

Letters written during World War 1 in 1915 and 1916

By **Captain Thomas Cotgrave Hewitt** (1881-1916)

Letters from:

Gallipoli

Egypt

S.S. Northland

Belgium

France

Sydney



Family members mentioned in letters:

'Helen' Donaldson (née Hewitt) – Tom's sister on property near Camooweal, Q'ld (1886-1978)

'Bill D.' (William) Donaldson – Helen's husband (1886-1927)

'Deane' (Hubert Deane) Hewitt – Tom's brother also in the army (1887-1980)

'Father' Henry Vigors Hewitt – Tom's father in Baulkham Hills near Sydney (1839-1931)

'Mother' Mary Hewitt (née Simmons) – Tom's mother, who kept these letters carefully in their envelopes for the rest of her life (1875-1933)

The letters are largely unedited, although paragraph breaks have been added for ease of reading. See Notes page at end for further details and links to online related primary sources including additional letters written by Tom and his family, his military records and memorials.

ANZAC, GALLIPOLI, 11/10/'15.

Dear Helen,-

A very interesting letter from you, dated, I think, about Aug. 2nd., came along a couple of days since. But I often get your letters sent on by other members of the family. They regard you as their pigeon in the letter-writing story, & save themselves by enclosing one of yours. I hope that the high price of beef has now rendered you a millionaire.

I'll try and describe my present days round, & take yesterday as a sample. Rise – from the very hard uneven floor of my dug-out – 6 or a little before. Go round & look at my men fall in to draw water & tell them what jobs they'll do. By the way 6 a.m. is 06.00 as we use the French system of clocking – 24 hours right off from midnight & always show four figures, whether they are wanted or not. Yesterday I had to tell the men each to draw half a gallon only, owing to the storm two nights before. They usually get one gallon – It's just enough to do nicely if you don't waste it. Half past six breakfast of crushed biscuit porridge & fried bacon & bread – We get bread nearly every day now, very seldom have to depend on biscuit. Half-past seven, 07.30, men fall in & go, some to the jobs & most to the beach, on the beach I take charge of about 300 men, & draft them off in bunches to report to various engineer officers for any kind of job from laying tram lines & pile driving to - well, anything else. That is done by eight o'clock, & then behold me a free-lance for the day or nearly so.

Yesterday a Tasmanian Capt. Tyrrell – relation of the lad who slew Rufus I believe - & then I went half a mile along the beach to ANZAC. There we found a crowd of Tommies (about 40) trying to fix a pile up against a boat to lever it off where she had been blown by the Storm. They couldn't do it so Tyrrell & two more of us got to work & did it for them. Two tugboats (paddle wheelers) tied themselves on & broke the hawsers and the boat is still there. She is one of our water boats. We found a couple of our parties & saw them work – then we climbed a hill 300 ft. straight up, & found an artillery officer who is a friend of Tyrrell's. With him we went down the hill again & inspected his artillery horses - nicely hidden in the creek, they looked a bit skinny I thought. Next we found, nearby, a party of ours pulling a huge big iron tank up the hill with ropes & iron pipes to roll it on. It weighed 1½ tons, & the hill was steep, but our men delivered the goods - they have that rep. We climbed up the hill again & had dinner with the Battery Officers, cold boiled shoulder of bacon, bread, tinned fruit & rice, & bread and jam.

After dinner we visited the Batteries. They are the most shelled on the Peninsula of our guns, so they have what they call funk pits where they can put the guns & go back to their dug-outs to sleep while the enemy wastes high explosives. They're only little eighteen pounders anyhow. Capt. Robert Thompson, the Artillery Bird, is an Ex-Indian artillery-man from Tas. & he won't talk anything but farming – he don't like to talk war all the time. He showed us his guns & while we were there 'Action No.1 Guns, Target J.' came from the control station through the speaking tube. The control station is a dug-out some distance off, with telephone to the observation station & speaking tubes to each gun. The reason for "Action" was that when the Turks shell us in one place we always shell them in another – it's what we call retaliation.

