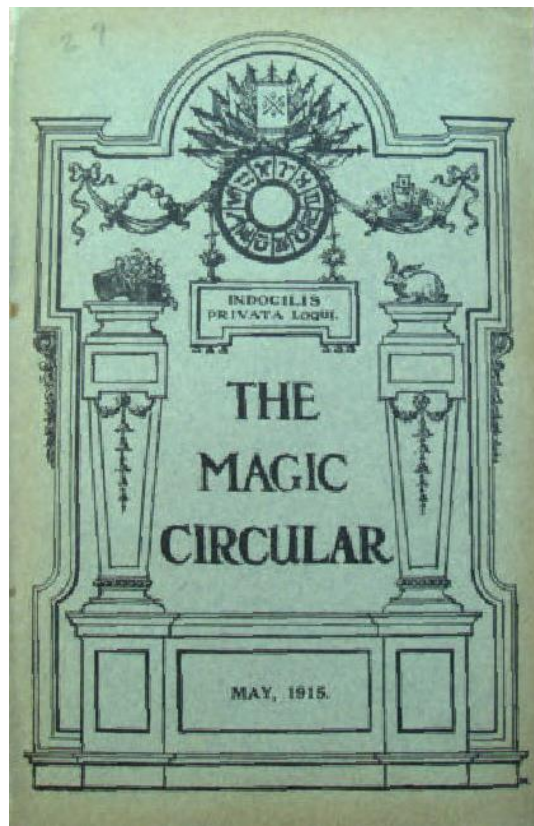


# “Letters from the Front”



**A brief look at**

**The Magic Circle and the Great War  
based on Letters to The Magic Circular**

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Presented at

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# Letters from the Front – The Magic Circle and the Great War

The Magic Circle was but nine years old when the First World War began. The first mention of the War was in *The Magic Circular* of October 1914 when, instead of there being a full list of programme dates for the year, only the date of the Annual General Meeting was given.<sup>1</sup> The next month however came a statement to proceed with “business as usual”. Members were exhorted to attend as many meetings as possible and were also requested to encourage the organisers of functions and events to continue with their plans; lack of such functions would be bad for the income of entertainers.<sup>2</sup>

In fact business as usual did continue with regular Monday meetings throughout the War. Apart from the cancellation of the Annual Dinners and the abandonment of the Grand Séance in 1918 as a result of air raids, only one meeting was cancelled, in June 1917, when the War duties of Rev. EJ Whittall prevented his coming to London to present *Some Ideas*.

In November 1914 *The Magic Circular* published a list of men serving in the forces as “Our Roll of Honour”.<sup>3</sup> Two of the men listed, H Simpson and JH Webster, were already in Army before the start of the War.

## OUR ROLL OF HONOUR.

The following members of THE MAGIC CIRCLE are serving in His Majesty's Forces :—

E. L. Barndon, M.M.C.  
Sergt. Harry Frazer, M.M.C.  
Chris. Hilton, M.I.M.C.  
Sydney Howard, M.M.C.  
Arthur Jesson, M.M.C.  
Sydney F. Lydon, M.M.C. (Public Schools Corps).  
Frederick Niles, M.M.C. (Royal Navy).  
C. L. Penwill, M.M.C.  
E. J. Rudland, A.I.M.C. (Royal Navy).  
H. Simpson, M.M.C.  
D. H. Thomas, M.M.C.  
J. H. Webster, M.I.M.C. (Staff).

The Editor would like to receive names to be added to this list in future numbers of THE CIRCULAR (see *Editorial Notes*).

In January 1916 Captain N Ogle, who was serving with the Indian Expeditionary Force but did not at that time appear on the list, noted that the term “Roll of Honour” was normally used for those killed in conflict and suggested a change to “List of our Fighting Men” or similar.<sup>4</sup> This was supported by JH Johnson<sup>5</sup> and Rev. EJ Whittall<sup>6</sup> and in May 1916 the title was changed to “On Active Service”.<sup>7</sup>

In total 118 Members of The Magic Circle served in the Forces during the War, not all at the same time. The numbers on the list increased from 12 in November 1914<sup>8</sup> (shown above) to 95 in June 1918<sup>9</sup>. The maximum was 107 in February 1919<sup>10</sup> the last time the list was published.

