

# Letters from the First World War, 1915



These are some of the many letters sent by staff of the Great Western Railway Audit office at Paddington who had enlisted to fight in the First World War. Here you will find all the letters and transcripts from this collection that relate to the soldiers' experience of the conflict in the Dardanelles, Turkey. (RAIL 253/516).

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**Dardanelles: 'an everlasting nightmare'**

Thomas Harold Watts, 18 June 1915, Dardanelles. **Born:** 28 August 1884, **Regiment:** Drakes Battalion, Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, **Died:** 11 September 1953

COPY.

Date Despatched 18/6/15      Received 4/8/15.

Dear Arthur,

I expect you are all wondering why I have not written, but it is an awfully effort to get all correspondence off, and be on active service at the same time. I can't say that I am enjoying myself out here. It's awfully hot, and we are eaten up by millions of flies. Life in the trenches is not a picnic either, we have about four or five days out of them and eight or nine in them. When we are out supposed to be resting, we have to go on working parties, digging etc, then wherever we are, we are always under shell fire, so it's not much rest after all. The last shell we had in camp, there was four killed, and seventeen wounded.

We have been under fire for three months now, and we should like a rest as the strain is tremendous on one's nerves. I don't think the troops in France get it quite as bad. Then again the only comforts we have are sent from home, as the country here is quite barren, and we cannot buy anything in shops. I would give a quid for a pint of beer down the club. Our food consists of half a loaf of bread per day, bacon and tea for breakfast, Bully beef & biscuits for dinner, and Jam for tea and cheese. Lime juice is served out about four times per week, that is, a drop is put into a dixie of water and a cup full served out per man, and rum is served out twice a week (sometimes) that is about four table spoon-fuls each.

We live in a trench and its a mercy it don't rain either wise we'd be washed away. The fighting just lately has been terrible. Our shells knock the enemy all ways and the sight in the trenches that we take is awful. We wear our respirators because of the awful smell of the dead. I'll never get the sight out of my eyes, and it will be an everlasting nightmare. If I am spared to come home, I'll be able to tell you all about it, but I cannot possibly write as words fail me. I can't describe things.

Wouldn't it be nice to be at Walmer again and you come down and see me again, I did enjoy that time, & also seeing Billy Dawson & Richardson. There seem to be a lot of fresh troops out here, but there seems to be no relief for us. Nobody loves us now Churchill has gone, we are nobodys pets. Its the Army first here, except when there is work to be done, and then the Naval Division have to do it. You know both my brothers have Commissions in the 4th. Bedfordshires and are at Dovercourt. My wife tells me she has sent me three boxes of stuff, I received one box, and I fear that one transport has floundered and another has been torpedoed, so I expect that is where my other two boxes are. Its awfully disappointing because I do look forward so to a bit of chocolate, and a few biscuits from home. We get cigarettes and honey served out to us, but it is too hot to smoke much, so that

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I don't miss that so much. I get a bath in a biscuit tin when I can, but when in the trenches I have to go all the time without a wash, so you can tell I am used to being dirty.

How are they all down the Club, and is Emmie still there, and is she better or not? Is Paice going to Loce this year? and where are you spending your holidays? Lord how I'd like a holiday, I am so tired & would ~~not~~ give anything to get away from this continual banging.

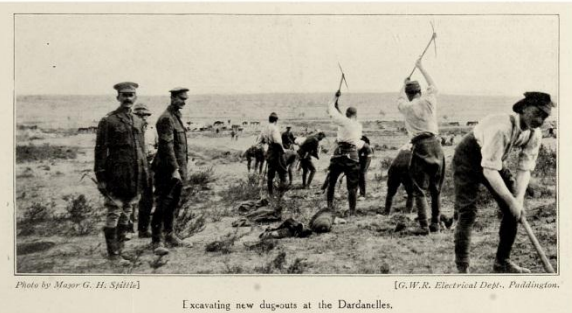
Please remember me to all the fellows who are left in the office. Mr. Miller & Goff, & Hills and Geo Williams and all the boys generally. I can't write to all separately, and also for details of my experiences you must wait till I get back, if ever I do, of which sometimes I despair.

