



The British sector of the Western Front, 1914–18: injuries, treatment and the trenches

Knowledge, selection and use of sources for historical enquiries

- Knowledge of local sources relevant to the period and issue, eg: letters from three Norfolk Regiment soldiers
- Selection of appropriate sources for specific investigations, eg: quotes from the above, objects on display in the Royal Norfolk Regiment Gallery in Norwich Castle
- Recognition of the strengths and weaknesses of different types of source for specific enquiries

Reading soldiers' personal letters

The letters of Sidney Smith and Robert Millington Knowles were written as private letters for family members. As such they contain references to shortened family names and nicknames and to events linked with personal family circumstances. Sometimes it is difficult to make sense of these references as the reader is only looking at one side of the communication. Nevertheless, as personal letters they provide poignant insights into the experiences and attitudes of the two men. Although Sidney Smith and Robert Millington Knowles served in the same battalion of the Norfolk Regiment they came from very different backgrounds. The spelling of words and places on transcribed versions of the letters are authentic.

Information from letters of Private Sidney Smith, Second Lieutenant Cecil Upcher and Lieutenant Robert Millington Knowles

Personal details of the soldiers

Private Sidney Smith

Private Sidney Smith was from a large but close-knit family in Upwell. His mother Jessie and father Robert had 16 children, although two sadly died in infancy. There were eight sons (Bob, Charles, William, Bert, Leonard, Alfred, Frederick and Sidney) and six daughters (Ellen, Sarah, Elizabeth, Eva, Mabel and Beatrice). Sidney was working as a farm labourer in 1911, but by 1914 he was a professional soldier in the 1st Battalion of the Norfolk Regiment. He completed his training in Ireland and by 1916 was a lance corporal. Sidney went to France as part of the BEF and was involved in fighting at Mons, Ypres and the Somme. His elder brother Bert joined him on the Western Front in 1916, but went missing on 27 July. Sidney died on 31 July at the Somme, and it turned out Bert had died five days before. Sidney's wallet, campaign medals and commemorative plaques are on display

Second Lieutenant Cecil Upcher (1884 – 1972)

Second Lieutenant Cecil Upcher was born in Hingham, the son of a rector. He trained as an architect. His letters were written to his sweetheart, Hilda Ward, whom he married in November 1916. During the war he was injured and suffered shellshock. Cecil designed the Norfolk Regiment War Memorial cottages in Norwich for injured soldiers.

Lieutenant Robert Millington Knowles (1893-1950)

Lieutenant Robert Millington Knowles was born in London to well-off family which was from Lancashire and then Gloucestershire. He had an elder brother called Andrew (named Danny in his letters), elder sisters called Honor and Dorothy (referred to as Mrs Wilson, Cissie or Old Girl), a half-brother called James (or Jim) and a half-sister called Hester. When his father died in 1909, Robert and his mother moved to Taverham Hall, just outside Norwich. He went to public school in London, and then on to Cambridge. When war broke out Robert joined the 1st Norfolks and spent two years on the Western Front before joining the RFC, where he was awarded the MC for bravery, as a navigator. His letters were to his mother from the Western Front from January 1915 to April 1917 (with letters from the Somme between July and October 1915).

Table with information from the soldiers' letters

1. **Topic:** The context of the British sector of the Western Front and the theatre of war in Flanders and northern France: the Ypres salient, the Somme, Arras and Cambrai. The **trench** system - its construction and organisation, including frontline and support trenches. The use of **mines at Hill 60** [see background information below] near Ypres and the expansion of tunnels, caves and quarries at Arras. Significance for **medical treatment of the nature of the terrain and problems of the transport and communications infrastructure**

