

Coming home: Tragic letters of a wartime hero

Almost a century after one of Norfolk's most notorious first world war disasters, a remarkable gift of remembrance has highlighted one family's sacrifice. **Steve Snelling** reports.

Humf Mason was in the best of spirits. In fact, he'd never felt better. As July faded into August and the war entered its second year, he could barely contain his enthusiasm at the prospect of action after endless months of training.

With his baptism of fire drawing ever nearer, he found himself pitying friends and relatives in Norfolk for missing what seemed to him the grandest of all adventures.

"I do feel for you having a dull and dreary time of it at home while we (at present at any rate) are having such a good time," he wrote to his "dearest mama" at home in Necton Hall, "and if we don't have a good time there is nowhere else we would sooner be in such a crisis as this."

He was not alone in thinking that way. Cosseted in the lap of peace-time luxury aboard a vast ocean-going liner, it seemed to Humf as though morale was soaring. "A lot of the men," he told his mother, "are saying they are enjoying this voyage as they never enjoyed themselves before."

As the Aquitania steamed into the Aegean harbour of Mudros, he scribbled two letters



home, enclosing a brief account of his journey to war. "I hope the Regiment will do well," he wrote. "We ought to, I think, as we've got some real good material..."

He closed his second note in much the same spirit. "We are all very fit," he observed, "and have had a first rate voyage..."

The two letters were dated August 5, 1915. Seven days later, in a disastrous action notorious for its futility and myth-making slaughter, Humf Mason made his rendezvous with death on a sun-baked Gallipoli battlefield drenched with the blood of Norfolk soldiery.

Those short notes and optimistic diary entries represented his final contact with home, but they were far from being

the last word on the life and death of an officer and a gentleman whose willing sacrifice was so typical of his generation of 'doomed youth'.

Fast forward almost a century to a late afternoon in a rain-drenched summer in stark contrast to the soaring temperatures of Humf's last days. In an upstairs room at the Norfolk Record Office a mosaic of correspondence, page after page of spidery writing, whispered ghostly echoes of a brave life cut tragically short.

All told, there were more than a hundred letters, all dating back to the early years of the first world war when Humf Mason and so many men like him marched off to war in search of 'some desperate glory', never to return. Not all of them bore Humf's hand.

There were letters from his sisters, his mother and his brother-in-law, a fellow Norfolk officer destined to die on that same day in a wretched action made famous by the casualties among a company that included a number of Sandringham royal estate workers.

Much of the correspondence, however, was made up of sad little letters of condolence from a myriad of friends and acquaintances representing 'the

great and the good' of Norfolk society.

Together, they reek of patriotism and the pain of loss as well as providing a poignant connection to a tragedy close to home rendered notorious by a TV dramatisation of the action starring David Jason as the King's Sandringham land agent.

Above all, they represent a remarkable gift of remembrance. For this wonderfully evocative collection might so easily have vanished into obscurity, never to be seen again, but for the generosity of three local military history enthusiasts.

When the archive came up for auction at Keys' three years ago, Mike Eastaff, Graham Prior and Dick Rayner were determined to buy them, not for themselves but to ensure that they were

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preserved for posterity in the county that was home to Humf.

"Our thoughts on the matter were very simple," said Dick, who has made an exhaustive study of the Gallipoli battle that left so many grieving families. "The letters were written by or about a Norfolk man and an officer of the Norfolk Regiment who died with fellow Norfolk soldiers and we felt strongly that they should remain in Norfolk and belong to the county."

Pooling their financial resources, the three fellow members of the Western Front Association, were successful in their bid. "It was a great feeling to secure them," said Graham. "They represent a unique collection and our big fear was that they would fall into the hands of a private buyer, possibly a foreign collector, never to be seen again."

Together with Dick and Mike, who along with his wife Linda has spent around six months transcribing the letters, he was at the Record Office for the informal hand-over of the archive to county archivist Dr John Alban who praised their "great public-spirited gesture".

Referring to the terrible action which claimed the lives of so many Norfolk men, Dr Alban said: "The letters in this collection add a very human dimension to that event. Reading them, one cannot fail to be struck by their immense emotional force."

He is quite right. As Dick, Graham and

Mike readily acknowledge, the letters shed little fresh light on one of the war's most infamous debacles and still less on the circumstances that led to the needless loss of so many brave men.

What they do offer, however, is some insight into the social network that transferred almost seamlessly from the country estates of Norfolk to the officers' messes of the county's territorial battalions.

From a fishing holiday in Norway with his great friend Gervase Birkbeck, Humf Mason quickly found himself in uniform, serving alongside his angling chum and the scions of many another landed family.

All were infected by the same patriotic fervour, the same desire to do their duty and fight for King and Country no matter what the cost.

