

# Letters

Letters to the soldiers from family and friends and from the soldiers were vital to all parties. Some of these letters were published in the Madison Eagle. Many are poignant since their authors did not survive the war. They seem general at times because the soldiers knew that any information that was too specific would not get past the military censors. The following letters printed in the Madison Eagle show a cross-section of the experiences of the people who served.

Charles Yoeman Barnes

Somewhere in France,  
Monday, April 22, 1918.

My dear Aunt :—

Some time has passed since my bang in my forehead, and I am feeling much better. The results as I told you in my other letter are two things, a bad dig in my forehead just about in the center of my forehead over the nose, and it hit just a little to the right, so my eye, the right one, is rather bad, as I cannot see hardly at all, out of the right one. But the Dr. and nurses are taking good care of me, and I think in time it will be O. K., so don't worry at all.

I am going to see if I can tell you the story of the accident, but I must be careful what I say as the censor might object, so I will pick my way, remembering all the things I cannot tell about, and try to give you my idea of how it feels to get hit.

But then about eleven o'clock a shell broke about 30 yards in front of our trenches where we are working. Well, the months of this kind of experience made us pretty quick in getting down on the ground, and the first shell caused a little trouble, and after a little bit we got up and started work again. Then the second one came and it landed just about 40 feet from the trench. Well, that boy caused considerable trouble. A piece split my steel hat, known as the helmet, just like a piece of paper, going through it and striking my forehead, as I explained in the beginning of my letter. Well, I still had enough sense left to drop into the trench and lay flat, which I did, and it seemed an age before all that dirt, stones, mud and sod came down out of the air. So you can see what kind of stuff Fritz was sending over.

Well, several fellows rushed to me and tore open one of the first aid packages and fixed me up a bit, and then I looked out of my one good eye and saw the most terrible things I ever gazed upon.

Well, when they got this bandage on me, two fellows started to drag me to the rear. I could not walk, as it had made me a little numb, and I had by this time lost a terrible lot of blood. Well, after they had taken me about 12 steps to the rear, another one broke. Well, a good army man knows what to do when shells are breaking. So down they drop flat on the ground, and I go with them. Well, the noise of this one finished me. I guess I must have fainted, because I knew no more until I found myself under the sheets.

Now, that's my little story, and pretty soon I shall be well enough to go back to my Company, and try it all over again.

A little bang like that can't kill my spirit anyway. Here in the hospital where I am there are a number of my pals, so I am not lonesome, and we spend some pleasant times talking about the most glorious 11th.

Well, I guess this is all this time. Now don't worry, I shall write always once a week and let you know just how I am. Lots and lots of love to all the folks. Let them read this letter, as it hurts my good eye to do much with it, so I won't try to write to them just yet.

Best regards to C. L. D., kid brother and all.

YEO.

Madison Eagle June 21, 1918

## Frederick Reginald Burnham

### BURNHAM SAVED BY DEAD HORSE

Madison Artilleryman Writes of  
His First Battle on the Western  
Front and Tells of His  
Narrow Escape

The following extracts are from a letter dated September 27th, 1918 which F. A. Burnham, Jr., has just received from his son, F. Reginald Burnham, who is in active service on the western front with Battery D, 308th Field Artillery, American Expeditionary Forces:

"We are back from the front for a rest and expect to return any day. I will try and give you a little description of my first battle. We left our camp on the coast at — one day and hiked to a railroad where we loaded our horses and cannon aboard the train, the men riding in "box cars." We traveled for four days through France and this gave us an excellent opportunity to see the country. We stopped at a great many of the large cities, finally unloading our supplies and hiking for 24 hours to our position at the front in a 'quiet sector.'

"The airplanes were as thick as birds over our heads. We went into dugouts that were once occupied by the French, and they were full of mud, rats and water, and the odor was fierce. We stayed here quite a while and the Germans shelled us every night and some of us had very narrow experiences. Sometimes we would have to give up our suppers and go into the dugouts and stay until morning and when we would come out in the morning would find our kitchen knocked to pieces. All this time we never fired a shot so as to not give our positions away to the enemy.

