

Edmund Fenning Parke

Transcriptions of letters sent by Edmund Fenning Parke from the Front to his parents in Chestnut Square, Wellesbourne.



1) Published in Stratford upon Avon Herald 5/2/1915

We have just had our baptism of fire. We were sent up to the first line of trenches for forty eight hours and have come back for a rest. The mud and water were awful, everybody absolutely wet to the skin, and no place to sleep or anything. The firing was rather heavy at times, and we had a few casualties, not many. I have just received your parcel and thank you very much for it. They were the first mince pies I have had this season; although they were very squashed they were very nice. You know all parcels get a lot of knocking about before they reach us, so next time pack in a light wooden box, then it will be quite safe.

I am feeling very fit, and the grub is very good, too. We are having a fourteen days rest now. Don't forget the Keating's powder. I haven't been able to post this sooner. We are having another rest again after being in the trenches. They are awfully muddy and wet, and very hard on the men. Thanks for your powder and your letters. I have sprinkled my clothes with the powder and I think it will do good. You know I cannot put too many particulars in my letters of what we are doing. To-night we are going back to a little village close to the firing-line and tomorrow night we go into the trenches just twenty-four hours this time. The men cannot stand anymore this weather. And then we spend 2 days as supports. It's an old ruined village. We have to keep our packs on, and hold ourselves in readiness all the time. Then we go back six or seven miles to other villages for a long rest.

It takes quite a long time to get fit again. Yes, a soldier's life is very healthy in the summer time if you are dry, but this weather we have 300 men sick in our regiment with colds, rheumatism, dysentery and fatigue. The other regiments have more sick than we have. The country is devastated round here: villages and small towns are completely wrecked; the fields and roads are torn up with shell fire, and it looks as though things will never be the same again. We get good food while we are resting, but the time when we need hot tea and hot food we cannot get them. i.e. in the trenches. But, of course, it is very awkward to do so, because of the German snipers. These men are very daring, and they know the country very well, because they are retiring all the time, whereas we are going over new ground.

We get papers nearly every day, and some of them are only a day old, so we are well fixed up with regard to news. Our chief topic of conversation is what we would eat if we had so and so now, and it is very amusing to hear the fellows at it. We are only paid 4s (4shillings) a fortnight now so that we need every cent of it for milk and sometimes a little butter. The reason they don't give us any more pay is to stop the men drinking.

I don't want to put you too much expense in sending parcels to me, so when you do, just send a small one. Yes, I should like the gloves, my others are worn out; but I don't want anything else except for some sweets. The first night we went into the trenches we lost a Captain Newton. As it happens I had a letter two or three days after from T -----, saying that Mr. S ----- met Captain

Newton's brother at Cambridge. I remember the Captain quite well. Just out of the trenches again! I have a parcel from T ----- with figs, dates, raisins, &c., and one from C ----- with cake and chocolate which I took to the trenches with me, and they were very good. One of my friends Pepler, was killed last night. Poor chap!

2) Printed in Stratford upon Avon Herald 19/3/1915

February 20th. We left England two months today, and we are expecting a long rest soon. The last time we were in the trenches, and about the time we were to be relieved at 8p.m., a German attack started on our left so they sent our relief up as supports. They and thousands of troops concentrated quite close, in a few hours, in case anything really serious happened, but the Germans only took a few trenches and they were taken by our Division the next day. We had to stay in the trenches forty eight hours, besides doing forty eight hours as supports, where we were not allowed to take any equipment or to take any clothes off, and we only get cold food, but the great thing about the trenches is that they are now dry. At present I am acting as guide to the company. I go in the trenches at night to show the way, and to guide anyone who wants to go to the trench. I have to guide the relief in also. It is by no means an easy job, because there are so many disused trenches, and the guide is held responsible for any mistakes.

March 2nd. Our new draft has just gone past the window, about 660 men and eight officers. They are a very fine lot of men. Our regiment did good work the other day in

taking some German trenches, which were very dangerous to us. We received congratulations from Generals and regiments by the dozen.

March 7th. We all look forward very much to receiving our mail, as it is the one bright spot in our lives. I suppose you have seen that our regiment has been mentioned by Sir John French and by the Premier of the House. We are calling for recruits from the other Canadian regiments and the men are just clamouring to get into this regiment so we can pick and chose the best. A regiment of Cambridgeshire Territorials have joined our brigade. Last time I could throw a stone into the German trenches from our own. That shows how close they were to us.

3) Printed in Stratford upon Avon Herald 7/5/1915

April 20th. Headquarters Company. I am writing this in a little hut just behind the firing line . The hut was made by the French and is composed of branches of trees fastened together at the top with about nine inches of earth piled on the top to stop shrapnel. Over that is placed boughs of trees . The hut is in a wood. This is done for cover so the enemy's aeroplanes cannot see us .The wood is very big and the Germans don't know where the huts are so they don't shell it. Our new trenches are much better than the old ones both for safety, position and their comparative dryness. I am with the Colonel a good deal now .I go with him wherever he goes – when we are doing our turn in the trenches. It is quite a good job and a lot of fellows are envying my work. I started out as guide to the

company. One night the adjutant, Captain Buller, nephew of General Buller, wanted a guide so I went with him. After that I was with him most of the time. Now he has been made Colonel, and he asked me to stay with him. I was offered promotion. I hope the war will be over by the end of June, as you say, but I very much doubt it. Believe me the Germans are not weakening at all, and the only hope of the speedy termination of the war is the entry of Italy into the fray and some big Russian victories.

Personally, I don't think our line will ever advance much. Frontal attacks are much too expensive. E.g. Neuve Chapelle where we had 12,000 casualties, and only gained a little ground, which was not worth the loss of life. Looking over at the Germans one would not think there was a soul about but if we started an attack they would spring up in thousands.

Out of our platoon which was about 50 strong to start with there are only four of us who have stuck it right through. Some have been killed, some wounded and the rest went sick with bad feet, breakdowns &c. Most of the sick have returned to the regiment, now that shows I have been fortunate so far. Of the twenty six officers we started out with there are only about six left now.

Transcribed by Grev Hudson (June 2014)(grev.hudson@tinyworld.co.uk)