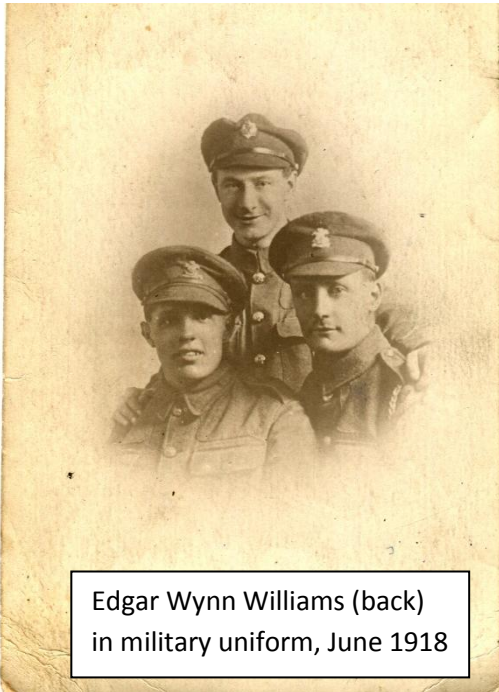


# Edgar Wynn Williams: Experiences of the War 1 – December 1915 to March 1916

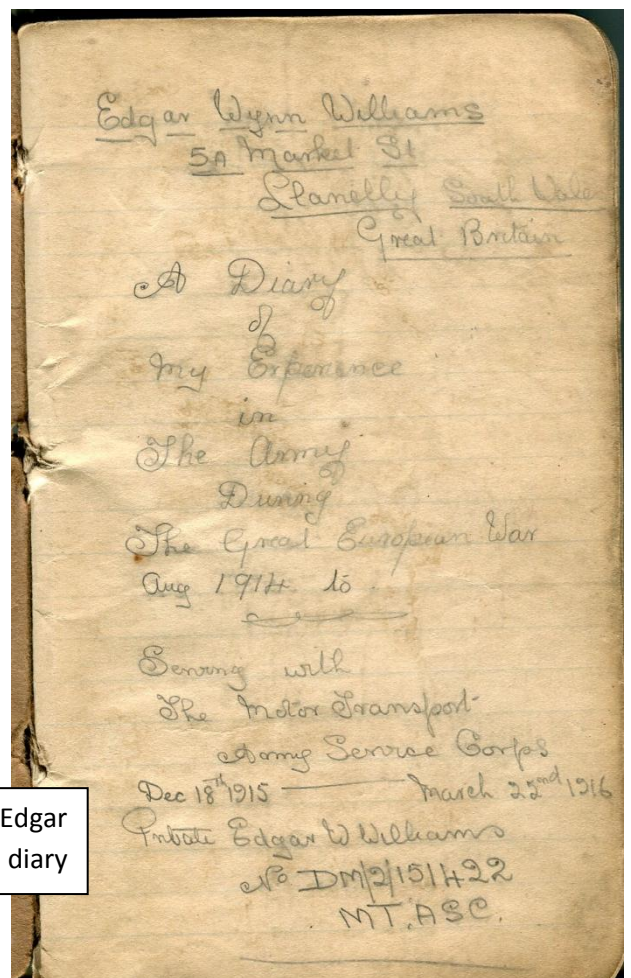


Edgar Wynn Williams (back)  
in military uniform, June 1918

Edgar Wynn Williams of Market Street, Llanelli was a driver before the war, working for the family firm delivering yeast to bakeries all around south-west Wales. He was 20 years old in late 1915 when he made the decision to join the Army Service Corps. He began writing a diary on the day he made the decision: 8 December 1915; and the following day he travelled to Carmarthen to enlist. Given his experience, he was accepted by the Motor Transport division of the ASC, and he had a few days at home before being sent to London to receive his military training and take his tests.