The papers tell you pretty full accounts, altho' they are rather anticipating events as to our advancing. Now I must close old chap, and thank you very much for all your kindness.

Wishing you all the best ( etc.)

Yours very sincerely

(Signed) T. Harold Watts.



Excavating new dug-outs at the Dardanelles.

**Transcript**

Dear Arthur,

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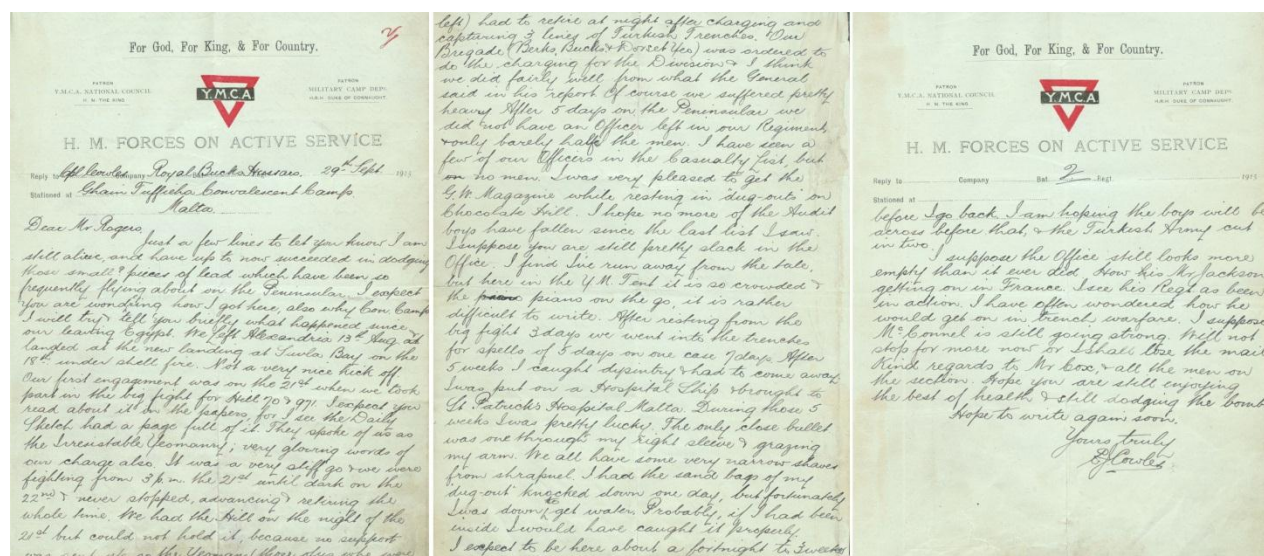
The papers tell you pretty full accounts, although they are rather anticipating events as to our advancing. Now I must close old chap, and thank you very much for all your kindness. Wishing you all the best

Yours very sincerely,

Harold Watts.

## Dardanelles: 'caught dysentery'

Ernest John Cowles, 29 September 1915, Malta. **Born:** 8 August 1893, **Joined GWR:** 29 June 1903, **Regiment:** Royal Buckinghamshire Hussars; Royal Army Medical Corps, **Regiment number:** 713; 434085, **Rank:** Corporal, **Died:** 1967



## Transcript

Dear Mr Rogers,

Just a few lines to let you know I am still alive and have up to now succeeded in dodging those small pieces of lead which have been so frequently flying about the Peninsular [Dardanelles]. I expect you are wondering how I got here, also why Con. [convalescent] Camp. I will try and tell you briefly what happened since our leaving Egypt. We left Alexandria 13<sup>th</sup> August and landed at the new landing at Sulva Bay on the 18<sup>th</sup> under shell fire. Not a very nice kick off. Our first engagement was on the 21<sup>st</sup> when we took part in the big fight for Hill 70 and 971. I expect you read about it in the papers, for I see the *Daily Sketch* had a page full of it. They spoke of us as the *Irresistible Yeomanry*; very glowing words of our charge also. It was a very stiff go and we were fighting from 3pm the 21<sup>st</sup> until dark on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and never stopped advancing and retiring the whole time. We had the Hill on the night of the 21<sup>st</sup> but could not hold it, because no support was sent up, so the Yeomanry (those of us who

