

2<sup>nd</sup> Lieut, E.C. Kemp,

9<sup>th</sup> Battn, Yorkshire Regt,

Abbey House,

30, Angel Hill,

Bury St Edmunds,

2/1/1915

Dear Mother, Father & c,

After sending the post card last night from Stowmarket we arrived here safely a little after 7o/c. We reported at the Brigade Office & were sent to the Training School at the above address. The other 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieuts had just sat down to dinner so we had dinner out at the Suffolk Hotel. We then went back to Abbey House & Sheldon & I were given a small bedroom between us.

I must explain here that Abbey House is a large old mansion in the shade of the Abbey. I understand it used to be a girls school but is now quite given up to the Officers Training School. It is a rambling old place & seems to consist of additions & bits of an adjoining house. Our room – as we arrived late – is right at the top under the roof. It takes the two of us comfortably but it is a long way up. The ascent is relieved in the middle by transferring to the servants stair-case & having to go down two short flights in order to go up again. After arranging our goods as snugly as possible (we have a small chest of drawers) we turned in. We sleep on camp beds but have a wash stand & hip-bath so the camp bath contraption will not be used yet.

I slept fairly well but the novel conditions made my sleep a trifle broken. I shall no doubt soon get used to it.

An orderly woke us at 6.45 am. & we paraded on the lawn just by the Abbey at 7.30 – 8 o/c for physical exercises. After breakfast we had a short lecture by Col. Pemberton (the officer in charge of the school) on “Etiquette & Discipline”. We were free for a little time & then at 10 o/c we were inspected by the Brigadier-General of the East Midlands Infantry Brigade.

After the inspection we had squad drill under 3 Territorial Sergeants & took it in turns to drill each other.

We were free a little after 11 o/c and my friend Sheldon & I went for a little walk round the town. It is a bigger place than I expected. The shopping centre seems quite a thriving part & the old portions of the town are very interesting – especially the Abbey Gate+ we overlook from our bedroom the fine Abbey Park. I will endeavour to get some pictures post cards and send them to you.

After our walk we had a lesson on “Musketry” demonstrated to for squads by the Sergeants. This was from 12.15 to 1 o/c then we had lunch.

I am writing this after lunch & I understand we have the afternoon free, it being Saturday. There does not appear to be much to do except walk about & explore.

Of course, I have not got right into the swing of things yet but I think I shall like the life very much, especially as I have luckily struck a nice fellow to share my room with.

There are 27 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieuts here in a like position to myself so far as I can judge they seem very nice fellows – some of all sorts as might be expected. (The course is expected to take 30 days)

I will write to you in a day or two & let you know my further experiences.

I am afraid I was a bit of a trouble to you in getting my stuff together, But I must thank you very much, Mother, for all you did for me.

I must thank you also, Father, very much for all you did – especially for seeing me off & standing the taxi & the lunch.

Please give my best to Marjorie. I hope she is going on well & that the troubles & inconvenience arising from the danger of infection will be as small as possible.

Please give my kind regards to anybody who may enquire & use this letter as a general epistle to all interested.

With much love to all

From your soldier son, Ernest.

PS Please send down my Infantry Training Handbooks. It is in the kitchen somewhere. Father will probably find my name in "The Gazette" on or about 7<sup>th</sup> December. I shall be glad to hear the exact date.

Somewhere in France.

Dear Mother, Father & All.

5<sup>th</sup> September 1915.

At last I am able to write a letter to you from that very indefinite address given above. The phrase slips very lightly from the tongue but I doubt if everybody realises the full significance it has for us out here & for you waiting at home.

I am sorry I have not written before, but naturally we have been very busy & letter writing was not encouraged for the first few days.

I must thank you all very much for your letters & the "Tit Bits" which latter arrived today. A regular delivery of the "Daily Graphic" & the "Westminster" will be very acceptable as will also any light reading matter.

