

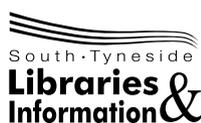
South Tyneside  
Remembers...

# WORLD WAR ONE

The letters of  
Sergeant Reginald  
Maurice Daniel



South Tyneside Council



# INTRODUCTION

Letters from home were very important to the men who were away fighting during WW1. They raised morale and kept them in touch with what was happening at home. Letters from the Front were important to families, friends and colleagues too as they provided confirmation that their loved ones were alive and safe for now.

Reginald Maurice Daniel was born in 1885 and started working as a Library Assistant in South Shields in 1899. He enjoyed open-air swimming and was the Honorary Secretary of the Westoe Bathing Club. He had joined the Northumberland Hussars, a British Territorial Army Squadron, prior to the war and was mobilised almost immediately once war was declared.

The letters that R.M. Daniel wrote home were gratefully received by those who knew him. They shared these letters with The Shields Gazette who regularly published them for the community of South Shields to read.

He was an articulate writer and his letters provide an excellent description of his life on the battlefields of France. His experiences, as he tells them, reflect those of the millions of other men he fought alongside. A selection of his published letters can be read [here](#).

# YEOMANRY IN ACTION

**PREFACE:** *Published: 20 November 1914*

*This letter was received by Mr Ernest Bailey,  
Chief Librarian of South Shields Public Library.*

## LETTER:

27 October 1914

We are having a few minutes rest so I am taking this opportunity of writing you a few lines. I am quite fit and well, in fact, I have never felt better. Our grub is plenteous but rough. We have slept in barns, barracks, joiners' shops, schools, market places, station platforms, open fields, etc., etc. We have tramped up and down this part of the Continent day and night. This division has had the hardest job since this war began. Other men who have come to relieve us from Mons and the Aisne say that the conditions there were nothing compared with those existing here. For the past ten days and still continuing is the biggest battle in history, and the stiffest corner the British Army has ever been in. However, we hope that as a result of the British Army's persistence in face of enormous difficulties we may have good news for the world in a day or so.

The infantry and artillery have borne the brunt of this war. As cavalry proper we have had very little to do in the firing line, though we have had a very hard time as a whole. As mounted infantry we have been in one or two hot corners, very hot. One day, fifty of us were sent out to occupy a position and to hold it until the infantry came up. We got into our position about 10am and started digging trenches under fire. Towards 2pm they commenced shelling our trenches, the shells dropping all around us. A little later they got a couple of maxims on to us, and rifle fire from about 500 Germans. Then they brought up a pom-pom and made our position untenable. We retired about 50 yards on to a wood, and remained there until nightfall, when we were relieved. I cannot describe to you how unenviable our position was. To put it without any idea of a swear, "We were in hell." The bullets were "zipping" over our heads, fellows' caps and all about trench line high were riddled; the trees all about us were subject to a constant fire from Maxims and rifles for about five to six hours.

Another day we had a similar job to do, and laid in an open field practically up against nearly a thousand Germans. We lost fairly heavily on this second occasion, only two men killed, but several wounded; we had several officers wounded. The reason such a small body as we are gets such work to do is because we are practically mounted infantry, and can get into a weak position quickly and stay there until foot regiments have time to arrive. We have been complimented by headquarters on the work we have done, and have quite won our way among the regular regiments.

But this is a terrible war, and one hopes that the world will be spared from anything like it again. The South African War was a picnic, so are all agreed, compared to this. There was none of those terrible artillery duels there.

M. Maeterlinck, I saw in the only paper I have read since we left England, has said that Belgium is bleeding to death for asserting her neutrality. It is only too true. It is terrible to see the devastation wrought in this country. The skies at night are lit with the lights of dozens of fires; villages, farms, and homesteads are all ablaze. The houses are all in a more or less state of ruination. We were billeted one night in a large brick-works; two hours after leaving it, it was a mass of flames. The refugees are a grievous sight. To see the poor people tramp, not knowing where to go to evade the general conflagration, is terrible to witness. Old people of 80 or more years of age compelled to tramp in search of sanctuary. The farms and stock, etc., are going to wreck and ruin from neglect.

The Germans have an elaborate spy-system which aids them considerably. The following are various means used in our lines for conveying intelligence by German spies to the enemy. Drawings and marks on building and roads; the situation of the hands on stopped clocks; the situation of sails, or their motion on windmills; the ringing of bells; lights in windows, etc., etc.

The Belgium people are extremely kind; someday I will tell you some tales of their kindness. "The English soldiers," they say, "are our brothers." If we were really so they could not be more hospitable. One only regret is that some of the towns which we have passed through, and where we have been hailed with enthusiasm, have, for strategical reasons, to be left open to the enemy.

If you saw this country at the present time you would thank God you lived in England. If English people pictured the most terrible devastation of their homes they would have a very poor idea of the real thing. We have good reason for thanking God war has never been carried into our country, and pray God it may never be.