Harry Webster, who was serving at the Headquarters of the British Expeditionary Force, was awarded the Legion d'Honneur by the French Government after the Battle of Mons, 23rd August 1914. After the battle he was staying in a small town and found magicians' equipment scattered round the room which was his temporary Headquarters office. As best he could he collected it together and left a note giving his name and the address of The Magic Circle.<sup>11</sup> There is no record of any further contact from this event.

H Simpson wrote in April 1915 that he had been awarded the Military Cross. He said “This, I think, will be interesting to the members, seeing that THE MAGIC CIRCLE has the same initial letters.”<sup>12</sup>

Sydney Lydon had joined the Public Schools Corps. *The Times* reported “They are all of the well-to-do class and are paying their own expenses. Their camp rations and tent accommodation costing 15s. 6d. a week have to be paid for a week in advance. The uniform is also coming out of their own pockets ... At least 100 are providing their own horses to act as a cavalry squadron.”<sup>13</sup>



Claude Chandler



Edward Victor



Herbert J Collings



Gus Fowler



Victor Peacock

Some well-known names joined the Forces. By October 1915 Claude Chandler was in the Royal Bucks. Hussars and Edward Victor in the 10<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers. By May 1916 Herbert J Collings (later to be President of The Magic Circle) was in the Artists' Rifles, Gus Fowler, the Watch King, in the Auxiliary Services Corps and Victor Peacock in the Cyclists' Regiment. Although keen cyclists were exhorted to "Cycle for the King", cycling near the Front would not have been a pleasurable experience.



Cyclists' Regiment, Brie, Somme, 1917

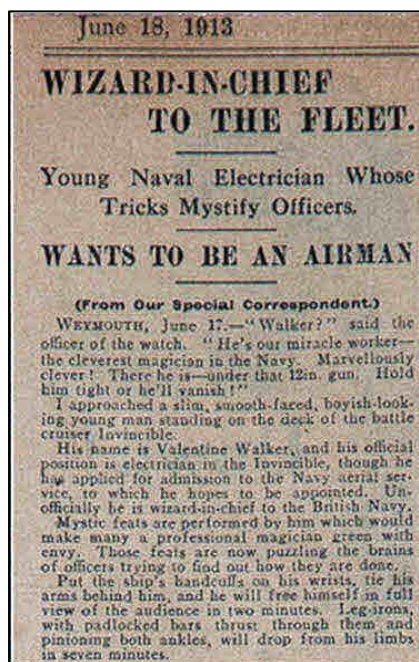
Not all those enlisted were soldiers. Twelve sailors appear in the lists, Ernest John (Jack) Rudland and Francis Bewley, *HMS Yarmouth*; C Higginbottom, *HMS Medea*; Frederick Niles, *HMS Morning Star*; KS Mackenzie, *HMS Greenwich*; James Linn, Henry AJ Shearman-Dyer and George Henry Batchelor, *Royal Naval Air Squadron*; James Steedman, *HMS Egremont* and Val D Walker, *HMS Greenwich*. Johnnie Alexander and WJA Burrell are merely given as RN.

Jack Rudland wrote regularly to *The Magic Circular*, initially from the Far East<sup>14</sup> but later from home waters.<sup>15</sup> He and his crewmates were "living in hopes of having a good turn-to before long".<sup>16</sup> He also took opportunities to perform magic as reported by his crewmate.<sup>17</sup> *HMS Yarmouth*, the ship on which they both served, was of note as the first ship from which an aircraft, a Sopwith Pup, was launched at sea.

Both Rudland and Bewley on *HMS Yarmouth* and Frederick Niles on *HMS Morning Star* were in the Battle of Jutland on 31<sup>st</sup> May 1916. Rudland gave a "photogravure" of the Battle to The Magic Circle. A minor point of interest is that *HMS Magic* was also at Jutland.

It is said that the first casualty of War is the truth. Jack Rudland was commended for his part in "the brilliant exploit" as coxswain of one of the ships loaded with cement which were sunk to block the harbour at Ostend.<sup>18</sup> In fact the exercise was unsuccessful and German submarines were not denied access to the high seas.

