

Letters from the First World War, 1916- 18



Here you will find all the letters and transcripts from this collection that relate to the soldiers' experience of the trenches.

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Military kit: 'no light weight'

Corporal F.D. Woodhams writes home under date 16.12.16 as follows: 19

(Extracts)

The last time I wrote I think I told you we had lost our comfortable job on railheads. We have been shifted from G.H.Q. and are at the most God-forsaken hole there can possibly be in France. We had a rotten journey raining all the time. Revellie was at 4 a.m. and we eventually left the station about 10 a.m. The accommodation consisted of the old cattle trucks and rations of Bully and Biscuits, it was a very cold and uncomfortable journey.

We arrived at our destination about 4.30 p.m. and after ~~standing in the rain for 2 1/2 hours~~ with full pack on, we set out as a 10 mile march. It's the worst march I've ever done. The majority of us at the finish were absolutely knocked up and were only too glad to crawl into billets (?) before going to bed, which was about 12 ~~mid.~~, they gave us a mug of tea (the first we had since 6 in the morning) and best of all a ration of rum.

Time up to date soldier kit to carry about from place to place consists of 150 rounds of ammunition, inside the pack, Overcoat, fur coat, 2 pairs socks, 1 pants, 1 shirt, ground sheet, iron ration Outside pack, mackintosh and mess tin, in haversack, cleaning kit, hold all, 2N the rations, soap and towel, and on top of that extras such as handkerchiefs, plate, mug, tobacco, etc. Two smoke helmets in a satchel slung over the shoulder, a respirator in the left flap of the tunic and field dressing on the right, and of course the rifle. In all its no light weight on a long march, it takes all one's strength and staying power to keep going.

We are billeted in a barn and have a sea of mud to get through if we have no boards, so sleep on the ground, fires are not allowed in the billet and at night time its devilish cold.

In the village there is a little general shop (now nearly sold out) one pub where they sell anything they charge 2/6 for and call beer, there are no shops of any description and of course no amusements.

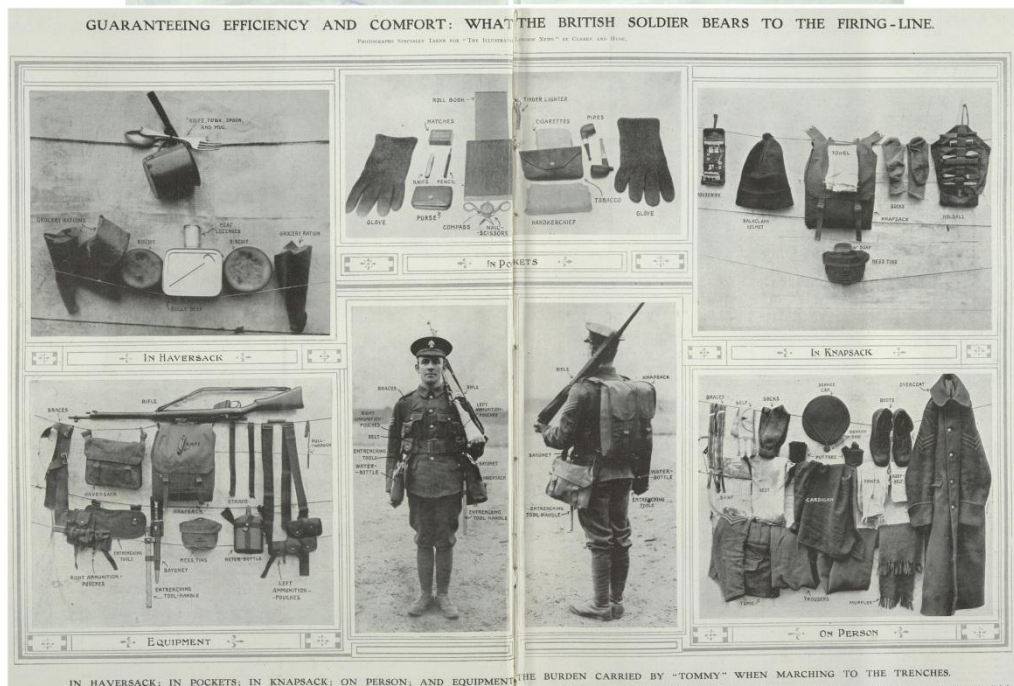
Rations are not so good now (to-day's dinner, Sunday, Bully beef, stew and two potatoes between 35 men, we have a loaf and a bit (small loaf) and two tins of jam between 7 men, the short bread issue being augmented by the world famous Army Biscuits.

Here follow few suggestions of requisites to help those at home when packing the next parcel.

Our Captain is a perfect gentleman and about the most popular man in the Regiment, the Junior Captain (an absolute sport) and the platoon officers are all very decent sort of fellows, we appear to be much better off in this respect than before, and certainly think that D.C. has not a good selection of Officers as any other Coy. in the Battalion.

One of our fellows ran across a number of Audit R.R.s and they enquired after Maggie and myself.

Freddy or what's left of him after some very stiff marching.



