

Reading Around a Text

Journey's End

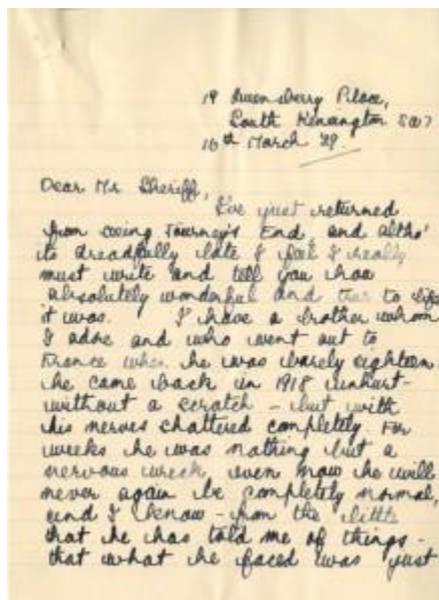
A collection of resources aimed to enrich and develop students' wider reading and contextual understanding.

M Baldwin

CONTENTS

- Letters showing contemporary public response to the play
- 'Why did so many men keep fighting?', Telegraph Article
- Extract from 'Regeneration', by Pat Barker
- 'Survivors', by Siegfried Sassoon
- Extract from 'All Quiet on the Western Front', by Erich Maria Remarque
- 'Death of our best and brightest: Eton Rifles may have been 'built for' slaughter', Daily Express Article
- Extract from 'A Brass Hat in No Man's Land', a memoir by Commander Frank Percy Crozier
- A range of Christmas cards sent from the front line.
- Extract from 'Birdsong', by Sebastian Faulks
- R C Sherrif Biographical Information, with references to his biography
- Extract from 'Good-bye to all that', by Robert Graves
- Letters sent from Sherriff to his parents during his time at war

Letters showing contemporary public response to Journey's End

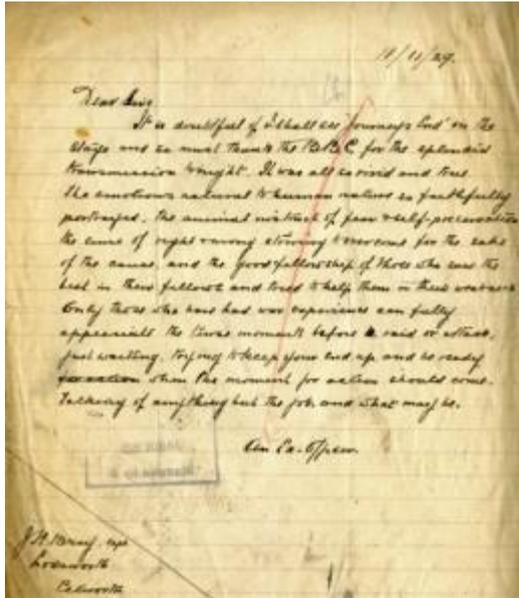


The play's realism apparently struck a strong personal chord with many theatre goers, including the Norwegian-born Helga Stang, who wrote the following letter to Sherriff:

19 Queensberry Place
South Kensington
SW7
10th March 1929

Dear Mr Sherriff

I've just returned from seeing Journey's End, and although it's dreadfully late I feel I really must write and tell you how absolutely wonderful and true to life it was. I have a brother whom I adore and who went out to France when he was barely eighteen – he came back in 1918 unhurt – without a scratch – but with his nerves shattered completely. For weeks he was nothing but a nervous wreck, even now he will never again be completely normal, and I know – from the little that he has told me of things – that what he faced was just what those men were facing tonight. For one felt they really were facing death – never for one moment did I realise that I was in a theatre, rather I felt as if I were in another dugout, watching a real and living drama unfold itself. How could you do it? How could you create such types? – no, not create them, for they have really lived, but breathe new life into them, make them live again – which is a far greater thing to do. I didn't cry at all tonight, the whole thing was too tense for me to think of doing so, but when I was home again, musing over it all, I suddenly thought of Osborne sitting with that little brave grin and saying that he liked cocoa for breakfast and then – quite suddenly – I couldn't help crying. Oh don't you see what you have done? You have brought back, so clearly, the memory of the War to so many people who were in danger of forgetting it – you have shown them the horror and wonder of those awful years.



Many ex-servicemen also had praise for the play, such as Captain J H Bray of Lodsworth, West Sussex. In the letter below he remarks how he was struck by its authenticity when he listened to a radio version broadcast by the BBC on Armistice Day 1929:

11/11/29

Dear Sirs

It is doubtful if I shall see Journey's End on the stage, and so must thank the BBC for the splendid transmission tonight. It was all so vivid and true. The emotions natural to human nature so faithfully portrayed. The animal instinct of fear and self-preservation, the sense of right and wrong striving to overcome for the sake of the cause, and the good fellowship of those who saw the best in their fellows, and tried to help them in their weakness. Only those who have had war experiences can fully appreciate the tense moments before a raid or attack: just waiting, trying to keep your end up and be ready when the moment for action should come, talking of anything but the job, and what may be.

An Ex-Officer

J H Bray, Capt Lodsworth

Why did so many men keep fighting?

It is remarkable how few soldiers refused to fight in the First World War. Mutinies were rare, with millions winning their personal battles of endurance

A British soldier carries a wounded friend away from the front and to a dressing station near Aveluy Wood

By Jonathan Boff

5:05PM BST 30 May 2014

Brig-Gen James Jack saw the **First World War** up close for longer than most. A regular officer who fought on the Western Front almost the whole way through, he was an austere man whose diary provides one of the most honest surviving descriptions of the war. On November 11, 1918, even Jack's stiff upper lip seems at last to have quivered. He wrote of "a frightful four years" during which his soldiers "have suffered bravely, patiently and unselfishly, hardships and perils beyond even the imagination of those, including soldiers, who have not shared them".

For us, 100 years on, it is the endurance of the millions of soldiers on all sides that mystifies and fascinates. What is remarkable is not how many men ran away or broke down, but how few did.

Very few tried to duck their duty. Out of five million British soldiers, fewer than 9,000 were [tried for cowardice, desertion and mutiny](#). Only 287 were executed for these crimes.

For all the myths of savage discipline, statistically you were two and a half thousand times more likely to be killed by the enemy than by your own side. Cases of psychological breakdown were similarly rare. About one in 20 British and German soldiers suffered a nervous disorder.

