



THE SOUTH AFRICAN LEGION

NEWSLETTER OF THE PORT ELIZABETH BRANCH

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Branch news

Not much that the Secretary can write about as he has now missed two meetings due to his moonlighting. But hopefully things might be improving just a bit, and he can now start to stand on tiptoe to get his head out of the mess and be able to take a few deep breaths once again.

One event that was attended by him was the SA Legion braai, where all who attended were offered a free boerewors roll as a starter. Braai packs were also on sale, and so was plenty of the liquid stuff. Unfortunately attendance by local straight SA Legion members could be counted on one hand. Those that did attend were dual members, both SAL and Moth members, and apparently more used to getting out and attending a social event. In fact it was rather embarrassing and disappointing for Spencer Beckley, who had organised the braai. However rest assured nothing went to waste, those that were there saw to that, and probably made a decent dent in the liquid stuff as well.

When the Moths offered the same incentive to their members, to celebrate the opening of the new Provincial HQ for the Moths, the Moth Memorial Centre, in King Edward Street, Newton Park, Moths that had probably not seen the outside of their homes for years, were there in force. The Moths never knew so many of their members still existed. So what is wrong with the SA Legion? Must we up the ante to a free case of whisky or what? Unfortunately the Go-Go Lounge is closed; otherwise this may have provided the right incentive for a future braai.

It is the intention of the PE Branch to try to have some kind of social function at least 3 or 4 times a year. Currently the only functions that we see some SA Legion members is at the AGM, which is coming up shortly, perhaps the November 11th parade, and maybe one other parade.

If it is a transport problem this can be solved by the many other members who are willing provide any SA Legion member with a lift to and from the function. So at our next attempt lets all try to make a brief appearance to meet other members, share a yarn or two about the good old days, and drink something refreshing and cold. 🍹

The war of the words (Ben MacIntyre)

With their diaries, letters home and poems, soldiers in the trenches made it the most literary of conflicts.

This was a comment on the Internet based mainly on the British Tommie's who were in service during WW I. Here are a few extracts of some of the

correspondence.

On Christmas Day 1914, from a trench in northern France, a British soldier who signed himself "**Boy**" wrote a letter to his mother. "***My Dear Mater, This will be the most memorable Christmas I've ever spent, just before dinner I had the pleasure of shaking hands with several Germans. It all seems so strange.***" Boy was merely doing what so many soldiers of the Great War did as a matter of routine, putting his thoughts and observations into words, and committing them to paper. He knew he was recording history, but he cannot have suspected that he was creating an artefact that would one day be worth a small fortune.

Recently, Boy's Christmas Truce letter was sold at auction for £14,400, after the singer Chris de Burgh trumped 14 rival bidders.

Letters from the trenches are now commanding "***Titanic prices***", as one First World War historian told me, with some regret, after the auction. The Imperial War Museum has built up its unparalleled collection of original letters, diaries, and manuscripts from the Great War, relying almost entirely on donations. The expanding market in First World War letters means that these are increasingly likely to pass, for sums beyond the reach of most museums, into private hands.

But in another sense, the extraordinary value, and interest attached to Boy's letter is a reflection of our unique cultural relationship with the writings of the First World War.

The Great War forged a greater literature than any other conflict, from sublime poetry to the scribbling of the humble private in his dugout, for this was the first war in history in which the majority of combatants were men of letters, however rudimentary.

British soldiers in the trenches read voraciously, and wrote regularly, to their families and for themselves.

The introduction of universal primary education ensured that very few in the ranks were wholly illiterate, while such institutions as the National Home Reading Union encouraged the working man to better himself through reading the national literature. Before going over the top, officers would recite stirring passages from Shakespeare or Walter Scott. The process of picking lice out of the seams of a uniform was known, in trench slang, as "***reading one's shirt***".

The boredom helped. In the long, dreary gaps between battles, reading and writing offered temporary escape from the horror, the noise, and the stench.

The postal service from the front was so efficient

that a letter written in the slime of Ypres could be on mater's doormat two days later. The war was absurdly close to Britain, Rudyard Kipling could hear the guns of Passchendaele from his study in Sussex, and the steady stream of letters from the front brought it closer still.

Even the letters that deliberately revealed nothing spoke volumes by their restraint, as satirised by Robert Graves: ***"This comes leaving me in the pink which I hope it finds you. We are having a bit of rain at present . . ."*** This war was not only more literate than any other, but avowedly literary. When a slim volume by the poet Edmund Blunden was reviewed in *The Times Literary Supplement*, his commanding officer read it and immediately ordered that he be removed from frontline duty. Poets were too valuable to risk in the trenches.

