

# David's Letters from France 1916 -1917

Notes from a soldier that fought in the "War to end all wars"



**David Williams**

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## Preface

David Williams, my grandfather's brother, was born on the 20th April 1896 at Glasbury-on-Wye. At that time the River Wye formed the boundary between Breconshire and Radnorshire, although the village was officially in Radnorshire because the Registry Office was on the Radnorshire side of the river. So he was born in Breconshire and his birth was registered in Radnorshire. Today the county is known as Powys on both sides of the river.

David's father was a Baptist Minister and he was the eldest of three children. His brother, Evan David (Evie) was born two years later. His sister, Elisabeth Ann (Lila) was born ten years later.

In 1898 he moved with his parents to Treherbert in the Rhondda Valley and in 1900 they moved to Merthyr Tydfil, (now in mid Glamorgan). He was educated at Abermorlais Elementary School and Merthyr County School, but left school in 1912 - at the age of 16 - to commence a three-year apprenticeship in the old National Provincial Bank at Pontypridd. He finished his apprenticeship in June 1915 and was appointed to a clerkship at Pentre (Rhondda).

## **The First World War**

World War I began in 1914 when a train of events, starting in Bosnia, culminated in most of the nations in Europe, tied to each other by treaties, taking up arms and declaring war.

Britain and her Empire commenced hostilities when the regular army, known as the B.E.F. or “British Expeditionary Force”, which had taken up a position in Northern France and Belgium, met leading units of the German Army advancing through Belgium towards France in September 1914.

There followed for the next four years a war of attrition; the old Regular Army, then the Territorial Army, followed by Lord Kitchener’s Volunteer Army, were almost wiped out. Eventually their remnants, reinforced by a huge army of conscripts, held the line with the balance of power swinging first one way then the other.

The French Army aided by its Empire troops suffered similarly, particularly at Verdun, and with the assistance of the American Army, which added to the onslaught in later years of the war, held the German advances with much bloodshed.

Finally, after a series of synchronised attacks along the line of battle, the allied Armies won the day: hostilities ending on the 11<sup>th</sup> November 1918.

David Williams was one of a huge band of young men who were keen to get into the war before it finished. In those far off days it was imagined that the whole thing was a big adventure not to be missed, and enthusiastic volunteers outstripped the availability of uniforms and rifles. Such were the numbers of young men keen to fight “the Hun” that cities and towns formed their own units and even large organisations formed their own Battalions.

Once formed, a new Battalion, sometimes commanded by ageing officers and NCOs who were veterans of the Boer War, was drilled in a local hall for many weeks before being transported to a training camp which may have been located anywhere in the United Kingdom. It was not uncommon for roles in the workplace to be turned upside down when, for example, an old retired Sergeant, who may have been a commissionaire or a lift operator, was put in charge of a platoon containing his old boss.

## **The story begins**

The year is now 1915. Recruitment is in full swing. The Bankers' Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers is being formed and David applies to join up. He is accepted, but only subject to release by his employer.

The Rhondda Valley is a special area - the Royal Navy's lifeblood is Rhondda Valley coal: as much as they can get. The local bank must have first claim to his labour.

Although only 19 David is running two agencies single-handed, at Treorchy and Treherbert, so his release was deferred several times, even after the "Derby Scheme", which heralded the start of conscription, came into operation.

Eventually he was given three months to teach a man, over military age and not connected with coal production, to take his place. Finally, released from the bank in March 1916, his army career has started. It was to last a little over 16 months, quite undistinguished, but typical of tens of thousands of others. The date was 23rd March 1916.

The Bankers' Battalion is now full up, so David is sent to join the 31st Battalion (Reserve) Royal Fusiliers for training in Epping Forest.

From fragments of early letters we learn...

We had uniforms but no rifles; we played football with our bowler hats and learned to sleep on bed-boards and bags of straw. From High Beach in Epping Forest we were moved to the Marine Gardens, Portobello, Edinburgh to continue our training.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> August 1916 I was one member of a draft of 150 entrained for France - via Folkestone, and Boulogne.

I was now part of the 18th Division of the Second Corps of the Second Army of the British Expeditionary Force in France.

There were three Brigades in the Division, - the 53rd, the 54th, and the 55th. The 54th Brigade consisted of four Battalions, - the 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Northants; the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Bedfords; the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers; and the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment ("The Diehards") which I would soon be joining.

The 12<sup>th</sup> Middlesex had been recruited and formed in September 1914 and stationed at Colchester in Essex. They did 12 months training on Salisbury plain at Colford, Wiltshire before embarking for France in July 1915. Then followed 12 months trench warfare in front of Albert (a town in Picardy) in the region between Alveluy and Carnoy. They took part in the disastrous offensive of the 1st July at Trenches Wood, where they suffered many casualties.

To make good their losses of this battle, they were reinforced by a draft of 150 men, transferred from the Royal Fusiliers, 31<sup>st</sup> Reserve Battalion to the 26<sup>th</sup> Bankers' Battalion - fresh from Portobello, Edinburgh, after approximately six months training at the end of August 1916. I was one of this draft and on transfer to the Middlesex Regiment. Our new regimental numbers were 140,000 to 140,150 inclusive; my number was 140,135. We were their first draft of "outsiders" since the arrival of the 12<sup>th</sup> Middlesex in France in July 1915. Inevitably we had to be called: "The bloody lah-de-dah bank clerks".



**An odd photo found with one of the letters.  
Is this a picture of the Bankers' Battalion before embarkation?**

## The Letters

The letters that are transcribed here have survived after a period of 85 years. Unfortunately a number are missing so they do not in any way make a complete story but it seems a pity to put them back in the sideboard drawer, where they would remain in obscurity, and leave them unpublished. The originals were written in pencil on any kind of notepaper and whole sections here and there, were made indecipherable by Censors. It was a part of every Officer's duty to read and censor the letters of his platoon in case the enemy gained an advantage, were the letters to be captured or published.

In all cases the letters are dated and in most cases they have a place name at their start. We have the advantage of hindsight and can see that many of the places mentioned are in fact in Belgium rather than in France. This distinction was not so clear to fighting troops, as one battle scarred quagmire or trench full of mud, looked much the same as any other. Frontiers were absent as indeed were most of the villages in the area of actual fighting. Occasionally, merely a few bricks, or the foundations of a few buildings that marked what was once a bustling country village, remained to give the area a name. When this was not possible a name would be invented. Many trenches or places were given convenient titles... Blighty Valley, Hammerhead Sap, Lime Street (if a Liverpool Regiment was the first occupant) or Tottenham Court Road (if a London Regiment was in residence). The names in the letters were usually vague enough so as not to invite the Censor's pen.

**Marquay –September 4th 1916**

Dear Mother and Father,

My last letter to you was written from Scotland and since then I moved to a place which, though just as near as regards distance, is yet in another sense much further away.

The route across, and the method of crossing, must be guessed at by yourselves as I am allowed to give no details. However, I assure you that we did not come here in aeroplanes, nor did we take a route around the North Pole!

Eventually we got to one of the Expeditionary Force base camps where we stayed a few weeks to complete our training. There we lived under canvas and during the time we were there we had not a great deal of spare time, as there was much to be learnt that was entirely new. The next thing we learnt was that a certain number of the original draft was to be transferred to another Regiment and I was among that number. The usual mode of conveyance for troops out here is to transport them along a railway line in cattle trucks. Of course, the trucks have not carried any cattle for some time; they are usually used for carrying either 10 horses or 40 men and the authorities do not trouble to keep the vans exclusive for either. In one of these vans I with others was transported to another part of France.

We travelled through some very beautiful flat country and at this time of year it is made still prettier by the rows of corn sheaves which are to be seen in the fields extending in all directions. When we reached our railway destination, Tinqes we had a short march of five miles between the station and our billets.

The road wound along amongst more corn fields and fields of sugar beet and was lined by an avenue of beech trees on either side. It is in this way that the roads of France are made much more picturesque than those of England and it is a plan which is really dispensed with in this country. Although these rows of trees make marching rather monotonous, their shade is very welcome on a hot day and they take away much of the ugliness of an ordinary road. Still, in my opinion they do not equal the English country roads with the familiar hedgerows. Now I think we'll leave the road question to be dealt with by the mayor and councillors and proceed with the letter.

Our final destination was a village where we were shown our billets in one of the farms. The billets are the outhouses and barns and they are not half as pleasant as tents.

French barns are made of posts and sticks intermixed with mud and straw. Neither the walls nor the roof are airtight and so we are provided with plenty of ventilation - rather too much sometimes! However, this is better than too little so we are not dissatisfied. Our beds consist of straw and chaff on the earthen floor and our overcoats over us. Our food is quite good and wholesome and we are, generally speaking, quite well and happy.

We are rather hard-worked and our time is fully occupied. For that reason I must apologise for not writing any individual letters and also because I know that the platoon officer is rather fed up with the number of letters he has to censor. In fact, I expect he is inwardly cursing me for writing such a long letter but I do not think I have transgressed beyond the limits of the authorities and I do not promise you another such long letter for a long time. We are likely to move to new billets in the near future and in a week or so we may get into closer contact with the big guns, which may sometimes be heard with a lot of boom or a rumble in the far distance.

Your loving son,  
David

**Hedauville -September 23rd 1916**

Dear Mother and Father,

We are again on the move and, as usual, we have no idea of our destination or length of journey. However, this time I think the move means something as we are going in the direction of the line. I am writing in a French village where we stay the night en-route. It means sleeping almost in an open field tonight with an apology for a marquee made of tarpaulin and a few posts.

As regards my letters they are written (and dated) on one evening, handed into the officer at midday following and I think they leave the Battalion that evening.



I can give you no details of our whereabouts but I might be permitted to say that it is somewhere beyond the portion of line at present most prominently before the public eye.

I have been near no town as yet since landing; this portion is all composed of agricultural land and small villages. We get very little spare time as there are all sorts of odd jobs to be done and it is very difficult even to find time for writing.

I have heard from Mr Griffith; he only says that Lewis is out here somewhere and is quite well.

I have just heard from Evie; it's very funny that he is called up so soon. What is the manager going to do? His suppositions are correct; how he got them I don't know. Ask him, please?  
No time for more now; it's getting very dark.

Your loving son,  
David

**Martinsart –September 28 1916**

Dear Mother and Father,

I have been through some awful experiences. Last Sunday we went into the trenches and on Tuesday morning we went "over the top" towards Thiépval. We gained our objective and yesterday morning we were relieved and are now out of it altogether. Of the actual experiences I will write nothing; it was too awful for words. Previous to this I thought the word "Hell" was being used rather too freely in connection with these things but now I know that there is no word strong enough to describe it. Our Battalion was the first to go over and when we left our own trench I assure you it was absolutely hell. You will probably read all about it in the papers. They will give no regiments though, so remember that we went over first and so had the hardest task. Consequently our losses were enormous and I consider that I am exceedingly lucky to have come through without a scratch. I thank God with all my heart that he has seen fit to spare my life when men were being hit all around me. It is over now and I will write no more - I cannot.

We are now resting in a wood while in all directions around the big guns are keeping up a continuous fire - making good the advance we began.

The nearest gun is only about 20 yards away as I write and it is making an awful noise.

Owing to our movements our letters have been delayed. Last night I got your letter of the 22nd. Since I wrote last we have not been allowed to send anything until the postcard I sent yesterday. I shall probably get the parcel soon. It is more than likely that this Battalion will be out resting for a few months now so do not worry any more. I also got a letter from Uncle Ben yesterday. If you are writing soon tell him I'll reply as soon as possible.

Your loving son,  
David

**Prouville – October 7th 1916**

Dear Mother and Father,

I find that I am rather later in writing than I intended. I have been trying to get all my correspondence up-to-date during the last fortnight and time seems to have flown rather quickly. Referring to your last letter (in which you included JL. and letter). I was unable to write to you during that week owing to the fact that no mail was collected. I had a letter written but I believe the authorities wish to prevent any news of our movements being sent. Please let me know whether any portions of my letter have been censored.

The parcels were in excellent condition when I received them. The fellows here are on the whole quite decent: a large number are rather rough diamonds but we all get on very well together. The fellows of the Fusiliers Draft stick together very well. You know there's a great deal of socialism, of the right sort in the army; it's a case of the fellows who have anything giving the rest a share (whatever the "anything" might be).

