

# 1915

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## **Private Reginald Arthur Edwards of Prickwillow with the 9<sup>th</sup> Lancers – 8<sup>th</sup> January 1915**

“I like it better than I did at first... We didn't do too much on Christmas Day or Boxing Day. We had a little concert between ourselves on Boxing night. The officers joined in and on the whole we had a nice time. We almost live on bread and jam and shouldn't get the bread if we didn't buy it. I share it with my mates when I get a box, and they do the same.... We get some funny weather, frost, rain and heaps of mud. They have just started sending soldiers home on leave, but only two or three at a time.. I am in hopes the war will be over before my turn comes.”

*Reginald was then nineteen, and had been an assistant in the family grocery and bakery business run out of Prickwillow Post Office.*

## **George Toombs writes from aboard H.M.A.S. Australia (see his letters from 1914 and later this year). He wrote from the Falkland Islands on January 3<sup>rd</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> February 1915**

“We arrived at Theses Islands this morning from Valpariso. This trip we have got right into the snow from the tropics, and it is cold, too, coming through the Straits of Magellan. It was a nice sight. On both sides of us were large mountains covered with snow, and on some of the very high ones there were glaciers. The snow and ice were the colour of Cambridge blue, and it looked very pretty. We have managed to strike some wreckage either of the Good Hope, Monmouth, or the German cruisers which were sunk. On the way from Valpariso we passed over the Good Hope and Monmouth, and stopped and held a funeral. We passed some life buoys of the German flagship yesterday afternoon and we have got the Dresden, which had escaped two of our cruisers, bottled up in a channel leading from the Straits. Today we are coaling ship, and the divers are down putting our propeller straight. This is Sunday, but that does not make much difference. We have not had a Sunday since the war started. Tomorrow afternoon we leave for our next place, and thank goodness we shall soon be in a warm climate again. I hear we get our mail about Jan. 25<sup>th</sup>, and that will make five months mails due to us.”

## Ordinary Seaman Harry Toombs on board HMS New Zealand about the North Sea Battle – 5<sup>th</sup> February 1915



“...It was simply great. I saw some of the fighting from our foremost superstructure and it was a sight worth seeing..... the Germans opened fire first at a very long range...we commenced to retire at 12.30 because of mines and submarines. The Germans were on the run all the time, we made them gallop in fact. I saw the Tiger hit once and we had two very close shaves, two shells bursting within 50 yards of us. We were then told to go down below worse luck.”

*Harry was one of the five Toombs brothers who fought in the War. He was a career sailor who was already in the Royal Navy at the outbreak of the War (having signed up in 1912) and continued to serve until 1926. At the time of this letter he was twenty. The Battle had taken place on 24<sup>th</sup> January 1915 near the Dogger Bank. See two letters from his brother George on this page.*

**A letter from a member of the Australian Forces from Mena Camp near Cairo to his relatives in Ely – 12<sup>th</sup> February 1915. (This is possibly Horace Taylor, formerly of Prickwillow, as he is certainly noted in the August 1915 Ely Standard as sending “very detailed and vivid accounts” home to his mother, along with photographs, when the Australians moved into the Dardanelles. )**

“The 9<sup>th</sup> has just finished its last course of field firing, and things are beginning to look business-like.....The 7<sup>th</sup> have built a large boxing stadium in the camp. This has aroused a great deal of boxing enthusiasts in Mena Camp, and they have some good genuine matches. The entrance fee to the stadium is five piasters, an Egyptian shilling. We are paid in Egyptian money, a piaster equalling 2½d. I went down to the stadium last night and saw some real good bouts, I had the pleasure of seeing a private of the 9<sup>th</sup> knock out a sergeant of the 7<sup>th</sup> Ammunition Column (Queensland).”

**Two of the masters at Silver Street Boys' School, R Coward and Alfred Adams, were Territorials before the War and consequently first went into the Front Line in March of 1915 with the 1<sup>st</sup> Cambridgeshire Regiment. Both wrote home to headmaster Mr J S Barnett (no doubt with the intention that their letters should be shared with their pupils) and their letters appeared together on 13<sup>th</sup> March 1915. These were the first published letters from Ely Territorials and would have been met with great interest locally.**

### **R Coward**

“Sorry for not writing before, but so long as we were in England we had such a quiet time that there was really nothing to write about. I think the wheeler gave you some account of one journey up to the front, so I will begin from there. We had about a fortnight’s quiet training and then our Company (B) was sent up to the firing line. It was rather an honour for us and most of us were keen. We had three days of it and are now back in rest camp, which seems like heaven. We did not man the trenches, but were out at night on fatigue work – a very risky job, that of constructing trenches behind our lines. The enemy were not more than 150 yards away, so you can guess we had a rather anxious time, especially at first. The Germans are very great on sending up rockets all night long, which show up the country around, and then of course we have to lie low. We had casualties – very slight. The officers and men we have seen out here are wonderful under fire. They walk about in front of the trenches, as if no Germans were near, and of course their attitude gives us confidence. I really must tell you one little adventure I had the last night I was up. The night before we had been digging in a very exposed position, and we were somewhat relieved when we found that we were to have a safer job where we only got a few stray shots. We had not been at work long when some stakes were required and I was told off with two other fellows and two R.E. men to hunt for some. We started in search, and one engineer remembered having seen some about 100 yards from the enemy’s positions, all ready cut. Of course we Cambs fellows looked at one another when he said this, as we did not relish the idea. It was moonlight and nothing lay between the stakes and the Germans but an open field. However, they set the pace and we followed. It was not a pleasant sensation to hear the bullets whistling around you and to know the enemy were not more than a hundred yards away, and top it up a moonlight night. We got the stakes alright, but I shall never understand how they did not spot us.”

### **Alfred Adams**

“I was very pleased indeed to receive your most welcome letter last night, and am pleased to tell you that I am still alive and well. Since writing to you last I have had some wonderful experiences, and also some very narrow escapes, as we have been on some very dangerous work. My Company left the rest of the Battalion a week ago and we were sent right into the firing line. As no doubt you know, the firing line is in the shape of a horse shoe, and our position is right in the centre of the shoe, so that we get the fire from two directions. I am not allowed to mention the names of places, or you would be able to see the positions. We have been in the trenches that are only about 200 yards from the German trenches, and the mud and wet is something awful. Besides being in the trenches

we have had far more dangerous work. At night we have had to go out and dig new trenches under heavy shell and rifle fire. It is an awful sensation when the shells are bursting and the bullets flying all round you, but you get used to it after a time. I have had some very narrow escapes, the nearest one being two nights ago when the fellow next to me – almost touching me in fact – was wounded. We also had a Corporal killed in the same night. It seems a wonderful thing that more of us have not been killed or wounded, for the firing for the last week has been very heavy indeed. The snipers are the chaps that are to be feared, for if they once get the idea where you are they let drive. All night long they send up into the air very bright lights, which show up the whole country, and by their aid they get to know the British positions. We have been right in the open country, without any cover, and as soon as one of these lights go up we have to go down quite flat to stop them seeing us as much as we can where we are. The work is far more dangerous than being in the trenches, as you cannot get cover. The most dangerous part of the trenches is the changing, getting in and out, and that is when all the slaughter takes place. Today we have moved a few miles back for a short rest, and I expect another Company will have to go up to take our places. I am pleased to have been a member of the Company, the first in our Battalion to be in action, and am pleased to have come out safely. I hope \_\_\_ will not have to go out to the front, for the hardships out here are simply wicked, the bad weather making things much worse.”