Frederick G. Woodhams, 16 February 1916, France. **Regiment:** 13 London Rifles, **Regiment number:** 1383, **Rank:** Private; Lance Corporal; Sergeant, **Died:** Killed in action on 16 August 1917, having been struck by shrapnel; prior to this, he had been wounded twice.

These are typed extracts of a letter that Frederick Woodhams had written to his family (RAIL 253/516). Below that is an article from the Illustrated London News, 1915 (ZPER 34/146s9).

Transcript

The last time I wrote I think I told you we had lost our comfortable job on railheads. We have been shifted from General Headquarters and are at the most godforsaken hole there can possibly be in France. We had a rotten journey raining all the time. Reveille* was at 4am and we eventually left the station about 10am. The accommodation consisted of the old cattle trucks, and rations of bully and biscuits. It was a very cold and uncomfortable journey.

We arrived at our destination about 4.30pm and after standing in the rain for 2½ hours with full pack on, we set out on a ten mile march. It's the worst march I've ever done. The majority of us at the finish were absolutely knocked up and were only too glad to crawl into the billets before going to bed, which was about 12pm. They gave us a mug of tea (the first we had since six in the morning) and best of all a ration of rum.

The up to date soldier kit to carry about from place to place consists of 150 rounds of ammunition, inside the pack; overcoat, fur coat, two pairs socks, one pants, one shirt, ground sheet, iron rations [emergency food supply]. Outside pack; Mackintosh and mess tin, in haversack; cleaning kit, hold all, 24lbs rations, soap and towel, and on top of that extras such as handkerchiefs, plate, mug, tobacco, etc, two smoke helmets* in a satchel slung over the shoulder, a respirator in the left flap of a tunic and field dressing on the right, and of course the rifle, in all it's no light weight on a long march, it takes all one's strength and staying power to keep going.

We are billeted in a barn and have a sea of mud to get through. We have no boards, so sleep on the ground, fires are not allowed in the billet and at night time it's devilish cold.

In the village there is a little general shop (now nearly sold out), one pub where they sell something they charge 2½d for and call beer, there are no shops of any description and of course no amusements.

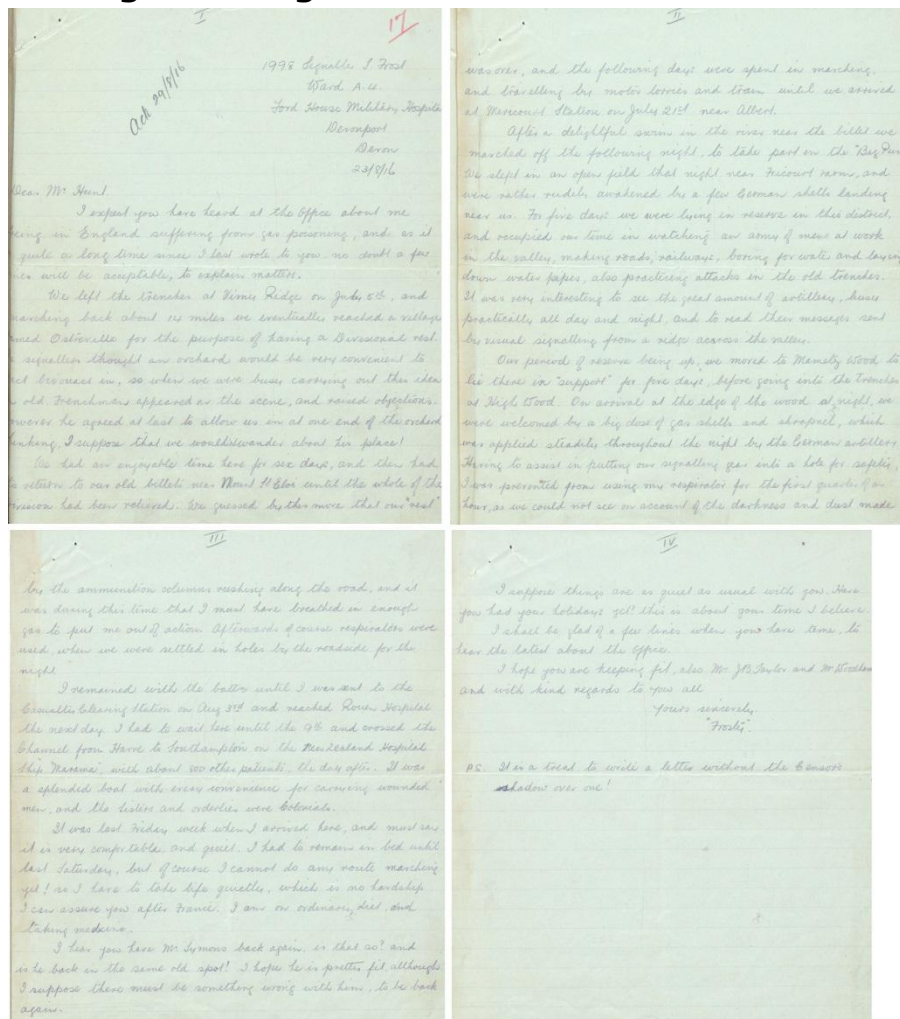
Rations are not so good now (today's dinner, Sunday, bully beef, stew and two potatoes between 35 men. We have a loaf and a bit (small loaf) and two tins of jam between seven men, the short bread issue being augmented by the world famous army biscuits.