But psychiatric casualties made up only about one in eight battle casualties.

Why did so many stick it out? Some reasons never change. Ask a soldier in Helmand what motivates him to fight and most likely he'll look embarrassed and mumble something about doing it for his mates. As soldier Richard Williams wrote home: "It is only the spirit of brotherliness and mutual helpfulness that makes the thing tolerable."

But other factors were also important. It's almost impossible to generalise. Each soldier found his strength in all sorts of places. In untrendy but eternal concepts such as duty, loyalty to regiment and King and Country. In the bottle. In God. In superstition. In humour – often of the blackest kind. In adapting to and making the best of even the most horrific environments. In hatred of the enemy and the thirst for revenge. In protecting home and family. In professional pride. For a few, in a disturbing love of killing. For many, in the youthful self-deception which says "it'll never happen to me". And, in almost every case, from knowing that dinner, relief, rest, even leave, were only hours or days away. Even when things were at their worst, they were always about to get better.

So millions of men on all sides found it within themselves to endure and to fight. No one could have forced them to do it. No one could have fooled so many into doing it for so long. We can

see this when we look at the (very rare) mutinies which took place. They were hardly ever refusals to bear arms.

Between 1914 and 1918, the British Army had only one: the 1917 Étapes mutiny, portrayed with fine drama but dismal history in *The Monocled Mutineer* in 1986. This was not a brave and principled refusal to fight but a tawdry rampage by 1,000 men in protest at conditions at a transit camp.

The same year saw a much larger mutiny in the French army. Perhaps 40,000 soldiers refused to leave their trenches. But this was also primarily a strike about conditions of service rather than a rejection of their broader duty. They remained ready to defend but refused to attack.

When they received concessions, including increased leave, they returned to action and were soon operating at full capacity again.

Eventually, of course, morale did collapse. Not in the British Army, where even German historians acknowledge that it remained more or less constant throughout, but in the armies of Germany and Austria-Hungary. Historians still argue about how widespread this was, exactly when it started, and why. What is clear is that about one in every five German soldiers on the Western Front raised the white flag and surrendered to Allies in July-November 1918.

Some of them, infected by Bolshevism, refused any longer to fight for rich capitalists safe at home.

But most gave up because they saw the war was lost and that there was no cause worth dying for. As one German soldier wrote to his wife: "Things are quite beyond description here. If they get too hot for me, and if it can be managed in any way, I shall let myself be taken prisoner, for otherwise one will never get out of this mess... I am fed up at the thought of being bowled over after four years of it."

This suggests that soldiers were prepared to risk their lives so long as there was a chance of success. As soon as that went, so too did morale. The interwar myth, that the German army was never defeated on the battlefield but stabbed in the back on the home front, is clearly false. The army collapsed before Germany slid into revolution, not after. But that didn't stop unscrupulous nationalists, including the Nazis, using this lie to poison the politics of the Weimar Republic, to ease Hitler's path to power and set the stage for another and even more terrible war.

**Dr Jonathan Boff is a lecturer in war studies at the University of Birmingham*

Extract from 'Regeneration', by Pat Barker

An extract taken from Regeneration by Pat Barker, first published in 1991, which explores the treatment of shell-shocked war victims. In this extract, Billy Prior, a soldier suffering from mutism is undergoing hypnosis to remember the tragic events that led to his breakdown.

He woke to a dugout smell of wet sandbags and stale farts. He curled his toes inside his wet boots and felt the creak and sag of chicken wire as he turned towards the table. The usual jumble: paper, bottles, mugs, the black-boxed field telephone, a couple of revolvers – all lit by a single candle stuck to the wood in a pool of its own grease. A barely perceptible thinning of the darkness around the gas curtain told him it must be nearly dawn. And sure enough, a few minutes later Sanderson lifted the curtain and shouted, 'Stand-to!' The bulky forms on the other bunks stirred, groaned, groped for revolvers. Soon they were all trying to climb out of the dugout, difficult because rain and recent near-hits had turned the steps into a muddy slide. All along the trench men were crawling out of funk holes. He clumped along the duckboards to his position, smelling the green, ratty, decomposing smell, stretching the muscles of his face into a smile whenever the men looked up. Then an hour of standing, stiff and shivery, watching dawn grow.

He had first trench watch. He gulped a mug of chlorine-tasting tea, and then started walking along to the outermost position on their left. A smell of bacon frying. In the third fire bay he found Sawdon and Towers crouched over a small fire made out of shredded sandbags and candle ends, coaxing the flames. He stopped to chat for a few minutes, and Towers, blinking under the green mushroom helmet, looked up and offered him tea. A quiet day, he thought, walking on. Not like the last few days, when the bombardment had gone on for seventy hours, and they'd stood to five times expecting a German counterattack. Damage from that bombardment was everywhere: crumbling parapets, flooded saps, dugouts with gagged mouths.

He'd gone, perhaps, three fire bays along when he heard the whoop of a shell, and, spinning round, saw the scrawl of dusty brown smoke already drifting away. He thought it'd gone clear over, but then he heard a cry and, feeling sick in his stomach, he ran back. Logan was there already. It must have been Logan's cry he heard, for nothing in that devastation could have had a voice. A conical black hole, still smoking, had been driven into the side of the trench. Of the kettle, the frying-pan, the carefully tended fire, there was no sign, and not much of Sawdon and Towers either, or not much that was recognisable.

There was a pile of sandbags and shovels close by, stacked against the parapet by a returning work party. He reached for a shovel. Logan picked up a sandbag and held it open, and he began shovelling soil, flesh and splinters of blackened bone into the bag. As he shovelled, he retched. He felt something jar against his teeth and saw that Logan was offering him a rum bottle. He forced down bile and rum together. Logan kept his face averted as the shovelling went on. He was swearing under his breath, steadily, blasphemously, obscenely, inventively. Somebody came running. 'Don't stand there gawping, man.' Logan said. 'Go and get some lime.'

They'd almost finished when Prior shifted his position on the duckboards, glanced down, and found himself staring into an eye. Delicately, like somebody selecting a particularly choice morsel from a plate, he put his thumb and forefinger down through the duckboards. His fingers touched the smooth surface and slid before they managed to get a hold. He got it out, transferred it in to the palm of his hand, and held it out towards Logan. He could see his hand was shaking, but the shaking didn't seem to be anything to do with him. 'What am I supposed to do with this gob-stopper?' He saw Logan blink and knew he was afraid. At last Logan reached out, grasped his shaking wrist, and tipped the eye into the bag. 'Williams and me'll do the rest, sir. You go on back now.'

