

One Man's War 1914-1918



From Gibraltar to The Final Offensive

ALBERT STANLEY DANIELS

(1895 – 1918)

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Introduction

The project of discovering Bert Daniels began by accident.

The initial idea occurred on a glorious summer day in Picardie, just east of Albert. Janee and I had left the main road we were travelling to the coastal port of Etaples. It was mid-morning and we were looking for somewhere to stop for a late picnic breakfast. To that end we followed signs down a series of minor lanes to a tiny cemetery. It was July 2008, and our breakfast destination that morning, the Citadel New Military Cemetery, sounded extremely dull, but it would suit our purpose.

The cemetery lies east of Albert and south of Fricourt. It's in the middle of nowhere. On arrival we pulled over just outside the low cemetery wall. As I munched on my fresh baguette and jam, washed down with coffee, I considered that I might as well take a look around inside. Up to this point I had never been inside a war cemetery but enough of me recognised that it's the sort of thing that I should perhaps do, if only in passing.



The kindling ground – The Citadel New Military Cemetery, 2008. Classic battleground scenery today. Nothing of any age exists.

A row of trees bordered one side of the graveyard, their branches alive with the sound of birdsong, young fledglings thrilled by the warm summer breeze. One of the first gravestones I walked past was a soldier recorded as ‘A. Fish’. I smiled. Why wouldn’t I? I commented to Janee that the next one we’ll come across might be ‘A. Hare’. I thought I was being mildly amusing.

About five graves further along that same row the smile was swept from my face. The gravestone in front of me read A. B. Hare (Alexander Balfour Hare, research since tells me). My son’s same is A .B. A. Hare. Alexander Balfour was a 26 year old 2nd Lieutenant when he fell. On his immaculately maintained gravestone was written: ‘He was the light and life of our happy home.’ Alexander Hare was a deeply mourned loved son from an embracing warm Scottish home.

As I straightened myself I sensed that I was about to lose control. I was aware of a similar young man from a similarly embracing family, although I knew absolutely nothing about him. Seeing what looked remarkably like my own son’s grave drove home the reality of where I was standing and the meaning of what had happened there. As I looked beyond the cemetery’s boundary to the sunlit corn field bending easily to the summer breeze the juxtaposition of what this peaceful landscape would have looked like less that a hundred years previously filled me with a deep sense of grief. I had to find somewhere to sit. I did, and I sobbed.

For context, along its Western Front the Somme valley feels haunted. It’s unnerving. Something isn’t quite right. And then it dawns on you - nothing is more than a 100 years old. There are no ancient or old buildings and there are no big old trees. All were swept away, like over a million BEF casualties and 300,000 fatalities during that one five-month battle alone, a battle that failed to gain anything more than a few feet of ground.

A year later, the fire of enthusiasm to discover the role my own family member played in the Great War was to ignite properly. It was in the visitor centre at Thiepval.



The First World War (WW1) was a global war that started in Europe and lasted from 28 July 1914 to 11 November 1918.

By July 1914, the great powers of Europe were divided into two coalitions; the Triple Entente (France Russia and Great Britain) and the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy).

The war started when a Yugoslavian nationalist assassinated the Austro Hungarian heir, Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Matters then escalated between the coalitions into a conflict that involved most of Europe.

WW1 led to the mobilisation of 70 million people, including 60 million Europeans and an estimated 9 million people died in combat.

One of those people was Albert Stanley Daniels.

Above, Europe in 1914 and how the Alliances were spread across the continent.

Finding Bert

Once it was recognised as such, finding the fellow who takes a lead role in this narrative was a challenge. Janee and I had almost reached the end of our first visit to the area and we were ready to give up. We had based ourselves in Peronne, home to the World’s leading Great War visitor centre, a visit well worth making in its own right. We scoured all the huge cemeteries with their massive walls of thousands of names. We took to splitting up the task, one of us on the grave headstones, the other on the walls of ‘the missing’. We got nowhere. Uncle Bert, as he is known to his family, remained elusive, an enigma. I began to wonder whether he had actually ever really existed. How could he *not* be here? At this stage I wasn’t in possession of any of his letters although I was aware that some were written to my grandmother, one of Bert’s elder sisters, but their whereabouts was unknown.

Then came the breakthrough. It was at Thiepval, home of the iconic and most definitive of Lutyens war memorials. We had scrutinised the endless list of names etched into it and watched the heart-wrenching film running in the theatre inside the centre. As we were about to leave my eye was caught by a ‘track an ancestor’ notice adjacent to the reception desk. I had tried websites previously. All led to nowhere. Might this be different? It was the official Commonwealth War Graves Commission data base of freely available information. Surely it was worth a final try...

“Name please?”
“Robert Daniels?”
Keys clicked rapidly. “I’m sorry sir; we can’t find a Robert Daniels”
“OK. Try Albert, please.”

6 Another dead end? Not this time; the printer immediately sprung into life. I couldn’t believe my eyes.

The single A4 page resonated with me before it even left the printer. ‘Parents’: John and Elizabeth Daniels. ‘Address’: Elm Road, Leigh-on-Sea; the same town in which many of us were born and grew up. ‘Where commemorated’: The Faubourg d’Amiens memorial, Arras.

I had him.

What followed were four more years of research, writing and cross referring with members of Bert’s family, helped greatly by collective family participation; and two more visits to the region. The result is this reconstruction of Bert’s war years. It is unusual as it spans all four of the years, and it takes us from Gibraltar, to Suez and finally to the Western Front. As Bert’s story took shape it was like cracking open an old trap door in a bombed-out barn to find the figure of a young soldier

standing within, waiting. Our collective family effort, with Bert at the helm, was to bring him back into heart of his family.

The thought that he might so easily have been lost, after the horror and trauma he had experienced at an age when many of us were carefree students breaks my heart. But that didn’t happen. He’s now back with us all through what we have within this document.

With Bert’s hand-written letters and the support of two essential books: ‘Four years on the Western Front’ by Aubrey Smith (although he mischievously refers to himself as ‘A. Rifleman’) and ‘Gavrelle’ by Kyle Tallett and Trevor Tasker, Bert’s letters can be read against the background of documented events. They tell the broader context to the story that Bert would have been unable to spell out due to essential battlefield censorship.

Towards the end, the events described inevitably become deeply tragic. He dies at the exact point when the war finally turned in the Allies favour and the armistice was within reach. He was denied the euphoria and desperately needed optimism of a new dawn approaching. It is a dark irony that he was spared the so-called Spanish Flue that was introduced by American troops, those same troops that made a speedy conclusion to the war possible.

A Final Act

A strange event occurred in 2016. I had only just drawn a line under the project when it happened. Bert's enlistment photograph has been hanging on a wall on our landing for about 25 years at this time. Before that it had hung in the stairwell at our previous home. Before that it had spent many decades in attics.

No sooner had the metaphorical ink dried on the final draft when there was an almighty crash inside our house. Fearing the worse I ran from room to room, anxious to find the cause. Had a car smashed into the house, again?

Once at the top of the stairs it became apparent - Bert's picture had fallen from the wall, its string torn. The glass had smashed but the frame was repairable. The glass has not been replaced since but the picture went straight back up on the wall.

I am not a spiritual man..! It makes you think though...

Site Visits

There were three information-gathering trips:

Oct '09 – First proper visit. Based in an auberge, La Provencal, Peronne. Peronne is home of the Great War visitor centre (Historial de la Grande Guerre). We had all but given up on finding Bert, but at Thiepval it all changed. The visit was not wasted though. We also visited the Australian Somme memorial, also a Lutyens design at Villers-Bretonneux. Spent most part of a day in the Peronne visitor centre.

March '12 – Arras: Visted Bert's cemetery; also the battlefield at Gavrelle. Visited the Wellington tunnels at Arras.

April '14 – A concluding last visit that included the visitor centre at Albert. Stayed at the former WW1 field hospital at Mailly-Maillet.



The map, above, shows Bert's key locations in France during the war from his family home in West Green to his deployment at The Somme (somewhere between Albert and Bapaume) via Gibraltar and Suez, Flanders, Arras and Gavrelle, where he fell.

Preface

Albert Stanley Daniels was a great uncle of the writer. He was killed, age 23, in the defence of Arras during the German final offensive on the Western Front in 1918.

There were three fact-finding visits to Arras and the Somme valley. This spanned five years and commenced in October 2009. Family reaction to two earlier simple drafts on Bert's story were positive and it lead to offers of assistance, all gratefully received. Without support and encouragement, particularly from Christine and Ian, this project would have ground to a halt.

Then, a fresh tranche of letters emerged, form Bert's elder sister (May Archer, my grandmother). Combined with the letters to younger sister Edie these letters were transformative. To his younger sister he wrote protectively, shielding her. To his elder sister he unburdens harder issues, albeit within the limits of censorship. From being a man who I was beginning to think might not even have existed Bert became a full three-dimensional man with presence and personality.



And so, an almost forgotten young soldier of the Great War returned to his family, all of whom embraced him with warmth and enthusiasm. Until then there had even uncertainly over his first name. Was he Robert? Or was he Albert?

With the two known letter recipients, Tom Archer and the Daniels girls are, clockwise from bottom right: May Archer, Edie Cox, Grace Blackmore, Alice Denman. Bert wrote to all four sisters but only those to Edie and May (front row) have survived. As to who took the photo, it looks like a sibling occasion, judging from the joke that's going around. Tom certainly isn't looking at one of his parents-in-law. Bert may have carried a copy of this picture with him until the end. It would have been a good snap to show your mates.

The story that unfolds here – almost half of which is written by Bert himself - benefits from the books described in the 'Building the Project' section. 'A. Rifleman' (Aubrey Smith) was a London Rifle Brigade limber driver who survived the full four years. He kept a record of his experiences and wrote of them with lucidity, humour and acerbic social comment once he was free of battleground censorship. His story tells us much of the regiment's movements and the thoughts of its members, their horrors and their lighter moments. This is the background to Bert's own narrative.

A lot of credit for this work goes to Mark Baker (Christine Baker's husband, Christine being a descendent of Bert's sister, Grace). A medical doctor and a keen World War I historian, Mark provided guidance on some hard facts of the events that surrounded Bert. His input anchored me into good holding ground, particularly in the difficult early stage.

Meanwhile, Ian Cox (through Bert's sister Edie) has visited the Somme several times and has shared his reminiscences with me. As an art teacher he assisted the history teacher when taking school parties to the sites and visitor centres. Ian contributed valuable copies of letters from Bert to his grandmother, Edie (Bert's younger sister). Bert writes to Edie and May differently, providing us with insight into his personality. To Edie he's protective, to his elder sister May he opens up and expresses a lot more of the horrors around him, and the impact it is having on him.



Before the war, Southend beach possibly. L to R: Bert Daniels, Unknown, Unknown could it be Percy & Florrie...?), Alice Denman (nee Daniels), Harry Denman, May Archer (nee Daniels), Tom Archer. Assumed to be summer of 1913 or 1914.



Clockwise from top left: Letter recipients - Sisters Edie (L) and May (R) with husbands Cecil Cox (Hon. Artillery) and Tom Archer (Fleet Air Arm), thought to be 1917.

Top right: Before the war. L to R: Unknown, Unknown (Percy and Florrie?), Harry Denman, Alice Denman (nee Daniels), Bert Daniels, May Archer (nee Daniels), Tom Archer. Presumed to be 1913 or 1914.

Bottom right: Young couple with aspirations - John and Elizabeth Daniels with daughters May (L) and Alice (R). Circa 1893.

Of particular pleasure to me, this exercise evolved into a family collaboration which, as I write, looks set to expand and grow further. Harriet Deane (also through Edie) worked at the time of this research for the British Legion. She took particular interest in her great great uncle, submitting his story to the group coordinating the Legion's 2014/18 schools education programme. Bert's letters and basic story not only featured in the education pack CDs but he was also profiled in the printed publication alongside well known personalities like Edith Cavell. Cavell was an acknowledged heroine and the British nurse who was executed by the Germans despite her refusal to stop caring for the injured of both sides of the conflict.

Regarding the letters, where possible, I have scanned in only those that Bert wrote. Wonderful though it is to read his direct communications, his pencil-written letters from the battle lines have had to be transcribed. They're too faint. They are included in the appendices, both handwritten and transcribed.

Gavrelle:

'Gavrelle' is not a name that resonates much with the man in the street. Words like 'Somme', 'Ypres' and 'Passchendaele' are more likely to prevail, all of them strategic catastrophes. But the media focuses on catastrophes rather more than it does on successes. 'Gavrelle' and the date of Bert's death were defining points of the war. March 28, 1918 was the day that the German Spring final offensive was brought to a halt in the Gavrelle defence of Arras. Thereon Germany was held in check, soon to be beaten into retreat. How could we have not known this? Bert was part of this successful defence, albeit at the most awful price. It was also the day that his regiment was annihilated.



Left and above, photos from the Battle of Arras, 1917. These indicate the conditions for Bert at Gavrelle when he fell in 1918.

Why This Project?

I was asked by a family member why I have done this. It’s a fair question. The answer is that the Thiepval memorial stunned me into silence. Reminiscent of an H.G. Wells monster it sits atop a small hill, brooding. The mist-laden October breeze did nothing to disguise what it represents – and it speaks of that in an instant. It silences even the most careless chatter-box. This is what it was designed to do, guide us into reflection. It was without question one of the most profound experiences of my life, its uncomfortable impact now embedded.

Further, rightly or wrongly, and in answer to the question, I sense that the world has marginally better prospects if World War I and other profoundly painful events - the Holocaust, Srebrenica, for example - are not air-brushed out of history and our collective conscience.

I also felt that this was the least I could do for a blood relation of ours. Bert was a decent young man whose diplomatic skills and capacity to be philosophical probably come from him being the only boy amid four sisters. Either way, he was at the coalface of four of Europe’s darkest years. His dignity, humour and decency in adversity are humbling. His inner strength and fortitude are both astonishing. And like many others of his generation he was an exceptionally good writer. They were men of their time, different from us today. A useful insight into this characteristic of that time can be found in ‘Into the Silence’, by Wade Davis, an exploration of the men who made the first attempt at the summit of Everest, notably Mallory and Irvine. Their strength and an ability to climb to the highest crags of Everest without a map in little more than tweed jackets and sensible shoes is inconceivable to us today. Davis demonstrates that the constitution of these men, both mental and physical, was forged in large part in the trenches of northern France. In many ways, this naivety about the true risks they

faced underpins much of the pathos found within their collective stories of terrible sacrifice.

Finally, on a practical level, I sense that if my generation failed to compile this record – particularly as the centenary of World War I is now only recently passed – Bert, and so many like him, will be lost to the next generations. How fair on them would that be? A little recognition never did anyone any harm.

Left, the imposing structure at Thiepval, a war grave managed by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Funded by six governments, its work is to maintain 23,000 cemeteries all over the world.



Family Background

It will be useful to add a brief profile of Bert’s family background. It’s that background – secure and encouraging that led him to be the man you are about to discover.

His father, John Gough Daniels 1861 – 1942 (‘Goughie’ as he was often known to his friends), is an example of the post-industrial Victorian/Edwardian ‘upwardly-mobile’ generation. Born in Bow, London in 1862 he trained as a bricklayer and married Elizabeth Bruton. Bert’s grandfather on this side of the family was Thomas Atkinson Daniels (1834 – 1886); his grandmother was Mary Ann Cale. Thomas was born and died in Bethnal Green, then a hamlet on the eastern fringe of the city conurbation (1843 map). Thomas’s father (Bert’s great grandfather) appears to have been a Richard Daniels.

Meanwhile, Bert’s mother, Elizabeth Daniels (Ma Dan), is likely to have her Bruton roots in Ireland or, possibly, somewhere along the Severn valley. The Severn valley is indicated in the 1881 census – the one used for name origins in Britain because it’s the most recent census before populations mobilised. It doesn’t register Brutons anywhere else in the UK, apart from London.

But Bruton is predominantly an Irish name. Recently there was the Irish prime minister, John Bruton. Elizabeth received a C of E burial at Eastwood Church, Rochford. It might therefore be assumed that she was not from a Catholic Irish family. The Brutons may have arrived as refugees seeking work in London from what is now the Republic of Ireland.

