

Recount Years 10 to 12: 'Dear Mother, I lost all but my life', Sydney Morning Herald, 17th July 2010

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Exactly 94 years after he survived the Battle of Fromelles, James Murgatroyd Holgate's tender letters home to his parents infuse new life into his story, writes Paola Totaro.



Caption: Letters bring back memories ... Holgate's daughter Helen and the pair in wartime (right). Photo: Anna Kucera

The letters sat forgotten in an old trunk for decades, scores of them amid the dust of three generations. Reams of brittle army paper covered with neat, stylish cursive reaching across time to share the visceral horror - and rare, small joys - shared by men at war.

James Murgatroyd Holgate, "Roy" or "Murg" to his mates, fought in both world wars but spoke very little of his experiences in life, even to his family.

Heading

Introduction to the topic, the Battle of Fromelles, which contextualises the historical era

Image included

Caption included

Creates a personal connection to the piece and draws the reader in

The use of nicknames makes the subject more relatable for the reader



Caption: Dispatches from the front ... World War I digger James Murgatroyd Holgate in uniform.

Use of image and caption

Now, exactly 94 years after he survived the monstrous Battle of Fromelles, the tender missives sent by Holgate to his parents in Australia have emerged to infuse new life to the place where so many, including his much-loved mate, Eric Leask, met their deaths.

Highlights key events

"Should I be spared to return to you I will be able to recount to you what war is like, not the glory of it but the horrors of it," he wrote on July 23, 1916.

Use of primary evidence and a first-hand account of war experience

"After the action we went into billets just in rear of firing line and as we passed along the road I noticed a burial service being held in a British Soldiers' Cemetery. I walked over to the graveside to pay last respects to a fallen comrade and when I got there I found it was Leask ... I am going to write to his people."

For Helen Simmons, 72, "Roy" Holgate was just dad. The youngest of his six children, Helen remembers him as a loving figure but also, a religious, rather stern man: "He was 43 when I was born. I don't remember him speaking about either war but I do remember he had a friend who must have served and they used to sit on the verandah and talk and talk and he always went on the Anzac Day march.

Daughter remembers own experiences with her father

"Reading the letters made me realise that he once was care-free and then later ... well, he wasn't. He was very serious. I really felt I knew him better after reading them, he had had girls writing to him, he played tennis, they socialised. Once, he too had been a regular, young chap."

Daughter reflects on how the war experience seemed to have changed her father. Recollection used as a lead into his military service.

