

Reg's War

Reginald Arthur "Reg" Edwards of Prickwillow was not especially famous or noteworthy, but his family was prepared to share his letters and news with Mr Carpenter, who was both the headmaster of Prickwillow School (his old headmaster) and the Prickwillow correspondent of the Ely Standard / Cambridge Independent Press, and as a result we find out quite a bit about Reg and his pals at the Front through the period 1914 – 1915.

Reginald Edwards was born on 19th September 1895 at Prickwillow. His father was Albert George Edwards (1866-1945) and his mother Elizabeth Palmer (1864-1958) who had been the local school teacher before her marriage. Reg had four older siblings called Dora (1888), Eleanor (1889), Bertram (1891) and Daisy (1892), and a younger sister, Olive (1906). The Edwards family ran the Post Office



cum village bakery and grocer's shop in Prickwillow, and when war broke out Reginald was working in the family business. (The business had in fact been set up by Reginald's grandfather, Samuel Edwards.) The shop sold meat, bread, groceries, coal, draperies and other goods as well as being a Post Office, and Reg's father Albert was sub-postmaster here for roughly fifty years. There were also nine or ten horses kept at the shop used for

different purposes such as drawing the Coal Wagon or for delivering Telegrams or provisions. The family were leading members of the local Methodist Church. Reg was also known as a good cricketer, playing for the local team.

Reg was swift to volunteer to fight for his country, and his name appears in the newspaper's Roll of Honour for 4th September 1914, a fortnight before his nineteenth birthday. He was placed in the Queen's Royal 21st Lancers (Service Number 6502) and reached France on 23rd November 1914 (with the 9th Lancers). The weekly letters began to flow and a number found their way into the newspapers. (*Dates are the dates of letter publication.*)

30th October 1914

The one other local man training with Reg in the 21st Lancers was Frederick Carpenter. Frederick was the son of the headteacher of Prickwillow School (who happened to also be the "Prickwillow Correspondent" for the Ely Standard). Although this account of training with the Lancers does not carry a name, it is probable it stems from Frederick's conversations with his father rather than from Reg – of course Reg would be going through the exactly the same training with Frederick.

"Reveille at 6 a.m. Roll call 6.15. "Stables" 6.25 to take out the horses bedding, water and feed them, and brush the stables out. Breakfast at 7. Riding school at 7.45 (riding exercises include trotting, cantering, trotting out, galloping, riding (no stirrups), jumping with stirrups and arms folded, and a little formation drill.) Then unsaddle and blanket horses at 10.30.

" "Stables" is sounded at 11, when horses have to be groomed down, and their eyes, noses, docks and feet washed. They then have to be led out for the officer to pass. He rubs his hand over the

horse, and inspects the feet, nose, dock and eyes. If the hand comes off the horse's coat clean the horse is passed. It is then led back to the stable, watered and fed, and the stables cleaned. Finish at 12.45 p.m.

"Dinner is served at 1 p.m. At 2 either lance, sword, or rifle drill until 3.15. At 4 "Stables" is sounded again, when the horses have to be wisped down, fed and watered, the bedding put down for the night and the centre of the stable swept down. Tea at 5, which finishes the day unless the recruit's turn is for night guard.

"Night guard" sounds at 6, and is started at 6.30 (two hours on and four hours off). "Lights out" sounds at 10 p.m. and at 10.15 all lights are turned off.

"This constitutes the preliminary part of the recruit's training until he is proficient at riding, when the day is mostly taken up with hard rifle, lance, sword and physical drills, and helping in the stables morning and evening. Of course the recruit who knows nothing of riding is first put on the dummy horse. In the Summer Reville is sounded at 5.15 a.m. instead of 6 a.m. It will thus be seen that the recruit is kept well occupied.

"Sunday is as follows: Reville at 7 a.m., "Stables" at 7.30. (No bedding is got out on Sunday.) Church parade for all at 10.30, excepting those who are told off for the stables at 12. Dinner at 1, and a few are again told off for the stables at 4. The afternoon is free for recreation.

