



Dec. 31. 15

my dear Father

Thanks you for your last letter acknowledging my field card. You would gather that the reason why I had not written for so long was that we had been cut off from the post for 2 weeks. But I expect you and Bee would both get one from me by the time I get yours. It was good to get a decent Xmas leave. I hope you had a good shot on the 10th and that you were able to help. I had a good letter from Ted but did not answer it as I thought he would see my news when he came home. The water-proof socks are very satisfactory

at least they have served me very well today. I had 1 pair of socks (ordinary), 1 of waterproof, 1 of puttees, and 1 of sandbags and I am warm and dry. In these trenches the mud is not so deep, not up to your knees and as they are just right. I hope you are still shovelling and now promoted to the shell as well hedging. I am promoted to 36 stripes less than 5th Paul. M. G. must have been very funny ^{for} the subject of his drinking races. In this campaign it is not necessary to know how to fight or shoot, the thing you want is to be able to use a spade and dig a drain and have much out of the light. In fact it is not a fight against the enemy but against the opposing circumstances of mud, water and the loss of ground. We have been out there 2 months and I have not fired a shot but every single day since we landed I have been busy contending with dirt and discomfort. We invariably find our billets dirty, draughty and more or less useless, and we always immediately set to work to make them as clean and cozy as possible. In the trenches it is the same thing, we find them choked with mud and once deep in water and we immediately start for days and night to dig them out. You stand in the middle of the mud and water and somewhere under your feet there is a wooden platform which you are supposed to dig out and clear the mud from underneath it. The sides of the trench are 7 or 8 ft high and 2 1/2 of each spadeful comes back in your eye. Generally you are forbidden to throw it over the top at all for fear of attracting the enemy's fire and all you can do is to try to plaster it on the sides where it gently subsides back into the bottom of the trench again. It seems absolutely hopeless and yet

LETTER FROM ROBERT OAKLEY VAVASOUR THORP TO HIS FATHER, 31 DECEMBER 1915

REFERENCE: B/DAT/7/1/49 | SUGGESTED AGE GROUPS: KS3, KS4, LIFELONG LEARNERS
| TOPIC AREAS: WW1, LIFE IN THE TRENCHES

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if you get for it somehow or anyhow it is wonderful things gradually begin to improve. I had to take a party of 100 to a place that combined all the worst points but there was a little stream that cut across it at one place and there was a lot of "level" down to it on each side and we made quite a good job of it in the end, beginning at the stream and working upwards. Only the Germans spotted something was going on and sent a few shells at us and we had to stop for a bit. Next day it was the other way round to take the fatigue party and I was left with a few other

to clean up the billets, so set to work to drain a huge mud swamp at the back of the house. Old Hercules did the original stables in a day but I am sure if he had seen my mud puddle his heart would have failed him. But again I found a level and began a drain upwards and improved matters very much. Hercules was all as bad off after all, it is when the mud comes back on you again like Sisyphus that it breaks your heart. It is the same with the water, if you can only engineer a way for it to clear itself it is not so bad but when your trench is lower

than the surrounding country and you have to pump it out only to see it run gradually in again it almost makes you swear. We were marched up one night in about pitch dark to near the front line and ordered along the front of a railway and told to dig the mud from where we were standing and pile it up against the rails. You couldn't get at the mud because there was another foot of water above on the top of it, your feet were stuck deep in the mud, you went in up to your knees

Robert Thorp was the son of Reverend William Tudor Thorp, the vicar of Ellingham. Robert went to Berwick Grammar School. He worked as a teacher in Manchester. This is one of the letters that Robert sent to his father while he was serving in the army during the First World War.

Robert was awarded the Military Cross (a medal for bravery) in 1916. He was killed in France on 22 March 1918.

ROBERT'S LETTER

At the beginning of his letter Robert mentions a "field card"

that he sent to his family. This was a pre-printed postcard that was given to soldiers by the army (see Imperial War Museum link). Soldiers would delete sections on the postcard in order to send a quick message back home. Field postcards were also much easier for the army, because they didn't need an officer to read and censor them.