Capt. R.T.Tyrrell & I then went to the observation station about a mile off – it's right near our front line of trenches – Turks & Ours. He, R.T. showed us all the Targets, each battery has registered targets & each target has a distinguishing letter. While we were there we were giving them a taste of shrapnel - the sound of the shell going through the air is the first thing you know, & then you see a little cloud of white smoke where the shell explodes in the air. Shrapnel explodes from a time fuse, and you set it to burst just over where you want to hit. It is a strong steel case with an exploding

charge in the bottom, & stuffed full of bullets, and when it bursts the bullets shoot out in all directions. The case doesn't burst – it acts like the barrel of a shotgun - but if it falls on you it usually hurts.

Well my dear, to go on with the days round, after we had a good look round the battery we returned to the beach, & saw all our working parties and arranged for them to knock off work a little early for some reason or other. A swim in the Briny off our pier, was the next act, as some shrapnel was coming along we dressed more or less under cover behind a truck on the tramway we've laid there. Up the high hill for tea, I forget the menu but probably stewed steak and onions, boiled rice & jam. About 7 o'clock the orders arrive for next day's work, & I sort them out for various officers, & the hard toil of "War" is over for 24 hours – so that you may see how hard my work is – nothing to do but enjoy myself in the fresh air and all day to do it in. Of course at times we do a little more, but most days that's a fair sample. TO-DAY, for example, I am on a Court-martial but that's unusual.

I began this a day or two ago but left it - one gets lazy about writing letters. The uncertainty of this life is just about enough to make it interesting - since we have been here there's been nothing done but sit down in trenches & wait till men get sick or wounded - but of course we might get called out at any minute for scrapping. The bombs are the worst part of trench fighting – they are horrid things – back here on the beach we get spent bullets, high explosives, & shrapnel. There are several kinds of Indians, who all think a lot of the Australians, and are a jolly useful lot of men, a good many Tommies of various kinds. Egyptians & Maltese labourers, & sundry men of the navy. The naval boats lie off, & at intervals amuse themselves knocking the trenches to bits for the Turks. Their shooting is wonderful.

I must get off to work - Church. If Bill D. does come, mind he battles for a commission, the only thing he wants to know is how to handle men, & he understands that. But he is much more usefully employed growing beef.

Yours, TOM.

Just found a chap called Huxton, used to be up your way, droving or something.

He is a blacksmith also. 13/10/15

Dear Father,

Your letter - the date about middle of August arrived perhaps a week ago. We have been here rather more than five weeks now, and have done nothing war-like. I have charge of about 300 men and they are detailed each day to about 299 jobs. I just sent a memo to the Colonel to tell him what work we were doing, and there were about 25 sorts of work - from wharflumping to carrying messages.

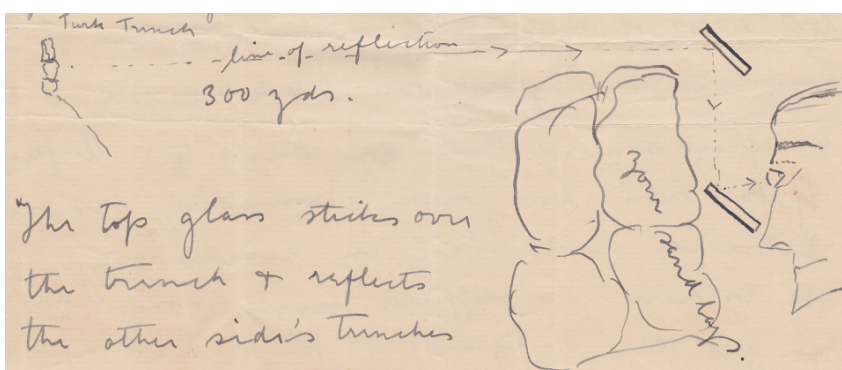
For the first four weeks I was camped on the spur of a ridge overlooking the sea - I have now moved a mile nearer to Gaba Tepu and in full view of the ruined forts there, whenever Jacko, as the Turk is called, observes for his guns at the Olive Grove. They are a little over a mile south of my home. The place I now live in is no longer a dug out. It is cut in to the hill side and the walls are built up of sandbags. I have a fine canvas roof that I "found" as the place is about 14 ft square, you see I live in luxury. I also have risen to the dignity of an officer with a good serviceable home made desk. The food supplied is excellent - and we are even able to augment the splendid issue from a canteen at Imbros. My office & dwelling place are a few yards only from the sea - naturally I bathe nearly every day.

