13th and 14th were undoubtedly the worst and fiercest days I have ever experienced. Stuck up there alone, in an isolated position, with very few rations coming through,
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with rotten weak dug-outs to occupy, and with the men getting decidedly jumpy, they bombarded us hard for two days – not with common or garden small-stuff but with shells that battered everything down before them, and created holes 20 feet wide and six feet deep.

There was the remnant of a little village just by, and the shells crashed into the already ruined houses, and brought them clean down.

The fortifications on one side were simply knocked out of recognition, and I think it told you that I got some men buried underneath. It was an hour's hard job digging them out, and we had to do it under shell-fire; and when we got through to the poor fellows, there was of course not much left of them. Two of them were old 16th DLI men.

Fortunately I had got most of the men out of that part just previously, and put them in the cellars of the adjacent houses, which of course, were not really much safer, but it proved a lucky move.

It was simply horrible listening to the vicious swirl, as the shells came over, and then the crash, sometimes within a few yards, and never knowing where the next one was going to drop. My dug-out was shaking and swaying the whole time, and I didn't enjoy myself a wee bit.

I got relieved the night before last, and didn't we give a whoop of joy when I got the remains of my party clear of that hole. I did not of course bring away anything like the number with which I first occupied the spot, but was lucky to get away with so few casualties. The commanding officer was kind enough to come and see me last night, and say some silly rot about my having hung on jolly well, and was very pleased, so that was recompense anyhow. Said he was going to mention it to the general, which was also very nice of him.

This part of the world is extremely unhealthy. There was a big show on last Xmas, and we were wondering if there will be any sort of an attack on this. Hope not, as I

want to have a fairly peaceful day, and think of you, and all at home; then we will do all the scrapping they want afterwards.

I've just been chatting to an officer, who has been home on leave, and he's simply full of the great time he had. It's making me want to come home already. It's very difficult to believe it's Xmas-time here, for in spite of the intense cold, it doesn't look a bit like it. It is raining too, and there is no holly or mistletoe, nor any other vegetation to be seen anywhere. Just this weird desolate place, where now, never a civilian is seen, and the surroundings speak of anything but a Christmas spirit. We must try and cultivate one though, and when things start arriving from home, we shall find it easier. May God bless you and give you a really good time.

Best wishes from the front to everybody.

Note: Second Lieutenant Gamble was mentioned in despatches for his actions on the 13th/14th December.

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23 December 1915

I think I wrote my last letter on the 17th, and will go on with my doings from there. The following day there was an ominous and heavy calm; the guns were comparatively quiet; it seemed like huge clouds gathering for a storm. The air was nasty and heavy, and all sorts of rumours were flying about; and this promised outburst was realised with a vengeance on Sunday.

On Saturday, then, I took advantage of the temporary calm, and had another look round Ypres. It is really a wonderful sight – weird, grotesque, and desolate of course – but most interesting. I expect the place will be flooded with sightseers and tourists after the war, and they will be amazed by what they see. The ancient ruins of Pompeii and such places will be simply out of it.
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Willis (a topping officer who was attached to us, and who was very badly wounded on Sunday) and I went round the ruins of the cathedral. It must have been a magnificent building before the strafing, and was reputed to have some wonderful stained glass windows. We found that there was only a fragment of this glass remaining, and that it was in a very difficult place, but we clambered through heaps of shattered stonework and debris, up a rickety and tottering belfry staircase, swarmed with the remains of a window-frame, and obtained a few splendid pieces of this glass. These will, I guess, be valuable someday, and are certainly already historic. I've got them safely stowed away in my kit, and hope to get them home safely as a souvenir. I also got some fragments of a 17 inch shell which had burst amongst the Cathedral ruins the previous day.

Sunday is another day which I shall never forget; in fact the whole of that week's experiences must ever be glued to my memory. It was appalling!

At about 5.30am I was aroused in my dug-out by a gas helmeted and scared sentry, the sound of voluminous rifle fire and big guns, and above all a choking feeling.

Our dug-out was already full of gas, and for a moment the terror of waking up to such a situation properly put the wind up both Eyre (who shared my dug-out) and myself. I could not at first find my gas-helmet, and began to splutter and choke, but eventually I got it fixed on, and went out to get to business at once.

And how terrible it was!
The gas was rolling across towards us in thick whitish-yellow clouds; men were running about with their weird-looking gas helmets on, and shells were bursting all around. It was, of course, quite dark, and as each shell burst, it caused a tremendous crash and a horrible flash of fire.

As I emerged from my dug-out, there seemed to be a hundred big shells bursting lighting up everything. The noise of all these tons of high explosives bursting all round was almost unbearable, and then to put the tin-hat on it, every British gun in the vicinity began to pound away at top-speed.

It took me some time to realise what was happening, but I soon got information and orders that there was a gas attack on in the front-line and we were to man the reserve trenches at once. A number of men were already gassed, but we got into those trenches amid a huge bombardment, and expected to see the Bosche coming across at any moment. The men began to stifle and choke, and the shells were doing a great deal of damage amongst our troops, but they stuck it wonderfully.

The gas still came over in great clouds and the shelling continued unceasingly.

They evidently anticipated a big attack, as they were peppering all the roads, rails and communications up which reinforcements might be brought, and were simply battering our reserve position to nothing. They seemed to be using every big gun they had, and were sending over every kind of shell from a 17 inch, down to a small whizz-bang. The noise was appalling and nerve-racking, and there was no cessation for three hours. Then the gas began to thin, and the shelling toned down, and the joyous news came through that our two companies, in the front line had repulsed the first German attack.

We “stood to” all that Sunday morning strained and waiting after three and a half hours under gas and shell-fire and without food, and then came the order for us to go up to the front trench to relieve the companies who had had a shocking time. We’d already had a lot of casualties, and Willis was horribly wounded early on, and Iveson knocked out by shell-shock. Iveson had recovered splendidly by the time we went up into action however, and we’d just got the company formed up, and were starting up the road from our reserve trenches, when we got a “Jack Johnson” right into us, and laid out a lot of good fellows. We had a nasty job getting right up, but we manned that front-line, and were ready for the Huns coming over. They did not attack again on Sunday, but we were on the watch all night, and early the next morning, they gassed again, but we did not allow them to get into our trench, and all day Monday, we potted away hard, until by the evening the show seemed about over, and the Germans gave up the idea of getting through.

They gave our line a furious strafing to finish up with though, and Eyre got two wounds in the hand and back, and another 16th officer, Hickson, had been gassed previously.

Well, we hung on until late that night, and then came out; of course getting shelled and machine-gunned coming out; we got back behind about 2am on Tuesday. We had been without rest or food for nearly 48 hours; been under gas for over three hours at one time, an hour at another, and on a rotten nerve-stretch all the time, and I just collapsed, but am all right now, except for sickness and headache, owing to that devilish gas.

Our casualties are bad, but the men were absolutely splendid, and the divisional general has complimented our battalion on the way we repulsed the attack and stuck the horrible experience.

The effect of the whole show on one's nerves defies definition, but with all those millions of tons of high explosives flying about, it seems as if something must break in the head – but one just hangs on and hopes.

The gas is also past description! Of course our battalion only got a part of the attack, as it was on a large front, but we got just about the worst part, and we are all so glad that we did well.

I suppose it would be just mentioned in the papers at home that "there has been a gas attack on the western front, which was repulsed", but people will never possibly realise a hundredth part of what it means, and what the troops are going through. I wouldn't have thought it possible that humanity could stand it, but one does somehow.

I've only given you a rough idea of the show. Shall have to leave the many details till I come home. By Jove! What a lot I shall have to talk about!

Your last parcel arrived today. Got through in record time, so that I have now both your Xmas parcels, and am delighted with all the good things.

Please thank everyone who sent things. I am not able to write half as much as I did before, but the reason is obvious, as it takes one all the time to keep up to scratch in this – the hottest fighting spot in the world.

One thing I must tell you, before I stop and that is about a little bit of diversion during the gas attack. I had just been bandaging up a couple of wounded, when one of them called my attention to a couple of big rats which were staggering about on their hind-legs as if drunk. It was really one of the funniest sights imaginable. One usually only gets glimpses of rats as they scuttle rapidly by (during the day), but these two were right out in the open, and their antics were too quaint. They were half-gassed of course, but strangely enough it was one of the things I remembered best after the show was over.

One good thing the gas did was to kill a lot of the little beasts.

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24 December 1915

Xmas Eve

It is not the pleasantest of Xmas eves, but it might be a lot worse, and we are all sitting chatting in a dug-out now, and keeping cheery as possible.

Everyone is in a fairly good humour, in spite of the wet, the strafing, and the effects of that horrid gas attack, from which we have not all properly recovered.

Yes, most of the officers are in a good humour – absolutely must be – because one of them, who possesses a fountain-pen, which he guards like a priceless treasure, and which he will rarely allow anyone but himself to use, has offered me the loan of it whilst scribbling this!
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The Bosche is not so wicked tonight as he has been recently, and we are taking advantage of it to try and get our Xmas Eve Dinner. We are just waiting for it to appear now, and the cook is working manfully to give us some-thing like a spread. His greatest difficulty is to keep a fire going, for these is water in the trench (it is raining) and whenever Fritz sees a cloud of smoke he invariably sends a whizz-bang into it.

We are well supplied with good things thanks to you and other friends, and to the other four officers' "yous" and other friends, and don't we just appreciate them? We shall be compelled to east most things cold, both today and tomorrow, but we shall not enjoy them any the less.

The poultry is coming in now, and it does look splendid.

