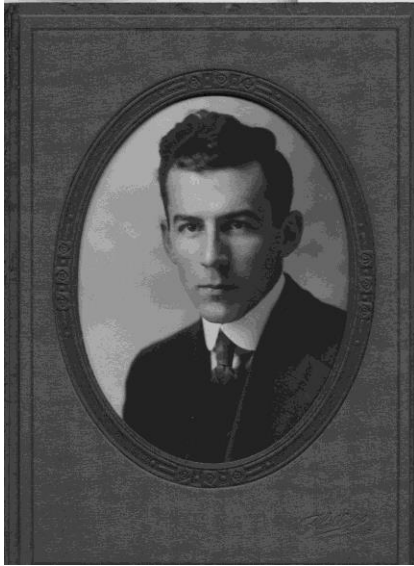


## Dr. Jim in The Great War

By Mark Fritz

Many Bloomsburg-area doctors volunteered for military service in WWI (aka, The Great War), including Drs. Bierman, Yost, McDonald, and Brobst, just to name a few. In fact, so many joined up that when they were really needed here at home—during the terrible Spanish Flu epidemic in October of 1918—their absence was keenly felt.



One of the first local physicians to volunteer was Dr. James Montgomery, Jr., son of James Montgomery, Sr., who himself was a well-known local medico, having covered the Buckhorn area for years before moving to Bloomsburg in 1904. To distinguish between the two doctors Montgomery, most people referred to James Jr. as either Jim or Dr. Jim.

After first attending Bloomsburg State Normal School and then Penn State, Jim Montgomery went to Jefferson Medical School in Philadelphia (his father's alma mater). After graduating from Jefferson in 1915, he interned for a year at Lancaster General Hospital in Lancaster, PA. He had just set himself up in practice, sharing his father's office space, when Congress declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917.

Like many physicians during wartime, Jim probably saw combat service as a learning opportunity. He signed up during the first week of May in 1917, less than a month after the U.S. had entered the war. But he wasn't shipped across the Atlantic until September 1. During that time interval he went through military training, probably at Camp Greenleaf, Fort Oglethorpe, GA, the U.S. Army's primary medical training facility. Once overseas Jim Montgomery was posted to the British army, which was not unusual at the time. He had entered service so early that he preceded most of the American troops overseas. He would have had very few doughboys to treat at that time. Dr. Montgomery remained with the British throughout the war. He at first worked in a hospital in London; then later (in March of 1918) he was sent to the front in France, which made him probably the first local doctor to be under fire.

### LETTERS FROM THE FRONT

A common practice which began during the Civil War and continued during the Spanish American War and this Great War was for parents to take the letters written to them from their sons on the front lines and give them to the local newspaper for publication. In the days before instant communications like radio and TV, it was a way to deliver first hand news from the front to the public. And, of course, it was a way for parents to brag. On October 15, 1917 *The Morning Press* printed the following letter sent by James Jr. to his parents.

London, Sunday, Sept. 30.

Dear Folks:

As you may not have received my letter of a week ago, I will again tell you that I am in a large military hospital here. It is a 500 bed hospital to which the wounded soldiers are brought directly from the front. They arrive here within 24 hours of the time they are injured. I have charge of a 70 bed ward which always contains from sixty to seventy wounded men. I also have charge of a tuberculosis ward. So you see, I have plenty to do.

I have just had dinner and have been watching a couple of aeroplanes performing. One was quite near. They seem to be all biplanes.

Last night we had a hard air raid which lasted a couple of hours. We went up on the heath to see it when it first started, but pretty soon they began to come toward us, when we started on a run for home. It is impossible to see the aeroplanes, but we can tell about where they are by the sounds of the engines and the crack of the bombs. They have several large anti-air craft guns near here and they flash and make a terrible racket.

After we left the heath, we stood at the door for a while until the shrapnel began falling in the street, when we got inside. Shrapnel is what our guns shoot at the planes. They are shells and we can see them go. They look like little balls of fire with the moon shining on them. They burst and pieces fly in every direction. This is the reason we keep inside, for it is useless going in to dodge a bomb. It wouldn't stop for a building. If it misses you, you are lucky, if it doesn't, good bye. This would be a poor place for nervous persons as they would have quite a time getting any sleep. Tonight when I take my usual walk, I shall go towards the country so as to get away from the bombs.

I am as you see, writing on only one side of the paper so that should the censor cut anything out it will not spoil the rest of the letter.

I'll give you my address again if you didn't happen to get that letter. Tell my friends where I am and that I would be glad to hear from them.

I hope you are all well and happy. I am. Good luck.  
JIM.



*English army hospital*

Two months later Jim sent another letter to his parents that the *Press* printed.

London, November 27

Dear Folks:

It is pretty cold here now and snowed the other day. It rains nearly every day. When the sun shines I feel like a different fellow. I am as fit as a fiddle, not even a cold or a cough. The hospital is a long mile from where I live and I walk it several times a day which keeps me in good condition.

I try not to think of Christmas very much and won't care when it is over. I can't see how it will be any different from any other day, a little sadder, perhaps, and can't help wondering where I will spend the next one.

My old roommate at Lancaster Hospital [REMEMBER, HE DID HIS INTERNSHIP THERE?] came over a few weeks ago and is stationed about 15 miles from here. We had a joyful reunion on Friday. He is the same fine fellow, but I can see a change in him, not so light-hearted and care-free as in the past. This war seems to affect everyone the same. It is a sad, serious business.

