

Un-numbered

(Retrospective on Bapaume, March 1917)

FRANCE

4<sup>th</sup> July 1918

My dear ALL,

Now that such a long period has elapsed as to make such events immune from censorship, I would like to give you some details about what happened to me during the great German retirement on the Somme last winter.

We were located in a collection of little huts, connected with each other by means of duckboard tracks. The snow was about a foot deep on the ground and was trodden hard into the duckboards, making things somewhat slippery, especially going round corners. Our bread was frozen hard as stone, the jam was frozen thick and the butter simply un-spreadable.

Our position was about a mile from the famous Fricourt Wood, where Harold and I spent about a month in that big German dugout under the remains of Fricourt Château some months previously. The notorious Scott's Redoubt, with its solid emplacement of railway rails and concrete, was just a stone's throw away. We were supposed to be in Shelter Wood but there was only about 5cwt (five hundred-weight) of Shelter Wood left.

The day before we discovered that the Germans were retreating, they sent a plane over and dropped a bomb, demolishing a hut about a hundred yards from us. Needless to say, we had a very busy time when his retreat started, working all through the night on several occasions. However, we had a plentiful supply of café-au-lait to keep the cold out. One night when I was on duty, a Taube (fighter-plane) blew up one of our ammunition dumps and I was treated to a free fireworks show for about four hours --- it went off like hundreds of giant jumping jacks.

About a week later, in consequence of the retreat, we had to move up a bit closer so packed all our gear on wagons and set off on foot past what remained of the village of Contalmaison, to Bazentin-le-Petit. We passed three huge howitzers on the roadside, firing into Bapaume, and we stopped to watch them for a few minutes. Our new headquarters were an improvement on the old. It must have been a beautiful spot before the war. On the side of a hill, it commanded a fine view of Mametz and the surrounding country. We were now fairly near the old front line and a field a few hundred yards away was full of unburied skeletons of Germans and Tommies. About a fortnight later, the burning of Bapaume by the Germans commenced and the sky was lit up for miles around. A couple of days after this the Australians entered Bapaume and I was selected with 2 others to open up an advance headquarters near the Bapaume Railway Station. The walk from Bazentin-le-Petit to Bapaume was a most interesting one, in spite of the fact that there was

snow on the ground and it was snowing heavily nearly all the way. We started off at 9 a.m., with water bottle and gas helmet slung over our shoulders, also haversack containing the day's rations, towel, soap and shaving gear. We followed the road for about half a mile, then switched off to the right along a light railway line, leaving this another half mile further on for a battered duckboard track. Here we passed several German field guns which had been blown out by our shells, and a few minutes later arrived at the village of Martinpuich, or what was left of it. We then pushed on to Le Sars where I met some of my old ambulance pals who had a dressing station in an old dugout. They looked a pretty set of Rip-van-Winkles – dirty and unshaven – and described Le Sars in most unflattering terms. It certainly looked a most pitiable, tumbledown village – a collection of some 300 old houses built on each side of the main Albert-Bapaume Rd., and there didn't seem to be whole house left. Just past this village, I beheld that remarkable old historic mound, the Butte de Warlencourt. It is about 100 feet high and is said to be the resting place of an ancient race of kings. Before the retreat, the Butte had been just about level with the German front line and was a special target of our artillery. It was a huge honeycomb of shell-holes and numbers of dead Germans were lying around in all positions. We stopped to explore the Butte and climbed to the top, then continued on our way along the Albert-Bapaume Road. A broad-gauge line of rails had been laid along one side of the road from here, apparently by the Germans, and on one part of this an engine and about ten trucks which had evidently received several direct hits from our heavy artillery, lay scattered in all directions. We passed a military wagon stuck fast in the mud and then came to the first big crater which the Germans had blown fair in the middle of the road. It was a tremendous whole and a gang of men was already engaged making a new road round it. A little further on we came to another crater and, later, still another. After passing through the ruined village of Warlencourt, we came to the crossroad which leads to Grevillers – a place famous in the 1870 war. We could see Grevillers in the distance, it being only about 1½ miles from the main road. A little later we arrived at the German dugout which had been set aside for us near the Bapaume railway station yards, several officers having preceded us on horseback. While waiting for the wagon with our office gear to arrive, I took a stroll into the town of Bapaume. It was a pitiable sight: not a whole building remained. Some looked untouched in the distance, but on arriving closer, you would perceive that one side had been blown out, or perhaps the roof was blown in. Part of the town was still burning then. The hôtel-de-ville (townhall), however, in the centre of town, was still standing. The top had been knocked of its tall tower, but otherwise it appeared quite habitable. I stood under its arches for about ten minutes to read a copy of the Daily Mail which some kind person had had stuck on one of the walls. In front of the hôtel-de-ville they had left the aeroplane of Prince Frederic Charles of Prussia. The prince had been brought down by us in the morning, sustaining injuries from which he eventually died. The statue of the famous French general Faidherbe had originally stood in front of the hôtel-de-ville but the Germans had removed