You would be much interested in the variety of races here - Indians for transport and mountain labourers largely - or course there are several types of them; Ghurkas, who look almost celestial - very hardy & fine athletic looking men; Sikhs & others: Maltese and Egyptian labourers, and every variety of English, Irish & Scotch: Maoris, Australians, Ceylon Planters & all sorts. I have not tried to learn any of the foreign tongues, as I don't have to work with them.

The transport work is almost entirely per mule. We have also donkeys & a few large motor lorries. The hardy & hardworking mule is the most useful beast of the lot - you can't hurt him & he always looks to be in good condition.

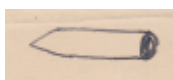
The roads here are mainly saps - cut about 6 feet deep & crooked to avoid be enfiladed. They wind in & out, along creeks mainly of course, but not invariably. I don't know what will happen if we get heavy rain - but some of our saps will certainly have to be avoided. I don't think that the rain here is very heavy - I think the climate is almost English.

The trenches are mostly 6 ft deep & very narrow - unless they are a long way apart one never looks over the top except with a periscope - which one wants a fair amount of practise with, to use. It is very simple - just two glasses set cross wise like this:



The top glass sticks over the trench and reflects the other side's trenches on to the bottom glass and that reflects it to the eye. Dozens of top glasses get broken of course. A similar device is fixed to a rifle butt & you can fire a rifle over the top in the same way without exposing yourself.

You also have iron loopholes set in the sandbags - these have a door & are shut when not in use. I have seen holes punched in the iron plates, by rifle bullets. The Turk bullet is sharp pointed and smaller than ours - it is often turned round as it gives more of a punch when reversed.



Very many of their rifles must be worn out, as the rifling hardly marks a lot of their bullets. A new rifle leaves deep grooves on a bullet, but we pick up hundreds of their bullets hardly marked.

Since we have been here we have lost a lot of men from sickness - they go away sick & very few come back promptly. I am afraid some of them don't want to. A few of our men have been wounded, but our battalion has been in reserve and so we have not suffered much. Long before you get this I expect we shall have moved into the trenches. The main things that wound men are bombs & shrapnel - a few get hurt from high explosion shells and bullets. The shrapnel is just as bad on the beach as anywhere, tho the much dreaded "Beachy Bill" gun has been quiet for a month. I hope he remains quiet.

It is already getting quite cold - I expect we shall find the winter pretty tough, but probably we shall be as tough as the rest. I am glad you had a mild winter - look after yourself. Best love to you - mother - & all. If I don't get a chance again - here's to wish you a happy Xmas,

Your affectionate son,

Tom.

Russell Top 23.11.15

Dear Mother,

Your letters - & enclosure arrive with much regularity & great acceptability. But I wonder if I shall ever teach you that one should only write in one direction on the same sheet of paper. Mary also has the same pernicious habit of writing to leave a margin - then along the margin at 90 & then along the top at 45! I suppose one should not attempt to dictate one's grandmother - but I guess if I ever get my grandchildren writing so, there'll be dark deeds did!

I am in a good state of health - temperature 98.4, appetite good, & appreciating to the full the present cold snap. It is just as cold now as at Glen Innes in mid winter - so you may guess that the warm goods we get so freely from our friends are in much demand. I have a very good scarf, & a balaclava & a pair of mittens from Dollie - which is a good start - & sox from - legion friends & all good - & a big tin of lollies just arrived has proved OK. - another promised from the Renwick girls whom Ethel knows. A fine pair of sox & a cake of Pears just arrived from Mrs. Martin - & every mail brings stax of letters and parcels. The mails are now working wonderfully well. It is hard to answer all the letters I get - but the last few days I have sent off a lot as I am off duty for a few days after a pretty solid time in the trenches.

