

1914

Albert Illett of the 16th Lancers was shot in the thigh during the Battle of Mons. He wrote home to Prickwillow from Netley hospital – September 11th 1914

“The Suffolks and 9th Lancers got cut up a great deal. The German shooting is bad. They are rotten shots with the rifle, but they are good with their artillery.... The artillery and maxim fire has done most of the damage to the Allies..... The French gunners in particular are grand, much quicker than our fellows..... (Mons) was terrible, we lost many of our men but managed to drive the enemy off, who were in the majority 6 to 1 to our troops. They killed all the ambulance men and wounded one day. They do not like to feel the points of the English lances. They also shoot all their prisoners.”

Albert was the first wounded soldier to arrive home in Ely to recuperate. His comment about the Germans shooting all their prisoners is clearly not correct as several Ely soldiers were taken prisoner at this time and spent the war in camps such as Doberitz.

On September 13th 1914 George Toombs wrote from Rabaul, German New Guinea. He was a steward on board HMS Australia.

“This place we captured from the Germans, and lost eight killed in the fight and six wounded. The fighting started directly we landed. We had to capture the wireless station, which was eight miles in the bush. All along the pathway were laid land mines, and the people we were fighting against were blacks with white German officers in command. The black men fired from the coconut trees. The fighting lasted all day, and until two o’clock next morning. The following morning they broke out again. Then the Admiral ordered one of the cruisers to shell the bush with lyddite shell. We took a lot of prisoners, and there were sixty white Germans amongst them. These we have got on board.

“We have just returned here from capturing another place, “Freidrich Wilhelm’s Haven”. They did not show fight there, nor at the capture of Samoa. We are doing a lot of steaming, about 10,000 miles since August 6th. On Saturday we filled up with 3,000 tonnes of coal, and today we have taken 300 tons on the upper deck. We expect to come into contact with five German cruisers within the next week.. we have with us a French cruiser, the Montcalm, and the Sydney, and the Japanese fleet are standing south, and us north, in hopes of getting the German cruisers in between. It is enough to burn you up out here, and the further north we get the hotter.”

George Toombs was one of seven brothers who served with the Forces – five in the Royal Navy and two in the Army. His younger brother Reginald was the only one not to survive the War – his name can be found on the Ely memorial.

An unnamed Ely Territorial (“formerly a server at St Peter’s”) wrote about being posted overseas to do garrison duty. Use was made of the Territorials in this way to free up the regular troops for the Front – 16th October 1914

“As we are the first Territorial Regiment to go abroad we have the honour of the whole Territorial Service to uphold..... When once our transport was aboard, we put off, the band playing the French, Russian and British National Anthems and then “Auld Lang Syne”. It was a cheering send off, and we sang some of our homeland songs. I certainly felt a pang when we started. Leaving there we sailed for Plymouth, where we picked up the remainder of our convoy – fourteen liners (escorted by battleships) containing 30,000 troops, guns, and 4,000 tons of ammunition. It is said to be the largest that has ever left English or any other shore at one time. At night it was a beautiful sight to see these vessels riding beautifully lit up, on the swelling wave. After passing Ushant, we were told one morning that German cruisers had appeared in the night, but had sheered off on seeing our numbers.

“Here I am at last, settled down like an old soldier. We marched, headed by our two bands, to the Barracks. On the way we passed all kinds of people, Moors, Arabs, Spanish etc. All seemed very pleased to see us, and gave us a warm reception. We six friends have a room of our own, with folding bed, blankets, sheets and bolster – quite civilised to what we expected.”

One of the early Ely casualties was Sapper Wilfred Morris of the Royal Engineers. Two letters were published in the newspaper of 23rd October 1914 – the first was from Charlie Matthews, a regimental policeman based at No. 8 General Hospital, and the second from Wilfred himself.

Charlie Matthews to his mother in Walworth: “One poor fellow lying here deserves the V.C. He saved two officers under some heavy firing then after that a shell came and blew a horse right in two. One part of the horse fell across the legs of another wounded chap. This fellow, named Morris of the R.E. rushed out and tried to pull the horse off the chap. He had just managed to do so, and the chap could get up, when another shell came and absolutely blew the wounded chap’s head and shoulders off, at the same time blowing half of Morris’ right leg off, and that’s how he got wounded. The brave fellow has a wife and three children, and is only twenty-five years old. I am glad to say he is getting better, although the whole of his leg has been taken off.”

Wilfred Morris wrote to Mr Kempton in Ely that his leg was “getting on fine”, he had been lying on his back for a month “as it was on the 14th of August that the Germans hit me at the River Aisne with a Black Maria from one of their big guns, which they had dipped in poisoned oil before sending them at us. You know they are the boys to very soon put you into darkness, which they have done with most of my section, including the officer..I am looking forward to coming to England very shortly, or

what there is left of me to come..... but still I would go back again after the if I could, as it was fine sport to get close to them.”

Wilfred lived in Newnham Street with his wife Lily (nee Rickwood) and children Mabel, Evelyn and Nellie. They had two sons, Donald in 1916 and George in 1918. Wilfred (who actually signed his name “Wilford”) was a brewer’s drayman. After the War he became a postmaster (1939).