Our captain is a perfect gentleman and about the most popular man in the regiment, the junior captain (an absolute sport) and the platoon officers are all very decent sort of fellows. We appear to be much better off in this respect than before, and certainly think that D. Co. has got as good a selection of officers as any other company in the battalion. One of our fellows ran across a number of Audit R.E.s and they enquired after Maggs and myself.

Freddy or

What's left of him after some very stiff marching.

Trenches: 'a big dose of gas shells'



Richard Charles Stanley Frost, 23 August 1916, Devonport, England. **Born:** 30 January 1888, **Regiment:** 8th

Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders; Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, **Regiment number:** 1998; 300470, **Rank:** Private; Second Lieutenant, **Died:** 1962

Transcript

Dear Mr Hunt,

I expect you have heard at the office about me being in England suffering from gas poisoning, and as it is quite a long time since I last wrote to you, no doubt a few lines will be acceptable, to explain matters.

We left the trenches at Vimy Ridge on July 5th, and marching back about 14 miles we eventually reached a village named Ostreville for the purpose of having a divisional rest. The signallers thought an orchard would be very convenient to erect bivouacs in, so when we were busy carrying out this idea an old Frenchman appeared at the scene, and raised objections. However he agreed at last to allow us in at one end of the orchard, thinking, I suppose, that we would wander about his place! We had an enjoyable time here for six days, and then had to return to our old billets near Mount St. Eloi until the whole of the division had retired. We guessed by this move that our 'rest' was over, and the following days were spent in marching, and travelling by motor lorries and train until we arrived at Mericourt Station on July 21st near Albert.

After a delightful swim in the river near the billet we marched off the following night, to take part in the 'big push.' We slept in an open field that night near Fricourt farm, and were rather rudely awakened by a few German shells landing near us.

For five days we were lying in reserve in this district, and occupied our time in watching an army of men at work in the valley, making roads, railways, boring for water and laying down water pipes, also practicing attacks in the old trenches. It was very interesting to see the great amount of artillery, busy practically all day and night, and to read their messages sent by visual signalling [often using lights] from a ridge across the valley.

Our period in reserve being up, we moved to Mametz Wood to lie there in support for five days, before going into the trenches at High Wood. On arrival at the edge of the wood at night, we were welcomed by a big dose of gas shells and shrapnel, which was applied steadily throughout the night by the German artillery. Having to assist in putting our signalling gear into a hole for safety, I was prevented from using my respirator for the first quarter of an hour, as we could not see on account of the darkness and dust made by the ammunition columns rushing along the road, and it was during this time that I must have breathed in enough gas

to put me out of action. Afterwards of course respirators were used, when we were settled in holes by the roadside for the night.

I remained with the battalion until I was sent to the casualty clearing station on August 3rd and reached Rouen hospital the next day. I had to wait until the 9th and crossed the channel from Havre to Southampton on the New Zealand ship *Marama*, with about 800 other patients, the day after. It was a splendid boat with every convenience for carrying wounded men, and the sisters and orderlies were colonials.

It was last Friday week when I arrived here, and must say it is very comfortable and quiet. I had to remain in bed until last Saturday, but of course I cannot do any route marching yet! So I have to take life quietly, which is no hardship I can assure you after France. I am on an ordinary diet, and taking medicine.

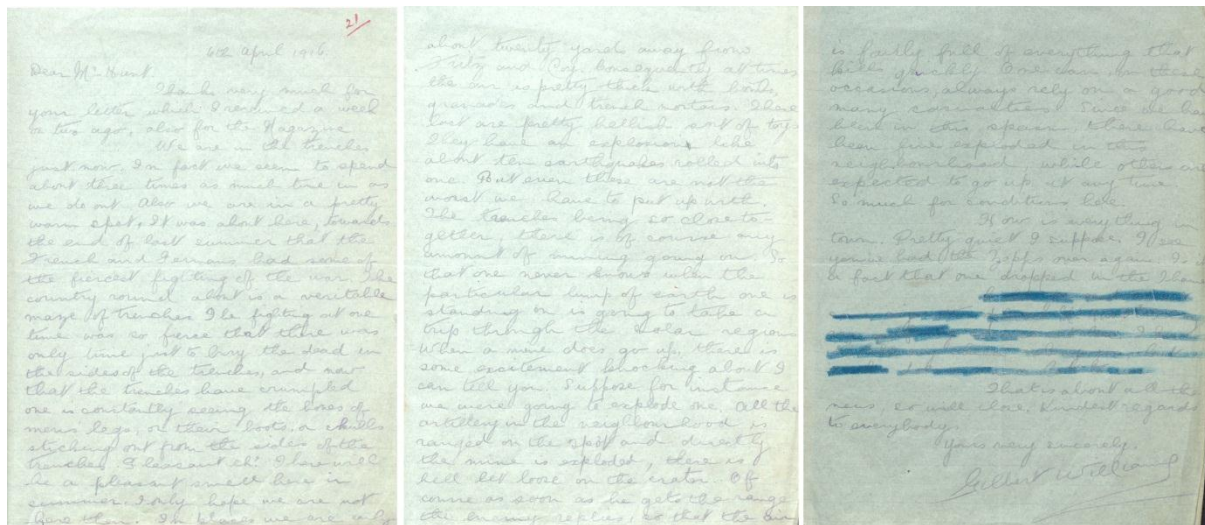
I hear you have Mr Symons back again, is that so? And is he back in the same old spot? I hope he is pretty fit, although I suppose there must be something wrong with him, to be back again.

