

BETTY FREUND: A NURSE IN FRANCE PART IV

Compiled and edited by Betty Hugo*

BETTY'S LETTERS HOME

3 July 1916

... I told you I was nursing an old Commandant ... he died last Sunday morning, his wife was not here and he kept saying I had not to leave him one moment. I was not a bit afraid he is the first person I saw dying...

The day after new wounded arrived and we have been awfully busy since. Some of them are very badly wounded indeed. I do 51 dressings every morning ... a French Dr who has been here in our convalescent home comes and helps me every morning...

Young Casalis who is here on sick leave ... was badly wounded, he lost his reason for three days and could not remember anything, not even his mother's address. He is much better and is soon returning to the front...

9 July 1916

... People begin to say that this is the beginning of the end, but heaps of others are sure that next year this time it will not be over yet ... I have such a nice boy of 20 with ... one hand blown to bits, he is in awful pain all day and night and can only get a little sleep when he has had double doses of morphia. I like the French soldiers very much, they are very respectful and very thankful for all you do for them...

15 July 1916

... The 14th July is a great holiday in France and we had a very good concert yesterday, the whole place was beautifully decorated with flags and flowers ... if you could only see how beautiful the sea is...

23 July 1916

... Yesterday afternoon a Rev. Clement Brown sent his motor for 4 of us and we had tea with them and then went for a beautiful motor drive. They have a most beautiful home with a tremen-

dous garden, but now of course nothing is at its best ... I wish you could have seen his garden, he being American has mealies growing in his garden, it made me feel quite homesick. I am sorry you have not heard from me – if ever anything were wrong I would always cable at once, so don't worry...

This is the first letter in which Betty mentions the word "homesick" – and how delightfully homespun it is that home-sickness should have been induced by "mealies".

29 July 1916

... We have been so awfully busy, day after day we received not wounded but sick soldiers. In Salonika they get sick by the thousands and are all shipped to France, poor things, they do look white and ill and their nerves are completely gone. They mostly have Malaria, which is awful, Diarrhoea, and Enteric, poor things, at night their temperatures go as high as 105, they are delirious and faint. A soldier who came from Lyon in the middle of France was telling me how they suffer there, the town is full of wounded soldiers from Verdun...

I see in to-night's papers that the South Africans have done some heavy fighting and that there is a long list of casualties. If only the war could be over, how happy everybody would be. The two patients with their hands blown to bits ... are getting slowly better. When you least expect it their hands swell up and bits of shell come out again – heaps of men will have bits of shell in their bodies for all their lives...

On 21 February 1916 the German army began bombarding the French trenches near Verdun, a fortress city astride the river Meuse on the Lorrain frontier. A French soldier, describing the horror of bombardment said: "... the pounding was continuous and terrifying ... the earth around us quaked, and we were lifted and tossed about ... our blinded, wounded, crawling and shouting soldiers kept falling on top of us and died while splashing us with their blood..." The battle of Verdun continued until mid-December 1916. Meanwhile, the British had begun their attack on the Somme by the end of June, and America had entered the war against Germany in April of the same year. The battle of the Somme was over by mid-November. Casualties sustained: Germans 650 000; Allies 615 000.

The South African casualties referred to here occurred at Delville Wood. John Buchan's comment is relevant here:

"The six days and five nights during which the South African Brigade held the most difficult post on the British front – a corner of death on which the

enemy fire was concentrated at all hours from three sides, and into which fresh German troops, vastly superior in number to the defence, made periodic incursions only to be broken and driven back – constitute an epoch of terror and glory scarcely equalled in the campaign." (p 73).

On 14 July at midnight the Brigade numbered 121 officers and 3 032 men. On 20 July there were only 143 left (this must have excluded wounded, because the final total was 750).

15 August 1916

... Sister Archer and I went up for two days into the mountains, 4 000 feet higher than Cannes, it was beautifully cool up there, at night it was cold. It only takes 2½ hours by motor but you can hardly believe the difference it makes ...

Mrs Casalis is going away to-morrow for a month to the north of France to some friends of hers ...

'Yesterday far out to sea we could hear some firing – an Austrian submarine was firing at some fishing boats but did no harm. People from Paris, or just outside Paris, say they can hear the big guns at Verdun. If it only were all over, but it can't be this year they say ...

It does not seem very likely that people from Paris, or nearby, would have heard the guns at Verdun, since Verdun is very far away from Paris. Yet, during the battle of the Somme (1 July 1916) the windows of No. 10, Downing Street, rattled.

21 August 1916

... They have started fighting again in Salonika, so are clearing all the hospitals here for the wounded from there. A new sister has come, a miss McIntosh from Port Elizabeth, I believe. I have not seen her yet, she only arrived this afternoon. Mrs Casalis is away on her holiday, she has not been well lately – I think I told you their daughter and her husband are here as well now. The daughter helps with the linen of the hospital, and the son, Mr Wilson, is looking after one ward. He is a medical student ...

