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Inconsistent hyphenation and unusual spelling in the original document has been preserved.

Note that the style used in this text to record times such a 6-0 is quite different from the modern 6:00.

A number of obvious typographical errors have been corrected in this text. For a complete list, please see the end of this document.

LETTERS FROM FRANCE

WRITTEN BY

ISAAC ALEXANDER MACK
THE YOUNGER

LIEUTENANT OF THE
11TH SUFFOLK REGIMENT

AND LATER

CAPTAIN OF THE
101ST TRENCH MORTAR BATTERY

PRIVATELY PRINTED

LETTERS FROM FRANCE.

11TH SUFFOLKS,
B.E.F., Monday, January 10th, 1916.

My darling Mother,—

This will probably be a long letter; I hope you will not get bored with it. Please keep this letter and any that follow it, so that at the end of the war I may perhaps achieve fame as the author of "Drivellings of a young Officer at the Front." As I have not got used to the routine out here I will describe all the last few days as they strike me, because probably, when I have been out here a little, everything will become such a matter of course that it will be difficult to give you any idea of what our life is like unless I begin with a good chapter one.

CHAPTER I.

"The young soldier's last day in England."

The last day or two was rather a rush. Thursday we frantically packed valises and vainly attempted to reduce them to something near the regulation 35lbs. At first one put in a wardrobe fit for Darius going to conquer Greece, which, when put on the scale, gaily passed its maximum of 55 pounds. Then out came slacks, shoes, scarves, all sorts of things. The weighing was then repeated and further reductions embarked upon, the final result being about 45 lbs. However, we packed them up tight and they all passed all right. Friday was an awful day spent in full marching field service order, inspections, and rumours of absurd Divisional and Brigade operations, which were to take place at night, although we were to rise at 4 a.m. to march to the station. However, the operations were only for Company Commanders, and so we were saved.

In the afternoon we bought all the things we thought we had forgotten. As everything was packed up a group of half-a-dozen of us assembled round the anti-room fire to attempt to obtain a little sleep. I had a chair and a great coat to go over me. The others slept on the floor with table clothes and such like things. We kept a huge fire burning all night, and, unfortunately, instead of going to sleep one could not help looking into its red depths and seeing the pictures of men and horses you always see in fires. Personally, I did not sleep at all, only rested and dozed. At 3-0 a.m. a man came in and announced in a stentorian voice, "The Corporal of the Guards' compliments to Captain Seddon, and it is 3 o'clock." Appreciation of the fact from Captain Seddon, who had been sleeping, in unprintable language which finally resolved itself in a complaint that he had not been introduced to the Corporal of the Guard and he failed to see why he should bear him a grudge.

At 3-30 we got up,
4-0 a hasty breakfast,
4-45 I began to go to the lines to fall in,

4-46 I came back for my glasses,
4-48 I return for my identity disc,
4-50 I return again for my day's rations,
5-0 I fall in a quarter of an hour late.

At 5-15 we march off in the dark saying good-bye to those that remain behind, and realising that at last our many months of training are over, and we are soldiers at last, proud of the fact and beginning to be proud of ourselves as we march down to the station. I was very much struck by the great send-off given us by the women of the cottages we passed who, despite the fact that they had seen thousands march out, all turned out at that early hour, and from their doorsteps wished us a very sincere and affecting God speed. At 7-0 we reach the station and the train, uncertain from what port we sail, to what port we shall go, and almost in entire ignorance of our destination, even the C.O. knows nothing and our staff less.

But in three or four hours we reach our port of embarkation and go straight from train to boat, and are soon out in the Channel. Before we sail all the men put on lifebelts, in accordance with orders, much to the amusement of two or three blasé Canadian Officers returning to the Front, who, however, are soon unable to take any further interest in our proceedings, and seem from their earnest studies of the sea to be trying indelibly to impress upon their brains a distinct remembrance not of the ship but of the Channel itself. As soon as we started we all went in to the cabin and lunched, I, attempting to fill myself so full that the pitching of the ship in a choppy sea shall not affect me. It was all of no avail. I paid three shillings for my lunch, and discovered afterwards that I had not bought it, only hired it for a short while. I was greatly relieved when the voyage was over and we backed into our port of debarkation. [5]

There we had to fall in about half a mile from the landing place, and Staff Colonels and Captains completely lost their heads trying to get us to form up without telling us where to do so, or in what formation. We did not know what we were to expect or what we should do for the night. I expected to sleep on the ground and to eat cold bully-beef—the remains of the rations we were carrying. It had been impressed upon us by all the officers whom we had seen, who had returned from the Front, that directly we arrived abroad all comfort was gone, and that troops were rushed about here and there undergoing frightful privations and fatigues, but not a bit of it. We marched up about two miles to a rest camp, and arrived very tired to find a beautiful dinner ready for us. Tents (two officers to a tent), beds, spring mattresses, and as many blankets as we wanted. There we received all sorts of orders and supplies. A day's ration, another gas helmet (we already had one each), war rations (an emergency ration), &c. The next day (Sunday) we marched down to the station to entrain, marching off at 7-45. This was the only hard day we have had so far. We had a tiring march to the station, carrying equipment weighing about 60lbs.—an awful weight—we then waited at the station, and a train came in with our transport on it, who had come over separately by a different route, and spent four or five hours in the train, and finally detrained at a very pretty village, where we could distinctly hear the booming of the guns. There we waited for some time before marching off, and were greeted with the sound of loud cheers from a neighbouring field where the Artists were playing the H.A.C. at rugger and were cheering their own sides. Then we set out, led by a French guide, and marched about ten miles to reach our present abode. The thing that struck me on the way was the flatness of the country, and the roads, which were the typical roads one always sees in the illustrated papers: long, straight and slightly raised, with avenues of poplars along them all. The march was awful. The weight in my pack almost dragged my shoulders off, and the men felt it terribly. Finally, we arrived in the market place of the village near which we are, and fell out on the grass immediately, only too glad to get our packs off and rest, while the billeting officer led the Company Commanders round and showed them where they were to be billeted.

After an hour or so they returned and we marched off to our billets. We are billeted in a sort of irregular ring round the village, with Battalion Headquarters in a small chateau. We are in farms. Most farms take anything from 50 to 100 men, and all the farms are similar. There is a central square with a sort of depression in the centre, which is covered with dirty straw and filthy water; all the rubbish is thrown into it, and pigs, hens, and cows, wander at will all over it. I asked the doctor this morning if it was not very unhealthy, but he said that fortunately such places became septic filters. I think he said they breed all sorts of bacteria and they have a squabble among themselves, and by fighting against each other keep things all right. If the Austrian and German bacteria would only do the same it would save a lot of trouble. Round the cesspits are barns and pig-houses, &c. A lot of barns. Instead of stacking hay and straw as we do they seem to put it in barns. The men sleep in the barns; they snuggle down into the straw and enjoy themselves thoroughly. They are just like kittens and quite as happy, playing round and hiding themselves in the straw. We set out for our billets, and were halted when we came to our farms. I was in the rear when word was passed down that I was needed in front, and I went up and found a small farm on the left and a big one on the right. I was told my platoon would be in the little one and the rest of the company in the big one, so I was sent in to tackle the [6]

owner, who did not know a word of English, and to settle my men. I did my best, my French is just good enough to make myself understood at a pinch, and I am getting on. The farmer showed me round and I put the men into two barns. Then I asked him "Avez-vous de l'eau a boire?" and he replied "Mais oui." Then he showed me a pump. We then drew some water to make tea in the company's travelling cooker. The Quartermaster-Sergeant asked me to come and listen to it. About ten yards off my nose told me where it was; it was filthy, so we had to try elsewhere.

The first night I slept very comfortably in an attic in the chateau with Battalion Headquarters. Monsieur and his son and the old cook, whose husband is a prisoner in Germany, still live in part of the house, the other empty rooms we have, the Colonel having a toppingly furnished room. Then we picniced quite happily the first night, breakfasting off coffee and bully beef at about 10-0 the next morning. The next day we spent in settling in and organising things. We are about 24 miles from the [7] firing line and sometimes hear the big guns and see plenty of aeroplanes. Two Taubes flew over yesterday, were shelled in the air, and chased away by our aeroplanes.

It was arranged that we would collect most of our company together, and officers sleep together, so I came down to this farm. We have three-quarters of the Company here, my platoon in the farm I told you about, and the others in the big farm. The officers, the Company Commander and three subalterns have a room in the house, with big windows opening out into the yard of the big farm. The room is on the second storey. We have a large bed with a feather mattress, two of us have the mattress on the floor, and very comfortable it is. We censored our men's letters and so to bed.

In the afternoon we went to the village and purchased eggs, candles, bread, &c., and I scrambled the eggs for dinner and made chocolate, in addition to our bully beef, which was stewed in the company's cooker and made a very good stew. We then censored our men's letters and went to bed.

The letters seem most meagre affairs. All they said was that they were writing to send their addresses. They were much as follows:—

> My darling so and so,—
>
> Hoping this finds you well as it leaves me well. I am writing to send you my address. (Then follows an address hopelessly wrong, and most of which I had to censor). We travel first-class here—in bullock carts. (The men were put in vans in the train—you have probably seen pictures of them labelled: Hommes 40, Chevals 8. I would rather be one of the chevals myself; we had second-class carriages—the officers). Please send me some fags. The people here don't speak English. I can't put as many crosses in as I would like as the officers have to read them.
>
> Much love, &c.

This is not an actual letter, but a similar one to them all.

Interruption. A knock came in "Monsieur il y a un soldat qui vous demande" "Merci madame est-il dehas" "O oui Monsieur," Merci Madame. I go and see. B Company Officers' valises have gone astray, &c.

When we were finally in bed and almost asleep comes loud knocking. Brown puts his head out of the window. "For the love of Heaven, come and show us our billets." B and D Companies have just arrived a day later than us and their guide is deficient in [8] common sense. We are quite old soldiers now and past such excitement; we could billet ourselves in China if necessary. However, Brown goes to help. To-day we rose early and breakfasted at 10-0 off bacon and eggs (fried by me), bread and jam. We have a company orderly officer, and it is my turn to-day, so I had to get up and put trousers, coat and boots over my pyjamas and to mount a guard at 8 a.m. and to dress properly afterwards. We have cold baths out of a hand basin and shave. One is very particular about shaving and all small details. The men have to be kept as smart as possible, and it is laid down that shaving is most important. If left to themselves they soon grow long beards, long hair and dirty clothes. All the morning we spent in cleaning up. We swept out the yard. They hardly know themselves now. The farm has never been so clean before. We built an incinerator to burn all our rubbish; we organised a Company Store, a cobbler's shop, and we have a qualified cobbler to do all our repairs. We organised our rations, and collected remains to make stews for the men. Constructed scrapers for boots outside each barn to keep them clean. At about 12-0 a.m. the doctor and C.O. came round with me and inspected our billets and praised them as the cleanest and best organised in the Battalion.

This afternoon ammunition drill, &c., to smarten the men up. At 4-30 I mounted our guard. Each lot of billets has its own guard; and we mount them with all the pomp and ceremony a guard should have, so that our guard mounting is really as impressive as that at Buckingham Palace, and it keeps the men smart. Tea time, visitors from other companies; afterwards the others go shopping. I am cook and mess president of our little lot, and I give them a housekeeping list of what to

purchase. Then having nothing else to do I sit down and write the largest and most drivelling letter I have ever written in my life, I call it No. 35. The next ought to be No. 135. Please tell me if it is too long. If it bores you, censor it and pass it on. I hope it does not; tell me if it does. Now:—

Cigarettes. Please give someone an order to send me 150 cigarettes a week. I will send you a cheque for them any time. They may be either Matinee, Abdulla No. 5 or No. 4. Sullivan, Savoy, Nestor, Pera, or any similar brand. They might send vain attempts, but please get them to send them regularly then and I will send a cheque. Letters will be very welcome. Please give my love to all, and thank May again for her cigarette case, it is awfully useful and much admired. Please ask her to excuse a [9] letter. Give Amy my love and thank her for her letter I received a little time ago. Also, if you could let Auntie Effie see this bit, or tell her I will try and write, I should be very pleased. I am very happy, as you may gather, and it is the first real holiday I have had for 14 months. We have a theory out here similar to Miss —— to wit, that there is no war. We have come to the conclusion that the whole thing is engineered by Heath Robinson, Horatio Bottomley and the Archbishop of Canterbury. Heath Robinson because he thinks humour is decadent, Horatio Bottomley to advertise "John Bull," and the Archbishop to cause a religious revival. How it is worked is as follows:—Heath Robinson bought a chateau in Flanders and a Crimean war gun. Then Churchill and the Kaiser came into the show. They bring troops up to within 20 miles of Heath Robinson, who fires off his gun every half hour. The troops are quite happy; if anyone grumbles they are sent up to the trenches, where George Graves and Sarah Bernhardt let off crackers. The battalion snipers are put in the opposite trench and told to snipe the trench opposite them. Occasionally they hit a man, and then there is a casualty list, and some General gets sent home in disgrace. Gallipoli is another chateau near here.

If you came out in pith helmets the corporation sand cart spreads sand in front of you, and you are supposed to be in Egypt. To accomplish The Great Practical Joke, Troops are trained to exercise their imagination. They begin by being soldiers in blue, and imaginary uniforms. Then they do arm drill and imagine they have rifles. Then they do Brigade operations and have an imaginary enemy, get killed by imaginary shells, shoot with imaginary rifles, fire imaginary cartridges out of imaginary guns. In the end there is Heath Robinson and his gun. I can't venture to read this letter over, and I am afraid no one else will. But my imagination is now so good that I can almost imagine my little Mother doing so, if no one else has the courage to do so.

Well the others have returned and common sense is returning, so I must shut up.

Good night, little Mother, and much love to all,

From your loving Son,

ALEC.

P.S.—I shall soon be home on leave as a lunatic.

11TH SUFFOLKS, [10]

B.E.F., Wednesday, January 12th.

My darling Mother,—

I am beginning letter No. 2, so that, although you will not get it for a few days, I may add to it occasionally and despatch it to you when it reaches a decent length, and before it reaches the colossal and iniquitous verbosity of my former screed—a monologue on the Great European War.

I finished letter 35 last night. To-day we again spent in improving our billets. The sailor is always known as the handy man, but I doubt if he would have a look in even with amateur Tommies like ourselves. We made scrapers for each barn door out of nothing, mats to scrape our boots on out of straw, roadways over muddy places out of brushwood and tins, &c., and incinerators out of mud. We could easily make bricks without straw.

The G.O.C. inspected our billets this morning and complimented our arrangements, and seemed highly pleased with them. The men are extremely smart at present; the easy time and change of circumstances seems to have returned to them all the original keenness we had rather lost during our rather boring time during the last few months.

We had our first shot fired in anger yesterday. A Taube flew over a mile or two up and a long distance away, and a sentry, to show his appreciation of its attentions, loosed off his rifle, much to his own surprise and his neighbours.

To-night I invented a new dish—an omelette made of scrambled eggs and minced bully beef. It was very good. To-day we route marched, and inspected gas helmets and ammunition this afternoon. To-night we are making a savoury—it is still in the making. Its ingredients are:—Cheese, butter, eggs, mustard, pepper, and a little brandy to act as vinegar. It is a recipe of our own and I hope it turns out well.

To-night is a time of great excitement. A post has arrived—a letter from you written last Thursday to Sutton Veney and from Father and one from Win. Your parcel has not arrived yet. I did not get a tin box, as we are not in Egypt. I have no new uniform.

I am keeping the knife, fork and spoon. I am enclosing a 10s. note to pay for it and the knife (slight pause). The savoury was good. (P.S.—Later, note not enclosed.) Please tell Father he is very generous, but I have plenty money, as Miss Jennie would [11] say. I think I must be awfully extravagant. I spend a lot of money, but I always seem to have plenty. I generally buy good things and few.

