

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



For Love and Courage

Edited by Anne Nason

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About the Book



Lieutenant Colonel E. W. Hermon died in a hail of bullets on 9 April 1917, the first day of the Battle of Arras, leading his men of the 24th Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers into attack. He was shot through the heart, one bullet slicing through the papers in his top pocket, including the four-leaf clover his wife had given him for luck. This could have been the end of the story but he left a hitherto unknown, unpublished and uncensored collection of letters which he wrote to his beloved wife Ethel and his children, Betty, Bob, Mary, Meg and Ken: 'the Chugs'.

About the Author



Anne Nason is the granddaughter of Lt. Colonel E.W. Hermon and the daughter of Mary ('Mairky' who bequeathed her the letters. Emigrating with her family to New Zealand in 1935 she was educated in that country, graduating with a BA degree from Canterbury University College in 1955. Returning to England in 1956 she worked in MI6 prior to her marriage to an Army Officer and has travelled the world whilst bringing up a family of two sons and two daughters. She lives with her husband in Wiltshire and currently has nine grandchildren.

FOR LOVE AND COURAGE



The Letters of Lieutenant
Colonel E.W. Hermon from the
Western Front 1914–1917



Edited by Anne Nason



preface
publishing

List of Illustration Credits



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Impey's House, Eton, 1892

Victoria Hermon

The Cliffe

Ethel aged sixteen

Ethel with her sister Vio and brothers Vincent and Victor

The family at Inverloddan, 1911

Ethel with Meg at Inverloddan, 1911

Jean Richards

EWH with the Chugs at Brook Hill, 1915

Ethel and the Chugs on the steps at Brook Hill, 1915

Meg with two of the family dogs, 1915

EWH sailing before the war

Betty looking for her dog

The History of King Edward's Horse

Portrait of Lt. Colonel Edward William ('Robert') Hermon

Jessica Hawes

Gordon Offord Buxton

EWH at Aldershot with King Edward's Horse

Troopers of King Edward's Horse, 1911

Hugh McKergow

Brook Hill House in the 1950s

Imperial War Museum

British troops helping with the threshing near Franvillers (Q4331)

British soldiers in billets (Q29051)

Souchez at the foot of Hill 119 (Q70424)

The ruins of the cathedral at Albert (Q1475)

Fixing scaling ladders in trenches (Q6229)

Scene on the road beside the Scarpe at Blangy at Arras (Q6453)

A British tank passing through Arras (Q6418)

The cavalry resting beside the St. Pol-Arras Road (Q3217)

Artillery moving up through Arras

A 9.2 inch howitzer in action (Q6450)

The scene on newly won ground near the Feuchy crossroads (Q5183)

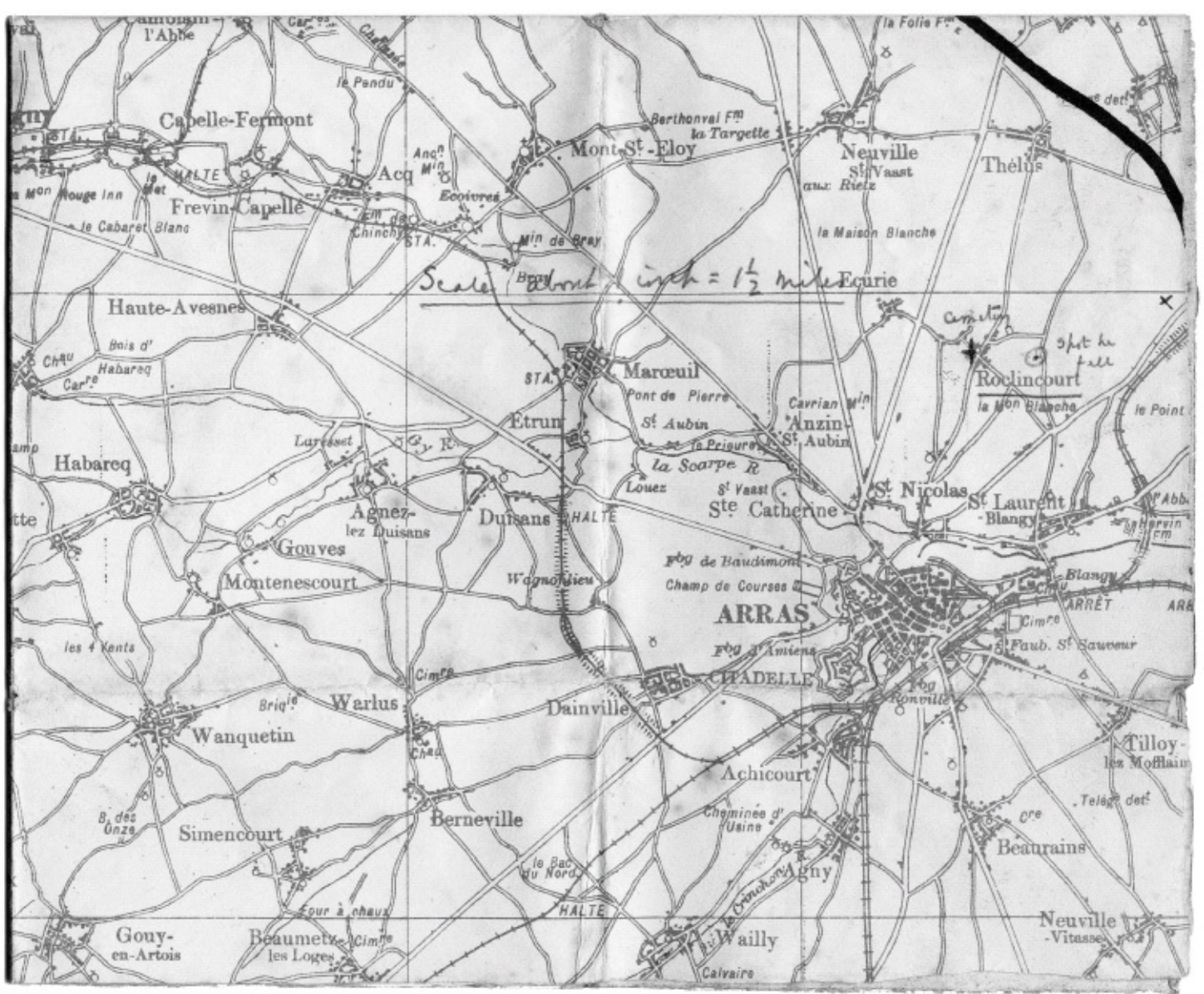
An 18-pounder quick-firing field-gun (Q5171)

