

Letters Home

When people are sent to fight in wars, they are generally far away from home and for long periods of time. In the two World Wars they didn't have telephones or other methods of staying in touch with their families. So they wrote letters and cards. This podcast is devoted to letters and memoirs written around the Christmas period. They remind us of the regimented life of service personnel and the privations of prisoners of war or patients in a military hospital.

X003-0380/002/004

Aircraft Mechanic John Roscoe had been conscripted into the RFC on 4th February 1918 at the age of 20 and transferred into the RAF in April. In December 1918 he was serving with 20 Training Depot Station in Egypt but was in hospital with dysentery.

Government Hospital, Suez. December 24th 1918

Dear Mother

You see I am staying in a dock for Christmas, which is just as well. A tree has been fitted up in the yard, and electric lights arranged on it, while every night for the last week I have heard the patients downstairs singing Christmas carols. The music is mostly provided by the gramophone.

Aircraft Mechanic Frances Pattenden was serving with 18 Squadron RFC in 1915; spending his first Christmas in France.

X001-2334/004

18th December 1915

My Dear Parents and All

Many thanks for all three parcels. The electric lamp is splendid. Was glad you sent another battery in the Xmas parcel as the one in the case was worn out when I received it.

I have not opened the cake and "pudd'n" parcel yet. Am saving it for Christmas. Also contents of other parcel, so that I can enjoy my Christmas, thinking of you all the while I am enjoying the seasonal fare.

Don't you worry about me not having a jolly time now! We shall be merry and bright out here, don't you fret. Why, it doesn't do to get down in the dumps out here; we stand the chance of not getting out again if we did. Besides, above all, the RFC should be up in the clouds. Of course we get a bit fed up at times and start moaning a bit but it's only skin deep. Half an hour afterwards we are singing at the tops of our voices. I shall be a jolly sight happier this Christmas out here, than I was last, in Dover, knowing as I did that others were across the water having hardships whilst I was in comfort.

During 1941 and 1942, Cadet John Kelly was based in Scarborough, billeted at the Crown Hotel, whilst serving with No.10 Official Training Wing.

John Arnold Kelly joined the RAF in October 1941, via 1 Receiving Wing in London. He was sent to 10 Initial Training Wing in late October, passing out and being selected for aircrew training in January 1942. In late January he was posted to 11 Elementary Flying Training School, remaining until early March 1942.

X004-2500-001

15th December 1941. Crown Hotel, Scarborough

...We have taken up carol singing now, and after lights out we go in the corridor outside the rooms of a rival flight and sing to them. However they don't seem to appreciate it very much, it must be the dustbin lids we bang, for the last expedition was received with well-directed jets from several stirrup pumps which rather damped our enthusiasm for singing.

Flying Officer Howard Luck was held in Dulag Luft and Stalag Luft III prisoner of war camps between 23 November 1942 and 9 November 1944. He wrote regular letters to his wife Olga and their daughter Val, and they give an impression of what it was like inside one of these camps. This selection from the letters covers two Christmases spent as a prisoner of war.

X003-6019

30th December 1942.

We had quite a nice time at Christmas; we each had a special food parcel from the Red Cross, which contained a pudding, a cake, and a box of chocolate biscuits, so with the addition

of our ordinary stuff we had quite a festive meal. We haven't had all our Christmas parcels yet, but are keeping some for the New Year. We had porridge for breakfast, made our lunch of sardines etc, and for tea we had a cake homemade from biscuit and breadcrumbs, which was better than the Red Cross ones. We had a slap-up evening meal of steak and onions (tinned) and pudding. We had some beer, which was quite good though very light, and had decorated the rooms with bits of shrubbery and so on. Our artist was kept very busy and did some wizard drawings. There were choir and carol services, which I am told were very good, and there is going to be a pantomime soon. Don't forget to tell me what you did, and what Val found in her stocking.

Love to both, Howard.

28th December 1944

My Dear Olga

So Christmas is over and done with. I hope you all had a good time, and plenty of enjoyment. Thanks to the American Red Cross we had quite a good Christmas dinner, with turkey and pudding. On such occasions as this a Kriegy finds he is not the man he used to be: you'd be surprised at the number of chaps who were upset by the richness of those delicacies. The Germans were going to let us have some beer, but it did not materialise, and I'm glad to say that owing to our being on half-parcels the SBO's rule against distilling raisin wine was kept. I've not heard from you for some time, but had a letter from Frank on Christmas Eve. What is he doing now? I've had letters from him before with different postmarks, so suppose he's not in the local police any more. I hope he's all right - he said in his letter that he hadn't been doing any serious work for a long time. His previous letters must have gone astray, as I last heard from him in a letter of last February. I hope little Val is getting better - tell her I think of her every day. And do be sure and look after yourself, dear, and keep warm this weather. Regards to all, and love... Howard.

X004-8451/001

Sgt Betty Bristow enlisted in the WAAF in December 1940. Her memoir recalls her first service Christmas whilst undertaking initial training at Harrogate.