'Survivors', by Siegfried Sassoon

The poet, Sassoon, explores the effect of war on soldiers and indirectly criticizes the non-combatant's complacent attitude towards war. He does this effectively using an underlying ironic tone in the poem by making statements (necessarily a non-combatant's statements i.e. the common people or a politician's) that seem to reassure the reader that the wounded and shell-shocked soldiers will be fine and that war is glorious, but immediately follows such statements with a graphic presentation of the physical and mental scars that war creates. This jolts the reader's reassurance and makes the poem doubly effective. The poem is also powerful because it is auto-biographical. It was written while the poet was recovering from shell-shock at Craiglockhart Hospital.

No doubt they'll soon get well; the shock and strain
Have caused their stammering, disconnected talk.
Of course they're 'longing to go out again,'—
These boys with old, scared faces, learning to walk.
They'll soon forget their haunted nights; their cowed
Subjection to the ghosts of friends who died,—
Their dreams that drip with murder; and they'll be proud
Of glorious war that shatter'd all their pride...
Men who went out to battle, grim and glad;
Children, with eyes that hate you, broken and mad.

Extract from 'All Quiet on the Western Front', by Erich Maria

Remarque

This extract is taken from All Quiet on the Western Front by Erich Maria Remarque, first published in 1929. It is narrated by Paul Bäumer, a young man of nineteen who, along with friends, joins the German army voluntarily after listening to the stirring patriotic speeches of his teacher. In this extract, Bäumer and his comrades have just undergone a bombardment.

The shelling has stopped. I turn back to the crater and wave to the others. They scramble up and tear off their masks. We pick up the wounded man, one of us holds the arm with the splint on it. And in a group we stumble away as quickly as possible.

The cemetery has been blown to pieces. Coffins and corpses are scattered all around. They have been killed for a second time; but every corpse that was shattered saved the life of one of us.

The fence has been wrecked, the rails of the field railway on the other side have been ripped out and bent upwards, so that they point to the sky. Someone is lying on the ground in front of us. We stop. Kropp goes on alone with the wounded man.

The man on the ground is a recruit. He has blood smeared all over one hip; he is so exhausted that I reach for my flask, which has tea with rum in it. Kat holds back my hand and bends over him. 'Where did you cop it, mate?'

He moves his eyes, too weak to answer.

Carefully we cut away his trousers. He moans. 'It's OK, OK, it'll soon be better...'

If he's been hit in the stomach then he mustn't drink anything. He has thrown up, and that is a good sign. We expose the hip area. It is just a pulp of torn flesh and splintered bone. The joint has been hit. This lad will never walk again.

I wet my fingers and run them across his forehead, then give him a drink. Some life comes into his eyes. It's only now that we realise that his right arm is bleeding as well.

Kat spreads out two field dressings as wide as he can, so that they cover the wound. I look around for some cloth, so that I can tie it up loosely. We haven't got anything. So I cut more of the wounded man's trousers away so that I can use a piece of his underpants as a bandage. But he isn't wearing any. I look at him more closely. It's the blond lad from earlier on.

Meanwhile Kat has fetched a couple more field dressings from the pockets of dead soldiers, and we place them carefully on the wound. The lad is looking at us with a fixed gaze.

'We'll go and get a stretcher now.'

But he opens his mouth and whispers, 'Stay here -'

Kat says, 'We'll be back in a minute. We're going to get a stretcher for you.'

It is impossible to say whether he understands or not; he whimpers like a child behind us as we go: 'Stay here -'

Kat looks all round and then whispers, 'Wouldn't it be best just to take a revolver and put him out of his misery?'

The lad is not likely to survive being moved, and at the very most he'll last a couple of days. But everything he's been through so far will be nothing compared to those few days until he dies. At the moment he is still in shock and can't feel anything. Within an hour he'll be a screaming mass of unbearable agonies, and the few days he still has left to live will just be an incessant raging torture. And what difference does it make to anyone whether he has to suffer them or not?

I nod. 'You're right Kat. The best thing would be a bullet.'

'Give me a gun,' he says, and stops walking. I can see that he is set on it. We look around - but we're not alone any more. A small group is gathering near us, and heads are appearing out of the shell holes and trenches.

We bring a stretcher.

Kat shakes his head. 'Such young lads -' He says it again: 'Such young innocent lads -'

Death of our best and brightest: Eton Rifles may have been 'built for' slaughter

CARICATURED as nice but dim and hiding miles from the front line, public school officers during the First World War have had a bad press. As John Lewis-Stempel reports however, their chances of surviving were scant and their bravery unquestionable

By [JOHN LEWIS-STEMPEL](#)

Eton will be to the last the same as my parents and dear friends are to me...To die for one's school is an honour

Lionel Sotheby, in his last letter home

I am deadly serious. When war came in August 1914 the martial and patriotic "ethos" of Eton and the other 120 elite public schools of Britain was exactly what the country needed. Who could withstand the highly drilled militarism of the Kaiser's army better than British boys who believed in courage, country and selfless service?

These values may stick in the craw of modern political sensitivities, especially after decades of classroom exposure to "pity of war" poetry, but as a Darwinian survival mechanism the public schools of Britain were unsurpassed. They trained a whole generation of boys to be waiting in the wings of history as military leaders.

The young gentlemen from Eton and the Edwardian public schools paid a terrible price for this duty. It was a funny old world war, the First World War, but there was one unassailable, and surprising, truth about it. The more exclusive your education, the more likely you were to die.

As a rule of thumb 20 per cent of public school boys who fought in the war died, against 13 per cent of those overall who served. There are 1,157 names on Eton's memorial to its Great War dead, so many chiselled on the wall in the cloisters that it hurts the head to scan them.

Historians have a horrible phrase for this difference between the war's general mortality rate and the public school rate: "surplus deaths".

The reason for the "surplus deaths" of public school boys is simple: They were more likely to be junior officers, lieutenants and captains, in the bloody trenches. Forget the pernicious myth that officers sipped sherry in HQ while they carelessly sent the plebs to the slaughter. By the rule of the British Army, junior officers were the first "over the top" and the last to retreat.

Some officers were very junior indeed when they climbed the side of the trench. They were just 17. The young officers died in their droves with a revolver in one hand a cigarette in the other; held for a desperate, affected nonchalance as they led their men into the hail of German or Turkish lead. In the worst places, and worst phases, of the war a second lieutenant could expect to survive a mere six weeks before becoming a casualty.

