

Y.M.C.A.

On Active Service
with the

AMERICAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCES.

October 7, 1918.

Dear Father:

Your fine letters came night before last, but too late for me to read them. Also a nice letter from Mama and Nan. They all helped a great deal. I doubt if any mail we have received has done as much good as this received right in the front. I got my letters Saturday night and could not keep a light burning to read them for fear of giving our positions away. We were encamped right up. They have the habit of sending the 1st Battalion of 113th F.A. up closer to the front than any other artillery. They have yet to shoot over any friendly artillery.

Since I wrote to you I have lived a new life. I thought I had seen something of war and experienced all the thrills in the other drive, but things different have come up here. I've seen our infantry scared and shooting wild at a woods in which were machine guns, and I've seen other infantry advance through a German barrage in broad day without the support of our guns. We have longed to be behind our own boys from N.C. and hope we shall not always be attacking artillery on one front while they are attacking infantry on another.

One night when the boys in front of us were hard pressed and likely to break the General came along and ordered us in such case to run our guns to the crest of ridge and hold

it at any cost. Needless to say the infantry did not break, but we experienced a night of it.

I believe I have done everything in this last drive. I acted as No. 1 in 1st piece of Battery "C" for a little while during the first barrage. No. 1 pulls the trigger and opens and closes the breech. Later the next morning I talked to returned prisoners. They were all glad to be captured, although later in the day I met some Prussian machine gunners who were not so happy.

When the first party of artillery went forward in reconnaissance I went too. Just a small party. We went out across the French trenches which had been bridged by our engineers, and the wire torn aside by the same forces. Then across "No Man's land", the most desolate place on earth. This time we went through a village destroyed beyond all belief. And I think no one can imagine a shell marked field or forest until he has seen one. The road was full of advancing infantry and machine gunners and ammunition carriers. The engineers were taxed beyond their strength making a road across the shell torn German lines. This is one of the historic battle fields of the war and there were shell holes old and new. We entered a forest, the limbs of the trees of which were torn away by the shells, and in the thick undergrowth had lurked the deadly machine gun nests. More quickly than we could wish we caught up with the infantry which was held up in the forest by machine guns. Even while waiting there a shell bursted among the machine gunners, killing three, tearing them almost to pieces. We found a German

77 about like our own 75's, but the Germans had taken away enough parts to render it useless. We finally sent back for our batteries and went to bed in a German dug out, a veritable village, with deep dug outs against shell fire, and more comfortable ones near the service for living in. A big pump kept the deep ones dry. They have electric lights and all conveniences there. I know they hated to leave it.

That night it rained and the new made roads became mud bogs, but our guns got up before morning. Just after I got up a shell burst among our men wounding three. 'Tis a strange feeling for death to come our of the distance with no warning save the short whistle, and sharp explosion. 'Tis unnerving too. We soon had our batteries going forward again, and before dinner they were in advance of all others save ten of ----- on our left and firing at the enemy. We were in an exposed position yet fortunately no one got our exact location although shells were thrown all around us. The wounded were coming back afoot and on litters. Roads were too bad for ambulances and the prisoners were used to carry the wounded in.

Near our position were the heavy German guns I must have written you about. My hurriedly organized crew did fine work and we shot into a town, a woods infested with machine guns and an important enemy road. The next day the General came down and gave me a good word for my work. That night a french crew which could not get its guns up on account of mud took the guns and fired them.

At this position I saw a rare air battle. A bunch of our

planes got a Boche hemmed in. Of all the flying up side down and all around he did it. But just as he did a loop he must have been hit for he did two, one after the other, and in the second one he struck the ground. He was crushed past all recognition, strapped to his seat with his right hand on his machine gun. When they buried him they could not pick him up he was broken all to pieces. Right now let me say that the Boche man for man and plane for plane is equally as good as we are. I've seen lots of both sides brought down, but they seem more daring and aggressive than our men.

We had some awful weather there and got some mud believe me. Again I went forward to reconnoiter. Saw others struck by shell and machine gun bullets lying by the road or in barbed wire. I think of four dead now. The man in the former drive who died in his shell hole, himself and his automatic rifle lying towards the enemy. His companion lay in the wire beside a town we recently captured. Like a runner who had tripped on the last strand of barbed wire he lay prone toward Germany. The third is the Boche pilot I just described, strapped to his seat with his hand on his machine gun. The fourth is a lovely lad. I saw him way up, sitting beside the road, his head forward, his helmet hanging from his right wrist. I thought he was asleep, but when I went nearer after calling to him I saw his helmet quite full of water and knew he died before the rains. Wounded perhaps he sat thus naturally to die.