Private Jimmy Roberts of the 6th Division Cycling Company writes to a friend in Ely – 6th November 1914

“I can sum up the whole situation in one sentence: It is simply awful. We have been stuck in this district for about a week now, and it seems a year – nothing else from morning to night but the roar of the cannonade and Maxim gun and rifle fire, and they don’t stop at night either. The Lord above knows how it will end, for every night there comes down to us reports of whole regiments being cut up, and also of thousands and thousands of Germans being killed, wounded or taken prisoners. It is simply staggering, and yet the Germans keep coming up and asking for more. I have had a few narrow escapes lately. One day I was on scout duty, right in front of the Army. We were going along a road, when we suddenly had orders to halt from our officer. We had no sooner halted when “Zip! Zip!” came the bullets. We had run straight into a German trap. My lefthand man was shot dead straight away, and I’ve got a souvenir in the shape of a clean cut through my right coat sleeve when a bullet went through. It only wanted about two more inches to the right to put a finish to poor old Jimmy. We got away all right, after a bit of a struggle, getting two more of our chaps wounded also....There is not one man that would like to go back till the German Emperor and all his beasts of officers and men are conquered and brought to the dust. You can take it from me that all you hear about the Germans looting and burning us true.”

A sergeant in the Royal Army Medical Corps writes to his relatives in Ely – 20th November 1914

“I had four German soldiers surrender to me. They were done up and nearly starved. They were hiding in a hedge, and seemed only too pleased to see the Red Cross.”

In the Christmas Day issue of 1914 was an interview with Private Albert Henry Meadows of the 2nd Battalion of the Suffolk Regiment. Albert had been invalided home on 25th November to Tarporley Hospital. He had been allowed home for Christmas and brought with him several “interesting and much-prized relics from the fighting line, including German and French bullets, and a Belgian string of beads”.

"In common with most of our gallant men who have been invalided home, Pte Meadows endured terrible suffering and hardships, and the tale he unfolded was similar to those which have daily filled the columns of the newspapers. He went to France in the early part of October and was in the firing line for over six weeks. At Ypres he was in the trenches for 17 days without being relieved, and for three days was without food or drink. The conditions were deplorable. Often the men were fighting in water half-way up to their knees. During the heavy fighting at Ypres, Pte Meadows had two narrow escapes. One day he was told off for outpost duty. He had to creep up to the barbed wire entanglement and then lay down and listen to what was going on in the German trenches, which were only separated from those held by the British by some 60 yards, and report to the officer in command. He had just left his trench when a bullet struck a button on his tunic pocket and the jack knife and books in the pocket turned the bullet, which struck the muscles in his left arm, blackening it. On another occasion he was leaving the trench when some shrapnel struck his backpack and the tin containing what might be called emergency rations, which were only to be used in case of absolute necessity, was knocked in, that it was impossible to remove the food..... When interviewed Pte Meadows was wearing the same tunic that he had on when the bullet struck the button....

"He also related how on another occasion he was "between two fires". In company with a comrade he had crawled out of the trenches their errand being to gain what information they could from the enemy's trench. They had not proceeded far before they spotted a German coming in their direction. He had evidently not seen the two British soldiers, and Meadows, having beckoned to his comrade to retire, made up his mind to have a pot at the advancing German, although he had instructions not to fire on these missions. He thought to himself "Here goes", and after seeking cover, took aim and fired....immediately the Germans and British opened fire, "and there was such a stream of bullets" said Pte Meadows "that you could hear them click as they whizzed by. I hid in a ditch until the firing ceased, and then returned to my trench. I told the officer against which tree I had seen the German... and you should have seen the way they riddled it....."

"We were often in the habit of arriving in shocks from the harvest field for use in the trenches. One day a soldier – we did not discover who he was when we first saw him – came into our trenches carrying one of these bundles. His head and face were hidden from view, and in excellent English he exclaimed "Shove along, plenty more coming behind." By which he meant to imply there were more men coming, but his manner struck the others as strange. He was a German spy and was soon shot. On searching his clothing papers were found giving the names of the British Regiments which were occupying the trenches and other information."

"Meadows testified to the mischief caused by German snipers, who, he stated, were known to remain concealed up in trees for days at a stretch. Sometimes they even managed to hide behind the British trenches.

"Alluding to the attack of the Prussian guards he said "I shall never forget the sensation of that bayonet charge. We were leaving the trenches and were going to have a few days' rest, as we expected. We were going as we might down Broad Street (Ely) and turning as we might towards the station we saw the Guards advancing. The order of the officer rang out "Fix bayonets...Charge!" And we went to them, I can tell you. I went for one German and I shall never forget that impact and his yell. I can often see the man now. My comrade's bayonet snapped in half."

“Meadows, who was also in the trenches at St. Omer and Dinmude spoke of the harm caused by the Jack Johnsons which made holes in the streets large enough to put a horse and cart in , and said he once witnessed the destruction of a church by the Germans while his unit was sheltering in a brewery not far away. The first shot destroyed the steeple and the next one took the roof off...
“After this we had orders to clear out of the brewery as soon as we could.”

Albert was a brewery agent and lived on Ely’s Back Hill with his wife and their three young girls. He was originally from Kings Lynn, but had lived a time in March and then Sheffield before moving to Ely. At the outbreak of the War he was thirty. He returned to Ely after the War and later became a railway porter.

As well as those who went abroad to fight, there were Ely residents trapped abroad as the Germans invaded. One such story appeared in the Wisbech Standard, although the article did not name the family concerned.

“A resident of Ely has received from her brother, who has lived in Compiègne for some years, a letter from which the following extracts are taken:-

“They (the Germans) burnt my house up. They took all that was in it, and wanted to take me and my wife. I am in trouble; I cannot get a penny. I have no horses, and can get nothing. There seems no prospect for me but to die in France...”