

[letter contained on more than four postcards depicting scenes around Cairo. The letter flows on to at least the fifth postcard, but only the first four remain in the collection.]

dated Zeitoun M. Camp
Feby 24th 1916

Dear Nellie,

Another week has just about gone and mail closing day is again here. Six months ago from Yesterday I left Stratford en route for Trentham, and I am still going strong.

In some ways the time seems to have flown very rapidly. The time when I was toiling in the office seems but a memory. I wonder where six months hence will find me? [the next three lines have been deleted with indelible ink, presumably by the censor] I hope so. One really can't be certain of course until he finds himself there. The Russians, by all accounts, are dealing fairly effectively with the Turks. So it is probable we won't encounter the latter. Enough, it's a waste of time to surmise. Meantime, I'm here.

The picture on the other side is of the obelisk near Natarilh [?placename]. We went for a route march this afternoon and passed near it. I have examined it on one or two previous occasions. It is a sister needle to that of Cleopatra which is now erected on the Thames Embankment, London. This obelisk is less than a mile from the camp, one of the many interesting objects about here. The picture on the other side of the card depicts a sight very common about here. It is marvellous what loads the little donkeys pull. They are not very fast but they are sure. The veiled woman on the left has a kind of veiled ornament resting on the nose. This intimates that she is married. The trees lining the road are typical of those about this part. On the route march today we went along roads just like this. The land along either side is irrigated and very fertile. The old dray has no springs. The Arabs don't seem to worry about them. The whole picture is very typical. Here on No 3 is a street scene in the native quarters. I have often been in streets just like this. They are not extremely clean, sometimes very much to the contrary and rather unpleasant odours greets one's nostrils. The buildings are flat roofed and they seem to take the place of back yards. Fowls and rubbish of all descriptions finds a place up there. This doesn't tend to give the places a very tidy appearance. Dirty little shops open right on to the pavement. A good many of them are more like recesses let into the wall, with entrance from the front only. They haven't room for yards etc!

The camel coming along the street is carrying a load of fodder - lucerne I think. I have seen these animals with loads on their backs so large that you could see only its head sticking out. You have to look for the camel! No wonder [word missing] the hump. The large building with the minaret is a mosque. Here is the interior of a mosque - Mohamed Ali. It is in the citadel. I have been there a couple of times. The mosque is really magnificent. The interior (with the exception of the four main pillars, which are of limestone) facing of alabaster. The floor is covered with carpets which were made in Constantinople. The whole mosque is on the lines of a similar building in

Constantinople. This picture can give you but a very slight idea of the magnificence of the place.

The ceiling of the dome would be about 200 feet from the floor. The hundreds of lamps present a very beautiful sight. I believe they are all lighted only on several occasions during the year. It would be splendid to see them then. On card No 5 is a view of the side of the mosque as seen from below the citadel outside the walls ... [here the letter obviously continues on the next card]

March 13th 1916

My dearest Mother,

At last I have left Zeitoun and I am now in a new camp. We left the old camp on Tuesday 7th inst and arrived here the same evening.

I am not allowed to say exactly where I am but presume the Censor won't mind my saying that we are camped near the Suez Canal right in the desert. Sand, sand everywhere. Since our arrival here we have been somewhat reorganised, being split up according to respective districts where we enlisted.

In future please address letters to me: Signallers, 2nd Wellington Infantry Battalion. Drill goes on as ever: I however am now in the Battalion Signallers and should miss a deal of the drudgery of the ordinary infantry man. The work will be much more interesting to me. It is now nearly five weeks since I received any mail from NZ.

A long time isn't it? It is rumoured that our mail missed the Sydney connection. I believe though that some mail is due to arrive in a day or so (this has been the rumour for the last month) and I am looking forward to a good bundle of letters. I sincerely trust this finds you all enjoying the best of health. I am feeling tip-top. Getting as brown as a berry. The weather here is not at all bad. Pretty warm in the middle of the day but nice and cool at nights. Of course it is gradually getting warmer. Most of the chaps including myself are now wearing shorts. They are so much more comfortable.

March 16th: I didn't finish this the other night. Something interrupted. Bed time I think. However since then the long looked for mail has arrived and in it Nellie's two letters of Jan'y 16th and 24th respectively. I was very pleased to learn by them that you were all well. There's one disadvantage here: it takes such a long time for mail to reach here from NZ or vice versa. I suppose you will have seen Norman a good deal. He will be able to tell you a great deal about Egypt. I sincerely trust that he will soon be back to health again. You will of course have received my letter telling you about my just missing seeing him. It was hard luck.

My transfer to the signallers went through orders the other night: so it will now be better to address my letters to - Signallers, 2nd Wellington Infantry Battalion (I have repeated this on account of it being not very clear on sheet 2).

Tell Nellie that I would very much like to have a game of tennis with her. Regarding your very kind offer regarding money. I must thank you very much, but am alright in that respect just now. There is not very much inducement for money spending where I am at present.