This was clearly a time of enormous change in Edgar's life: on 16 December he bought an engagement ring for his sweetheart, Olga Bevan; the following day he left Llanelli. His diary contains his thoughts and experiences as he underwent training and then travelled to Egypt, where he underwent many pleasurable experiences and also saw some upsetting sights as he served, driving the wounded to a field hospital. In many ways, it seems that Edgar was undertaking an adventure: however, there are various unexpected aspects to the story he tells.

Although Edgar travelled to some exotic locations, along the way he had many different encounters with Welsh troops, and he was continually being reminded of home from the letters and parcels he received. Throughout his diary we get a sense of how much free time a soldier would have, and that it was not all doom and gloom on the front line. There were some opportunities to try new experiences, but also plenty of dull routine work.



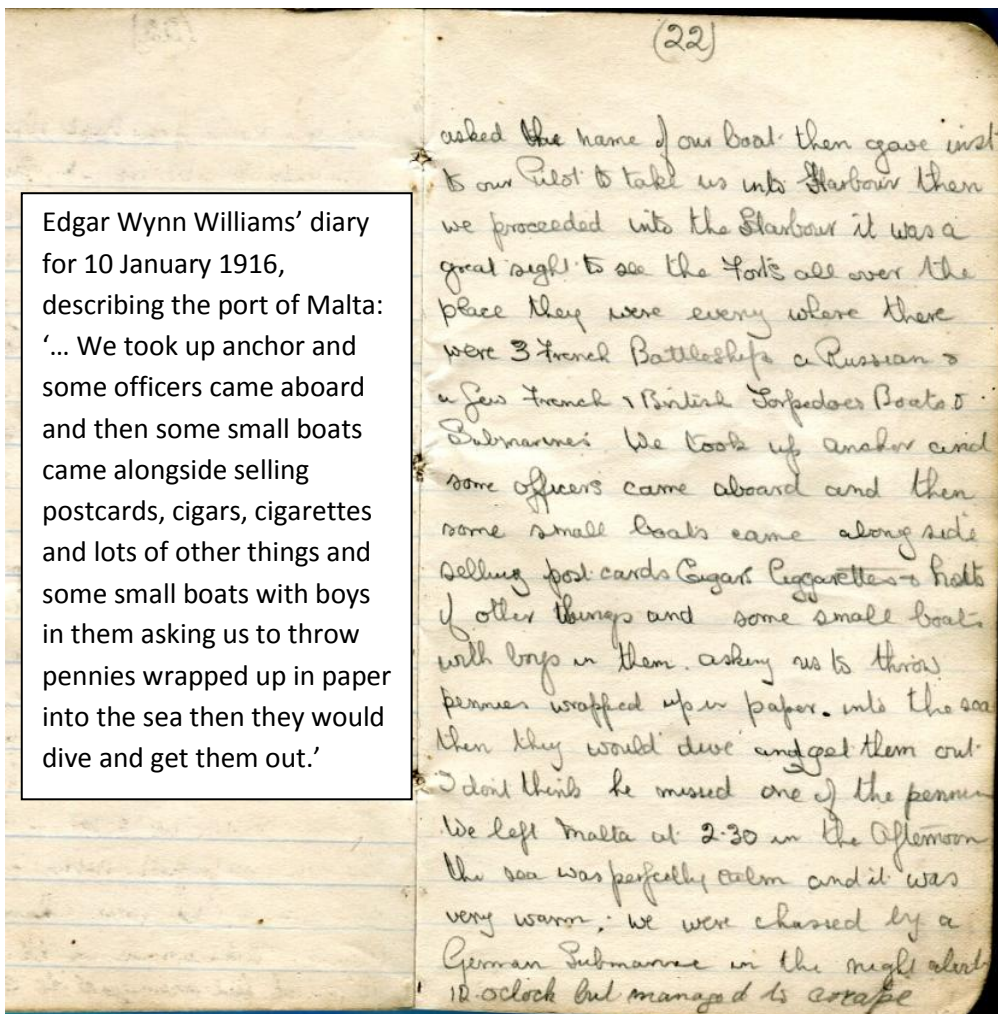
First page of Edgar Wynn Williams' diary

At the beginning of his service, Edgar was stationed at Farnham where he was given his equipment and assigned as an ambulance driver to the South African Expeditionary Force. He writes of the many parades that his unit had to perform, the route marches they did and what food he had to eat (mainly noted with satisfaction). He notes the free time they had, including enjoying performances in the barracks by acts from the London theatres. He writes of seeing many aeroplanes flying from Farnborough – perhaps the first time he had seen such a sight.

