



Saturday

14.4.17

My dear Father & Mother,

I promised you in my letter of yesterday (which I dated the 14th - I thought yesterday was Saturday) I said I'd send you a longer letter soon, so here goes.

I must first of all thank you for your loving letter I received last night. I was rather disappointed at not getting one when I got back from the line, because I had not received any letters since Good Friday, and I was 'specking' on getting one from everyone. Ah well, I only had to wait another day, and I did get about 10 all told. Five from Mag, one from the Rector, Wm White, Dick & Doll, Gradby, & H Scrivens, & several papers. I've not read them all properly yet, for we have moved every day since we came out of the attack, & I hear we move again tomorrow. We are now right away from the roar of the guns, for which I am thankful, for my head seemed like a spinning top, & I was going deaf too. I'm pleased to say I am quite sane, though I'm blessed if I don't think I was beginning to go 'potty,' & I was somewhat pleased to leave the slaughter behind. I have not shook the tired feeling off yet, but when we get settled down, I shall soon be A1 again.

Now let me tell you a bit about the largest battle in the world's history. You would gather from my letters that I was about to 'move' again, so in other words, go over the top. It did not come off so soon as we expected, so that was why I managed to drop you a line on Easter Saturday, or was it Good Friday? No matter. On Sat. we moved to a deep dugout, in 'battle' order, that is, without our spare-kit. Never shall I forget the roar of our guns, - hundreds of them. On Easter Sunday, we had nothing to do except load up with bombs, ammunition, rifle-grenades, very lights, & other weapons of war. We stretcher-bearers packed our bags full of bandages, & shell-dressings. That done, we smoked & sang & thought. I was wondering what you were all doing, & I kept looking at my watch & guessing so-&-so was happening at the various times. 6,7 & 8. I thought of the Holy Communion services being held, & of the prayers that were being offered on our behalf. At 11, I fancied the Choir singing 'Jesus Christ is risen today,' & all the other beautiful Easter hymns. Again at 6, I wondered

how many bells were being rung, & wished I could have made another. No use wishing though.

Night came, & I noticed more men saying their prayers than usual, & it was rumoured that the Chaplain was coming round to hold a short service, but he did not turn up. I was sorry, for the fellows would have responded. However, we sang hymns, & sometimes broke off into some old songs.

Midnight came, & the order ran down the dug-out, "Get your equipment on." That done, we filed out, & had a search over the ground we recently took, into some assembly trenches. Everything was done as quickly as possible, so that the enemy would not know we were there. We deepened the trench, & then we sat down. And talk about cold & rain! I was frozen to the marrow, & we could not stir because no movement was to be made. So the time rolled slowly by, & all the time our guns were pounding away, & it was very few who had not got a severe headache. I can vouch for mine being rocky! 2,3,4,5, & 5.30 came & went, & then we saw four tanks lumbering over the shell-swept ground. Then the fun began. Fritz began to shell us, & up went our temperatures a few degrees. (Shelling always makes one warm.) Down came the metal, mingling with the snow & sleet. No casualties so far. Then there was such a crash, & I tried to look, but it was dark. 'Am I blinded,' I thought. No, only buried. Next I felt a shovel shove my arm, & I tried to move, but couldn't. A few more digs from the shovel, & another heave, & out comes my 'nut.' "Are you hurt?" everyone near was saying, but thank God I was right as rain, only for a shaking.

My pal was in a like plight, but we both got 'normal' again after a while. We moved away from there, & bless me if the same thing did not occur again! I began to think Fritz had got us 'taped.' Ah well, nothing else happened, & the order came ringing down, "Over the top boys," & up jumped every man as one. A finer sight I never saw. Wave after wave in perfect order, marching into the jaws of death! Down went many a good husband & sons, but on went the remainder without a flinch. We stretcher-bearers were soon busy putting shell-dressings on the poor fellows who had been hit, & ever anon the cries went up. Oh, it was awful. Our platoon officer & his servant got a leg blown off, & I put a tourniquet on each, & left them for the R.A.M.C. to carry back, but both of them were hit again, & killed. Our orders were to scotch up until we reached our objective, & bandage all, & then start to carry. Some of the poor fellows prayed for us to take them back, but we could not. My pal was mortally wounded only a yard from me, & I showed him his wife's photo, & read her last letter to him, & part of St. John 17th, & so passed away a real Christian soldier, & I could not help but think of the Easter message as I saw the smile on his face as he died, - 'Oh Death, where is thy sting.' It was with a heavy heart & wet eyes that I left him, with the snow falling on his body. All around lay dead & wounded, & I did what I could for the latter, giving water to those wounded in the legs or arms, but flinging the water-bottle away from those wounded in the stomach. You will gather how we outfired when I tell you that out of 42 in our platoon who mounted the parapet, only 11 are left, & I am one of them.

The battle raged, and our objective was gained after hard fighting, & we commenced to carry back. It was hard work on an empty stomach, but we stuck it. The first one was a Captain who had a bullet through his lung, & he was wearing a steel waistcoat, but the bullet pierced it. Meanwhile,

the captured Germans helped to carry out, & within four hours, all the wounded were in capable hands at the dressing stations. Back we went as we thought to stop, but in a dug-out we found a wounded German & although we were dead beat, we carried him back. My shoulders were terribly sore, but I did the same to the German as I should like him to have done to me. Going back, we got caught in the dark, so we hunted round for a dug-out, & after finding one, & searching it to see that no Huns were left behind, we sat down. The 'inner man' began to cry out, so we went on the top again, & took some food out of a Sgt's haversack who was killed, & took the water bottle too, & had some cocoa, & biscuits & 'bully,' & never did I enjoy a meal better, for it was 18 hours since we had our last meal. After that, we had a smoke, & then looked round the dug-out, & what should we come across but a store of food, - black bread, German sausage, bully, & coffee. Oh très bonne.

Another feed, & a talk, & then we decided to stay there the night, as it was impossible to reach the batt. over the shell-holes & barbed wire. After offering up our thanks to God for all His mercies, we got down amongst the Hun blankets, & slept for 4 solid hours. Up at day-break, more bread & bully etc, & coffee, & off we set, reaching the batt. soon after 8 o'clock. No casual fire during the night, so we had a mooch around, & saw loads of things far too numerous to mention. Anyway, the Hun had been beaten, & driven back, & rare lot of stuff he'd left behind too. I could run on for for another 14 pages, but my time is short. Suffice to say that beyond a little shelling, we had it fairly easy until we came out on Wednesday, as another division had come up, & gone past us to their objective. Wednesday night saw us singing merrily on a march back to civilization, & down to 'kip' in an old French barn.

Speaking of the amusing side of the battle, I could not help but laugh at the droves of Huns running away back to the rear, & up would go their hands to every Tommy they met. They were most obliging when we asked them to carry our wounded back, & one who could speak English I made follow me as an interpreter, & he scotched me up like a lamb, & called the Huns toward us in fours, & away they went. I asked him what he thought of Kaiser Bill & Hindenburg, & he said 'they are beaten.' When I told him about America declaring war on Germany, he seemed most surprised, & told me that they had been told America, Russia & Italy had all declared war on the Allies, & France was expected to 'pack in.' What a disillusion!

I must now conclude. I'll write again tomorrow if I get a chance.

Best love to all,

Your Soldier Boy

Tom