The treatment of prisoners by ourselves and by the Germans is another contrast. When we have prisoners you will hear the officers telling the men to treat them as they would like to be treated themselves. If a fellow was as much making a grimace he would have been told off. Instead, you will see them giving biscuits and cigarettes to the German prisoners. On the other hand, only one example that occurred to a squadron on duty with us ---CENSORED---. Someday, I will tell you the story of that regiment's revenge.

Another story of German treachery. The Scots Guards were in a position they had occupied for some days, and from which they were hoping to be relieved. Just after dusk a company of men were seen arriving and they were challenged by the captain of the Scots Guards, who received the reply in English, "We are the Highland Light Infantry to relieve the Scots Guards." The Scots climbed out of their trench, only to be shot dead almost to a man, by Germans masquerading in kahki ---CENSORED---

Flying machines we see by the dozen every day. We give them little notice except to see if they are English, French, or German. We have seen duels in the air; we have seen flying machines brought down by pom-poms; we have seen a Zeppelin brought down.

And so I could go on, but must leave some news for personal relation when the war is finished, and please God we return safe and sound.

This letter is written whilst sitting under cover in a ditch waiting for orders to go forward.

## 4 November 1914

I am writing to ask you if you could send me an occasional back number of "Punch" or: "T.P.'s Weekly if you will so kindly do so. I cannot tell you what a blessing such papers would be; a newspaper goes round the squadron and drops to rags before being finished with. We have seen about three papers since leaving England. We are now engaged in the most desperate struggle since the commencement of the war; where it is I am, of course, not allowed to say. The continual booming of guns night and day becomes part of one's existence. Shells, etc., now concern us very little; we haven't the time. Our billet was set on fire again last night. We had seven shells into our billet the night before. Strange to say our casualties are small and we are known throughout the division as "The Lucky Northumberlands." A shell burst against a wall breaking it down, blew over one gun-carriage, and injured no man. We were issuing rations and a shell burst into a pool six yards away; it practically threw the pond over us, we were soaked to the skin. Had it burst a yard nearer we would all most likely have been killed. A third shell took away the wall of the farm where we had been billeted, and fourth, fifth, and sixth burst among our horses. Only one horse was killed and one man slightly injured! We see some sorry sights. Last Saturday was one of our hardest days. One instinctively made a comparison with what was likely to be happening at home. The crowds cheering at a football match, engrossed and entirely oblivious to the sufferings of their comrades out here. One very pitiful sight; a suffering in the cause of humanity; scene, an outlying trench. An injured German lies there helpless; two English stretchers have gone to his aid; in the act of lifting the German onto the stretcher they were both shot down dead.

However, in spite of the trying time I am keeping splendidly healthy and quite fit. This in spite of my not having had my clothes off since we arrived here, not having had my boots off for a month, not having had a shave for a fortnight, and not having had a wash for six days. Water is too much of a luxury. We are up at 4.30am and get to bed, if we do get at all, about 10pm. Still we keep lively.

# SOLDIERS' RUM ALLOWANCE

**PREFACE:** *Published: 8 January 1915*

*In this letter, R.M. Daniel addresses the debate that was had over the rum ration which was provided by authorities for soldiers serving at the Front.*

## LETTER:

January 1915

I expect you hear many arguments against the rum ration. I see that Ald. G. B. Hunter and many lesser lights have been protesting against it. A few days on active service would soon refuse all their arguments. They protest against the compulsory issue of the rum ration. This shows that they know nothing about the matter, as any soldier is free to forego his ration if he so desires. I do not always take it as I hate the taste of the stuff, but there have been times when I have been glad to have it for its medical value. You would think to read some of their arguments that we got enough to bath in. As a matter of fact is hardly covers the bottom of a teacup.

Then they say that the soldiers should be provided with hot soup or a hot bath instead of the rum. What extraordinary ignorance. The trenches may be miles away from the water, let alone hot water, still less hot soup. Water is the most precious thing that we have. Drinking water in this country is unobtainable; it all has to be filtered. Just think what the warmth derived from a rum ration means to the men who have all night in cold wet trenches, covered from head to foot with mud and miles away from any possibility of a fire. Or think of men who just returned from the trenches, their greencoats soaking wet. They have tramped through miles of mud to their billets. The soldiers themselves are wet and cold. Just think about what it would mean to these men to be robbed of the warmth derived from their small tot of rum. Just compare the position of these soldiers with the position of those people, who perhaps, seated in a comfortable chair in a warm room before a good fire, write such "bosh" to the press. It makes me feel sick. A change of positions would soon change their opinions. The people are surely not aware of the hardships endured by our soldiers.