Of course, public school boys were easier for the Germans and Turks to hit. Due to their better diet and general physical fitness they were, on average, five inches taller than their working-class contemporaries in 1914.

One might almost say that public school boys had been physically built up for the slaughter. School sport, as the Duke of Wellington suggested, was a key part in their preparation as incipient warriors. The public schools of Britain had a fitness regime that a Spartan would blanch at: lashings of physical contact sport such as rugby or, Eton's version of it, the wall game, plus lots of cross-country runs and cold showers. Sedbergh's school song required its athletes to "laugh at pain".

Besides toughening up the warriors in waiting, sport instilled military skills. After all, most sports contain some DNA of their military origins. What else is cricket but using a shield to protect oneself from a projectile? Of Eton's first VIII rowing team of 1913 three died in action. So did their diminutive cox, Esmond Elliot, killed at wintry Passchendaele.

Above all, schools believed that team sports developed character, leadership skills and loyalty. A boy's loyalty to his alma mater could equal his loyalty to his family. Lionel Sotheby wrote in his last letter before he was killed in battle in 1915: "Eton will be to the last the same as my parents and dear friends are to me... To die for one's school is an honour."

Loyalty is an elastic concept. If a boy could be made loyal to his "house", his school, he could be made loyal to his country.

The sport beloved of Wellington, however, was just one of the Holy Quartet of methods by which schools prepared young boys to become officers and gentlemen. There was also curriculum, chapel and unadulterated military training.

Off the playing fields and into the classroom, a boy at Eton in 1913 could expect to spend half his week studying Latin and Greek classics, not anything as airy-fairy as Plato's philosophical Republic but action yarns celebrating sinewy subalterns. Homer's Odyssey was a standard. These classics lessons forged an enduring mental template of aspirational heroism.

When 29-year-old Patrick Shaw-Stewart went into action at Gallipoli in 1915 his school days at Eton were long behind him. Even so he had just scrawled the only poem of his life, including a couplet calling on the greatest of Greek heroes for help:

Stand in the trench, Achilles

Flame-capped, and shout for me.

Fellow Old Etonian and future prime minister Harold Macmillan was similarly hooked on classics. Injured by machine gun bullets at Ginchy on the Western Front, Macmillan lay in a shell-hole and read his pocket edition of Aeschylus's play Prometheus, about the suffering the Titan endured when bound to a rock. A paean to fortitude, Prometheus was singularly appropriate reading. Macmillan perused the tragedy in Ancient Greek.

Not all public school boys were as intellectual as Macmillan, the scion of a publishing dynasty. Some were terrifically "hearty", yet the dim-witted Lieutenant George (Hugh Laurie) in Blackadder Goes Forth is a whopping miss. Stupidity was a sin in school. An empire could hardly be run efficiently if the helmsmen were uneducated or inane.

Next in the education of the warrior-in-waiting was chapel. Boys could expect religious services every morning and in boarding schools thrice on Sunday. What they heard from the pulpit was Church of England lite, a religion that downplayed doctrine and ramped up ethics. Boys on the shivering pews were told over and over to live a life of service and sacrifice. Like the Lord Jesus himself.

There was one last corner of the school life in which boys were inculcated with their future martial duty. The Officers' Training Corps was introduced in 1908 by Lord Haldane. Almost all public schools had this form of army cadets, which trained boys to lead a platoon of 50 men. Some schools took "the Corps" extremely seriously; at Uppingham School in Rutland no pupil could receive a school prize or hold a house position unless he had passed a rifle marksmanship exam.

Everything about public school trained a boy for war. Manliness, duty, love of Britain, stiff upper-lip self denial were the inescapable virtues. So when Lord Kitchener asked public school boys to step forward to officer the expanded British Army in 1914 they did so. Almost to the boy.

Researching Six Weeks, my book on junior officers in the trenches, I asked school archivists: "How many of your old boys served in the Great War?" The reply was always: "We think almost everybody." One snapshot will serve as proof and illustration. Of the 51 boys who left Newick House, Cheltenham College, in 1910, 50 donned khaki. They went willingly, even when every issue of the school magazine announced more dead.

Something like a tsunami of death was visited on the public schools. The unenviable pole position in the league table of loss goes to King Edward VII School, Lytham, where 32.4 per cent of its boys who served were slain.

Their sacrifice was not in vain. The gallantry of all the young gentlemen helped turn the grinding battles at Ypres, the Somme and Passchendaele. With their chapel services still in mind the public school boys did more than die well. They looked after their men.

Long before the Beatles, these young men realised all you needed was love. As Bernard Adams of Malvern College explained to a fellow downy-lipped officer on the Somme: "The only way to run a company is by love." By looking after their men in the trenches, by giving them cigarettes and smiles, the public school officers made the lives of the khaki multitude bearable and kept morale buoyant.

Of course, some public school boys were arrogant and selfish. They were not all kindly, brave Bernard Adamses. By and large, however, the young toffs delivered the goods splendidly.

John Lewis-Stempel is author of Six Weeks: The Short And Gallant Life Of The British Officer In The First World War.

Extract from 'A Brass Hat in No Man's Land', a memoir by Commander Frank Percy Crozier

This extract is taken from A Brass Hat in No Man's Land, a war memoir by Commander Frank Percy Crozier (1879–1937) first published in 1930. More than three hundred men were shot at dawn by the British Army during World War One. These men were executed for various offences considered by the military authorities to be forms of cowardice, and Crozier was present at several of these executions.