(Adjournment for Grub)
The Bosche's quietness rather puzzles us tonight. Whether it means he is trying to be festive and enjoy himself for a little time, or whether he is working up for a "strafe big" tomorrow is the question, but it does not really matter what his idea is, because we are going to give him a little present to put in his stocking in return for the gas he presented us with last Sunday.

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31 December 1915
We are doing a long spell this time without doubt. After going through the gas attack and being in for Xmas day, we expected to get out for New Year; but it is not to be, and so another celebration will be spent by us to the music of shells.

The artillery on both sides up here is too enormous for anything. They both strafe away for all they're worth. A great deal of damage is done too, and it's a rotten strain on one's nerves.
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Poor old Iveson was put out yesterday. A big shell dropped and burst just outside a dugout – Iveson was standing about 10 yards away. He was knocked yards away into a traverse, and went down like a ninepin. Wonderful to relate, no wounds were found on his body, and he was just conscious; but soon he became unconscious, and was taken away to hospital with severest shell shock.

I hear that some of our officer's casualties were in the papers of 28th and 29th and that Willis has died of wounds. He had only just joined us from the 2nd DLI, and was a magnificent chap. He was wounded in the morning of the gas attack during the hottest part of the bombardment, and after Iveson and I had bound him up, we sent him off to the dressing station, and were sure he would recover. He got a lot of gas into him, however, and his wounds turned out worse than we anticipated.

The Colonel told me yesterday that he had recommended Iveson to be a captain just before he became a casualty.

We shall be wanting a new draft of officers from the 16th and 17th, and I can imagine how keen they will be to get out here, (as we all were), and how elated they will be when they receive their orders for embarkation; but I guess they will change their ideas when they've been in this old salient for a few weeks.

Qualification for leave is three months out here, which I am just completing, but there are still a number to go, before my turn arrives, and of course leave may be cancelled anytime, if a scrap is coming off. With all the best of luck however, I ought to be home in about a month from now.

An amusing incident happened the other night in no man's land. For a day or two, a large black dog had appeared occasionally, running about on the German parapet and behind the lines. It was only when he was able to escape the vigilance of the Bosche in the trenches, evidently, that he managed to take the little trips, as he was invariably hauled in by unseen hands, or unheard coaxings. He was quite safe however, as we never fired at him, and it was novel to see a dog running about amongst that inferno.

Well, on that Tuesday night, I was out between the lines with a non-commissioned officer [NCO] , a grenadier, and another man, reconnoitring the ground, and scouring the place, for the chance of getting to know anything about the Bosche. We were about 200 yards from our own parapet, and had been out half-an-hour – (it takes that time to move out in front with nothing between you and the Huns – but they can't see you even when the star-shells go up, if you keep flat down and move very slowly and cautiously) – when the NCO touched my arm to get my attention, and silently pointed in a half-right direction. There we distinctively saw someone moving. We were, of course, quite prepared for meeting an enemy patrol, similar to ourselves, and were fully armed to the teeth. The other of my men wriggled a few feet nearer to me, and then we waited for them (the Bosche) to come nearer. The movements were under a broken-down tree, near the German line, and we could clearly see black-looking figures moving about.

Everything was very dark and quiet, and a flare-light had not been sent up for some time. We waited and waited, on high tension, but still they did not approach us, and I was just wondering whether we ought to stalk them, when up went a brilliant flare, lighting up the whole surroundings. We kept absolutely flat and still, but with a gentle imperceptible movement I raised my head, and saw – that black dog, calmly examining something which had probably been thrown out of the German trench – possibly meat or other wasted food, as he appeared to be in an eating attitude.

When I got back, and related the experience to the other officers over a cup of hot cocoa, we simply screamed, and the following morning when the animal appeared on the parapet for a few moments, he was greeted by laughter from everyone who knew about it.

The three officers you asked about were all "pinked" during the attack. Two of them gassed, and Captain Richardson slightly wounded. Laurie Hickson was a big friend of mine – fortunately he's not seriously gassed. He joined the 16th at South Shields with me 13 months ago. Beatty and Eyre were also in the 16th for some time, but did not belong to our topping old South Shields crush. Every single officer who was in the original 16th DLI, is, or has been out here, except Colonel Grimshawe, who is

training people for the front at Cannock Chase. Major Iremonger has gone home from the 8th Suffolks pretty well chewed up, PT Iveson was killed in the Dardanelles, and Harry put out of action here. Ken Raine was wounded at Ypres (he was in the 2nd DLI, then) last October. Herd and I are the only original 16th's now left in this battalion – the 14th. There's a wee summary for you.

The Daily Mail account of the gas attack must have been inaccurate, if it said that it started at 3am, I was there, and know that it did not commence till after 5am. I could also say a lot about that report, but am not allowed to pull to pieces censored press articles.

I'm as right as rain, except for throat trouble – not much – brought on by the gas, and as fit as ever.

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31 December 1915

Later on New Year's Eve

It is a perfect night, all stars out, no moon and comparatively quiet.

We have now about two hours of the old year left, and have got to celebrate it in mud and water and to the accompaniment of high explosive.

In a dugout near to ours, a number of dour Durham boys are chanting away at old home songs. They ought not to, as Bosche might feel inclined to put a whizz-bang into the sound, but they are singing to gently, harmonically, and with such feeling, that we have not the heart to stop them. They are thinking of home, and giving voice to their thoughts. They are so much like ours, and make us think of England too, of those who are dear to us and who are probably thinking of us now. Oh! it is a splendid night, and I do wish those guns would stop!
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It is with a certain sense of sadness that we see out old 1915. There are only two of us left in my company out of six, and when we grasp hands at midnight, we shall think of poor old Harry Iveson, and the others – especially Rawlins – an old 16th Officer, who was shot through both knees only half-an-hour ago, and whom we have just bundled off to hospital.

The Salient is " - ", and we have got one of the rottenest parts.

12:15am [1 January 1916]
I wondered what would happen here on the passing of 1915, and this is what did.

I was just about to announce "1916 is here" and wish everyone a Happy New Year, when on the tick of 12, every British Gun burst forth in a regular tornado. For 10 minutes they pounded away their welcome to 1916, and the noise was terrific. And then all was quiet again.

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5 January 1916
Our battalion is still in the trenches, but we hope to get out for a rest in a few days.

I've been feeling seedy – can't get the effects of the gas off my throat and chest – and the result is a dry, hacking cough, which is a wee bit troublesome. Doctor wanted me to go to hospital yesterday, but I'm not keen on doing that, as we're so short of officers, (only two in the company, I'm now commanding) and I'm afraid it would interfere with my leave. Of course they might give me sick-leave from hospital, but it's not worth risking.

However, I'm hoping to pick up a bit, when we get back to rest billets for a short spell. There's certainly not much chance for convalescence at this well-known (sea-side?) resort – The Salient!

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12 January 1916

I suppose you will have been informed by now, that I was sent to hospital on Saturday, but this is the first time I've been able to write.

Please don't worry as it is nothing at all serious and I hope to be fit and back with the 14th very soon.

They are so short of officers, and I hung on as long as possible, but when the doctor had a look at me on Saturday evening after the bombardment, he wouldn't hear of anything but putting me slap-bang on the ambulance and rushing me away.

I'm in an awfully comfy spot. It seems just like Fairyland after the five months in the trenches and that last shocking month in the salient. To get between snow-white sheets, in a big airy room with a cheery fire crackling away merrily was just sublime to start with, and the food (although not full diet for me) is just topping. The nurses and doctors are awfully nice, and say that they'll soon mend me up, so you see, I'm quite all right as usual. I don't know what my address will be, as I may get moved, but anyhow, try here with one letter, and I'll send my change of address as soon as possible. Cheeryho!

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13 January 1916

Writing in bed, introduces to one, difficulties previously undreamed of. One commences by propping oneself up with mountains of pillows, planting the paper firmly on a book which in turn is put on another pillow, and resolutely committing on to the paper that which one wants to say. A few lines written – and then – a landslide – and that comfortable position is lost. Then turning over onto one's side, a trial is given to holding the paper with one hand, and writing with the one on the same side as which, the body is resting on the elbow.
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This undoubtedly cramps ones style, as the wrist can't move. And thus, one struggles on – but against these petty difficulties, there is the big advantage of being able to take plenty of time over writing – an advantage which is greatly appreciated after having scribed so many hasty and meagre documents in the firing line. However, here we are writing in bed and enjoying it.

This admirable institution, finding itself with an empty bed, in one of the nicest wards, near a large window, which overlooks a wide and fairly busy road, with a park and a Roman Catholic church, all of which can be seen from the bed – this institution, I say, decided after due consideration, that I was a fairly desirable person to enter, and the result was, that I was installed in bed no. 24, ward 4, on Saturday, carriage forward, perishable!

And oh, the bliss of thrusting one's legs daintily between clean white sheets, and of being in a big airy room out of sound of those belching guns.

The splendour of seeing first class meals walking about, offering up themselves for consumption; of seeing a coal fire blazing away merrily in the grate. The enjoyment of suddenly seeing a nice-looking nurse, after actually not having set eyes on female for nearly a month; and the general atmosphere of comfort and warmth did me good before I'd been in the place five minutes.

Much to my disappointment, they started me on milk diet, but I soon got promotion, and have now risen to the giddy heights of being an ordinary diet patient! Excellent are the Vittals! Is there any more appalling sound in the world than a running-down gramophone? There's one playing in the next ward, and it persists in either not getting wound up properly, or suddenly suffering from acute cramp in the middle of each record.