ROBERT'S LETTER: FAMILY

Robert mentions other members of his family in the letter to his father. He writes about Col, his brother, Collingwood. Collingwood was also in the army, but did not go to France until 1916 (so in 1915 he could get home for Christmas). Robert also mentions Bea, their sister, both Robert and Collingwood wrote to Bea regularly throughout the war. At the end of the letter he mentions Aunt Constance, Aunt Julia and "Totta" who had all sent him Christmas presents, including mince pies and a big box of chocolates.

ROBERT'S LETTER: SOCKS

At the end of the first page of his letter, Robert talks about the waterproof socks that his family sent to him and describes what he is wearing on his feet in the trenches:

The waterproof socks are very satisfactory at least they have served me very well today. I had 1 pair of socks (ordinary), 1 of waterproof, 1 of putties, and 1 of sandbags and I am warm and dry. In these trenches the mud is not so deep, not up to your knees and so they are just right.

Putties (or puttees) were strips of cloth that soldiers wound around their lower legs. British soldiers in India before the war saw Indians wearing puttees and started using them as cheap and comfortable calf protectors. They were used widely by British and Commonwealth soldiers during the First World War.

Sandbags were essential in the construction of the trenches (see Photographs of Northumberland Fusiliers in the trenches, 1915). Soldiers used the material sack from the sandbags for all sorts of things, including trying to keep warm and dry.

ROBERT'S LETTER: TRENCHES AND BILLETS

Trenches – system of trenches dug into the ground. Not all of the trenches were directly "at the front". (See Long Long Trail webpage for diagram.)

Billets – soldiers were not in the trenches all of the time. They usually spent a few weeks in the trenches and then a few weeks in "billets". Billets were building away from the front, often abandoned farm buildings.

Robert writes about the conditions that he lives in and about the work involved in keeping the billets and trenches useable. Pages 3 and 4, in particular, provide a good description of a trench and the efforts needed to maintain it.

In fact it is not a fight against the enemy but against the opposing circumstances of mud, water and the law of gravity. We have been out nearly 2 months and I have not fired a shot but every single day since we landed I have been busy contending against dirt and discomfort. (Page 3)

LETTER WRITING

Writing and receiving letters was extremely important to the soldiers serving abroad during the First World War. Over 12 million letters and parcels were delivered to the trenches each week (see links below for more about the wartime postal service). As well as letters, soldiers received parcels of food and clothing.

RELATED IMAGES - TRANSCRIPT

*Transcript of letter from Robert Thorp to his father
B/DAT/7/1/49*

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Dec 31 1915

My dear Father

Thank you for your last letter acknowledging my field card. You would gather that the reason why I had not written for so long was that we had been sent off from the post for 2 weeks. But I expect you and Bea would both get one from me by the time I got yours. It was good Col getting a decent Xmas leave. I hope you had a good shoot on the Monday and that you were able to help. I had a good letter from Col but did not answer it as I thought he would see my news when he came home. The water-proof socks are very satisfactory

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at least they have served me very well today. I had 1 pair of socks (ordinary), 1 of waterproof, 1 of putties, and 1 of sandbags and I am warm and dry. In these trenches the mud is not so deep, not up to your knees and so they are just right. I hope you are still dangling and now promoted to the shed as well hedging. I am promoted to 36 stripes less than St Paul. MG must have been very funny on the subject of his donkey races. In this campaign it is not necessary to know how to fight or shoot, the thing you want is to be able to use a spade and dig a drain and have muck out of the light. In fact

*Transcript of letter from Robert Thorp to his father
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it is not a fight against the enemy but against the opposing circumstances of mud, water and the law of gravity. We have been out nearly 2 months and I have not fired a shot but every single day since we landed I have been busy contending against dirt and discomfort. We invariably find out billets dirty, draughty and more or less roofless, and we always immediately set to work to make them as clean and cosy as possible. For the trenches it is the same thing, we find them choked with mud and knee-deep in water and we immediately start parades day and night