"Further riding exercises include riding with full arms, viz. lance, sword and rifle, charging, dummy thrusting with lance, etc, etc.

"At this particular barracks the bill of fare includes: Breakfast – cold bacon, and bread, or kippers, cheese, curried liver, with a mug of tea. Dinner – stew or beef, now and again mutton, with potatoes, and greens, peas, or haricot beans and bread. Tea – bread and butter with cheese, jam or marmalade, and sometimes tinned fish and pastes."

27th November 1914

Notes from the Prickwillow correspondent: "Private R.A. Edwards of the 21st Lancers (Kitchener's Army) youngest son of the postmaster, set sail for France on Monday. This clears up a long standing controversy!

"At the beginning of the war opinions varied considerably as to the possible length of time that would elapse before the new Army was trained sufficiently for service with the Expeditionary Force.

"Cavalry, of course, takes longer training than infantry. But I read experts' opinion on the subject of length of training, and one of these stated that to make a cavalry man efficient would require at least six months training.

"Well Pte Edwards enlisted just three months ago; and for the first week or so he did no training; which seems to show that the experts did not comprehend what Lord Kitchener was capable of doing with his new material."

Although Reg went abroad with the 21st Lancers he was soon transferred into the 9th Lancers which needed reinforcements after they had been badly mauled by the Germans in the Battle of Mons and the subsequent retreat. The 9th Lancers only really operated as a cavalry unit during 1914 and then again in the last months of the war. This was due to the move to trench warfare accompanied by the widespread use of machine guns and shelling and also the advent of the tank. For the remainder of the war they operated as infantry in the trenches. However, as a couple of Reg's letters show, they had not abandoned their horses entirely.

8th 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."

15th January 1915

The "Prickwillow notes" report: "he says he was then sleeping in an old barn with several others. They were kept quite lively at night hunting for those little animals that "Keatings tries his best to kill" and they get plenty of bayonet practice hunting rats. He also says he has received one of Princess Mary's Christmas gifts, consisting of a pipe, tobacco, cigarettes (he doesn't smoke) and a lovely tin. He has sent home the Christmas and New Year card with a photo of Princess Mary which he says he will value all his life."

15th March 1915

"I have felt so tired since we came back (from the trenches) that I haven't felt like writing. I am pleased to say I am feeling better now. I have seen a thing or two since I wrote last time. You cannot imagine what it's like. When you get a bit used to it you walk about as though nothing was going on, yet, if you show a finger you lose it. We were only about 25 yards away from the Germans' first line, but I never saw a movement of them. They have some very good shots for if they can see the muzzle of a rifle they can hit it every time. We hadn't been in the trenches more than half-an-hour before they had knocked three foresights clean off the rifles. This was in our troop, so you can tell that we mustn't show much. At night, if they see the flash of our rifles when we fire through the loopholes, the next instant you would get a bullet clean through.

"I expect you wonder how we get rations, etc, to the trenches. Well, with all their good shots, we get in and out of the trenches. We have to fetch the rations up every night, so many at a time are told off for it. The carts bring them as far as they dare, and then we crawl out and crawl back with

them the best way we can. I was on that job the first night I was up there, and I thought it really good. I think I had a good experience, for the first time.

“Another chap and I went out one night and built a bank up because it was not high enough, and the Germans could see us walking about. They were sniping at us all the time, but we managed to keep too low for them. It’s rotten working, but you can’t stand up straight ; you are bending down low all the time and standing up to the knees in mud and water, but you don’t think about that, as the shots and shells are coming all the while all one thinks about is getting done. Another nice job I went on – it was an observation post. The trenches didn’t quite meet between one regiment and another, so we were sent there to see that no one crawled through this space and got behind us. The mud was awful, well over our knees. We had bags tied round our legs over our gumboots, to stop some of the mud. We all came off that job fairly done up.

“One night one of the regiments in our brigade blew up one of the German trenches. I shall never forget it as long as I live. The noise from the shells bursting, maxims going, bombs, and rifles was terrible. When the trench went up it shook the ground for a long way round. It seemed to sway backwards and forwards. To tell you the truth I was glad when things calmed down a bit, and I think everyone else was. So for the first time in the trenches I didn’t think I have done so bad.