I think I told you that I had heard from Veale; he's in the last R.F. (somewhere in France). Oh yes! He got Lila's letter alright before we left Portobello. There are several Welsh fellows here and came out on our draft but all the rest (of the old Middlesex) are Londoners. I recollect that

someone told me his home was at Builth but I cannot remember who it was.

A fellow from Cardiff, A.J. Jones, who was at Lloyd's, Merthyr, was wounded in the hand in the attack. We were in the same platoon: as a matter of fact, Jones and I and two others, being all in the same section, slept and "grubbed" together. Going over the top we stuck together but during the first few minutes, Jones got hit and went back. Just at the same time our corporal was killed and two others wounded. The rest of us went forward and got through it all safely except another one of our four. This chap had on a steel waistcoat for he had paid three pounds ten shillings, but as fate had ordained he was wounded sometime during the evening. A bullet grazed the side of his head but he was able to walk back unaided after one of the fellows put a bandage on it. We heard later that both he and Jones got back to our lines safely. So you see that the bullet found a spot in spite of the body shield which was rather hard lines.

As regards pay: we get ten francs occasionally. It is not a regular payment but if the cash is procurable they try to pay us as often as possible. It's just enough to keep us going. I have seen no YMCA since I left Etaples (the base). There is a Battalion canteen which sometimes has some goods in hand if we are staying at one place for a time. The French cafes and shops in these villages are usually badly stocked and the prices charged to English soldiers are very exorbitant. They are not ashamed to tell us "you English, plenty money".

I'm very glad that Evie is not to be called up yet. Also glad to hear that Tom B. has got his discharge. Please convey my kind regards him. Can't think of more just now I'm quite well. We're still in the same village as when I last wrote. This billet is very comfortable too, the best since I left the base. We have also managed to obtain some clean straw to sleep on so we live in comfort and in a clean billet. We're regular gentleman.

Your loving son,  
David

### **Bouzincourt - 19th October 1916**

Dear Mother and Father,

We have been moving about for the last few days; marching from one village to another. At present we are rather nearer the line than previously but still a long way off. We may not have such a long rest as

anticipated as a large number of reserves are required to remain in the line during the present big advance. It will, however, be sometime before we shall be ready as the Battalion is not yet up to strength. I expect you received my postcard. The parcel arrived in very good condition and its contents were very welcome. The cakes were excellent and I enjoyed them very much - as also did a few others.

I have today received a letter from a pal who was at Portobello. I left my watch with him as the glass got broken a day before I left. The protector over it was no good so he promised to get a new glass and a protector of the following type: It appears that he failed to get this is so he has returned it to you. I think you had better keep it for the time being unless you can get one of these protectors. A few days ago I received a small parcel from Mrs Richardson of Edinburgh containing a big cake and a very good pair of thick socks. It was very kind of her to think of me in this way, especially as I was only a few months at Edinburgh. Their son, who was reported "missing" many months ago has now been officially reported "killed". In most cases of "missing" men there is no hope of any further news unless it arrives within a week or so. Unless one of the men who returned is certain that he saw another man killed then he was reported as "missing". Someone may be killed amidst men who do not know his name and as no one can give any information when his name is called, he was reported as "missing". The suspense of this must be awful to any relatives and it awakens false hope when there is absolutely none, or exceedingly little. Please thank Tom B. for his letter I will reply later. I also received two short notes, one from Uncle Ben and one from "your new Auntie", enclosed in the same envelope. I can't think of more just now. Besides its bedtime and I am tired.

Goodnight,

Love,  
David

**Albert- 21st October 1916**

Dear Mother and Father,

Since my last letter we have moved nearer the line. We may be sent into the trenches at any time as I explained before so we are now waiting for further orders. This place is a large town - larger than any I've stayed at previously. Early in the war it suffered badly from a heavy bombardment and, of course, no effort had yet been made to renovate it. It is, therefore, still possible to see what terrible damage may be wrought by shells and it seems an awful shame that the big shame that a big town should be so badly knocked about. The Germans seem to have made the cathedral a

special mark and it is in a very bad state. Most of the houses are deserted – many of them only heaps of bricks. I am billeted, with 19 others, in the front room of a large house, which is in good condition. We are very comfortable in spite of a slight touch of frosty weather. A blanket has been issued to each man and we are able to keep going a good fire of wood every evening.

The Colonel of our Battalion has been promoted to Brigadier General. We are all very sorry to lose him as we will never get such another Colonel however good the new man may be. Colonel Maxwell wore two rows of ribbons amongst them being the VC, CSI and DSO. He well deserved the promotion and would have got it before but for the fact that he did not wish to leave the Battalion. He was a man who inspired confidence in everyone who saw him as knew of no fear and I don't think he had any idea of what nerves were. He always went over the top with the men and at Thiepval I saw him walking about as if he owned the place in spite of snipers, machine-guns and shells. All our best wishes go with him although we would all have preferred to keep him. I am afraid I've written rather long eulogy but it all fills up.

Don't be alarmed if you do not get another letter for a time: I'll write as soon as possible or send a field postcard. The trouble is that no mail is collected when we are in the line. I can't think of any more just now so, for the present, goodbye.

Your loving son,  
David

**Albert- 30th October 1916**

Dear Mother and Father,

Since writing to you and sending the postcards I have been into the trenches and the Battalion is now out for a very short rest. It was rather rough luck that before going into the line I received three parcels by one post. They came at night and we had orders to move next day for the line. Consequently, I had to distribute the eatables amongst pals in order to get rid of them. As a matter of fact the trip was postponed for a day. McAndrew sent fruit, cake and chocolate; Sybil sent cakes, cooker etc so we had a good feed that night. The tinned stuff I took up with me and also the cooker and some oxo cubes which Auntie sent. Oxo was very acceptable up there and I made it several times. We had poor weather so

we only had five days in the trenches at Regina. We are only resting for a day or two in order to get dry and clean and then will have to go up again I expect.

Please excuse brevity as I have very little time and I'm fearfully tired. Please make a special point of thanking Miss Adams for the cigarettes she sent. I've run out of field cards and cannot write another letter. Will write them as soon as possible. I've not written to Eric lately so please give him the latest news.

I'm quite well in spite of wet and mud but there's a great deal of cleaning to be done. We all come out plastered in mud.

That's all for now.

Love,

David

**Warloy 2nd November 1916**

Dear Mother and Father,

My last letter to you was written rather hurriedly. I wrote from the same town as my previous letter. We are now at a village a few miles away from there. Our rest is almost over and we may go up again at any time. As regards your last parcel, I forgot to tell you that the pears were very good; I quite enjoyed them and please thank David Jones on my behalf. The sponge is quite alright but you need not send another soap tablet for a time. That soap is rather good. I must have some more Harrison's soon and you can rely on sending that each time. It is the only thing that is any good against lice; little white things that cannot be kept away. Leave is impossible; there are fellows who have been out 18 months without leave.

I get a letter occasionally from Mrs Thompson. I think those few disjointed remarks reply to your various questions.

Your last letter is dated 24th October; I hope that none of your letters have gone down in the Channel transport which was sunk.

By the way, I received a parcel a few days ago from some people to whom I wrote regarding their son who was wounded. It is customary for parcels addressed to killed and wounded men to be opened and the contents divided amongst their platoon. One of the fellows then sends an acknowledgement to the sender. A large number of parcels arrived after we got out of Thiepval and amongst them was one addressed to the

platoon sergeant, which I was asked to acknowledge. The sergeant was a jolly fine fellow; he was seriously wounded and we were all very sorry. Well, I wrote a decent acknowledgement and received a reply saying that my letter informed them of their son's wound sometime before the official intimation and asked me to give them particulars as fully as possible. By that time the poor chap had died in hospital and I wrote a letter of sympathy. In the parcel, which they sent, they say that a letter is also being sent. I'm afraid that this must have gone astray, as I have not received it. It's not a very pleasant job to write in such a case as you have to be very careful. It was very good of them to send a parcel containing cake, toffees and sweets.

Now I think I'll close.

Love,  
David

P.S. Alteration of address, erase 16 Platoon and substitute M. G. Section.

**Albert- 5th November 1916**

Dear Mother and Father,

Just another line or two while I've a few moments to spare. Although it is Sunday we have a few hours training to do. I have been transferred to the machine-gun section and at present I'm receiving a course of instruction in the Lewis automatic gun.

Last Sunday we were in the trenches and were relieved that night. The previous Sunday we were in this town, leaving it on the following day. If we stay here tonight I shall attend a nonconformist service. I heard that they are held here but was unable to find the hall last time. I have now discovered it and hope to attend a noncom. service at last- (the first since I've been out here).

I received your letter of 30th of October last night but the parcel has not yet arrived. I am glad that you sent some oxo. I got some sent with the cooker from Pontlottyn and I was able to make some in the trenches. The socks will also be very welcome. Tell Lila that her woollen helmet and mittens proved very useful. I wore them day and night during the five days I spent in the line and they kept me nice and warm. The weather was not very favourable and at nighttime especially it was very cold. But I managed to come out without even taking a cold. Soon I expect we shall have another dose. This morning we all had a warm spray bath and clean change of underclothing, so for a short time I feel quite nice and clean.

Following morning...

We are still here awaiting orders.

I attended the service last night and enjoyed it very much. R.A.M.C men, A.S.C and R.E who practically stay in the town have formed a Soldiers' Christian Association. It was their service and there was a chaplain present. I took communion there after.

No time for more just now.

Love,  
David

**Contay- 16th November 1916**

Dear Mother and Father,

I hope that I've not caused you a great deal of anxiety lately but if so I am very sorry; it has been unavoidable. At the end of last week we came out of the trenches after five days of very bad weather.

*Note: whole paragraphs blacked out by the censor*

So you see it was impossible to write more than a card. Here I must say that I did not do the last stage of the journey. Instead I crocked up and got sent back to a rest camp from which I now write. Please don't worry when I say that I'm sick because I shall be all right in a week.

Your loving son,  
David

**Regina- 18th November 1916**

Dear Mother and Father,

*Paragraphs blacked out by the censor*

There were five of us crowded into a small dugout for two when we were in the line, so it was impossible to get any sleep. We could just doze for a time, then everyone would move a few inches to prevent cramp- and so



on. Then, wading through mud up to the thighs (I had waders on) is very hard and exhausting as well as cold. I was absolutely all right until the last day but when I came out on that night I was properly exhausted. The huts were many miles from the front line and when I eventually got there I had a good sleep.

Your loving son,  
David

### OVILLIERS- 19th November 1916

Dear Mother and Father,

#### *Paragraphs blacked out by Censor*

There is nothing to worry about; my temperature is up a bit; my appetite is down a bit and I had a general feeling of grogginess. I shall soon be well. Don't think at all of the old kidney trouble because it hasn't touched the kidneys at all. This is a very common complaint and half the fellows, sent to this camp are in the state as I. All that we want is complete rest. We are getting that and also some good food. In a way I've been lucky to miss another trip to the line and probably over the top. I'm out of touch with the Battalion so will probably get no letters for a time. Your parcel awaited me when I came out of the line and also one from Chloe Parry. They were both very welcome. I sent Chloe a postcard from the base. It appears that she wrote a letter in reply which I never got. As a matter-of-fact I forgot all about her until this parcel and a letter gave me a surprising shake-up.

The contents of your parcel were all good especially to one coming out of the line.

Please thank Mrs D. & S. M. Jimmy Hayword has got hold of a soft job; grocer's assistant will be rather a new line, eh?

The cooker has been a very great boon especially the last time in the line: it is invaluable. Please write to Pontlottyn for me I can't write much.

Thanks for cutting: I knew Davies very well and he passed me after being wounded. He was walking down quite cheerfully to get it attended to. A piece of shell caught him in the side of the neck. He said "Hello Williams, I've got a bit this time". There was another chap wounded and also one killed by the same shell. We were all surprised to hear that Davies had died in hospital because it looked quite a healthy case for 'Blighty' ". It was very rough luck (he was married too).

Well, that's all for now.

**CONTAY – 21st November 1916.**

Dear Mother and Father,

I am still at the rest camp from which I last wrote that I shall probably rejoin the Battalion in a few days as I am by this time practically alright. I cannot get any letters all parcels here so I expect there will be several awaiting me when I get back. I hear that the Battalion are now out of it and I will get a good long rest. At this present camp we are under canvas. The weather is none too warm but we sleep all right as each man has three blankets.