Letters of Private Sidney Smith	Letters of Second Lieutenant Cecil Upcher	Letters of Lieutenant Robert Millington Knowles
<p>1.8.1915 – I am glad we have left Ypres as the Germans blew three mines but as luck would have it we only lost one poor boy when we got to him he had about a tone of earth and sandbags on him, several other men were bruised but not very serious</p>	<p>April 24th-25th, April 29th, May 9th-10th May, May 30th-31st, June 8th, June 15th, July 29th, Aug 15-16th, Aug 27th 1916 – sketches of the interior of the trenches</p>	<p>Monday morning – We left ‘Wipers’ at 6.45pm last night and arrived here (the Support Dugouts’) at 8.0pm. We are in a wood 200yds from the German trenches and about 100yds behind our own ‘fire’ trenches. The dugouts are very funny little places – you crawl in on all fours and there is just room for two and a brazier.</p> <p>April 12 1915 – We are in the fire trenches at present but go back into the support dug-outs tonight when the support come up to the fire trenches. There is only about 500yds between the two, but it makes all the difference, as the support dug-outs are in the wood and the trenches just in front.</p> <p>Wednesday April 14 1915 – We are two miles in front of Ypres and about 40yds from the Germans. Two of us are in this dug-out and we take duty every 3 hours. We came into trenches last Saturday and stay here till next Sunday night. Then we go back to Ouderdom, a little place about 5 miles behind the firing line and rest there for a week. Then 8 days more of it, etc.</p> <p>Saturday April 18th 1915 – whole letter on the mine attack on Hill 60 [at 6.30pm]</p> <p>Thursday, 3 Aug 1915 (date received) – Our new trenches are simply ripping. At the present moment my company is in the Reserve Dug-outs, about 100yds behind the firing line. These are real dug-outs,</p>

Letters of Private Sidney Smith	Letters of Second Lieutenant Cecil Upcher	Letters of Lieutenant Robert Millington Knowles
		not built above ground like our old ones, but dug right into the side of a hill. There are any amount of them. We sleep two in a hut. They are beautifully fitted up with beds, tables, chairs, looking glasses, basins, etc. We have also a bathroom, writing room and dining room! The communication trenches are about 10 foot deep and are very twisty and narrow – just as they should be... The dug-outs in the firing line are also very good, being fitting up with doors, windows, beds, etc. There also are dug very deep into the ground.

Background information about Hill 60

This area is referred to by both Sidney Smith and Robert Millington Knowles in their letters. Hill 60 was approximately three miles from Ypres and was man-made in the 1860s with material dug out from a nearby railway line. The Hill was almost 50 metres high and because the surrounding terrain was so flat it offered clear advantages to whichever army unit managed to keep control of the summit. The Hill was an ongoing military target for both the Allies and the Germans, and it changed hands on a number of occasions during the war. Because of the fierceness of the fighting for Hill 60, it is believed that many bodies may still lie there. The Germans used poisonous gas at Hill 60, and this is mentioned in the letters of Robert Millington Knowles.

2. **Topic:** Conditions requiring medical treatment on the Western Front, including the problems of **ill health arising from the trench environment**. The nature of wounds **from rifles and explosives**. The problem of **shrapnel, wound infection** and increased numbers of **head injuries**. The effects of **gas attacks**.

Letters of Private Sidney Smith	Letters of Second Lieutenant Cecil Upcher	Letters of Lieutenant Robert Millington Knowles
5th Jan 1915 – wet stormy weather and it's up to our waists in mud and water in the trenches 23/3/1915 – I have a letter from poor old Mourice Calaby he says	Mon April 24 th morning 1916 – I heard last night that in a recent attack men were actually drowned in the mud and water.	Saturday March 27 th 1915 – Our Battalion is at Ypres and I am writing this in a farm house 500 yds. from the firing line. Some bullets keep hitting the house and occasionally an odd shell of two lands in the field just outside. We go up into the 'fire trenches' tonight. They are in the middle of a wood which is torn and split all to bits by shells.