“There is one thing about it, we were well looked after when we came out. We went to a billet and had a warm bath, and after that a good drink of hot Oxo, which was waiting for us. You ought to have seen us before the bath, after having been up there all that time without a wash or a shave. You can imagine we looked some pretty objects. When we got to our billet we were dead beat. We had three miles to walk from the trenches to the billet, and it took about three hours to cover that three miles.”

2nd April 1915

An “anonymous” 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. Later evidence shows this was Reg, whose parents, for some reason, had not wanted his name to be recorded in this instance.

14th May 1915

“We have stood ready for hours together day after day but never got (to the firing line). One night we were in a sort of billet in reserve and another night in the reserve trenches. ...When they took that ridge we were there. We know just when they are going to make the attack and from that minute we are ready. The horses are saddled up.... But we should not need them unless they have broke through somewhere else for we are always close enough to walk to the firing line where the attack is being made. You have no idea what it is like out here. In small attacks the bombardment is bad enough, but when they took that ridge it was awful. It is like one continuous roll of thunder,

only about a dozen times as heavy. One of the guns they use now makes enough noise, but when you get hundreds going at once you can tell it's far from being quiet...

"The French have some funny races fighting for them. I should think they come from the French colonies. They dress like Arabs, most of them, and ride small ponies, such smart little things, I have never seen any like before. There were some of these men in a wood where we stopped for a night. They were a rum looking lot; some were black, but there were more white. I walked to one of their fires, they were all sitting down. I went and joined them and made one of them understand I wanted some bread. They fetched out some bread and goodness knows what else. At any rate I sat down among them and had a real good feed. I did enjoy it; it made me think of those rice puddings at home. We are in a billet again now in a lovely place and are in no hurry to move. We are not very far from the coast, so if it were not for that "little bit of water" I could bike home after tea. This is Sunday, and I am writing this laying in the grass. The weather is beautiful; I couldn't want better. I am alright and although we have barns to sleep in I always sleep outside."

Shortly after this letter appeared another soldier from Prickwillow mentioned in his letter home that he had met up with Reg who was looking very happy and "as fat as a pig"!

11th June 1915

"We have had a rough time of it. To give you a little idea – out of about twenty in our troop that went up, five of us returned, and the two sergeants and our officer. The Regiment went up for the start 300 strong, and then we had two lots of reinforcements, but when they came back the other night there were 72. So you can guess we have been in it this time. I have been very lucky. I came back two or three days before the Regiment. One morning I set out from headquarters to join the Regiment in the trenches. It was just getting light and just before I got to the Regiment the Germans started sending the gas, which came over in great clouds. I managed to get to a house. I don't know if they saw me go in or not, but I had just got inside when bang! came a gas shell right in the door, and it filled the house. You have no idea how the gas affects one. I had two mouthfuls of it before I could get out. I could see there was no chance of getting to the Regiment, so I set off back to where I started. I hadn't gone many yards when I was cut off from them, as I could see that the only thing to do was to retire. By this time I was nearly done, but kept on going and, as luck would have it, I came across an old bike. I can't say how pleased I was, for I couldn't go much further..... I chanced getting hit with the shells and rode out of it, and got out safe and sound, bar, of course, having a good dose of gas. The Regiment did not come back for three days after this. I am sorry to say I have lost my close chums now, and also every bit of my kit. We are back in a nice little billet and having a fine time now..."

9th July 1915

The Prickwillow correspondent shares that Reg "...in a letter home gives some interesting facts of the farm work going on just behind the firing line "Somewhere in France or Belgium". As regards the hay there is very little grown where they are. The process of making it is exactly the same as with us, but they had not carted it at the time of writing.

“There is scarcely any waste land round about, every foot being cultivated and made the most of. The corn is all out in ear, but the potatoes are nothing like ready to dig yet. It looks just like a bit of England.

“There are not many hares and rabbits about. No! they have got their passports and have done the “Order of the Bunk”. There are some orchards round about, but everything is so dear. Strawberries, for instance, are marked up at 10d a pound.”