<p>"Roy" Holgate enlisted on July 12, 1915, a couple of months after his 21st birthday. The young man's letters are meticulously dated and span the 2½ years, from his arrival in Egypt for training, the brutal summer battle on the Western Front and a final, terrible winter suffering trench foot in the icy nightmare of the Somme Valley trenches.</p> <p>The early letters home, however, bristle with the raw excitement of a young fellow travelling abroad and are made all the more poignant by his innocence and ignorance of the horror that was to come.</p> <p>"I shall never forget the trip to Alexandria. The night was beautiful moonlight ... I lay awake for hours wondering a good deal about what the future had in store for us, enjoying the interesting things we saw . . . it was festive season and the mosques and minarets were alight and a band was playing," he wrote.</p> <p>Sailing to France, on a "beautiful, big ship", he revelled in weather "perfect so that the Mediterranean was wonderfully calm and of a rich, deep blue". Even on the train heading from Marseilles, along the river Rhone towards the Western Front, the scenery stirred a natural delight: "I thought as we sped along the course of that grand old river, that ... it was truly sublime and description could only convey to you but a very faint idea of its loveliness."</p> <p>Bone tired but ever the bright-eyed optimist, Holgate and his brigade arrived at their farmhouse billet on July 7, where "a good meal caused us soon to forget our weariness".</p> <p>The respite would not last: "Here we first heard the boom of the guns and saw for the first time anti-aircraft shells bursting high in the air near an aeroplane and these things stirred for us for we felt that at last we could take an active part in fighting the detestable Hun."</p> <p>While British forces had been in action in Belgium and France since 1914, Fromelles - where Roy would soon find himself - was the first theatre on the Western Front that involved Australian troops.</p> <p>A day or so later, issued with their kit, "steel helmet and gas mask", Holgate and his brigade embarked on the march he would describe vividly in a speech to his local church in 1920. The men had all undergone gruelling training on the sands of the Sinai Desert but had comforted themselves that the going in France couldn't be any tougher thanks to cooler weather and better roads: "We had not counted on the 60lb [27 kilogram] dead weights. ... men just dropped especially from the leading battalion and by the time they got to destination, 50 per cent had fallen to the rear."</p> <p>On July 10, as they reached an area just south of the Belgian border, they stopped. Here, reality began to dawn.</p>	<p>Key details about the beginning of his military career</p> <p>Use of sequencing words to distinguish between early letters and later letters. This also helps to highlight how the military service changed Holgate.</p> <p>Uses key geographic places to help sequence the text</p> <p>Use of connect word 'respite' to join together the idea from the previous paragraph</p> <p>Use of key terms ('Hun'- slang for German soldier)</p> <p>Use of word first to indicate multiple theatres were fought in</p>
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<p>"The loud rat-rat of several machine guns and of numerous rifles and the intermittent shelling of field guns and trench mortars and the brilliant flares shooting upwards into the sky made us feel as if we were going into real hot action and we felt too that we would tested here as never before in our lives and we must steel our hearts," he wrote.</p> <p>"That was our greatest hope - that we might acquit ourselves and that even the supreme test of death would not find us wanting and for many that test was not long delayed which for all was very severe."</p> <p>And so it would be, July 19, the 24 hours often described as the "worst day in Australian military history" and a cruel blink in time that saw 5533 casualties and about 2000 dead. "From the very start, we were exposed to murderous machine gun and rifle fire also shrapnel and high-explosive shells from our left flank," he wrote four days later.</p> <p>Still concussed, suffering shellshock and trying to shield his parents from the true terror of what he had seen, he continued: "Under these conditions we had to dig the trench ... the strain was terrific. Before we had dug in and provided ourselves with a bit of cover our casualties were heavy and it was then that we lost some of our finest men. All through the night we worked under a most terrific bombardment, losing men from shrapnel, high explosive and machine gun all the time only not so rapidly as when we first commenced before dark."</p> <p>Helen Simmons, her sister Ruth and brother David read the letters together a few months ago after their older brother, Peter - custodian of the correspondence after their mother died in 1973 - passed away. Another brother, Jim, she says, had always wanted to look in the trunk but died seven years ago, never quite getting around to it.</p> <p>"I found the letter written on July 23 the most moving ... I was touched about Eric Leask and have since found a letter from his family, saying they were instigating a memorial scholarship in memory of him," Helen said.</p> <p>Roy Holgate, meticulous throughout his life, wrote to the families of all his dead friends, describing a happy moment, a comrade's final bravery, a comforting memory in a bid to temper their grief.</p> <p>Among the hundreds of letters are their grateful, if heart-rending replies.</p> <p>"I found that very moving, too," said his daughter quietly. "And I was happy to read the letters written in England ... that he did have some happy times meeting up with his relatives there."</p> <p>On Monday, when the long-lost men of Pheasant Wood are laid to rest in the new Commonwealth Cemetery in the little town of Fromelles, Helen Simmons will attend the memorial service in Sydney. Her</p>	<p>Detailed descriptions used of the battlefield and conditions</p> <p>Key factual detail places Holgate's experiences with the broader context of the battle and the war</p> <p>Recalls the discovery of the letters</p> <p>Family members share their own experiences and feelings on the letter collection</p> <p>Brings the reader back to the main focus of the article, the</p>
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<p>beloved dad survived but he did not emerge unscathed.</p> <p>Roy Holgate was discharged from service on March 16, 1918, judged "medically unfit".</p> <p>He was only 23.</p>	<p>Fromelles battle and concludes with the end of Holgate's military service.</p> <p>A simple statement which sums up the brutality of the conflict</p>
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