Another Naval Correspondent was Val Walker who had joined The Magic Circle in October 1913. He had been in the Navy before the war and served on *HMS Invincible*, where his escapology and magic had resulted in his being christened “Wizard in Chief to the Fleet” by the *Daily Mirror* or later “Wizard in Chief to the Navy”. He was 23 at the time.

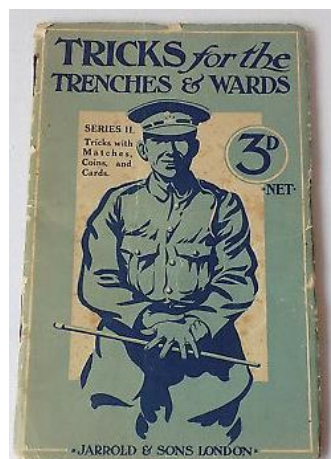
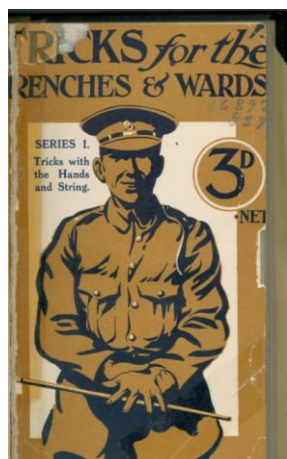


Val Walker

Walker had left the Navy to be a professional entertainer in January 1914 but signed up again when the war started. In October 1916 he wrote “I am happy to know THE CIRCLE has not suffered the loss of any member killed in action, and sincerely hope THE CIRCULAR will have no occasion to publish a Roll of Honour. I have lost several friends, my dear old ship too—the *Invincible*. I had a cherished spot in my heart for her.”<sup>19</sup> The *HMS Invincible* was sunk at Jutland when a 305mm shell exploded the ship’s ammunition store. 1026 men were lost and only 6 survived.

Back home magicians were entertaining the troops. In May 1915 a group from The Magic Circle, including Herbert J Collings, William Minns, Ernest Noakes, Edward Victor and Frank Staff, gave an entertainment for the Fleet at an unspecified naval base.<sup>20</sup> After the show the men were accommodated on *HMS Dido* while the ladies of the party were housed ashore. Later a photo of *HMS Dido* was presented to the Circle by Rev. NM Livingstone and hung in the clubroom. She was an Eclipse Class Cruiser on reserve as a depot ship.

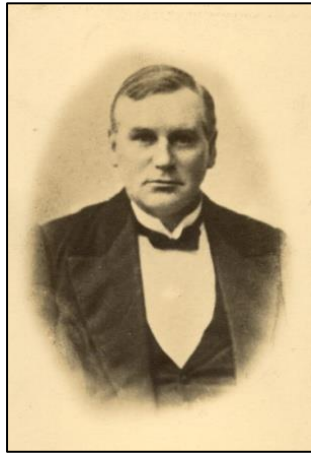
Magicians were also going about their normal business. Chung Ling Soo toured the UK throughout the War and even took a tour to India in January 1917. As is well known he was fatally shot at the Wood Green Empire a few months before the end of the War on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1918 and died early the next day. Maskelyne and Devant continued to stage shows at St. George’s Hall, including performers such as Culpitt, Devant, Victor and Collings. Lewis Davenport was engaged there in June 1916 after a Magic Circle Grand Séance.<sup>21</sup> A blow to The Magic Circle was the death of JN Maskelyne on 18<sup>th</sup> May 1917.



Books were written on entertaining the troops and wounded servicemen. One, reviewed in *The Magic Circular* was “How to Entertain in Camp and Hospital” by HC Mole<sup>22</sup>. Another pair by “Draklof” (Charles Folkard, originally an illustrator who had created Teddy Tail for the *Daily Mail*) was “Tricks for the Trenches and Wards” which had two parts, “Series 1 - Tricks with the Hands and String” and “Series 2 - Tricks with Matches, Coins and Cards”. These 3d books were later reprinted with a price of 7d.

