

Does the publication of soldier's correspondence by the Scottish regional press, during the years of the Great War, depict battlefield conditions in an accurate manner?

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Research Question

On the 23rd of September 1914 the Aberdeen Evening Express published a letter that had been sent by Private Charles Neave to his mother, informing her of his brother's death.

I am sorry to tell you that Willie got killed in his first engagement. He came out here and joined the regiment on the 6th, and got killed on the 9th, so I think he had very hard lines. We were messing together for the very short time he was with us. He got a good burial. He was hurried up to a graveyard near hand to the place where he was killed. He was shot through both legs and through the brain and I can say that he died like a soldier. He was joking to the last minute¹.

This research assignment explores the question, 'Does the publication of soldier's correspondence by the Scottish regional press, during the years of the Great War, depict battlefield conditions in an accurate manner?'

Underlying the research is a consideration of the impact of wartime censorship and propaganda. There is a popular assumption that central government control of the news media was rigorous and all embracing, leading to a reporting of events that was neither neutral nor objective. Aspects of this will be explored in order to reach a better understanding of where published soldiers correspondence sits within a Scottish context. A number of secondary or subsidiary questions also emerged as the primary source data was being collected. Are there noticeable differences between private and published letters? Is there a preference in relation to the rank or profession of soldiers whose letters are published? Does the use of letters by the press change as the war progresses? Is there a focus on particular theatres of war?

Relevance

My interest in this topic was sparked by personal research into the backgrounds of those commemorated on the war memorial in my home village and how their experiences were reported in the local press (Fanning 2013). Such research, popular as it has become in the last decade, tends to be framed against a social narrative of irreplaceable loss (Bishop and Bostridge 1998), exacerbated by civilian ignorance of the conditions of war (Aslet 2012). The reasons for this supposed ignorance have been explained through a combination of press censorship (DeGroot 2014), army censorship of soldiers letters (Smith 2013) and an unwillingness or inability on the part of combatants to describe the realities of the battlefield (Nicolson 2009). A reading of the local newspapers available in West Calder village during the war years revealed a range of first-hand accounts of battlefield conditions by local soldiers serving at the front. The publication of such letters suggested a level of public awareness of warfare that does not appear to be reflected in the historical discourse.

The topic is an important one on two levels. Firstly, at the time of writing a range of both academic (Clark 2013, Hastings 2013, MacMillan 2013,

¹ Aberdeen Evening Express. 23/9/1914. Page 3.

Reynolds 2013) and popular histories (Paxman 2013) are appearing on bookshelves and magazine racks (Castle 2014, Jones and Vallois 2014, Mace 2014). Acrimonious debates around war guilt (Hastings 2013, Ferguson 2014) and disagreements (Copping 2013) about the nature of commemoration have surfaced. This investigation will support an understanding of the differences between contemporary representations of warfare in the press of the day and subsequent narratives that have been created and sustained by post-conflict attitudes to remembrance (Brown 1993, Todman 2007, BBC 2014). Secondly, in terms of historiography, Great War narratives tend to view the micro-histories of the different parts of the United Kingdom through the experiences of England and make the assumption that one interpretation fits all. Within many of the popular histories that tell the British story of the war years, such as Keegan's or Strachan's (Keegan 1998; Strachan 2001), any particularly Scottish contribution tends to get lost within the bigger story. Royle would claim that 'Scotland's history of the First World War remains largely unwritten' (Royle 2006). This assignment will explore this scenario in relation to the press.

Structure

In Part 1 I will describe the historical context against which this research takes place, including the key events of the war around which data collection occurs and the contribution of the Scottish military. I will explore the newsgathering and reporting issues that faced the Scottish regional press during that conflict, including censorship and the mechanisms through which soldier's letters reached the home front. In Part 2 I will explain the research methodology and methods that underpin this assignment. In Part 3 I will analyse the collected data and present an argument in response to the research questions. I will conclude by recommending ways in which this research could be further developed.

I will argue that censorship was not as draconian in relation to the regional press, as it was for those London based publications whose offices were literally within walking distance of the government Press Bureau. Despite the fact that a system of army censorship was in place in relation to soldier's letters, in practice it was not comprehensively applied. Where censorship was effective it lay in the fact that press and soldiers practiced self-censorship to a large degree. In terms of the press this meant that whilst the physical aspects of battle – the mud, rats, barbed wire, shrapnel and heavy losses – are present in published letters, the emotional and psychological aspects – as revealed in private letters through descriptions of the impact of the loss of ones friends and the ever present fear of death – are ignored. The published letters follow an establishment narrative.

Part 1

Introduction

In this section I will explore Scottish regional recruitment to the army; the structure of the regional press and its distinctiveness from Fleet Street; and the link between regional recruitment and correspondence in specific newspapers. I will illustrate how censorship of both press and soldier correspondence was applied. The key themes in private correspondence and in the ways in which historians have represented the Western Front will be discussed. I will argue that censorship in relation to both the regional press and military letters was not as rigorous as has been perceived. I will begin to establish a framework for evaluating the accuracy of published letters through the mapping of themes from private correspondence and historian's interpretations of conditions, on to those letters.

Key Events

The British government declared war against Germany on August 4th, 1914. On August 7th, Lord Kitchener, Secretary of State for War, issued the first of his appeals for recruits. On the same day troops from the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) landed in France, a fact the British press agreed not to report until the 18th of that month, by which point the force had safely reached its destinations (Lovelace 1978). On the 23rd of August the British army first engaged the German army at the Battle of Mons and was forced to withdraw. A fictional story of phantom bowmen helping British troops appeared in the London Evening News at the end of September and was to become the basis for the widely publicised Angel of Mons myths. On the 26th of August they faced the Germans once more at the Battle of Le Cateau, delaying the enemy in a way that allowed the British and French armies to coordinate their retreat. German progress was stopped at the First Battle of the Marne on September 6th. As the German army retreated northeastwards, the 'Race to the Sea' saw both sides attempting to gain control of the channel ports, with a line of trenches and a fighting zone eventually being constructed from the Belgian coast to the borders of Switzerland. By end of the 1st Battle of Ypres on November 22nd a state of siege warfare had been established along this Western Front, which was to last until August 1918. Whilst there were attempts to wage warfare in other parts of the world – Gallipoli, East Africa, the Middle East – the front in the West remained the place where the war would be lost or won. Throughout 1915 to 1918 a number of major battles were fought to break what had become a war of attrition, with little effect on the overall balance of power. The breakthrough came late in 1918. From the Battle of Amiens on the 8th of August onwards, the continuous advance of British, French and American armies against an exhausted Germany, led to the Armistice of November 11th and an end to four years of warfare. This assignment will focus in particular on the period shortly after the launch of some of the key set piece battles on the Western Front, including Loos, Neuve Chapelle, the Somme and 3rd Ypres.

Scotland's Military Role

The military prowess of the Scots is a prevalent theme in Scottish history (Spiers 2006). In James' Warrior Race (James 2001) the martial prowess of the Highland soldiers is emphasised. Ferguson's Pity of War (Ferguson 1998) repeats the claims that the Scots were the keenest to sign up and lost most as a percentage of total casualties. A concern for recognition of the separate contribution that Scots made to the Great War effort dates as far back as 1917. In that year Captain J Black wrote to the Scottish Secretary, Robert Munro, concerning the writing of the official history of the conflict. Black wrote what he called 'an earnest appeal' to ensure that 'due credit (be) given to Scotland for the part which she has, and is, so nobly playing in this great war (Royle 2006).'

Scotland contributed ten infantry regiments to the British army and the battalion system meant that they were linked to geographical areas, a fact which had an impact on the way the regional press reported events (Education Scotland 2014) (see Table 1.0). For example, the Black Watch was heavily involved in the retreat from Mons (1914) and the Battle of Neuve Chapelle (1915), both events being covered in detail by local newspapers such as the Dundee Courier.

Table 1.0 Battalion Recruiting Areas (Cowan 2014)

Regiment	Recruiting Area
Black Watch	Perthshire, Fife, Dundee
Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders	Inverness-shire
Seaforth Highlanders	North and east of Fort George
Royal Scots	Edinburgh and the Lothian's
Royal Scots Fusiliers	Ayrshire
King's Own Scottish Borderer's	Scottish borders
The Cameronians/Scottish Rifles	Lanarkshire, Glasgow
Highland Light Infantry	Glasgow
Gordon Highlanders	Aberdeenshire
Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders	Central Scotland, Argyll and Dunbartonshire

Although exact figures vary, at least 20, 000 men of the 247, 000 strong BEF were Scottish and by the end of the war 13% of those who had volunteered to join Kitchener's New Army were Scottish (Education Scotland 2014). Claims to a distinct Scottish contribution to the war have been disputed. Cameron has said that 'the Scottish experience of the war was not particularly distinctive' (Cameron 2010: p.104) and that, 'The Scottish national experience of the war is an artificial construct based on war memoirs, regimental histories, war memorials and symbols such as the kilt and bagpipes (Cameron 2010: p.113).'

McFarland has taken a more nuanced approach in challenging some of the more widely held beliefs (McFarland 2012). For example, it was in the opening months of the war that Scottish manpower signed up most, for the

rest of the war it was only slightly above the UK average. In relation to Pals Battalions, they proved much less central to recruiting efforts in Scotland than in the rest of the UK. And whilst popular history talks of loss, 'the military narrative that emerges from war diaries and operational histories is instead one of continuity and survival' (McFarland 2012; p. 558). Whatever the debate around the distinctive contribution of Scots to fighting in the 1st World War, in a number of key battles large numbers of Scots were involved. For example, on 25th September 1915, the first day of the Battle of Loos, the 15th (Scottish) Division suffered 1,595 killed, the highest death rate of any division involved in the battle (Palmer 2010). As Royle says, 'Hardly a community in Scotland was left unaffected by the action at Loos and the late September and early October newspapers were thick with the casualty lists and heroic descriptions of the fighting' (Royle 2006; loc. 1719).

The Fleet Street Press

When William Thomas Stead, editor of the Pall Mall Gazette, died on the Titanic, he was described in the New York Sun as being as close to governing Britain as any politician, due to the perceived power and influence of the press (Lovelace 1978). In 1918 Northcliffe, whose newspapers made up of half of all London sales, was appointed Director of Propaganda in Foreign Countries, with another press baron, Beaverbrook as Head of the Ministry of Information.

Ferguson has described the First World War as the first media war (Ferguson 1998). Circulation figures are difficult to confirm for the Fleet Street press from 1914-1918 (McEwen 1982), although by that period there was immense competition in providing cheap, easily accessible news. There were 27 dailies, 8 evening papers, 284 weekly or monthly periodicals and 7 Sunday newspapers published in Fleet Street for national circulation. Many provincial newspapers had offices in Fleet Street and printed syndicated articles written by Fleet Street journalists (Lovelace 1982). Whilst The Times was seen as the voice of the governing classes, it was the deliberate low pricing of the Daily Mail that had turned it into a mass circulation newspaper. Outside of London, the Manchester Guardian was one of the few major regional newspapers that could hold its own against the London based press. The majority of regional newspapers served a geographically small but diverse population and reflected the local interests of their readers. The Western Mail, for example, published in Cardiff, regarded itself as the national newspaper of Wales, although its circulation was limited to North Wales. This variety ensured that, 'Most adults in Britain had access to either a national or local daily newspaper, and even in small country villages pages from the local newspaper would be pinned up on public noticeboards to be read (Badsey 2011).' Given such a scenario, historians have placed some importance on newspapers as the single best source of war news for the civilian population (Hobbs 2010).

