

Cuthbert Henry Peerless (1892–1918) was the eldest child of Amelia Peerless (nee Garrett) and Henry Heathfield Peerless, a Brighton timber merchant whose diaries have been published by Day Books under the title A Brief Jolly Change. Cuthbert enlisted in the Inns of Court Officer Training Corps on 25 January 1916, and went into camp at Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire; but if he kept a diary at that time, there is no record of it. These brief diary entries from May to August 1917 have only survived because of a transcript made by his nephew James. The original diary has vanished, and the text below is a copy of James Peerless's transcript.

The diary is a good illustration of the familiar saying that war consists of 'long periods of boredom, punctuated by moments of sheer terror'. Momentous events – a gas attack, the deaths of comrades – are described with little emotion; and when Cuthbert falls from his horse on 19 July, there is no indication that the resulting wounds would later kill him.

Diary for 1917

2nd. Lt. C.H. Peerless, 3rd. Royal Sussex Regt.

Wed. May 23

Spent night at Imperial Hotel Russell Sque. London. Met Reg at Vic. Had intended to have share a room with Golby at Strand Palace but when I got there Hotel was full so went on to Imperial & expected Golby to turn up later. He did not come so I went to bed about 11. o'clock.

Thur. May 24

Rose 5.30 am. taxi to Vic. Left Vic 7.50 am. Folk. abt 10.30. Left Folkestone 5.50 pm. Arrived Boulogne 7.30 pm. Wonderful sight on quay. Spent night Hotel Dervaux. In great form with my French. Very hot. Princess Clementine, an old paddle tub.

Fri. May 25

Rose 8.0 am. Weird noises in street while dressing. Entrained at 10.0 am. left for Etaples at 11.0 am. Arrived 12.30 pm. Very hot.

Sat. May 26

Inoculated this morning. Excused duty 48 hours. Looked round the camp, it is a wonderful place, very hot.

Sun. May 27

Arm better this morning. Went to Paris Plage in afternoon, disappointed with the place. Did some shopping in my very best French. Extremely hot.

Mon. May 28

Arm better. Paris Plage afternoon.

Tues. May 29

1st day in Bull Ring, Gas, A wonderful sight, takes ½ hour to clear. Parade Ground. About 10,000 troops.

Wed. May 30

Bull Ring. Bayonet Fighting. Water supply stopped owing to pump breaking.

Thur. May 31

Bull Ring. Water still off.

Fri. Jun. 1

Bull Ring. Water still off. Washed in same old stuff, very thick.

Sat. Jun. 2

Bull Ring. Water on again. Had good wash. Recd orders to "go up the line", Shout Hurrah, on learning that all the people who went to Reading are to go to The Pioneers (8th Battn).

Sun. Jun. 3

Rose 4.30 am. Left Etaples 7.45 am. Arrived Bouquemaision abt 1.0 o'clock. Kit left behind at Etaples. Walked to billet in a beautiful village called Souich. Spent sleepless night, very cold.

Mon. Jun. 4

Rose 7.0 am. Did nothing all day.

Tues. Jun. 5

Still at Le Souich. Recd orders to leave & proceed to Div.nl Base on the morrow.

Wed. Jun. 6

Left Le Souich 9.15 am. Marched to Beaumetz a distance of abt 15 miles. Very hot, towards finish developed into a crawl. Spent night here. Golby ill, was it the lobster or the wine? I am not feeling particularly well, the same question repeated.

Thur. Jun. 7

Paraded 10. o'clock. I feel very ill after dinner last night off tinned lobster. M.O. gives me large dose Castor Oil & Chlorodine, this eases me. We proceeded by rail to camp at Mercatel. After dinner watch guns barking in distance sleep well in spite of this.

Fri. Jun. 8

Rose 7.30. Interview C.O. 9.30. Posted to B Coy, was guided by orderly to Coy. H.qrs in a sunken road abt 4 miles from front line. Terrific gun fire from our guns in neighbourhood. There are some about 400 yds up road. Commenced at about 10pm. a big straffe until abt 12 m/n. Watched flashes for some time, then went to bed. Concert.

Sat. Jun. 9

Rose 8.0 a.m. Black day. Am i/c No. 7 Platoon. We are digging near front line to-night. Start from here 9.0 pm. Dug portion of front line trench in No-man's-land very quiet. A few Hun shells (whizz-bangs) near us when leaving. Slept well, got into bed 4.30 am.