Battle of Arras: an advanced dressing station during the battle (Q3216)

**CWGC / The War Graves Photographic Project
(photographs by Iain Smith)**

Marble headstone at Roclincourt CWGC

Roclincourt cemetery



The map sent to Ethel Hermon by Brigadier-General H. E. Trevor marking the spot where her husband was killed on 9 April 1917

Foreword



Lieutenant Colonel Edward William Hermon died on 9 April 1917, the first day of the Battle of Arras, leading his men of the 24th Battalion, Northumberland Fusiliers, into the attack. He now lies buried in the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery at Roelincourt, three miles from Arras. Mentioned in Despatches three times, he was posthumously awarded the DSO.

This could have been the end of the story, but my grandfather left a testament of his life and ideas in his letters to his wife, my grandmother, written nearly every day from his arrival in France two years before. Though keeping within the bounds of strict censorship, he was able to give a full insight into the day-to-day life of the cavalry officer in France and the frustrations that this caused whilst his men were kept on the periphery of the action. Later, when he gained command of an infantry battalion, the daily hardships of the infantry and the awful responsibilities of the commanding officer would become all too painfully apparent, despite a tendency to play down the severity of the situation in his letters home.

Born on 10 June 1878, the son of Sidney and Fanny Hermon of the White House, Balcombe, Sussex, he was known to his family as 'Robert'. Educated at Eton and Christ Church, Oxford, it was whilst he was at university that the Anglo-Boer War broke out and, answering the appeal to 'defend the Empire', he abandoned his studies and joined the 7th Queen's Own Hussars. He subsequently took part in operations in the Transvaal and Orange River Colony, receiving the Queen's Medal with five clasps. By 1904 he was a married man, having wed his cousin Ethel. She joined him in South Africa and the following year their first child, Betty, was born.

The regiment returned home late in 1905, and was stationed in England for the next six years. In the meantime, more children followed: Robert (Bob) in 1906, and Mary in 1908. It was shortly before the birth of his fourth child, Meg, in 1911, that Robert resigned from the 7th Hussars. The regiment was due to go to India and as he could not bear to leave his children behind, as was customary, he left the regular army and joined King Edward's Horse – a Special Reserve cavalry regiment largely made up of from the old Dominions. Given command of the Oxford and Cambridge Squadron, he was promoted to major.

After the outbreak of the First World War, in August 1914, Robert's regiment was required to undergo months of intensive training, to bring their 'part-time' soldiers up to the active-service standard of a regular cavalry unit. They were then mobilized to France in April 1915. Following Robert into war were his manservant Gordon Offord Buxton ('Buckin'), who had worked for the family since 1908, and who had elected to accompany the man he called 'master', as had Robert's groom, Harry Parsons. Both would remain with him throughout the war until his death.

My grandmother kept the letters from her beloved husband, each carefully replaced in its envelope, in the top drawer of her Georgian mahogany desk at their home in Cowfold, Sussex. The letters remained unopened after her death and, together with the desk, were left to her second daughter, Mary – or 'Mairky' – my mother. In 1935 they travelled with us to New Zealand, and as a child I well remember seeing the bundles of letters in the drawer, tied up with ribbon. Mary was only eight years old when her father died and even into her eighties the memory of his death remained almost too painful for her to read them. When she died in 1991, I inherited the desk with the letters still tied up in bundles in their drawer, virtually untouched. Once again they made the long sea journey back to England.

When finally I decided the time was right to read them from start to finish, I was struck both by the testament of love that my grandparents showed for each other and by the enormous amount of historical detail that the letters revealed. Throughout, my grandfather remained an optimist. He had a huge regard for the courage of the ordinary soldier who faced the appalling conditions in the trenches with humour and stoicism. The publication of these letters will, I hope, be a testament to them as well.