One person deeply involved in entertaining wounded servicemen was Charles Williams in Wales who was giving up the whole of his professional work to this service in the Winter of 1915-1916.<sup>23</sup>

Charles Williams



Williams was a friend of Chung Ling Soo. On one occasion a wounded soldier expressed regret that although Soo was performing locally (in South Wales) he wouldn't see him. Next day Soo turned up at the hospital, in Stetson, making no pretence to be Chinese, and performed magic for the patients. He distributed large quantities of chocolates, cigarettes, tobacco and flowers.<sup>24</sup> Three other reports of shows by Magic Circle members for service men are noted here. Daniel Brewer, William Minns and Kingsley Ronald entertained the Army Service Corps at Aldershot in July 1915<sup>25</sup>, David Devant entertained wounded soldiers at a garden party in Gosforth in August 1915<sup>26</sup> and William Minns and Herbert J Collings entertained troops in the presence of the King and Queen in February 1916.<sup>27</sup>

Magicians were not only active in England but went with Concert Parties from England to entertain the troops, many under the aegis of the impresario Lena Ashwell. One of the first was Stanley Bell who was performing with Maskelyne and Devant.<sup>28</sup> He was shortly after followed by Henry Hull.



Stanley  
Bell



Lena  
Ashwell



Henry  
Hull

Hull wrote to *The Magic Circular*, "I am doing tricks that need no preparation, and I only have to lift them out. Another difficulty is that the air is thick with smoke, just like a November fog, which makes it difficult to see small things, and out here one cannot carry big things. It is hard work, but the men are so appreciative that it is a perfect delight to rough it."<sup>29</sup>

Henry Hull made five trips to France and also gave a show on *HMS Dido*, where the Magic Circle's previous visit was still talked about.<sup>30</sup> Others who went to Europe included Arthur Feather who made five trips to France and Flanders giving 1710 performances,<sup>31</sup> and Tom Burrows<sup>32</sup>, again with a Lena Ashwell Concert Party.

Serving soldiers performed as well. Edward Victor and Hubert Lea scored a great success at a big show for soldiers "somewhere in Scotland".<sup>33</sup> Their prowess was reported even on the Continent.<sup>34</sup> GT Simpson made himself unpopular with the Military Police, though popular with the soldiers, by escaping from their shackles.<sup>35</sup> Lewis Davenport was serving in France just before the end of the War and "showing them what a fine conjurer is capable of doing."<sup>36</sup> After the War one soldier reported that he had entertained over 200,000 soldiers and sailors and over 6000 wounded and nurses in addition to his military duties.<sup>37</sup>

Members in the Forces got consolation from *The Magic Circular*. These included DH Thomas<sup>38</sup>, Sidney Saunders<sup>39</sup> and Basil Green, who received his *Circular* in the middle of a barrage of "Coal-boxes and Whiz-bangs".<sup>40</sup> There had been talk in *The Magic Circular* of discontinuing publication because of a lack of material but Arthur Jesson wrote a long letter describing the hell of war and pleading for the *Circular* to continue to appear. He wrote, "You may, some of you, see pictures of this great offensive on the cinematograph, but the hell of this war cannot possibly be depicted ... and may there be no further talk of the discontinuance of THE CIRCULAR through lack of support from those whose leisure and facilities are at least not less than ours."<sup>41</sup>

Soldier magicians needed magical equipment, though it had to be light and easy to carry. Letters were received from soldiers asking for small pieces of equipment, though the Editor did comment that perhaps people should send a list of tricks to Mr. Donn before sending the tricks themselves. "This will doubtless prevent Private Green from becoming the proud possessor of 15 sets of multiplying billiard balls, several sliding die boxes and sundry obedient balls, &c."<sup>42</sup>

Entertainment of the troops was obviously deemed important. The Canadian Corps even set up a College to train Concert Parties. This was under the direction of Lieut. FG Armitage, a Member of The Magic Circle. Conditions were sometimes not ideal. The entertainers could be practising at one end of a street while there was bombardment going on at the other end.<sup>43</sup> Frank Armitage was awarded the Military Cross after Amiens Aug. 1918. He was to return to England where he "expects to be able to carry on the good work of 'giving furiously to laugh.'"