Sun. Jun. 10

Rose 11.30 am. Did nothing all day, on night work. Commenced 9.0 pm, finished 2.15 am, to bed 3.30 am. Some birthday.

Mon. Jun. 11

Rose 1.30 am. Moved back to rear camp at 2.15 pm. Did nothing during rest of day. Share a shanty with Goldring. Slept well.

Tues. Jun. 12

I have a day off to-day. Goldring & I decide to rebuild our hut. With the help of our batmen we erect a lovely shanty which is the envy of everybody. Concert.

Wed. Jun. 13

Rose 6.45 am. Take the Coy. To the baths at Boiry-Becquerelle. Walk back by myself to breakfast at 8.30 am. Morning off. Afternoon cricket match 7 v 5. I made 2 runs.

Thur. Jun. 14

Morning off. Proceed to Earls Court at 12.15 pm. to put down grids. Back to camp 7.0 pm. Saw Huns put up barrage R. of Monchy while up at the trenches.

Fri. Jun. 15

Morning training. Cricket match 7 v 6 afternoon. I caught 1st ball.

Sat. Jun. 16

Whole Coy. had day off to prepare for march to rest. Very hot indeed.

Sun. Jun. 17

Rose 1.15 am. Parade 3.50 am. to march back to rest. Quite comfortable marching until the sun comes up, for the last 5 miles the march was very fatiguing. Arrived Couin 12.30 – all ranks almost done up, 2 men only from my platoon fall out. Couin is a pretty spot but very inconvenient. Severe thunderstorm. I did not hear it, so tired.

Mon. Jun. 18

Parade 8.30 am. Inspection of kit, feet etc. rest of day free. Another storm to-day. Walked to St. Léger before dinner with Golby.

Tues. Jun. 19

Rose 7.30 am. Had lovely warm bath. Then breakfast. No parades to-day. Officers conference to-day at 11 am. C.O. informs us that our rest will not last much longer. One or two showers to-day, also thunder.

Wed. Jun. 20

Rose 7.30 am. Warm bath again before breakfast. No parades all day. Very heavy rain during day. Fortunately Goldring & I have a tent which is waterproof.

Thur. Jun. 21

Left Couin 9.0 am. Marched to Saulty L'Arbret, entrained and left 5.19 pm. passing through Doullens, Frevent, St. Pol, Hazebrouck.

Fri. Jun. 22

Arrived Poperinguique 2.45 am. Detrained at a siding & marched to camp arriving 7.30 am. Very tired & it is raining. Get under canvas, have some eggs & bacon 10.30 am. Get a little sleep during remainder of the day. Devonshire Camp.

Sat. Jun. 23

Am awakened 7.30 am. & told Coy. is parading 8.15 am. Get some hustle on & get on parade. I am detailed to hand Camp over to Town Major. Have great difficulty with him, he accuses me of having lost a lot of his stuff. I know nothing about it. In time however I appease his wrath & all is well. Rest of Battn moves to Winnipeg & Montreal Camp forward. B. Coy. remains.

Sun. Jun. 24

On parade 8.0 am. my platoon constructing Nissen Bow huts. I am very busy looking after things, we finish work at 4.15 pm, quite a good day's work.

Mon. Jun. 25

On parade 8.0 am. Spend morning training. P.T., B.F., Musketry, Arms Drill. Afternoon off, I go into Poperinghe, Quite a nice place. Buy 1 pair pants, Boots, Putties, Socks. Also visit Field Cashier. Run into Golby on turning a corner. Am very pleased with purchases & begin to feel that I don't care if my valise does not turn up, as far as comfort is concerned.

Tues. Jun. 26

Parade 8.0 am. Build huts.

Wed. Jun. 27

On parade 8.0 am. We leave camp to join Battn. this afternoon.

Thur. Jun. 28

Rose 12.30 am. On parade 1.45 am. We work on a Rly, forward, while marching up we get wet through with rain; it pours while we are working. Get home to D. Coy. where we live while doing forward work. Rest & sleep afternoon, retire to bed 9.15 pm. while terrific thunder storm is in progress and sleep well.

Fri. Jun. 29

Rose 2.0 am. Work on railway at Bedford House, at 9.30 am. a few Krupps fall about 300 yds from us, Amm dump blown up 200 yds from us. We got 2 casualties from shell splinters. Pack up 10.0 am., home to camp. Sleep. Concert in evening.