24 August 1916

... The French Dr, dr Leclercq, who was here – the one I knew so well – is up in Amiens now ... he says they come in every day, between 500 and 600. I do wish the war could finish, but of course it can't possibly do so for at least another year. Yesterday afternoon a nurse ... and I went for a long drive up to an Observatory and could see snow-covered mountains right away in Italy. It was lovely – you can go for such beautiful walks and drives here ...

16 September 1916

... On my birthday we had a big tea-party in the afternoon – a Book-tea, it was great fun. The next day (that was yesterday) I was taken for a lovely motor trip ... to Nice and from there up into the mountain 5 000 feet high to a place called Plera Cava ... what beautiful country ...

The Masters have gone to Le Trayas for 10 days before they go to England ... I went to see them off. The train was full of soldiers going to the front, all young boys, but they were full of spirit, poor men – how everyone longs for the war to be over ...

Plera Cava is a ski-resort about 78 kilometres from Cannes, and they evidently returned late that night. Motoring was, of course, one of the luxuries of the time ("motoring for millions" was a fairly recent concept then). The Masters were the parents of a Miss Masters, a nurse whom Betty nursed for a while, at the Beau Rivage Hospital, and then befriended.

18 September 1916

... Col. Casalis told me this morning that the French War Office had proposed giving Mrs Casalis, Sister Archer and myself the French War Medal for noble and good work done to the French wounded – it will be lovely having a medal and I hope we'll get it ...

30 September 1916

... We had rain for two days, it came down in sheets. When it rains I am always hoping and wishing it would rain so much in South Africa. I can still go to Switzerland, but now I think I'll wait until the winter. I'll have saved up some more money by then ... don't know how it is, but I can't save – I suppose it runs in the family ...

The only amusement here is going to the Bioscope – of course the pictures are lovely – and they have music all the time. They show very interesting war pictures, lately they have had some wonderful coloured pictures ...

These would have been "moving pictures", or "movies", with captions. Quite a number of propaganda films were also made at the time. It is nice to know that she had been informed about the possibility of receiving a medal, yet the medal she was looking forward to possessing was to be awarded posthumously, in Luckhoff, almost two years later.

16 October 1916

My dear Mama,

The sun is shining so lovely and mild and the sea looks such a deep blue this morning and I am sitting comfortably in bed writing to you.

You'll be wondering why I am in bed this morning. Well, about a fortnight ago I suddenly discovered one evening that I had a lump, as I thought just like yours, you can imagine I felt fearfully upset. But as soon as Casalis had examined it he said "my dear girl, you need not worry at all, it is not like your mother's, you are too young and the lump has not the feel of anything but an innocent fibre". He said "I will take it out for you before it gets any bigger". That was on the Thursday. They were all fearfully upset in Hospital when they heard about it and everybody was awfully good to me.

I said I would have it done the next Monday. Friday, Saturday and Sunday Mrs Casalis took me for long motor drives each day and on Monday morning the Colonel took the lump out for me, the whole operation took about $\frac{1}{2}$ hour. He had three well-known Bacteriologists examine it and they all said it was nothing. Casalis and Dr Griffin both say they would have told me if it had been anything else, and besides they would have removed the whole breast if it had been necessary. As it is now it will hardly leave a scar, as they cut underneath the breast and just cut out the lump. They took all the stitches out the 4th day so you can see how well I am. He left a little opening in case any drainage was needed and that is healing up now. It is just a week since the operation to-day and I have been up the last two days.

Yesterday we had a concert here and I enjoyed it so much. A Mrs Mellor with a glorious voice sang some beautiful songs.

I may go to Switzerland for a month now but I am not sure yet. It is strange that I never felt the lump before and that I have been feeling so well with it all along, and now I am feeling absolutely well. The rest in bed has done me such a lot of good and I'll have another 6 weeks before I start work again. I would much rather start at once but they won't let me. I want to go on with my nursing a little longer if you are all well at home. I could not come back and sit in Luckhoff and do nothing, it would worry me so much. I assure you mother I am quite well and I think it is lucky for me I was here with Casalis and Dr Griffin, be-

cause both of them are awfully clever and I think if this had all happened in South Africa it would have meant going to Cape Town or Johannesburg, being in hospital, which would have been awful, and paying £50 for the operation.

They have had the lump carefully examined by the best men here and all say it is nothing. Not that it might not have become more serious if I had left it there for another year or two. They even think now I must have had it for years, not knowing about it. I just said I had a knock in the ward and the Colonel removed the lump, so you can say the same if you tell anybody about it...