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to dig them out. You stand in the middle of the mud and water and somewhere under your feet there is a wooden platform which you are supposed to dig out and clear the mud from underneath it. The sides of the trench are 7 or 8 ft high and $\frac{3}{4}$ of each spadeful comes back in your eye. Generally you are forbidden to throw it over the top at all for fear of attracting the enemy's fire and all you can do is to try to plaster it on the sides whence it gently slides back into the bottom of the trench again. It seems absolutely hopeless and yet

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if you go for it somehow or anyhow it is wonderful things gradually begin to improve. I had to take a party up the day before yesterday to a place that combined all the worst points but there was a little stream that cut across it at one place and there was a bit of "level" down to it on each side and we made quite a good job of it in the end, beginning at the stream and working upwards. Only the Germans spotted something was going on and sent a few shells at us and he had to stop for a bit. Next day it was the other sergeant's turn to take the fatigue party and I was left with a few others

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to clean up the billet, so set to work to drain a huge mud swamp at the back of the house. Old Hercules did the Augean Stables in a day but I am sure if he had seen my mud puddle his heart would have failed him. But again I found a level and began a drain upwards and improved matters very much. Hercules was not so bad off after all, it is when the mud comes back on you again like Sisyphus that it breaks your heart. It is the same with the water, if you can only engineer a way for it to clear itself it is not so bad but when your trench is lower

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than the surrounding country and you have to pump it out only to see it run gradually in again it almost makes you swear. We were marched up one night in almost pitch dark to near the front line and extended along the front of a railing and told to dig the mud from where we were standing and pile it up against the rails. You couldn't get at the mud because there was another foot of watery slime on top of it, you could not dig because both your feet were stuck deep in the same when you did get part of a spadeful and carried it across you went in up to your knees

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and when you did get it then it would not come off your spade on any provocation. Jan 2nd I have just rec. Bea's parcel and letter. Many thanks for them, they are "some" mince pies. We are back in billets again after 4 days mud-plugging. The vest and pants will just come in handy to change [word unreadable] I have on, otherwise I am well off for everything as I got my socks and shirts washed a short time ago. I hope you and Bea are keeping fit. Aunt Constance sent me a huge box of chocolates. I write to Aunt Julia to thank her for her Xmas presents and asked her to thank Totta for them. We are here for a few days + then go back to the trenches for another spell. I am fit

Your affec. son

ROV Thorp

OTHER ONLINE RESOURCES

ROBERT THORP

Commonwealth War Graves Commission website, page about Robert Thorp: <https://www.cwgc.org/find-records/find-war-dead/casualty-details/315901/R%20%20V%20THORP/>

The London Gazette website, page for medals awarded 24 November 1916 (look for Robert Thorp at the bottom of the page):
<https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/29837/supplement/11545>

North East War Memorials Project website, page for Berwick Grammar School war memorial: <http://www.newmp.org.uk/detail.php?contentId=6563>

North East War Memorials Project website, page for Ellingham Church plaque: <http://www.newmp.org.uk/detail.php?contentId=7098>

POSTAL SERVICE DURING FIRST WORLD WAR

BBC website, page about postal service during the First World War: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-25934407#:~:text=During%20World%20War%20One%20up,former%20Home%20Secretary%20Alan%20Johnson.>

Postal Museum website, pdf of learning resources about the postal service and communications during the First World War:
<https://www.postalmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Last-Post-full-learning-resource.pdf>

Imperial War Museum website, page showing field postcard: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205131476>

LETTER WRITING: DURHAM HYMNS

Durham Hymns was part of the 100 year commemorations of the First World War.

Carol Ann Dufy used archives, including letters, from Durham Record Office to write poems that were set to music and performed at Durham Cathedral.