He and his unit were sent to Devonport, ready to board ship: they sailed on the *Corsican*, a passenger ship owned by the Allen line of Glasgow, on 2 January 1916. After leaving port, Edgar's diary records how boring life was on board ship, and how

much time they spent doing nothing, although he does mention a close encounter with a submarine and passing through the straits of Gibraltar.

When the ship reached Malta, Edgar describes the scene of a bustling port full of ships and torpedo boats, and also how the locals came alongside the ship trying to sell goods to the soldiers such as postcards and cigarettes. Even in times of war there was money to be made!



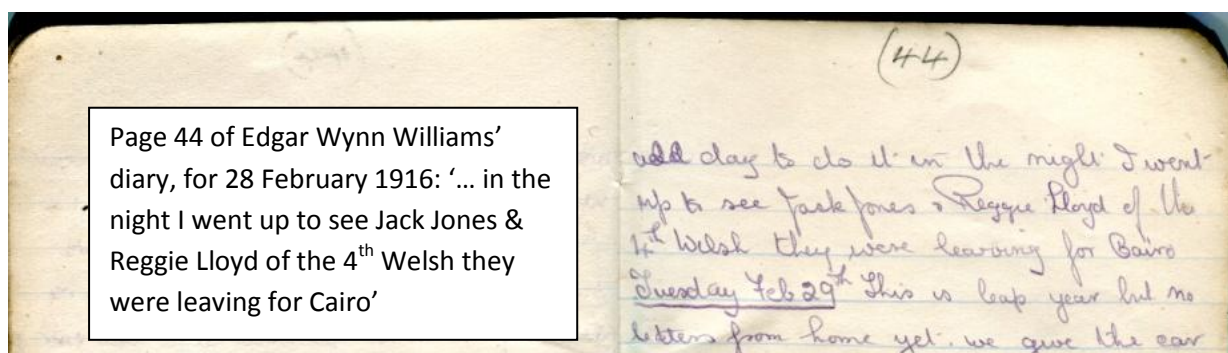
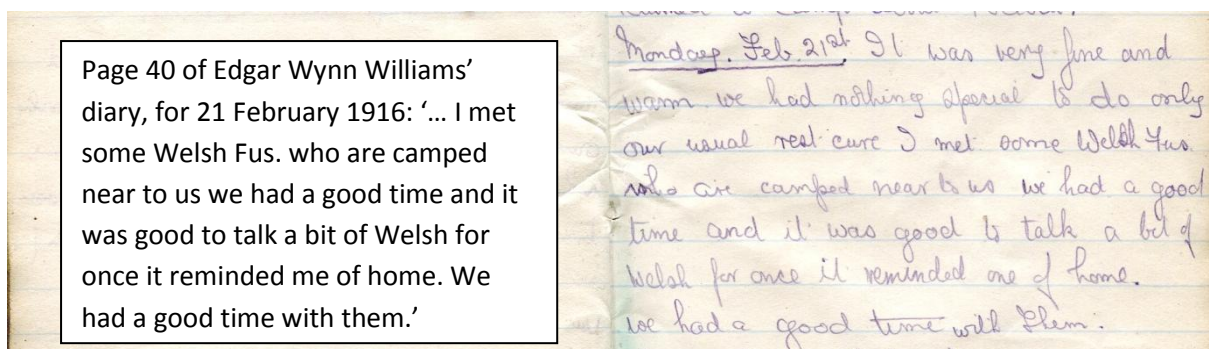
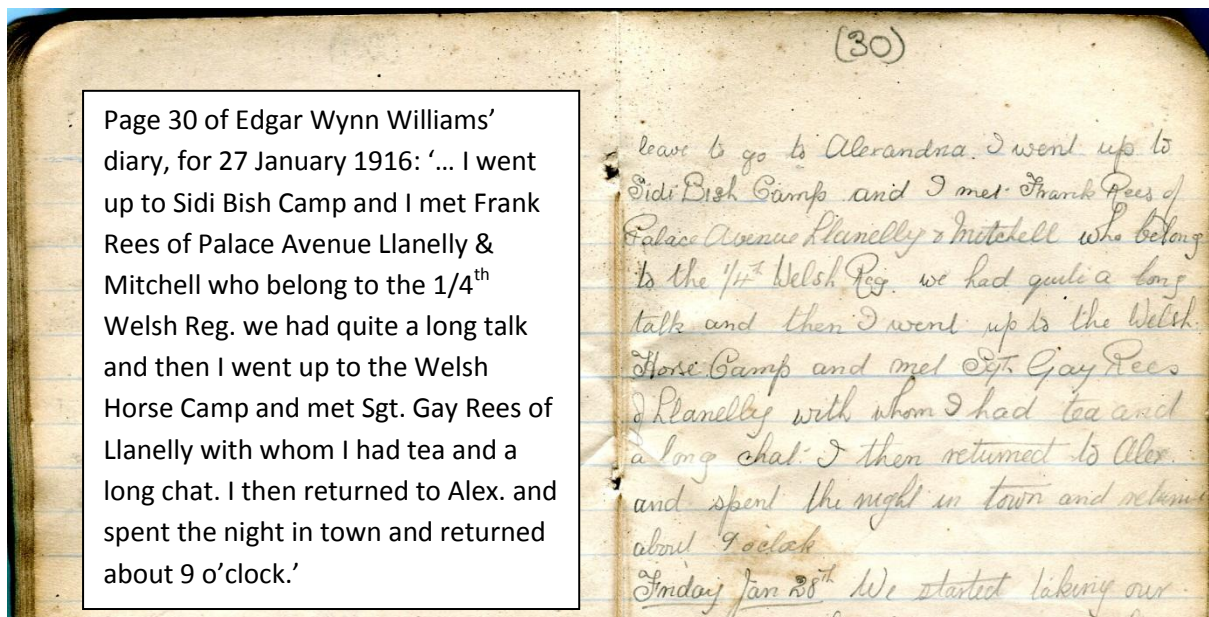
Edgar Wynn Williams' diary for 10 January 1916, describing the port of Malta: '... We took up anchor and some officers came aboard and then some small boats came alongside selling postcards, cigars, cigarettes and lots of other things and some small boats with boys in them asking us to throw pennies wrapped up in paper into the sea then they would dive and get them out.'