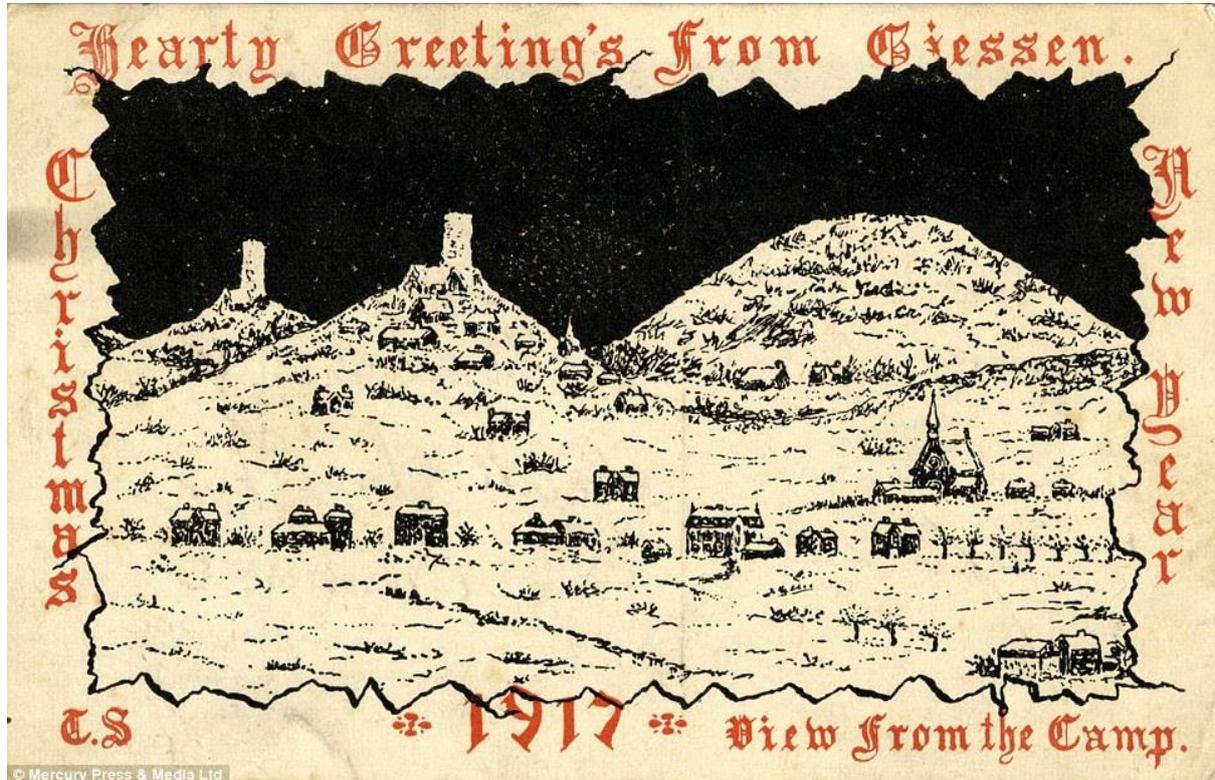
Inside the little garden on the other side of the wall, not ten yards distant from the centre of the line, the victim is carried to the stake. He is far too drunk to walk. He is out of view save from myself, as I stand on a mound near the wall. As he is produced I see he is practically lifeless and quite unconscious. He has already been bound with ropes. There are hooks on the post; we always do things thoroughly in the Rifles. He is hooked on like dead meat in a butcher's shop. His eyes are bandaged – not that it really matters, for he is already blind. The men of the firing party pick up their rifles, one of which is unloaded, on a given sign. On another sign they come to the Present and, on the lowering of a handkerchief by the officer, they fire – a volley rings out – a nervous ragged volley it is true, yet a volley. Before the fatal shots are fired I had called the battalion to attention. There is a pause, I wait. I see the medical officer examining the victim. He makes a sign, the subaltern strides forward, a single shot rings out. Life is now extinct. We march back to breakfast while the men of a certain company pay the last tribute at the graveside of an unfortunate comrade. This is war.

To this sad story there was a sequel. Some months later one of my officers was on leave, and as he had recently been awarded the D.S.O. was entertained to luncheon by his Club. At the function there were present some young business men who had not volunteered for war service. One of these asked my officer if it were true that 'one of your men had been executed for desertion, and if so did he not think it was a very discreditable affair for the battalion and a disgrace to the city?' 'Well,' my officer replied, 'the unfortunate man volunteered to serve his country in the field; you have not done even that yet. He went through the trials of a truly terrible winter in the trenches. He endured bombardment, mud, exposure, cold, frost, trench-feet, sleepless nights and daily drudgery under conditions in which man was never intended to play a part (he had to play a part the whole time to keep going at all). This quite unnatural test broke his spirit. His brain was probably affected. In despair he quitted the line. Why don't you and your other slacking and profiteering friends join up and have a shot at doing better than this unhappy comrade of ours? If you can't stand the test and are executed because you are not endowed with the steel-like qualities which make for war efficiency, I shall think better of you than I do now. Our dead comrade, whom we had to kill with our own hands and rifles pour encourager les autres¹, is a hero compared with you! He tried and failed. He died for such as you! Isn't it time you had a shot at dying for your country?'

1 pour encourager les autres – for the encouragement of others

A range of Christmas cards sent from the front line.

The festive cards were professionally printed and highlight the pride, humour, 'stiff upper lip' and propaganda of the First World War over the festive period



A card wishing 'Hearty greetings', from 1917, features a snowy view from the prisoner of war camp and was sent as propaganda to the families of prisoners back home- the cards were produced because people running the camps wanted families in Britain to think the prisoners were being treated fairly and humanely

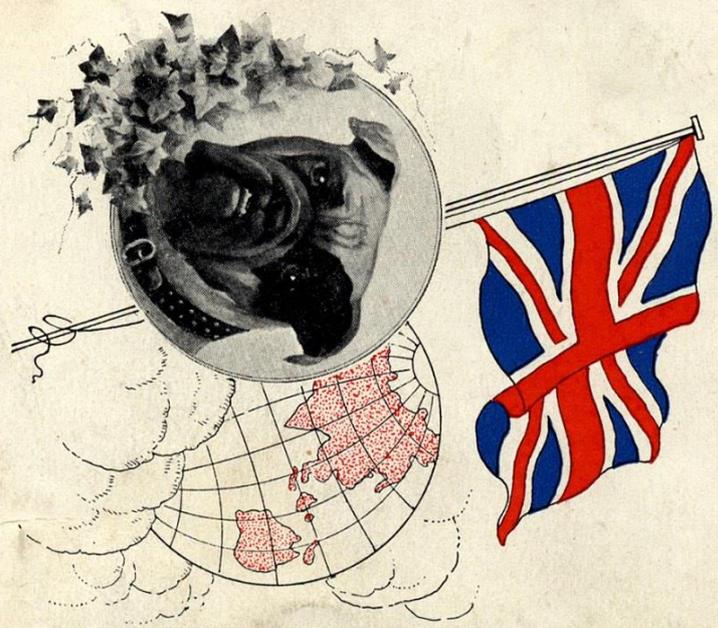




LOOS · FRICOURT · MAMETZ · BAZENTIIN ·
 GEUDECOURT · ARRAS · FONTAINE ·

BORN 21 **STILL**
 1914 DIVISION **GOING**
STRONG

CHRISTMAS 1917



And our Banner
 unfurled
 Shall proclaim to the world,
 That there's life in the
 Old Dog yet.