I suppose things are as quiet as usual with you. Have you had your holidays yet? This is about your time I believe. I shall be glad of a few lines when you have time, to hear the latest about the office. I hope you are keeping fit, also Mr J.B. Taylor and Mr Woodhams and with kind regards to you all. Yours sincerely,

Frosty.

P.S. It is a treat to write a letter without the censor's shadow over one!

Trenches: 'a veritable maze'



Gilbert Williams, 6 April 1916, France. **Born:** 18 April 1894, **Regiment:** 1/6 Seaforth Highlanders, **Regiment number:** 2175, **Rank:** Private, **Died:** 1967. **Note:** Williams also fought in Second World War returned from war on 15 November 1948

Transcript

Dear Mr Hunt,

Thanks very much for your letter which I received a week or two ago, also for the magazine.

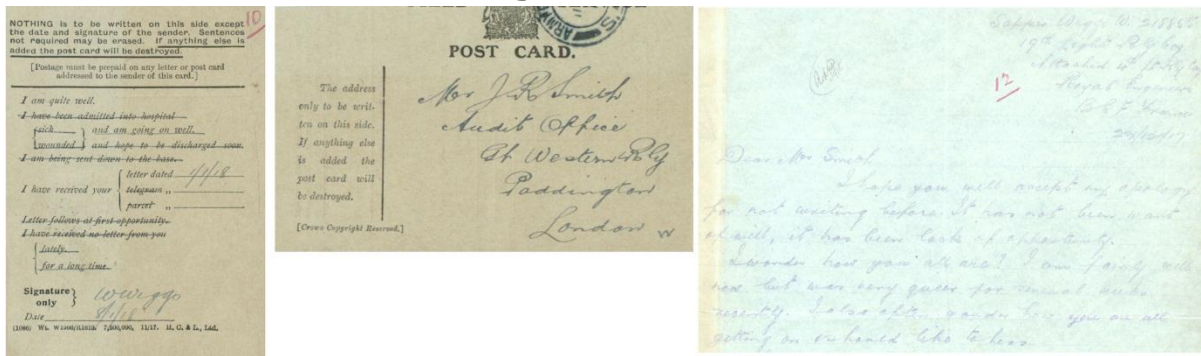
We are in the trenches just now. In fact we seem to spend about three times as much time in as we do out. Also we are in a pretty warm spot, it was about here, towards the end of last summer that the French and German had some of the fiercest fighting of the war. The country around about is a veritable maze of trenches. The fighting at one time was so fierce that there was only time just to bury the dead in the sides of the trenches, and now that the trenches have crumpled one is constantly seeing the bones of men's legs or their boots, or skulls sticking out from the sides of the trenches, pleasant, eh? There will be a pleasant smell here in the summer. I only hope we are not here then. In places we are only about twenty yards away from Fritz and company. Consequently all times the air is pretty thick with bombs, grenades and trench mortars. These last are pretty hellish sort of toys. They have an explosion like

about ten earthquakes rolled into one. But even these are not the worst we have to put up with. The trenches being so close together there is of course any amount of mining going on. So one never knows when the particular lump of earth one is standing on is going to take a trip through the solar regions. When a mine does go up, there is some excitement knocking about I can tell you. Suppose for instance we were going to explode one, all the artillery in the neighbourhood is ranged on the spot and directly the mine is exploded, there is hell let loose on the crater. Of course as soon as he gets the range the enemy replies, so that the air is fairly full of everything that kills quickly. One can on these occasions always rely on a good many casualties. Since we have been in this spasm there have been five exploded in this neighbourhood, while others are expected to go up at any time. So much for conditions here.

How is everything in town? Pretty quiet I suppose. I see you've had the zepps (Zeppelins) over again? Is it a fact that one dropped in the Thames? (Lines censored.) That is about all the news, so will close, kindest regards to everybody. Yours very sincerely,

Gilbert Williams.

