

Guide to MS-250:

The First World War Letters of H.J.C. Peirs



Gettysburg College, Musselman Library
Special Collections and College Archives

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MS – 250: The First World War Letter of H.J.C. Peirs

Processed by Lizzie Hobbs, Class of 2018, Diane Werley- Smith Intern , 2021

Location: Special Collections and College Archives

Size

3 boxes + oversized materials in drawer, 3 cubic feet

Dates

Inclusive Dates: 1844-

Bulk Dates: 1914-1919

Provenance

The bulk of the collection was loaned in 2014 by Dracopoli Family (P '14). It was donated, along with additions in December 2019.

Biographical Note

Hugh John Chevallier Peirs, known to his family as Jack, was born in 1886 in England to Hugh Vaughan Peirs and Charlotte Sophia Peirs. As a boy he attended Charterhouse School and went up to New College, Oxford where he was a keen football player. He became a solicitor, practicing in his father's firm, before the First World War. In 1914, Peirs was commissioned an officer in the 8th Battalion, The Queen's (Royal West Surrey Regiment). He arrived in France in September 1915. For three years, Peirs served on the western front, fighting in every major campaign waged by the British Army from 1915 to 1918. During the war, Peirs was wounded twice and rose in rank from Lieutenant to Lieutenant-Colonel. He was decorated with Distinguished Service Order (two bars) and named a Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George at the King's Birthday Honours in 1919. Peirs died in 1943, his funeral attended by hundreds, including many men with whom he had served in the First World War.

Historical Note

The 8th Battalion of the Queen's Royal West Surrey Regiment, approximately 1000 men, arrived in France in September 1915, fighting in the Battle of Loos a few weeks after arrival. The 8th Queen's was entrenched east of the town of Vermelles, and was met with heavy shrapnel and machine gun fire. At the end of the second day of the battle, September 27th, the battalion had already sustained over 400 casualties including 6 officers killed, missing, or captured- nearly half the battalion. As Peirs wrote, in a letter to his father, "We went into action on Sunday with 20 officers and 10 came out. I am quite all right, tho why I wasn't touched I don't know."¹ At the end of 1915, after transferring troops, sustaining more casualties, and receiving replacements, the battalion strength was 826 men and officers. The beginning of 1916 found the battalion in Belgium. Where they remained until the summer, moving in and out of the trenches, before heading back into Northern France for the Somme offensive. September 1916 brought the 8th Queen's from the reserve trenches to the front-line trenches at Delville Wood, Guillemont, where they were under frequent and consistent threat of German attack. As Jack wrote home, the locale was "well known" and "certainly distinctly lively."² All the while, the war's longest

¹ H.J.C. Peirs to father, 28 September 1915.

² H.J.C. Peirs to mother, September 2, 1916.

battle at Verdun, raged on until 1916. Peirs' letters from 1917 are far fewer in number than previous times, as he spent a portion of his year traveling back and forth to England for leave and officer's training schools. The 8th Queen's was involved in two major battles during the course of 1917, the Battle of Arras (9 April- 16 May 1917) and the Battle of Passchendaele/Third Ypres (31 July- 10 November 1917). The Battle of Arras (perhaps most famous for the Canadian attack at Vimy Ridge), cost the battalion over 50 casualties, though with reinforcements and transferred officers, the 8th Queen's went into the Battle of Passchendaele with 900 men- almost full strength. Fall of 1917 found Jack back home in England, attending the Senior Officer's school at Aldershot. 1918, the final year of the war, would prove no easier than the previous three for the 8th Queen's. The 1918 Spring Offensive, known as the Kaiserschlacht, caused mass casualties for the battalion, leaving them with around 200 men. Peirs himself was shot in the arm on March 25th near Omiécourt, stayed to organize the British retreat, and was then hospitalized and then sent back to London to recover. He returned to his men in late June, and spent the next few months in and out of reserve and front-line trenches in support of their division. October 1918 found Peirs hospitalized again, after suffering a gas attack with 120 other men. Peirs is cleared for duty and able to return to his command, two weeks before the war ends on November 11th. Jack arrived back in England on July 7, 1919, after organizing demobilization efforts, and the 8th Queen's battalion was formally demobilized in Mansfield, England.

Scope and Content Note

The bulk of the collection (Series 1) contains over 200 letters written by H.J.C. Peirs throughout the war (September 1915- June 1919) which were sent to various members of the Peirs family. Additional papers which were enclosed with his letters have been kept with the original correspondence. The collection also contains miscellaneous items pertaining to the war (trench maps, pieces of Peirs' uniform, communications from the front, awards, and photos.) In addition, Series 3 contains objects relating to the Peirs/ Chevallier families, either pre- or post-war. This includes letters from Jack's childhood, family photos, death notices, and material pertaining to various memorials the family was involved in erecting. The earliest piece is a Railway and Steam Guide from 1844. The collection also contains a few pieces added by the staff of The First World War Letters of H.J.C. Peirs: a Digital History also known as #TeamPeirs. One example is a Gettysburg College "Stole of Gratitude" from Meghan O' Donnell '18, which was bestowed to the project following her graduation. The collection spans over three boxes, as well as oversized items (trench maps) which have been stored together in one of the drawers.