were left) had to retire at night after charging and capturing three lines of Turkish trenches. Our Brigade (Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Dorset Yeomanry) was ordered to do the charging for the Division and I think we did fairly well from what the General said in his report. Of course we suffered pretty heavy. After five days on the Peninsular we did not have an Officer left in our regiment, and only barely half the men. I have seen a few of our Officers in the casualty list, but no men. I was very pleased to get the *GRW Magazine* while resting in dugouts on Chocolate Hill. I hope no more of the Audit boys have fallen since the last I saw. I suppose you are still pretty slack in the office. I find I've run away from the tale, but here in the Y.M.C.A. tent it is so crowded and the piano on the go, it is rather difficult to write. After resting from the big fight three days we went into the trenches for spells of five days, on one case seven days. After five weeks I caught dysentery and had to come away. I was put on a hospital ship and brought to St. Patrick's Hospital, Malta. During those five weeks I was pretty lucky. The only close bullet was one through my right sleeve and grazing my arm. We all have some very narrow shaves from shrapnel. I had the sandbags of my dugout knocked down one day, but fortunately I was down to get water. Probably, if I had been inside I would have caught it properly. I expect to be here about a fortnight to three weeks before I go back. I am hoping the boys will be across before that, and the Turkish army cut in two.

I suppose the office still looks more empty than it ever did. How is Mr Jackson getting on in France? I see his regiment has been in action. I have often wondered how he would get on in trench warfare. I suppose McConnel is still going strong. Will not stop for more now as I shall lose the mail. Kind regards to Mr Cox and all the men on the section. Hope you are still enjoying the best of health and still dodging the bombs. Hope to write again soon. Yours truly,

E.J. Cowles.

### Dardanelles: 'got married a week before'

George Shipley, 6 August 1915, at sea on route to the Dardanelles, Turkey. **Born:** 18 August 1878, **Regiment:** 10 Middlesex Regiment, **Regiment number:** 2594, **Rank:** Company Sergeant Major, **Died:** 2 December 1915

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 Atsea 6/8/15  
 Dear Nic  
 First of all I must thank you & Fred & F. Lewis & the others who sent me their kind letters of sympathy in regard to my brother Sam. I shall feel it very much at home as it was a great shock to our parents naturally, but it can't be helped as he was killed in a good cause.  
 I suppose you have heard how we left Bedford early on Sunday 1/8/15 & had a lovely trip down the old firm to Keyham we were well taken & I was glad to get aboard & get to my berth in which I am very comfortable with two other M.O.s  
 The men & Apts are on the top deck & are very comfortable but are foggy & doxy all right now.  
 The first part of the voyage the sea was very quiet, but lamed bit in a fog at night, so couldn't see it.

2  
 We then skirted the coast of Algeria & had a pleasant run to Malta where we stopped a full day, the higher officials went ashore for a few hours (including my dad & good time).  
 I cannot mention troops or ships so refrain from doing so but there was a hell of a lot.  
 Our next stop was Alcazar for 3 days where we had our best look round including a visit to the barracks.  
 The sea is fairly rough at this end rather hazy but always colour night & at day & dark at night.  
 All right out at night perfect darkness there as twilight to speak of, being dark at 7/30 pm.  
 We then wondered what we were off to but eventually reached Port Said & stopped a day, went ashore, & off to the Dardanelles which

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 We expect to reach tonight but Nic has been left behind in Egypt & we have got to stand in.  
 We are now passing through the Aegean Sea full of rocky islands, very much like the highlands of Scotland.  
 Buller has just lost his helmet over the side but is otherwise well. Has no milk from the states in Alcazar & I see across seas from the C.O. M.O. in Malta.  
 I am in the best of health at present & hope to go through alright. I expect you heard I got married a week before I left, what you did the same thing & it was quite a common occurrence.  
 Our vessel is a captured German liner & is full up but we have got a Greek crew with a few Portuguese thrown in so we are smacked lot.

