

MS-1176

Brown, Martin George, 1885-1966

Papers relating to war service

Auckland War Memorial Museum – Tāmaki Paenga Hira

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MS.1176

Walton-on-Thames
June 21st 1917

Dear Father,

I have just been given a new writing pad by one of the sisters so must make use of it straight away. Writing material is generally pretty scarce the first few days one is in hospital but when your turn comes you get a pad and envelopes. I have been one of the lucky ones this time.

I had a letter from Mother this morning which she wrote about Easter time. We have been on the move almost constantly since the beginning of the month and I just missed a mail that was being delivered then. My letters are just beginning to find me out again so I shall probably be getting a few almost every day or two. I think the Post Office people do very well hunting up the boys. Some one is always on the move even in ordinary quiet times, and when a big stunt comes off, such as the Messines affair, there are thousands changing about.

In my letter to Mother yesterday I said I would write to you and tell you about the fight. You will have read something of it in the papers so will know the main features. This is the first time since they were in the Somme last September that the New Zealanders have taken part in an advance. There are now four Brigades in the N.Z. Division, but the fourth is a new Brigade and did not take part in the Messines battle. Each Brigade was out of the trenches in turn

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for about three weeks special training so you see we have been getting ready for two months or more. Ours was the last Brigade on the training business. We left St Omer, or rather a village about 6 miles further back, on Thursday morning May 31st and set out on a three days march carrying all our belongings and equipment. We arrived at a new concentration camp on the Saturday evening, very tired and foot-sore and almost immediately set about making preparations for the trenches. Our overcoats and all changes of underclothing, and odd things like boot & button cleaning gear, balaclava caps etc were packed in valises, labelled and stacked away. On Sunday morning our company, 16th Waikatos, set out for the front line about six miles away and got into our places somewhere about mid-day. We were holding a piece of new trench that had recently been dug in front of our own wiring and which was to be used as an assembly or hop-off trench. It was deep and narrow, without dug-outs or fire-steps. I fancy the enemy did not know we were holding it because most of his shells were going over into our old front line and into the saps or communication trenches up which the food & supplies are brought to the men holding the line. We had to spend practically all our time in the trench and could get out only for an hour or two a day to get a bit of a wash and a sleep.

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The trench being deep & narrow was rather awkward to live in but very safe as a shell had to land practically right in the trench to do us any harm. We had to be very careful not to make any extra noise or to show anything above the parapet for fear the enemy should guess where we were. We left the front line again on Wednesday evening, the advance taking place the next morning. We went back to our third reserve trench near the top of a hill and overlooking the valley where our main line of trenches were. During the night we were busy getting everything ready - filling water bottles & stacking away biscuits and tins of bully-beef in every spare corner of our haversacks, being issued with shovels, picks, wire-cutters, bombs, flares etc. The picks & shovels are carried on the back, the handle being pushed down behind the straps of the web equipment. I managed to get a few winks of sleep about midnight but was quickly roused to put on my gas helmet. Fritz was sending over a number of gas shells trying to catch the batteries near us. Some of them burst quite near part of the trench and some of the boys were gassed before they could put their masks on. It was pitiful to see the poor fellows as they were helped along on their way to the doctor who was in the trench with us. At 3 o'clock the side of the hill gave a roll like a violent earthquake, one officer said "A mine!" and we all jumped up on

the fire step to see what was happening. I lay over on the other side of the valley on the ridge held by the Germans I could see the earth bulging up into a great heap and bursting out in a great geyser of smoke and mud. Mine after mine followed along the ridge to the number of about 30. The whole ridge seemed to be heaving itself up into the air from several of them went up pieces that seemed to explode in mid air. It was an uncanny and awe inspiring sight in the pale moonlight of early dawn. No sooner had the mines exploded than hundreds of machine guns opened fire as if they had all been set off by a touch of a button. In a minute or two there came another burst of sound which completely drowned the rat-tat-tat-tat of the machine guns. It was the opening out of hundreds of guns of artillery - from the eighteen pounders close up to the line to the big 12 & 15 in howitzers and naval guns five or six miles behind. We watched for a few minutes and then got down into the trench as the valley was filled with smoke and we could see nothing more. A chap next to me sat down and just remarked "And this is war." I can hardly imagine a more expressive term to describe the awful opening of that great battle. In less than five minutes the quiet morning had changed into a perfect roar of sound so that we could scarcely hear each other speak.