# SIMPLY GREAT

**PREFACE:** *Published: 20 February 1915*

*R.M. Daniel discussing life at the Front.*

## **LETTER:**

**February 1915**

We are having better weather here just now, I don't suppose it will last long enough to make an alteration in our plans, which are to hang on here. They are certainly the best. Here we are and here we remain. You seem to be dreading what may happen when we start advancing again. Well, we are expecting great things to happen owing to our increasing superiority. There is a great deal of difference in our services, to its condition, say, when we landed here. Infantry are bearing the brunt of the work just now, and the cavalry are still in reserve, though the regiment is up every day trench-digging. This war is nearly all trenches, and infantry are the men who are in them. We feel like shirkers when we pass infantry on the road. However, the infantry get a few days rest every four days and a bath every time they come in from the trenches, which must be a God-send.

It is wonderful what a difference a bit fine weather makes. The men going up or coming down from the trenches are all singing. They are simply great. The artillery seems to be increasing in superiority every day. We are expecting great things from our artillery. It seems droll that that arm of the service which does most harm lies behind the line of almost absolute security. The guns are placed so far behind the line that they are firing from districts to which the people have long since returned, to follow the ordinary routine of their everyday life – tilling the soil, threshing the corn, tending the cattle, and so on. Yet the guns nearby are constantly booming away, perhaps wreaking vengeance some eight or ten miles away. There is certainly no romance about R.G.A [Royal Garrison Artillery].

The air service – ‘The eyes of our Army’ – does absolute wonders. It is a common sight to see our airmen whirring through the air nonchalantly carrying out most important work in an absolute hail of rifle bullets and in the midst of bursting shrapnel shells. It is thrilling to see them volplaning, banking up, even looping amidst such conditions. They know no fear. Yesterday one of our planes passed over our heads pursuing a German plane. It was exciting to see them struggling for the position of mastery. They were firing on one another all the time. The Englishman brought his man down within the English lines. We all take off our hats to the men of the Flying Corps.

I have come across two Shieldsmen this week – one chap called Curley, a motorcyclist and a chap called Leslie, who was in Messrs Wood’s, the tailors. He is in the Cyclists’ Company. I haven’t got a fur coat, and I don’t want one. So far, although the weather has been wet, it has not been so cold as we know it on our sea coast. However, we haven’t wanted clothing to keep the cold out. I have a British warmer, a thick coat with a sort of blanket lining, and as an extra protection against wet I am fortunate to have a long mackintosh, also an army issue. Seriously, we don’t think so much about the war as we did when we were at Castle Eden. We go about the roads here much more freely than we did at home. We often laugh about our night patrols at home.

# A FRENCHMAN WITH THE TYNESIDE DIALECT

**PREFACE:** *Published: 6 April 1915*

*This letter was received by Mr J.H. Wight who had filled R.M. Daniel's place as secretary of the Westoe Bathing Club whilst he was away at war.*

## **LETTER:**

24 March 1915

Dear Old Comrade, - How I just wish I had been with the quartette for that Christmas Day swim. I'd absolutely give 'quids' for a dip in the briny at the moment. How I do miss the sea- more than anything else.

On Christmas Day I had to walk up to the trenches to witness the scenes of that most informal Christmas truce. How curious it was to see the intermixture of the troops, our fellows hobnobbing with the 'Allemands.' To see soldiers of both sides having dinner on the parapet tops. At one place I saw a dozen chaps sitting down to dinner around a table they had taken from a destroyed farm. They had a good spread, and were enjoying it to the full in front of the trenches. Everybody else was walking about between the trenches quite free and easy. One funny thing happening was when our chaps were standing around 'chinning,' some Germans were potting at one of our aeroplanes. But all this is old news to you.

Many good stories can be told in spite of the terrible hardships suffered by some of the troops. They soon forget such hardships, and many a happy pow-wow we have had. Have met quite a lot of Canadians. Some splendid chaps there are amongst them. They are a happy crush, some of these Indians, and go past singing their curious chants, quite contented. Most of them speak English- some splendid English- and some French besides. You certainly do get an admixture of languages and dialects here, and occasionally one seems to slam up against it. One night when we were on patrol we halted a chap "Halt! Who comes there?" to receive the reply in broad Tyneside "Royal Warwick's intarpreter." With keen anticipation of meeting a Tynesider and perhaps a fellow- townsman, we gave him the "Advance" to be struck all in a heap to see a dapper little Frenchman. On expressing our surprise at his pronunciation we asked him where he had come from, to which he replied he "had just cum fra Paris thi other day." He had "larned" his English from a Tynesider in a hospital near Paris.