Can you send me a pound tin of solidified methylated spirits for "Tommy's Cooker." (No substitutes.) Cost 1s. Yesterday I took a fatigue party of 30 men over to a large town near here—(I wish I could give you its name)—to unload stores for the division. We marched there, and the men loaded and unloaded, while their officer betook himself up to the town and purchased tinned fruit, potted meat, &c., and executed all sorts of odd commissions for various people.

I went and lunched at a French Cafe. I got a great shock, when I entered, the outside, as it seemed a common eating house, but then I went through the kitchen into another room, where there were two large tables round which were seated English and French officers mixed, and they brought us our food without one having to commit oneself too much in French. We did not know what we were eating, but it was very good. I had a Trinity Hall man on my right and a Caius man on my left, both of whom knew several friends of mine. One of them was a captain, and in his battalion was Kenneth Rudd, a great friend of mine at Jesus.

We returned in waggons, big motor transport waggons. We finished loading, and then I asked the A.S.C. officer which waggons to put my men on, and he told us the empty ones in front. There were about seven of them; they all go in a long train following each other, a few yards between each one and the next. However, when we were nearly settled the train moved off and left us behind, and I was then told that the empty waggons were going in quite another direction. According I got only one waggon and pushed the thirty men into it and rode in front myself. We got stuck once or twice, and all had to help to pull it out, and also had to help another waggon which was stuck; the road was so narrow and muddy that we could not get it out, and so had to leave it for the breakdown gang.

At night we had a practice alarm and got all the men out with all their kit packed, and the officers with their valises packed up, all in 20 minutes. At 11-0 at night the men were all asleep, and it took them completely by surprise, but I am afraid some of the officers cheated and had most of their things ready beforehand. My platoon was [12] the quickest in the battalion—14 minutes, though they were rather hastily dressed and sleepy. To-day we route marched, and are now awaiting a battalion alarm, time unknown, where I know of at least one officer who has cheated again.

A new major, a regular, has just come to us—he is to command our company. Any food would always be acceptable, especially good solid cakes.

I am afraid this letter is almost as long and almost as boring as the last. I will close it to-morrow. Tell me if they are too long, and please tell everyone that the post is the real excitement of the day. Good-night, little Mother, sleep tight and go to bed early and don't get a headache. God bless you.

The new major is to be second in command of the Battalion, and Major Morton is coming back to us.

To-day being Sunday we had very little work to do, only inspection of men to see if they were clean and shaved, of rifles, ammunition, gas helmets, emergency rations, &c.

I must close now, as I must go to bed. I will try and write continuously, and send each letter off when it begins to get too bulky.

Good-night, Mother, and love to all.

From your loving Son,

ALEC.

11th Suffolks, [13]
B.E.F., Monday, January 17th, 1916.

My darling Mother,—

Chapter three now commences. It might be labelled "Reforms in the Household." Major Morton, as I told you in the last letter, has returned to our company. Before he returned we had one room for officers, in which we slept, washed from one small basin, cooked, ate, wrote and received our visitors. Now, we, Green, Parker and I sleep in one room and Major Morton in another, and we eat in the family kitchen, while two servants cook our food. To-day I arose with the lark, which had unfortunately not been warned of my intentions, and so failed to put in an appearance. Fuller, my servant, boiled me an egg and made me some tea, which I ate at 7-0 o'clock, and then set out to Divisional Headquarters to go on a one day's bombing course. We left Headquarters in two motor 'buses and sailed along quite happily, as peacefully as if we were in England, despite the fact that we were some 15 miles or so from the firing line. On the way there we saw one German aeroplane chased by four of our own, and I heard that they finally had a battle near here, though I do not know the result. We arrived there about 10 o'clock and spent the day bombing, throwing live grenades, &c. We saw all the English bombs that are in use. I knew most of what they told us before. They seemed a bit surprised at what we knew; most divisions coming out have not done nearly as much bombing—I have thrown about 20 live grenades myself already. Our lunch we took with us. I had eggs, potted meat and marmalade sandwiches I had made myself. We returned by 'bus, and had tea with D Company on the way home. The men have just had tobacco served out to them and are going to be paid to-day. It is very difficult to regulate their pay, as they are paid in francs, and the rate of exchange makes it difficult to pay them properly, especially as it changes from day to day.

I have just been conversing with Madame. I believe she thought I understood her, as I tried to look intelligent and to make suitable remarks at proper intervals. Really, I only understood a little of it. To-day it is drizzling, and I must go and lecture my platoon on the use of gas helmets. I have just received May's letter (Tuesday, January 18th, to-day, I think). Please let me know when you receive mine so that I can know [14] how long they take to go. Some of the people are very difficult to understand, as they talk half Flemish and half French, at least many of the farmers do. We are about 24 miles from where Arthur was in the firing line, and the big train, where I went with a fatigue party, is the headquarters of my friend, the general, whom I was with in 1912. I can't tell you more than that. It will be an interesting little puzzle for you to solve. I will despatch this letter now. It is rumoured that we shall see Joffre in a few days or so, but it is probably not so.

It seems very funny out here. We have no need to put our blinds down at night, no trouble about lights on cars, while in London and Cambridge one lives in inky blackness. The socks are very welcome.

Much love, from your loving Son,

ALEC.

P.S.—My letters are getting short, because they are sent off at short intervals.

11th Suffolks, [15]
B.E.F., Wednesday, 19th.

My darling Mother,—

I have just received a very welcome letter from you. I append a list of things I want and would be very grateful for at times:—

1. Powdered milk.
2. Tea cubes.
3. One tablet coal tar soap (Wright's).
4. Mixed soups.
5. A warm pair of bedroom slippers.

I did not enclose a note in my last letter, as I have only French money. I will do so

as soon as possible!

As a week has gone, I can tell you we crossed Folkestone to Boulogne and passed through Calais on the way here. I don't think I can tell you any more. Perhaps you can understand my reference in the last letter, if you cannot no one else can.

Could you not get Finlay's to send cigarettes out of bond to me. Try, at least, with a small quantity, and I will let you know if I receive them—it is so much cheaper. I must have cigarettes, and Seddon says his brother always received his all right.

The weather has been beautifully fine, if slightly cold, the last week or so. I do hope Father is getting better now, I was awfully sorry to hear he has been ill. Now that we live in more luxurious circumstances, Graves, Major Morton's servant, does our cooking. Foster came to dinner in order to play bridge afterwards, and we had a pleasant meal, consisting of soup, roast beef, and apple fritters, and had a rubber or two afterwards. To-day we have done a few parades and practised for the inspection. I told you about it in my last letter and it is coming off to-morrow (Thursday). We paid out this morning; we each have to pay our own platoons in francs and to sign lots of documents, and to get the men to sign is rather a job. We marched out to-day and the whole division was drawn up along the road two deep, and we had to wait two or three hours in a piercing wind, with squalls of rain and sleet, to be inspected. Then we were inspected by General Joffre and Sir Douglas Haigh, who went slowly past in a car, followed by 13 other cars. You must remember that the division would [16] stretch for 12 or 15 miles along the road. We returned a little time ago to our billets and have just had tea. Some of the French papers have a German official communique in them saying that the 34th Division has been badly cut up. Well, the 34th Division is ours, and we have not even seen a German yet, nor even come within miles of one, so they must have been very clever.

P.S.—I am starving for cigarettes, please get some sent out of bond. I am sorry to ask for so many things and to cause you trouble, but I hope you don't mind. Please give my especial love to the Aunts and Aunt Polly and Francis if you get any opportunity, also Uncle Ted. There was rather an amusing paragraph in the Cambridge evening paper of January 14th about our departure. I think it is the "Cambridge Daily News." You might like to write for it. Watch the first letters of each sentence in my next letter on page 3. Yesterday I was unfortunately slightly unwell and stayed in bed in the morning and got up in the afternoon, and in the evening we had a brigade alarm and were out from 7 till 12. I had only had six biscuits and some milk, so I did not feel very strong.

To-day being Saturday we have done little, and we bicycled into the same huge town to make some purchases. Don't send me cigarettes unless I write again for them, as I find I can get them cheaper from the Officers' Canteen out here. I must close now as we move to-morrow a few miles nearer the firing line and billet again, but we shall still be rather safer than we were in England. Well, write again as soon as possible.

Much love to all, from your loving Son,

ALEC.

11TH SUFFOLKS, [17]

B.E.F., January 23rd, 1916.

My darling Mother,—

I have just received a parcel from you; I might almost say *the* parcel. I never remembered ever having received a parcel which caused me greater pleasure. I opened one end of it and took out each article in turn and each article was simply delightful. It was really like an unexpected Christmas, or a visit to the perfect grotto. There is only one thing, mother, that you really must not do, it is simply spoiling one as it is impossible to realise that one is supposed to be on active service, when we are billeted in extremely comfortable billets, and given all the luxuries one could possibly desire. I thought that once we left England we should have to say good-bye to comfort, but not a bit of it. I can say with perfect truth that nowhere in England were we half so comfortable, or did have half so easy a time as here. We sleep in absolute comfort and warmth, we are fed far better than in any hotel outside London, and we are given just enough exercise to keep us fit. Most people told us before we came out here that the billets were not at all comfortable, and we expected to be in any old cowshed. Our last billets were extremely comfortable and our new ones are equally so. Rotten billets are usually only given to troops who leave their billets

untidy when they leave. Before we leave we are always very careful to leave ours clean and so we get good ones. Early this morning we moved our billets again and are now some 16 miles from the firing line. Continuing from where I left off in my last letter. Quite unexpectedly we had to move on Saturday night. Unfortunately practice night alarms have been very frequent lately, and so we were prepared to move quickly. Every other night last week, almost, we had practices. We were warned that we were to be ready to move on Saturday night any time after midnight, and, as a matter of fact, had two or three hours to get our things ready. We went to bed and got the word to move early this morning. We marched for about three hours and arrived here in comfort in the morning, and found we only had one very dirty and tumbledown farm for the company. Within about three hours we had cleared every barn of old straw, clothes, boots, tins, &c., put new straw in, and are now quite comfortable, the officers have a sort of sitting room again, with one bed in it, two on [18]
the bed, two on the mattress, and one on the floor, and I expect we shall be very comfortable. As we did not seem to have any food for the officers the farm people asked us if we would like some chickens. And we had soup, the typical French pot-au-feu, which they keep on the fire and put all scraps into it and which makes delicious soup, chickens, fruit salad, and cafe noire, which all French people know how to make. To-morrow we will spend in making the place like a palace. Don't send me any more cigarettes. The ones I have just received will come in very handy as I am short, but in future I can get them out here cheaper.

Much love to all, and especially to you, Mother dear.

From your loving Son,

ALEC.

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[19]

11TH SUFFOLKS,

B.E.F., January 24th.

My darling Mother,—

To-day we were expecting to get up late, parade this morning 9-30, but, unfortunately, we were wakened at 7-0 o'clock and told to parade at 8-0 for inspection by our Corps Commander, and spent the whole morning standing still while we were inspected. It is extremely tiring to stand still for half an hour or more, more tiring than marching for hours. The rest of the day we spent cleaning up everything. Now we are sleeping in three different rooms. In here two sleep, and we all eat in another room, six feet by eight feet, three of us have our mattress on the floor and one more in a small room by himself. Most of the rooms lead out of the kitchen. In the kitchen most of the servants and a few other men hob-nob with Madame and her buxom daughter, who are Belgian refugees, and who are very agreeable and don't seem to mind us over-running the whole place, and soldiers coming in to their kitchen, where they live, in all stages of dishabile, to buy huge bowls of coffee at 1d. each. The General this morning was a cheery untidy old soul, who reviewed the troops in an old mackintosh and gum boots and a day's beard, or I should think the result of a bad razor. He addressed us afterwards in an oration full of split infinitives and mixed metaphors, welcoming us to France for a few month's holiday.

I perpetrated quite one of my best efforts to-night. I went into a shop, where I hoped to get potted meat, and asked for "pâté en bottine," which being interpreted is meat in boots, which was unfortunate. Parker then entered another shop and asked "Je desire un larabeau si vous l'avez," which means "I want a basin, if you have one." But, unfortunately, the good lady thought he meant not "si vous l'avez" if you have it, but "si you lavez" if you wash. I am afraid that No. 36 was delayed, and so it arrived at the same time as No. 37, I suppose. Read both very carefully together and you will perchance be interested. To-day I had an inspiration. We could not get anywhere for the men to bathe for the last week or two and this morning I was desperate. I believe a lot of the little friends which are said to dwell with the soldiers are due to troops in the same conditions not having an inspiration and so starting badly. The idea was [20]
almost too simple. I dug four holes in the ground and pegged a waterproof sheet in it, and got four dixifuls of hot water, so that each section of my platoon had a bath per platoon and water not quite cold. As there was a gentle zephyr wind blowing and a nice warm sun it was very pleasing. We have been having topping fine weather—hardly any rain so far.

Good-night, Mother,

From your loving Son,
ALEC.

11TH SUFFOLKS, [21]
B.E.F.

My darling Mother,

I hope you got my last letters all right and understood them. Since writing them I have moved, but the battalion has not. Two of us and 71 men are on a course in trench mortars. We have moved some 12 miles further, and are, I think, about three miles from where Arthur was. We came right up here in 'busses, and arrived here no one seemed to know anything about us, so we had to forage round and get billets for our men and then for ourselves. When all was settled, an officer came and told us he had orders from his brigade to have these billets for a battalion just coming out of the trenches, so we started off again, and finally fixed the men up and in the end ourselves in an estaminet (whisper it softly—a pub.) in a wee room with one large bed. We both then slept on the bed and used the rest of the room for storing our clothes in. The men were roused up in the night by a false alarm from the trenches, but they did not disturb us. To-day we breakfasted at 9-0 and were lectured to in the morning and afternoon by an officer, who came out of the trenches yesterday afternoon. This evening we went to a fairly large town near here and had tea and dinner. At tea we found a large major leaving the cafe and vainly looking for his cap. At length he got the services of a waitress. "I've lost my cap" ("ton chapeau?") "Call it what you like as long as you find it." He was rather amusing. Dinner we had in the usual French cafe I have described before, and returned home to bed. The other man has gone to another estaminet and so I am sleeping alone. The house is on a slight rise, so from my window at night I can see a huge circle with lights going up every minute here and there—star shells, they quite light up the room, then flashes and a boom. They have just been quite bad tempered a few miles north of us and have been making a dickens of a row. I think it is a nuisance that ought to be stopped, it must be quite annoying to the people round. Now they are getting distinctly unfriendly to the south for a little. It looks like a fifth of November show, rather long drawn-out.

Please excuse this writing, as I am lying down in bed.

Good-night, little Mother,
Your loving Son,
ALEC.

I meant to send this letter off to-day, but I have not been able to. This morning we [22]
breakfasted at the gentlemanly hour of 9-0 off omelettes from the estaminet, bacon (a ration), coffee, marmalade and bread and butter. We did a little work this morning, lunched off bread and butter and marmalade and then a lecture, and then we went into the town for tea and dinner. They have a very nice cafe place here—a private house. Madam's husband is a prisoner, and her husband told her to be "gaie," so she runs a cafe and enjoys herself. We had a very good tea; they have some very nice cakes called gauffes (I don't quite know how to spell it), like sweet pancakes, and afterwards a bath. The division has some baths. There is a starch factory—I think it is—and there are some large sort of square vats in it. They are used as baths for officers; they have three big vats, one very big, and they are as hot as you like, and are 8 feet by 4 by 4 feet deep, and you can have a topping bath in them—you can just swim a stroke or two. Then afterwards we had a cold plunge in a very big one. It was simply delicious and cost us nothing. One of the best baths I have ever had. I had one bath to myself and Bill Fiddian the other. Then we went to dinner and enjoyed ourselves muchly. Soup, veal, chicken, coffee, all for 3/9 or rather five francs—a franc equals about 9d now, as English credit is very good—and then home to bed.

