

Letters transcribed by Jeannie Fisher 24th September 1916
Letters of Captain Eric Mortley Fisher 16th January 1916 to 28th July 1916

Broomlea
Loftus street
Ashfield

To H E Barff Esq.,

Dear Sir,

Enclosed are further extracts from the letters of my son E M Fisher on Active Service in France. The package is rather bulky this time I fear. My fault for allowing the letters to accumulate so long.

Yours truly,
J. Fisher

24th Sept 1916

1 Further extracts from the letters of Eric M Fisher
Tel-El-Kebir 16.1.16

Nothing to do or see and nowhere to go, plenty of sun, sand, dirt, niggers, horses, tents and soldiers. That is this place and my life in a couple of lines. You will see by this we were shipped out of Mudros quickly and came down on a fine big transport without meeting any submarines. Spent a very quiet Christmas on board. Lost most of my kit when we left Anzac. The Turks booty will consist mostly of kits, old blankets, sheets of tin, some timber etc. most of the stuff left behind was destroyed by fire and the rest was of little military value. The whole show went off perfectly although it was a bit strenuous at the time. Have quite got over the strains and next fight we get into will have to get accustomed to it all over again. The hospital – No 3 Aust Gen – is to come down here soon. I am still with the 3rd Field Ambulance, have had no letters for over a month. One thing you learn on active service – you can't call it patience – is to put up with things and not worry about anything though you growl and swear at everything and everybody. One thing I have mastered the art of doing nothing for long periods. One description of a medical officers life at Anzac

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I heard is – “Prolonged periods of profound boredom varied by occasional intervals of intense terror.” Pretty accurate.

Here is a big camp four or five times the size of Liverpool. It is alongside the railway on the edge of the desert. The other side of the line is cultivated with irrigation ditches everywhere and is beautifully green. This side is just dirt, sand, pebbles and dirt. Some of it is nice dirt but it varies. There are railway lines everywhere and there is dust everywhere but the weather is great and we've enough to eat now. At first there was not too much. All our old pals are here in camp so we can have reunions. Have been into Cairo a couple of times. It is a two hours trip. Of our future I know little, it looks as if we were to have the prolonged period of boredom in finitum. Sunday afternoon means a football match. We have a good piece of dirt alongside the camp and a football club of which I am president. Have had a couple of games and it feels

like old times to take the skin off my knees again. Footballs are a bit scarce though and the few in the camp get plenty of use. I expect sooner or later we will go to the Canal. There are troops everywhere and this camp is becoming so businesslike and comfortable that we are sure to get moved on somewhere

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else.

30.1.16

Left Tel-el-Kebir in a truck one morning and am now in the desert. Have no railway near us as heretofore to wake us up at night, no filthy niggers about us, no canteen, no beer, oh help! it is nothing but sand and sunset – nice sand and no flies at present only sand-storms, rain-storms, cold weather, some sun, a little food and less water and much time to put in doing nothing. Soon, a matter of eight days we go eight miles further on to life in and on sand, but we might have a scrap any of these days or nights. Tozer is in the next battalion and helps me to pass the time. I am fat and cannot get thin even on biscuits and bully beef. One man I saw hold up a biscuit and say as he dashed it to pieces with his fist

O God! Our help in ages past,

Our food for years to come!

I suppose that's what it amounts to.

At Sea

4.4.1916

As you see we are off again. Before leaving the Canal our Brigade was chosen to march past the General - Birdwood I mean – we were first of all drawn up in hollow square for Church parade and after waiting a few minutes the General and Suite walked in. "Birdie" was accompanied by a small sandy haired little boy who turned out on closer inspection to be the Prince of Wales. His Nib's first effort

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was to fall over a peat much to everyone's delight. After the Service Birdie made a great fighting speech and was well cheered. Then he marched past with a certain amount of success, receiving a very anaemic salute from the Prince and words of praise from the Brigadier later. Listening to the comments of the men later on – most of them unfit for publication – it was easily seen how little weight being "born to the purple" carried with them. They don't fix their liking or respect to anyone till they've proved themselves and then it is unshakeable and for all time. That is why Birdie is so well liked by our chaps and why they'll do things for him, they won't do for other people. Well we left the Canal one evening and spent all night in the train. The Train! Oh Help! Have you ever travelled far on a cold night in an open iron truck. Lying on the floor with an overcoat on, your head on a pack, your eyes, ears and mouth full of coal dust and cinders and your temper so ragged that you curse the war, the army, the Kaiser, Egypt, yourself for being such a fool as to be there and everything on earth or in the sea? Well I have and hope it is the last time.

When we got to Alexandria we embarked the same day and pushed off. Now I am bloated up with "flash" food. I have slept between sheets, had many

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hot baths and everyday I lay back in a chair and pay a man to shade me so at present it's a good war. I think we are off to France but will soon know. We have had a quiet trip so far and I hope we get through without excitement.