Anne Naso

A Note on the Text



In the two years before his death, my grandfather wrote almost 600 letters home to his wife. It has therefore been necessary to edit the collection down: some letters are reproduced in their entirety, others have had to be omitted altogether. My grandfather would often write in pencil, on message paper or on graph paper, when in the trenches or living in bivouacs, though my grandmother frequently sent him writing paper on request. His handwriting was generally easy to read, though at times it has been necessary to research names and places.

As a commanding officer my grandfather was expected to censor his own letters. Sometimes I have used dashes to denote names or places he should not reveal, and occasionally the letters were marked 'Opened by Base Censor'. He never disclosed his locations: these have been derived from the war diaries, regimental histories and Gordon Buxton's own diary, and added to the letter headings. The letters were generally dated, but where they were not I have used the postmark as an indication of date. Punctuation has been largely kept as in the original.

Anne Nas

Dramatis Personae



E.W.H.	Edward William ‘Robert’ Hermon
Ethel	Ethel Hermon
The Chugs	their children: Bet, Betsy – the eldest daughter Betty Bob, Bobbo – the eldest son, Robert Arthur Mairky, Pookie – the second daughter, Mary Migwig, Wig, Meg – the third daughter, Olga Margaret Ken – Kenneth Edward, known as Benjamin or Ben before christening
Addie, Adeline	Adeline Ryan, an unmarried cousin
Arthur	Arthur Hodgson, a friend and neighbour in Sussex
Brook Hill	the family home in Cowfold, Sussex
Dick	Robert’s younger brother, Richard Outram Hermon
Dogs	dogs belonging to the family at Brook Hill: Spoot, Ben, Nell, Teeny
The Governor, Pa	Robert’s father, Sidney Alfred Hermon
Juckes, Jucko	Dr Juckes, the family doctor in Sussex
Mimi, Ma	Robert’s mother, Fanny née Owtram
Nell	Robert’s sister, Nell Hermon
Pike	the chauffeur at the White House
Vic	Ethel’s elder brother, Victor Hermon
Vio	Ethel’s sister
The White House	Robert’s parents’ home in Balcombe, Sussex
Woolven	Tom Woolven, the gardener at Brook Hill
Barber	Lieutenant, later Captain, B. H. Barber, K.E.H.
Buckin, ‘Buccy’	Gordon Offord Buxton, Private, later Lance Corporal, K.E.H.; formerly Robert’s manservant
Chev	Cheviot Dillon Bell, Captain, K.E.H.
D.H.	General Sir Douglas Haig
Harry	Harry Parsons, Private, K.E.H.; formerly a groom at Brook Hill
Henry	Lieutenant Henry Simon Feilding, attached K.E.H.; later Captain Coldstream Guards
K	Lord Kitchener of Khartoum
K.E.H.	King Edward’s Horse, the King’s Oversea Dominions Regiment
‘Mac’	1. Captain, later Major, J. N. MacDonald, K.E.H. 2. Lieutenant, later Captain, D. MacKinnon, K.E.H.
Pongo	Lieutenant T. A. Izard, K.E.H.
Steve	Lieutenant, later Captain, P. D. Stevenson, K.E.H.

MOBILIZATION

ON THE EVE of the First World War, Major Hermon's regiment, King Edward's Horse (K.E.H.), was undergoing its annual training near Canterbury. With the declaration of war on 4 August 1914 the mobilization that Robert had envisaged became a reality, and the regiment was immediately assembled at Alexandra Palace in London, and then sent to Grove Park in Watford and on to Bishop Stortford for additional training.

Meanwhile, on 22 August at Mons, the British army – the 'Old Contemptibles' of the British Expeditionary Force – engaged in their first battle on European soil for nearly a hundred years. Although the soldiers fought with great bravery, they were forced to retreat. The auspices for a quick British victory were not favourable. Reinforcements for the regular army were urgently needed and the following April two squadrons of K.E.H., with Robert in command of 'C' Squadron, were mobilized to France as independent commands. He opted to take with him, as many cavalry officers did, his own horse – and his wife's – from their stables at Cowfold. 'C' Squadron was detailed to the 47th (London) Division and 'B' Squadron to the 48th (South Midland) Division. Just before the squadrons embarked on the 21st, a telegram of encouragement arrived from King George V, the Colonel-in-Chief.



31st July 1914, 11.15 p.m. – Old Park Farm, Canterbury

Darling mine,

It seems as if it will be some time before you see me home again, as if mobilization comes everyone seems to expect it tomorrow, we shall be here for a very long time. However we will hope that things will be brighter & perhaps Prince Henry¹ will work something with the Czar.

Last night every important bridge in England was guarded by troops & every warlike preparation short of complete mobilization has been made. We are quite expecting to receive orders to mobilize any minute. Grierson² inspected us today & I think the squadron did right well.

Give my love to the Chugs.

Ever your Robert.



3rd August 1914, 11.30 p.m. – Old Park Farm, Canterbury

Just put on all my clo' before going to bed to be ready for a hasty call.

