

3rd May 1918.

Dear Father,

I was just going to write you on my return to France, but owing to such sudden alterations and stoppages of post etc., I was forced to give up the idea, so now I have a little more time I am making the attempt to complete this short note which I hope does not bore you to a great extent.

Having just completed my 14 days leave and returned to my Battⁿ, which, by the way I thought I was never going to find. In my absence they had moved from Poperinghe to a place further down the South, this sort of thing always causes delay to individuals returning from leave, and consequently it took me four days from leaving London to the time when I reached my destination. During this journey there were several unusual things occurring all the time and I thought to recall some of them while I am laid in hospital would be rather more interesting than to keep on looking at the blank walls and sickly patients in the ward.

To commence with, I don't profess to be a Journalist or a Writer of astounding stories, but merely for amusement and passtime I am jotting down a few of my experiences during the brief stay I had this time in France, and at the same time I think they will certainly interest you a little.

Well! on the morning of the 21st March I was travelling fast towards the railhead called Jussy, when suddenly about 3-30 a.m. a terrific bombardment opened out which appeared to be on a very wide front, just then we came to a standstill so I had a look out to see if we were anywhere near home. I heard someone say "the German

offensive has begun!" and I could not turn to them to say it was an untruth, as it sounded only too true, therefore, we were quite satisfied to say we hoped they would get as much as they gave.

I arrived at the end of the Railway Journey about 5 a.m. and reported at Divisional Head quarters where there was a substantial breakfast ready for all those arriving off leave. After this meal I enquired for my Battⁿ who were just a few miles away, I could not get a ride for some time as they seemed to be busy moving everything and everybody, but about 12 noon two busses were moving off in my direction and the driver said he would put me off where I wanted to be. It was rather a perilous journey, the Bosche was shelling the road in many places; however, there was probably too much "wind up" for him to hit any of the busses; talk about the "flying Scotchman" he is not in it for speed. Well, the driver was as good as his word, he put me off but it was at a nice little village miles out of my way, so I went into an orderly room and carefully scrutinised a map, then started to trudge my way back, the march was not without interest, the first place I passed through was what had been the beautiful town of Chauny, but it is now in a similar condition to Ypres, only there are a few houses left standing, the magnificent church it possessed is literally a heap of stones, excepting in one corner where the Crucifix stands firm on the altar; this is a most remarkable thing but it is noticeable in most of these ruined churches.

As I walked through this town the Bosche were constantly dropping shells into the centre and scattering a few more bricks. The R. E's were busy laying dynamite and fuse wires on all the

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bridges in readiness to blow them up; all Labour Corps were being moved back and everybody in a state of packing up. With all this going on the thought flashed across my mind we must be going to retreat from our positions, and the idea of it made me feel a little bit disheartened to think that we were going to give up land to the Hun, which had cost us so many thousands of lives to gain. Then I thought of the support which I gave to the strength of our Armies in France when I was home on leave, saying it would be impossible for him to break through, I am thinking my words will not be carrying much weight at the present moment, but I am still of the same opinion, that our Armies will yet deal the final blow, ~~he~~ will never defeat Soldiers & Sailors like ours, I have come to that conclusion every time I have been in contact with the Bosche, and at the fight for Villiers - Brettoneux on the 4/4/18 it struck me more forcibly still; without numbers he is no good at all and before this year is out he will be well on his way back to Germany.

In the centre of this town "Chauny" I dropped across an Officers' Club, it was quite a pleasant surprise seeing I was ready for a rest and a good feed; lunch was just on the point of being served so I soon settled down to five courses of the best - I never thought for one moment the Hun would be sitting there the next day probably enjoying a similar meal.

I continued my journey and as I was leaving the town he was shelling it more fiercely every minute so I did not walk too slowly and soon got on the right track for home, being eager to get to the Battⁿ in case I might get held up by some other Unit for duty, as they are not particular who they attach in times like these.

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I discovered that my Company had got a good Billet in the form of a few broken down farm buildings; they had been tidying up the garden, paving the path with edged bricks and gravel, which made it look very nice, they had also a hen-run under construction which was intended to be used for the hens the old lady had left behind in our care; of course, you can plainly see that we were going to have eggs with our bacon for breakfast; however, all these luxuries were not for us, for at noon on the 23rd March those nasty minute notices began to fly about.

It was a lovely spring morning, one of those when a sudden impulse seizes one to get up at 5 a.m. and have a walk round the garden in your pyjamas, enjoying the fresh air and puffing away at a cigarette to the sweet melodies of the thrush. Well! I happened to be passing an hour away, but it was about 10-30 a.m. when I was moved from my thoughts of what a nice time I had had on leave by an orderly who brought a message - "Prepare to move at a minutes notice".
"Fighting Order".

In less than five minutes we had everything ready to proceed up the line, all our spare kit was put on the transport and off we went to a place in close reserve, which was a nice grass field, a most suitable place for us to pass the remainder of the day.

