

Letters transcribed by Jeannie Fisher 5th December 1915

Letters from Captain Eric Mortley Fisher 26th June 1915 to 15th October 1915

“Broomlea”
Loftus Street
Ashfield
5th Dec 1915

To H G Barff MA Esq.,

Dear Sir

In response to a paragraph in one of our daily papers a few weeks ago, I send the following extracts from letters received from my son Capt. Eric M Fisher who is attached to the No 3 Aust Gen Hosp in command of Col. Fiaschi, which sailed from Sydney in the “Mooltan” Saturday 15th May 1915. Should any of his letters of a future date have interesting items I shall only be too pleased to let you have them.

Yours faithfully
Jeannie Fisher.

Extracts from the letters of Capt. Eric M Fisher
No 3 Australian General Hospital

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“S.S. Mooltan” 26th June 1915

It is just six weeks to day since we sailed and we’ve been remarkably fortunate in the weather excepting some terribly hot days in the tropics. Had a most interesting time in Marseilles, got there on a Sunday and got the men off about 7 pm and marched them about two miles into the town and let them go. There were three officers with them and we went further on for dinner, after which we went for a walk. It is a city with fine buildings and avenues, plenty of cafes and people. We marched back to the docks arriving about 11.15. Next morning we marched then men up into the town again for breakfast and dismissed them in the principal square before an interested crowd. There are a great number of houses turned into hospitals and the people all seem very serious and not much inclined to jest. It certainly made me feel much nearer the War. You would have been amused could you have seen the men marching through the centre of the city whistling and singing The Marseilles, Tipperary etc., etc. The traffic held up the while by the crowds who gathered. Heads out of windows, no cheers but everyone

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hand-clapping, which is the French custom I believe.

We had a fine run down the Spanish Coast to Gibraltar. The mountains are right along the coast and slope gently down to the water and along the whole way you could see orchards and villages tucked in the valleys. Gibraltar was a most astounding sight. Words fail me. It is a tremendous rock about as high at the cliffs as Govett’s Leap and I suppose a mile long, commands the narrow part of the Straits and bristles with guns.

The town is a weird little place, tiny narrow streets smelling vilely like Bombay, crowded full with different races and kinds of people, vehicles, horses, mules and donkeys. We took a gun on board there, and crew to handle same, as a protection against submarines. We expect to land in England to morrow, We arrived at Plymouth last Sunday (27th June) our advance party two weeks ahead had found unexpected difficulties in gathering our equipment and so we were split up into parties and sent to different military hospitals. I am here at the Royal Hotel Plymouth

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in charge of thirty men with one other officer. There was no accommodation for us at the hospital so naturally we asked where was the best hotel and here we are. We will probably be here about a week longer, then we begin to assemble at Southampton and leave for France about the middle of the month. It certainly brings the war much more home to one to meet and talk with men who have been in it. Was talking last night to a doctor who was onboard the Triumph at the Dardanelles when it went down. There are some Australians at the hospital here from the Dardanelles and the general impression you get is that things aren't going too well there. However, we'll be right in the thick of it shortly, So Cheero-o

Two days ago we went overland to Southampton. Every few miles along the line you see white tents and soldiers, every town we've been in is alive with soldiers in khaki. The day after I wrote last our orders were changed and instead of France we go to the Dardanelles. Will be on Lemnos Island.

We are at sea again, left ten days ago and have had a slow deadly time on a crowded transport.

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We came though Gibraltar at night and it was most interesting. We were early spotted by a search light and a destroyer absolutely raced after us and conversed with us, finding everything satisfactory turned in its own length and raced away again. From all I've seen there is not much the matter with the Navy and it gives one a most comfortable feeling. We called at Malta and I had a few hours ashore, we are now on our way to Alexandria, and then Lemnos. After we get there we have to erect our hospital and I expect it will be weeks before we can get it started but will tell you about that when it eventuates.

“Lemnos” August

We arrived at this Godforsaken place a week ago. It is a bare rocky and hilly island with about half a dozen trees on it. It has a very fine harbour (Mudros) and is in the process of transformation into a big base, so everything is chaos. The water supply is very meagre and we are allowed only one gallon for the men per day for drinking, cooking, washing etc. At present the hills and flats are all brown, the beautiful (?) Spring Crop of thistles and burrs having withered off before we got here. After putting in two days on board the boat

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Walter (Capt Walter Matthews) and I with five men were landed as an advance party to survey and peg out the site. I don't know much about surveying but was sent all the same. We have spent six days ashore, the first three baking by day on the stony hillside, eating flies with everything. You have to get your bread and run into the

wind to avoid them. It is rather cold at night, as we had no tent because there was none to be got, we had to get on with a blanket. However, by bribery and stealing we have managed to get a covering two tarpaulins from the supply department, a ridge pole stolen from within two yards of an armed sentry and two uprights commandeered from other exciting (sic) shelters, whose owners were absent; so we're comfortable in comparison with three days ago. The rest of the unit have landed and spent three days already on the side of the hill without tents having a taste of our life. We have our site on a long peninsular having the pick of the place although that's not saying much. It is something like Watson's Bay but without any scrub only rocks and thistles. Our tents are only arriving gradually and we have a very

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strenuous fortnight in front of us. How nurses are going to get on goodness only knows, there are no women here, it is too primitive for them. There are no mosquitos and the evenings are just now cool and long, the sun setting about 7.30 but you can see till 9 o'clock. There are a great number of troops here of all descriptions and the harbour is so full of ships – war or otherwise – that in some places they are tied up in fours. There are two wharves, and very few small craft to empty them so you can imagine the result.