People in England with the most keen imagination cannot realise things as they are out here. If they could have only one day out here they would go back thanking God that they lived in good old England. To pass along a road and see farm after farm which has been destroyed by shell fire, only the foundations remaining; whole villages in ruins, fields all cut to pieces, works destroyed. Yet people in some places seem quite resigned to their fate. A house opposite is burn down after shell fire, yet they remain. I have bought a coffee off a woman who still lived in her house so near to the firing trenches that bullets were constantly zipping up against the walls of the house. Some people have had soldiers billeted on them since last August- French, Germans, English, Indians, all in turn. I can not tell you how exceedingly pleased I am to know that the club still remembers me. You do not know how much it helps me out here to get a small letter again and again. As to that parcel I don't know how to thank you sufficiently. Just now I hardly know what our movements are likely to be, so I can hardly tell you what to send on. There are all sorts of rumours floating around, but as soon as I hear something definite I will let you know. Anything you send I will do my best with, and you may be sure it will be greatly appreciated. I often think of you all. I would like to pop in and see Mr Hutton, and to hail the cheery figure of Mr Bodger. A few months ago I thought maybe I might get a bathe in with you on May 1st. Now I think I shall be lucky if I get a bathe with the Westoe Bathing Club. However, all goes well with me just now. I am in the best of health. I hope that sooner or later I may meet all my old friends of the club.

With kindest remembrances, best wishes and good luck. R. M. Daniel.

...The good old German blockade! Before the blockade we got letter in four days, which was considered marvellous. Since the Blockade, we get them in three, sometimes within two days!

# WAR CONTRASTS IN FRANCE

**PREFACE:** *Published: 12 April 1915*

*This letter was received by Ernest Bailey and discusses life at the Front.*

## LETTER:

April 1915

Now April is here, we are experiencing some decent weather. We have had some very cold frosty weather this last week. Today is simply glorious. Where we are just now the country is very flat; it reminds me one very forcibly of Norfolk. Consequent upon this we get some grand sky effects; the effect obtained by seeing an interrupted horizon all around is like looking into some vast dome. The war, in spite of its awfulness and its intensity, is a war of contrasts. The days of the Neuve Chappelle battle just to the rear of where that fearful contest was waging one could have seen the farmers ploughing quite unperturbed as if nothing was happening, yet they were within hearing of the roar of musketry and could see and hear the bursting of giant shells. One passes soldiers' clubs within a mile of the trenches; places opened by military authorities where the soldier can sit and write his letters, drink a cup of coffee, etc. Football matches have often been interrupted by the bursting in close proximity of a 'Jack Johnson.' In towns behind our lines just out of the shelled area (even within) business has been resumed as usual; not as usual, but extraordinarily, as the shopkeepers are making harvest out of the troops. Last week it was possible, as the Canadians did, to come out of the trenches one day, and be listening to the Bishop of London the next, or as some of the troops were fortunate in doing- hearing first-class actors. I was among the Canadian crowd when they were listening to the Bishop. They were a large good-humoured, almost boyish crowd in their "carry on." They sang first of all- while waiting for the Bishop- the Canadian national hymns – 'Canada, O, Canada,' and the 'Maple Leaf,' followed by the 'Marseillaise.' It was grand to hear the swell of their strong voices in the final National Anthem. Thanks very much to whoever is sending the papers. Fancy we have been out here six months now! The time seemed fearfully long to Christmas, but now it seems to fly. I am pleased to say I am keeping in the best of health.

There are a lot of native Indian troops around here. It is said that east and west will never meet. Whatever effect it may have in the future one cannot say but at present they seem to meet quite all right. There are some handsome men among them, tall, well-built, fine soldiers. You should hear them passing by here singing their peculiar native chants, or, perhaps 'Tipperary,' or see them grouped around their billets at night having quite a happy time. Of course they speak French – more or less good – like ourselves. It is quaint to hear them "Bellow the bat," or speak the language; it seems to come strange from them.

## **EASTER SUNDAY**

Just an addition to my letter of a few days ago. Another war contrast. Today an opportunity was given to all the troops in billets of whatever creed to attend communion of which great numbers availed themselves. In the nearest Catholic Church here, which is used as a hospital in times of great pressure, the Wesleyan preacher celebrated at seven a.m. and the Church of England at eleven. In this small instance one sees a result of war – a temporary re-union of the churches.

# LONGING FOR A DIP

**PREFACE:** *Published: 13 May 1915*

*This letter was received by J.H. Wight at the Westoe Bathing Club.*

## LETTER:

**22 April 1915**

The day of the opening of the Westoe Bathing Club fast approaches. Just about this date, ordinary times, I would be writing cards to all the members- "The members: the W.B.C will meet on Saturday May 1st. Your attendance is respectfully requested." How different this year! Just now the weather is splendid. Just the ideal for an opening dip; and I trust you will be favoured on the 1st. We are very quiet now, having quite a restful time. Our billet is alongside of a canal. Have a dip? Not yet; the canal is too strong; not the current but the smell. The mud at the bottom is unfathomable, and the canal is the depositing place for all refuse.

By the way, I think the club ought to take up boomerang throwing again; would come in handy as a means of defence. If any of the Zepps come along that morning to see the chaps capering about, 'mit noddings on, they will be turning about and reporting that the English have again become barbarians. I am still at a loss to know what to ask you to send me. We are getting plenty to eat just now. It is really when we are on the go that we discover what we want. I will certainly let you know in good time.

