

*A soldier in the Highland Scots Territorial Regiment writes to his wife from the front during the second battle of Ypres.*

Hell Fire Corner, June 2nd 1915

Dear Phyllis,

These are strenuous times indeed. It's well over a week since we came up here, and this is the first opportunity I have had of getting off a letter.

5 We had rather a thrilling march up, and made all the more thrilling by the probability of having to make an attack at the end of it.

10 Along the none too wide road four streams of traffic were passing, on the outside, to the right, jostling us and moving in the same direction, clattered long lines of ammunition limbers<sup>1</sup>, British and Belgian, the latter reminiscent of country bakers' carts manned by semi-equipped emergency postmen. With them went convoys of motor ambulances. Coming the other way the same limbers and ambulances, but now the limbers were empty and the ambulances full. And on the far side of the road straggling little groups of weary men, some of them hardly able to breathe from the effects of the gas. Through it all buzzed the dispatch riders, twisting and turning among the horses with unbelievable skill. As we marched the men sang, sang as only Scotch troops can.

15 At last we reached the outskirts of Ypres. At the bridge where the sentry stands, guarding the ruined city from the hand of the looter, the pipers turned aside and broke into "Highland Laddie". From the men came what a journalist would probably describe as a "deep-throated roar", and for the life of me I can't give a better word for it. In it blended the voices of the business men, students, clerks, artisans, labourers and all the other classes which go to make up the battalion. As we entered Wipers<sup>2</sup>  
20 it died down, for who could be anything but silent in that city of the dead? Past the Cloth Hall, past the Cathedral, past shops and houses now little heaps of crumbling brick.

The men, of course, were dead fagged<sup>3</sup> by the time they got there, but we had to set them to dig themselves in without a moment's rest. Poor devils. But at dawn we were so far down that the Hun<sup>4</sup> had only our head and shoulders to pot at instead of our entire weary anatomies.

25 Since then we have spent the time being shelled by their artillery. Yesterday we had thirteen hours of it without a moment's respite. By night we try to rebuild the trenches which have been blown in by day. After the Germans have been shelling us for an hour or so our own artillery will reply with one round of shrapnel, generally a "dud". But of course that isn't their fault. If only the B.E.F. [British Expeditionary Force] could lay hands on the man whose fault it is, he would have a pretty rough  
30 crossing. Was out in No Man's Land<sup>5</sup> last night firing rifle grenades. It was creepy work out there in the long, wet grass, in which you kept on running against dead bodies. To my dismay they all failed to explode, and it was not till we got back safely that I remembered that I had not pulled out the pins!

We hear (1) that our depleted battalion is shortly to return home to recruit, (2) that all T.F. [Territorial Force] battalions are to be withdrawn from the firing line, (3) that we are to do an attack, (4)  
35 that we are to form the nucleus of a new conscript battalion, (5) that we are going to Rouen to dig drains.

There's a fine selection for you. Take your choice and it's certain to be untrue. Meanwhile here are we, stretched across the road to Ypres and holding what is probably the most important part of the whole line.

40 With which cheery thought, farewell.

Your Tired THOMAS.

The papers of Captain N C S Down. *Imperial War Museum Documents* 62/NCSD and courtesy of the author's estate.

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- <sup>1</sup> a limber: a two-wheeled vehicle for transporting ammunition  
<sup>2</sup> Wipers: the soldiers' way of pronouncing Ypres  
<sup>3</sup> dead fagged: exhausted  
<sup>4</sup> the Hun: soldiers' slang for "the Germans"  
<sup>5</sup> No Man's Land: the area between the trenches of hostile armies

- In what ways does the use of detail add to our understanding of the letter-writer and the situation he finds himself in?
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