

Section 354-05

Life as a Prisoner of War

Pte Ernest Charles Cousins 39290

Ernest Charles Cousins was the son of Mr and Mrs William Cousins of 4 Hawthorn Cottages, Eaton Ford, St Neots, Hunts. He was born in 1891 and enlisted in the Hunts Cyclists November 1915. He served with the 2/1st Battalion. He was transferred to the 1st Royal Berks 9/8/1916 along with 52 other Hunts Cyclists. He received his Royal Berks Number 39290.

He had been engaged to Kitty Saunders of Blunham, Bedfordshire and many of his letters and cards to her have survived.

22nd November 1915

He has evidently just joined the Hunts Cyclists and is with their 3rd/1st Battalion at Huntingdon. This was the regiment's training and reserve battalion. He writes a postcard of St Mary's Church Huntingdon to Kitty:-

Dear K

I am made up alright now, got a good billet

Pte E C C

3/1 Hunts C B

33 West Street

Newtown

Huntingdon

31st July 1916

There was no news of him between November 1915 and August 1916. He was evidently still with the Hunts Cyclists at this time but the 3rd/1st had been disbanded in March 1916 and the men posted variously to the 1st/1st, the 2nd/1st and to the Machine Gun Corps. He appears to have joined the 2nd/1st which was based at Sutton-le-Marsh near Mablethorpe. This unit never left England but batches of men were sent to base camps in France to be posted to other regiments. His card is postmarked APO S15 which was at Bruyere Camp, Rouen at the time. It would seem that he had just arrived in France.

The message is on a standard Field Service card (W3497/293) with a selection of phrases which could be crossed out if not relevant. They were not allowed to add anything for security reasons. The residual message read:-

I am quite well

Letter follows at first opportunity

I have received no letter from you lately

E C Cousins

July 31st 1916

20th August 1916

By now he had joined the 1st Royal Berks who were at Bus Les Artois having moved there by route march from Authie that afternoon. The FPO number on the card is illegible but should have been FPO SA1 for 99th Bde or FPO D9 for 2nd Division. It is on a standard Field Service Card ref AFA2042 - 114/Gen No 5248.

The message reads:-

I am quite well

Letter follows at first opportunity

I have received no letter from you lately

11th September 1916

Again on a standard Field Post Card. The field postmark is again illegible. On this date the 1st Bn were in Divisional Reserve at Couin having arrived there from Hebuterne the previous day. This message read:-

I am quite well

I have received your letter dated Sep 1st and parcel

Letter follows at first opportunity

22nd April 1917

He had evidently been taken prisoner by the Germans shortly before this date as he was now in a temporary POW Camp at Le Quesnoy some 15 Km north east of Cambrai. His card is a German field post card but instead of unit details he has written

Kriegsgefangenen Sendung

Kriegsgefangener Pte E C Cousins no 64

Royal Berks

Stammlager

Kriegsgefangener

Le Quesnoy

The card is of a type captured in bulk by the British in January 1916 It asks the sender to insert, rank, name, Army Corps, Division, Regiment, Battalion or detachment, Company or battery, squadron or column. The Germans, meticulous as ever filled these in assiduously and from the captured data British Intelligence was able to reconstruct the whole German order of battle. As a result changes were made to the British military postal system to avoid the Germans being able to do likewise.

The 1st Battalion had been in the line at Roelincourt

from the 11th to 18th April The last time they had seen serious action was on the 10th March when they attacked Grevillers trench - only one man was reported missing in this incident although 12 were killed and 85 wounded.

The message reads:-

April 22nd 1917

My Dear Kitty

I hope you are quite well and all at Blunham that I know. I am pleased to say I am alright but I should very much like to hear from you, remember me to all the Family and if you happen to be going to Eaton let them know that you have heard from me. Well Kitty I cannot tell you much on the card. Note new address.

Kindest regards, I remain, your loving Ernest

The card was postmarked K D [Kaiserliche Dienst] - ie Royal Service} Feldpost 1.5 17 and certified free by the Germans. It was received in London on June 22nd 1917 and forwarded to Sandy. There is no clue as to the route it took but probably via Holland or Switzerland.