Darling mine,

Just heard that the 'House' has sanctioned a complete mobilization of Army, Special Reserve & Territorials, so I take what opportunity I have of writing you another line as I expect to be on the march early tomorrow to Alexandra Park, & doubt if I shall have a minute for the next few days.

Squadrons are marching up independently I am glad to say. Oh! If I had a squadron of good horses

I wouldn't mind but it is not much fun route marching if half one's horses are going lame on the way. What this is going to mean for the nation I do not know.

It really is terrible that all this should come now over so small an excuse, but it seems Germany was mobilizing before Austria sent her ultimatum to Serbia. However let us hope the fleet will give 'em Hades before long just to put our tails up.

Love to you all my dears,
Ever your Robert.

❁ ❁

4th August 1914 – Old Park Farm, Canterbury

My darling Lassye,

Well there's no turning back now, for better or for worse we are committed to it.

We start to mobilize tomorrow sending all our horses back by train at once & going ourselves by train on Friday to Alexandra Palace, where we complete & then I believe we join the 2nd London Division (Territorial) & act as Div. Cav. to them. You will have to be awfully careful about money. You can't buy a thing in London except for spot cash. They won't even change a five pound note.

I don't know what I am going to do for servants but I think both Buxton and Harry are quite keen to follow master.

Love to you all,
Ever your Robert.

❁ ❁

Wednesday 5th August 1914, 6 p.m. – Old Park Farm, Canterbury

Darling mine,

I cannot get down to telephone to you as we are 2 miles out of Canterbury and the P.O. will not guarantee a call under 1½ to 2 hrs.

I hope you got home safe & sound and I wish I could see you, I probably shall next week with luck, but there is such a lot to do & one can't leave for long as so few know their work.

I think I shall have the new horse for a charger but haven't made up my mind yet. I'll see what can get out of our horses when we get them but it strikes me that if it comes to fighting I should like to be as well mounted as I could be.

Give my love to the Chugs & my dear doggies.
Ever your Robert.

❁ ❁

Thursday 6th August 1914, 5.15 p.m. – Old Park Farm, Canterbury

Darling mine,

I have had a very busy day today teaching my men to shoot & with some success. Don't let them take my new horse if you can prevent it. Say it is a registered charger & I shall want it sent to me on Monday or Tuesday.

I am afraid that our boat for next year is off. Will you write to Wally & say that owing to the

congestion in the N. Sea I am afraid our cruise must be off.

~~I shall be at Alexandra Park sometime tomorrow evening when things begin for us in earnest. Buxton is most anxious to go with Master and his wife is all for it too but I don't quite know yet. I think I shall send him back to take care of you. I should be more comfortable if I thought you had someone you could rely upon. Anyhow I shall think it over.~~

Faversham powder factory was blown up last night & it made a fine old bang & fairly lit up the sky. I heard that several folk were killed. Suppose they were working overtime as it was about 10.30 when it happened.

Best love dearie mine,
Ever your Robert.

❁ ❁

18th August 1914 – Grove Park, Watford

Darling mine,

Sorry I haven't been able to write you before but I have had too much to do.

I got in here on Sunday night after a very successful night and am camped alongside the grand junction canal. We bivouacked instead of going into billets as it was a lovely night and all slept in the lines. Exactly at midnight a steam barge came along the canal, blew its siren & the whole of the horses cleared off again. We were all lying on the ground, every man within 4 yards of his horse & the whole squadron except one horse went, & not a soul was touched. One horse broke its neck and several were badly injured. I seem to be cursed with bad luck with the horses but perhaps now all will go well. I have got the whole squadron in farms all over the shop, & one can't look after one's horses personally and it is most disappointing, but perhaps it will be alright.

These two stampedes have taken thirty horses from me & I can't mount the men, which is a terrible handicap. The administration of the squadron under these conditions is also most difficult & valuable time is lost assembling and dispersing to say nothing of the extra trouble of sending ration to six different places.

The C.O. saw Kitchener the other day & he told him he wanted to send 6 more divisions across Belgium that he had fully made up his mind that no regiment should go over unless it was trained sufficiently highly to do credit to the Nation. I was awfully glad when I heard it as I was afraid we should get fired out when I knew we were not fit.

Love to you all,
Ever your Robert.

THE FIRST STAMPEDE occurred in Alexandra Park. Many of these horses were hunters, unused to being picketed in the open. Unfortunately the commanding officer declined to picket them in the enclosed area of the grass tennis courts, and the racecourse had already been declared off limits. On the night of 13 August, 300 horses were involved in the stampede. All night the terrified animals tore round the park and in the morning, when they were finally brought under control, six animals were either dead or had to be destroyed and thirty more were injured.

❁ ❁

14th April 1915, 11.30 a.m. – Bishop's Stortford

My own darling,

God knows it was hard parting when I went to the S. African war, but hard as it was then, this infinitely harder.

Darling mine you don't know how you have helped me by being my own dear brave Lassie to the last. My work has been very hard these last few days and had you attempted to come to see me dearie it would have only made it so much the harder. I must be at my very best now to get my squadron on and no personal feelings must be allowed to interfere with the work for a moment.