I will be sending you in a few days an album containing 100 of my negatives. From these if you wish you will be able to get enlargements taken off. Some of them should produce very good pictures. Well Mum I could write you a longer letter were the censorship not so strict. However I suppose this cannot be helped. Perhaps the chief item is that I am enjoying splendid health. Will write again shortly. Love to all.

from your affect son
Bertie

I am enclosing yours of photos - taken some weeks ago at Cairo and about there.

France
May 31st 1916

Dear Nellie,

My last letter to you was written at a little village about one [?figure] mile distant from this town, in which, after having spent eight days in the trenches, I am now in billet enjoying a rest. I am also enjoying excellent health and sincerely trust this finds you all similarly.

The day following my arrival here I went into the trenches and during the time I was there did not fare at all badly. Had a comparatively quiet time which perhaps was just as well for a start. I was with two other signallers in a signal station in the front line. Herr Fritz's trench was only about 75 yards away, but despite this, I haven't seen any of its occupants yet. One doesn't expose himself unnecessarily. Neither does "Fritz"! I have looked through periscopes but there isn't much to be seen. Barbed wire entanglements and here and there you can pick up the other parapet. You would at times hardly think there was anyone there. The "dug-out" in which I was in was very small, about four feet high by eight long by six wide. Not too much room! Just enough for two to lie down and the other to sit at a tiny table bracketed to the side and attend to the telephones. One man had to be on duty all the time. However there being three of us it only meant 8 hours per day, which is less than that worked by the infantry in the Company. Even "work" only meant sitting down with the phone receiver strapped on one's head and taking or sending a few messages. Signallers are exempt from fatigues, guards etc, and even when "out" in billet while the companies are going up to the trenches at all hours of the day and night to do fatigues we merely do our signal practice 9 a.m. till noon, 2 p.m. till 5 p.m. So you see I am not having such a hard time. I know that as soon as Mum hears that the NZers have taken their place in the front line she will be worrying about me but I wish to reassure her that I am alright, in the best of health and spirits and perhaps at the very moment when she is most anxious about me will be having a good time.

The thing is that I feel sure that "you all at home" are alright, while you have not the same assurance about me. Let this be it.

After being relieved by the new lot, we went into headquarters. There I found quite a bundle of papers etc awaiting me, 3 Auck Weeklies, a Weekly Press and 3 or 4 newspapers. There were fortunately none duplicated. My friends suddenly seemed to think that I would like some reading! I can assure you that it was very pleasant to receive them. And then there was a little package, the contents of which I was delighted with. Just what, a week or so previously, I had been trying to get. I thank you very much for it and will endeavour to keep it up to date.

After my arrival in Egypt I got behind with my diary and eventually let it drop. It was too large and I was putting too much detail into it. It is alright as long as it is kept up to date, but when one misses a few days it is just "all wrong." It becomes an effort then, especially when one hasn't too much spare time.

The general system applying to the troops here seems to be about eight days in the trenches and about a similar period out of them in billets some distance back in reserve. This spell gives the men opportunity to freshen up again, although I must say I didn't have such a strenuous time in the front line. Of course I don't expect the quiet time will always exist.

Since being here, the weather has been splendid and the trenches are dry - the country around here is all level and low lying. The mud must have been very bad in the trenches during the winter. As it is now, we have the good weather with, and ahead of us for some time. The twilight here is splendid. It is now five past eight and I have just lit a candle. Even now I could have done without it for about another half hour, only there are plenty of candles available. Out in NZ at this time of the year it will be nearly dark at 5 o'clock still I think. I would be able to put up with that if I could only flash out there for a week or so!

The town I am in now is a big place and should say it approaches Wellington in size.

The Germans were here at the beginning of the war and I believe that they were driven out only after a lot of street fighting. The buildings are well scared and knocked about by rifle and shellfire. Most of the inhabitant have left - those who remain being the poorer people, probably because of the expense of shifting away and having to pay heavy rent for a new home. A rather moving incident was related to me the other day by one of our chaps who had noticed it. A number of soldiers were standing on the pavement up the street laughing and joking. An old dame, poorly but neatly dressed came slowly and feebly along the street and as she passed the men they noticed here. At once their laughing and jesting was hushed - it seemed out of respect to the old lady who had remained behind in her old home, having the dangers of shell and shoot. As the chap who told me about it said, their silence seemed to say "She stays because she's poor." I think the latter summed it up well. The same thought had often struck me when I have noticed other similar instances.

I was greatly surprised to learn that Norman has received his discharge. I was sorry to learn that he had not yet recovered from the effects of his illness. On the other hand however, NZ is a very nice place to stay in these times. Good luck to him! Tell him I would be very pleased to hear

from him.

Two or three days ago I received a great surprise - met Ted Toy. He has been on the Peninsula, was wounded and had a lot of time in hospital in Egypt. He said that he was shortly going to England on leave.

About my camera. Together with another, it was left in London with a Mr J.C. Cameron, Bank of New South Wales, Threadneedle Street. It was put up by me in a package with my address on the outside, while on the inside I put a note with Dad's a/d. The chap who took it over for me put my package and the other he had into one parcel and left it at the above a/d. I am going to write to Mr Cameron and ask him if he still has it alright.