Bert’s parents, John and Elizabeth Daniels. They lived in Leigh-on-Sea at the time of this photograph (probably the ‘30s) and John was by then a prospering building contractor in the fast-growing town of Southend-on-sea. They were much-loved grandparents.



Family Background

By 1883, before Alice was born – Alice (Denman) being John and Elizabeth’s oldest surviving child - the Daniels family had moved to Summerhill Rd, West Green, then a hamlet. It was close enough to take advantage of the late Victorian/early Edwardian expansion of Tottenham (Totten’s Ham) and Walthamstow. Work was plentiful for an ambitious young builder with a large family to raise. With their little gardens the Edwardian villas of that era that John contributed to building remain today. They have become desirable homes, appealing particularly to young professionals working in the City. Here, it is likely that John progressed to owning his own building firm. The family became reasonably affluent and all the children were well educated and encouraged to be aspirational in their outlook on life.



Fresh opportunity - with Bert's death weighing heavily, the open estuary seascapes, clean air and sunshine at Leigh would have helped the family's healing process.

Fresh Opportunity & A New Start

In 1919, with the war behind them, the family migrated to Leigh-on-Sea. Exciting work opportunities beckoned as the large borough we know today as Southend was earmarked for commuter belt development.

The grieving family was desperate for a fresh start. A new life in Leigh would have been exactly what was needed. Apart from the ancient old town of Leigh, the locality was open heath, dense ancient forest (Belfairs Wood survives), a wide open estuary landscape, clean fresh air and plenty of sunshine. Against the background of the ‘Spanish’ flue epidemic it would have been irresistible.

Apart from fishermen’s brick and weatherboard cottages above Leigh Old Town (St Clements church down to Leigh creek waterfront), and the later Victorian and Edwardian villas that lead down to Cliff Parade, modern Leigh was built after World War I and John played an active role in this. Ian (Cox) is probably correct in believing that, had Bert survived, John’s impact would have been significantly greater. Bert was planning on developing an architectural practice to work alongside his father’s firm of building associates. In his heart he had a place for his (in all but name) fiancé, Florrie. Bert’s nephew, Ron Cox, was later to take on that architectural role with characteristic flair, perhaps inherited in part from Bert.

In Leigh John and his associates built many of the houses within which his daughters dwelt. This includes my own grandparents house ‘Redstacks’ in Eastwood Rd. John and Elizabeth’s children enjoyed the benefit of a supportive and encouraging family and they settled easily into respected professions – the girls in occupations like short-hand typist (they were in the vanguard of women performing clerical jobs formerly held my men exclusively). John and Elizabeth became much loved grandparents too. Edna Cotgrove frequently reminisced about ‘Ma Dan’s’ excellent pie lunches. Her eyes used to glaze over whenever she recounted their deliciousness.

John and Elizabeth were laid to rest in a family grave at Eastwood Church, today adjacent to Southend Airport. Despite its proximity to a depressing level of architectural blight, the Medieval church and its yard retains at least some of the charm it still had even up to the ‘60s. They share the grave with their daughters, Alice Denman and May Archer, a grand-daughter, Audrey Hilbourne, and their son-in-law, Tom Archer.

In Conclusion

We have come a long way since I mulled over what Bert’s first name was. Was it Albert or Robert? I was enjoying a glass of wine with Edna and Stephen Cotgrove in the garden of my home in Woodbridge, Suffolk, Edna being a daughter of Bert’s sister Edie. I told them that Janee and I were ‘off to the Somme’ for a few days and that I wasn’t going to become side-tracked by Uncle Bert. Edna was having none of it though – I was urged to “find out more about Uncle Bert”. After all, she remonstrated: “what else was the point in going there..?”

So, with my work cut out for me I couldn’t return empty-handed. There was research to be done. And it wasn’t just me either – several of us became involved. Surprisingly soon I wanted to focus in on the man, harden the image. My aspired detachment was gone. I was hooked.

This work makes no attempt to be a historical document; it’s a personal reflection by some of Bert’s relations (mostly great nephews and nieces). Above all, it is written by Bert, much of it in his own hand. It’s open to be challenged, and so it should. As far as I’m concerned it’s free to be adapted and improved. I think I speak for the others too that participated.

Richard Hare (through Bert’s sister, May), February 2021

The War

Albert Daniels – The War Years 1915 - 1918

Lance Sergeant Albert Stanley Daniels was killed at Gavrelle, a small agricultural village to the east of Arras. It was March 28, 1918. Bert was 23 years old.

He was ‘brother Bert’ to his four adoring sisters - Alice, May, Edie and Grace - and who knows what to his fiancé Florrie. His parents had invested everything they could have into him.



To the generations that followed, he’s known as ‘Uncle Bert’. At the time he fell he was a sergeant in the London Rifle Brigade (a Regiment) and he was one of the most long-serving and experienced front-line soldiers in his midst. His service had spanned three and a half of the four war years and before serving in France he served in Gibraltar and Egypt.

He is commemorated at the Faubourg d’ Amiens memorial, Arras, a cemetery dedicated primarily to the 36,000 British missing in the locality of Arras predominantly during the 1917 Battle of Arras but also the 1918 defence against Germany’s spring offensive, ‘Operation Michael’. This operation was a 15-day German last-ditch push for Paris. It occurred within six months of the end of the war.

The cemetery is a fine Lutyens designed memorial, beautifully maintained (as indeed are they all), and it’s located at the base of the Arras citadel, itself designed by the ubiquitous French military architect, Vauban.

Bert can be found in Bay 9 (far left as you enter, third column from the right). He sits up there right at the very top of his column of names.



Above, Gavrelle church today. Like everything in the Somme war zone it was re-built after 1918. The original, the one that Bert would have looked across to from his trench was not dissimilar, but it had already been savaged during the previous year.



Above; Richard & Janee Hare, March 24 2012, almost exactly 96 years to the day before the final offensive was halted at Gavrelle, enjoying a morning coffee and hot chocolate in the square of a very different Arras, in a very different - peaceful - Europe. A far cry from the hellish conditions Bert experienced here.

Left; The Fauberge cemetery in Arras.

Gavrelle, March 1918 – Last Hours

Gavrelle is an underwhelming village set in a featureless landscape just 10 minutes drive east of Arras. Motorways criss-cross the huge prairie farmland and dull high tension pylons carry electricity out from the power sub-station on the village’s northern fringes. It’s a pretty dismal place.

And it was even more dismal when Bert clamped eyes on it as dusk fell on March 27 1918. The village was little more than a pile of rubble with no more that the decayed tooth of a broken church standing proud. All had been laid waste during the previous year, one of the many casualties of the Spring 1917 Battle of Arras.



By now an exhausted veteran of the London Rifle Brigade who struggled to understand why he was still alive, Bert’s senses were blunted by the incessant bludgeoning and horror of almost constant conflict and killing during 1917. He had survived the 1917 Battle of Arras, the third Battle of Ypres, Passchendaele (we believe), Cambrai, and this had followed the 1916 horrors of The Somme. Few had been exposed to so much.

As the battle of Cambrai drew to close on Dec 7 widespread depression set in among Brigade (Aubrey Smith – ‘Four Years on the Western front’), a mood that was reflected across the UK too. In 1917, casualties of 800,000 were higher

than those of 1916 (650,000) and Germany’s armistice down the Eastern Front meant that the fiercest fighting was anticipated imminently down the Western Front during 1918. Underpinning this depression was the political reluctance to send reinforcements to compensate for the 1917 losses. The prognosis couldn’t have been more desperate, and there were gloomy mutterings that the war would now drag on for 30 years. As it transpired these weren’t far from the truth.

Above, Gavrelle, (photo by R Hare) in 2012. Right, the Belfry at nearby Arras indicating the destruction and condition of the city Bert will have experienced.



After Ypres, Bert appears to descend into a frail state, mentally at least. This shouldn’t surprise anyone. His experiences since summer 1916 would have taken a high toll. Furthermore, all the ‘chums’ he enlisted alongside were now dead or seriously wounded and out of the war.

His energetic communication with this family appears to cease during his last five months and his last known letter of Sept 19 1917 (see letter 13, Appendix 1) to his mother makes tragic reading. It is unrecognisable as one of his. Gone is the humour, the keen observational comment, the immense capacity for decency. In it he clings to all that is probably left to him - his mother, and all she represents that was good in the world, and his faith. He fuses these two elements and immerses himself in escapist fantasy. Imploded and despairing, he is upsettingly and needlessly self-critical.

With little winter respite – and certainly one devoid of any comforts - the London Rifles were deployed to the Gavrelle trenches in February, and it’s against this freezing, desperate, background that the Brigade’s performance on March 28 1918 is all the more heroic.

Despite his condition, Bert was a lance sergeant. He was responsible for the men in his platoon. As a veteran of all major campaigns since the Somme it’s very likely that he commanded much respect.

And so, as the clock ticked into the early hours of March 28 - Day 8 of Germany’s final Spring Offensive, the focus of German attention was directed into the Gavrelle/Arleux line. They called this particular attack on Gavrelle ‘Operation Mars’ (the God of War), its aim being to re-take Arras. Here, they anticipated the same satisfying gains that they had achieved immediately to the south during the preceding week.

Just 13 days previously The London Rifle Brigade had raided German trenches, killed a few Germans (no prisoners this time) but returned with alarming news of the high level of German preparedness.

So, sinews stiffened in readiness for imminent battle, Bert settled himself in the trench and prepared himself for what was to come. All the men with him were in no doubt that the next few hours were likely to be their last. Given his extensive battle weariness, Bert probably prayed for the strength to get through it, or be allowed to succumb as painlessly as possible.

The Regiment knew it was their turn to halt the onslaught that caused British lines to crumple just days previously to the south thereby allowing German forces to advance 20 miles westward towards Amiens. He probably felt a mix of emotions as he waited for action to start - sick at the prospect of likely death, remorse for the safety of his men, and perhaps even a sense of calm before the inevitable storm. To keep his mind occupied he probably cleaned and re-checked his rifle action many more times than was necessary, and he probably smoked a lot of cigarettes.

So, what went through Bert’s mind as he stamped his feet in the freezing mud to keep warm on that cold night of March 27/28? It had rained earlier during the day so he would almost certainly have been wet. It’s may be presumptuous conjecture, but when you stand on the line that marks Naval/Marine trench it’s hard to prevent yourself from trying to surmise what is likely to have been going through his mind:

- Did his thoughts drift back to 1915 when he signed up with a group of chums for overseas service in the Mediterranean? Did he reflect on the series of events that had led to this cold trench and its own bitter omen?
- Was he anxious, terrified, as he contemplated how the battle line to the south had collapsed so easily?
- Was he angry at the government, his ‘betters’ for letting him down by not sending more troops when plainly they were needed, and called for by General Gough? Did he feel unsupported, under-valued, his ceaseless efforts and personal sacrifice unrecognised? Or was he just getting on with his job and doing his duty, regardless of the hellish circumstances around him?
- Did he think about his girlfriend Florrie who he was adamant he wasn’t going to propose to until he was in a position to ‘keep her in comfort’?
- Did he reflect on his four sisters and his supportive parents? Did he think about his father, John, and his building firm and how he wanted nothing more now than a normal life working alongside him, and perhaps with Florrie as his wife?



Left: Arras today - in stark contrast to the photo shown on page 22. It was rebuilt exactly as it was using German reparations.

Or had he given up thinking such things?

- With troop morale so very low at the time - men were exhausted and battle lines thin - so did Bert question how this unrelenting, attritional war was ever going to end? Or did he just want a way out of it by this stage, after all he had seen and endured?

Whatever he was thinking that cold night it was brought to an abrupt halt at 3am on the 28th of March. The waiting was over. The sky exploded with violent artillery fire, the noise excruciating. The attack that would all but wipe out The London Rifle Brigade had begun.

Hereon, Bert’s life began to unravel. Within two hours he was dead, one of the thousands of British Expeditionary Force (BEF) soldiers with no known grave.

Silence followed. For five months.



Above left, The Royal Scots at Arras April-May 1917 indicates the reality of trench warfare and a landscape of unending, churned up, mud. Very few photos of nearby Gavrelle are available. Above right; Janee ‘standing on the line’, Naval/Marine trench where Bert fell.

In mid-August Bert’s parents John and Elizabeth received a note, and that’s only after Elizabeth had made enquiries and badgered the army for information:

The British Help Committee
HEUBERG (BADEN) AUGUST 29th 1918

Mrs J Daniels:

Madam/

In reply to your letter of July 13 Sergt. A. S. Daniels was in my Company on March 28th, and on that morning he left me to endeavour to get back, with Sgt. W. Kench, to our lines, but from what I have since learnt, and the fact that nothing has been heard of them by the Battn, I am very much afraid the worst must have happened to them in their attempt.

Please accept my sympathy in your anxiety,

Yours faithfully

T. L. Diplock
Coy, Sgt. Major.
L.R.B.

This, of course, is a palatable version of what happened in those cold early hours of March 28, as Bert’s great niece Christine Baker’s research discovered:

“The LRB was almost annihilated. Its fighting strength at the commencement of the battle was 23 officers and 564 other ranks but this was reduced to 8 officers and 60 other ranks within just a few blistering hours. What remained of the London Rifle Brigade joined the Queen’s Westminsters.”

Great nephew Ian Cox has heard it said that John’s hair grew out grey from this moment, a measure of the man’s unimaginable grief. We can only imagine the questions that would have tormented him.

Bert died during the London Rifle Brigade’s last stand. It was a stand that, as Mark Baker (Christine’s husband) reveals:

“Important as this success was held to be at the time, a time of great strain upon the forces of the Empire, it was not till later on, when Ludendorff (German Chief of Staff and effective commander of the German Army) took us into his confidence, that we learned its full significance. Ludendorff gives us to understand that the failure of the German effort of 28th March constituted the turning-point of the 1918 campaign. That evening Ludendorff recognised the beginning of the end; the German nation lost heart; the morale of the German Army deteriorated rapidly.”

Clearly this battle was a crucial turning point in not just the Great War but also in European history. Hereon the momentum for victory finally swung away from the Germans and towards the Allies. The men that fought at this battle – and those that held Vimy Ridge - did not die entirely in vain. Gavrelle can therefore be described as one of the most significant battles of the war, a historical point that is, unfortunately, not well known.

For the Gavrelle battle sequence and Bert’s role in it, see pagee 22.



Above right, an artists depiction of the Battle of Vimy Ridge and, left, the Canadian memorial to this battle which claimed 3598 men. This in addition to over 10,000 French casualties in a previous attempt to take the advantageous higher ground here. The battle is Canada's most celebrated military victory after the four divisions of the Canadian Corps came together for the first time to capture the ridge from the German army. Bert’s role in the broader Battle of Arras saw the Allies engage the German line whilst this successful and significant Canadian assault took place.

Bert’s Earlier War

Enlistment

There would have been much excitement as Bert and Percy Coleman made their way down to the recruiting office with their several other mates – Ralph, Ernie Nunn, Jimmy Day, Harris B. A. – joking, jostling and generally chivvying each other along to enlist as ‘chums’. In total there were twelve of them and the Middlesex Regiment offered an overseas posting in Gibraltar.

It was a young man’s opportunity to travel and see part of the world.

Archive diaries reveal that Bert was a member of the Territorial Army (TA) before he enlisted formally. This would very likely have been during very late 1914. In Bert’s letter of 15/10/1916 to Mrs Coleman (Percy’s mother) he suggests they enlisted into the TA in October 1914, or thereabouts, two months after Britain declared war on Germany.

Bert’s parents, John and Elizabeth, would have had mixed feelings over Bert’s decision but, given the smiling enlistment photo portrait of their son, pictured left, they approved and felt proud. After all, it was widely proclaimed that the war would all be over by Christmas.

Bert was mid-way through his training to become an architect but, being nurturing parents with aspirations for all their children it seems they gave Bert his own head in his bid for adventure. Gibraltar was a world away from the mud and blood bath of Flanders. As it transpired they probably resigned themselves to the idea that it would be a good experience for their only son, a noble gesture in support of the war effort and one without too much risk. Conscription came later in 1917.



Gibraltar and Egypt

Bert and his chums boarded the troop ship, the ‘Grantully Castle’, on February 1 1915. They were bound for Gibraltar, their home for 6 months in B Company, 8 Platoon, 7th (Reserve) Middlesex Regiment.