Trenches: 'Fritz was bombing us'



William Charles Frederick Wiggs, letter sent 23 December 1917, field card sent 8 January 1918, France. **Born:** 2 February 1881, **Regiment:** Royal Engineers, Railway Troop, **Regiment number:** 218855, **Rank:** 2nd Corporal, **Died:** Oct-Dec 1971

Transcript

Dear Mr Smith,

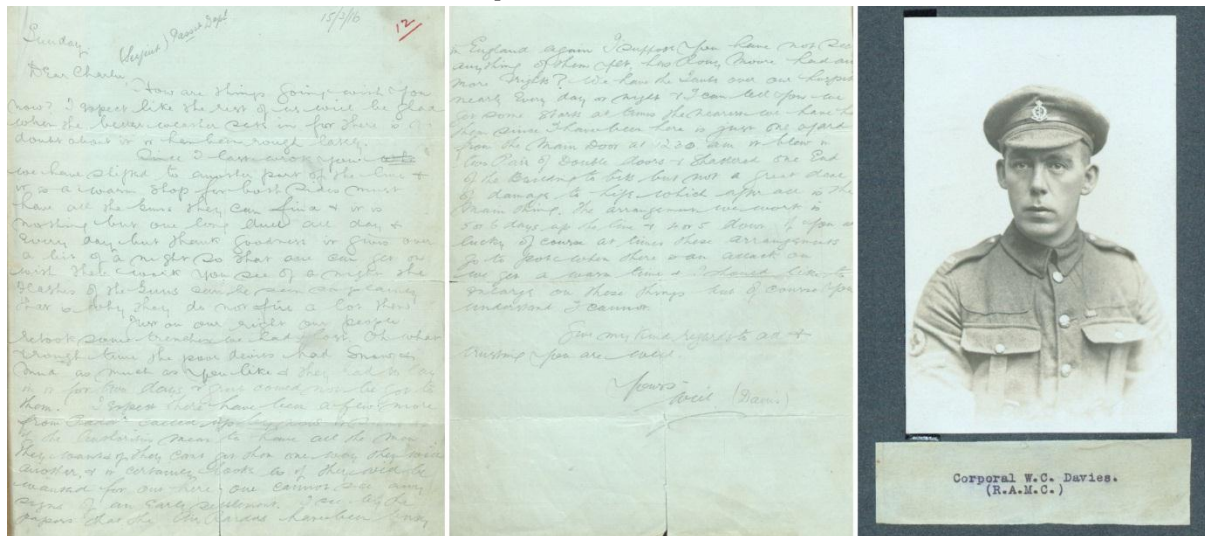
I hope you will accept my apology for not writing before. It has not been want of will it has been lack of opportunity. I wonder how you all are. I am fairly well now but was very queer for several weeks recently. I also often wonder how you are all getting on and should like to hear.

A matter of about five minutes ago Fritz was bombing us, and I have just got up off the ground where I was laying for about twenty minutes. One fellow has been hit, but not severely by shrapnel. This is his second visit this evening.

It will soon be twelve months since I left you. It seems a very long time ago. I am afraid I have very little I may tell you, so will conclude by asking you to accept my best wishes for the New year and desiring that you will remember me kindly to any enquiring friends. Believe me, dear Mr Smith, sincerely yours,

W. Wiggs

Trenches: 'it is a warm shop'



William Charles Davis, 15 March 1916, France. **Born:** 12 November 1884, **Joined GWR:** 12 January 1900, **Regiment:** Royal Army Medical Corps, **Regiment number:** 31223, **Rank:** Lance Corporal; Sergeant, **Retired:** 1944

Transcript

Sunday

Dear Charlie,

How are things going with you now? I expect like the rest of us will be glad when the better weather sets in for there is no doubt about it, it has been rough lately.

Since I last wrote to you we have shifted to another part of the line and it is a warm shop, for both sides must have all guns they can find and it is nothing but one long duel all day and every day but thank goodness it gives over a bit a night so that one can get on with their work. You see of a night the flashes of the guns can be seen so plainly that is why they do not fire a lot then.

Just on our right our people retook some trenches we had lost, oh what a rough time the poor devils had, snow and mud as much as you like and they had to lay in it for two days and grub could not be got to them. I

expect there have been a few more from Paddington called up by now, it seems if the authorities mean to have all the men they want and if they can't get them one way they will another, and it certainly looks as if they will be wanted for out here. One cannot see any signs of an early settlement. I see by the papers that the air raids have been busy in England again. I suppose you have not seen anything of them yet, has Rory Moore had any more frights? We have the taubes [German aircraft] over our hospital nearly every day or night and I can tell you we got some starts at times. The nearest we have to them since I have been here is just one yard from the main door, at 12.30 it blew in two pairs of double doors and shattered on end of the building to bits but not a great deal of damage to life which after all is the main thing. The arrangements we in work is five or six days up the line and four or five down if you are lucky. Of course at times these arrangements go to pot when there is an attack and we get a warm time and I should like to enlarge on these things but of course you understand I cannot.

Give my kind regards to all and trusting you are well.

Yours Will

Trenches: 'there is Somme noise'

Jan 5th 1917
 Dear Mr. Davies,
 Just a line to let you know I have not forgotten you. I received a letter on Tuesday Jan 3rd 17, which you sent to me on Aug. 24th 1916. By the marking on the envelope, it has been sent to various regiments & officers but it has arrived quite safe at last. I received the letter you wrote on Oct., quite safe. I am sorry I have not written before but we were rather busy when I received your last letter & we could not send much more than a field card for about a month. Well I am pleased to tell you that I am still going on first rate. I expect you

will be surprised to hear that I have left the Northamptonshire Regt. & am now attached to the Army Printing & Stationery Services. We are opening a new branch in the photographic line & I am here as a photographer. I am unable to tell you more than this up to the present. I expect Harry will be pleased to hear this as he used to give me quite a lot of tuition in this respect. There are only two of us here up to the present & as the dark rooms are not finished yet we are having an easy time. The Officer is away in England just now getting more photographic apparatus so we are on our own & I am in charge.

