

EXTRACTS FROM LETTERS TO MOTHER & FATHER.

13th March, 1915.

*From Capt Wilmot Maitland**Songall
R. F. A.*

I return the photos with many thanks. No time for much of a letter; been battle fighting with some strenuousity just lately, fairly loosing off the old guns. We fired 1000 shells one day and I'm still deaf. Germans got a direct hit on, and many others very near; my observing place too, and smashed it all in where my head usually grows, but fortunately was in a hole in the ground underneath and got nothing worse than a free and fortunately unnecessary burial, but it took me 50 sandbags and much labour that night to mend the place, which considering the flares and searchlights, accompanied by rifle fire, was no mean work. Certainly when war brisks up it gets cheerier. Its next winter that will do me in. Feel much happier now things are more on the go. I found two eggs in my bed last night; I can't keep that rotten hen out of the place. What ho, for peace and an egg-less bed! The brutes shelled me in the night too, my telephone men told me in the morning, and I can just remember sleepily being half wakened at intervals by mud and splinters and stuff rattling against the house. The Captain's talking awful rubbish & at the moment, and I can't concentrate on this letter. Good night, xx herewith the photos, and may we pursue the Germans again shortly.

Wilmot.

7th April, 1915.

Am quite well, no special news. Have got very muddy messing about in the trenches lately; largely in Bagswater, which is a particularly wet one. There is a network of them everywhere now, and one can walk for miles without ever coming out of the trenches, and they mostly all own London names, Picadilly, Shaftesbury Ave., Cheyne Walk, etc. I got smote yesterday by a bit of shell on the right heel, but it did not go in through the boot. That was how poor old Achilles got done down. Excuse Bagswater mud on this paper, its late, and I've got to retire to my downy couch which now consists of mother earth again, with the sky as roof.

Wilmot.

22nd April, 1915.

Am quite well and all that sort of thing. Mines are the latest little pleasantries, I've had several fairly near me, but usually at night and haven't really seen them. However, yesterday afternoon, I was messing about in the trenches and it was all beautifully bright and sunny when suddenly the whole ground heaved and shook and seemed to be moving bodily and all the ground in front of me shot hundreds of feet up into the air with a dull roar (not nearly so much noise as you would expect, however) and then it rained sandbags and bricks for some time. They loosed off two more directly after but these were of more ordinary size, I think, and were something of an anticlimax. The infantry fixed bayonets and gunmen stood ready in case they rushed in on us, but we're too offensive, even for the Germans, and they didn't come beyond a lot of heavy sniping at rows and rows of heads which were too interested to keep down, nothing happened. Thats about the only form of killing I hadn't seen up to now, and I rather think it is the most impressive of the lot.

File in War Letters

I had a lot of quiet fun a short while back with a German Cannon. There was only one place which I could see him from (which he knew) and when I used to go and have a look to see if all was still well with him he used to shoot and continually smashed up all my sandbags, the range being unpleasantly short, however, I got my own back for I smote him once below the muzzle and once on the near wheel, and next morning he had gone to hospital or else deserted his post, so the sandbags wear a brighter expression now. Rather a warlike letter this, isn't it? However, I feel anything but that as a matter of fact. I should like to catch a trout.

Wilmot.

3rd May, 1915.

Just to say I am all correct but likely not to get any more writing done for a day or two. Have heard a cuckoo stammering already. There are crowds of nightingales here; we have had some pretty good weather lately, however it is beginning to look like rain again now. The wind has been keeping on the west fairly well, so the bosches cant poison us just at present. Never been so peevish about the direction of the wind before, not even fishing in Devon. There are lots of openings still for the Germans. They might have loosed snakes on us and attached a snake charmer per Company to their own side to keep the snakes stuffing Englanders and not Deutchmen. They'd rather overlooked the matter of poisons up till now. There ought to be another line for them in acids and something doing in broken glass. Nothing more to say.

Wilmot.

5th May, 1915.