The last letter I received from you was dated March 27th. There is I believe a mail somewhere about now so perhaps I will get some there. I suppose you will be having things quiet just now, and it will hardly be "tennis weather!"

Well, Nellie, I have been finishing this letter while relieving for a few hours down at headquarters in town. I now am going back to billets so will conclude and post this. Love to all.

From your affectionate brother,
Bertie

France
June 29th 1916

Dear Nellie,

This afternoon I was delighted to receive quite a bundle of letters from you -- five in all dating from April 7th to May 1st. Some of them have evidently been delayed somewhere. Of course you will long ago have received my letter advising you of my new address. This will find me more easily.

I came out of the trenches about a week ago. I am now at a signal station a little distance behind the front trenches. Our office is in the basement of a house and I can assure you we are very comfortable. We have beds, kapok mattresses (got from the house which has long ago been left by its civilian occupants) to sleep on and after twenty days in the trenches this luxury is appreciated. There are six of us on this station -- that means four hours work for each man per day. We are enjoying the easy time. There are no civilians about here -- the houses are all deserted and I suppose have been so since the beginning of the war. Just out the back is the remains of what must have been a fine garden. Strawberries, black and red currants and gooseberries. I have had a few strawberries but there are a good few after them as soon as they ripen.

The buildings about here are smashed about by shell fire. Near here is a fine old chateau surrounded by fine old grounds, gardens and orchards. The latter are now overgrown with grass

etc and are going to rack and ruin. The fine old house bears evidence of the devastating effect of shells. It must be hundreds of years old. A terrible shame that it should be so damaged and neglected. In its garden there is now a wild profusion of flowers. In front of me on the table as I write is

a vase containing some of them -- beautiful pink and cream roses, pink Sweet William, a couple of sprigs of orange blossom and the two or three pieces of humble little wallflower. Very refreshing indeed!

This is a real little home. Don't mind staying for a good while.

I was pleased to learn that the photos I took at the Wharf at Wellington and Lyttelton turned out alright. You mention that in the snap of Wellington two people stand out rather prominently, looking at me. I think this snap must be of the wharf Lyttelton. They were strangers to me but I managed to attract their attention and got them to post a p.c. (home) for me. I then snapped them. One of them had a camera I think. If it isn't too much trouble I would like to see a copy of these prints.

I was sorry to learn that poor Johnny was suffering such poor health. I sincerely trust he finds improvement soon. Well, Nellie, it is now after 2 a.m. I heard last night that after today letters will probably be held up for a while for some reason or other. I think I have explained the probability of this to you before. So if it is correct you will understand. I have therefore hastily scribbled this and will try to get it away this morning. It will at least serve to let you know that I am well. There really isn't a great deal more that I can tell you. I trust that this finds you all enjoying the best of health. I will of course keep on writing. I am in the best of health and spirits.

(Goodnight)

Bon Soir!

Love to all from

Bertie

France

July 6th 1916

Dear Nellie,

I am still at the signal station from which I wrote you about a week ago. Am enjoying about the easiest time I had since I went into camp at Trentham. Have been here for over a fortnight now. So I suppose it won't last very much longer. It will be someone else's turn then. The papers are full of reports etc regarding the offensive on this front and of course you will read all about it over there.

It's just about time, too, otherwise this state of affairs might go on indefinitely. I am not very keen on spending a winter in the trenches in this country. The Allies, especially the Russians, seem to be doing well, which is cheering. I think I have previously told you that we get English papers over here, yesterday's paper arriving over here early this morning. This is rather recent.

I am sending you copies of a couple of little publications of sketches of life out this way by Capt Bairnsfather - " Fragments from France" and "More Ditto." To my mind his work is absolutely splendid. It is very popular with the chaps out here and never fails to produce laughter. We have of course seen a little of the kind of surroundings and have experienced some of the feelings and thoughts of the individual pictures. As it says on page 3 of No 1 Capt Bairnsfather has been through it all himself and I can assure you he has very vividly and with a great attention to

detail put his experiences onto black and white. It isn't hard to read the thoughts of his subjects. Perhaps one or two words in explanation of one or two of the sketches will not be out of the way. They, for the most part, depict scenes during the winter-time. That is, of course, where mud and snow are shown. However, even now, it doesn't require very much rain to put the trenches into a pretty slushy condition.

The chap on page 6, volume 1, isn't feeling too happy, his dug-out isn't too luxurious, could do with a few more bags of earth on the top. At the top, beyond is our barbed wire entanglements. But he is not worrying about that or about old Fritz. The air isn't what you'd describe as being balmy. His little charcoal fire (charcoal and coke are used chiefly on account of their giving off practically no smoke) isn't flourishing. It seems to be out. His sox are hanging out to dry! The oblong object below them is a trench periscope. The mud and slush outside his dug-out is over knee deep and it is still raining heavily and steadily! I repeat I am not very keen on a winter here.