25th May 1917

He was now in hospital at Wahn in West Phalia. The card is similar to the previous one but over-stamped 'Gefangenen Sendung' [prisoner mail] in red. The message reads:-

May 20th 1917

My dearest Kitty

I trust these few lines will find you quite well also your mother and all I know at Blunham. I am in hospital with a swollen leg but I am getting on alright and I am being well treated. I should very much like to get a letter from you to know how you all are, also from home if you happen to be that way let them know that I am getting on alright

Kindest regards to all I remain your loving Ernest

15th June 1917

He is now in a different hospital, Reserve Lazarette III, Johannistal, Stettin, (Szeczin) Pomerania. The postmark is ALTDAMM 30-6-17. It reads

I am still in hospital with my leg, but I am getting on fine & I am being well looked after.

You will note my new address.

22nd July 1917

He is evidently recovered from his leg injury and now at a POW camp in Altdam. He has been allocated British Prisoner of War number 35348. The card is postmarked ALTDAMM 2.8.17 and reposted from the London Foreign Section of the GPO on the 24th August. He inadvertently dates his letter 22nd July 1916. It reads:-

I hope you are in the best of health. I am pleased to say that I am alright again now. I have not heard from you yet but have hopes of doing so during the next few days. Give my kindest regards to your Mother, Brother & Sisters who I trust are all well, also yourself. I remain your loving Ernest.

15th August 1917

He is now at Schneidemühl a small village in Thuringia close to the Czech border. He writes a letter this time which is enclosed in an envelope postmarked SCHNEIDEMUHL 23.8.17. I reads:-

Kriegsgefangenen Sendung

Pte E C Cousins No 39290

1st Royal Berks Regt

British Prisoner of War

Gefangenen Lager

Schneidemuhl

Posen

Germany

Aug 15th 1917

My dearest Kitty

I hope you are still getting on alright I am very pleased to be able to tell you that I received another of your letters on the 11th dated April 23rd. That makes three I have received from you. I am so pleased to hear that you have got such a nice place at Putnoe and that you are getting on so well, don't worry yourself about getting too far.

I have not yet heard from Clements who you said wrote for my address. I wonder if he is alright again now. I suppose he was in England when he wrote to you I should like to hear from him.

I hope that Frank and Olive and the large family are all still quite well remember me to them all when you are home again also your Mother. I hope that Lily and Olive are quite well are they still at the same places

I suppose things are looking nice now the - like plum trees and apples

Well Kitty I hope to hear from you again soon I am sending a card home

I remain Your loving Ernest

Clements was 39288 Bertram Mitchell Clements from Spare Rib, St Ives Hunts who had been in the same Hunts Cyclists units and was now also a prisoner of war. At this POW camp they are using regimental numbers rather than allocating special POW numbers which seem to have confused the system and delayed the mail. Olive was Kitty's sister.

5th September 1917

They now have their own special printed POW cards so he only has to give his name and number. The card is postmarked Schneidemühl. 17.9.17 and reposted at the London Foreign Section Sep 27 1917 so the mail is speeding up quite considerably. The message reads:-

Sept 5th 1917

My Dearest Kitty

I received a letter from you dated July 30th. I also got one from Annie, also one from Lizzie from which I was sorry to learn that Father had died. I have wrote home since. I am pleased to say that I am now receiving your letters. I am also receiving parcels so I am getting on alright now and trust that you are.

I remain, your loving Ernest.

Annie is Kitty's sister and Lizzie is his sister.

18th October 1917

He is still at Schneidemühl. The card was dated at the camp 18 Okt and postmarked Schneidemühl. 22.10.17 and reposted from the London Foreign Section Nov 13th The message reads:-

My dear Kitty,

You will be thinking that I am a long time writing to you, but I have been writing about my father and we are allowed 2 letter and 4 cards a month. I have now received all the clothes parcels except the boots so I am hoping they will send some more boots out. I have asked them too. I received your April 18th letter this week. sorry to see that you had Frank ill last winter. I hope you are well and all at home, remember me to them all,

I remain your loving Ernest

The card was readdressed from Putnoe House in Goldington to Blunham and evidently arrived after the next one.