Upon arrival there, in his letter to his parents of 8/2/15, he’s clearly in shock but pluckily good humoured about his troop ship experience. Wrenched from his comfortable and secure family life, and at the age of 20, he’s aghast at the dimly lit, cramped and unventilated conditions of the cargo hold that he and his ‘fellows’ are entombed during their week-long passage. They go without food for days – it’s too revolting to contemplate - and they sleep in the corridors or out on deck, freezing in February weather with nothing more than a single blanket for comfort. The conditions he describes are appalling. Suffice to say:

‘When I arrived down in the mess room my heart dropped, for the place reminded me of the dens which they used to carry slaves about in in olden times.’

The vileness of the conditions he describes is incomprehensible by today’s standards. Treated like livestock, Bert:

‘We were unable to eat anything from Wednesday to Friday as I think we were all more dead than alive and it was cold and raining the whole time. We had to sleep on deck or up the corridors every evening and for six nights we never took an article of clothing off as it was so cold and we only had one blanket to sleep in. At night it was impossible to walk a step without stepping on somebody as fellows were lying about like dead sheep. The sergeants had the cabins and berths, so they were alright. Of course, the officers had 1st class everything so we saw very little of them.’

Once on Gibraltar he’s happier. This is more like what he signed up for. He could see the North African Atlas Mountains across the Straits and in his letter of 8/8/15 to his younger sister Edie it’s evident that he was enjoying life on ‘the Rock’ although he describes downtown Gib’ as being “proper tame down there”. He doesn’t seem very impressed. His letter describes the sort of mundane tasks that a 20-year old raw recruit would have had to do, from stretcher bearer drills to peeling “spuds”.

The letter takes on a grimmer tone – albeit detached and objective - when he describes the conditions of the Gallipoli wounded that he helps disembark for hospital treatment in Gibraltar. Grimmer still are the stories they relay to him of the appalling conditions in the Dardanelles. Bert Daniels:

‘Well the lot of us marched down to the docks and found there was a hospital ship in, laden with wounded from the Dardanelles. We had to go on the ship, put the patients on the stretcher and carry him to the hospital.

We worked hard from 9 o’ clock to 4 o’ clock with not a stop, or anything to eat or drink, and in the heat of 150 degrees. Some of the poor fellows were suffering terrible agony while some seemed alright. Any amount of cases were through Enteric Fever or similar complaints. Some of the cases were terrible sort and I’ll not attempt to describe them. Those that could speak said it was like hell in the Dardanelles. They not only had to put up with the fighting but the heat, flies, and the mosquitoes were unbearable. Owing to the shortage of time they could not bury their dead properly and he said it was quite a common sight to see heads, arms & legs sticking from the ground infested with flies.’

Realising that this isn’t the stuff of a Happy Birthday letter to his younger sister, three years his junior, he pulls himself up sharp by finishing with: ”But still, this is not very pleasant talk, especially for a birthday, is it?”. He then returns to lighter subjects.

Bert’s Middlesex Regiment medals card describes his ‘theatre of war’ as ‘Egypt’, the ‘date of entry therein’ being 1/9/15, roughly a month after his first birthday letter to Edie. He also makes a passing mention of Egypt in subsequent letters.

And so, in Autumn 1915, once again aboard a steamer but this time on passage eastwards across the Mediterranean, Bert and Percy would no doubt have been excited and fired up by the promise of foreign and exotic lands. Their role in Egypt was to participate in the defence of Suez.

Although we don’t have any letters that he wrote from Egypt there is more on the background to his deployment to Suez, see Appendix III.

30



Left; The Thiepval memorial. It speaks in an instant of what it stands for: reflection. Right; The Somme memorial. Each of the 16 pillars are covered on all four sides with names in tiny writing. It is huge. And these are just men with no known grave... Bert and those who died alongside him are not commemorated here but at Arras.



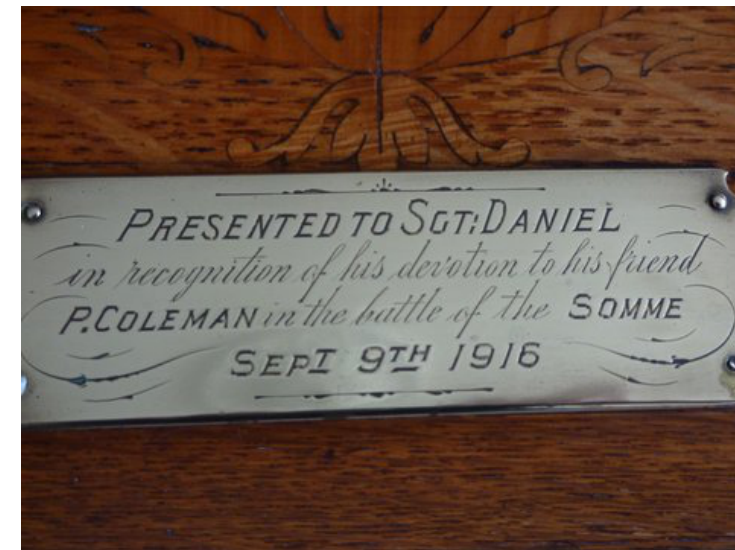
The Battle of the Somme

With the Ottoman threat to Suez receding, Bert, Percy and their ‘chums’ boarded a troop ship from Egypt to the South of France in June 1916, this being five months after the Gallipoli campaign ended. They arrived in Marseille on June 10. Their Middlesex Battalion had been disbanded and they were attached to the 1/5th London Regiment (The London Rifle Brigade, a Regiment and not a Brigade as the name suggests) within Allenby’s 56th Division. Sir Edward Allenby was commander-in-Chief of the Third Army (which included the 56th London Division).

Their arrival was planned to coincide with a defining battle of World War I; the Somme. According to a memo from General Haig to General Rawlinson its aim was to divert German resources away from Verdun where the French were suffering appalling losses. It was also anticipated that huge losses would be inflicted on the enemy north of the Somme river. The British suffered 419,654 dead, missing or wounded during the battle whereas the French lost 202,567, although the British had by far the greater troop commitment from the outset. Either way, it resulted in many more Allied casualties than there were German; a very costly diversion. The allies only advanced as much as seven miles in places; a lamentable return on over half a million soldiers killed.



Men going ‘over the top’ into battle. On just the first day of the Somme British forces suffered 57,000 casualties and over 19,000 deaths, making it the single most disastrous day in British Military history with a man dying every 4.4 seconds.



The clock presented to John and Elizabeth Daniels by Percy Coleman’s mother, shown here on Judith Deane’s mantelpiece, Judith being a great niece of Bert’s. Note the incorrect spelling of his name.

31

Somme – Gommecourt, Foncquevilliers and Hanneschamps

Bert’s 56th Division had its first major action on the Western Front during the infamous 1st day of the Battle of the Somme, 1st July 1916.

The division was engaged in the diversionary attack at Gommecourt, a small town just south of Arras but at the northern end of the Somme battle line. The objective was to draw German troops away from the location of the main attack nearer Albert, Theipval, Beaumont Hamel. Given Bert’s disembarkation date at Marseille it’s likely that he would not have witnessed first hand the carnage of the first day. With no experience of battle, Bert and his chums were in reserve during the first few weeks. Experienced, seasoned, soldiers would have been in the front line.

But Gommecourt was a bloody battle nonetheless. Ground gained during the early part of the first day was lost during the afternoon. ‘Heavy casualties’ are reported.

Life for those serving on the Somme, in the north at least, alternated between front line duty and ‘rest’. In his letter to sister Edie of August 9,1916, Bert reports:

“... we are once again out of the trenches and well in the rear of the lines having a rest. We have had quite a long spell up the lines this time but I am pleased to say it’s been very quiet and we have had very few casualties.
...When we have been out of the trenches before we have always been in reserve, but this time we are further back from the lines and not in reserve, so I am anticipating having a rest. This time you have nothing to worry about now Ma, for we are right out of the way of the shells and its lovely and peaceful here.”

Even during the Somme there were opportunities to relax, albeit in the earlier month of August and away from the most intense fighting to the south, nearer Theipval. At this time the London Rifle Brigade was defending the comparatively quieter line between Foncquevilliers and Hanneschamps, not far from Gommecourt.

At night they witnessed the constant artillery bombardment just a few miles to the south. They counted their blessings and hoped they would be spared doing their stint ‘on the Somme’. Alas, this was not to transpire, but meanwhile Bert was optimistic in his letter to Edie of 9/8/16:

“Have just seen Ralph, B.A, & the other boys. They are all quite merry & bright although they have been split up a bit. B.A. has been made a sniper.

*The weather is grand here and we imagine we are on our holidays at a country village. This is a fine old place, and strange to say, it has not suffered a great deal. Of course we still have a good issue of rats, but as long as they don’t start walking over us with army boots, we don’t mind them.
... I can assure you that I am quite safe and happy here & I don’t suppose we shall go up the line again for some time.”*

Somme – Leuze Wood

A month later, life for the band of chums took a desperate turn for the worse. The London Rifle Brigade was deployed to the Gincy/Guillemont line in the heat of the Western Front, near Theipval. Many of the friends that Bert refers to in his second letter to Edie were killed during September and early October. In his most graphic of letters (Oct 16, Letter 10) to Mrs Coleman, in which he provides her with an account of his rescue of her son Percy, he gives us an insight into his state of mind when, a few week’s after Percy’s injury (Sept 9) he loses nearly all his ‘chums’ while attacking Lesboeufs.

The background to Percy’s rescue is that on Sept 9 the brigade attacked a German trench from Leuze Wood. But, destroyed, Leuze Wood offered scant cover. Aubrey Smith, author of ‘*Four Years on the Western Front*’:

“This battle was Capt Nobbs’ first experience of warfare; he had to lead a company in a charge from Leuze Wood against a peculiar-shaped German trench which had to be taken at all costs. The Germans, however, ‘got wind’ of the attack and shelled our men unmercifully while they were assembling. Leuze Wood itself was a shambles and it is a wonder that anyone got through the barrage to take part in the attack on the farther side. Nevertheless, those that came through unscathed bravely started off at zero hour, raked by a concentrated machine gun fire which absolutely decimated them... Men laughed and cried during that advance as, one after another, they darted from shell hole to shell hole, cheating death at every bound.”

This theme is echoed in Bert’s account to Mrs Coleman of Percy’s injury and rescue. He shows us the state of the battlefield. He describes a scenario that we all now associate with the Somme – a lunar landscape of shell holes with soldiers weaving from one crater to the next, taking cover, and regularly being buried alive. Although he indicates men near him were suffering from shell-shock he spares us the broken bodies and barbed wire churned into the mud.

This iconic letter describes the Somme battlefield when it was at its muddiest. The soldiers “became increasingly exhausted and often had to lead assaults in waist-high mud.”

Bert describes Percy’s injury and his rescue of him. It’s an incredible incident, of valour, bravery, selflessness and humanity. Bert, with characteristic, humility asks not to be ‘put on a pedestal’ because, for him, this was routine and ‘What I did, anyone would have done for a pal.’

However, from the safety and comfort of living in 21st Century Britain, reflecting on what Bert did, it was quite simply extraordinary.

Percy, and he appear to have been attacking German lines when Percy is hit. As Bert moves towards him, a huge explosion blows Bert into a crater and renders him unconscious. Some time later, he comes round, and on thanking his lucky stars (for he is uninjured) he waits until dusk before crawling from hole to hole in search of his chum. Finally, he finds him; still alive but badly injured. Bert somehow finds the strength and courage to haul his friend off the battlefield all whilst under heavy machine gun fire. It’s an unbelievable act of heroism.

For Bert to normalise this as ‘all in a days work’ speaks volumes of the type of man he was.

The date of the incident is Sept 9, 1916.

The soil here continues to surrender corpses even a century later, some of whom are identifiable.



Photos courtesy of Judith Deane.



Bert also gives us an insight into his mindset in early October when during the attack on Lesboeufs he lost nearly all the pals he enlisted alongside.

“I must say I very much miss his (Percy’s) company and also that of poor Ralph’s and the seven other members of our section. For the first week after the sad affair I felt as though I should go mad. It seems as though all my chums had been taken from me, and I could give my mind to nothing. The only consoling thought I had was that Percy was safe. However I am pleased to say that things are brighter now. I am pleased to say I have found another chum, but of course nobody could take Percy’s place.”

Aubrey Smith in his book captures eloquently the effect that the attrition of September and early October was having on the men while they were ‘on the Somme’:

“What an unusual life we were living! Here were we, intelligent human beings (let us hope!) brought up to home comforts and decent respectable pursuits and office life, living like savages – thinking only of our food and drink, our repose and safety. Here were we, presumably sane individuals all, going mad with delight over a cracked harmonium in the middle of a wilderness in the same way that some French Moroccan troops were dancing to some reed instrument further down the valley. Meanwhile, our careers, our civilian prospects and what brains we once possessed were -- to use a poetical phrase – being borne away on the wings of time. Many of the men had lost their positions at the outbreak of the war: for two years they had not received a penny more than their army pay. They had got to start all over again when this Armageddon was over, like boys just leaving school, with whom they would be in competition. Some of them were married, their wives existing on the miserable army separation allowance at home. All sorts and conditions of men were here, some with little cause to worry and others with plenty of excuses for pessimism, yet all were rubbing along decidedly cheerfully. Our section was like one big family and in these months of close acquaintanceship we got to KNOW each other as men had never done before the war. Everyone’s character, will-power, nerve, generosity, and general peculiarities came to be known little by little.”

In the letter of October 12, 1916, to sister May and Tom Archer, Bert is mentally exhausted and, clearly he doesn’t want to talk much. He indicates the date of Percy’s injury as August 9 (mistakenly), not September 9 as stated on the plaque on the clock that Percy’s parents presented to Bert’s parents (see pics left). That said, his name is miss-spelt on the plaque. Furthermore, judging from the dates of Percy’s letters from his hospital bed in Dublin (Sept 20 to Bert) and Sept 23 to his parents, Sept 9 must surely be the correct date; and Percy’s mother is not likely to be mistaken over the date of her son’s injury. Sept 9 also coincides with the period of intense fighting near Ginchy. Either way, in this letter to sister May, in his usual self-deprecating way, Bert describes his condition thus:

‘I am pleased to say that I am well, although feeling a bit shaky after going through a rather rough time for the last four days.’

Further down the letter he provides an insight into his acceptance of his situation:

‘I really envy Percy for I realise he is far better off where he is surrounded by peace and kindness. But still, we must not grumble, things might be worse so cheerio and let’s hope for the best.’

On September 20 Percy wrote to Bert from his hospital in Dublin:

‘Once again old man let me thank you from the bottom of my heart for all you did for me, and I shall be more than pleased to have a line or two from you any time.’

To Bert’s parents Percy wrote:

‘I expect Mrs Daniels is worrying about Bert. I am sure that Bert was very kind to me. He was very brave out in ‘No Mans’ Land’. He knew I was hit, and he had lost the run of me, so he wandered about under shell fire until he found me and then dragged me in at the best opportunity. I should like you to write him a line and thank him. I am sure that no one could have been kinder.’

Percy had suffered a shattered elbow and a piece of shrapnel the size of thimble was removed from his chest. One of Bert’s references states that it was removed from his heart. Since Bert no longer refers to Percy in subsequent letters it’s reasonable to assume that Percy was spared front line duties and survived the war.

Naturally, Bert envied the wounded. In early October he confided to his elder sister May:

‘I am pleased to say that I have come through the whole issue without a scratch, thank God, although I must admit thousands of times I have looked upon the wounded and absolutely envied them. For the past three weeks we have been living in a perfect Hell and I cannot tell you how glad we all are to get out of it.’

The official Somme battle chronology states of Sept 9, the day of Percy’s rescue: “Ginchy falls to the British. Trenches also taken to the north and east of Leuze Wood.” Ginchy is near to Combles, a village that was successfully taken by Bert’s 56th a month earlier on September 25.