### Cuthbert Wycherley of 1<sup>st</sup> Cambridgeshires writes to his parents in St Mary's Street – 26th March 1915

“I am all right and well, I am pleased to say I have been through a rather trying time, but have come through with safety. We were shifted on Saturday (the 13th inst.) from our barns further up towards the firing line, in a village which was a mass of ruins through heavy shell fire lately. We were there all Saturday night until Sunday afternoon, about half past four, when the Germans started shelling the place – (*excision by censor*) – and proceeded to the trenches, where we had a terrible time all night long. The artillery fire on both sides was terrific. It was our baptism of fire with a vengeance, and I was jolly glad when we left the trenches today (the 16th inst.) I was up to my neck in mud, and also wet through, having to wade through a ditch nearly up to my waist in slush and water. The trenches were fearfully muddy and there was plenty of water about. I don't think we shall go through a hotter time than we did last night, it is an awful job getting into the trenches, the German rockets lighting up the ground, and one has to lie flat when these go up, otherwise one would be in danger of being hit. But we managed all right, although we were under heavy shell and rifle fire the whole time. I can't explain to you what it was really like. It was terrible. I am covered in mud from head to foot, but still I am thankful to say that I am all right with the exception of being fearfully tired. I am sorry to say that we sustained several casualties, but I cannot say the number yet, as no one really knows. I think that **Wenn** was wounded, but he is the only Ely fellow as far as I know.”

*In the Ely Standard this was followed by a shorter article:*

“Pte. **George Cornwell**, son of Inspector Cornwell, of Ely, in a letter he has just written home, describes the recent fight in which the Territorials took part. He states that he does not know how

they managed to get out of the trenches. He also mentions the names of some who had fallen, but these were crossed out by a censor.”

### **An unnamed Prickwillow soldier – 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1915**

A soldier wrote home how he had been kicked by a horse above the heart and had been saved because he had been carrying his Queen Mary’s gift box in his left breast pocket. “Had it not been for the box I might not be able to relate this incident.” The box had been badly bent.

*There are many stories of lucky escapes such as this from the War – “unfortunately” in this case the soldier was not named in the newspaper, but later evidence suggests it was Reg Edwards.*

### **Lance-Corporal Martin Cranwell of the Cambridgeshires wrote to his family including news of fellow Territorials. 16<sup>th</sup> April 1915**

“We came up from the trenches yesterday (Sunday), having had another 48 hours in the trenches – not the same as we were in before. This last trench was not so good. At one part of the trench where I did a good deal of duty at the listening post, it was only about five yards from the German trench. One would scarcely believe it. At other parts it ranged from 10, 15 or 25 yards from the Germans. I was not sorry to get out of it.

“Poor Ted Cox was killed in that trench, shot through the head, killed instantly and buried just at the end of the trench....another fellow was shot through the wrist yesterday. I had just taken one to the doctor’s on sick report, and it was as we were returning. He was between me and the younger Burns when he was hit by a sniper...there were scarcely yards between the three of us. I and Burns, I consider were lucky. We soon had the chap bandaged and down to the dressing station, and he is doing well.

“We are now back in the big town I spoke of –staying in a large convent. We have a piano to keep ourselves merry, and pleased to say I am really well. The weather is fairly good here, but rather cold. Forty hours in a trench is quite long enough, and nobody can realise what it is like until they actually experience it. We shall have six or seven days’ rest, I think, but there is really no telling; everything is so uncertain. The town where we are now is one of the principal points of the fighting line, and is shelled heavily occasionally. In my platoon when we first came out there were over 60 men; now we have only about 30, the others being in hospital through sickness, three dead and two wounded.

“At our last resting place I saw several Ely men, namely Mac Taylor, Sergt. Page, Oakey from Newnham Street, Wilkin (Stuntney), J. Negus (Waterside), W. Creak (Newnham) and Mac Wilkinson (from Station Road Green). Some of these were with poor Alf Taylor and Fendick. I also saw Chevill.”

## **Private Harry Gordon Teverson of D Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Cambridgeshire Regiment writes to his family – 30<sup>th</sup> April 1915**

“Last evening which was our second night in the trenches since we left the rest camp, we had a little excitement, the brigade on our right making a successful attack on the enemy’s trenches. This morning it is simply grand sitting comfortably in the trenches. As you are aware, practically all of the firing is done at night, so you obtain your rest (if any) in the daytime.... No one on England realises what the war is to us fellows, because if they did there would not be an Englishman who would not enlist. I tell you plainly that we have the toughest job on that has ever faced the British forces, but we shall succeed..... It seems strange that since we have come to France all our moved have been on the Sabbath, and this is the third Sunday we have had in the trenches.”

*Harry was later to be promoted to Corporal and then to Second Lieutenant. During the War he was awarded both the Military Medal and the Military Cross.*

## **Private (Arthur) Ernest Pake of A Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Suffolk Regiment, wrote to Frederick Carpenter, the Prickwillow schoolmaster – 30<sup>th</sup> April 1915**

“Just a line hoping to find you and all Prickwillow people well, as it leaves me well. I do not know if you have received any letters straight from the trenches, so I am writing this within 100 yards of the Germans, and the shots and shells are flying over me like rain. I quite agree with what Reg Edwards said about the Germans shooting. You must not lift a hand above the trenches in daytime, or there is a bullet through it, and it is the same with us, but I might say that when they do move we are always ready and willing for anything. I am very pleased to tell you I have come across seven Prickwillow young men. All of them were well. Good old Prickwillow! I think you are doing your share. I have had six weeks in the trenches now, and thank God I have come through all right up till now and I pray I may go through all safely and return home again to my wife and children. If I fall I will fall like a soldier and a man, doing my duty for God, King and country,

“I cannot tell you anything about the war, as you know more than I do, except on our own front. I might say, with all the hardships, we are happy and ready. When we are in the trenches we are cut off from the outside world until we get out again, and do not get many letters. There is nothing a soldier looks forward to like news from home. I should be only too pleased for a letter from any kind friend.....I would like to see some of the young men be men, and do their duty. What can they think of a man over 40 who leaves a wife and five children behind while they stay at home? I would like all Cambridgeshire to know that while I am being shelled by Jack Johnsons my wife and five children were being shelled with Jacksons in Burnt Fen for five months until they have to leave their home and retire on Ely, but I am glad to say no one was killed. They were turned out because I was fighting for my country. I must close now, as it is getting too hot for writing. I heard more shots and shells last night in half-an-hour than I heard during the last twelve months in South Africa.”