**26 April 1915**

Congratulations to Mr Hutton on succeeding to the presidential chair of the Shop Assistants' Union. He has taken to the chair in what will prove to be a most trying and critical year. However, I know that he is the man in such a time. I wish him health in and during his year of office.

I have no news of importance. We have been among the English, Canadians, and Indians. Now we are among the troops principally Irish, Scotch, and Welsh. I am not sure if I am safe in saying so, but I think the Scots the most attractive and "canny" of the lot. They are a lot of stalwarts. I am in the pink, and quite fit.

Now, dear old comrades, I must quit. Oh for a dip in the briny! I wouldn't live anywhere but by the sea if I could help it. Oh for a good day's glimpse of the old North Sea!

With my sincerest regards to you all. – Yours, always thinking of you, R.M. DANIEL.

# OPTIMISTS AT THE FRONT

**PREFACE:** *Published: 12 August 1915*

*The below letter was addressed to R.M. Daniel's mother at 64 Ocean Road, South Shields.*

## **LETTER:**

**2 August 1915**

August Bank Holiday! To think this time last year we were trembling on the brink of war. The war which one then thought would be over by Christmas still continues, and when it is going to finish is beyond all speculation. This month in France is sacred to Providence. It is hoped that August will see something done definitely. However, if nothing happens, or if it happens so as to be seemingly adverse to our arms, we are still confident of the end.

Soldiers are getting used to the life out here and have ceased to count the days and months. 'C'est l'habitude.' However, they are all examples to set before some of the croakers at home. They are all confident in the capability of their leaders and in French and Kitchener. Kitchener had a grand smile, and the men looked upon that as a good sign.

If things seem to be going slow, they say it's all right. The men in charge know the state of affairs better than –more or less- incapable critics. If anyone asks 'How long do you think the war will last?' they reply, laughingly, 'Oh I think the first five years will be the worst!' or something to that effect...

There is quite an innovation out there. It is the nearest possible place to the trenches. It is a van, run by the clergyman, who bought the van and pays for its upkeep. From it one can buy bread and butter, eggs (boiled), tea and coffee, tin sardines, etc, cigarettes, etc., all at cost price. What a boon it must be to the men far away from all other sources of purchasing extras!

What an improvement there is on previous campaigns in the hospital system. All that is within the power of man is exerted to save life. What a tremendous number, in comparison with previous campaigns, of lives must be saved, including seemingly impossible cases. Everything about the hospitals is as clean as is possible to make them. The operating rooms are all white and spotlessly clean. The instruments are scrupulously clean. What a revolution motor transport has made! One sees the silent motor ambulance speeding smoothly along the roads, without jerk or concussion. One shudders to think of the suffering caused in others days by horse drawn vehicles. The motor ambulance goes almost up to the trenches to the first field dressing stations and takes the men away to the different hospitals accordingly.

# WONDERFUL TRENCHES

**PREFACE:** *Published: 28 September 1915*

*In this letter sent to his friend, R.M. Daniel discusses the trenches at the Front.*

## LETTER:

September 1915

We finished our turn in the trenches yesterday. We have had a fortnight of real hard graft. I consider the trenches out here should become the tenth wonder of the world. I have been in dug-outs cut in solid chalk, which would beat Marsden Grotto – officers' quarters, men's billets, etc., etc. I have seen a whole village underground, with its soldiers' clubs, its headquarters, hospitals, officers' and men's billets, cook houses, stores and so on – everything under the earth and bomb proof. One walks along the trenches which fill you with amazement and wonder. All the trenches have names giving a touch of home. One finds his King's Road, King George's Road, Piccadilly Circus, Hyde Park Corner, Daly's Passage, and crowds of other "streets." You can see the halfway house with its sign "Four miles to London." You can see Parliament Buildings, the Unreformed Club, the Empire, and heaps of other such places, all underground. You can go into a dug-out for a concert, a feed, or to read the papers. I should think these places will become the wonder of tourists. I wonder how many thousands of miles of trenches there are here. It would take months to dig a drain a mile long in town, but here we do one, four feet wide, 5 to 6 feet deep and a mile long in a couple of nights. It is a matter of simple arithmetic – so many yards to do, each man to do three yards, it will take so many men, and that number is put on the job.

We have with us a chap who is paying another man a guinea a day, seven days a week, to do his work while he is working out here for 1s 2d a day. How's that a lesson for some people? We went in for a coffee one day to a woman who has had soldiers billeted on her ever since the first day of October last year. One time two French officers, another sixty men, and never less than a dozen. One asks if she is sick of the war. She replies "No. I have so much to do I never have time to think of it!" And many a day the shells drop near her house. We sometimes feel quite proud of our simple bivouacs, and when turning in at night with mother earth, covered by our great coats and single blanket as bedclothes, someone will say, 'My this is great! Feather beds and such are just the invention of people who are weak-minded and have forgotten the luxury of a sleep beneath the stars,' to which someone will faintly murmur. 'Give me some weak mind and feather bed!'