Somme - Lesboeufs

As the awful ‘month on the Somme’ nears its end there was to be another bad experience. According to his letter of September 30 to May and Tom (Letter 7) Bert thought he’d be spared further front line action but this was wishful thinking. Hardly had the ink dried on the page when he was recalled to the front line. In his letter of early Oct, (2-12/10/16, letter 9) to his parents, Bert recounts the tragedy:

‘We have recently had a similar affair to what we had on the 9th, the day Percy was wounded. Am pleased to say that Fred and I got back alright, but I have only got two of my old ‘B’ Company chums left now. I cannot tell you how hard it feels. Being with 12 fellows continually for two years, in fact being more than brothers to one another, and then to see them all go within a month. It seems too cruel for words.’

This appears to have happened during the attack on Lesboeufs. On this, Aubrey Smith reports:

‘The attacking lines eventually reached their objective (taking Lesboeufs) but, owing to the support’s failing to put in an appearance, it was necessary to abandon it and fall back.’

Aubrey Smith – a man who spares his ‘superiors’ nothing in the book (*‘Fear of criticism by higher authority occasionally led lesser officers to extreme lengths of imbecility’*) lambastes the fateful attack on Lesboeufs as a classic example of High Command ineptitude, and also an absurd use of soldiers’ time during the preceding week:

‘The Lesboeufs affair was another example of a hastily conceived attack and what I should consider extraordinary bad staff-work somewhere in the higher realms. The division was exhausted through its lengthy stay on the Somme, fed, for five weeks principally on bully beef and biscuits; the men were particularly fatigued during the few days preceding the attack when the last ounce of effort had been extracted from them; then they were panicked up without notice into a position they did not know and employed for hours in carrying ammunition and tools for their own attack.

They were sent out in broad daylight to attack a position half a mile away, but with no idea where the enemy really were, and as soon as they got within machine gun range they got knocked over by the dozen. Finally, the objectives had to be given up owing to the failure of supports to appear and they reverted practically to the status quo. No mention was made of this attack in the official communiqué except the statement that we had advanced our line SW of Guedecourt.’

Under these circumstances it hardly seems surprising that Bert appears dejected in his letter of Sept 12 to May and Tom. He would have been restrained from spelling out the truth.

The Battle of the Somme is known for being the one with the familiar imagery of British soldiers walking into enemy gunfire on the first catastrophic day, many of whom became entangled in barbed-wire, their bodies riddled with bullets.

“The first day of battle not only failed to achieve the expected results; it turned out to be a veritable carnage. The British lined up 66,000 men at 7.30am, but after only six minutes, 30,000 soldiers had been rendered unfit for battle. By the evening of 1 July, Britain had lost 58,000 men i.e three times as many as the German army”.

(Source: ‘A Tour of Remembrance – The Somme during the First Wold War.’

Britain had set a world record for military incompetence; its architects were Generals Haig and Rawlinson. 30,000 men were rendered unfit for battle within the first 6 minutes, 58,000 ‘lost’ by the end of the day, that’s three times as many as the German army.

56th Division continued to be involved almost until the end of the Battle of the Somme. For example, when Bert wrote his letter to Mrs Coleman, while on rest, the attacks on Le Tansloy (near Theipval) continued for much of October.

The Battle of the Somme ground to a halt in punishing winter weather on November 18th, its troops exhausted. It was nearly 5 months since the fateful first day.

For more information and a personal perspective on The Somme, see Appendix IV.



Left, British soldiers trudging towards German lines through mud and over barb wire at the Somme, from: <https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/world-war-one/battles-of-world-war-one/the-battle-of-the-somme/>

Winter Respite

But relief came finally. Bert’s division was moved back to Mametz on October 10, preparatory to departure. From Mametz the London Rifle Brigade marched south to the pretty town of Picquigny on the Somme river, safely within Allied-held territory, west of Amiens. Bert’s battle of the Somme was over. Aubrey Smith says “a delightful river ran past the house that furnished our transport billet”. Here, Bert enjoyed much earned leave. With bars, restaurants and shops aplenty (not quite so many nowadays, alas) it’s the sort of place where he could recharge his batteries, and its here that he composed this brilliant letter of Oct 17 (Letter 7) to Mrs Coleman.

On October 21 the London Rifle Brigade left Picquigny to move to the winter quarters at La Gorgue, a small town north of Bethune in what is now Pas-de-Calais. According to Aubrey Smith, La Gorge was a comprehensive and jolly town ‘inhabited by exceedingly hospitable French people’, two cinemas, a ‘real live’ canteen, and ‘hundreds of estaminets (bars/brasseries) stocked with the best’.

Unlike the Germans who were loathed by the locals, British and Commonwealth troops usually had warmer hospitality extended to them, although not always. Many soldiers fell in love with local girls, not least Aubrey Smith, and it’s nice to hope that Bert enjoyed his fair share of this. A fine looking, intelligent young man, he probably broke a few hearts too.

Although there is no evidence, it seems possible that Bert enjoyed some home leave at around this time. As a soldier who had served in the colonies before the battle of the Somme, he was eligible for Blighty leave ahead of most of the longer standing London Rifle Brigade soldiers.

When he wrote his letter of 17/2/17 to Edie (Letter 11) he was likely to have felt safe at La Gorge. It was still winter. He reports on the cold and the snow but he says he’s not bothered by it. Traditionally, all armies used the winter to rebuild their broken defences and make plans for next spring offensive. Off duty, he probably enjoyed some excellent long Sunday lunches with hospitable local families too, and that’s in between propping up bars in any of the ‘hundreds of estaminets’.

Meanwhile, the Germans were preoccupied with their withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line.

Battles Recommences, 1917

The 56th Division had a role in the Spring 1917 Battle of Arras (including operations on the Scarpe on May 3), Ypres (Third battle, June 7 to November 10th 1917), Passchendaele, and it then took part in the Cambrai offensive (November 20th to Dec 18th 1917).

The letter Bert wrote in August was almost certainly written from Ypres. The date, 8/8/17, is significant - there was a pause in the battle due to exceptionally heavy rain. Battle resumed two days later. The summer and autumn of 1917 was appalling. Continuous rain and artillery pounding reduced the battlefield to a quagmire. Men and horses sunk into it and drowned, their corpses used as stepping stones . On June 7 the allies detonated a series of 19 huge mines under the Messines ridge. The sound and vibration is widely reported to have been felt in Downing St, London.

In the letter to Edie (8/8/17), during Ypres, Bert describes being buried by rubble caused by a nearby bomb explosion:

‘I well remember once walking through a village that was being heavily shelled. One shell I heard coming, and it sounded as if it was going to drop near me. I at once dived down against the wall of what once was a house. The shell came & burst just the other side of the wall. It sent me dizzy for a time but when I came round I found I was covered in bricks and rubbish & scarcely able to breathe. I dug myself out, & except for sundry cuts & bruises, I was quite alright & went on my way rejoicing. The shell had burst only a few feet from me but thanks to my ears & the wall I was quite safe.’

But his last known letter (Sept 19, 1917) makes tragic reading. It is to his mother and is unrecognisable as one of his. Gone is the humour, gone is the keen observational comment, absent is the depth of personality that enabled him to endlessly reassure his family at home. The letter is painful to read because Bert is exhausted, lonely, and depressed. Everything from the friends he enlisted with to his ideals and aspirations have all deserted him. His nervous system must surely have been damaged beyond repair.

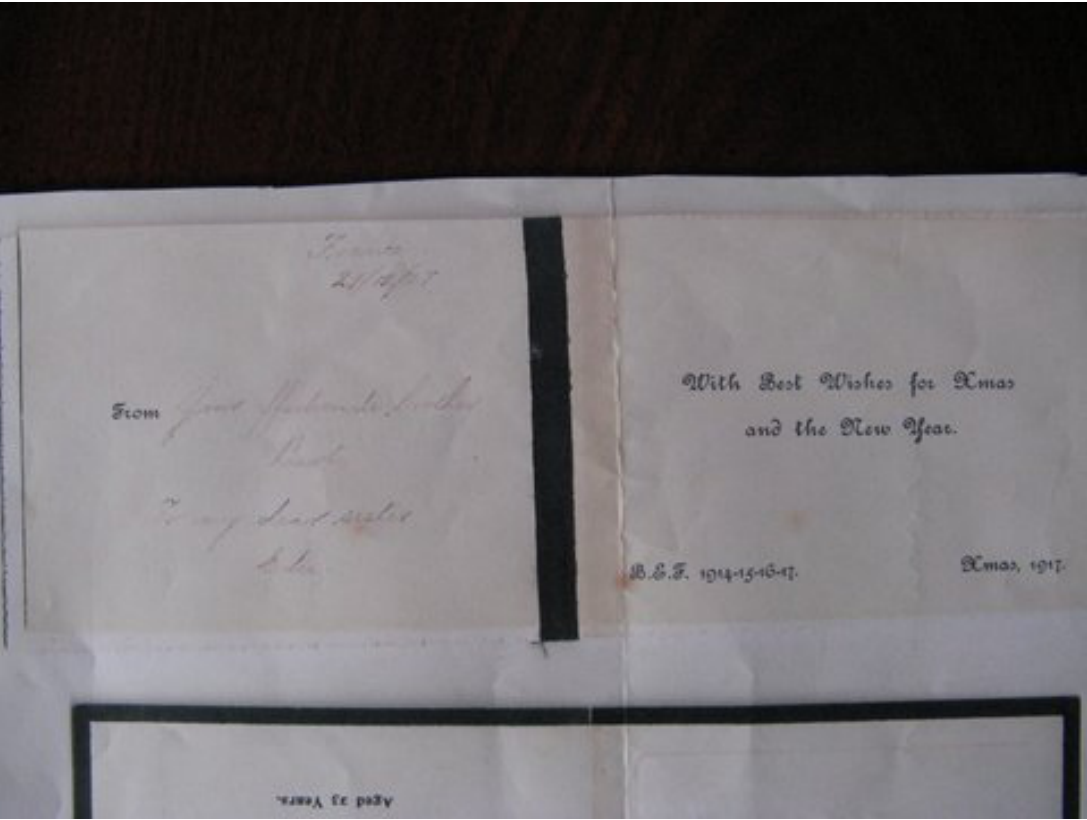
*‘I set about the task of conveying my innermost thoughts to paper. The more I think the more I realise how wholly incapable I am of the task I set myself. However, as you know, I am a poor writer...
... May this war quickly end so that the worry I indirectly bestow upon you may finish’.*

He also loses himself in fantasy, notably one in which he gives himself no role. Might this needless guilt mean there were pleas from his parents for him not to enlist at the outset?

After this letter Bert appears to cease communicating with home. The Brigade endured paltry winter rest in two equally dismal towns of Ecurie and Frevillers. Both, according to Aubrey Smith, offer ‘nothing of interest except an estaminet or two.’ Ecurie is tantalisingly near to Arras and the 1917 battle, but it’s too far to walk to the centre for any relief. Besides, its heart was ripped out during the 1914 First Battle of Arras. The winter of 1917/18 is a world away from the hospitality of La Gorge during the previous winter.

There is a chink in the armour; ray of hope for those at home. at Christmas: A little British Expeditionary Force official Christmas cardlet drops through Edie’s letter box. Bert fills it in: ‘France 21/12/17 (From) your affectionate brother Bert. To my dear sister Edie’. There is no letter, and it seems he’s sending it too late to arrive in time for Christmas.

Which bring us full circle back to Gavrelle. It’s hard to accept that Bert wasn’t in a very frail and imploded state as he took his place in his trench at Gavrelle on that fateful evening of March 27, 1918.



Left: Bert’s Christmas message. Assuming there is no accompanying letter Bert’s last communication is a mere shadow of his former energetic communication. The year is 1917.

‘Operation Michael’, Gavrelle, The Battle Sequence

Germany’s Spring Offensive, ‘Operation Michael’, commenced on March 21 1918.

Having signed a peace treaty with the newly installed Bolshevik government of Russia it was Germany’s final bid to seize territory on the Western Front.

Spearheaded by the new and highly trained storm-troopers, it was a ferocious last-ditch attempt to seize Paris. All its combatants and equipment from the Russian Front – much of it latest technology artillery - were dismantled and re-deployed along a line that stretched from Vimy Ridge, just north-east of Arras down to the Somme valley. Germany was desperate to deliver a knock-out blow before Allied reinforcements and fresh Americans troops arrived. With a huge army of specially trained soldiers now positioned along the Western Front, Operation Michael was unprecedented in its violence.

Meanwhile, already exhausted by almost two years of combat Bert and The London Rifle Brigade took the full brunt of this searing attack. On Day 8 of this (3rd) Battle of Arras, the focus was turned on Arras itself and everything that lay in its path. This included the London Rifle Brigade at Gavrelle.

The line immediately to the south of him, defended by the inexperienced 5th Army, had crumpled during the preceding week. Troops that were desperately needed to bolster the defence had not arrived in time to save the situation (see Appendix IV).

Bert would have known that it was unlikely that he would survive the day, even with his luck. In his exhausted condition he may have hoped for an end to the horror. Almost all his friends were dead now and it was probably beyond him why he kept surviving.

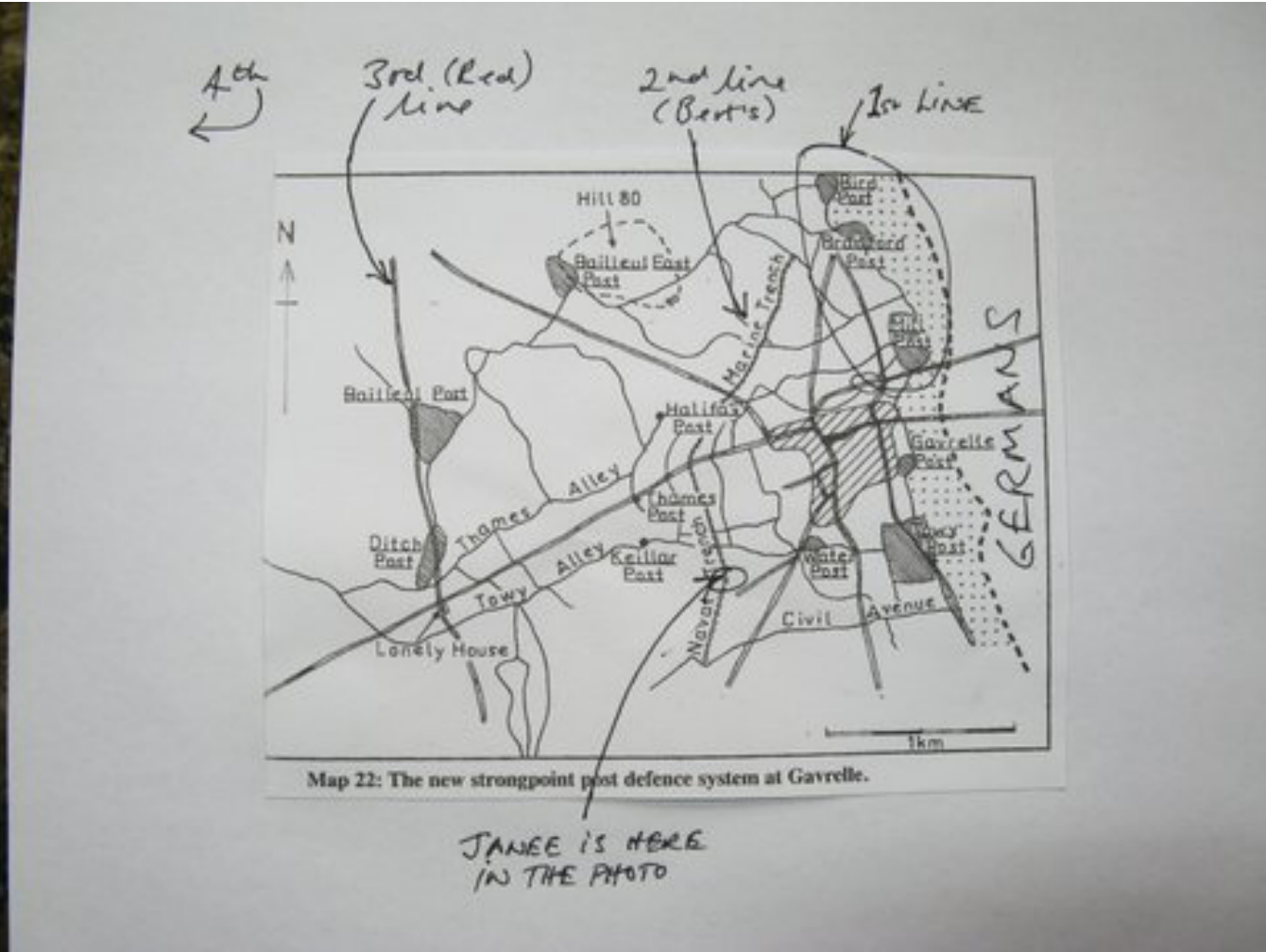
Alexander Hare (former Royal Marines reservist and a great great nephew of Bert’s) is probably the best person to get inside Bert’s head at this stage:

‘Bert would have prepared himself mentally, as best he could considering his exhaustion. There would likely have been silence in the trenches immediately prior to ‘going over the top’. Fear and anticipation combined. He loads his ammunition, cleans and cleans his rifle, checks and re checks his kit, checks the chamber is clear of debris again, then does it again. He moves his knife to the front of his belt for easy access and maybe, if he has one, he puts one around his leg in case he’s on the ground and needs to get to it more easily. These are the rituals of professional soldiers, to occupy both the quiet, interminable time during the ‘calm’ before the storm and because it is your kit working fully that can keep you alive in the face of your enemy.’