the statue and the pedestal remained, with a wooden dummy mounted thereon. Our camp commandant had arranged for us to be quarter us in the hôtel-de-ville but one of the officers requested him to change his plans in favour of the dugout as he considered the former locality too easy a target for the German guns. He must have known something I think for at 11.30 the following night the hôtel-de-ville blew up. I was working in a hut at the time and the whole thing rocked and I rushed to the door and saw lurid flames shooting up in the direction of the hôtel-de-ville. Next morning, I went over to have a look. It was only a quarter of a mile away. Never was such a huge building so completely destroyed. There seemed to be scarcely two stones left on one another. About a dozen men, including two members of the French Chamber of Deputies had been sleeping in the cellars over night, and some twenty Australians were working madly to try and clear away the tons of debris and get at the victims. They got two or three out alive a day or two afterwards.

The large Bapaume church had its roof completely blown off. Part of the stone floor had also been blown up, disclosing an underground chamber which contained the strangest sight I have ever seen – a large pile of human skulls. They seemed to be about five or 600 year old. At one entrance to Bapaume was a small hill with a tremendous moat all around. This had evidently been made hundreds of years ago as a place of refuge in case the town was attacked. The hill was planted with pine trees and the top commanded all the roads entering Bapaume. The Germans seemed to have made a veritable little paradise of this place. There were rows of dugouts (now blown in) in the bottom of the dry moat and there were places on the hill which, judging by the large number of empty bottles about, must have been beer gardens. In the pine trees on the top of the hill the Germans had constructed several look-outs – something after the style of crow's nests. We had heard stories of an ancient tunnel which ran underground from Bapaume to the village of Warlencourt and I verified the existence of this by coming across a couple of places in the fields where the tunnel had been blown in by shells. It is said that the German despatch-carriers made use of this tunnel during heavy bombardments.

It is perhaps worthwhile to mention here that the day after we arrived in Bapaume a dugout occupied by one of our brigades, under the ruins of the Bapaume Sucrierie (sugar-mill), blew up and two of the clerks were killed. After that, everything one touched seemed to blow up. Men picked up lead pencils and got their fingers blown off when they tried to sharpen them; bunches of artificial flowers were attached by strings to charges of dynamite; dugouts blew up when you tried to push loose boards back into place; old trenches contained boxes of bombs which exploded when you took the lid off the box; trip-wire were laid at different places to explode mines; big shells were buried in the road, nose upwards, which exploded when a wagon went over them. A large quantity of ammunition was removed from our dugout and also several mine fuses and there was a bayonet stuck up to the hilt in one of the walls, which no-one dared to

touch. However, when the sucrerie dugout blew up we shifted out of ours with a rush and moved into a hut which they had by this time managed to erect.

We learned afterwards from a German prisoner that the hotel-de-ville had been blown up by means of a clock-work fuze and that some of the cellars had been filled with ammonal. Big mines exploded at several crossroads round Bapaume at intervals of even a week and ten days later. These had evidently been fired by similar clock-work devices. We spent about a week at Bapaume and then shifted back as our division was withdrawn from the line again.

Your loving son,

Bob.