This expansion in newspapers had an impact on the standing of the journalist. Whilst on the one hand their role was developing into that of a profession, the National Union of Journalists had been established in 1907, the reputation of the 'Yellow Press', a term first coined at the turn of the century in the United

States to refer to sensationalized journalism that put sales ahead of truth, put this at risk. During the war, in *Editorial Impressions* (1918) and *Fight to the Finish* (1918), the Yellow-Pressmen are a target of Siegfried Sassoon's (Campbell 2007), reflecting a more general concern. In the *Wipers Times*, a soldier publication printed close to the Menin Gate in Ypres during the war years, the role of the military journalist came in for derision in relation to the accuracy of their reports (Westthorp 2013).

The Scottish Regional Press

Macdonald reflects similarities with the London press when she says that, 'Issues regarding the circulation and ownership structure of the Scottish press at the turn of the century remain something of a mystery' (MacDonald 1998; p.147). Scotland did however remain resilient to infiltration by newspapers from south of the border. The *Scotsman*, published in Edinburgh, was *the* quality national broadsheet, whilst *The Glasgow Herald* claimed a readership higher than *The Times*. As well as the national dailies, there were over 300 separate regional titles published in Scotland on the eve of the First World War and the importance of this local base should not be underestimated.

For many rural communities, it was often such weekly titles, rather than the more famous dailies, which informed public opinion in these years (MacDonald 1998; p.148)

The Scottish press was decentralised and fragmented, the majority being liberal or independent. Generalisations rooted in the London metropolitan experience don't hold true north of the border. In their reporting they focused on a Scottish perspective, designed to appeal to a largely Scottish readership (Todman 2007). In relation to war news, the small local newspapers relied upon 'official press releases, syndicated news and letters home from local soldiers at the front (McFarland 2012).'

Censorship of the Press

In the years leading immediately up to the outbreak of war, 'a system of voluntary censorship and self-regulation worked remarkably smoothly' (Smith 1996; P.75). In October 1912 a new government body, the Joint Standing Committee, with representatives from the Admiralty, War Office and the press, was established to bring some regulation to what could be published in relation to the defence of the country. The committee could issue D or Defence Notices that would advise on the non-publication of material linked to national security. Editors would receive advice on how events should be covered. For example, the press did not publish details of the BEF landings in France until the 18th of September 1914, as a result of a request from the Joint Standing Committee. At the outbreak of war the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), passed in August 1914 and subsequently added to, restricted what could be reported. The War Office Press Bureau, based in London, was established in 1914 to circulate official information and censor reports voluntarily submitted by the press. This and Kitchener's ban on war correspondents at the front restricted the flow of information to the press in the early stages of the war. The work of the Press Bureau was resented by

newspaper owners, partly because of the success of the pre-war voluntary system and partly because of the delay in publishing news stories. As a result of growing political pressure, in 1915 Kitchener allowed a number of official newspaper correspondents on to the Western Front, working under strict guidelines. The first two official press photographers were appointed in 1916 (Badsey 2011). By that point newspaper owners seemed to be in grudging agreement that both government and press relations had improved. This was reflected in a report from the proceedings of the annual conference of the Institute of Journalists in October 1916.

The president, in moving the adoption of the annual report said the press had accommodated itself to war conditions, and the censorship had learned wisdom with the years, with the result that the irritation and follies of the early days were now only more or less an agreeable memory Secrecy was the very essence of war, but with a proper understanding the press could, while preserving much of its freedom, serve the state very materially. Its function was never to alarm the public mind with exaggerated fears, nor to buoy it up with exaggerated hopes. ... Its business was not to create crises, but to ward them off².

In the immediate post war years the belief that the press had suffered seriously at the hands of the censorship and had been a mouthpiece for government propaganda began to grow. In 1920, Repington, military correspondent of *The Times*, published his memoirs in which he claimed that the censorship had been the 'master of the press' (Lovelace 1982; p.169). By the time Sassoon published the second volume in his semi-autobiographical *Sherston Trilogy* in 1930 he could record without contradiction that, "The newspapers informed us that German soldiers crucified Belgian babies. Stories of that kind were taken for granted; to have disbelieved them would have been unpatriotic" (Sassoon 1975; p.247). It is a narrative repeated by historians (Knightly 1975) and those who 'know' the press. In his history of his profession, journalist Andrew Marr refers to the 'ruthless censorship' of 1915 (Marr 2004). Simpson, another BBC journalist, tracing the story of reporting in the 20th century, states that even without censorship, the press would not have reported the horrors of the battlefield (Simpson 2010). Britain still had a war to win and such reporting could have had a dramatic impact on recruitment. Simpson focuses on press self-censorship and that is an interpretation that is more in keeping with current academic narratives. The patriotic commitment of the press in effect made an official press censorship unnecessary as many newspapers pointed out during the war (MacDonald 1998).

Censorship, imposed or self-imposed, could have a geographical character to it. Those London based publications, simply because of close proximity to the government Press Bureau office, submitted more material for clearance than their regional counterparts. In October 1915, George Riddell, Secretary of the Newspaper Proprietor's Association wrote to Sir Frank Athelstone Swettenham, one of the director's of the Bureau, complaining about this

² *The Scotsman*. 23/10/1916. Page 8.

preferential treatment.

The censorship is geographical. A paper with a 20,000 circulation amongst the upper classes (i.e. Westminster Gazette) is gone through most carefully. A paper with a 300,000 circulation amongst the working classes in Glasgow is never looked at and has probably never been heard of. Far too much attention is paid to London (Lovelace 1982; p.169).

And whilst there is no comprehensive study of the regional press during the war years, those few individual studies that exist do suggest that smaller county newspapers may have taken a somewhat different view of the war than has been supposed. White argues that the 'recruitment profile' in Devon is different from national trends due to the local press refusing 'to practice self-censorship' (White 2009). Budge's study of Caithness in the First World War however, makes ample use of newspapers such as the John O'Groat Journal and the Northern Ensign, with no indication of dissent (Budge 1996). Harding's study of Perth, making use of the Perth Courier and Perth Advertiser, similarly provides no indication of disagreement (Harding 2000).

Soldier Correspondence and Censorship

The correspondence of those involved in military conflicts has provided a rich seam of primary evidence for historians. The Crimean War (Williams 2011, Dawson 2014), the American Civil War (Reinhart 2006, Blaisdell 2012), the Boer War (Mileham 1994, Morris 2011) and conflicts prior to and following these, have all been interpreted through such material. The Great War is no exception, with a high level of writing skills amongst not only the officer class but also the ordinary foot soldiers as a result of the introduction of state education in the 19th century. Combined with an efficient postal service that hurried mail from home front to war front and back - it could take as little as two days for an envelope to reach its destination - and a recognition amongst officers that letters from home did much to bolster army morale, this produced an immense volume of mail. On the Western Front an average of 8, 150, 000 letters a week were being sent by 1917 (Edinburgh University 2014).

The use of Great War correspondence by historians comes in many shapes and forms. Collections that illustrate the lives of particular individuals, such as Letters from a Lost Generation (Bishop and Bostridge 1998), Vera Brittain's correspondence with her fiancé, brother and friends, that formed the basis of her popular 1933 work Testament of Youth (Brittain 2014). Or the Nevill Letters, a publication of letters held by the Imperial War Museum (IWM), from Captain Wilfred Nevill, best known for leading his men on July 1st 1916 by kicking footballs out into no-man's land (Harris 1991). Thematic collections have been used to illustrate one particular aspect of the war, for example Love Letters of the Great War (Kirkby and Dunmore 2014) or Love Tommy: Letters Home, from the Great War to the present day (Roberts 2012). Or more generally, they are integrated into narratives and used as primary evidence to confirm or underpin a specific course of enquiry or argument, such as Fletcher's Life, Death and Growing up on the Western Front (Fletcher 2013).

Correspondence could take the form of a field postcard, which gave soldiers a number of multiple choice options that they could cross out (BBC 2014). It could be a letter that had been inspected by a soldier's superiors. Or it could be what was called an honour envelope, green envelope or Green Cross envelope that involved the sender in signing a declaration that they were not disclosing forbidden information (Brown 1993).

Writing to Vera Brittain, on 26th March 1915, her fiancé Lieutenant Roland Leighton described the difference approaches to censorship between the ordinary soldier and the officer class.

I have just received lengthy orders regarding censorship. I have to censor all the letters written by the 60 odd men in my platoon; while my own unsuspected by my company commander, and then forwarded and fastened to one of the censors in chief at headquarters. He stamps letters and send them off (Bishop and Bostridge 1998; P.62).

There are numerous examples from current popular literature and the media where this has been regarded as an effective means of censorship. For example, in a scene in *The Ghost Road*, the last in the 'Regeneration Trilogy' by Pat Barker, the junior officer Billy Pryor, a leading character, sits in his billet censoring letters and recounting a memory of a soldier who had been killed (Barker 1995). In Helen Dunmore's 'The Lie', the central character, Daniel Branwell, suffering from neurasthenia or what was popularly called 'shell shock', refers on a number of occasions to the censorship of letters and the 'lies' contained therein (Dunmore 2014). In the BBC documentary 'Britain's Great War', one section of broadcast illustrates the censorship of letters (Paxman 2014).

Despite regulations however, the realities of warfare meant that censorship could not be as strictly applied as the rules required (Meyer 2012). Lieutenant John Reith wrote in his autobiography, *Wearing Spurs* (1966), 'I was supposed to censor their letters home, but I informed they [soldiers] were on their honour not to say things they should not say, and I handed over the censor's stamp to the sergeant' (Edinburgh University 2014). Nicolson judges that, 'So long as no operational details that could be of use to the enemy were included the men's freedom of speech was widely indulged: it was one of the things, which Britain was fighting after all. Censorship was thus not used as a means of controlling the men, let alone civilian morale (Nicolson 2009; location 90).'

As with the press however, self-censorship could be a more effective means of ensuring that relatives and friends were shielded from the realities of the battlefield. As one ex-officer from the Imperial War Museum archive recounts.

My mother was a very nice woman. I just felt it was my job not to frighten her to death and allied to a cheerful disposition my letters read like a piece of cake (IWM 2012).

That did not mean that events at the front were not dealt with.

Would you believe it, by mutual consent, our battalions and the Germans opposite had a little armistice and didn't fire a shot all day. We met one another, had a chat, half way between the two lines of trenches and exchanged buttons, cigars and cigarettes. It was really funny to see the hated antagonists standing in groups laughing and talking and shaking hands. Of course we didn't talk about who was going to win, or anything touchy like that. (IWM 2012)"

Letters with details such as this appear to have been published almost verbatim in the press.

Official censorship was not a secret. Those receiving such letters were more than aware of the role of the censor, as this example from the pages of the Dundee Courier reveals.

The severe censorship which is being imposed on many of the letters sent by soldiers at the front to their relatives in order to prevent any information, which may prove valuable, leaking out, is exemplified in a communication received by a Perth woman. On tearing open the envelope after receiving it from the hand of the postman, she at first thought was empty, and was just about to place it in the fire, when closer communication revealed the fact that it contained a small slip of paper, on which was written the following – “your husband is quite well, but he is much too communicative³.”

It was common in the early months of the war for newspapers to run appeals for soldier's correspondence.

Letters may shortly be expected by relatives and friends in the North from soldiers in front. Much of this correspondence will be of general interest, and we should be glad to receive and publish such letters, wholly or in part. All letters will be careful returned to the centres⁴.

The Sphere newspaper, in November 1915, claimed that such material would be of immense historic value.

The letter-writers of all ages give us a far truer and more vivid picture of the times in which they lived than their historians.... In all probability some of the letters that are now passing to and from the trenches will make the poignant history of these – our own times – live far more thrillingly and truly than all the memoirs of the Joffres, and the Hindenburgs, and the Grand Dukes that will come out after the titanic struggle is ended (MacDonald 1991; p.140).