We are billeted with a Company of Australian Elect & Mech, Mining & Boring Engineers & are having a fine time. They are a good lot of fellows & make us very welcome, we had a grand Xmas with them & they know how to enjoy themselves. You can understand what a change this is after being in the line. Just before I came on this job we had over a month in & out of the line waiting to go over the top when the weather was favourable. We went in for four days then out for a rest for about three days then back again. The water was over our fences in the trenches & it was impossible to use the

communication trenches at all. We were holding the front line with two platoons (I should say our Coy section of the line). Our platoon was 22 strong in the Officer, & during a bombardment we had eight put out in ten minutes. There were no dugouts of any description there, so you can imagine what it was like to stand there for four nights. We hoped the weather would be alright so that we could go over to get it done with but it was not to be. We were out digging one night when they let us burn it for five hours with gas shells, we had two chops but with them to put right out. The sight & smell were awful, as a good many

of the chops lay just as they fell during the advance. It was impossible to bury them. There were about a dozen dead horses run over about in the middle, that were killed by shell fire while bringing up ammunition for the guns. Our guns were close down there, as soon as we action stop, another lot open out so you can tell there is some noise. The last time we came out, was for 48 hours rest then in again & over, but the troops were in such a bad condition that the doctor sent in a report saying that we were not fit for the line so two other regiments in our division went over in our place.

& we were held in reserve & I am glad to say not required after all. Well I think this is about all for now, I have been with the A.P. & S. since Dec 1st & I can tell you I hope I shall stop here. I have no desire to go back to the line. Kindly remember me to all old friends. With kind regards to yourself & all in Section 4.
 Yours sincerely
 H. Skilling.
 L/H/L H. Skilling 43228
 No 2 Advancement Section
 Army Printing & Stationery Service
 T.P.O. A.D. 2.
 B.E.F. France.

Hugh Andrew Skilling, 5 January 1917, France. **Born:** 17 April 1891, **Regiment:** 3 Battalion Bedfordshire Regiment; 7 London Brigade Field Artillery, **Regiment number:** 43228, **Rank:** Lance Corporal, **Died:** 1970

Transcript

Dear Mr W.H. Davies,

Just a line to let you know I have not forgotten you. I received a letter on Tuesday 3rd of January 1917 which you sent to me on August 24th 1916. By the marking on the envelope it has been round to various regiments and officers, but it has arrived quite safe at last. I received the letter you wrote in October quite safe. I am sorry I have not written before but we were rather busy when I received your last letter and we could not send more than a field card for about a month. Well I am pleased to tell you that I am still going on first rate. I expect you will be surprised to hear that I have left the Northamptonshire Regiment and am now attached to the Army Printing and Stationary Services. We are opening a new branch in the photography line and I am here as a photographer.

I am unable to tell you more than this up to the present. I expect Harry will be pleased to hear this as he used to give me quite a lot of tuition in this respect.

There are only two of us here up to the present and as the dark rooms are not finished yet we are having an easy time. The Officer is away in England just now getting some more photographic apparatus so we are on our own and I am in charge.

We are billeted with a company of Australian electricians, mechanics, mining and boring engineers and are having a fine time. There are a good lot of fellows and make us very welcome. We had a grand Xmas with them and they know how to enjoy themselves. You can understand what a change this is after being in the line. Just before I came on this job we had over a month in and out of the line waiting to go over the top when the weather was favourable.

We went in for four days then out for a rest for about three days then back again. The water was over our knees in the trenches and it was impossible to use the communication trenches at all. We were holding the front line with two platoons (I should say our boys' section of the line). Our platoon was twenty two strong including the Officer, and during the bombardment we had eight put out in ten minutes. There were no dugouts of any description there, so you can imagine what it was like to

stand there for four nights. We hoped the weather would be alright so that we could go over and get it done with but it was not to be. We were out digging one night when they let us have it for five hours with gas shells, we had two chaps hit with them and put right out.

The sights and smells were awful, as a good many of the chaps lay just as they fell during the advance. It was impossible to bury them. Also there were about a dozen dead horses round about in the mud that were killed by shell fire while bringing up ammunition for the guns. Our guns never cease down there, as soon as one section stop, another lot open out so you can tell there is Somme noise.

The last time we came out, was for forty eight hours' rest then in again and over, but the troops were in such a bad condition that the doctor sent in a report saying we were not fit for the line so two other regiments in our division went over in our place.