May God watch over you & keep you & my little darlings till I come back again.

Goodbye my darling love,

Ever your Robert.

ON THE 14TH, Robert also posted a letter to his wife marked 'Open only when I am gone abroad'. Within it he included the following poem, written by Sheila E. Braine:

'Farewell'

*If, when you think of me in future years,
It brings a pang, and on your pale sweet face
The happy smile is lost 'mid gathering tears,
And grief usurps its lovely dwelling-place,
Then let me be forgot; alone, apart –
Soldier of England, counted leal and true
I shall sleep well 'neath alien soil, dear heart,
Sleep well – and dream of you.*

Underneath it he wrote:

Darling mine,

I thought this rather nice in case of accidents.

Ever your Robert.



20th April 1915 – Bishop's Stortford

My own dear Lassie,

Goodbye my darling & may God keep you & the dear little Chugs. Give them all a nice kiss from me & my darling I love you so for being so brave, & I wish I could write you all I have felt these last few days but somehow it doesn't seem to come now, perhaps it will one day later & then I will try to write you a really nice letter my love & tell you why I couldn't see you.

I did so want to write you a letter that would be a comfort to you & it isn't a bit.

Lassie darling, I pray every night I may be worthy of my men & of you.

Ever your Robert.

ON 21 APRIL, 'B' and 'C' Squadrons embarked at Southampton in the transport ship *Palm Branch*. Major Hermon was 'OC Troops' in the ship, which was escorted by two destroyers. The journey was uneventful with a moonlit night and a glassy calm sea. No submarines were sighted. The ship arrived

at 2.30 the following morning at Le Havre, where the squadrons disembarked. From here Robert was able to send a brief postcard to Ethel, which read: 'Landed alright. Robert.'

Robert's squadron entrained at the Gare des Marchandises. The journey to Lillers, via Abbeville, Boulogne, Calais and Hazebrouck, took twenty-four hours, with stops to water the horses and provide coffee and brandy for the men. The men arrived to the sound of gunfire – the second Battle of Ypres was in progress. The War Diary for 'C' Squadron, written in Robert's own hand, recorded:

Arrived at LILLERS, raining hard & detrained at once. Acetylene flares of greatest assistance, which was more than RTO [Railway Transport Officer] was, who invaded the trucks with an army of ruffians & threw the saddlery all over the place & it took hours to sort it in the dark while he went off to bed.

From Lillers, the squadron proceeded to Ecquedeques in pouring rain, arriving at 3 a.m. All ranks rested in a straw barn until daylight when the officers moved into an *estaminet* in the town until they found billets.

❁ ❁

26th April 1915 – *estaminet* in Ecquedeques

My own darling,

I got your dear letter today my own darling & I have simply loved it, both your No. 1 & 2 arrived together as my orderlies did not go in to Div. Hd Qrs until today. You can't imagine how cheering your letters are dearie & how they have brightened the day for me, not that it wanted brightening, we are all in the very best of spirits & really thoroughly enjoying every minute of the time. You wonder where I am & at the present time I am in the big room of the 'estaminet' & all the others with me. I think that in a few days I shall be able to give you more news but as I am my own censor I have to be particularly careful what I say & am no doubt erring on the over-cautious side.

Darling mine your letter hasn't blued me a bit & I have loved it. I am glad you felt as I did about the train business. Poor old Bell,³ he shook hands with me at the train with tears running down his cheeks & his voice so broken he couldn't speak.

We are really doing top-hole at present, Buxton is a top-hole cook, we only want some cakes & you might send me a box of cigars (Harrods Club Stock No. 1).

The staff of this Division are all charming & only too anxious to do anything for one. The G.O.C. came & had a dish of tea with us tonight & was horrified at MacDonald being left at home & has gone off to wire for him to come out to me at once. Poor old Mac he will be delighted. Will you ring him up about 8 p.m. & tell him this & that the G.O.C. told me to write to him and tell him to get his kit together at once. Tell him to bring food for himself for the voyage across as he might get on a ship that doesn't cater for officers. Tell him to keep it dark till he gets his official orders. Also tell him that he will have to act up to the highest traditions of the British army when he does come as I told the G.O.C. that his services were indispensable & that he was the best officer I ever met.

We move to our new billets tomorrow. I will try & send you one of my maps soon if I can & then you will be able to follow in the papers. I cannot of course tell you too much or absolutely promise the map but will do all I can. We are to be 5 days in the new billets & then move into the town to the Division.

There has been a good deal of heavy gunfire today & it fairly shakes the windows of this old pu

They tell me that Mondays are always 'lively' as the French do not shoot much on Sundays so have a double allowance of ammun. to get through on Mondays.

You would laugh at my efforts at French, they are decidedly crude. Those damned verbs fairly bore me. I think you might send me out my French grammar, it is in the gunroom cupboard. The men are doing really very well & I am pleased with them & don't care who sees them now. They are as keen as mustard & working top-hole. Give my love to the family and tell them that I will write to them as soon as I can find time. I must go to bed now dearie as it is late & I have had a tiring day.

All my love to you dearie mine & the dear little Chugs too.