To-night the machine guns seem rather busy. I have just heard one let off a few hundred rounds, but I don't think one round in a thousand hits a man. There is one busy popping off now. It is funny being a sort of spectator. Things are pretty quiet really at present, as I saw in a captured German letter from a German soldier to his mother. "In the spring the curtain will rise"—I wonder who will pull the string. They are noisy to-night, a lot of waste of ammunition, both rifle and machine guns going on. It is a calm night so the noise carried.

Well, good-night, Mother,

Much love to all,
From your loving Son,
ALEC.

There they go: rat-a-tat-a-tat-a-tat, a machine gun.

11TH SUFFOLKS, [23]
B.E.F., Saturday, January 29th.

My darling Mother,—

Do you send any of my letters on to Winnie? or anybody? After work to-day we went into the town to have tea. After tea we met some of our men and gave them some pay, pro. tem., as they have had no pay for two weeks or so and were broke. Then I bought a Pearson's magazine (price 1s.) and we started for home and got a lift on a 3-ton A.S.C. lorry, from which I dropped the magazine, unfortunately. I am billeted in an estaminet by myself, and Bill Fiddian is with two other officers on the same course in another estaminet in a large room with three beds, out of which all the bedrooms open. Grandma groans in one small room, Monsieur and Madame and about two dozen others in another small room and two officers in two other small rooms. Grandma has just gone to bed; she has attained to the small total of 97 years and seems able to look after herself. We have just been having a long talk with Madame, who brought us up our dinner, an omelette and coffee. We have been reading and talking, and on Monday we shall return to the battalion. The big candle you sent me is topping and is lasting for hours. The guns are at it again—they have been busy all day. The Germans were here once, but they are not here now. Since coming out here I have come to be very proud of the battalion. I have seen no battalion with their physique and few with their discipline. They sing a song about the Suffolk boys being respected wherever they go, and I think they are. In comparing them with other men, I have been struck, and so have others, with how fair they are. Most of them have very fair hair, often gold, and fair rosy cheeks. They seem a very Saxon type. I have been wondering whether they are descendents of the Danes and Saxons, who took refuge in the fens in Norman times, a memory of Hereward the Wake. The fen men have always been a separate race; they must have very little Norman blood in their veins. They have the Saxon stolidity also. I am very glad I am not in a town battalion like the Northumberlands and such regiments. They are not nearly so easy to control or so well disciplined, and I am pleased to discern to-day that our men seem much quicker in picking up new ideas, despite the fact that they are not so educated. Well, I am afraid all this is very boring. But, as I have [24] suddenly developed into a writer of letters, I must write either just what comes into my head or nothing at all. It seems funny this long, stretching line of trenches, always busy even in the quietest of times. By daytime guns and shells; by night, bombs, flares, searchlights and machine guns. And a few miles behind it as we are, perfectly safe as if there was no such thing as war, with only the faint noises one notices, now faintly, now clearly, as the wind varies to remind one of the struggle going on. It seems funny to lie in a comfortable bed and watch it all through the window as on a stage. Noises off.

Please send me big candles when you send a parcel. This one is lasting beautifully. Yesterday (Sunday) we fired off the mortar in the morning, and in the afternoon went into the town for dinner. I wanted to go to a Catholic Church in the evening to see what it is like, because, of course, there are no Protestant Churches here.

This afternoon we went to the Theatre of the Division we are attached to. They have a cinematograph and a band, orchestra and concert party, all composed of Tommies. They are at present in what I think must be part of a disused factory, and it was a very good show. I went and one of the other officers on the course, and two of the officers whose battalion we are attached to. Then we had dinner with them in their company mess, and a jolly good dinner, too, and after we talked. It was very interesting, as they have been out over six months continually, and not lost a single officer I think. They had some very amusing yarns. I will tell you sometime.

When I returned to my billet I had an awful business. It was one of the blackest nights I have ever seen. I have never before remembered a night, when you literally could not see your hand six inches before your nose. Last night you could not—I tried. Also the darkness was misty as well, it simply got up and hit you in the face. I started back once—it quite seemed as if someone was striking a blow.

To-day we did one of the most curious and typical things of modern warfare. At 10-30 we went out for a walk—five of us—and our destination was the trenches, just for a few hours' joy ride. We walked about five miles along the road, and then about a mile across open fields. The last mile, of course, was within rifle range of the German trenches, but they could not see you, except from observation posts, and if they could we were too far off to make the shot easy enough to make it worth trying. The only [25] disturbing thing was the behaviour of our own artillery, who suddenly let off a gun, only a few yards from the road on which we were walking, and made a horrid row. The curious thing about this trench warfare is that a trench is such a small thing to hit that the German and our own artillery have given up trying to do any real damage, but they have come to a sort of agreement to keep their faces up and to impress upon the infantry in the trenches that there is some reason for an artilleryman being paid more than the infantry. Accordingly, they plant their wretched guns near a road, and when anyone goes along it they let off a round just to see him jump. The shell probably falls in Holland or in our own lines. Anyway, it does no damage, and the artillery enjoy their little joke all right. It has become almost second nature with them. Of course, the new batteries take some training—they lack humour. One battery let one Brigadier-General, one Colonel and a transport mule go past and each time forgot about loosing off a round. At the end of the cross country jaunt we came across the beginning of the works of the Cave-men. You may have seen some in England—they disguise themselves as earth and then dig long narrow holes and live in them. The Cave-men are strange creatures. We went up one of then funny long narrow burrows, and occasionally they let off a funny toy which cracked overhead. At length we came to the real caves where these men live. I noticed that they were very vain men and were continually looking into a sort of box thing, with a glass at the end, and admiring themselves therein, and then so intoxicated were they with the sight that they would put a stick to their shoulder and break forth into smoke and flame. The name of this people is the Tribe of Tommizi.

And I noticed their gods visited them. Speckless mortals, clothed in fine linen, wearing turbans or caps, as they call them, trimmed with red and gold, and so appalling was their aspect that the Cave-men were, as it were, turned to stone, and stood with their hand to their hats as if to guard against a blow, or to ward off the evil eye. And behold, a terrible dragon screamed across the sky, shouting out with hate and roaring as the thunder, and fell and burst itself asunder, and I fled, and the Cave-men laughed, for their gods in red were there and they feared not. I expect the above gives you a good picture of trench life. It is as given me by a friend of mine [26] who visited these men—my own experiences were different.

My own experiences I will call "An Idyll of Spring" in blank verse, without the blanks and without the verse, and will be continued in our next.

We wandered up the communication trench and nosed all along the firing line, only 50 yards from the German trench—I thought it was topping. I had a good look, with a periscope, while a sniper vainly tried to hit it, and its owner became nervous of losing it. I enjoyed my visit very much. Wednesday: The Brigade Major came to see me, and told me that I am to command the Brigade Trench Mortar Battery, so I am now one of the working members of the Brigade Staff, though I don't wear a red hat. I was very pleased. He took me back to Brigade Headquarters for tea and dinner and I had a very good time. But, unfortunately, I had to come home in the dark. All the roads round here have ditches on either side. It was pitch dark, I did not know the road, and it was too dark to see the turnings oft. I missed my way and went miles. I hated it. I don't mind a German, but I don't like the dark. Thursday: We amused ourselves, and at 3-0 I went to see the Brigade Major of the Brigade, to which we were attached for instruction, and he sent us to the reserve billets, within a mile or so from the firing line, which they have a stupid habit of shelling. It keeps waking you up in the night. Then this morning we marched off and got two 'busses back to the place we were in two weeks ago, after our first move, well back about ten miles or so, to train the battery. It is a topping little village on a slight hill, and we have topping billets. Fiddian is with me at present. We have a room each, a feather bed with clean sheets and a nice little sitting room. The men are in a topping loft with plenty of straw and seem very happy. We are going to dinner with the Colonel of the 16th Royal Scots. I command the battery and have the powers of a Battalion Commander. I am absolutely on my own, no Company Commander, no Battalion Commander, only the Brigade can give me orders. Fiddian is second in command. We have four gun detachments. I hope the war goes on for ever as far as myself is concerned; at present I like it all, even including the trenches.

Much love to all, Mother dear,

From your loving Son,

ALEC.

P.S.—I have just received your letter dated January 30th. The reason some of my [27]

letters are dated differently inside from out is that I begin writing a new letter directly the old one goes off and they take some days to write, and also posting is often delayed. I am very busy organising the battery at present, and have a lot of work to do. I have just got my guns (4) to-night. The first place we were in was near St. Omer, and it was there we went to shop. I am allowed to tell you now—it is some time since we left there.

Please send me my Sam Browne belt as soon as possible. I am awfully sorry to hear that Father has been ill. Please give him my very best love as always, and tell him I do not write to him separately as my letters are always family affairs, and I cannot write more than one. Does anyone else see my letters? If you see the Aunts please give them my very best love too. Please thank Auntie Agnes for writing me such an interesting letter. It was awfully nice of her to write, and I will try to answer it. She asked if she could do anything for me—well, I don't want to trouble her, but if she really would like to, a cake sent any time she is making them would be very acceptable. You can get no cakes out here. Also I should like you to take my letters to the Aunts and Uncle Ted any time you go to see them, and read them any bits that may interest them. You have no idea, but I know you have, how I appreciate letters, especially the topping long one I have just received from you. My letters are very much delayed at present as I am detached from the battalion and being moved about. I have little time to complete letters before there is more news to tell.

Good-night, little Mother, give them all a good-night kiss from me. I hope Charlie is fit and well.

Much love to all,
From your loving Son,
ALEC.

11TH SUFFOLKS, [28]
B.E.F., Monday, February 7th.

My darling Mother,—

I think my budget must be growing fast. Yesterday I spent in organising my battery. I got some green and white paint from the A.S.C. and painted all my guns, so that they look beautiful now. Most of my time nowadays I spend in trying to get money for myself and for my men, rifle oil, baths, boots mended, equipment for guns, and all sorts of things. This morning I took the whole battery in battery drill. Most of it's composed by myself, as there isn't a drill book for trench mortar batteries. It is very interesting, as I have to think out all my own tactics, and organisation. On every other, infantry or cavalry or artillery, there are thousands of War Office books, so that one needs to think very little for oneself.

We are just having dinner, Fiddian, Carroll, who is my second in command, and myself—quite a nice dinner—while our servants make merry in the kitchen. The house where I am billeted is owned by a topping old man. Whenever I pass through their kitchen they all get up and monsieur says: "Bon jour Monsieur L'Officier." He is a time-served French soldier, and works in a big wood just near here. We had a Taube—A German aeroplane—over here this morning. It dropped one bomb, which did not go off, a few hundred yards from here. I did not hear about it till afterwards. The battalion has just returned to-day from the trenches for a week or so before we return to them to take over part of the line. Where we are going is, I believe, a fairly nice peaceful spot. I shall try and stir them up if I have half a chance. What happens in trenches is: that if the Germans get nasty and shell us, or send a few bombs from trench mortars, we try to make ourselves nastier still and send over twice as many. Then the Germans get nastier still, till both sides have got thoroughly bad tempered at having their parapets spoiled and trenches messed about. Then it gradually wears out. And as the Germans are using bad ammunition at present they go to bed or wander off to get a drink, and we soon do the same. I have just seen Brown. He says he was going up to the trenches in rather a nervous state of mind when the Officer Commanding the trenches into which we were going for instruction met him, told him his sergeant-major, would look after our men and took him to have a wash and [29]
then to have dinner in mess. They had soup, meat, sweet and savoury, all to the strains of a gramophone. Not bad for the much-abused trenches. The battalion was in about a week and lost nobody. This morning we were to be inspected by our Divisional General. But he spent so much time talking to the battalion that he was unable to see us. He says he is going to save every life he can in his division. He is

going to improve any trenches we go into, to make them absolutely safe, and so on. He is a fine man. He was in command of a brigade at the beginning of the war, and saved his own brigade by his calmness and bravery.

Tell May there is nothing I like so much as long letters, otherwise I should not write such appalling long screeds about nothing at all.

I am going out to-night to mess with "D" Company of one of the Scots Battalion. Now I am attached to Brigade Headquarters I see quite a lot of Captain Creig, who is on it you know. He sometimes gives me news of Uncle Fred.

I have just received a letter from May and one from Father. They have been delayed, as I am away from the battalion. Remember that you can say anything you like in your letters, as they are not censored at all. I very rarely see a paper, so any news is valuable, especially about such things as the last Zeppelin raid, &c. Please send me also my slacks and shoes, and the Sam Brown belt as soon as possible. I will enclose a cheque for all I owe you in this letter; I hope it will cover it all. One of the Scots, Kitton, a friend of mine, came in to dinner last night with us, Carroll and myself, or rather it was Bill Fiddian and myself. Carroll was out.

Yesterday we spent in the usual way. I went to dinner in the evening with "D" Company of the Scots, and had a very pleasant time. Unfortunately, after dinner, I went to see Major Warden, of the Scots, and, instead of going into his room, I stalked into Madame's bedroom, and fled precipitately. This morning I took the men down, and we had a bath in some temporary baths the R.E.'s have rigged up. I received a very nice parcel from you to-day (Thursday) containing a cake, powdered milk, tea, &c. It was very welcome. It had been delayed with the battalion. I went along to the battalion and saw several of the officers to-night. I was very glad to see them. Good-night, little Mother, I am going to bed. Whenever it is raining you can be quite [30]
certain that we are being inspected by some big General. It has been pouring all this morning because we were being inspected by Lord Kitchener. We have just returned and had lunch and changed, and I am now spending a quiet afternoon, hoping that some of the battalion will come in to tea with us.

The Colonel is in command of the Brigade, as our new Brigadier is away on leave. Our Brigadier, General Fitton, was, as you may have seen in the casualty lists, the first casualty in the Division. He was killed by a stray bullet during a visit to the trenches. We are all extremely sorry to lose him; he was such a priceless old man, although he made us work. It was extremely bad luck for him.

I will finish this letter now, as I am just sending off a batch of my men's letters, which I have just finished censoring.

Much love to all—

From your loving Son,
ALEC.

11TH SUFFOLKS, [31]
B.E.F., Sunday.

My darling Mother,—

I have just returned from taking the men to have a hot bath in some baths the Engineers have rigged up. You asked about our padré. He is at present at the base; he has been very ill for a little time, and we have no padré at present. Yesterday afternoon I went down to see "C" Company, and, whilst I was in a farm talking to Gillson, a Fokker came and dropped two bombs a few hundred yards away. They did no damage as they exploded in the middle of a large field. I am sorry that I have not sent this letter before, but I have been rather busy lately, not only with work, but with social business. Last night I had dinner with the A.S.C., and the night before with Major Warder, of the Scots, and the Signalling Officer of the Brigade had dinner with us. You will be surprised at the menu:—Soup, lobster, roast beef and fried potatoes, chocolate blancmange, welsh rarebit, coffee. Quite good for France. Fuller, my servant, cooks for us, and he is turning out a genius as a cook; he cooks toppingly. We have rather to try and make ourselves pleasant to other people, when we are an independent unit, they can do so much for us. A captain of the A.S.C. took me into the town I have often mentioned before—20 miles from here. I wanted to buy a gramophone, a lot of people have them in the dug-out. I am thinking of getting one. Will you ask May to get me two catalogues, one of Decca gramophones and one of Master's Voice. If I go on like this I expect you will all be coming out here for a

holiday. We fired off our guns the other night and the Colonel in command of the R.E.'s came to see us fire. I asked him to dinner, but he could not come.

I cannot write a long letter, but will write again soon. To-morrow we go towards the trenches and will be in them in a day or so. Much love to all,

From your loving Son,

ALEC.