The Colonel had a conference with his Company Commanders which lasted quite a long time, when it was over we were all rather eager to know our position, but it seemed as though it was told without words, it was written on the Captain's face when he was coming towards us; however, he broke the news with the common phrase "that's ~~torn~~ it!" there's one Brigade lost up the line and our Battⁿ has to go to fill up the gap", the position is rather a serious one but we

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must hold on at all costs.

So now we knew what was in the wind we felt more settled and I finished reading the book which I had brought with me; in the meantime the lad made me a nice 'bully sandwich', then I completed the rest of our time with two hours sleep as I knew there would not be any for a few nights to come.

On arriving at the place we had to take up a position which was situated in the village called La-nuville; the Civilians had just left their homes that morning, it was a most distressing sight to see them, all they could take with them was whatever they could carry, it really made tears come to our eyes to see the old people crying like children. We went through one or two of their houses, and feeling sorry did not express one eighth of what passed through our minds when we saw all the good furniture and old fashioned articles which no doubt the people have cherished for years. I'm sure the Rev. J.L.Kyle and you too would have taken some beating at an auction sale for some of the old clocks and chairs &c., which were all left to the mercy of the Hun. In some houses they had left some of the finest rabbits you could wish to see, also quite a number of nice fat chickens just ready for the table; these birds of course could not be allowed to run about in the hopes of making a good feed for the Bosche, so the little time we had we made good use of the oven and soon two of them were frizzling away like a joint of beef. After collecting a few potatoes and carrots everything was prepared to serve up quite a tempting lunch; however we began to realize before they were finished cooking there was going to be a race against time, whether the lunch would be ready

for us or just in time for the Bosche, as he was pounding away on our left and right with great force. It was about 6 to 4 on the Hun this time, and there was really a small bet made, anyway we got a start with the lunch and had about one third of it when the Capt. was sent for, I guessed what it was and I immediately rushed to the posts to see if my men were all ready to move as it was plain to see Fritz was working round behind us. As anticipated we had to withdraw, which business requires handling very carefully, as the least excitement flurries the men and control is soon lost, so I just allowed three men to leave their positions at a time and not to run, although the Bosche was getting fairly near. We got all of them formed up in the village in a fairly sheltered place and marched off just as Fritz was coming in the other end. None of the boys liked the idea of going back, but there it was we got the order and it had to be obeyed, therefore, our opinion that we could have kept him back was not worth salt. Some remarks were overheard to the effect "Look at the Blooming British Army in Retreat". It certainly did look strange to us. I was on my usual job in this march back, bringing up the rear, but it was the best route march I ever did as I had not to tell one man to keep up.

Well! after we covered a little distance we halted for half an hour and had a smoke, this seemed to me to be rather a cool thing to do, especially when Fritz was still on the move, and he had us under close observation from one of his balloons, although this is the British all over they will have their last draw and get on with their business after. The funny part about it was that he stopped advancing believing we were concentrating a large force to

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push him back, but we were only giving the Gunners a little more time to put their guns into position further in the rear, there's no doubt he was bluffed as we were only about 500 to his 5000.

After withdrawing a good distance we came to a place late at night. There was nothing for us to eat but fortune smiled upon us in the shape of a straw stack, each man got a batten of straw and covered himself up for a few hours sleep; however, it was a bitter cold night and in about an hours time we had to get on the move again. The Enemy were still advancing under the lovely moonlight, so we acted as rear guard for about 4 miles, when we took up a position on the Canal Bank. The boys dug themselves well in here and waited for the Bosche to come as fast as he liked. We kept an eager watch all the time till late the following night about 7 p.m., the French had held him up in front of us all the day but at last he succeeded in pressing them back to our position. I asked one Officer what was taking place, he said "Oh. ~~Bosche~~ ^{Bosche} ~~No-bon~~ ^{No-bon}". We held on for about another hour then we got our marching orders but not before many had served their last. This withdrawal was rather a hurried one, but I went along to all the men to make sure they knew where we were going to and everyone was got out without a casualty, I was last of course and took a look round before leaving the position, then I made a B. line through the forest with my servant as the Bosche was shelling it thick and heavy, shrapnel~~y~~ was hitting our helmets and trees were falling in all directions, naturally my platoon had got picked up with the Capt. and moved further on out of danger. There was no one to be seen when I got through the forest, so I took a look all round the

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village of Burraains before leaving, to make certain I was leaving no one behind, and two of the finest calves came blurring after me like little kiddies, they seemed to know everyone had gone and had a great desire not to be left alone. Just then a shell burst in a house close by which nearly deafened and blinded us, and the calves were seen no more. We walked for about 4 miles and managed to catch up to the boys who were resting in a village. They had had several casualties, who were being carried and some hopped along the best way possible. Being thirsty and tired one or two of us got into some of the empty cottages and partook of a little wine of which these French people always had abundance, and behold it was good. From this place we were continually moving mostly in reserve to the French until they finally relieved us altogether. We were not sorry when this time came as most of us were feeling worn out, not getting much in the way of food since the time of our ill-fated chickens, and the want of sleep made it worse; but on the 27th March we stayed in a village called Elencourt and what a god-send to be sure. The house where my Company stayed had four beds ready made for sleeping in, Well you can imagine the temptation to us chaps, We did not care what came we were determined to take the chance of one nights sleep, so after cooking another chicken we had come across (at least the cook said he found it dead in the yard and thought it would go down very well for dinner) we got into bed and slept well, but again we had to go on another long march to a village called Beauports, we arrived there about 8 p.m. and discovered the civilians quite worried and excited, as they had heard the British had let the Germans break

