

# 1917

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Few whole letters from the Front appear in the Ely Standard this year, although some were reported:

## **Summary of letters from Privates Sidney and Albert Starling of the Suffolk Regiment whose father was for many years stationmaster at Ely – 16<sup>th</sup> February 1917**

(Sidney) “has written home stating that he was superintending the bailing of hay when he noticed that the name on the tarpaulin and also on the engine was that of James Graven, Ely. Strange to relate, Pvt Albert Starling of the Suffolks, a brother, who is also in France, was unloading sacks of potatoes elsewhere and discovered that the sacks were marked “Cole Ambrose, Ely”.”

*Literally a “taste of home” for Albert!*

## **One of the Silver Street School’s teachers wrote to the headteacher, Mr J S Barnett, from France – 16<sup>th</sup> February 1917.**

“We came out from Folkestone on Dec. 10<sup>th</sup>, and spent a night in Boulogne Rest Camp (very much rest?) – we called it Mud Camp – and then on to the base, where we stayed about ten days. This place was amongst sand dunes, and must be lovely in summer. We went through the Bull ring there – the training ground that is – and proceeded from there to Calais, where we spent our Christmas; such a one I hope never to spend again. That was a “Mud on Sand” camp, and a wet and muddy time we had there. Our Christmas Day was memorable in many respects. We were left on half-ration; and had bread and jam (pessie) for breakfast, and nearly cold tea; dinner of bully beef stew and a tiny wedge of plum pudding, - which disappeared at once; tea for tea, with cheese; and during the evening an issue of Christmas fare, which when doled out (by counting) came to one apple or orange per man, per tent, seven figs, and three “assorted” nuts – also per man. Didn’t we think of our last Christmas meals in Blighty! Well that’s a recollection now. We left Calais, and reached this camp, where we have been ever since. You will notice we are attached to an Entrenching Battalion, and though I am not allowed to give detail of work, the name pretty well speaks for itself. Sergt. Oakey (of the Fountain and from P.O. Ely) is our A. Co-Sergt-Major pro tem. Young Pilgrim, Fyson (of Soham Grammar School) and P. Adcock also are other Ely boys here; also P Woods. I expect you can hardly imagine us as navvies, with pick and shovel. But though arduous it is healthy work. I may say we have had our baptism of fire, and the first sensations are “bobbing” ones. At present I am under medical treatment. A great many of the Flemish women here sell coffee; nearly every house in the village is either a coffee house, egg and chips house, or shop. It is a curious sight here to see dogs pulling small carts along, and big horses pulling three-wheeled barrows (or small carts) along.”

## **This letter from Corporal T. Gotobed of the Leicestershire Regiment to his brother William was titled “Ely Corporal Gains Distinction in France”**

“You will be pleased to hear that we have won both the Company and Battalion prizes. Our Commanding Officer offered £5 for the best section on parade, and also a prize for the best section in the whole Battalion. The parade was in field marching order. There are four companies in the regiment, each of eight sections, and out of the 32 sections mine came out top. Our captain was very pleased, so we were all photographed together.”

*This letter appears to be from Charles Tingey Gotobed – his older brother Thomas had been a Prisoner of War since 1914 and the newspaper used the wrong initial (unless the family called him Tingey). Charles had been in France since December 1916.*

## **This letter was signed “Arthur” and was from the son of “a well-known tradesman in Ely” – letter dated 11<sup>th</sup> May 1917**