The last letter from you was dated 7th Nov. Lila's socks were very well knitted and they are very warm. There is another good point about them too; they are big enough to put on over another pair when the feet get rather cold. The other pair you sent was good but they've got to take second place to the khaki pair.

Please put in a couple of good pencils in the next parcel - one black and one indelible: also a few envelopes. By the way, my Welsh cakes soon disappear when I get a parcel - of all the fellows seem very fond of them so I've got to lie low sometimes. You wrote sometime ago that Quaint had a plum pudding idea; how is it going to work?

Your loving son,  
David

**NEUILLY HOSPITAL 24th November 1916**

Dear Mother and Father,

Please don't be alarmed at the scribble and fancy that I've been imbibing rather too freely or anything equally silly. The fact is that I am trying to write with gloves on, as the weather is rather slightly cold.

Today I got back from the rest camp and rejoined the Battalion, I am now quite well. The Battalion is now miles and miles away from the line and are really out for a rest this time I'd think.

It won't be a case of "Christmas in the trenches" this time at any rate. So your mind may rest easy for a month or two. Thank you very much for your letter, which was enclosed in the parcel. I did not receive all the contents of the parcel this time as it arrived while I was at the rest camp. At my instructions (before leaving) it was opened and the eatables divided amongst the section. It is quite impossible to forward parcel so this is the usual procedure. The contents were enjoyed and appreciated

by the fellows and they kept the oxo, pomade, etc for my return. Regarding the girl guides: they seem to me to be making a big thing of the plum pudding affair and the circular is very elaborate. By the way, this letter I wrote to the Powells was really written to the kiddies and addressed to the Misses Powell so I can plead "not guilty" this time. I suppose Sybil could be included but I am not likely to write again so don't be alarmed.

By the way, I am very short of envelopes so please send out a dozen or so when next you write please: I've got plenty of writing paper. Our billet this time is a very comfortable barn. Of course, the weather now is rather chilly but this barn is well preserved and free from draughts so I think we shall be alright.

I must now conclude as it is drawing near to bedtime: I'm writing by candlelight. So for the present goodbye

Your loving son,  
David

### **M. G. SECTION D. COY - Sunday, 3rd December 1916**

Dear Mother and Father,

Yesterday I received your letter dated 24th November and the one containing Veale's letter I have not received. The last letter I had, was the one contained in the parcel, which I have replied to. Our mails have been very irregular lately; there is talk of submarine trouble in the Channel.

I cannot understand why so much of my letter was crossed out as I always thought that I kept on the right side of Mr.Censor. As the letter was written three weeks ago I cannot remember what music contained.

I had a letter from Veale yesterday in which he mentioned that he had written to you and received a reply. My last letter to him has evidently not reached its destination. I am writing to him today.

I received Mrs B. Jones parcel intact as it only arrived the day previous to my return.

I have not met Veale here nor am I likely to, as everything is worked in Divisions out here. Lloyd of Abercanaid I see very frequently as he is in another company of this Battalion and is billeted about 200 yards away. The oxo cubes are very good but please don't send any more tea tablets, as they are not worth buying. They are not at all a success. Several fellows have received them here but no one can make more than an amber

coloured tea-flavoured liquid with more sediment than taste. My cooker re-fills are being used up. Please send in your next parcel a tin of solidified methylated spirit, which may be obtained at Boots. Your parcels contained just what I want in the way of eatables: I've got sufficient oxo just now.

I've often wondered whether you received Bennet's photograph from Birmingham; I should like to know. Bennett is now in hospital somewhere in England suffering from pneumonia. He was at the same rest camp with me for a few days.

That's all for just now

Love,  
David

P. S. I did not know the Porthcawl M.C. man.

**France- 4th December 1916**

Dear Mother and Father,

Since writing to you last night I have received two of your letters. One dated 29 Nov came today by post and the other 15th Nov, which I thought had gone astray, was discovered by the sergeant in his pocket. It arrived during my absence and was forgotten when I returned.

Thank you for forwarding Veale's letter. He has evidently not received the last I wrote.

While I was at the rest camp the Battalion were in the line. They took no part in the advance but remained in the trenches as reserves.

There is very little difference between being in the M. G. section and in the platoon. I still carry a rifle and in an advance would have an additional amount of ammunition to carry for the Lewis Gun. I may be kept in the section or I may be put back in the platoon as a reserve gunner. In point of danger there is no difference.

I sent a letter acknowledging the parcel, which contained the socks. Haven't you received it?

There is no need at all for you to worry about my health. I feel absolutely fit again now. A cold is a very, very rare occurrence and I have not had the least sign of any trouble with the kidneys. Should there be anything wrong, there is a medical officer attached to the Battalion and there is a sick parade every morning.

I think that I have dealt with all the points in your first letter. The second is the one written in a hurry.

Thanks very much for writing so often. I will try to write a few more now during our rest also one to the Y.P.S. We are in strict training although at "rest".

Your loving son,  
David

P.S. Written in the twilight.

## **To The Park Y.P.S.**

**Somewhere in France, 5th Dec1916**

Dear friends,

I am afraid that you would all be rather disappointed if I did not give you an account of some of my active service experience so if you will all do your best to help me I will try to give you an account of a certain night which is typical of many others. It is rather a difficult task to explain things in sufficient detail to enable you to understand fully but if you use a little imagination I will do my best to produce a pen picture for you.

Whenever a Battalion is holding the front line there is always another Battalion in support in the second line, and still another Battalion in comparative safety some distance behind. The latter is usually spoken of as Brigade Reserve. At the time of which I speak, in April last year, my Battalion was thus in reserve and at a place known as Henin. It had once been a village but as it happened to be situated on the ground from which the Germans made their big retreat last year it had the misfortune to be blown up before we arrived there. So if you can again try to imagine a mass of ruins, with the foundations just distinguishable to show you where houses once stood; gardens full of pretty flowers peeping through a litter of bricks and stones, iron gateways and remains of red tiled roofs.

Owing to the hospitality of the Germans we are unable to make use of the village for billeting purposes so our homes consisted of the bivouacs, erected by ourselves in a field nearby, of sandbags, wooden

posts and waterproof sheets. Each bivouac contained four men. They could hardly be called comfortable in the true sense of the word but they were at least dry inside and on a cold dark night when the rain was pouring down I am afraid you would hardly believe me that we were only too delighted to receive an order of turnout on parade with leather jerkins and box respirators. Well, I can't blame you for being doubtful of my veracity because we are really and truly annoyed although that was quite a detail as it had not the slightest effect for turn out we did, -every man. And if there is such a night when it is impossible to see your hand before your face it was so then, and the cold rain was driven biting into the face by a sharp wind. The party was in the charge of an officer, a second lieutenant. With the aid of an electric torch he soon ascertained that we were all present and we formed up preparatory to moving off. By this time we had discovered that we were out for a night of it and the prospect was not particularly pleasant.

Our job was to dig a portion of a communication trench between the first and second lines of trenches, under the direction of the R.E.s (Royal Engineers). Our officer's orders were to report at the R.E. dump to pick up tools and guides, after which we were to proceed to the ground marked out for digging. Our leader had been given the Map reference of RE dump but owing to the nature of the night he had to rely almost entirely on his memory to find it. And we wandered about for several hours along muddy roads to sounds made by 50 pairs of boots as they splashed their way through mud and water. Can you imagine us trudging along cold and wet to the skin, saying nothing but thinking a good many unwriteable thoughts? Our officer led the way enquiring any place where a light gleamed but he had little success. Then there was our sergeant major, the great unapproachable man, always a pattern of smartness and efficiency on parade, now with little to help you to recognise him or distinguish him from any one of the rest of us.

Can you imagine one of the few cheerful ones trying to strike up in a very mournful voice, some sort of tune "there's a long long trail awinding", to be greeted with a chorus, very impolitely "to put a sock in it": then another cheerful voice would commence enlarging on the delights of a comfortable armchair before a roaring fire. This voice would be drained in a chorus of most awful threats, which I really believe could have been carried out had he not desisted.

If all the nasty things we wished for the R.E.s that night had really happened to them they would have been very miserable because we were all in a most an unenviable state of mind and body, but eventually we found the place we were looking for. It was situated in the ruins of what had once been a habitable dwelling in a nice little village. By this time the rain had stopped, which was something to be thankful for, although if it had continued our clothes could hardly of absorbed any more water. We were soaked to the skin.

A few of the R.E.s were, very reluctantly, brought out from the cellar that formed their home and we were handed out picks and shovels to aid to our discomfort. Then followed a long walk along a winding trench to the scene of our labour. But owing to the time taken already in finding our destination we had only a few hours left. We should have to start back before dawn as this area would be under German observation by day and all movement of troops restricted.

We had just started our digging when the enemy opened their nightly bombardment on our lines and their shells came whistling over. Fortunately nothing burst very near us but we never know when it might. The result was that every one dug-in more and more furiously in order to provide cover for himself. It is very curious what energy any man can put into his work when it is done to provide a haven of safety for himself. The cold and wet and misery were almost forgotten in the desire to dig-in for better cover.

Hard work made the time pass more quickly but we were nonetheless glad when we got the order to stop work and make our way back, hand in our tools, and set off on the return march to our bivouacs.

That night the German gunners must have had a good supply of ammunition: he was searching out our batteries and we should have to pass quite a number of them on our way so we were in for a rough time. We could hear the constant screaming of shells as they passed overhead and the explosions of our own shells as they replied to the enemy bombardment. One lucky shot landed on an ammunition dump not too far away. You can hardly imagine the result. The dump consisting of several hundred shells immediately bursts into flame with a horrific explosion, there was pandemonium. It happens so suddenly that every one was properly scared and there was an immediate stampede to get away. There was still a long way to go so we soon slowed down, steadied our pace, and got into marching formation once more. Fortunately no one was any the worse for the experience, except perhaps a little out of breath and just as day was dawning we struggled back to camp.

After a good drink of hot tea all around, we crawled into our bivouacs and slept until the sun was well up in the sky.

What about our wet clothes? You ask. OH!! They dried on us.

Best wishes,  
David Williams

PS. I hope you find the enclosed picture of our enemy interesting!



**Written on back...**  
**“A picture I found in the pocket of a poor dead German”**



**France- 11th December 1916**

Dear Mother and Father,

I have today received both your letter and parcel, which have been sent very quickly this time. I believe that the parcel mails are being sent in record time just now to prevent a stoppage over Christmas. Thank you all very much for the contents, I have already sampled the cakes and mince pies and found them excellent.

There is not much news to give you; we are still in the same little village and the usual daily routine of training is being carried on.

Please do not send any soap, oxo or pomade in the next parcel as I have sufficient for a few weeks. I thought that I had answered all the questions put in your letters, especially as regards parcels. I am sorry if I have not done so. I see that things are in a bad way with you in England. I had no idea that food was so scarce and so dear. Parliament has got itself into a bit of a muddle I see.

If it were possible to obtain leave, I should certainly jump at the first opportunity of getting it. Leave is certainly being granted and the names are taken according to the length of active service. At present the men who have served out here for 17 months, with no previous leave, are being sent. There is one of our Section, at present on leave, who came out with the original Battalion 17 months ago. So you see it is not for the lack of trying that I cannot get any leave.

I have received the girl guides' parcel but have not yet written to them! I acknowledged it by a field postcard. They have been very busy writing letters during the past week so my correspondence was very backward. I think I have written about a dozen letters.

I cannot think of any more just now. I will certainly write to Mr. Thomas.

Fondest love to all.

I am sending a card with this letter as it may reach a day or two earlier.

Your loving son,  
David

**France- 15th December 1916**

Dear Lila

Thank you very much for your long letter, which I received two days ago. Please don't think that I have forgotten my dear little sister. I am thinking of you all during every moment of the day. You little realised the yearnings that have to be suppressed when I think of all that separates us.

I am sorry that I have not written to you before but remember that whenever I write to Dad I am writing to all of you so that every one of my letters is to you and Mama as much as to Dad. I should very much like to spend Christmas with you, but it is quite impossible. I am anxious to see you as you are to see me, and if there was the slightest chance I would grasp it.

I am very glad to hear that you have been baptised, you have decided very young but I am sure you will never regret it. Sometimes you will find it very hard to keep all the promises that you have made but you will always have strengthened guidance from God above. I would do my best to get a few contributions for your autograph album but you must remember that this Battalion is far different from the old R. F. there are all types of fellows and many of them have had little education.