*Arthur was a reservist who had been in France for two months at this stage of the War. He was a farmworker and it is clear from his letter that his family had been turned out of their tied accommodation when he left. He did survive the War and later became a smallholder in Lincolnshire.*

**Corporal Claude James Boyden fought with the 8<sup>th</sup> Middlesex Regiment (aka “The Die Hards”) and wrote the following account to his father, the headmaster of Needhams School. Claude had been in the Battle of Ypres on 25<sup>th</sup> April and was writing a week later from the Red Cross Hospital in Torquay.**

“I have been on the move in more ways than one since the fighting on Sunday (the Battle of Ypres) – five hospitals since then. The country in France and Belgium outside of the war area looked beautiful, and it seemed wicked to think that the country around was being devastated. I have had a pretty good time amongst the destructive dealing shells lately. I was in and out of Ypres at the beginning of the last big battle – in fact, we were actually billeted inside the town at the Convent during the first two days bombardment, with shells all around us, but not near enough to kill. We only just got away in time to save our skins, for our transport mules and carts behind went like Tom Bowling up aloft, on the wings of “J. Johnsons”. One cannot describe the awful scene – bits of everything bestrewn about the streets, human beings included, a head here and a foot there. While we were sitting in a field in St. Jean 10 J.J.s arrived and sent rows and blocks of houses to blazes instantly. You would hear a noise like a fast tube train coming out of a tunnel, see a large mass of black smoke and bits and then a bang and the Johnson’s work was done. The last week we were in trenches outside Zonnebeke, to the right of the Canadians, being billeted in a village. Imagine Littleport (minus the river) with every building laid in ruins, church, station, etc, included, and the road a mass of shell holes, and you have a picture of every village along the firing area. We were billeted in one of the houses, an ex-cycle shop, consisting of three rooms on ground floor, still furnished, the roof and upstairs being in ruins. During the seven days in and out of our billets we were continually being shelled, but though houses next door got them, they missed us. Our luck was in, but alas, to be out for many of our poor chaps very soon after. Friday, Saturday and Sunday were our worst days, and God knows what has happened since to those I left when I fell on Sunday. They shelled our trenches unmercifully those three days, using all sorts of shells, including the latest gas shells, which helped to render me unconscious when my knee went out. These are made exactly like an ordinary shell, and burst emitting a colourless gas, which burns eyes, tongue and mouth with a scorching sort of sensation. You can’t escape it, for if you lie flat it is still there. The doctor at one of the hospitals to whom I showed a large piece of shell with the fumes still in, said it was hydrochloric or prussic. Hell will be too good for such fiends! I can still, eight days after, feel the burning sensation, but when I look round the various beds and see the poor fellows with their terrible shell wounds I thank God he has spared me that awful experience. On the boat were several Canadians from St. Julien – one big handsome fellow blinded by the gas. But with all the suffering one finds the same cheery note, the same hopeful endurance – “when you have finished with us send us to Blighty”. Have heard nothing from you for nearly three weeks, as our transports was smashed up, so buck up and write quickly.”



*Claude survived the War and became a teacher like his father.*

### **Private W Harding from Prickwillow writes to his parents about life with the 4<sup>th</sup> Hussars. 28<sup>th</sup> May 1915.**

“I have just come out of the trenches after doing ten days in them. We were also in them about twelve days ago, so you see we do our share even if you don’t see our regiment mentioned in the paper, and I can tell you we are in the thick of it when we are up. The other time we were up the Germans were using those poisonous gases and it was a tough time for our poor men leaving the trenches. It was an awful sight.”

*In the same edition of the newspaper was a rather more graphic description of the effects of gas by Corporal W Dade of Littleport, who was with the 1<sup>st</sup> Norfolks. It is surprising this got past the censors:*

“This gas is awful; for after you get a deep breath of it you are done in and cannot move, and those who die by it turn black as a native. The grass turns the colour of straw, the leaves die on the trees, and everything that is in the trenches dies as if by magic, so you can guess what sort of stuff it is.. Even our buttons and brasses turn grey and black by it, and all food that it touches is spoilt.”

### **Gunner Walter Gage of the Royal Field Artillery writes to his parents at Shippea Hill about being gassed– 11<sup>th</sup> June 1915**

“Thanks for the parcel, as we do not get much to smoke. We are where they use the gas. They gave us some last Monday morning, and it lasted about five or six hours. It doesn’t half give you “socks” as it gets in your eyes and nearly blinds you. We have got things made to go over our nose and mouth, so it doesn’t affect us a lot, only the eyes. It is cruel for the poor infantry. They are just like a lot of drunken men, but drunken men get over it, and these poor souls do not. I shall always remember last Whit-Monday as long as I live, to see our poor gunners at work. They started about three in the morning, when the Germans began to send over the gas, and they did not leave off till night. They were firing as fast as they could to keep the Germans back, as our poor infantry could do nothing. It was just like thunder, you could not hear yourself speak all day long. I shall be glad when this is all over, so that I can get back to dear old England once again.”

### **Private James Bonnett of A Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Bedfordshires – 11<sup>th</sup> June 1915**

“We have had some very hard fighting lately but we do not mind this. If the Germans can stick it, I am sure we English can. I have seen a good bit of fighting in this war, and the more the boys fight I



am sure the more pluck they get. I hope, please God, that I shall see you all soon, but we must do our duty first.”

### **Meanwhile Will Oakey of D Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Cambridgeshires, wrote to his brother H in Newnham Street – 11<sup>th</sup> June 1915**

“We are back again in the trenches so we did not get much of a rest. We were three days in a field about eight miles back from the firing line, then we had three days marching and right in the trenches we had to go again. We are not in such a rough place now. It is a lot quieter here.”

### **Private Arthur Jakes of the Suffolk Regiment wrote from the American Women’s War Hospital in Paignton, Devon – 11 June 1915**

“I am very glad to tell you that I am getting on fine now, and hope to be home soon for a few days. Thank you very much for the cigarettes.... The first time in the trenches was in front of Hill 60 at Ypres, and the fighting was very severe. It made me think of Prickwillow for a time, but I soon got used to it. The next time in the trenches was on the right of Ypres, and I well knew it, as we were cut up. My company was 148 strong. The next day there were only 20 of us left and no officers. You can bet it was sharp fighting. On May 4<sup>th</sup> I was wounded at Ypres. The Germans had been shelling us for 24 hours, and out of my Battalion only 12 came out of the trench without being killed or wounded.”

