

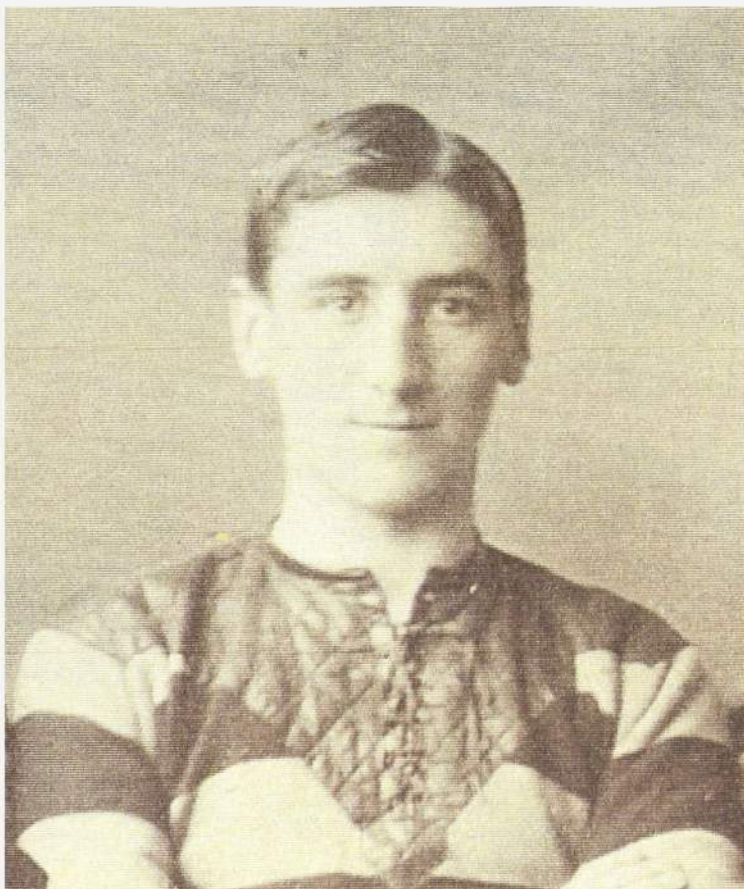
# **Driver Abroad**

**The Early Wartime Letters of  
William 'Bill' Haig**

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William 'Bill' Haig**

**Published September 2017**



Bill Haig, age 22, from a 1911 photo of the Mornington Association Football Club Senior Team.

*Source: Tim Linzey collection.*

On August 21st, 1914, less than three weeks after Britain declared war on Germany, William Kerr Haig, the third son of James and Jane ('Jeannie') Haig of 2 Lawrence Street, Mornington, Dunedin, enlisted in the Otago Mounted Rifles.

Two months later, he sailed from Wellington with the 1st New Zealand Expeditionary Force, bound for the Middle East.

William (also known as 'Bill' or 'Willie') was aged 25.

Once at sea, he began writing letters home to his mother describing his experiences. This booklet reproduces this early correspondence, tracing Bill's sea voyage to Egypt via Colombo and Suez, and his time in Cairo, Gallipoli and Alexandria serving as a Driver with the New Zealand Division's supply and transport arm ('Divisional Train').





# R. HUDSON & CO. LTD

MANUFACTURERS  
OF

*Biscuits, Confectionery,  
Tea & Chocolate.*



Branches at  
CHRISTCHURCH, WELLINGTON, AUCKLAND.

DUNEDIN, N.Z. 25th August, 1914.

Mr. W. Haig,

DUNEDIN.

Dear Haig,

The employees of Messrs. R. Hudson & Co. Ltd., are very proud of your loyalty to your King and the Empire in volunteering for the Front.

They wish you to accept this "Wrist Watch" to remind you when away of your old workmates.

Wishing you success, and a safe return.

*Geo Thurgood and*

Signed on behalf of the employees.

A letter to Bill Haig on behalf of the employees of R. Hudson and Company Limited, Dunedin, acknowledging his enlistment. Bill was a clerk with the company.

Source: Tim Linzey collection.



# Letter 1 - 20 October 1914

## Expeditionary Force

HMNZ Transport no 9.

20 Oct 1914

Dear Mother

I am taking the opportunity to let you know I am doing alright. We expect to be in Hobart tomorrow morning after taking in water, which will take about twenty-four hours. We will sail again for Fremantle, another five days sail, where we expect to stay a fortnight to give the horses a rest.