28th October 1917

Still at Schneidemühl, he writes:

Oct 28th 1917

My dear Kitty. Many thanks for your letter of Sept 10th. I am very pleased to hear that you are getting on so well at Bedford. I am also glad to hear that Lily and Olive are getting on alright. I am pleased to say I am quite well. I received a letter from Mother today with a photo of Father in.

Remember me to your Mother and all. I remain, Your loving Ernest

Kitty is now working at Hepworths, Gentlemen's Outfitters at Bedford.

25th November 1917

The card is postmarked SCHNIEDEMUHL 4.12.17. and reposted from London January 11th. The message reads:-

My dearest Kitty

I hope you are still in the best of health I am pleased to say that I am quite well. Well Kit I suppose when you receive this card it will be somewhere about Christmas, so I hope you will be as merry as possible, although at present I cannot wish you a Merry Christmas as I would like to, but anyway I hope you will have a happier one than last year. I suppose that last Christmas you did not know where I was.

Remember me to all at home so with Kindest regards I remain your loving Ernest

23rd December 1917

The Germans appear to have run out of the standard camp postcards and have given him a plain postcard (ref C154 (10.16)) to use. It is postmarked Schneidemühl 10.1.18 and reposted from London 24th Jan 1918. The mail delays appear to be within the camp rather than the postal service. The message reads:-

Dec 23rd 1917

My Dearest Kitty

I hope you are quite well. I am pleased to say that I am quite well. well Kitty it is now close to Christmas day so we shall be as Merry as possible. I think that I shall be going to Church on Christmas Morning and I guess you will be going too. I received another suit this week from the Committee. Remember me to all so with Kindest regards I remain Your loving Ernest

The Committee referred to was the 'Royal Berkshire Regiment Prisoners of War Care Committee'. Mrs Mount of Wasing in Berkshire looked after the 1st Battalion. Each man received a parcel with a complete change of clothing as soon as he was notified as a POW and every six months thereafter. This new suit was evidently the second he had received. Mrs Mount's son Francis was an officer in the 1st Battalion and had been killed at Loos. He husband was an MP.

6th January 1918

Again on a standard blank postcard the message reads:-

Jan 6th 1918

My Dear Kitty

I hope you are still in the best of health. I received a letter from Olive this week, thank her for it for me I also received a letter from Lizzie but not very good news has she tells me that Arthur is missing, but I hope they have heard something from him by now.

Remember me to all I remain Your loving Ernest

Arthur was his brother. He was 391955 Rifleman Arthur Edwin Cousins aged 24 of the 2/9th London Regiment (Queen Victorias Rifles) He was killed 26/9/17 and is commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial.

10th February 1918

Again from Schneidemühl on a standard blank postcard. The message reads:-

Feb 10th 1918

My dearest Kitty

I hope you are quite well and all at Blunham. I am quite well. I have not received a letter from you this week but I expect I will get one or two soon. I got one from Emily. The weather here has not been as severe as one might expect up to the present. Well Kitty Kindest regards to all I remain Your loving Ernest.

Emily was his sister

24th February 1918

The postcard has been reduced in size from 140x90 mm to 113x90 mm. The message reads:-

Feb 24th 1918

My Dearest Kitty

I am very pleased to tell you that I received your Photo this week and I think it is a very good Photo of you. I have not had mine taken yet. It is very bad news I have heard of Arthur. I am afraid that we shall see him no more. I also understand from the letter that I had from Mother that Kisby has been killed, Well Kitty I hope you are still in the best of health and all at home.

I remain Your loving Ernest

Kisby was 325596 Pte William Kisby of the 1st Bn Cambridgeshire Regiment. He was killed at Passchendaele 26/9/1917 and is commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial.

10th March 1918

He is still at Schneidemühl. They are back to using 140x90 mm postcards. It is postmarked Schneidemühl. 20.3.18. It reads

March 10th 1918

My Dear Kitty

I am very pleased to say that I received a letter from you dated Jan 13th also one from Mother and one from Louie and I am glad to hear that you are getting on alright. Mother tells me in her letter that Bert Clements is a prisoner the one you mention in your letter. I am sorry to hear that they have not heard anything more of Arthur. Well I am glad to hear that you keep the dancing up.