#### How They "Let Loose."

"We were on a hill where we could look down on our infantry in the trenches. One night we received orders to 'let loose,' and all the guns for miles around opened up and it was hell. We fired continuously for ten hours; it was terrible and I never expected to come out of it alive. The infantry went over the top and gained seven kilometers (5 miles) and took about 20,000 prisoners. All the fighting is done at night.

"The next night we hauled our guns out of the pits and started to advance. You no doubt read of this drive in the papers. We were about half way across 'No Man's Land' when one of our guns became stuck in the mud and held up our whole battery. Then the Huns started to shell us and the first shell landed near one of our guns killing six men and twelve horses. The first man killed was our top sergeant. We left the gun and got away without any further losses and arrived at our new position. We then went into the German dugouts that had been taken. Up to this time (about four weeks) I have not had my clothes off or washed, and my clothes are nothing but shreds. Things then quieted down for a while and so we went out into the large city we had shelled and captured. The people had fled and left everything, beautiful gardens full of all kinds of fruits, cellars full of wine and champagne. We have had champagne for supper every night for a couple of weeks. Two other fellows and myself found two Germans hiding in a shell hole. They were so afraid we were going to kill them that they offered us everything they had.

#### A Narrow Escape.

"The following night while eating supper we heard a shell coming and ran for the dugouts. I stopped and was standing near my horse which had just been fed and before we could turn to run again the shell was upon us. I crouched down behind my horse and covered my face with my hands and the shell burst directly overhead, a piece of shrapnel went through my horse killing him and a splinter of it passed through my left hand, but it has healed and is now O. K.

"One night one of the fellows struck a match and in no time a German plane was over us and dropped a bomb killing six horses and five men.

"We are now resting up and hope that the war will be over before we go into action again. When you send my Xmas box be sure to put some chocolate and cigarettes in it."

Madison Eagle October 5 1918

## Amabel Schraff Roberts

# Serious Side of War Intermingles With Humor in War Hospital Life

### Miss Amabel Scharff Roberts Writes of her Experiences as Nurse With American Red Cross Unit That Went to France Over Five Months Ago

#### EXCERPTS FROM LETTERS TO PARENTS

War bread as a strengthener of jaw muscles, the difficulties of an American with English slang and the tremendous size of French strawberries are some of the amusing impressions of Miss Amabel Scharff Roberts, who has been with the American unit in a base hospital at Etretat, France, since the latter part of May. By permission of Mr. and Mrs. Louis H. Roberts of Woodland road parts of the letters received by them from their daughter are published. Although there are records of the amusing side of the life with which Miss Roberts is in contact, the tremendous seriousness of the war is manifested in her letters. The excerpts are taken from letters dating from shortly after the arrival of the unit in France.

Somewhere in France, June 1.  
We had a very quiet trip across the channel. There was no motion, although quite a bit of vibration from the ship's machinery. As we left England there were a great many British soldiers on the docks, and they cheered and cheered us as we steamed away. It was very thrilling. They shouted, "We like the Americans," and cheered as long as we could hear them. Then when we reached our destination here we had a marvelous welcome. We were met by a band, which escorted us through the streets playing, and the entire population walking alongside. It is a glorious spot. I have never seen a more beautiful place.

I want you to know we are not isolated, and that we can buy anything we may need. As you see, we do not have to stamp our letters. I should love to see a New York newspaper for a minute, but one can't have everything. Our food so far is simply delicious—much better than the ship's fare, or our meals in London. I wonder if it will last. The milk and butter from our own dairies, and oh! so good. We have also had cider and lime water, so we are not asking for any sympathy yet. I guess the winters will be pretty cold.

The soldiers are very friendly and crazy to talk to you and find out how America feels, and what is going on over there.

We take our letters unsealed over to the postoffice and leave them with the censor, and as we have been forbidden to write about the very things that are of interest, I'm afraid you won't enjoy hearing from me in the least. It is just like writing with some one continually looking over your shoulder.

We work from 7 a. m. to 8 p. m. Some days we do have time off. We are supposed to have three hours off daily, but it rarely happens that it is so arranged.

When I heard that France was cold

twisted trees like Corot's paintings.

August 2.

