

## Letter 14: 20 December 1915 [Part One]

Dated 20th December 1915, 10th Cameronians, B.E.F.

My dear Mother,

This will be my Xmas letter as I hope it will succeed in reaching you just on Xmas day. It is to wish you all a merry Xmas & a happy New Year. All the family will be at home I expect save myself but don't worry about me, I'm getting on all right & Xmas out here isn't desperately bad except of course that it differs so far little from any other day in the week & like the weekly Sunday will arrive alas! without Carols - & I am afraid quite with a shock. I can hardly realise that it is now three months since I have come out here. Time passes so quickly & this is not really war at all. For those in the trenches it's magnificent target practice carried out no doubt in the main by over zealous gunners engaged in what is I believe technically known as an Artillery Duel but which being interpreted means that our brave boys way back pom pom the German in his trenches & the German also way back pom poms our boys ditto. So we are the piano on which this elegant & oft recurring duet or duel is performed & we don't like it one little bit. If our artillery & the Bosch arranged to straff one another & dodged about & hid well it would be war, interesting fair play & a glorious gentlemanly sort of procedure but for both the big fellows to whack us on the head with big sticks while we cower in the trenches & by mutual understanding refrain from punching each other is neither heroic laudable nor funny. Still it's known as an Artillery Duel in Flanders!

Well I've a good deal to tell you. No doubt in that last letter of mine you were surprised at the propinquity of the Bosch. But in our last tour of the trenches he became quite friendly, he waved his arms he threw white papers, he got up he sat on his parapet, he came out of the trench altogether & one bold man came over to the regiment we relieved. They not to be out done in daring sent out a bold L/Corpl. too. These met in NO MAN'S LAND between the trenches which all the world wondered. They exchanged cigarettes, & the Bosch told us we would be very welcome & well done to at his restaurant behind his barbed wire. But - the moment each parted they ran like billy oh for their respective little hole in the mud for the last blighter might receive some presents he did not quite desire. Thereafter we had quite a chummy sort of time with Fritz, we threw over pamphlets inviting him to come & be happy with us & otherwise shewed him how willing we were to have a guest. But the old blighter didn't

come tho' grimy & unshaven & as he told us he had been there for months & months.

But during the night he must have been relieved as in the morn sullen mud & cold barbed wire & the ping of a rifle bullet were all the weather forecast we could get.

Curiously one of our fellows picked up a Bosche shell fired at us indited I think R STRONG & CO. It must be a swine of an American firm but these Americans are pool sfools anyway & not worth quarrelling with.

Well today I saw Field Marshal Sir John FRENCH for the first time saying his farewell to his troops. We were all drawn up along the roadway & presented arms as the car with the

white moustached old man passed slowly along. And then it passed away – for ever with the man who for eighteen months had charge of the British Destiny in France.

[Caithness Archive Centre reference P38/10/16]

### **Letter 14: 20 December 1915 [Part Two]**

Last night we had a concert. But soldiers' concerts out here are different indeed from those at home. At home there are civilians & lots of smiling people in a well lit hall. Here in Flanders it's a whitewashed schoolhouse with a stone floor, & the light is penny dips & the audience is only the khaki coated Tommy with his pipe in his mouth. Often they sing with no accompaniment & the predominant note is a dull low dreary melancholy about "Dead for bread" or something of that sort. Be the song dismal, be the singer a bass & be there no accompaniment & roll the song on without rhythm thro' interminable stories of the woes of existence & the clamour & applause great. Not that Tommy is downhearted or dull, on the contrary, but he is a bit of a sentimentalist as one understands as he joins with right good will in "Dear Homeland - Goodbye" or "When Irish Eyes are Smiling" or other suchlike sentimental ditties.

But the pipes out here sound grand. It's a great thing to be a Scotsman & it's tremendous to be in a Scottish Regiment with its pipes in this land of France. When the pipes play & we go swinging along we feel so much better than the poor blue coated Frenchy & we strut mightily proud thro' the streets of France.

And at concerts with the tobacco smoke & the songs & the atmosphere it awakens memories of the great broad moorlands & the swirl of the wind & the clear sky & how we hate the Sassenach intruder. It must be the remains of that primitive instinct that made the Highland raiders come from their mists & their hill tops with their plaids wound tightly round them, & holding a good claymore come down into the lowlands to garner what they could by force & steel.

It's a great life this & it makes one realise the reality of humanity & how all men are equal & there are no classes & no schisms but all together doing their best for the benefit of the whole. And yet there are officers & there are leaders & with the most democratic army in the world there is respect for the officers aye & tell it not to the labour parasite there is love also; real deep affection between those in authority & the men they lead.

Well I'm getting off the point & only talking. We have an R.C. padre in the Brigade & he's absolutely Tip Top. No finer fellow could be imagined. He's Irish of course & he tells a good story & he's always giving & he's got a delightful brogue. Well he went on leave when the Calais Conference was on & got a divisional car down to CALAIS. There owing to mismanagement he couldn't get across because there wasn't any boat at all you see. So the other brass hats there they swore a bit & expressed themselves on the great staff capabilities of our Army & the Padre I'm afraid did likewise & then the happy thought of luncheon. Behold a big restaurant. Into this they strode & on opening the dining room door who should they find but Kitchener & the conference at lunch. The Brass hats thought they would go & find some other little pub but the Padre stood his ground. We're going to pay for what we eat he said so here goes. But to avoid any unseemly squabble no doubt by intuition K. sent out & told them to come in & they came & dined in the same Room. K was at the head of the table, Joffre on his right, A.J. Balfour on his left & all the others round about but Sir John French was not there – only Sir Douglas Haig was. Lunch ended, K sent word that he was sorry that the navy part had failed & if they liked the destroyer accompanying [him] was at their service.

Oho said the padre. I'm a bit of a sailor & I'll go. But the others trembled. The waves were very stormy & the ship was very wee. However they took courage & embarked. 8 of them Colonels & suchlike were stuffed in a tiny cabin & battened down cause it was too rough for them to get out above. They were told that the ship was to start. It whistled & then they got off at an awful rate

with unfortunate results to the inhabitants of that black hole. One elderly Colonel smashed his eyeglass, another stood upon his false teeth & the Padre found his head on the centre of another's stomach & it got worse & worse as the boat tossed & twisted & they all got as sick as dogs & they all rolled about mixed up on the floor. & when they reached the other side - fortunately for the dignity of the British Army it was dark – they had to have ropes tied round their middles & get hoisted ashore.

Well I think I have drivelled enough now & I must stop. I hope you all have a jolly time & I will write again when Xmas has been & tell you all what it is like. There's nothing about leave yet.

With love to all & best wishes for Xmas & hoping all are well,

From

DB Keith

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