Am quite all right, There's no news but I feel I ought to write. I am at last acquiring to the full a proper hatred of the enemy. They use every rotten trick both "Ancient and modern". These gases they use not only kill people at the time, but cause a form of illness (bronchitis, I think) and men are bad and die with it days after as their scientiests and authorities know and intend. Moreover, 'on dit' that in any case if one gets gassed it ruins ones lungs permanently. I'm having my four "Boots off at night" days now, being down with the guns (the battery) having returned from my peried at the observation place. One of my nights up there the order came, by telephone? stand to arms? all the infantry in front of you have been gassed" which is a cheery Good Morning at 1:00 A. M. (By the way, my train of thought is being interrupted, and therefore my story for I am being shelled and they're getting nearer & nearer, two or three just arrived together so there'll be a pause while they load so I can continue.) The battery turned out and were ready in about 15 seconds at the other end of my telephone wire and I stuck on my mask and crept out to look for the much talked of green cloud or else for a line of Allemands advancing across the poisoned bodies of the infantry. Fortunately it all turned out to be the cheeriest joke we've had lately. A Ferrier officer and two men were out in front of our trenches messing about in the dark, then a glare went up and to avoid being seen they sat down, the officer on something that burst with his weight. When he saw what it was he fainted, being new but the two men only smelt a horrid smell and saw their officer

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obviously overcome by it, so they legged it back to their trenches thoroughly scared and reported the Germans were gassing us which tale both men and the non-return of the officer alike bore out. Hence, the excitement. They loosed off a mine 3 or 4 hours later as it got light and this battery's shells were bursting in the enemy's trenches before the rain of debris was properly over we were streets ahead of the other batteries. No more news.

Wilmot.

16th May, 1915.

Pleased to tell you that I am in the pink and hoping that you are the same as it leaves me at present. Not had much time for inscribing lately. Am rather weary and worn and sad mentally, though all very well physically. I should like a light round of duty at home, killing undesirables and all kinds of shirkers. I feel towards them all the unpleasantnesses-envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitablemess, I haven't any news. Those dirty looking things I sent home were two rifle bullets (out of absolute thousands) that hit my observing place at the place I was when last on leave, and the fuze is the fuze of a big German shell that went a yard into the trench in front of me in "Bagswater" the day I had a duel with the German gun that withdrew in the night under cover of darkness. The aforesaid fusil had been rather strung up. I think the fuze was a portion of the "hate of frightfulness" that the other guns replied with in retaliation. I didn't mean to keep any of these things as they are as common as dirt, but I had meant to keep the hunk that smote my boot; however, I lost it somehow or other. Its about bedtime. Its a long time since I had a proper boots off night with sleep from 9:00 P. M. to 5:00 P. M. or thereabouts, which constitutes a proper nights rest, and I sigh for the days of bed and pyjamas. Its warm enough now for such things. I've seen more mines go up lately, in fact I was in a ruined house (by shells) the other evening and one went up not far away and the house fell in and nearly I was not in the pink. Hood night.

Wilmot.

29th May, 1915.

Got a little more time at last. The battery marched out of action yesterday after nearly four months continuous action. We went into action on Feb. 8th, I think, and beyond one or two small local changes of position have never been out of action since. Now we're out for a rest (of how long I don't know) and are leading the simple life among unsmashed houses and the sound of the guns only distant rumbling. That's one bit of news. My other is that I am leaving the 50th Battery very shortly to go to some other battery out here as Captain. I'm not actually promoted yet but I suppose our Division has had heavier casualties in the Artillery than others and anyway is short of officers, so a few Senior Captains are getting batteries, and a few senior Subalterns are going to act Captain pending promotion. I am due to go practically at once. There are only three left now of this Brigade of the 20 who started out and altogether between 50 and 60 officers have been in it during the war. My last observing house was about the worst I've had and I'm not sorry to be out of it. It used to be hid on an average of more than once a day with a direct hit from a Maria. Love to all.

Wilmot.

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5th June, 1915.

It is evening now. I wrote a short line this morning just telling you I'd been posted to the 44th Field Howitzer Brigade. I'm to be Adjutant for a bit; anyway get 2/6 extra a day as Adjutant, possibly Captain's pay too but don't know. However, it is rather "embriace", or however its spelt, as the French say, and rather lacking in excitement as a rule. More signing my name to be done than killing the enemy, worse luck. Corrie and Naples say I've done my share of real fighting, crawling about on my tummie, etc., and its quite time I was given a soft job. However, I've a mild feeling of shirking. However, its not my fault and I'll be in a battery again when I can manage to. I join the 44th Brigade tomorrow and have been doing my last day today at Subaltern work. I am quite sorry to leave the old "Blind Half Hundred" or "Dragon Troop" which are the 50th's names. I've had many interesting and exciting moments in it; they've been great days; however, they are over now, and "Roll on the end of the War" as the soldiers say. Meanwhile, I hope to make a respectable Adjutant. I hear my Colonel's name is Ward and he's said to be a good fellow. Hope its true.