I am very sorry that I forgot your birthday this time. During the week previous to that date I was in the trenches and it was on the 10th that we were relieved. On the date of your birthday we spent the greater part of the day in marching back away from the line. Still we have Christmas before us, so don't give up hope.

Your affectionate brother,  
David

**France-20th December  
1916.**

Dear Mother and Father,

I have no news to give you, so I am sending just a few lines to let you know I am quite well. There is not much excitement in this little French village, the weather is rather cold and frosty but we've had no real winter weather yet except just one fall of snow.

I sent a registered letter to you two days ago, which I hope you received ere this. The contents hardly need any further explanation. I hope you will be pleased with them.

The mail has been delayed somewhat lately; my last letter from home was Lila's letter of the eighth. Mrs Richardson of Edinburgh wrote on the same date that she was sending on a Scotch bannock, and Mrs Thompson wrote on the 11th also sending a parcel. I have not yet received either.

Yesterday I sent you a Battalion Christmas card. The Brigadier gave each man one of these and they may also be purchased at two and a half pence each. It is a rather neat card and very appropriate, it would make a rather good souvenir.

Your loving son,  
David

**France- 26th December 1916**

Dear Mother and Father,

Thanks very much for your parcel which I received quite safely yesterday morning. I also received your letter of the 18th at the same time. The mails have been very small lately and many long expected parcels have not arrived. All the fellows have the same complaint. So I suppose there must be a stoppage. Is rather queer that I've received your parcel before those from Edinburgh and Buckhurst Hill. Although it was posted later. The contents are all very acceptable; thanks very much.

In reply to your questions, I have not chummed up at all with any particular fellow but I am quite friendly with most of our chaps; particularly with those of our draft. There are no Welsh men in our section, except myself. The section numbers 30.

I should like you to send out the watch. Please put it in a small tin and packed round tightly with paper then send in a registered envelope for which you will receive a receipt over the Post Office counter. Registered envelopes may be obtained of any size at the GPO Tydvil's Well may only stop the small size.

As regards Malcolm James, I find, by the address you sent, that he must be in a village about two miles away from here. His regiment is in the same brigade as ourselves so he has been within a few miles of me ever since he came out. Also our Battalion relieved the Fusiliers when we were up at the line. I shall endeavour to pay Malcolm a visit as soon as possible. I may have to get a pass as we are only allowed to go a certain distance from the Battalion headquarters. Everyone has to be in billets by 8pm so that our evenings are not very long and are mostly spent in the billet. We are allowed about the village, and at several houses, coffee is sold, and occasionally one may get a little feed, such as fried eggs, bread-and-butter, cakes, etc. generally, however the cottages are too small to cope with any demand for anything except coffee.

I hope you received my registered letter in time for Christmas morning.

I've had a parcel from Mrs. Hughes and letters from May Price and Amy.

Your loving son,  
David

P.S. My next letter will be an account of Christmas for the Y. P. S.

**France- 30th December 1916**

**To The Park Y.P.S.**

Dear Friends,

A few lines from one of your fragments in France to let you know that I am quite well and to wish you all the compliments of the season and success of the Society during the New Year. I trust that I shall be able to rejoin you once again as the dawn of another year approaches us.

I should like to give you just a short pen picture of Christmas days programme out here. But you must bring your imagination into play and then perhaps you will understand it a little more clearly.

Sunrise dawns upon a peaceful little French village surrounded on all sides by open fields for miles around -- the monotony of which is occasionally broken by groups of tall trees and open roads. This morning there is no bright sunshine for Father Sol is hidden by masses of clouds, which are being hurried from one horizon to another. A very strong wind is blowing which whistles through the bare branches of the trees and threatens to bring a rainstorm in its wake. Owing to the lateness of the season, the stillness of the village is unbroken by any sound of toil until the day is properly light and then suddenly above the sighing of the wind is heard the clear shrill notes of a bugle. The call is a well-known reveille and heralds the dawn of another Christmas Day.

Christmas is a wonderful time and for over a week great preparations had been made in order that the men of the Battalion stationed in this nameless village should have a good time. Before the last notes of the bugle call have died away there are sudden signs of movement in various barns and outhouses. Brown bundles spread about over the straw resolve themselves into figures of men who immediately commenced folding up the blankets, which covered them. Then follows a good deal of cleaning up and polishing as everyone likes to appear smart on the greatest holiday of the year. For one day all the dangers and horrors of war are forgotten and peace and goodwill take their place. Good fare had been provided for the boys in khaki, and for just one day the meals are being served up in some style. Each company has been allotted a large dining room in which the Battalion carpenters have fixed up long tables and benches. There are also plates provided so that each company was able to sit down properly to the meals (I mention this as the usual method of having a meal is to use the floor as a seat and eat out of a mess tin). The fare provided was very good and there was a plentiful supply of everything. Breakfast consisted of tea, bread and butter, and bacon and eggs. Dinner was the big event of the day and the menu consisted of roast port, vegetables and Christmas pudding followed by lemonade, fruit, nuts and cigarettes also some light French beer.

The afternoon was taken up by sports; and excellent entertainment

was provided in the evening by the Brigade Pierrot troop. The concert hall was a very large barn in which a stage had been erected and the whole place suitably decorated. The members of the Pierrot troop were officers and men of the brigade, and all were suitably dressed. They had a very good programme and I am doubtful whether any professional party could have given a better entertainment. The barn was crowded with a very enthusiastic audience and there was no hesitation in responding to the various choruses of the popular songs.

This ended the day's programme. The authorities had done their best and everyone had also helped in various ways to make it a successful day. Everything had worked out successfully and every man had spent a very happy day. Even the weather had been very lenient, although the dawn threatened a stormy day. There had been several showers but no bad weather. Christmas Day was over and on the following day the usual programme of training would continue. The war is not yet over so we must prepare for the coming Spring. We must all pray that soon the conflict may be brought to a successful termination and that a lasting peace may follow.

Best wishes to you all,  
David Williams

**1917**

**France- 3rd January 1917**

Dear Mother and Father,

I will only write just a short letter tonight, as I haven't much time. I received your letter of this 27th, two days ago. Thank you very much. I have not yet had the parcel. I hope that you received the registered letter ere now.

Yesterday I received the parcel from Buckhurst Hill, and it was a jolly good one. It had been sent by rail, hence the delay. A parcel of any weight may be sent by rail, addressed c/o. the military forwarding officer, Southampton. It is cheaper than the post but takes longer to get here.

I shall now make inquiries about the Commission. I have seen Malcolm and he looks very well. I walked three miles to the village where R. F. are billeted, and when I got there I discovered that he was on the signalling course in our own village, where I found him two days later.

I am quite well and in the same place.

Your loving son,  
David

P.S. The Edinburgh parcel has not arrived, so I have written to them.

**France- 10th January 1917**

Dear Mother and Father,

Am sorry to say that your parcel has not yet arrived. Poor old Turkey I feel sorry for him, as I expect he will not be very pleased over his long journey. The last letter I had from you was dated 29 December so I expect there is also a letter in transit as well. The Edinburgh parcel has not arrived so I have given up hope of its arrival now. In answer to some questions in your last letter I wrote to Mr. Thomas as soon as possible after receiving your parcel. I told you I had met Malcolm, I expect he has

not returned to the Fusiliers village. I have not seen them since.

For the present nothing can be done about the commission. I've made enquiries of the sergeant major and find that the C.O. will only recommend non-commissioned officers (i.e. men with stripes) who have been in action. I can fulfil the latter qualification but not the former. Also, as I am now in the M G section, there is no hope of a stripe as they have sufficient NCOs, and I am one of the latest additions.

Please don't send any underclothing; but a pair of socks occasionally would be very welcome. Any cheap old things will do, as they will only be thrown away eventually. Also some old rags or handkerchiefs.

I should like you to remember these points when you send anything. Everything kept by me has to be carried in my pack on my back (there is no kit bag) or else thrown away. If the things are new they add to the weight; old things can be used and thrown away. There is very little chance of washing any clothing. I've not put it very clearly but I think you'll understand. Mind, I don't wish to find any fault with your parcels, they have all been alright. Now, however, as winter is here, you might be tempted to send warm stuff, which I could not carry. If I want anything I will certainly ask.

The Nonconformist Chaplain has at last discovered the 12th Middlesex. He has been attached to the brigade since they came out and he explained to us that for 15 months he tried to get nonconformist's in this Battalion to attend his service but was unsuccessful in his efforts so he gave up hope. Hearing that the Battalion was now mostly composed of new men he approached the CO and announced a nonconformist parade a few weeks ago. He was agreeably surprised to find some response and began to take an interest in the Battalion. Last Sunday there was an evening service as well as a morning one, and there was also a communion service, the usual attendance is about 50. You may be sure that I am a regular attender. The Chaplain, a Wesleyan, is a very nice man. He holds services in three villages every Sunday, going from one to another on horseback.

PS. There are two other M.G. fellows who have filled in forms and gone before the CO. They are in the same position as myself. All they got was that the matter is being held over (indefinitely).

I can't think of anything further. I am quite well. As regards weather; it has been rather wet for the last few weeks, but not particularly cold. We only had one fall of snow. Today, however, it is colder and we've had more snow.

I hope you are all quite well. How did my letters to the YPS and Girl Guides go?

Your loving son,  
David



*On the back of the previous letter*

**13th January 1917**

I've been forced to keep this letter for three days as we are on the march. Letters are not collected while on the move. Parcel not yet received.

**France- 19th January 1917**

Dear Mother and Father,

I expect that you will be wondering why you have received no letter for me for a week or so before the last green 'un. But I think I dated that letter the 10th, and added a P.S. on the 13th. Even then I missed the post collection and could not get it sent for another four days. So you see it is not exactly my own fault. I wrote that letter the night before moving and we had three days marching, two days walking, and a day's bus ride. We stayed at various villages en-route for sleeping accommodation. There was a YMCA at the village where we had a days rest.

So you see that our long rest is over, and we are now in huts at a small village a safe distance behind the line. Ere you receive this I shall have been into the trenches and probably out again. Winter has now set in, the snow being now several inches deep all around, and the trips to the trenches are short in duration. Also there is no need for any worry on your part as this portion of the line is at present very quiet. Fritz hasn't got any ammunition to spare whereas our guns are pounding away all day and all night.

The parcel has not yet arrived.

Referring to your letters of the eighth and the eleventh, I'm afraid that the commission application will have to stand over for a time. You had better send the watch, I think. Thanks for the news cuttings. I don't know Marianne Evans husband, but I think he was an old flame. Ivor Cule was the favoured one while I was at Pentre. Trevor Morgan I think was at school with me. I am sorry to learn of his death.

Thanked Lila for her letter. I cannot get a photo taken out here. The village inhabitants are usually very primitive and there is no living

for any photographer. Could you get a cheap postcard photo of your three and send it to me?

I cannot write any more now, so will write to you again soon.

I have received a parcel from Aunt Mair.

Your loving son,

David

PS. 27/1/17 Been in trenches. Now in reserve. Received Christmas parcel. Unable to post before.

**France- 28th January 1917**

Dear Mother and Father,

At last I've got an opportunity of writing, I expect you've been wondering at the delay. I've really being unable to get a letter sent previously as we have been in the trenches. Yesterday we came out and we are staying at some huts now in reserve.

This morning I received the watch and letter quite safely. The cover looks quite strong and I believe I shall have no more trouble with it. Thank you very much.

I received the Christmas parcel a few days ago. The cake and pudding were excellently preserved. As for the other, well! It had turned green with envy at the rest. The cake and pudding were very good and went down very well, I quite enjoyed them.

With reference to your note re. Knitting Guild, I have quite sufficient woollen stuff, thanks. If they have too much of course, or if they are very pressing I could easily find an acceptor. That's as regards scarfs, etc. A few pairs of socks would always be useful. Especially during winter. I am very glad to hear that you have such a large number of scholars before the church.

There are no hospitals near here so I shall not see Nurse Smith I'm afraid.

As regards writing a short article to the Record, I may have a try by and by. At present there is no time. But I'm afraid it won't be much good.

Yesterday I met Willie Thomas of Abergavenny here. We were marching along and he suddenly "spotted" me and rushed up. He's in the R.E.s. I hope to see him again before we leave here.