Royle characterises the bulk of these letters as ‘romanticised’ and containing ‘fanciful descriptions of the fighting from soldiers’ (Royle 2006), yet one of the issues faced in letter writing was finding a language that would adequately

³ Perth Soldier's Letter Censored. Dundee Courier. 23/9/1914. Page 8.

⁴ Aberdeen Evening Express. 26/9/1914. Page 2.

describe a scene that both combatant and civilian could never have imagined (Hanna 2014). Anthony Fletcher’s account of life on the Western front makes extensive use of correspondence sourced mainly from the Imperial War Museum, to reinforce descriptions of the military experience (Fletcher 2013). Of this kind of evidence he says: 'Letters are immediate, recording emotions and experiences at the time...The curtain of myth that dominates the constructed account of the conflict...needs to be torn aside. Letters like these help us to recapture the war as it was fought and felt (Fletcher 2012).' Fussell is more cautionary when he says, 'Clearly, any historian would err badly who relied on letters for factual testimony about the war (Fussell 2000; p.183).' His caution is mainly based on self-censorship and the unwritten conventions that governed the writing of soldier’s letters. 'The trick', claims Fussell, 'was to fill the page by saying nothing and to offer the maximum number of clichés (Fussell 2000; p.182).' The motives for such conventions being a care for the feelings of the recipient. Whilst Meyer accepts this limitation on the use and interpretation of such sources, she see’s letters as important 'narrative spaces in which men could construct their own identities as soldiers at war (Meyer 2012; p.74).' In her study of soldier’s private letters she identifies a number of common themes that run throughout (see Table 2.0).

Table 2.0: Common themes in soldiers personal correspondence (identified from Meyer’s study (Meyer 2012))

Theme	Feature
Reassurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In good health despite weather • Distance from battle • The safety of the trenches
Discomfort and danger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mud • Weather • Food • Marching • Boredom • Shells • Snipers
Reaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear • Disillusionment • Vulnerability
Change (positive effects of war)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical • Mental • Spiritual
Adventure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pride • Excitement • Endurance
Enthusiasm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protecting home • The Bosche/the Hun

Accuracy/Battlefield Interpretations

Towards the last years of the 1920's, memoirs (Morris 2011, Blaisdell 2012) and reminiscences (Mileham 1994, Reinhart 2006) of ex-combatants began to be published, along with works of fiction in the shape of novels (Reith 1966, Zhang and Wildemouth 2009, Dawson 2014), plays (Richardson 2007) and poems (Williams 2011). A central theme throughout this body of work was a perception of the war as having wasted the lives of a whole generation of British men. It's that sense of waste and loss that becomes the central narrative in Great War remembrance and writing. By 1935 there were over 20 000 books in print describing the conflict (Harding 2000), although as another European conflict approached interest in the former waned somewhat. This sense of disillusionment was not widespread amongst the public during the war years (Harding 2000).

In relation to the soldier experience of war, recent academic work has sought to bring a more focused understanding to aspects of that experience (Ferguson 1998, Corrigan 2003, Todman 2007). In Table 3.0 I have identified the interpretations that counter-balance the popular views of mud, blood and loss. This revisionism seeks to strip away the layers of interpretation that have built up since the 1920s. As Reynolds reminds us, 'In the 1920s...the cultural reading of the great War in Britain was not fundamentally negative (Reynolds 2013; p.426).'

Table 3.0. Popular and Academic themes in Great War historiography

Popular Interpretation	Academic Revisionist Position
The Scots have a history of martial prowess, signed up in greater numbers than elsewhere in the UK and suffered most as a result (Ferguson 1998, Royle 2006, Kerr 2010).	The Scots signed up in greater numbers than elsewhere in the UK only in the initial stages of the war. While the Scots suffered disproportionate losses in some key battles, the overall story is one of 'continuity and survival' rather than the loss of a generation of young men (MacDonald 1998).
The officer class was incompetent and cared little for their men (Clark 1991).	The officer class was competent, caring, motivated and suffered higher casualties in relation to the men under their command (Sheffield 2001).

Popular Interpretation	Academic Revisionist Position
<p>'The trench', 'the night patrol caught in barbed wire' and the 'disfigured landscape with broken trunks, ruins, shell holes and craters filled with water' are recurring images of warfare (Sorlin, 1999; p.20).</p>	<p>Aspects of warfare were horrific, however 'British soldiers did not spend four years of war in the firing line, or even at the front. Men were regularly rotated from the firing line to the support and reserve lines and then back to billets, usually well behind the battle area (Corrigan 2003; loc 1042). Boredom was a major feature of soldier's lives (Holmes 2004). The war was global in nature and the fighting conditions on parts of the Western front did not represent that global experience (Todman 2007). Many soldiers enjoyed the experience of war and the comradeship it brought.</p>
<p>British soldiers did not know what they were fighting for (Ben McIntyre see Times).</p>	<p>Soldiers remained convinced, throughout the war, that they were fighting a just war and would fight through to victory (Fuller 1991). 'Soldiers knew all too well the bitterness of trench warfare, but they did not convert their knowledge into the nihilism and despair or even the rebellion of some poets and artists (Winter 1992; p.530)'.</p>
<p>All soldiers experienced front-line fighting and were affected by it.</p>	<p>"Not every soldier served in a front line infantry regiment. The nature of fighting on the Western Front required large numbers of men to serve in the artillery, and to a lesser degree in new arms like tanks and airplanes. It also required a very great number of men supporting the effort at the front: moving supplies, guarding lines of communication, training soldiers and administering their lives (Todman 2007; loc 194)."</p>

Conclusions

Geographical remoteness from London meant that the Scottish regional press relied more on self-censorship in relationship to war reporting, than on central control from the Press Bureau. The local nature of army recruitment would reveal itself in the ways in which the press covered events that led to large losses of men in those areas where newspapers had their publishing base. The common themes in both private letters and from historian's interpretations of the battlefield experience will be compared and contrasted with evidence

from this published material. Those similarities or differences will be used to evaluate the accuracy of this correspondence.

Part 2

Methods and Methodology

- **Introduction**

Michael Crotty has written that the 'easiest' part of the research process is the construction of the research question (Crotty 1998). He describes the four components of the research process as: methods (the procedures used to gather data); methodology (the process behind the choice and use of methods); theoretical perspective (the philosophy at the heart of the methodology); and epistemology (the theory of knowledge). In this section I will describe the methods used to collect data. I will present the rationale for following a mixed method approach to the analysis of this data and how critical discourse analysis (CDA) has influenced the final conclusions.

Methods

Source information for this assignment has been collected from three Scottish regional newspapers; the Aberdeen Evening Express, the Dundee Courier and The Scotsman. The Express had been launched in 1879 and served the city of Aberdeen. It was a traditionally Conservative paper, with a circulation of 42,000 in 1912, rising throughout the war years to 52,000 in 1921 (Fraser 2000). The Dundee Courier had been established in 1801 as The Dundee Courier & Argus. William Thomson purchased it in 1886 and in 1905 it was merged with another local publishing company to form D.C. Thomson, with offices in Dundee and London. It was a regional newspaper, editions covering other parts of the northeast of Scotland. The Scotsman newspaper was first published in 1817 in Edinburgh as a liberal weekly newspaper. By 1865 it was accounting for 17, 000 sales a day and for the remainder of the century and beyond this figure rose. Whilst being Edinburgh based, the Scotsman captured a market share across Scotland as it organised delivery of its editions by high-speed train. The rationale behind such a selection was to focus on established daily newspapers that served an urban catchment area, where recruitment to the army was traditionally popular

Information was gathered from all three newspapers for specific dates during the war. Dates were selected to be within five days of major military initiatives, allowing for a time lag between events and the filtering back of news or the delivery of letters. Those dates and events were:

- 23rd-26thSeptember 1914 (Mons and its aftermath)
- 1st-5th January 1915 (post Christmas truce)
- 15th-19th March 1915 (Battle of Neuve Chapelle)
- 1st – 5th October 1915 (Battle of Loos)
- 6th – 10th July and 20th – 24th October 1916 (the Somme)
- 21st – 25th July and 6th – 10th August 1917 (Passchendale)
- 25th – 29th March 1918 (German offensives)
- 9th – 13th November 1918 (Armistice).

Whilst all of these dates reference events on the Western Front, letters from other battlefronts were not ignored.

Sources have been identified in the following ways and include references to, or information from, field-postcards; the direct reproduction of or quotes from a letter; or where information from a letter has been used and reference made to that letter. The locations from which letters have been sent vary from the front-line, to billets and hospitals behind the lines, to hospitals in Britain. Throughout this assignment the terms letter, letters and correspondence have been used in an inter-changeable way.

Where field-postcards are mentioned in the press they tend to be reported in the following way:

Constable William Smith, a reservist in the Cameron Highlanders, has been wounded in the left hand. His parents, who lived at 32 Carmichael Street, received an official postcard from their son yesterday conveying the information that he had been wounded and that the injury was not serious. Constable Smith was attached to the Northern division of the Dundee police force⁵.

Postcards were designed to be quick and easy to complete, giving the sender a selection of multiple-choice comments to select from. For example, to the statement 'I have been admitted to hospital', the following statements could be selected; 'sick' or 'wounded', 'and am going on well' or 'and hope to be discharged soon' (see Appendix 1).

Most often a letter is quoted directly from or sometimes produced in full:

A Private in the Gordon Highlanders writing from France to a friend in Dundee says: "Every town we passed through is deserted and the door of every house stands open. Our battalion is now only 100 strong. The rest are all dead or wounded, so, you see, I have been very lucky. It is a wonder to me that there is a man left in the Gordon's⁶."

Where a newspaper does not quote directly from a letter, it describes the information contained in that letter:

Private Scots father resides at 41 Rosebank Street, and the news was broken to the family in dramatic fashion. It came from a soldier in hospital unknown to the family, but who was apparently a chum of George at the front. The writer was J Beattie, who stated that he belonged to Glamis, where his wife at present resides. The letter read that he was sorry to inform them that George died on 10th September. He got a gunshot wound in the head and went through an operation successfully, but he was too weak to stand it⁷.

⁵ The Dundee Courier. 24/9/1914. Page 4.

⁶ The Dundee Courier. 24/9/1914. Page 4.

⁷ The Dundee Courier. 24/9/1914. Page 4

Digital online editions of these newspapers are available for the period of the war. An initial sift of the newspapers took place to identify a range of information about the source and subject of correspondence. This information included the total number of soldier's letters that appeared or were referred to in each edition of a newspaper (see Table 4); the rank of the sender (see Table 5); where mentioned, the location that the letter was sent from (i.e. billet, hospital, etc.); where apparent, the means by which the letter was sourced by the newspaper (i.e. was the letter sent direct to the press, did it come via a relative, or a friend).

A more detailed survey of the individual newspapers then took place and a transcript was created of the 184 examples of relevant correspondence. The content of this was analysed and coded according to certain keywords that appear in popular (i.e. current) Great War discourse – mud, trench, rats, Somme, Ypres, gas, barbed wire – and also against the key themes identified in Tables 2.0 and 3.0.

Methodology

One of the leading debates amongst users of content analysis relates to its quantitative or qualitative nature (Schreier 2012). Crotty says that methods in themselves are not neutral or value free but underpin a particular belief about the ways in which people make sense of the world around them (Crotty 1998). The methods applied to this research have generated a range of quantitative and qualitative data. The former approach has dominated in the field of scientific research.

The ontological position of the quantitative paradigm is that there is only one truth, an objective reality that exists independent of human perception (Sale, Lohfeld et al. 2004; p.44)

A qualitative approach, favoured by the social sciences including history, puts human interaction at its heart, with not just one but indeed multiple narratives at play, depending on a range of variables.

The key philosophical assumption, upon which all types of qualitative research are based, is the view that reality is constructed by individuals in interaction with their social worlds (Merriam and Simpson 1995; p.79).

