



## Letters from the Past No. 28

### The WW1 Letters of Reginald John Greig

#### 1. The Journey to England

These letters have been transcribed by Reg's daughter Dawn Daken. They were published in the Moruya Examiner and kept in a scrap book by her Grandmother. The originals have unfortunately not survived. Reginald John Greig was the eldest child of John Alexander Greig and Alice Beatrice Parbery. Reg enlisted in January 1916 at Casula. At the time he was described as 20 years and nine months old, 5 feet 8 inches in height with brown hair and eyes and a fresh complexion. His weight was 154 lbs. In June 1916 Reg embarked for England aboard the H.M.A.T. A8 Argyllshire.



*HMAT Argyllshire leaves Sydney Harbour. From "Yandoo".*



#### June 1916

I am writing this, hoping to get a chance to post it at Durban. Well, to start from the beginning, we left Sydney at 4pm on 17th May, the next morning at 6 we were off Bermagui. I got a sight of Montague light. We kept pretty close to land all day. The next day we arrived at Port Phillip, went inside and a boat came out to meet us and took a mail off. We only went up a little way and came out again. We passed Cape Otway light at 8 pm and that is the last land we saw. We are on a good boat, she is pretty fast. She has averaged 300 miles a day since we left. She is a great sea boat too. When we were crossing the Bight we struck a sea mountains high, but she behaved well; she took a few heavy seas aboard; but they did not do any damage, only washed one of the member boards off. On Saturday week, we struck a heavy beam sea and she did roll; it was hard to stand on the deck, but it only lasted an hour or two. She is a big boat, 549 feet long and about 70 feet wide, she draws 29 feet of water. Some days we are doing 16 knots, she can do 18 with Welsh coal at Durban. We were to call at Fremantle, but the Captain received a wireless to steer for Durban and then for England, so by the time you get this letter I will be about landing in the old country. It will take about a month from here. I believe we are to camp on Salisbury Plain. It will be better than Egypt anyway.

We have only sighted one steamer since leaving Australia and we soon left her astern. We have seen nothing but sea and a few birds. I have been doing a bit of stoking; it is not a bad job, a bit hot though, but it is a good exercise, and if you have nothing to do it passes the time away. It is a pretty dirty job, but there is plenty of water here to wash it off. We are now right in the middle of the Indian Ocean, it is of a most beautiful blue colour, ever so much bluer than the old Pacific. The phosphorous at night is beautiful, sometimes it looks as though the boat is going through fire. We expect to get to Durban on Saturday, the boat will have to coal and take in stores and water, so we will be there for a day or two. It is wonderful that we should be eating fresh meat away out here, we get all fresh meat, also

rabbit sometimes, real Australian rabbit. The boat has a great frozen cargo, and the temperature of the frozen holds is from 6 degrees to 21, so you can guess the stuff keeps well.

### **At sea**

Just a few lines now that I have a chance, I may be able to get it posted in a day or so. I wrote home some time ago, but I know that it will not get there before this, as we did not do as we expected to. We have not seen land for about a fortnight, and I almost forget what it is like. I don't think we will see it for about a week yet. The ocean is a big thing when you travel over it. I am feeling well and I have never been a bit sea-sick yet, so I think I am proof against it now. It is not at all hot, just about the same temperature as the south coast, so you can form an idea where we are. We are in for the long trip and I hope it will be as nice as this part of it. I think we will get it hot before we get to our destination, but we cannot be certain of anything in this life.

We have a lot of sport on board. We have tug o' war and boxing and other games, we also have a gramophone and a good number of records. Each battery has its own gramophone. They came out of the Field Artillery Comfort Fund and are very much appreciated. It would be very slow on the boats without something to pass the time away. I am keeping a diary. I write down the doings of each day and at the end of the trip I will send it home. We expect to be a good while on the trip, and we are also making the longest trip of it ....

### **At sea**

Just a few lines to let you know that I am somewhere on the sea and that I am feeling tip top. We had lovely weather the first two days we were at sea, but since then we have had nothing but cold winds and rough sea, as I am writing this the old boat is pitching like fun. I haven't been a bit sick yet, quite a lot of the boys have been sea-sick but most of them are used to the sea by this. The decks haven't been dry for three days now, so you can guess the sea has been rough. Time goes pretty slow on a transport. We do an hour's physical drill every morning, and we had tug-o'-war this morning. It was good exercise. We all sleep in hammocks slung from the roof of the troop deck, they are good to sleep in as you don't get any motion from the ship. It's funny to watch them all swinging like clock work, they all swing the same way.

