

WILLIAM HENRY MILLS

Born Riverton 10 March 1887 - Died Waimate 10 May 1972

The following are some of the letters sent by William to his family whilst on leave in England during the first world war. The typescript follows his words exactly and the only changes made are in punctuation and the insertion of paragraphs.

404 High St
Brentford

October 25/17

My Dear People

I have written two letters, one to Annie and one to Jack explaining that I was going to write more and ask you to read them and then hand them round to the rest of our people to read. So here I am and I must try and keep my promise. You will see by the heading of this letter where I am. I gave Mabel quite a surprise when she opened the door in answer to my knock but has got over the surprise now. Well I must keep my promise and get along with this letter to let you know about where I have been and what I have been doing during this last 12 months.

I am in England on leave and I must make the best of my chance for uncensored letters while I have got the chance. So here goes. On leaving sling camp we were entrained right down through Kent to Folkstone and embarked for Boulogne. About one and a half hours took us across the English Channel and we marched through Boulogne to a camp about 2 miles away, stayed the night at what is commonly known to the soldiers as "blanket hill", only as far as we were concerned we did not score our one blanket here. Put in a very cold night and entrained next day for Etaples (pronounced Etaps). I honestly think that this place is one of the coldest places ever I have been landed in and to soldiers it has always proved to be a starvation place. However we lived through it, or at least we existed, and put in some pretty heavy training in what is known to soldiers as the "Bull Ring" and after being there for about a month we were bumped on to the train and found ourselves on the way to the trenches.

We were on the train all day only not travelling and about four in the morning, after a few hours travelling, we found ourselves dumped off at some station where there was plenty of mud. We had a march of about 2 and a half hours and we pulled up at a place called Sailloy and got our final touch up with gas helmets etc. After a couple of days most of the old mates were parted from one another (myself and my old mate included) and went off to join up the different battalions that we were posted to. Another march, and we found our battalion, the 4th at Fleurbaix (pronounced Fleurbay). They were out of the trenches at the time and in billets so we were lucky.

We soon found ourselves packing up and getting ready for the trenches where we done 4 days in Reserve and 4 days in Supports on the Fleurbaix Front and were out again in billets just in time for Xmas. It was Xmas of a sort but I need not stop to describe that to you just now. And here I may as

well explain to you that this is just a short detailed account of my wanderings. I know nothing about dates as I did not keep a diary after I left England so everything is just as it is in my nut.

On New Years day we were due for the trenches again. But I was sent with a few others for a course of instruction on the Lewis Automatic gun for 8 days. During the 8 days I had 3 and a half hours instruction on the gun so you can guess how much I know about it. But it was a spell and I joined up the company again when they returned to billets. I must tell you that on New Years Day I got my first taste of Lecromatory gas commonly known as teargas, which makes one shed tears at the eyes and nose too. While we are out in billets we generally have to go somewhere in the vicinity of the trenches on fatigue work. So even being in billets is not always sweet.

In February we were shifted a little to the right and took over a sector of the Levantie Front. During this time I was put on as Company linesman to look after the telephone lines connecting up with our company. This was supposed to be a very quiet sector but I think Fritz must have got to know that the NZ's were there and made it pretty willing with his shells and high explosive shells and there was quite a lot of our boys put out of action on this front.

After finishing there we had some more shifting about and a bit more long marching and we were shifted to Plugsturt (known to soldiers as Plugstreet). It seemed to be our luck to be poked into all the hot places as Fritz made it pretty willing here too especially with his minnies (minniwefer) and the trenches were just a sea of mud. Many a time I thought I was going to fall right through and find myself in NZ again but it wasn't my luck. There is a lovely bush here known as Plugstreet Wood and I believe is the private property of the King of Belgium and before the war was used by him as a private hunting ground.

Now I had better ring off for tonight and tomorrow night I shall "carry on". You will be able to pick the right rotation of the letters by the dates. Ta Ta for tonight.