I had a parcel yesterday from Swansea.  
That's all just now.

Your loving son,  
David

P.S. I have not heard from Veale for some time.

**France- 3rd February 1917**

Dear Mother and Father,

Just a few lines to let you know that I am quite well. I am writing from the same place as I wrote my last letter; that is some huts many miles behind the line.

There is no news to give you now, and I accidentally destroyed your last letter, so I hardly know what to write.

I don't think that I received a letter since I acknowledged the parcel; in fact we have received no mail for the past two days.

The cake was very nice and I quite enjoyed it, so much so that there is now nothing left except the tin. I will keep the Bible as I only had a testament previously and I will read the little book and pass it on. The socks were very acceptable and the wool. I had a parcel sent from Swansea about a week ago containing Welsh cakes, chocolates, etc. I also had a letter from Mrs. Daniel Davies of Pentre. Mr. Davies has decided to accept the call to Liverpool and they will probably be leaving the Rhondda early in April.

Auntie Let wrote me a nice letter; to which I have replied.

I've not heard from Veale for some time but I am expecting a reply to a letter of wrote several days ago. That's all just now.

Your loving son,  
David

France- 13th February 1917

Dear Mother and Father,

A letter once more just to let you know how I am getting on, and to reply to your letter of the 5th. The parcel has also arrived thanks very much. The cakes were fine, and the tea and sugar very acceptable, just as I wanted it. I was surprised to receive another pudding now, but it will be enjoyed alright, you bet.

Since I sent you the field card I have paid another visit to the trenches. We came out on the night of the 11th, arriving at our rest huts at 2am yesterday morning. You will judge from the date of the card that our stay in the trenches was very short indeed this time. I will try to write a short account as you suggested, if I can get a few spare hours, before long.

I've had a letter from J. L. I expect that you will be receiving a visit from him shortly as he expects leave.

I was in the middle of a letter to you this afternoon when the Post Corporal bowled in for letters, so I hurriedly thrust the half-written epistle into a "green un" I do have doubtless received it ere this.

Since then I have also received your letter of the eighth with the news cuttings telling of the wonderful doings of the Powell family.

In reply to your two letters: I did not receive the Edinburgh parcel. I have heard nothing of Jones or Lewis for a very long time. I received Mac's parcel all right and also I received one from W. B. Jones yesterday. I will not answer your "trench" questions just now, but will try to give you an account later. As regards the big German dugouts, we get a chance of living in them sometimes. When we left the front line two or three weeks ago we were put in reserve for a few days at the old well-remembered place; Thiepval, where we lived in these famous deep dugouts "made in Germany". They are very well constructed and to go down into some of them is just like descending a mine by a stairway; they are so deep.

I'm sorry to say that I have not written to Uncle Tom. I really forgot it entirely.

These huts are well constructed of wood and corrugated iron, with a wooden floor, and containing a big stove in each. They are very warm

and comfortable.

I think that I will now be allowed to tell you that the little village where we spent Christmas was almost on the site of the Battle of Crecy and about ten miles from the town of Abbeville. In fact we saw the old mill from which the English king is supposed to have watched the valour of his son, the Black Prince. The rest of the story you must look up. I've forgotten it.

Many thanks for the parcel, the cakes were fine.

Your loving son,  
David

**France- 20th February 1917**

Dear Mother and Father,

I have come out of the line again and we are now staying in some huts well behind and quite nearer to the place where we were at previously. It is very probable that we shall now move back again for a few weeks rest.

The thaw has set in out here and it was very wet and muddy in the trenches.

I don't intend to write very much to night as I've got a slight headache, so I will get in early between the blankets. There is a tot of rum each to be issued to night, which I expect will put me right by the morning. It is brought round just as we go to bed. Also I have only a tiny piece of candle left so I cannot continue long if I wished to. By the way, please send me a few candles occasionally, as they are difficult to get out here and also very dear.

We've had a very big job cleaning up today as all clothes, equipment, etc., were coated with dried mud, as for rifles, Lewis guns and ammunition drums. It is an awful job, but it has got to be done.

I will write to you again very soon, when we get properly settled.

Your loving son,  
David

PS. Enclosed is a photo. Unfortunately you won't find me on it as I was persuaded to hold the camera!



**Written on the back....**  
**“A snap taken by myself of some of the lads behind the lines”**

**France- 28th February 1917**

Dear Mother and Father,

I am writing from the same place as my last letter was written at, but we may have to move from here at any time. At present we are very unsettled and there is little spare time as we are doing long daily fatigues; mostly road making. When (?) the war is over I shall never again be short of a job. Can you imagine me in a few years time clad in moleskins, grey shirt and red necktie picking away at the road or munching a "doorstep" of bread and a piece of cheese. And that's not the only job I can apply for by a long way. I think there must be dozens.

I am glad to say that I am quite fit. There is not a great deal of room here as the huts are very crowded, accommodation being limited. But still all these are mere details the vital question of the day out here is "are we winning". We've just heard today (you've read it in the newspapers before reading this) that the men up in the front line can't find old Fritz. It seems that he has gone back to Berlin or at least part of the way. If he begins tricks like this, and continues so, we shall have no-one to fight against; which would be rather a nuisance, don't you think? Think of all these men out here with nothing to do, and also think of the terrific waste of munitions. Besides, Hayden Davies hasn't finished

training yet so the war mustn't end for a time. (That's all rubbish and I'll stop)

I've seen the Abergavenny man several times lately. He lives only about half a mile from here.

I had a letter from Frank Veale a few days ago, he is quite well and out resting, he wishes to be remembered to you.

The mail must have been held up a great deal lately as very few letters are being delivered. I have not received any of your letters since the one dated 5th February. (I know you must have written some). Did I tell you that I met W. Thomas a few weeks ago out here? It was on the outskirts of the little village of Aveluy, which was rather badly smashed up in the early days of the war. I mean Hartley's brother. I think that's all just now.

Your loving son,  
David

**France-8th March 1917**

Dear Mother and Father,

I am writing this under cover of a green envelope. By the same post I am also sending an ordinary envelope containing the article promised you for the Record. The short note sent with it you need not take any notice of, it was written purely for the benefit of the officer, as I did not wish him to think it was for publication. I do not know the censorship rules for articles dealing with war matter. I sent this in a white envelope just to see whether it will be censored in the ordinary way, if he rubs any other out, I'm afraid it will be useless for your purpose. Also I expect that the "Record" editor would have to get it censored again at Cardiff before publication.

The watch is still all right.

The letters are being collected. I will continue and post tomorrow.

Love,  
David

**France-8th March 1917**

Dear Father,

Enclosed is the promised article for "The Record".

I am sorry it is so badly written but please excuse, as I've no time to rewrite it. I should suggest that you might ask Mr Reeves to do me the favour of typewriting it as you can't send it in so badly written. If you find any mistakes, please correct, and also mark off paragraphs, as I'm afraid mine have all run into one.

But really, Dad, I don't think much of this article myself. I could write it much better if I had the facilities. I hope you will not be disappointed with it, but really if you do not think much of it, please do not let it go any further. Don't think I shall be disappointed, because I would prefer to let it drop than make it a failure. I should like your candid opinion.

A few days ago I received your letter of the 28 February.

I hope that your Special Meetings have been a great success. I am very pleased to hear that you are having such a good re-awakening in Park. To receive in forty-eight at one time is very good. Carry on with the good work, and may GOD send you continued success.

You cannot send me anything better in the parcels than you have been previously sending, except that I should like a small tin of "Harrison's Cimo Bane " lice powder. It is very good stuff and being a powder is better than the pomade as the latter irritates the skin a great deal.

Referring to your letter, we have not a great deal of spare time in the evenings. There are a good many things to be done. And we usually turn in before eight o'clock. We have a lot of cleaning up of equipment to do, as they are almost as particular as in England. There is also the Lewis Gun paraphernalia to be kept clean. I spend a good deal of time letter writing and when I get a little spare time for reading I have one or two weekly novels that Evie sends out.

I have abandoned the idea of a commission, at least for the present, but if I find there are any hopes I shall see about it.

A few weeks ago I had a letter from Auntie Let. She was very anxious to send me something, if I would mention anything. Well, I saw by the tone of her letters that she would be offended if I didn't. So I tried to give something very easy, and mentioned a few cigarettes, and added that if she happened to be cake making she could make me a little one extra. Well, I had a letter a few days ago saying that she was leaving St Albans. She had tried hard to get cake flour and sugar but it had to be especially ordered and she failed to get it. I had no idea that things were in that state, how do you manage?

I am awfully sorry to find that I inadvertently caused her so much trouble.



She asked me send a reply through you as you would know our movements. It is a great pity that she has to move again and, if you see her, please tell her not to worry on my account. She has sent me a small parcel but it has not arrived yet. I will write when I receive it. Well, I've written quite a long letter and I can't think of anything else. I am quite well, and staying in the same place as when I wrote last.

PS I enclose Mrs. Thompson's letter, which you sent me sometime ago. Thanks for sending it. She was very good to write.

Love,  
David

### **Article for "The Record"**

#### **Outpost duty in winter**

At the beginning of the war almost all the public hoardings were covered with great recruiting posters, many of which brought fame to the artist who painted them. One, especially, has been recalled to my memory many times out here, although it is a long time since I have seen it. The poster I've referred to represents a soldier standing on French soil, with one hand shading his eyes, which are strained forward to look for reinforcements. Underneath are the words, which represent the thoughts of the soldier, "will they never come!"

These words recalled the poster to my mind some weeks ago as I stood in a portion of a broken trench with some companions. The time was a few hours after sunset and as it was in the middle of winter the dreary waste around simply showed up as a big stretch of greyish white as far as the darkness permitted one to distinguish between earth and sky. We had been in that spot for four days, and that night the relief party was expected and as we waited for their appearance, at the same time the sentry keeping the usual night the lookout we several times asked ourselves the same question, "will they never come?"

At last we hear the Sentry's challenge and everyone prepares to gather together his belongings for instant departure. But tonight we are doomed to disappointment for word comes round that the arrivals are a patrol from the support lines. "No relief tonight, boys!" says the officer in charge of the patrol, "they have been delayed so we shall have to wait another day". Of course, everyone is very annoyed, but Army discipline has taught us that grumbling is quite useless, so we settled down to the idea of another 24 hours of outpost duty here.

At this part of the front line there are no such things as trenches. The actual trenches of the British and Germans are a long distance apart so each side puts forward outposts in a line, at a distance varying, perhaps, from 100 to 200, or more, yards apart. The number of men placed on each post varies, and at night the lines of outposts are patrolled at irregular intervals by a party from the support trenches to see that everything is in order. As we do not know the exact position of the enemy outposts a strict lookout as to be kept and nothing is done to give away our own position to the enemy. By day everyone has to remain hidden, and as there are no connecting trenches, no patrol can be done during the day and all food has to be taken up during the night. An outpost position may be quite comfortable for the holders, or it may be quite the reverse, according to its nature. If the outpost is situated in a portion of an old enemy trench it may contain an old dug out for a shelter of some sort: on the other hand the post may be merely an old shell hole with no protection at all. In the latter case the outpost party may be taken back to the support lines just before daybreak, and posted again as soon as darkness falls to prevent observation.

The particular post, of which I write, was situated in a portion of a disused trench, in which a very indifferent sort of shelter had been roughly constructed out of corrugated metal sheets, sandbags of earth and waterproof rubber sheeting. Our party was of ten, one being the NCO in charge, and we pass the time together rather pleasantly. Our quarters were somewhat cramped as the shelter seems likely to provide elbowroom for no more than a mere half-dozen. The nights were very cold, but a fire was out of the question, as it would reveal our situation. It was dangerous at night even to smoke or show any light. Once our position was discovered it would immediately be made untenable by the enemy artillery. Daytime was very wearisome as we had to move about as little as possible and pass the time as best we could, talking, reading, writing or trying to snatch a little sleep. Rations were brought up during the night but the soup and the tea were quite cold when they arrived and what should have been cold water was a handful of ice. However, with the aid of a few "Tommy Cookers" we were able to get something warmed to drink but as our supply of cookers was very limited the ice was allowed to remain until the warmer weather released it from its imprisoned state to provide a drink for some future inhabitants of our post.