# SOLDIER'S SCATHING CRITICISM

**PREFACE:** *Published: 14 April 1916*

*This letter discusses the Zeppelin raids that happened in South Tyneside as well as criticises the Government's approach to the Compulsory Service Act.*

## LETTER:

April 1916

This is the fourth time that I have started this letter. My last two attempts are dated March 30th and April 3rd. However I hope I am successful in finishing this trip. We have been very busy relieving trench men and sending out different patrols that sometimes I've not known whether I have been on my head or my heels. Our troop sergeant is on leave so I've "kind of been" on my own. I've been jolly happy to receive your letters and parcels. I've got the parcel of cigarettes; they've helped me some and also saved many others from despair. Cigarettes are short in this place. I also got the other parcel of chocolates and biscuits. My, these were a treat. You've had quite a crush of Zepp raids recently. I hope they pass pretty clear of "Canny old Shields." What a mess the Government is making of the Compulsory Service Act. It's quite simple if they had had it like the French system. One would die of laughing if they heard of a French conscientious objector. I often think what sort of people the French people think we are with our consciences. Every class is called up in its turn in France. Supposing, for example they called up the 1898 class, all the men of 23 years of age would report to their depots immediately. The fact that they are married or single is a factor which the Government does not consider. If a man enters a marriage contract at an early age, he takes all its drawbacks and responsibilities. You are 23 years of age, that's the only thing that counts and that's the only thing that should count. In the French army you see the youngest men in the firing line and the old men on the lines of communication. There is no need to pay exorbitant rates of pay to get men for what are considered skilled branches of service. For example, men of motor transport in our army can obtain 6s per day with little risk while the man in the trenches gets a paltry shilling a day.

There everybody is under compulsory service. Such a thing as the Clyde strike (shame on the men who are responsible for it) is impossible. Out here if a man refused to work he is sent to the trenches. One village where we stayed the day was in ordinary times a fete day and two men thought they would celebrate, so they got more drink than was good for them and missed two days' work. The next day an escort was sent for them and they were taken away to be sent to the trenches. It seems hard, but it's the only just way. I expected that all the Clyde strikers would be young men, and according to the photographs in the papers, that's what they are – men between 20 and 30, men who should be given no other chance than to be out here. Men who are, or were before the war, distinct bitter agitators but are now out here most emphatic as to what they would do with strikers, and that is – shoot them.

I have been very lucky recently in the correspondence line. Hardly a mail has come but what there has been a letter for me. Perhaps some others have noticed that remark in the papers that what men wanted out here was letters. This is a fact.

## **7 April 1916**

I didn't get this letter finished at all. The doctor gave a surprise visit about 6 p.m. and inoculated all the original men again. Since then I've lost all interest in anything but compulsory affairs. Today I'm just about all serene. The effects only last about 48 hours, so I shall be as right as rain tomorrow.

# OPERATING THEATRE AT THE FRONT

**PREFACE:** *Published: 27 September 1916*

*This letter was received by R.M. Daniel's mother, aged 64 at the time, and praises the hospitals near the Front.*

## **LETTER:**

**September 1916**

During our time out here we have done a number of jobs, but even the long list has been added to. At present a few of us are working in a hospital. How's that for a change? We are all split up again, some up the line, some in the line and others all over the place. It's wonderful how quickly and efficiently the work goes on. A train is telegraphed, and immediately all the men available are sent up to the station to help in the wounded and sick. Perhaps the number runs into hundreds, but as soon as a train is expected everyone gets a move on. The cooks get busy and the men are all allotted wards. The doctors are all in attendance, and within ten minutes of the arrival of the train the men are in their proper beds and wards, having a good meal, as "comfy" as if they had been there for months. The doctors are extremely clever, and it is a grand sight to see how quickly, kindly, and ably they carry out the operating work. While here I met the Reverend Mr Connor, the first Shieldsman I have met I knew previous to the war. He has volunteered for work here while his battalion is resting. As a result of much moving around I have not had any mail for over ten days, so I am hoping for quite a budget when it does come.

Just to see if I could stand it all right, I volunteered to help in the operating theatre. Just at first it was a bit uncanny, but in time it became quite interesting. It is simply marvellous how efficiently the work is carried out. I have had an insight into yet another department of army life. The operations are quite painless to the men, and they come out of it knowing nothing of what's happened. They just go to sleep and dream. The quick trip to "Blighty" the doctors call it. One fellow dreams he's home; another chap that he is at a banquet; another that he has fallen in love with a countess, and another that he is back among the Boches, and so on.