BILL

October 26/17

I think last night we got as far as Plugstreet so I will carry on from there. From there we shifted a little to the left (north) and occupied the sector in front of Hill 63 and as usual did not have a very pleasant time. Our company lost a good few during our last turn in (but I am getting a bit ahead of myself, I knew it would take some thinking out from now on).

In April we were withdrawn and after 3 days hard marching we landed a little bit out of Saint Omer and settled down for our training for Messines. After doing a fortnights solid work we marched back to Hill 63 (close to Romain if you are looking at a map). We went into the trenches here again and had a lot of fatigue work and it was in May that our company got rather a bad knock so now I can carry on again after getting ahead of myself.

I don't think it is worthwhile telling you anything about Messines as I gave a bit of an idea what it was like after we came out from there and hope you got my letters alright. We were about 70 hours in Messines from the time we hopped over our sandbags till we were relieved and after that we went back in Reserve. After that we marched to and had about 24 hours rest and after that we were told that we had to go in again and hunt Fritz out of his ditches. On the right (south) of Messines we thought our luck was dead out but just before we set out from our billets to go to the trenches we were told that Fritz had evacuated the place where we had to go but nobody knew how far back he had gone. It had evidently been a bit too hot for him as we were closing round on him at both sides and we were not sorry he had gone back. He made things very nasty and uncomfortable for us for about 48 hours and then we were relieved.

In a few days time we were back again, only this time we went a bit further on as Fritz had been chased back a bit more - this time we were in for 6 days. During that time we never had our clothes or boots off and occasionally the rations were very scanty. Some days we got two meals or at least they were supposed to be meals, but we lived through it alright.

After we came out from there we went to a place that is spelt something like this Doulou. This was supposed to be our promised rest after Messines and the place where we were supposed to be billeted in a big cherry orchard, that is according to the yarn that was pitched to the people in NZ. There were two cherry trees where we were and as soon as the French people saw the soldiers coming they started to get the fruit into a safe place. We certainly got a few cherries but we had to pay for them and we were only in this place for two

days. So don't believe all they try to tell you in NZ.

Here is something else that causes us to say something when we hear it mentioned. The NZ papers printed that during the time our boys were in the line at Messines, every man was issued with two lemons and they got plenty of water up to the men and hot stew and tea - nothing of the sort. We saw no lemons - I don't think any of the 4th Batt. saw any. We were holding the line after we advanced for over 70 hours and in that time we had no hot meal or a hot drink of any sort. We did not expect it but we hate to think of the way the heads and others try to ring in these yarns to people who have no chance to contradict. And as far as plenty of water I can only say the same again - nothing of the sort. We got some water in petrol tins that were never washed out and it tasted as if there was as much petrol as water. I think I had better knock off now for tonight and have another shot tomorrow night. Ta ta and be good.

BILL

October 27/17

With this letter I will carry on from the cherry orchard. Well as I was saying on my last letter we stayed there for two days and the second evening we were there we had orders to be packed up early in the morning and ready for the road but nobody knew where we were going. In the morning we made a move and General Goodley (?) had a yarn with the NCOs and told them where we were going and that we would get our spell for sure when we came back. So in a couple of days time we found ourselves about 2 miles out of Poperinghe and right amongst the French army or to be exact where the French and English armies joined up with each other. There was a big push coming off and we (the rifle brigade) having gained the name of being good workers - some old French General saw our work once - we were sent up here to dig gun pits and dugouts and help the preparations along for the big push. We got on well with the French soldiers and we put in some hard toil here as well as long marches to and from work.

When we had finished our job the French sent along a barrel or two of wine to our camp and I think every man had a pint of wine. I had two pints, good too. We pulled down our tents in the evening and had a snooze on the grass till about 2 in the morning and after a light breakfast were on the road by 3 and finished our days march by 9/30 that morning. That night when the rations were issued there was a bottle of champagne between every three men. This was more gifts from the French troops so evidently we had pleased them with our work. The French soldiers always treat us real well but the usual run of Flemish people round about where we have been are quite the opposite and I think are about the dirtiest people that ever you could find. Perhaps living in the war area may have a lot to do with it.