Even the simplest message might aspire to literary lyricism. On the outbreak of war, an unknown soldier placed this notice in *The Times*: ***"Pauline , alas, it cannot be. But I will dash into the great venture with all that pride and spirit an ancient race has given me . . ."*** Education, the belief in literature as a vehicle for moral improvement, boredom, and the knowledge that a ready audience was waiting in Blighty just a letter away, all combined to ensure that the written word was not the preserve of an upper-class officer corps, but embraced by men of all ranks.

The simple beauty of the prose in Boy's letter is representative of a literary style peculiar to the trenches. Even more striking is the diary of James Beatson, auctioned recently. A private in the 9th Royal Scots Regiment, Beatson, who would die in the Battle of the Somme, wrote with stark eloquence of the ***"slow, fat, waddling rats"***, the ***"hellish hurly-burly"*** and the longing for ***"ten minutes in front of the fire at home"***.

The diary was written so that Beatson could ***"more faithfully recount"*** his experiences. He intended it to be read by posterity. This is the other distinguishing feature of Great War writing, from Wilfred Owen to James Beatson: soldiers set out to leave a testament. Boy knew that he had seen something remarkable on Christmas Day 1914, and must bear witness by leaving a written souvenir.

From the outset, participants in the Great War scrambled to collect mementos: enemy cap badges, shell casings, spiked helmets and, above all, words.

My great-uncle was shot at St Eloi in 1915 (the bullet passed straight through his chest and killed the officer standing behind him). He returned to the front in 1918, taking an inch-thick diary to record what he saw. He was shot again while advancing at Cambrai, but thanks to the diary in his breast pocket, the bullet passed under his ribs and missed his heart. ***"The thickness slowed up the bullet and deflected it,"*** he wrote. My great-uncle kept the holed diary in a display case; the words that had saved his life.

Our age may be a less obviously literate one, but the soldier's urge to tell his story, even if only to an

audience of one, is as powerful as ever: witness the remarkable outpourings, some of them deeply moving and articulate, in the military blogosphere.

Sadly, those writings will not endure like the literary legacy of the Great War. The war to end all wars remains anchored in memory by words preserved in the unpublished diaries and letters of ordinary foot soldiers, in published poems and novels, and in the anonymous account of an unknown soldier, a Boy without a name. 🙏

'I go to die now'

A betrayed soldier's farewell letter is found after 90 years by Ben Macintyre

A deeply moving last letter written by a British soldier executed by the Germans in 1916 has been discovered in an attic in Hastings. It casts fresh light on one of the most tragic episodes of the First World War.

Private David Martin, from Belfast, was one of a handful of soldiers left behind during the British retreat in 1914, and then trapped behind the lines in German-occupied France.

For 18 months, Martin and three other British soldiers were hidden by French peasants in a little village near the Somme, until they were betrayed, tried as spies, and shot by a German firing squad.

On the night before he died, 28-year-old Martin wrote to his wife, Mary, on a typewriter provided by his German gaoler. He was uneducated and his letter contains numerous spelling mistakes and grammatical errors, yet it is also extraordinarily touching: the final testament of a terrified man summoning up his last reserves of piety, pluck, and patriotism.

"Germans shot me for nothing," he wrote. ***"I never surrender"***, the true words of a British soldier. ***"We die happy knowing our [side] is winning. [We] will win for the [war] for you my dear wife and child. I go to die now. I am not afraid to die."***

Mary Martin never received the letter. Ninety years later it was found among the possessions of Reginald Ernest Burges, a First World War veteran who died in 1977. It remains a mystery how he obtained it.

"Perhaps he felt it was too harrowing to pass on at the time," says Nicki Ayres, Mr Burges's granddaughter, who inherited the letter in a box of his wartime mementoes.

A former cook, Martin enlisted in the Royal Irish Fusiliers and was sent to France with the British Expeditionary Force in August 1914, leaving his wife and baby daughter in Belfast.

Instead of rolling back the Kaiser's armies, the British were forced into a pell-mell retreat from Mons. Many wounded or disorientated stragglers were left behind, and Martin and another private became detached from their unit.

After wandering for several days, hiding from German patrols, they were sheltered with two other comrades in the tiny village of Villeret. When the battlefield stabilised, the four found they were trapped on the wrong side of the trenches.

