

A letter from the front

Early this year the Better and Wiser Half and her father went through some old family photos and documents. As most of you have probably learned, it can be an eerie business; a sense of invading a lost loved one's privacy. It also leaves the reader with a satisfied feeling, knowing they've uncovered real history, a small gear in that giant machine that conveyed us to where we are today. In the process of their digging, they found a neatly folded letter in its original envelope that her father's mother had carefully put away and possibly forgotten.

It was common in both world wars to put notes of good wishes in armaments and materiel sent to the fighting forces. Her grandmother worked in an ammunition factory making artillery shells during WW 1. One day she slipped a note randomly into one of the charges as it was leaving her care and on its way to France. No one knows how many times she repeated this token of support to unknown soldiers or sailors and she probably forgot about it as soon as it was out of sight. Maybe she wondered if anyone would find her letter, or whether it would be of comfort to the finder. It was.

Some time later, she received a reply. The letter is growing faded with time, since the gunner wrote it in pencil over 87 years ago, but it is still readable and is as poignant today as it must have been back then. Here it is.

Sunday, April 29. 1917

Dear Miss Withers

Just a line to let you know I found your note in the charge all right. I was just getting it ready to put in the muzzle behind the shell when we were bombarding the Germans at 5.0 AM yesterday morning. We are having a rough time out here at present as we are giving the Germans no peace at all.

My address is 24565 Bombardier T. Grundy. 'D' Battery, 170 Brigade R.F.A. (Royal Field Artillery) BEF (British Expeditionary Force) France.

So I will close for now hoping to hear from you soon. Don't forget to send a photo.

Your true friend

Tommy

We haven't had luck finding out more about Thomas Grundy. According to the Ministry of Defense, in response to our queries, the majority of WW 1 service records were lost during the blitz in WW 2. His name doesn't appear in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's registry, so we assume he survived the war. Any knowledge of continued correspondence or whether she sent the requested photograph has died with her grandmother. (Thomas may still be alive for all we know.)

As we prepare to observe Remembrance Day, I thought this simple letter to a caring young armament worker on the home front, from a war-weary British "Tommy" was worth sharing. Unfortunately, the printed words on this page can't accurately reflect the impact conveyed by the original. One can almost picture Grundy crouching in his gun pit, hastily-rolled cigarette in his mouth, reading the letter again before pulling out a pencil stub and scribbling his heart-felt reply in as vague terms as possible in order to avoid the censor's scissors. Few things this mute and seemingly inconsequential can do more to convey the horrors of war.

See you on parade next Thursday.