Tonight I have to go a couple of miles from here to examine recruits. I will be the only M.D. there so you can see my responsibility. I travel on the subway. They have a very good system here, better than New York or Philadelphia, but they have very few trolleys. Most people travel in buses, something like sight-seeing buses, with two decks. The trolley cars also have two decks. They don't have the railroad facilities that we have. Their freight cars are about the size of our mine cars and the engines are much smaller than ours. The coaches are divided into little compartments and they have first, second, and third class accommodations.

I had a roommate from Virginia but he was ordered away this week--God knows where. These people here mean alright but their ways are different. We don't understand them and they don't understand us. So you see why I sometimes get lonely and wish for a letter from home...

The air raids cause lots of excitement. When we first came here we went out to see what was going on but we have stopped that. Dr. Blake and I rode out three miles the other night intending to walk back for exercise. We started back when the bombs and guns started. We ran awhile and finally sat down on a bench and trusted to luck. After getting our breath we came on. The next morning I happened to see in a paper an account which told of some people passing who had seen a man and woman sitting on this bench and how in the morning there was a big hole where the bench had stood and little pieces of flesh and clothes sticking around on surrounding objects. Evidently some one else had sat down after we left. I showed the account to Dr. Blake and he didn't laugh.

About half of our bunch have been sent to France and I may be there before you get this. I'm ready for anything. They can get me but once and I'll be ahead of the Germans anyhow for I helped fix up a bunch of British and ordered them back to the firing line.

Wish you a joyful Christmas.

JIM

On April 22, 1918, the *Morning Press* printed another letter from Jim, which was introduced with the following notice: "From Dr. James R. Montgomery to his parents, Dr. and Mrs. James

Montgomery, has come the following letter of exceptional interest written direct from the Flanders front, where some of the heaviest fighting of the war is now in progress."

Somewhere in France, Mar. 24

Dear Folks: -- I have been in this country for several days but am not definitely located yet. Am 5 or 6 miles back of the front line. Can hear the guns all the time, night and day. The town is pretty well knocked to pieces by shells and bombs. They put the shells in here right from the front. They shelled it yesterday.

Left my trunk in London and brought only necessities along, cot, bedding-roll, water bottle, etc. Am sitting in an old brewery which is my home at the present. Am with the British Army and am attached to a field ambulance with the station about 3 miles behind the front line. I sleep in the cellar and am fairly safe. The small shells fall all around here and the big ones go over our heads like express trains. Suppose this sounds terrible to you but in fact it isn't.

This is a wonderful life, great and thrilling. Wish I could tell you of many things I have seen, and I have been here but a few days. Don't worry about me, I'll be all right. This is the right place for me. You know, there is always one comforting thought—whatever happens we are doing our best and our duty.

I hope to stay with the British. They treat us fine—like men. My chief (London) Major tried his best to keep me there but could not do so. Don't you ever let anyone say anything to you against the British.

Am getting plenty of good food and cheap, about 2 or 3 francs a day, which is much different from London, where I was always hungry. The American doctor who was here when I came has been sent on so I am the only representative of the U. S. in this section. There seems to be only one friend who sticks to me and his name is Henry Ford. I came here in one and travel in one everywhere I go.

I never saw an aeroplane before I came over. Well I know what they look like now with both Allies and Huns. Also tanks by the dozen and all kinds of balloons and Zepps.

I could write many pages but dare not do so. I wish you could see the house-roofs made of straw. A man told me a good one would last 5 or 6 years and would not leak. Well it is eleven o'clock and I am going down to the cellar to bed—for how long nobody knows. Am feeling fine. Good night.

JIM.

Address: Lt. J. R. Montgomery

2-3 Wessex Field Ambulance

B. E. F. France

I am in Flanders on the field where the Huns were driven back by the British last year.

**DEATH AT HOME—1918 WAS A VERY BAD YEAR**

On August 5, 1918, Jim's mother, Daisy Harris Montgomery, died unexpectedly. She was only 51.

In the letter that Jim had written home to his parents back in November, he had tried to explain how the war was changing people and creating great sadness in England. He wrote:

...when you write don't tell me who is sick or who has died. Everybody is so sad around here. Nobody sings. Nobody laughs. Maybe I can tell you why. One of my patients seemed sort of funny and reckless. The nurses said he was a little off but he didn't seem that way to me and so I had a talk with him. He told me he was an Australian, that his wife had died three months after their marriage and his father was buried one week before he was drafted. When the war started he had three brothers and they all had been killed and he told me the places. On top of that he got word a month ago that his mother had died and was buried. I believe he told me the truth. In addition he has been wounded three times that I know of. He has had more than three years of this Hell. Do you blame him for being queer and reckless? That's why the people here don't laugh.



*Horse Ambulance*

The senior Dr. James Montgomery, the father, didn't honor Jim's request to not tell him who had died and instead dutifully wrote his son a letter informing him of his mother's death (that must have been a hard job for him). However, according to Montgomery family lore, the letter was lost in the mail and Jim never received it. According to Jim's son Dale (born 1932), Jim didn't find out about his mother's death until he arrived home in Bloomsburg at the end of the war. Can you picture him jumping off the train at the station on Sixth Street, dashing up Market Street to his home on West Third Street, filled with excitement and anticipation of his reunion with his family and being hit with the news that his mother had died?

Jim Montgomery Jr. went on to live a prosperous and productive life as a local physician and never became "queer and reckless" like his Australian friend, but I'll bet it was a long time until he laughed again.

[More detail about WWI, both abroad and here on the home front, as experienced by the doctors Montgomery, junior and senior, can be found in the book *Small Town Doctor*, which is available from the Society. The author is currently working on a book of collected WWI soldiers' letters, which is expected to be published by the Society sometime in 2017, the war's centennial year.]