The trip up till now has been a very enjoyable one. The sea has been just like a mill pond, so you see we have very little to complain of.

It's a bit of a change for me to be at sea for five days at a stretch and it seems just the thing.

The fleet of ten transports are sailing about two miles apart with the Japanese cruiser and the British cruiser scouting away on the other side. The Germans would get pretty roughly handled if they took to us.

There has been a good deal of sea sickness this time due I think more to fright than anything else. A good few will be glad to get ashore tomorrow for a few hours to recuperate.

I expect Dave is on either the 'Star of India' or the 'Waimana' and I will have a good look out tomorrow to see him. It will be a hard job I suppose as we are only going ashore for a two hour route march and no leave will be granted on any account.

I wonder how you are all doing at home. How does Fred shape as the chief of the house? I expect to see his name figuring in cricket scores when I next get a Dunedin paper. Remember me to Mrs Cain and tell her that I am going to get that elephant tooth the first chance I have. Walter I suppose is still taking the good old game on for Mornington, and Evie I am sure will pass that exam and secure a good Government situation.

Frances and Edith are I hope all just as good friends as they were before I left. Poor little Jean. How are her poor little teeth? I suppose it is those new ones coming through. We are having a dental inspection in a day or two and I'm afraid I am doomed to lose a few of my tusks. Perhaps it will be just as well.

I think I have written all there is worth writing just at present, but if I get a chance I will let you know if I have seen Dave tomorrow evening. So Mother I will close here. Hoping that this will find you in your usual bright spirit as it leaves the writer.

Yours affectionately

Bill

P.S. Don't believe all you hear about our rough time. Up till now it has been a jolly good holiday.



H.M.N.Z. Transport  
28 Oct 1914

My Dear Mother

We have just steamed  
into Albany after a six days sojourn  
from Hobart. It is rumoured that after  
coaling here we are to sail straight for  
England via Colombo.

I was sorry I was not permitted to see  
Dad in Hobart. From what I hear he is  
on the "Star of India" which is  
close behind us. She seems to be a  
very poor sea boat. No wonder  
he was so sick the first night  
out. Our boat is reckoned to be the  
best sea boat of the lot. Most of  
the time we forget we are on a boat  
at all, she runs along so smooth.

There was a very impressive scene  
Monday afternoon when <sup>that</sup> poor man Gale  
from Gore was buried off the Quaker.  
To see all the boats including the  
cruisers shut off steam for about five  
minutes and sound the last post I can tell



## Letter 2 - 28 October 1914

HMNZ Transport no 9.

28 Oct 1914

My Dear Mother

We have just steamed into Albany after a six days sail from Hobart. It is rumoured that after coaling here we are to sail straight for England via Colombo.

I was sorry I was not permitted to see Dave in Hobart. From what I hear he is on the 'Star of India' which is sailing close behind ours. She seems to be a very poor sea boat. No wonder he was so sick the first night out. Our boat is reckoned to be the best sea boat of the lot. Most of the time we forget we are on a boat at all, she runs along so smoothly.

There was a very impressive scene on Monday afternoon where that poor man Galebros from Gore was buried off the Ruapehu. To see all the boats including the cruisers shut off steam for about five minutes and sound the last post, I can tell you mother it was something to be remembered. There has been very little sickness on our boat. The infantry have undergone inoculations for typhoid. It seems to tie them up for a day or two. They say we get ours on Friday.

Well Mother I think I have written all I can think of at present so I will close here with best love to all

Affectionately yours

Bill

P.S. Hope you have been collecting the 14/-. The paymaster tells me it is to be paid every month. We are only paid 1/- a day on the boat but this is not much use as we are not able to spend it.



Camp. Zertun  
Cairns

27/12/14

Dear Mother

I have always attempted to write long before this but some how I have usually just managed to miss the mail

Daoc has written and I suppose he has given you a fair idea as to what sort of a time we are having. Your two letters and papers came to hand about a week ago and I might say I was very pleased to hear that you and all the family were keeping well.

They are not censoring our letters after arriving so this makes letter writing much easier for us now.

The voyage in Transport No 9 was a great experience for one who had never left New Zealand before.