Page 7. This fellow has been out somewhere in front of our trenches in "No-man's land" getting the old rum jar filled with water. Suddenly from the German trenches a star shell is fired into the air. These star shells are very brilliant and light up, almost as clearly as day, the place for chains around. They still keep flaring as they fall. Our friend has lost no time in getting flat on the ground to minimise his chance of being seen. He feels terribly conspicuous out there, but it is probable he will never be noticed.

Page 9. Shows an old farm house and buildings somewhat the worse for "shell-wear." I have seen any amount of old places knocked about like this. On the right hand side just above the old clock you can see the corner of a bricked pit which is to be found in all old farm yards. Into this pit is thrown the stable refuse which later is carted out into the fields.

I think the sketch on page 13 is a gem! Page 17 shows a typical shell hole in a brick wall.

Page 18, Getting water at night time. This is very typical (of course, every picture is typical) of an old pump and is especially so of the ruined building, smashed trees etc.

Page 27. The eternal question here just now is: "When are we going to get some other jam?" We get nothing but marmalade, marmalade, marmalade. Better than plum and apple, though. Page 42. Out on a wiring party putting up entanglements in front of our trenches. Not a very good job with a full moon. The German trench is only about a hundred yards away.

Volume 2. - Bairnsfather has picked out "Bert" rather much. Don't you think so?

Page 29. The chap on the right has just come in perhaps from billet to do some fatigue work in the trenches at night. He has brought with him a sheet of corrugated and a couple of pieces of wood perhaps for the building of a new dug-out.

Page 31 shows the steel helmet we wear in the trenches now. Have not yet got as far as page 40. Have hopes though.

I have not yet come across cousin Bert yet.

I suppose at present you will be having a quiet time.

Well, Nellie, I haven't much news to tell you: in any case we are not allowed to give "news."

I trust that this finds you all enjoying the best of health. I am very fit and am looking after myself.

Love to you all,
from

brother

Your affectionate
Bertie

Field Service Post Card addressed to Mrs H. Henson, Te Kowhai, Waikato, NZ, and dated 9/9/16 [This card is a formally printed post card letter which is composed by the sender deleting certain phrases. Nothing extra was to be written on it apart from the date and signature]. I am quite well. I have received your letter. Letter follows at first opportunity Signed Bert 9/9/16

[letter written on back of self-portrait photo]

France
30/12/16

Dear Nellie,

What you see on the other side is the result of a visit to a photographer on Nov 27th. Very indiscreet, I'll admit, but my chum, Ruscoe, of Wanganui, and I were on our way to the baths when we decided to go round and place ourselves at the tender mercy of the camera-man. The latter turned out to be a boy of about 10 years. He was a very business-like youth. Hew took us out to the back yard (his studio), told us where to stand, stuck his head under the dark cloth, pushed a slide in and pressed the button. The horrible consequence is here recorded. It's very rough but thought I'd risk sending it. At the time we were in billets in town, taking things easy. Am still in trenches. Don't know whether will be out for New Year or not. No, probably not. Wrote you on Xmas Day. There is not much news since. Love to all from

Bertie

The bags slung across our shoulders are gas respirators. Au revoir.

NEW ZEALAND POST OFFICE TELEGRAPHS

Received (stamp) Te Kowhai 4 July 17

Office of Origin: Field P.O.

TO Esm (?) Herbert Henson Te Kowhai New Zealand

Well Henson

[Letter written on two post cards depicting scenes from Oban in Scotland]

Oban
July 24th 1917

Dear Nellie,

Arrived in Oban from Glasgow at 10 to 10 last night. Am staying with my friend Berry at the Marine Hotel, a high class place running us for about 12s 6d per day. We are enjoying the luxury.

The weather up to midday today has been very disappointing but this afternoon it cleared up splendidly and the sun shines strongly and happily. This afternoon at 2.30 p.m. we went out on a cruise on Loch Linnhe and around the Island of Lismore, and from there have just returned. It is now nearly 7 o'clock. On the boat we met some very nice people, including two girls on holiday up here from Glasgow. These two we are to meet again at 7.30 p.m. after we have had some tea. Oh, my word, Oban is a beautiful little place and we are having quite a good holiday.

Time is short, so ta ta.

Love to all,
Bert

Monday Aug 13th '17

Dear Nellie,

I have had tea and have come out here to a quiet little spot in a little field where in the calm and