The villagers hid the soldiers, Martin behind the oven in the house of the village baker.

Karl Evers, the local German commander, found out that British soldiers were hiding in the area, and issued a proclamation warning that **“all those arrested after 30 April 1916 will be punished by death”**.

One of the fugitives, Private Robert Digby, had a love affair with a young woman in the village, Claire Dessenne, who gave birth to a baby girl in November 1915.

Possibly motivated by jealousy over the love affair, someone in Villeret informed the Germans of the fugitives' whereabouts and they were captured in a barn. Digby escaped through a window, but later surrendered.

The British soldiers were taken before a military tribunal at the German administrative centre in the nearby town of Le Câtelet, and after a brief trial without legal representation or a translator, they were sentenced to death.

On the evening of May 26, 1916, the condemned men were allowed to write letters and, in a bizarrely civilised gesture, provided with a typewriter.

Martin's letter was the last of his life, but it may also have been the first. He had almost certainly never used a typewriter before, as the frequent mistakes seem to show.

In its painful simplicity, the letter reads almost like an accidental poem, repeating the phrase **“Dear Loving Wife”**, interspersed with lines of Xs. It ends **“Goodbye for ever. God bless you all.”**

Martin then typed out his father's address in Lisburn, south of Belfast, and then, finally, his own epitaph: **“Shot at Catlet, Aisne, at 6 am morning, your loving David Martin.”**

The letter was passed to the local priest, who went to the prison to administer the last rites. He passed it on to Henri Godé, the mayor.

The following day, the condemned men were taken from the cells, **“singing Scottish tunes, hymns, and parodies of German songs”**, according to a French witness, and taken to a spot beneath the walls of the ruined château at Le Câtelet. There they were tied to firing posts and shot. They were buried in Le Câtelet graveyard.

The day before the Armistice in 1918, 88 years ago, Major Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett, commanding the 12th battalion of the London Regiment, entered a newly liberated town near the Somme and was accosted by M Godé, who handed him the bundle of letters.

Major Ashmead-Bartlett read the letters, and was moved by the **“voices rising from the grave to**

accuse the Germans”. Somehow Private Martin's letter ended up in the possession of Reginald Burges, who served as a stretcher-bearer.

It was found tucked away in a leather wallet with Mr Burges's wartime postcards and other souvenirs. Mrs Ayres rediscovered it this year when she and her husband, Mark, became interested in exploring their family history.

David Martin's name is inscribed (though his names have been accidentally transposed) on a small plaque erected by the municipality of Le Câtelet in 1999 at the site of his execution, along with an inscription in French: **“Ici ont été fusillés quatre soldats Britanniques”**: Four British soldiers were shot here.

Every year on Armistice Day the villagers lay flowers beneath the plaque. 🌸

The actual letter

May 26th

My Dear Loving Wife and My Dear Loving Child, (the) Germans shot me for nothing. If you see Germans in Ireland, boot them out of it. They are not men. Goodbye Dear Loving Wife and My Dear Loving Child, I hope (and) trust in God that I will meet you in Heaven. I am not afraid to die. I hope (and) trust God to forgive me all my sins. Goodbye forever.

X

My Dear Loving Wife and Dear Child, God bless you. Tell them all about me, the people of France. Tell how I died (a) true English soldier. I will it to God, what He does. Trust in Him. God Bless. I go to die now. I am not afraid to die. Goodbye forever my Dear Wife and my Child.

X

My Dear Wife. Look after yourself and the child well. I am leaving all my money to you and my child. (I am) sentenced to death at 6 am for not surrendering in time by 30th April. I never surrender, the true words of a British soldier. We die happy knowing our (side) is winning.

X

I hope we will all meet (in) Heaven some good day but I hold trust in God. Forgive me all my sins and God bless me. I am not afraid to die. Tell Bill and all of them that (I am) a good-hearted soldier. Goodbye my Dear Wife and Child (don't) ever forget me.

X

My Dear Loving Wife, My Dear Child, and God bless you and Child. Sent to die. Tell my old mother and my sister (I) died a good English soldier. And My Dear Wife goodbye and my Dear Child goodbye forever. I will die (a) good soldier and will leave my money to you. And God bless you my loving wife and Loving Child, goodbye for ever. True English soldier. Tell Hannah (and) Harry God bless and the children and David and his wife (and) children, tell

Anne, Bill and (his) Wife and all his children
goodbye for ever. God bless you all.
Your loving David Martin. 🍷

Various anecdotes

Bungs for ever!