They let the "Chocolate Soldier" do it, and now it is screeching out. "You'll have to get under", which is also whining away, much to our loudly-voiced disapproval.

As Irwin S Cobb says in his "Bill of Fare" which I read this morning, "In music, as in art, one is easily satisfied. All I ask of a picture, is that it shall look like something, and all I expect of music is that it shall sound like something".

A gramophone in pain, though, sounds like nothing on earth. There it is, obviously not being manipulated properly, as it has just played "Destiny" through perfectly. Topping valse that!

I told you that we got quite an interesting view from this ward. It is a fairly large French town, which I am "honouring" by staying in, while mending, and some of the happenings I see from my exalted look-out are both amusing and interesting.

The first time I saw an umbrella, I had to howl with delight. Do you know, I had actually forgotten such a thing existed, and the old French boy, strolling along with his umbrella aloft, wind behind him, and like a sailing-boat, full-sail out, was too ludicrous a sight. There was a merest spot of rain!

All sorts and conditions of men and women pass here. Plenty of British soldiers, and innumerable French in their many different kinds of uniform. Some of these poilus look silly-asses in their baggy and red breeches, little blue monkey-coats and jelly-bag caps, and others look just as business like in their adaption of Khaki.

Most of the French regiments, however, now wear the round steel helmet, and a blue-grey uniform, which looks neither so picturesque nor absurd as their old garb.

Two flocks of little school girls scampered past this morning, chattering away, and jumping about, with their stern and withered shepherds, vainly endeavouring to keep them in hand. They looked up here, and we were immediately treated to 100 blown kisses, waved hands, and unheard messages, much to the disgust of the wizened ones.

There is a magnificent crucifix at the side of the church, and all the natives being Catholics cross themselves as they pass.

I must not be irreverent, but the first few people I saw pass the saluting point, tickled me immensely, I could not for my life make out why they were going through such curious antics. Then it dawned. The ways of making this sign are indeed many and varied, and I watched specially for the different ways.

First of all came an old Abbe or Cure. As he approached, he stiffened himself up, as a good soldier would, when nearing a senior officer. The regulation three paces away, saw him remove his black broad-brimmed hat, then with a most devout expression, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and moved his hand slowly from breast to breast. He seemed to sigh as he donned his hat - but at this point he espied a smartly-dressed French girl swinging down the street and… She crossed herself very daintily and gracefully with an exquisite poise of the wrist, like a tip-top actress would, and then her eyes came to the windows of No.12 Casualty Clearing Station.

Most of the good wives trotting along to do their shopping and talking hard, no doubt, of their dear Bonnehommes in the trenches, never bother to pause in their discourse, but automatically, as if a habit, they move their hands across as they pass the church.

The fat old tradesman, puffing along, finds himself in a predicament, and realises he's got to do something. Like a little shy English boy, he raises his hand and fingers the peak of his cap for a second, without removing his pipe from his mouth, and shuffles on.

Did I write you during my last few days in the trenches? I can't remember whether I did, in fact I can't remember much about them. I must have been really bad I suppose, but when a 6 inch howitzer slammed into my dug-out roof, which was supposed to be fairly safe, having seven feet of various stuff on top, and knocked it in, well I felt a bit crushed, especially about the legs, but fortunately it was nothing to write yarns about.

I guess I shall be back in a week or so, as I don't think I shall get home.

There is one bit of road up there, which I dream about, and which I always used to dread. One has to pass it going to and from the trenches and it is only a few hundred yards behind the firing line. The Bosche has got the range absolutely, and he shrapnels it frequently every day, and there is at all times a machine gun trained on to it. It is a cross-roads called Suicide Corner, and I always double across that bit. One of the reasons I detest it so, I guess, is because the other night I had a sergeant and a corporal who were on either side of me, both 'pinked' through the head, when passing the spot. Unlucky indeed is the officer who happens to be taking his company or platoon past "Suicide" when they put one of their shells there. It is simply a question of how many? That is one of the rottenest parts of the salient - the strain of getting your men about, past such spots. Old Rawlins was hit there too! Brrrrr – away with shop!

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23 January 1916

No correspondence of any kind has reached me here, and there must be about three weeks correspondence chasing me round from the firing-line, Ypres, Hazebrouck and Le Touquet. It always takes a considerable time for re-addressed letters etc. to float through, but it makes me feel cut off from tout mon monde.

The doctors say I shall not be fit for the trenches for some time, and are keeping me convalescent. Silly asses!

It is neither one thing, nor the other, hanging about at a convalescent base! What I want is either to get to England until I'm considered fit, or to get back to the 14th, who are deucedly short of officers, and must be having a fairly hard time. And these silly old medical men will do neither! When I tell them I'm due for leave, and anyway ought to have some sick leave, they just smile; and when I try the alternative, and confidently assure them that I am as fit as any of them and ought to be back with my regiment, their grin broadens with the inane remark that 'they know best'. An exasperating sect!
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Did I tell you about my journey from Hazebrouck to Le Touquet? It was the limit! I don't know exactly the distance between the two places, but as the crow flies it is not much more than 50 miles. It took 12 hours!

We were put into the hospital train at 12 noon – a very comfortable saloon with beds, and all luxuries, and these trains are extremely smooth-running, so that after lunch I dozed off to sleep. I woke up at dusk, looked at my watch, and saw it was half past 4 – glanced out of the window and observed that we were gliding into a station. "Ah!" thought I "here we are, no doubt at our destination, splendid journey what? – although a little slow." The train came to a standstill without the remotest jerk, and I at once enquired from a nurse, where we were. "Oh, this is Hazebrouck" says she, I was amazed, astounded! Then I thought she must be pulling my leg, but she wasn't. The train had been round some God-forsaken route to pick up some casualties from the front, and for some unknown reason had been compelled to return through the station it started from.

That was typical of the journey, and I was pretty fed up with hospital trains and motor-ambulances by the time we were welcomed by the Duchess. She is charming and has been awfully nice to me. Especially one evening when there was a dance on. All the available staff went, and the patients who were well enough, but the doctors did not consider me in the latter category, so I lay in bed listening to the strains of dreamy waltzes and lively one-steps.

I'd told Her Grace how much I wanted to get up and dance, and during the evening, she left the gorgeous ball-room, and came into the ward and chatted.

I was pretty seedy the first few days there, but bucked up later. Of course, everything there was conducive to getting one well quickly. One of the sisters, who had a sweet voice, used to sing each evening in the ward. She was particularly fond of the Indian Love lyrics, and I insisted on her singing them each night.

I do hope some letters will discover me tomorrow.

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26 January 1916

21st IBD APC S17 BEF

[21st Infantry Base Depot, Army Post Office S17, British Expeditionary Force]

The above weird-looking collection of figures and letters is now the address which will find me.

I had an awfully nice time at Le Touquet hospital. They make one very comfy, and give one every luxury, and the Duchess is topping. I am now at a convalescent base, and do nothing but take gentle walks and eat – especially the latter, as I found that when I left hospital, I had lost a stone of my fighting weight. I am beginning to feel more like my old self again, and am going before a medical board on Saturday, and shall then know what is in store for me. There does not seem to be much chance of me getting home, so I'm anxious to get back to my regiment, who are awfully short of officers.

Cheers! I have this morning received my first correspondence for three weeks! And it was the mighty post bag of two letters, both written a week ago today. They had a very fine welcome too. There must be scores of letters etc. chasing me round from Ypres, No.12 Casualty Clearing Station, and the Duchess of Westminster's Hospital at Le Touquet, which is also known as No.1 Red Cross. And letters get most awfully held up and delayed when they are trying to work their way through the mazes of an Expeditionary Force - readdressed! You can't imagine then how very bucked I was on receiving two letters today!

I met Hicks on in hospital. You know this gas is awful stuff. It seems to do a lasting and prolonged harm to one; not like an ordinary wound which one gets and recovers from. Hickson got on fairly badly for a time, and was then sent home for a short time. He was pretty bad when in England, and when he got back he gave way again, and is now in hospital with very bad lungs, chest etc. He'll probably not be fit for any further active service.

Iveson has got a month at Nice. Very nice!! There seems to be another sort of new ailment out here, and it is "Salientitis". The RAMC major here was telling me this morning about the large number of casualties they are getting down from the salient; many not actually hit, but some of them suffering from severe mental strain; others shell-shock, and quite a lot from the combination of the two. This they call "Salientitis".

The surroundings of dear old Wipers are undoubtedly in a frightfully nasty condition. I saw a couple of these cases taken away to a padded-room yesterday. They were only youngsters, but had become raving lunatics. It was really rather appalling!

Last night, being Burn's night, the scores of Scotch RAMC (they all seem to be Scotch) people here, organised a concert. Now I don't know whether you've ever been to an all Scotch concert, but if the show they put on last night was a fair example, let me pray of you never to be tempted to one.

Item No.1. was an overture by a pipe-band. Ugh! Where the Scotch people find the music in a maze of noise like that I don't know, but they seemed to enjoy it, and insisted on an encore. I managed to survive that by an effort, but Item No.2. nearly finished me. It was a pipe-solo, an awful scream, by Pipe-Major "Something or other".

Next they trotted out an old captain from somewhere many miles north of the Tweed, who chanted away some weird stuff, which I was assured by an enthusiastic and spirited old major, was "Scots were here, when Wallace bled"!

And then I nearly fled, because I heard the chairman talking, and recognised three of his broad Scotch words – "one hundred pipers", but I was relieved when I discovered that they were not going to inflict a screeching centurion on us, but it was just the name of old MacNab's encore.