**HAROLD'S LAST LETTER (Original hand-written)**  
**12 August 1918**

**FRANCE**  
**[Fricourt Wood]**

My dear All,

We've been very busy during the past week, straffing the Hun and following him up. He has had a rough time and although at times we've worked some queer hours, our part of the war has been quite decent.

Last Monday 5<sup>th</sup> August we were up at 4.30 a.m. and entrained at a rail station just after lunch. Arrived at our destination after a good run, at 11 p.m. that night and commenced detraining in drizzly rain. We then pushed off along the road to wagon lines where we turned in about 11 a.m. Tuesday morning 6<sup>th</sup>. Off again at 9.30 p.m. that night and finished up in an outlandish sort of place (near where I finished up my first Blighty leave) at about 3 a.m. on the morning of the 7<sup>th</sup>. I slept till about 11 a.m. and then went up to the gun-pits which were 6 or 7 miles away. On Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> at 4.20 a.m. we "hopped into" Fritz. Our part of the stunt finished about 8.30 a.m. and we just lay off all day watching the streams of transport moving up and the Hun prisoners moving down. It was most interesting and the stunt a great success as our casualties almost incredibly small. We turned in about 8 p.m. and slept till about 7 next morning Friday 9<sup>th</sup>.

Poor old Carl Ryan is buried just here. He was killed in a stunt a few months ago. His grave was just a few hundred yards behind our guns. There is a wooden cross on it and some white stones and a rough fence around it.

After breakfast we pushed on a couple of miles over the old battlefield, passing quite a lot of Fritz guns and material that he left behind in his haste. We pulled into a position which was

unsuitable however, so we moved off to a flank about ½ mile to another position. This was about 4 p.m. and we had no more firing till about 8 a.m. the next morning (Saturday).

About 8.30 p.m. that night we moved up again to support the Infantry. This time we lived in an old Fritz dugout which had been occupied by searchlight people and they'd named it Glubrwarm Villa. I didn't care for it much for it was rather close to the line and I was getting bites all night. I am sending you some cards that were fastened to the walls.

Next day (Sunday) we moved back a few hundred yards (about 8.30 p.m.) and we're still here in a little dug-out with a Fritz tarpaulin on top. However it won't surprise me if we shift again as we're still shoving Fritz back.

We've been very fortunate with fine weather since the stunt started. Today is quite hot.

Excuse my writing as I'm lying on my back to write this letter. We're perched in the side of a steep valley and looking across the other side of the valley as I'm lying I can see a big Fritz 5.9" naval gun that we've captured. It's just as he left it and almost new. I don't think it's fired a shot in action. Afternoon tea is ready so excuse me please!

Now I'm back on the job again. This officer job is not bad at times. Sometimes I think it would be better to be back in the "Spooks" again.

There's another N.B.T. chap in this battery – a 1<sup>st</sup> Lieut. He came across in the same mess as I did on the Pt Macquarie.

I had a note from Bob the other day. He's just back from Paris.

There's no more news now and tea is just ready so I'll say Goodbye,

Love to all,

From your loving son and brother,

Harold.

## THE DREAMER GOES WALKING WITH THE CHEERFUL THING

The dreamer was meandering through the tired village of ----- when he bumped into the Cheerful Thing.

“Well?” said the Dreamer.

“Quite well!” said the Cheerful Thing.

Two lorries rumbled past. “Curse the lorries;” muttered the Dreamer, hey smother us with mud in the winter, and in the summer they choke us with dust.”

“C’est la guerre!” said the Cheerful Thing, and then added: “Suppose we walk as far as the Canal?”

Arrived at the canal, they sat on the grass on the bank.

“I love the smell of the reeds,” remarked the Cheerful Thing.

No reply from the Dreamer – he was dreaming of something else, far, far away.

“Nothing doing on the Canal nowadays, what!” continued the Cheerful Thing. “I should have liked to see in the pre-war days. I can fancy the laden barges gliding slowly past and the horse jogging along the towpath. And look at that lock with the big hole alongside where a bomb has just missed it. Yes, everything seems strangely deserted now: but the water, which has no soul, still keeps flowing, flowing as though nothing has changed. It knows no war. Ignorance is bliss, &c, &c: or one might say: ‘Wars may come and wars may go, but I go on forever’.”

