

MS-1176

Brown, Martin George, 1885-1966

Papers relating to war service

Auckland War Memorial Museum – Tāmaki Paenga Hira

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MS1176

Walton-on-Thames

20th June. 1917

Dear Mother,

No doubt by this time you have received my cable which cousin Florence sent for me the other day. I have not written before as I had no writing paper. Well no doubt you are anxiously waiting to hear from me as I have not written for almost a month. My wound is in the foot, really in the toes. A piece of shell went right through my foot, missing the little toe, cutting the top of the next one, through the other two and cutting the big one underneath. I have lost about half of the two middle toes. They are healing up nicely and I hope to be able to hop about on crutches in a few days.

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I received my little crack in the Great Battle of Messines on June 7th. After holding the line for four days the 2nd Auckland Battalion went back into our third reserve line of trenches on the Wednesday evening. The first wave hopped the bags in the front line assembly trench at about 3:10 a.m. but we did not get on the move till 4 o'clock. We had to cover about a mile across open country before we got to the front line. It was while crossing this that I was knocked out. My wounds were quickly dressed by the field ambulance and I was soon on my way out. After the stretcher bearers had carried me about a quarter of a mile a batch of Hunos came along and six of them carried me for about a mile to the dressing station.

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I spent about a week in a hospital at St. Omer in France and then commenced my journey to dear old Blighty. For about two days I was shifted about in stretchers, motor ambulances, and red cross trains and the hospital ship until I finally reached my present home, the No 2 New Zealand hospital, Walton on Thames. Most of the staff, here and all the patients here are New Zealanders so I am amongst friends and am really having a very enjoyable time.

Our letters from here are not censored so I can write very much ^{more} freely than from France. Really I have seen very little fighting yet. When I joined up on April 19th our battalion was in the line and after being in supports for three or four

day we came out into what is called the subsidiary line. We were camped in a wood just behind the last line of trenches and went into the trenches in fatigue work every day for three or four days. Then we shifted further back and were engaged on railway works for a week or more. The whole country side behind the line is just a network of light lines which are used for running supplies and ammunition up the line. All the batteries of heavy artillery have a tramline running right up to them. During the most of May we were training for the big stunt at St. Omer about 35 miles behind the line. We ~~was~~ went there by train but we had to march back, a three day's march in the hot sun and then into the trenches. We had rather a rough time the four days

we had there. Our artillery was pounding away all the time and of course old Fritz was sending a good deal back. He caught quite a number of our boys and altogether gave us rather an unpleasant time. It is not the nicest place in the world squatting in a trench with shells bursting all round and not knowing when one may land near. One day while having lunch a shell burst on the loose earth thrown out of the trench and filled my stew and tea with dirt. It is surprising how quickly I got used to being in danger. After the first shell or two I became quite cool and collected. The front line is the place to

see what a man is like. Men who are wild and thoughtless in training pull themselves together and often make the very best of mates in the firing line. It is really grand to see the way some fellows take hold of themselves and although they are frightened and nervous do their best to disguise the fact and carry on with their work to the best of their ability. The most anxious time in the front line is what is called "Stand-to" each morning and evening at dawn and dusk. It always lasts for an hour and during that time every man in the trenches has to be ready for immediate action (rifle loaded & bayonet fixed) a very sharp look-out is kept over the parapet and at the entrance to each bay in the front line. Just now the "Stand-to" times are 9-10 p.m. and 3-4 a.m.

7 2

These are the times when a "strafe" is generally on or when a raid is likely to take place. Things are generally busiest just at dawn. During our last spell in the line we had no less than three bombardments and a gas attack in 24 hours. Most of the gas is sent over in shells and a large part of it what we call "tear-gas" has no effect on the lungs but makes the eyes run like the juice from an onion does. On the morning of the attack on Messines we had to advance through a gas cloud made with gas shells. It was soon after we had passed through it and taken off our respirators got wounded.

We always carry two gas helmets. one which is always reliable and ready for use is called the "box" respirator, and the other an emergency one called the "P. H."

Well I think I have told you enough about war this time. I have so much to write about that I get carried away and do not know when to pull up. I will write to father in a day or two and tell him about the big battle from my point of view.

When in the danger zone I always put my trust and faith in the Almighty, who alone is capable of protecting and helping me there. I prayed constantly for coolness and courage and I felt sure my prayers were answered. My great dread has always been least I get excited and do something foolish. After the first few nervous hours I became quite normal and now have confidence in myself. My heart is full of thankfulness for my deliverance. The men next to me when

9
rest were killed outright
while I got only a slight wound
in the foot - a nice little
"Blighty One" - as the soldiers
call such wounds.

Now you need not worry about
me for some time to come. After
I have been through the hospital
and convalescent hospital I get
a fortnight's leave. Then I
have to ~~go~~ go through all the
training at St. Ing and Etaples
(our base in France), again, so will
not be any where near the
firing line till about October
at least. In the meantime you
can get to work on a scarf
and balaclava cap for next
winter. All I have left of my
kit is a few things I had in
my pockets when wounded and
my knitted waistcoat which

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I was wearing ¹⁰ at the time which I have hung on to. When we go into action we leave our kits behind and take only a small haversack holding toilet ~~star~~ rations and a pair of socks. We have to carry - 170 rounds ammunition, two Mills bombs (hand grenades) shovel or pick, gas helmets, rifle & bayonet and entrenching tool, also three or more empty sandbags. So you see we have plenty to carry for hopping over trenches and shell holes etc.

I have not heard anything of Arthur since the 7th. I spoke to him just before we formed up to get out of the trench on the Thursday morning and have not heard anything of him since. I do hope he is alright. Cousin Florence is coming to see me to-morrow.

your very affectionate son

Martin

Mrs J. B. Brown
Pukekoe
N. Z.