

On Active Service

Y.M.C.A.

WITH THE BRITISH  
EXPEDITIONARY FORCE

Y.M.C.A.

13088

No 2 A.R.C.S.

Dear Max,

We have now settled down for a while in a fairly big town quite close to Belgium. I have been away up in Belgium quite a number of times since arriving here and of course am well within sound and sight of the big guns. They dropped a few bombs over our way the other night but without any results and I believe the aeroplane was caught soon after.

We were very happy in our last place. It was only a tiny village but we were very comfortable in our billets. I shared a beauty with her Captain. We each had a double bed. The French people put three big mattresses on top of one another and by the time all the clothes are on one needs a little ladder to climb up. They charge us 5 francs a week for this. Its really awfully cheap as a franc amounts only to 8 eightpence at present. After being a week there we moved on up nearer the

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Spring line to a bigger but less comfortable and very uninteresting place. It is about 40 kilos from our previous place and is very close to Belgium. As soon as you get across the border the type of people and the language change at once. The people are Flemish and in looks and language closely resemble the Germans and are, I believe, not trusted very much. We are about twelve miles from Percy Dunlop. I am going over to see him next Sunday to have a chat as it is now twelve months since I have seen him. The food here is excellent in fact we have never been fed better and the cook is awfully good. There is a thing really interesting to tell you. At present there is a terrific bombardment going on, the biggest that has ever been. The aeroplanes do a lot of stunts above us but the one thing that keeps us from dying of ennui is work, of which there is plenty. Mrs Gilchrist sent me a pair of socks the other day. I must send her a card to thank her. Gilchrist himself is very dopey and is I am afraid quite impossible as he has neither read, heard nor seen the ordinary things of life and is always getting into arguments of which he knows nothing about. He lacks ambition and as a singing partner of course would be hopeless in that respect. We have been unable to have any practice or any concerts since arriving here.

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as there is no Y.M. Ca. and no one seems to possess a piano. The people are very poor and many have lost their homes through the Germans coming down as far as this. It is rather a good thing too as all the cottages are filthy and very unsanitary. The farmhouses are built &c with all the living rooms, fowl houses, stables and pigsly's opening on to a common courtyard in the centre of which every sort of rubbish, dung and filth is thrown for the pigs and fowls to feed on, so you can imagine the stench which arises and how healthy it must be. Our 2<sup>nd</sup> Division has not come yet. They are resting at present away from the Line and we are supplying another Division. All the supplies are brought by rail to the rail head where they are then placed on our lorries and carted to the Division dump from which the whole division draws its supplies. They are carted up the Line mostly by horse transport. There is a terrific stint coming off very shortly so that you will know about it in a couple of weeks. It is, I believe, going to be the biggest

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thing that has ever happened. Some of our boys have been in some very tight corners since arriving here and yesterday I was through a town that had been shelled two days before but the remarkable thing is that not a thing was happening there and the people were going about their work as though nothing had happened. A number of houses were smashed to pieces and the whole street was chipped and knocked about by shrapnel. We have had no Australian mail for seven weeks now but I hear there is one floating round the country somewhere so we're hoping it will arrive here shortly. The mails are in a shocking state and we have lost a large numbers of letters. Did you get the letter about the Lyceum concert in London. I am posting you the ~~the~~ usual shortly which gives a notice about it. How is Eddie getting on with her singing. She must practise hard if she is to do any thing and not fool round and waste money the way she did with her music. It is much better to have a few lessons from a really good teacher than a lot from a quack. I will try to send her some songs from London if I get an opportunity. Yours. Dyer is

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she is in London and will do any little commissions for me that I want. Is Annie still with Mr Stell. When I return we shall probably be able to make is a family affair like the crowd that used to appear at the Town Hall and Jivoli. The only trouble would be to get Dad into an evening suit and not to wear a tie that he ~~did not~~ <sup>would</sup> tuck under his collar. He would also have to learn not to suck his rabbit heads if we were ever asked out to perform at a dinner.

I am afraid I have no more news for you. Does Mrs Vaughan still come to see you. If so just ask her into the kitchen and don't worry about her as she really likes to think she is being made at home. She is really awfully kind although a little queer. Love to all  
Will.

France

4.11.18

Dear Mr. J

I received four letters from you by this mail (yesterday) the last date being somewhere about the 5th Nov. and was very happy to hear from home. It hardly seems 12 months to me since we left Aixey but the reason is that we have had so much to interest us & the experience is so new that time has flown. We are still on this quiet sector and the work is fairly light although the waggons are going night and day. Our Christmas parcels arrived from the 1st A.A.M.T.C. Comforts Fund. Mine was packed by Mrs Ross the O. C.'s wife and was an awfully good one. Christmas has been very gay this year. Mine was spent mostly with Percy Dunlop and Alanic Howell. For the last three weeks there has been a continuous round of parties, dinners and generally blow-outs. Percy

up

Dunlop gave a return dinner in the nearest town, to the one I gave during Christmas week. Both were a huge success. Only eight in the party and well selected congenial company. Our menus unfortunately were limited consisting mostly of soup, rissoles, steak, roast beef, potatoes, peas, spuds, and different sweets and the good wine of the country which in these strenuous times develops more and more each day in the prussic acid direction. I was at nine Christmas dinners. I am enclosing the menu of one so you can see we are not being starved out here and the best food in England is sent over for the Army. They have sugar, margarine and bread cards in England now as a precaution only against people storing provisions. I have had a few offers to join concert companies out here and tour France but I've turned them down as I'm quite happy in this Unit and get every facility for practice and concert work.

