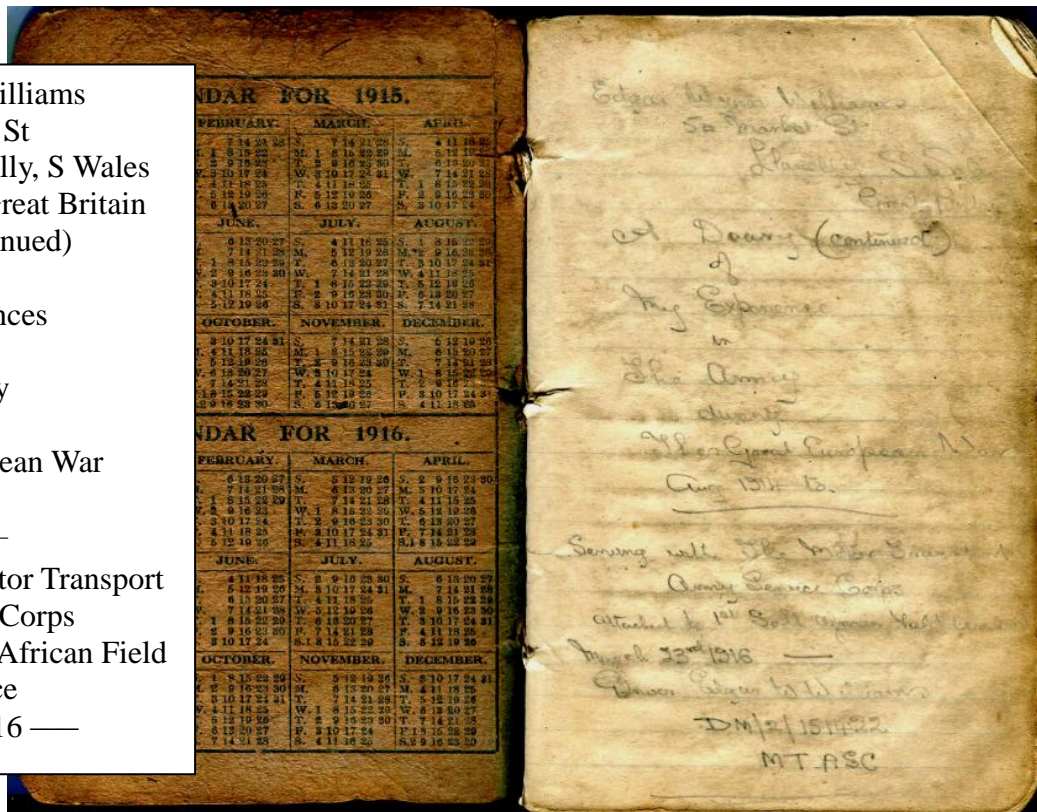


# Edgar Wynn Williams: Experiences of the War 2 – March 1916 to July 1916

Edgar Wynn Williams  
5A Market St  
Llanelly, S Wales  
Great Britain  
A Diary (continued)  
of  
My Experiences  
in  
The Army  
during  
The Great European War  
Aug 1914 to  
Serving with The Motor Transport  
Army Service Corps  
Attached to 1<sup>st</sup> South African Field  
Ambulance  
March 23<sup>rd</sup> 1916 —