“We went up into the line again last Sunday and went over the top at four o’clock Monday morning. We lay out in a large field for an hour or two and moved forward at the time stated. We had to advance about 500 yards and take a trench just in front of an important village. My word it was just hell! Fritz sent over to us every conceivable form of killing material devised – shrapnel, high explosive, machine gun bullets, bombs, all the time throwing up coloured star shells and rockets wherewith to spot us in the half light. How I and so many of us got across we can’t remember: I haven’t got a single scratch. When we reached the trench we got in and worked up and down throwing bombs in the dugouts and setting them on fire. The Boches scurried out like rabbits and the boys got busy with the rifles and bayonets. You would hardly believe what a coward the present Boche soldier is. I should not have believed it myself had I not seen it with my own eyes. He wrings and claps his hands and shouts frantically for mercy, and empties his pockets offering you the contents, and behaves almost like a woman in hysterics. We get a great number of prisoners. We came out of the line at night, being four days in, and Fritz bombarding us every night. Two of my section were killed within a yard of me, and I escaped with being buried up to my waist, but with the exception of a dent in my steel helmet from a piece of shrapnel, I came out alive and kicking. We shall have a decent rest now I think. It was a tough job all through, considering the fact that this was the third attempt that was made on this line, but we got there and with very few casualties. After we were out we had a generous tot of rum, neat, and needless to say, we weren’t long in getting our heads down on the Jack and asleep. I have now several deceased Boches to my credit and didn’t realise it until the excitement had passed. Now, I came back minus my bombs, and my rifle got uncomfortably hot in my hands. I never dreamed I should be able to kill anyone, but it seemed quite natural at the time. I am jolly glad to be out of it for a good spell, and it will be some time before our turn comes to go over again.

“ I had to break off this letter as we had to move to another village, so am finishing it in the new billets. We are in some very comfy billets with wire beds, rows of them, fixed up in a decent airy barn, and also it is warm weather, it is very pleasant. You ought to have seen us come out of the line. My putties were torn nearly off with crossing the barbed wire (and the German entanglements are some obstacle). Of course, our artillery had smashed up a lot of it, but it is very awkward and nasty getting through it in semi-darkness. We had no water for 48 hours, so we didn't half bury our noses in the hot tea when coming out. It is rather difficult keeping up connection and getting stuff up to the line, as it is now practically open country where we are, as you no doubt have guessed. Hope you are quite well. I am in the pink, and didn't feel the least bit nervy through the “gaff”.”

### **Private A.F. Crane of the Suffolks wrote home to his wife in Prickwillow to describe his marvellous escape. His letter and its contents were shared with Frederick Carpenter who wrote them up for the paper – 1<sup>st</sup> June 1917**

“He was in the trenches for 23 days with his battalion, and they went through what he described as a very rough time”. He was carrying a small parcel of letters and an enamelled cup in the left pocket of his tunic, when a bullet went through the letters and penetrated the cup, which undoubtedly preserved his life. He has sent home the letters and the mis-shapen bullet. The writer has personally examined them, and it is easy to see where the bullet pierced the letters and where it made its exit near the centre of the package.”

### **The Reverend Frederick. James Bywaters, curate of Holy Trinity Church, was called up to be a Forces Chaplain. He wrote to friends back in Ely from his posting near Warminster – 20<sup>th</sup> July 1917**

“I am attached to the 46<sup>th</sup> Batt. of the 10<sup>th</sup> Training Reserve Brigade. I am the only “padre” in the camp – over 5,000 men, all in huts and tents, vegetable gardens in between fancy plots here and there – all situated on a slope of the hills with gorgeous woods, hills and valleys all around.....They are mainly lads of 18, and every few days batches of men come in, nearly all from East London, any number of Jews, boys from the slums, and sons of well-to-do people. The 43<sup>rd</sup> Battalion is composed of older men and lads and sends out drafts to various fields – the other three, the 44<sup>th</sup>, 46<sup>th</sup> and 47<sup>th</sup>, are training battalions, and when the lads are efficient they are sent either to the 43<sup>rd</sup> or to some battalion elsewhere....I have arranged with the Colonels to have instruction classes at least once a week. This means that over 3000 lads hear something once a week beside Sunday and it gives me a chance to know them. It is hard work, from 8.30 to 12.30, and from 2 to 4.50 on four days a week, company after company coming in the shed or Church hut.....I allow questions to be asked, and have had some teasers too!

“The boys live well. Weedy East-Enders turn into hearty bronzed boys after six weeks. Games are played in the evening, cricket and football chiefly, through the YMCA, and regimental canteens cater

for indoor games like billiards. My wooden church seats 160 or thereabouts....on fine Sundays I have only two church parades and 2000 men at each. it is grand! The band leads the singing and plays chants as well. They tell me they can all hear me too. The General comes every Sunday; he likes it. When wet – we must have four parades – I rig up the cinema as a sanctuary...the cinema is in the camp.