Sat. Jun. 30

Parade 8.30 am. Work on huts Bussiboom. Raining hard all the time, men get wet to the skin. I do too altho' I wear Trench Coat, am utterly miserable, pack up at 1.30 pm. to camp, get into pyjamas while clothes are dried. Where is my valise, how I miss it.

Sun. Jul. 1

Move to forward camp. Very unhealthy spot. Am detailed to return to Winnipeg Camp to rest for 2 days.

Mon. Jul. 2

Breakfast in bed. Still resting. To Poperinghe in afternoon, visit Cashier.

Tues. Jul. 3

Still resting. Morning letter writing. Afternoon Poperinghe.

Wed. Jul. 4

Rose 8.30 am. Slack morning. To forward Camp 5.0 pm. While at dinner Bosch found Amm. Dump near Mess. 1 man wounded. To work 9.0 pm. Finished 12.45 am. Several shells near us while getting to bed. At 1.15 am. a shell hits a dug-out about 6 yds from mine. 4 killed & 9 wounded. We all dress & bunk. Spent remainder night in a field 200 yds away.

Thur. Jul. 5

Get orders to proceed to back Camp. When we get there I find my valise. I now have too much kit. A lot of clothes arrive from home at the same time.

Fri. Jul. 6

To work at Pioneer Camp making our new home. We have a new Gramophone it is A.1.

Sat. Jul. 7

Still at work on Biveys, our new home. We are to move to-morrow.

Sun. Jul. 8

Orders to move to new camp cancelled, we have to stand by for orders. There is not a sound of a gun, Peace must be declared. It is wonderful. To work at 8.0 pm. Look for grids along a road which is being shelled. There undoubtedly is a war on.

Mon. Jul. 9

To bed 5.0 am. Rise 12 midday. To work at 8.0 pm. Carrying grids, fairly quiet round our part of the trenches. The Hun sent over some gas (cloud) it was diluted when it reached us but we put on our Gas Masks. Golby was with me, he is transferred to B. Coy. on this day.

Tues. Jul. 10

To bed 4.30 am. Rise 10.30 am. I am Orderly Dog to-day.

Wed. Jul. 11

Rose 8.0 am. To Poperinghe with Martin 10.45 am, back at Camp 6.0 pm. To work, carrying grids 8.15 pm. A very dirty night, I have 2 men, Lord & Laker killed and Vinall wounded.

Thur. Jul. 12

To bed 3.30 am. Rise 11.30 am. Rest to-day. Hot.

Fri. Jul. 13

Rose 8.0 am. Work at night 8.0 pm. The preparations for the coming Show are in progress. New guns spring up like mushrooms. My platoon carrying grids. Leave work 12.30. Very hot.

Sat. Jul. 14

Arrive home 2.15 am. Breakfast and bed at 4.0 am. Rise 11.0 am. No work to-night. To bed 10.0 pm. could not sleep. Shells coming in back area all night. Terrific rain, thunder.

Sun. Jul. 15

Breakfast in bed. Rise 12.30 pm. Rest to-day. Poperinghe in afternoon. No work to-night. Pioneer Farm shelled, to bed 11.0 pm. Weather fine, fairly cool.

Mon. Jul. 16

Rise 11.0 am. Rest all day. To work 8.0 pm. I dig C.T. 24 yds long, heavy gas shell attack, we are forced to remain in trenches until 3.0 am. We then decide to come home, all goes well till get end Zillebeke Trench, more gas. On reaching the Bund chaos meets our vision, the D.O's have been shelled heavily, a lot of gas about. We (Capt. Golby & self) make

Tues. Jul. 17

our way away from gassed area & eventually get on Denby Track & Thank God we have got through. We feel we must have had laughing gas, for after a while we sing while we stroll home, we are quite happy in spite of what we have been through. To bed 7.0 am. Rise again 10.0 am. unable to sleep. To bed 10.0 pm. I have to go out again at

Wed. Jul. 18

3.0 am. to-day. Goldring is not well. Arrive camp again 10.30 am. To sleep until lunch, 2.30 pm. wrote short note to Ma. Sleep again, dress for dinner 6.0 pm. To bed again 10.0 pm. Sleep well. Rain very heavy.

Thur. Jul. 19

Rise 9.30 & breakfast. Ride to Pop. afternoon damage myself, internally, see M.O. who thinks I'll have to go to Hospital. Am "fed up".

Fri. Jul. 20

Rise 9.0 am. & breakfast. M.O. takes me to Corps Main dressg. Stn. & finally decides to send me to 54 F.A., am pushed on to 17 C.C.S. where I spend the night. Pavitt is with me. Am to go to base tomorrow. Ward C.1.