Val Walker in October 1916 had commented that there had been no deaths of Circle Members, but only the month after came the first report, Reginald Roots of the London Scottish who had joined The Magic Circle in April 1914. He lost his way in thick mist when on messenger duty. When the mist lifted he was near a German trench. He was shot, but crawled back to British lines. Injured in September he died in October 1916. He was a local scoutmaster in Cranford and was honoured by the scouts on the return of his body to England.<sup>44</sup>

In November Arthur Jesson, who had written the letter saying what hell it was, died leading an attack on enemy lines. His body was not recovered.<sup>45</sup> He is remembered on the Thiepval memorial at Authuille in the Somme.

The third Member to die was Edwin Baskerville Hickox of 9<sup>th</sup> Essex Regiment in August 1917.<sup>46</sup> He was, in his spare time, a Captain in the Church Lads' Brigade. He had appeared at a Magic Circle Ladies' Night in February 1917 with a clever card effect.<sup>47</sup> He had only recently returned to the trenches after recovering from wounds.

Douglas J Matthews was a popular Birmingham entertainer as Kenneth Douglas. He wrote from Salisbury Plain in May 1916 that there was plenty of entertainment available for the troops. "Captain S., one of the officers, works magic. Is he in THE CIRCLE?"<sup>48</sup> Matthews also died in August 1917.<sup>49</sup>

Angus Dodgshon was killed by a bursting shell in November 1917. He was 22 and had been about to go up to Cambridge when the War started. He had appeared a number of times at The Magic Circle and was viewed as an up-and-coming performer.

Articles by Dodgshon had been published in *The Magic Circular* including an account of a visit to 'Le Prieuré', the former home of Robert-Houdin near Blois, which was in a poor state 40 years after Robert-Houdin's death. He made a number of gifts of books to The Magic Circle and before going to the front he had also presented a photo of 'Le Prieuré'. After his death his mother gave his collection of 22 books to the Magic Circle Library, which necessitated the purchase of a new bookcase. All the books have since been sold off as duplicates but one came to light few years ago via a contact with Peter Lane from someone with an interest in WW1 who'd bought it at a book sale. It was *A Dozen of Magic* by AC Medrington.

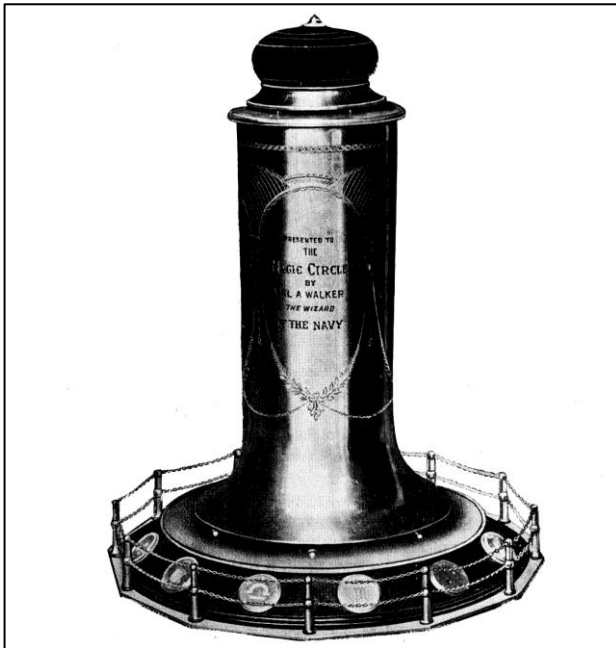


In the last letter received by Douglas Dexter from Dodgshon he had written "Write about Magic, for God's sake. I'm fed up with this. If I had any other kind of news, I'd have sent that."<sup>50</sup>

The last casualty was Horace P Stone who had joined The Magic Circle in October 1913, the same day as Val Walker, and was promoted to AIMC (Associate of the Inner Magic Circle) in May 1915. He had appeared at the June Social 1914 with Soldier's Cane & Envelope, (similar to Wand and Envelope), Cards up Sleeve and Egg Bag<sup>51</sup> and at the April Social 1915, performing Egg Bag, Spirit Slate Writing & Photography and Paper Folding.<sup>52</sup> He enlisted in 1915 and went to France in early 1916. Wounded in January 1917 he recovered and returned to the Front only to die in September 1918.<sup>53</sup>

There were therefore 6 deaths out of 118 Members who served and 2½% of The Magic Circle membership of 1914. This corresponds with an overall death rate of about 2% of the UK population.