France 10.4.1916

Landed at Marseilles and entrained the same day. Spent 60 hours getting here in the train without a break and it was a rotten trip as far as the train went. Didn't have a decent meal all the way and practically no sleep as you couldn't get room on the seat for a stretch out. Arrived at this end about dawn feeling dirty, tired and sore. We always seem to leave or arrive at the most unpleasant hours of the day. I hate the dawn, there's nothing beautiful about it and I've seen enough since leaving home to do me for the rest of my life. If the actual train journey was rotten, the scenery was beautiful and made up for a lot especially in the South of France. The country is all agricultural there with lots of vines and fruit trees which were all in bloom and it looked so clean that you'd think it has just been swept. We are now in the billets at country farm houses, the men in big cosy barns and officers in rooms. It is quaint and countrified with mud, pigs, cows, fowls, ducks and dungheaps everywhere. It is about fifteen miles behind the trenches but we can hear the guns going quite

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distinctly and have aeroplanes over us every day. It doesn't make us too happy getting into it again, but it must be done. Had a practice with gas helmets yesterday walking through a trench full of poison gas. It's not too good, but there again it has to be done. It does make you 'ate the 'uns. Tomorrow I have to go up to the trenches with Tozer for instruction in sanitation etc.

Went up to the trenches on a tour of inspection and saw more mud and unpleasantness than I've seen for years, of course it rains so much here that I suppose it is unavoidable but it's rotten all the same. At Anzac we has some beautiful trenches and dugouts as the ground there lends itself to digging, but here you strike water as about three feet below the surface, so you can't go in for artistic stunts. You just live that's all; or rather you try to live in spite of all the efforts made to land you one. Attended a second poison gas lecture and demonstration and don't like it. Sat for ten minutes in a dugout full of gas. We carry round gas helmets all day ready for it. It strikes you as being a cold-blooded way of carrying on. Renewed my acquaintance with shells and their screech sounds. Just as unpleasant over here as at Gallipoli. Saw Gregg and several other

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medicos who are with RAMC. Gregg is well and fat and gave up news of Broughton hope we run across him but there's very little chance I'm afraid. We moved out of our first billets and were a bit sorry to go. We had settled down comfortably. My French is coming on a treat and I find I can converse fairly well with most of the people. the old farmer and his wife had a great opinion of our chaps and liked to compare them with the Germans who stayed at the place for two nights. They were strictly just but firm, requisitioned a few horses and some wagons for atrocities – Uh. The evening before we left they asked us in for a cup of coffee in their kitchen, a big stone floored place with a great coke stove standing out of a big fireplace a couple of yards into the room. The old man, his wife and son and servant were sitting round the wall and the table was covered with bottles, glasses, cups etc. we started off with a couple of glasses of Normandy cider and followed that up by a few glasses of white wine also

very nice and with a fair amount of bite in it. Then it was time for coffee which is made strong and with which you drink a small glass of French rum. After that we had some Belgian gin as a chaser

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and the drinks were over. A little vodka and some beer and we would have samples all the allies. All these were out of different glasses. They go in for that a great deal, even a small house has quantities of glasses and old family china which they are proud of. The next morning we marched off in the rain and mud to our present billets. Here we are not so well off and are within range of enemy guns. It's a funny feeling to go to bed with only a brick wall and some windows to keep out the shells. You don't feel nearly so safe as in a dugout. The mud here is awful. You very rarely see the sun and then only for a few minutes. Aeroplanes fly over here by the dozens both Germans and ours and the sky is simply a mass of smoke puffs from the shells which burst all around them and follow them up for miles. At Anzac we had one anti-aircraft gun and everyone used to look upon it as a joke but it's no joke here. They fire her by batteries where we used to fire one.

May 1916

Since the Australians moved in we have been shaking things up and getting a return from the Germans every night there's a terrible fight now and we're not getting the worst of it either. We have had some alarms ourselves and once at night moved up into position behind the line but nothing happened. There have

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some gas attacks over us which were repulsed at right. The shells they fire are bigger and more frequent than the old Turk used but it's wonderful what local effect they have. I have been living in an empty house in a little tinpot village in which some furniture was left. It is all shattered with shrapnel and one whole shell has ploughed through a door and one of the walls. These places do not have much in the way of pictures except some weird efforts generally of the crucifixion, but they make up for the lack with a profusion of images which my batman finds very handy for hanging clothes on. It is strange to see people living in their houses right up to behind the trenches and of course in range. The fields are cultivated right up close also and it is not uncommon to see shells dropping on a field while a man or in some cases two women is ploughing it. Of course they get killed and it gives one a rotten feeling to see old women and small children right up under fire. I've been in the trenches some time now and it's not too good as the ground and weather are so wet they are all built above ground and it doesn't take very much to knock them about. They knock a piece of our parapet down and then we try to do the same to them. We build ours up at night and so do they and there you

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are. That's war – or a bit of war. They snipe us and we snipe them, they fire machine guns at us and sweep our roads and we do ditto, they blow up a mine and so do we and so it goes on, each trying to do more than the other and neither side enjoying it. It's all stupid and rotten and I wish both sides would go home. We have tones of rats here, most of them big enough to put a scrap with a fair-sized cat. They are everywhere and are horrible pests worse than the other vermin which also abounds. We have mosquitoes as big as Hexham Greys and flies and small insects in swarms.