It’s a horrible scenario, but inescapable for him.

At 3am on the March 28 the skyline was set ablaze by a blistering bombardment of the 3rd line of defence immediately behind Bert (The Red Line). The rear line – the 4th line - was also taking a pounding.

‘Gavrelle’ by Kyle Tallett and Trevor Tasker explains that there were four lines of defence: A front line comprised battle posts running north-south down the west (British) flank of Gavrelle. A second line (Bert’s) comprised the Marine/Naval trench. There was then the 3rd line (the Red Line), and about 1,500 yards behind that was the rear defence, the 4th line.



Above, the Gavrelle battle plan, March 28, 1918.

The experienced 5/London Brigade (London Rifles) was stationed in the northern three battle posts of the front line (Mill, Bradford, and Bird posts) with the remainder in the Marine/Naval trench (2nd line).

From this information we can tell that Bert was either in the front line or the 2nd line (Marine/Naval trench).

Meanwhile, two east/west communication trenches – Thames and Tovey – linked the Marine/Naval (2nd) trench back to the Red Line (3rd trench). These alleys, ditches more like, afforded minimal cover when compared to a trench.

For two hours German artillery pounded the fortified Red and rear lines with artillery and gas shells. Despite the cold Bert would probably have been perspiring profusely inside his gas mask as he glanced over his shoulder to see his safe haven being destroyed. The mask’s claustrophobic tunnel vision and the sound of his panic-stricken breathing would have intensified the terror.

After just under two hours the guns finally fell silent. The ‘softening up’ was over. There then followed a protracted and ominous pause as German artillerymen carefully altered their gun settings. Bert and his pals would have exchanged anxious glances and fidgeted at their posts. They knew what was happening, and it would have terrified them. Satisfied with their first two hours’ work the Germans were now refocusing their weaponry on the front line, and his.

It was 5am, a faint trace of dawn in the east behind the German lines.

There then followed a blistering bombardment of the Marine/Naval trench (but not enough to destroy it – the Germans had plans to use it themselves...) and what is described in ‘Gavrelle’ as an ‘extremely violent’ bombardment on the front line posts. These positions and the men that occupied them were wiped out almost in an instant and there was just one survivor. That survivor wasn’t Bert. So when the documented battle sequence is cross referenced with family folklore that ‘Bert was hit by a shell while returning from the front’, as well as the death notification by T.L. Diplock, we can deduce that he was stationed in Marine/Naval trench.

“The enemy attacked in large numbers and overran the blown in remains of the (battle) posts and swarmed up to the Naval Marine line. The battalion HQ, which was in Marine trench, suddenly found itself in the front line. The Germans came on in three large attacks, but were severely hampered by wire, which had recently been erected....

“The Germans then managed to get into the Marine trench system and outflank the Londoners. Lieutenant Colonel Hussey, the commanding officer of 5/London, ordered his men to withdraw southwards up Marine trench to the junction with Thames alley. They managed this and continued a fighting withdrawal up Thames alley until they reached the Red Line...”

Source: ‘Gavrelle’, The battleground Europe series. * ‘Gavrelle’ by Kyle Tallett and Trevor Tasker

As the Londoners launched themselves into a frenzied tactical withdrawal along the trenches and Thames communication alley, soldiers threw down the barbed wire ‘trench-blockers’ as they retreated. These held the Germans back for brief but useful periods. It was a frantic scramble, a semi-controlled fighting withdrawal.

But more Germans were being killed than Londoners. As exhausted as they were, the London Rifles had forced the German advance to a halt half way up the exposed communication alleys, their energy spent.

Once in the comparative safety of the Red Line, a small band of riflemen regrouped and took stock. A role call would have been shouted but Bert, along with most of the names called, did not respond. Of the 587 officers and troops that prepared for the attack, only 68 survived.

Bert’s Great War had come to a violent end. His corpse - or what remained of it - was out in the trench or, more likely, in the far end of Thames alley, temporarily under German control. Whatever the state of his remains, or the manner of his death, Bert was inevitably recorded as ‘missing’.

Right; this photo would have been taken by a German. The dead are London Riflemen. They lie with their bayonetted rifles beside them. It is very likely to be Thames Alley, the aftermath of the ‘fighting withdrawal.’

Being 'missing' didn't always mean being vapourised, it could equally mean lost behind new enemy lines, and irretrievable. Many bodies were found and recovered after the war - if mass graves were marked - and were buried properly. Others weren't, and some still remain in the fields today.



Despite the massive bombardment, the Gavrelle line slumped a bit but, crucially, it held. German troops were unable to advance any further than half way up the two alleys, and there they remained until the British blew the alleys to deny them further access.

The success of March 28 swept away the depression and malaise that had infected allied troops and citizens during the winter of 1917. The rightly feared offensive had been stopped. Exposed in a pock-marked landscape with no cover it was the turn of German troops to become despondent.

The London Rifles had held the line and, as Mark Baker noted, this was a startling achievement from men who couldn't have been further from their physical peak, testimony to their veteran status and sheer strength of will and determination.

In August the final and highly skilled allied advance forced the German army back to the armistice line of November 1918.

A note on ‘fiancé’ Florrie

The name Florrie occurs periodically in the letters to Edie. One letter, pencil written, is almost indecipherable and is not reproduced in the appendix. Too little of it remains to make any sense of it. However, one line – underlined probably to emphasise his view, and possibly to quell sisterly whispers states of Florrie: “I have made up my mind that I shall not be engaged until after the war, until I have made a way for myself and have sufficient guarantee to be able to keep (her) in comfort.”

We don't know what happened to Florrie.

The Theipval historial (right) represents the 72,205 missing British and South African soldiers who died on the Somme between July 1915 to March 1918. In addition there were 166,938 killed. It was built recently in the woods that surround the Thiepval memorial and its role is to speak for those who suffered. It asks two things of the generations that follow: that we try to remember their sacrifice (an accurate word, not one to feel awkward, uncomfortable or embarrassed about), and to learn from it. It's a hard man who can walk out of the documentary film shown there without a tear in his eye, or preferring to forget.



Appendices

Appendix I

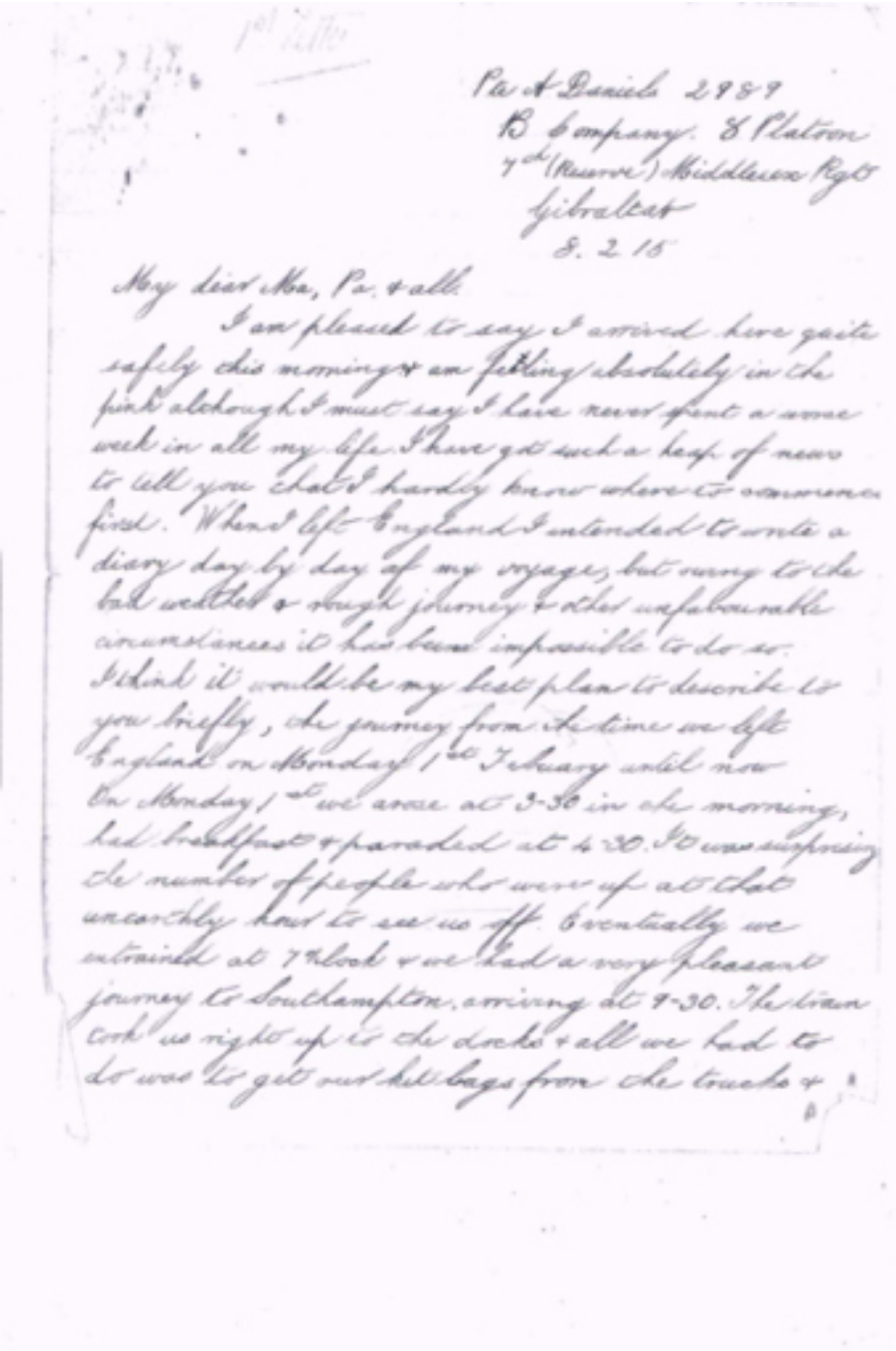
Handwritten letters to sister Edie and his parents

Bert wrote these three letters in ink and they are sufficiently defined to be reproduced via a scanner. They are the first three in a chronological sequence of letters to his home.

They are also transcribed, along with others that he wrote using a pencil. Previously photocopied, these pencil-written letters did not stand up to the scanner, even though I can see that Bert has sharpened his pencil every four or five lines. It's doubtful that soldiers used ink pens while in battle lines. Sister Edie is three years Bert's junior. She is the next sibling in line.



Bankside wildflowers - The river Somme, today a symbol of the Great War and a living reminder of all those that fell on both sides of the conflict.



march on to the boat. We got aboard the Brentally
 castle at 10 o'clock. We were not allowed to leave
 when once on board, so I got a scout boy to post
 me one or two letters post cards, which I hope you
 received, although I was unable to put stamps
 on them. The boat was not at all a big one
 & I was somewhat disappointed with it. Lying
 along side of us was another ship containing
 the Royal Fusiliers, bound for Malta. At 2 1/2
 the bugle sounded for dinner & there was a
 general rush for the mess room. When I arrived
 down in the mess room my heart dropped, for the
 place reminded me of the dens which they
 used to carry slaves about in, in olden times.
 I was situated in the hold of the ship, the
 place where cargo is usually put, & it was a
 proper dungeon. It was very dimly lighted by
 a few lights round the side of the ship. It
 would have been possible to read if one got
 directly under a light but toward the centre
 of the hold it was impossible to recognise
 anybody. But worst still was the ventilation for
 it was only ventilated by only a very few port
 holes & the atmosphere was thick. I don't think
 I have ever laught so much over a dinner
 in all my life before. The utensils were all

of tin, & the knives were absolutely rusty.
 The hold contained about 40 tables (there
 was several different holds). At each table sat
 18 fellows. For Monday's dinner we had mutton
 which two fellows had to fetch from the cook
 house. The carver, who was farthest away from
 the light could not see what he was doing
 so the result was that some got all fat
 & some all lean & so on. The potatoes were
 boiled in their dress suits & if a fellow wanted
 some more "taters" they were passed from hand
 to hand down the table. I could not fancy
 any of the stuff but it was a most novel
 dinner. The 8th Middlessex from Staines came
 aboard in the afternoon & we were properly packed
 at 4-30, we got a move on, but we had
 hardly been going 5 minutes when we were
 all ordered below for 30 hours. I shall never
 forget the experience. The port holes were
 all closed up & coats put up to shelter the
 lights & we were ordered not to sing. You
 can guess in a few hours we were all nearly
 stifled, for we were packed like herrings
 & had no ventilation whatever & the atmosphere
 smelt fearful. During the evening however
 I managed to scramble on deck ^{for a moment} & it was

sight worth seeing. Our ship was guided on both sides by warships who threw their searchlights from one ship to another & was indeed a fine sight, more like Paines benefit night. At night we found a few hammocks below & the fortunate ones put their heads up to the ceiling & got into them. The others laid on the tables, forms, or floor & got on as best they could. The whole of the next day we were not allowed up top & everybody was getting queer as the ship was rolling dreadfully & things were too terrible for words below deck. By the way we had several rumours that our ship was reported sunk, by the newspapers in England. I hope the rumour was not true. You might tell me in your next letter if it was so. On Wednesday morning we were allowed on deck & I have never been on such a rough sea in my life before for we were in the Bay of Biscay. Every body looked as though they were dying & for my part I felt & if I were, but I was by no means the worst case for I think that Percy suffered far more than I did. This state of things lasted two days. The sea was sweeping over our decks as there was no cargo

on the ^{bottom} & it looked as if it was top-heavy. We were unable to eat anything from Wed. to Friday as I think we were all more or less dead than alive & it was cold & raining the whole time. We had to sleep on deck or up the corridors every evening & for six nights we never took a article of clothing off as it was so cold & we only had one blanket to sleep in. At night it was impossible to walk a step without stepping on somebody as fellows were lying about like dead sheep. The sergeants had the cabins & berths so they were alright. Of course the officers had the 1st class everything so we saw very little of them. We did not have any parade however as the boat was too small. On Saturday things began to get a bit brighter. The fellows were getting better & it was a lovely hot day. In the afternoon the 8th brass band played on the upper deck & the fellows were squalling about on the deck playing games. By this time we were getting very hungry as we had had no food for three days & it was nobody could stand going down stairs to meals so we lined up at the canteen. There was hundreds of fellows waiting & we stood 4 or 5 hours before we got served. We

2989 B. Bony
6th Platoon
7th (R) Middlesex Rgt
Gibraltar
8. 8. 15

My dear sister Edie.