Especially with Helderwen aboard. How are things going at the office, I have been away nearly a year & we still want some men out here. I shall be glad to see you soon & again just to keep in touch.  
 Harry Drown is going strong & wishes to be remembered.  
 I must close now as the my mail is being collected & I shall be glad to hear from you & kindly remember me to Mr. & Mrs. Smith & their & all kind friends too numerous to mention with kind regards to self & all.  
 Love  
 George  
 1915



### Transcript

Dear Nic,

First of all I must thank you and... the others who sent me their kind letters of sympathy in regard to my brother Sam. We all felt it very much

at home and it was a great shock to our parents naturally, but it can't be helped, as he was killed in a good cause.

I suppose you have heard how we left Bedford early on Sunday 18/7/15 and had a lovely trip down the old firm to Keyham, we were well laden and I was glad to get aboard and get to my berth in which I am very comfortable with two other Warrant Officers. The men and Sergeants are on the troop deck and none too comfortable but are jogging along alright now.

The first part of the voyage the sea was very quiet, we passed Gibraltar in a fog at night, so couldn't see it. We then skirted the coast of Algeria and had a pleasant run to Malta where we stopped a full day. The higher officials went ashore for a few hours (including myself) and had a good time. I cannot mention troops or ships so refrain from doing so but there was a hell of a lot.

Our next stop was Alexandria for three days, where we had another look round including a route march for the Battalion. The sea is fairly rough at this end, rather surprising, but a lovely colour, light blue at day and dark at night. All lights out at 8.00, perfect darkness, there is no twilight to speak of, being dark at 7.30pm.

We then wondered where we were off to but eventually reached Port Said, stopped a day, went ashore, and off we go to the Dardanelles which we expect to reach tonight.

Our kits have been left behind in Egypt and all we have got we stand in. We are now passing through the Aegean sea, full of rocky islands, very much like the highlands of Scotland. Bullen has just lost his helmet over the side, but is otherwise well...

I am in the best of health at present and hope to go through alright. I expect you heard I got married a week before I left, a lot of us did the same thing, it was quite a common occurrence.

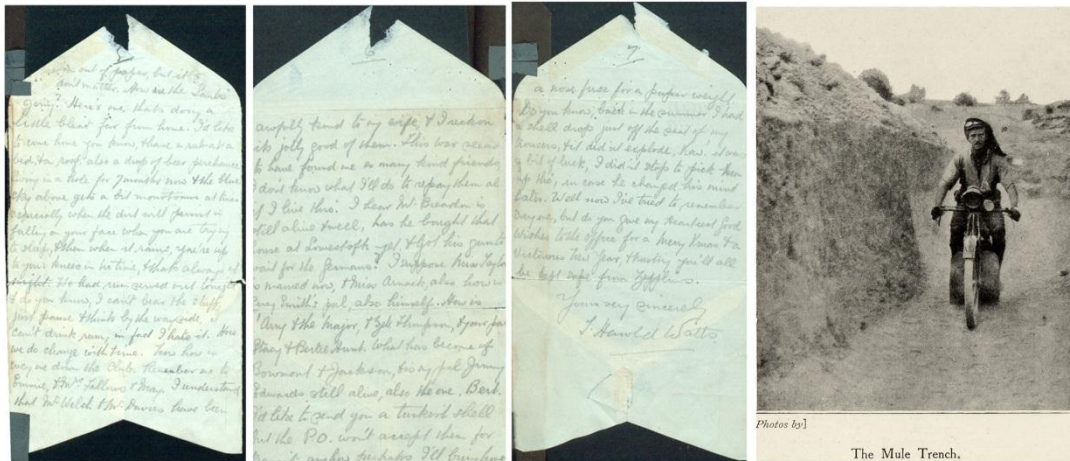
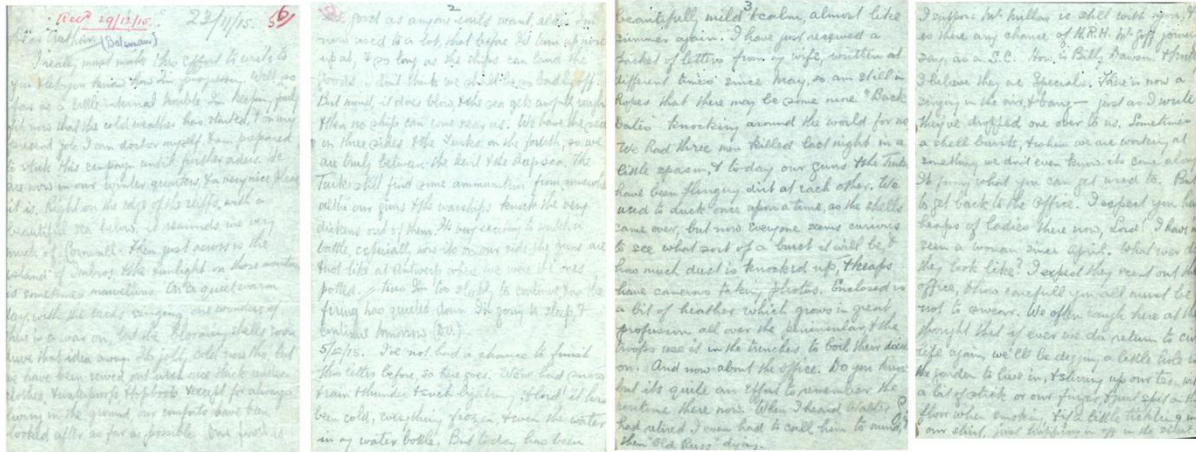