11TH SUFFOLKS, [32]

A/101 TRENCH MORTAR BATTERY,

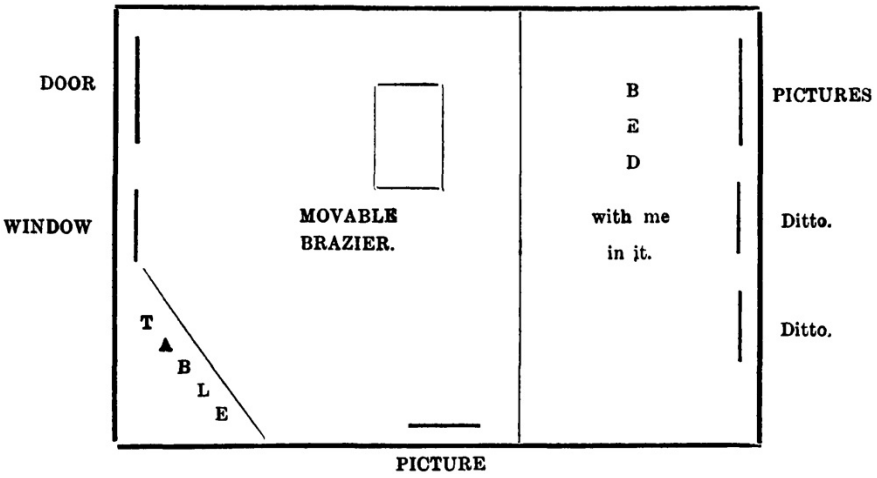
B.E.F.

This letter is in two parts—this is No. 1.

My darling Mother,—

I have another letter half written to you, but the tablet it was written on is left at my billet, and, as I rather forgot where I left off, I hope I will not leave a gap. To-day is Monday, 22nd. As you know, or will know when I finish the other letter, Friday and Saturday we moved, and rather marched up, billeting Friday night and on Saturday night—I won't go into details. On the march we saw an aeroplane being shelled—a very pretty sight—white puffs of smoke bursting all round it; one bit of shrapnel fell quite near us and made one of the brigade sergeants quite excited. I am writing this in comfort in bed in my dug-out, though my eyes keep trying to close; I am a bit tired, but I shall get a good night's sleep, I hope. It is now nearly eleven. On Sunday morning I came up early to prospect round the trenches, and to take over from the battery we were relieving. I prospected and then returned back to bring the battery up.

To get to the trenches we go first along the road up to a deserted village the Germans shell when they have nothing better to do. They were shelling it when I came out in the morning. I have often heard shells described as sounding like express trains coming through the air. They are almost as difficult to describe as the noise of the bullet. It's a far quicker noise than an express train. It sounds like a taxi going at about a hundred miles an hour and then bursting; a bullet sounds like someone cracking a very loud whip just in your ear, and a bit noisier than that when it is close to you. A machine gun—there is one going now—sounds like a very noisy motor bike, exactly like one, shells and bullets both whistle as well as they are going on. Well, I must get on, I brought my men in in the afternoon. After you get to the deserted village, you start up the communication trench, twisting and turning for about 1,000 yards, you pass the second line, and so on up to the firing line. The trenches we are in are rather wet, but quite pleasant. Directly we arrived in I found dug-outs for the men and myself, or rather pinched them, and put my guns in position. I will carry on to-morrow, I hope; till then, good-night. It's to-morrow now, and nearly the day after; in fact, it is the day after. You will be glad to know that the [33] trench mortar man is the only one who gets a chance to sleep in the trenches; that is, to have a decent sleep. This morning I got up at 11-0, when my servant got me tea and a fire. Here is a plan of my dug-out:—



It is quite a comfortable place, but rather cold now the brazier is out. I will describe it. The whole is made of wood with a wooden floor, just like our hut, only a smaller edition. It is about five feet six inches high, and stands on the ground level in the firing line, earth piled on top and all round it. The bed is made, I don't quite know how, but it is wood with canvas stretched across it, like a sort of hammock, and I have my valise, sleeping bag, blanket, fur coat, &c. I sleep in everything except tunic and boots. The pictures are post cards. It is lighted by your candle. It has been snowing the last two days and everything is cased with snow. I mess with "D" Company of the Scots—we have quite a nice dug-out.

The first night I arrived I climbed over the parapet with another officer to examine our wire. It has to be repaired every night. The German trenches are about 70 yards away in some places and as much as 400 in others. It is rather exciting wandering about in front of the line, as lights go up every now and then and show a bright white light in the air for a minute or two like a rocket. When one goes up you fall flat and pretend you are a sandbag or a milk-can or a rat. You may meet Fritz on the same job [34] sometimes; I always have a bomb handy to give him a brotherly welcome.

Well, I arose at 11-0, washed myself, and messed about, sent down for rations and sandbags, &c. The German artillery is just firing, or perhaps it is our own. You hear a bang and then a buzz over your head a long way up. They are probably firing at something a good way back. Rather bad form to fire at night time, I think; I hope no one sends for me to do a little straffing. Having arisen at the early hour I mentioned I nosed round and noticed some of the wretched Germans were having the cheek to work by day time, throwing earth out of their trenches. You could see on the snow on the parapet, so I sent them four rounds with my compliments and they then saw their mistake and stopped. I then watched their return of compliments with a battery of field guns; they were quite cruel to a small bush a hundred yards behind our line. I thought it rather a funny object to vent their spleen on. Yesterday I inspected the whole of the brigade trenches to see where I could make myself unpleasant to Fritz, and to-day we started making a beautiful emplacement in the salient. I messed as a visitor with "B" Company to-night, and so to bed. To-day it is Thursday, I think. Yesterday I had a very exciting day, rather too exciting in parts. I got up at 8-30 in time for breakfast, and went down to see the second in command of the Scots, and stayed at headquarters for lunch. In the afternoon we worked on another emplacement and got it nearly finished. We have to be continually working on the trenches—that is, the Infantry have to. My men do some work every day making emplacements, as those already in the trench do not come up to my standard at all, and we need a lot more to move the guns about. The life is either rather too exciting or ideal. It is usually a sort of picnic; at least, for the battery. We can't do any firing as I have not got my own ammunition at present. The men get up at any old time, they brew tea most of the day. In the morning they don't do much. Then they cook their dinner. In the afternoon they work on emplacements and some go down for rations; they have to carry it all a mile or two, and it takes a long time, mostly through trenches. Then they brew tea again. At night one is always on duty as a sentry over the guns. In the ordinary course of events their life and mine is just a picnic. Well, yesterday after lunch we worked, and then I had tea with the company I mess with, after which, at about 6-30, Kitton and I started out. By the way, the men [35] all have to stand to arms for an hour or more at dawn and dusk. After stand-to in the morning, they get rum. I think I am the only man in the trenches who does not stand-to. Kitton and I went to see the Brigade Major, and they made us stay for dinner; we did not want to, as headquarters mess are all nice and clean and we were simply filthy, I had not shaved and was filthy dirty. I will tell you what I wear. Starting at the extremities:—Long pair of gum boots—they are an Army issue, and come up to the thighs, one pair socks, trousers (more intimate details censored), sweater, tunic, fur coat, what skin I don't know, it is something like squirrel in colour, grey—also an Army issue; and either a waterproof cape, coming down to the calves, Army issue (free) or my Thresher and Glenny.

After dinner, and a talk with the Brigade Major about instructions, &c., for the battery, we set off down the road back to the trenches. When we got to the village you can either go up the communication trench or miss the first 500 yards or so of it and go up the road taking your chance of machine guns. Being rather late we chose the road. But, unfortunately, we had not gone 200 yards up it when tut-tut-tut-tut-tut-tut (say that as fast as you can and then say it faster and get father to sneeze it) a wretched machine gun got right on to the road. With our usual politeness we gave the road up to someone who seemed to want it more than ourselves, and dived into some R.E. stores at the side, while the wretched gun went on for 2 minutes, the bullets ricocheting off the road and ripping into the wood in which we were hiding. The only thing you could see of me were: (1) That upon which I sit down, and (2) my legs. I didn't mind about them, as a wound in them would only have meant a few months leave. At last the thing stopped, and we, strange to say, returned to the village and went along to the communication trench when plop, bang, smash (four sneezes from father, the new housemaid dropping the dinner tray and the chapel-keeper dropping the plate, will give you some idea—get them to try), four shells fell 50 yards away on our left. We were then halted by a sentry, one of my own battalion.

Meanwhile, I saw the whole sky lit up as all our heavy guns were letting themselves go a bit; I suppose they knew the machine guns had been unkind to us and were trying to show their sympathy. The sentry challenged, I replied with our names and [36] ranks. He glibly replied "Pass friends, all's well." As we were passing him to go to the C.T. (communication trench) I noticed something funny about his face, so I asked him what was the matter with it. He answered that he was wearing a gas helmet. I asked him if it was for amusement, or because he thought his face would frighten the passers-by. He answered that there was a gas attack on. Then an infernal din broke out, artillery, rifles, machine guns, &c., Very lights. I can tell you we got our helmets on pretty slick. Of course, Kitty (that's Kitton) had forgotten his (he's getting the other battery in the brigade, a Scot—a topping chap), but as I had two I lent him one of mine, keeping the prettiest, a blue and white striped one, for myself. Then we proceeded up the C.T. Well, you have never worn a gas helmet. It smells like ten hospitals and nearly suffocates you. I could not breathe out of mine at first and the windows got misty, but it got all right soon. You can imagine what it was like, nearly suffocated, hardly able to see or hear, and slithering about in army rubber boots on the ice in the bottom of the C.T., catching my cloak in everything, never knowing who was coming towards us, whether it was a fat, greasy Fritz or what it was, not having the faintest idea what was happening in the front and the firing line we were making for, unarmed except for the moral effect our gas helmets would create by their hideousness.

However, I soon managed to breathe out and to see a bit. Then I noticed the position of the Very lights and saw we still held the front line, so we felt reassured, especially as we could hear the topping sound of our own shells whizzing over our heads, about the most comforting sound I have ever heard. When we came to Battalion Headquarters we found that the gas was off and gladly took off our helmets and tried to push on to the firing line. But we had awful difficulty, as about 800 men, who had been in working parties working on the trenches, were coming down, and the whole way up the C.T. we were sniped and shelled, the shells bursting all round us within a few yards, but, thank goodness, none going into the trench. The men coming down seemed to think the end of the world had come were almost on their hands and knees. We tried to encourage them a bit, but they did not like to stand up, though they were not likely to be hit unless a shell came into the trench. At length we arrived at the safety of the firing line; really it is quite the safest place unless you are [37] several miles back. They practically never shell the trenches unless there is an attack coming off, because they can do so little damage without shooting off hundreds of rounds. In the firing line we found things quieted down, no attack being made against us and things generally normal. The alarm had come from our right. There was an attack away up North, and probably the alarm had been passed right down the line. I think we were successful in the attack I mention. At about 3-0 a.m. I got to bed.

I arose this morning at about 11-0. Fuller fried my breakfast on the brazier and I had it in bed. Then I washed my feet, rubbed them with anti-frost bite, had a good wash and shave, brushed my teeth and hair and went to lunch feeling very fit.

Had tea this afternoon at our Battalion Headquarters and am now going to bed at 1-10 a.m., having been scrawling this rubbish for about an hour; breakfast in bed in the morning, I think.

I am afraid this letter has been a long time coming, but somehow I always seem to have something to do. There are two noises I can hear now, one the squeak of a rat, but I know he won't come in (at least, I hope not), and two, the crack of a sniper's bullet, which I know has no chance of coming in. As the papers would say, "Situation normal on the Western Front." We get absolutely no news, you know more of what is going on in France than I do. We heard that the division on our right were in action the other night, but, although it was four nights ago, we don't know whether it is true.

Father's and May's letters to hand, for which many thanks. Father gives me a lot of news. I had not heard of the fall of the place he speaks of, I suppose the Russians took it—good work. I do hope Lovel comes home, don't tell him too much of what I say about the artillery.

There are two things of which we absolutely cannot get too much—1, candles; 2, cake. I have about one and a half of ordinary candles a day.

Much love to all,

From your sleepy and loquacious Son,

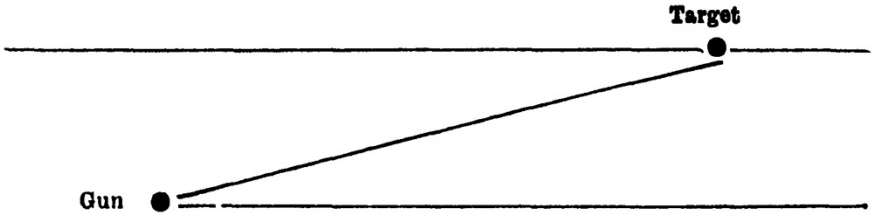
ALEC.

P.S.—Don't believe all I say.

A/101 Trench Mortar Battery, [38]
101st Brigade, B.E.F.

My darling Mother,—

I received yesterday a letter from you and one from Win. I am sorry to hear you had not heard from me for some time. How long was it? as I have never been a week yet without sending off a letter. Only once has there been more than five or six days between letters. My last was sent off on Friday night and the previous one the Friday before. By the time you receive this you will be glad to know that I am out of the trenches (D.V.) for 16 days, and shall have a nice rest. Yesterday we fired some ranging shots and were unsuccessful, as there was a strong head wind. I was firing obliquely thus:



and the first shot got blown right back into our wire and put me in a fearful funk. To-day I had my usual breakfast at 10-0 in bed, washed, shaved, and then went along to see "A" Company Commander to arrange about firing. On the way to his headquarters I saw a captain of the R.H.A., and found out he had come to be in command of a heavy trench mortar battery in our brigade. While talking, he mentioned the name of a man's father whom I knew at Jesus, and then I found out he had been at Jesus; he was in his third year when I was in my first, I had met him and knew his name well and he knew mine. I was extremely pleased to have him in the brigade. This afternoon a major in command asked me to get on to a dug-out in the German lines, the roof of which was showing over the parapet and from where a sniper had killed one of his men. I did so. We fired four shots, all landed in the trench, the fourth blowing up the dug-out. That sniper snipes no more. The infantry were awfully bucked and several men have spoken to me as I wander along the trenches about our good shooting. It was a long-range and there was a difficult wind. I was very pleased. The Germans retaliated with mortars, but fell short of our front line. Then I went and had tea, having done a good day's work. To-night the company I [39] mess with kindly invited Lloyd-Barrow, the Jesus man, to dinner, and I am just going to bed now. I will send this letter off to-morrow night when we arrive in billets. I am afraid that it is rather short, but one has very little time on one's hands in the trenches, I find.

Yesterday we came out of the trenches. In the morning I got up early and was cleaned for the fray at 10-0 o'clock when with his and I with my guns we played havoc for an hour or so. The men were very pleased when I removed what they declared to be a cookhouse. This war becomes quite incomprehensible to you once you have seen the real thing; no tactics, no strategy, just men turned moles. I believe in time we should become sort of Cave-men; our eyes would have developed into sorts of periscopes, our feet would have become web-footed to help us to stand up on wet duck boards; there would be a new type of man. As it is, it is quite haphazard and pointless. Just somebody makes himself disagreeable when he has nothing better to do. It is so difficult to hurt anyone actually in trenches; I think a mortar is the only thing that can do so. With dozens of shells sent over in the last ten days or so (40 yesterday morning) there has not been a single man in the brigade wounded by shell fire, and rifles and machine guns are the same. The casualties occur only in a push when one goes over the parapet, and that is not war, only a big field day. I was talking to a sergeant-major who had been through Neuve Chapelle, and said that it was just like a field day in Salisbury Plain, men marching in fours in all sorts of formations. His battalion halted after a little, ate its lunch, and then went on, got a bit too far forward, returned and dug themselves in, and trenches again. It is a hole and corner affair. We were all very cheered yesterday morning by the official news of the French successes at Verdun, and we all got obstreperous and terrorised poor Fritz. The men say they infinitely prefer the front line trenches to training at home. They have more comfortable sleeping accommodation, better food and less work. I like it better myself. Then what seems funny is to come out of the trenches and to be in perfect safety two and three miles back. I went on a course to-day; demonstration in mortars.