Ever your Robert.

AFTER TWO DAYS, on 27 April, the squadron left Ecquedeques and marched to Fontinelle Farm, near Béthune. Robert's reference to the fact that Cheviot Bell was distressed at not being fit to go to France is confirmed by a letter from Bell to Ethel Hermon on 21 April, from the New Oxford and Cambridge Club, Pall Mall:

Dear Mrs Hermon,

I have been staying up at Bishop's Stortford to see something of the K.E.H. before they went this morning saw them off on the train so I thought perhaps you might like to get news of Major Hermon. He has of course been working awfully hard ever since they got their orders & has been looking rather tired, but this morning he was as fresh as he could possibly be & of course delighted to be really off this time & he's looking awfully fit.

Both squadrons looked awfully well & went off without a hitch: 'C' really are top-hole, some of the most unlikely recruits having turned out splendid. With a squadron like that of his own making I'm perfectly convinced he'll do something really big out at the front; I formed this opinion on my first parade under him as a trooper & I'm doubly sure of it now.

I shall miss him dreadfully myself as he has always been so good to me, especially now when I'm stuck as I am, with the doctors telling me that if I join up & start riding I'll probably crack up in a week & making me wait longer & longer. I'm afraid I'm a shocking bad patient but Major Hermon is always going out of his way to cheer me up.

My brother – lucky beggar – went off also this morning with 'B' Sqdn. Personally I'm quite one of the most fed-up men in England at the present moment; to be forced to do nothing except loaf & iddle just when loafers & idlers are the last people wanted & not to know when one will be able to get out to the front when one's simply dying to do the latter, is simply the limit.

Please give my kindest regards to Betsy, Mary, Meg & Bob, & whatever you do don't worry about Major Hermon as he'll be as safe as if he was over here for some time yet.

Yours v. sincerely,

Cheviot W. D. Bell

IN FRANCE, MEANWHILE, Robert's squadron were adjusting to life closer to the front.

— ❁ ❁ —

28th April 1915 – Fontinelle Farm

Darling mine,

Just a few lines to tell you I am still well & happy. The G.O.C. came out here this morning

inspect the squadron & seemed quite pleased with what he saw.

I have been in to dine with him tonight. He sent his A.D.C., a gunner captain, out in a covered Daimler to fetch me into the town and sent me out again in the car afterwards. We had a top-hole dinner. Very good soup, fried sole, lamb's fry, apricot tart, cheese & some really first class cigars at about 2/6 a time & I then took 2 frcs 50 out of them at bridge. It seemed so funny to be sitting there just having an ordinary dinner & the guns shelling away like steam just outside the town. There was some talk of a shell having fallen in the town during the day but no one seemed to be quite certain about it.

We are to have our first go in the trenches next week which should be very interesting, a troop at a time just to get accustomed to the shelling & to learn a bit about trench warfare & how it's done, then in case of need, we should know our way about a bit. I haven't been out yet on the German side of the town yet but hope to have a smell round there soon. Today has been simply glorious & the aeroplanes have fairly been on the go. It was almost too hot here at times & one wished one had thin clothes. You will have to send me my thin coats soon as these I have at present will soon be too heavy tho' one fine day don't make a summer & I daresay I shall be glad of them yet.

My love to you old dear.

Ever your Robert.

— ❁ ❁ —
30th April 1915 – Fontinelle Farm

Darling mine,

I had a most interesting day yesterday as I was told to go & reconnoitre the roads & lanes up to the trenches in case of the squadron being wanted suddenly. The sergeant major & I rode off together while watering our horses the S.S.M.'s⁵ horse stepped into deep water & was quite out of his depth & swam about like a dog but he made for the bank & soon swam ashore, but it was rather funny seeing him swim about. We then rode on towards the trenches passing several batteries in action, which was very interesting. We then reached the line where it was advisable to leave our horses & go on foot, so we tied them up to some trees & walked on, & saw some more guns in action. We went right on till we couldn't go any further without unnecessary risk & sat down & listened to the snipers sniping but no bullets were coming our way & we had lots of time to look around.

I have told you of the absolute tranquillity of the inhabitants, but even here right up within 800 yards of the trenches the ordinary agricultural work is proceeding just as tho' nothing at all was going on. Women and children in all the cottages along the roadside and all the fields around pitted with shell holes. Yesterday the Germans were not replying to our gun fire at all & I didn't see a single shell come over from them which was rather disappointing after a long walk. Today however Barber & Stevenson⁶ went over to reconnoitre & while they were having tea with one of the Regts just behind the trenches, the Germans put their shells into the next house.

Yesterday it almost made one laugh to see in the fields so close to the trenches, notice boards saying that crops were sown & that soldiers were not to walk or ride in the field!! As I walked out the Germans were fairly letting fly with an anti-aircraft gun at an aeroplane just over my head.

I have just taken over command for warlike purposes 180 cyclists & six officers in addition to my own commando, so in the event of a scrap I have now got quite an army!! Things have been pretty quiet in this sector of the line lately and not much doing. Today we had some field firing in a big sandpit near here & I was delighted with the way the men shot, really top-hole.