Next day we were on the go again and after another good march pulled up at our billets. That is the place where I mentioned in one of my letters that we were living just next to the pigsty and a nice big heap of ripe manure right in front of our door. If you walked outside in the dark three paces from the door would land you in the manure heap but even that did not kill us. While we were there we were told the good news that No 2 platoon was picked out to do special training and that we were to be the model platoon of our Battalion. Of course that was better than going into the line and it wasn't long before we could go through an inspection every morning without even a speck of dust anywhere. And the way we drilled after a bit of practice was good to see. We had a good time and an easy time and plenty of good food for 6 weeks and then we had to be broken up on account of our brigade shifting.

So we went back and rejoined up the company. We had a few

shifts fast and furious from now on and I forget our movements but will do the best I can. There may be a few little bits missed out so I will start again with our work on the Ypres front. We travelled there by motor bus and had to make our own camp on arrival. We were to do fatigue work - cable laying - and were told next day how much we had to do. It was 10 days work but they believed we could do it in 8 if we worked well - that would mean two days back at the camp resting, and how the men did work too, stripped right to the trousers and everybody getting tanned with the hot sun. We were always glad to finish the days work and get back to the camp. But the way we were treated nearly broke the mens hearts, we had to push further on nearer to the line with our work and of course were often under heavy shell fire. (October 28/17) We were right beside Hill 60 but it is not much of a hill now. With all the explosions it is nearly levelled. Well the job went on for 11 days and then being too close to Fritz we had to do the rest at night. So you can guess how much spell we had. We stayed here just a fortnight and were away again on the Sunday afternoon.

We marched about 3 and a half miles in a terrible heat till the sweat was running out of our clothes, then entrained and were jolted about from one place to another all night. About 5 or 6 in the morning we got off the train and were told we had a march of 9 miles before breakfast but we were allowed to smoke. A guts full of smoke aint much for marching on but we hung it out and rested for the remainder of the day. Just a few days in this place where we were enjoying ourselves and one night we had orders to be ready to move in an hour. We were going back to Ypres again and started away about 10 at night by motor bus. After we arrived at our new place which proved to be on the left (north) of where we were before it was still night and we tried to get some sleep but all our bedding was a ground sheet and overcoat and no roof, just out in the open and the night was cold and damp.

Next day we made up our camp but nobody was in love with the position. There were batteries of our own naval guns all around us and a big ammunition dump at the back. But it will be enough to say just now that we had Fritz shells land right in our camp and leave our Battalion short of 7 men. Our work up here was the same as before only I think under greater difficulties. We had to walk 6 miles to our work, do the work which was pick and shovel and walk home again, the whole lot generally taking about 12 hours and very often at night time. We were well fed up of cable laying and after about a fortnight had another move back to Poperingale but still going up past Ypres to work. From there we got orders to proceed to the line, that we were going to be put into another stunt and nearly every man fairly worn out and in need of a good rest but we had to go. So from now on I will tell you all about our last go at Fritz.

I know it won't be pleasing to read and it is not pleasing to think about but it is the truth. I was through the lot and I hope I have never got to go through anything like it again.

Some of the English troops had been sent in on an advance a few days before us. They were held up by machine guns and suffered very heavy casualties. Nobody seemed to know if there was any of them left or where they were, so our work was to find them, relieve them and await orders after about 5 hours trudging along through mud up to our knees. It was like pulling your legs away from your body to be continually dragging them out of the mud. About midnight we found the Tommies so evidently our Officers had some idea where to go. The Tommies did not need to be told we came to relieve them. They took off out of it as soon as we arrived, there were not many of them left they had been badly cut up. Their dead were thick all around and some of their wounded were still out in front. It was an open battlefield with no trenches, shell holes and mud everywhere.