Our old boat is a captured German liner and is full up but we have got a Greek crew with a few Portuguese thrown in and so are a mixed lot, especially with Welsh men aboard. How are things going at the office, I have been away nearly a year... I shall be glad to hear from you now and again just to keep in touch... I must close now as they say a mail is being collected before we land... Yours sincerely,

George

### Dardanelles: 'heaps have cameras taking photos'

Thomas Harold Watts, 23 November 1915, Dardanelles, Turkey. **Born:** 28 August 1884, **Regiment:** Drakes Battalion, Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, **Died:** 1953



### Transcript

Dear Arthur,

I really must make this effort to write to you and let you know how I am progressing. Well so far as a little internal trouble I'm keeping fairly fit now that the cold weather has started, and on my present job I can doctor myself, I am prepared to stick this campaign until further orders.

We are now in our winter quarters and a very nice place it is. Right on the edge of the cliffs, with a beautiful sea below, it reminds me very much of Cornwall. Then just across is the island of Imbros, and the sunlight on

those mountains is sometimes marvellous. On a quiet, warm day, with the birds singing, one wonders if there is a war on, but the blooming shells soon drive that idea away. It's jolly cold now though, but we have been served out with nice thick underclothes, and waterproofs, and top boots and except for always living in the ground, our comforts have been looked after as far as possible. Our food is as good as anyone could want, also I'm now used to a lot that before I'd turn my nose up at, and so long as the ships can land the goods I don't think we shall be so badly off.

Mind it does blow, and the sea gets awfully rough and then no ships can come near us. We have the sea on three sides and the Turks on the fourth, so we are truly between the devil and the deep sea. The Turks still find some ammunition from somewhere whether our guns and the warships knock the very dickens out of them. It's very exciting to watch a battle especially now it's on our side the guns are not like at Antwerp where we were the ones potted. Now I am too sleepy to continue and as the firing has quieted down I'm going to sleep and continue tomorrow.

5/12/15. I've not had a chance to finish this letter before, so here goes. We've had snow and rain and thunder and such lightening, and Lord it has been cold, everything frozen and even the water in my water bottle. But today has been beautifully mild and calm, almost like summer again. I have just received a packet of letters from my wife, written at different times since May, so am still in hopes that there may be some more back dates knocking around the world for me. We had three men killed last night in a little spasm, and today our guns and the Turks have been flinging dirt at each other. We used to duck once upon a time, as the shells came over, but now everyone seems curious to see what sort of a burst it will be and how much dust is knocked up, and heaps have cameras taking photos.

Enclosed is a bit of heather which grows in great profusion all over the peninsular. And the troops use in the trenches to boil their dixies on. And now about the office. Do you know but, it's quite an effort to remember the routine now...