Quantitative content analysis (QCA) on its own has its limitations (Zhang and Wildemouth 2009). For example, the image most commonly associated with trench warfare in the First World War is that of mud (Todman 2007). In this assignment, across the correspondence that was studied, the word 'mud' appears 11 times in the Aberdeen Evening Express, 4 times in The Scotsman and once in the Dundee Courier. 'Rats', such a powerful and persistent image of the trench experience, are mentioned only once throughout the correspondence and in relation to a sea journey as opposed to a battlefield experience.

I suppose the censor will allow me to say that we are left in exceedingly comfortable billet in Bedford with regret, that we did not get seasick during a very smooth voyage on a fine night spent on a cattle boat, attempting to sleep to the accompaniment of the squeaking of the rats⁸.

On their own, these figures are fairly meaningless. QCA is good at uncovering trends or patterns, but it cannot answer why they do or do not occur. It's only when they are examined in context, with reference to a range of qualitative evidence, that an interpretation or narrative may begin to emerge.

In previous research assignments I have had a preference for a qualitative approach, believing that it best uncovers the complexity of human interactions. In reality in the study of history there is no simple demarcation line between the different approaches and I have adopted a mixed method or blended approach to the use of both quantitative and qualitative data. Such an approach has been debated and resisted by some historians (Cohen, Flint et al. 2014), but I believe the techniques employed allow a richer understanding of the historical process.

Matching quantitative evidence from the correspondence to a qualitative coding based around the strands or themes identified from the revisionist histories (see Table 3) provides an indication of the extent to which aspects of this correspondence begin to mirror battlefield conditions (see Table 4).

Table 4

Cross-referencing letter contents to historical themes.

Theme	Aberdeen Evening Express	Dundee Courier	Scotsman	Totals
1. Battlefield conditions	31	32	29	92
2. The officer class	3	3	3	9
3. Life behind the lines	4	1	1	6
4. Comradeship & enjoyment	6	6	3	15
5. Conviction	2	2	2	6
6. Servicing the army	4	0	4	8

Note: figures relate to the number of individual pieces of correspondence where a theme is prevalent. For example, 31 individual letters published in the Aberdeen Evening Express describe in detail battlefield conditions.

⁸ Aberdeen Evening Express. 17/3/1915. Page 3.

This research has also been influenced by elements of critical discourse analysis (CDA), a set of tools and theories that have been used in particular with newspaper analysis (Richardson 2007). CDA is an interdisciplinary approach to analysis that takes the view that texts and language do not describe the world in a neutral way, but that they are constructs that define knowledge and social relations (Fairclough 2010). It is important to have some understanding of the different aspects of CDA. Critical theory or critical research seeks to uncover power relationships where they exist (Cohen, Manion et al. 2011). In the context of CDA 'discourse' has been described as a way, 'of talking and writing about, as well as acting with and toward, people and things...they cause certain perspectives and states of affairs to come to seem or be taken as 'normal' or 'natural' and others to seem or be taken as 'deviant' or 'marginal' (Strathclyde University 2014). In terms of analysis, CDA encourages the researcher to understand a text in terms of what it includes and what it leaves out or omits.

- **Conclusion**

The influence that CDA has had in relation to my approach to this assignment lies in the kind of questions that it raises when studying soldier correspondence that appears in the press. Who composed it? Who will read it? Will everyone understand what has been written in the same way? Why was it written and what were the reasons behind publication in a newspaper? Could it have been written in a different way? Is there anything missing from the text? How does the text reflect wider society? (Strathclyde University 2014).

For example, the following is an extract from a letter published in the Aberdeen Evening Express on the 1st of October 1915.

It is with very great sorrow that I have to write and tell you that your brother was killed during an attack on the German trenches on Saturday. I have no time just now to more than sympathise with you in your great loss, but it may be some consolation to you to know that he died on a day, which has brought great honour to the regiment⁹.

A Captain Dow of the 4th Gordon's wrote this letter. Notification of death on the battlefield could arrive via telegram, in letters from friends of the fallen or through official channels, such as a battalion chaplain or officer. Not all officers wrote in this way, it depended very much on the nature of battle and the number of casualties involved. This letter was sent to 'Miss Beattie, 47 Wales Street' and referred to the death of her brother Private Robert Beattie. Wales Street is in Aberdeen and the inclusion of such detail immediately makes it personal to readers of the newspaper. Miss Beattie is 'one of us'. The ways in which a family read and interpret such letters may be different from the public at large. It might be assumed that the sister released the letter to the press as a reflection of pride felt in a brother who had carried out his

⁹ Aberdeen Evening Express. 1/10/1915. Page 3

duty and died for his country. On the newspaper page on which this letter appears there are a large number of military casualties, but this is the only letter from a battalion officer reflecting on a soldier's death. In its publication in such a way there may be an element of this letter also reflecting on the reputations of those others who had also been killed in action. The letter is after all fairly anonymous in its description of Robert Beattie, with no personal information. It could be assumed that Captain Dow simply did not know him. Robert Beattie died on the 25/9/1915, the first day of the Battle of Loos. The 'day' referred to in the letter is probably that first day, by the end of which, in military terms, 'great honour' had been achieved through the initial capture of the town of Loos, although there is little to actually link Beattie with fighting in that area. Robert Beattie was 19 when he was killed. He had worked before the war for the Northern Agricultural Company. The 4th Gordon's were a Territorial Battalion of what had been, pre-war, part-time civilian-soldiers. Robert Beattie did not die as a civilian, or an agricultural worker or even as a brother however. The use of language in the letter is not neutral. Beattie died as a soldier doing a soldier's duty and the letter amply reflects this. The 'power' reflected even in this simple letter is the power of the military to transform civilians into fighting men and the acceptance by civilian society of this process.

Part 3

The Newspaper Correspondence

- **Introduction**

Newspapers are not neutral artefacts. They are constructed from a random choice of information, sifted by an editor or editorial board, with different levels of intervention depending upon the role of the proprietor. Articles, letters or photographs, are rejected, selected and placed for specific reasons. Do newspapers reflect the views of their readers or do they promote a certain viewpoint or value is a widely debated question (Richardson 2007). The Leveson Enquiry reflects this on-going concern (Mair 2013). The official history of The Times newspaper, published in 1952, stated that, in relation to the conduct of the Great War, 'A principal policy of Printing House Square was to increase the flow of recruits' (Marr 2004; p.83). It was a common complaint of the press during the years of the conflict that rather than seek to censor and make newsgathering difficult, the government should from the outset have been working with the press, as the aims of both were the same – to support and win the war (Lovelace 1978). There is no reason to believe that the Scottish regional press differed in such aims from their counterparts south of the border. Given these circumstances and this level of cooperation in relation to war aims, in the mainstream press what was published took place within an establishment narrative that was constructed around 'poor little Belgium, German aggression, join up lads, do your duty, defeat the Hun, for king and country.'

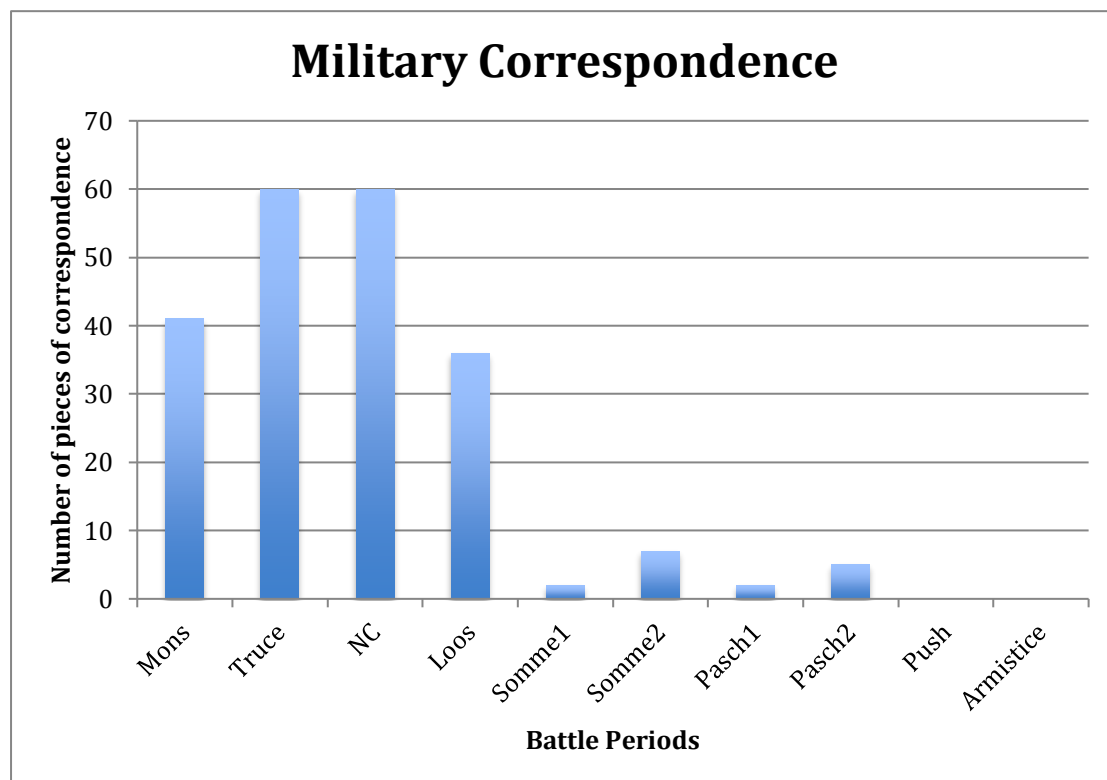
The official history of The Times stated that the aim of increasing the flow of volunteers 'would get little help from accounts of what happened to recruits once they had become front-line soldiers (Marr 2004; p.83).' The publication of those accounts from serving soldiers is what the Scottish regional press did however at the outset of the war. Whether through direct interviews with returning soldiers or the publication of correspondence supplied by friends or families, from 1914 into 1915 readers were made aware of battlefield conditions and the resulting impacts. By September 1914 the Aberdeen Evening Express could state that, 'So many letters and statements of our wounded soldiers have been published in our newspapers¹⁰'. In this next section I will explore and analyse the military correspondence that has been uncovered. I will argue that whilst this evidence exposes in an accurate way the conditions of trench warfare on the Western Front, it does so within an establishment narrative whose aim is to support and promote the flow of recruits into the armed forces. As a result, battlefield conditions are presented in a certain way and there are key differences between what appears in private correspondence compared to what is published within the pages of these daily newspapers.

¹⁰ Aberdeen Evening Express. 23/9/1914. Page 2

- **The evidence**

Across the three newspapers in this study a total of 184 separate examples of correspondence were recorded. The pattern of publication was to change as the war progressed (see Table 5). The bulk of soldier correspondence was published in the first two years of the conflict, becoming a trickle by 1916 and virtually non-existent by 1917-18. The reasons for this may be that with reporters embedded in the army on the Western Front by 1916, the press did not need to rely on soldier correspondence. By 1916 relations between press and government had improved. From this period on there is a visible increase in the pages of all the newspapers of reports from official channels. The decline in the publication of military correspondence may also lie in the fact that other media was being developed more effectively to reflect life on the front line. The use of photographs appears to feature more prominently in the press. Perhaps more importantly the officially sponsored film the *Battle of the Somme* was released in August 1916, followed by the *Battle of the Ancre* and the *Battle of Arras* in 1917. On a commercial level, such letters may simply no longer have been considered as ‘news’.

Table 5. Patterns of publication for military correspondence.