It was a seven weeks ordeal I don't want to go through again. Although Daoc and I and in fact all the Māori



## Letter 3 - 27 December 1914

Camp Zeitoun

Cairo

27/12/14

Dear Mother

I have always attempted to write long before this but somehow I have usually just managed to miss the mail.

Dave has written and I suppose he has given you a fair idea as to what sort of a time we are having.

Your two letters and papers came to hand about a week ago and I might say I was very pleased to hear that you and all the family were keeping well.

They are not censoring our letters after arriving so this makes letter writing much easier for us now.

The voyage in Transport no 9 was a great experience for ones who had never left New Zealand before. It was a seven weeks ordeal I don't want to go through again. Although Dave and I and in fact all the Mornington boys are none the worse for it, we should have been treated much more reasonably.

Well I suppose you will all be anxious to learn when we are to be landed at the front. From what I learn here we have to have everything in readiness by 25th February. There is camped in Egypt at present about 200,000 British troops so you see we are a very small link in a huge army. The papers in N.Z. will be full of accounts of our doings, so I suppose it is useless me trying to let you know all that has happened. Every day there is something happening but our ride through Cairo the other day was an eye opener to me.

I think we saw in Cairo one of the dirtiest towns we are likely to see anywhere. It is a wonder to me how the thousands of natives live.

Well mother 'lights out' has just sounded. I am afraid I will have to close here. Hoping this will find all the ones in Good old Dunedin are all in their usual good spirit and Mrs Cane I hope is as bright as ever and hoping to hear from you again soon.

Your affectionate son

Bill

P.S. As there are cheap cable rates tomorrow, I am cabling New Year greetings from Dave and I and you will understand that this leaves us both in the very best of spirits.





Bill Haig (right) with his younger brother David in Cairo, circa. January 1915.

*Source: Tim Linzey collection.*

## Letter 4 - 21 June 1915

21st June [1915]

Alexandria

My Dear Mother

Just a line before the mail closes to let you know I am well and keeping well.

Things on the Peninsula are, from what we hear, very much the same as we left them. I had a message from Dave yesterday and you will be pleased to hear that he is doing A.I.

His lieutenant is in Alexandria and will be going back on Thursday. I am sending Dave some Condensed Milk and tinned fruit which is very scarce over where he is. It will never do to have 'our' Dave going without his milk.

Well Mother I suppose you will be expecting to get some news from us, but the NZ papers which we get every week supply us with more information than we get here.

Our company is still waiting orders to move off any day. Goodness knows where. I don't see where the horses will ever be of any use on the Peninsula.

Our camp is situated on a splendid beach and during the day we are practically living in the water. When I tell you the temperature is never much under 100 you will know it is pretty hot.

I don't know how we will stand old Dunedin's frost and Scotch Mist after living in a climate like this. Just fancy the first time we saw a shower of rain since leaving the transport was on the Peninsula about a month ago.

The mails since going to the Peninsula must have fallen into evil hands as I have not received one since leaving Zeitoun.

Dave will be getting his alright because I think they are sending all the mail to the Peninsula.

I might tell you I am just beginning to get anxious to get back to Gaba Tepe. It is getting very monotonous here, no excitement at all.

They are singing out for the mail so I will have to leave off till [next] week.

Hoping this finds you all in the best of form.

Affect yours

Bill



Side Bisle

6/7/15

My Dear Mother

I have just received several letters from you which I think must have been sent all over Egypt before coming here. It was the first news I had received since leaving Zentr and I may tell you I was very pleased to hear that you <sup>are</sup> all doing well.

I am enclosing some snapshots which Dave sent me from the peninsula. They will give you a very fair idea of the country on which our men made the famous landing.

I had a letter from Dave the other day and you will be pleased to hear that he is still safe and sound.

We are still camped on this beach waiting for orders to move any day. I don't think they will ever require us at the Dardanelles again as horses would never be of any use on such rough country. The country is more suited for mules. I would not be surprised if we get orders to go to England very shortly.

I don't know where you got that rumour about me being laid up from as there has never



*Sidi Bishr*  
*6/7/15*

## Letter 5 - 6 July 1915

*My Dear Mother*  
Sidi Bishr

6/7/15

My Dear Mother

I have just received several letters from you which I think must have been sent all over Egypt before coming here. It was the first news I had received since leaving Zeitoun and I may tell you I was very pleased to hear that you are all doing well.

