

## ARMISTICE DAY, 11 NOVEMBER, 1918: A TALE OF TWO FAMILIES

Like so many families across the world, the Semple family were in mourning when the Armistice brought the fighting to a stop on 11 November 1918. Just six days earlier, Captain Robert Semple had died in a French hospital, his father by his side. He was 22 and had been fighting the war for three years and three months. The family had already lost Robert's brother William, a Second Lieutenant in the King's Royal Rifle Corps, in June 1916, aged 21.



*Captain Robert Semple*

1918 had been a tough year. In the spring, the German army launched a series of successful attacks along the front line in France and Belgium. Robert was in charge of a trench mortar battery, a small group of men who moved their weapon where it was needed along the front line. In May he sent a letter to his younger sister Mabel which said that he was resting from 'the fatigue of war'. On the final page he drew a funny sketch of himself.

Great war lying on my  
back in an orchard smoking  
a cigarette. If the Germans  
come I have decided to cover  
myself with grass and pretend  
I'm a haystack.

With my very very best  
love from your loving  
~~brother~~ brother

Robert.



Think of me out at the Great war,  
lying on my back in an orchard  
smoking a cigarette. If the  
Germans come I have decided to  
cover myself with grass and  
pretend I'm a haystack.

With my very very best love from  
your loving brother

Robert

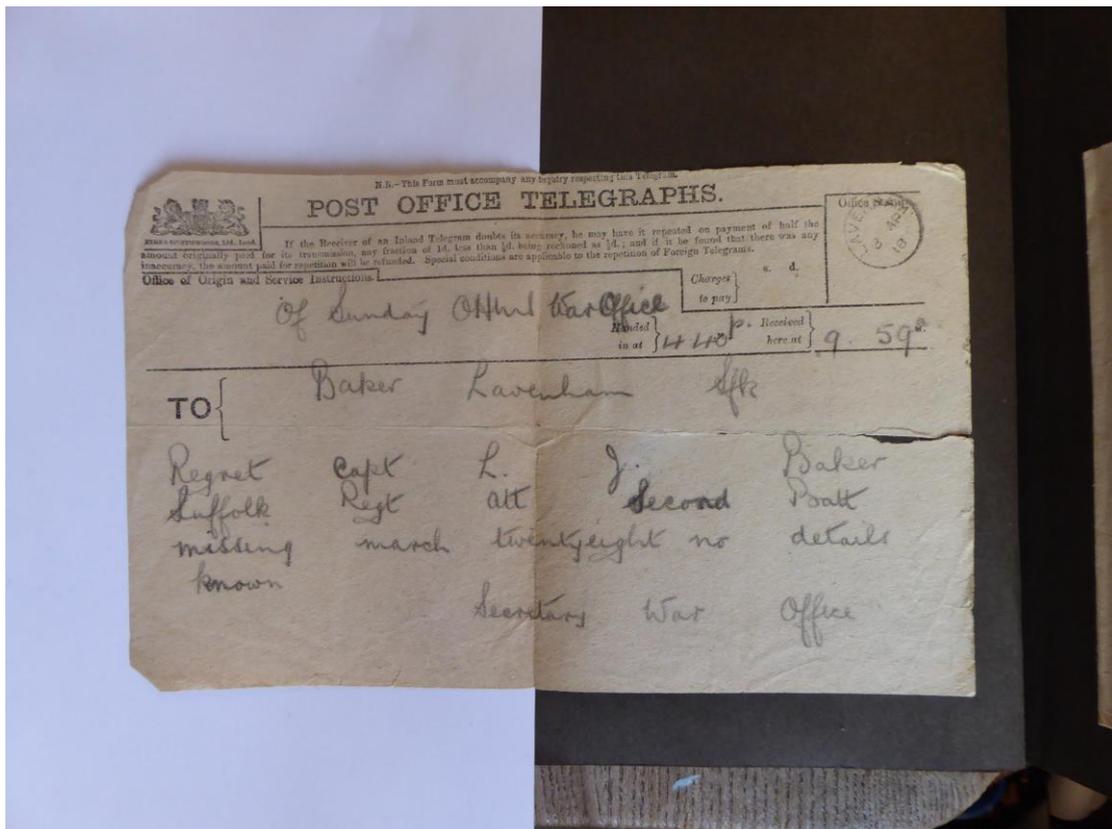
Letter from Robert Semple to his  
younger sister Mabel.

As the year went on the war turned in favour of Britain and her allies. The good news was reported in British newspapers that autumn but for the Semple family, October was full of worries. Robert's youngest sister Eileen (whose nickname was Jelly) was very ill with Spanish flu, a virus that killed millions worldwide. Then they heard that Robert had been wounded on 22 October and was recovering in hospital in Rouen, France. And then came more bad news from France: Robert had caught Spanish flu. Nursing staff at the hospital sent a telegram to the family to say that they should travel soon if they wanted to see Robert alive. His father set off for France and although he was a doctor, there was nothing he could do and Robert died.

Other families were more fortunate. My own great-grandparents had also said goodbye to two sons, who joined the army and in time set off for France. Both survived. However, like the Semple family, the Baker family had lived through four

anxious years, waiting for letters or postcards from their sons and dreading the arrival of a telegram bearing bad news. Bad news arrived in July 1916 after their son Maurice was wounded on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. By the time the Armistice was signed, he had been discharged from the army and was learning to live as an amputee.

