

1855

1858

Modbury

England

7<sup>th</sup> March

1918?

My Dear Ethel

As you will see by the above heading that I have at last got to Blyth on Furlong, came over yesterday week & have to leave again on the 13<sup>th</sup> inst so that half my holiday has gone, arrived in London from France at Midnight & was all day Thursday getting my Pay book fixed up & on Friday went to Retford which is close to Sheffield to see Susie (Mrs Rippingale) & came back to London on Monday night & on to Plymouth & Modbury on Tuesday, so that I have been travelling some.

On Saturday night Susie, her husband, the two young ones, & myself went to Sheffield & had a look at one of the Theatres there & came back by train leaving at 11 o'clock the same night. Sheffield is a very large town, & the place where the trams stop put you in mind of Circular Quay, there being so many trams, of course there wasn't any Harbour or water but they



have a Terminus very similar to the Quay & there were dozens of frames. The buildings are very large & there are several Theatres there so that you can see its someplace.

As I said before that I came here on Tuesday, caught the Cornish Express on the Great Western Railway, at Paddington Station, at fifteen minutes past ten in the morning, & landed in Plymouth at three in the afternoon & came straight on to Modbury which is a small but very pretty place about 12 miles from Plymouth & yesterday Frank Coyle & myself drove over to Kingbridge to the Stock Market in pouring rain, Well the Stock Market was one of the fiercest that I had ever seen, they have it in the street the sheep are penned up in about five or six in a pen & the cattle all have a number put on them & are yarded up in a corner without any fence of any kind but the walls on either side of the street. Well the store cattle & sheep were sold by Auction & the fat stock are allotted by a committee this has to be done now <sup>on account of</sup> ~~on account of~~ England being rationed & so that any



a Butcher cannot get more than his share. A butcher has to hold a registration ticket to buy & they allot him the stock according to the amount which he killed during the month of October, last, he had on a certain date to produce his books & show the amount of meat he used & on that; the Committee allow him 50% for instance Frank Coyle used two Bullocks & ten sheep, well they now allow him one bullock & five sheep, the sheep are judged at a certain weight by two experts & the bullocks are put on a weighbridge & weighed alive, when they are then classified & graded according to quality, when this is done <sup>the</sup> allotment Committee then allot the cattle & sheep to the butchers, if the butcher is not satisfied he can either leave it or take it & if he does not take it he cannot get any more until the next market as he is not allowed to buy anything off a farmer & a farmer is not allowed to sell to a butcher, he must have his stock graded & allotted. I think this is a very good thing as every one then gets a fair share, at present the rationing for meat is not



in force in the Country Districts, but this comes in on the 25<sup>th</sup> of this month, it came into force in London last week. A poor person is allowed  $\frac{1}{3}$  worth of meat a week & children under a certain age half that amount, so that an adult gets about a pound of meat a week & a child half that amount, so that people will not get fat on the meat they are allowed, but even with that small allowance people can manage as they have plenty of ~~substitutes~~ substitutes, the principle things they are short of are Sugar, butter & meat, but they have ample of other things. Well Sweetheart I've told you of how things are in England & will now try & write you of my wandering from the time we left to go to France until we landed back & hope it will be interesting, although I have probably written you a good deal of it in my previous letters, I have not mentioned the names of different places, you will probably have read a lot of these names in the papers



On the 29<sup>th</sup> Dec 1916 we embarked on the train at Amesbury Railway Station & arrived at Southampton after a train journey of between two & three hours, we then embarked on the Hums craft (a boat taken from the Germans) & sailed about 8 o'clock the same night, we were then a fully equipped 4 gun Battery, we arrived at Havre on the French coast next day after having been anchored for some considerable time waiting for the tide so as to get into the locks, it was getting on towards night before we got all our wagons & equipment unloaded from the boat & we then had to march to a rest camp about four or five miles away, we landed here about 8 o'clock & left again next morning about 5 o'clock to take the train for the front where we were to go into action, we left the station at Havre on the morning of the 31<sup>st</sup> about 11 o'clock & travelled all day & all night arriving at a town called Ballieux about noon, so that we saw the Old Year out & New Year in in the train, after getting everything off the train in good order, I, one of the Officers & several men had to go on ahead with an Interpreter