I am very sorry I have not the pleasure this year, to wish you a verbal many happy returns of your birthday, but still I am allowed to write so you must accept that for the time & let us hope that by next year we shall be happy at home together. Well Edie, I sincerely hope & wish you all the very best of birthday greetings. May health, happiness & prosperity be yours, & each year more full of the beautiful happiness there is to be had in life. I'm fast Edie, I cannot do better than wish you all you wish yourself, for I know a girls wishes are not many. As the poem says "They want everything they wish". Well Edie I am pleased to say I am in the best of health again. I think my last week has been one of the busiest & most eventful since I have been on the Rock. This time last week I was in the hospital. I came out on August Monday. Went on guard Tuesday, came off Wednesday & was put on the sergeants mess fatigue Thursday

from 6th in the morning to 8th at night. It was a proper rotten job. On Friday I was mess orderly. About 4th I was busy feeling the spuds when the alarm sounded. Of course we all fall in at the double & were marched down to the Military Hospital. Here we were given one stretched to four men. Of course as I have told you we had already received instructions in stretchers bearing. Well the lot of us marched down to the Locks & found there was a hospital ship in, laden with wounded from the Dardanelles. We had to go on the ship put the patients on the stretchers & carry him to the hospital. We worked hard from 9th to 4th with not a stop, or anything to eat or drink, & in a heat of 150 degrees. Some of the poor fellows were suffering terrible agony, while some seemed alright. Any amount of cases were through enteric fever & similar complaints. Some of the cases were terrible so will not attempt to describe them. Those that could speak said it was like hell in the Dardanelles. They not only had to put up with the fighting, but the heat, flies, & mosquitoes were unendurable. During the shortage of time they could not bury their dead properly & he said it was quite a common

sight to see heads, arms & legs sticking from the ground infested with flies. But still this is not very pleasant talk, especially for a birthday is it? I think I had better sling off. We have had a card from "Wobly". He says he is getting on alright & we take it that he is at Rouen, the base. He says he expects to go in the firing line shortly. It is a lovely day here only jolly hot. I have just come back from church. Last night Port went down town. It is properly tamed down there I hope you will excuse this short letter as I seem to have got such a lot of letters ~~now~~ want answering. By the way, I owe Art a letter, will you please tell him I will answer his one as soon as possible. I am enclosing some handkerchiefs as I did not know what to get. Do you mind sharing them with Gracie & please accept my very best wishes for your birthday. Hoping all are well I remain
Your affectionate brother
Bert xxx

2nd letter to sister Edie 9 August 1916 (about 1 month after the commencement of the Battle of the Somme). A transcribed version follows:

The Rovers
B. L. Long. 9. Platoon
B. E. F
France
8/8/16

My dear Edie.

It has suddenly occurred to me that in a few days time it will be your birthday so I am writing you now hoping it will arrive in time. Well Edie, my dear I hardly know how to frame my words, to express all I could wish you. Sometimes how I try I cannot find words more fit for the occasion than the old greeting of "Many many happy returns of your birthday". I sincerely trust Edie, that every year may prove more prosperous & happier than each previous year, & above all things, I hope your health improves by leaps & bounds. I am sure if all I could wish you, were to come true you would have an ideal life. I am pleased to say I received

your letter from Margate today &
thank you very much for it. I am
pleased to hear you have found
some decent digs. That is at least
something to be thankful for. If only
the weather remains fine I can see
you having a grand time. It was
jolly good of Basil to give you that
lovely present. I suppose you had a
stone ginger when he gave you it.

By the way, I have received that book
Fragrance from France from Basil
also the letters. I must write to thank
him for the book, it is jolly funny, &
all the boys have had a good laugh
from it. The two magazines I received
must have come from Katie. You
thanks Ma, the parcel arrived quite
safely, also the one from Florrie. The
flask was quite large enough. I always
carry it with me, but have not
 drunk the pot yet. Well Ma & all,
we are once again out of the trenches &

well in the rear of the line having a
rest. We have had quite a long spell
up the line this time, but I am pleased
to say it's been very quiet, & we have
had very few casualties. We had
quite an interesting time for we had
some fine fireworks displays. When we
have been out of the trenches before, we
have always been in reserve, but this
time we are further back from the
line, & not in reserve, so I am
anticipating having a rest, this time
you have nothing to worry about
now Ma, for we are right out of the
way of the shells & it's lovely & peaceful
here. We are still billeted in barns, &
we look upon the shells of a barn
& a bit of straw to lie upon, as a
palace now. It's marvellous how
one gets used to roughing it. We
have heard nothing about our
leave yet, but I suppose we shall
get it, if we only wait patiently.

Have just seen Ralph, B. A. & the
other boys. They are all quite merry
& bright although they have been
split up a bit. B. A. has been made
a snifter. The weather is grand here
& we imagine we are on our holidays
at a country village. This is a fine
old place & strange to say it has
not suffered a great deal. Of course
we still have a good issue of rats, but
as long as they don't start walking
over us with army boots, we don't
mind them. Well, I don't think I
have any more news, only I hope you
give up worrying about me, & have a
jolly good ~~new~~ holiday. I can assure
you, I am quite safe & happy here, &
I don't suppose we shall go up the line
again for some time. Again wishing
Bodie the best of luck & birthday wishes
& trusting you make the best of your
holidays, & don't think of the war.
I remain, with fondest wishes
Your affectionate brother

Transcribed letters to sisters Edie and May and parents, including those reproduced above. There would have been letters to Grace and Alice but none have come to light to date.

The letters are transcribed as Bert wrote them, and in his style. On rare occasions I have added a comma where I think it serves a useful purpose. As Bert seldom uses paragraphs I have also opened a few, a luxury I can afford but one that he is likely to have ignored as he may have seen them as a waste of writing paper. The originals are kept safe by Ian Cox (Edie's) and Olly Mayo (May's).

Edie is three years his junior, May three years his senior.

Letter 1: This letter is to his parents and sister. It describes his journey to Gibraltar and his arrival. He is probably age 20.

Pte A. Daniels 2989
B Company. 8 Platoon
7th (Reserve) Middlesex Rgt
Gibraltar
8.2.15

My dear Ma, Pa & All

I am pleased to say I arrived here quite safely this morning and I am feeling absolutely in the pink although I must say I have never spent a worse week in all my life. I have got such a heap of news to tell you that I hardly know where to commence first. When I left England I intended to write a diary day by day of my voyage, but owing to the bad weather and rough journey and other unfavourable circumstances it has been impossible to do so. I think it would be my best plan to describe to you briefly the journey from the time we left England on Monday 1st February until now.

On Monday 1st we arose at 3.30 in the morning, had breakfast and paraded at 4.30. It was surprising the number of people who were up at that unearthly hour to see us off. Eventually we entrained at 7 o' clock and we had a very pleasant journey to Southampton, arriving at 9.30. The train took us right up to the docks and all we had to do was to get our kit bags from the trucks and march onto the boat. We got aboard the Grantully Castle at 10 o' clock.

We were not allowed to leave when once on board, so I got a scout boy to post for me one or two postcards, which I hope you received, although I was unable to put stamps on them. The boat was not at all a big one and I was somewhat disappointed with it. Lying alongside us was another ship containing the Royal Fusiliers, bound for Malta.

At 2 o’ clock the bugle sounded for dinner and there was a general rush for the mess room. When I arrived down in the mess room my heart dropped, for the place reminded me of the dens which they used to carry slaves about in in olden times. It was situated in the hold of the ship, the place where cargo is usually put, and it was a proper dungeon. It was very dimly lighted by a few lights round the side of the ship. It would have been possible to read if one got directly under a light but towards the centre of the hold it was impossible to recognise anybody.

But worst still was the ventilation, for it was only ventilated by only a very few portholes and the atmosphere was thick.

I don’t think I have laughed so much over a dinner (lunch) in all my life before. The utensils were all of tin and the knives were absolutely rusty. The hold contained about 40 tables (and there were several different holds). At each table sat 18 fellows. For Monday’s dinner we had mutton which two fellows had to fetch from the cook house. The carver, who was farthest away from the light could not see what he was doing so the result was that some got all the fat and some all lean, and so on. The potatoes were boiled in their dress suits and if a fellow wanted some more ‘tatters’ they were passed from hand to hand down the table. I could not fancy any of the stuff but it was a most novel dinner (lunch).

The 8th Middlesex from Stains came aboard in the afternoon and we were properly packed. At 4.30pm we got a move on but we hardly been going 5 minutes when we were all ordered below for 30 hours. I shall never forget the experience. The portholes were all closed up and coats put up to shelter the light and we were ordered not to sing. You can guess in a few hours we were all nearly stifled, for we were packed like herrings and had no ventilation whatsoever and the atmosphere smelt fearful.

During the evening, however, I managed to scramble on deck for a moment and it was sight worth seeing. Our ship was guided on both sides by warships who threw their searchlights from one ship to another and it was indeed a fine sight, more like Paines Benefit Night.

At night we found a few hammocks below and the fortunate ones put them up to the ceiling and got into them. The others laid on the tables, forms, or floor and got on as best they could. The whole of the next day we were not allowed up top and everybody was getting queer as the ship was rolling dreadfully and things were too terrible for words below decks. By the way, we had several rumours that our ship was reported sunk by the newspapers in England. I hope the rumour was not true. You might tell me in you next letter if it was so.

On Wednesday morning we were allowed on deck and I have never been on such a rough sea in my life before for we were in the Bay of Biscay. Everybody looked as though they were dying and for my part I felt as if I were, but I was by no means the worst case for I think Percy suffered far more than I did. This state of things lasted two days. The sea was sweeping over the decks as there was no cargo in the bottom and it looked as though we were top heavy.

We were unable to eat anything from Wednesday to Friday as I think we were all more dead than alive and it was cold and raining the whole time. We had to sleep on deck or up the corridors every evening and for six nights we never took an article of clothing off as it was so cold and we only had one blanket to sleep in. At night it was impossible to walk a step without stepping on somebody as fellows were lying about like dead sheep. The sergeants had the cabins and berths, so they were alright. Of course, the officers had 1st class everything so we saw very little of them.

We did not have any parade however as the boat was too small. On Saturday things began to get a bit brighter. The fellows were getting better and it was a lovely hot day. In the afternoon the 8th brass band played on the upper deck and the fellows were squatting about on the deck playing games.

By this time we were getting very hungry as we had had no food for three days and nobody could stand going downstairs to meals so we lined up at the canteen. There were hundreds of fellows waiting and we stood 4¹/₂ hours before we got served.

(The letter ends here abruptly. There was probably only one more page, or part thereof. It seems to have been mislaid)

Letter 2: Birthday letter to sister Edie. Gibraltar 8/8/15. Age 20.

Like his graphic and vivid letter to Mrs Coleman, this letter 1 contains historical and contextual material on Gibraltar and the Dardanelles.

2989 B. Company
6th Platoon
7th Middlesex Rgt
Gibraltar
8.8.15

My dear sister Edie

I am very sorry I have not the pleasure this year to wish you a verbal ‘Many happy returns of your birthday’, but still I am allowed to write to you so you must accept that for the time & let us hope that by next year we shall be happy at home together. Well Edie, I sincerely hope and wish you all the very best of birthday greetings.

May health, happiness and prosperity ever be yours, & each year more full of the beautiful happiness there is to be had in life. In fact, Edie, I cannot do better than wish you all you wish yourself, for I know a girl’s wishes are not many. As the poem says “They want everything they see”. Well Edie I am pleased to say I am in the best of health again. I think my last week has been one of the busiest & most eventful since I have been on the Rock. This time last week I was in the hospital. I came out on August Monday. Went on guard Tuesday, came off Wednesday & was put on the sergeant’s mess fatigue Thursday from 6 o’ clock in the morning to 8 o’ clock at night. It was a proper rotten job. On Friday I was mess orderly. About 9 o’ clock I was busy peeling the spuds when the alarm sounded. Of course, we all fell in on the double & were marched down to the military hospital. Here we were given one stretcher to four men. Of course, as I have told you, we had already received instructions in stretcher bearing. Well the lot of us marched down to the docks & found there was a hospital ship in, laden with wounded from the Dardanelles. We had to go on the ship, put the patients on the stretcher & carry him to the hospital. We worked hard from 9 o’ clock to 4 o’ clock with not a stop, or anything to eat or drink, & in the heat of 150 degrees. Some of the poor fellows were suffering terrible agony while some seemed alright. Any amount of cases were through Enteric Fever or similar complaints. Some of the cases were terrible sort (and I sic) will not attempt to describe them. Those that could speak said it was like hell in the Dardanelles. They not only had to put up with the fighting but the heat, flies, & mosquitoes were unbearable. Owing to the shortage of time they could not bury their dead properly & he said it was quite a common sight to see heads, arms & legs sticking from the ground infested with flies. But still, this is not very pleasant talk, especially for a birthday is it? So I think I had better ring off. We have had a card from ‘Wobly’. He says he is getting on alright & we take it that he is at Rouen, the base. He says he expects to go into the firing line shortly.

It is a lovely day here only jolly hot. I have just come back from church. Last night P (Percy?) and I went down town. It is properly tame down there. I hope you will excuse this short letter as I seem to have got such a lot of letters (that) want answering. By the way, I owe A.B. a letter, will you please tell him I will answer his one as soon as poss. I am enclosing some handkerchiefs as I did not know what else to get. Do you mind sharing them with Gracie & please accept my very best wishes for your birthday.

Hoping all are well

I remain

Your affectionate brother

Bert xxx

Letter 3: Birthday letter to sister Edie. The Somme, 9/8/16. Age 21.

This letter was written just over a month after the commencement of Battle of the Somme. Bert is on ‘rest’, ‘out of the lines’.

Although he would have been well aware of the catastrophic first day of the Somme battle, he goes out of his way to stop his family from worrying about him

“The Rosery”

6 Comy. 9. Platoon

B.E.F.

France

9/8/16

My dear Edie

It has suddenly occurred to me that in a few days’ time it will be your birthday so I am writing you now hoping it will arrive in time.

Well Edie, my dear, I hardly know how to frame my words to express all I could wish you. No matter how I try I cannot find words more fit for the occasion than the old greeting of “Many, many happy returns of your birthday”. I sincerely trust, Edie, that every year may prove more prosperous & happier than each previous year, & above all things I hope your health improves in leaps and bounds. I am sure if all I could wish you were to come true you would have an ideal life.

I am pleased to say I received your letter from Margate today & thank you very much for it. I am pleased to hear you have found some decent digs. That is at least something to be thankful for. If only the weather remains fine I can see you having a grand time. It was jolly good of Cecil to give you that lovely present.

I suppose you had a stone ginger when he gave you it. By the way, I have received that book “Fragrance from France” from Cecil, also the letters. I must write & thank him for the book, it is jolly funny & all the boys have had a good laugh from it. The two magazines I received must have come from Katie. Yes, thanks Ma, the parcel arrived quite safely, also the one from Florrie (*his girlfriend*). The flack was quite large enough. I always carry it with me, but have not drunk the port yet.

Well Ma & all, we are once again out of the trenches & well in the rear of the lines having a rest. We have had quite a long spell up the lines this time but I am pleased to say it’s been very quiet & we have had very few casualties. We had quite an interesting time for we had some fine firework displays. When we have been out of the trenches before we have always been in reserve, but this time we are further back from the lines and not in reserve, so I am anticipating having a rest.This time you have nothing to worry about now Ma, for we are right out of the way of the shells & it’s lovely and peaceful here. We are still billeted in barns & we look upon the shelter of a barn & a bit of straw to lie upon as a palace now. It’s marvellous how one gets used to roughing it.

We have heard nothing about our leave yet, but I suppose we shall get it, if we only wait patiently. Have just seen Ralph, B.A, & the other boys. They are all quite merry & bright although they have been split up a bit. B.A. has been made a sniper.

The weather is grand here & we imagine we are on our holidays at a country village. This is a fine old place, & strange to say, it has not suffered a great deal. Of course we still have a good issue of rats, but as long as they don’t start walking over us with army boots, we don’t mind them.

Well, I don’t think I have any more news. Only I hope you give up worrying about me, and have a jolly good holiday. I can assure you that I am quite safe and happy here & I don’t suppose we shall go up the line again for some time. Again, wishing you, Edie, the best of luck and birthday wishes & trusting you make the best of your holidays, and don’t think of the war.

I remain, with fondest wishes
Your loving brother
Bert

Letter 4: To sister May and brother-in-law Tom. of Sept 12

This short letter is written at the close of the London Rifle Brigade’s most harrowing spell on The Somme. It’s little more than ‘I’m OK letter’. During August the LRB was redeployed from the comparatively quiet Foncevilliers to Hanneschamp line (just west of Gommecourt) to the north. By September though it was redeployed to the heat of the Somme battle along the Ginchy/Guillemont line (near Combles) not far from Theipval. This is ‘the month’ on the Somme that he frequently mentions.

Bert is clearly exhausted, shocked and distressed. He doesn’t want to speak of what he’s witnesses and he suggests that he’s restricted anyway by the censors.