We are billeted in a topping farm, and I have a huge great room with a big bed and a fire. They are nice clean people in the farm. The men have a loft, and use of kitchen for sitting in. We are within shelling distance, but the people in the farm have been [40]

living in the farm, carrying-on their ordinary work, without the young men right through everything, and the farm is absolutely undamaged. Well, I must go to bed, little Mother. Did you receive my letters asking May to get me gramophone catalogues of Decca and Master's Voice gramophones as soon as possible? Parcel received. Slacks, shoes, candle, biscuits, &c., very welcome indeed. Stir Ellen up to make another cake, larger; I will write to her. Also can you send me Mars oil for boots.

Much love to all,

From your loving Son,
ALEC.

A/101 Trench Mortar Battery, [41]
101st Brigade, B.E.F.
March 2nd.

My darling Mother,—

Please note address. Don't put in my battalion, if you like you can put in O.C. before the name of the battery officer commanding, as a bit of swank. This letter is a joint one to you and May. Many thanks, May dear, for the simply topping parcel; it is ripping. Thank you, Mother mine, also for the letter and the papers. The parcel had been delayed a little by going to the battalion. The Aunts also sent me a delightful parcel. I have been having a sort of little private Christmas on my own, with a letter from Win also, and two free papers from the King. At least, the Post Office gave us them, free to the B.E.F. Consequently, I am very pleased to-night. I don't want my gum boots, nor my Burberry, British warm or rug, as you know I have my Thresher and Glenny and a fleece lining, also a fur coat, a mackintosh cape, and a pair of thigh gum boots, all the last three presents from the King, or rather from Father as a taxpayer. Please thank Father very much for them. Also for the guns, which were bought out of the taxes he pays. Several people have asked me where to get candles like the ones you send me, and I tell them to see that when their father marries he marries a wife with brains, as that is the only way. Then, Mother, about the cheque: it is intended to pay for the cigarettes and my knife, fork and spoon, and such things, I would much rather you used it, as you are all practising war economy and I am living in luxury; at least, do please me by buying a new hat with it, or something as a little gift from me. I know it will not go far towards a hat, but Father will give you the rest, and then it will be from the two Alexanders. I am quite rich, I have nearly £30 in the bank, and I am intending to be absolutely extravagant and buy a gramophone, and even then I shall have a nice balance. I don't spend nearly all my pay, and I am sure I don't earn my pay, because already I have introduced economic reforms in Germany by cutting down the personnel of their Army, and so saving them expense.

I wish I had seen Norman Smith in St. Omer. At present in billets we are doing little: we draw our rations and eat them, go for our letters and read them, get new clothes and wear them, take rations up to the dump for those in the trenches, and [42] then go to bed. To-morrow is a red-letter day. We are going to have a bath. I am getting quite good at having a bath in a tin hand-basin, but to-morrow I shall soak in a great vat, which was once used for washing clothes. You will be glad to hear that we have had no single case in the brigade yet of a man sharing his clothes with anything else of the type in the dog's diary: "Bad attack of eczema, caught one."

The rats in the trenches are delightful animals, about as large as an overgrown horse, but you get quite friendly towards them in a little while; after all, I suppose they are fighting for their country like some of us. I expect the papers in ratland are like ours: "In the western hole there is nothing to report, the situation was normal, in Rotten Row Alley gnawing was heard, and it is thought that the enemy are sapping towards us." Then they have articles about the bad conditions of their trenches, and write home to say that the human vermin simply swarm there, and are swollen to a huge size and have all become furry.

Much love to all,

From your loving Son,
ALEC.

P.S.—We had an official message sent by the French line brigade to say that the French had won back all ground lost at Verdun and taken thousands of prisoners.

A/101 Trench Mortar Battery, [43]
101st Brigade, B.E.F.
Monday.

My darling Mother,—

I have not written for the last day or two; that is, my writing has not been continuous as it usually is, because in billets we do little, and have little we can do. All the guns are in the trenches, so we have nothing to amuse ourselves with; half the battery is in with my second in command. We have only had three killed in the battalion so far, two men and one officer, and about half a dozen slightly wounded, almost all on working parties, on which trench mortar batteries do not go. If you are with the battalions you come out for four days rest, but it is a very deceptive rest; you usually have to send large working parties up at night-time to work on the trenches. Our rest, fortunately, is really rest. The only things we have to do is to take rations up to the dump for the rest of the battery, draw our own rations, and get our mails from the Field Post Office. I have a fair amount to do. There is a sort of Will o' the Wisp person called the field cashier, from him a whole army corps draws the pay for its men, and he goes to various places. His best game is to hide himself in a wood miles away from anyone, and, then just before you succeed in reaching him, he flits away to the other end of France; it takes about a week to catch him, if you are lucky —I have been trying for six days now. Another way I manage to fill up my time: Suppose I want some rifle oil I send an indent in marked urgent. Then the indent goes to the Practical Joke Department of the Division, and the indent is returned to you, telling you to apply elsewhere. You apply elsewhere, and are told to apply to the cheese department. If you are persevering you get the right department at last, and your indent is returned to you again with either a demand for the authority for the issue of what you require—and by then you have forgotten what you wanted, and have "borrowed" someone else's—or telling you that what you want is not one trouser button, but button, trouser, one, and you let it go at that. So the rest of my time is spent indenting and receiving indents, and finally bearding some divisional authority in his den, and discern him trying to find some way out of supplying you with the article. I then smile in my most charming manner, and treat the matter firmly. It's [44] like answering Margaret's questions, or getting her to go to sleep. The last "Tatler" you sent me has a large picture that will cover a lot of boards in my dug-out. I am becoming very careful now. When I first got in the trenches I used to get bored with a periscope, and put my head and shoulders up and have a good look round. The Bosches opposite us are rather sleepy. But now I am becoming quite careful; No Man's Land isn't very interesting, so a periscope is good enough. I take good care of myself nowadays since the little machine episode on the road. I expected when I first went up to the trenches to find them smelling of dead men, and to find No Man's Land a sort of quagmire covered with dead bodies, but in front of us it is a nice green field with no dead bodies on it; the only excitement is right on the right of our line, where there is one dead German in the middle. I believe a small charge is made for looking at him through the periscope there.

There's something I notice, and that is that there are certain magnificent gentlemen, you will have seen, who wear red round their hats—the Staff. In England you see the red about 60 miles off. Behind the lines here there is no mistake about seeing it. But in the trenches, the red is carefully covered over with a nice khaki band.

The Aunts sent me a topping parcel the other night, a pair of socks, worked by Auntie Lil, that I have on now, a cake, made by Auntie Agnes, I have in me now, and a book and some chocolate, the last has been censored and the other is being so. I wrote and thanked them. If you see them please thank them again and give them my love. Fancy I have been out here about nine weeks and I am still writing long letters about nothing at all, and I see no chance of my falling off in this respect, mother mine, because I know that you like to receive, even the most ridiculous letters I send. I received letters this week from David Smythe, who, after being rejected several times, has at last managed to get into the Black Watch in the ranks. From Eric Davies, who has now got a commission. From Jasper Holmes and Kenneth Rudd. I was very pleased to receive them. Roly, I hear, has been wounded. Pat I have not heard from for some time. I also had a letter from Miss Crocker from Paris. Ask May to write to Miss Smyth some time and give her my love, and ask her to write to me and send me her address. I am thinking of you all to-night, Father in the dining room, [45] Charlie not in yet; you and May having your supper before you go to bed, and Amy,

probably in bed already, at Ripon. I hope Arthur is all right again, and Lovel is enjoying himself. Good-night, little mother; God bless you. I should like to walk in and surprise you all; perhaps in two or three months I may do so, and find you all out at a meeting or some other thing.

With much love to all,

From your loving Son,
ALEC.

March 7th (Tuesday).

A/101 Trench Mortar Battery, [46]
101st Brigade, B.E.F.

My darling Mother,—

I have just received your letter and a parcel with a topping waistcoat; I don't think I could ever be cold with it on. Thank you very much indeed for it. I received the slacks, &c., in the trenches. I have got enough clothes now to keep me warm at the North-Pole. I would be very glad indeed of socks for my men—I have 23 men if you can send for all. I got the papers last week; they are not due yet this week. I have two Tommy's cookers. I have got rid of my camera; they are very strict about not having them out here, so I got rid of mine directly I came out, and, of course, had no opportunity to take any photos. We all got rid of them the first day out here. Please tell Ellen that I will never forgive her if she is not at home to welcome me back when I come. I don't know where the Pals are. Winnie ought to know exactly where I am. If not mention a few places S. of 5 if you can remember. We got into rest a few miles behind the firing line. We are also S. of 1 S of 2 and 3.

I am going into the trenches to-night for two or three nights and then for about a week's rest. I have just had a week's rest. I cannot tell you the exact number of days, as I should have to censor it myself if I did.

I must stop now.

Much love to all, From your loving Son,
ALEC.

A/101 Trench Mortar Battery, [47]
101st Brigade, B.E.F.

My darling Mother,—

It is Sunday afternoon, 2-30, and I am just finishing dressing. We came out of the trenches yesterday; we were only in three or four days, as the brigade has to hold these trenches for longer than was first intended—my second in command is in now. I shall have about 11 days rest now. We arrived at our billet at about 11 o'clock last night tired and hungry, and found everyone in bed; however, one of the girls got up and made me an omelette, consisting of five eggs, and some coffee, and the men had beer and coffee. Then I read some letters from Father, Amy and Roly Wait, and then to bed. I have got an awfully comfortable bed. I will write later; this is only to let you know that I am safe and happy.

Much love to all. In haste,

From your loving Son,
ALEC

A/101 Trench Mortar Battery, [48]
101st Brigade, B.E.F.
Sunday.

My darling Mother,—

My letter this morning was interrupted by a message from the War Office, brought per Second-Lieutenant Lake, of the gunners, that I had to go to get some tea at the officer's tea room at ——. Now for enlightenment. You have one son younger than myself, take the first two letters of his name. Then think of the opposite of a woman crying. If you cannot understand this take it to Uncle Ted, or some detective, and you will find out something you are very anxious to know. It is a good conundrum. Tell me if you get it. To resume. At about 10-0 this morning Fuller came in and started lighting fires, cleaning up the room, and cooking my breakfast. At 10-45 five officers came to see me—I was where? Two guesses allowed. Still in bed. 10-46 message from Brigade Headquarters asking for a return. I daresay you have seen a picture taken from the "Bystander" of a scene at Loos during the September offensive. Colonel Fitz Shrapnel in his dug-out with a telephone at Battalion Headquarters, his dug-out being blown to pieces, a shell bursting on the top of it. He received an urgent message from G.H.Q. "Hello, hello! Please let us know, as soon as possible, the number of tins of raspberry jam issued to you last Friday." Just like the staff. They will stand up in the middle of an attack to know when your return of trained farriers will be in. I am afraid I forgot most of my returns. I should get, if I were you, "Fragments from France," by Capt. Bruce Bairnsfather, price 1s.; it is very interesting and amusing and very true. To continue:—From 11-0 till about 12-30 I ate my breakfast and talked to these two, and then shaved, washed, &c., and other such details, dressed and lunched off some potatoes at 2-0, being all I wanted when Lake called for me. We had a pleasant tea in a farm about one mile from here (see riddle), and bought some books and things and so back home. I went out to dinner immediately with another battery in another brigade in our division, and we were just enjoying our coffee when we were disturbed by a divisional test alarm. I rushed back, but was thankful to find we were not included in the amusement. To-day the papers would describe as "Artillery active on the Western front." They have been putting a lot of shrapnel over into the front trenches, and did some damage with one [49]
shell to my battalion, who are in at present. They always seem to shell when I am out (touch wood). I am beginning to hope I am a safe mascot against shells. I will write about the last few days in the trenches to-morrow. We had one awful attack on my dug-out—by mice—I hated it. I can sleep through machine gun fire (I mean the noise of it) and shells as long as they are not too close, but mice, ugh! they wake me up at once and I hurl the nearest thing I have at the noise. Fuller came in the other morning to find my dug-out strewn with Very pistol cartridges; I found they were useful not only for sending up lights but also for frightening mice. The rats are more gentlemanly, so far, they keep themselves to themselves, they have their own dug-out and have left mine alone so far.

By the way, the "Tatler" and "Punch" have not arrived this week, or rather last week; I have only had one copy of each so far. It must be the fault of the bookseller who is sending them, as if posted they would come through all right. I have just had three days in, and I did not enjoy the first two, as I had a sort of chill, and only ate a plate of porridge each day, and, added to that, there was one of our battalions of our brigade in which I do not like. The last day I was all right, and the Scots were in, so I enjoyed myself. I usually attach myself to the nearest company mess, as I have told you, and mess with them, but with the battalion that I was in with for two of the three days I preferred to mess alone, and it is not nearly so nice. To-morrow we go into Divisional Reserve for about a week or a little more. I shall have a topping billet in the town just close to here; a nice mess-room with a piano, and a good bedroom. I am thinking of turning Presbyterian (not seriously) because the padré—Black—is such an absolutely tophole chap, I see a good deal of him. He is attached to the 16th Scots, of whom also I see a lot. Padre Black was offered R.J. Campbell's Church after Campbell, but refused it. His brother, Hugh Black, is rather famous I think. Anyway, the Padre's a topper. He is like a ray of sunshine in the trenches. He come striding along, head up, not stooping as all those who don't live in the trenches (and some of those who do) do, with a cheery word for everyone, and a memory for anyone he knows. A curious thing is that, as you may know, dotted all over the roads in France, are crosses and *prie dieu*, and I have seen scarcely one touched; you can see villages in ruins and in the middle of it all a shrine untouched, not a flower, not a piece of [50]
tinsel, not a bit of gold paint damaged. You become sort of superstitious sometimes out here, and when there are shells I always try to get behind the nearest one, and I know I am safe. I have seen no Wesleyan Padres out here at all. We have in our brigade one Church of England, one Catholic, and a Presbyterian for the Scots.

To-day I had company, one Northumberland Fusilier and one 15th Scots, to lunch, three men to tea, and I have just had dinner with our quartermaster and our interpreter, a Frenchman—roast duck. *Bon.*

This is rather a mixture of a letter. The next time I am in the trenches I will describe it in detail if you like, but it is all just the same, sometimes you long to get out and over the parapet and have a go at the blighters and settle the matter, instead of potting at each other from behind mud heaps, especially when you see a man killed by a stray bullet; we have only had a few, thank goodness. Well, I must to bed.

Much love to all,

From your loving Son,
ALEC.

P.S.—We are now changed to 101/1 T.M.B. not A/101 any longer.

101/1 Trench Mortar Battery, [51]
101st Brigade, B.E.F.

My darling Mother,—

As you see, the name of our battery is changed. We are in billets at present, in divisional rest, none of the Brigade is in the trenches. We do not do very much. This afternoon we fired about 30 rounds for practice. Rest is chiefly a social and bathing time. We had a good wash yesterday. Two visitors came to lunch to-day and two are coming to dinner. Will you look in the papers every day at the "Gazette" and tell me when I become a First Lieutenant; my name went in a month ago. I never see the papers. Again this week, I have not received "Punch" or the "Tatler." I am afraid this will be a short letter, as I have little news, and I don't want to write just for the sake of filling pages; when I have news it is easy to write, and to you is, I know, interesting reading. But, as you know, the happy and the righteous are generally uninteresting, and we are very contented at present. We fire most of the day for practice, and, as I say, entertain a lot of officers, and go out to meals. I know almost all the officers in three Battalions in the Brigade now. It's been beautiful and warm this last week. If things go on as they are doing at present I should not like the war to stop. It is very nice being out, and I really enjoy the trenches.