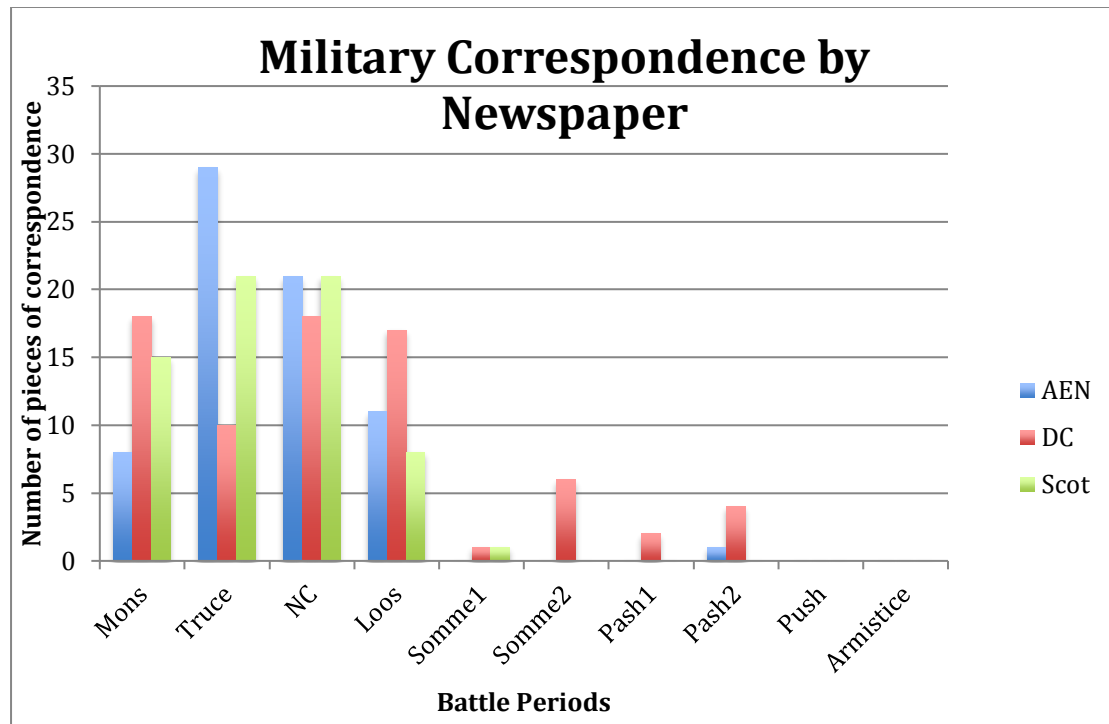
Key to table: Battle of Mons, Christmas truce, Neuve Chapelle, Loos, Battle of the Somme, Passchendale, Armistice

- **Personalisation**

Correspondence in the regional press was personalised for a local audience in a way that national newspapers could not emulate. The bulk of the military correspondence from the Scottish press was from a named soldier in a

Scottish battalion and addressed to a friend or family member who lived local to the newspapers publishing base. Where Scottish battalions featured in specific engagements, there was an increase in the number of letters where a regiment and newspaper had a similar geographical location, saw the number of letters in the press. For example, letters relating to the Battle of Loos are more numerous in the Dundee Courier, given the Black Watch involvement in that particular event (see Table 6).

Table 6. Published Military Correspondence by Newspaper.



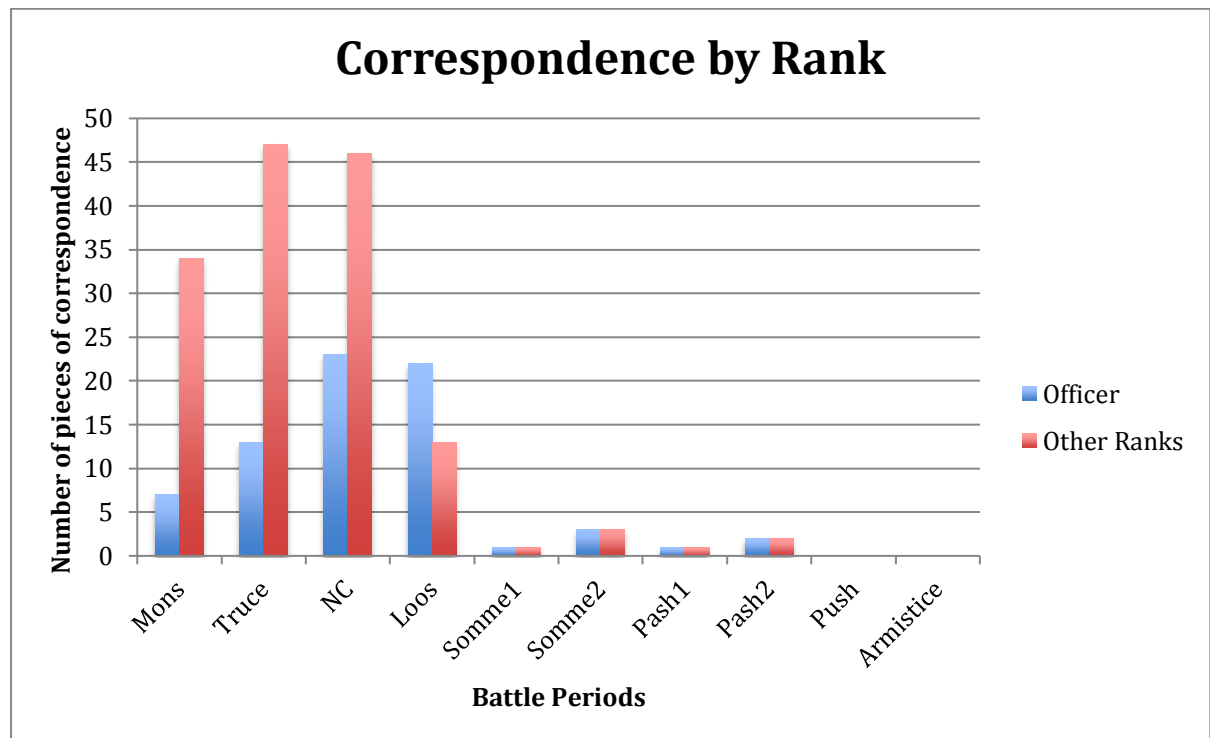
Key to table: Battle of Mons, Christmas truce, Neuve Chapelle, Loos, Battle of the Somme, Passchendale, Armistice

Soldier letters in the early years of the conflict, across all newspapers, at least up until the aftermath of the Battle of Neuve Chapelle, are dominated by those from the ranks (see Table 7). By the Battle of Loos the balance swings in favour of the officer class, the reason for this mainly being the growing correspondence between chaplains and officers to the families of those missing or killed in action. It is a male voice that dominates. The experience of women at war, beyond the letters of condolence or bereavement from ward sisters or reference to nurses, is non-existent.

12 pieces of this correspondence was referred to by the press as ‘postcards’ and mainly provided information about those who had been injured. Soldiers, who were in hospital, most usually in England, recovering from their injuries, wrote 36 of the letters. 8 letters had undergone some form of obvious censorship. For example, names or locations had been deleted. ‘The fighting is very hot. These last four days, from daylight to dusk, have been one incessant artillery duel. The Germans are making a great stand at – – – to

cover their retirement, which commenced a week ago¹¹.’ Or there was a specific reference to the work of the censor within the letter itself. ‘This is just to let you know I am still alive and kicking. We are now in the middle of what must be the biggest battle of the war. German prisoners are streaming steadily up the road – (excision by officer censor) - some horrible sights¹².’ This does not mean however that reporting was totally sanitised or that the reading public were naïve in their understanding of the press. They would have been under no illusion that censorship, for the benefit of the war, was being exercised.

Table 7. Military correspondence by rank.



Key to table: Battle of Mons, Christmas truce, Neuve Chapelle, Loos, Battle of the Somme, Passchendale, Armistice

Propaganda was also subtler than is commonly perceived. As Richardson states, ‘facts were deployed selectively yet rationally, while falsehoods were eschewed in the belief that they would ultimately be exposed and thereby jeopardise the credibility of those facts that had been released’ (Richardson 2007; p.181). Hobbs suggests that the public might be aware that they were being propagandised but simply not care (Hobbs 2010).

Nine letters within those studied were not addressed to specific friends or relatives and should be considered as very obvious examples of propaganda, published with the aim of supporting recruitment.

¹¹ The Scotsman. 24/9/1914. Page 9

¹² Aberdeen Evening Express. 16/3/1915. Page 3

In January 1915, in the Aberdeen Evening Express, a 'Private in the Seaforth Highlanders writes – 'You will find this a wonderful life when you come out here, those of you who have answered your country's call. A comfortless, hard life always, but as phase after phase of the preparation process has been going through, and that not very distant underground world of steadfast courage and magnificent fortitude – the trenches – becomes a nearer and grimmer reality, you will be gathering for your minds storehouse a harvest of experiences and memories peerless and invaluable¹³ .' In the same newspaper later in the year 'an Aberdeen student with the forces in France, writing to a friend in the city, gives details of the recent big battle. He says – I was thrilled as I plodded on up the communication trench, over the knees in mud, through shot and shell, with a vengeance. Yet we laughed, laughed! It was really glorious; one was absolutely overcome with the feeling of wishing to do anything, anything that would add glory to the already glorious name of the regiment. But the feeling is absolutely exquisite, because our officers are so splendid; they smile us a welcome as though we were off for fun, and honestly I think we believed we were off for fun¹⁴.' It's difficult to know whether these were actually written 'tongue in cheek', but were clearly published as a recruitment effort and featured the importance of the regiment and military pride.

Three letters were reproduced from other newspapers and claimed to be from German soldiers. These examples were published in the Aberdeen Evening Express and in the Scotsman on the same day and were part of a dispatch the claimed to quote from a German soldier to his wife. 'My dear wife, I have just been living through days that defy imagination. I should never have thought that men could stand it. Not a second has passed but my life has been in danger, and yet not a hair of my head has been hurt. It was horrible, it was ghastly, but I have been saved for you and for our happiness, and I take heart, although I am terribly unnerved...the fear of a death of agony, which is in everyman's heart, and naturally so, is a terrible feeling.... Our morale was absolutely broken... Our first Battalion, which has fought with unparalleled bravery, is reduced from 1202 to 194 men. These numbers speak for themselves¹⁵.' It was obvious 'good news' that the enemy was suffering in such a way! Its publication is clearly an attempt to sway the opinion of the reader. Similarly, the following letter, originally published in Le Figaro, leaves little to the imagination in describing the character of the ordinary German soldier. 'We have plenty of wine to drink here, and we drink it like water. The first thing we do is to empty the cellars and fill our water bottles surreptitiously with wine. The beer is horrible, but a good brand can often be found. Looting is general. Picture to yourself rooms turned into piggeries, and sugar, rice, flour, broken windowpanes, wineglasses, lying about everywhere. Linen is torn from cupboards and a silk dress is trampled underfoot. The place looks like a robber's cave. We have looted everything on which we could lay our hands, including women's stockings and underclothing. I myself am at present

¹³ Aberdeen Evening Express. 5/1/1915. Page 3

¹⁴ Aberdeen Evening Express. 5/10/1915. Page 2

¹⁵ Aberdeen Evening Express. 23/9/1914. Page 2

wearing a low-cut chemise ¹⁶.’ It would not have gone unnoticed that this was an example of how the German army dealt with the civilian population.