A few months before the end of the war, at a *Magic and Music* evening at The Magic Circle, instead of the interval, Nevil Maskelyne presented, on behalf of Val Walker, a gong which Val had crafted from a spent shell case.<sup>54</sup> This gong, which has lost the "fence" round it, can still be seen, slightly battered, in The Magic Circle Clubroom.

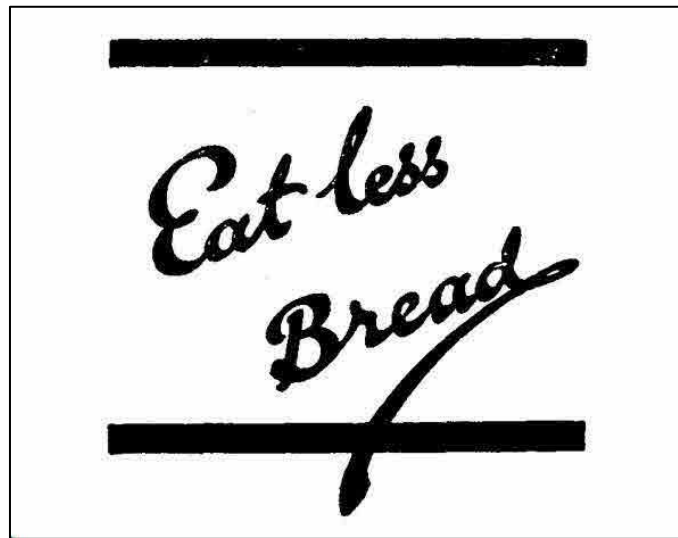


Another memento of the War with Magic Circle relevance is a pewter dish, presented to Herbert J Collings for his services to the Officers' Training Corps of the Artists' Rifles. The dish sold for £250 at auction in July 2014 and was later available for £775 from a dealer in London. Sadly it does not belong to The Magic Circle.



War has proven good for magic and The Magic Circle. Serving men were exposed to magical entertainment and a number also found it an interesting hobby while in the trenches. As a result, membership numbers rose after the War; having been around 240 in 1914 they increased to about 350-400 in the post-War years. Numbers remained steady until after World War 2, when there was again an increase to around 1400 by 1957.

In finishing I present what appears to be a mysterious injunction which appeared three times in *The Magic Circular*, the first time in November 1917.<sup>55</sup>



You could use Google to search for the context.

I would like to thank David Hibberd, Sue Rowbotham, Anne & John Davenport, Peter Lane and Paul Cobb for help with this project.

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<sup>1</sup> Editor. Editorial Notes. *The Magic Circular*, 1914;8:220

<sup>2</sup> Editor. Editorial Notes. *The Magic Circular*, 1914;9:1

<sup>3</sup> Anon. Roll of Honour. *The Magic Circular*, 1914;9:14

<sup>4</sup> Ogle N. Correspondence. *The Magic Circular*, 1916;10:43

<sup>5</sup> Johnson JH. Our Roll of Honour. *The Magic Circular*, 1916;10:87

<sup>6</sup> Whittall EJ. Correspondence. *The Magic Circular*, 1916;10:125

<sup>7</sup> Anon. On Active Service. *The Magic Circular*, 1916;10:123

<sup>8</sup> Anon. Roll of Honour. *The Magic Circular*, 1914;9:14

<sup>9</sup> Anon. On Active Service. *The Magic Circular*, 1918;12:170

<sup>10</sup> Anon. On Active Service. *The Magic Circular*, 1919;13:70

<sup>11</sup> Webster JH. Correspondence. News From the Front. *The Magic Circular*, 1915;9:106

<sup>12</sup> Simpson H. Correspondence. *The Magic Circular*, 1915;9:141

<sup>13</sup> Anon. The Public School, Corps. *The Times*, 11 September 1914

<sup>14</sup> Editor. Editorial Notes. *The Magic Circular*, 1915;9:26

<sup>15</sup> Rudland J. From The Fleet. *The Magic Circular*, 1915;9:86

<sup>16</sup> Rudland J. Greetings From The Fleet. *The Magic Circular*, 1915;9:168