We are established in Mudros Bay. It is a fairly big harbour and at present crowded with shipping. We are on the top of the peninsular and get a good view on one side of the entrance, and on the other, of the rest of the harbour, quite like Mosman on a small scale. The sides of the bay are gently sloping and covered with rocks and dead thistles. There is an occasional Greek village to be seen tucked away between low hills, with some attempt at cultivation around them. To the west about ten miles away is a high range of hills, which look more rugged and barren than the rest of the place, but it certainly

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is pretty when the sun sets behind them. The place is inhabited by dirty Greeks, who dress like brigands and look like oyster shop men in disguise, donkeys and flies. The flies sing their song all day long, and the donkeys take it up at night and keep it going pretty late. The flies really deserve a chapter to themselves. They are the same houseflies as you get at home, but they swarm in millions, sing loudly and unceasingly, and are much more persistent and curse-producing than their Sydney relatives. They are the direct cause of the dysentery which is very prevalent, but so far I've been lucky enough to escape it. The food here is not bad, but very monotonous, it's not exactly bully beef and biscuits all the time – although we have been on that – but it mostly consists meat supposedly fresh but rather uncertain, pickles, rice and jam. Occasionally we get bread from a field bakery in tents, but it is generally doughy and sour, the biscuits are so hard that by the time you've finished one you're too tired to eat any more. Sometimes we

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manage to get tinned fruit from the warships, but that is the exception. The harbour is fairly clean and there are no sharks, so we swim all over the place twice a day, which helps to keep fit.

The place is in the process of being made into a big base and there is tremendous activity. There are a couple of thousand Egyptian labourers here, doing heavy unskilled work and their goings on are very quaint. They get about in weird coloured

costumes, all colours in fact, some of them are made of mail bags or chaff bags. You see a long line of them with planks on their heads marching slowly along chanting weird native songs which sound exactly like the noise the rusty wheel of a wheelbarrow makes, long interminable things with a chorus of about four notes all in semitones and thirds. They do a lot of work in a very long time and one white man is worth about 20 niggers, but they are cheap and you can almost buy one for a handful of rice. They have native bosses who go about armed with long sticks and big voices, and they tear into any unfortunate who drops his load or speaks out of his turn. The recipient of these attentions generally goes for his

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life crying at the top of his voice like a child. There are no trees on the island and consequently no timber or firewood. It together with the water has to be brought from Alexandria. There is a big condenser being erected which is to supply a long line of hospitals with water. There are two other hospitals on the peninsula with us and more expected. I have a tent with Walter Matthews and we are comfortable at present. We manage to keep clean by having many swims. Bought a small enamel basin in the village and it forms a good washstand balanced on 3 sticks, a canvas bucket bought in England forms the source of supply. There have been two boats torpedoed near here, it makes one realise how lucky we were to get here safely. There are a number of other hospitals behind us now along the peninsular, but ours is the only General Hospital the others being stationary or Convalescent Hospitals and Detail Camps. We manage to get a good deal of food and tobacco from the boats in the bay otherwise it would be very monotonous, but at present our mess is quite good. I have heard nothing yet of your Red Cross parcel, but expect it will turn up all right as the Red Cross are a first rate body,

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in fact, the most alive body we have had anything to do with. I think everyone would be better advised to give their money and gifts to this society than to many different Belgium, Australia and other days indiscriminately. Certainly you cannot go wrong and know your money will be carefully and thoroughly administered. Anyway we couldn't carry on without them and their goods were indispensable at the start. Hear Jack Massie has been wounded three times, the first by a bomb, not seriously, second by a bayonet, in the neck and not serious and lastly a bullet through the muscles of the left shoulder and back not dangerous but sufficient to knock him out for a few months. There is very little surgery to do here, an occasional anaesthetic or a bullet to remove but nothing big. The place is full of typhoid and dysentery many of them serious. Most of the Australians who landed first are here in rest camp and I have had several reunions with some old pals, Harry Clayton, Tebbutt, Street, Humphery Scott, Bert Stacey, Clive Thompson and many others. It's good to get with your pals again and away from dead bodies. They asked for volunteers to go to Gallipoli and they were short of medical officers and I

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am one of four going, have no idea when, or to what unit we are going.
Suvla Bay – 7.10.15