This anecdote is taken from John Nichol's (he was the cooper on board *HMS Surprise*) account of the encounter between *HMS Surprise* and the American frigate *Jason* during the Anglo-American war of 1812-1814.

'I was serving powder as busy as I could, the shot and splinters flying in all directions when I heard the Irishman call from one of the guns (they fought like devils and the captain was fond of them on that account) "**Halloo bungs, where are you?**"

I looked to their gun and saw the two horns of my study [the cooper's anvil] across its mouth; the next moment it was through the *Jason's* side. The rogues thus disposed of my study which I had been using just before the action commenced and had placed in a secure place, as I thought, out of their reach. "**Bungs for ever!**" they shouted when they saw the dreadful hole it made in the *Jason's* side.

Bungs is the name they always gave the cooper in those days.' 🍷

General John B. Gordon relates a fortuitous escape from injury by General Ewell at the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863.

"As we rode together, a body of Union soldiers, posted behind some buildings and fences, suddenly opened a brisk fire. I heard the ominous thud of a Minie ball as it struck General Ewell at my side. I quickly asked, "Are you hurt, Sir?" "No, no," he replied; "I'm not hurt. But suppose that ball had struck you, we would have had the trouble of carrying you off the field, sir. You see how much better fixed for a fight I am than you are. It don't hurt a bit to be shot in a wooden leg." 🍷

The Merrimack versus The Monitor

On the 9th March 1862, one of the most extraordinary engagements in Naval history took place. It was the battle of the ironclad ships, the Merrimack (also known as the CSS Virginia) and the USS Monitor.

The Virginia was created by bolting on armour plating to the hull of an old frigate. Her armaments comprised 10 guns and attached to her prow was a massive steel ram. The plating to the superstructure was set at an angle of 36 degrees to the horizontal. This afforded added protection by causing enemy shots to ricochet. Unable to build new engines of adequate horsepower, they had been forced to recondition the existing engines. Consequently, the Merrimack was severely under powered and had a top speed of only some 4 knots. She was so slow and un-maneuvrable that a 180-degree turn could take up to half an hour to perform.

The Monitor was purpose built at the enormous cost of \$275,000 to specifically counter the threat of the Merrimack. She was flat decked and had 4, 5 inch armour plating. She had a top speed of 8 knots. She had only two 11 inch guns, but these were housed in a rotating turret (protected by 8 inch thick armour plating). This enabled the Monitor to fire in any direction.

On March 8th 1862, the Merrimack steamed out of Norfolk to run the blockade of the five Union ships guarding the mouth of the St James River. She easily sank two of the ships and forced another to run aground before steaming back into harbour. However, when she reappeared on the following day, the Monitor was waiting for her and the two extraordinary ships engaged.

The ironclads blazed away at each other for two hours, but neither was able to penetrate the other's armour. Only superficial damage was caused. During two days of engagement the Merrimack was hit by 98 shots and the Monitor by 22, none of which came anywhere close to doing significant damage. During the battle the two ships got so close to each other, firing at point blank range, that they collided on five separate occasions. It is said that, such was the noisy and concussive effect of the shots hitting the armour, that many sailors had blood running from their ears.

Finally, a shot hit the pilot house of the Monitor, wounding her captain, and the Union vessel withdrew briefly from the fray. By this time the Merrimack's overworked, wheezy engines were all but useless, making her "**as unwieldy as Noah's Ark**", according to one of her lieutenants. Thinking that she had won the battle, the Merrimack steamed back into harbour. The crew of the Monitor took this as a retreat and also claimed victory. But of course it had been nothing more than a complete stalemate. 🍷

Good parenting

Having passed the enlistment physical, Jon was asked by the doctor, "**Why do you want to join the Navy, son?**"

"My father said it'd be a good idea, sir."

"Oh? And what does your father do?"

"He's in the Army, sir." 🍷

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this newsletter reflect the personal views of the Editor and are not the official views of the Port Elizabeth Branch of the SA Legion.

Many of the articles published in this newsletter come direct off the Internet, or from other published articles in magazines, old newsletters, etc. Though often no direct acknowledgement is made to the authors, when it is known, readers must know that the editor readily acknowledges that others have written many of the articles, and all he has done is perhaps edit them to fit into available space. 🍷

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