Durham at War website, page about Joseph Furness (including a transcript of this last letter to his wife: <https://www.durhamatwar.org.uk/story/12683/>)

Vimeo website, video of “Kiss the Bairns for Me” performance, at Durham Cathedral: <https://vimeo.com/243147618>



LIFE IN THE TRENCHES

The Long Long Trail website, page for life in the trenches: <https://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/soldiers/a-soldiers-life-1914-1918/life-in-the-trenches-of-the-first-world-war/>

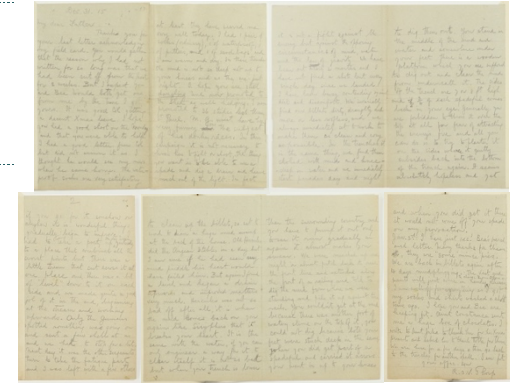
Youtube website, page for tour of a trench reconstruction with Andy Robertshaw: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgRm7aU-Gol>

Youtube website, aerial photography of a trench reconstruction: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAJfRrkq_nk

Imperial War Museum website, page for oral history podcast about life in the trenches: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of-the-first-world-war-trench-life>

LETTER FROM ROBERT OAKLEY VAVASOUR THORP TO HIS FATHER, 31 DECEMBER 1915

TOPIC: WW1, LIFE IN THE TRENCHES
SUBJECT AREAS: HISTORY, LITERACY, MUSIC



Background	Activity	Resources
<p>Robert Thorp was the son of Reverend William Tudor Thorp, the vicar of Ellingham. This is one of the letters that Robert sent to his father while he was serving in the army during the First World War.</p> <p>Writing and receiving letters was extremely important to the soldiers serving abroad during the First World War. Field postcards were also much easier for the army, because they didn't need an officer to read and censor them.</p>	<p>See: Who is Robert writing to?</p> <p>See: Which family members does Robert mention in his letter?</p> <p>See: How does Robert describe the conditions in the trenches?</p> <p>See: What does Robert describe fighting against?</p> <p>See: What contact does Robert describe having with the German soldiers?</p> <hr/> <p>Think: What impression does Robert give you of the trenches?</p> <p>Think: How does Robert's mood seem?</p> <p>Think: Do you think this is a typical representation of letters that soldiers wrote home from the trenches?</p> <p>Think: Do you think Robert gave an accurate representation of being in the trenches, or do you think he over- or under- exaggerated? Why?</p>	<p>https://www.cwgc.org/find-records/find-war-dead/casualty-details/315901/R%20%20V%20THORP/</p> <p>https://vimeo.com/243147618</p> <p>https://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/soldiers/a-soldiers-life-1914-1918/life-in-the-trenches-of-the-first-world-war/</p> <p>https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of-the-first-world-war-trench-life</p>



Think: Did anything surprise you about the letter?

Think: Why was letter writing so important during WW1?

Think: Why were letters censored by an officer?

Do: Write down a list of the words in Robert's letter that are new or unfamiliar to you.

Do: Find the definitions of these new or unfamiliar words.

Do: Make illustrated definitions for these words so that someone else reading Robert's letter can use your definitions to understand the letter.

Do: Create a piece of descriptive writing about what it was like for soldiers living in trenches inspired by Robert's description of the trenches.

Do: Imagine you are a soldier serving in WW1. Write a letter home to your family to update them as Robert did.

Do: Swap letters with someone else. Go through their letter and censor any information that you think an officer would have censored.

Do: Write a poem inspired by WW1 letter writing. You could create a piece of music for this poem to be set, to inspired by Carol Ann Duffy's performance at Durham Cathedral.