Letter 1 – Stephen Brown

*Dear Mother*

*Just a line to let you know that I am quite well. I am for the front on Tuesday. But if you write to the Commanding Officer and say I am only seventeen it will stop me from going. Get it here before Tuesday for I cannot get a pass to come and see you. Don’t forget.*

*From Stephen*

Letter 2 – Richard Gilson

My dear Mother,

Have just come through a particularly nasty period. We went into the trenches on Wednesday night and on Sunday morning at 5am our Artillery commenced bombarding the German trenches and after 20 minutes had elapsed, we went over the parapet. My goodness what a reception the Huns had in store for us, they simply swept the ground with machine gun fire and shrapnel. Poor old ‘C’ coy. caught it hot and Neuve Chapelle seemed to be a fleabite compared with this. It was found impossible to make any advance in our quarter, so I dug myself in and awaited events. It was horrible suspense, as I seemed to be the only man untouched, all around me, and being personally acquainted with each man made matters worse, in fact, it’s all wrong to call them men, as they were mostly mere boys.

About early afternoon I was hailed from the trench as to whether it was possible for me to get back. I replied in the affirmative and decided to run the risk of getting potted on the way. So, I commenced crawling on my stomach until about a few yards from the parapet, then made a spring and rushed headlong over the top, nearly spoiling the features of a few who happened to be in the trench and were not expecting me. We were relieved that afternoon, but some of the fellows did not get in until nightfall and these experienced another bombardment… Billy Hastings is quite fit and the only pal left. We have been resting since and getting information but by all reports we shall be up again soon. No rest for the wicked it is said, and if true we must surely be a bad lot.

Letter 3 – Wilfrid Cove

My Darling Ethel,

I hope you have received my birthday present, but in case you haven’t here’s again wishing you many many happy returns of your birthday. It is the first of your birthdays that we have been apart since you were sweet 17 that I can remember. I hope it will be the last.

Heaven send that by your next birthday – or mine come to that – this terrible war will be over & that we may both be spared & united on each of our birthdays and those of our dear little kiddies & for many years to come.

It causes me many regrets and much sorrow when I remember that my selfishness has more than once caused you unhappiness and I sincerely hope that my future conduct will make you realise that notwithstanding my shortcomings I do love you with all my heart and realise I have one of the best wives in the world.

I can now quite understand the Late Lord Kitchener’s preference for bachelors as soldiers. He must have realised, altho’ a bachelor himself, that it is not the coward’s fear of death but the fear of that by death many a good soldier may thus be prevented from rejoining the wife & family he loves so much. I have just that very feeling myself at times when the shells are dropping all around us and the air is whistling with them.

Goodnight my darling. Longing and hoping for a letter from you tomorrow. Xxxx

Letter 4 – Jonathan George Symons

Dear Bert,

Just a few lines to let you know I am alright, hoping you are the same… At the present time we are in dugouts. The weather is simply awful, raining day after day and especially night after night…To tell you the truth, while writing this letter I am wet through to the skin and not a dry thing for a change. We have got our winter fur coats and gum boots, but the latter cause more curses than you can imagine, for instance last night I was sent off to select dugouts for our platoon, which is number 37. It was pitch dark, no light allowed and in a strange place, well honestly, I fell over at least 20 times got smothered in mud from head to feet and on the top of that wet though for it rained in torrents. On a round of inspection this morning to see if all were ‘comfortable’ I was ‘blinded’ up hill and down dale, ‘Sergeant this’ and ‘Sergeant that’.

How can you expect men to live in this, and then to put a dampener on the lot, was the language from the occupiers who unfortunately were in a residence that fell in during the night. They took shelter under a tree from 2am after looking for me for half an hour or so, but they could not find me, for the only thing that would shift me, after settling down, if I may call it that, would be a ‘Jack Johnson’ and then I would have no option.

While in the trenches last week John and I were up to our knees in water and got our gum boots half full. The line is a bit quiet lately and only now and again do we get a shelling, but one gets used to it. That, to give you an idea, is like sitting at Paddington and hearing the engines screech.

After our stretch this time I shall be looking forward for a short leave for I have been here nearly three months now and we stand a good chance. Well I must now conclude…Yours sincerely

Jack Symons

Letter 5 – Arthur

Enclosed is from local Gerardmer paper & gives account of result of bomb dropping here Saturday morning. It was about 200 yards from here, one of our ambulances & one Commandant rushed off & took the poor woman to hospital close by but she died soon after. They found her terribly wounded & in corner of room her small child of 4 crying, very sad.  
  