to the Billets allotted to us, This was a  
farm house about a mile from the village  
of Strazeele ~~about~~ which ~~is~~<sup>is</sup> about six or  
seven Kilometers from Balicourt, (to find the  
difference in Kilometers & miles, you multiply the  
former by six & divide by 10 viz  $7 \times 6 =$   
 $42 \div 10 = 4\frac{2}{10}$  miles this is not exactly right but  
near enough) we were billeted here until the  
14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> ~~of~~<sup>of</sup> January & put in the worst time we  
have in France both horse & man having a  
very rough time (I had a real good place  
myself but was laid up for a week) the Battery here  
was then brought up to a six gun Battery  
we getting the right direction of what was then  
the 27<sup>th</sup> Battery, about the 15<sup>th</sup> the battery moved  
into Mayon line right at the Village of Strazeele  
& on the 18<sup>th</sup> January, our left section went  
into action at ~~Chappelle~~ Chapelle Armenteries  
I having to go with them, we landed at Armenteries  
(about 11 ~~mi~~<sup>mi</sup>) at dark & took our guns & ammunition  
to the position, after unloading the stores etc  
I was given a map & told the wagon line  
were at a certain place, & not far from  
a farm called "Jesus farm" well we  
got to our destination about 11 P.M. &  
after a very trying day it being bitterly  
cold & snow had been falling all day.



(2)  
When I say that the wagon lines were five  
miles from the guns, <sup>for each gun the distance we had to find out</sup> having found the  
locality of the wagon lines & being in  
charge, the first thing was to find a  
Park for the wagons & limbers & the next  
to find a place for the horses, after some  
trouble & considerable fumbling about in  
mud we got these things fixed, well the next  
thing was the men, well we found the huts  
such as they were & got everyone a bit  
of Bread & Cheese (with not even water to  
drink) from our next day's rations & rolled  
into our Blankets at 10 o'clock in the morning  
tired & cold, thus finishing our first day  
of going into action, on each succeeding  
day ~~until~~ a further section came into action  
& I had to go to the guns to meet them &  
bring <sup>the wagon lines etc</sup> the wagon lines, also to take the rations  
to the men at the guns, "there being three sections  
in a six gun battery" it took us three  
days for all to get into action. Having to go  
to the guns every night with rations or ammunition  
for a month I used to see a good deal of  
Armenteries, it is a very large place &  
there are some very fine buildings in it,  
including what was a very fine Cathedral  
but very much knocked about. Shells, etc.



At the time of our going into action in Armenterie there were a lot of civilians living there, but these had to shift away some six months or so later as the Germans bombarded the place very heavily also sent a lot of gas over which done a great amount of harm to the civilians.

The position where our guns were, was in a very fine ground of what had been some gentleman's Mansion & which was now used as Officers Quarters, Office & Signaller's Station etc, The summer's having very comfortable day outs adjoining the gun pits, Naturally being our first time in action we were very keen & were very careful over trifles which we laugh at now, During our period in action here we did a lot of shooting at the German lines & Bunkers but we got very little hostile fire in return, I remember one Sunday night the guns fired about 900 rounds in about an hour & a half. Our Brigade but ~~not~~ we here got the first casualty, this being a chap named Bob Fowler (he was at one time in the U.S. Bank at Hull & his father lived at Warrandera) a signaller in the



26<sup>th</sup> Battery, he was laying a telephone line & got hit in the leg & had to have his leg taken off. After being in this position for six or seven weeks we had orders to hand it to an Imperial Battery & to take up other positions, four of the guns going to La Blizet & the other two going to Douplines (both of these places still being on the outskirts of Armenterie, we had also orders to move our Wagon Line to Armenterie, & when this last order came there was a lot of disappointment among the drivers as they had worked hard putting up Stables, Huts, etc & making things as comfortable as possible for both men & horses, but when we got to the Wagon Lines allotted to us in Armenterie we were quite pleased with them as this had at one time been an old factory & we had one portion for Billets for the men & another part for our horses & both horses & men were much better housed & we were also very much closer to our guns being only about 3/4 of a mile from the 4 guns & about 1 1/2 miles from the two guns.