I have had some capital letters from the Chugs & enjoyed them very much, will you please thank them & I will try & write them a letter or two soon but one is very busy these times & it is only by burning the midnight oil that one gets a chance.

I asked yesterday how much I might tell you & they said there was no objection to saying where I was so long as I did not mention my unit or other troops in the neighbourhood. I am at present at Fontinelle Farm about 4 km outside Béthune.

I am enclosing you the map I promised you as you can then follow what is published in the papers. Of course I cannot tell you where the trenches are exactly, tho' really I don't see why I shouldn't as the Germans know that already as they are quite close together in places, some places not more than a few yards apart.

You might arrange to send us some good strawberry jam regularly & if you will send me a monthly bill I will send you a cheque from the mess. We want cakes, soup squares, Oxo, Bovril etc., & odd delicacies of sorts. We get plenty of good meat & bread & it is oddments we want at present. Cakes twice a week if possible as they [are] most acceptable.

We have had the most lovely weather you can possibly imagine & the lads are so overcome with the heat that they are absolutely worn out tonight. Extract from old Bob's letter 'Mum & I have been mending a punkture on Bettie's bicycle. We bloo the tar up——'.

We are going to have a turn in the trenches next week for a bit just to see how things are done. I am glad to say in our section it is impossible for either side to mine or sap as there is water only two feet below the surface so that is something gained.

The country here is as flat as a looking glass & is just like the dyke country from Rye to Hytly only as you will see from the enclosed map, small cottages everywhere & willow trees. I must go to bed now dearie mine.

My best love to you all.

Ever your Robert.

ALTHOUGH THERE WAS a stalemate on the Western Front in April 1915, there was continual shelling on both sides and daily incursions into no man's land by British troops, with resulting casualties. Just as 'C' Squadron arrived in France the German army used chlorine gas for the first time in the conflict against French and Canadian Divisions in the Ypres Salient. British army censorship prevented any mention of this escalation in weaponry in letters home at this stage of the war.

During May, 'C' Squadron were employed digging trenches, escorting prisoners and experiencing life in the trenches for themselves. First, however, the squadron needed to clean out the farmyard at Fontinelle Farm, where they were billeted, to reduce the risk of flyborne diseases to both soldiers and horses. The regimental history records that: 'This was at length accomplished to the great pride of the O.C. and the intense amusement of the local inhabitants.'

— ❁ ❁ —
Sunday 2nd May 1915 – Fontinelle Farm

My dear old Lassie,

I am glad you have begun to get my letters now but I had a terribly busy time getting here & not a moment for writing.

I am taking half my army into the trenches on Wed. night & the other half relieves us after 4 hours. I don't expect we shall do more than one turn just for experience, but I am most anxious to g

simply to see what it is like. Pretty beastly I expect.

~~I have been into Béthune this afternoon to call on the G.O.C. & see the staff about one or two things. Did I tell you I met old Howe the gunner we knew at Aldershot the other day & also Douglas Haig but he didn't know me & we had no conversation. We had a church parade service here this morning, a padre came over from La Bouvriere, quite a nice little man.~~

We are all very fit & well I am glad to say & thoroughly enjoying ourselves. Very comfortable in this little farm tho' rather smelly & the water is running out.

Best love to you dearie mine,

Ever your Robert.

— ❁ ❁ —
3rd May 1915 – Fontinelle Farm

Darling mine,

I got two top-hole letters from you today. Your number 8 came yesterday & I got 7 & 9 today. I suppose 7 got a bit lonely on the way & went off with some casual acquaintances in another bag.

The cake etc. rolled up at lunch time today & as we were having a somewhat meagre lunch the presence of 'pottie' was hailed with screams of delight, especially when we saw the truffles, but what ho! When the maid opened the lid – nearly blew the roof off & we thought the Germans were here with their asphyxiating gases. I am afraid in this hot weather it is no use sending home-made meat things as they don't keep. However the rest of the parcel was most acceptable.

You need not bother any more about cigars as I can get plenty here now that I quite like and the best kind cost 1d each!! Many thanks for sending the camera & I hope soon to send you some good photos to have developed.

We are going to have our first dash in the trenches on the 6th for 48 hours & I am going down early on Wed. morning to spend a few hours in the section occupied by Harry Cubitt's² battn just to see how things are done first by those who really know.

The men are all very fit & well I am glad to say, & so we are a very merry party, hardly stopped laughing since we left.

I had another nice letter from old Bob today & have got a piece of a German shell to send him when I have time to pack it up. Just a bit of copper from the driving band.

Best love old girl,

Ever your Robert.

— ❁ ❁ —
4th May 1915 – Fontinelle Farm

I have been out most of the day up near the trenches arranging about the troops going there on Thursday. I wish you could come and have a look round here & see how everyone takes things, it would fairly astonish you. Even right up in the front people treat it rather as a huge joke, not that they mean that the actual business isn't taken seriously, but that the lighter side is given considerable prominence.

I lunched within a few hundred yards of the front line of trenches with a brigade Hd Qrs & the Brigadier gave me a very excellent lunch ending with a capital pot of Paté & coffee. They were a

frightfully amused because the next brigadier at lunch yesterday was shelled out of his house & the had to leave their lunch & off it like steam.