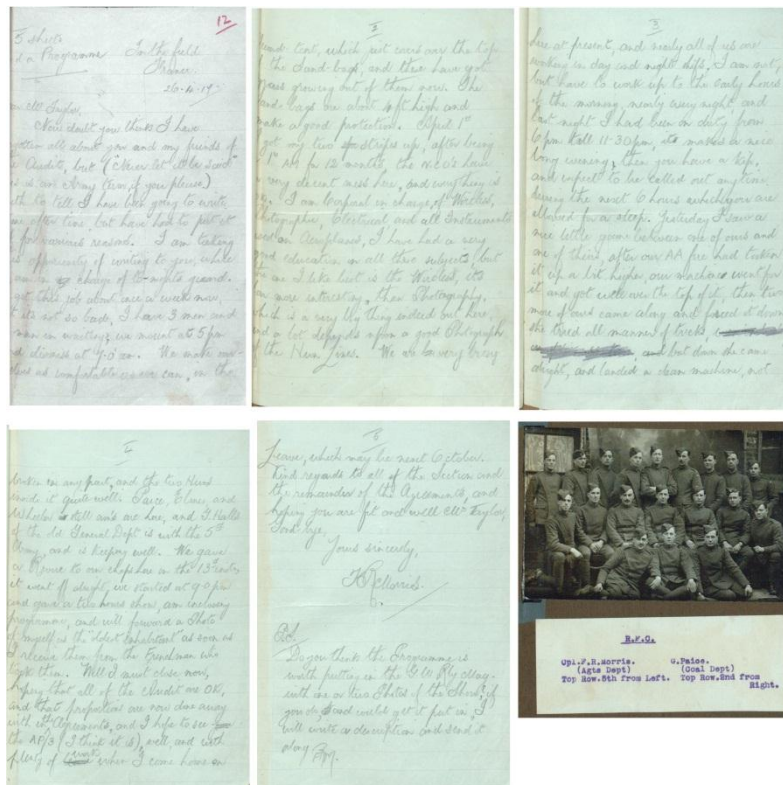
We were held in reserve and I am glad to say not required after all. Well I think this is about all, for now, I have been with the A.P. & S.S. since December 1st and I can tell you, I hope I shall stop here. I have no desire to go back to the line. Kindly remember me to all old friends. With kind regards to yourself and all on Section 4.

Yours sincerely, H.A. Skilling

No. 2 Section Advanced Section

Army Printing & Stationary Service...

Trenches: 'anti-aircraft fire'



Frederick Ronald Morris, 26 April 1917, 'in the field', France. **Born:** 1 April 1893, **Regiment:** Royal Flying Corps, **Regiment number:** 16922, **Rank:** 1st class Air Mechanic, **Returned to office:** 10 March 1919, **Retired:** Resigned on 25 March 1925.

Transcript

Dear Mr Taylor,

No doubt you think that I have forgotten all about you and my friends of the Audit, but never let it be said (this is an army term, if you please.) Truth to tell I have been going to write time after time, but have had to put it off for various reasons. I am taking this opportunity of writing to you, while I am in charge of tonight's guard. I get this job about once a week now, it's not so bad, I have three men and a man in waiting; we mount at 5pm and dismiss at 7am. We make ourselves as comfortable as we can, in the guard tent, which just covers over the top of the sand bags, and these have got grass growing out of them now. The sand bags

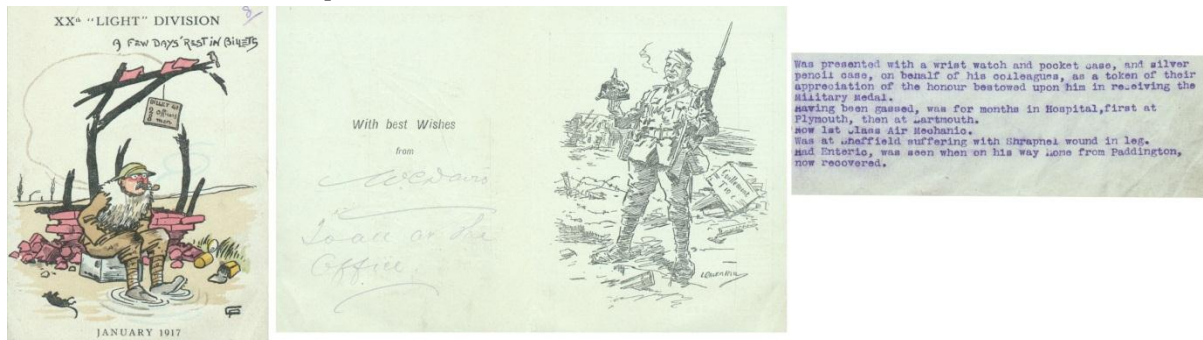
are about 4ft high and make a good protection. April 1st I got my two stripes up, after being a 1st Air Mechanic for 12 months, the Non-Commissioned Officers have a very decent mess here, and everything is ok. I am corporal in charge of wireless, photographic, electrical and all instruments used on aeroplanes, I have had a very good education on all those subjects, but the one I like best is the wireless, it's far more interesting than photography, which is a very big thing indeed out here, and a lot depends upon a good photograph of the Hun lines...

Yesterday I saw a nice little game between one of ours and one of theirs, after our anti-aircraft fire had taken it up a bit higher, our machine went for it and got well over the top of it, then two more of ours came along and forced it down, she tried all manner of tricks, but down she came alright, and landed a clean machine, not broken in any part, and the two Huns inside it quite well.