### **Privates William Tunnell of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cambridgeshire Regiment and Joe Tunnell of the Motor Transport Corps write separately to their widowed mother in Waterside, Ely, of meeting each other at the Front – 9<sup>th</sup> July 1915**

**Joe:** “I heard that the Cambs. Regiment was about 14 miles from where I was, so I made up my mind to go and see them. I got the afternoon off and walked to where I heard they were. When I got there, however, they were in action, but I made up my mind, after the long walk, that I would see old Will, even if I got killed in the attempt. As I was walking about I met young Vic. Benton who was getting some things for the officer. You can bet how surprised he was when I went up to him and asked him if I could carry some of his parcels. I told him that I wanted to see Will, and he said “I will try and get you through to the trenches.”

“After about another four miles’ walk I found myself getting into the trenches. I had to go a long way in them, because Will’s regiment was in the first line of the trenches. On we went with bullets and shells flying all around. It was a bit lively, but I never enjoyed anything more than when young Benton said “Look out we are nearing the Cambs. trenches now.” The first thing I saw was old Billy Harvey washing himself in a pond by the side of the trenches. Then I went a bit further and saw old

Barwick and Fred Mallion and all the lot of them. Will was in his dug-out as large as you like. When he saw me I thought his eyes would come out of his head. When he came to his senses again we did not half hug and kiss one another, and then when I had shaken hands with all his mates – a job which made my arm ache – I got a rifle and started firing at the Huns like old boot. I don't know whether I killed any, but I hope I did one or two in. We went into Will's dugout and had a fine tea of bread and butter and sardines. He was still at his old job as cook. We had a jolly good time. After walking another 14 miles I got "home" about 12 o'clock."

**Will:** "The poor little old fellow looked a bit strange at hearing the bullets fly over his head, but I watched him to see that no harm came to him....We blew the German trenches up the other night, and talk about the earth shaking – I suppose some of the poor devils went to heaven on a sandbag. The trench went up in the air and as the Germans ran out the Irish shot them down. The following night they tried to blow us up, but they were 45 yards too short."

*At the time of writing Will was twenty- one and Joe nineteen. This was almost certainly the first time Joe had been in the Front Line. The "old Barwick" mentioned was probably Rex Barwick who was actually killed just over a month later.*

**This is an "anonymous" letter home by someone who was formerly a scoutmaster in Ely but had since emigrated and was then serving with the Australian Forces on the Gallipoli Peninsula. 10<sup>th</sup> September 1915. (This is possibly Horace Taylor, formerly of Prickwillow, as he is certainly noted in the August 1915 Ely Standard as sending "very detailed and vivid accounts" home to his mother, along with photographs, when the Australians moved into the Dardanelles. )**

"We have been issued with the service envelope, as you will see. I do not know if this is any advantage. The only thing is that we are not restricted to one page..... In the first place, the flies here are most abominable. The filthy creatures struggle to enter my eyes, ears, and mouth even when I write, and almost between each word, I have to pause and wave them away, only to fly back instantly to continue their buzzing and itching. To make matters worse, there are the dead and decomposing bodies of the Turks, who are also famous for their lack of cleanliness during life, lying side by side with lads who will never again see sunny Australia, between ours and Abdul's trenches. This fact makes itself known by the horrible stench which arises and travels with the wind across our lines. Knowing the origin of these detestable disquieting carriers of filth and deadly disease germs, who fly from the dead bodies and crawl around the edges of our mess tins until they fall in the tea we have to drink or the jam we have to eat, is it to be wondered that we curse them so? Today I am in the front fire trench; in fact I have lived, of course with my battalion, in the trenches the whole time, and have never been out of shooting distance from "Abdul". How I envy the troops in France, where they can leave the fighting zone for a spell, a wash, and a clean shirt. I have washed my shirt twice in nearly four months, and that was when I happened to be by the sea. If I wish to wash myself I take about a pint of my drinking water issue (two pints a day) in a mess tin, and manipulate my towel so as to distribute this small amount of water over my body. This is a rare luxury, and can

only be indulged in when the water can be spared. This depends upon the heat, and works out about once a week.

“I wonder what it would feel like to be in a quiet, peaceful building, fixing or hanging doors, and singing and smoking at leisure, knocking off at six to jump on the old bike to ride home to a civilised meal.... Sounds like a novel, eh!” *(This last paragraph is the writer reminiscing about working in the building trade – perhaps even in Ely.)*

**There were actually quite a number of Ely men at Gallipoli – Corporal Hubert Wesley Lemmon of D Company 1/5 Norfolks wrote to his brother – 13<sup>th</sup> September 1915. The Lemmons were poultry dealers living in Broad Street and the recipient of this letter, Hubert’s younger brother Arnold, was to die in France just six weeks before the Armistice.**

“I am writing this in a dug-out, a few yards from the firing line, in a different place this time. ....I expect we shall be in it again in a day or two. You can see I have been promoted to Corporal.... I saw Harry Winter last night. He is all right. He took me to Bert Sawyer, who is a clerk, so does not do any “pinking”. We are doing well; keep pushing them (the enemy) up, a bit at a time....I am in the best of health, and getting on fine. We are at first shelling the Turks from our warships over our heads, and don’t they buzz!”

**On September 13<sup>th</sup> 1915 George Toombs wrote to his sister about a narrow escape in Halifax harbour, Nova Scotia.**



“Thanks for letter, as I have not had one for some time. Two lots of our mails have been sunk, one in the *Arabic* and one in the *Hespiran*, so most likely some of your letters have been lost. The other night I nearly got done in myself. I had been ashore from 7 till 10.30. From the town to where we are is a good half hour’s run in our packet boat, that is the fastest boat. When we were about half-a-mile from the ship – it was pitch dark – the bowman shouted out “ship ahead” and our boat turned to starboard. And she (meaning the other boat) caught us lovely, right in the middle. A massive dockyard tug cut us in two, and we sank within a minute. There were thirty of us in the packet boat. Somehow or other when the tug hit us it knocked me so that I caught hold of the 3-pounder gun on the bows. Then I got hold of the anchor cable hanging from the tug, pulled myself up, and stood on the anchor and then on board..... The boat was cut in two and three sailors drowned.”

## **A trench occupied by several Ely men serving with D Company of the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Buffs was blown up. Private James Veal and Private Alfred Pegram wrote home – 17<sup>th</sup> September 1915**

**Veal:** “Our trenches were blown up, and we have lost some of our good boys, and cannot find them yet. Jack Creak has got one of his legs broken, and young Pegram and C. Wilson got hurt. I am pleased to tell you I got out alright.”