Within a month of the outbreak of war, Humf had signed up for overseas service. "If I had not volunteered," he wrote, "I should not have thought I was doing my duty to my Country."

Never for a moment did he regret his decision to soldier with the 5th Norfolks. His only frustration was the lack of action while other units shipped out to France or the Middle East.

Typical of his mood was a letter written to his mother in November 1914 as the British Expeditionary Force was fighting for survival near the Belgian town of Ypres. "We have had a bad whack in the



Bound for disaster: Humf Mason (pictured with the walking stick) of the 5th Norfolks in 1915 and some of his letters and papers and those of his family, given to the Norfolk Archives Centre.

eye,” he groaned. “The other Regiments in this Brigade have orders to stand by and be ready to cross the water this week. I do hope we shall be next. It will be awful if we are not...”

In fact, he would have to be patient a while longer. Not until the following July, almost a year after he had hurried home to join up, did Humf and the 5th Norfolks embark for the front on what would prove for all too many a one-way ticket to Hell.

Humf could scarcely conceal his excitement. Cheered on their way by the people of Watford, they trooped aboard the Aquitania in Liverpool “in the best of spirits”.

Eight largely uneventful days at sea would eventually be followed by just two days ashore before the battalion was thrust, ill-prepared, into an action that neither Humf nor his brother-in-law and adjutant, Arthur Ward, would survive.

He died somewhere on the gorse-freckled ground beneath the slopes of the Anafarta range of hills in the late afternoon of August 12 along with more than 150 men from his unit.

According to one account, he was last seen wounded close to the Turkish positions, trying to bring order to the chaos of a disorganised and fast disintegrating attack.

Eventually word came back that he had been killed, although in the absence of more corroborating evidence and with his body lying somewhere in enemy territory

confirmation of his fate was slow to reach his family back home in Norfolk.

So slow, in fact, that for several days after his mother faithfully maintained her correspondence, little realising that she was writing to a ghost.

Some of those letters have survived and nearly a century on they retain a heartbreaking poignancy. In one, written five days after his death, she began: “The family is rejoicing greatly... that you have all safely embarked...”

She hoped that in a week or so they would receive letters from him and that he would begin to receive letters from the rest of the family.

She wrote about friends and about the harvest – the weather had been “fine for over 30 hours”, allowing them to cut the wheat – and she wrote of aeroplane hangars sprouting on Mousehold and land near Narborough.

“We do hope you will get to see the Pyramids, which I don’t think are very far off,” she added, “and you will love seeing the East if you are not too bothered with flies, and I suppose it will be fearfully hot...”

By August 28 news had reached Norfolk that Arthur Ward was among the many listed as “missing” in action following the muddled attack, but with no news about Humf the family clung desperately to the hope that he was still alive.

Taking a break from “harvesting and hay making”, his father wrote: “We have

Generous donation: The three donors who bought the letters and papers of Humphrey Mason of the 5th Norfolks, present them to Dr John Alban, 2nd left, county archivist, at the Norfolk Archives Centre. From left, Mike Eastaff, Dick Rayner and Graham Prior.

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only heard of the officers ‘Missing’ in your regiment after the fighting... which I fear was not on the whole so successful as we hoped... “Not hearing anything about you or Gervase we hope you are both all right and only imagine you and he may have escaped with some of the Regiment some how. It will be intensely interesting if you are able to write and tell us something about what really happened to you personally and the Regiment... “My difficulty with the family is to prevent them taking pessimistic views...”

Sadly, there was no room for optimism, only a deafening silence as weeks of mourning as family and friends came to terms with the fact that Humf was gone.

Even in a country already familiar with loss and sacrifice, the outpouring of grief was extraordinary. From the great houses of Norfolk came a flood of letters. They spoke of a latter-day ‘Sir Galahad’, a pure, selfless soul “cut off in his prime”. “Poor dear old Humfrey,” wrote one. “He was one of the best and beloved by all who knew him.”

Etheldreda Birkbeck wrote: “I am sure it is no use trying to be ‘brave’ as people say we ought to be.

“Of course, in public, one has to pull oneself together, but I am sure it is better to let one’s grief have its way... no one but mothers know how great is the pain of parting, but as gold is tried in the fire, so our hearts must be tried by pain.”



One of the most affecting letters of all came from Humf’s uncle at Hingham rectory. He had delayed writing in the hope that the “continual silence” would yield good news about his fate. But with his death apparently certain, he could hold back no longer. “How pure... and single-minded was his life,” he wrote. “It is indeed sad to lose our best and bravest.”

Almost a century on, his words found an echo in the presentation of the Mason family correspondence.

In accepting the treasure trove of letters, Dr Alban summed up their significance: “They form an outstanding record of the saga of sacrifices made by Norfolk soldiers and their families and it is, therefore, very important that they should be preserved for posterity.”