We had quite a few interesting goes with Johnny Turk mostly underground. A couple of old T'ba [Toowoomba] boys got much praise in the go - & the Colonel actually seemed pleased with us all. Finally we pushed Johnny right back into his own trench along his own drive & blew the show up. Gun-cotton is used on a larger scale. Johnny's last explosion had a breeze that blew all the gas our way & did us not much good - but I wasn't affected: probably because I knew it wasn't really "gas" which the others were scared of. Knowledge is power - ahem.

Hutton Harvey has proved himself worth his weight in gold - in fact I have more than once considered making him a Lance Corporal - which would lose him to me personally to a great extent. He is very annoyed today because while he was observing for a chap today with a telescope, the chap missed a good shot that he pointed out. We mostly shoot in pairs - one observing & the other shooting. I picked up an exploded shell today, full of mud, & the nose cap, & I put the two together & gave it to an officer. A little later he came after me in a great state: a bombardier (artillery man) had told him it was loaded and would go off! But he left me satisfied.

There are some pigeons near here on a high cliff & I intend to have pigeon pie soon. They are homers - & are supposed to belong to a Turkish sniper who used to live on the cliff. The poor chap is now no more - a machine gun was put to him. But there are lots of pigeons. As it is cold now we have no flies - but the fleas seem content. I have a tin of Keatings.

It is curious, but the chaps who turn up trumps in the tight corners are not always the ones that you expect. Several of my "old drunks" are among the best men we have. I had about five that I kept in the guard tent for the last week in Abbassia, for fear they would - with the best intentions in the world - get drunk in the last day & stay behind. Over here they are fine chaps. One of them is a Boer - another fought against him - but, they are all handy men in a risky place. One lad who built a barricade in a very touchy place is a fellow that was always blundering - but when I told him what was wanted in a dark explosion hole underground, with a dead man at his elbow - he just went straight ahead and made a splendid job of it. And that with a Turkish bullet hitting a few feet off every minute or so. We have the finest lot of chaps that a man could wish for. Things are much more interesting now we are in the firing line.

Best love to you all. I hope all goes well at home,

Tom.

[Fragments of a letter – 1st page cut off at start of sentence – not completed or censored?]

... This paper is from Janet C.

Yesterday we had an inspection by General Sir A Murray, late Chief of Staff to General French. The men certainly looked a splendid lot: all Australians. I was in charge of the company as usual & I have a horse for myself at present which is a great scheme.

... but other ...

... I wasn't so fortunate and had to take the Regiment: the Colonel is a Wesleyan & the 2nd in command an R.C. But everything went alright, thanks. Our Brigadier is now General Paton for good services in the evacuation & discusses it too. I have been recommended for a step, but don't expect it to eventuate – at any rate not for some time. Too many officers here, who didn't like the Peninsula climate! I had a pleasant ride today along the Ismailia Canal - it's a fresh water canal to Ismailia on the Suez Canal.

Fingers getting cold – I'll finish this tomorrow.

Tel el Kibi 2.2.16

Dear Mother,

I got a letter from Ethel & Leila written on Xmas Day - all was well. I have seen Deane twice. He looks very well and has been recommended for Corporal twice I believe. His officer is an old friend of mine from Toowoomba - Mr. Atkinson.

I have been into Cairo, for a few hours each time only, twice. We have been here nearly a month - now we are off to the Canal tomorrow, but only for more training I think. Anyhow, our Brigade Major told me today that he didn't think there was hope of a scrap there. It is not much good, waiting for fight - we want to finish the war sometime. There seems nothing much to write about when one is in this sort of camp - they are dull after the pleasing whiz-bang of the 75cm or the swish boom of howitzers.

I am in splendid health - my only anxiety is to know how my promotion is faring - I should like to get news of it.

Very much love to you all

Tom.

P.S. I enclose 5 pounds for glasses etc.