We went into —— (do you know where now?) the day before yesterday, and went to the Divisional Pierrot Troupe, a sort of Follies. They are quite good, and have a sort of theatre, in a disused college—College des beaux Arts. It is always crowded with officers and men.

Much love to all, from your loving Son,
ALEC.

101/1 Trench Mortar Battery, [52]
101st Brigade, B.E.F.
Sunday.

My darling Mother,—

I am afraid that I have rather fallen off in the writing line lately, but we have been leading a very pleasant but humdrum life, and the evenings have been rather busy; at present, five rowdy young subalterns profane the air with discordant music and facetious witticisms, so it is difficult to write ("Mack, you will never write a letter," "Do lend me a hundred sandbags," "Orders from Brigade," &c.).

We are at present in a very pleasant billet just a few miles south of where we were before; we ought to be in the trenches, but as there are no dug-outs for us yet we are building them before we go in, or rather we are talking of making them at present.

For eight days or so we were in divisional rest, during which time we fired for practice most days, entertained people to meals, and went in to the town near to see the divisional pierrot show. Two or three days ago we suddenly had orders to move to the section on our right, so Greig, Uncle Fred's friend, told me to ride his second horse, and to come and look round with him at the billets, &c. We had a very pleasant ride. The next day we came along, bringing our things on handcarts, and one big horse waggon; we came to take over this billet—it is a huge, big farm, square with a long courtyard, and a long tower at the gateway. The men sleep in huts round and in barns; we have a large mess-room, with a sort of camp beds on which we sleep. We have a huge fire, which we keep going, and we have piles of crockery and tableclothes, &c., which we have "borrowed." The first night there was an officer of the Company we relieved who had apparently a little too much to drink, and, unfortunately, got thrown from his horse three times and was found unconscious in a ditch, and has quite wrongly been charged with being drunk, and is going to be court martialled. I am a witness for the defence; we have with us at present two officers of his company who have to stay behind for the court martial. The first day we were in we slept in huts, but it was so terribly cold that the night after we shifted our beds into the mess-room. The first day, Carroll and I went a tour of the trenches; they are topping trenches, we sought and found many things to devour and destroy. Finally, [53]
we came to a road, where we asked the way, and were directed to go up it. We went up it until we came to a low barricade, and looking over it, to find our trenches just below and the Bosche trenches about 200 yards peeping at us. Crack, crack; we returned to try again, only to find ourselves up in the firing line. Finally, we succeeded in getting home all right rather tired. We had a pleasant dinner, and got a large wood fire made with ammunition boxes. The next day being Sunday we had breakfast at 10-0 in pyjamas and fur coats, and went a walk in the afternoon.

To-day we went up to the trenches and worked hard (?) all day emplacing guns, and making dug-outs, &c. I lunched and tea'd with the Scots, and returned in the pouring rain.

Much love to all, from your loving Son,

ALEC.

101/1 Trench Mortar Battery, [54]

101st Brigade, B.E.F.

Sunday, April 2nd.

My darling Mother,—

I am afraid that in the last week or two I have not been writing so well, but as you know when you become used to a life, and nothing exciting is happening, there is little news, and there is not much that strikes me as interesting to tell. When you begin to accept things in the ordinary course of things, it is difficult to feel that trivial occurrences of every day will be of interest to others. One consolation you can have is that the more uninteresting and the fewer my letters are the more harmless my life. If there was anything doing I should become as verbose again as ever. However, I will try to give you what news I have.

In the first place the weather is beautifully hot. I got up this morning, much to my disgust, to see the Brigade Major at 9-30, and since then I have been sitting in the large yard in the sun reading "A Knight on Wheels," by Ian Hay, with only two interruptions—to inspect my men, and to pull our ambulance, which had broken down, back to the billet. It is glorious weather; you can hear the birds and the faint hum of an aeroplane, with occasionally the noise of anti-aircraft shells bursting round one, just a faint crump and tiny little fleecy white clouds clustering round a black speck in the sky. It is a perfect almost summer day. There is one point about shell fire that may interest you. A battery of guns fires on a target, say a farm house. The guns are a long way back, and, of course, cannot see their target. An officer or some observer will be well forward up a big tree, in a church steeple, or a ruined farm house, or, perhaps, in an aeroplane, and will direct the battery. Consequently, once a battery gets on to a point, that point alone is the dangerous one; you can stand on a road, about 200 yards away and watch the whole show quite safely. The other afternoon we were coming down the road and the Bosche was shelling a point about 200 yards beyond. His shells came over the road and always sounded to be going to drop on the road. Of course, they never did. A shell is awfully deceptive; you see a large black cloud of smoke arise from the ground and bits fly, while you still hear the shell in the air, so often you try to get out of the way of a shell that has already burst [55]

somewhere else, until you know what happens. It is rather funny to see the explosion of a shell, while you apparently hear the shell just going over your head. Our mess at present, commonly known as the Anarchists, consists of those who take and those who give life—three Trench Mortar Batteries and one Field Ambulance. We have a very pleasant mess. Although the Brigade is in the trenches at present we are not sleeping in the front line. There are no dug-outs for us, and we have a lot of work to do, so we go up every day and make emplacements and sleep in comfort at our billet; we have a pleasant life, because we get pleasant sleep in pyjamas, and plenty of exercise to keep us fit. We have just had lunch, and are lying out in the field in the sun—it is rather pleasant. There are only about two things we want, and they are a gramophone, which Winnie is getting for us, and a tennis court, which does not seem probable at present. We are very impatient for the gramophone to arrive. Kitton is with me at present; he is a topping chap, and is in command of the other battery in the Brigade.

Last night I had to take some ammunition (200 rounds) up to the trenches, also two dug-out frames and 2,000 sandbags; we get through in the battery about 500 sandbags a day. They are brought up to the dump, and from there we push them up tramway lines on trucks, across the open up to the firing line, and then along it in the open behind to the place where they are wanted. Stray bullets and machine guns make it rather exciting; we had one man wounded—the bullet went right through his calf just about half an inch under the skin, a tiny little wound, but he will only be a few days. I hope Amy is quite better again.

I was made a First Lieutenant on March 1st. It is possible that I may be made a Captain sometime in the future. There is talk of making all Battery Commanders Captains. I am afraid that soon we will be moving further south; we are very comfortable here, and I am enjoying myself greatly. I am not feeling up to writing much; I am going to read or sleep.

Much love to all, from your loving Son,

ALEC.

101/1 Trench Mortar Battery, [56]

101st Brigade, B.E.F.

Wednesday.

My darling Mother,—

I did not quite know what was the meaning of the telegram the other day. It was dated April 1st, which made me rather suspicious, and it did not arrive here till April 4th. I wired immediately, but it is difficult to do so; I wrote last Sunday and once the week before; I hope you have received them all right. You can be quite happy about me now, as after this afternoon I shall be quite safe for some time. This afternoon I had my first real taste of heavy shell fire, and I was glad to find that I did not object to it half as much as I thought I should. We were doing a pre-arranged strafe into a German salient—two trench mortar batteries and all our artillery on to their first and second lines, &c. We put over about 4,000 lbs. of shells from the two mortar batteries in ten minutes and absolutely crumpled about 150 yards of their trenches. There is no trench there now—just a mass of earth, great girders, pointing jauntily skywards, timbers drooping over where the parapet was, and the front of the trench, where any remains, leaning in a tired fashion against the back of it. Of course, directly we started the Germans got going with all their artillery at us. "Jack Johnsons," so-called howitzers—I have never heard such a noise. I was observing in our salient; they had cleared all the infantry out except the machine guns. I had my eyes glued to a periscope, and never noticed most of the stuff coming over till I had to go along a deserted trench to give orders to my guns, and they put over in one place four shells from big howitzers into the stream within 10 yards of me. I enjoyed it; it was topping to see the Bosche parapet crumpling away, lighted every half second or so with a weird flash, covered with smoke, and the earth rocking with the concussion. They must have lost a lot of men; we lost only about three killed and a dozen or so wounded, none in my battery I am glad to say. In about half an hour all was quiet again, and I was observing the damage through a topping periscope, which magnifies ten times, when I saw four German officers crawling among the debris and distinctly saw them from the waist upwards. I had no rifle worse luck, and when I found a sniper they had gone. Fancy missing four German officers. They had grey [57] uniforms and grey caps on and Sam Browne belts. That is what we have been working for, for the last week making emplacements to guard against their shells. At

present we are rather being messed about; we are supposed to be going back for about a month's rest, which no one wants—a rest means twice as much work as you do in the trenches, and no excitement. After that we shall probably go to somewhere unpleasant. We are being relieved here by men who were in the same place as Lovel.

Much love to all, from your loving Son,

ALEC.

(*After this date the names of places are inserted from a diary which was sent home later.*)

April 14th. [58]

My darling Mother,—

I am afraid I have not written to you for several days, but I have not been able to do so as we have been marching every day. We were relieved in the trenches by the Australians from Anzac. They are a very casual lot and did all manner of absurd things in daytime, thinking it so much safer than Gallipoli, but I hope they have learnt wisdom now. The first day we moved only about five miles independently to a new billet; we had two rooms with a big bed in each, and we slept two on each bed. That was Monday.

On Tuesday we moved again, about 15 miles, to Havesoskirk. It was raining all day, but we managed to put our packs into our waggon, and so marched the whole five days in Sam Brownes only. That night we had a farm house, with the usual arrangements, and went a few miles into St. Vement for dinner, where we went over the school of mortars and saw several interesting guns, especially the 9.4. Major Dodgson was very interesting and pleasant to us. We had dinner at an estaminet—quite a good dinner, but a mad female served us. On Wednesday we again wended our way farther on our flat feet marching again; also rain again and a very cold wind. When we march it looks rather funny, as we have a long train of handcarts, which are our transport, packed with all sorts of things, including a lot of wood, chiefly composed of ammunition boxes. We had an hour's halt for lunch and tried to get some lunch, but were pushed out of one estaminet by a fat madam who was bustling round, and evidently did not trust us near her very unattractive daughter. Then we went to get some lunch at an hotel piloted by a major, but discovered we only had sovereigns and halfpennies, and so bought chocolate instead. That night we had a topping billet—a house in a lane at Roquetoire standing by itself, which belonged to a French doctor; we had a dining room, the use of the drawing room, and three topping bedrooms with big double beds in each. Kitty and I shared one, Carol and Brand another, and Seddon and Douse, the Brigade Signalling Officer, another. We had a topping time, but, unfortunately, had to wait till 9-30 for dinner, as our servants seem to have fallen on evil days. After dinner we made our confessions in a book of Madame's, such questions as "Who is the greatest author of the day," [59] "Describe the girl of the period," &c. Afterwards we went in with Madam, a topping old dame, who spoke English very well, and Madamoiselle, who was rather charming but "triste" because so many of her friends had been killed, so "triste" that she never plays the piano now. We had to justify and explain our opinions and confessions, and so to bed, only to get up at 7-0 the next morning so as to get everything packed up to move off at 9-20 a.m. This day (Thursday) fortunately it was not raining, and the Trench Mortar Batteries and Brigade Headquarters moved off independently of the Battalion; we went only about ten miles and arrived at Blendeque for lunch, where we were billeted with the brewer, a most topping and hospitable old man, who offered us drinks before lunch, and attended to us in a most courtly manner. After lunch Kitty and I borrowed two signallers' bikes and biked into St. Omer to get pay—it is rather nice country round here, not flat like it is further forward, but rolling downs and quite a lot of wood, and lanes, rather like Salisbury Plain. You will be relieved to know that the Bosches could not shell us here if he tried, and we are here in army rest for a week or two. In St. Omer we went for money for ourselves and men, and then went to the canteen to get cigarettes, &c.; after that we went to a tea shop to tea. While we were there a lot of the 16th Scots came in, and we had a jolly tea altogether. We then biked back again. I paid my men, and then we had a jolly good dinner. After dinner we went in to enjoy ourselves with our host; he offered us all sorts of drinks, cigarettes, cigars, &c., in a very hospitable manner, and his daughter played the piano and we all sang all sorts of English songs. Madamoiselle sang "Where my caravan has rested," "Chocolate soldier," &c., with a perfect English

accent. Then she and Monsieur sang from various operas in French; they both have very good voices, and have been well trained. When we went to bed I said to Madamoiselle "Bon soir," &c., of course, in a hopelessly English accent, and she replied with "Good-night" in perfect English. In bed, unfortunately, Kitty insisted on having all the bed and most of the bedclothes, and in the morning accused me of taking it all. When two people sleep together they always both sleep on the edge, and a mysterious third person seems to come and sleep in the middle and to take all the clothes.

At 8-0 this morning we moved off again and arrived here at Eperlecques at about 12-30, this being our final destination. We are in a big farm, with a nice big mess-room and a nice little bedroom with a big bed for Kitty and myself. To-night we had to go to Divisional Headquarters in the rain, and returned home for a late dinner, and are now sitting in pyjamas and coats with a big wood fire. Two of my men, two corporals, are getting Divisional cards of merit for their work and pluck in the strafe the other day. Well, good-night, little Mother. [60]

Much love to all, from your loving Son,

ALEC.

P.S.—Have received a week or two ago the three parcels you mentioned, but absolutely no papers. Would you please send me another pair of pyjamas and lots of handkerchiefs, no more tea or milk, but lots of those Foster Clark's 2d. packets of soup, and cake any time. P.P.S.—I am writing in duplicate to make a diary, and names are censored by me in letters home, but you can see them later. P.P.P.S.—Life is very pleasant.

April 15th. [61]

My darling Mother,—

We got up late this morning for breakfast in pyjamas at 9-0 a.m. and dressed by degrees. This afternoon we had a parade for drill and after we went a walk; the country round is very pretty, like England. Our farm is a nice big white one with a nice orchard; the country is wooded with rather nice little streams. We wandered into the grounds of a chateau, where the A.S.C. were playing soccer against the R.A.M.C., and so through a wood with primroses in it home again.

I am afraid that I have been unable to continue this letter for several days, as we have been busy early and late.

On April 16th we packed up all our worldly goods and removed ourselves to Divisional Headquarters at Tilques for a course in Stokes guns. All the Batteries of the Division, nine in all, were assembled together—three medium and six light batteries. The personelle as follows:—Kitty you know. Brand, his second in command, from the 15th Scots., quite a decent chap, known as the Band Box for obvious reasons. Lloyd Barrow, Captain R.F.A., in charge of one of the medium batteries, a strange fellow, was at Jesus, slightly fierce appearance and manners, an authority on most things, but all right if not taken seriously. Burlingham, in command of another medium battery, just a baby grown up. Badderley, a monomaniac on mortars, who saves 3d. out of every 2d. he receives. Wylie, 9th H.L.I., a Scotchman, and a topping chap. Others: Sutcliffe, Laury, Lake, a decent kid, Bowquet and two others, quite a jovial crowd in all. We all live in a large brewery, all the batteries in barns, &c., and the officers in the house—big, deserted bedrooms, with camp beds or bedsteads, and thousands of doors, secret and otherwise.

We breakfast at 8 and start work at 8-30, and with intervals on to 4 or 5. Kitty has been teaching my battery the Stokes gun, firing dummy shells, &c. Our Adjutant is an A.S.C. man, and James, the Divisional Trench Mortar Officer, is in command. Parcel, with topping cake, received; many thanks! All the parcels you mention in your last letter have been received all right.

We are having appallingly rainy days. Most evenings the men play inter-battery soccer matches.

The officers are going to play the men, but it is wet to-night. I am afraid that there is little of interest in this letter.