About the beginning of April orders came for us to pull out of action, the Brigade to go for a rest, we had a three days



March, which took us through Stenwerck  
 (our first camp being here) Ballieul, Hazebrouck  
 (both of these towns being very nice places our next  
 camp being near the latter town at a Village called  
 Wallon Cappel from here we went through  
 St Omer (another nice town) to a small place  
 called Gues Gues (pronounced Quack) this  
 was where we were to rest & do some training,  
 but not being able to get suitable billets  
 for the men we moved on about 4 miles to  
 a little Village called Brunembert, We were  
 now about 16 miles from the Seaport of  
 Boulogne & stayed for about 10 days,  
 At the beginning of the march we had very  
 rough weather the second <sup>day</sup> there being snow  
 & hail, but from this on the weather was  
 perfect & during the 10 days at Brunembert  
 we had quite a pleasant time. As many  
 as could be spared were allowed a day's  
 holiday to Boulogne, about 20 a day went  
 at one time. I had to go on one occasion  
 for stores & started early in the morning & did  
 not get there until 1 P.M. it took me a good  
 part of the rest of the afternoon try to get  
 our requirements, (but was not able to get too much  
 for which I was thankful) we left for Camp about 8 P.M.  
 but did not reach it until 5 o'clock in the morning.



I had a very hard case of a Driver with me & he used to want to pull into every Estimanet on the road (we came back a different road) his excuse being to find enquire the way, but he had a drought on & was trying to loose it, well you can guess the fun we had when he being in a jolly good humour used to try to enquire which way to go & the people not being able to understand English & neither one of us being able to understand French, it was the best joke I was ever in, however he could always make them understand ~~that~~ he wanted a drink & always managed to buy one, however about 12 o'clock we struck about 20 French Soldiers in an Estimanet & frightened the deuce out of them, they ~~being~~ drinking after hours & my Driver got in amongst them & after they had several drinks around, they put us on the right track, things went very well for about 2 hours & we got to a place where 7 roads run into one another & as we did not know which to take decided to camp until daylight. At daylight we were just harnessing the horses, when our Captain came along, he also having ridden to Boulogne & seemed to have had a very warm night as the first thing he asked



was if we had anything to drink, he told us which road to take & as I said before we got back to Camp at 6 o'clock in the morning.

Nothing was said excepting the Captain asked us to have a Whiskey.

When he had orders to get back into action, we moved back to a place called Petit Motier, this being the wagon line & the guns were moved into positions at Fleurbaey & we stayed in this position for a about a fortnight, when we moved on to take part in the Messines Stunt, Our gun positions were close to the village of Ploegsteert (called Plug Street) & we stayed here until some little time after the Battle of Messines, this was where we got our first casualties from the Germans, the first was an Officer named Carrol who was wounded in the leg & eventually had to be sent back to Australia, & we also had a chap named Whitecross killed, this being our first death. A few days after the Messines Stunt which was the 7<sup>th</sup> June, we moved into another position about a mile & a half away & in more advanced positions. During all this time we were in both of these positions we were subjected to constant shelling from the German batteries, but were very lucky & seemed to



have a charmed existence, as we only  
 had two men killed in these positions, we had  
 had several sent away with light wounds & a  
 touch of gas, but, <sup>when</sup> you consider that it  
 was very common to have five or six  
 Hundred shells dropped around the  
 Battery position in a day & those of all  
 sizes from the biggest to the smallest, it's  
 a wonder any of us escaped, one night  
 we got gas for 8 hours so that you see  
 that we were not exactly having quite a  
 peaceful time of it. After we moved from  
 Ploegsteert we went on to Messines Ridge  
 & had two or three different positions on the  
 now famous Ridge. The first was about  
 a mile to the left of the village & the next  
 was straight ~~behind~~ behind of what, I should  
 say had been the village as it is now only  
 a heap of brick dust, we were in action on  
 this ridge for some time & ~~that~~ got some  
 very hot times, was nearly caught myself  
 on two separate occasions when going to  
 the guns with Ammunition. Before I go  
 any farther I might say that the wagon lines  
 are generally from 4 to 5 miles behind the  
 guns, & that stores are taken up every night &  
 Ammunition when required, the horses &