- **A matter of accuracy**

As has already been described, in the popular narrative features of trench warfare include the flooded and frozen trench and the risk of trench foot; attacks through the barbed wire of no-man’s land against a hail of machine-gun fire; the danger of shelling and snipers; shell shock and gas; rats and lice; and of course high casualties (Middlebrook 2006, Sheffield 2007, Lynch 2008). More recent revisionist interpretations of the front line experience of war focus on it as a global enterprise, with different conditions in different locales; even on the Western Front soldiers did not spend all of their time on the front-line, but were regularly billeted away from it; boredom was a major feature of trench life; and many soldiers actually enjoyed the experience of war (Ferguson 1998, Strachan 2001, Holmes 2004, Holmes 2008). The officer class, once derided as the ‘donkeys’ of the war experience (Clark 1991), are being relocated in a narrative that re-evaluates the role of the public school officers and the high losses they suffered, as they were the first to lead their men into battle (Hurst 2007, Lewis-Stempel 2011, Seldon and Walsh 2013).

In a private letter to his parents, seventeen year old Lieutenant Wilbert Spencer wrote, ‘I wonder how many people realise what hell the trenches can be. In some newspapers one sees accounts of hot soup and wonderful fires etc. In some places the mud came over my knees. This is not exaggerated. In most places over one’s ankles (Spencer 2014).’ The nearest the newspaper letters in this research come to a homely description of trench life, is that of a 4th Gordon’s description of his dug-out with a charcoal brazier that keeps warm those who are on night duty¹⁷. Those letters that deal with trench warfare, over half of the letters in this study, cover many aspects of both the popular and academic narratives of the Great War. Mud, snipers, shells, shrapnel, barbed wire, life in the billets and high casualties are there in abundance. Enthusiasm for the cause is evident and there are references to boredom, although appeals for books and other reading material brought a good response from the home front. The officer class emerge well from the correspondence, although this is not surprising given that very often the evidence comes from officers writing about other officers.

- **The Trench Experience**

To a public unaccustomed to trench warfare, soldiers letters described the experience of living and fighting in such an environment. The details are similar across the 91 letters that cover the experience of the battlefield. Getting in and out of the front-line trenches is accounted for as a dangerous task. ‘It is not so bad once you are in the trenches, but it is a awful job getting into them, also a bit exciting going for rations while the bullets fly... We come

¹⁶ The Scotsman. 25/9/1914. Page 6

¹⁷ Aberdeen Evening Express. 17/3/1915. Page 3

out an awful mess of mud. This is an awful place for mud. ¹⁸ The experience of 'mud', though dominant, was not universal. 'Our trenches are well-drained and quite healthy¹⁹.' Some letters give a detailed description of trench layout and construction. 'I arrived at the trench, and saw for the first time the little dugout I had to occupy. First of all, the trench was a shallow affair of about 18 inches deep, with a sandbag parapet of about 3'6", above ground. This made the total protection 5 feet in height. Thus you can guess I could never stand upright. Every now and again along the trench was a 'traverse' built to form a sort of E in order to protect one from side fire...My dug-out was about 3 foot high from floor to roof and about 5 ft. 6in long. It was roofed with corrugated iron to keep out rain, but was of course quite useless against shells. Outside the door was a brazier of glowing charcoal and one was very thankful for it, as one had to keep awake all night²⁰.' The closeness to the German front line is remarked on, as are the dangers from snipers. 'In the trenches we are only 33 yards from the Germans, and what with sniping and throwing hand bombs at each other it is a bit lively. I am sniper for the Regiment, and you will be pleased to know that I have been making them a wild²¹.'

As with personal letters home, the weather is a common theme running through the correspondence. 'A good few are laid up with rheumatism, for it is terribly cold here²².' The sending of comforts from home helped. 'The weather here is bitterly cold and frosty, thanks to all our kind friends and the government, we are well supplied with warm clothing, and are as comfortable as circumstances will permit²³.' Sleep and food, or lack of it, are mentioned. 'I think I had only four hours sleep all the week²⁴.' 'We have been through the hards. Some of us had no food or practically no food for a day or two at a time²⁵.' Those mundane aspects of trench warfare are also covered, although carried out in dangerous circumstances. 'We have to fetch wood and water under fire, and it was while trimming saplings for a brushwood to put at the bottom of the trenches, which are inches deep in mud, but I was shot²⁶.' 'The second night in the trenches I volunteered to carry the barbed wire. I must have had a charmed life for that snipers were busy, what they did not get any of us. We got safely back to the trenches next day at dawn²⁷.'

The Germans on the Eastern front first used gas in January 1915 and on the Western front in April 1915. It does not feature in the correspondence that was evaluated in this assignment, but the press from the 24th of April 1915 onwards covered the subject. The term shell shock only came into use in 1917. Rats and lice, a feature of private correspondence, are not recorded in

¹⁸ Aberdeen Evening Express. 4/1/1915. Page 2

¹⁹ Aberdeen Evening Express. 17/3/1915. Page 2

²⁰ Aberdeen Evening Express. 17/3/1915. Page 3

²¹ Aberdeen Evening Express. 5/1/1915. Page 2

²² Aberdeen Evening Express. 1/1/1915. Page 2

²³ Aberdeen Evening Express. 4/1/1915. Page 2

²⁴ Aberdeen Evening Express. 1/1/1915. Page 2

²⁵ Aberdeen Evening Express. 24/9/1914. Page 3

²⁶ The Scotsman. 5/1/1915. Page 8

²⁷ Aberdeen Evening Express. 19/3/1915. Page 3

the evidence used here, although a more general online search for such keywords, across the newspaper databases, does record their use. Other theatres of war were mainly absent in the correspondence that was examined. The importance of letters was recognised however, as this newspaper story reveals. 'A week or two ago a Manchester newspaper printed a passage from a letter written by a corporal in the 2nd South Lancashire division who said he had not received a letter since he had been at the front. He has written to say that since the paragraph appeared he has received 300 letters and is steadily working his way through replies in odd moments in the trenches²⁸.'

- **Away from the front line**

The reading public would know that their soldiers were not continually based on the front line. 'We have been in France now for about two months, and the regiment has been back and forwards to the trenches for about half that time²⁹.' The delights of sleeping in other than a trench were described in one letter. 'We are sleeping in a barn, and that is a great treat for us, for I have not had my clothes off for four months, and only once changed my shirts, so you can think what ilk a mess we were all in. This is better than an open field or a trench, which is filled with water, and a lot of dead men in it. It is nothing to be lying for hours between them, and sometimes a few days if you cannot get the chance to bury them³⁰.' And behind the lines could bring its own rewards. 'The snails were great', a roughrider at a base depot writes – 'I and a chum stole from our troops yesterday, and crawled half a mile so as not to be seen. We got into the town. Two nice girls showed us where we could get a bath. It cost us six pennies each, and I would not have cared if it cost us five shillings, as it was a pleasure to get a wash... we had a six course dinner, including snails, which were great. But we got punished pretty severely when we got back, 14 days pay stop and four days in a French barracks.³¹ Temporary residence in a billet was not without its risks. 'We left on Saturday night for the reserve billets, which are situated about five or 6 miles from our huts, and about seven or 800 yards from the firing line. We remained in these billets – an old farm with shell holes in it – until Monday night, when we shifted to the firing line. We were almost shelled on Sunday afternoon, the shells landing about 20 yards distant from the barn. The farmhouse of the place was shelled the week before. The ruins were still burning when we were there. While we were there, we each did our own cooking, as we did in the trenches. On Monday night we left the billet for the firing line.³²

- **Other ranks**

The vast majority of letters describe front-line fighting by the infantry, although some deal with other aspects of warfare. War in the air is referenced in seven letters, reflecting on the experience from the position of an observer on the

²⁸ Aberdeen Evening Express. 18/3/1915. Page 2

²⁹ Aberdeen Evening Express. 4/1/1915. Page 2

³⁰ Aberdeen Evening Express. 5/1/1915. Page 2

³¹ Aberdeen Evening Express. 5/1/1915. Page 2

³² Aberdeen Evening Express. 17/3/1915. Page 3

ground. 'Yesterday we saw a duel in the air between French and German aeroplanes³³.' 'When in reserve our artillery fired over our heads at the opposing batteries, and an interesting spectacle was the shelling of our aeroplanes by German shrapnel³⁴.' 'Aeroplanes are about us common as flies in summer³⁵.' 'Yesterday we watched an aeroplane serenely circling round the country followed by little pots of smoke, which told us of bursting shell. In spite of it all the aviator continued to send back his signals to our batteries of heavy artillery, and I hope our replies had some effect³⁶.' Serene would probably not have been the view of those involved in aerial combat. A very small number of letters describe the experiences of those men who are not front line infantry. 'Herbert Anderson, Greenock man who is serving with the transport division in France, states that in conveying ammunition to the firing line the drivers run narrow escapes. 'One day', he writes, 'we were chased about 50 miles, as we got to near the enemy. The shells were flying all over us. But we got out safely – all but a private car, which was riddled with bullets. The officer in the back seat was killed, and the driver wounded in the legs, but he managed to get clear'³⁷.' Driver Richard Thomas from Kelso describes 'as sight I shall never forget' in his published letter. 'When we arrived at the rest camp we had orders from the officer in charge to stand by until we received further instructions. We all switched off, and got on cracking with some of the boys belonging to the Ninth Lancers about the war. Just as the clock struck 12 we heard a terrible whistling sound that startled everybody, and about three minutes afterwards a second shell came and burst about 50 yards from us. At 12:05 a third came, and landed right in the centre of the yard, in which the Ninth Lancers had just returned from grazing their horses. They were just waiting for dinner, and in a second 10 of the men were killed, and three horses were also knocked to pieces. Two or three of us went down to see them, and it was a sight I shall never forget. All the men lay there in a heap. I noticed one of them had a smile on his face.'³⁸

- **The random nature of survival**

Whilst reassuring family members of their good health, the random nature of warfare is a feature. This is amply illustrated by the lucky escape of one soldier. 'Just a few lines to let you know that I am well and keeping in the very best of health, that is, as far as health goes. You will be wondering what has gone wrong with me. Well, I will try and explain to you as best I can. I have had a very narrow shave. I will never be as near death again until I am dead. I was buried in a trench for about a quarter of an hour through a bomb. It racked all my body; I had to be dug out with shovels. But I thank God I am all right again with the exception of my right knee, which is going on first-class³⁹.' And the graphic nature of battle surfaces frequently. Describing the fighting at

³³ Aberdeen Evening Express. 1/1/1915. Page 4

³⁴ Dundee Courier. 1/1/1915. Page 4

³⁵ Aberdeen Evening Express. 17/3/1915. Page 3

³⁶ The Scotsman. 1/1/1915. Page 8

³⁷ The Scotsman. 1/1/1915. Page 9

³⁸ The Scotsman. 2/1/1915. Page 10

³⁹ Dundee Courier. 1/1/1915. Page 6

Neuve Chapelle, Corporal C B Robertson, who was hospitalised in Norwich wrote, 'the attack began with a terrible bombardment from our artillery. The ground was shaking, and the noise was awful. We could see nothing but smoke coming from the German lines. At 8 o'clock our infantry advanced, and by 10 o'clock the Ghurkhas had taken a trench and 200 prisoners. We were going to take up a position in a wood, to be ready for a counter-attack. I was looking forward to doing a bit of a bayonet work, but shrapnel laid out 17 of our company, including myself⁴⁰.' Another letter tells of a lucky escape. 'I have had the most lucky escape from death ever known. On Monday the 14th we were attacking the Germans in that strong position they are still holding. We were lying behind a hedge 1000 yards from them. I believe they fired two or 300 shells at us.I was only there about 30 seconds when one of their big shells landed right under the bank I was lying on, lifting me about 30 feet in the air and almost wiping out my section. I was knocked stone deaf, and my knee bruised, but I think I am getting my hearing back again. I don't know how I escaped. I think this shell was well into the ground before it burst, and the amount of earth between it and me saved me. I will tell you a lot more about the scraps we had in my next letter, as the paper here is limited⁴¹.' And this from another combatant, "I was wounded on Monday, 14 September, in the big battle which started on Saturday afternoon. I was at it all Sunday night and right on until I was hit with a bullet. It was hell upon earth. There was nothing but shells and bullets flying all over the place."⁴²