“I wish this war would go; it came quite a long time ago,” said the Dreamer, forcefully, (coming back to earth again with a thud).

The Cheerful Thing gazed carelessly down the Canal.

“You don’t see these things in Australia,” he remarked presently.

“Seldom,” answered the Dreamer.

“Rather pretty and peaceful, don’t you think?”

“Yes, but I’d give all their canals for any little Australian creek at present.”

“You don’t say! What creek would the gentleman like?”

“Oh! any old creek. Even the Moonee Ponds, with all its dead pets thrown in.”

“I’d like a river for every cat or dog that has finished up in that picturesque and pleasant stream, what?”

“What’s that silly song that goes, ‘I want to get back; I want to get back?’ “ asked the Dreamer, suddenly. “Those confounded words will persist in repeating themselves in my brain.”

“Better see the doctor,” suggested the Cheerful Thing. “Go on sick parade in the morning and get painted with iodine or something,” he added cheerfully.

“Don’t be mad: I’m always like this when I’ve received mail from Home.”

“Trouble is, old man, you think too much.”

“Can’t help it. When the Australian mail comes in, up goes my barometer; but when I’ve finished the last letter, bang goes everything. I fold up the sheets and replace them in the envelopes – then look around me and realise that I am still in France, some 12,000 miles from dear old Home.”

“Dear, oh dear!” said the Cheerful Thing, with a mock sigh. “Well! What’s wrong with France, anyhow? Most delightful place! Delightful climate – er, in summer I mean; and delightful language -- when you happen to see a civilian about, to talk to.”

“Yes, but Australia means Home – and that makes all the difference in the world,” snapped the Dreamer.

“Mid châteaux and shell-holes tho’ we may roam, Be it ever so humble, there’s no place like home,” chanted the Cheerful Thing. “Shut up, can’t you!” cried the Dreamer, “I’m feeling rotten enough now.”

“Well! I guarantee to wither kill or cure. I say! After the war, they reckon one will be able to reach Australia in a few days by aerial means.”

“Why, I can reach Australia in a moment, by merely closing my eyes,” said the Dreamer. “I was actually there last night, though I don’t often dream of it nowadays.” I had caught the 20 to 6 from Flinders Street – the same old crawling train. Stopped once on the viaduct and twice between Spencer Street and North Melbourne, and landed me at the old Essendon station about 5 past six. I looked about for my father as I made my exit from the station, but, as he was nowhere to be seen, I concluded he had missed his usual train and would probably be following on the next. I dashed through the twisty old subway and walked briskly down the same old Buckley Street hill, then rushed in the Lorraine Street side gate. Saw my mother standing at the back door and gave her an impulsive kiss. I then had a bit of a wash and slipped into the drawing room for a few minutes on the piano while waiting for father to arrive. My brother Harold was already home, and engaged in printing some photos. Five minutes later, Father and my brother Frank arrived together, and we all sat down to the tea-table in just the same old way. I was just taking my mouthful of soup when something seemed to go wrong and I found myself lying on a board floor, with the first rays of the morning sun trying to struggle through the cracked and dirt-stained glass of our billet’s windows.” The Dreamer finished up with a lump in his throat.

“I was dreaming; I was dreaming!” There was sadness in the air,” warbled the Cheerful Thing.

“Jove! It begins to get dusk early now,” interrupted the Dreamer, “I think we’d better return to work again.”

“At night when ‘tis dark and lonely,  
In dreams it is still with me,” hummed the Cheerful Thing as they rose to go back.

---

**HAROLD GASSED :--- 18 August 1918. (See pdf Desktop).**



No 8 General Hospital  
B. S. F.  
15. 8. 18

Dear Sir,

I am writing to tell you that  
your son, Lieut. A. J. Snaps A. F. A. - is a  
patient in this hospital - very seriously  
ill from the effects of mustard gas shell  
poisoning.

I am afraid that his condition is very  
grave indeed: - his chest is very much  
affected & his breathing is bad.

He is having every care & attention & you  
may rest assured that all that human  
skill can do - will be done.

Yours faithfully  
R. Rose  
Matron.