Reg probably wrote in detail about local farming as his parents would have included in their letter the previous week the news that the Ely area had been hit by a terrific hailstorm which had flattened the crops.

16th July 1915

The local newspaper carried the news that Reg was home unexpectedly on leave for five days “he is modest about his experiences, although he has had three very narrow escapes. Once he was kicked over the heart by a charger, but his Princess Mary’s gift box undoubtedly saved him from serious hurt.

“He received a German gift of a piece of shell, which went through his hat and grazed his scalp, and he also had a taste of the German gas. He was entrenched within fifteen yards of the German trenches, and could hear them talking quite plainly. All the French soldiers he has met are quite confident of an early settlement. May it be soon!”

22nd October 1915

“Writing home this week (Reg) says things seem pretty quiet just now on the Western Front. Some of our troops are having considerable practice in bomb and grenade throwing.”

19th November 1915

“Leggings are the very things I want, and would go a long way towards keeping me much drier. I haven’t had dry legs and feet for a week now. The rain runs off my coat on to my puttees and into my boots, and leggings would stop all that. You ask if the bread is too dry to eat. “No certainly not!” If it was three weeks old we could eat it. Where we are now we can buy cigarettes as cheap as you could in England before the war. It is an English canteen they have built on purpose for soldiers. The people are all strict Roman Catholics out here. Everybody goes to church once on a Sunday. You see all the old men come up some time during the day and then they go straight back to work. On Sunday they work on the land just the same as any other day. The old ladies go to church with their baskets on their arms and as soon as they come out they go shopping. In fact Sunday is the same as any other day. They go to church about six times a week. If anyone dies in the village they all turn out and go to church as though it were a wedding and the bells ring as they do for a wedding in England. I like to see the old ladies going to and coming back from market. They tame all animals

out here. You see them taking a pig to market, they put a rope round its neck and drive it...you often see an old lady with four or five chickens in a basket (like one of our bread baskets). They never try to fly out, everything is so tame. They never drive cows as we do, but put a rope round their horns and lead them. Dogs do a lot of work out here. They are used like horses and yoked to anything.”

14th January 1916 – Reg’s Christmas letter

“We had a very good time, as good as anyone could want. Being so far back we feared the order coming “Turn out at once.” We all set to and decorated the place fine. There are tons of holly and mistletoe growing around here. We had turkey, and boiled bacon making it like ham, plum pudding and jelly. What more could one want than that? We had a barrel of beer in the room too, so you bet there wasn’t a row at all. We had a very enjoyable time. Then some of the officers brought us cigars, nuts and oranges. One would never have thought it possible to have got such stuff and make it as much like home as we did. It was different from last year, when we had nothing to eat at all. We were lucky to get such a fine time, as I think there were some out here who had a poor Xmas. It rained hard all day, but we were in the dry, and altogether had a very good time. This is Monday morning and I would like to be off to the coursing (*referring to coursing at Quanea*).”

Reg’s parents received another letter shortly after this one to say he was back in the lines once more.

Reg undoubtedly continued to write home, but in 1916 the local newspaper appears to have changed (or been made to change) its policy on including whole letters, and the “Prickwillow Correspondent” did not send in any more from Reg, although he knew all about his exploits:

On **6th October 1916** he reported Reg was then in hospital “with a poisoned arm”.

The newspaper of **2nd February 1917** recorded that Reg was then serving with the Machine Gun Section of the Lancers; as only the most proficient shots took on this role, this speaks of Reg’s skill with the guns. He was home in Prickwillow at this point for a few days well-earned rest – this was only his second home leave, the last being in the Spring of 1915. Just three weeks later it was reported that Reg was on the sick list and had fallen ill shortly after returning to the Front.

Reg later became a Lance Corporal in the Machine Gun Section with the Service Number 51373. He “arrived home unexpectedly last Friday evening (i.e. **1st March 1918**) on leave from the Western Front (for two weeks), where he has spent over three years continuous service. During that time he has been through all the most important engagements that the British have taken part in, and was with the cavalry brigade at Cambrai in November (1917). He still wears his “cricket” smile.”

