

John Petros

of Flanders Fields

In Flanders

March 16. 15

My Dear Charley

Thanks for your kind letter of Feb 5. As to Comfort, the weather is getting warmer and things are drier, and every way better, so that we do not now stand in need of anything in particular. The army is very well fed. We have been in the firing line for nearly a month, in our first position as well as this one. Our guns are in action every day and some nights, and for the last week things have been very active, for we are less than four miles away from the village which was the scene of a big battle, in which we took part the first day. The artillery fire from our side was terrible; for 2 hours, guns fired like the nose of a machine gun. There were nearly a quarter of a million men engaged on both sides, and the general casualties for the first two days was estimated at 18,000. Firing never dies down entirely; yesterday morning I was down observing in the house behind the trenches (in lack of any other field office to go) and they began to shell it: we had to take to the cellar, and while there they knocked the end off the house: coming back I got a sniper at me, but he made a good miss. We are much troubled by snipers behind our lines, disguised as Tommies or else civilians. They get a good many men, too.

Medically, work is light, for the men are very fit. I met General Carleton for the 1st day, and he opened up on me about my name appearing in the papers as appointed to the McGill Hospital (he took exception to the name). He intimated that my movements depended on him, and I intimated that I didn't greatly care which way it went. This in a sufficiently pleasant way, however, I was sorry there was any snarl over the medical post - and sorry too that Charley Peter was put out about it. He has done good and long service.

I hope Mrs. Markin got my note of acknowledgment for her parcel. My best love to her.

Yours very truly

Jack

St. France:

May 13. 15.

My dear Charley,

Thank you for your kind and interesting letter which reached me a few days ago. We have just got through the terrible battle of Ypres, which was not the brief affair you might judge from the papers. We were going in on April 22, and were miles behind the French line at the spot where and the time when it broke. We stood by in the melee & confusion all night from 6 p.m. and at 3³⁰ a.m. were sent in on the gallop to a spot on the canal north of the town, and there we stayed 17 days and nights; all the time we never even had our boots off: it was fight all the time. We were far up to the front, and to that we owe our effectiveness, as well as our losses which could not but be heavy. The artillery fire was constant, heavy and from all sorts of guns. We were said to have 2 Army Corps reinforcements in our front - and it felt like it. The men behaved magnificently; and the labor was terribly hard. In one 30 hours we fired 2600 rounds; and at one time our brigade had only seven guns able to fire; two of these smoked at every joint and were too hot to touch with the unprotected hand.

Throughout 3 nights they belted us continuously: and the firing never ceased. One consecutive minute night or day: and yet the birds kept singing in the trees - what trees were not cut down by shells. We were so close up to the trenches (for gins) that the rifle bullets came over us in clouds. We got the gas again and again. Of the 17 days the first 8 we were with the French army - and all the time had French troops on our front: the anxiety was terrible, for we never knew if the Fr. would hold or give. Our part of the battle was to hold the German lines and allow the subsequent French & British advance to the south. And day after day it was firing to support French attack, or repel German attacks. And we sometimes had 3 of these latter in a day. We got into them well again and again.

We lost very heavy (for artillery) but we have justified our existence. Of the 'horror gas', we saw them an hundred fold - at close quarters.

From some grey uniform I can't get the bloodstains clear yet. My good old friend "Bonfire" (ex-John Todd) got two light shrapnel wounds, but is quite fit again. It has been a terrible time, but we have been very mercifully preserved so far. No word of the hospital yet! My love to your family - both families.

Yours very truly
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Medically work is light, for the men are very fit. I met General Carleton Jones the other day and he opened up to me about my name appearing in the papers as appointed to the McGill Hospital (he took exception to the name). He indicated that my movements befriended on him, and I indicated that I didn't really care which way it went. This is sufficiently pleasant way however. I was sorry there was any snarl over the medical post – and sorry too that Charley Peters was put out about it. He has done good and long service.

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We lost (for artillery) but we have justified our existence. Of the ‘heroes of war’ we saw them a hundred fold – at close quarters. From my military uniform I can’t get the bloodstains cleaned yet. My good old friend “Bonfire” (ex-John Todd) got two light shrapnel wounds, but is quite fit again. It has been a terrible time, but we have been very mercifully preserved so far. No word of the hospital yet! My love to your family – both families.

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