France

12/9/16

My Dear May and Tom

I am pleased to say that I am still quite well although feeling a bit shaky after going through a rather rough time for

last four days. I am also sorry to say that I have some sad news to tell regarding Percy.

He was wounded in action on the 9th August (*Bert is mistaken here – he’s distracted and in shock. All other indicators suggest Sept*) but I am pleased to say that I do not think it is at all serious. He was wounded by shrapnel in the arm and chest, but I have every hope of hearing he is about, fit and well in a few weeks’ time.

I really envy Percy for I realise he is far better off where he is surrounded by peace and kindness.

But still, we must not grumble. Things might be worse so cheerio and let’s hope for the best. I cannot write any details now and I feel like anything but writing so please excuse a short note.

Hoping you are both keeping fit and well.

I remain with fondest love

Your affectionate brother (*he has scribbles out the word ‘son’, a measure of his distraction?*)

Bert xxx

Letter 5: This letter of 20/9/16 to Bert is written by Percy from his hospital bed in Dublin. Bert would have been green with envy...

No 9 Ward
Dr Stevens hospital
Dublin

20/9/16

Dear Bert

You will see by the above address where I am landed. I am suffering from fractured elbow and a piece of shrapnel was taken out of my chest. I am glad to say that I am feeling better now, and I am very comfortable in my new billet.

Once again old man let me thank you from the bottom of my heart for all you did for me, and I shall be more than pleased to have a line or two from you any time.

Always wishing you better luck than mine.

I remain
Your dear chum
Percy

Letter 6: This letter is written by Percy Coleman to parents. Undated, it is probably written at around the same day as his letter to Bert, 20/9/16. It would have prompted Mrs Coleman to write to Bert about a week later on September 26, a correspondence that inspired his response, Letter 10, below

Rifleman P. Coleman, No 2988
No 9 Ward
Dr Stevens Hospital
Dublin

Dear Mother and Dad

Many thanks for your letter. It is a great pity I am such a long way away from you. I should have liked to have seen someone to tell them of my experiences.

The last two days I have not felt so well in myself, but the sister says it is nothing to worry about.

I must tell you that my right elbow is shattered and the bone splintered, and I'm afraid it will be a long time healing up. My chest wound seems to be going along nicely. A piece of shrapnel the size of a thimble has been taken out. I am made very comfortable at the hospital and it is a treat to get some good food. I don't think there is anything I want, only the two local papers.

I expect Mrs Daniels is worrying about Bert. I am sure that Bert was very kind to me. He was very brave out in 'No Mans' Land'. He knew I was hit, and he had lost the run of me, so he wandered about under shell fire until he found me and then dragged me in at the best opportunity. I should like you to write him a line and thank him. I am sure that no one could have been kinder

I think that is all I have to say at present.

Your affectionate son
Percy

Letter 7 to sister May and Tom of September 30, - Although this letter is written about 10 days before the division goes on official rest, it seems, at the time, that his company is winding down. He is not on the front line. As it transpired, this 'wind-down to a period of rest was not to last, as is evident from Letter 8.

Somme
30/9/16

My dear May and Tom

I have now to thank you for your letter dated 18th and also the parcel of the 14th. The fruit arrived last night and I am pleased to say it was in good condition. Some of the plums had got slightly squashed, but still they were all eatable and very much enjoyed. What a treat to get a hit of fruit. Ma's parcel of fruit arrived a few day's ago but the pears had gone over ripe and started making fuss of the cakes. But I can assure you it takes a lot to upset the appetite of a Tommy and nothing was wasted.

Well May, before I answer your letter I have some good news to tell you. I am pleased to say we have been relieved from the firing line and are now on our way back out of danger. No doubt you have read of the successes of the 26th inst (Sept 26?) and have been thinking of me for your conjectures (its alright we are out of the trenches) as to where I was on the 15th were quite correct (*probably Ginchy and Lesboeufs*). I am pleased to say that I have come through the whole issue without a scratch, thank god, although I must admit thousands of times I have looked upon the wounded and absolutely envied them. For the past three weeks we have been living in a perfect Hell and I cannot tell you how glad we all are to get out of it, although I must say we have done some jolly good work, as you have no doubt read.

I do not know where we are going to but, at the present, we are billeted in barns at a peaceful village out of sound of the guns. I never realised a barn was so comfortable before. In fact it's like being home. The village is inhabited by civilians and it seems quite strange. Rumours of divisional rest and Blighty leave are very current and I only hope they are true. Apart from being flung out of England 20 months, I think we have earned our leave.

Well, may, to answer your letter I must thank you very much for your photo and I really think it is very good of you both.. It is now nearly two years since I saw you but I do not think that either of you have altered a scrap. I am pleased to say that I have heard from Percy. He is suffering from a fractured arm and a piece of shrapnel was actually taken from his heart. I never though it was so serious as that, but still, he is doing well now.

Fancy him being sent to Ireland. A lot of the fellows who are wounded in the same attack as P are in Blighty now. Lucky bounders. Yes, may, like you I have wished often to be able to change places with the slightly wounded, but still, I have come through A1 so I must not grumble. It's a terrible strain upon the nerves but I think mine will stand anything after what I have already gone through. I am confident that I shall never be in a hotter part of the line or in more nerve-racking experiences. So, that it one consolation.

Yes, as you say, some people 'can swing the lead' properly, I never was any good at it. That is not one of my accomplishments. But still, there is nothing like trusting in the lord and keeping one's bowels open.

Thanks very much for your good wishes to me may but really you flatter me too much. Remember, I am only doing what thousands of others are doing.

I am pleased to hear that Edie has struck a cushy job near home. I hope it turns out all that can be expected. I think I am receiving all your letters May. Your last one telling me about the Zepps I answered in latter. Well, May, have no more news at present so once again thanking you for the fruit and hoping you are both still in the pink.

I remain, with fondest love
Your affectionate brother

Bert

PS: By the way may, we have all been transferred into the LRB so my address in future will be Rifleman Daniels, 10716. C Company, 9 Platoon, 1st LRB, BEF, France

Letter 8 from Bert to May and Tom of October 10.

It seems he spoke too soon about impending rest from the Front Line in the letter of only a week or two previously. He is again wrenched back into action. He writes this letter when he would just have been relieved of Front Line duties. Aubrey Smith tells us in his book that the LRB were withdrawn back to the safety of Memetz on October 10 to prepare for their subsequent rest in Picquigney. Here, Bert describes a distressing incident that happened later at the end of September, after Percy's injury. Bert is deeply upset by his huge personal losses:

France

10/10/16

My Dear May and Tom

I must thank you very much for your letter dated 2nd Oct. However, before I attempt to answer it I will tell some of my news. We have been having a pretty rough time of it this last week for we have had a similar experience to what we had on the 9th, the day that Percy was wounded. I am sorry to say that I have lost several more of my old 'B' Company (Middx Regiment) chums, the 12 fellows of the old 8 Section fellows whom I have lived with for the last 2 years and who have been as brothers together. Within one month out here (*the Ginchy/Guillemont line*) and then there are only 3 of us left, seven of them (suffering wounds?) too terrible for words. I cannot describe my sorrow at losing them apart from the sympathy that I have for the (people?). Poor Ralph, he should so much have liked you to have seen him but it seems that it was not to be.

Well May, I must not run on in this train or I shall be making you feel miserable, I am sure. May, I sincerely thank you for your fine compliments regarding my bringing Percy in. I am sure I appreciate your words far more than I would any decoration, although I really think you rather flatter me. I did no more than any of you would have done for a chum, so please do not put me on the pedestal. By the way, I am pleased to say Percy is progressing nicely.

Although we have recently been through a pretty rough time I have lots to be thankful for I have come out of it all, thank God, without a scratch. It seems a perfect miracle when I review the past, and it impresses upon one the fact that it is a mightier hand than our own that moulds our destiny. I have more good news too May, for I am pleased to say we are right out of the danger zone now and are on our way back for a rest. It does seem a treat to get away from the noise and suffering. It's like being in heaven here compared to up in the line. I am pleased to see in some of the papers that our doings have been mentioned and we seem to have earned some praise.

Letter 10: Bert’s letter to Percy’s mother, Mrs Coleman

For context, this iconic letter describes the Somme battlefield when it was at its muddiest. The soldiers “became increasingly exhausted and often had to lead assaults in waist-high mud.”

Bert describes Percy’s injury and his rescue of him. The date of the incident is Sept 9, the aim being to take Lesboeufs, a village just east of Theipval. The regiment was defending the line at Ginchy to Guillemont.

A reason why this letter is so well composed and considered is that Bert writes it while on rest comfortably behind the lines in the pretty Somme riverside town of Picquigny, or in a village close nearby. It is still a pretty little town today with a few bars, restaurants and shops. I have spent a night tied up to the bank aboard Keppel. Had a swim in the clean river water and we enjoyed an evening barbecue. It is a comfort to know that he was able to restore himself there during the Autumn.

France. 15-10-16

Dear Mrs Coleman & All

I must sincerely thank you for your letter dated the 26th and the fine compliments and good wishes you tender to me. I am sure it is very good of you to write such an encouraging letter. As regards the thanks for getting Percy in, well I’m sure this is quite unnecessary. I have been fully repaid for all I did in the knowledge that I was able to do something (thanks to pure luck) for a chum. I am rather inclined to think you flatter me in your praise. What I did, anyone would have done for a pal, so please do not put me on a pedestal. I did not really think Percy’s condition was so serious, but still I trust he pulls round and feels no after effects of his injuries, although from recent accounts he does not seem to be doing over grand, but still let us hope for the best. I must say I very much miss his company and also that of poor Ralph’s and the seven other members of our section. For the first week after the sad affair I felt as though I should go mad. It seems as though all my chums had been taken from me, and I could give my mind to nothing. The only consoling thought I had was that Percy was safe. However I am pleased to say that things are brighter now. I am pleased to say I have found another chum, but of course nobody could take Percy’s place. For two years we were continually together and I thank God we were together when Percy went down. I was about 6 yards behind him at the time. I saw him fall and instantly rushed for him, but before I could get to him a shell exploded quite near me, and the next I remember finding myself in a shell hole. I do not know how long I had been there, but it was still light. I felt myself all over, and to my great surprise I found I was not hit at all. How I escaped scot free I shall never understand. It was a miracle.

I put my head over the top of the hole but could see nobody about. I wondered what had happened. It was impossible to get out for machine gun bullets were whistling in hundreds. I recollected Percy had fallen somewhere near, but could see nothing of him. I waited till dusk and then started wriggling from shell hole to shell hole. It seemed a terrible long time before I found Percy, and when I did I cried for joy, for he was still alive. He had lost a lot of blood and was very weak, and he said he could not get in without the aid of a stretcher. I realised that to wait till dark for stretchers was hopeless, as we were too near the Huns and again a counter attack was likely to start at any moment. I gave Percy some Wine I had in my flask, bucked him up, tied his arm up, turned him on his knees, and absolutely shoved him out of the shell hole. After much pulling and pushing we got back to our lines, although shells were bursting in hundreds and we seemed to be smothered with machine gun bullets. It was the second miracle in one day. When we arrived at the trench, no stretchers were to be had for they had all been blown up, so Percy laid the whole night in the trench. That night was hellish, the continual roar of guns and rifles, and it was impossible to go out and collect our wounded, so I was jolly glad that Percy was in. Our trenches were full of wounded and to cap matters they kept groaning for water and there was not a drain to be had. Luckily I was able to keep Percy supplied for a while. The following day no stretchers could be obtained, so Percy said he would try and walk to the dressing station. A party of six wounded men were going so Percy went with them. About two hours later the Huns commenced a terrific bombardment on our lines. Percy had just got away in time. I was buried twice and the two fellows near to me went in shell shock. This bombardment went on all day, and I thanked God when we were relieved at night, although we were shelled all the way going back. Well, Mrs Coleman, this is the first account I have written about the affair, and I have simply done it to ease your curiosity as to how things happened. I trust it will pass the censor for I have done my best not to give any information of Military importance. I am pleased to say we are at last out of the lines on rest, and there are prospects of leave.

Thanking you once again for your good wishes and trusting Percy quickly recovers.

Yours very sincerely
‘Bert’

Letter 11: Letter to sister Edie of 17/2/17. Origin not given, but probable La Gorgue where the LRB was resting for the winter. Age 21 or 22.

This letter was written during the winter between the close of the The Battle of the Somme (Nov 1916) and the commencement of the Battle of Arras (April 1917). It was a period of preparation for a major allied offensive.

17/2/17

My Dear Edie
I was very pleased indeed to receive your fine long letter of the 9th & I thank you very much for it. I am pleased you received the Rosaries quite safely and like them. It's jolly good of you to let Florrie have her pick. Poor Florrie, I do feel sorry for her for the loss of her father. It must be a heavy blow. Her brother, Ted, is out here, wounded but although we correspond together I can't make out whereabouts he is. I wish I could help brighten Florrie's life up a bit, but I'm afraid it is impossible to do so while I am out here, so (I) trust that you all at home will do your best for me and also for poor Florrie. I suppose the recent cold weather is really responsible for a lot of deaths. I am also very sorry to hear of the death of poor Mr Flembrow (?). Am surprised to hear the news that Mrs Goddard has a baby. Will you please tender to her my congratulations, I don't know if that is the proper thing to do under such circumstances but if it is not in order, please don't do it, & (I) hope that all are well.

Now for the greatest surprise I had, re your engagement. Please accept my heartfelt congratulations, Edie, and every good wish for your future happiness and prosperity. The news certainly surprised me for it seems that I do not realise how the years are rolling by and how we are all growing older, but still I can assure my wishes are none the less sincere. Will you also please tender my sincere congratulations to Cecil. Although I have unfortunately seen so little of him I really like him and consider him as one of my best pals. He is a chap to be proud of & I trust that nothing but sunshine is in your future. I am pleased to hear that Cecil has managed to get into the H.A.C. He could not have done better, regarding artillery, as I think it is one of the finest branches of the artillery going. At least it is a swell London branch. I have never seen them in action out here but we had a few batteries with us in Egypt. By the way, Edie, is he enlisting as a private or as an officer? I wish him the very best of luck, for luck to a soldier is far better than anything else.

Am very pleased to hear that Beatie is still keeping well. Please give her my kindest regards & tell her that when her boys (sorry, one boy meant) comes home, to be careful of that wink, or she shall find herself getting into hot water. By the way, when I get home I intend to introduce that winking game again for her special benefit.

Am sorry to hear that Ma has got the wind up over Germany trying to sink our ships. It's alright, Ma, thank God we have got a navy, & keep smiling, you can't whack it.

Well, Edie, I'm afraid I have practically no more news of any importance, at present, except that all the boys are keeping merry and bright. The cold weather does not seem to have affected their health any more than their spirits. The weather is certainly a lot warmer now than it has been for the past month and the snow is gradually disappearing & the mud is once again making its presence very well known. It freezes at night and it thaws by day, but still it doesn't matter a lot what it does.

Once again, thanking you for your letter and hoping that all at home are now quite merry and bright, & again sending my heartfelt congratulations & very best wishes.

I remain, with fondest love
Your loving brother
Bert

Letter 12: Birthday letter to sister Edie 8/8/17. Origin not given, other than ‘France’ but likely to be Pas de Calais. Age 22.

We know that the 56th Division was engaged at Ypres/Passchendaele (June 7 to November 10 1917). This letter is written during the 3rd Battle of Ypres and Bert, now an experienced soldier, would most likely have been fighting in the front lines. At the time of writing there was a pause in the battle due to heavy rain and battle resumed two days afterwards on August 10. Bert appears to have taken advantage of this respite to rattle off a letter or two, a fact that supports the supposition that he is present on this particular front on August 8.

France
8/8/17

My dear Edie

Many thanks for your fine letter of the 30th. But before I answer it, I will take this opportunity to wish you the old, old wish of Many Happy Returns of your birthday. May each year be happier, healthier, & more full of the things in life worth living for than the preceding year. May your face always wear a smile, & that in future pain be unknown to you.

Now, to answer your letter Edie. You need not apologise for not writing to me before, for I quite understand how things have been with you. I expect by now that Cecil is somewhere in this beautiful land of mud. I hope he likes it, but between you and me I know of a better ‘ole. But still, if Cecil manages to dodge the Hawkey (?) bits I do not think the experience will do him any harm. As regards all the London Rgts being withdrawn from here, we hear that tale about once a week, so we laugh at it now. As regards the “flapping” when the next air raid is on I think I had better get a special leave to see Ma, cut the capers.