cool I'll attempt to attend to my rather neglected correspondence dept! Another chap of the section has come out too. He returned from leave in "Blighty" today and is simply brimming with tales of the great time he had. I can tell you I rather envy him. He went up to Edinburgh and had the time of his life. Now of course he has a mighty store of news to unburden to those back in N.Z. He's greatly in love with the Scotch lassies he met. Suppose he will get over the malady in a month or two. He says that he felt the leaving of old England's shores even more than leaving N.Z. That's understandable. When leaving the little home in the south, there's a good deal of novelty and anticipation experienced, while when coming back here one knows pretty well what he's returning to. But still in a week or two after returning from leave one finds himself sailing along in the same old groove, looking back on the holiday as a sort of dream, a pleasant one no doubt. Why, do you know it's just over seven months since I had my little trip, and nearly two years since I went into camp, and I'm still going strong. What I'm looking forward to next is a trip to Paris. The percentage of leave there is rather small but I may have the good fortune one of these days. Another of our signallers returned from there today. He assures me it's absolutely out on its own. He had four spare days there and naturally feels the return mighty hard. There was only one thing he objected to in the Gay C; that was being generally mistaken for an American! Rough, wasn't it? On account of the hat, of course. Oh, by the way it might interest you to know that this chap's name was Berry, a brother of Mrs E.O. Osborne. It's most tantalising to have all these chaps coming back from leave and then setting out to tell you what a great time they've had.

It is possible that I might be given the opportunity of a little holiday in Paris within the next few months. If so I think I would have to cable you for a remittance. I depleted my immediate credit somewhat down at the school. It would be hard luck to have to forego the chance through lack of funds would it not? But then if I do find this necessary I don't want you send too large an amount. It's only a short leave. Now this is all "in case" but then if you do get a cable request you'll know what

it's for. Haven't I stated my case modestly?

I am still with battalion school with my lot signallers and it seems probable that I'll be carrying on with this for some time yet (already!). About eight days ago we experienced a week of very rainy weather. In England I believe it was the heaviest rainy period for fourteen years. However I'm pleased to say we are again enjoying fine weather. Even now one notices the slight shortening of the days and the lessening power of the sun - but I'm not entertaining thoughts of winter for a long time yet. It's rather delightful out here this evening. Just as I wrote this a Frenchman (or probably a Belgian) came along the edge of the field just in front of me. He was looking round his crop which upon my enquiring he told me was tobacco. A very luxuriant plant indeed. I really wasn't sure what it was. In a mixture of English, French and Flemish he then proceeded to explain the process of tobacco making. I'm not altogether sure about it now but it is to be cut in about a fortnight's time, then it's dried. Then I understood him to say that the rest of the process was in the hands of the madames (and mademoiselles, of course) after which it is carted away and sold to tobacco people in the towns around. He named different towns to which he took it. Pointing towards the line he mentioned a town or two (now in the hands of the Huns) in which he used to sell his tobacco. I said "perhaps you'll be able to sell it there next year. He shrugged his shoulders, gesticulated with his hands and said "Ah, perhaps, but it is a great war - a

great war." Thereupon he continued on his way round his crop, I proceeded to relate the incident. I rather hope he is able to sell it there in that exiled town not later than this time next year.

I haven't seen Bert since the time I mentioned in my last letter of about a week ago. I must go and hunt him out again.

The grain crops around here are now being harvested. The recent rainy weather has been rather against this but now that the fine weather is back again the people are getting busy with the work of cutting and stooking the crops. Most of the cutting is done by hand - the plots of course are small. I have though seen several reapers and binders in use. Most of the methods of farming here are a great deal different to those obtaining in N.Z. The cultivation out there is of course not nearly as intense, on a much larger and perhaps rougher scale and warrants the employing of modern and expensive implements and machines. However, these people are a long way behind in farming methods and the introduction of new methods and machinery would do no harm. but as it is, each man occupying his little piece of land finds he can, with the assistance of his women folk, manage most of the work without much expensive plant. So it remains.

The crop in stook here reminds me of this time last year when I was on the way to the Somme. Further down that way a great deal of grain is grown and on a rather larger scale. And here is the season round again. Reminds one of how the time slips by. You will perhaps by the time this reaches you, already have received a letter full of cards from me.

Well dear Nellie (it) is getting late, time for me to go in. Love to you all, from your affectionate brother

Bert

Field Service Post Card dated 18/8/17 addressed to Mrs H. Henson, Te Rapa, Frankton, New Zealand

I am quite well. I have received your letter dated 26.6.17 Letter follows at first opportunity. (signed) Bert

France
November 3rd 1917

Dear Nellie,

This is Saturday night in a quiet little village, where excepting our presence, the evidence of war is slight. I am in my billet, that comfortable temporary home about which I told you in my last letter. The room, a large bright one, presents quite a cheerful scene this evening. The fireplace, which by the way boasts of marble fittings, has in it a bright little fire, around which some of the chaps are sitting toasting themselves. Apart from this fire it is warm this evening, the sky being overcast and promising more rain, but then a fire always gives an air of homeliness and cosiness, doesn't it? The old gramophone is going down in the YMCA room below. Earlier in the evening a concert was held outside. Songs etc given by different chaps and selections by the band made an hour or two pass pleasantly.

This band of ours came over here from Abing [(?spelling- word indecipherable)] a month or so ago. It possesses a set of silver instruments which are made good use of. It practises assiduously every day; we get ample music. It is only since about three months ago that we had a band at all in this battalion. A brass band came over and was with us for a while, but then went to 2nd Auckland Battalion and our present band took its place. The bands in N.Z must be getting considerable depleted of their players. However, bandsmen don't go into the line, so they ought to get back alright to play the boys home.