The compass has been sent on to me here, I shall be glad if you will keep an account & put in it the cost of the compass & any other money you have to pay out on my behalf. I can then periodically send you a cheque when the account reaches £5 or so & thus keep things square.

I should be very glad if you could send me out some cigarettes – preferably Wills "Three Castles" (Gold Star). The French cigarettes are very poor & English cigarettes at 3d & 4d per packet of 10 cost out here 6d & 7d which is a bit steep. I think the best way will be to give Messrs W.D. & H.O. Wills a standing order for 100 of the above cigarettes a week. They will send them direct here free of duty. I should also like 10z of Bell's "Three Nuns" tobacco a week. Yet another useful thing would be some Horlick's Malted Milk Tablets.

The amount of luggage we were allowed to bring was very small so I should be glad if you will send out my British Warm – it is on the top of the small box. The only coat I have here is my Burberry.

I saw Leslie's name yesterday in the Gazette – I wish him every success in the Surrey's.

I am glad you had a good time at Seaford & hope you are feeling better for your holiday.

I will now give you an account of my doings since leaving Bramshott.

We left camp about 6 o/c on Thursday evening the 26<sup>th</sup> August & took train at Liphook for our port of embarkation. This port (*Folkestone*) of course must not be mentioned by name but we spent several months there training. We embarked about 10 o/c & had a glorious crossing. The night was fine & the sea smooth & I thoroughly enjoyed the voyage. The ship was kept quite dark except down below & we were conveyed by destroyers.

On reaching the port of disembarkation (*Boulogne*) the troops filed out of the ship & formed up on the quay & we were then marched 2 miles to a camp at the back of the town. Here we got about 4 hours sleep. Next morning the battalion went for a short march round the town while I had to go about 3 miles to find the way to the station from which we began the next part of our journey. In the afternoon I went down into the town & spent a few hours looking round.

We left this rest camp at 8 o/c on Friday evening & I guided the battalion to the station. Our train was, however, very late & as I was very tired I laid down on the hard coal dusty platform with my pack as a pillow & snatched a little sleep. When the train came in the men were packed in large trucks, 44 in each. The officers had carriages but there were 9 in mine so it was rather crowded & I only got a little sleep to relieve the tedious journey.

We reached the end of the railway journey at about 3 o/c in the morning & I then had to help superintend getting the horses & mules out of the train. By the time everything was clear it was 5.30 o/c & then began a very tiring march to the place (*Notrecourt*) where we are now. We had a had very little sleep for 2 nights, had been pretty busy, had very heavy packs to carry & had nothing to eat since about 6 o/c the previous (Friday) evening. We did not know where we were going, & were in a strange country & it gradually got hotter & hotter. However, we eventually reached the village where "C & D" companies are billeted, "A & B" Cos being in a village about 1½ miles away.

This is wholly a farming village & the men sleep in barns & c. Armitage & I share a bedroom & also have a sitting room attached, where our servants sleep. The country is entirely agricultural, every inch of ground, except the wooded parts, being devoted to some crops or other.

The people here are very good to us & my French is progressing splendidly through talking with them. Armitage is quite good & will soon have the accent & fluency of a native. It is, however, not very pure French that is spoken here.

We are still some way from the fighting line but we sometimes hear the guns – in fact as I write now I can hear them quite distinctly.

This last day or two we have had a good deal of rain – worse than in England as we tell the people here, whereat they get voluble in praise of the French climate.

There are no young men left in the village & the farm work is carried on by the older men & the girls.

My landlady is very taken with the little black cat Armitage & I had over our tent at Longmoor. You probably know the thing – a little fluffy cat with glass bead eyes & red ribbon round its neck & a label bearing its name "Fifi". If you could get me another I will give it to the lady & give her good luck. She is very interested in our superstition of black cats & good luck.

Although we are now in France we shall carry on with our training in route marches, musketry & c & we have also had instruction in the use of gas helmets.