We were in sections of about 8 men in a section and we dug little trenches to get shelter from the enemy's fire. We stayed there for the remainder of the night and all next day and in the evening our Officer came along to tell us that we were going to advance in the morning and supposed everybody would be glad. He did not stop long with us, a sniper saw him and drilled a hole in his arm with a bullet. However we hung on all that night in the rain and mud and cold and about 5/30 in the morning our barrage of artillery fire opened up and once again NZ was on the move. Our battalion was in reserve and we had to wait in our trenches 48 minutes after the advance started then go forward and if necessary help those in front of us

Oct 29

This waiting proved to be our death trap. When our guns opened up it was only natural that Fritz would open up his guns too and he fairly smothered us with shells. There was a section dug in behind us, I heard the shells coming, heard it pass and then I looked round. It had landed the section just behind us. Two of them were left, and they came forward to our hole for shelter. About 5 minutes later it was our turn and a shell burst right amongst us. There were 8 in my section and then these two who had just come into our hole. We could not wait to see how many had been killed as our 48 minutes are just up and we must be away. But there is only two riflemen and the corporal to go. We made for our objective with shells and bullets whistling all around us and not a few of us were caught. We soon found out that the others had been held up at the first objective and had encountered heavy machine gun fire from the Fritz pillboxes so we could not get any further. So we then dug in and

consolidated our position.

At 3 in the afternoon Fritz made a counter attack. We got our artillery on to him and he did not reach our front line but made things very uncomfortable with his artillery. The party I was with were sheltering in a big hole right in a Hun cemetery. Fritz put another shell there and some more of our boys crossed the Great Beyond. I suggested to some of my mates that we move to another position and 4 of us made a dive for it. We know the machine guns were playing right where we had to go and out of the 4 of us two landed a bullet each. I laid flat in the mud and applied a field dressing on my mates wound and told him to make for the first aid post as fast as he could. He was wounded in the arm. So now I was the only rifleman left in the section. I had to cross this same place again to get with the rest of the company as I was now amongst the Scotties. So I made a bold dash for it, my feet got tangled and I spread myself out in the mud. Just as I fell I heard a crack and a bullet went over me. Evidently he had a shot and missed and I am still left to tell the tale. At midnight we were to be relieved. It was showery and cold all the time and men looked like a living ball of mud. We had no overcoats and our clothes were sopping. The relief turned up about midnight and we were moved back to what had once been a brick building, laid down on broken bricks and (Oct 30) went to sleep with shells falling all round us.

Just before daylight we were up again and went back to be in reserve. Here we got a good issue of rum which helped to pull us together a bit. Before night set in we were dug in and had dried our clothes a bit during the day. The next day was Sunday and some of us had to go back and bring out our wounded. Some of them had been there for 3 days. Between weakness and the mud 4 men could not carry a wounded man on a stretcher any more than 20 yards at a time and in one case 6 men were 6 hours bringing down one wounded man. It just feels as if your legs are being pulled away from your body to try and drag them through the mud and I think if the people of England could see the Ypres battle front they would enforce peace being proclaimed. Sunday night we went well back, had tents to sleep in, a good meal and best of all a blanket each. I might tell you that we had been 4 and a half months without a blanket of any sort and it was enjoyable to curl up in one again.

Now there isn't much more to tell you about where I have been. Perhaps you will say in this last stunt we failed to get to our objective. Yes we did although we certainly made a good push. But the whole concern was too hurried. Probably it had to be done. Our men (I mean the 4th Battalion) were done up with hard work and not a days spell to be had and then to be rushed from fatigue right into the line without any preparation was too much. To stay for days and nights on end wet and cold was really hard to put up

with. Can you wonder at us being half dead with colds. I have been for a month now with a broken husky voice and some times can scarcely raise a whisper. I did not think I could endure quite so much as I have been through but as I say I am still alive. In a couple of days from now (this is Nov 2) I must go back to it all again after living in a civilised way in England for 12 days but I hope not to the trenches. When I left France our NZ boys were about 10 miles out of Boulogne enjoying the rest they'd had been promised after Messines. I must be more exact, my battalion are just out of Boulogne. All the NZRB are about in the same area and the whole of our NZ Division are out for a spell. My battalion were waiting for reinforcements. I have been given charge of a section of men and the day I leaving to come to England, the captain said you better sew a stripe up Mills, you are going through orders tonight. As far as I.....