

A Wonderful Experience

During the First World War the staff members of Belfast Public Libraries who enlisted in regiments of the British Army remained employees of the library on half pay if they corresponded regularly with the Chief Librarian, Mr Elliott, and his assistant, Mr Goldsbrough.

Joe took a deep breath and leaned over to dip his fountain pen into the inkwell he had set on the rough wooden floor beside the bed. He blotted the ink on a scrap of paper then began to address the right hand side of the postcard.

Central Library, Royal Avenue, Belfast, Ireland.
B.E.F.
5th July '16.

He turned the postcard sideways to write his message.

Dear Sir, At present we are up to the ears in work through this great offensive. I will write a letter at 1st opportunity. At present I have only time for a postcard.

Maybe it's for the best I've not time to tell him in more detail what I've seen these past few days. How could he even imagine the state of the lads we've had come through our station, their heads and limbs swathed in bandages and worse? Often I can barely find the dressings under all the mud and blood. A right job it is to get the muck off them so I can clean their wounds and change their dressings to get them ready for the hospital trains.

He stopped writing and sighed, scrunching his eyes closed and opening them again. The long hours of work, straining to see in the dim light of the windowless tented ward wasn't helping his weak eyesight. It was as well that they had declared him unfit for active service. If he'd been up in the firing lines, he probably wouldn't have been able to find a Hun even if the devil was right on top of him. His lips twitched in a rueful grin at the thought.

Like as not, it's as well I don't have the space to write about the wounded. I don't want to whinge. Even in a great offensive like ours, there'll be wounded, and perhaps it's best not to call attention to such things. When we win the war the suffering will be forgotten. I will tell him about the German wounded though. Not that I would gloat, but they know when they've met a better army.

We have had many German wounded prisoners in hospital and they look a beaten lot.

The Boche soon won't have the spirit left in them to fight back. Look at how many of theirs we've wounded in only a few days. They'll soon be suing for peace, so they will.

Joe frowned.

There are a right lot of our own wounded coming in too. More than the Germans, if the truth be told. I've heard rumours about how many bodies are lying out there. Our lads. In No Man's Land. But the rumours mustn't be true. Our casualties can't be as high as some say.

I'm almost out of space on this postcard. What else shall I tell him? I won't say anything about how relentless and hard the work is. We've been working day and night since this offensive started Saturday last. Halfway through the week and I can count on my fingers, and maybe a few toes too, the number of hours of sleep I've had since it began. I'd nod off if I don't will my eyes open, and even when I do snatch some sleep, in my dreams I hear Lieutenant Morris calling me to fetch the iodine or change a dressing.

But sure, that's nothing to whinge about. Look at those wounded Tommies coming into the station nearly buried under their filthy bandages and they laugh and joke, begging cigarettes from the orderlies. They're a marvel, so they are. Their courage makes me proud to tend to them. Such brave lads. And so young, the lot of them.

God save us, you wouldn't think it's scarcely more than half a year since my twenty-first birthday, sure you wouldn't? It was only a few days past when I shipped out November last. But I feel much older than that now. Mr Elliott, in his last letter, praised the wonderful experience I'm having and said it will widen my knowledge of life.

Joe reached inside his unbuttoned tunic and scratched at his rough wool flannel shirt. The temperature had dropped several degrees since the offensive began a few days ago but it was still clammy in his uniform and heavy boots. It was time he got this postcard finished and was back on the ward. What else should he say? If only he had had a bit more sleep, his head might not be so woolly. It felt like the morning after a few, maybe a right few, jars of porter. An idea struck him and he scribbled hurriedly.

I have great expectations of a victorious end to this great offensive. Yours Sir, Joe Fitzsimons.

That was it. He wasn't the sort to boast, but it was not a lie.

Joe set the postcard carefully on one corner of the bunk to let the ink dry and re-buttoned his tunic. He put the lid on the inkwell and set it in the tattered Red Cross Disinfectant Soap box he kept in his kit bag before he hurried out of the tent.

As he stepped into the tent which housed the orthopaedic ward, Lieutenant Morris hailed him from the other end of the large structure.

"Fitzsimons, there you are. Remove that dressing for me."

The medical officer indicated a patient lying in the bunk next to the soldier he was examining.

“Yes, sir.”

Joe strode down the centre aisle to the patient the medical officer had indicated and began unwinding the bandages on the soldier’s right forearm. As he unwrapped the layers of the dressing, the unmistakable putrid smell of infection assailed him. The smell didn’t bother him anymore, but he felt a moment of pity for the soldier. The young corporal lying on the cot had had his broken left leg amputated below the knee at the field station. Fragments of shrapnel had pierced his right eye but its removal had had to wait until he arrived here yesterday. Before Lieutenant Morris spoke Joe knew that the soldier would be returning to the surgical theatre to have his right arm amputated, like as not, at least to the elbow. He heard Lieutenant Morris’s cluck of annoyance behind him and was surprised by the medical officer’s uncharacteristic outburst.

“Blast it, anyway. I had great hope the arm would mend.”

The medical officer looked at Joe.

“Move him to the surgical tent.”

“Yes sir.”

Joe carefully replaced the dressing and summoned two stretcher-bearers to move the patient. As they transferred the patient to a stretcher, Joe stepped out of their way.

“Fitzsimons, fetch iodine tincture and fresh dressings. After I have a look at this wound you may re-dress it.”

The medical officer’s tone of voice was still irritable as he glared at the ragged wound on the leg of the patient he was examining. Joe turned to look at him, then glanced back at the young corporal who was being borne away by the stretcher-bearers. The injured soldier was silent and looked as dejected as any of the German prisoners Joe had seen. If he survived, he would be invalided back to England. What sort of life would the poor man have there?

Joe shook his head slowly, thinking of the many soldiers who had passed through the station with horrible injuries during these last few days.

I have great expectations of a victorious end to this great offensive.

That’s what he’d written to Mr Goldsbrough not half an hour ago. Some of the pride and confidence he had felt in the righteousness of the campaign ebbed away. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly as his thoughts churned.

A disturbing idea emerged: could Mr Elliott be wrong? The Chief Librarian had always encouraged him to improve himself, to read and learn everything he could to widen his knowledge, and had praised his decision to enlist. As well as doing his patriotic duty, he would meet people and visit places that he would never have encountered otherwise. But how was it a wonderful experience

to watch others' lives ruined? He should have heeded Mam when she implored him not to join the Colours. Standing behind the lending desk in the library, surrounded by books, and, in his free moments gaining a different knowledge from their pages, would have done him rightly.

"Fitzsimons!" Lieutenant Morris barked.

Joe was startled out of his thoughts.

"Yes, sir. I'm away for them this minute."

As he walked briskly up the aisle to the supplies cabinet at the end of the tent, the last sentence he had written on the postcard ran through his mind. He shook his head, chiding himself for his naivety.

He rested his hand on the doorknob of the cabinet and closed his eyes for a brief moment.

God willing, this wonderful experience will soon end and I shall be home for Christmas.

Dianne Ascroft writes historical and contemporary fiction, often with an Irish connection. Her series The Yankee Years is a collection of Short Reads and novels set in World War II County Fermanagh.

This story was inspired by Private Joe Fitzsimons's postcard to Mr Goldsbrough, the Assistant Chief Librarian, at Belfast Central Library, on 5th July, 1916, during the first days of the Battle of the Somme. The postcard is in the Belfast Public Libraries collection (FIT-010)