**Pegram:** “We had an unpleasant experience last Wednesday morning (September 1<sup>st</sup>). Just after 4 o’clock we had our whole trench blown up, and it shot me in the air about 20 ft. I got hit on top of the head by a piece of shrapnel. It was not very bad, but just enough to lay me up for a week or so. Creak lies in hospital very bad. He got nearly buried up. About a dozen of our fellows got buried up alive. My mate “Ginger” is one of them. I don’t think they have found anything of them yet.”

## **Private A T Wayman of the 1<sup>st</sup> King’s Own Scottish Borderers was wounded and invalided home to Downham Road, Ely, where he shared his diary of the Gallipoli Landings – 24<sup>th</sup> September 1915**

“Left Lucknow, India, 27<sup>th</sup> October 1914. Arrived Bombay 27<sup>th</sup> October midday. Embarked on the S.S. Sardinia during the afternoon. Sailed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> November, with convoy consisting of 56 boats, escorted by HMS Swiftsure and Duffrin. On the 8<sup>th</sup> November we were joined by a convoy from Karachi, also HMS Duke of Edinburgh. Arrived Aden the 10<sup>th</sup> November; dropped anchor for about 24 hours. Sailed again the 11<sup>th</sup> November. Arrived Port Suez on the 17<sup>th</sup> November about 10 a.m. disembarked during the afternoon. Entrained from Ismailia about 9 p.m. the 17<sup>th</sup> November. Arrived at Camp Moasker about 2.30 a.m. 18<sup>th</sup> November where we dug the trenches along the Suez Canal and furnished outposts, as we were expecting to be attacked by the Turks, marching to invade Egypt. Received orders for England on the 13<sup>th</sup> December. Entrained for Alexandria on the 14<sup>th</sup> December for embarkation on the S S Geelong. Arrived at Alexandria about 2.30 p.m. 14<sup>th</sup> December and went straight on board. Sailed on the 15<sup>th</sup> December. Arrived at Malta for orders on the 18<sup>th</sup> December. Arrived in Gibraltar on the 22<sup>nd</sup> December; went into the Admiralty Dock. Orders were then given to 1 and 4 Platoons, about 125 men – I was in No. 4 Platoon – to disembark and go aboard the S S Wiltshire. During the afternoon we took on board 700 prisoners of war, including Turks, Germans and Austrians.

“Sailed on the 24<sup>th</sup> December with convoy of three boats, escorted by HMS Talbot. Got into the Bay of Biscay on Christmas Day. Arrived off the Eddystone lighthouse about 10 a.m., 29<sup>th</sup> December. We kept sailing around it until 8 p.m. the same night. The weather was very rough. At 8 p.m. we sailed into Plymouth Sound; we dropped anchor just inside the breakwater. We started to disembark in tug boats about 7 a.m. 30<sup>th</sup> December. As we got ashore we went straight into the trains that were waiting for us. There were five prisoners and one soldier with fixed bayonet in each compartment.

We don't know where we are going to take them. Arrived at Exeter City about 2 p.m. The prisoners got a cup of tea and some sandwiches here, but we got nothing. Arrived at Southampton about 8 p.m.; handed the prisoners over to an escort that was waiting for them. We got a cup of dirty water here, supposed to be tea, but nothing to eat. Entrained again about 10 p.m. for Brentwood, Essex. Arrived at Waterloo Station about 11.30 p.m, then marched through London to Liverpool Street Station. On arrival there were no trains leaving for Brentwood, so we had to sleep in the waiting room for the night. We entrained the next morning about 5 a.m., the 31<sup>st</sup> December. Arrived at Warley Barracks about 6.30 a.m. where we were put into empty houses. During our stay here we got some warm clothing issued out to us which we were very badly in need of. Entrained again on the 19<sup>th</sup> January about 9 a.m. for Rugby. Arrived at Ely at 1.30 p.m. for water.

“Arrived at Rugby about 6.30 p.m. the same day, where we were put into private billets. We had a very fine time during our stay here. We stopped at Rugby for nine weeks, and the people were very sorry we left. We were inspected by the King at Rugby on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March. I am in the 87<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade and the 29<sup>th</sup> Division. Entrained at Rugby on the 18<sup>th</sup> of March, about 5 a.m. for Avonmouth, for embarkation on the SS Dongola. Arrived at Avonmouth about 3 p.m. the same date and went straight on board and sailed the same evening at 8 p.m. with about 1,700 on board of various regiments. Arrived off Gibraltar on the 22<sup>nd</sup> March about 4 p.m. but never stopped. Arrived at Malta on the 25<sup>th</sup> March about midday and went into the port. The French battleship Paris was laying along the quay and the band played various English tunes, and the sailors cheered us.

“Sailed again on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March. Arrived at Alexandria on the 29<sup>th</sup> of March, about 10 a.m. Dropped anchor just inside the harbour. Went along the side of the quay on the 30<sup>th</sup> of March, about 11 a.m. and started to disembark. We got to Mex camp about 6 p.m. Mex is four miles from Alexandria. When we got there we laid down for the night on the open ground, with nothing to eat since early morning. We pitched the camp early the next morning, the 31<sup>st</sup> March. We were camping beside the salt lakes. We were inspected by General Sir Ian Hamilton on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April. He gave us a very good name. We embarked again at Alexandria on the 15<sup>th</sup> of April on the SS Southland, and sailed on the 16<sup>th</sup> of April about 10 a.m. The General Officer commanding the Forces came on board during the afternoon. My battalion furnished him with a guard of honour. We arrived off the Greek coast on the 18<sup>th</sup> of April. We went into the harbour, and dropped anchor. The Queen Elizabeth and several more English ships were lying in here. We went on board HMS Amethyst on the evening of 24<sup>th</sup> April – Saturday – and sailed about 8 p.m. the same night.

“The sailors on board were very kind to us. HMS Sapphire was following up very close with the Royal Marine Light Infantry on board, and the remainder of the battleships and transports came behind. We arrived off the coast of Gallipoli just before daybreak 25<sup>th</sup>. The battleships spread all along the coast, and we got into small boats, pulled by trawlers, and kept between the battleships until the order was given to rush for the coast. As soon as it was light enough to see the cliffs the battleships opened a furious bombardment on the enemy's trenches that were on the top of the cliffs. The order was given to let go the boats and away we went. When we got within 60 yards of the beach we had to jump out of the boats and walk up to our necks in water. All this time we were under a very heavy rifle and shrapnel fire, but some of us managed to get ashore and get under cover of the cliffs.