Much love to all, from your loving Son, ALEC.

April 23rd. [62]

My darling Mother,—

We are all still together, with not much to do and plenty of time on parade to do it in. I will give you one of my men's description of their billet: "I am situated at present in country not unlike Welphine. Our billet is pretty decent, on the first floor of a large building, which bears a slight resemblance outwardly to a Workhouse. What an existence! Look up 'Dante's Inferno,' and you will get some idea of every soldier's environment." I am afraid that our mess is none too quiet at times itself, though at present they are all quietly playing cards and reading. To-day being Sunday Kitty and I had a holiday and had breakfast in bed at 9-30.

I am just recovering from rather a bad cold; we all have come in for one, and it seems to make most of us rather argumentative on all subjects relating to trench mortars, various regiments, &c., being a motley collection of regulars, New Army and Special Reserve, and Territorial officers drawn from all sorts of regiments and representing every branch of the army except the R.E. We have R.F.A., E.G.A., R.H.A., A.S.C. and Infantry. Rather a cosmopolitan crowd, and we, most of us, all hold different views on every possible subject that turns up, but we manage to agree on the whole.

Last night Brand and I took our beds outside. It is topping weather at present—very hot, but I like hot weather. Our mess-room leads out into a sort of terrace with a wild garden all round. It must have been very pretty before the war, even in its deserted state it is very nice; forget-me-nots and bits of lake and stream everywhere. I feel as fit as a fiddle and am as brown as a berry.

And guess what time I was up this morning—6-0 a.m., and it will be 5-0 a.m. to-morrow for a field day. When you are in rest you do just twice as much work as in the trenches. But the only think I dislike is moving.

I am waiting very impatiently for our gramophone to arrive, it is so topping out in the open at night. I am afraid that I have been a long time writing this letter, but, as you know, we are still in rest, and I have little news. In addition, we have been kept very busy. To-day (Sunday) we paraded at 4-15 a.m. (just think of me on parade at 4-15!) and I wasn't late; we had a field day, lugging heavy guns about in the heat, and [63] firing dummy rounds. Nevertheless, I quite enjoyed it. To-night Lake and I went for a bathe in the river. As I think I have told you the country is very like Cambridge, or rather more like Norfolk Broads, streams everywhere, wide rivers and small streams intersecting all the fields, so that, unfortunately, wherever you take a short cut you have to jump all sorts of ditches, and already three of us, including myself, have bathed in our clothes. Leading off the rivers are smaller rivers, and everywhere by the riverside are small white farms, each owning two or three flat-bottomed boats like large canoes, shaped like gondolas, and they go everywhere in them, and take their horses too.

I hope to come home for leave on the 1st of June, but leave may be cancelled before then. We have an allotment of leave for the Battery, but I cannot take the first leave myself. Thank you very much for the pleasant parcel, with pyjamas and papers, received the other day. Well, good-night, little mother, you can always know that the fewer letters I write the more harmless time I am having, because I have less to tell.

Much love to all, from your loving Son,

ALEC.

May 7th. [64]

My darling Mother,—

The dates put at the top of each letter are the dates on which the letter is commenced, and, as each letter is written bit by bit, it is usually several days before it is sent off; as a rule I forget to put the date at the end on which the letter is despatched. Father said that one of my letters was heavily censored lately, but the

censor was myself. I think I explained that I write my letters in a book now, and fill everything in the form of a diary and send the duplicate on to you censored by myself.

I received the parcel of socks all right, and thanked you for them in a letter written in March. Socks are always welcome to the men. I keep about 15 pairs for myself, and the men like as many as they can get. At last we have got away from the Bomb School. We moved back to our Brigade a few days ago (May 3rd) to the billet we were in before at Eperlecques, only to move off again the next day in the afternoon.

Kitty and I went into St. Omer for tea and to get our hair cut, to get mess things, fruit, &c. We started to walk about seven or eight miles on a scorchingly hot day, but fortunately managed to go almost all the way in two ambulances we commandeered.

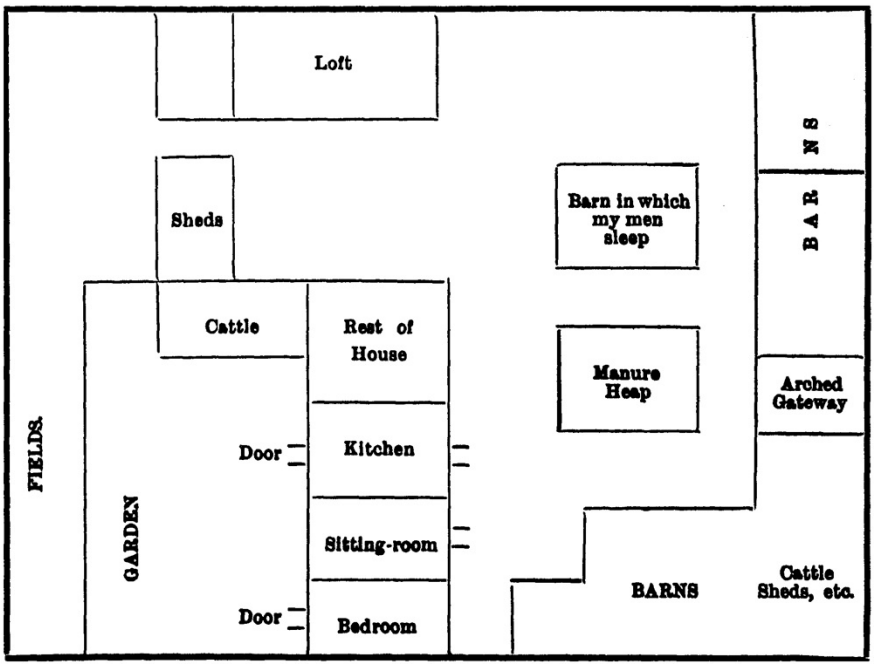
We had a very pleasant time, and then went to the canteen and bought stuff, which our servants took away in a handcart. Then we went and had our hair cut, and I bought a new auto-strop safety razor as a birthday present to myself. After we had done everything we wanted we went down to the station to meet our batteries, who had marched in with Brigade Headquarters, and for three hours we messed about, shoving great lorries on to trucks by hand, and then while we had dinner (an omelette) in quite an English buffet, our men brewed tea in a large loading shed. And, finally, at 11-15 our men bundled into the usual trucks, labelled Hommes 32-40 Chevaux (en long) 8 (1 horse—4 men), while Kitty and I had a French second class carriage, in which we slept fitfully, and ate chocolate biscuits and oranges intermittently throughout the night.

The next morning we arrived at a station near Amiens and proceeded to unload g.s. [65]
waggons, &c., again. When that was finished we marched a mile down the road and halted for breakfast. We had ours in an estaminet—coffee, omelette, &c. After breakfast I went to the river and had a topping bathe; no weeds or anything to trouble you, only two garrulous old French soldiers, who stood on the bank and watched and gave me encouragement. At about 11-0 we set off. A blazing hot, dusty day, pushing handcarts about 12 miles, without any lunch, and arrived at St. Gratien at about 5-0. Arrived there we found Wren, the Brigade Signal Officer, absolutely at sea as to where our billets were, so we foraged round for ourselves. After being kicked out once or twice we finally settled our men and bagged a Battalion Headquarters for ourselves. The Brigade lent us blankets as our valises had been left behind with guns, ammunition, &c., for the Division to bring along.

We moved off again the next afternoon about three miles to Rehencourt, and there found a terrible muddle. A.S.C., two brigades R.F.A., our Brigade Headquarters, all trying to billet in one small village. We found a large billet marked up for our two batteries, and the machine gun company, and, while we were trying to fit in, an A.S.C. Colonel, who was town major, came bustling round looking into every barn and calculating how many they would hold. He would go into each little hencoop and chalk up about 100 men on the door, and, finally finished up by looking round for a loft for 14 officers to sleep in, in which he proposed to jumble up ten machine gun officers and four of ourselves. When he had gone we put our men in (not according to his scale). We bagged the house for ourselves and the machine gun officers went out and discovered billets for themselves.

We have a priceless little mess-room papered in yellow and white, old oak-carved chairs, oak table, shaded lamp, &c., and a bedroom with one bed in it.

Madame was in tears at having so many soldiers all over the place, but we soon pacified her, and did all she wanted, and now she cannot do enough for us, especially as I send Fuller, my servant, who is a gardener, to work in her garden every day. I [66]
will give you a rough plan of the house, as it is typical of the farms we are in:



We get a lot of food from Madame—Fowls, eggs, milk, lettuce, asparagus, &c. We have very good meals. We seem to have the best billet in the place. Brigade Headquarters, of course, spotted the best billet, a chateau, and went there; unfortunately it is owned by a mad French Countess, who ran about locking all the doors in front of them. They could not get into the house at all at first and had to eat and do everything in the garden. Finally, they got assistance from a French General and got bedrooms, but they have their meals in the passage, and their office in a stable. Madame came at 8-0 the first night and ordered the general and all of them to bed. But they were not obedient.

Greig came in the other night and was very jealous of our billets, seeing he had missed his chance and had judged by externals and had caught a whited sepulchre.

The second night an A.S.C. friend came to dinner and the menu was:— [67]

Soup. Salmon croquettes. Asparagus. Stuffed chicken and sausages.
Fruit, custard and cream. Sardines on toast. Coffee.

Not bad for active service. One of us sleeps in the bedroom, Brand, Kitty, Carroll and I sleep on folding beds and big mattresses in the mess-room. All borrowed from Madame when we had charmed her tears away.

Yesterday I had a very good birthday. Please thank everyone very much for the parcels, especially yourself. They were topping and very welcome. Who was it sent all the chocolates? I could not quite make out.

I was very pleased; my servant gave me a box of Abdulla cigarettes, and the Battery, or rather the Sergeant for the Battery, presented me with another box.

In the afternoon, Brocklebank, my A.S.C. Captain, took me down to Albert in his car. It is rather knocked about, and the church has a huge figure of the Virgin Mary hanging down at right angles to the church tower; it looks very curious, why it has not fallen I do not know.

Then, after finding the people we wanted, we went up on to a hill with glasses to look at the trenches. Before, as you know, the trenches we were in were breastworks, moulds of earth in perfectly flat country, and we rarely saw the Bosche trenches except through a periscope. But here, from the top of the hill, we saw on a hill a mile or two away long lines on the hillside, where the chalk had been thrown up in building the trenches, and opposite them other white and brown lines, where the German trenches were, white lines in all directions—a sort of maze upon the hillside our trenches and their's—and behind that hill other hills in the distance, much like Salisbury Plain and Aldershot. There is a very noticeable difference in the country here in districts occupied by the English. Civilians here are in their farms right up to the firing line. In fact, in one instance, an old woman was known to live for ten days in her cottage, once a lonely country spot in the open fields, but now with a boundary on each side, one where the Germans held their front line and one where our front line existed. Ten days in No Man's Land! But here all things are different. One rarely sees a French civilian; even here, some twenty miles back, one sees very few, and in Albert one sees none. The trenches are also better. Miles and miles of wire and lines [68] of trenches extend behind Albert, whereas North there is rarely more than one real line of trenches. The French are much more business-like and more thorough.

In the evening we returned to dinner, and again we had a very pleasant one in celebration of my birthday. After dinner we played cut-throat auction, and so to bed.

To-day Carroll has gone on leave. If I am lucky I may come home in a week or two. If so, I wonder if it would be possible for us to go up to Lowood or somewhere of the sort for a week, as I am longing for some decent country—tennis, &c.

Much love to all, from your loving Son,

ALEC.

May 10th.

May 11th. [69]

My darling Mother,—

To-day we transported all our worldly belongings in handcarts from our former billets to a village about six miles nearer the firing line. The village is called Bresle. It is quite a nice little village in a hollow, only it is crowded with troops—three Battalions and various other units all billeted in it. Consequently, though the men still have room for their usual billets in barns, &c., some have very little spare room, whilst most of the officers are billeted in tents, hiding from aeroplanes, under trees. When we arrived we had to get parties to move our tents into a field under a hedge and some trees. We have three tents—one we use as a mess—and the men looted wood and doors and made a splendidly fine table round the tent pole, also a form to sit on. Another tent we all three—Kitty, Brand and myself—sleep in, and a third we have handed over to the servants. I myself have a folding bed that Captain Brockbank, of the Divisional Supply Column, had made for me, and I hope to be fairly comfortable. Our little camp is in the corner of a cultivated field, behind the farms on the hills rising from the village. When we had finished putting up our tents, we lay down for a late lunch of bully-beef sandwiches and cake and watched Mademoiselle and the family digging the field. Then at the other's instigation I offered Mademoiselle a piece of the cake you sent me as my "gateau de marriage," telling her I had been married vingt-cinq anees. It is always well to conciliate the native. To-night I went to tea with the Battalion, several spare officers have arrived out from our depot Battalion. They all have tents in a sort of orchard.

To-night we dined off boiled eggs, tea, and soup, in that order, in our mess-tent, and we are now going to bed.

On Sunday I went away in a waggon to Railhead to Mericourt to catch a train at 7-30 to go on another course at G.H.Q.—Hezdin, near Etaples. On the train I met Bowkett, from the Tyneside Scottish, and we travelled together. While we were waiting at Amiens to catch a connection we met another man, who was going on the same course, and whom we avoided, as he seemed a terrible person. We arrived at Hezdin about 6-30, reported at G.H.Q., and then walked up to a chateau, where we were billeted. There we saw the Adjutant, who gave us a room together with two decent beds. The chateau is a topping big place in pretty grounds and has most of [70] the furniture left in it. We had a large mess-room, with doors opening into the terrace, and an ante-room. The next day, as our time was slow, we missed our breakfast and only just came down in time for parade at 9-0. In the evening we went down to Hezdin to the hotel to dinner, about four of us. The next day we had breakfast in bed, and were in time for the lecture at 9-0. In the morning, gun drill and firing. The other people in the course were very interesting people, and an awfully nice lot. There was an Australian whom, of course, we all called Anzac—a small strongly-built man, with a military moustache, named Hart. He had a very amusing manner of taking off old Army Colonels and 'varsity men, from what he called Okker and Camer, and whom he described as always going about with a towel round their necks, a blazer and pumps. He would always talk to order. To set him off we had the man we saw on Amiens station, and whom we all call George, for no known reason, and whose real name was Arthur. Like Anzac, he had been all over the world, and was very quiet and melancholy. He used to talk in a pathetic high voice, and teach us Chinese, and tell us how he was arrested as a spy in Armentières, and of his experiences. The other chevalier, you knew at sight, came from Oxford. Bouchier, of the Royal Scots, a small, dark Englishman, who was born in Tipperary, and was known to our society as Arthur Bouchier, the passionate Scot from Tipperary. Sutherland, Black Watch, a decadent specimen from the Coldstreamers; Pinto Pike, and a Canadian Captain called Clarke. The others were Lloyd (Cheshire), Robinson (King's Liverpool), Laying (Gloucesters), Granville (Royal Fusiliers), who was in the same Battalion as Wynn, who was chaplain of Jesus, and Cuthbertson, the girl of the footlights; Steed, a pianist, Propert, and others. Our instructor, Higgins, was a topping chap, with the Military Cross. We had an awfully jolly time on the

course.

On Friday we again went into Hezdin for dinner, several of us.

On Saturday morning we saw most of them off, and Bowkett, George Bouchier and I remained. In the afternoon Bouchier and I went and had a hot bath at an old nunnery by the river. Dinner at the hotel, where we spent a comfortable night.

On Sunday morning we set off at 6-0 to catch the 6-24 train, and we arrived at [71]
Amiens about lunch-time. On the station I met half a dozen officers from the 8th Suffolks, and talked to them about various mutual acquaintances and of what the Battalion was doing. Then in the town Bowkett and I met a man named Grey, who had come out from our Reserve Battalion to the 8th Suffolks, and we went and had lunch in the Hotel du Rhine with him and several other officers, two of whom I had met at Cambridge. A topping dinner, including ices and strawberries.