In my last letter I think I told you that I had previously started but not completed a letter to you. Well, it's so old now I think I'll confine it to the fire, and start again. In it I mentioned that I had cabled you that I was well, incidentally asking that ten pounds be cabled to Bank of N.Z. London. The reason that I cabled for this was that I anticipated getting Paris leave in the near future. I asked that it be sent to the Bank of N.Z. London because I thought I'd get it quicker that way. I wrote the bank asking that when the cable came through to them, to forward it on in treasury notes to me. However, I haven't yet heard from them, neither has the Paris leave come along. I think I'll get away shortly though. By the way it will soon be my turn for English leave again, but I don't think I'll take it until the winter is over. The holiday would be much more enjoyable in fine summer weather. Of course, on the other hand I might have changed my mind when the time comes round.

A few days ago gift parcels were distributed to us here, one per man. They were provided by the Mayoress of Wellington's fund and were much appreciated. They contained a towel, a tin of jam, a tin of condensed milk, cigarettes, potted meat and sweets, all in good condition. Our food box (otherwise our cupboard) is now full of Kirkpatrick's jam and Highlanders milk all the way from old "home." We are living very well indeed. This evening for tea we had boiled fresh meat, potatoes, cabbage and turnips in plenty. We get a very fair issue of bread, butter and jam. For supper we get cocoa and biscuits from the YMCA. We're doing all right just now, I assure you.

There is a mail, or part of one in today. Mine will probably come along tomorrow.

My mail has dwindled down considerably nowadays due I must confess to my own failure to keep up my end of the correspondence. I don't mind though as long as I get news from home. It's now just on two years since I left N.Z. A long time, but trust to see the shores of Aotea-roa before another such period elapses.

I haven't told you anything about our last "stunt" have I? I started to do so in that letter I didn't post. Now don't expect a full detailed account. I'm not a war correspondent or a rival of Malcolm Ross. Here's just a brief outline of some of my impressions.

Before the "affair" we were out at a village far away from the scene of strife. Here over rested and trained. Altogether having a very fair time. We left this peaceful part of France near the end of September doing some long route marches in the direction of the line. The first day we did over twenty two miles, which with a full pack, rifle etc was any amount far enough. A number fell out on the way. I got through alright, mighty tired and sore. I've never fallen out of a route march yet, and with the idea of not spoiling my record in this respect I suppose I stick to it more grimly. We billeted at a village that night and got the way (sic) again next morning. From here on the journey was done in easier stages. The third day brought us to a village in Belgium and here we rested for a couple of days. A lot of refugees were in this part, housed in temporary shacks. One wondered why in the face of going into a stunt, we should be asked to do such a long trek. To endure the hardships of battle one should be fresh and fit. However, we were pretty right after the little rest and from here continued the journey in motor lorries. Up to this point we had tramped close on fifty miles. It was here too that I was temporarily attached to "Brigade." I rejoined the battalion on the third of October. It was then in a reserve line. We were to go over the top next morning. I didn't get much sleep that night for we moved out at about one o'clock next morning. The sky was overcast, the night very dark. For part of the way we followed a duck-walk and then leaving this plodded across muddy, shell ploughed ground. We signallers were pretty well laden with our signalling gear, phones, wire, lamps etc, and it wasn't anything like "roaming in the gloaming" as we struggled along in the dark trying to dodge shell holes and mud and slush. A few shells dropped about erratically but our main concern was the rotten path (?) we had to take. We were not at all sorry when we came to a halt at a position a few hundred

yards behind the front line. Time was then about 3 a.m. Here we waited in shell-holes until about 4.30 a.m. when it was decided to move up into the front line. We had some very marshy ground to cross but eventually got there alright and commenced with the aid of shovels to improve our "possies" in the trench for it was very probable that the Hun would drop a barrage on to it as soon as our artillery started. To cheer the boys a drizzling rain commenced. Things were comparatively quiet, that is there wasn't any concentrated shelling until about twenty to six. Of course old Fritz a hundred yards or so across the way kept sending up a few flares; He can usually be relied upon to supply the illumination.

Then circumstances altered; the old Hun became aggressive and dropped a barrage just over and behind our trench. There was quite a lot of loose metal and mud flying around. We thanked our lucky stars that we had moved up to the line and not remained in the shell holes behind, for it was there that the barrage was thickest. We rather wondered what the old Hun's game was. It was possible that he had become suspicious, or I thought that he perhaps was intending to come over himself, so taking due precaution I wiped a considerable quantity of mud off the breech of my rifle and got it into working order, and was prepared to welcome old Fritz and his boy karl. As it turned out I wasn't afforded the pleasure. In view of Fritz's unseemly action I wondered whether our guns would start any earlier. But no. Everything was to plan. Exactly at six o'clock our guns opened up like clockwork. The whole sky behind was lit up with the flashes. Our