“After we had got a decent few on shore the order was given to advance up the cliffs, and my God! didn’t they let us have it. Our men were falling like flies, but we got to the top. And what a sight it was! Too horrible to mention. Well we started to dig ourselves some trenches. When we had got a small hole each the Turks started to attack us, so we fixed bayonets and charged them. You should have seen them run, and us after them; and they did beg for mercy, but who could give them mercy when you look round and see your comrades lying dead all around you? We advanced about 300 yards then started to dig ourselves in again. This was about 11 a.m. Well we managed to get some decent trenches dug this time. The Turks attacked us again about 7 p.m. and kept at us until 8 o’clock the next morning, the 26<sup>th</sup> of April, when we charged them again and drove them off, then retired to our own trenches again. At 11 o’clock they attacked us again, and we were getting very weak by this time. We had lost a terrible lot of men, including our Commanding Officer and Adjutant, and several other officers and about 600 men.

“Well the Turks with their great numbers, drove us back on the cliffs, but we were unable to hold it, so the Navy sent the boats to fetch us off again, which we all made a run for, and they took us on board the Goliath. She took us round to Tenedos, and the next morning, the 27<sup>th</sup> of April, we landed again, and we drove the Turks about five miles up the peninsula and strongly entrenched ourselves, waiting then until we could get some reinforcements. During the time we were waiting the Turks were very strongly entrenching themselves. Their nearest trench to ours was about 400 yards away. We kept having a pop at them every now and again, and they were doing the same at us. They also gave us a few shrapnel now and again, just to let us know they were still there. We were busy getting our guns on shore while this was going on. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of May we made another general advance and captured three more rows of Turkish trenches, the enemy losing very heavily. On the 10<sup>th</sup> we made another advance, about 600 yards. On the 20<sup>th</sup> of May we got relieved by the Lancashire Fusiliers at daybreak.

“At 12 o’clock the same day we were called back again, as the Terriers had lost their trench, so we had to go and charge the enemy out of it, which we did in very quick time, the enemy losing very heavily. We got relieved again on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May. We went right back into the reserve trenches. While we were there we made roads, and used to go up into the firing line at night to dig communicating trenches. On the evening of 3<sup>rd</sup> of June, about 8 p.m. we went up into the trenches – the first line. We knew that we were going to have a big fight the next day, the 4<sup>th</sup> of June. While we were in the trenches the officers explained the plan of operations to us. A steady bombardment of the enemy’s trenches started at 8 a.m. and continued until 11.20 a.m. Then there was an interval of ten minutes. During this interval we had to fix bayonets and show them above the top of the trench and shout for all we were worth, and also fire three rounds rapidly. The idea of this was to make the enemy think that we were advancing. At 11.30 a.m. there was a furious bombardment until 12 o’clock. When the last gun went we had to jump out of the trench and charge the enemy. Well, away we went. The bullets were falling just like a hailstorm, but on we went.

“When we got to the first trench we bayoneted all we could get hold of, and what a sight it was. After we had finished the first, on we went to the second one. When we got up to it the Turks started to run, all those that could, but the trench was full of dead and dying. It was an awful sight. Well, we got no opposition there. I might say our fellows were falling like flies all the way up here. The ground was strewn with dead. Well, on we went to the third, and, my God, didn’t they let us have it, but we got there, and didn’t we make a mess of them. After we had finished the third, on to

the fourth we went, and we got no opposition in there, as the Turks were going for all they were worth, our big guns giving them plenty of shrapnel to help them along. Well we started to make the trenches a bit decent, and chuck the dead out of them. About 4 p.m. the Turks attacked us with a very strong force. We did our best, but we could not hold them back, so we had to retire to the third row of trenches. During this retirement I got a piece of shrapnel in my foot, and it felt very uncomfortable. When I got about fifty yards off the trench a shell burst just above my head, and I knew no more until I came to myself in hospital in Malta.

“Well, the doctor said I was not fit to send back to the firing line, so he asked me if I would like to go to England. We went on board the *Europesi* on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June, and sailed on the 20<sup>th</sup>. Got to Gibraltar on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, and a beautiful voyage we had. We arrived at Plymouth Sound on the 27<sup>th</sup> of June about 6.30 a.m., anchored just inside the breakwater, disembarked about 10.30 a.m. and arrived at Netley Hospital 6.30 p.m. same day.”

### **Another letter from the unnamed Ely correspondent with the Australian Forces at Gallipoli – 24<sup>th</sup> September 1915**

“At present I am sitting in my dug-out. I have folded the “Standard”, and with the assistance of my right knee, improvised a writing pad. Now, then, you sit on the floor up in a corner, so that your back is supported by two walls. Then draw up one knee, and with a folded newspaper and writing material you have all the necessaries required for performing the trick. To do the trick properly you need to dig a hole in the back garden – this is to represent a dug-out; also import an army corps of “Abdul’s” 1915 Gallipoli-bred flies. A blazing hot summer day will add to the effect. The Corporal from H.Q. signallers has just paid me a visit, and he informs me that I am being transferred into that section. Although field signalling is not the securest of jobs, there is not that strain which one gets when night observing in the fire trench. You can have no idea how it tells on a man to be standing to arms for any length of time, or to be one on and one off – that is, one man standing to for an hour while his mate sleeps for an hour (or tries to). This is carried on through the night, and I can tell you this is a test for soldier, especially on a dark night with no moon. Our company is occupying captured Turkish trenches. These trenches have been dug where dead men have been buried only about a foot deep, and in one place as you go through the trench you can see the skull of one corpse. Dead men are lying outside the trenches where they have been since the Turks came one night and recaptured the trench, only to lose it again that night. It is reckoned to be one of the hottest places in the line. While writing this letter I have had my tea, consisting of a pint of tea and half a pint of plain boiled rice, also a biscuit with syrup on to help it down. This syrup has been issued tonight for the first time. We call it “cockey’s joy”. I will explain the reason. In Australia there are a large number of small general farmers, usually men who have taken up Government selections. These men work their selections, and usually collar a chummy or two just landed, and get them to work day and night for a small wage and board. These framers are called “cockeys”, and, because they feed their men on syrup, which is about the only luxury provided in the board, it is called “cockey’s joy”.