Kindest regards to all, I remain, your loving Ernest.

Bertram Mitchel Clements (Royal Berks 39288 and Hunts Cyclists 1591) was in the same batch of men transferred to the Royal Berks as Ernest in August 1916.

24th March 1918

The message reads:-

March 24th 1918

My Dear Kitty

I am pleased to say that I received a letter from you dated Feby 8th and I am glad to hear that you are getting on alright. I am very pleased with the Photo you sent it is a very good one of you. I did not receive the the song you said you were sending. I also received a letter from Bessie yesterday, they must have had the floods out badly by what she said. Well Kitty remember me to all

I remain Your loving Ernest.

8th April 1918

The message reads:-

April 8th 1918

My Dear Kitty

I hope you are quite well and all at home. I am pleased to say that I received a letter from you dated Feby 26th. I must thank you for the pound you have sent. I have not yet received it but I suppose it will be turning up before long. I am pleased to hear that you heard from May and that she is well, give my kindest regards to your Mother and all.

I remain Your loving Ernest

May was his sister living in Canada.

April 15th 1918

A letter this time which had been opened by the Censor in London. It read

My Dearest Kitty

I am very pleased to say that I received the parcel you sent for which I thank you very much and Mother. I am sure all the articles sent are very useful. I also received your letter dated Feby 18th.

I am very pleased to hear that George has been home and that you had a good time when you went down. I am also very sorry to hear that Lily has been unwell but I hope that she is now quite well again. I am pleased to hear that Lily and Annie are writing to me, it is very nice to receive letters has you know well Kitty the weather is getting warm. I wonder if it is the same about home. how is Rose getting on I hope she is well. it was a nice long letter you wrote while you were having your tea, I am very pleased to think you had a good appetite that Sunday and how is Olive you did not say much about her. you might tell her some of my pals are falling in love with her Photo which I have still got in an album I have quite a collection of photos now.

Well Kitty I think this is all this time I remain With Kindest Regards Your loving Ernest

13th May 1918

Another letter which reads:-

May 13th 1918

My Dearest Kitty

Thanks very much for your letter which you wrote on Easter Sunday and I received this last week. I am very pleased to hear that you are well at home and I am pleased to say that I am quite well.

I am pleased to hear that you went down to Eaton it is very good of you to take some flowers down when you receive this letter Kitty it will be nearly a year since poor Father died. I received the two photos Mother sent of his grave.

I received a letter from Sir E Mowbray and he says that he is sending me five shillings to buy myself something for Easter it will be rather late coming for I have not yet received it but I have bought a watch chain on the strength of it. I have still got the watch which I brought out with me and it is still going fine. I have had it mended once since I have been here, I wrote to Sir E Mowbray about two months ago but he had not received it when he wrote to me. I shall have to write to him again when I receive the money. by the way Kitty I don't want any money sent I thought I would tell you or you might be sending some and I have no need of it at present.

Yes Kitty I remember Easter 1916 with pleasure. I think we had a very nice time of it then, yes and I hope it won't be too long before we have some more good times together.

I am pleased to hear that they are all fairly well at home but I am afraid that John does not get much better but I have not had a letter from him for a week or two but I suppose I will be having one before long.

I suppose you will be busy in the garden now are you doing the gardening this year Kitty, or just picking the gooseberries as they get ripe.

Give my Kindest regards to all does Olive still play the Dead March on Sundays but I suppose she has something better to do now or nicer.

Well Kitty I think I have wrote a long latter this time so with Best of Love I remain Your loving Ernest.

John was his brother who was with the 4th Hussars and having been repeatedly buried by shell explosions had

been judged unfit to rejoin after home convalescence.