right through, and they had orders to be prepared to move out, so we had to console a few of the old ladies and tell them the "Bosche Partee" ; however, about 2 a.m. we were sound asleep in one of their beds with not a care in the world, when one of the old girls came into the room. It was difficult to judge whether she was one of the opposite sex or not, her tash was fairly lengthy and a successful air-raid on the chin would not have been so bad, but her "silent" footsteps seemed to rouse me, she looked at each one of us in gloryland and then departed in peace. When suddenly the old dear appeared again, in one word did she speak, "Non-partee!" I said, Non-Madam, ~~Beau Coup~~ ~~Couche~~ pour Officeer". She began saying something about the Bosche coming, and the four of us looked up and said "Let him come Madam"! but all the time she wanted her bed clothes to pack up. At another house we went into they were all in tears and the little girl jumped on my knee and said something about me going to kill Bosche if he comes, then she told me about her Dad being killed at Ypres and he had left her the chairs we were sitting on. She was a dear little girl. Everything seemed to change there in a few minutes, we cheered them up that much till they started to make us coffee, and even gave us part of their dinner. Suddenly another short notice came and we had to take up outpost positions a mile outside the village, as our line had lost touch with the right flank; this job lasted most of the day, when we got the message through "all correct" and we could go on our way, which meant another long march in front of us. We arrived at Pout -de -(-) early morning, rested all day on the 29th. Oh! I forgot to mention, in most of the villages we marched through

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up to the present we were received with very black looks from the French people, and some of them were even putting their hands up, "shouting Kamarade!" meaning that we had been giving ourselves up, of course this sort of thing occurred before they got any news about how the British Army had laid down their lives defending their Country.

Well! In spite of it all we decided to alter things through one big town called Bellrue. The boys were marching well and fairly cheery so I turned round and said "give them a song boys!". They started off with the French National Anthem causing quite a din in the place. Some girls and old ladies started throwing kisses about and waving handkerchiefs and the sides were fairly well lined with people. We heard shortly after that they had just got some official news of our doings which made us not quite so bad as they were ready to paint us.

We eventually arrived at Hebercourt for the purpose of re-organisation on the 30th March, 48 hours being given to us for the purpose of getting the Division into order, when our Battⁿ became permanently attached to the Rifle Brigade. After this time was up we started duty in the line, the usual routine going on, a long march there, 24 hours in, then a long march out again. So I will pass on to the 4th April, but I never care to write much detail about our fortune in the line; however, on this occasion the Bosche opened out for another big attack about 5-30 right across our front. Talk about shells, well they came like hailstones. I cannot tell yet how we were so lucky not to be blown to shreds, but in the whole four hours, not one dropped in the trench, they were one yard to the front or one yard to the rear, giving us terrible

shocks, and a few of the lads got buried in the dirt, then about 9 a.m. the news came, "Enemy advancing in mass on the right" the machine guns got well on to these lot and our Lewis Guns were sending a hurricane of shots across; however, he got too far round and we had to withdraw rather hastily as he had come up rather smartly on our left, in fact almost closing in on to us, therefore, we stopped at the top of the wood to stop his rush. It was rather exciting in such a critical situation, but we were successful for a time. We got our few men set out half facing one way and half the other in the back to back position and the boys gave him such a hot time till he was glad to get back a little bit. Before I finish about this attack there is one little incident which I should like to mention. While this shooting was in progress I saw one or two Yorkshire lads wandering about, a bit lost I think, when an Officer pointed his Revolver at them, which was not necessary, but they took no notice of him as much as to say "Shoot if you like". I did not have my revolver out of the holster, and I just shouted over to those lads "Hey ~~lads~~ Lads! Come on, get down here and shoot like the devil at those Germans!" I often thought we would never get out of that corner but there was no doubt those few lads saved the situation, and the Bosche has not got any further to this day, - East of Villiers Brettoneux where I got my piece of lead.

Now I think the best I can do is to dry up as I am sure you must be getting weary of all this scribble. I'm sure when you gave consent for me to join up in 1914, if I had thought I was going to face so much for so many years I believe I would have hesitated; however, as it is now I look back on my experiences with a little pride. I started with the second Battle of St. Julien, 2nd Battle

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of Ypres, Hooge, Battle on the Somme 15th Sept. 1916, Cambrai
20th Nov. 1917 & 30th Nov. 1917, ten days in this 14 days German
Offensive, and doing front line work in all the intervals. There
are many others who have gone through more than I, and I believe it
is God alone who brings us safely through.

I read your letter with interest the other day also pleased
to hear of Jim.

I am getting on fine now, still in bed and should be
pleased to see both mother and you but don't you think it would be
too much for mother.

Give my best love to all,

From your Son ,

Will.