*“The writer enclosed a sketch, showing how the soldiers were dressed in Gallipoli. “Real good dress, too” he added, “with plenty of fresh air.” The men wear short knickers, like footballers, their arms are almost bare, and their shirts are opened at the neck.”*

### **Rifleman Sidney Ablett of the King’s Royal Rifles – 8<sup>th</sup> October 1915**

“We have had four days rest from the trenches but are back in them now. No doubt you read about the charge on Saturday last. Well I am pleased to say I was not in it. We happened to be out of the trenches when that came off....We have been giving the Germans socks lately. I think they will soon pack up as they begin to realise they are beaten. I killed one myself last Saturday week. It was during the night, I looked over the trench and saw a flash from a rifle about fifty yards in front of our trench, so I took careful aim and let drive at him.... soon as I knew I had hit him I pumped three more shots at him.... he soon gave over shouting. He turns out to be a German sniper.... The next night eight of us were out putting barbed wire between our trenches and theirs and when the Germans saw us they put up a couple of Maxim guns on us. We had to lie flat on our backs until they gave over and then crawl back into our trench. Thank God none of us were hit.”

*Sidney was twenty. He worked in his family’s business in West Fen Road, Ely.*

### **Private John H Gent of the Machine Gun Section of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Cambridgeshires writes to Mr Atkin of Curry’s Cycle Store. His letter included the good news that his brothers had just joined up – in fact his brother Jim was later to be killed in action. – 29<sup>th</sup> October 1915**

“I am sitting in what is left of a cottage writing this, just behind our trench, and “the Germs” are just over the way about two or three hundred yards. They are very quiet this morning (24<sup>th</sup> October) I am not sorry I came out here, for I have seen things that I shall never forget..... But we never know when our last minute has come..... for you may be with a pal one minute, and a few hours later one of you may be dead and buried. It is a grand sight to see our chaps look after the wounded comrades, it does not matter how we are being fired upon, it is always our first thought. I think I have been one of the lucky ones, for although I have lost a lot of my comrades I have not had a scratch yet.”

### **An unnamed Prickwillow gunner wrote of a dogfight between a British plane and a German spy plane called a Taube – 12<sup>th</sup> November 1915**

“We had an aeroplane and Taube fight above our heads. They were firing at each other for a short time. Then the Englishman swerved towards the German lines and came back fast above the Taube, and, my word, it brought the Taube down beautifully.

“The Taube after being hit made for the German lines, but came down in our lines. I think our infantry prevented her escaping by opening a rapid fire on him. The pilot was killed and another wounded....We also watched three more duels but they were too far off to see the results. Anyhow we saw all our aeroplanes come back safely. You can see little white puffs of smoke in the air when they fire at each other.”

### **Trooper Eric Rickwood of the Life Guards writes from hospital to his parents in Trinity House, Ely - 19<sup>th</sup> November 1915**

“We were working in a gravel quarry and the whole of one side came in on us, burying me completely and four others partly (during the whole of the time I was conscious). I was found to have got a dislocated shoulder and my foot and hip were hurt... my back and head were bruised with the stones also...I have to lie on my back so am writing this in an awkward position.....(I am) progressing splendidly.”

*Eric was nineteen. Before the War he was on a farm in Wendron, Cornwall, learning farming from farmer Bennett Johns.*

### **Gunner Frederick George Carpenter was the only son of the headmaster of Prickwillow School. He had tried to enlist several times before being finally accepted into the Royal Field Artillery. Frederick was eighteen. Now he was writing home to say he had been wounded – 19<sup>th</sup> November 1915**

“Thanks for parcel received. The leggings will come in grand, as puttees are no good here. Talk about mud in the fens, why it’s over your head here. I have been in hospital for over a fortnight. I went right up to the guns with a limber of ammunition, and was hit by a piece of shrapnel in the thigh – a flesh wound. It’s better now, and I am out of the hospital again. The shell burst about 20 yards to the side of my pair of horses, and I was hit by a flying piece. No one else was hurt, and no horses were touched. I seemed the unlucky one. In the hospital I had a good rest, and was treated extra well. I might have had another fortnight in hospital, but I felt better and so returned to duty. Hard bombarding here the last day or two. Aeroplane duels still keep on – weather permitting. We are well quartered, two or three blankets apiece, a ground waterproof sheet, and a mackintosh cape, besides our big overcoats. We also get nice food, and altogether we manage to make ourselves comfortable. You would be surprised to know where I am, but of course I cannot tell you. Don’t forget the C.T. (Cambridgeshire Times). Have all the Prickwillow chaps enlisted yet?”

**Another long letter from an Australian in Gallipoli to relatives in Ely. It is very possible that the “letters from an Australian” on this and other pages are actually all from the same soldier. – 19<sup>th</sup> November 1915**

*“It should be mentioned that the writer, who was one of the first to land on the peninsula, has, after several months of trench warfare, been appointed a signaller at headquarters.”*

“I am now a member of that most honourable and trusted society of Headquarters Signallers. I do not know whether it sounds much to you, but it means a lot to me. It means that I am, as it were, in the know and you can take it from me it is a great thing here to be able to get more news first hand, news which is always more or less official. Of course, we are bound by certain regulations, etc, to keep any knowledge that we gather in the course of our duties strictly to ourselves. We are kept fairly busy but the work is interesting, mostly telegraphy and telephone. A man needs to use his “nut” a little bit and not a little his legs., for if we have a bit of a “stunt” as we did yesterday, the signaller becomes an express dispatch bearer, scudding across open spaces, dodging shells, and diving from trench to trench with a message to all companies, which must be signed by the respective company commanders. The easiest part of our work is sitting in the operating dug-out with the “buzzer”, and that terrible instrument of torture which fits over the head and ear. I must not forget that this easy job I have just been explaining becomes very tedious and wearisome during the long hours of night, and it is sometimes extremely hard to keep awake. Of course, to go to sleep on such an important post as this is a most criminal offence, and there is no knowing how it would end if a fellow were to be caught in the act.

“You know I almost believe that if a chap is to be hit he will be hit, but if the reverse – well, then he will never get hit....I have had some extraordinary close shaves, and I am not an exception, for everybody has had narrow escapes here. The morning of the eventful 25<sup>th</sup> was crammed with close shaves, and so close were they that I never expected to leave that beach alive. Don’t think that I was nervous. Far from it. It was not until some weeks afterwards, when the strain of things in general began to weaken my system, that I got a sudden shock and was surprised to find myself all of a shake. I think that day was the only one in which my nerves gave way. We were making our way, single file, fully equipped and carrying shovels, etc, when suddenly the enemy opened fire with common shell. I heard the sudden whizz of the shell and made a dive for the underneath of a watercart. In my endeavour to reach safety I tripped over the barbed wire, and my rifle caught in the same. The fall probably saved my life, but I could not leave my rifle. I had already lost one rifle on the Peninsula. I paused for a while, and then dodged back to extricate my rifle from the wire, when there was another explosion only a few yards away. I made another dive for the watercart, and while I lay on comparative safety a whole shower of shells fell all around. I then made for a gully where a number of our party had taken cover. I sat down under a bit of cliff, and to be sure, they dropped one right beside me. ...you bet we did not all get out of it whole.