Then a lady was announced to sing, and we became interested for the first time, but oh my hat! She was an elongated pull-through, and she squealed away at "My Ain

Folk", and everybody sang the chorus fervently! It was misery, and when the pipers started again, I flew, with those haunting strains chasing me!

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30 January 1916

The medical board yesterday passed me fit, so with mingled feelings, I am just starting on the long and tedious journey to the frontline – you know where.

My address now will be the old simple 14th DLI BEF, I will write from firing-line on first opportunity.

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3 February 1916

Here I am back again amongst it. It was indeed "some journey" getting back here, as all movements by rail in this country are at present appalling.

Eyre and I started off at 4.30am and were as usual held up repeatedly. We had to stop on numerous occasions for inexplicable reasons, and were shunted about on all sorts of little stations. We stopped at Hazebrouck for three hours, and I went round to No.12 Casualty Clearing Station to ask if there were any letters or parcels for me. There weren't however, as they informed me that everything that had arrived for me had been forwarded. We eventually arrived in Poperinghe at half-past six (evening), and stopped there for some dinner, and a visit to the amateur pierrot show, before going up the line. It was a rotten journey, and to add to the other small inconveniences we had to conduct a draft of 120 men, who were going up to reinforce another regiment, who are close to us in the line.

These men were very good, and did not attempt to get out of the train without permission, which is the great trouble in draft conducting. They were fresh from

England, and of course were very keen to get into the line. During our short stops at Hazebrouck and Poperinghe, we found billets for them in the town, where they could get washes, and where they could cook the rations which every man carried.

We handed these people over to their regiment late at night, and then went to find the 14th. The colonel was awfully glad to see us, as the battalion is so very short of officers. None of the officers who were wounded, gassed, or otherwise put out of action last month or on 19th December, have returned, except Eyre and me, and I have now got command of Iveson's old company.

A Company, of course you know, is a fourth of a battalion and is usually commanded by a captain or major, so I've not much time to spare, for it is a very different thing from a platoon officer's job.

We took three Bosche prisoners last night. They were right up to our barbed wire, and had obviously got into difficulties when out on patrol.

A flare light suddenly sent up from our trench revealed them, and they were so close to our parapet that they immediately gave up, and came into our trench. As soon as the Germans saw what was happening they fired on their own men, but only wounded one.

The prisoners, who were Saxons, did not seem a wee bit downcast at being taken, except the wounded one, who I am afraid, would peg out.

The things I've seen in recent papers about wounded German prisoners not being well treated are so much absolute tosh. There was a hospital of them down at the base, over which the depot, to which I was attached, had guard.

I had to go down several times to inspect the sentries, and see if the prisoners were all right, and I have not a bit of hesitation in saying that the prisoners are being, as well or even better treated than our own men.

The majority of them were Saxons, but there were also Prussians and Bavarians amongst the number, and all of them proclaimed how pleasantly surprised and delighted they were with the treatment they were getting. They've got comfortable beds, nice nurses to look after them, and live on a jolly good diet. Sentries are really quite unnecessary, as they would never attempt to escape. They know a good thing when they've got it.

I chatted with some of them who could talk our lingo, but I haven't time to tell you about it.

I was delighted to find a number of letters waiting for me here, and have got a task on to answer them all.

I'm feeling almost my old self again, and am awfully glad to be back with the boys. I'm afraid there is little chance of getting leave at present.

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5 February 1916

I am now settling down to the old game in the line again, which is really much more satisfactory than hospitals and bases! Things are fairly normal up here, thank goodness, but we are properly ready for them, if they do decide on another gas attack.

I believe I told you what an awful journey we had getting back to the line, stopping at all sorts of little stations for a few hours demonstration of shunting by the railway staffs! Each set of these individuals seemed to vie with the last one in endurance and stamina, in pushing trains up and down a few hundred yards of railway, placing them and replacing them, like pieces In a game of chess. Very amusing and instructive to railwayites probably, but extremely irritating and tiring to the individuals who were aboard.
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You asked about the meaning of the base address. The euclid problem is solved thus:- Let A = Army, E = Expeditionary, B = British, F = Force, O = Office, P = Post. Let B = Base, S = Station, D = Depot. Then it is required to prove that IBD, APO, S17 BEF = an address somewhere at the war. As a fellow who wrote to me at the same mystical address remarked, "It's devilish hard to make anything of it, unless you use algebra or logs."

When you apply the code, you will see that the answer to the conundrum is practically identical with your results. I have great pleasure then in awarding you the first prize of £2000,000. Please call round here sometime this week and sign a receipt, when cheque for that amount will be handed to you!!

I refuse to argue about bag-pipe music! But you never could imagine anything more horrible than a pipe-band of all enthusiastic Jocks, who were getting plenty of support from their countrymen, properly all out for a "sprint". Sprinting all out of tune and time too! "Bow" stroking early, two and three late and later respectively, and "Stroke" trying to pull them together! Ugh!

As a matter of fact, I did think of purple hills and highlands of Scotland as they played, but not with any thoughts of romance. It simply came in as one of the places, where I wished all Scotch pipers, born, dead, or future, and that was about the mildest place to which I would have transferred them! Brrrr!

Of course I will admit that they were in a concert room, with no possible chance of the threads of discord escaping from our reluctant ears, and they probably would sound better from up a hill. But ugh! It makes my headache to think of it, but of course I don't wish them any harm. As someone says – "Scotland, with all thy faults, I love thee still"!

The Bosche though, have no use at all for Sandy and Jock. There were a number of wounded Germans in hospital, and they belonged to a regiment which had a very nasty time with the braw-boys at Loos.

They say, that a Scot with his kilt flying, his tam-o-shanter at a wicked angle, his face distorted frightfully as he yells, and his bayonet levelled menacingly, is the most awful thing in the world to meet in a charge. I believed them, more or less, but then casually asked if they'd ever met a Durham Battalion in action. They thought they hadn't, and I thought so too.

One of these German prisoners, who spoke quite good English, told me rather a funny episode, against himself. When he was made prisoner, he was conducted away to headquarters, by a sergeant, who instead of taking him down a communication trench, made him go along the top, at the side of the trench. After a time, he protested, owing to several bullets, whizzing past very close. The sergeant, who had said nothing much up to then, laconically replied, "All right, if you wish to walk down the trench, you shall". At the same time he gave him a slight push - and he was in. In, with a splash too, for he had struck a flooded trench, neck deep. He struggled and spluttered for a time, until the grinning sergeant pulled him out, and they continued their way, back to a safe place. He fumed and cursed at the time, but was sport enough to appreciate the humour of it afterwards.

I'm now going to snatch a couple of hours between a blanket and greatcoat - a bit different from a bed with whitest sheets, hot water bottles, and all comforts complete in the hospital. However!

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7 February 1916

Am not on form for letter writing just at present. We've had hades from the big guns these last three days - Look out for the announcement "Artillery activity E and NE of Y-----“. If people knew what it means, any old slackers who got a bomb from the zeppelin over Derby anywhere near him, would probably imagine what it is to be under continuous shell fire for days – with not one or six bombs – but hundreds and hundreds of shells, bursting all round!
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February 6th is another little red letter date in my diary. The Bosche celebrated perfectly. They scarcely left a bit of parapet standing, and started off the day by wiping out 10 of the very best men. We expected sort of an attack last night after such hot artillery preparations, but they contented themselves with machine gunning and shrapnelling, where they naturally guessed our working parties would be rebuilding the trench, with the usual results.

Today has been, from the weather point of view perfect, but from an infantryman's standpoint, beastly. The beautiful sunshine and clear air are appreciated more by the artilleryman and his observers than probably anyone else, and front line trenches have had a rotten time today on both sides. Whilst the gunners, a mile or two behind the line, and comparatively safe, pump overhead steel and horror into habited trenches, the poor trenchite can do nothing but hang on, endure the shells, and trust to luck! That's what has happened today.

I expect the zeppelin raid over Derby has washed all other branches of war out of the limelight for the time being. It must have been a jolly exciting time for some people, and I suppose, terrifying for others. We rarely get a zeppelin over here, but the aeroplanes are busy almost every day. There were about 20 up all morning today from both sides, and some very pretty fights too!

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13 February 1916

A bright Sunday morning, with the sun in jovial mood, and nature protesting against the noise and smoke, finds us out of the trenches for four days in reserve.

We had a pretty tough time during our last tour up there; the artillery was so annoyingly talkative, and the Bosche would persist in registering on our trenches with heavies.
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The night before we came out, I went out on patrol. It was bitingly cold, and rain and sleet descended unceasingly. We'd been out about two hours, moving warily about, and were amongst a clump of trees half way between the lines, when we heard voices in what was apparently an advanced German sap. We lay very quiet and located them, but my NCO and bomber were so completely frozen and saturated that it was obvious we were not in fit condition to bomb or capture their post. So I decided to go back, and warn the regiment who were relieving us, to go out to the place the following night.

Whether they heard us moving, or we were revealed by a flare, I know not, but when we had made a short distance towards our lines, we were spotted and got rapid rifle fire. We kept very flat to the ground for a few moments, and then, on my signal, did one of our special dashes for our trenches, which we luckily reached in safety. This was the only really exciting thing that happened during the latter part of our stay in the trenches, which was chiefly used up by getting shelled, and working hard repairing the damage done to our position.

It is more or less a relief to get out of the front line, but we are not far behind and we had to get out yesterday for a little attack by the Germans. We were not put actually into action though, and our people in front kept them out. There was the deuce of a strafe by the guns yesterday and we got a fair share, but without disastrous results. Our CO had a narrow escape yesterday. He was clambering up a steep bank, when a high explosive hit the bottom and blew it up. He was unhurt fortunately.