I was called out at 5 a.m. that morning to go up over the Pass & as we got to the top at 6 a glorious cloudless morning the sentries saw the Taube come over & rushed to telephone down here to look out. Two or three other Taubes were flying about up there trying to locate French batteries; **they shelled them & fired with mitrailleuses at them,** quite exciting to watch & the puffs of white smoke in the clear air as the shells burst, however as usual none were hit.  
  
**We have had the narrowest escape this morning that I suppose any of us want to experience**, about 2 seconds, I suppose, saved us, I mean in time & one feels Providence must have looked after us. At 5.15 a.m. a terrific report just in front of Villa, 30 ft from our windows woke us, or me, up, one or two were awake, then another almost immediately after this just 40 ft. behind the house, then 2 more further on. Of course, we all jumped up. It was a Taube of course. Luckily the bomb fell on grass plot in front, it was soft & so it sunk in a bit, if it had been on road just beyond a few feet it would have been worse, on anything hard it is so much worse. It threw earth up into my room & into my bath which was by open window.   
  
A stone right on to our Commandant’s bed other side of landing & where Lord C Beresford had been sleeping two previous nights. All our windows were wide open or they’d have been smashed, some closed ones were all glass in Gardeners house at back, was smashed & his children had a narrow shave; I’ve just been up to see them; she says she’ll stay in a cellar in future.  
  
If the first bomb had been thrown I suppose 2 seconds, at the outside, later, most of us would be no more, as it would have come down through the roof & smashed the whole house & if actual parts of bomb did not get us, bricks & beams would have most likely. They go through these roofs & houses from roof to ground floor. We are wondering if they heard Lord C Beresford was here & were trying for him, as only last week I saw he made a speech in England advocating the hanging of the Kaiser & his entourage after a trial for murder.

Letter 6 – Harold William Cronin

Dear Mr. Welsh,

We were only out here a matter of a few hours before we went into the trenches; we were there for eight days and then came on to what is called a Rest Camp. I suppose it is called that to distinguish it from the trenches because the men are at work all day road and trench making and it comes under both rifle and artillery fire. We got here at 7 o’clock yesterday morning and were shelled at 9 o’clock.

In the trenches it was fairly bad, they are so narrow and smelly and one is being potted at and shelled all the time. A turn of eight days was really quite long enough because it is strenuous work and even when you do turn in for a rest you have to be ready to turn out at once on an alarm.

The country is really quite pretty and just like the hills and valleys of South Wales, but there are no brooks or rivers. It rains hard for a month each year usually about this time and then there is no more until the next rainy season. But although it is so gloriously sunny something is wrong with the place and it really isn’t as healthy as it looks. I think the flies have something to do with it as well as the heat and the still unburied dead bodies about. There are millions and millions of flies here and they are all over everything. Put a cup of tea down without a cover and it is immediately covered with dead ones, they are all round your mouth and directly you open it to speak or to eat in they pop. It is a game. We have all got nets of course, we should have been worried, no medicine by now if we hadn’t.

We get plenty of bully beef and army biscuits, but bread and fresh meat is still a luxury and it is not possible to buy anything. It must have been a “No Man’s Land” because there are no houses or buildings of any kind to be seen and except the flies, the only living things are green canaries and lizards.

We live in dugouts built up the reverse sides of the hills. They are just holes really, but all the same they can be made very comfortable with a bit of digging and a few waterproof sheets. They are not shell proof by any means and the one I slept in during my first night here was knocked in completely by a shell pitching right into it. Fortunately, I was not at home at the time. We have another now and I must try and get a photo of it and let you see what it is like. I must send you one of our mess dugout too.

Letter 7 - My dear little Marjorie,

I have only just received your little letter which Mamma sent with hers on Nov 19th. Do you remember that you asked me to be home for Xmas? I only wish I could but there are many more soldiers in our Battery who are more entitled to the Xmas leave than I am, so am afraid you will have to do without Daddy this Xmas. Santa Claus will come as usual.

I think your writing and dictation just splendid, and your drawings are getting funnier than ever. I have pinned your crayoned tulips on the wall of my dug-out bedroom beside your photograph.

Daddy is as comfortable as possible. I expect even you would get tired enough to go soundly asleep in this dug-out. It would be a change from your pink bedroom. And how is little Daffodil getting on? I expect you quite enjoy the time when Mamma reads you more about her. It was Mamma’s book when she was a girl like you. Write again soon, dear, + send another crayoning to help cover the sand bags.

Heaps of love & kisses, which you must share with Mamma and Betty.

From your ever loving Daddy.

Letter 8 – Josef Wenzl

What I believed to be madness several hours ago, I could see now with my own eyes. Bavarians and English, until then the greatest of enemies, shook hands, talked and exchanged items. A single star stood still in the sky directly above them, interpreted by many as a special sign from heaven. More and more joined, and the entire line greeted each other. For the rest of my life, I shall never forget this scene. Which goes to show that human feelings continue to go on, even if in these times, men do not know anything but killing and murdering.