By the time you get this letter I will of course be quite well again so don't cable – if there had been any need I would have cabled you – I don't want you to worry as I am really telling you the truth and all there is to tell...

This is a crucial letter, and has been left virtually un-edited. There is no reason to doubt Betty's sincerity where she says at the end: "I am really telling you the truth and all there is to tell..." It is not likely that she would have made this statement if she had known, at this stage, that she had cancer. Moreover, the breast was not removed, so she herself would not have suspected anything. On the other hand, a man with Casalis's specialised knowledge would not have made a mistake. One can only conclude that Casalis realised that the tumour had reached an advanced stage (hence her statement "I must have had it for years") and that removal of the breast would not have been a solution – it would merely have been an unnecessary mutilation. It was only 9 months later, in Betty's letter to Willy, that she revealed some knowledge of her condition. Yet one wonders why she keeps on insisting, in the above letter, that "it is nothing", and why she says: "I want to go on with my nursing a little longer".

In the sources I have consulted there is only one "Mellor", who could have been the same person: Grace E. Mellor who published a song *The Little Dustman* (Augener Publishers, Germany). Hugh Mellor, mentioned by P.A. Scholes in his *Oxford Companion to Music*, may have been related.

30 October 1916

... On Wednesday is "All Souls' Day", some of us are going up to the cemetery to put some flowers on the soldiers' graves that died here in hospital with us. Only 3 have died so far and we have nursed over 6 000. Of course, the hospitals at the front have nursed far more, but then most of the soldiers stay only a day or two in the hospitals there and are then sent away, whereas here they stay a month or two. I still have just a small dressing but am feeling so well – it is three weeks to-day I have had my operation and it all seems a dream and far away...

5 November 1916

... I am staying with the Tophams and am feeling well and happy...

There are two South African Ambulances in France now, ours and the one that came over with the African troops, and then there is the African Hospital in London, so our letters often spend a month or two going from one to the other without finding us. Perhaps it would be better if you were to leave out the South African Ambulance on the address and address the letters as I have done at the top of this letter –

We are still so busy ... and I often go down to see some of the men in my ward, they are always pleased to see me and I am longing to be back with them.

I have no more dressing and in another week or two you'll hardly be able to see that I had an operation at all ... I am feeling wonderfully well. ...

In the above letter Betty also mentions "great excitement" at the Topham establishment: the forthcoming wedding in London of Countess Nada de Torby to Prince George of Battenberg on 15 November 1916. The Tophams knew her father Grand-duke Michael of Russia, grandson of Emperor Nicholas I who had married Sophie von Merenberg (Countess de Torby) in 1891.

Their elder daughter was Zia de Torby who married Maj.-Gen. Sir Harold Wernher, son of the S.A. mining magnate Sir Julius Wernher.

The allusion to other South African nursing units is interesting:

Neville Gomm, in an article entitled *Some Notes on the South African Military Nursing Services* (MILITARY HISTORY JOURNAL, vol. 1, No 2, June 1968) provides background to the establishment of the South African Military Nursing Service and states that the "original S.A.M.N.S. contingent embarked for the United Kingdom on the 27th September 1915 ... trained staff, some 174 in number, served in German East Africa. Members of the S.A.M.N.S. staffed No 1 S.A. General Hospital (2 000 beds) in Abbeville in France as well as the S.A. Military Hospital at Richmond, Surrey, in England and those in the Union. In August, 1916, 22 members, all probationers from the four provinces, embarked for England. They were recruited specifically for service in Europe from the ranks of S.A. Red Cross Society and the St. John Ambulance Brigade."

Prof. Charlotte Searle, in her book *The History of the Development of Nursing in S.A.* (1965, p 362) has the following to say about S.A. nurses during the Great War: "By May, 1915, the shortage of nurses in Europe was critical. The Joint War Committee asked the South African Government to send over a contingent of South African nurses to serve in the European theatre of war. The first group left under Miss J.C. Child in 1915. The Matron-in-Chief, Mrs Creagh, followed with a second group soon thereafter. Several further groups were sent over in 1915 and 1916. The South African nurses served with great distinction in all theatres of war."

It must be remembered that Betty Freund joined the French *Ambulance Sud-Africaine*. The Cape Province was peripherally involved, there was a Cape Town Committee and a London Committee to supervise funds and general organisation. In January 1915 the unit was taken over by the French. This explains why details of Dr Casalis's venture are not mentioned in accounts of purely South African enterprises.

9 November 1916

... I am glad to know you started a Red Cross Society in Luckhoff. Where do they send the money to? I suppose to the South Africans –

They have had a funeral from every hospital in Cannes yesterday. These poor men that come from Salonika lately have been awfully bad. They mostly have malaria, but not the malaria we know, far worse, they have temperatures of 106, 107 and are sometimes delirious for days and days. They get all sorts of injections, right into the vein, but their hearts get so weak as well.