wagons going right up to the guns.  
 The horses get quite used to the firing of the  
 guns & take very notice of them, but they know as  
 well as we do the difference is the sound of the  
 guns & the burst of a shell even if they don't  
 see them. I forgot to mention that at Poperden  
 on one occasion when delivering Ammunition  
 that we got caught in the fog & several of the  
 horses got jammed, but am pleased to say  
 that all got over it. You must not think that  
 because we are so far away that we do not  
 get any shells at the Major Line as it  
 was about this time that we used to get our  
 wagon lines shelled ever day, but our luck  
 was still with us, although the other Battalion  
 had horses & men killed we had so far escaped.  
 One day he was at it all day & put his  
 shells all round us but never a one right  
 into our lines, this particular day he killed  
 several horses & men right at our front  
 entrance & several men just at rear &  
 the shells were dropped at both sides of our  
 line within 12 feet of the stables. I might  
 say that we shifted our horses when he was  
 shelling so heavily & only the Pgt Major &  
 myself stayed behind, there was some  
 iron flying about that day.



About the end of August we again got orders to  
 pull out of action for which we were informed was  
 to be a lengthy spell, we started on our March on the  
 first of September & passed through Ballinul & Hazebrouck  
 & camped at a place called Staple, the next day  
 went on to a small place called Merck St Leger,  
 near a very nice Village called Languebergues,  
 which was to be our destination. The country here-  
 abouts was very pretty, & there was a nice lot of  
 orchards round about this district with the fruit  
 on the trees just about ripe, so this was a great  
 change for us being able to get fresh fruit, the  
 people here were also much nicer than they are  
 nearer the fighting line. There was also a very fine  
 stream of water here called the Ode River, ~~after~~  
 when we had only been here for about three or four  
 days we had orders to get back again into action  
 & on the 5<sup>th</sup> Sept we moved off again, going a different  
 route which passed through the Villages of Cousegue  
 & Heekin, both the latter place being our camp for the  
 night, then through Aire to Marbecque which was  
 our next stop for the night, next day we went  
 through Hazebrouck, Steenvorde, Peninphelot to  
 Dickelbruch, these two latter towns being in Belgium.  
 At Dickelbruch we had our Major Lewis & the day or at least  
 night after the same went ~~to~~ into action close to



Zillebake, It was here were we got the most of the casualties we have received up to date, we had a lot of men killed & wounded in this position & it was a fairly warm shop, although we got some much warmer afterwards, but did not receive so many casualties as in this particular place. There was a board road that was a little over a mile long that we had to go to along when going to the guns & one night when taking stores to the guns I was on this road for nearly two hours & Fritz was shelling the whole of the time, but he was a bit out in his range & was dropping the shells from 50 to 100 yards too far & as it was very soft ground where they were falling did us no damage. On this particular night I saw a very fine sight, some of the shells that were sent over were incendiary shells & the night being a very dark one they used to light up the whole place, well in front of us at the end of the board road was a ridge & some of the teams that were carrying ammunition had to go along the top of the ridge to get to their guns & whilst one team which had un'loaded was coming back, a big incendiary shell landed just behind the wagon, well to see the horses going at full gallop & the riders riding for all they were worth & this big shell lighting the place up as clear



As day was something never to be forgotten.  
 The morning after we landed at Diekebusch one  
 of our other batteries had a shell land amongst  
 their men whilst they were have breakfast &  
 about seven men were killed & a large number  
 were wounded, I think if I remember right the  
 casualties were 44 in all including those suffering  
 from Shell Shock.

Whilst in action here we face the Germans a very bad  
 time & made a big advance & took a large number of  
 Prisoners (when I say we, mean the British force here at the  
 time) & of course had to advance about a mile with  
 our guns & in the position taken by our Battery we again  
 got a lot of heavy shelling & received a number of  
 casualties but not so many as in the last position  
 we were in, ~~and~~ I forgot to mention that these  
 positions are near Epre (pronounced E-pray),  
 well we shifted our position twice later on & also  
 our Wagon Line. In the last position which was  
~~at~~ in front of Paschendale, we had a  
 particularly hot time of it, it was a red hot  
 brand of Hell. When here we attempted the task  
 of taking Paschendale & our infantry succeeded  
 in getting into this place, but had to leave it on  
 account of the New Zealanders being held up by  
 Barb wire, where they practically got cut to  
 pieces by the German Machine guns & our own