The greater part of the night was spent in doing sentry duty, which is far from being pleasant on a dark frosty night in midwinter. The sentry stands with his hands on his rifle, ready for action, gazing across a dreary expanse of snow covered shell holes, and every minute his imagination plays tricks with his eyes so that every dark speck shown up against the whiteness of the snow seems to take on life and human shape and a single hour seems to lengthen out to several.

The last day seems to be the longest of all, and we were all very glad when darkness fell once more. That night we were not disappointed; the promised relief arrived and we were all very glad that our stay in the line on outpost duty was over. We went back along several miles of tortuous trenches, and about midnight arrived at our destination; some very comfortable huts where cheerful fires burned, hot tea was provided, and bundles of blankets awaited our use. Only one who has experienced it can know of the joy of the first night spent out of the trenches and also of the enjoyment of the freedom of movement on the following day.

**France- 9th April 1917**

Dear Mother and Father,

This is to follow the field card in acknowledgement of the parcel. It arrived rather quickly but had not received very delicate handling in the post. Consequently the cake was in a rather crumbly condition and the Welsh cake slightly broken. However, it all went down with much enjoyment. There was very, very little eaten by anyone else and I am much wiser now than I used to be. The shirt is very acceptable as I can do with the new one just now. It is very good and well made, too good in fact, as it will only be handed in, in exchange for another when it gets dirty. There is a system of washing and exchange shirts and other dirty underclothing but they are not exchanged quite often enough. I've written my acknowledgement and thanks for it.

Thank you very much for the cakes, tell Ma they were excellent.

I am still in the same place as when I last wrote. The name of the village would not appear on any English map. I hope you read a hidden word in one of my letters lately. It was the name of a town, which would give some indication of the district.

In any future letters when the date is underlined keep an eye open for any errors and alterations. I've had a long letter from Evie and I've also written to him. Thank you for the papers, I've read them both through. I see that Sam Jones is taking up YMCA work. I heard also from W. Baker Jones, but he doesn't start until June or July. I may run across him then, unless the war finishes first; who knows? Is there any news of Perrott? And, by the way, what's happened to the Reverend Thomas of Pentre?

I suppose you know that McAndrew's letter contained a postal

order for two shillings. It was very kind of him. Is he being hit very hard in business? From the tone of his letter I'm inclined to think so.

As regards life here, we're having a fairly good time. The people are very good and ready to oblige. We've been paid ten francs a week since we have been here (one franc = ten pence) but it doesn't go very far with things at such a price. French bread is attainable at one franc a loaf. The French loaf is a round flat one about fifteen inches across and three inches thick. The bread is, however, very light and the loaf would hardly weigh two pounds. Eggs are attainable at our own farm at twopence halfpenny. Coffee is always one penny a glass (or small basin) and it's jolly good stuff. At one little cottage I've had several evening 'feeds'. Usually a 'feed' costing two francs consists of two fried eggs, a plate of fried potatoes (very dear now), two glasses of cafe au lait and bread and butter. It's well worth the price and in addition you sit on a nice chair in front of a good fire in the kitchen where everything is beautifully clean and polished. Also you eat off a clean plate with a knife and fork. I will! Two francs is a small price to pay for a comfortable hour and a good feed, even although the old dame makes you peel your own spuds.

Your loving son,  
David

**France- 27th July 1917**

Dear Mother and Father,

Just a few lines in reply to yours of the 16th and Lila's letter of the 18th. I am glad to hear that Tom Stephens is alright although I expect he wishes that his recovery was not quite so rapid. If he is sent to the 11th R. F. I may see him soon.

If you know any more boys who are coming out tell them to keep an eye open for the 18th Division.

I am rather surprised to hear that J. L. Jones is out here and also rather doubtful if it is correct.

I think I've told you before that the Nonconformist Chaplain of the brigade is a Wesleyan. I've had several chats with him and while we were at (*blacked out by Censor*) myself and two others spent an afternoon and evening (Sunday) at his billet. We had a very good tea there and went to the service at night. He told me once that he intended writing you a few lines. His name is Reverend Jarvis-Smith. We were unable to have any service last Sunday as we were on the move.

I have only just missed seeing Frank Veale on two or three occasions during the last week. His Division and ours seem to be making rings round one another. One day I heard that some Battalions of that Division were only a few miles away so I obtained a pass and spent the evening searching for the R. F. but could only learn that they were expected in a few days. The next day we moved and I saw one of the Middlesex Battalions in the same Division. I made enquiries of them and as result I jumped on a passing lorry and searched for a few miles without result. To cap it all we arrived at this place about seven o'clock one evening. Towards eight o'clock I entered the village and met some of the 1st RF. They were billeted only a mile or two away but it was too late to walk there as we must be in billets at 8.30. By the time we were free on the next day they had moved; probably up towards the line so this time I've been properly done in. Better luck next time I hope.

I've told you, I think, that I met John Quaint. I also met a chap from Abercanoid named Rees Beynon there. We were at the county school together and he was a great pal of W. Lloyd. He was formerly a clerk at one of Lloyd's South Wales branches (I've forgotten where) and he joined up in the original Bankers Battalion (26th R. F.), which he is still in.

By the way, I don't think I would be allowed to write to Lloyd. I've sent him a card.

This CO has turned us all into Boy Scouts today by sending the tailor round to convert each man's trousers into short 'Knicks'. So now, in order to recognise me, you must look at the last photograph and imagine the trousers cut short and a pair of bare knees sticking out between them and the tops of the puttees. This idea is much more comfortable than the old one and appearance counts for nothing here. When the weather gets colder we returned to 'long' togs once again. I can't think of anything more just now.

Your loving son,  
David

**France- 28th July 1917**

Dear Mother and Father,

I was unable to catch the post collection with this letter this morning so, as I received your letter of the 23rd this evening, I am adding another few lines. I hope to get this off tomorrow morning.

I am quite as happy and cheerful as possible under the circumstances.

I did not notice that you still use the 'G' before my regimental number. I never use it myself as it is quite unnecessary, I believe it means "General Service".

I am sorry to hear that your Sunday School treat was a disappointment and I hope you had a pleasant time on the postponed date.

Thank you very much for the 'snaps', they are very interesting and I was delighted to receive them. As far as I am able to distinguish, you all look very well.

We are here on the outskirts of a decent little town and are having quite a pleasant time. The weather has been glorious lately and today it's been very hot. My knees are quite red already.

Fondest love to all,  
David

### **57 General Hospital B. E. F. 18th August 1917**

Dear Mother and Father,

*Paragraphs blacked out by Censor*

Here I am sitting on a nice white bed attired in the suit of hospital blue having the easiest time of my life, while you, I expect are wondering whether I am going to spend the rest of my life in hospital or not. Well! You may rest easy on that point. This little scratch is going to heal very quickly -- much too quickly to suit my liking I assure you. This morning -- some time -- I am going to be photographed under x-rays in order to locate the minute fragment of Shell, which has probably buried itself somewhere underneath the skin.

By the way, did you notice that I was wounded on the 16th August, which is exactly the day when I celebrated the first anniversary of my landing in France? Rather a coincidence isn't it? Twelve months in France without any rest or leave deserves a holiday, doesn't it? Well! I'm having one too.

Also, by the way, I am being attended to by a nurse from Pontypridd and also one from Merthyr -- the latter being Nurse James, the daughter of Mr Frank T. James, whom you know very well, I think. They are all jolly fine nurses here too!

I have mislaid your last two letters somewhere so I shall have to rely a little on my poor memory. First of all I received your parcel of cake some time ago, and I acknowledged it by a field card. Also I received

three pairs of socks from the Guild.

I wrote you a short letter while we were on the way back for rest but the next day we were ordered up the line again. On the evening of the 15th we went up just behind the front-line to be ready in case of emergency when another Division made the attack on the following morning at dawn. The attack was made successfully and at 9am we were awaiting news in a trench behind. The shells had been coming over rather plentifully and just then I happened to get in the way of this tiny bit and here I am!

Your last letter told me of the death of D. Jones, another son of Mr R. T. Jones. I was very sorry to read of that as we were at the county school together and I knew him very well.

I have just looked through last week's Merthyr Express -- supplied by nurse James and I find a reference to his death there.

My address here is: "No 10 Ward, 57 General hospital, B. E. F., France", but I hear that is unusual to keep patients here for more than a few days so you needn't write until you here again from me.

PS. any letters sent to the 12th Middlesex will be returned and parcels opened and distributed among the boys.

Fondest love,  
David



Written on the back of the photo...  
"57<sup>th</sup> General Hospital, Aug 1917; I'm on 2<sup>nd</sup> row down 3<sup>rd</sup> from left"

**Boulogne, 23rd August 1917**

Dear Mother and Father,

I am getting on A1; today I have been informed by the medical officer that the wound is almost well and tomorrow I am being sent to a convalescent camp not very far away. So you see that I am progressing rather too quickly. I was hoping when I first came down here that I would be sent across the Channel but the wound was much too slight for that. However, even this is a delightful holiday and it will do me a great deal of good. Besides, in about four or five months time, I shall begin to think of leave. So don't get downhearted; be patient and I may be home to wish you a happy New Year.

Two days ago I had a visitor, whom perhaps you know. He is the Nonconformist Chaplain of two or three hospital camps here and happens to be a Baptist. He is Captain Hughes and he said you'd probably know him as the son of Hughes, Briton Ferry. We had a short chat together but as he had a big round of nonconformist patients to visit he could not stay very long. He told me that he had once been a member at Park -- before Mr. Aubrey's time, I think -- and inquired after Mr. Hayward and Mrs. Hill. That's the first Baptist chaplain I've met since I've been in France. Do you happen to know where Mr. Whitehead is or Mr. Sam Jones if they are near here or at Etaples I may see one of them. I'm doubtful if they'd be sent any further than one of these coast base camps.

You can write to me here and I will arrange to get my letters forwarded. I suppose that all my letters to the old address must have been returned; consequently I've not had a letter since the 14th from anyone.

That's all this time.

Love,  
David



Tent 8, K. company, No 7 Convalescent Depot  
Boulogne, 27th August 1917

Dear Mother and Father,

I received your first letters safely last night the photograph was quite undamaged. Thank you very much -- it is an excellent photo. I will write to a pal in the Battalion and get the other photo sent on. I was sorry to hear of the death of J. L.'s brother and I must drop Jack a line. I don't think I ever met that brother.

Now as regards the scratch. It's practically healed up and gives me no trouble at all.

A remark in your letters shows me that you've taken it rather too seriously I mean the reference to pain. Well, between you and me - I was rather surprised myself at the absence of pain. When I was hit I thought that a piece of stone had hit me- caused to fly by the explosion of the shell. A tiny trickle of blood undeceived me on that point and I cleared off to the dressing station. After that I walked a couple of miles with my equipment on. After a few hours I've felt certain amount of soreness and stiffness, of course, but not what you call pain. Well, when it was taken out I was under chloroform; so there was no pain then. In fact, it was a most delightful sensation. I got up onto the operating table and lay down and then a sort of rubber cup was put over my nose and mouth. A rather sickly smell assailed my nostrils, my head began to buzz and I felt myself wafted away into space.

I heard a voice next and opened my eyes to find myself lying in bed and the nurse asking me how I felt. All thoughts of any operation faded from my mind and it took a few seconds for me to collect my thoughts and remember where I was. You see I had walked to the operating theatre and they carried me back to bed. It appears that when I got back I passed from unconsciousness into a deep sleep and a few hours later nurse woke me up. Next day I saw the cut in a mirror the doctor had made an incision about two inches long and it was drawn together by three stitches. So that's all it was. The stitches were removed on Friday (24th) and I came here on Saturday. I am having quite a pleasant time. The only trouble is that I'm 'stony'. While at hospital there was no money required and nothing to spend on, as we were not short of anything. Here, however, there are refreshment bars and canteens and I hope to get a pass out of camp to go into town some evening. Tomorrow is payday here and I will receive 10 francs (nearly seven shillings.) Now, I thought I may as well make this a bit of a holiday while I'm down here so I've written to Pentre for £1, as they only pay here are once a fortnight. I didn't wish to trouble you but nevertheless thank you very much for your offers; although under the circumstances there is nothing you can send me just at present. I'm feeling very contented.

I was able to get off a postcard at the hospital to acknowledge receipt of the socks.