By December 1942 Sgt Bristow was serving at RAF Riccall in Yorkshire. She became involved with the station concert party...

By December 1943 Sgt Bristow was serving at RAF Stoney Cross. She was recovering from the loss of her boyfriend who had been killed during a night flying training accident

December 1940.

The next day was Christmas Eve. Breakfast was filling. Porridge, bacon and fried bread, thick doorstops of grey wartime bread, two cog wheel shaped past of margarine and a dollop of marmalade. There was plenty of tea, thick and strong, it was made with tinned milk. I was pleased to see there were two tea urns, one sweet and thankfully one unsweetened. I don't know how many girls were in my intake. There were tall ones, short ones, fat girls, thin girls, some very young and some of maturer years. We came from all kinds of backgrounds but there wasn't much talk of our past lives. We were all much too interested in the future.

The Christmas Eve dinner tasted rather nasty so I left most of mine and filled up with buns in the canteen. It was just as well I did. As it was I spent part of the night trudging to and fro to what we learned to call the ablutions. I was quite lucky, some of the girls were really ill. I hoped the Christmas dinner would be more acceptable. It was. Different cook, no doubt. We had to take turns with the washing up. The kitchen was a rather horrid place. Great big old wooden sinks, thickly coated with years of grease and soggy tea leaves. It really was disgusting; no wonder we got food poisoning. I was very glad that I was going to be an office runner.

We were free on Christmas Day. The weather was mild and sunny. We walked around the town, wrote letters home and went to a Carol service. In the evening there was a dance in the canteen. Mostly we danced with each other. There weren't many men at the Grand Hotel. Some girls wept with home-sickness, a few got a bit drunk on warm beer but most

of us were happy and full of excited anticipation for the unknown life that lay ahead.

From 1942, this is an extract from Betty's memory of a Christmas Concert Party at RAF Riccall in Yorkshire.

It was to be produced by LAC Bill Cook and to be called the 'Riccall Raffians', with music provided by the small band, 'The Riccall Rhythm Kings'. Very soon we had a company of singers, instrumentalists, dancers, comedians and a contortionist. She had been on the stage before the war and intended to go back as soon as the war was over. In the meantime she kept herself supple with rigorous training. We became accustomed to seeing her tied into reef knots in the corner of our hut. I appeared in chorus numbers and danced duets with Midge - the dancing twins. We did two or three shows on the camp and then at the Selby Hippodrome. The Riccall Ruffians were a great success, well we thought we were. The audiences clapped and cheered and laughed in all the right places. There's nothing like topical jokes to bring the house down: It hadn't stopped raining for weeks and all leave was cancelled.

At Christmas time in 1943, Betty is getting over the loss of her boyfriend.

As Christmas approached I was beginning to recover my spirits. I was not due for any leave until the New Year so I looked forward to the coming Air Force festivities. On Christmas Day there are old service traditions to be observed. Members of the Sergeants Mess are invited to the Officers Mess for an annual seasonable drink. We were greeted with a lot of convivial bonhomie and asked what we would like to drink. I asked for a gin and orange. What I got was a tumbler full of weak orange squash. Presumably they had misheard or the gin had already run out, either way I was hardly in a position to complain. That over, we all trooped off to the next old custom, waiting at the table to the 'other ranks' In the Airmen's Mess. The MO traditionally carved the turkey, Senior officers and warrant officers put it on to plates. The rest of us carried it all to the tables. As everyone - except me - was fairly merry after the morning drinks it was all very jolly. I didn't have time to enjoy my own dinner very much because I was due

on duty. There was no flying that day but the Ops blocked had to be manned for routine signals and reports and possible emergencies. It was not as dull as I had anticipated, most of the ops staff and quite a few squadron personnel wandered in and out in varying degrees of inebriation bearing food and drink to the Cinderellas who couldn't go to the ball. The night shift drifted in at about 22.30 and we were released to enjoy what was left of Christmas Day.

X002-5426/080/012

Warrant Officer WG Hough was an Air Gunner and joined the RAF on 14 June 1941. He served in Burma with various units, including 357 Squadron, and flew on Liberators, Hudsons, Blenheims and Battles. He was in the RAF until the end of the Second World War completing two tours.

1254009 Sgt Hough

Sergeants Mess

RAF Delhi, India

24 December 1942

My darling,

Christmas Eve! How can I describe my thoughts? I expect they are pretty similar to your own. All I can say is that I wish I had the opportunity of hitch-hiking as I did last year even if it meant walking all the way. Can you wonder that I do not expect to enjoy this Christmas? Days of high jinks - including a dozen geese - have been prepared in the mess. I am on duty today and again on Boxing Day, and I wouldn't really have minded doing tomorrow for at least I would have been alone with my thoughts and could have got more pleasure in this remembering our past Christmases than in drinking and singing (I expect) a lot of dirty songs. However, at this moment you seem very close to me, and I can almost feel you thinking of me, and I am more or less content. Who knows, next year we'll be together again and we can then enjoy two Christmases in one.