“Probably my name will be sent in for France....”

*Frederick went out to France as an Army Chaplain about two months after he wrote this letter. After the War he returned to Ely and was made rector of nearby Haddenham in 1920. He was 26 at the time he wrote his letter; he died in 1968.*

### **George William Skeels MM was wounded in the left shoulder when “going over the top” on 31<sup>st</sup> July 1917 – 10<sup>th</sup> August 1917**

“It was in the afternoon. We have made a very big push and we (the Cambridgeshires) were in it. The regiment took what they went for, and I hope they will have a good rest, as they did some good work. It was very hard to see some of the German prisoners, as they were very young. They came to you with their hands up. I think it is one of the greatest battles ever known. The ground was full of shell holes whenever you went...”

*George was referring to the opening day of the Battle of Passchendaele.*

### **This letter was from a young man of military age who had been exempted from service because the Tribunal had agreed he was essential as a farmworker. However, he complains that the farmers are exploiting their remaining younger workers, believing they will not complain, as working on a farm was safer than being at the Front – 24<sup>th</sup> August 1917**

“Sir – Would you let me say a few words in your paper for the men that are of military age, as the farmers think because a man is of military age he belongs to him body and soul, and the result is that he has to work for one and even two shillings less than men over 41 years of age. And not only that, but they tell them if they are not satisfied, they can go in the Army. Surely farmers have not judges of working men, nor is a man of military age let off to further fill the farmers’ overflowing pockets, but for the nation’s good. Why then should he be made a slave of the farmers? Will they think so much of the man between 60 and 70 years of age after the war as they do now? They did not before it, as they did not want him then, but today he is worth twelve shillings more a week than a man between 18 and 41. Do any of you readers think that is justice?”

## **Sergeant James Howlett of the Suffolk Regiment wrote home to his wife in Broad Street after being wounded for the fourth time. He was by this time in hospital in Glasgow - 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1917**

"I am slightly wounded in the head, left arm and both legs, but am going on quite well. I suppose I shall go under a small operation in a day or two to have the shrapnel removed if they don't let it stop, the same as they did the last lot. There was a great lot of them killed the day I was wounded. More than half of my platoon went under, but, thank God, I managed to get through it with only a few scratches. I have some very special news to tell you when I get home if they don't let you know from the War Office or put it in the papers. There is nothing to worry about, only something you will be very pleased when you know what it is. I don't know myself yet what it is until I hear from France, only I can guess, and I hope it is right what I guess, then I shall be happy."

## **Another letter from Private William Rayment of the Marines showed how far packages from Ely travelled – 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1917**

William had been a butcher's roundsman for Eastman's on Ely High Street – he wrote back home about visiting his brother in a casualty clearing station, where he had spotted a bale of clothing made by Ely Ladies' Sewing Party.

## **On 17<sup>th</sup> October 1917 Private Charles Edwards, a POW in Friedrichsfeld, writes to Mr P S Allen of Ely – 7<sup>th</sup> December 1917**

"I now sit down to write a few lines to you, trusting to find you in the very nest of health, as I am very pleased to say it leaves me the same at this time of writing. Sir, I was very sorry to think that I could not write to thank you before for the parcels which you have been sending to me. I was very sorry indeed, but it could not be helped, as I have only just received a postcard from the Cambridge Committee, and now I feel it my duty to thank you very much indeed for what you are doing for me now I am a prisoner of war. I am sorry to tell you that I have been a prisoner of war for over three years. It is a long time for one to be a prisoner. We shall all be very pleased when can return to the dear motherland from the fatherland. I am sure none of us British boys will be sorry when the time comes for us to return. We are all trying to be merry and bright, but it takes a lot to keep it up at times. We have had all our N.C.O.s taken from us, and we think that they have gone to a better land, and we all think that we will not be long here before it is our turn. We are all looking forward for our turn, trusting that it will come before long. Sir, I would thank you very much if you could arrange to have your name put on each parcel, and then I could put it on each card when received. I am pleased to tell you that I am receiving all the parcels quite safe..."

*Philip Allen worked at Ely Brewery as a cashier. He was a regular sender of parcels to Ely POWs from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Suffolks, including Leslie Broad and Thomas Gotobed.*