A nurse was going round saying, 'You're for the theatre' (meaning of course, the operating theatre), and 'You're for the theatre' when one fellow looks up and says, 'Say what's on at the theatre- Charlie Chaplin?'

Everything is spotlessly clean, and the surgeons are as good as it is possible to be. It does one's heart good to see the masterly way in which they handle the cases; it makes one thank God for modern surgery and science. This is done at what they call a clearing station. This has been a very busy Sunday. We have been at it since 5.30am this morning and have just finished - 9pm.

# AIRMEN'S FEATS

**PREFACE:** *Published: 13 July 1917*

*R.M. Daniel praises the brilliant work of the newly formed Royal Air Service in this letter sent to his parents.*

## LETTER:

June 1917

We have just got in from a seven days' spell in the front line trenches, and I hadn't a chance of writing you from there. We were pretty when we came out- seven days without a wash or a shave and covered with mud, the result of a very heavy thunderstorm- and as we were in open trenches without shelters we were pretty nearly washed out.

Fortunately the sun has plenty of power in these days, and so we are only inconvenienced for one day. The trouble is the beetles. Thousands' of 'em. Rats there were none, as these were new trenches into which we had dug ourselves. One officer said. 'When you are up here you should study beetles to pass the time away,' and another officer replied: 'My time is occupied by studying shells.

We had some Canadian lumbermen in our camp back here cutting down some trees – 100 to 120 feet high. It's marvellous in what a remarkably short time they cleared them all. The sergeants' mess was made of a big cart sheet supported by a pole suspended between two trees. We put two uprights in to support the mess. Between one of the trees and the mess there was half an inch clearance and an inch clearance from a hut on the other side and yet they dropped the tree without touching either erection. They dropped the tree where they wanted it to an inch. I spoke to one of them and mentioned trees, and he said, 'Trees! This is only scrub.'

What a terrible affair that last air raid was. That is like the Boche. He is not a fair fighter. He is afraid to meet our men on equal terms or with the odds against our men. It's marvellous to see the way our airmen worry the Boche. He flies over the Hun trenches at a height of one to two hundred feet, and watches their every movement, all the time the target for a perfect hail of machine gun bullets and shell fire. He must be an absolute terror to them. No one could ever say enough praise of our flying men.

When they go over the line they fly at absurdly low altitudes and by their manoeuvres simply beg the Huns to come out and fight. If the Germans come over our lines it is generally at such a height that one cannot see them, just the shells bursting out of them. The Huns hardly dare to put up an observation balloon, as our chaps are over it in no time.

Dropping bombs on undefended citizens is more in the German line. It is hoped they will take reprisals now. I know our airmen would simply detest doing it, but I am afraid it's the only way we have of protecting our poor women and children.

## July 1917

We have just finished a short spell in the trenches again- the last for a while, as we are in for a special training stunt again. Frankly, we are glad to get into the trenches, despite what it means, now and again, as we get fed with all sorts of new stunts while behind the line.

I read that they intend to give conscientious "objects" the right to vote again. What a ghastly shame! They don't deserve to share any citizenship rights. They should be shipped to Germany, the country for which they seem to have such consideration. Life under German regime and discipline would be the right kind of punishment. We would be well rid of 'em. The difficulty would be to find a country ready to accept them. All honour to the Hebburn and Hetton miners who have refused to work alongside them.

Our airmen still continue to do their manoeuvres in the air. They loop the loop, do the spinning dive head down, and then the spinning dive tail down; they turn their machines over and over sideways, make their planes skid as if down a mountain side. Then they will do all the lot, one after the other, finishing up by swinging their machines from one side to the other like pendulum without any support. The only thing one can compare to it is a cockle shell of a boat being tossed about from wave to wave at an incredible speed.

By the way, how small this world is. One night an officer came along the trench and on being halted and replying to the challenge, he asked for an officer of ours named ---CENSORED---. He was relieving our officer next day. We told him this and then he said 'Tell him when he comes in that ---CENSORED---, who he worked alongside of in the Straits Settlements, is on the next post.'

Next night both officers were waiting in the same traverse to relieve their posts. To part in Straits Settlements and meet in a trench traverse just in front of ---CENSORED---, is surely a remarkable experience.

# ON THE HEELS OF FRITZ

**PREFACE:** *Published: 13 December 1917*

*R.M. Daniel sent the below letter to his parents having been serving in France since the beginning of the war.*

## LETTER:

28 November 1917

We have been on the wander for nearly three weeks. We did quite a long trick as a start off, and, fortunately, had rare decent weather for the time of year, as occasionally we slept out beneath the stars. While going through villages occupied by civilians I was one of the forward billeting party. It is good experience, and I should think in comparison with it standing as a candidate for Parliament must be a rare 'cushy' job. First of all, one must overcome a certain fear in the people to monopolise the place. Then I got quite used to smiling hard at 'Madam.' Sympathising with 'Monsieur' over the difficulties of harvesting the crops; making a fuss of the youngsters; making friends with the dog; agreeing with them how difficult it was to billet anyone, and leaving with permission to billet 20 men and so many horses. It was interesting to pass through villages which, when we saw them before, were large army centres, scenes of rush bustle, and excitement.