And now – hold your breath a moment – and don't jump. I've been agitating for leave again, and if I experience my old luck, there is just the possibility of coming home for five days on the 23rd. It is only an off chance, so don't put too much faith in it, but if there is no offensive on either side, and we don't have heavy officer's casualties before then, I should not be a bit surprised if it came off.

So Cheeryho! Shall see you in about 10 days' time, if things go right, but don't let us be disappointed if we are let down by circumstances!

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19 February 1916

At present, the burning questions assailing me are – will the Bosche make another attack before the 24th? – shall we suddenly get a crump-shell into our dug-out when all the company officers are having a hurried snack and reduce our numbers again? – will there be a big naval battle? – shall I be made Commander-in-Chief of the allied forces? – shall we have to do a big push? – because if the answer to any of these were in the affirmative then it would mean, I don't get away on the 24th.

If, however, I can manage to dodge shot and shell (and I'm getting rather good at this recreation) for four days, and none of the above named queries become realities, then I shall put foot on board the leave boat on the evening of the 24th, and arrive in Derby about a day later.

For two and a half days and nights, I'm going to act coward. I shall haunt the trenches half doubled-up, so that my head may never appear above the parapet, not even if there are the most tempting Huns to fire at. I shall not throw any grenades in ease they went off prematurely by some unknown accident. I shall positively refuse to go out on patrol or listening post, and if I see a German I shall, instead of doing the usual thing, and going for him, run like the deuce for safety.

For, in two and a half days we are relieved and go back to Pop[eringhe] for a short rest, and what are two and a half days among so many, especially when I shall have so much time afterwards to exhibit recompensing valour.

I told the CO, when he assured me that my leave was approved, that I was going to lie low, and do nothing till we got out of the front line. He roared with merriment and pulled my ear.

Then he picked up a paper, and showed me a paragraph about bombs being continually dropped on the town to which we go, asserting that if by any lucky chance I did manage to get out of the trenches alive, I should undoubtedly be blown up by a bomb from the blue. The old brute!!

I retorted that, very well, I would do what the people with the wind up in England do, and as soon as we get into Pop. I would find a cellar and not be seen until 10 minutes before train time, even if he considered it "absence without leave". He swears that something will happen to stop my leave, but he's in leg-pulling mood, and when I wanted to bet him 20 francs that I arrive in England, he backed out.

Things are still very hot up here, and I see the English papers are talking about a sledgehammer blow at us just here. They've been trying nail hammer taps for some time without success, but if they are really going to use their heavier tools, I pray them to postpone it for a week, and it is the first time I've asked the Bosche for anything.

So when you get this, don't write until you see or hear from me, as I may have started by the time your letter would arrive.

It is raining and sleeting, cold and miserable today, but I don't care a hang, for with luck this time next week, I shall be home. So here's to my proverbial luck, and I don't think it should fail this time.

Think of it! Five more days! Hurrah!!

(Note. He came "on leave" on the 24th, and returned to the front on the 31st [sic])

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Sunday 5 March 1916

Back again amidst the clatter and noise, mud and shells!

I had an extremely calm crossing. We experienced one very exciting moment, when about half way over. The airship and destroyers, which were escorting our boat, were seen to be violently signalling, and the sailors were very busy with telescopes at once. The captain on his deck appeared to be a wee bit excited, and suddenly the
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engines stopped. Of course we mere landsmen did not know what it all meant, and many senior officers were making tracks for boats and life-belts, thinking it might be serious. On the whole, though, the passengers were very unperturbed. They were all, either officers going out for the first time, or returning from leave, or Red Cross nurses.

One of the destroyers cut right across in front of our path, and an airship swooped down very near the water about 200 yards away. There was more signalling, and then we started off again, but veered right over to the left, from our original track.

As soon as the engines got going, the seaman pointed out to us a black object on the surface about 50 yards away, and explained that it was a mine, which we had had a very narrow escape from striking.

The vigilant airship and destroyer, patrolling with us, had spotted it, and averted the danger for us. As we steamed away, a couple of trawlers arrived to destroy the mine.

Going over, I heard that all leave was stopped from France, two days after I came away, so I was fortunate in getting away when I did. The officers of this battalion, whose turn it is next, are of course very fed up, I don't know the exact reason for leave being cancelled, but things are livening up here some, as I believe they are all down the line.

On the day I returned, those trenches about which I told you, changing hands so often, were again successfully tackled, and we took a good lot of prisoners, including a couple of staff officers.

Can hardly realise that I've had my leave even now! Didn't it fly? But I think it is worth it! The cough doesn't seem to be any more troublesome, although it is pretty stiff weather up here at the war, with the snow and cold.

I think our division may be going out for a spell, on lines of communications, of about a month, commencing in 10 days' time. It does not mean a complete rest, as there

will be duties, parades etc. but it is a great thing to get away from the strain and discomforts of the front line for a time, and to go to sleep at nights.

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9 March 1916

It is pretty rough out here at present – most bitterly cold and horribly wet – with snow everywhere. The so-called trenches too are practically non-est, and you can scarcely imagine the condition in which I am writing this. Will you send me a muffler, my club colour one I'd rather like, I've an old affection for it and meant to bring it out with me. A pair of thin gloves too would be acceptable to use as a lining for the fur lined ones I've now got.

Another British aeroplane has just been brought down over here. After a picturesque but very short fight, he came to earth with a crash, and the triumphant Fokker opened his engine, and went back over our lines at a terrific speed, probably to get hold of his anticipated Iron Cross.

Leave seems to be a misty dream already, but wasn't I lucky to get away before it was universally stopped.

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12 March 1916

The Sabbath again, and the first decent day we've had since I returned from my fleeting glimpse of England and home. Actually, the sun, a weak winter one, is shining, and cheering us up no end. It is quite clear and the aircraft and artillery are busy with their infernal co-operation. Two or three beautiful new Bosche aeroplanes, a silver colour with the two black crosses on the planes have just been over here, flying faster than the "devil on wings", and we had an unsuccessful attempt to bring them down. They are the new machine, the Fokker, and are top-hole.

Strange to say, in spite of this tour in the trenches being the most severe I've yet experienced, my cough seems to be improving and is not half so troublesome, and I ought to get properly rid of it soon, as in a day or two we are going out for our long-promised, and much looked-for rest from the firing line.

Iveson has not come back to the regiment yet. I understand he completed his convalescence at Nice; went home for 10 days, and then went to Etaples ready to come up the line. His nerves are pretty well crocked-up though, and he went to bits again at the base, and is now back in England.

Hickson has not come back either. He seems to be gassed properly, and cannot get his lungs and other parts of himself back to condition.

Do you remember a Captain Popham, who used to be in the 1st Sherwoods before the war. He was a topping looking fellow, about 6 feet 4 inches tall, and a Victoria Cross won in Africa. I used to see him often in the morning going up to the Derby barracks some years ago, and was very bucked with myself when I met him round at Reverend Gordon Haye's place, because I had such an admiration for him.

Well, yesterday the Bosche were shelling our trench, and a few generals, resplendent in clean uniform, polished buttons and red tabs, were going round the trenches. A whizz-bang tore over, and down they went in the mud for cover – a ludicrous sight – and as they got up and hurried away, I could swear that one of them was Popham in the uniform of a staff major, with a recent and nasty scar on his cheek. I was busy in the trench, and had not the opportunity to go and make sure.

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Sunday 19 March 1916

We have just started our spell out of the trenches, and are now at a topping place almost out of gun range. With the trenches, we seem to have left behind all the miserable weather and conditions we experienced up there, as it is beautifully sunny and spring like here.

We are not doing a great deal of work, chiefly re-equipping and getting stunts ready for when we go back, and short parades. We are fixing up football matches, and entertainments for the men, and everything is now coleur-de-rose.

We expect to be out for three weeks or a month, but shall not stay here the whole time. We may be moving towards the coast tomorrow.

My cough is a great deal better – almost gone in fact – and if this weather continues, it ought to have entirely disappeared in a few days.

We had a ceremonial church parade this morning. It was just like one of the old shows in England, band playing, men all turned out spic and span in their new khaki – the battalion all formed up in a square on the parade ground. It was a lovely morning and everybody enjoyed it I'm sure.

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21 March 1916

We've had rather a fright today. We got an order this morning suddenly to equip and 'stand to' ready to go up the line if necessary. Don't quite know yet whether we shall have to go, or why we should be so dropped on when in rest, but it is certainly rather a blow and we are still "standing to". This entails, at present, sitting in a comfortable warm hut, listening to an excellent gramophone, and offering up small prayers that orders will arrive soon cancelling our up-move.
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A general inspection took up all our time yesterday – it took the whole day – preparing, going through it, and recovering.

If we don't move tonight, we are to be reviewed again tomorrow, by a tin-hat – a big one too – no less than an army commander!

We're getting up two little plays to give when we get to "Calais", that is of course, if we don't have to go up to the trenches again.

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23 March 1916

We did not have to go up the line after all, which caused great jubilation.

The Guards, however, who are holding the part of the line which we left, got rather badly strafed. Rather a compliment when a battalion comes right out of trenches for a rest, to have to fill up their place with the Guards, n'est pas?

The weather smashed up yesterday for the general inspection, and the whole brigade stood in the drizzling rain, waiting for the "Tin Hats", and getting wetter and wetter.