But I have other pictures in my mind too. Can you imagine a valley lying parallel to the lines, on the northern slope four of our batteries and on the southern slope two others. All slong

the valley hundreds of infantry men who had dug their little graves to protect them from shell fire. To our east a famous point, now in ruin. To our west a little village constantly under shell fire, as were also the roads leading out of our valley. Overhead the planes and the sausages hanging in the distance. Then we saw in closed ranks about two hundred men approach the crest of the ridge on the other side of our valley. All put our glasses on the mass of men and saw the long overcoats of the German prisoners. Suddenly a shout went up from the infantry in the valley and on the slope of the hill, all seemed to be confusion there. Then I saw the long ears of a big French rabbit, very much like our jack rabbit, hitting it up across the valley amid the cheers and chases of our soldiers. He escaped, but 'twas a funny chase under such circumstances.

One Sunday night afterwards Major sent for me and said they were shy of officers and would I act as observer or direct a battery. I told him I would do so if he desired and he directed me to observe. I must say I did not feel too secure going forward towards the front line with my telephone man and operator. But before I got a place to observe from it was too late for observation so I went over to the Infantry Post of Command. They were shelling the valley as I went down to his dug out under a hill. I passed wounded and gassed men and finally found the Colonel of infantry. We arranged for my return on the morrow. The next day began four days of curious work for a preacher. I ran a wire near to the front line, on a hill in

plain view of the enemy, for they had to be in my view. I had hardly got my lines laid when I saw a German gun change position. I directed the fire of one of our batteries upon the hedge behind which they placed the gun and made a few of them clear out. Later that day I directed fire on other targets that appeared. And they fired on us too - threw mud and fragments through the window of the little shack I had been fool enough to go into. The next day and always thereafter I went to a hole in ground near by instead of the old German hut. We were constantly under fire and I had the time of my life seeing and directing our own fire. Also I had a dandy telephone boy operating. A shell fragment struck him on the helmet and mud was thrown in on us, but he never flinched or dodged. There are some dandy men. While here I saw the infantry advance through that barrage. It was magnificent.

But one day just before day they shelled up with gas for quite a while. They just before light a high explosive burst among our men killing four outright and wounding others. I helped get the men wounded and gassed away, and stayed in that day to bury the dead. Before we got them buried they shelled us, while waiting to have the little service, one man was wounded. Colonel and I rushed up to help him and while I was putting a first aid bandage on him two shells burst on ammunition cases near us wounding two medical men who had come up to help us, but not hurting the Colonel or me. I went back and put the fire out that had been started among the ammunition boxes. How any

of us escaped is a wonder to me. I fear one of the medical corps boys will not recover as the fragment cut his jugular vein. We then put the funeral off until the night, and just at dusk we laid them away, four side by side. We added another yesterday.

I have had three fine services at the front. Of course we could not have the men grouped together. But Sunday a week ago in an advanced position about fifteen of us gathered behind the guns under the edge of the road and had a little service. Yesterday Capt. Morrison, whose battery had the most dangerous position, but which suffered less, asked me to come over for a service. We gathered under the camouflage, just his gun crews and signal men. It was a very dear service to me, Tom was there.

Later I had a service at the 4th gun of Battery "D" then buried a man from "B" and before I could do more, orders for our relief came. So we came back here, a few miles behind the front getting in last night and this morning. Today lots of them washed-up, but I went off to a Y.M.C.A. and got about \$120.00 worth of sweets and tobacco for the men. Tomorrow I may bathe or I may march - I need the former.

Too long a letter you will say. How I do wish I could write more often. Letters to bereave parents will be the order of the day tomorrow. Don't measure my love by the number of letters I write. I took my breeches off for the first time in two weeks last night. I've tried to do my work, and it takes most of my time. I'll try to write as often as I can.

I know I'll not get a chance to write this anywhere else, so please keep this letter for me to keep as a kind of diary. There is this much more I would like to write, but I can't do so.

~~I love you all dearly and long to see you all. Tell Mother and Nan I enjoyed their letters famously.~~

With lots of love,

Devotedly,

Ben.

O.K.
B.R. Lacy Jr.,
Chaplain, 113th F.A.