Well mother, I will have to close here hoping this will find you all in the best of spirits. With best love to all.

Yours affect  
Bill

I am enclosing some snapshots which Dave sent me from the peninsula. They will give you a very fast idea of the country on which our men made the famous landing.

I had a letter from Dave the other day and you will be pleased to hear that he is still safe and sound.

We are still camped on this beach waiting for orders to move any day. I don't think they will ever require us at the Dardanelles again as horses would never be of any use on such rough country. The country is more suited for mules. I would not be surprised if we get orders to go to England very shortly.

I don't know where you got that rumour about me being laid up from, as there has never been anything wrong with me as far as I can remember.

I have just been reading the casualty list in the Otago Witness. The Otago Infantry has caught it pretty hot. It is very hard to get any information from the authorities here. I have not run across any Otago boys in the hospitals here, they must be all up at Cairo or Malta.

The weather here is still very warm. If it wasn't for the surf bathing I don't know how we would get on.

I suppose Andy [Andrew Haig, Bill's brother] is now settled down to married life. I must send him my congratulations, this mail. I suppose that's all he can expect from a hard up soldier.



that I got  
camped with  
their first rate  
The Holderness is comp  
about five miles away  
from us and the his  
completely recovered and  
his wounds are I think  
looking forward to go  
back with some  
in fire yet

10 Oct 1911  
Pidi Bask  
Alexand

My Dear Mother

I have nothing  
new to let you know about  
our poor Dave's death but  
I am living in hopes that you  
have received all details by  
mail. After making all sorts of  
enquiries here I can find out  
nothing as to how he died  
You will be pleased to hear  
that I had the pleasure of seeing  
our Fred, who is looking the part  
of condition on the Maheno  
which is sailed for England  
last Friday. Since coming  
here they have been employ  
carrying wounded from Gallipoli  
to Lemnos and Malta. And  
from what he tells me they have  
been kept very busy but he  
seems to have settled down  
to the work like an old hand



## Letter 6 - 10 October 1915

10th Oct 1915

Sidi Bishr

Alexandria

My Dear Mother

I have nothing new to let you know about our poor Dave's death but I am living in hopes that you have received all details by mail. After making all sorts of enquiries here I can find out nothing as to how he died.

You will be pleased to hear that I had the pleasure of seeing our Fred who is looking the picture of condition on the Maheno, which sailed for England last Friday. Since coming here they have been employed conveying wounded from Gallipoli to Lemnos and Malta and from what he tells me they have been kept very busy, but he seems to have settled down to the work like an old hand.

From England they say here that the Maheno is to take disabled men home to N.Z. This means that you will no doubt have Fred home again in about two months. While in Alexandria the boys of the ship were given a trip up to Cairo which they all enjoyed greatly.

There does not seem much chance of our company moving for some time yet. We are doing all sorts of transport work around Alexandria and with the weather becoming cooler it is not such a bad job, from all accounts much better than being in Gallipoli.

I have not run across any of the boys you mentioned in your letters. There are very few of the New Zealand wounded sent here now. They are mostly sent to Malta, Cyprus or Cairo.

Well Mother as the mail is just about to close I will close here.

Love to all

Ever your affect Son

Bill

P.S. Stuart Fyffe is camped with us here and is doing first rate, Bill.

Vic Holderness is camped about five miles away from us. He has completely recovered from his wounds and is looking forward to going back, but I think he will have to stay here for some time yet.





Bill's mother, Jane 'Jeannie' Haig (nee Kerr). From a photograph taken at the Kapai Studio, Dunedin.

*Source: Tim Linzey collection.*



Teams of horses and wagons at a NZ Army Service Corps ration dump, 1917. Bill Haig was experienced with horses and before the war had worked for the Luggate Transport Company in Central Otago.

*Source: Alexander Turnbull Library, Reference: 1/2-012904-G, Photographer: Henry Armytage Sanders.*



A New Zealand artillery gun and gun crew at the Battle of Messines.