On 13 January the ship docked at Alexandria, a huge port and a hive of activity, with 'hundreds of boats in there including warships, hospital ships and transports'. Stationed about four miles out of Alexandria, Edgar's first records of his days in Egypt are dominated by notes on the (generally pleasant) weather and the numerous



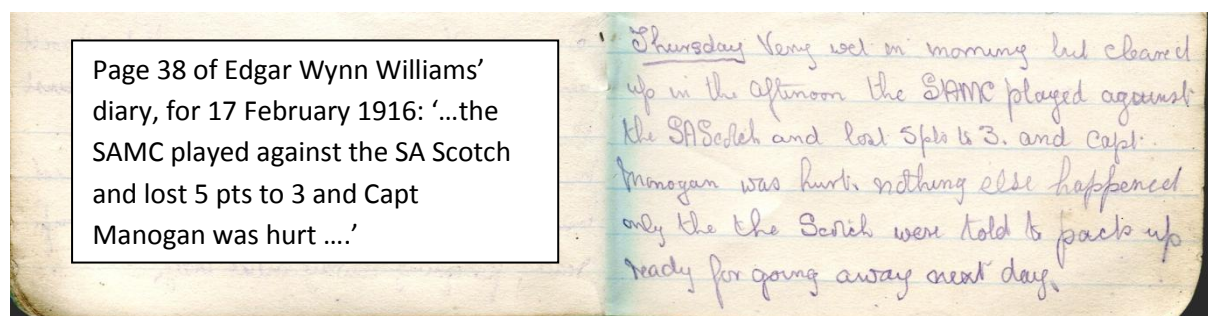
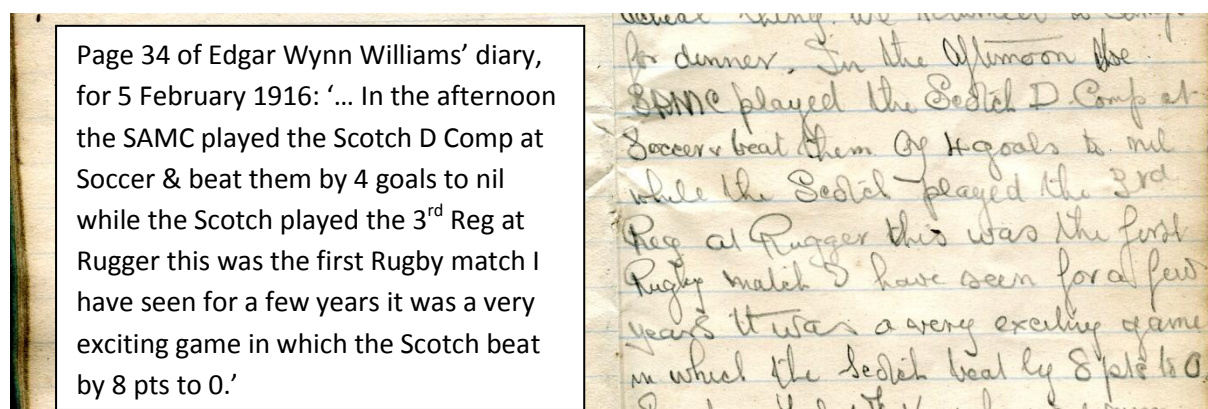
parades. He notes the difference in culture, describing seeing two Egyptian funerals 'in which the mourners seemed very happy indeed they were singing all the time' (20 January 1916). He also comments on the standard of driving: 'the rule of the road is "keep to the right" but I think it was "go where you can"'.

In terms of his duties, Edgar was often called upon to drive officers in and out of the city. He also describes meeting troops from many different regiments while there including the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, the Royal Army Medical Corps, various units from South Africa, and even units from the West Indies. However, it is meeting other Welshmen that gets the most attention in his diary.

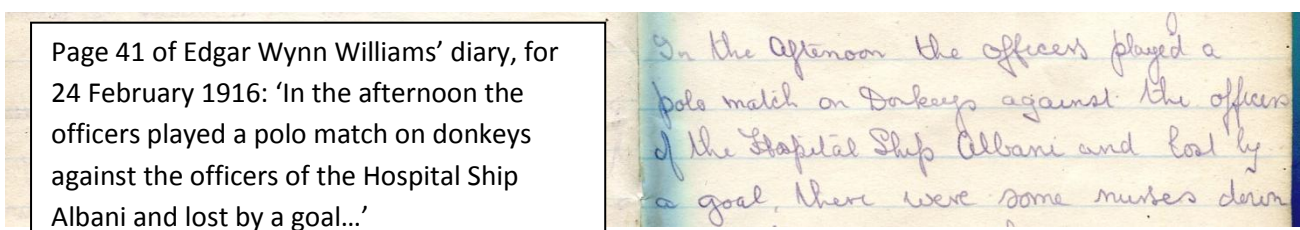


A common topic that Edgar writes about is the severity of the weather in Egypt, and quite often plans have to be postponed because of sand-storms (eg. 25 January 1916: ‘The sandstorm continued and all work was suspended for the day it was a sight to see the sand being blown about’; 18 March 1916: ‘The sandstorm continued and we do not go out in the morning’). He also comments on the condition of the roads that he has to navigate: sometimes complaining (20 January 1916: ‘The roads are very bad and consist of large blocks of stone about 24” x 12”’); sometimes content (9 March 1916: ‘we were surprised at the road which was perfect for about 50 miles it was a straight road for nearly 35 miles and perfectly flat’).