I well remember once walking through a village that was being heavily shelled. One shell I heard coming, and it sounded as if it was going to drop near me. I at once dived down against the wall of what once was (a) house. The shell came & burst just the other side of the wall. It sent me dizzy for a time but when I came round I found I was covered in bricks and rubbish & scarcely able to breathe. I dug myself out, & except for sundry cuts & bruises, I was quite alright & went on my way rejoicing. The shell had burst only a few feet from me but thanks to my ears & the wall I was quite safe.

Yes, Edie, several of our boys have been home on leave lately so you may have seen some of them. They are the boys that have been out here 17 months. I am sorry I cannot accompany you on your holiday Edie but (*cheer up*), plenty of time later. I hope you have a ripping time & come back feeling like the emblem of health.

Well, Edie, I am afraid I have no more to write about now, and am rather busy, in fact this is quite a busy life. Well cheerio, Edie, & buck up & get well & come back as brown as I was in Egypt. Please tell Gracie I will answer her fine letter later. Again, wishing you all the best of birthday greetings.

I remain, with fondest love
Yours to a cinder
Bert

Letter 13 of Sept 9 1917, written during the particularly depressing Third battle of Ypres.

The battlefield was a quagmire: This letter to Bert’s mother is alarmingly out of character. Gone is the humour, the keen observation, the humanity. Something seems to have happened to destroy the spirit that sustained him over the past two years. Maybe he imploded from the constant attrition. It would be understandable. All the chums that he joined up with in 1915 are gone, either dead or wounded. In this, his last letter, he seems to take refuge in the two certainties available to him – his mother, and all she represents in terms of safety, security, decency, normality - and his faith. He fuses these to compose this tragic and perhaps a little grotesque, tortured and self-flagellating letter. He is a husk of his former robust self and it seems that he ceased communicating with his family after this letter. It’s likely that he went to his death at Gavrelle six months later in much the same frail state.

France

19/9/17

My dearest Mother

It is rather a doubtful hand that I now take up my pencil to write to you, and it is with even more doubtful mind that I set about the task of conveying my inner-most thoughts to paper. The more I think, the more I realise how wholly incapable I am of the task I set myself. However, as you know, I am a poor writer, and even a poorer one at expressing or translating my thoughts. But even so, although my words be ill-chosen, I trust that they may render unto you the thankfulness, honour and respect with which my mind is at this time filled towards you, my mother. Could ever a son pay too high a compliment to such a sacred personage. No, never. The highest of high compliments are as a drain of water to the mighty ocean. Could ever a son express his thoughts, his debt and respect for his mother. Again I say never, for such thoughts are beyond utterance. Yet mother, the little word, love, seems to convey to a small extent the outward meaning of one’s thoughts. But, oh how difficult is that word to define. Yea, almost an impossibility. However, mother, my respect and love for you is such. To you I owe my life, my health and happiness. Could ever words be formed to convey the thoughts of ones thankfulness for such a precious and valued gift. I think not. It is a heavenly gift, through you, and must need a heavenly thanks. Such are my sentiments to you my mother. However I am afraid I have somewhat veered round from the main object of this letter which is to express my hearty greetings and best of birthday wishes to you upon your birthday. It seems impossible to compose a birthday letter without expressing the old wish of Many Happy Returns of your Birthday’ but may I just add that each year improves in your estimation for the greater health and happiness that it may bring to you. I pray that the trouble and worry of your life is now over and that the future has nothing in store for you than bright sunshine and gladness and that your life may be one continual round of gladness. May this war quickly end so that the worry that I indirectly bestow upon you may finish, and help you to more fully realise the true meaning of undisturbed happiness. I live, Ma, in the hope of shortly seeing both yourself and Dad comfortably settled down in a cosy little farm, surrounded by the beauties of nature and living a life of sublime bliss. In conclusion, may I wish you all you wish yourself and I pray that god will give you the realisation of them speedily. God bless and protect you my dearest mother is the ardent wish of your ever loving son, Bert.

Appendix II – Operation Michael, Gavrelle 1918 and the 3rd Battle of Arras

General Gough, the commander of the 5th Army British troops was immediately blamed for the failure of the lines south of Gavrelle and we now know that he was used as a scapegoat. Gough had re-iterated on several occasions that the British line was too thin between Arras and Peronne and fresh reinforcements were needed urgently. He had also warned Military Command that Germany would concentrate solely on the Western Front once it had signed its inevitable peace treaty with the new Russian Bolshevik regime that seized power in 1917. He was right on both scores; territory was lost as a result.

Public support for the war was ebbing fast too and it’s reasonable to understand why the government was nervous over committing yet more young men to enormous risk. Nonetheless, it did so, albeit far too late and I detect a note of cynicism in a paragraph from “The History of the Great War”, Volume 12:

“The British government took great credit to themselves for dispatching reinforcements across the channel at an average rate of 30,000 a day, in the due course of which not a single life was lost. Their ability to do that after the event is in itself the severest indictment of their policy. Had that reinforcement been sent before, thousands of lives would undoubtedly have been saved. It was the old story repeated over and over again in British history – the undue influence of civilian in military matters.”

Of course, it can easily be argued that some civilian influence might have saved millions of lives but the tragedy is that few civilians wanted to be seen as objecting. It was easier to turn away and hope for the best. This tragedy was to cause many problems after the war – both for those at the front and for those who worked in support roles at home.

Gough was replaced by General Rawlinson, the general who made the record-breaking and catastrophic miscalculation at the opening day of The Battle of the Somme. Fortunately, Bert would have been spared knowledge of this as Rawlinson was appointed on the 28th, the day he was killed.

Simultaneous with Gough’s replacement was the installation of France’s Marshal Foch with overall command of all allied troops. His tactical record was good and, free of the quagmire of political/tactical decisions, British troops were at comparative liberty to concentrate on, and develop, fresh military tactics reminiscent of the small and focussed battle units of today. They became particularly effective, a fact that is frequently overlooked. The days of medieval ‘death walks’ into unrelenting enemy fire, like at the Somme, were gone forever. The subsequent arrival of US troops also did much to restore morale. But it was all too late for Bert.

Appendix III – Suez and Ottoman plans for the canal

The background to the British deployment to Egypt is that, during a few decades before the outbreak of war, Britain and the Albanian dynasty founded by Mohammed Ali jointly administered Egypt despite it nominally being part of the Ottoman Empire. Although Mohammed Ali began his time in Egypt as an Ottoman military commander, and subsequently pasha of Egypt, he became so powerful that he declared a sort of U.D.I. As a result, the British and Albanians paid lip-service to the Ottomans but largely ignored them.

But Ottoman insouciance and lethargy was swept aside when Turkey declared in favour of Germany at the outbreak of war. This alarmed the British as Turkey now threatened the Suez Canal far more than it had previously. Consequently, Britain was compelled to defend the canal. Sea links to the Empire had to remain open, not least because Indian Army and Anzacs troops made a sizeable contribution to the Commonwealth forces on the battlefields of Flanders and the Somme.

Despite Turkey prosecuting a war against Russia during this period, the Ottomans had launched a surprise attack on Suez in February 1915. A subsequent attack was planned for February 1916 - and anticipated by the British – hence the need for Britain to bolster troops in Egypt. As it transpired, this second attack never materialised, not least because Ottoman troops were by then heavily committed to defending the Dardanelles. The Gallipoli campaign ran from April 25 1915 to Jan 9 1916.

Bert would have enjoyed a 9-month combat-free posting in Egypt from September 1915 to June 1916. In 1917 he wrote to Edie: “Well cheerio, Edie, and buck up and get well and come back as brown as I was in Egypt.”

Appendix IV – The Somme – A Personal View.

The Somme debate is guaranteed to generate robust discussion. The views expressed here are my own and designed to initiate discussion.

During the first day of the Somme Britain set a world record for military incompetence; its architects were Generals Haig and Rawlinson. 30,000 men were rendered unfit for battle within the first 6 minutes, 58,000 ‘lost’ by the end of the day, that’s three times as many as the German army. By the end of the battle there were almost 420,000 British killed, missing or wounded.

Bewildered, the Generals didn’t have a Plan ‘B’ for Day 2. They didn’t think they’d need one. By the time the British offensive resumed the Germans had taken advantage of two weeks to recover and were prepared to continue the slaughter.

General Haig is commonly implicated as the architect of the carnage, but the British attack was just a part of a wider assault on German armies that included the French. As Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force, with no Plan B, one of Haig’s biggest failings was that there ought to have been a contingency.

Or is it Rawlinson who should shoulder most of the responsibility for the catastrophe? He had convinced Haig that his bombardment of the German lines beforehand meant that Allied troops had little more to do than walk across ‘no-mans’ land and occupy German trenches that would either be vacated or full of dead Germans. Wires had all been cut, troops were told. It worried troops, therefore, to find that they were being ordered into battle in broad daylight and, since the wire was supposed to be cut, why were they being issued with wire-cutters? “Nothing would exist at the conclusion of the bombardment”, Rawlinson is recorded as saying. He could not have been more wrong.

And when troops tried to use the wire-cutters, they were useless. No one thought to test them on German wire. They were fine on British wire but panic-stricken and confused soldiers were machine gunned in their thousands as they struggled with lamentable orders and useless equipment.

There are some military historians who make a case for us to be sympathetic towards Haig, notably Julian Thomas. He cites that the declared objectives – to keep the French in the war, and to relieve pressure on them at Verdun – justifies his conduct at The Somme.

He is correct in that the deployment to the Somme achieved this, but given the terrible death toll this remains a futile position to defend.

The cost was far too high. To their astonishment, the German gunners and artillerymen found that most of their work was done for them, by Haig’s decision-making. Indefensible is the fact that Haig learned nothing from his debacles and persisted with useless and incompetent battle tactics year after year, stubbornly refusing to learn any lessons until the last year of the war when he was removed. He was ill-equipped for the role, both intellectually and morally although his approval of the use of the old mines of Arras (The Wellington Tunnels) is an exception. I can’t believe it was his idea though.

But he wasn’t alone in this. He was just one of many of his type. More on this later.

According to Wade Davis, author of the non-fiction literary award-winning ‘Into the Silence’, not once did Haig visit a front line, nor did he visit the wounded. Insulated from the carnage he wrought, Haig remained in his chateau in Montreuil, the comical dustpan and brush wielding lunatic lampooned by Stephen Fry in Blackadder IV.

According to Davis – an American writer and a Harvard graduate:

‘The high command exhibited a stubborn disconnection from reality so complete as to merge at times with the criminal. A survey conducted in the three years before the war found that 95% of the officers had never read a military book of any kind. This cult of the amateur, militantly anti-intellectual, resulted in a leadership that, with noted exceptions, was obtuse, wilfully intolerant of change, and incapable for the most part of innovation, thought or action.’

Harsh words? As if this wasn’t bad enough the German, French and US High Commands were no better served. The French had General Nivelle – France’s Douglas Haig. It wasn’t until French troops went on strike, demanding a competent leader with an ability to lead by example that he was removed and despatched to Africa.

Meanwhile, the Americans had General Pershing, a ‘leader’ who continued fighting after the armistice had been signed. Three thousand American soldiers were mown down senselessly on land that they could have walked into peacefully just a few hours or minutes later. The American public was outraged and a Congressional Hearing was set up. Pershing was unrepentant. He was unable to see what he had done wrong.

Germany had Ludendorff. Having caused the carnage from the outset with Kaiser Wilhelm II, Ludendorff, a coward, had to find others to blame for Germany’s humiliation – anyone but the military elite.

Folk who stayed at home working in the factories and all the support industries were targeted plus revolutionaries and, of course, the Jews. Ludendorff’s protégé, Adolf Hitler, a true child of the Great War and champion of revenge was keen to embrace the latter. Conveniently, he concealed the fact the Iron Cross he wore was on the recommendation of his Great War commanding officer, Lieutenant Hugo Guttman, a Jewish German soldier.

But Douglas Haig’s ineptitude seems to have been in a league of its own. Davis:

‘As late as March 1916, after 20 months’ of fighting, Douglas Haig ... sought to limit the number of machine guns per battalion, concerned that their presence might dampen the men’s offensive spirit. For a similar reason, he resisted the introduction of the steel helmet, which had been shown to reduce head injuries by 75%. He had little use for light mortars, which in time would become the most effective of all trench weapons. Even the rifle was suspect. What counted was the horse and the sabre.’

Of course, the German high command wasn’t quite so stupid and to German troops’ amazement, they were able to machine gun swathes of British and Commonwealth troops during that appalling first day. They did this by employing the very same weapon that Haig persistently and obstinately rejected.

With 30,000 men rendered unfit for battle within the first six minutes, Haig appears to have been unable to react. He was incapable of reacting because he was clueless, an inevitable consequence of not once visiting The Front Line, and not once visiting the wounded. He is excused from doing either, according to his grandson, because he would have found it upsetting.

Haig went into comfortable retirement after the war and he was not subject to a war crimes trial. There is a proud statue of him on a horse in remembrance of him. Similarly, Kaiser Wilhelm lived out his life in comfort in the Netherlands without justice served.

Haig was to become the last of his kind in the British forces. Public reaction to him was axiomatic in the social changes that followed over the next 20 years, none of which he would have approved.

Mind you, he looked damn fine on a horse (so long as it was nowhere near the front).

Appendix V – Background notes of Mark and Christine Baker

Christine Baker’s research sheds some light on what unfolded, Christine being through Bert’s sister Grace:

On 28.3.18 (The date of Bert’s death) Bert’s regimental diary records:

‘On the morning of the 28th March the 56th division was holding a line south of Gavrelle to Arleux (Arleux-en-Gohelle? See below), a front of about 5,000 yards...between 3 a.m. and 3.20 a.m. the Germans put down a heavy barrage of gas and HE shell...our posts were heavily bombarded with trench mortars.’

Christine’s research and personal perspective on this is as follows:

The account given by the London Rifle Brigade is short, but in it one can read the desperate nature of the fighting and the gallant resistance which was put up. (It seems that the front line was being relieved at the time, which might perhaps account for my grandmother’s account of Bert being killed by a shell as he was returning from the front). All forward and lateral communication was at once cut. Wire and posts defending the front line were wiped out. When the enemy infantry advanced they simply walked into the front line, rushed the few men left at the blocks and commenced bombing towards Naval trench. The battalion was almost annihilated. Its fighting strength at the commencement of the battle was 23 officers and 564 other ranks; it was reduced to 8 officers and 60 other ranks. What remained joined the Queens Westminsters.

Overall, the conclusion of the diaries is that the 56th Division put up a successful defence, the Germans were exhausted and made little further headway - but what a cost!

Note: There are two Arleuxs in the vicinity – Arleux-en-Grohelle, about 2.8 miles (5000 yards) to the north of Gavrelle and the other Arleux is 11 miles ESE of Gavrelle. The description given in the regimental diary is ambiguous because we now know that the 5/London was in place to defend the line at Gavrelle, just south of Vimy Ridge. Source ‘Gavrelle’.

Christine’s husband Mark Baker provides us with some broader context:

When day broke on the 28th March, 1918, the 56th London Territorial Division was in position on the southern portion of the Vimy Ridge. At nightfall the division still held its ground, having beaten back three separate assaults delivered in great strength by picked German troops specially trained in the attack and inspired with confidence resulting from the

successes of the previous week. Truly a great achievement, and important as great, for the Vimy Ridge covered the city of Arras and the coalfields of Béthune.

Important as this success was held to be at the time, a time of great strain upon the forces of the Empire, it was not till later on, when Ludendorff (German Chief of Staff and effective commander of the German Army) took us into his confidence, that we learned its full significance. Ludendorff gives us to understand that the failure of the German effort of 28th March constituted the turning-point of the 1918 campaign. That evening Ludendorff recognised the beginning of the end; the German nation lost heart; the morale of the German Army deteriorated rapidly.”

This was the action where Lance Serjeant Bert Daniels was killed. His battalion, the 1/5 Londons (The London Rifle Brigade) lost heavily, but the pick of the German Army was stopped in its tracks, and would be defeated later in 1918 by a highly trained, motivated, professional and effective army.