I suppose Mr Millow is still with you and is there any chance of H.R.H. Goff joining say as a S.C. (probably Senior Clerk)? There is now a singing in the air and bang just as I write they've dropped one over to us. Sometimes a shell bursts, and when we are working at something we don't even know it's come along. It's funny what you can get used. But to get back to the office. I expect you have heaps of ladies there now, lord I haven't seen a woman since April. What do they look like? I expect they scent out the office, and how careful you all must be not to swear. We often laugh here at the thought that if ever we do return to civil life again, we'll be digging a little hole in the garden to live in and stirring up our tea with a bit of stick or our finger and just spit on the floor when smoking and if a little tickling in our shirt, just hopping it off in the street.

I am out of paper (he is writing this on envelope), but it don't matter. How are the lambs going? Here's one that's doing a little doing a little bleat far from home. I'd like to come you know, and have a rub at a bed and a roof, also a drop of beer perchance. Living in a hole for seven months now and the blue sky above gets a bit monotonous at times especially when the dirt will persist in falling on your face when you are trying to sleep and when it rains you're up to your knees in no time, and that's always at night. We had rum served out tonight and do you know, I can't bear the stuff, just pause and think by the wayside, I can't drink rum, in fact I hate it. How we do change by time. Now how is everyone down the club? Remember me to Emmie and Mrs Fellows and May. I understand that Mr Welsh and Mr Davies have been awfully kind to my wife, and I reckon its jolly good of them. This war seems to have found me so many kind friends, I don't know what I'll do to repay them all if I live through this...

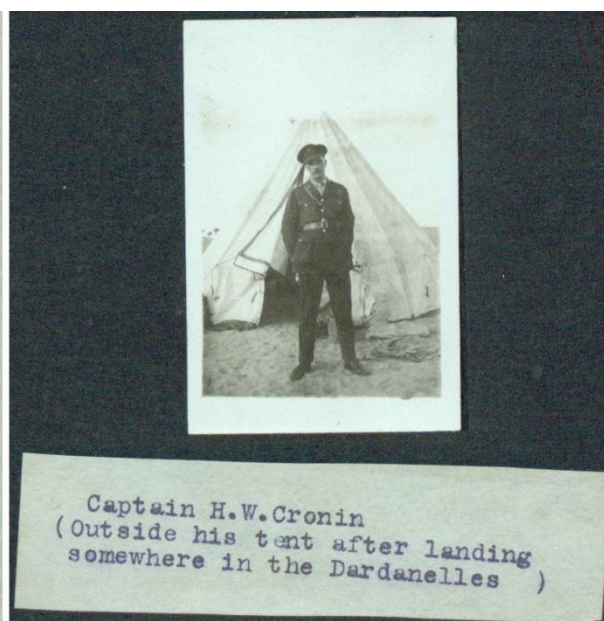
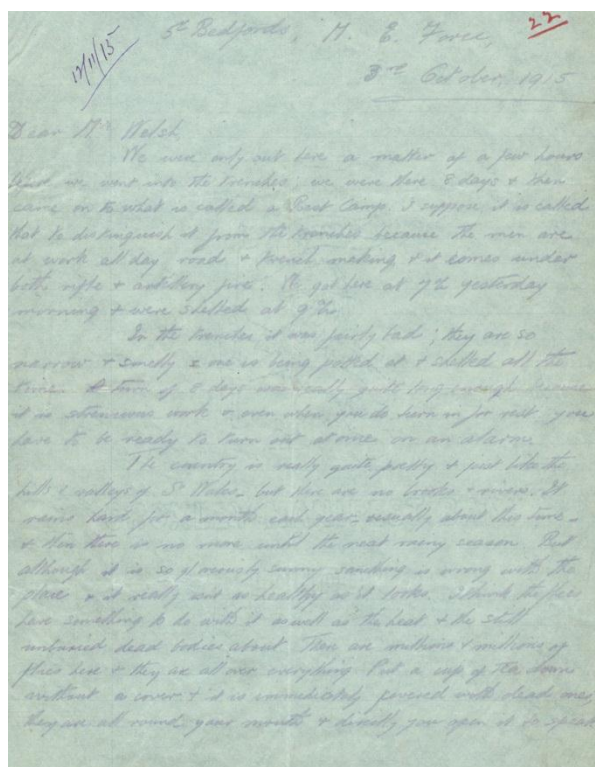
What has become of Beaumont and Jackson, and is my pal Jimmy Edwards still alive,... Bert I'd like to send you a Turkish shell but the post office won't accept them for transit, anyhow perhaps I'll bring home a nose fuse for a paper weight. Do you know back in the summer I had a shell drop just off the seat of my trousers and it did not explode. Kaw! It was a bit of luck, I didn't stop to pick him up though, in case he changed his mind later. Well now I've tried to remember everyone, but do you give