Sir "Very Big Pott" complimented on our alleged excellent work during our long tour in the trenches, pinned on two Military Crosses, and a few DCM's, and grumbled because the men's hair required cutting! The usual red tab procedure! Then he wanted to see the battalion at work, and I'm afraid we rather scared the old boy, as the Grenadiers got to work throwing live bombs in a specially prepared pit; the snipers got on to the range, and sniped away merrily; and the machine guns commenced their practice with a rattle and a whir. He, no doubt, expected to see some ceremonial drill, and criticise little things like being out of step, or rifles badly sloped, or a weak word of command, but we wanted to show what our specialists could do, and soon made the place warlike and noisy. He stayed a very short time!!!
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Have been reading "The Perfect Gentleman" this evening and was as intensely amused as I was delighted. We have a little more time for reading now, and appreciate it no end.

I found all my things intact when I got back from leave, but sad to relate, my dear old revolver went last time in the trenches. Sorry to lose it too, as I knew all its little ways. Have claimed for an allowance for a new one.

I enjoyed the butterscotch very much. It was consumed during dark and nasty hours up in the line. I believe it has a soothing effect, (it may be second childhood of course), so prefer it to chocolate.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

1 April 1916

We have been on the move for some days but have now settled down in camp on the sea coast for a week (Calais).

It is lovely weather; today has been perfect: and our rest is doing the battalion all the good in the world.

The camp is about three kilometres outside the town, which we can visit most days, after about 3 o'clock, when our parades are finished, and it is just topping to get back among civilisation again; to see no signs of the work of the big guns; not to be able to hear them either, and to see a French town in decent working order.

The people, too, are awfully good, and when we marched into the town with the band playing, although it was late evening, they turned out and gave us a fine reception, for they had heard we were from the trenches.

We were greeted along all the streets with cheers and "Vive L'Anglais", and waving of hats.
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

On a really clear day we can see England from near the range which we use for shooting practice. So near, and yet so far!

This range really belongs to a French brigade, which is also in a rest camp here, and we share it with them. The result is that we are often firing side by side with these fellows. They are a topping lot too, and I'm afraid I rather hurt one of their officers down there, the first day, when I asked him if his regiment had been in the trenches. He threw up his hands in dismay and cried, "Ah Monsieur, des trenches, la la! Nous etions sur les trenches en Aout 1914", and pointed to a couple of medals, which had hitherto been hidden by his greatcoat. Exit I, for a moment, apologetic!

We have friendly competitions with them, and the chaff which goes on between our men and their men with regard to their respective shooting is too amusing.
PS
Carl's admirable letter arrived in safety = Calais.

The first two nights we were here, it was very wet, and the gale was most violent. Tents were blown down wholesale, and kit was flying about all over the place. Several officers lost such things as hats, putties etc. and looked rather sheepish the following morning, when they had to turn out on parade with improvised articles of attire. Nearly everybody's tent suffered during these two nights, and on the second, I was so tired of it, that I slept with the tent down, the pole absolutely flat, and canvas flapping about over me.

But then the weather cleared up and became summer-like, and we had bathing parades in the sea. It was first rate, I can tell you, sea bathing, with England just in sight, and lying in the sun to dry afterwards.

One morning the whole of our company had divested themselves of clothing, and were splashing about in the foam, some quite a distance out swimming, others just fooling close to the edge, and others running on the sands. It was a secluded spot of course, where there was no one but English and French Soldiers, and such things as bathing costumes were unthought of.

Now, the brigade general had his daughter staying with him, from one of the adjacent hospitals, and on this particular morning had decided to take her for a gallop on horseback, across the sand dunes and "en passant" have a look at some of his troops. It was rather unfortunate, naturally, when his red and brass cap appeared over the cliffs, followed closely up by the lady on horseback, but he very quickly and splendidly called her attention to some guns in the distance, which were practising firing to sea, and in a twinkling their horses had wheeled and were off as hard as they could go in the opposite direction, much to our relief and amusement. And unlike Lot's wife, there was no transformation into a pillar of salt!!!

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8 April 1916

My 22nd Birthday

Just a scribbled line to let you know I received your topping parcel last night, to thank you very much, and to say that my birthday is a very jolly one, as we are at a splendid little spot, 40 miles from where I wrote last, and it’s a lovely Saturday.

I will write you a letter either tonight or in the morning, but mustn't put any more in this, as I want to get the today's post, which is the first to go out for some days.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

9 April 1916

Sunday

The birthday passed quietly and pleasantly, and except for a little festive dinner for a selected few of the old 16th officers in the evening, not much happened. We chewed over old times at South Shields, Durham, Humersknott, and Cannock Chase, and many little celebrations, including my 21st at Durham last year, which in spite of being spent in England, was far more exciting than this one at the war!

This is a very wee place, and just consists of scattered farmhouses and estaminets, rather picturesque surroundings for Flanders, and the continual boom of the guns, which are getting closer every time we move.

We did an awful lot of hard marching last week, four days solid, stopping each night at a French village where the whole brigade billetted. I got a couple of splendid billets on the second and third nights, actually slept between sheets; but on one occasion I slept on the ground, in the open, which was not quite so comfy. By the time we arrive in the trenches, we shall have covered the whole road from the sea to the war-scene on foot.

We passed through some very fine country too, and two views which we got on Thursday were splendid, but the going was so hard in full fighting kit, everything carried, and an extremely hot sun, that we were not always in an appreciative state of mind.

The demeanour and appearance of the people gradually changed as we neared Belgium, and we are now back amongst the Flemish peasants.

I don't know what was happening in a small town close to here this morning. After church parade, I marched my company down to this place for baths, and as we went through we saw crowds of young women, all dressed in white, and some of them wearing "bridal" veils, in the streets. I suppose it must have been some religious ceremony, of which, I must confess, I'm at present quite ignorant, but I'm sure they were not all being married, for there were no budding bridegrooms to be seen. Our boys were greatly amused, and called out all sorts of remarks to the self-conscious wenches, some complimentary and some – well, it was probably a good thing that the girls didn't understand "Durham".

We are expecting to be back in the line in about a week, and are devoutly hoping that this good weather will hold out, so that we may not have those filthy wet trenches to put up with, and have a little more cheery and comfy conditions. Guess there will be more scrapping and less mole existence soon, and old Brother Bosche

can be looking out for trouble, because we've been getting ready for him for nearly a month, and everybody is as fit and well and happy as a battalion could be. So look out for news from slightly north of where we were before. The next time I write, I'll do it from the trenches.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Sunday 16 April 1916

We are just off up, and everyone is fit and cheery, although I'm hanged if we are not going to a spot even worse than the last, and in the same district - a place where there has been a lot of scrapping recently, and I guess they'll get some more when we get in. However, the weather is still quite good, which is a great boon, and although we are now going into what is probably the worst part of the western front, I suppose it is more or less a compliment that they should keep pushing our brigade into these positions.

I went to a place near the highest point above sea-level in Northern France yesterday, to sit on a court martial, and when it was over I "went up onto a mountain" and saw the sights. It was not quite clear enough to obtain the best view, which is the sea away in the long distance, in one direction and the firing line with shells bursting in the other; but it was very excellent and I enjoyed it immensely. As I left in the evening, we could see the flare lights going up and breaking into painful illumination (for any poor souls out in no man's land) all along the line. We were a good long way behind, but this display, and the bursting-shells, which we could also discern, marked out the line quite plainly, and it was a jolly interesting spectacle – for when one watches those star-shells flaring slowly, and lighting up the whole scene, and high explosives crashing their way into trenches from a close range, one doesn't appreciate it a wee bit.

Must rush off now, and get ready.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Sunday 16 April 1916

Later

We are just getting into our new part of the line, and it is not very cheery.

There is practically no trench worthy of the name, just a nasty series of posts, where there has been some stiff fighting.

One scarcely knows whether the Bosche is in front, on a flank, or where, so here's a cheery (?) time during the next few weeks.

If I haven't time to write again, I wish you all a very happy Easter, and no zeppelin scares!

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Sunday 23 April 1916

Easter Sunday Morning 1am

Just a hurried line from the thick of it, to let you know I'm all right.

Been up for five days now, north of where we were holding before I came home on leave, and the scrapping has been very hot.

It's "some" Easter for me, and Good Friday was another red letter day up this part of the line.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

26 April 1916

Your letter arrived last night, but not the parcel – that will probably come in with this evening's mail – and I'm looking forward to it.

Poor old Iveson did not last very long this time – three days in the front line were enough to knock him over again. I met him the last night he was up and he was gibbering like a kid, with nerves all gone again, and he's gone off to hospital again. So has Eyre.

This new part of the line is certainly a pretty severe test as results are already showing. We are of course still in the salient, and are on the extreme left of the British line. In fact, the post which I have been holding, joins up with the French, and it has been one of my duties to act as "liaison officer", keep in touch with our allies, and to keep a friendly eye on their movements, as they have a dangerous habit of retiring when they are badly shelled, which of course leaves our flank absolutely exposed.

Up here, it is not the usual kind of trench warfare, which people think of as a long line of trench, with a good stout parapet in front, barbed wire before that, and the whole show manned all along by lots of Tommies, who can sleep occasionally, cook food and be fairly comfortable, if they can dodge all the projectiles which the Bosche hurls over.

At this spot it is more like open fighting. The line consists of a number of detached posts which are not connected up. Each post is held by a number of men, chiefly bombers, and by day it is almost an impossibility to move about, as the German position is on a ridge above us, and they snipe right down with deadly accuracy.