Series Description

This collection is divided into three Series. **Series 1: Wartime Correspondence, Series 2: Wartime Materials, Series 3: Pre-War, Post-War, and Family Materials**

Container List

Box 1

1-0 Finding Aid and Biographical Information

Series 1 Wartime Correspondence

1-1 Letters 1915 September

1-2 Letters 1915 October
1-3 Letters 1915 November
1-4 Letters 1915 December
1-5 Letters 1916 January
1-6 Letters 1916 February
1-7 Letters 1916 March
1-8 Letters 1916 April
1-9 Letters 1916 May
1-10 Letters 1916 June
1-11 Letters 1916 July
1-12 Letters 1916 August
1-13 Letters 1916 September
1-14 Letters 1916 October
1-15 Letters 1916 November
1-16 Letters 1916 December
1-17 Letters 1917 January
1-18 Letters 1917 February
1-19 Letters 1917 March
1-20 Letters 1917 April
1-21 Letters 1917 May
1-22 Letters 1917 June
1-23 Letters 1917 July
1-24 Letters 1917 August
1-25 Letters 1917 September
1-26 Letters 1917 October
1-27 Letters 1917 November
1-28 Letters 1917 December
1-29 Letters 1918 February
1-30 Letters 1918 March
1-31 Letters 1918 April
1-32 Letters 1918 June
1-33 Letters 1918 July
1-34 Letters 1918 August
1-35 Letters 1918 September
1-36 Letters 1918 October
1-37 Letters 1918 November
1-38 Letters 1918 December
1-39 Letters 1919 January
1-40 Letters 1919 February
1-41 Letters 1919 March
1-42 Letters 1919 May
1-43 Letters 1919 June

Box 2

Series 2 Wartime Materials

2-1 Wartime Photographs

- 2-2 Wartime Portrait in silver Queen's Frame
- 2-3 Peirs' Commission
- 2-4 Holiday Paraphernalia 1916- 1919
- 2-5 DSO Award 1916
- 2-6 *The BEF Times*- 22 January 1916
- 2-7 "Orders to Battalion on Right"- 10 February 1918
 - From Lt. Col. of 3rd Bn. Rifle Brigade
- 2-8 Extracts from the *Times* 1918
- 2-9 Notebook holding wartime correspondence
 - Letters to Peirs (1917)
 - Post-war papers on 1926 Worker's strike

Series 3 Pre-War, Post-War, and Family Materials

- 2-10 1919 Correspondence to Peirs
- 2-11 1919 Correspondence and photographs of Le Verguier Memorial
- 2-12 Vues d'Ypres Postcard Set (Post-War)
- 2-13 Newspaper Clippings
 - 1935 memorial piece about March 1918
 - Mentions Peirs and 8th Queen's
 - 2 undated clippings announcing DSO award
- 2-14 Childhood Letters from H.J.C. Peirs
 - One from Age 5 (to "Aunt Lillie"- mother's sister Amelia Jane Paull)
 - One from an older age (to "Aunt Sophie"- mother's sister)
- 2-15 Family Photographs
 - Includes portraits of H.J.C. Peirs (multiple ages) and photos from wedding of Jack and Eirene
- 2-16 2 Handwritten Chevallier Family Trees
- 2-17 Law Society's Gazette- Spetember 1919
 - Announces H.J.C. Peirs as a partner at Messrs. Ellis, Peirs, and Co.
- 2-18 Wedding Invitation of H.J.C Peirs and Eirene Chevallier
- 2-19 1930 St. Paul's Thanksgiving Service
- 2-20 War Memorial Unveiling Program- 1922
- 2-21 Death Announcements of H.J.C. Peirs and Copy of Will (June 1943)
- 2-23 Family Genealogical Research Materials
- 2-24 Funeral Service Program for Felicity Dracopoli (Jack's Daughter) 2003, and Obituary of Peronelle Guild Chevallier
- 2-25 1844 Bradshaw's Railway and Steam Guide
- 2-26 Envelopes & Packaging
- 2-27 Stole of Gratitude, gift of Meghan O'Donnell, Class of 2018, to Team Peirs [added 2018]

Box 3 (Oversized)

Series 2 Wartime Materials

- 3-1 Wartime Portrait of H.J.C. Peirs (colorized and enlarged from 1915 photo)
- 3-2 1915 Officers of the 8th Queen's Portrait
- 3-3 8th Queen's Hat Badge and Epaulets
- 3-4 H.J.C. Peirs' pips from Dress Uniform

Series 3 Pre-War, Post-War, and Family Materials

- 3-5 Le Guetter de L'Aisne Newspaper (October 1926)
- Piece on le Verguier memorial
- 3-6 The British Gazette (May 1926)
- Piece on Worker's Strike
- 3-7 Page from *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, February 27, 1909, a British weekly magazine featuring illustrations from an Oxford V. Cambridge football (soccer) match at the Queen's Club, London. Jack Peirs is possibly in the top center image.
[Added 3-2023, gift of Jenna Fleming '16, 2023-0129]

Sources

www.jackpeirs.org

Related Collections

- VFM-557: Private Leonard Stovell – Documents and Memorabilia
- MS-003: Amos E. Taylor Papers, Class of 1915
- MS-019: Donald Lybarger WWI Letter Collection
- MS-032: The Toomey Family Papers
- MS-048: World War I Service Questionnaires
- MS-053: Charles D. Ryan Collection
- MS-095: John Wright, WWI Letters
- MS-103: Jess Jerry Jessen WWI Letters
- MS-130: World War I Letters of Henry W. Straus
- MS-147: Lieutenant Andrew R. Kane Letters
- MS-148: Lieutenant John A. Kinnear Letters
- MS-153: The Fritz Draper Hurd '16 Papers
- MS-155: The Lt. Francis M. Tompkins WWI Scrapbooks
- MS-212: Emma West Durkee Papers
- MS-232: Edward A. Frederick Papers
- MS-236: Bernard Peace WWI Photograph Album
- MS-241: Harry Dravo Parkin WWI Memoir
- MS-246: Bond-Smith Family Papers

Additional Information

www.jackpeirs.org

Contact Information

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