When we returned to the station we discovered that the train we were supposed to go on was a crowded leave train, full of people returning from leave, so we waited till the next. Arriving at Mericourt I had to walk to Bresle, but got the assistance of one motor waggon and a mess cart, and arrived at Bresle only to find that the Battery was moving in an hour to Albert, and was going in the trenches that night. I went to have tea, and meanwhile the Batteries went on. Then, very luckily, I found a friend and a car that whisked me past the Batteries trudging with handcarts on into Albert. Arrived in Albert I went on to see Rigby, whom we were taking over from, in a small billet, but found that we were getting a big billet in the hospital—a huge, great place, with large rooms built in 1904, and toppingly fitted up, but now practically empty. All our men sleep in two big double rooms, and Kitty and I in one room, the others in a room 100 feet by 25 feet. Our mess-room is a large, clean, dry, tiled room, with one huge window; we furnished it with tables and chairs, chiefly taken from the old billet, which we are not using. Fuller keeps the room smart with wild flowers.

At 11-0 p.m. o'clock I went up to the trenches with Carroll and half the Battery, who were going in for the night—the men in one big dug-out and Carroll in one with two machine gunners. I returned home and got to bed about 3-0 a.m.

The next morning I was wakened before seven by the guns waking up for their early morning hate just under my window. There are Batteries dotted about all over the place here—18 pounders, howitzers of all sizes, and naval guns. You almost trip over them wherever you go. There are two 6in. howitzers hiding in our back garden. I went up to the trenches to look round the next morning (Monday).

The trenches here are very different from what we have been used to—long narrow [72]
trenches, not breastworks, dug down in the chalk, a veritable labrynth of trenches, going in all directions, up hill and down dale. They are very deep, and very few rifle shots are fired. Sniping is done with field guns and trench mortars. The line is very curious, moving forward and backward. In one place in our line a village runs out and there is a German salient. In front of the salient lots of mines have been exploded and no trenches remain, merely holes that bombers hide in, where the trench bulging again we share our parapet with the Bosche. I don't go there often, as you have to crawl, and you usually crawl into the wrong trench and find yourselves wandering in the Bosche lines. The Germans send over a lot of oil cans filled with old razor blades and rubbish, which do a good deal of damage, and are rather unpleasant. However, we are educating them not to send them over too often, as we send over two to their one with our mortars, and in time we shall get them under our thumbs I hope. We always have one man by each gun firing almost continuously. We have dug-outs well back with wire beds in them, also rats! Here we have big underground dug-outs 20 feet underground, some of them down long stairways. The country is very hilly and wooded in parts; our part of the line has two hills and one valley, it is rather like Salisbury Plain, or a flat edition of Derbyshire.

Carroll has been in, and I have gone up in the daytime.

I am going to relieve him this afternoon; I shall only be in a few days. I hope to come home on leave about June 4th.

Much love to all, from your loving Son,

ALEC.

P.S.—I have not got your letter, but I have received all the letters and things sent, I think.

My darling Mother,— [73]

I am writing this in my dug-out. It seems very comfortable at present. We have one large dug-out in which Carroll slept with two machine gunners. I was going to sleep there too, and as I have a new officer, Ingle, with me he was going to sleep there. But by the greatest stroke of good fortune I spotted this one just near. It is the best dug-out I have ever had. The other dug-out is swarming with mice and rats, who scratch earth into you all the time, and come and expire on you at night. One fell down and died on the table while we were having tea. But in this I have only seen one mouse so far, and it has got about ten feet of solid earth over it. I sleep on a comfortable folding bed, in my clothes, of course. It is well back six or seven hundred yards from the firing line. The firing line is more unhealthy than other trenches we have been in. They will keep sending the oil cans I told you of over into the front line. If you manage to get away from them round a traverse they come rolling round the corner after you; I don't love them at all. I have got "Printer's Pie," and I am just going to put up some pictures and am then going to bed. I relieved Carroll, and have been messing around since. I went down to the firing line for an hour or two to go to each emplacement and see how the men who were firing the guns were getting on, and then came back and observed their fire just outside my dug-out; there is our observation post from which you can see our own lines and the Bosche lines for miles. I have just been down to one of our ammunition dug-outs, seeing 100 rounds put in that a fatigue party had brought up. Friday 10 to 12. Good-night, Mother mine.

Had a comfortable night, but, as it was rather cold, I have had my sleeping bag brought up for to-night, so I shall be all right. Fuller was late this morning, so I had to wait impatiently for my boots and puttees to be cleaned before I could get up, consequently we did not have breakfast till nearly 10-0 o'clock. After breakfast Ingle and I went round all our emplacements. We had quite an interesting time, as in one place where the trench is not occupied, and up which we have to go to one emplacement, one of our field gun batteries put four shots into the trench about 10 yards behind Ingle and knocked him over, then a rifle grenade landed nearly at my feet and kindly failed to go off. We returned in time for a late scrappy lunch at 2-30. [74] When I was intending to have a nap and a read when one of the Northumberland Fusiliers officers, Bowkett, turned up with Kitty to see the line, as he is probably taking it over from us in a few days, and I had to wander right around all the emplacements again. After tea I went down to see how our guns were getting on and found the infantry were very pleased with them, as one gun had managed to destroy a Hun machine gun emplacement, and the others must have done considerable damage, as they so much raised the Hun's ire that he shelled them all unsuccessfully.

We had a pleasant dinner, and the rest of the evening I have spent worrying over returns, new emplacements, trench maps, &c., and so to a well-earned rest.

I am beginning to find my way about a bit now, but there is a veritable maze of nice white chalk trenches. We are in a sort of valley, and in the middle of the valley is a slight rise on which the village of La Boiselle once existed, and which now forms the German salient.

Sunday, 28th, 1-0 a.m. Wakened up by Parker, of the Lincolns to tell me that gas cylinders have been seen being taken in La Boiselle, and that, as the wind is in the right direction, there may be a gas attack. I hope not; however put on boots and puttees. I warned the men, putting one sentry on duty, as also the servants. I have a beastly headache, and I am very tired; I wish people wouldn't see such things. They are very quiet, too, to-night, which looks suspicious.

May 29th. Awakened very tired about 8-0 o'clock, dressed by putting on my boots, sponge bath, shaved while I had my breakfast in my dug-out. Then I went with my sergeant to see about new emplacements. Started on a new one with a corporal and four men working, also myself. In the afternoon I received a scheme for construction of six new emplacements, and I had to go to try and find positions. I managed more or less to do so, and returned in time to start working out ranges, compass bearing, angles, &c., only to find I had to go down to two emplacements again to place them accurately by the map. Busy all evening with indents, returns and chiefly with schemes for emplacements. Bed at last—12 midnight.

Yesterday we worked on emplacements till about 2-0, when I returned for lunch, and was strafed by the Divisional General for having my guns in the firing line; [75] afterwards a disturbed lunch, during which we were shelled and our men's dug-out pushed in with a 5.9 howitzer, though 16 men in the dug-out were unhurt. The Bosche was busy all day with 5.9's, blowing most things in. In the afternoon I went up to see the Brigadier, who was very nice, and attempted to solve all my difficulties. I then had dinner with Carroll and Brand, and returned to the trenches, and so to bed.

This morning I wakened at 7-30 Tempest came in, laying claims to my dug-out, claiming it for Barker, but we said "No." Breakfast at 8-0. At 9-0 I prospected with Wilson-Jones and found a topping place for a new emplacement, which we set up forthwith, also making on the other two new ones. Lake and another man came to lunch. This afternoon and evening we have been doing more work on the

emplacements. I am getting a bit tired of these trenches; they are much too dangerous, and I hate suddenly having to crouch against a traverse when a big shell comes and crouches on the other side of it. I shall now retire to my little couch. Good-night, Mother dear.

June 1st. Working all day on emplacements, putting headcover on, &c. This evening, about six o'clock, I was called upon to reply to German trench mortars, but just as we had reached the bottom of the communication, they opened gun fire on the communication trench, wounding several men, while we lay at the bottom of the trench, while they whizzed over in sort of sheets of shells. They soon quieted, but one burst was enough. I went down to the front line about 10-0 to look round, and coming back they were unpleasant again—big stuff too—but to our left. The shells are something terrific here; I think it is one of the hottest parts of the line.

June 2nd. Working all day on emplacements. In the evening we were called upon to retaliate for German mortars, and pumped hell into them for a few minutes (excuse the word, it is the only one I can think of), and soon shut them up. I was relieved by Carroll.

June 3rd. Went up to the trenches, to see how the emplacements were getting on, with Kitty. In the evening the Tyneside Scottish relieved us, going up to the trenches at 2-0 a.m. instead of 2 p.m. We had an awful crush of them in our mess for several hours, and I had great difficulty in pushing them off up to the trenches. I took them [76]
there just to be in time for a terrific bombardment on the trenches, whilst the Germans tried unsuccessfully to raid our trenches. They used tear gas on us, sent over in shells, and it makes you weep. When I returned they were shelling near our billet, and we had to spend the whole of the rest of the night in the cellars, and only got to our bed at about 6-0 in the morning.

June 4th. Carroll and Brand went back to rest with the two new batteries, and Kitty and I remained in reserve, as they wanted us to take part in a raid that we were going to do, and, though our own brigade was in rest, our batteries were selected as a compliment to take part in the raid, which we learned was to come off on Monday, June 5th, so we tried to go to bed early on Sunday after our troublous Saturday night. However, we learnt that the division on our right was doing a raid, and the Bosche started retaliating on Albert, the town we were in, so we had to spend another night in the cellars.

June 5th. We spent the day getting ammunition up, 400 rounds, registering our guns, &c. We found our emplacements damaged by the bombardment of the night before and had to make one new one. We meant to return to our billet for lunch at 2-0, but we actually came back at 6-0—in time for high tea. At 8-30 we paraded, six men from each battery to work four guns, and got to the trenches to find everything quiet. We prepared our ammunition, &c., and were finished just before 11-0, at which time all our artillery suddenly burst forth into a hundred thunderstorms, and absolutely rained shells on the German lines like hail. At 11-20 we started, and put over about 70 rounds from each gun, and finished at 11-35, and returned to the third line as soon as possible to collect there to take our guns out. I quite enjoyed it all; there was a huge row on, and you could not tell if any German shells were coming at you, there was such a noise. It was quite exciting. I was surprised to find that it is really not nearly half so bad when both sides are hard at it and our own getting decidedly the best of it, as when occasional shots keep arriving.

We were glad to get out all right at 1-30 and back to our billet. The next day (Tuesday) we moved back to Bresle, and arrived there in the evening. Kitty and I had to go up to the trenches to collect some things, then we had tea, and came along in motor wagons, &c.

At present we are back where we were in tents; it rains fairly often, and, as a rest, [77]
we have to parade at 6-45 for field days. I am going to the Suffolks to-night.

I am awfully sorry this letter has been so long, but I have been made O.C. group of four batteries, and I have had to work all day and most of the night.

I am very fit and well, and hope to be home on June 15th. Old Wroxan, who shared a room with me at Cambridge, was killed the other day—he had only been out about a month.

Socks, cake and all sorts of nice things received.

Much love to all, from your loving Son,

ALEC.

B.E.F., 10th. [78]

My darling Mother,—

As I told you in my last letter we are now resting, and we are doing it very vigorously indeed. There are two kinds of rest for Infantry in the British Army, and they are (1) A good rest, and (2) a thoroughly good rest. A good rest is when your brigade is in the trenches, and your battalion or unit is out. Then between shells in the trenches you rest. You begin the cure at 7-0 in the morning, if you are lucky, and continue it all day and all night on working parties.

When you are having a thoroughly good rest you rise at 6-0 a.m., parade at 6-45 every day, and charge across country, practicing the assault for the day that has always been coming (is always in a fortnight) and never comes off—the great Spring Offensive. That's what we have been doing the last few days, walking five or six miles out, then walking two miles or so across country, and then marching home. Every day we receive orders in the afternoon that the brigade will go somewhere, to the trenches or to some other village, but they are always cancelled in the evening.

Fortunately, to-morrow is Sunday, and we are to have a day's rest. I hope it will not be cancelled.

Last night I had dinner with "C" Company, my old Company; we had a wonderful dinner. This evening we went to our brigade theatre. It is an old barn, and we all sit on the floor—Colonels, Majors, Subalterns and privates. There are cinematograph films, songs, &c., and it is very cheering; Kitty, Dougal and I went together to-night. The chief talk is all about leave, everyone being in hopes of it, and all except the staff being put off from week to week until you almost despair of it. Dougal is just talking about hopping into a big hot bath and a feather bed, but if we had never done without them we should not value them quite as we do now.

Wednesday, 14th. The Day of Days, the heaven of every British soldier. Leave, that Will-o'-the-Wisp which everyone possesses, but which evades all but the staff, and the very lucky. A long journey from Mericourt, starting at 9-30 to Havre. Lunch off omelette and coffee during an hour's halt in the dignified perambulations of a French train at Bouchie. At Havre we rushed to get cabins, but found plenty, and we soon went to bed—Payne and I (Bernard Thompson on the same boat)—and we slept until [79] wakened one hour out of Southampton. Breakfast off a cup of coffee, and then train again.

Winnie met me at Waterloo, or rather I met her, gazing forlornly at streams of strange soldiers. All morning at Harold's offices and shopping, lunching at the Criterion, &c. Then on to Win's to tea and back in bare time to the Savoy to change for dinner. Then to "To-night's the night"—topping seats and a good show.

The writer of these letters arrived in England June 15th, 1916, and returned to France June 22nd. The Spring Offensive, of which he wrote, was launched at 7-30 on July 1st, 1916, and on that day he was killed near La Boiselle—"A corner of a foreign field that is for ever England."

Writing of him a fellow Officer said:—

> "The last time I saw him was on Friday afternoon, June 30th, in the cellars of the Chateau. He was gaily talking to his Officers and giving them one or two final instructions. 'Have some tea of dog biscuits and bully beef' he said to me just as I had finished a wash. I said 'Good-bye' to him, and then crept along the dark passage to the Chateau.
>
> He was one of the real enthusiasts for war amongst us as a regiment. Most people had joined because it was their duty—he joined because he was a soldier by nature as well. If there was to be a scrap he was sure to be in it. He wanted to go out before the battalion on July 1st, but the C.O., of course, would not hear of it.
>
> At Armentières I was told that when the Corner Fort was bombarded he [80] was hit on his helmet by a huge piece of shell, but just carried on. I feel certain he died in the forefront of the battle, for his pluck was proverbial.

"Whoever else gets the wind up—Mack won't" I heard an Officer of the regiment say one day during a bad spell in the trenches.

I do not believe he was afraid of death, and I am sure he fell as far forward as the German leaden hail would let anyone get alive."

Another one wrote:—

"I saw a good deal of him during the last few days before July 1st, as his battery was encamped with us. He was in the highest spirits, though he knew he was to occupy a most exposed position in the attack.

He was as brave as any man I know, and his loss is tremendous. I, as well as all his friends out here, sympathise most deeply with his family, whose consolation must be that he died a gallant soldier's death."

"Daily Post" Printers, Wood Street, Liverpool.

Typographical errors corrected in text:

Page 12: Moher replaced with Mother
Page 37: fraid replaced with afraid
Page 44: Boches replaced with Bosches
Page 48: intersting replaced with interesting
Page 55: we we replaced with we
Page 64: Epeleque replaced with Eperlecques
Page 73: greatet replaced with greatest

On Pages 78 and 79, the author uses a common British phrasing "Breakfast off a cup of coffee" and "Lunch off omelette". This is not a typo.

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