men consequently got badly cut up when they retired, when this stunt took place we had a lot of rain & the ground was nothing but a quagmire, you would have no idea of what it was like unless you saw it & think that a large number of men who were wounded could not get out nor could they be rescued in time & consequently a large number of them died from exposure. The roads which were made or put in order were not too bad to travel on but were subjected to very severe shelling & as there was always a <sup>constant</sup> ~~consequent~~ stream of traffic, both night & day the natural consequence was that large numbers of transports etc got hit, when either horses or vehicles were hit & not capable of travelling, they were just dumped on the sides of the road & the whole of it was nothing but a hedge on either side of all sorts of things, including, Motor lorries, Ammunition Wagons, Ambulance Cars (both Motor & horse), Water Carts, Dead horses & mules & all sorts of transports, the wastage was something terrific & these things could not be got away until some considerable time later, when the place got quieter. When we had to take Ammunition to the front we had to pack it in packs on the backs of the horses, each pack carrying 8 rounds, & even then it was a very difficult matter getting the Ammunition up, on the first occasion we did this



we had 19 shoes pulled off the horses the mud  
 was so sticky, very often both men & horses went  
 into a shell hole & when they came out you could  
 not tell what they were as they were covered from  
 head to heel with thick mud. On the 25<sup>th</sup> October  
 we were relieved by the Canadians, who later on took  
 Pirschendale & held it, by this time the place had  
 been reduced to brick dust, but we had the satisfaction  
 of holding the high ground & forcing the Germans  
 into the low lying country. When in these positions  
 the Germans came over both day & night <sup>with mortar</sup> ~~with~~  
 & bombed the wagon line & sometimes did great damage  
 to horses, killing & maiming very large numbers.  
 When we pulled out from here we shifted to the  
 Neuve Eglise road & stayed there for about a  
 fortnight being held as a reserve Brigade & during  
 this time our men had a chance to pull themselves  
 together & for us to get some reinforcements, the battery being  
 very much under strength, but we went into action  
 in Ploegsteert not a very great distance from the  
 last position we had in that locality & stayed there for  
 some time & later on were shifted to Houthulst (on  
 the outskirts of Armentieres), this was a very quiet  
 place & our gunners had a very good time here, as the  
 people of Armentieres had cleared away some time  
 before this & left nearly everything they possessed  
 behind them & as the Germans were likely to destroy







a couple of furs buried by German shells, but these we had going as merrily as ever the next day.

At times we used to see some thrilling things in the air & it was quite a common thing to have Ballons brought down on fire & it was very funny seeing the observers coming down in white parachutes, they used to look like animated Mushrooms floating about in the air, one afternoon Fritz made a raid on our Ballons & brought five down in flames in about as many minutes & immediately afterwards our Aviators went over & brought down several of his, but it's a dreadful sight seeing an Aeroplane coming down on fire, they blaze like fury & the men in them are not able to get away & are nearly always burnt to cinders, The first I saw was one of our own & the ~~last~~ have since seen several German planes.

Another dreadful sight is to see horses Bombed from the Aeroplane, one night a German Plane got on to a New Zealand Stables & he dropped three bombs on the Centre stable & in all killed 85 horses, Some of them had their heads & some their legs blown off, I have seen some dreadful sights but have seen nothing to come up to this, it was pitiful to see the poor brutes.



It seems a great shame to see towns & villages destroyed the way they are, some of them have hardly a brick left. If you must have been a very fine place at one time & had some beautiful buildings but these are all in ruins & if ever the place is to be inhabited ever much of it will have to be rebuilt. It's wonderful how far a shell can be fired, take for instance the town of Hazebruck, the nearest point this place is to the German line is about 14 miles, well this place is shelled very often & that means that the Germans would have their guns at least 3 miles behind his line, so that he would be shelling at least 17 miles.

This letter I started on the 7<sup>th</sup> & have had several attempts to finish & now I have to go tomorrow I have to go back to France. So will finish this now & will write you again tonight so with fond love & trusting you are enjoying the best of health from  
 your loving hubby  
 George

Tom has just come to see me, he is only out of Hospital today & is going on leave for 14 days & he is then to go to Plymouth & probably on to Australia later.