ELIZA COOK



Extract from 'Birdsong', by Sebastian Faulks

The extract is taken from Birdsong by Sebastian Faulks, first published in 1993, a novel which tells the story of a British man called Stephen Wraysford at different stages of his life both before and during World War I. In this extract, Jack Firebrace and Arthur Shaw, miners in the tunnels at the Front, observe the first day of the Battle of the Somme.

Jack Firebrace stood with Arthur Shaw on raised ground near what they had called One Tree Hill, watching. They expected a swift passage, almost unopposed.

Jack was muttering, Shaw saying nothing at all. They saw the Scots coming up out of their burrows like raving women in their skirts, dying in ripples across the yellowish-brown soil. They saw the steady tread of the Hampshires as though they had willingly embarked on a slow-motion dance from which they were content not to return. They saw men from every corner walking, powerless, into an engulfing storm.

Their own contribution to the day, the vast hole that had been blown at twenty past seven, had given the enemy ten minutes in which to take their positions at leisure. By the crater they saw young men dying in quantities that they had not dreamed possible. They had not fired a shot.

The excess of it made them clutch each other's arms in disbelief.

'They can't let this go on,' said Jack, 'they can't.'

Shaw stood with his mouth open. He was unmoved by violence, hardened to the mutilation he had seen and inflicted, but what he was watching here was something of a different order.

Please God, let it stop, thought Jack. Please let them send no more men into this hurricane.

The padre, Horrocks, came and stood with them. He crossed himself and tried to comfort them with words and prayers.

Jack turned his face away from what he saw, and he felt something dying in him as he turned. Shaw has begun to weep. He held his miner's hands to the sides of his head and the tears coursed down his face. 'Boys, boys,' he kept saying. 'Oh my poor boys.'

Horrocks was trembling. 'This is half of England. What are we going to do?' he stammered.

Soon they all fell silent. There was an eruption from the trench below and another wave went up into the pitted moonlike landscape, perhaps Essex or Duke of Wellington's, it was impossible to see. They made no more than ten yards before they began to waver, single men at first picked out, knocked spinning, then more going as they reached the barrage; then, when the machine guns found them, they rippled, like corn through which the wind is passing. Jack thought of meat, the smell of it.

Horrocks pulled the silver cross from his chest and hurled it from him. His old reflex still persisting, he fell to his knees, but he did not pray. He stayed kneeling with his palms spread out on the ground, then lowered his head and covered it with his hands. Jack knew what had died in him.



R. C. Sherriff

Robert Cedric Sherriff, the only child of Herbert Hankin Sherriff, insurance clerk, and his wife, Constance Winder, was born at Hampton Wick on 6th June 1896. He attended Kingston Grammar School and after leaving school in 1914 he joined the Sun Assurance Company in London.

A week after the outbreak of the First World War the British Army advertised in the national press inviting young men between the ages of 17 and 30 to serve as officers during the conflict. Sherriff, who was 18 years old in 1914, decided to apply. Sherriff later recalled: "I was excited, enthusiastic. It would be far more interesting to be an officer than a man in the ranks. An officer, I realised, had to be a bit above the others, but I had had a sound education at the grammar school and could speak good English." However, the army was not impressed with his grammar school education and his application was rejected.

Sherriff returned to his job with the Sun Assurance Company.

However, by the following year, the British Army had lost so many junior officers that it decided to lower its standards. In November 1915, Sherriff volunteered again and he was granted a commission in the East Surrey Regiment. He arrived on the front-line of the Western Front on 7th October 1916. Over the next four months he served at Vimy Ridge and Messines Ridge.

On 27th January 1917 Sherriff was wounded during a bombardment at Bracquemont. After two weeks of being treated at the 73rd Field Ambulance's Main Dressing Station he returned to the front-line. In July he was sent on a sniping course at Mont des Cats.

General Sir Douglas Haig, the British Commander in Chief in France, was encouraged by the gains made at the offensive at Messines Ridge. Haig was convinced that the German Army was now close to collapse and once again made plans for a major offensive to obtain the necessary breakthrough at Passchendaele. Sherriff and the East Surrey Regiment took part in the opening sequences of the battle. In his autobiography, *No Leading Lady* (1968), Sherriff recalled: "The great preliminary bombardment had begun. We were surrounded by batteries of artillery, and for three nights it was bedlam."

Allied attacks on the German front-line continued despite very heavy rain that turned the Ypres lowlands into a swamp. The situation was made worse by the fact that the British heavy bombardment had destroyed the drainage system in the area. This heavy mud created terrible problems for the infantry and the use of tanks became impossible.

As William Beach Thomas, a journalist working for the Daily Mail, pointed out: "Floods of rain and a blanket of mist have doused and cloaked the whole of the Flanders plain. The newest shell-holes, already half-filled with soakage, are now flooded to the brim. The rain has so fouled this low, stoneless ground, spoiled of all natural drainage by shell-fire, that we experienced the double value of the early work, for today moving heavy material was extremely difficult and the men could scarcely walk in full equipment, much less dig. Every man was soaked through and was standing or sleeping in a marsh. It was a work of energy to keep a rifle in a state fit to use."

Sherriff argued in *No Leading Lady* (1968): "The living conditions in our camp were sordid beyond belief. The cookhouse was flooded, and most of the food was uneatable. There was nothing but

sodden biscuits and cold stew. The cooks tried to supply bacon for breakfast, but the men complained that it smelled like dead men."

On 31st July 1917, Sherriff and his men were called forward to attack the German positions. "At dawn on the morning of the attack, the battalion assembled in the mud outside the huts. I lined up my platoon and went through the necessary inspection. Some of the men looked terribly ill: grey, worn faces in the dawn, unshaved and dirty because there was no clean water. I saw the characteristic shrugging of their shoulders that I knew so well. They hadn't had their clothes off for weeks, and their shirts were full of lice."

Sherriff later recalled: "All of us, I knew, had one despairing hope in mind: that we should be lucky enough to be wounded, not fatally, but severely enough to take us out of this loathsome ordeal and get us home. But when we looked across that awful slough ahead of us, even the thought of a wound was best forgotten. If you were badly hit, unable to move, what hope was there of being carried out of it? The stretcher bearers were valiant men, but there were far too few of them."