Thank you all for remembering me in your prayers; they are surely being answered. When I saw some of the poor boys at the dressing stations and at the hospital I've felt very thankful that God had seen fit to let me off so lightly. The war is seemingly never-ending and the awful horror of it can never properly be realised by those at home. I have a great deal to be thankful for and my thanks all go up to God in gratitude for all his kindness and long-suffering mercy. Now, I think I'd better conclude. If possible during the next few days I'll try and write an account for the Y.P.S. of all that happened from the trenches to this convalescent camp.

Your loving son,  
David

**France- 27th August 1917**

**To The Park Y.P.S.**

Dear friends,

"The company will get ready to move forward at once to (*word censored*) Trench". Such was the order that was passed along as we lay huddled up in all sorts of attitudes in an underground tunnel somewhere in the line. It must have been about 6am when we received this order and it came as quite a relief to most, although we could only guess what the order meant.

The company had arrived at the tunnel on the previous evening and had remained there all night. Owing to the limited space it had been impossible to get any sound sleep, so the hours had passed very slowly. At daybreak, an attack had been made by another Division on the German lines half a mile or so in front and we had been brought here to act as reinforcements in case of necessity. We had distinctly heard the guns as they opened up for the barrage a few hours before, so we knew that the "Boys" had gone over, but we had received no news of the attack otherwise.

Immediately the order was received everyone proceeded to put on his

equipment and get ready to move. A few minutes later we emerged into daylight and started out for our destination. There was no track to follow but the engineers had put out a line of white tape which we knew would, if followed, lead us to our destination. Our way lead across the usual maze of shell holes, trenches and ground battered beyond recognition by terrific artillery bombardment.

All around was a scene of havoc beyond all imagination by anyone who had not actually witnessed it. We were not long in reaching our destination although it was rather a puzzle to find any trenches there. Without doubt it had once been a trench but constant shelling had reduced it almost to the condition of the space all around. However, as no one had expected otherwise, no-one was disappointed so we all proceeded to make ourselves as comfortable as circumstances permitted. We were not allowed to remain "comfortable" for long however.

Towards nine o'clock "Fritz" suddenly seemed to have a presentiment of our whereabouts; big shells began dropping all around us and one of them came rather close to me.

Suddenly I felt a sharp pain in the left shoulder. Upon investigation I discovered a small wound, which was bleeding rather freely. A friendly stretcher-bearer bandaged it up and advised me to get away at once and make for the nearest dressing station.

It is a good maxim, when wounded, to get away from the front line as far as possible and as quickly as possible. I needed no second bidding and I have a pair of good long legs I was soon stepping out towards the rear. All around, as I went, was to be seen the same state of havoc and desolation. Craters and shell holes, remains of trenches, smashed up dugouts, and gun positions, broken wagons, duckboards and remnants of trees were all included in the devastated scene, besides other things too horrible and too sad to describe.

It seems a very curious coincidence, and I've noticed it on several occasions, that if you tried to get away from a shelled area, the shells will always appear to follow you. It seems so in this case, for almost every few minutes or so a shell would burst within 100 yards of me in one direction or another.

When I had walked a couple of miles I got among a battery of big guns, and as the shells were dropping rather thickly around here, I took the advice of an artillery officer and sought shelter in one of their dugouts for a time until the atmosphere quietened down a little. Then I restarted and shortly afterwards I had a lift on an ambulance car to one of the rear dressing stations.

There the wound was carefully dressed and I was provided with some hot tea, sandwiches, chocolate and a few cigarettes, after which I was put on a wagon with a batch of other wounded men and taken down on a light railway to the main dressing station.

Here we all received another meal, our wounds were examined again and every man was inoculated against tetanus. Every man also had a label tied to his tunic giving the nature and particulars of his injury.

We next proceeded to embark on a train and travel about 20 miles to the casualty clearing station where the labels were marked for the hospitals or rest stations according to the seriousness or otherwise of the wound.

More food was made available and stretchers and blankets were provided so that we could rest until we were required to move. Most of us were very glad to avail ourselves of the facilities and I settled down for a good sleep.

Early on the following morning I was awakened and taken to the hospital train waiting in a siding. The train was soon filled and we moved off at a steady rate, without any jolting and jerking, that we would usually expect, on a normal French railway journey. The hospital trains are specially built and travelling is wonderfully smooth in them. There were nurses aboard to see that we were alright and orderlies who brought us breakfast, and dinner later on, during the journey.

Eventually we reached the station of a large town on the coast, but even then our journey was not completed. Outside were waiting ambulance cars for the "stretchered cases" and motor charabancs for "walking wounded". I took my place in a coach and we drove through the town to the outskirts, being eventually deposited at the gates of a large marquee camp. We had reached the hospital.

First I entered a large marquee, where all particulars were recorded. Next came a very enjoyable, and very necessary, hot bath, after which my khaki uniform was discarded and I donned a suit of hospital blues, after which I was conducted to another marquee.

Upon entering, I found myself, in what to a civilised nation, is one of the most sacred places on earth, a hospital ward. Coming straight, as I did, from the awful turmoil of modern warfare, the cool atmosphere of restfulness had the effect of soothing the mind in a wonderful degree. There was the interior lining of the canvas all around of a uniform pale yellow colouring, pleasant to the eye and restful to the mind. Below was

the double row of clean white beds, and the nurses, daintily clad in their hospital garb, hovering around from one patient to another, soothing with a word or a smile, as well as by their medical skill, the pain of some poor suffering lad.

It was such a scene as a man would dream of as an ideal rest when he happens to have a minutes respite from the conflict "somewhere up there" in the trenches. My one desire was to get between those snow-white sheets and gaze silently around until my eyes were tired, then to close them and slip away into oblivion. My wish was soon gratified for I was given possession of one of those beds, but it took me several hours to get used to its softness. Then nature conquered and I slept.

My sleep was sound, and my dreams? Who knows what they were! I don't remember, but they were probably of home.

Then followed a week of peace during which I was able to enjoy fully the comfort of all hospital life. Everyone was exceedingly kind to me and I had all the care and attention that was necessary. Naturally I took great interest in watching the nurses as they went about their task, and during my stay, I never heard anything but praise and appreciation of their work by all the "Boys" of whom they were over 30 in the ward.

I've found that behind their uniforms there were real British girls full of gentleness and good humour, with always a smiling face and a jest on their lips to cheer us up. I soon discovered that two of them were Welsh from near my home, one being the daughter of Mr Frank T. Jones of Merthyr Tydfil.

There was natural joy at finding someone from home: it makes a wonderful difference in a strange land and breaks down any barrier of reserve. After that I was made quite a fuss of and made to feel almost, but not quite like being at home.

On my second day at the hospital I was examined and photographed under the x-rays in order determine whether the fragment of shell had penetrated the skin and entered the shoulder, and if so, to ascertain its exact position. I saw the photographic plate later and it showed an irregular shaped black spot a short distance below the skin surface.

On the following day I was told to prepare for the operation, and I was conducted to the operating theatre. It was a well lit room, but I hardly remember it in any more detail for I immediately got up on the table and laid down in obedience to orders as every good soldier has been taught to do. A cup shaped rubber-lined instrument was fitted tightly around my

mouth and nostrils and I began to breathe a very sickly and not unpleasant smelling gas. For a number of seconds I felt no effect but soon there was a curious throbbing of the nerves, a peculiar buzzing in the head, and then- oblivion!

I awoke as from a deep sleep and saw nothing unusual in finding myself back in bed being asked how I felt. I had forgotten all about the operating theatre but I felt very drowsy as I assured the nurse that I felt all right and immediately went to sleep again.

When next I awoke I remembered that I was supposed to have been operated on and I realised that there was a feeling of soreness in my shoulder. Upon inquiry I was told that the cause of the trouble had been successfully removed and now had only to wait for the incision to heal up, to assist which there were three small stitches.

A few days later the stitches were removed and shortly afterwards the doctor marked my card with the two letters "CC" meaning that my short stay in hospital was at an end and I was fit for removal to a Convalescent Camp. So I had to say goodbye to the hospital ward and all its occupants as the pleasantest time I have ever spent in France was brought to an end.

At present I am once more attired in my uniform of khaki and as I write I'm sitting on the veranda of the recreation hut of the convalescent camp, which is situated on a hill. From here I can see in the distance, on one side the hospital I have recently left, and on the other side, the sheet of water that separates me from "Blighty". In a few weeks time I shall probably be ordered to rejoin my Battalion in the line. What the future holds for me may be written another time.

I hope that this short narrative may give you some impression of the thoughts that bring a smile to the face of any "Tommy" that may have been slightly wounded.

Best wishes,  
David Williams

**Pte.D.W. 40135, 12th Mdx.**  
**No. 8 Tent, K Coy. No. 7 Convalescent Depot, Boulogne, France**

Dear Mother and Father,

I have left the hospital and am now at the above address. I'm feeling fairly fit but it will take a few days to harden me properly yet after the softening the effect of the hospital. I only arrived here this afternoon and I'm trying to get this short note scribbled before I turn in. My next letter I promise you will be a long one. This is just to show that you're continually in my mind and to reassure you will of my well-being. I think I shall have a rather a comfortable time here for a short time at least.

Love,  
David

**Convalescent Depot - 31st August 1917**

Dear Mother and Father,

There is a concert here this evening which I hope to attend so please excuse me if this is a short letter as I will have to rush off early to secure a seat.

To begin with- I received two of your letters last night- those dated 27th and 28th and also one this afternoon dated the 29th. The first two were brought over from the hospital last night by a fellow who came from the hospital with me to this camp (an Australian). He went over last night as he had a pass out of the camp. A pass can only be got occasionally and it is impossible to leave the camp without one. The hospital is only ten minutes walk from here or less. While at the hospital he learnt that the previous evening a parcel and letter had been redirected to me here. Upon inquiry at the Post Office here today I learnt that they had not arrived. Such is the red tape, that although these two camps are within sight of each other, the parcel would be sent down to the town, re-sorted and sent here again. It ought to arrive tomorrow they told me.

I have today written to the Battalion to a friend there enquiring of Evie's photo and 'telling him off' for not having acknowledged the parcel. As I explained the ATP cannot forward any parcel if a fellow is wounded owing to their having no knowledge of his movements. It is, therefore, customary to share the contents among his section and acknowledge

receipt -- it thanking the sender. I have done so myself on more than one occasion. It's a dirty trick if they don't write and I should "tell off" someone severely if they don't. Between you and myself, however, I may say that this is a job that several fellows will fight shy of as it sometimes involved one in a lengthy correspondence. Suppose a man is missing or killed, his friends naturally being anxious jump at the opportunity thus offered of getting some news and you can guess what sort of letter comes in reply to an acknowledgement of the above-mentioned kind. Did I tell you the following before? Last May while I was left in reserve while the Battalion took part in an attack a friend (a Sergeant), left me 40 francs to keep for him and also his home address. When the Battalion came back he was 'missing' so I had to undertake the unpleasant task of writing to his Mother and sending the money.

Several letters followed and I wrote in reply to each giving as many particulars as possible. Next came a decent parcel in token of gratitude to me and they have since written to let me know that he is reported wounded and prisoner of war. However, it doesn't always turn out so well and writing bad news is an unpleasant job.

Referring to that chap -- Thomas -- who wrote to you. I only saw him a few times and know very little of him. He worried me to write and so I wrote two or three short notes to him. If I were you I'd scribble a few lines and shake him off so to speak.

Now, I'll dry up. I'll write again tomorrow, so ta ta.

Love,  
David

### **Same address at Convalescent Camp: Boulogne 2nd September 1917**

Dear Mother and Father,

Last night I received your letter of the 30th with the note enclosed. Thanks very much. Yesterday also I received your parcel and the one from Oaklands together with a few letters. I had a pass yesterday so I went over to the hospital and discovered the parcels; they had not been forwarded. Afterwards I went to look around the town.

Thank you very much for the parcel. I enjoyed all its contents immensely. The cakes were excellent.

I've had about 16 letters during the last few days and I don't know how I'm going to answer them all.

Referring to your last few letters:-



There was no one else injured at the same time as myself. The photo came out very well. I'm afraid it's quite hopeless for you to try to come out here to see me. You see, there are over 2000 men in the camp alone besides a large number of other camps in the neighbourhood -- many larger. All are convalescent after wounds or sickness. I'm just one spot in the ocean and besides, 12 months is short compared with the time that many have been here without leave. Sixteen months is very, very common. So you see what would happen if they allowed people to come out here. I know that they allow relatives to come out if a man is dying but I've not heard of any cases otherwise. And I assure you that I'm now absolutely as fit as ever ever I was and there is only a scar on my shoulder to show that I've ever been hit. If there was the least hope of seeing you I'd try to get permission for you to come out but I'm so certain of what I've been told that I know it's absolutely hopeless to try. I'm awfully sorry to disappoint you but if you could only look at it from the same standpoint as myself and realise the enormous number daily passing through these camps you'd see the utter impossibility of it.