- **Losses**

Losses are a recurring theme. 'Our casualties have been great, and I don't know how any of us are here with the amount of odds we have had against us⁴³.' 'The Germans are losing very heavily now, but they are doing a great deal of damage to us. We have only got about 250 men left out of 1497 of the Gordon's, and not much more of the Royal Scots, about 150 of the Middlesex Regiment, and between 300 and 400 of the Royal Irish⁴⁴.' 'In a letter to his son, Sgt John Peffers, D Company Highland cyclists Battalion, stationed at Carnoustie, quartermaster Sgt Peffers, who is at the front with the fifth black watch, says that the casualties in the fifth now number 150. These figures include all those killed, wounded, or in hospital.⁴⁵'

At least sixteen published letters in the selection were official ones that notified a relative that a soldier was missing or killed in action. These were composed either by a commanding officer or chaplain and tend to be clustered according to which regiment was involved most heavily in a particular battle. For example, the battles of Neuve Chapelle and Loos, with high casualties amongst the Black Watch, generated a large number of such letters in the Dundee Courier. 'Dear Mrs Meldrum – Sergeant Falconer, I

⁴⁰ Dundee Courier. 19/3/1915. Page 5

⁴¹ Dundee Courier. 26/9/1914. Page 6

⁴² Dundee Courier. 25/9/1914. Page 16

⁴³ Aberdeen Evening Express. 24/9/1914. Page 4

⁴⁴ Aberdeen Evening Express. 24/9/1914. Page 3

⁴⁵ Dundee Courier. 5/1/1915. Page 4

believe, is to give you an account of your son's death, and I can only write and send my sincere sympathy. I am very vexed about him. He was a good soldier, and did his duty well, and now he has given all he has to give for his country. It must be very hard, but a higher power will help you in your sorrow, knowing, as He does, that your boy died for his country, fighting for honour and justice. With my sincere regards, I am, yours truly, T Ogilvie, Lieutenant-Colonel⁴⁶.'

Friends or companions, who witnessed the event, announced some deaths ahead of any official telegram or letter. 'Sad news from the front reached the city yesterday regarding the fate of George Scott, a private in B Company of the Gordon Highlanders. Private Scot's father resides at 41 Rosebank Street, and the news was broken to the family in dramatic fashion. It came from a soldier in hospital unknown to the family, but who was apparently a chum of George at the front. The writer was J Beattie, who stated that he belonged to Glamis, where his wife at present resides. The letter read that he was sorry to inform them that George died on 10th September. He got a gunshot wound in the head and went through an operation successfully, but he was too weak to stand it...Despite the apparent frankness of the letter George Scott's father is not without hope that some mistake has been made, as although his son is said to have died on 10th of September no official intimation has been received⁴⁷.'

Notification of some deaths could take place under very different circumstances. 'Mrs Lennon, residing at Springbank, Alyth, sent a parcel to corporal Alexander Macdonald, first company second battalion Gordon Highlanders. She has now had the parcel returned opened but intact, with these words written across – killed in action – Ardrossan⁴⁸.' What these letters do reveal, certainly in the early years of the conflict, is the both the brutal nature of death and the 'luck of the draw' in terms of injury from distant shells, shrapnel and snipers.

The narrative of those privately held, non-published letters differs from those that are published in a number of ways. Private letters tend to be more graphic in nature, certainly longer, with more personal details and crucially, reflect more on the nature and impact of loss, than those in the public domain. Fletcher, who researched a range of private correspondence in relation to the experience of the Western Front, says, 'Yet letters home, one finds, contain far more material about the deaths of colleagues, their injuries and broken comradeship than about mud or the horrific physical aspects of trench service. Daily discomforts, whether of mud, lice and even falling shells, could be borne. Grief at the ever-present stalking figure of Death, who, often close by, regularly stared men in the face, occupied men's minds more intensively than

⁴⁶ Aberdeen Evening Express. 16/3/1915. Page 3.

⁴⁷ Dundee Courier. 24/9/1914. Page 4. The official records show the date of death of a George Scott of the Gordon Highlanders taking place on 31/8/1914, probably a casualty of the Battle of Le Cateau.

⁴⁸ Dundee Courier. 18/3/1915. Page 4. The official records show the date of death of an Alexander McDonald of the 2nd battalion Gordon Highlanders taking place on 1/3/1915.

anything else, testing their endurance to the utmost. So did frightening premonitions of wounding (Fletcher 2013; p.168).’ Whilst loss, injury and the difficult-to-imagine features of trench life are dealt with in the press, they are done so within a linguistic framework that focuses on duty, being manly, doing ones bit and enjoying it. It frequently employs variations on the word hero (The soldier who thus died so heroically in his country’s service was a stalwart, well set up young fellow of 34⁴⁹); soldiers are cheery and never complain (A chatty and cheery letter from the front has been received⁵⁰); circumstances and people are frequently splendid (I cannot tell you adequately of the splendid courage of our officers and men in this attack⁵¹) and jolly (One thing I can tell you is that we have a jolly good forward line, you ought to see them shoot⁵²).

- **Duty and humour**

In a recent Times newspaper article, columnist Ben McIntyre described the construction of soldier letters from the 1st World War in the following way. ‘They are filled with allusions to king and country, God and honour, home and hearth, made all the more moving because they have clearly been learnt by rote. The references to chivalry and patriotism sound almost medieval to modern ears. I recently read a last letter written by a private shortly before his death, in which he described himself in the third person as “a brave British Soldier, not afraid to die”, as if martyrdom alone was a reason for fighting (McIntyre 2014).’ McIntyre ignores the context in which these letters are written. Where they follow a similar format does not mean that they have been ‘learnt by rote’, but that they simply conform to an established war narrative. This is more so the case when that correspondence has been further mediated by family, friends or newspaper editors.

Softening these messages of the grim realities of fighting however is the constant and consistent theme of ‘doing ones duty’. ‘We are just keeping at it in the same old sloggling style that always brings us out on top⁵³.’ ‘Despite being wounded - Marr adds that they are “enjoying themselves up to the mark⁵⁴.” ‘It’s funny, we think nothing of the danger, but you are not so bad as long as you keep your head down⁵⁵.’ “Willie was killed in his first engagement on the ninth and was joking to the last⁵⁶.” This is suffused with an element of humour, “One day we bought a live chicken, and were getting ready to kill it in the trenches. It had evidently made up its mind not to be killed, for it dashed towards the German lines. We were not very keen in going after it, but there was one chap who swore he would not run the risk of losing his dinner, so he dashed out after the bird. The Germans spotted him at once, and opened fire.

⁴⁹ Aberdeen Evening Express. 23/9/1914. Page 3.

⁵⁰ Aberdeen Evening Express. 1/1/1915. Page 4.

⁵¹ Aberdeen Evening Express. 2/10/1915. Page 2.

⁵² Aberdeen Evening Express. 5/1/1915. Page 2.

⁵³ Aberdeen Evening Express. 24/9/1914. Page 3

⁵⁴ Dundee Courier. 26/9/1914. Page 6

⁵⁵ Aberdeen Evening Express. 4/1/1915. Page 2

⁵⁶ Dundee Courier. 23/9/1914. Page 4

It was very funny to see him dashing about after the chicken and dodging the German bullets. He brought it in all right in the end, and we all enjoyed it when it was cooked and served up to our little section afterwards⁵⁷.

- **Our officers**

In the early stages of the war those letters from other ranks, on average, outnumber officer correspondence in the press by at least 3 to 1. By the time of the Battle of Loos, the publication of officer letters outnumbers those of other ranks.

Where officers are referred to, it tends to be in terms of the heroic actions that they perform in relation to the enemy. Writing from his hospital bed in Reading, one Sergeant Meads describes the 'saving of the guns at Soissons and the actions of one particular officer. 'The men made a series of rushes under heavy shrapnel fire until they reached the guns. The enemy went down in scores, shells simply mowing them down. When the men were only 50 strong the order to abandon the guns was heard, but a gallant young officer, Lieut Hibbert said, 'No boys, we must never let the Germans take a British gun. They kept up the fight until reinforced by the South Stafford's, and saved the guns⁵⁸.' The same letter was published in both the Dundee Courier and The Scotsman on the same day, opening up questions about how such material was source. Another letter that was published across different newspapers describes the loss of a number of officers on the barbed wire as they led their men across no-man's land. 'Poor Feneron was killed leading his men, a very sad loss indeed to us. Poor Madden, Webb, O'Donoghue, and Young were killed during the assault, the last named being actually on the enemies wire entanglements. Poor little Webb was heard shouting 'Come on the Kings' as he lay dying. He will not be forgotten by the old regiment ever. Hayes Newington and seven men were killed by a shell. He was the son of a former officer of the King's. We lost 219 all told, of whom 119 are wounded⁵⁹.' Officers have the distinction of being personally named, whilst other ranks are recorded as numbers. Evidence such as this gives some idea of the toll of war on the officer class.

Where officers describe the face of battle, this tends to be done in a 'Boy's Own' style that records battle as an adventure. Writing to his uncle in Edinburgh, Lieutenant Harry Rawson of the Royal Scots, says, 'I have come through the great push with nothing worse than two bullet wounds, neither very serious. I'm off to England in the morning. It was a great day on Saturday. We started at 7:30 AM after blowing up two huge and mine craters, and we had captured four lines of German trenches before I 'found it' about 9:30 AM. We went through a perfect hell of machine gun fire, and the – made a great charge. Everybody was talking about the charge later in the day.

⁵⁷ Aberdeen Evening Express. 1/1/1915. Page 2

⁵⁸ Dundee Courier. 24/9/1914. Page 4

⁵⁹ The Dundee Courier. 19/3/1915. Page 5

Nobody faltered. Our losses are pretty big, although the majority wounded by machine gun fire and the wounds are clean. Cheer O! Going on fine.⁶⁰

- **Attitudes to the Germans**

For the most part published attitudes to the enemy are what would be expected. 'When we charged, the Germans held up their hands for mercy, and we passed them without touching them, but after we were through they turned and fired on us. We however smartened them up when we came back⁶¹.' The sense of a chivalrous war was evident in these early letters. 'The Germans are behaving disgracefully. An officer dressed as our French officer went up to some Coldstream Guards and asked if Bukley, the machine gun officer, was in that battalion. He then shot the officer he was talking to. Others dress up as British staff officers, and drive about in motor cars, and when they meet transports of convoys shout at them –“ the Germans are advancing at you just ahead”, which causes stampede. That happened to us.⁶²

In the first year of warfare however the enemy is not painted as entirely barbaric in these letters. One Scottish prisoner of war describes his experience of captivity in a letter home. 'Been badly wounded above the right eye and ear, and very weak through loss of blood and exposure. Glad to say since arriving here the Germans are looking after us.⁶³' The sporadic front-line 'truce' of Christmas 1914 is represented in up to 60 of the published letters and reveals the 'Bosch' or the 'Huns' in a very different light. The term 'Huns' is used only once to throughout the entire correspondence and then as a headline directing readers to the letter describing German atrocities. 'I was in a farmhouse yesterday, and the women there told us that the Germans went into the house, killed all the men, and cleared off with everything they could possibly carry.⁶⁴' 'Bosche' makes no appearance. The following letter describes the common experience of Christmas 1914 as detailed in those letters that dealt with the 'Christmas truce'. Whilst that phrase is not specifically used, the term truce is applied in these letters to those events.

