

Private Frank Geddes letter, Port Elgin Times, September 12, 1917 Transcription

In a most vivid description of the big attack and capture of Vimy Ridge, Pte. Frank Geddes writes to his mother here. As his was among the first battalions “over” the letter will be most interesting to Times Readers:

France, May 10, 1917

Dear Mother,

Am I not right in thinking this is your birthday and how better can I celebrate it, in a captured German dugout, than by writing to you?

First you mention the devastation shown by a card I sent. That is only a pin prick to what we see out here. I am glad to say that owing to our efforts the tower on the silken card is now out of range of his guns, let us hope forever. I have noticed the French peasants starting to come back to their ruined homes all old men, and women, or very young children, for the most part. The most pathetic sight in the world to see them ploughing a patch of ground with our artillery or transports occupying their front yard or back garden.

Yes, Mother, I see beautiful sunsets, some of the most wonderful I have ever seen. As a write, I am thinking of one night I watched it set behind “our” ridge. Such a blaze, on the crest - below, the white chalk, marked by paths among the scarred and shattered trees - birches. I couldn’t help thinking that it was setting back there on two years of British inferiority in guns, lack of shells, and all that, and that in the opposite direction, was dawning for us a new day, where everything is in our favor.

Oh, it would do your heart good to hear John Bull when he “strafes”. You’ve heard a machine gun. Well, the morning we went over, there were several scores of these engines behind us, besides the ones we took over. They opened on a set minute, breaking the silence with a noise like a dozen combined boiler factories. And then - oh, its indescribable - the noise of innumerable field guns and heavies everything from whizz bang to 15 inch. (Now I’ve started, I may as well give you an idea of a modern battle.)

Before dawn we went up and took our positions in the shelter of the mine craters that I have often mentioned. Crouched in shell holes, to be out of the way of any of our shells dropping short (this is unavoidable) we waited the opening of barrage, sometime about dawn. The infantry were a few yards in front of us, and as I described before, everything opens at once. To be blunt - it isn't hell let loose as it is often called - it's dozens of them. Behind, the sky is a sheet of flame, ahead - view is blocked pretty well by the craters - and it's just as well it is. The shells shriek overhead, the machine gun bullets (our own) swish after them. Away above, the planes do the observing. You know then you haven't long to wait. In a minutes the infantry gets the word - we are to follow them in a several minutes. As they scramble up and over the edge, we stand up and give them a cheer, more to be doing something than any thing else. I remember an infantry officer signalling on the crest of a crater for his men to follow - as two ran past him a German "crump" landed beneath them - taking away their footing, and they went head over heels through space into the crater. I don't imagine they were killed, but that made me mad. So at the same minute we got the "up and over" and were away - past the pipers playing "Blue Bonnets over the Border" up to the crest and then down the slope to the German side. But in that fraction of a second as I was on the very top of things, I got an impression that I will never forget. In the half light of dawn it was the wildest thing I saw or ever expect to see. Below - the infantry, in waves, struggling over the shell craters, behind - our barrage which formed a perfect curtain of fire - light and heavy, shrapnel and high explosive. Over and behind - yes and among them, other shells bursting, but not ours. Luckily these latter were few in comparison. Ahead of them, rockets of all colors - German signals of smoke - cordite smoke, whose acrid fumes are "the smell of battle" and which by the way, you cough up for twenty-four hours after.

All this in a second, and then you are down the slope - all fear vanished - your one aim to be up with the rest - to be there when the goal is scored. You're not exactly nervous - but strung up to a high pitch. You grab barbed wire without feeling the cut - laugh at nothing - and above all, you want a cigarette. Machine gun bullets "Zip zip" past, shrapnel "pings" right overhead, but I just had the feeling that Fritz had absolutely nothing that could touch me - that day at least.

I remember one incident - a group of us were getting our wind in the shelter of a shell hole (we carried 500 rounds of ammunition in belts). One chap lit a match - lit a chum's cigarette - then his own. I clenched my fists while I waited to see what he would do. I have always laughed at and dared that superstition of three lights being bad luck, time and again, but I didn't want to take that light then. He evidently felt the same, for he blew it out and with a nervous laugh, handed me the box, saying "That's the first time in my life that I've done that". I said it was my first, too, so he said, "Well, let's hope not making three, will be good luck" - and so it proved in all three cases, I think, I just relate that as an example of the tension on one's nerves.

[A popular superstition among the soldiers is that one match lighting three cigarets is bad luck - Editor]

But we finally reached our objective, and had nothing to do but hold it against counter attacks, which is much the worst part of the affair, as the reaction on the nerves has set in, and unless his aeroplanes are kept back, you are in for a continual

shower of shells. But relief comes at last, and your part of that particular “push” is done, and there’s nothing to worry about except occasional shells and the next push. Not until after, does one realize he has taken part in the largest affair Canadians have ever been in (by numbers as well as results) and one of the best planned and best executed strokes of the war.

[Below this reprint of the letter was the following short note: “Pte. Cairns and Pte. Whitham of Kincardine, were killed in action.”]