It is cold as can be here. We try to warm ourselves with the accounts of the great heat in New York. It has rained on and off for several days, and the wind has blown a great gale, so that the waves are high and roar continually. The breakers dash against the cliffs and the spray leaps high into the air—a wonderful sight.

We had a concert yesterday afternoon, the performers being patients and our own privates. They gave

dull.

August 13.

Life goes on much the same here. All the suffering and death seem so needless. If the Tommies are able to return to the front after a certain number of days, back they go again, only to receive more wounds, perhaps the death blow. If they are permanently disabled they are shipped home eventually. Oh, this terrible war! It is indeed a great privilege to be over here to do "our bit," but how we all pray for peace and wonder if it will ever come. From the tone of this you might suppose we were a sad lot, but really I have never seen a more cheerful group than the people here. There is always somebody else whose trouble is greater, whose wound is worse, or whose sorrow is as deep. In other words, everybody is in the same boat, and they just make the best of it. It is hard to keep track of time in writing home, for we are terribly rushed, and then comes a breathing spell for a short time when we all get extra time off duty. We must win this war!

August 21.

One afternoon four of us hired a four-wheeled cart and pony and drove to St. J., six miles, and had supper at the home of La Belle Ernestine, who is now an old woman. Her home used to be the gathering place for the artists and poets who came there. Alexander Dumas gave her her name in a poem. Guy de Maupassant was a frequent caller. The house is literally filled with paintings by famous artists, framed poems to La Belle Ernestine, and antiques—a museum indeed—simply fascinating. We had a delicious meal with wine. La Belle welcomed us herself, an old gray-haired woman, still with a faint suggestion of former beauty.

August 27.

The New York Times was just wonderful to get. I have enjoyed reading it so much. Brought it over to the ward and everybody spent the afternoon lost among the pages. Now that the first draft has been taken at home, and you have seen the boys leave, you too can realize that we are at war.

It has been very rainy lately and the wheat is beaten down flat on the ground. I was just reading the New York Times this p. m. and saw one article on this very subject. It is serious, of course, as much of the crop will be lost. When I read the papers and your letters I realize how changed everything at home is now, and how you too see that we are at war. I can't bear to think of our country losing its men and being pinched in the very necessities of life—wheat, sugar, etc. We are very well fed here. The nurses all have comfortable beds. We are so much better off than some of the units, who are housed in huts and have to sleep on army cots. Of course, our privates at the barracks sleep between blankets on hard cots, and their food is quite different from ours. We get the best of everything—better mess than the officers. We almost live in luxury, everything taken into consideration. There is a piano in our quarters. Last evening I was playing all the latest U. S. ragtime. One of the privates had just received it from home. All candy is very expensive here, and we are very scant with the sugar at meals, so we are hungry for sweets. I simply can't imagine the heat you have been suffering. One night about the middle of August I slept under one blanket, but every other night I have needed two.

September 11.

Things look very discouraging with the reports from the Eastern front. "But are we down-hearted? No, indeed!"

One of my boys died last week. He was a Scotch lad from Glasgow. His mother was sent for, but did not arrive here in time. He was under 19 and looked ever so much younger. He never complained, always had a twinkle in his eye. The last thing he said he asked for "a wee drop o' water." Poor kid! And he is only one of thousands!

September 15.

As you know, I can't write of the number of patients, their means of arrival or departure, but I can say it is a wonderfully worked out system. I have been on duty since July 1st in a



I never dreamed of this. We have all apparently prepared our wardrobes for a summer's sojourn. I have been wearing a sweater to bed almost every night, and this is the last of June. We are living in such a cold, bleak house, and there is never a drop of water to spare. Last winter the English sisters wore high rubber boots, so I suppose Uncle Sam will have to supply us

some very good piano selections, and one private sang "Oft in the Stilly Night" and "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" among others very well indeed. Some of our men are professionals. "Jock," as all Scotchmen are called, came out in his kilts and sang some songs, the words of which no one could understand at all. He was simply killing. There is always a

Amabel Scharff Roberts did not survive the war. She was the first Army Nurse to die in France. This is a portion of excerpts of letters from Amabel Roberts that appear on page nine of the:

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