*Source: Royal New Zealand Returned and Services' Association: New Zealand official negatives, World War 1914-1918. Ref: 1/4-009467-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington,*

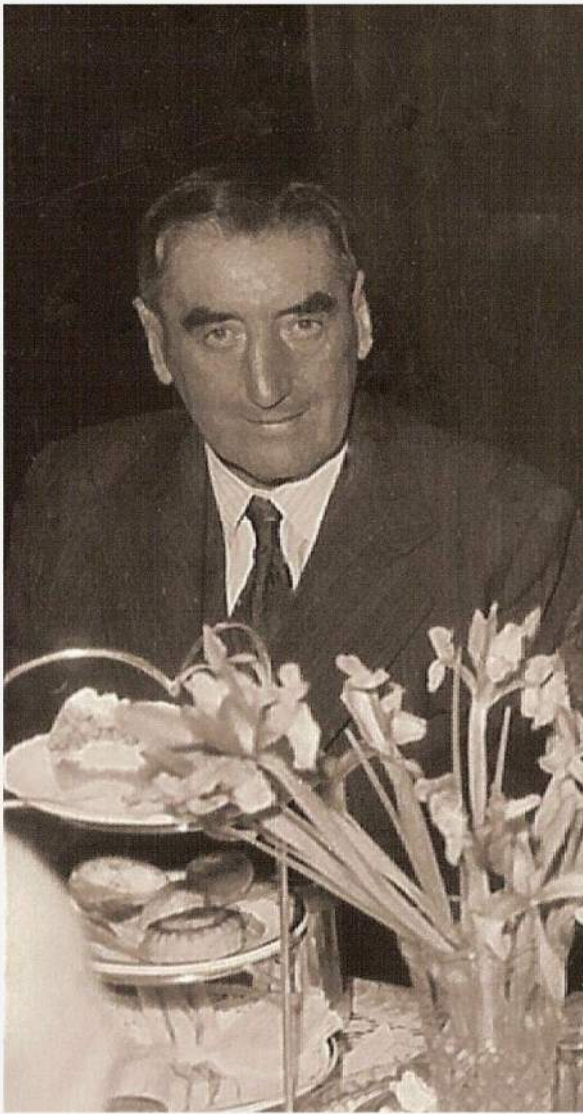


The events Bill describes in these letters were only the start of his war experiences. By mid-1916, he and many other NZ Division supply and transport drivers had been transferred to the Western Front in France and Belgium. In total, Bill spent over three years on active service in the Middle East, Gallipoli and Western Europe.

On June 9th 1917, at Messines, shortly after a successful major offensive by NZ and Australian forces, Bill was driving a team of horses towing a loaded wagon when a nearby artillery battery opened fire. The horses bolted, overturning the wagon. Bill was trapped underneath, sustaining a broken pelvis and other serious injuries.

Following surgery and several months of hospital care in France and England, Bill was invalided home on the hospital ship 'Marama', arriving at Port Chalmers on 30 December 1917. He was met at the dockside by his mother, Jeannie, who, because no public transport was available at the time, had walked all the way from Dunedin to Port Chalmers to meet the ship.

Although he lived to age 74, Bill never fully-recovered from his injuries.



Bill Haig in 1954, at the wedding dinner for his niece Agnes Hodges (nee Haig).

*Source: Agnes Hodges collection.*



*Acknowledgements:* We are very grateful to Tim Linzey, nephew of Bill Haig, for preserving and making available the letters reproduced here.

This booklet has been compiled and edited by Ian Hodges and Caroline Maskill. Free digital copies of the booklet and other WWI Haig family history material can be obtained by emailing [hodgian@gmail.com](mailto:hodgian@gmail.com) or by downloading them from the following website:  
[nzfamilyhistorysearch.com](http://nzfamilyhistorysearch.com)

Other booklets available include:

*From the Maheno to Mornington: Fred Haig's Wartime Letters Home.*

*Signalman at Gallipoli: The Wartime Diary of David Kerr Haig.*

*Signalman at Gallipoli: The Wartime Letters of David Kerr Haig.*

N.Z. Expeditionary Force

N.M.N.Z. Transport no 9

20 Oct

1914

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The trip up till now has been very enjoyable and the conditions have been just like a mill pond so you see we have very little to complain of.

It's a bit of change for me to be at sea for five days at a stretch and so seems just the thing.

The fleet of ten transports are sailing about two miles apart with the Japanese cruiser fifteen miles one side of us and the British cruiser scouting away on the other side. The Germans would get pretty roughly handled if they took to us.

There has been a good deal of gossip