Yesterday Captain Beckett & I went over to the town where Gen. French has his headquarters. I had to enquire about 9 bicycles that were lost in transit & we also did some shopping, buying footballs, boxing gloves & sundry articles of food & c.

The 6 officers of our Co. have meals in the Captain's sitting room. We have the ordinary rations & add to them anything we can buy locally. Thus we sometimes have a rabbit, chickens, & to-night two ducks. We also have had a melon, so altogether we are doing very well so far.

May I mention here some things I should like to sent out:- A little French dictionary containing, if possible, a little grammar, my football which is in one of my boxes & a pad of writing paper. I am afraid that I am giving you a lot of trouble, but please put all the cost & postage down on the account.

I will write as much as possible but you of course understand that if we get busy & move about much letters may be rather irregular. Also my letters to you should be regarded as general letters to all interested in my doings.

To sum up the experiences of my first week in France, I can truly say I am having a real good time & with the exception of being so far from home for I know not how long, I am perfectly happy & contented.

With fondest love to all

From your soldier son & brother, Ernest.

In Billets,

Somewhere in France,

Monday 1<sup>st</sup> Nov 1915.

My dear Mother, Father & all,

I must thank you very much indeed for the splendid parcel which has just arrived – from the look of it you must all have had a finger in its' composition. The body-belt and the helmet must have taken a long time to knit and will be very comforting with the cold weather fast setting in. So far, however, I have not felt the need for thick underwear, much less a body-belt. The helmet will also come in useful as a head covering when out on patrol in "No Man's Land" when Service Cap might show up against the sky. The old fashioned bulls-eyes were top hole and the biscuits I propose to place on our Company mess-table. Out here the Officers mess by companies (6 in each). We draw Army rations and supplement them by provisions bought at local farms or a near-by town. Even when in the trenches we do very well for we take in a good supply & can sometimes send a servant out to get fresh butter, eggs, new bread & c. Altogether we feed very well indeed and Armitage, our mess president does it all on about 10/- a week each. – a bit different from the 6/6 a day at Bramshott. We draw money out here by applying to the Adjutant who gets it from the Field cashier who gets Holt & Co to debit our account for the necessary sum. We draw 125 francs at a time, which at the present rate equals £4.9.4. A franc at present is therefore worth  $8 \frac{3}{5}$ , a bit of a depreciation. Since I have been out here I have drawn 250 francs & have 90 left. I bought about £7 out with me and thus have spent about £12 -£ 13 in  $9 \frac{1}{2}$  weeks, excluding the amounts you have spent on my account. In this time I have credited £33 in pay & allowances & £16:13;4 office pay, so you see I am saving money quite well & yet not stinting myself in the least. If I get back alright I shall have saved quite a decent little sum while doing my duty.

When one of us gets a cake, biscuits or anything of that sort we generally present it to the Mess and if some time, Mother, you could make one of your famous cakes and send it out in a tin box I am sure it would be much appreciated by all of us.

I must also thank you for all the magazines- they are very acceptable out here and pass from hand to hand. We very rarely get time to settle down to a book but a magazine is always handy to fill up a few odd moments. I think you send me so much light literature that I am apt to read them when I should be writing home. Such is the dire effect of your generosity.

Just to make sure that none have gone astray I should mention that I have not received a letter from you since I wrote my last letter. The letter you forwarded from the Institute states that they are waiving subscriptions this year in respect of members of HM Forces & returning the subs. in respect of last year to those members who enlisted or mobilised prior to last April. This is quite a generous action.

I expect this time you will really want an account of experiences, although as I have said before the bulk will have to wait till that glorious and eagerly looked for time when I shall be with you once again either on leave or permanently. I find I shall not have time to write much more as I want to catch the post but I will just tell you of the narrowest escape I have had so far.