Thank you for saying you are sending me some money again, it is very good of you Mama. I only hope this war will be over soon, so that we might all be at home again, but everybody says it will be another two years. Time does pass quickly, it is just 2 years ago that I left home.

They will pay my passage out any time I like to go, so don't worry about that ...

19 November 1916

... Casalis said to Sister Archer if I wanted to go very much he would try to get the London Committee to pay my passage out to Africa and back, but I had to promise faithfully to come back. I could only be a fortnight to three weeks at home, it is fearfully dangerous travelling now and not at all comfortable, so I thought I would wait until the summer and see how things are then and ask them for 3 months leave, or go home altogether. It is really not worth taking all that long journey for such a short time, not at least just at present when it is so stormy. It might be better in summer, as they are fighting so heavily now ... things might be better then too ...

The other evening Casalis asked me when I was down at the hospital to leave my old ward and take over a ward on the ground floor. He is having only surgical cases in that ward and he is looking after them himself ... they have often asked me to take this ward, but as I have been in my ward since we came here I would never leave it ... but I have to please Casalis and it will be half the work. I can choose which nurses I want ... so when I go back it will be child's play. I will have to do more supervising and that is not hard, is it? ...

11 November 1916

... I saw Casalis this morning again and he says I am quite healed up and need not worry about it at all ... they have tested it in every way in the

Laboratory and they are all positive it was an innocent growth....

This week they took a growth out of a woman ... over 16 lbs, isn't it awful? Casalis is about the only surgeon they have here...

25 November 1916

... I am not going back for another fortnight, so will have had 6 weeks away from hospital, that is of course not including the time I was in bed and up at the hospital. I am feeling so well and fit now!...

Up till now we have always been able to get enough sugar, but now that is getting scarce here as well. In Paris they won't sell you any sugar unless you buy other things to the value of 20 francs with the sugar you want.

The Government wants to know all about potatoes the people grow too, then the shops all have to close earlier to save light and places of amusement have to close once a week...

26 November 1916

... This will reach you about Xmas time so I wish you all at home a very happy Xmas and a very happy New Year, and I hope we will all be at home for the next year...

Most of the motor cars have been taken for war work now and you see very few private motors about now. Then they are not allowed to bake white bread any more either, and next month no more cakes are to be baked in France. I'll be awfully sorry as I like cakes and all sweet things, as you know...

9 December 1916

... They have sent down an order from the Minister of War from Paris forbidding all the nurses all over France to wear outdoor uniform, we must only go out in mufti.

They say the uniforms have been misused so much and I believe lately they have caught several spies travelling about in nurses' uniform and so many people wear it who have no right to it whatsoever...

I hear we are going to have a French lady Doctor at the hospital as well. I wonder how that will answer. Yesterday we saw a General presenting some medals to some soldiers and to some mothers whose sons have fallen. Their medals they had won were given to their old mother or father, it was a most pathetic sight and made your heart ache. The whole Avenue was decorated with flags and a town band played the Marseillaise...

"It was a most pathetic sight and made your heart ache." Within two years of Betty's writing this letter her own parents would be receiving her medal after she had died.

19 December 1916

... Life is terribly sad and hard for everybody these days ... I came back to hospital two days ago and I am pleased to be back, the soldiers were all so pleased to see me again...

1 January 1917

... It was the first letter I had from you since you heard about my operation. I am dreadfully sorry you were worried, but I can assure you I only knew about the tumour 6 days before I wrote to you...