heartiest good wishes to the office for a Merry Xmas and a victorious New Year and trusting you'll all be safe from Zeppelins. Yours very sincerely,

T. Harold Watts

**Dardanelles: 'millions of flies'**

Harold William Cronin, 3 October 1915, Dardanelles. **Born:** 9 May 1880, **Regiment:** 4<sup>th</sup> Seaforth Highlanders. **Rank:** Promoted to Lieutenant in 5<sup>th</sup> Bedfordshire Regiment on 20 May 1915, **Died:** 2 December 1917 in Palestine, leaving £268 19s to his widow Muriel



Captain H.W. Cronin  
(Outside his tent after landing  
somewhere in the Dardanelles )

**Transcript**

Dear Mr Welsh,

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

In the trenches it was fairly bad, they are so narrow and smelly and one is being potted at and shelled all the time. A turn of eight days was really

quite long enough because it is strenuous work and even when you do turn in for a rest you have to be ready to turn out at once on an alarm.

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

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

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

Mess dugout too.

Everything here is named after the Regiment responsible for the making or taking. For instance the road we made from our trenches to this camp is called 'New Bedford Rd' and the ridge we took and now occupy is called on the army maps, Bedford Ridge. I have just been filling in and colouring

my map and find it is one of the most, if not the most, advanced line of the lot. Standing on that ridge it is possible to see what a lot of country we have taken and now hold, but there is nothing to get wildly excited about. Each position is strengthened as much as possible before another attempt is made to push on and the whole thing is just steady progress. Something might happen suddenly, I only hope it does.

We have had some very big ships out here and they have been bombarding the forts heavily now for some few days, and there are cruisers, monitors etc. standing in the bay helping the land batteries to shell the trenches. You see a flash and then wait a long time before hearing the boom and the shriek of the shell passing over our heads, almost together, then look round quickly and see the burst of the shell in or over the trenches sometimes before hearing the explosion. The first we know of shells aimed at us is the bang of the explosion, and it is too late to get out of the way. Three officers were laid flat on their backs the other day without any hurt except to their dignity and farther on six men were buried without one being injured. It isn't always like that though.

There is quite good bathing here when we can find time to go. As the beach is in full view of the enemy, and comes under their shell fire, it would not appeal to the nervous. We never keep closer together than ten yards when we are undressing and swimming in hopes that the Turk will not consider one man worth the price of a shell. We have had some casualties through the men keeping too close together, but after washing out of a teacup for a week or more it is worth a bit of risk to get rid of some of the trench dust and smell and feel and look clean again. And really is the best bathing I've ever had. The water is quite warm and clear.

All the hospital work is done on board a ship that stands in the bay. If the cases are serious or lengthy they are transferred to one of the hospital ships that calls daily and then go to either one of the bases or back to England. We land troops night or day in spite of the fact that they come under fire so it is possible for a man to be on his way back wounded, by



the same ship that bought him from the base, without ever having landed.

We had a grand voyage out. All the officers had either staterooms or 1<sup>st</sup> Class cabins and the food mostly was just the same as we should have had on an ordinary cruise to India or Australia, wherever it is that the Cruise Line calls. The usual cabin stewards and waiters were in attendance and it was difficult to remember that we were not exactly on a pleasure trip. We did enjoy those two weeks...

Kind regards,

Yours sincerely,

H.W. Cronin, Lieutenant.

I am acting as captain until some of the others come back from hospital.