“I will tell you how I lost my first rifle. We were advancing over flat scrubby country about two days after landing, and we dropped down behind some small bushes for cover, or rather concealment. When we had been lying there for some time the order came to cease fire and fix bayonets. This we could not understand, for we could not see the enemy, but, of course, we knew he was there by his machine gun and rifle fire, which was pouring over us like rain. We got the order to advance again,

and we made a quick sudden rush and dropped to the bushes. All this time we were losing men who seemed to be hit from the flank. However, we discovered that we were flanked, and when the enemy had us in a position that they had purposely drawn us they opened fire with shrapnel. It was something awful, and more than we could stand. If we had stayed a minute longer we should have all been wiped out. But we retired, and you should have seen me do the mile in record time. I had the sense to unfix my bayonet first, and, grabbing my rifle, up and off like blazes I went. I dropped again for a spell, then up again. I caught my foot in a shrub and pitched head over heels dropping my rifle in the act. I laid out about three yards from my rifle, fairly exhausted. I had no time to waste and I was off again. This time I nearly ran right plump into a dead comrade. I dodged round him and went headlong down a gully. When I pulled myself together I began to lament over my lost rifle, but not for long, as I soon picked up another, a fair love, and here she hangs in my dugout now.

“I will now tell you how I did get hit. I was constructing a bit of a dugout at the time, and Abdul was putting a few over. Sometimes they would hit some poor unfortunate who was slow in getting under cover. One chap was killed about three yards away from me. They were making it pretty warm, so I thought that I would sit in my little bit of a hole until it was all over. While sitting there a shower of shrapnel fell all around, and my cobber’s greatcoat, which was being used to screen the sun, was perforated, and one saucy piece caught me in the side of my head. What do you think? my head is bullet proof, for all the pellet did was to raise a bump. Of course, it did sting a little, but I picked the piece of shrapnel up, and I have it in my purse to this day.

“About a fortnight ago I was sitting in my dugout for four, this being before we took up our present position. I was in company with one of my dugout partners, and another was just outside boiling the daxies. He had cooked the rice, and it was in a dixie between myself and my friend in the dugout, and all of a sudden whiz! and a piece of shell about 4 in by 2 in came through the overhead awning, and struck the lid off the rice pot, by gum Abdul made a right mess of our dinner.

“Yesterday Abdul must have got a bit of a fright for he made things hum for a time, I was sitting in the operating “possie” with two other signallers when, to our surprise and consternation, one of Abdul’s 4 in shells struck the bank above and rolled right into the dugout, as though he lived there. Gee we did give him a look, but he didn’t say anything, so we let him cool down a bit and then removed him.

“I could go on with stories like this and fill a book. They only go to show how a man has luck, they may not appear to be true to those who have not experienced this particular kind of sport, but I tell you they are quite true to a detail, and that such things happen in the fighting zone continuously.”

**Lance Corporal G Webster, 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion Buffs writes to a friend in Ely – 26<sup>th</sup> November 1915**

“We are having very cold weather and my fingers are nearly frozen. Speaking of rest, our best time is in the trenches, we get more time to ourselves there than we do when they are in the rest camp. We go into the trenches again amongst the snow and ice next Monday.... The day before shrapnel burst right over my head, and caught another corporal and a private..... several dugouts also fell in and buried men while they were asleep. I suppose it was due to the snow.....our platoon is getting very small now owing to casualties.”

**Gunner Frederick George Carpenter had been wounded again (see above). He was aboard the Hospital Ship Anglia when it hit a German mine on 17<sup>th</sup> November 1915; the ship was carrying 390 injured men, 134 of whom were killed – 26<sup>th</sup> November 1915**

“On October 26<sup>th</sup> I was wounded in the thigh by a shrapnel bullet..that healed up but I was kept in hospital as I had caught cold, so was sent...Clearing Station.. (November 17<sup>th</sup>) we boarded the Anglia (at Calais) ...and sailed about 11.45 a.m. It was an extra rough sea, but nevertheless all went well till – bang! the boat struck about three miles out from Dover.

“I was on a stretcher underneath. I got off it and climbed up out on the deck the best way I could. Everyone was hurrying about, and the ship was sinking fast. I got a lifebelt, but I saw a nurse so I put it on her. A destroyer came near us and another soldier and I threw her bodily on to the deck of the destroyer, and two more badly wounded fellows also. The destroyer could not keep near us, and was moving away, so I took off my overcoat, tunic, cardigan, boots, leggings etc and got on the railings with a 40 or 50ft drop in front of me. The ship was right up on one end when I dived, and just managed to clear the propellers, which were still going. I swam about for about a quarter of an hour, and was picked up by another destroyer. I might add I had put my arm out through the lowering of a boat, and had to swim with one hand. We were eventually landed at Dover.

“...It was barely five minutes after our ship struck when a collier which had come to our help was also struck. Both boats went under in about 10 or 15 minutes. I never want to go to sea again.....I am in a nice hospital on Leicester....I have lost all my kit, my new leggings, my watch and chain, paybook, pocket case, gloves and £2 I had in French money, but I am still living. I am none the worse for it only my arm has been out and set again...I only know of one other stretcher case besides myself that was saved...

“My arm is better and in myself I feel altogether better. The Vicar of Leicester visited me and brought me cigarettes. He was very nice to me; so were the nurses.

“It was an awful experience but, believe me, I never was excited nor lost my head. We could not realise it, and we never had time to think of it. A telegram came from the king to the hospital expressing his sympathy to the saved.... They are getting up a fund in Leicester on our behalf.

“I don't mind fighting, but I do mind the Channel. I would rather have the last part of Loos all over again than that. When my arm is better I expect to get a ten days' furlough, which will be A1.”

**Private J Cooper, a stretcher bearer in the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the East Surrey Regiment, writes to the Ely Standard about the paper itself – 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1915**

“...as a regular reader of your paper, through the kindness of friends who send it out every week... how valued your paper is especially in the trenches. There is a rage for it, as everyone wants to see it at the same time. When it arrives back to me again it is in several pieces, so you can imagine the craze there is for it.”

**Private Thomas Morriss of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Norfolk Regiment wrote a Christmas letter home before he left the hospital in Basra to rejoin his regiment. His parents received it one day after they heard he had died.**

“I really intended to send you a Christmas card with this letter, but I have never had the chance of getting one, as we are shifted so quickly. I may be able to get some when I get to the regiment. If so, I will send you some on. They are very decent cards. They have on them the coat of arms of the I.E.F.D , which a private suggested is a shark, fly, mosquito, beetle, flea and the sun, and it has a nice verse on it too in any case. I will wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, although I don't suppose there will be much happiness in a good many homes.”

*The I.E.F.D. was the “Indian Expeditionary Force D”, later known as the “Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force”.*