I am just writing on the off chance of getting an opportunity of posting it. The sea is much calmer today and the sun is shining, which makes things much more cheerful. Just had a great tug o war, we have two teams in our section and we won one pull and lost one but it is not the best pulling on ships because of the heave of the vessel.

### **June 3**

We arrived at Durban at 11am today and we are getting leave from 2 till 10 tonight, and I am just finishing this before I go ashore. Durban is a poor looking place from the water but it may get better when one gets ashore. We sighted the land at 9.30 and it did us good to see land for the first time for 21 days. The natives here are funny, they are as black as coal; so they do not get any blacker than coal dust. The bar here is not as wide as Moruya bar.

You pass between two great concrete walls and a tug took us in. They are the biggest tugs in the world here. They are beauties I can tell you.....

### **At Sea 7th July 1916**

My last Letter was written in Table Bay. I gave it to one of the chaps on the tug that was bringing out water to us. We left Cape Town on the 16th and our next one was to Dakar a French naval base at Cape Verdi. We left Cape Town in company with the Beratia, Beltane and Maratan, in charge of the Kent. The Kent is the cruiser that made a name for herself in the Falkland Island fight by sinking the Nuremburg, she is coming with us in case of German raiders and submarines. We started out from Cape Town line abreast with the cruiser in the lead and after a day or two the weather got pretty warm. The little fleet is steaming along at 12 knots and at that rate we should arrive in England on the 9th. We crossed the line at 1 pm on the 25th June, we didn't have any of the dipping sports as was

the old custom, the reason being that on a former occasion they started a row and it ended in a free fight so as to save trouble, the Captain decided that it was best to let old Neptune alone.

We turned up the Dakar quite unexpectedly to ourselves, we knew nothing of it till half of an hour before we entered. It is a pretty good harbour and is very strongly fortified, guns being put everywhere they can find room for one. The town of Dakar is practically all offices and cable station and wireless, also great coal depot, there is an island about a mile off the shore and this is a French penal settlement where they send all the criminals to. We were not able to get off at Dakar and I reckon it was a bit too hot, the place fairly steams, the country round is very low-lying and is considered a white man's grave. Cape Verdi is the only high land to be seen about Dakar and it is just a bluff right on the point just like a big ant hill. They took the ships into Dakar to put guns on all of them and also to clean all the boiler tubs, so that she will get the best steaming results. We got a 12 pdr gun at Cape Town, they took it off at Dakar and put on a 4.7, they also put 4.7s on the other ships, The battleship Swiftsure was waiting for us at Dakar, she did a bit of good work at the Dardanelles, and she is a fine big ship.



*HMS Kent. Length 463 feet. Scrapped in 1920 and HMS Swiftsure. Length 475 feet. Scrapped in 1920. From Wikipedia*

We stayed 2 days at Dakar and 8 at Cape Town that is 10 days altogether we lost. We are now in the Bay of Biscay and it is trying to keep up its reputation but it is nothing like the sea we struck after we left Durban. On the 5th inst. we sighted a derelict schooner on the horizon on the starboard bow. The Swiftsure had a look at her and then she had a few shots at her and set her on fire. The same night we sighted a steamer and she did not answer the battleship's challenge and she put the search light on her and made her come along with them till daylight when they could examine her. She proved to be a Greek ship and I guess they didn't like having to come about 180 miles out of their course, good enough for the old beggars would give us away sooner than anything else.

I forgot to put in the last letter that we had a paper issued on board, it is called the Yandoo and it contains all the news of the troop ship. I am sending some of them home.

### **8<sup>th</sup> July 1916**

This morning we sighted a fleet of destroyers they were like a lot of terriers running out to meet us only they didn't bark. The Swiftsure handed us over to the destroyers and then she cleared back to the Gib. The destroyers are zigzagging in front of us all the time and I think the submarines will have a job to fool the destroyers they will be like terriers onto a rat. I think the Yandoo will give you more news than I can write here.

Each ship is going independently with her own destroyer and they are also going for the lick of their lives. We are doing 17 knots and we expect to get to Devonport tomorrow. I belong to the 28th air rifle club and we won the ships competitions. We tied one team and won the shoot off, it is worth 10/- per man. We had all kinds of sports on board. The boxing tournament finished today. One thing that strikes us here is the beautiful long twilight as it is quite bright up till 9.30 which is quite a big jump from what we had at Cape Town. There the sun rose at 8.45 and it was dark at 4.30. It is daylight here at 3am. I have had good health during the trip but I got a bad cold in the tropics, it is getting well now, nearly all the boys got it more or less. There has been very little sickness on board; a few cases of the mumps and measles and 2 of pneumonia so I think we have been very fortunate, some of the other boats had quite a lot of sickness.