**Dardanelles: 'parched with the heat'**

George Shipley, 8 November 1915, Gallipoli, Turkey. **Born:** 18 August 1878, **Regiment:** 10 Middlesex Regiment, **Regiment number:** 2594, **Rank:** Company Sergeant Major, **Died:** 2 December 1915

Boyce M. G. F. ✓  
8/11/15

Dear Nic

Thanks very much for your interesting letter of Oct 7<sup>th</sup>. I wondered when I would hear from someone at the office.

Also many thanks for your good wishes & congratulations for my marriage, which I have conveyed to my wife & I am sure she will thank you all very much.

Will tell you a little about our experiences, we started off mysteriously one Sunday from Liverpool on the captured German liner 'Kerbling' in a bad boat. The W.O. had 2<sup>nd</sup> class quarters so I was all right, food very fair. Submarine pickets every night.

**Transcript**

Dear Nic (Boyce),

Thanks very much for your interesting letter... I wondered when I would hear from someone at the office. Also many thanks for your good wishes

and congratulations on my marriage which I have conveyed to my wife. I am sure she will thank you all very much.

Well to tell you a little about our experiences, we started off mysteriously one Sunday from Devonport on the captured German liner *Derflinger*, not a bad boat. The Warrant Officers had 2<sup>nd</sup> class quarters it was all right. Food was very fair. Submarine pickets\* every night for one of the four companies, lights out... at seven or half past. Stole by Gibraltar at night in a fog expecting it to be torpedoed. We did reach Malta in due course after skirting north African coast, spent a day there, went ashore, had a few drinks which we needed being very hot and then on to Alexandria for three days, ashore every night, not a bad place, of course the lower men didn't go, except for a route march on the Saturday. Our movements were kept very secret and we couldn't find out what was to be done with our division, we then pushed to Port Said and had a day there. All of a sudden, we received orders to sail and soon found we were off to Gallipoli as we were passing through the Aegean sea, which is as you know full of pretty islands. Some hours before reaching Lemnos, the naval guns could be heard booming and we ran into the magnificent harbour there full of shipping and life. After a day there, we pushed on to Imbros 4½ miles from Sulva Bay during the afternoon they treated us to a naval shelling of Achi Baba, which is really the other side of the peninsula, but they shoot over the hills and mountains here. It was a fine sight and many of our chaps went sick at once. At night (Sunday 9/8/15) our good ship made for Anafarta Bay where a new landing had been effected two days before. 900 rounds, four days' rations each, as much as a man is expected to carry and they dumped us over the side in lighters [a type of flat-bottomed barge] at 7am, a short journey through the boom defences and we were ashore waiting for something to turn up.

Bivouacked on the beach and were put on unloading lighters till about 10 when the Turks spotted us and started shelling, two men killed and four wounded to start with and we lost a few more, wounded during the day although naturally we took what cover we could. I had one or two near me whilst getting a timber out of the hold of a lighter but managed to dodge them all right. At night my company received orders to take picks

and shovels up into the firing line which was about five miles away half way up Chocolate Hill... Well Nic the 10<sup>th</sup> were soon in the thick of it as we advanced across the salt lake in extended order.

Rifle fire now we had to dodge and many of our chaps got hit rather seriously I have since found out. I was glad of a rest at the foot of the hill but had to push on again and deliver the goods, after feeling about in the dark for some time our guide led us in single file up behind the firing line, where we laid down, bullets were whistling round but we managed to escape them... The enemy were yelling for all they were worth and I was glad when our captain ordered us down again to the beach. This took us some hours and when we reached the place, the other three had gone up to reinforce the firing line, so up we went again the next day about 6pm, nearly all things are done here in the dark as we are in view all the time. We again advanced across the take from Lala Baba, my heels were nearly raw through new boots and I eventually had to rest for a fortnight later on. Well on our right was a hill burning furiously with many a chap caught in the flames and so perishing (not our regiment).

We finished on rather a feathered bed and did not find the other Company 'til next day, it was a night, we were all parched with the heat, and no water. Dried up and had to dig ourselves in, it's no light job this hiding being... like an ostrich, 'til you make a hole large enough to get into and make yourself head cover.