Sat. Jul. 21

Rise 9.0 am. & wait for train to "somewhere". Entrain 1.30 pm. start journey 4.0 pm pass through St. Omer, Fontaine, Boulogne, Etaples, Abbeville, arrive Tréport our destination at 4.0 am.

Sun. Jul. 22

Taken by the Motor Ambulance driven by ladies to the Hospital, a lovely place on top of a hill. In pre-war days it must have been an Hotel, Trianon. Am shown where my ward is No. 17. 3rd General Hospital. Sleep for a few hours. There are 4 others in the room, one is a Frenchman, 2 others have lost 1 leg ea. they are quite jolly. To sleep 9.30 pm.

Mon. Jul. 23

Am awakened by a nurse who wishes to take my temperature, at 5.30 am. Wash & wait for breakfast, this comes at 8.0 o'clock. Lunch at 12.0 Tea at 4.0 Dinner at 6.30. I spend the intervals sleeping, smoking and reading. To bed or rather to sleep 9.30 pm.

Tues. Jul. 24 Ditto yesterday
Wed. 25 Ditto yesterday
Thur. 26 Ditto yesterday
Fri. 27 Ditto
Sat. 28 Ditto
Sun. 29 Ditto
Mon. 30 Ditto

Tues. Jul. 31 Ditto. There is a rumour that I am going to be sent to England. There is an evacuation at 6.0 pm. Very wet.

Wed. Aug. 1

Wake & fine myself still here at 5.0 am. Spend day as others. Am definitely for England soon. Very wet.

Thur. Aug. 2

Still here. Same routine. Very wet.

Fri. Aug. 3

Ditto. There is a definite rumour that we leave here at 6.0 o'clock this afternoon, I wonder. T's correct so far that Hamilton & Ritson go, I do not. That leaves M. Bugnard, Baldry & me in No. 17 Ward. We are sorry to lose the others. Hamilton was very gay, in spite of the loss of a leg & a crooked arm. Very wet.

Sat. Aug. 4

This morning we 3 are separated. Baldry to No. 12 Bugnard to No. 15, & I to No. 18 Wards. We are loath to part. Baldry visits me & we talk & play draughts. Later Bugnard visits me, he is off to Rouen in the morning at 7.15. Very wet.

Sun. Aug. 5

Still here, the sun shines for 3 minutes at 7.30 am., Later quite a lot. I am going to England to-day, yes, leave hospital at Le Treport 6.30 pm. Train moves off 8.30 pm. I have a top bunk. To sleep about 10.15 pm. and sleep well too. Weather fine.

Mon. Aug. 6

Arrive Le Havre 8.0 am. Shipped on the "Warilda" 7000 of the Adelaide Steamship Coy. Ltd. at 10.30 am. Lunch at 1.0 pm., very nice. Cast our mooring at 2.0 pm. We pass a sunken vessel in the harbour. We anchor outside the harbour until about 9.30 pm. Dinner 7.0 pm. Soup, Fish, Meat good. I share a 1st. class cabin on main deck with a Capt., jolly little bunk, best in the boat.

Tues. Aug. 7

We did not go at all last evening, too foggy so we are still just outside Le Havre. 9.30 pm. anchor is weighed and off we go. To sleep about 11.0 pm.

Wed. Aug. 8

Wake at 4.30 am to find that we are off I. of W. 7.30 am. we are off Southampton, 8.30 am. we are moored. Placed on train for Southsea at 12 mid-day, arrive 5th. Southern General Hospital Southsea 2.0 pm., a large school. I am not struck with the place, 1st impression very bad.

Thur. Aug. 9

Nothing to report except that I am better pleased with the place, am getting on quite well with everybody. Asked Cox's to send Golby 215 Frs.

Fri. Aug. 10 Ditto yesterday

Sat. 11 Ditto

Sun. Aug. 12 Ditto. Mother Father, Auntie F. & Uncle T. visit me.

The entry for 12 August is his last. From Southsea – where his parents had come on their honeymoon 26 years earlier – Cuthbert returned home to Brighton, but he was not to recover. He died of his injuries on 12 May 1918.

His comrade Pavitt did not survive the war either; and in 1922 Cuthbert's younger brother Reginald Peerless married Pavitt's widow Dorothy. Today it is through their grandchildren that the Peerless name still survives.