We gave a revue (theatrical show) to our chaps here on the 13th, it went off alright, we started at 9pm and gave a two hours show, am enclosing programme, and will forward a photo of myself as the 'oldest inhabitant' as soon as I receive them from the Frenchman who took them...Kind regards to all of the section and the remainder of the agreements, and hoping you are fit and well. Good bye. Yours sincerely,

F.R. Morris

Trenches: 'Military Medal'



William Charles Davis, January 1917. **Born:** 12 November 1884, **Regiment:** Royal Army Medical Corps, **Regiment number:** 31223, **Rank:** Lance Corporal; Sergeant, **Returned to office:** 10 February 1919 **Retired:** 12 November 1944

William Davis sent the card to E.H. Serjent who worked in the Great Western Railway Audit office at Paddington. Davis was also mentioned in the office newsletter for March 1917 for his bravery on the battlefield (RAIL 253/516). Read a letter from William Davis and see his photograph.

Transcript

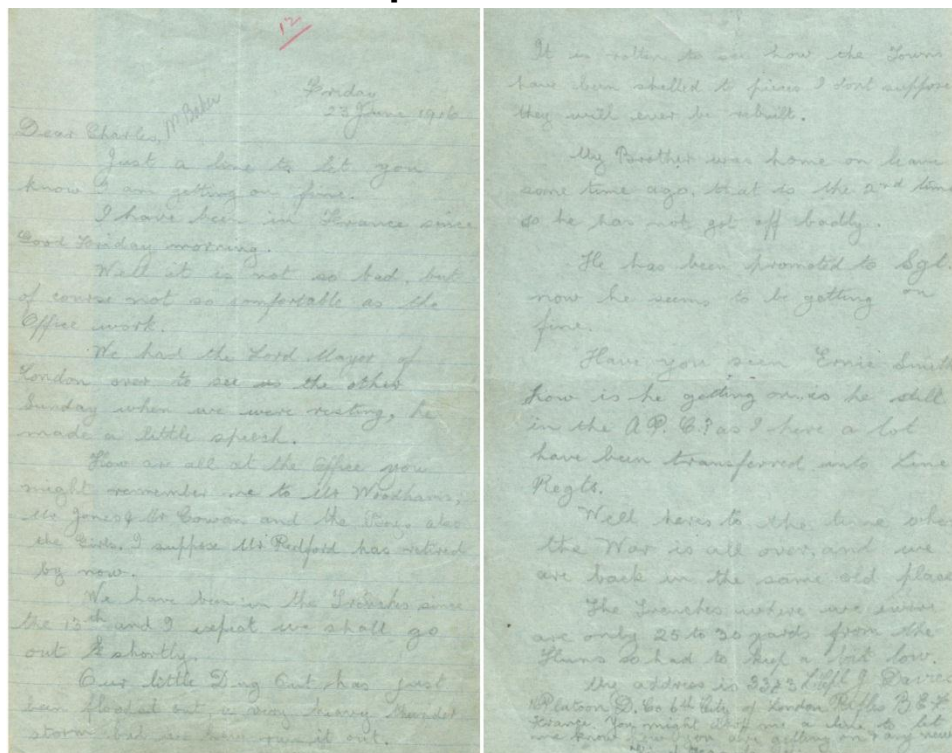
Christmas card:

XXa "LIGHT" DIVISION, A few days' rest in billets, January 1917.

With best wishes from W.C. Davis to all at the office.

Newsletter (extract):

.... (Davis) was presented with a wrist watch and pocket case, and silver pencil case on behalf of his colleagues as a token of their appreciation of the honour bestowed upon in receiving the Military Medal.

Trenches: 'towns shelled to pieces'

James Davies, 23 June 1916, France. **Regiment:** 6 City of London Rifles, **Regiment number:** 3343, **Rank:** Lance Corporal

Transcript

Dear Charles,

Just a line to let you know I am getting on fine. I have been in France since Good Friday morning. Well it is not so bad, but of course not so comfortable as the office work.

We had the Lord Mayor of London over to see us the other Sunday when we were resting, he made a little speech.

How are all at the office? You might remember me to Mr Woodhams, Mr Jones and Mr Cowan and the boys also the girls. I suppose Mr Redford has retired by now.

We have been in the trenches since the 13th and I expect we shall go out shortly. Our little dugout has just been flooded out, a very heavy

thunderstorm, but we have run it out. It is rotten to see how the towns have been shelled to pieces. I don't suppose they will ever be rebuilt.

My brother was home on leave some time ago that is the second time so he has not got off badly. He has been promoted to Sergeant now. He seems to be getting on fine.

Have you seen Ernie Smith? How is he getting on, is he still in the A.P.C. (Army Pay Corps, non-fighting troops)? As I hear a lot have been transferred into line regiments.

Well here's to the time when the war is all over and we are back in the same old place. The trenches where we were are only 25 to 30 yards from the Huns so had to keep a bit low.

My address is 3343 Lance Corporal J. Davies, No. 1 Platoon D Company, 6th City of London Rifles, B.E.F., France. You might drop me a line to let me know how you are getting on and any news,

Kind regards...