We see that in the free time he had in Egypt sport was a common pastime, and Edgar writes about many units playing rugby and football against one another.



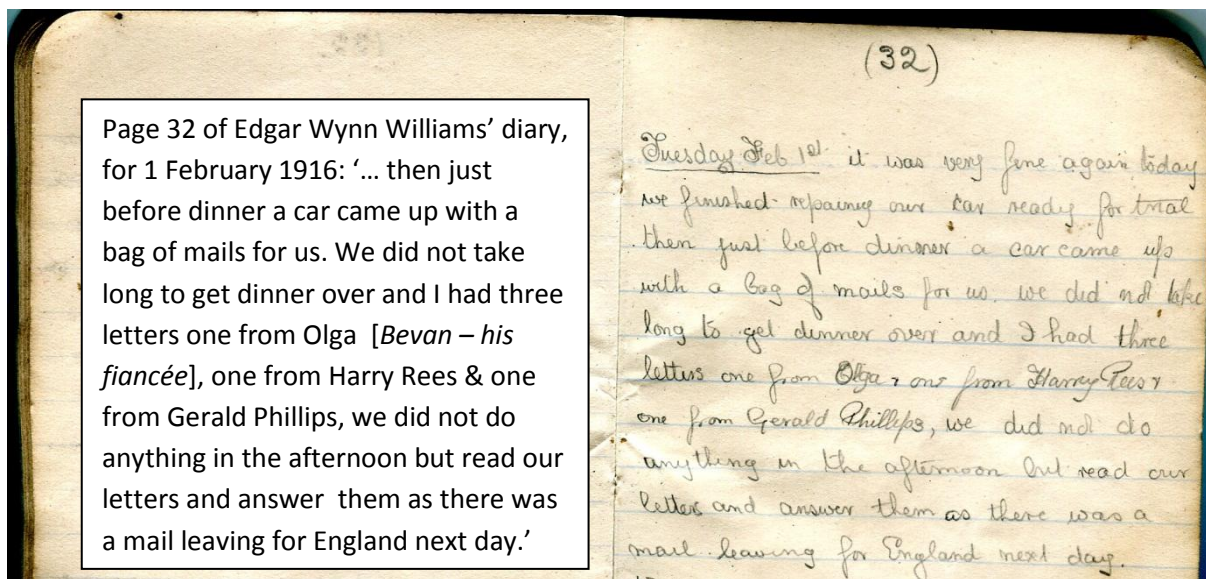
One more unusual sport witnessed by Edgar was a game of polo played by officers riding donkeys!