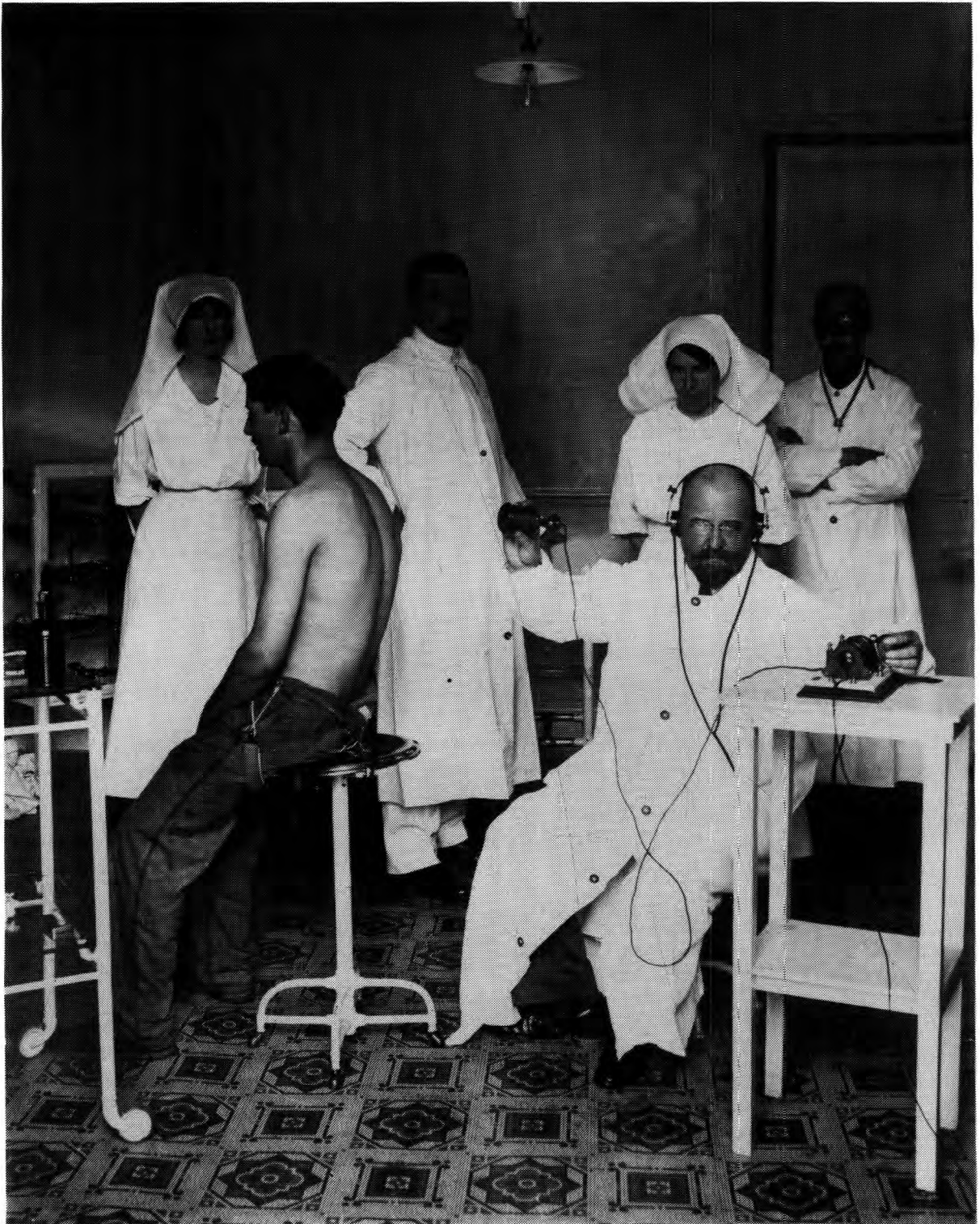
Everybody thinks the war will be over this year, so next New Year I hope to be back in Luckhoff again – in any case I think I'll be home for New Year if not long before...

Don't worry mother dear, as I am quite well and very happy in my work and it won't be long now and I'll be back in Luckhoff – years pass very quickly...

12 January 1917

... To-morrow they are having a most interesting operation. They have a Russian hospital here at Cannes with heaps of Russians. They have brought one here to be operated on, the bullet went in in his shoulder and went into his heart where it still is. If they don't operate he can drop dead any moment. It is a very difficult operation and Doctors are coming to watch.

He has a room here and his own special Russian nurse. I am going down to help Sister Archer, her theatre nurse is on night duty, so I'll be able to see it all and will let you know how he is getting on...



Dr Casalls examining a patient

11 February 1917

... We have had rain and rain this week and some days were quite cold. Up in the north of France the winter has been terrible – snow everywhere. I saw yesterday in the papers that in many of the villages in the mountains the wolves had come down into the towns, the trains have been snowed up for hours and hours ... more than half the hospitals here in Cannes now have Russians. We still have only French ...

The Russians were fighting together with the Allied forces in Salonika. This was part of the question whether Greece would finally decide to come into the war on the Allied side. The the Brass Hats and the Frocks thought a campaign against the Bulgarians would be a useful diversion and a sort of combined operation was started. Russian troops in some strength joined the prosecution of the campaign in July 1916. They would obviously, if wounded, have been sent to the south of France, not to their own ambulances.

23 February 1917

... The heart case I told you about is quite well and he is away back in Russia ... This afternoon we went to see a French opera – "Lakme" – very pretty music ... it is lovely to listen to music now and then, away from the wards for a change ... it is getting much warmer and there is a scent of spring in the air ...

4 April 1917

... As this is your birthday morning I have got up early to write to you ... what I wish for you is a few years in absolute peace and quietness somewhere where you can have flowers and music and nice people ... I would be perfectly happy wherever I am if I could only have music always ...

I love nursing the soldiers and want nothing better than their love in return for what I am doing for them ...