<sup>17</sup> Bewley FRJ. A Sailor Conjuror. *The Magic Circular*, 1916;10:125

<sup>18</sup> Editor. Editorial Notes. *The Magic Circular*, 1918;13:11

<sup>19</sup> Walker VD. From The Grand Fleet. *The Magic Circular*, 1916;11:10

<sup>20</sup> MIMC. Entertaining our Sailors. *The Magic Circular*, 1915;9:86

<sup>21</sup> HBD. The Grand Séance. *The Magic Circular*, 1916;10:133

<sup>22</sup> Anon. Review: How To Entertain in Camp and Hospital. *The Magic Circular*, 1917;11:143

<sup>23</sup> Williams CO. Entertainments for Soldiers. *The Magic Circular*, 1915;10:15

<sup>24</sup> Steinmeyer J. *The Glorious Deception*. New York. Carroll & Graf. 2005, p.376.

<sup>25</sup> Brewer DJ. The Magic Circle Entertains the Soldiers. *The Magic Circular*, 1915;9:261

<sup>26</sup> Devant D. Two New Illusions. *The Magic Circular*, 1915;9:267

<sup>27</sup> Minns WR. Circlers Entertain Their Majesties. *The Magic Circular*, 1916;10:80

<sup>28</sup> Facer G. Conjurers at the Front. *The Magic Circular*, 1915;9:183



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- <sup>29</sup> Hull H. Conjurers at the Front. *The Magic Circular*, 1915;9:185
- <sup>30</sup> Anon. Editorial Notes. *The Magic Circular*, 1916;10:208
- <sup>31</sup> Anon. Editorial Notes. *The Magic Circular*, 1919;13:152
- <sup>32</sup> Anon. Editorial Notes. *The Magic Circular*, 1917;12:30
- <sup>33</sup> Anon. Editorial Notes. *The Magic Circular*, 1916;10:207
- <sup>34</sup> Stone HP. More From the Fighting Line. *The Magic Circular*, 1916;11:50
- <sup>35</sup> Simpson GT. A Conjuror's Experience. *The Magic Circular*, 1916;11:10
- <sup>36</sup> Anon. Editorial Notes. *The Magic Circular*, 1918;13:45
- <sup>37</sup> Anon. Editorial Notes. *The Magic Circular*, 1919;13:58
- <sup>38</sup> Thomas DH. From Somewhere in France. *The Magic Circular*, 1916;11:9
- <sup>39</sup> Saunders SJ. From the Camps. *The Magic Circular*, 1916;11:51
- <sup>40</sup> Green BJ. From the Camps. *The Magic Circular*, 1915;9:229
- <sup>41</sup> Jesson A. From the Fighting Line. *The Magic Circular*, 1916;11:8
- <sup>42</sup> Anon. Editorial Notes. *The Magic Circular*, 1915;10:22
- <sup>43</sup> Crescendo. A Wartime Concert College. *The Magic Circular*, 1918;13:40
- <sup>44</sup> Anon. Reginald Arthur Roots. *The Magic Circular*, 1916;11:42
- <sup>45</sup> Anon. Lieut Arthur Jesson. *The Magic Circular*, 1917;11:73
- <sup>46</sup> Anon. Major Edwin Baskerville Hickox. *The Magic Circular*, 1917;12:1
- <sup>47</sup> Denham HB. Ladies' Night. *The Magic Circular*, 1917;11:124
- <sup>48</sup> Matthews DJ. Conjuring in Camp. *The Magic Circular*, 1917;11:124
- <sup>49</sup> Anon. Editorial Notes. *The Magic Circular*, 1916;10:125
- <sup>50</sup> Dexter D. Lieut Angus Dodgshon MIMC. *The Magic Circular*, 1918;12:163
- <sup>51</sup> Anon. The June Social. *The Magic Circular*, 1914;8:199
- <sup>52</sup> Anon. The April Social. *The Magic Circular*, 1914;9:174
- <sup>53</sup> Anon. Editorial Notes. *The Magic Circular*, 1918;13:44
- <sup>54</sup> Anon. Magic and Music. *The Magic Circular*, 1918;12:168
- <sup>55</sup> Anon. Eat Less Bread. *The Magic Circular*, 1917;12:39