Letters from the Sisters, sent during the First World War

**8 October 1916, from Sr. Mary Oswin, Headmistress:**

We had not slept properly for a good many nights beforehand [this letter was written after an air-raid], for we heard the Zeppelins pass over the house, when they raided the North and Midlands. They always pass this way. On Sunday night, about ten o’clock we heard them coming, and we saw a few searchlights dark quickly in and out. So the four of us, who were awake, hurried down to the Chapel, which is always our ‘harbour of refuge’ on such occasions. We said Rosary after Rosary, and then all seeming to be quiet, we went upstairs again. That was just half past eleven; but Sr Superior and I were afraid to go to bed, and she stood looking through the window. All at once she saw what she thought to be flashes of lightning and called me to look; but we soon realised they were flashes from guns. Thus, while we watched, high up in the sky in the glare of the searchlights, a Zeppelin came into view. It appeared to be not more than two feet long, and shone like silver. It moved about a little at first, and then seemed to stand quite still. We could see the shrapnel flying all round; but just then the house began to shake with the bombs, or the guns, and we raced down to the Chapel, and began to pray. The Sister in the upstairs dormitory, and the children saw it all. They saw the shots strike it three times, and then it burst into flames, and fell, a blazing mass to the earth. We downstairs thought for a moment, that the Chapel was on fire. The flames from the blazing Zepp lit up the whole countryside. Sister said that, as it fell it broke in two, and one half seemed to catch on a big tree. This was quite true, for the papers gave the details the next day. It fell at a distance of seven or eight miles from here; but we being on such high ground, get the benefit of these terrible sights. This is the second blazing Zeppelin which has been seen from our windows. We had only three Zeppelins hanging round us, last Sunday night or Monday morning. One was caught in the searchlights between Mr. Lane’s house and ours, and another was racing about to avoid them, on the opposite side. We were not left in peace until nearly half past four. They could not get out of the country, on account of the searchlights. A little after three o’clock, all being quiet, we left the Chapel, and went to look through the windows in the children’s corridor. There we had a grand sight. There were a great number of searchlights, coming from the direction of London, all turned towards the house. They had evidently caught something over our heads, or as far distant. It was a beautiful sight; the sky was one blaze of light. But the knowledge of our danger prevented our staying long to admire it. We returned to the Chapel and began again to pray.

Sr Superior wishes me to tell you that she thinks your Community at Much Hadham has, at last, acquired the ‘Spirit of Prayer’. This is the third time we have risen to spend the night in Chapel. We have said Rosaries without number; and other prayers also; to say nothing of the aspirations which poured fourth, whenever the bombs came rather near. They were certainly original (the aspirations). We have had some good laughs at recreation about it. When the first Zeppelin fell into flames, it lit up the whole house. The Sisters were just in the corridor, going to the Chapel, and they could not see the cause of the red glare. Poor old Sr. Jacoben immediately sat down on the floor with her arm stretched heavenwards and cried out ‘Oh Lord!’ or something of the kind, while the other Sisters nearly fell over her. There were other comical scenes, which it would take too long to describe. The patients were all very good; there was no sign of panic. They lay quietly in bed, praying very fervently; and the Sisters who have charge of the dormitories stayed with them.

There is a big anti-aircraft gun about six miles from here; and now, since the last raid, they have placed two more, and a searchlight; two fields away from our property. So we shall be having some fine shocks when they go bang. The people in Hadham village have been warned to keep indoors, out of the way of the shrapnel.

**October 1917, from Sr. Mary Oswin**

Sr. Superior has asked me to write just a few lines to let you know we are all safe. Last night’s raid was the most terrible we have yet experienced, the raiders came right over the house. There were no bombs dropped here; but the gun-fire was terrible. The house was rattling and shaking; the shrapnel from the guns was raining on to our roof, and the shells were whistling through the air, over our heads. We found a piece of shrapnel, weighing about a pound and a half, embedded in the asphalt patch close by the Chaplain’s cottage. No Sister is going upstairs tonight. The patients are going to lie under their beds; they were there last night. We can see just how the fight is going on, by the rockets which are sent up. We saw two attacks beaten off. In the first attack when they came over the house, the search-lights shone through a window in the boys division, and lit up the whole corridor. We have four more windows cracked, and of course the asphalt patch is badly damaged. I am sure you will pray for our safety. Please excuse the mistakes. I have written this in a great hurry.

**1917**

We are all a bit ‘done up’ today after last night’s air raid which was the worst we have had as yet. We thought the roof would come in with the firing of our guns. But we escaped with a few cracked panes of glass which unfortunately, happen to be the largest panes of glass something like 40” x 27”. Some shrapnel must have fallen on the roof, as a piece was found this morning. The noise of the whizzing of the shells through the air was terrific. This was the seventh raid this week including two on Monday and two last night.

Could you possibly send us more help? We cannot go on as we have been doing since the early part of the year. We are four short. Two nurses have left – Sr. Benedict can no longer take charge and Sr. M. Edwina has gone. Two Sisters are on night duty in their turn. This leaves thirteen Sisters to look after the hundred and thirty six patients. I am afraid that if we do not get help the Sisters will break down. Many times the Sisters who are on night work only get a few hours rest...But what is troubling me most of all is, I have no English Sister to take the adults out for their walks. Sr. Amata always took them out up to the end of July. I had to stop her going as a lady, a frequent visitor here, stopped her and not knowing that was a German, spoke rather bitterly about them. After this I decided not to let Sr. Amata out again, consequently the adults have not been out since. If the Commissioners get to know this – there is bound to be an investigation, as according to the regulations, all patients are supposed to get their regular country walk.

Did I ever tell you that we have four more new anti-aircraft guns fitted up near us? We are now in a ring of guns and search lights.

P.S. Monday morning. We have had another terrifying night!

**February 1918**

We had a very narrow escape during last week’s raid – yesterday the men came and informed us that there was a shell hole in one of the fields facing the school-children’s division. I went to see it before informing the Authorities. The shell has penetrated the earth ever so deep. We put a stick four feet long down as far as we could reach, but we could not touch the shell. See what a narrow escape we had had!! Had it touched the roof, it would certainly have come through. The Superintendent of the Police rang me up this morning and asked me to get out men to place a board over the hole, as their men (probably military) could not come for two or three days. If they can dig up the shell they will, but if it is too deep down they will fill up the hole and leave it.

At present the men are attending to the roofs of different parts of the establishments, as damage has been done through the heavy fall of snow. While working on the roof of the Sanctuary, they came across a good sized piece of shell embedded in one of the slates. If this piece had gone through, it would have probably struck the altar. This piece must have been there since October’s raid as it is quite red with rust.