Since my operation I think life is God's best gift to us. I am only sorry that I realise everything so late and that I have not been as nice to everybody as I ought to have been. It has not made me a bit bitter, all I have gone through, I only love "God" the more. I don't reason and say there is no God if he could let all this happen to me as I have never done anybody the least bit of harm.

Spring is everywhere ... all the flowers are lovely, and I am going to send you a cable for your birthday ...

The above letter is the only one in which Betty talks about herself at some length. It suggests that she was aware of more than she was prepared to tell her mother.

18 April 1917

... I had a cold and stayed in bed for a few days ... am feeling much better, far better than I have done for years – strange to say, my headaches have left me ... and whereas I used to have a touch of Influenza every year at home, I have been perfectly well here – only my hair has turned quite grey. I am quite white, but not a bit thinner, isn't it sad?

They are having a terrible winter in England, snow and storms every day ...

Last week we had a splendid concert in the hospital, it was a "Revue" written by one of the soldiers and acted by the soldiers. Only the girls were from outside ...

6 May 1917

... Everything here is getting most fearfully expensive. Shoes cost from 32/- to 45/- and then they are not always leather. If this awful war would only end. This week 4 of my men came with tears in their eyes, telling me of their brother's death at the front. It is terrible. Last week we had two soldiers one after the other who had gone mad from the war, no wonder, poor men ...

13 May 1917

... We had such a nice boy working in the office here, he had to go to the front last year and always wrote to me every week ... and yesterday he was killed. I feel it very much, he was such a boy ...

Just now an Arab came to say good-bye to me. He came here but we are not allowed to have them – they go to a special hospital for Arabs. He is heartbroken to go, and in his broken French he told me with tears in his eyes (he is very old) that he loved me more than he did his mother. I had been good to him – the Arabs are so grateful. We've had one before, and I quite like them ...

24 May 1917

... The war won't be over for another year or two perhaps, so if you need me I better come home now ...

I was terribly upset yesterday when I got your letter – I hope Mimie is better by now ...

Isn't it sad to think that in your old age you still have to look after your children. We all seem to be ill or [have] something wrong with us ...

I am nursing a South African girl at present – she is nursing up in the north of France – she broke a leg and they asked us to take her in. She is awfully nice, and fancy, she was born in Hope-town, her name is Marshall, but they left there some time ago for Kimberley, and afterwards for Johannesburg ...

Betty's sister Mimie evidently had some kind of a nervous breakdown. In a letter in June, less than a month later, she offers advice on the subject. Mimie died in 1921, only three years after Betty herself had died.

11 June 1917

... It makes me sad to think you are alone and that I am not there to help you with the children – you know often when women get a nervous breakdown like Mimie had had, or when they feel Life is all wrong, it is on account of there being something wrong with the womb. I wonder if any of the doctors she has been seeing have thought of that ...

17 June 1917

... I do hope Mimie will soon be quite herself again, poor little May and Lou. I am awfully pleased to hear that Freddy has bought a little farm – it is always something for him ...

This afternoon they had an open air concert in a garden next to the hospital here. For the consumptives of the war – a little out of Cannes they have a hospital for them and the poor men are terribly ill there ...

Sister Archer and I were going to Switzerland for our holiday, but we are not going any more, as things are very scarce there now. The French nursing society we belong to send nurses over free, but you have to go where they like and with [whom] they like to send you ... so we've given up that idea ...

Betty's brother Freddy was Metha's "favourite". According to family lore Metha used to say that Freddy was sickly and would not live long. In fact, he outlived all his brothers and sisters. His son, Tom Freund, lives on this same farm, *Klein Palmietfontein*, just outside Luckhoff. The house has been preserved in exactly the way it used to be when Freddy and his wife first went to live there.

28 June 1917

... Col. and Mrs Casalis are leaving on Monday for their holiday, they are going away for two months, I think. In September they want Sister Archer and myself to go for a holiday ... we are going in France just on the border of Switzerland ...

I am enclosing a small photo for my new French passport. All strangers in France have to have them ... had to fill in a number of papers – where your father and mother were born and how old they are ... as I don't remember how old you and Papa are and where you were born exactly I said we were all born in Philippolis, as I remember that is where I was born –

I am writing to Willy to-night, he must be lonely on the farm. I do wish he would get married, there is nothing so terrible as loneliness ...

Betty's vagueness about where her parents were born was deliberate: she must have known. The family had lived in Glücksburg when Betty was 10, 11 and 12 years old; she and her mother were visiting the Menzels in Glücksburg in 1905 when she was 24; among her post cards – a collection of about 450 – there are dozens of them exchanged with members of her family in Glücksburg and in other parts of Germany, including some written by Betty herself in German; in one of her early letters she says that Cannes reminds her of Glücksburg and she mentions that her "Tante Louise" from Schlüchtern had written to her in Cannes (this was her father's sister). She obviously had to "warn" her mother not to say anything that would arouse the suspicion of the censors.