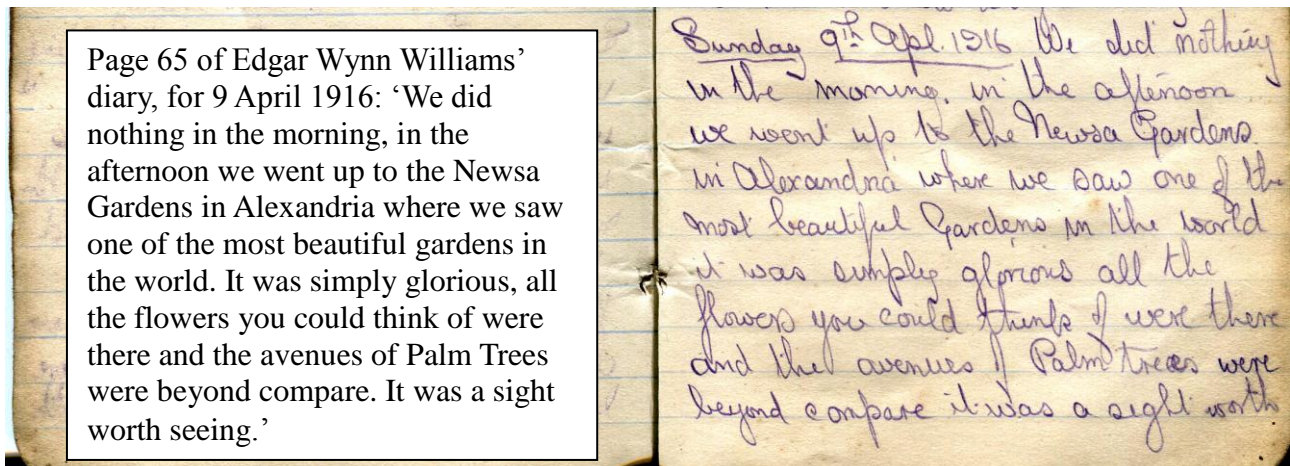


The first instalment of Edgar Wynn Williams' diary of war experiences traced his career from his decision to join the army (8 December 1915) through to 22 March 1916, by which time he had been stationed in Egypt for two months, and had seen some action as a driver with the Army Service Corps. The diary continues from 23 March 1916 in this second instalment, in which we gain further insight into his time and experiences while attached to the South African Expeditionary Force in Egypt, and then in France. We read about his activities and daily routine, with many detailed descriptions of his duties.

As with the first instalment of the diary, there are numerous references to correspondence with home – for example, on 1 April 1916, 'Today I had a parcel from Olga [Bevan, his fiancée] containing sugar tea etc.' On 15 May Edgar noted that his mail consisted of 11 letters, 6 (belated) birthday cards and 19 newspapers.

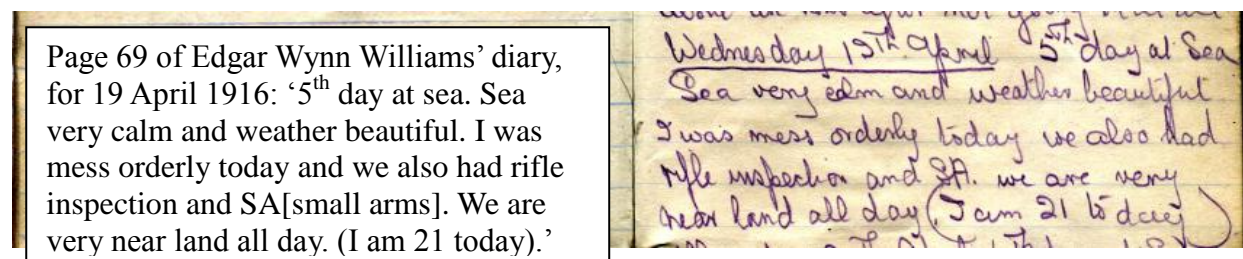
At the start of the period covered in the diary he was at Sollum (now usually written Sallum), a port in western Egypt: he sailed from there aboard S.S Borulos on 29 March, arriving at Alexandria two days later.

Life continued to be a mixture of boredom, routine and occasional delights. On 8 April, Edgar describes a parade which is a dress-rehearsal for a future review by the General in command of the troops in Egypt and the Prince of Wales. Following the parade, Edgar and his comrades were paid and went to the YMCA, where they enjoyed themselves. The following morning, 'We did nothing' (a phrase that crops up often), but for the afternoon there is an awestruck description of a visit to some beautiful gardens.



The next day, 10 April, after a long wait they had their opportunity to march past the General and the Prince of Wales: 'It was a fine sight to see over 4000 troops move like one man when an order was given.'

On 13 April, Edgar and his comrades boarded a transport ship, bound for Europe, although the rough seas meant it would be two days before they left Alexandria harbour. At sea, on 19 April, Edgar noted that it was his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. After a voyage characterised by rough seas and poor weather, they arrived in Marseilles, docking on 21 April (which Edgar noted was Good Friday).



After a week of route marches interspersed with some sightseeing (24 April: 'We went up to the Church of Notre Dame Le Gardé which is up on a rock and a beautiful sight of the town is got up there'), Edgar and his comrades boarded the train to northern France on 28 April. Their adventure was about to change its character.



Page 72 of Edgar Wynn Williams' diary, for 29 April 1916: 'We leave Lyons at 6.30 in the morning we have our food on the train. We met some French soldiers who gave us wine and fruit and some souvenirs and we had a good time.'

Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> April We leave Lyons at 6.30 in the morning we have our food on the train. We met some French soldiers who gave us wine and fruit and some souvenirs and we had a good time. The country which we pass was beautiful all being cultivated and mostly vine trees all over the place we are to

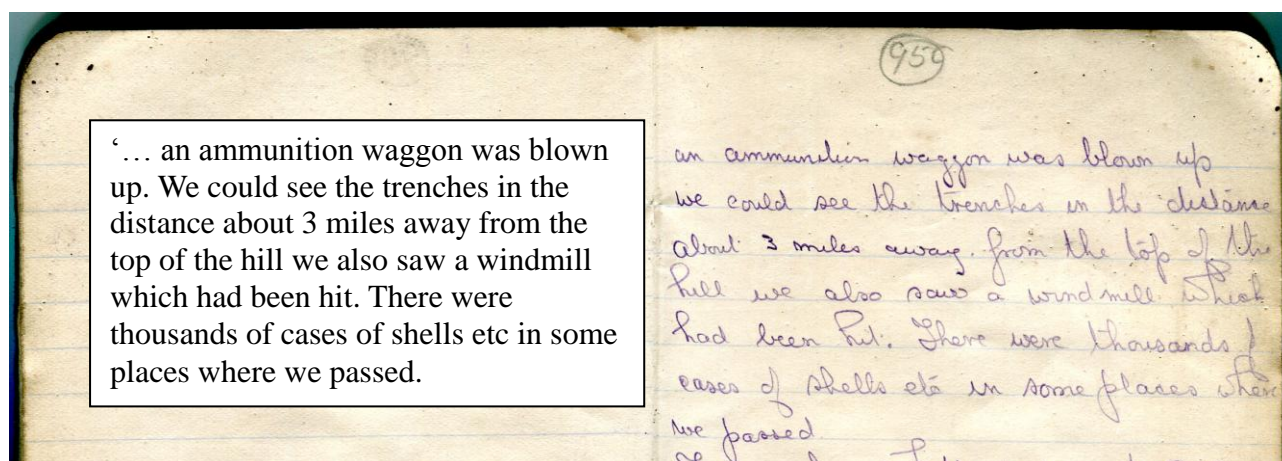
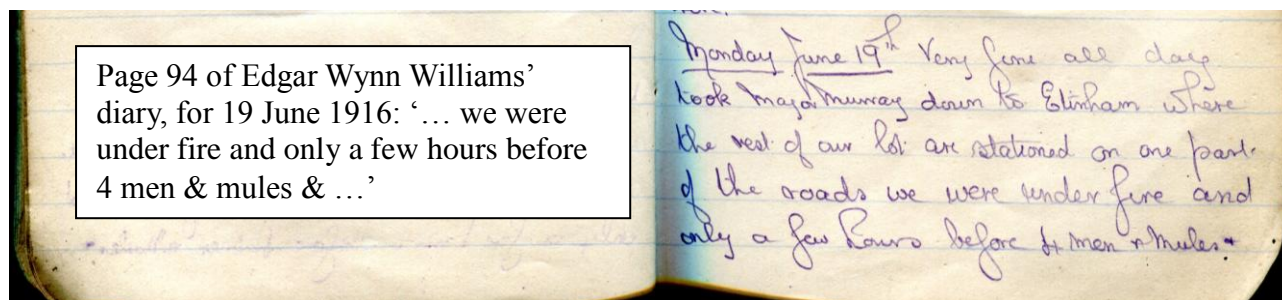
After four days travelling on trains, Edgar and his comrades arrived at Abbeville, in the Somme department in Picardy. As a soldier whose duty was to provide logistical support, rather than to fight in the front line, Edgar's story is not always what one might expect from the Western Front. He slept in bivouacs, not in the trenches, and although the sound of guns is often heard in the distance, there is only a little evidence of fighting in Edgar's descriptions in his first weeks at the front. One of the exceptions to this is a description of watching aerial dogfights during a church service:

Page 82 of Edgar Wynn Williams' diary, for 21 May 1916: 'Very fine today. We had Church service in the field in the morning and while the service was on a German aeroplane appeared overhead and the guns opened out on him and all the congregation had their eyes up and the preacher was talking away and I don't think there were more than about a dozen listened to him while the fight lasted. We saw three such fights during the Sermon.'

Sunday May 21<sup>st</sup> - Very fine today, we had Church service in the field in the morning and while the service was on a German aeroplane appeared overhead and the guns opened out on him and all the congregation had their eyes up and the preacher was talking away and I don't think there were more than about a dozen listened to him while the fight lasted we saw three such fights during the Sermon. There being no service in the night we went for a walk

As in the first instalment of the diary, Edgar was keen to meet up with fellow Welshmen. On 4 June 1916 he walked the 17 miles to La Gorgue to see Ben Davies, and he also met up with Glyn Thomas (of Inkerman Street, Llanelli), Dai Richards, Dai Arthur, Tom Smart 'and a chap from Pemberton Street who used to work in the Co-op'.