26th May 1918

May 26th 1918

My Dear Kitty

I am very pleased to say that I received a letter from you this week and I am very grateful to hear that you are all well. I was so very pleased to hear that John seemed so well when you met him. I am writing to Sir E Mowbray today so I am not writing home so let them know I am alright if you are down that way, remember me to all

so with Kindest regards I remain Your loving Ernest

9th June 1918

Letter censored in London

June 9th 1918

My Dearest Kitty

I am very pleased to say that I received your letter dated May 11th it came through fairly quick. the card you received when you wrote the letter took a long time to reach you. well I am pleased to be able to tell you that I am quite well I am sorry I did not tell you on that card but I must have forgot. Well Kitty I am very pleased to be able to tell you that I received another parcel of clothing this week underclothing and jersey so I suppose I will be receiving the other issue in the next few days. I am in need of a pair of boots has I have only received one pair.

I am so glad to hear that you are well and all at home. I received the letter that Lily wrote thank her for it for me has you know I cannot write to all we can only write one letter a fortnight but I can receive as many as people like to write to me so I am very pleased to hear from all.

I have not yet been able to have my Photo taken but I might get the chance before long has I know you would be pleased to have one.

I received a letter from Bessie at the same time has I got yours and she tells me that she had been has far as Wyboston with you. I am very glad to hear that Lily got the appointment she wanted at Blunham, it will be very nice for her to be so close home. I would not mind if I was working as close to home just now. I think it would be much nicer for me. you must have a long day of it Kitty with the train ride at my place of business now I sleep on the premises I might also state that we are on board wages or very nearly we have one man to do the cooking.

Well remember me to all Kitty so with Kindest regards I remain Your loving Ernest

PS excuse Blots has my pen nib comes out of the holder.

24th June 1918

He is still at Schneidemuhl camp. His postcard is potmarked SCHNEIDEMUHL 17.7.18. The message reads:-

June 24th 1918

My Dear Kitty

I hope you are still in the best of health and all at home. I am pleased to say that I am quite well. I am so pleased to hear that you are getting on so well at your work and I am glad to hear that you had a good time at Gamlingay. I had a letter from the office. The firm are paying for my bread parcels now, it is very good of them. It is a wet and cold

Sunday today and I have been spending a bit of time playing cards. So kindest regards to all. I remain, Your loving Ernest.

British POWs used to receive three kilos of bread every 28 days supplied by the Red Cross from Switzerland. As a result of the Spring Offensive the number of Royal Berks prisoners had swelled from 200 at the end of 1917 to over 1400 and the funds to pay for the bread had been drastically affected. It would seem that his employers, Jordan and Addington Ltd, corn merchants and Brewers of St Neots had agreed to fund his bread.

30th June 1918

A letter - no envelope

June 30th 1918

My Dearest Kitty

I am very pleased to say that I received two letters from you yesterday dated May 13th and 23rd and I am so very pleased to hear that you are quite well and I am pleased to say that I am alright.

I am so very sorry to hear that Jack has broken off with Rose. I hope she is getting on alright now where did she go for her holiday I hope her and Annie had a good time of it do you get a holiday Kitty in your business. I am sorry I cannot come and spend a fortnight with you this summer but we shall have to wait and see what another summer will bring forth and in the meantime we shall have to be as happy as we can. I am glad to hear that the Concert went off so well you must be getting quite a singer now and they took quite a lot of money. you must have had a good audience to sing too. you said you had sent me the words of a song once but I did not receive it. I suppose it got taken out. I wish I could have been there to hear you but that is a pleasure which I have yet to come.

One of my chums from here name of A L P Cole has gone to Holland he has wrote and told me that he wrote to Mother and I have had another letter from him and he says he might be going back to England shortly so if he gets back he might be coming down to see Mother he got sent away owing to his hearing being rather bad.

I am very glad that your Mother is going down to Eaton I am sure Mother will be pleased to know her so I hope that she went down as I don't think any of our Mothers go out far from home visiting very often.

It is very good of you and Lily to get your Photo taken and send me one. I am getting quite a collection of Photos now and I am so pleased to hear that you had a good time when you went to St Neots.

