

FORGET ME NOT

WILLIAM PITMAN

LEE COBB'S GRANDFATHER

My grandfather William Pitman was a Lance Bombardier in 14th Light Division, D Battery, 47th Brigade of the Royal Field Artillery and according to his medal record he joined up on 19th April 1915.

On 3rd June 1919 grandfather was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal and the following citation appeared in the Third supplement to The London Gazette on Tuesday 9th March 1920: *1017 L/Bdr. W Pitman, D/47th Bde. FA (Bristol). He served continuously in the Battery and has served in France for more than three and a half years. During that time he has always been a splendid example under fire, and has the reputation of being afraid of nothing. During the March offensive, he was one of the last to leave his gun after all ammunition was exhausted, having put his gun out of action he then joined the infantry with a rifle.*

At the time of the First World War the RFA was responsible for the medium calibre guns and howitzers deployed close to the front line and was organised into brigades. 'A' brigade was the tactical unit of the RFA and it comprised a number of Batteries. The 14th Light Division served on the Western Front throughout the war.

My uncle has grandfather's medals but my mother has a set of small replica medals and she had these put into a frame along with grandfather's cap badge and his Distinguished Conduct Medal citation.

I didn't know my grandfather, he died before I was born. My mother told me that when she went round to tell her father that she was expecting her second baby, me, she was greeted by the news that he had that day taken his life by walking into and drowning in the village pond.



NELLIE BYTHEWAY

CATHERINE HAWORTH'S GREAT, GREAT AUNT

My Forget Me Not is based on the letters that Nellie wrote to her brother Percy, my great grandfather, during the war. It is a little unusual as neither Nellie nor Percy were engaged in war work, Nellie worked as a book-keeper for The Northern Assurance Company Ltd based in Birmingham and Percy was an engineer and was living with his family in Glasgow and I think worked for the Post Office.

The most striking thing about the letters is how little mention there is of the war, they are full of references to birthdays, illnesses, lodging houses, holidays, children and petty family squabbles, in short, the things that everyday life is made of. Should I be surprised by this? Probably not, I think they document a typical relationship between brother & sister even if it was being conducted during a time of great upheaval and sadness.

Nellie was born on 3rd July 1877 and Percy was six years older, they had five sisters. Nellie never married and lived most of her adult life in rooms in respectable boarding houses. It's very clear from the letters that by 1914 she was firmly on the shelf and a very independent, demanding spinster. This extract from a letter dated 12th April 1914 is typical of the scolding Percy received on a regular basis *I believe tomorrow is the date of your birthday & I am just sending a line - if I can possibly write one with these awful 4 Oaks pens!Daisy thanks you for your formal acknowledgement of her photograph - at last. You are quite incorrigible as regards your correspondence aren't you?*

Daisy, Percy & Nellie's sister was a VAD as this extract from a Christmas Day letter in 1916, reporting that their father has pneumonia, shows. *You can imagine from this that we are having a sad time today not a bit like Christmas. I came on Saturday expecting to find everyone well & was met by this news. Miss Garrett is still here & Daisy now sees she must give up her VAD work for the time being*

In July 1917 Percy commits the unforgivable sin of forgetting his father's birthday and receives the full force of Nellie's ire, *I passed your birthday this year & you passed mine - & today was Pa's 85th & you have not remembered that, nor written for months & months & we shall all be glad of news of you & Louise & the childrenIs there any thought in your mind of coming down here or does the expensiveness of it put it quite out of the question? I think you might come if possible, if impossible then at least evince a little interest by letter - considering Pa's great age.....*

By April 1918 the war was beginning to be discussed as these extracts from a very long letter dated April 1918 demonstrate, though it is now Nellie who has to apologise for the lack of letters *Just a quick line to greet you on your birthday & to wish you many happy returns of the day! You are not quite forgotten you see, tho' it is many ages since I wrote I'm sure. I was glad to have your little note & Willa's card at Christmas & regretted not having sent to you but there's always such a rush of work on then & things get crowded out..... Are you fearfully busy like everywhere else, all the capables gone & a crowd of inexperienced incapables in their place? What about this new Man Power bill will it affect you? [An amendment to The UK Military services Act was published in April 1918 that extended conscription to men aged 17 to 51] Things are looking very serious aren't they? Elsie & Felix have run away from London & taken rooms five minutes away from mine..... Elsie is very homesick & Harry is having a very uncomfortable time but he is more comfortable knowing that they are safe in times of air raid.....*

It continued to be "many ages" between letters as reference is made to Armistice Day in a letter dated 1st June 1919 *What happened in Glasgow on 11th November? Birmingham went quite mad & ran quite loose, London even more so, as you will have read.....*

This correspondence between Nellie and her beloved brother Percy lasted their entire lives and contains details of so many everyday events, poignant facts, the highs and lows, delights and despairs of everyday families and their lives. It has been a wonderful experience for me, bringing these two amazing characters "back to life" and getting to know them so well through their letters.