Edgar's duties as a driver involved chauffeuring various Generals and Majors, and taking injured men to hospital. Although he was rarely in physical danger himself, Edgar regularly witnessed the destruction caused by the war:



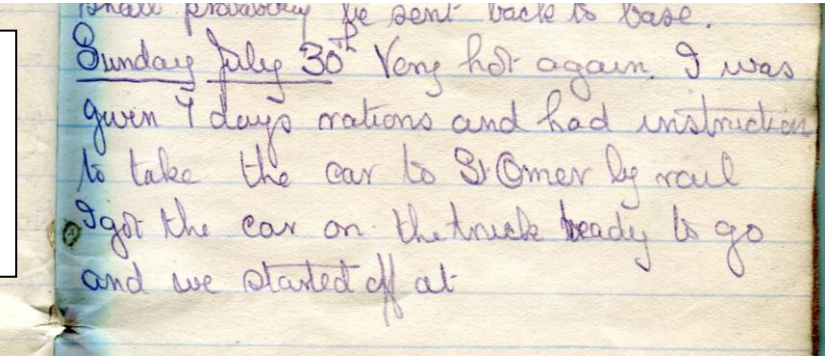
Then, in the build-up to the Somme offensive (28 June 1916): 'We have orders to go away today and we all go to Dive Copse where there is a Main Dressing Station and there are about 160 to 200 cars collected together for the big attack when it comes off.' On 1 July (the day the campaign was launched) Edgar was busy taking wounded soldiers to dressing stations – and he notes that he ferried 'German wounded' as well as 'our own'. There is more of the same over the next days, and the dangers of war are much nearer – on 10 July 'several shells burst near us one piece of shell hit me on the helmet but did not hurt me'.

The remaining days in the diary are peppered with evidence of death and destruction: on 14 July, 'Corporal A C Smith was killed today by shrapnel'; on 15 July, 'my orderly had shell shock and had to be taken to hospital'; on 18 July, 'Fritz put a large number of gas shells into the wood near our cars and we had to wear our helmets all night'; on 21 July, 'a 12" burst about 60 yards away and the side of my car was smashed in, I was inside at the time but escaped unhurt'.



Then, on 30 July the diary finishes abruptly, literally in mid-sentence. There is no explanation for this; however, the keeping of private diaries was expressly forbidden for WW1 soldiers on the front-line. Is it possible that Edgar was seen writing in his diary and was ordered to desist?

Page 112 of Edgar Wynn Williams' diary, for 30 July 1916: 'Very hot again. I was given 7 days rations and had instructions to take the car to St Omer by rail. I got the car on the truck ready to go and we started off at'



Thus we only have the sketchiest information regarding Edgar's subsequent career. The only evidence that has survived are two photographs: one rather typical of the period; the other very surprising and unexpected. At Christmastime 1916, a photograph of Edgar dressed up like a lady (Marie Antoinette comes to mind!), was taken in a French photographic studio. It was then sent to his fiancée, Olga Bevan, back in Llanelli.



Given that the name of the studio in St Omer is given, perhaps the note 'Somewhere in France' can be read as a private joke.

In the other photograph, taken in June 1918, Edgar (at the rear) is seen with two soldiers, who might be his brothers (Harold and Elwyn, who served in the Welsh Regiment).



Thus although we know a lot about Edgar's movements and feelings for the first few months of his army service, we can only guess what his experiences were in the remaining 2+ years of his time in the military. Much of his writing in the first few months of 1916 presents his experiences as an adventure: we can speculate that these feelings of excitement did not persist as the war on the Western Front dragged on.

Perhaps we might come to the conclusion that Edgar was luckier than most in his war experiences: after all, he survived the fighting without any visible wounds or disfigurement. He returned to Llanelli and married Olga Bevan, and they had two children (William Graham Williams, b.1921 and Anita Glenys Williams, b.1926). But war often carries a sting in its tail. Edgar died on 11 October 1929, aged just 34. The cause of death is noted on the certificate as encephalitis lethargica; his family believe it was actually African trypanosomiasis (commonly known as sleeping sickness), a disease spread by the tsetse fly. If so, then Edgar was carrying the disease that would kill him when he sailed from Egypt in April 1916.

Gethin Matthews, Rhys Williams, Ben Rees, Sean Kenny, Alys Rosser  
Swansea University