barrage must have (been) terrible, absolutely hellish for the Hun, the din was terrific. Then nearer and behind us scores of machine guns chattered and spat lead. The Hun frightfulness was completely drowned. A few minutes after our barrage opened up the boys went over. Auckland B'n was to go over and take the first objective, then 2nd Wellington B'n was to go through them and take the 2nd objective. In another few minutes I witnessed a great sight. Scores and hundreds of Huns came trooping back across our trench. They were losing no time either. They knew the way to go. I didn't notice any escort with them. They didn't require one. They of course had no arms but they all had their gas helmets and water bottles, while a few of them had their belongings and their rations in a little bundle. It really was amusing to see them. They shot their hands up above their heads nervously and upon the slightest provocation. If one looked at them up would go their hands and "kamerad, kamerad," they'd shout. Things seemed to be going well with us. Why, the way they flocked across, one would imagine the war was just about over. The headquarters left our "old" front line and moved up at about seven o'clock, or a little before, and landed at the place, where it was intended to establish battalion headquarters, without mishap although there was (a) fair amount of stuff flying around. It is strange how when one gets into the scrap he becomes indifferent to the danger. We expected to find here a pill-box or so, or the remnants of some, but looking around there was nothing like this about. The position was only verified in this wilderness of shell holes, by taking bearings on

some other known places. All that was left of those buildings and strong places was a heap of crumbling bricks and concrete. There was no place in which to establish h'dqrs, so the only thing to do was to dig in. This was done by some of the b'n pioneers and a few others. The work of the signallers was to get into communication with brigade behind, and our companies which were in front. Out of nine chaps in the section only three landed up there with the first lot, so it meant a pretty busy time for we three who were there. There were also a couple of new chaps attached to us but they were not much use at the beginning. The others had become astray from our party in the darkness of the early morning. Of these, four turned up a couple of hours later. They had not moved up with us from the first position behind our old front line and had consequently had a pretty hot time in the barrage. Two of them were wounded and it (was) really very fortunate that more were not hit. I for one was mighty pleased to see these four come along. We would have been in a bit of a fix for signallers had they not arrived. Things were in fair swing even before this. We were into communication with the companies and also with brigade, but the job now was to maintain this. The actual attack is generally not the hardest part of the stunt; it is the resistance of the counter-attacks that often costs the most effort and endurance. After an assault like this it takes a little while for the Hun to find out the real position and get his artillery on to the new line. On our little front however the counter-attacks were not formidable and were easily repelled. Our S.O.S. rockets were put up a few times, though, and our supporting artillery was very prompt in opening out. Just behind our headquarters a lot of machine guns were in position and they were especially prompt in answering the S.O.S. rockets. This rocket was a very pretty one, green, red and orange, and was very easily seen. I don't exaggerate when I say that these scores of machine guns of ours would be firing on the Hun line before our rocket started to come down in the air. A number were very close to us and made a terrible clatter. Still it was very nice to hear them going, one might call it reassuring. I must not go any further before I tell you how it was there were so many prisoners and so many dead (Huns). It transpired that the Huns had planned a big attack on us on the very same morning but we had got in ahead and upset things considerably. This accounted for their barrage at twenty to six. It was

probable that it was some time before the German commanders in (the) rear found out what was happening. They most likely thought that their own attack was going on alright. They were disappointed. The weather was not at all pleasant. A drizzling rain and a rather strong wind made things none the happier. I was caked all over in mud and for most of the time was wet through, and the whole time we were in had practically no sleep. I had no time to go souvenir hunting this stunt. What little time one did get off he tried to utilise in a little sleep or rather one dozed. A wet, muddy trench or shell hole are not places conducive to comfortable sleep (The letter ends at this point without full stop or conclusion by way of a sign-off, which suggests he may have written more. However, the second

half of the letter is written on the back of the first eight pages, because, he says on p8, "I have finished this pad." As the final sentence is squeezed into the bottom of the page, it may also mean that he didn't have space to sign off).

France
November 9th 1917

Dear Nellie,

My N.Z. mail came to hand three days ago. In it was your letter of Sept 9th and the photograph with which I am delighted; and also Katy's letter of August 26th written when you were up in Auckland on your holiday. Was very pleased to learn that you had an enjoyable time, but it was rather hard luck that the weather was not more kind. Better weather next time I trust. I like that photo of you immensely - it's really splendid. Yes, I think you have changed. I can scarcely realise that I have a sister so grown-up. I have always been used to thinking of you as the little girl you were at Halcombe when I used to get home occasionally. You know, I didn't get home very often during the year preceding my coming away and then I've been away just on two years now. So perhaps you'll pardon my regarding you as being younger. Why! you very shortly will have reached your twenty first birthday, one of the important events in one's lifetime. At least it's supposed to be. I wish you, my little sister, very many happy returns of the day. I would have liked to have been able to send some little present but I haven't been anywhere lately where I could get anything suitable. Perhaps I'll be able to send you something small later on. You'll understand why I can't do so just now. Meanwhile my fondest love and wishes for much happiness on your birthday (and all other times). I'm extremely proud of you little sister.