It was difficult to believe that this now quiet place was such a short time ago a tremendously busy railhead, pouring out train loads of reinforcements for the line, guns and ammunition, horses, and wagons, rations and equipment, building material, etc.: that this was the place where stood a large casualty station, with the hospital trains waiting alongside to convey the wounded down the line. This was the place, indeed, which just a few months ago represented in size, as railways go, some large town such as Newcastle, with its scores of trains a day.

A veritable army of men were employed handling stores, clearing away trains. Here were repairing shops, locomotive sheds, and all that goes to make a great railway depot. Encampments, huts and tents stretched away for miles around, and all the approaches were chock-a-block with a constant double stream of traffic. Yet, today, all around is normal again, everything is cleared away. The farmers are at work ploughing the fields, and all the traffic is now managed by a 'mademoiselle' who gives us a smile as she opens the gates at the level crossing.

It is difficult to believe that war has ever touched the fringe of this now tranquil village. Then one passed through the country when each town on the road recalled some of the events one had in part witnessed some months before, through villages – of which hardly a vestige remains – the names of which conjure up the picture of many sanguinary struggle-down at Death Valley' across which far-farmed regiments had rushed to the opposite crests and village beyond, in spite of the hellish fire of guns, machine guns, and rifles. Barley a trace remains of these villages situated in what before the war was one of the most beautiful districts in France. Then the pass down 'Suicide Lane' and 'Hell Fire Corner,' and other places the names alone of which are full of meaning, especially to ones who know the places so well.

This place which we are now passing and which was one of the most deadly shelled places in this area, where one crossed with anxiety, is occupied by a large field hospital, and all is as quiet and peaceful as if it was in the heart of the 'Downs.' The old battlefields have all been 'cleaned up,' even to the battered pieces of corrugated iron. The trenches are falling in, and even the shell-holes are not near so apparent to the eye. Nature has touched all with a kindly hand, and all is a rolling land of green. The most remarkable and interesting was the ride through the territory evacuated under pressure by the Boche. The land itself for miles and miles is untouched, unspoiled, and could tomorrow be cultivated without difficulty.

There is not a shell-hole, not a mark to show the enemy has passed that way. It is only when one passed through the towns and villages that one realises that Jerry Boche has been and gone. Here he has destroyed to his heart's content; not a house remains. In large towns he has been so thorough in his destruction that it is difficult to find shelter for a horse. All the explosives have been placed in the cellars and the houses shifted wholesale. The sight is more pitiful than that of a village that has been heavily shelled, as, in the latter case, some part may escape the tornado of fire, but here not a solitary room has escaped destruction- all pillaged, fired and blown to bits.

Of a large beautiful chateau with farm and outbuildings, gardeners and keepers lodges, situated in a park and wood, and in which the Kaiser once resided on one of his periodical visits to the battle field, not enough remains standing as would fill more than half a dozen carts. Not a church has been respected; they have met with the same fate. Photographs should be taken of all these places as they were before the war and as they are now, and exhibited throughout the length and breadth of our land, to show people what they have escaped by their immunity from invasion. In the orchards all the trees have been cut down and all is ruin and desolation.

One thing, Jerry Boche, in his thoroughness of destruction, robbed us of the benefit of decent billets, so that we are living in bell tents, not the most luxurious form of residence at this time of year. Well, the war, if nothing else, has taught us all to be resourceful. Given a few bits of wood and a good "scrounger" among the party, and a chap's hard out to it if he cannot make some sort of home. Swiss Family Robinson is not in it with us. So yesterday being the second very wet and cold day, we started in the "house" in which I am now sitting writing this scribble.

We dug 11 feet into 9-foot high bank, covered the top and front with an old tarpaulin, floored and walled the bottom and sided with six inch deals we salvaged out of an old German dug-out, put seats round the sides, made a couple of tables and a stove and you have no idea how comfortable and warm it is. Tonight we are sitting in our shirt sleeves, it is so warm. It is absolutely snug – champion.

One thing I meant to mention. In one of the houses where we stopped one night were some refugees – a farmer, this wife, and daughter. Since the Boches retired their old home is now in the safety zone, and they had secured permission from the authorities to return. It is right on to the old Boche front line, and all that remains is part of the four walls and the ceiling of one of the rooms – no roof, no windows, no doors.

The farmer told me this room was being used as a stable and shelter for an officer's horses, and did I think the officer would remove them when they arrived? He was going to take them out a door or two and some window frames, and hoped to make the place somewhat habitable, and then carry on. They were returning 'home' on the following Monday, and were as excited as people going on a jolly good holiday. So much for the spirit of France.