The letter to Willy, mentioned above, must be the one quoted in my introduction – it was written on the same day. One wonders why she said "I know it is not for long" and why Willy did not pass this information on to his mother. Since this is one of very few of Betty's letters to her brother Willy that was kept, these questions remain unanswered.

13 July 1917

... Another nurse we had was ordered to leave the hospital at once. She had been to Switzerland and they censored her letters and did not like some things she said I believe ... the Military authorities ordered her away. They are getting very strict now and they are quite right, they should have been so from the beginning. Family matters are the only subjects one should write about these days ...

25 July 1917

... The Americans have hired a big hotel here for a hospital and they have hired it for 3 years...

In April 1917 President Wilson asked Congress to declare war and America began to mobilise with surprising speed.

By 5 June 1917 some 9,5 million men had registered for the draft.

14 August 1917

... The Americans all say they have come prepared for another 3 years' war, so what is going to happen no one knows ... we are very busy, heaps of new patients from Salonika ...

26 August 1917

... We are going for 10 days or a fortnight inland, so as to get away from the sea for a bit and then we are coming back to Le Trayas ...

Col. and Mrs Casalis are coming back this week ...

3 September 1917

... To-morrow morning at 11 o'clock we are leaving for our holiday for a month. Sister Archer, Miss Topham and I and two other nurses. We are first going to a place called Avignon, a very old town on two rivers. We arrive there to-morrow evening at 7 o'clock, so it is not a very long train journey, not like in South Africa ...

9 September 1917

... We did not go to Avignon after all, but came up here (Grand Hotel Verdun, Annecy) – I'm sure you'll be able to find it on a map. It is pretty here ... we go for long walks and are on the lake most of the time ...

23 September 1917

... The view all along is lovely, trees laden with apples and pears ... fields and fields of wild flowers, everywhere they were bringing in the hay and you know how lovely that smells ... the cows all grazing about with bells on, making

lovely music, just like in Switzerland ... and the mountains full of pine forests ...

14 October 1917

... We got back here last Wednesday afternoon ... the trains are so full these days ... Lots of people who lent us beds are asking for them back as most of the hotels are going to open this winter. They must all think that the war will not last till next winter, if that were only true. We get military beds instead ...

3 November 1917

... We had injections against Enteric and Typhoid given us, so I was three days in bed. The first injection I did not feel very ill, but we had the second ten days after and I felt quite bad for two days. It is all over now and we run no risks whatever. Of course, we are all very sad about the poor Italians now.

The French and British are sending heaps of troops, the French troops pass through here and we go to the station and give them cigarettes ... the trains pass through nearly every ten minutes or quarter of an hour – we are not far from the station and I feel as if I never want to hear a train whistle again. All night you hear that awful shriek of a whistle and you know more men are leaving their homes and their country never to return again.

Yesterday they were all young boys full of fun and laughter; to-day only old men seemed to pass, and such sad faces – heaps of beautiful horses as well ...

Of course we are preparing for lots of wounded, they will all come through here ...

"The poor Italians": this was Italy's near-collapse at Caporetto. In the fighting on the Italian Front the worst of the disasters for the Allies was at Caporetto on 24 October 1917 when more than 260 000 Italians were taken prisoner and some 200 000 deserters were scattered throughout Italy.

A line of sorts was held along the river Piave and further British and French troops were rushed to the Northern Italian Front. Betty must have heard rumours at least, and they were not that far away from the new Austrian front (the Austrians pushed down the great valley between Asiago Plateau and the Gulf of Venice and were within fifteen miles or so of Venice itself. She *must* have heard something of this but, of course, she could not tell her family, or let even a hint of it pass in any of her letters.)

The Allies pushed over 250 000 of their troops into the area, and those were the ones the trains carried through to Cannes. The fighting was frightful, in extremely difficult conditions, as they went right into the mountains.