Their eldest son, Captain Lionel Baker of the Suffolk Regiment, joined up soon after war broke out and was still in uniform as it ended, over four years later. He'd been wounded several times, twice seriously enough to be sent back to England to recover. In March 1918 they received this telegram:



[transcript dated 8 April 1918]

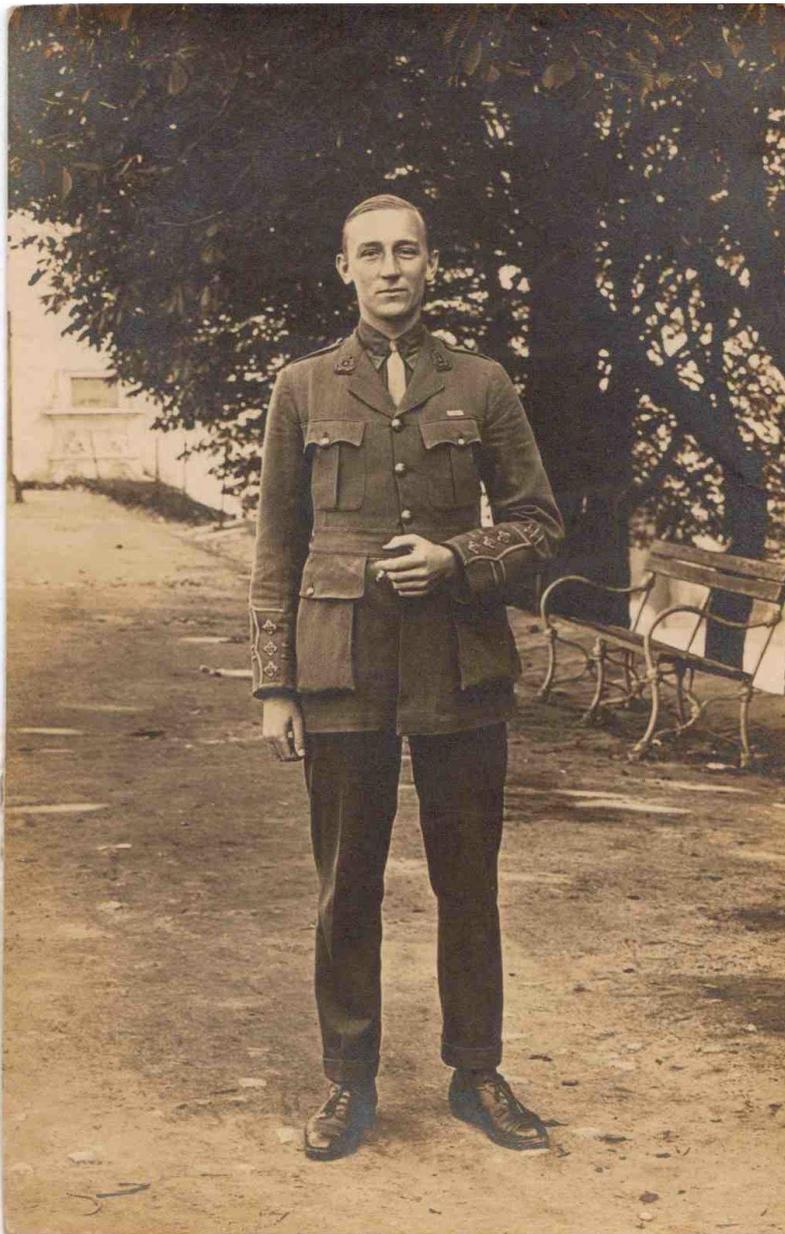
To Baker Lavenham, Sfk

Regret Capt L. J. Baker Suffolk Regt att Second Batt missing march twenty eight no details known.

Secretary War Office

'Missing' could mean wounded, or dead. Fortunately, ten days later, the Red Cross sent a telegram saying that Lionel was a prisoner. He kept a diary of that time, recording the long train journey into Germany and life in a prisoner of war camp in Germany. When the church bells rang out in Lavenham, Suffolk to announce the ceasefire on 11 November, my great-grandparents could hope that they would see their eldest son soon.

This photograph shows Captain Lionel Baker when he was a prisoner of war.



Their son Maurice adjusted to his wooden leg, worked as an accountant and reached his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. Along with other members of his family, he was a founding member of the Lavenham branch of the British Legion. This organisation supported ex-servicemen and their families, as well as war widows, and continues to do so today. The Poppy Appeal raises money so that they can continue their work.





### **Find out more**

If you want to know more about William and Robert Semple, you can read the letters they sent to their sisters in *Dear Jelly: Family letters from the First World War* by Sarah Ridley ISBN 978 1 4451 2817 7. To read more about Lionel and Maurice Baker's First World War experiences, get hold of a copy of *Brothers at War: A First World War Family History* ISBN 978 1 4451 2405 6. These two families were joined together by marriage when one of Lionel and Maurice's nieces married one of William and Robert's nephews. They are my aunt and uncle.

*Sarah Ridley*