19th April 1918

Reg “who has been in the thick of the fighting since March 21st, has sent a letter (cheery as ever) to his parents this week. He has had another marvellous escape, a piece of shell ripping off his left sleeve but leaving him unscratched.

Reg was not to survive the war unscathed – on **30th October 1918** the news came that Reg “is lying in Norwich Hospital, wounded in the right arm or hand. He has been on the Western Front since 1914,

and although he has been in many encounters and dangerous positions and has had several marvellous escapes, this is his first serious “knock out”.” Details appeared in the following week’s newspaper – probably after Reg’s family had been across to Norwich:

“The cavalry were mounted awaiting orders to advance, when the squadron to which Lance Corpl. Edwards was attached was spotted by German gunners, who at once started raining shells on them. The men dismounted and took what cover they could. Lance Corpl. Edwards was getting into a shell-hole holding his horse by his right hand extended above the hole. A shell came over and blew his horse to pieces, at the same time shattering its rider’s right hand and also wounding him in the back. With the assistance of one of his companions he tied his arm tightly above the injured hand and made his way on foot to the nearest dressing station some four miles away. On being received into hospital at Boulogne it was found necessary to amputate the shattered hand, and he was sent to England. His wounds are now healing nicely, and he is very cheerful.”

Reg’s War was over. He was 23.

Name	Corps	Rank	Regt. No.
EDWARDS	* 9th Lns MFC	PL L'PL	1502 51373
Regiment			
Medal	Roll	Page	Remarks
VICTORY	* CMG/10203	218	
BATTION	16		
15 STAR	MFC/102	12	
Theatre of War first served in			
(1)			
Date of entry therein			
23.11.14			

Reg’s Medal Card

Following the War Reg married Mary Helene Carpenter on 20th May 1919; Mary had been born in Isleworth, London, on 14th June 1897, but her family had moved to Prickwillow shortly after her birth. She was, in fact, the daughter of Prickwillow headmaster Frederick Carpenter who had collected news about Reg for his weekly “Prickwillow Notes” column in the Ely Standard. This marriage, so soon after the War was over and Reg had “recovered” from his injuries, would help to explain why Reg is the Prickwillow soldier who appears most often in the local newspaper! The wedding took place at St Mary’s Church in Ely, as Frederick Carpenter was by this stage headmaster of the Silver Street Schools (a useful venue for the wedding reception!). Reg was described as “in a large way of business” and the family business must indeed have done well over the War as the gifts from the Edwards family to the couple included “a nag, trap and harness” as well as a bedroom suite. Reg’s gift to Mary was a gold bracelet wrist watch.

Reg and Mary’s wedding was perhaps not quite as joyous as had been hoped, as just three days earlier Reg’s brother in law Sidney Strawson (husband of Eleanor / Nellie) had died of pneumonia following a serious operation. Sidney had worked as a GER clerk, but was also a choir master and local preacher at the Primitive Methodist church which the Edwards family attended.

Reg was soon back into his normal way of life at Prickwillow – a newspaper report of May 1919 lists the committee of the newly reformed cricket team, with Reg listed as scorer. In fact, this was quite a “family business” as the captain of the team was Reg’s father and his brother Bertram and cousin Ernest were on the committee too. In July 1919 the newspaper records that “Reggie Edwards received quite an ovation as he went in to bat, for notwithstanding the fact that the war had cost him his right hand, he put up eleven before being bowled out.” (This was actually quite a good innings when compared to the other batsmen!) A month later the newspaper recorded that Reg had been elected captain of Prickwillow Football Club for the new season; this time his cousin Ernest was vice-captain, and Bertram was also on the committee.

Along with his father, brothers and cousins, Reg was one of the leaders of the local Prickwillow community e.g. in November 1920 he deputised for his sick father by helping local landowner Frederick Hiam with the arrangements for the allocation of land “between the railway and the main engine drain” to local ex-servicemen.

Reg and Mary had a daughter, Monica, in 1924. Mary died in 1967 and Reg in 1973, in Buckinghamshire.