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I am going to Paris at the end of the month and am looking forward to a joyful and interesting time. Of course Paris is quieter than at peace time but still is much

gayer than London as there are no restrictions on lighting or food and no fear of aeroplane raids.

Gilchrist is still waiting in the officers mess and appears to be more dopey than ever! He takes no interest in himself or any body else. He was "chatty" a few days ago and here is absolutely no excuse for that here as we are all in clean bunks and have every opportunity to bathe as often as we like. He's about the only one in our column who's had vermin on him. We are going out for a rest very soon and hope to be near a big town.

Bert Tilly is in the same Park as we now and that fellow Wales that Annie Absalom was engaged to. He is in a Workshop here I think. I've had lots of presents from people in England. A huge parcel from the Tyne cum for the "Dung bats". It had lots of socks, scarves, mittens

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writing pads and things also a Cardigan  
jacket from a Mrs Payne. The jacket  
was made at Farmer's Sydney. A lot of  
books from Miss Worship. A box of  
cigarettes from Miss Bullen. Some books  
from Dorothy Hev's. A Shetland jacket  
from E. Rose Dietz, a sister of General  
Dietz. A cake from M<sup>r</sup> Arthur Bernill  
Tobacco from Mrs Smedley and cards  
from the Countess of Cromartie, Charles  
Gourlay Frederick King, Mr Frederick  
Harrold and lots of others so you see  
I could not have done much better  
had I been at home. Will Marshall  
is quite close here I believe in the 3rd  
Pioneers. I have not been to see him  
being fairly busy with Australian  
mail and Pay Rolls. We are well  
fitted out here in a cosy little  
hut with beds a fire, the electric  
light and a piano stove and a  
host of other comforts although  
within 3 miles of the front line. The  
Germans shell towns 27 miles  
behind the line so you would need  
to go a long way down to be quite out  
of danger. Our food is still  
excellent and plenty of it. It is  
really wonderful the amount of

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fun, that can be got out of this business owing to the facilities offered by train and post. We have a cinema right at the door — really only ten paces at the door. This is regarded more in the light of a nuisance as the engine kicks up a fearful noise during the show. Winter has been very mild and although we are in the beginning of January we cannot complain yet about the cold. We have a new piano and gramophone and have arranged for a dance with the W.A.A.C.'s the Women's Army when we go out to rest. I have written to Eddie and to Lizzie this mail but have very little news to tell. Remember me to everybody and you really should give Johnny a severe push in the face as he appears to need it. A small parcel came from the McPhee's but it was not much use as something had run out and the sweets were bad. I just passed away from my letter as there was a howl of fire. It was "K" workshop burning — the column

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next to us. There was a hell of a blaze  
but they've got it well under now.  
The ammunition in the wagon is  
still going off. The country is a  
vision just now. There has been a  
heavy fall of snow and a freeze-  
up after and it really makes  
the usual desolate landscape  
very beautiful. I was sorry to hear  
the Vaughan's were out each time  
Cannie had been to see them. Do  
be nice to them as she is really  
an awfully good-natured woman  
and has been exceedingly kind  
to me. I had Dick Neville, a  
friend of Dorothy Thompson's to  
afternoon tea the other day. He  
also knew Mary Milner very  
well. Bill Thompson is a driver  
in our column and a very decent  
chap too. Percy Dunlop and Alarie  
Howitt have gone back today for a  
rest so I will not see them for about  
a fortnight. Alarie Howitt is very  
fed up with the war but Percy  
still takes a keen interest in  
everything else but war which is  
really the only thing to do these  
days. Love from - Will.