As the battalion advanced towards the German front-line a shell exploded close-by: "The crash was deafening... I remember putting my hand to the right side of my face and feeling nothing; to my horror I thought that the whole side had been blown away." In fact, the shell had landed on the top of a pillbox and he had been hit by the shattered concrete.

Sherriff was taken to the Casualty Clearing Station at Abeele. He was one of the 2,015 men treated in the opening two days of the offensive. He was later moved to the 14th Base Hospital at Wimereux. He later recalled that "with the aid of probes and tweezers, a doctor took fifty-two pieces of concrete out of me."

Sherriff was sent back to England and remained at Royal Victoria Hospital at Netley until November 1917. He then joined the Home Service battalion of the regiment until being demobbed in March 1919. He returned to working as an insurance adjuster. In his spare-time he wrote plays for the annual fund-raising event at his Kingston Rowing Club. His first play was *The Adventurers*.

Sherriff's next play was *Journey's End*. It had been turned down by most of the theatres in London and only appeared after the intervention of George Bernard Shaw. As his biographer, John Courtenay Trewin, points out: "*Journey's End*, a play based upon his letters home from the trenches, in the new year of 1929 he became one of the most discussed English dramatists of the day.... The play is set entirely in a claustrophobic dugout before St Quentin on the eve of the March offensive of 1918. Sherriff, who always favoured naturalism in theatre, had sought to give no more than a straight, simple impression of the terrors of the western front in a play written with so much honesty - no heroics, no pretence - that its characters stamped themselves upon the English theatre of their time." The play, with Laurence Olivier, playing the lead role of Captain Dennis Stanhope, was a great success and there were 594 performances in London and 485 in New York City. It was also translated and performed in every European language.

The success of Sherriff's play opened up the way for other soldiers to write about their experiences in the First World War. Publishers now became interested in publishing books on the subject of trench life.

Extract from 'Good-bye to all that', by Robert Graves

The extract is taken from Good-bye To All That, an autobiography by Robert Graves (1895–1985) first published in 1929. Graves enlisted in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers in August 1914 and was drafted to France, where he was seriously wounded at the Battle of the Somme in 1916.

What happened in the next few minutes is difficult for me now to sort out. It was more difficult still at the time. All we heard back there in the sidings was a distant cheer confused crackle of rifle-fire, yells, heavy shelling on our front line, more shouts and yells and a continuous rattle of machine-guns. After a few minutes, lightly-wounded men of the Middlesex came stumbling down Maison Rouge Alley to the dressing-station. I was at the junction of the siding and the alley. 'What's happened? What's happened?' I asked. 'Bloody balls-up' was the most detailed answer I could get. Among the wounded were a number of men yellow-faced and choking, with their buttons tarnished green; these were gas cases. Then came the stretcher cases. Maison Rouge Alley was narrow and the stretchers had difficulty in getting down. The Germans started shelling it with five-point-nines. Thomas went through the shelling to battalion headquarters to ask for orders. It was the same place that I had visited on my first night in the trenches. This group of dug-outs in the reserve line showed very plainly from the air as battalion headquarters, and should never have been occupied on the day of a battle. Just before Thomas arrived the Germans put five shells into it. The adjutant jumped one way, the colonel another, the regimental sergeantmajor a third. One shell went into the signals dug-out and destroyed the telephone. The colonel had a slight wound on his hand; he joined the stream of wounded and was carried as far as the base with it. The adjutant took charge. All this time A Company had been waiting in the siding for the rum to arrive; the tradition of every attack was a double tot of rum beforehand. All the other companies got it except ours. The Actor was cursing: 'Where the bloody hell's that storeman gone?' We fixed bayonets in readiness to go up to the attack as soon as Thomas came back with orders. The Actor sent me along the siding to the other end of the company. The stream of wounded was continuous. At last Thomas's orderly appeared, saying: 'Captain's orders, sir: A Company to move up to the front line.' It seems that at that moment the storeman appeared with the rum. He was hugging the rum-bottle, without rifle or equipment, red-faced and retching. He staggered up to The Actor and said: 'There you are, sir,' then fell on his face in the thick mud of a sump-pit at the junction of the trench and the siding. The stopper of the bottle flew out and what was left of the three gallons bubbled on the ground. The Actor said nothing. It was a crime deserving the death-penalty. He put one foot on the storeman's neck, the other in the small of his back, and trod him into the mud. Then he gave the order 'Company forward.' The company went forward with a clatter of steel over the body, and that was the last heard of the storeman.

Letters sent from Sherriff to his parents during his time at war

9th East Surreys
24th Division

British Expeditionary Force

4.10.16

France

Dear Pips,

I have now spent close on a week in France and it seems months since I sailed.

I have seen plenty to interest me and enough of war to disgust me without having been into the Front Line yet.

At present I am on what is termed a "quiet part" of the front although at certain intervals during the day there is enough banging away off in the front line (half a mile or so away) to let you know there is a war – and at night you here the machine guns going "tap tap tap" like some impatient person knocking at the door.

Yesterday I made a journey up the line to find my away about – the ground is just as it appears in photos – absolutely honeycombed with shell holes which are now covered up in some places by rank looking weeds.

All the way up the trenches you here a bang behind and then a fearful screeching as the shell flies by and a second later a dull crash as it comes down behind the German lines.

The support line where I am has been free from bombardment up till now – and I hope it will remain so until we leave – I expect the first time under shell fire will be far from pleasant.

Tomorrow I am in charge of a working party of 50 men going up near the front line to do some repairs – they were shelled today so I may get a dose tomorrow – but the "baptism of fire" has got to come and it may be as well to get it over.

I have told you, I believe, how we are living here – in a shed which is quite comfortable if it were not for the Rats and Mice – one (with maybe an accomplice) got into the haversack which I was using as a pillow last night and bit through the liner of my emergency ration, marvellous feat considering the thickness of the clot – I heard them busy scratching about in the night.

We have quite a comfortable Mess – it is a dugout with a table down the middle and little sleeping bunks down the sides – we have quite good Meals too – bacon or sausages for breakfast and porridge cold tongue or salmon and bread and butter for lunch, and tea at 4 o'clock with dinner at 8 o'clock – there are 8 of us to the Company – 2 Captains and 6 Lieutenants all very nice.