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<p>he has the bullet extracted from his knee and is getting on alright now</p> <p>3.5.1915 – we have been in the trenches now three weeks and are still in and I haven't had my boots off once all the time</p> <p>1/8/15 – we have made a move from Hill 60 and I can tell you that I am not sorry as we did fifty six days in the trenches without a days rest of having our boots off so I was properly knocked up</p> <p>Envelope dates 4 July 1916 – it's not a job where one has to keep dodging pieces of lead and iron never knowing when you are going to die</p>	<p>Aug 18th Friday 1916 – Poor old Jimmy has just come in and I've just taken him down to see the Dr. A shell apparently burst right against him. It didn't touch him but the explosion has evidently fairly upset him and his nerves are all over the place.</p>	<p>April 18th 1915 – We left our dug-outs at 5.15pm and came into the firing line. Just before we left Billy Bryans 'stopped a shrapnel' with his head. He is not very bad and was able to walk down to the dressing station</p> <p>Received April 30th – The other night the Germans recaptured the French trenches north of Wipers by using this beastly asphyxiating gas in their shells. We have all been served out with cloths which we are to soak in water and put across our mouths and noses when they use this beastly gas... It is wonderful how one gets used to the 'sights' out here. I certainly felt a bit ill the other night when I was bandaging a man who had been hit in the head by a piece of shell and my hand slipped inside!</p> <p>Sunday May 2nd 1915 – The Germans tried their gas stunt on us last night about 6.0'clock. Unfortunately for them the wind changed and blew it back on them! Unfortunately it also blew it on to the 'Dorsets' who are on 'Go'. They lost 200 men and 6 officers due to it... I believe the heavy loss was due to their not having had their respirators served out to them.</p> <p>Thursday May 1915 – Don't be alarmed at the above address (c/o 7th Field Ambulance, Officers Rest Station, Mont Noir BEF). I've been sent down here for two causes. One is slight concussion caused by being sent flying by a shell and the other is slight throat trouble.</p>

3. **Topic:** The work of the RAMC and FANY. The system of **transport:** stretcher bearers, horse and motor ambulances. The stages of treatment areas: **aid post and field ambulance, dressing station, casualty clearing station, base hospital.** The underground hospital at Arras.

Letters of Private Sidney Smith	Letters of Second Lieutenant Cecil Upcher	Letters of Lieutenant Robert Millington Knowles
N/A	August 18 th Friday 1916 – 2.45am. I’ve just been helping to take poor old Fox along the trench in a stretcher. He got hit with shrapnel in the side earlier in the night. One of his signalling wires got burst by a shell and he went out to mend it and then got pipped himself. I don’t think he’s very bad thought a serious wound and he’s for England all right. His 2 nd dose. We had to carry him in a blanket round the sharp corners as the stretcher won’t go round.	Saturday March 27 th 1915 – This farm (see extract above) is also the dressing station and there are some horrible noises coming from the next room. May 13 1915 – I forgot to tell you in my last letter that the Germans shelled the dressing station solidly for two hours while I was there waiting for the ambulance and when the ambulances did come they shelled them for 5 miles. The driver of the ambulances behind the one I was in got hit in the head with the result that it finished up in the ditch. Wednesday (Grand Hotel du Louvre, Et Terminus, Boulongne-Sur-Mer) – This is one of the biggest hospital bases and is absolutely packed in ambulances. There are many interesting things that we have seen over here but can’t write about because of the wretched censor.

4. **Topic:** The significance of the Western Front for experiments in surgery and medicine: new techniques in the treatment of wounds and infection, the Thomas splint, the use of mobile x-ray units, the creation of a blood bank for the Battle of Cambrai.

This topic is not specifically mentioned in the letters of these soldiers.

5. **Topic:** The historical context of medicine in the early twentieth century: the understanding of infection and moves towards **aseptic** surgery; the development of **x-rays; blood transfusions and developments in the storage of blood.**

This topic is not specifically mentioned in the letters of these soldiers.