Well Kitty remember me to all so with Best of Love I remain Your loving Ernest

Arthur Cole referred to appears to have been a fellow POW at Schniedemuhl and repatriated via Holland as he had been certified as not being able to fight again. It seems likely he was also in the Hunts Cyclists but not the Royal Berks as he came to live near St Neots after the war. He could have been 572 Pte Arthur Cole of the Hunts Cyclists who became 43009 in the Bedfordshire Regiment. The Red Cross played an active role in this process and arranged exchanges of wounded prisoners through Holland and Switzerland. Also a large number

of men were sent to Holland to be interned there as Holland was a neutral country in the war.

14th July 1918

A somewhat damaged official POW postcard which reads:-

July 14th 1918

[My Dearest] Kitty

I was very pleased to receive your letter this week and to hear that you are quite well. I am pleased to say that I am well. I received a pair of boots this week so I am alright for clothes again. I hope Rose is keeping well and all at home. Well Kitty kindest regards I remain Your loving Ernest

28th July 1918

A letter enclosed in an official POW envelope. Postmarked SCHNEIDEMUHL 11.8.18 and reposted in London Sep 4th after being censored. The letter reads:-

July 28th 1918

My dearest Kitty

I am so pleased to be able to write and tell you that I received two letters from you this week also one from Olive and I am glad to hear that you are all well. Thank Olive for me and tell her I was very pleased with her cheerful letter. I do not mean that your letters are not cheerful too. Kit so I thank you for yours as well I am pleased to hear that you took your Mother down to Eaton and that she enjoyed it. I also had a letter from Louie and she tells me that my mate Frank Richardson had been home with his wife. I did not know that he was married, but Good luck to him he must be rather lucky staying at home but I don't know he might not be enjoying to good health. I had a letter from him once since I have been here but I have not written back yet. I shall have to send him a line one of these days if I don't get home first. I am pleased to hear that Mother had a letter from Arthur Cole he does not mean that I cannot write to him but he knows I won't have many letters to spare to send very often as we can only send two a month and I know you like to get a letter now and again.

Well Kit I hope there is a good harvest about this year I suppose they are all very busy about now. I am pleased to say that I am well. I nearly forgot to tell you Kit well remember me to all I remain Your loving Ernest

11th August 1918

A standard blank postcard written on August 11th, censored by the Germans on the 20th, posted at Schneidemuhl Sept 6th with no trace of a London forwarding postmark. It reads:-

Aug 11th 1918

My Dear Kitty

I trust that you are quite well and all at home. I am pleased to say that I am well. I received a letter from A Cole and he said that he had received a letter from Mother and that he was sending a Photo home. I am still waiting Kit for the Photo you said that you were sending me and you are still waiting for one from me. I am sorry I have not had a chance to get one taken yet. remember me to all so with Kindest regards I remain Your loving Ernest.

25th August 1918

A letter in a blank envelope written August 25th, censored on August 27th, posted at Schneidemuhl 14th September and forwarded from London October 1st. It reads:-

August 25th 1918

My Dearest Kitty

I again have the pleasure of writing to you and I am pleased to say that I received a letter from you this week and I am very glad to hear that you are quite well and all at home. I am pleased to say that I am quite well. I am also very glad to say that I received a parcel from home last Sunday and I was very glad to get it has I wanted some thread to do a bit of mending and all the other articles are very useful. I might mention that they are a very nice pair of boots I suppose you sent them Kitty. I have now come to the conclusion that those white things that were sent in the other parcels were meant for braces but they have shrunk a bit coming over the sea for when they got here they were not long enough to go round my neck but this pair I am pleased to say are quite long enough and I am wearing them but the others were quite a puzzle but I thank you very much for what you sent Kitty for I know you send with a good heart and I am very pleased to receive them but I would like to be wearing those braces in a boat up the Ouse this afternoon with you rowing and me sitting on some nice cushions holding the ropes.

Well Kitty I hope everyone is well at home. I am not writing home today I am sending a card to A L P Cole Remember me to all at home I hope it won't be too long before I can come and hear Olive singing that piece you said she would sing when I got back

Well Kitty Kindest regards and Best of Love I remain Your loving Ernest.