Bonus Christmas Letter – Frederick George Chandler

Last night was Christmas Eve. It was a bright starry moonlit night and it froze hard. Opposite our trenches was perfect quiet and soon we began to hear the shouts of our men to the Germans and their replies. Then various musical instruments began, and song and ribald mirth. One of our sergeants got out of the trench and met one of the Germans halfway. He lived in Scotland and spoke English with a Scotch accent! They shook hands and exchanged hats, the German declaring they had no wish to be fighting the English.

Between the Welsh Fusiliers and the Germans opposite them were passed greetings and words of bonhomie, and also an intermittent fire, whereat I was sorry.

This morning it was still freezing hard but a heavy mist was over everything… In the afternoon all firing ceased about our lines and an extraordinary thing occurred. Our men and the Germans got out of the trenches and met each other and chatted in great groups. The Germans in fact brought a barrel of beer over to the Regt on our left! One could walk about anywhere with safety – it was a most delicious feeling I can tell you. There was still some sniping going on on our right, but later on this stopped and about 6pm there was absolute quiet. It was perfectly delicious. I have not heard a quiet five minutes for nearly two months. Now, about 9pm, the singing has begun again and there is still no firing. You can’t imagine how sick one gets of the crack-crack of rifles and the beastly singing noise of the bullets. I swear they are worse than shells.

For dinner tonight we had soup, white win, haggis, whisky, vegetables, and some sort of old fowl, Christmas pudding with rum, savoury, dry biscuits and café au rhum. This morning we came across a dead German. We had him buried properly and I got a couple of buttons off the poor devil. A weird Christmas, n’est-ce pas?

Letter to a Husband – Frau S

Dear Leader of the Company!

I, the signer below, have a request to make of you. Although my husband has only been in the field for four months, I would like to ask you to grant him a leave of absence, namely, because of our sexual relationship.

I would like to have my husband just once for the satisfaction of my natural desires. I just can’t live like this any more. I can’t stand it. It is, of course, impossible for me to be satisfied in other ways, firstly, because of all the children and secondly, because I do not want to betray my husband. So I would like to ask you very kindly to grant my request. I will then be able to carry on until we are victorious.

With all reverence,

Frau S

The Stephen Brown Series

Dear Mother

Just a line to let you know that I am getting on all right in the Army. I hope that you are all well as I am myself. I am very sorry for what I done when I was at home and will pay you back when I get some more pay. I like the Army very well for I am going to join the Regulars when I have done my time in the Reserve. Then I shall be able to pay you back for I get 30/- as a bounty. I hope you and Dad will forgive me for what I done when at home. I cannot write no more at present for I have to do some more work. Trusting you will forgive me. I remain your son,

Stephen Brown

Dear Mother

Just a line to let you know that I am getting on alright. I hope you are the same. I am sorry I did not write before. We are so busy that I have had no time. We are confined to barracks so I can not get a stamp… I hope Tommy and Archie Hammond are all right. Give my love to Kitty, Lillie, Maggie, Freddy, and Ted. I hope Dad is quite well… I thank you for forgiving me. I know I don’t deserve it. Tell Auntie Tot and Uncle Bob that I am getting on fine. Is Uncle Bob been called up yet? We are calling all our Reservists up and those on leave. This is all at present.

I remain your loving son, Stephen

Dear Mother

Just a line to let you know that I got the fags on Tuesday. I thank you very much for sending them… They have stopped the weekend passes as there are a lot of absences, but I shall ask the Captain for permission to come on a pass. We are going to the front on the 19 of November. Dear mother, do not worry about me for by God’s help I shall come home well. Give my love to Lillie, Kitty and Freddie and tell him I will come and see him by and by. You will receive 3/0 shilling from me and the same from the War Office which will make six all together. Give my love to all… This is all at present.

So goodbye from your loving son, Steve

Dear Mother

Just a line to let you know that I am alright. I am enjoying myself… I will soon be home.

Love from Steve

Dear Mother

Just a line to let you know that I am quite well. I am for the front on Tuesday. But if you write to the Commanding Officer and say I am only seventeen it will stop me from going. Get it here before Tuesday for I cannot get a pass to come and see you. Don’t forget.

From Stephen

Mother

Just left for France

Stephen

Dear Mother

Just a line to let you know that I arrived quite safe. I hope you are quite well as it leaves me the same. Give my love to all at home.

From your ever loving son,

Stephen

Dear Mother

Just a line to let you know that I sent you all a photo of myself outside a tent door with two of my mates. Hope you will get them safe. Hoping you are in the best of health as I am myself. Goodbye for the present. I remain yours truly,

Stephen