'Private Edward Duncan, E company, 6th Battalion Gordon Highlanders (T.F.), son of Mr George Duncan, builder, Ardlui, Inverurie, writing home to his mother on the 28th December, in the course of a long and interesting letter, says: - We spent Christmas Day in the trenches and it was one long to be remembered for a reason that you can hardly credit. We had a day off with the Germans, and had fun along with them in chasing a hare, and giving as well as receiving souvenirs. It seemed to be a mutual truce along our part of the line. Certainly, it was not official. The first thing we knew about it was a few Germans putting their heads up above the trenches, and some of the boys saying that they were out to bury their dead. A few of the enemy soon appeared clear of the trenches, and before you could say 'Jack Robertson'

⁶⁰ The Scotsman. 4/7/1916. Page 3

⁶¹ Dundee Courier. 23/9/1914. Page 5

⁶² The Scotsman. 26/9/1914. Page 8

⁶³ Dundee Courier. 26/9/1914. Page 6

⁶⁴ Dundee Courier. 5/1/1915. Page 4

they all came out and over the trenches without their rifles. Our boys were soon swarming up to meet them, and hand shaking ensued. We were not allowed to go near their trenches, so we carried their dead half across, and they carried our dead the same distance. Soon a hare made its appearance between our trenches, and all joined in the chase. Not a man could refrain from laughing at the sight, as the Germans mixed with us in the scramble. Spontaneous laughter re-echoed all around, and the hare got clean away, so there was no trouble over who was to have the soup. A good few of them could speak English, and one of them was once a Sunday school teacher in Blackpool...They are all fed up, and wishing it was over. Some of them are exceedingly smart looking chaps, and gave our boys cigs and chocolate, as well as drinks of gin. They said that if we did not fire, they would not, and the agreement was carried out. The day after Christmas, they cried cross if we would play them at a game of football, but as no football was forthcoming, there was no match.⁶⁵

- **Other theatres of war**

Whilst events in the Dardanelles and other theatres of war are covered in the formal reporting in the newspapers, in terms of letters only a few were discovered that referred to the Gallipoli campaign. One of these thanked readers for providing comforts for Indian troops who were fighting on the peninsula⁶⁶. The others were from chaplains. The Reverend Dr Ewing, minister to the Grange United Free Church in Edinburgh and a chaplain with the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, had written a series of at least 12 letters for presentation to his Sunday congregation back in his home city. These gave a detailed description of trench life with some practical advice for parents who were seeking details of those missing or killed in action.

.... you may walk from one end of the lines to the other and never see a gloomy face or hear a grumbling word....There were grizzly sights to be seen by means of the periscope. From one point I saw many bodies that have lain unburied for long on a slope between the opposing trenches. The ground is perpetually swept by rifle and machine gun fire: to approach the bodies would mean certain death...⁶⁷

Unfortunately what can be learned is often very little indeed. In the terrible excitement and confusion of battle comrades are lost sight of, and men find it difficult to observe and recollect what happens at their side. It is a very awful thing to say; but in a great charge like that of June 28 or July 12, when so many of our Edinburgh men fell, attacking entrenched positions under heavy artillery fire, considerable numbers simply disappear. They are posted as 'missing' because no one saw what happened to them; but there is no doubt as to their fate.....

⁶⁵ Aberdeen Evening Express. 1/1/1915. Page 2

⁶⁶ The Scotsman. 1/10/1915. Page 6

⁶⁷ The Scotsman. 8/11/1915. Page 6

Great care is taken to preserve a record of all the wounded who pass through the ambulances and clearing stations; but one cannot always learn through which hands a particular man has passed, and a search through the books is apt at this stage to be both long and fruitless. It would be well if any friends writing to chaplains for information would make sure of giving the full name, regimental number, rank, and regiment of the soldier concerned, and note particularly the date on which he was posted as missing, wounded, killed, or died of wounds. They might also mention the names of any of his comrades with whom they know him to have been on intimate terms.⁶⁸

The Rev Hunter Smith of Crieff had written of his impression of the trenches from his hospital bed at Number 17 General Hospital in Alexandria (he was suffering from enteric fever) and a commitment to 'finish the job' despite heavy casualties. 'Well, I had a month of war, real bloody war. I lived for a month in the trenches. There is nothing else to live in on the peninsula...In such more elaborate structures I have never slept, though I have done much work in them – as chaplain tending the wounded and dying, or as censor of letters... Some are like graves, some like family vaults (these are the most comfortable), some like the ditches men dig in the streets when new gas or water mains are being laid...The total casualties in our brigade alone were over 1100, which was quarter and more of their strength. Yes, the carnage in the Peninsula is pretty awful. The reason is that we have got to attack. We must push the Turks back if we want to finish the job⁶⁹.'

- **Commercialism**

From waterproof trench coats to the 'super-pen', there are plenty of examples of wartime advertising in the pages of all of the newspapers (Doran and McCarthy 2014). The following 'letter' was published in the Aberdeen Evening Press as part of an advert for military body armour. 'Officially the British government have not yet seen fit to provide such armour for our own troops. It has been left to civilians to send body shields at their own expense to relatives in the trenches and the 'Chemico' body shield is the prime favourite... Comment has been made from time to time about the great value that a Chemico body shield is to our men in the trenches, and further evidence has just come to hand in a letter written from the County of Middlesex Hospital, and dated August 1. The information contained in this letter is of interest to all who have the welfare of their relatives in khaki at heart. "Am pleased to tell you", says the writer, 'but having worn your shield for some time in Belgium, I consider every soldier should have one. I got hit by a shell, which dropped and exploded right against me. Was wounded in seven places in legs and arms, but my body had not a scratch.'" He requests that his name and number be withheld, and we cannot but respect his wishes, but we know the name of the sender and his number.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ The Scotsman. 4/10/1915. Page 6

⁶⁹ The Scotsman. 5/10/1915. Page 5

⁷⁰ Aberdeen Evening Express. 10/8/1917. Page 2

End Note

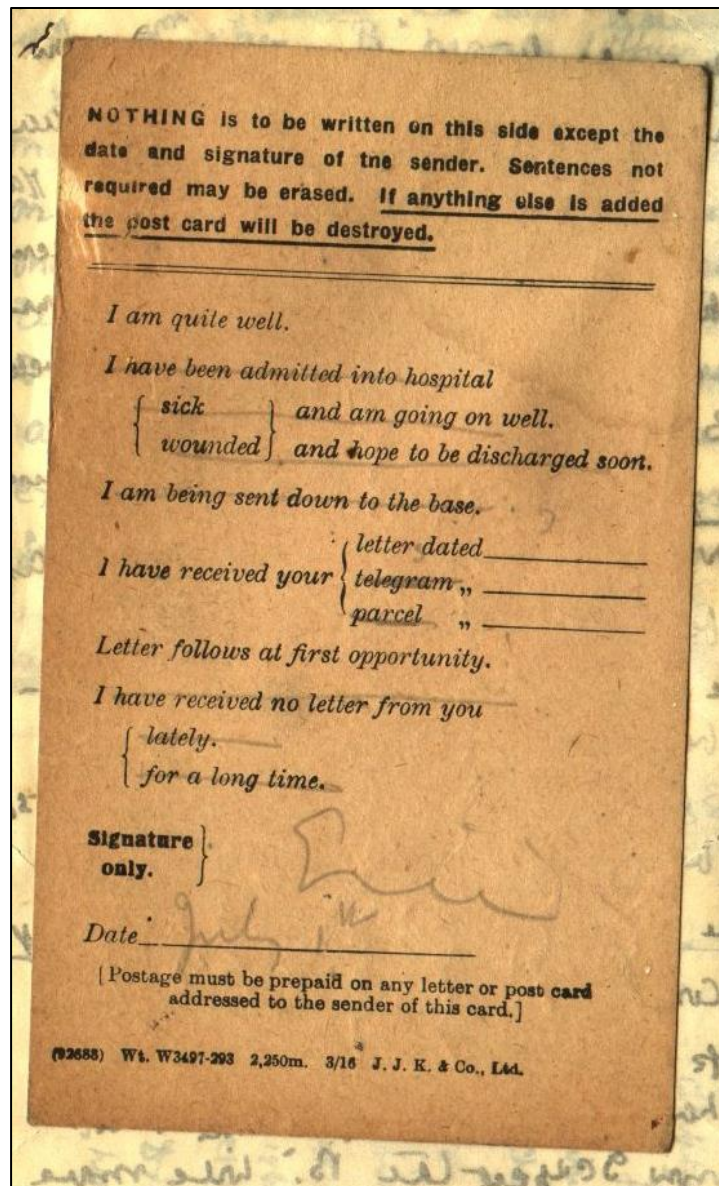
Do the letters in this assignment reflect battlefield conditions accurately? Badsey and Taylor's response would be that 'an average working class adult, newspaper-reading and cinema-going, with friends or relatives in the Army, would have had to have been remarkably obtuse not to have had some idea about the likely course and effects of a major British offensive by July 1917, or the conditions in which it would be fought (Badsey and Taylor 1997; p.373).' Whilst a care has to be taken in using individual correspondence to reveal wider truths – 'scholars cannot treat such testimony as intrinsically more reliable than any other source' (Reynolds 2013) - the narrative the published letters tell, despite the fact that what has been published has been mediated in a range of ways, is one that is accurate in relation to the physical experience of war. Even with a limited knowledge of the context of the Great War or the ways in which news was reported or generated, the reader of these texts would be on a good position to understand many aspects of trench warfare on the Western Front. What they do not do is reveal the emotional and psychological impacts of warfare, particularly in relation to loss, that can be found in private correspondence. Losses are represented within a military narrative where the deceased has fallen heroically in the field of battle, for the honour of the regiment and the good of the country. The endurance of battlefield conditions is expressed in 'manly' terms, with a 'dash' of humour to lighten events. Or at least this is the case for letters that cover the period into 1916. There is no despair, no doubt, and no opposition to the war. What is remarkable is the way that an army of four parts - the 1914 professional army, with its reservists; the Territorial Force of civilian soldiers; the New Armies raised by voluntary efforts in the first year of the war and those conscripted from 1916 onwards (Corrigan 2003) – could have their disparate stories and experiences represented in such a homogeneous way. Alternative viewpoints are missing. In all of this other narratives are simply not heard or recorded. In June 2014 the BBC featured the story of Amy and William Beechey who raised a family of 14, with 8 sons enlisting and only 3 returning at the end of the war. 'In April 1918, Amy Beechey was presented to King George V and Queen Mary who thanked her for her immense sacrifice. Her response was blunt. "It was no sacrifice, Ma'am," she told the queen. "I did not give them willingly" (Watson 2014).' Amy Beechey's reply does not represent the kind of establishment narratives that are recorded in the press.

As with any research, this assignment reveals further questions that would be worthy of future exploration. Would a longitudinal comparison of published letters and correspondence reveal any changes or differences from year to year as the war progressed? Is there a difference between a regional and national telling of soldier experiences? As Kay says, 'One of the fundamental problems facing.... all facets of Scottish culture which make the country

distinctive is the conflict between regional and national identities within Scotland (Kay 1986).’ Does that conflict surface in the correspondence? Is it possible to uncover sources that would allow us to triangulate findings in relation to the attitudes of press owners and editors in terms of what was published, and the impact that this then had on the reader? This research dealt with three regional daily newspapers, but there is a whole number of very local weekly publications that catered for smaller populations and who relied more heavily on soldier correspondence as a source of news. At the start of this assignment I referred to personal research into West Calder, my home village, through the pages of the Midlothian Advertiser for the years 1914-1918. That ‘amateur’ research suggests that newspapers such as the Advertiser used soldier correspondence well beyond 1916 and told a story that was more personal, given the social nature of small community life, than that of their larger regional cousins. Whatever the size of the newspaper however, whether urban or rural in its readership, there is no evidence to suggest, as White does in his study of those in the Devonshire press (White 2009), that the Scottish was any less loyal to the cause than any of the larger national publications.

ENDS
17100 WORDS

Appendix 1: World War 1 field postcard



Source: author's own collection

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