6th September 1918

A blank postcard written on Sept 6th, censored on the 13th, posted on the 19th but barely a trace of the London forwarding mark. It reads:-

Sept 6th 1918

My Dear Kitty

I am very pleased to be able to tell you that I received a letter from you this week but I have not yet received Cyrils that you said he had sent. I am very glad to hear that you are all quite well at home. I am pleased to say that I am well. I also got a letter from Louie yesterday. well Kitty remember me to all I remain Your loving Ernest

Cyril is Kitty's nephew and Louie is his sister.

22nd September 1918

The message reads

My Dear Kitty

I hope you are quite well and all at home. I received a letter from Mother this morning and I was glad to hear but I was sorry to hear that John does not get much better. I am afraid we should get no more news of poor Arthur, when I heard he was missing Well Kitty I hope you enjoyed yourself when you had your holiday. I am pleased to say that I am well so with Kinest regards I remain Your loving Ernest.

27th October 1918

They now have a further supply of the preprinted postcards

Oct 27th 1918

My Dear Kitty

I am very pleased to say that I received the letter you sent on Aug 20th with the Photo of yourself and Lily which I am very pleased to get. it is a very nice Photo, yes Kitty I can pick out which is you and which is Lily. well I am very glad to hear that you are well and hoping for the best and I am glad to say that I am well

Kindest regards to all I remain Your loving Ernest

1st December 1918

He has arrived at Leith. He writes on a standard British Army postcard reading:-

Dec 1st 1918

I have just arrived at Leith and am going on to Prisoners of War Reception Camp, South Camp Ripon.

I was pleased to say that I am quite well

Pte E C Cousins

1st Royal Berks

The card is postmarked OFFICIAL PAID, EDINBURGH 1 DE 18

General Notes

Compared to many prisoners Ernest seems to have had a reasonable time, most of which was spent in a camp far from the fighting and in fact buried deep in the German countryside. He seems to have had a regular supply of parcels and mail and the support provided by the Red Cross and the Berkshire POW Committee probably kept him much better fed than most of the German guards at the prison. For most of this time the German people were suffering terribly from the consequences of the Royal Navy's blockade and often resorted to begging food from their prisoners. However in the remote country areas this was not so much of a problem as the rural society were able to grow a lot of their own food. His letters never mention whether he was put to work while a prisoner, it was quite normal for them to work on local farms and prisoners often were given considerable freedom to come and go as the prospect of escape was close to zero. The hint of his churchgoing at Christmas tends to support this idea as does his request for boots which were evidently getting worn out quickly.

What these messages convey is the importance to a man's morale in having a support network at home. They were severely restricted in the number of letters they were allowed to send and it was important that the people back home understood that he could not reply to every letter he received, so news had to be repeated and passed around. What is curious is that so many letters had a completely blank page. Another point of note is the continual mention that he was well - it is obvious that when this phrase was omitted alarm bells began to ring back home.

There is a sharp contrast with the speed that letters were processed within the camp and the postal services which linked Germany and England via Switzerland or Holland. There is often a delay of many days between the writing of a letter and the date it was processed by the German censor and even longer delays between the time an item was censored and when it was actually posted. Letters were all opened in London and usually scanned by British Intelligence to see whether there was any information of military interest.

Biographical Notes

Ernest was born at Weir Cottage, Eaton Ford, St Neots in 1891, the 9th child of ten children to William and Caroline Cousins. The family moved to 4 Hawthorn Cottages, Eaton Ford in 1904. Ernest left Eaton Scoton village school in 1904 and became an office boy at Jordan and Addington's of St Neots who were corn merchants, millers and brewers.

He joined the local British Red Cross Society in 1914 and enlisted in the Hunts Cyclists Battalion in November 1916. After his imprisonment he returned home in December 1918, with a figure like a barrel. and a photograph of him taken in 1919 when he was treasurer of the St Neots Rowing Club showed a considerable paunch.

He and Kitty Saunders married at Blunham in 1921 and they had two children, Mary (1923-88) and Malcolm born 1932.

In the 1939-45 war he joined the ARP and was quartermaster of the 7th Huntingdonshire Red Cross as well as being a sidesman at St Neots parish church. He died 30th December 1945 aged 54.

Sources

Letters and postcards loaned by Malcolm Cousins

Commonwealth War Graves Commission records

Royal Berkshire Regimental Records.