DEATH OF HAROLD 19 August 1918

No 8 General Hosp.  
B. I. F.

19. 8. 18

Dear Sir,

I am writing  
again to give you very  
sad news.

Your son, Lieut. L. J. Drake  
became rapidly worse  
during the last twenty four  
hours - & I am very sorry  
to say that he passed  
quietly away this evening  
6.55 p.m.

All that was possible  
was done to save his life  
but he sank rapidly.

His lungs were choked  
with the gas - & although  
oxygen relieved his breathing  
- it was only a temporary

relief. With much sympathy  
for you in this terrible  
loss

I am  
yours faithfully  
K. Pease Watson

France  
31st August 1918

My dear Mother & Father & Frank

Oh how can I write to you about poor old Harold! This is the hardest blow I have ever had in my life. You can't realise what we have been to each other since we have been over here so far from home. One of the fellows at HQ said to me when I told him "This is terrible for you, you were not like ordinary brothers, you talked so much about him & wrote to him so often that you must have thought the world of each other". And he was just right. When I got the news I said to my self why wasn't it me & not him. He was so much nobler than I am. When I got to the hospital I could hardly keep from breaking down when talking about him with the nurses. My eyes were half full of tears all the time & I could scarcely speak at times. The nurses were also affected. They said he was wonderfully cheerful & didn't seem to think he was so bad. They didn't tell him at all that they thought his case hopeless as they said it is their rule not to. They did everything possible for him & he had a little room to himself. He asked them to read his *Scum & Wealth*

2  
to him they read quite a lot to him & said this always had a wonderfully peaceful affect on him. Miss Ward, (a voluntary aid nurse) gave up her afternoon off to him read to him from Science & Health the whole afternoon on the ~~his~~ last day. He said to her once "I wish I knew more about this then I wouldnt be sick at all" I think if they had told him he was so bad he would have sent a message to Miss James for treatment. He said on the last day that he wished his brother <sup>(was)</sup> was here. The orderly (Ruznor) said he was one of the best patients he had seen, never grumbled, never complained & always said Oh Goodah when the orderly requested anything or gave him anything. When he was at bed noon than usual he asked for the book 800 & they always read it to him & it always seemed to improve him.

The cemetery (a civilian military all round) is about 2 miles from the hospital. I took off my hat & knelt beside his grave as soon as the official went away. I completely lost control of myself & cried as though my heart would break for some minutes.

Oh he was so brave, so thoughtful for my feelings to worry me by letting me know he was ill, passing away sticking to Principle Love to the last, fighting for Principle for three or half years.

3

I think he loved me as much as I loved him. We had no one else you know who understood us, over here. He was so patriotic, his sense of duty to his country was so strong, there

was no one so noble in my estimation. I felt like crying "Oh mountains fall on me" when, after a few minutes the light began to shine through the gloom. I got out the little copy of Science & Health (which he gave me) & read aloud on my knees the Scientific Statement of Being Spirit as God & man in this unappreciated therefore man is not material, he is spiritual the cumulative reading from John

3, 1, 2, 3 Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us that we should be called the sons of God.

et cetera. And I dried my tears & smiled. I realized then that Harold wasn't buried in this earth before me, - never was & never would be. Man, in the image of his Maker is always beautiful & grand. Behold now are ye the sons of God.

This is the greatest cross I have ever had & I can pacify myself & comfort myself only by vowing

to place Principle absolutely first in  
my life. First last all the times I have  
realised how I have been gradually  
slipping back for some time excusing  
myself by saying it was on account  
of the war.

You have each other to sympathise  
with & talk it over with but here am  
I all alone. My sorrow is too deep  
to discuss with anyone over here. I  
saw Parker this evening he was very  
sympathetic but I was afraid to  
say much as my tears come so  
quickly & it looks so silly for a  
boy to cry.