The posts are really only mere scratches in the ground, and are very apt to be rushed. We are very near to the enemy, too, at most places, and get any amount of sport with bombing. It is when they start crumping us with his heavy shells and trench mortars that the rottenest time starts, and during the attacks which were on last week, the work of the big guns was really appalling.

During our first two days in it poured with rain, which was most unpleasant and disappointing. There is no suspicion of a dug-out or shelter, in which one can take refuge, and it is impossible to make a fire or the Bosche crump it in.

Then their snipers and machine-guns were hard at it, all the time. It was not cold, but deucedly uncomfortable; but on the third day it cheered up and we came in for trench mortars etc. These look like miniature beer barrels coming over; for unlike shells, they come slowly and are visible, but when they burst they make huge craters, and a horrible mess of your position. There was a deuce of a scrap on Wednesday, when a lot of trench on our right changed hands, and on Good Friday the counterattacks took place and, by jove, it was Bad Friday! You would probably see something about it in the papers. The bombardment was terrific. We had several little bombing stunts against us; one of my bombers was throwing Mills' grenades over 45 yards. They never got up to us, and we only suffered a few casualties. We are now withdrawn from the front for two or three days' rest, and it takes us most of that time to clean up. You would have had a fit had you seen me when I got down here! Six days beard, everything I wore plastered with mud, putties torn to shreds, and a steel helmet on top, tilted jauntily!

We get shelled all day where we are now with big guns, but have got good safe dug-outs. Since the rain, we've experienced a little touch of summer, and the seasonal pests, which, like the poor are always with us, are beginning to put in an appearance in the shape of odours and flies.

Had fresh fish for breakfast this morning. We are on the banks of a very famous canal (famous owing to the war), and we have only to throw half-a-dozen bombs into the water to get a lot of stunned fish up, which we duly fried this morning.

Can see the old city from here now (Ypres). It has been crumbled up a little more since I left it last, but this evening in the sunset it looks rather dignified and defiant. And proud too, that in spite of all the batterings of Brother Bosche, and the fierce fights that have taken place around it, it still manages to keep out of the hands of the Germans.

Proud of all the little crosses which surround it, of men who have given up their lives in its defence, and proud of all our jolly boys who mean to hang on whatever it costs.

Now, don't worry about me. I'm as right as anything, and quite happy, and it's fine to know that there are always people thinking and praying for one.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

30 April 1916

Saturday

The parcel arrived on Thursday evening, when I had come back into the line. It was extremely welcome too, as there is no chance to get much up here, and the things in the parcel were duly demolished with delight.

My "Tommy's Cookers" are coming in awfully useful now, as we can't have fires, and my man can boil water in record time on these wonderful little tins of solid methylated spirit, and get me tea, cocoa, or oxo whenever I want it. The apples in the parcel were quite all right, but the bananas had taken a slight turn the wrong way. It was jolly nice to get fresh fruit in the trenches though.

It is beautiful summer weather now, and the many feet of mud and water are rapidly solidifying, and a lovely (?) trench aroma is hourly increasing. The flies birth rate booms, tool!!!

I doubt greatly whether this will be a long or decent letter. You see, it is not easy, propped up against an array of dirty sandbags, worn and torn as the result of being part of the scenery in this blood thirsty show for many months, without being changed; and which are the only material things between myself and the Bosche parapet, fifty yards away; pad balancing on my knee, and a violent bombardment of our position going on, just to keep my hand steady.

It was a nasty night last night – a lot of bombs and bad temper flying about, and the Bosche didn't do as he wanted. The result is, he's letting off his spleen through the medium of his infernal heavy artillery, on to the people who annoyed him last evening. We happen to be that proletariat!
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There is a nice breeze today, but even this "refreshing waft" has its danger taken from a war point of view, because it is blowing straight across from the German lines, and there are rumours of a forthcoming gas attack here.

As a matter of fact, we had the gas alarm last night. I was awfully amused. During a little Bosche show, there was the deuce of a noise going on from grenades, machine guns, rifle fire, and the artillery, when suddenly someone ran into the gas-bell, and the alarm flew along the line like fury. Men began to pull their gas helmets on frantically, and of course imagined they could see the cloud of gas approaching, and got up on to the parapet pouring in rapid fire.

The few Bosche who had been out a short time before had been scuttled off back, and I could see at a glance that the imagined gas was the smoke from the explosions of our shells and bombs, which had been hurled at them, and which smoke the wind was blowing back gently towards us. It took me some time to assure the men that there was no gas, and I had to pull their legs (both literally and otherwise) before they believed it. Of course, they have experienced gas before, and know the horror of it, so were naturally a little agitated when the false alarm was given.

In the meantime, the news had been passed back to the artillery, and they were opening on to the enemy for all they were worth. Then they had to be stopped. It was really funny.

A few of our men have particular war cries, and there is one of my crack bombers sitting near me now, who I've noticed always yells some mysterious Red Indian howl when he is bombing or doing anything exciting. He's a great footer-player, and in company games behind the line, I've heard him howling his defiance in this strange phrase –"Baah-geeh-naahm". That is as near as I can get it, with a hanging on to each syllable for about four minims and eight crotchets. I've just asked him to explain it, and have shrieked with understanding and merriment.

It appears he lives in Middlesboro', is a great football enthusiast, and the local football rag is the "Middlesbrough Green 'Un" see?

We lost another officer yesterday. Poor old Leader. It was one of those horrible aerial torpedoes, which are the terror of one's existence up here. Smashed into his trench – blew it up with a lot of his men – and knocked him about terribly. He lived for about half an hour, and has been buried at a Little Cemetery in a farm behind the line. He was one of about 14 of us who came out together to the 14th DLI last October. Out of that number, now that Iveson and Eyre have gone, and Leader killed, only Herd and I are still with the battalion.

The German shells set fire to some woods behind the French lines, close to us last night, and caused a jolly big bonfire, which lit up everything – also a couple of farms got on fire. It was a pretty rough night too.

There is an air-scrap going on right over my head now, but I think they've just had enough, and are parting, the Fokker moving off towards his own lines. Any number of planes up today.

Must stop now things are beginning to wake up some! Will finish this tomorrow.

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Sunday [1 May 1916]

There was a gas attack last night, but over to our right, and we luckily didn't get any of it.

No time for any more at present.

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9 May 1916

Your parcels always seem to arrive at an opportune moment nowadays. The one you sent off on the 5th turned up last night, and found me in a detached post, and very glad to receive the good things. I'd finished the cigarettes which I brought up with me this time, and was just sending my man off to scour for the nearest officer and try to "borrow some, so you can guess how acceptable the yellow tin was. I had only got my ordinary rations with me, so the fruit, biscuits etc. proved a real treasure.

I had a surprise the other day. I had managed to get back to Poperinghe, when we were out of the front line for a few days, and was doing a little shopping.

"Shopping" sounds rather funny, for all the big shops were closed or knocked down some time ago, but a certain number of expeditions and daring people still keep little places open, for the sale of everything which troops require, at, of course, fabulous prices. Ordinary 4½d and 6½d magazines cost 1 fr. 30ct.; tins of fruit 2 francs. sauce 2 francs., writing pads 2 francs 50c., and a small rotten electric torch 7 francs. Of course, the Belgians who run these miniature emporiums are piling up fortunes, but of course they risk getting shelled to blazes at any moment.

There are two or three decent cafes still going too. But to come back to the surprise when shopping I'd purchased a couple of collars from one place, and was just waiting for a friend to finish bargaining with a villainous Flemish rogue over the price of a whistle, when I saw an officer standing gazing at me from outside. Didn't recognise him at first, so stared back. Then I opened the door, and he put out his hand and said, "How are you?" It was CP of Trowell's Lane and swimming fame. He is in the Engineers, and is one of those fiends in a mining company, who is always sapping under the Bosche, and either blowing them up or getting blown up. It's remarkable how one does drop across people out here. I'm continually meeting old UPS boys, and have just discovered two of them from my platoon at Ashtead in the same brigade as myself. They now belong to the 1st West Yorks.

The weather has crocked up today. It's now wet and chilly again. Coincident that my present orderly is called Waters, and a signaller has come up today bearing the name of Raine, and my sergeant is Moore. I've just been pulling their legs about it.

The war still strafes on over here, pretty much as usual. The silly asses of Bosche were evidently trying to frighten us during the last 10 days. They are reputed to have dropped a note from an aeroplane, stating "Happy and lucky is the Englishman who is alive in the salient on May 9th". They also shouted it across. So I suppose I must consider myself lucky – but so must thousands of others – all who are alive and kicking today up here.

As a matter of fact it is extraordinarily quiet for this part today, but the west wind and the rain may have upset their calculations. Again I say, Silly asses! They merely succeed in amusing us immensely.

Regarding the weather, a French officer, who is sitting near me now, gently chanting a love lyric, remarked, "Nevaire mind, it will be vair tomorra, and soon ze wahr will be after". They are optimists these Frenchmen and my regard for them grows, the more of them I meet. One of the NCOs at this post speaks better English than he does his own language, and another is a French Canadian who knows our language perfectly, but has a weird accent, the usual French zip mingled with the Dominion drawl. They are awfully interesting fellows, and are specially selected from the French regiment which adjoins us, because of their linguistic achievements, to be at the liaison post.

We had a magnificent draft from our 21st Battalion sent out the other day. Quite a lot of professional footballers in it, but they had rotten luck. A huge shell got into my company as we were coming up to the trenches and five of the new men went out, before they'd ever got into action, and only been in the country for a few days. The two Sunderland Football Club full backs were among them. I was glad to have them in my company, and I and everyone was awfully sorry about it. Rotten luck!