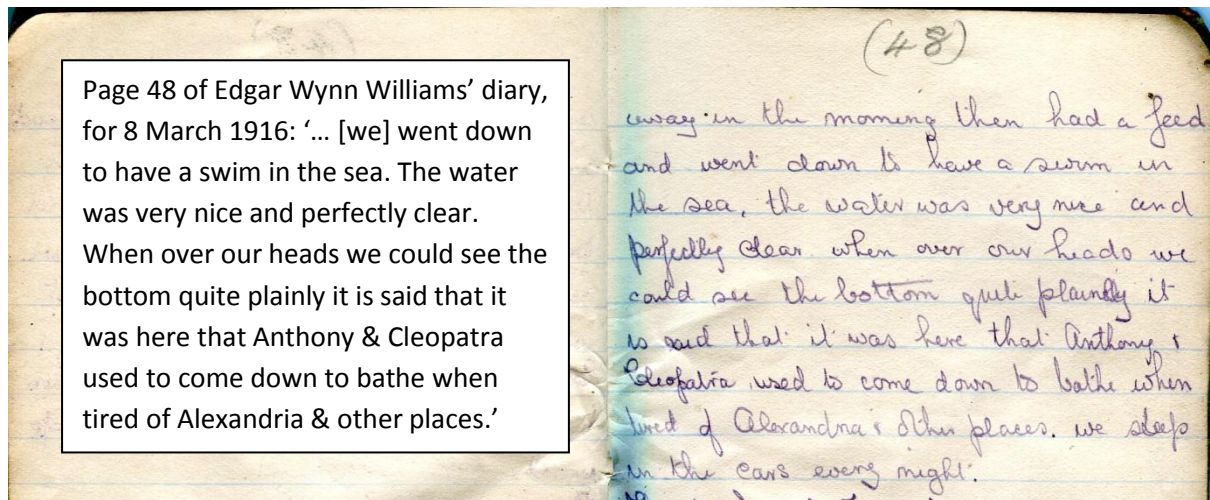
A trip into Alexandria to see the sights was also a common occurrence, such as on 26 February when Edgar visited the national museum, by which he was most impressed: 'They had thousands of ancient things and the mummies were marvellous some of them thousands of years dead and yet they were in a perfect state of preservation and they had all their teeth, fingernails and hair and in the same colour as it was when they died'.

We see that despite being in Egypt mail from home still got through to the troops, as Edgar receives letters on numerous occasions, and sometimes parcels too, as on 27 February 1916: 'received a parcel of cake and sweets from home today'.

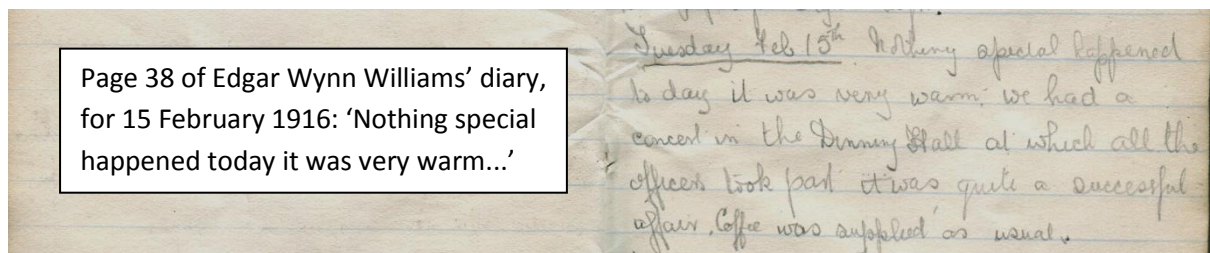


Later in the diary Edgar's unit was moved to other camps, further out in the desert, where he talks about the tough conditions and the lack of water, such as on 13 March 1916: 'we are only allowed 1 pt of water a day while the sun is very strong in the day and very cold at night. We can't get any fresh water and only 1 pint of doctored water which has a very nice flavour? [sic]'. This period was undoubtedly the most strenuous of Edgar's service in Egypt - 15 March 1916: 'One man offered 10/- [10 shillings] for ¼ of a bottle of water and some of the men drank the oil out of the oil bottles of the rifles'.

Yet while the front-line troops are fighting the enemy, Edgar has plenty of spare time on his hands to relax. One of his favourite pastimes is to swim in the sea.



Thus the diary presents us with an interesting mix of excitement and boredom; experiences that are fascinating and novel to Edgar, and the drudgery of waiting around for something to happen. Perhaps the most common comment in the diary is 'Today, nothing much happened' which reinforces the fact that for most soldiers, most of the time, their lives were not about being terrified on the front line.



This four-month diary provides us with a lot of information about how this one, rather typical, soldier adapted to the new circumstances and challenges which he faced. Some aspects of his story read as an adventure; on other days he just gets on with his normal routine.

Edgar's second diary, considered in the next article, picks up the story where this one leaves off.

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