Winnifred Holtby's poem *Trains in France*, published in *Time and Tide* in 1931, is relevant here:

Hôpital Beau-Rivage
12 : VIII 1917

My dear Mollie

Barrow. Ar
France

Only a card to-night in
case I miss the mail & you
should worry because there
is no letter from me -
I meant to have written
you a long letter, but
we were taken for a
glorious motor drive this
afternoon & had lots of
times out in a lovely
wood - I had quite a
lot of letters from you lately
& am always happy to hear
you are all well. Thanks for the money
Bill

The trains
 The fire-eyed trains
 Call to each other their wild seeking cry
 And I, who thought I had forgotten all the war
 Remember now a night in Camiers,
 When, through the darkness, as I wakelul lay,
 I heard the trains,
 The savage, shrieking trains,
 Call to each other their fierce hunting-cry,
 Ruthless, inevitable, as the beasts
 After their prey.
 Made for this end by their creators, they,
 Whose business was to capture and devour
 Flesh of our flesh, bone of our very bone.
 Hour after hour,
 Hungry and impotent I lay alone
 Hearing them hunt you down, my dear, and you,
 Hearing them carry you away to die,
 Trying to warn you of the beasts, the beasts!
 Then, no, thought I;
 So foul a dream as this cannot be true,
 And calmed myself, hearing their cry no more,
 Till, from the silence broke a trembling roar
 And I heard far away
 The growling thunder of their joyless feasts –
 The beasts had got you then, the beasts, the beasts –
 And knew
 The nightmare true.

Winitred Holtby had been in the WAAC during the war and had served at the base in Eraples; Vera Brittain as a VAD had been posted to a hospital at Etaples and had been nursing there during the most anxious time of the Big Push in 1918, at the time when it seemed that the Germans must break the Allied line. Etaples was the centre of the great military hospital system in France.

Vera Brittain:

*The main railway-line from Boulogne to Paris
 ran between the hospitals and the distant sea,
 and amongst the camps, and along the sides of
 the roads to Camiers, the humped sandhills
 bristled with tufts of spiky grass.*

(Testament of Youth, p 370).

... Winitred, like myself, had known that *via dolorosa* the road to Camiers, and had lived beside the same historic railway-line, and heard the same rattling engines go shrieking through the night.

(*ibid*, p 491).

(Vera Brittain's brother, Captain Edward Brittain M.C., was killed on the Asiago Plateau. He had been sent by train through the Riviera to Italy.)

14 November 1917

... Only nurses are allowed on the platform now when the troops pass, but outside the railings a crowd of nearly 1 000 people came when they heard the Band and when they played the French and English national anthems, you should have heard them cheer. A Military Band is lovely – we had not heard one for two years. I could have cried ... to see all their young and eager faces ...

18 November 1917

... I wish you all a happy Xmas and a very happy New Year. I only pray I may be with you next

Xmas and not so far away, although the war won't be over by then, it is sure to last another 2 years. You have no idea how expensive things are for the poor people. Eggs are 6d each, butter 5/6 a lb, milk you can hardly get and of course sugar and bread are given out so much per head; coal is very scarce too, and most of the poor people here cook with gas. Lots of people were coming down for the winter season, but this Italian affair has frightened them all. The troops still pass every day – they are all in such good spirits and look well. I told one of them that we had been to the funeral of a soldier, he said "What does it matter where we die, sister, here or at the front. We are all prepared to die" ...

"Another 2 years": this remark shows acceptance now of a war that appeared to be never-ending. In November 1917 the Allies had already met at Rapallo in Italy to establish a Supreme War Council to improve military co-ordination. Italy had suffered a defeat at Caporetto, and Russia had withdrawn. (The Armistice of Brest-Litovsk, after the Russian Revolution in October 1917, had been signed.)

This theme, that the war seemed to be endless, was by now commonplace as the earlier one that the war would be over soon. In Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (OUP, 1975, 1977, 1979) a Major Pilditch, describing events on the Somme in August 1917, is quoted as follows:

"Both sides are too strong for a finish yet. God knows how long it will be at this rate. None of us will ever see its end and children still at school will have to take it over." (p 72).

Betty herself reiterates this theme in her 1918 letters: "... and the war won't be over this year ..." (4/1/1918); "... next Xmas the war won't be over ..." (14/2/1918); and "... how many thousands of young lives are lost again and it won't be over soon..." (29/3/1918).

The above letter also mentions Sophie, Lady Gifford, who was Superintendent of a Convalescent Home for Nursing Sisters of the B.E.F. in Cannes at the time. Lady Gifford was mentioned in despatches, and was awarded a Star and two Medals in 1914. She was the wife of the 3rd Baron Gifford, and daughter of General Alfred Street, C.B., and had been attached to the Army Nursing Service during the Anglo-Boer War, for which she was decorated. Lady Gifford died in 1947.

23 December 1917

... I am having such a beautiful Xmas tree for my men ... Mrs Casalis and all the Doctors are coming to my fete ... and we are having a big concert for the staff. We first have our Xmas dinner – heaps of people have been asked to it –

Next Xmas I'll be at home ...

By December 1917 the British had lost 300 000 men at Passchendaele (near Ypres) and the battle had been fought to a stalemate. The prospects for 1918 were not hopeful.

*A Biographical sketch re the author of this article, who is a senior lecturer Dept of English, University of Pretoria, appears at the end of part one of the article in *Militaria* 15/1 of 1985.