I'm beginning to dare to think about leave again. Gee! what a thought! But I think about another six weeks of luck ought to bring it along, as long as it does not get stopped again.

I say that everyone up here ought to get one month's leave out of three, but unfortunately my word does not hold sway!

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15 May 1916

Another parcel found its way safely and arrived last night. Many thanks again!

I was rather amused by that wee newspaper cutting about the western front. I do think it is a bit too thick that the "Powers that Be" cannot see their way clear to publish a little bit about what actually does go on out here.

It would be intensely interesting to people at home, surely, who have so little idea of what a short meagre report like that really conceals, and who have so many relations and friends out here, about whom they would love to hear. And it would be gratifying to us in the trenches to see accounts of shows, shoots, and battles which are never mentioned, and to read papers when they quote regiments and places and give details.

Ah well, if leave is not stopped again, (which is very possible) my turn should come round in about six weeks.

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17 May 1916

Sorry I can't write you a decent letter but we are up in the front line, where at present time and conditions will not allow.

We're having some lovely hot weather now, and with a bright moon at night there is no darkness at all, for a few days. It was just like noon all last night, and moving about in front or on the parapet was rather sporting (from the Bosche point of view).

Well, I must finish. It's just the most hurried scrawl from the trenches to tell you there's someone there thinking of your birthday and wishing you all good things on the 20th.

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Note: This was John Walcote Gamble's last letter, and was received by his sister on the morning of the 20th. On the morning of the 23rd, news came through that he had "died of wounds".

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22 May 1916

BEF France

Dear Mrs Gamble,
With sorrow and great sympathy I have to inform you of the loss of your son.

Yesterday morning whilst on duty in the front trenches, a bullet passed through his arm, entered the left side, and came out in the middle of his back.

Our medical officer went up into the trenches to see him. He was asked if he had any message. He said, “No, he thought he would pull through”. In the evening he grew weaker, recognised me, asked for water, and to be moved on to his right side.

A motor ambulance took him to a medical station in the rear, where he passed away early this morning.

Your son was a very promising young officer, much liked by both officers and men. On one occasion whilst alone in charge of a post, under shell-fire, he helped to dig out several of his men who had been buried by shells.

I had brought this to the notice of the authorities and was shortly hoping for him to be rewarded.

May your consolation in the grief and sorrow which you are called on to bear, be that you have given your son, and he was taken whilst in noble defence of his country.

Yours very truly, GF Menzies.
(Lieutenant Colonel)

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23 May 1916
No.10 Casualty Clearing Station

Dear Mrs Gamble,
I am very sorry indeed to tell you that your son, Lieutenant JW Gamble died in hospital here at 6.30am yesterday morning.

He was brought here two hours before with a most serious wound in the abdomen. For a few moments he was just semi-conscious, and was able to give the nurse your address. But that was all he was able to say. The doctors and nurses spared absolutely no pains in their efforts for him, but they could not save his life, and after a very short time he became unconscious and later passed quietly away, without having been able to leave any message.
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I am so sorry that I was too far away to be able to get to him before he died, and the more so as I used to be in Derby, and feel sure I remember your name.

I would have given anything to have been able to get to him, and receive some last message for you, if only he had been able to give it. He did not suffer much pain. The shock of the wound prevented that.

I buried him late the same day in the military cemetery on the Poperinghe-Boeschepe Road, one mile and a half from Poperinghe. His grave will be marked with a cross bearing his name, and can always be easily found in future years.

It will always be cared for and preserved, and if you like to send out some flowers or plants to me, I will plant them myself on his grave.

He lies well behind the firing-line in the Belgian countryside. Any personal effects of his will be sent to you later by the authorities.

Please accept my deepest sympathy, and I hope you will feel that he was not alone, but with friends who did their very best for him.

May God help and comfort you.
Yours Sincerely,
AB Brooker (Chaplain).

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The following article, evidently written only a few days before the end, was sent home amongst JWG's kit.
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Pencillings or Pennings at Dusk

No, not Pennines at dusk! Although I am only too aware that that would be a much more desirable setting to these lines than the present. The Pennines! oh rapturous thought of the backbone of England! How lovely thou must look this spring evening! What would I not give to be sitting on one of thy lofty shoulders at this moment, inhaling the pure exhilarating air, and watching the golden sun gradually sink, bathing thee in a marvellous molten colour.

How quiet and peaceful it would be up there, in mountains and valleys, among streams and woods, and stretches of barren rocky slopes, which have never known as this land knows, the belching roar of the monstrous modern gun, the deafening tearing terrifying explosion of the high explosive shell, the hiss of the rifle bullet, the screeching whirr of the venomous machine-gun, the ripping and scaring of God's own creations, the blasting and shattering of centuries of man's thought and toil, and the anguished cry of cut and mangled soldiers – fighting.

Yes, the Pennines would be preferable to a certain spot in Belgium in May 1916 – even to the man with the least artistic and picturesque brain, even to the man who knows no fear or has no nerves – to anyone in fact.

But there are moments, sometimes hours, when right at the seat of the greatest wars, close behind the firing-line, near where there have been many thousands of lives lost in the fiercest fighting of the war, one can close one's eyes and imagine all is peace again. At times when all the infernal engines and machines at the command of the armies are subdued for a few minutes, one may realise that all the frightfulness man can invent will never kill nature. Listen, now, to the birds singing over in those trees, which are rustling gently in the mild western breeze, as they have done for hundreds of years; and that little stream which has so often run with blood since the war commenced, still makes its merry music, as it bubbles over the little stones towards the canal waiting to receive it.

Close your eyes with me here, and listen to nature gently protesting that she still does, and always will hold sway; that war will not continue for ever, and soon she will

reassert herself in this stricken land, and with the aid of time, gradually cover up and remove all the appalling signs of the forces which have endeavoured to upheave her.

Then open your eyes again, and look upwards and westwards, and see the old sun retiring majestically behind that wood. Don't look too low, or you'll see some of the achievements of King Terror.

And if, like I, you have to stay here, and can't transport yourself at will, get your fill of the sounds and the view of the sinking sun through that embroidery of green, because in a very few minutes there will be the noise of hell let loose again, and you'll lose the chance to drink in nature's message.

Now, mingling with her music, what is that distant humming and whirring, which seems to be getting steadily nearer and louder. Oh! that is the first of the evening's interferences with nature, but it is not so very objectionable, because look how graceful the aeroplane seems, as it soars with perfect balance and wing, over the trees, with the parting sun's rays glinting on its polished planes, making it appear a golden bird. But, as it takes its way over towards the east, one realises disappointedly that it is a battle place, and carries a gun for destruction.

At that moment a rifle-shot breaks the spell, and you must fly away from this scene – and the sun disappears.

Darkness comes and with it – what? Rest and dreams as it was surely made for? Calm and quiet in which one can appreciate and worship? No! Dare you stand with me, as you did two hours ago, and find out what it means? Nothing very terrible you'll say. No, for the moment, only the rumble of guns towards the south, the clattering of transport behind us, an occasional knocking of a machine-gun, bursts of rifle-fire, and some shrapnel bursting on the trench to the left.

And the scene – a starlit sky – the moon shining palely and sadly – this natural illumination assisted by the numerous flare lights and star-shells, and the flashing of guns. Gradually all these things increase in their intensity. The guns from the south

get louder and thunder out into the night, the reflection from their flashes glowing vividly, although it is five miles away, telling of a battle going on down there. Probably men are struggling there hand to hand for a crater, recently made by a mine, which one side has blown; and those merciless shells are cutting down, and tearing reinforcements coming up on both sides, and crashing into the trenches all around, sending high into the air travesties of timber, iron, sandbags, wire and bodies.

Or maybe one of the sides has used a favourable wind to release volumes of some poisonous gas or liquid fire to destroy his enemy, and is following it up with an attack. The roar of battle only tells us of a frightful struggle going on, for if you listen intently you can now distinguish other sounds besides the heavy rumblings, which tell of rifles, bombs and machine-guns also working at top speed. And that noise of transport tells of wagons of food for the men fighting, ammunition for the fast consuming guns, material for the rebuilding of shattered trenches, being brought up to the line through barrages of shrapnel. Night after night those drivers whip up their horses, or accelerate their motor-engines, as the shells, meant to catch them, begin to shower the roads. Many deeds unchronicled are enacted by this section of the Army, on wild fierce nights, behind the Infantry. They can't go back, however wild, however fierce the conditions or elements may be. They must push on, for their comrades in the trenches are waiting for their loads.

Those machine-guns, whose occasional tappings now change to continuity, are sweeping parapets, over which anxious vigilant sentries are peering; are playing on a canal-bridge over which a stretcher party is carrying out wounded; or have found a working party out between the lines, digging new defences, or erecting barbed-wire obstacles – with results left to the imagination.

If you will walk down this communication trench to the front lines, you will find them alive with men, working hard, keeping watch, crouching as shells hurtle over, ducking for bullets.

Here's a party going over the parapet, reconnoitring the ground in front, probably attempting to enter the enemy's lines.

Behind that traverse is an officer's party, working away at trench mortars, and the despatch of rifle grenades across to the enemy.

Then a patrol, going round, keeping the men on lookout cheery and watchful, and occasionally lighting up that mysterious land in front with a flare light.

You will realise then that although there is not an actual battle raging here, there is a war – and who knows? – at any moment this trench may become the scene of a large and bloody attack.

No – night is anything but a slice of time blackened and softened for the soothing and rest of our minds and bodies.

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