Wilmot.

6th of June, 1915.

I did a long trek today and have joined up at the 44th Brigade as I thought; I'm to be Adjutant- of course one wonders about the trenches and batteries and observing stations, but one is no longer actively employed trigger pulling. Its bed time, so Good Night.

Wilmot.

9th June, 1915.

I'm Adjutant at present, but shall probably get to a battery again before very long. I must say I've got an extremely nice Colonel here, so if I have to do Adjutant somewhere, I'd sooner be here than anywhere else. He's no fool either. There certainly are very nice fellows in the Division. I have a good deal to do with the 1st Division now as well and have met a good number of old friends lately. Not much news to tell you. Having just been handed over the Adjutant's books and belongings and having just got a new clerk too, who though very quick and willing doesn't know everything, I've not had much spare time for writing, so please make allowances. Bed time, so Good Night.

Wilmot.

18th June, 1915.

No news, as per usual. I've still got the 36th Brigade, A.C. and my address is the same. I don't know why you seemed to think I'd be coming home to one of the K's batteries. No fear of that if I can help it. I should be hanged for murder within the week if I peace-soldiered along side some of the gallant strikers and sundry others. Having nothing very much to do, one acquires the German habit of a daily hate, at which I am acquiring great skill, hence the above. The thing is a bit lopsided, however, for the Germans hate us and we hate ourselves, thereby getting a well deserved double ration. The old Boches dropped an aeroplane bomb on my show yesterday; fortunately it went just clear of the horses but it touched up the wagons and

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hit one poor fellow in the back (slight) and through the neck, which was baddish. It was a ticklish tie-up to avoid throttlng him, and we couldn't get it altogether stopped (He was bleeding like the dickens) I'd sent the Sergeant-Major for the Dr. and was looking forward to his arrival with skilled bandages and bandaging, but the rotten fellow was frightened or something and sent a message to say he'd see the man if he was carried round to him (the Dr.). The fellow couldn't be put on a stretcher well to be carried round anyway, as he bled worse unless held in an upright position. The Dr. was only 2 or 300 yards away and was doing nothing else, so I'm for his blood. I sent in a written complaint to the General, so the fellow ought to be court-martialed alright. Certainly it isn't often one calls in vain for a Doctor owing to shelling. I don't know if the man will live or not. Cotton (My Exeter Major) commands one of the batteries that I now supply with cannon food, so I see a certain amount of him now. Its rather a marvel he hasn't been killed; he's always asking for it. I'm not yet gazetted Captain; I think, but the General said I ought to wear the stars and stripes, so I look like one anyway. The working of the thing that has made me what I am is "Posted to such and such a Bat. for duty as Temporary Captain" so now you know what I am. I go under the heading of Captain now out here, but not having been gazetted letters oughtn't to be addressed as such. Am writing in my wood, after dinner, and its getting too dark to see any more, which means bed-time (8;45) so Good night. Love to all.

Wilmot.

"Having been offered an A.D.C. post at home by a friend of the family, a General Purvis, he writes on Aug. 1."

Many thanks for letter and for sending on General Purvis'. However, please decline for me with very many thanks for his kindness. Its so jolly out here I couldn't tear myself away from this delightful country. I'd be homesick, besides England's too quiet and it would disappoint the Germans and they feed us too well, and I might have to work in England and besides its not safe crossing the Channel, so on second thoughts I think I'll stick my rest cure out a bit longer out here. I am commanding the battery again, and have been doing so in fact ever since my return, as Seagrave has now gone on leave. I had a pretty comfortable journey home to this place, also had a very good time in London, no more news.

Wilmot.

"After heavy fighting on 25-28th Sept. he writes." Sept. 29.

Haven't time or inclination to write much now; the weather is foul, cold, wet and stormy. A draughty wet dug out is no place for an old man like me to sleep in. However, its got to be done, I'm afraid. I daresay the censor won't mind my saying there's been some pretty fair fighting lately hereabouts. Poor old Maples is pretty badly wounded and Kilbry with whom we've been especially working lately and whom I've seen a lot of lately, is killed. He got a bullet in the wrist and lost one foot and lay out all day between the lines close to the Germans and as it got dark he fell into the Canal, where I suppose he still is. I was out one evening lately, in a sap, a goodish way out in front of our trenches and close enough to the Bosches to hear them talking (I suppose they were about 10 or 12 yds. away). No real news. Time for my wet old dug out now. Bad luck to the Bosches! Good Night. Love to all.

Wilmot.