It happened on Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> Sept. About 1 o/c pm I was sitting in my dug-out just thinking of going to lunch when the Germans sent a shell across which burst near enough to throw first as far as my dug-out. A minute or two later my servant Jackson came running up and said the shell had burst right on the parapet just where my men were getting their dinners & filled the big dixies or saucepans with mud & c. The dinner was of course quite spoilt so I went along to see what could be done. Just as I reached the spot another shell burst plumb on the parapet just 5 yards from me. Sandbags, clay & c were blown in the air and descended all around me. Of course I had ducked and so received much debris on my back and down my neck. When the deluge had finished I looked up found that while the shell had burst 5 yards from me the shell-nose of solid brass and weighing 5-6 pounds had passed about 2 yards from me and buried itself about 4 feet deep in the parados or back parapet. One of the men picked up a shrapnel bullet by my left foot. I dug out the nose cap and am keeping it as a memento. It is hardly scratched and when polished and mounted it will make a very nice paper weight. Altogether we had 4 shells land on the parapet and it was really marvellous that no one was hurt. One man had a slight cut on his nose & one had a piece of shrapnel through his cap. Of course at night we had to repair the parapet and the Germans probably seeing they had caused some damage swept the parapet with a machine gun. This of course interrupted our work especially as they also turned a searchlight on us but we managed to complete all the repairs on the inside, on top & on the outside of the parapet without suffering any casualties. Altogether several of us had very narrow escapes and we were extremely lucky to suffer only material damage to our parapet and the loss of then men's dinners. One man was walking with his mess tin to get his stew when one of the shells filled his tin with dirt. He emptied it out and proceeded when another shell performed a similar dirty trick and at that he gave it up in disgust and went back to his dugout dinnerless.

In order to catch the post I must close now with fondest love to all

From your ever

Ernest.

PS You will remember that I asked you to get the CSSA to send out 100 cartridges for my .38 Colt Automatic Pistol & 6 spare magazines. They have not arrived yet – could you hurry them up.

EK

Somewhere in France.

My dear Mother, Father & all,

Wednesday 26/4/1916

As I mentioned in my card yesterday I have received Marjorie's letter of the 19th & Mother's of the 20th & I must thank you very much for these letters. There is still a gap between the 6th & the 19th but I was very glad to hear from you again.

I don't suppose I shall recognise Marjorie when I come home; I expect she is getting to be quite grown up, at any rate her writing is getting quite grown up. I am glad you had such a good time at the Williams'. That is rather a nice new dress of yours Madge, but why do you wear the braces outside. (oh, hush)

Many thanks, Mother, for the parcel you have sent off. It has not arrived yet but I will let you know as soon as it does. I am sorry Father had no Easter holiday – he must get a day or two when I am at home.

I am quite well again now & am to rejoin the battalion to-morrow. They have finished their manoeuvre training & I believe are about 5 or 6 miles from this hospital. We are not due for the trenches for another 2 or 3 weeks.

I hear from the Staff here that leave re-opens to-day & I expect it is the same for my battalion, in which case I hope to get away about the middle of May or shortly after. So with luck I shall not have long to wait.

There is a chance also of my transfer to the RFC coming through soon – did I tell you that a little while ago they asked what qualifications I had to support the application & also wanted to know what are my height & weight.

I have again hopes of seeing you very soon & trust I shall not be disappointed this time.

With fondest love to all,

Yours ever

Ernest.

In Billets,

Somewhere in France.

My dear Marjorie,

Sunday – 7/5/1916.

I must thank you very much for your letter of the 1st instant. I always enjoy your letters very much & sometimes show the drawings & read extracts to my friend Bethell. You see his sisters are grown up & therefore he does not have the pleasure of being addressed as "boydie", "iccle ociffer" & c & of being ragged & chaffed & generally having a sister behave towards him as a flapper sister is entitled to behave towards her elder & dignified brother.

I am sorry I could not get home while your holidays were on but you may heard that there is a bit of a war on out here & cannot get home every evening with the regularity that formerly characterised my movements. I have no further postponement of leave to report, which is something to be thankful for & so it still remains at probably the first week in June.