21.2.16

Dear Mother,

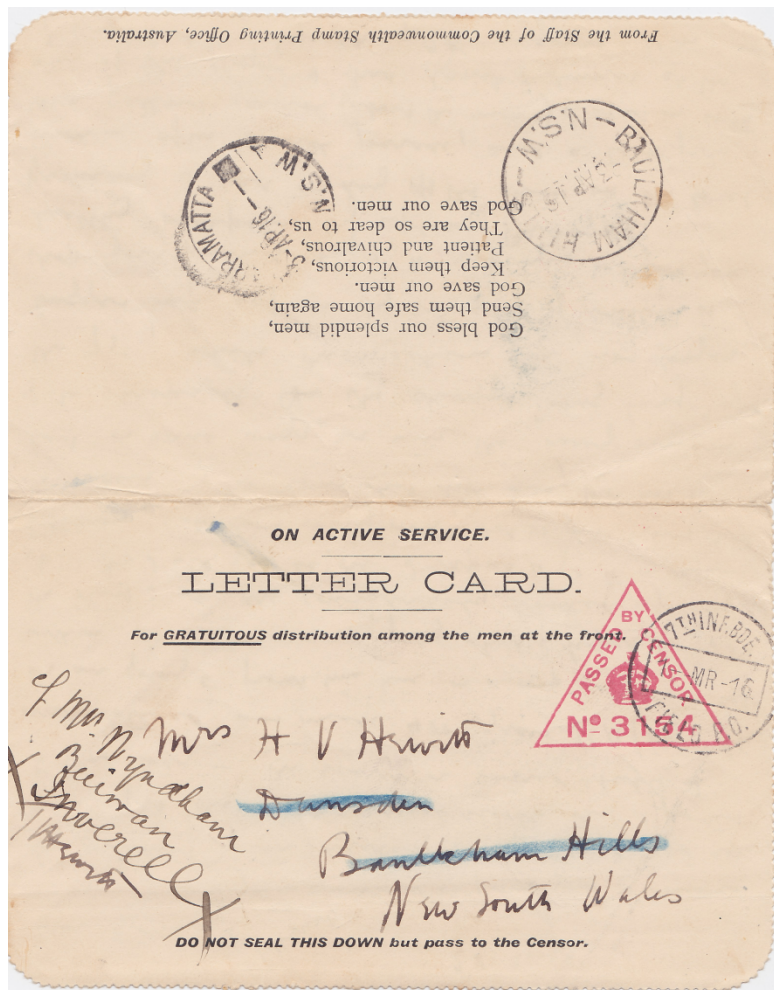
It is a most terrible job, this writing of letters when there is nothing to tell. Everything goes along with a certain amount perhaps of monotony - the chances of writing are not always available - and there you are - a week gone & no letter sent. However! I don't often apologise but I've started three letters to you & been called off & not sent them. The last letter I got from you is dated Dec 12th 1916. It seems wrong, somehow, but one does lose count of days at this job.

I am soon to be transferred to a new Division - & I expect the promotion will hang fire till the transfer comes off. I send a photo - not a beauty - to show that the Peninsula did me no damage - while Deane also looks pretty fit - the picture was taken under the most unholy light that was ever invented - a long glass tube.

Well dear - I am quite well & must go to a lecture,

Love to you all

Tom.



28.2.16

Dear Mother,

I got a wee note from you – omitted - by accident from Leila’s letter. Thanks. I hope you get the little scarab brooch that I posted to you today - the scarab, a sacred beetle I understand, was made 4000 years BA (before Adam).

We are going to front line here in a couple of days, but within a month we are going to where I hoped to go at the start: we are considerably bucked up about it. As I told you before I expect to go to a new battalion very soon, but so far have had no orders. Tis somewhat dull here, tho not so bad in some ways, we miss the merry scream of shrapnel & the cheerful “whiz bang” of the 75, while the machine gun no longer buzzes out a friendly stream of bullets to chop your sand bags to ribbons & give you healthy occupation by replacing bags.

Yesterday I had a day off the chain in the local town - after church parade and a talk from our gallant guard, (about the move), I went in with one of the Majors & had lunch & dinner at the French Club. Everything OK,

Yours, Tom.