The rain is very unpleasant as regards making everything very sticky – I have to inspect my mens rifles in their dugouts when it is wet – the men are wonderfully cheerful when considering the hardships they have to put up with – they get wet through and then set about getting dry before the little coles fires under the most trying circumstances treating it almost as a joke.

We all wear steel helmets which are rather heavy until you get used to them – but now I am touching on military matter and must get off them quickly or will be letting out secrets.

My chief worry is the impossibility of buying anything here – of course it is quite out of the question in the lines, but even in the rest billets it is almost out of the question to buy anything except what you don't want – chicory and coloured glass vases seem to be the chief articles which french people specialise in.

So if you could arrange with Mother to send me out parcels periodically – deducting the Cost from my account book I shall be very glad – it seems the custom here to get parcels and share some of the contents at Mess.

Chocolate, peppermints or anything of that nature which are difficult to get here would be very acceptable.

By the way – I expect my private account has run rather dry – so will let me know what I owe and I can send you a cheque so that you will money to get these things.

As I write I can hear trench mortars firing which make a noise like rolling a big square tank along.

We do not have very much to do here unless detailed for a working party – so I occupy most of my time in reading and writing.

Washing is rather an awkward procedure when up the line here as water is rather deficient to procure but on the whole we are living here in reserve almost the same we did in rest.

Things have moved so quickly since I left home that I expect I have only given you a pretty hazy idea of what has happened, so as it is all bound stand well in my memory I will not recount anything of my journey bringing me here reserving that for another time when I hope I will be able to tell you all about it on a walk down Cromwell Road at some time I hope not far distant. I will write to you again as soon as I can, so goodbye for the present and I hope shall hear from you or mother soon – I know it will take quite a week to get any letters at first on account of my changes of address, so will not expect any till I get them.

From your loving son, Bob

C Company

9th East Surrey Regt
24th Division

B.E.F

11.10.16

Dear Pips,

I received your letter dated the 4th just before we left the reserve line and I was very pleased indeed to get it as I thought the letters must have been going astray – and I received a letter from Mother dated the 7th last night – in which she says that it is the fourth letter she has written evidently the others which she addressed to the 9th KRR have gone astray – it is a pity that I told you to address them to KRR as I found out at the base that I was not attached to them – but with the East Surrey.

I am hoping I may get Mothers other letters but am afraid that I will not now – all the same I hope to get all those you write now.

I came into the front line yesterday morning and have now just done 1 day out of 8 and am of course utterly fed up with it already. We have got a good deep dugout for sleeping in and for generally living in but we have a rotten piece of line to look after which the enemy keep pretty hot with “Minenwerfer” sort of trench monsters which send big things over which do a lot of damage to our trenches which means constant working parties busy all day.

We do two spells of duty very 24 hours – 2 hours by night and 2³/₄ hours by day and then 1 hour in the evening and one in the early morning when the men “stand to” for an hour – this makes 6³/₄ hours duty per day – it does sound a great deal but I tell you when you are up in charge of your piece of the line the time goes as slowly as I have never known it to before – you have to occasionally patrol your area and see that all is well and all the time keeping an eye craned on the sky for shells – it is very nerve straining indeed and especially so as I am near to it – but I hope for the best and try and look forward to the time when all the beastly affair will be over – after 8 days (which I expect will seem months) we will go 8 days out and then 8 days reserve again – I hope in a better part of the line than we have here.

Of course I cannot give you a hint as to where I am – it is a serious crime and you must not mind me not dropping you any hint.

Please try not to worry about me Pips, it won't go any good, I am afraid, but we must all try and keep our spirits up as much as possible and always hope for the best – even here, where one cannot see a spark of humour, you have a certain amount of pleasure when you return to your dugout after the tour of duty and have a quiet sleep or read.

I hope all is going well with you at home and I am so glad to have heard from you – it cheered me up a great deal.

Well, one can't expect to be cheerful under the circumstances over here, but will forward to the time when the affair is all over and normal affairs recommence.

I am on duty from 12 till 2.45 so must begin to get ready now.

I have got my Marcus Aurelius and old Mortality to cheer me up as well as the thought of home so I am not hopelessly fed up – I would don't think I would ever reach that stage anywhere, though, as I passed a certain amount of Philosophy which I can always apply when necessary.

I hope the time will pass fairly quickly till the time comes for us to be relieved – and then what a relief to get some release behind the line where you can wack along an open road and across open fields again.

I expect you are still getting your walks in the Park, yes I look up at the same old moon and Plough as you do – its strange isn't it – but there is something friendly even about that thought.

Well goodbye for the present, I will endeavour to write you a letter every day while I am up here as well as one to Mother.

Hoping you are well and are able to get home fairly early from the office.

From your loving Son,

Bob

Same address

14.9.16

Dear Mother,

I believe I wrote two letters running to Pips, so I am doing the same to you – I am afraid that I have got a touch of influenza as I don't feel very lively – I don't feel bad in myself except a bit of a cold but I feel all I want to do is to lie down and sleep, fortunately I can manage to do this a great deal if I want to, though I think it is a bad habit to get into, to always be sleeping – still I will take some of my compressed medicine I think and see how that does – there is no need to worry dear, if I feel really bad enough I would go round to the Doctor straight away – only seems to affect my nerves a bit, too, they shelled this district again this morning and really I am quite ashamed of the way it makes me tremble – when I hear a shell whistle overhead I immediately get that sort of cold feeling all up my spine, if you know what I mean,

and my tongue feels all dry – yesterday they shelled the district just as I was sitting down to lunch and it immediately made me feel quite sick – with no appetite at all for dinner – it is strange that I did not feel this when I had those first 8 days in the trenches, it is since I have been here that I have felt this worst – perhaps due to the time that you are alone, (which I like for some reasons). I hope my nerves will improve, though, it is not at all a pleasant feeling to get nervous so quickly and easily.

Well, dearie, and how go things at the hospital? All well, I hope, and that you are still taken...

Same Address

17.4.17

Dear Mother,

I have been over to the Doctor today as told to by him yesterday and he had a good look at me and told me the neuralgia was probably caused by my nerves being out of order and gave me some tablets and told me to keep quiet in my billet for a day or two – I am afraid this is not really of much use because my nervousness is worse than the neuralgia and I find it impossible to settle down quietly to anything in my billet – all the while I have that dread of going into the line again – if only I could get a real rest for a fortnight or so I am sure I should get better and tomorrow I will explain that to him if possible – it is such a difficult subject to talk to him