27.6.1916

We came out of support last night in the rain and mud and are now in reserve, we don't expect to be very long here till probably be shifted to a warm spot next as we have received our initiation in a quiet one. By Jove quiet! It might have been before we got there but we have successfully stirred things up and there's a bright little war every day now. Personally I had a quiet time in reserve. No shells falling near our billets but some of the companies' billets were shelled and they had a few casualties. While you are in a dugout you have a certain feeling of security, very illfounded really, but yet you have it like an ostrich with its head in the sand. There were French people living still in the farm

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houses we stayed at, an old woman, a young girl, a soldier son back wounded from Champagne and a Belgian labourer. They carry on the farm between them and the girl runs a small pub and shop combined. The men and officers too drink a lot of beer and I suppose really they make as much money if not more than in peace times. It is the nearest place to the firing line that civilians are still occupying but it's a rotten life and very insecure. Things are quiet at present as far as we are concerned. Have moved back a bit into the country which looks very pretty with the trees in full leaf and the crops nearly ripe. There's a big British attack going on now and we may be pushed anywhere at anytime.

July 1916

Have had four moves since I last wrote. We scarcely stay more than a day in any place now. The night of our first move the battalion was making a raid on the German trenches and I went up to the firing line with them. Haven't heard such a row since May 30th when we got bombarded so badly that our own shells seemed to be going only a yard over heads and of course the Germans started too. Our fellows got into their trenches in the middle of it and safely back again without any casualties, so I had nothing to do. When things quietened down we left. That was about 2.30 am. The battalion had marched out early in the evening

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to new billets and there was another battalion in our old ones, so I rode straight on to find the new place. It was a lonely ride cold and foggy, but the sun rose when I was half way. Got to the new village at 5.45 and couldn't find my destination as no one was about to enquire of. So went into 12th Field Ambulance and woke Percy wall – previously with 3rd ABH – and Austin Curtin and invited myself into bed with them. Got undressed but had a bath instead as I'd had a sleep the previous night but hadn't had a bath for a week. After they had fed me I found my billet and was right. We stayed there a week and then moved out, put in a night in another place and moved out at 8.30 the following night. Got a mile from the station where we had to entrain and spent the night in a field. At least nearly everyone else did, but I found a shed with some Tommies in, and had a couple of hours in the straw. We entrained and moved out about 4.45 am. Put in six hours in the train and then marched till 9 pm that night. We stayed in a little village till 9 am next day and came on have been here a day and a half. That's the war for the last couple of weeks. It's a good war isn't it? We are in quite different country now. Previously it was flat country with only about on hill in the

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whole panorama. This is rolling country like Bathurst, heavily wooded in parts and of course beautifully green. The crops are all full grown, the trees in full leaf and there are poppies, daisies, clover and purple flowers like cornflowers out everywhere growing wild and the result is charming. We do a lot of marching and my feet are getting like a blackfellow's with leather soles. One of these days we'll be marching right into the thick of it.

28.7.16

As I predicted a while ago we were into the push and did a bit of pushing ourselves. O God! It was awful. We kept marching nearer every day and about a week ago marched twelve miles getting into the line about 2 am. We spent a couple of days improving the trenches and then went over. We captured about three lines of trenches and made about 1500 yards and had dreadful time hanging on to them. But we didn't give way at all and when we came out we'd kept everything we'd took. The worst thing about of being with a Brigade and Battalion with a reputation is that you get into all the hot spots and when it's all over the General is very nice, pats the men on the back and then you get ready for another one. Of course our casualties were heavy. Not only in the attack, but after when they counter-attacked us and when that failed sat tight and bombarded us for two days. This was worse than the previous

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bombardment we got. Of course I had a bad time. My aid post was right up in the trenches and a rickety thing at best and as there were a lot of wounded, there wasn't much rest. Two corners were blown off the aid post and only one shell came in although hundreds were close round. Tozer was wounded there in the forehead, but the last I heard he was doing all right. When the shell came in it was about a yard from me, it picked up two men and threw one outside and the other into the centre killing both. I could see it all through the glare and dust, but it happened so quickly that I hadn't time to be frightened. The aid post was full of wounded at the time and we were lucky to get off with only two killed. Everyone up there had narrow escapes, but I suppose it's all in the game. The ground is one mass of shell craters scarcely a yard of ground being left intact. There are dead horses, with guns, wagons and dead men also strewn about near the front line. But enough of the details I won't forget them ever I suppose until new ones take their place. We came out and have gradually moved back to where we started from and I suppose will gradually work forward into it again. Had my first decent sleep for ten days last night and fell much better. Till today felt much like a mouse the cat brings in on a wet night.

14 pages all done