Frank, it behoves both you & I  
in future to make a tremendous  
effort to keep up the standard set us  
by our Brother Harold. Your grief

I hope will not be so great as mine  
as you have not seen him for such  
a long time but he has borne things  
wonderfully over here. We always  
went to see each other at every  
opportunity & kept up a constant  
correspondence. His character was

far far above mine in many ways.  
He hated nobody & there wasn't the  
slightest thing petty or mean  
about him. We must put up a good  
fight to make ourselves worthy of  
meeting him in the next world.  
He will have proved for himself by  
experience now that there is no such  
thing as "death" & I trust he is already  
in the company of some of the "greats"  
for who have also passed on. (Don't you

25 to 2 & I have kept up at 6 I will close for this again later)  
Mother don't forget that we can always always know that God so Love  
your loving son & brother Bob.





(6) ~~7~~  
but you have no idea how slow our means  
of communication are here. They had told me  
at the Cas. Chan. Station that he would probably  
be sent to England & I then got a letter from  
Florence saying that St. Mowlan, a pal of  
Harold's, had written to her saying that  
Harold had been gassed & was probably  
in England now. I couldn't possibly get  
leave on a bare supposition without any-  
thing definite so I just had to wait  
anxiously for some word & then I got  
your cable & applied for special leave to  
go to the No. 8 General Hospital. I was  
given 3 days Special Leave from the morning  
of Aug 30 so started off at 5.30 am got  
to the nearest working railway station  
at 9 am. I was unable to get a train  
till 12.30 pm & arrived at my destination  
at 6 pm. the same day. I went straight to  
No. 8 General Hospital & found that the  
nurses who had attended Harold were  
off duty. So I went again this morning  
(31st August) & saw everybody who had had  
anything to do with Harold except  
Capt (Dr) E. E. Beaumont who had been sent  
to another town altogether some <sup>short</sup> distance  
off. However he had left full notes &  
another doctor gave me all particulars  
(this was really no drawback as the nurses  
knew most about the details) their names  
are Sister Thompson, Sister Ewen, Miss Ward  
& an orderly named Raynor. They were  
all most exceptionally nice & gave me all  
possible information.

Here are all the bare facts I will just  
set them out as they were given. (You will  
understand)

Harold arrived at the Hospital  
on the 17th Aug. with a temperature of 102  
& had vomited a good deal on the way.

D

He had no burns at all on his body but his face was very blue & his eyes were inflamed & the sight affected. He was much inflamed inwardly & had acute bronchitis in both lungs & fluid on lower part of both lungs. He was very cheerful & must wonderfully plucky all through but did not speak much. They <sup>told me</sup> said his case was hopeless from the first & it affected his heart was affected. He was a little delirious now & then & once counted up to 95. He passed away quietly while the orderly Rayner was giving him oxygen at 6.55 pm on 19th August. There was no post mortem examination as it was considered quite unnecessary.

The following things were in his pockets:  
1 pocket book, 3 letters, 2 photos, 1 pipe, 1 religious book, 1 compass, wrist watch & strap, 3 keys, 1 tobacco pouch, 1 fountain pen, 1 cig. holder, 1 wrist compass case, 1 eye for field glasses & revolver, 1 matchbox holder, 1 leather wallet containing papers, 1 fan thing, 1 silver coin & 6 francs 5 centimes. (The latter has been paid by the authorities into his account)

When I went to the Records office I was disappointed to find they had already sent the above things to London & they will be sent immediately to you. They said I could not have got any of them in any case. I sent the following cable today, New Florrie as I will save some days by

sending it through her.

Harold gassed 15th died ~~he~~ fearlessly peacefully 19th mustard gas. Hopeless from first. Inward inflammation lungs affected heart. No outward burns. Cheerful courageous little pair pacified by nurse reading from his little religious book every thing possible done. Bob

I visited his grave. The graves are all well looked after & according to regulations now all crosses must be the same & flowers are planted on all the graves by the officials there also grass on the vacant spaces (like a lawn) between the graves.

Here are the details of the cross.

Wood painted brown 3'6" high with cross piece 19".

Inscription:



G. R. N. means  
Graves Registration Unit

These are the exact words

Harold mentions from one of the nurses that he was gassed because they had taken away their helmets & they had none to put on but she doesn't know whether he was delirious or not when he said it. However I am going to visit the 47th Bty as soon as possible & make full enquiries into this matter. A Capt Callinan of the same Bty was gassed at the same time. Bob.