20 28 29  
AUSTRALIAN  
ARMED  
FORCES

France  
4. 1. 18

My dear Effie. I am indeed sorry if I appear to have neglected you on the literary side but I can assure you my thoughts are always of and about you. And now that I've got that little bit of kidstakes off I'll tell you really why I didn't write. I always meant that the letter I wrote to Ma should be shared by all the family. And when writing I have endeavoured to make the letter as full as possible and also as interesting as far as my limited powers of putting my thoughts into concrete form will permit. I am glad to hear that you are progressing with Charlie Evans. Do not be too anxious to get a song my dear. When I return I shall do nothing but exercises and study voice production for about two years. Perfecting in the interpretation of music

will come only with experience of life  
and in the perfect portrayal of emotion  
which it has been our good luck  
to experience during a very dull  
and prosaic existence. Remember  
that my dear Calie. It is only a  
lengthy experience and unfortunately  
middle age which make 'to blossom  
the tree' and sound interpretations  
of song. Do not be dismayed.  
Perhaps the spark of genius is  
within you and needs only to be  
fanned to a flame by a little  
hard work and good teaching.  
Who knows but you may yet  
grow a voice and burst in proportion  
and so attain unto those dizzy  
heights to which we, who have been  
blessed only with an ordinary voice  
and brains strive so unsuccessfully  
after. I am going to Paris at the  
end of the month for eight days so  
will perhaps be able to send you  
some decent little songs. I don't  
think Charlie Evans knows any  
French so I will translate them  
before sending them on. We have  
had a rippling Christmas, much  
more brilliant than one spent at

home and certainly more strenuous,  
our free unhampered souls giving  
vent to their joy at being away  
from the Choking conventions of  
civil life - in plain speech - we  
had "some" Christmas. Details  
would pain the family as it might  
probably lead them to believe that  
their little son was on to the downward  
path which leads only to true  
joy. As I am in a philosophical  
mood I will cease this senseless  
prattle and will close my letter  
as my philosophy and outlook  
on life now is very much  
changed and is apt to startle  
and disturb peace-loving  
conventional citizens. Give my  
love to any one who deserves  
it and to those who do not tell  
them I have forgotten them in a  
glorious cloud of new friends,  
philosophies and loves.

Yours aesthetically  
Bill.

85/8899  
AUSARTSUA  
AUSTRALIAN WAR

France  
7.10.18.

Dear Ma

Have just received two parcels from you. One with a big lot of butter etc. two pairs of socks & the other with soap and two pairs of socks. They will come in handy for the winter. In spite of peace talk and the collapse of Austria & other belligerents we will remain here for many months yet I think. Today the German peace delegations will arrive so that the papers may contain something definite this morning. All our troops have been resting for six weeks now but return to the line tomorrow. The concert party still goes on just the same. During the rest we have worked harder than ever and have not had one night's spell for nearly two months. This week however we close down for four or five days and open in the theatre at Amiens for a prolonged season with the Americans. By the way I sent two.

pair of those socks to my American pal as I knew  
he needed them very badly. Their postal facilities  
are not nearly so good as ours<sup>ours</sup> they have to wait  
longer for their mail than we do although only  
a short distance from home. I sent him  
also some tobacco that I received in a  
comforts parcel. He is a very fine Chap and has  
just succeeded in gaining his commission. We  
had General Monash, the Corps commander at  
the show on Saturday and a number of other  
Generals as well. He was very complimentary,  
came round after the show & shook hands with  
us all and had a chat with each. Every night  
has been the same. Our own Divisional General  
comes three times a week and last night the  
staff of the 4<sup>th</sup> Saxonians Hospital booked the  
house out. They had to come 30 miles to  
see the show. George Castles and I sang at a  
Requiem service conducted by the Archbishop of  
Amiens in memory of all Australians who  
fell in defending his diocese. It was most  
impressive. George Sang the Ave Maria and  
I the O! Salutaris. I think I will go to  
Abbeville for my weeks rest to see Sister

Macmillan — also spend a couple of days with my American pal. Alaric Howitt is off to Paris for the week-end to buy clothes for the show. I have an excellent billet in this town. A bedroom and sitting room with electric light, a small study for writing and lots of little comforts. The people are very kind indeed. The old lady brings my coffee to bed every morning at half past eight and at nine I go to breakfast at the mess. We are many kilos from the line and I have not seen an aeroplane for two months. In spite of all that I am keeping very thin but that is due to the dancing & work on the stage I think. I was not surprised to hear about Annie buzzing off like that to be married. I expected it at some time or other for I knew she disliked the routine of Ball & Welch's and the ordinary daily round of existence. Her renewal of friendship with Agnes is not to be wondered. They will continue like that to the end of their days. Scrapping one minute and making it up the next.

Their tongues lead them astray very often, but still their sense does not seem to increase with their years. I suppose the Chap she's married is a decent fellow. It's to be hoped she has used discretion. We have finished our season on this circuit. They built three theatres for us in this area. Tomorrow night is the last night. Did I tell you that Rosa Alsalom's fiancee had been badly gassed. I had his address but cannot find it else I should have written him. Capt. Carter who runs the paper called the Green Room and who is D.A.Q.M.G. on our Division has offered me an engagement at £20 a week on the Ixoli circuit. Colonel Dowse has also offered me one with Geo. Willoughby in comic opera. I am considering them now. I received the photographs of the girls at Buffalo. The Autumn is nearly finished here now and the heavy winter rains have set in. It is most dismal.

Love to all at home.

Will.