Today I bade farewell to that little "home" I've told you about previously, and a little jaunt of about seven miles with full pack up brought us to our new billets which I can say are as good as the last. I wasn't at all pleased with it when I first saw it, but we have cleaned it out and fixed one or two things up and now feel almost reconciled to the place. There is a fireplace in which as I write there is a roasting fire (the people who were here before we have most thoughtfully left a decent little lot of firewood) and then we have for furniture, a table on which I'm writing this. I look around and with the exception of a few postcards on the wall am afraid I can't say we

possess any other furniture. We are going to sleep on straw on the earth floor. Rough, but cosy enough. The time is now about eight o'clock, several of our chaps have just come in and are arguing about a football team which they are trying to select. We have had a couple of matches during the last week, the first a draw, in the second we got "pipped" by four points. We're out to win this next.

Today we passed some of the "Dinks" (otherwise Rifle Brigade) and someone sang out to me. I looked round and saw the chap who evidently recognized me well enough but I'm not at all sure who he was. The only one I can think it was, is cousin Alex Ross, but I haven't yet heard that he's over here.

I intended writing only a short note tonight, as I was late getting to bed last night and early in rising (about 5 a.m!) this morning. consequently am feeling a bit tired. Besides this chaps are arguing nineteen to 12. So I'll have to join in (I've got to start on a new pad. Got it in one of the gift parcels from N.Z.)

All the souvenirs I got out of this "stunt" were a couple of belt buckles, which I'll send to you, and then there is one J.H.H. who I am afraid will not be accepted for carriage by the postal people just now. He will be coming along one of these days, I trust without an address tag on.

The day after the attack, together with our signals officers and another went down to a brigade station which we took over. This was in a pill box and was ever so much more comfortable. I suppose you've heard a lot about these pillboxes as they are called. I have been (in) a few. They are concrete structures of immense strength, little forts in themselves. They have apertures through which to work machine guns, and provide great security to the gunners until our chaps get up to them when the game is just about finished for Fritz. Our fellows throw bombs inside and if there are any survivors they are mighty glad to come out with their hands as near the clouds as they can get 'em. They often though are costly to take. I have seen some absolutely smashed up by our artillery, others quite intact, despite that they have been hit repeatedly; they just had corners and pieces chipped off, but considering that the concrete was about six feet thick and very strongly reinforced, they could stand a great deal of knocking about. The Hun has built these shows since the Somme. He found his deep dug-outs to be not the success he had expected. They became man-traps when we advanced. But not even with the pill boxes can the "wily one" stop our advance. The p-b's become comfortable quarters for our fellows. The one I told you I went to was not very large and as there were a number of runners there as well it was rather cramped. Anyhow I can assure you I was very thankful to get into it for it was dry and cosy. I was here until about 3 a.m. the following morning, the 6th, when we were relieved.

Everything being handed over O.K. we set out on a most strenuous trudge across shell-torn ground to a reserve trench. Most of this ground was very marshy, and with our load of instruments etc, the going was exceedingly heavy, especially as we were not quite as fresh as we might have wished. However, very sleepy and dog-tired we arrived at this trench alright and enjoyed a few hours' rest. Later in the day we marched back some miles to a camp. We moved on next day to yet another, where under canvas we enjoyed a rest for about a week. I might say I made up for a good deal of lost sleep here.

It was from this camp that I sent you, or rather Dad, the cable.

In a previous letter I have told you about our going into the line again for about another week and then about our coming right away back here where things are peaceful and where one can for the time being almost forget about the war. I'm trying to make the most of it.

Since the "stunt" I haven't seen anything of Cousin Bert, G Mathers [?cannot decipher] or any of the fellows we both know. I trust all is well with them.

Oh, I must tell you that I saw the one-time city of Ypres during my "sojourn" up that way. Went through it several times. You will doubtless have seen at different times many views of it. I am, if I can get them censored, sending you several p.c.'s and a couple of photos. The place is now an absolute desolation, a wilderness of ruins. I don't think I am incorrect in saying that there is not, in the whole town, a roof or a wall intact. The famous clothhall is now a great deal more damaged than it was when the photo I am sending you was taken. It is an eternal shame to the Hun the way he has destroyed the place. Sheer vandalism! But one of these days he may find himself paid back in his own coin. It would be the only way to make such a people appreciate their own barbarism. One must see it to realize to a small degree what it is.

Well, Nellie, I notice the figure in the top left hand corner of these sheets (this is p25) and think it high time I drew rein. If you have read this far I must thank you for your patience and furthermore I tender apologies for having run mad like this, and starting to write a book. I'm sure there is a lot of it that won't be understood by you. If it were permissible I could tell you a lot more that might interest you but then Mr Censor steps in hard, but it's all for the best. Perhaps fortunate for you. What I have written in the previous pages is I know very disjointed and incomplete. I pray you, overlook this. If I read it over.

I sincerely trust this finds you are enjoying the best of health.

Fondest love to you all.

from your affectionate brother
Bert