I am looking forward to receiving copies of the photos you took with my (your really) camera. Do you develop them in Mother's big tank? – if so be careful you don't lose them.

We moved from the mining village last Friday & are now further back in an agricultural village which is much cleaner & prettier. I have a tiny little bedroom – so small that I have to wash outside in a sort of big landing or loft. Three of us have hired a sitting-room where we can write letters & c & where we can retire away from the Mess for none of us love the Major very much, as I have mentioned before.

Yesterday morning we were inspected by the General commanding the Division & this morning we all walked through a shed full of poisonous gas. This was to give us confidence in our gas helmets. We suffered no ill effects but the gas made our clothes smell & turned our buttons black. Rather a curious way of spending a Sunday morning, eh?

If I don't get leave pretty soon I shall be more like a tramp than an officer for after 17 months in the Army I am badly in need of new boots, uniform & c. I must tie myself together with string until the merry month of June comes along.

Please give my love to all at home & accept the same for yourself,

From yours ever,

Ernest.

BEF, France.

Monday, 24/7/1916.

My dear Mother, Father & all.

You are doubtless waiting to hear further particulars of the event briefly mentioned in my letter of yesterday, so here goes.

We were on patrol yesterday morning in rather dull weather the clouds being only 2,000 feet high. In the course of the patrol we wished to cross the lines & drop a couple of bombs, so the pilot endeavoured to cross just in the clouds still retaining a dim view of the ground. Unfortunately just as we go over "No Man's Land" the clouds thinned out and we were spotted from the German trenches. They opened machine gun fire on us and all of a sudden I received a severe blow in the side which knocked me off my seat on the floor of the nacelle which in these machines is very roomy. I was winded for a few seconds & on recovering felt on my chest, low down & slightly to the right, just as if a bullet had entered there. I investigated the matter but could only find a small cut on my leather flying coat & on the belt around it- nothing had passed through. Naturally I was at a loss to understand what happened.

You may have noticed that these flying coats have an outside pocket running slantwise across the front. Well, about 15 minutes later I pulled my handkerchief out of that pocket & there came out with it a machine gun bullet. This rather explained the matter. The bullet had struck me a glancing blow and its force had been transmitted probably deflected by my cigarette case – (the splinter proof one you will remember I bought at Richmond & then passed into my pocket.

On returning to the aerodrome I found a nasty bruise with a fair amount of skin removed, on my chest. The RAMC corporal attached to the squadron dressed the place at once & again this morning- he says it will be alright in a day or two.

It was without doubt a most extraordinary occurrence and a remarkable escape – the pilot was largely to blame for endeavouring to cross the lines at such a low altitude. I, of course, am keeping the bullet as a souvenir & if the CO decides to report me as “slightly wounded” then I shall be entitled to wear a piece of gold braid on my arm. The event was the talk of the squadron & the bullet was on show everywhere. If I get nothing nearer to than that I shan’t do badly.

I was up this morning a little after 3 o/c ready to fly at 4 o/c, but again the clouds were low. We went up twice to see what it was like, but it was not good enough so, so far, we have had another blank day.

Some of the men who have been in the fighting down south have come to this district for a rest. They have many souvenirs for sale & the other day I bought a very good German rifle, which I hope to bring home when next on leave.

I have been thinking of taking up drawing as a hobby for my spare time & am rather inclined to take the Preparatory Course of Instruction by Post from P V Bradshaw of the Press Art School, 37 Dacres Road, Forest Hill, SE. From his prospectus he seems to get very good results – the fee is rather high, being £5.5.0 in 5 monthly instalments for the course lasting about a year. But I am inclined to think it is worth it & in a criticism I have received from him on a sketch I sent up he says I should get on alright. What do you think of the enclosed copy of a drawing in a French magazine?

This morning I was shown over a French brick factory in the village. It is the only one in France working on the latest English system & was most interesting.

With fondest love to all, yours ever, Ernest.