I attended a service by Captain Hughes this morning and I've applied for permission to attend the English Wesleyan Chapel in town tonight. I was unable to write yesterday as I was out in the afternoon and evening and I hope to go out this evening so I don't know when I shall be able to write a good long account; I've got so many letters to answer. It will be stale by the time you get it. I've had letters from: Pontypridd, Buckhurst's Edinburgh, then from Merthyr I've heard from Miss Ballard, Edward James, Ossie and Amy Williams, besides Evie and yourselves and a few other army friends of mine. Please thank the Merthyr people for me and tell them I will endeavour to reply before very long. Then there are the two letters you enclosed in yours -- I've have already written to Baker Jones. Mrs Jones will be sufficient for the whole of Treherbert (only don't tell her I said so). Now as to the 'battle' (as you call it). I can't tell you anything about it. All I know myself is what I read in the newspapers. What Malcolm refers to, is about a week or more before I was hit when his Battalion took a portion of ground. We were behind them on that occasion. On the occasion when I was last up there, his Battalion was behind out of danger. That time we went up the line one evening and stayed in a huge tunnel all night. At daybreak next morning another Division 'went over' and we hadn't the faintest idea how they got on. Our orders were to move out to a certain trench to act as reinforcements in case of necessity. Well! We had been there less than two hours, when the particular shell exploded I came away as wise as when I went up.

By the way, there is a big notice of rules regulating letter writing in this camp. I wish I could send you a copy. My letters no doubt seem very strange sometimes and you wonder why I'd omitted to answer your questions. Well! If you saw those four large sheets of close type

regulations you'd understand the difficulty. The authorities evidently think you'd be satisfied with a stereotype letter similar to a field card. If it were not too difficult the job I'd make a copy of these rules. They're absolutely hopeless when a fellow wants to write a decent interesting letter. I don't think I'll write any more but stick to field card.

PS. excuse abrupt ending: it's caused by the shout 'fall in for tea'. I must go.

Your loving son,  
David

**Boulogne- 4th September 1917**

Dear Mother and Father,

Just a few lines to let you know I'm alright and have received all your letters up to the one dated 31st August. There was no English mail yesterday or today. The previous day I received, also, a box of fine apples and pears from Uncle Ben. They were picked from his garden. I believed I told you before that I did not know Mr Treasure. If I remember rightly he tried to enter the bank sometime before I left - but was unable to get in as he was over the age limit. Perhaps they've now taken him on as they were short of men. Am I right? Or was he in another bank before?

As with you, we had some very rough gales here about a week ago.

About 20 marquees in this camp were torn almost two ribbons by the wind. Our marquee was firm and stood the test well.

I was able to go out last Sunday night and attended the service and communion afterwards. It is a small Chapel and was crowded. Except for a few, all were soldiers -- mostly RAMC men from the hospitals around. Captain Hughes took the service. He and the Wesley Minister are joint chaplains of most of the hospitals and work the services in turn. I'm sending you a card. I'll also try to obtain a few views of the town shortly and send them on.

The long letter I promised is half written and I'll send it on in a day or two.

Fondest love,  
David

**Boulogne -- 7th September 1917**

Dear Mother and Father,

Just a few lines to let you know that tomorrow I shall be moving from here to another convalescent camp many miles away. Here I have had a very easy time but now, as I am alright, I shall probably have to do some training at the new place. Before writing again you had better wait for my new address.

I am sending the promised account by another post; you can read it at the YPS and also perhaps you could stick it in the Merthyr Express or anything else you like.

Last night I received your two letters of the 2nd and 3rd and was very pleased to get them.

Referring to leave: it is impossible to get any leave from a hospital or a convalescent camp. The only way to get to England from hospital is to be transferred to an English hospital if the case is serious enough. I passed that stage on the day following that of the operation.

Love,  
David

B. company Tent 6, No 10 convalescent depot, Ecault, Nr. Boulogne,  
France

**8th September 1917**

Dear Mother and Father,

I was unable to finish the above before so I am continuing at the new camp at which I arrive today. Referring to the narrative I'd intended to send you: I've spent about a week's work on it in my spare time and I think it was rather good -- perhaps better than the others as my mind was in better trim. Well, yesterday I took it to the C. of E. Chaplain (at the last camp) explaining the circs. and asking him to censor it. I thought

he'd have a little sense. In one of my letters I mentioned about a big list of letter regulations and it appears that one of them forbids any communication on army topics to any section of the press. This morning (earlier than at first ordered) we were warned to get ready for moving so although I had very little time I rushed in to see the chaplain in order to find out if he had sent on the letter. He coolly informed me that he had handed it over to the C.O. who wishes to see me on the matter. Well! I had to parade at once then and come here in motors. We are several miles from the last camp and there are no hopes of a pass out for a week. So I'm done. So either the letter will be destroyed, forwarded to you, or perhaps returned to me. I intend to write about it to night. There the thing will have to remain until I can get any information. I'm feeling a bit fed up at present until I settle down a bit at this new camp. It appears to be all right. There has been an afternoon of sports, and there is a concert tonight. So, until I write again (which will be soon). So they have sent you an official intimation of the wound at last, have they? It's only a month late but that's nothing.

*Paragraph blacked out by Censor*

The position of mine I've heard described as neck, it chest and shoulder. As a matter of fact it might be either, because it's just where the three meet -- just on the collarbone (left side). I was sorry to hear of the little telegram episode because it must have upset you. I've heard nothing about Edgar Jones' letter. But even that will be quite useless because leave cannot be granted from a hospital. A convalescent camp is really regarded in the same class as a hospital because it contains men who are unfit for duty. It follows that the man who is ill cannot get leave. That is entirely different from a man being transferred from France to a hospital in England. Even in England a man in hospital cannot get leave until the day of his discharge from hospital. You see the point?

I hear that there may be a chance of leave from the base for men of over 12 months service but I can't say if there is any truth in it. I'll see when I get there. However, I don't want to be in a great hurry to get away from here until I'm sent, because the quicker I'd get there, the sooner I return to the Battalion.

There's one thing the army training has taught me -- that's patience. You can't hurry up the army machine; it's too much entangled with red tape and will only work in its own time. It seems very perplexing to you, no doubt, and to all outsiders but we know it too well.

The usual stay at this camp is about five or six weeks.

Since yesterday I have been doing a bit of clerical work at the company

office. It's not hard work and I am exempt from parades and route marches. Also it may enable me to stay here a little longer than would otherwise be the case. As yet I've been unable to obtain a pass to go into town. I'm glad you ask questions; it makes writing easier, longer and more interesting.

Your loving son,  
David

Same address at  
No. 10 Convalescent Depot, Ecault, Nr. Boulogne, France.

**8th September 1917**

Dear Mother and Father,

I have today received your letter of the sixth forwarded from No 7 camp, a few miles away. Thanks very much. My letters took a long time to reach you - one 4 and another 6 days. They ought to take three days at the most from Boulogne. Still, there is no accounting for the vagaries of the cross-Channel traffic.

Referring to the parcel you addressed to the Battalion some time ago: I received a letter today from a pal of mine to whom I wrote about it. He made enquiries and found out that they received it alright and a certain Lance Corporal took the photo saying that he intended returning it to you. The other boys took his word and so they thought no more about it. My friend says that if you have not yet received it he will get it and send it on. I may add that this Lance Corporal is a bit of a rotter who is very officious and always interfering with things that do not concern him in the least. In this case the parcel should have gone to the L.G section so I don't know why he took any interest in the photo. But the Lance Corporal in charge of the L.G section is a bit of a fool - so there you are. As a matter of fact, to avoid any rows, the boys of the LG section, always have as little as possible to do with this interfering chap, unless he starts any of his nonsense, then he gets 'told off'. You see; (without boasting, I can say) the Lewis Gunners are the best set of fellows in the company and there is a great deal of 'Esprit de corp' among them. The rest of the fellows are, on the whole, decent fellows, but when you get such a mixed body of men and continual changes, it's impossible for everything to run in harmony (if you will excuse the mixed metaphor). However, please let me know if you received the photo or not. Perhaps if I quote a sentence from my friend's letter it might interest you.

I don't wish to swank but it may show that I'm thought something of by the other boys. He writes: 'I hope you come back to 16 platoon; the gun team is in need of a good man'. And, I may also add that he's not given to flattery. I'm doubtful if I shall see Sam Jones now, as I'm several miles from Boulogne. But I may be able to get a pass out on Saturday and if so I shall be able to go into the town. I'll make inquiries at the YMCA there. I don't know how long I may be here and when I move I shall get very short notice. I'm hoping that I shall be here for two or three weeks. If so my next move will be to the infantry based at Etaples and then to the Battalion. If this camp is too full I may yet be sent to another convalescent camp just as I was sent here from No 7.

We've had delightful weather since I've been here but I think we shall have rain here tonight.

Oh yes! I attended a nonconformist service (Parade) last Sunday morning. The chaplain was a Scotsman from Chatham (Presbyterian I think). In the evening I went to the voluntary C of E. service as there was no other.

Can't think of any more.

Fondest love,  
David

### **Ecault - Sunday 23rd September 1917**

Dear Mother and Father,

I hope that by the time you received this, Lila will have received the two little souvenirs I sent her and also that the postcards I sent have arrived. I have before me your last three letters dated 12<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> (I've answered the 1st two).

On Friday I paid a visit to Boulogne, and while there, I made enquiries at the YMCA quarters for Reverend Sam Jones. I found that at present he is in Calais.

I am still doing a little clerical work at the company office and it is now almost certain that I shall be here for another fortnight.

When I get to Etaples I shall do my best to get leave; I rather expected the sort of reply that Edgar Jones would get. However, it does no harm to show that someone is looking after our interests out here. Naturally, nothing was said to me about it.

I was rather surprised to hear that Ivor Cule and Bessie Davies are engaged but the news brought the fact suddenly to my memory that when I was home on my final leave I met them together in town and spoke to them.

I think I told you that I heard from Veale. He doesn't mention where the wound is that he caught it somewhere near the same sector of the line as myself but on the 31st July. He is at Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire. The wound is not serious. His parents were able to visit him and spent a few days at the same village.

I am very comfortable in this camp. We are sleeping in Bell tents with only five in each and we have sprawl mattresses and a couple of blankets each. To you it may sound rather cold but I assure you it's not. These tents are as draughtproof as any room and I feel as comfortable as if in any bed. This is on a very healthy site and within sight (excuse pun) of the sea.

The food is good and the quantities sufficient. The menu varies slightly everyday but the following might give you some idea. Breakfast; porridge, tea, thick slice of bread and marg. Pickles and ham. Dinner; roast meat, potatoes and greens and pudding. Tea; bread and Marg., jam (or sardines) and tea. Of course they are not served cooked as if in a first-class hotel but still generally quite palatable. Occasionally we get egg for breakfast (boiled). I may add that some contain chickens and some don't. On such occasions it is customary to eat everything else first and attack the egg-shell afterwards.

I had a parcel yesterday from Station St., Treherbert.  
Can't think of more now.

Fondest love,  
David

## Postscript

There were no more letters.....

David Williams was interviewed on Monday, 24<sup>th</sup> September 1917 by a doctor and declared fit for active service.

He returned to his unit just as they were about to relieve another Regiment in the front line.

The following morning, whistles blew and he and his comrades climbed from their trench into “no mans land”.

Before they had got more than twenty yards they were cut down by withering enemy machine gun fire... then came a rain of high explosive shells.

Just another day in the third battle of Ypres, familiarly known as “The Battle of Passchendaele”.

His body was never identified. Next time you're there you can look for his name on the Menin Gate at the far end of the High Street in Ypres and then maybe, if time allows, wait until 8pm when you'll hear the haunting notes of The Last Post, which has been played, almost without interruption, since the monument was completed many, many years ago.



Tyne Cott Military Cemetery, the largest of the thousands maintained by The Commonwealth War Graves Commission in France and Belgium.