I soon received orders to report here, and have been here a week. Although I am only temporarily lent, I don't expect to rejoin the hospital at any rate will be very surprised if I do. We came up from Mudros at half and hour's notice in a paddle-wheel ferry

steamer from Scotland. There were four of us chosen from those who volunteered, Stewart and I were sent up here, Harding was not detailed anywhere. When I left and Wally (Walter Matthews) was sent on a hospital ship to England. We landed on the beach near a small hospital and managed to get a shakedown there for the night. The guns were blazing away over at Anzac but we got no shells although one battery was flying over us. The next morning we walked five miles and reported to head quarters and after considerable wandering about brought up here. Am attached to a British Field Ambulance at present. Stewart was sent to a different division which was rotten luck as we hoped to keep together. We are dug in half way up a fair sized hill with a good view of things, was lucky enough to get a ready made dug out vacated by an

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officer who had left. It is pretty comfortable but very dirty, everything being covered by a fine film of dust. In winter it will probably get very wet and muddy but at present it is quite hot, whereas Mudros was cold and misty. We are out of rifle range but of course under shell fire. The Turks do not fire on us with our red cross (sic) flag up, but at guns and stores etc. all round us, and thought they are uncomfortably near as they fly over us, it is only an odd miss-aimed one that falls near us, of course when an action starts we will have to go up into it, but things are very quiet just now. I would rather be with our own men if I could but am pretty lucky to get in with such a lot of good fellows and am not too badly off. I have to go up and take a sick parade of the artillery and it's weird to be visiting sick men with big guns kicking up a dreadful row all round. It is pretty to watch the guns firing at night, you see the flash as the gun fires and a bigger flash as the shell bursts miles away, the warships' big guns make a terrible din and the row almost knocks you down. The other night there was a Turkish attack and from our position on the hill, it was a fine sight. They were firing star shells which light up the ground

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all round and the rifles and machine guns were making a continuous rattle, the big guns ashore and on the warships were lighting up the country with lurid flashes. After lasting an hour and a half it died down. It was very vivid and interesting while it lasted, on the whole things are quiet and there's not a great deal to do, we have a small hospital in connection with the ambulance full of sick and only and occasional wounded man. The medical officers have not very much to do so a swim comes in handy. The beach is about half a mile away and as we are in shell range anywhere we might as well be swimming as stuck in a dugout all day. Yesterday morning was very foggy and there was absolutely no breeze, the water and the sky were leaden and you could see no horizon. The Men of War were the same colour as the fog as they would only come into view at intervals between banks they gave a weird impression of being hung right up in the air. It was most peculiar. It is interesting to watch the aeroplanes come over and fly round. The Turks try to hit them with shrapnel but never get near them and they sail serenely on. We feed up here pretty well, the mess having brought stores and the cook is wonderful at making pastry pies and cakes of all sorts on a small camp kitchen

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But although you put up with it, it's an absolutely rotten life so dirty, disgusting and stagnating. Am very fit and feel energetic, but would like to get out of here and over to France.

Anzac 15.10.15

I had orders about a week ago to report over here and am attached to a Field Ambulance at present. Have met many old friends here Poate from RPA is in the same Ambulance. Aspinall and Tozer about two minutes walk away and lots of others handy. Although shells are more frequent here and there's more risk I prefer being among my own friends over at Suvla and continually felt the need of someone to swear at and insult. They were all as correct here as though walking down Piccadilly and used to come to mess without a button out of place. I only put on a collar occasionally and used to get round in a blue woollen shirt and no coat. I suppose they didn't expect any more from a Colonial and anyway I was happy. This place is really an eye opener and what our fellows have done so far is miraculous, have had several walks round and was up in the trenches this afternoon, and it seems to me as though we can't advance much, neither can the Turks so we just stay here and do nothing.

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Life is free and easy with not much to do as there's very little scrapping going on, but when they drop shells on the beach, which is a perfect ?? all day long, there's generally somebody hit and that means some work for us to do. But Beachy Bill as the gun is christened has been very quiet the last few days. When I came first he was more active and killed a couple just in front of the dressing station and wounded a number of others. But you don't want me to describe all the horrid things I've seen or you wouldn't sleep for a while. The weather is becoming wintry windy everyday and overcast with occasional rain. Soon we shall have snow on the hill around us. Had a rough trip to Imbros an island near, to buy stores. Went in a trawler and it was terribly cold. Going to bed consisted of wrapping a blanket round your overcoat and lying down, and that made you feel very cold towards morning. Not only cold, but sleeping on the ground and not having your clothes off for three days, made you feel dirty. Coming back we ran into a gale and had quite a wet time of it. There wasn't a dry spot on the deck, but we got here with our stores all right.

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When I left Mudros, the flies were largely all gone, but they are still here in the millions together with lice and fleas nearly as big as beetles. The fleas are the worst as they come out at night and if you don't get to sleep quickly before they get to work, you lay awake and swear for a long while. I won't be sorry when the end comes to this awful war.

(End of this group of letters) 16 pages