I want you to arrange with Harrods, or someone like that, to send us a £1 box of stores every week. We want potted meats; soup; sweets, peppermint, Mackintosh's toffee de luxe. The jam is essential & must come without fail. We want chutney very badly too as it makes the ration meat go down better with rice & curry powder. Some tinned vegetables & perhaps some bottled Tiptree raspberries remain. Cherry jam occasionally but the main jam supply to be Little Scarlets. The 'Gentleman's joy' you sent went like wild fire & two or three pots a week would be fine. I met another of my boys today, the 2nd. I have met so far & he seemed to be doing alright & looked the part. We have had a lot of wet lately at night & the horses are now standing in a bog which a very heavy thunderstorm tonight didn't help very much.

However, the worst billet is better than the best bivouac & as they say we have the best billet in the countryside we are all right & still smiling. Henry⁸ has come out immensely since we got here & is doing very well indeed & he & Izard⁹ are the life & soul of the Mess, & keep us laughing all day. So far life has been most enjoyable & I hope it will continue to be so. Going to spend the day tomorrow cleaning out the farmyard so as to do away with all manure as a breeding place for flies. I fear the fly trouble will shortly be awful as there are so many unburied bodies between the trenches & the authorities quite rightly are doing all they can to minimize the danger. Flypapers & strings would be good things to send us also any kind of gauze trap that looks like catching them.

Best love dearie mine,
Ever your Robert.

¹ Prince Henry of Prussia – the Kaiser's brother and a grandson of Queen Victoria. He had recently visited his cousin, George V.

² General Sir James Grierson, commander Eastern Command. It is believed that it was due to a conversation between him and the acting CO, Major James, that the regiment was allowed six months' training before they were mobilized, in order to bring them up to the standard of a regular cavalry unit.

³ Cheviot W. Dillon Bell, son of the first New Zealand-born prime minister of that country. He eventually joined the RFC and survived the war despite crashing his aircraft nine times. His brother William was killed at Pilkem Ridge, Passchendaele, in 1917.

⁴ General (Sir) Charles Barter.

⁵ Squadron Sergeant-Major.

⁶ Lieutenants B. H. Barber and P. D. Stevenson ('Steve').

⁷ Henry Archibald Cubitt, grandson of the 1st Lord Ashcombe, was serving with the Coldstream Guards and was killed in 1916.

⁸ Lieutenant Henry Feilding, son of Lord Denbigh.

⁹ Lieutenant T. A. Izard, known as 'Pongo', had been recruited to the regiment on mobilization, had joined at Alexandra Palace and was still serving in 1919.

CAVALRY RESERVE, AUBERS RIDGE

ON 7 MAY, Robert and 2nd and 3rd Troops, 'C' Squadron were ordered to proceed to Beuvry, on the outskirts of Béthune, as part of the Divisional Reserve for an attack between Rue du Bois and Festubert, in an attempt to capture Aubers Ridge. Although the attack, which occurred on the 9th, failed, and the Reserve was not called forward, the squadron came under shellfire for the first time. Meanwhile the 1st and 4th Troops remained at Fontinelle Farm under the command of Lieutenant Barber and then proceeded to Le Touret and Locon to escort prisoners.

The failure of the British attack on Aubers Ridge was largely due to the shortage of high-explosive ammunition and the ineffective barrage. Many shells failed to explode and were known as 'duds'. The French attack on Aubers Ridge was part of the combined Anglo-French attempt to break through the strongly fortified German trenches. They succeeded in advancing three miles but at the cost of nearly 2,000 lives.

— ❁ ❁ —
8th May 1915 – Beuvry

My darling old girl,

I sent you a field postcard tonight as I have been on the move & am now at Beuvry. Things are very lively here tonight, our aeroplanes are fairly buzzing overhead – dozens of them & the Germans shooting like steam at them but so far as one can see their shells only reach half way. It however keeps the flyers up in the air at a good height & lessens their observing powers. We had 'some liveliness' last night as we are well within range of the German guns & all last night there was a rare old fusillade going on & once or twice today they have sent us an odd shell just to cheer us up, but they have all so far been at the other end of the village.

They liven up before dark a good bit & are just beginning, as I can hear the snipers hard at it now. The German lines run from Neuve Chapelle through Festubert–Givenchy, Cuinchy & on the south of us & I have just had a very welcome telegram to say that the French attacked & carried the German trenches six miles south of us.

Tell Tiptree not to send us any more gooseberry jam, or raspberry. We like the bramble jelly, strawberry, & their Morello Cherry very much. I must stop now dearie mine as I have to get up at 7 a.m.

Ever your Robert. —10.40 p.m.

— ❁ ❁ —
10th May 1915 – on pages from a field notebook – Le Quesnoy

I got two nice letters from you tonight as we had no mail yesterday. Tobacco & cigarettes are the chief things the men want at present. They are so well fed & they can buy so much, besides that they are putting on flesh like anything.

They are a lot of dirty swine these Germans but I hope this *Lusitania* business will do them a lot

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