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It was the most perfectly organised affair you could possibly imagine. In an affair of this kind everything is made out to a timetable. The starting time is called "zero" and all other times are made out from that. All the officers from the general downwards have their watches set exactly alike and each movement is carried out to the second. For instance in this particular case "zero" was 3.10 am. I think. Well at 0 the mines go up, (I do not know the exact times allotted for each but I am just giving you an idea of how the thing is worked) At 0.1 the machine guns begin to play to catch the Germans who may be running over the top out of the way of the mines. At 0.3 (let us say) the artillery open out, and the men in the front line assembly trench hop out. By the time they get to Fritz's front line (0.5) the barrage lifts fifty yards ahead and they jump into what is left of the enemies trenches and begin to drive him out with bombs. In this particular case I fancy they had not much trouble as some of the boys told me they met Huns coming over to give themselves up as prisoners before our boys were well away from our own trench. Without a doubt we took Fritz completely by surprise and the poor beggars had nothing left to do but give themselves up as prisoners.

While some of our guns were pounding away at the German front line of trenches, others were shelling his saps and support trenches, others his reserve trenches and others the ground behind that again so that he could not bring up any fresh men to assist his men in the trenches. Our men advance at the rate of about fifty yards a minute and our own shells make a sort of screen just in front of them. This screen is what is called the barrage. Just before the barrage lifts our men are right up ~~to~~ to the place where our own shells are bursting. Sometimes one or two more eager spirits are in too much hurry and get caught in our barrage. Then in the stroke of a clock the barrage lifts fifty yards ahead and stops there exactly a minute, then lifts another fifty yards and so on.

As our company was in reserves I saw nothing of the fighting in the German trenches. We climbed out of our trench about four o'clock, lined up in sections and began to move forwards. Everything was as orderly as if we were on parade. There was not the slightest sign of excitement. We had not gone far when we came to a gas cloud and had to ~~wend~~ don our helmets. It was not long before we heard shrapnel whistling over our heads.

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Of course Fritz was shelling our support and reserve lines in much the same way as we were shelling his. We had quite enough to occupy our minds finding our way with the masks on and keeping together in our proper places. We had scarcely passed safely through the gas and had taken off the masks when I got hit. I had climbed down into an old trench and was just beginning to clamber up the other side when the shell landed right in the trench.

I was dazed and my ears were ringing for a minute or two but I had sense enough to creep under the side of the trench for shelter. I had hardly got my puttee off before the field ambulance ^{men} came along, dressed my foot, and I was soon helped on to a stretcher and was on my way back to a dressing station. After they had carried me about a quarter of a mile the stretcher bearers left me at a sort of dump and went back again to look for more wounded. Just then a party of about forty Tuns came along. Six of them were allotted to my stretcher and they carried me a mile or more to the dressing station. They seemed very pleased to be safe out of the firing line and were only too willing to help our wounded men.

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One of our boys told me that a Hun car picked him up in a shell hole in no man's land and carried him quite a distance through our own trench system to a dressing station. When ~~the~~ I got to the dressing station I was labelled and put into a motor ambulance and was taken to a C.C.S. (casualty clearing station). Here my wound was again dressed, a diagnosis made on my card and after waiting an hour or two I was again put aboard an ambulance and taken to a field hospital about ten miles away. I spent the rest of the day and a night there lying on the same old stretcher. They have time to deal with only the very serious cases here; the others are sorted out and sent to the different general hospitals in France as the convoys come for them. Next morning I was taken to the No 7 General Hospital at St Omer where I was at last undressed, washed and put to bed. After spending nearly a week there I was shifted to Blighty and at last arrived here. Such is my part of the fight. I would dearly have liked to have reached the Hun trenches but nevertheless am very thankful to get out of it with the loss of only half of two toes.

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Saturday 23rd.

Cousin Florence came to see me yesterday and brought me some fruit and my glasses so that I can now read all day in comfort. She was very cheerful and I was very glad to have a chat with her. I cannot hear anything of Arthur or the rest of my mates but I must simply wait in patience till the casualty lists make their appearance.

Our Brigadier General, General Brown, was killed at Messines. He had only recently got his promotion and was very well thought of by all the boys who knew him. He used to be the Colonel of our ~~company~~ Battalion.

Three or four days ago I paid a visit to the operating theatre and had my toes stitched up. They have not been touched since and are getting on fine. I scarcely know I have anything the matter with me and am feeling A. T., having a real good appetite and plenty of reading matter.

Well I must close now. I hope you are feeling well again and will get through the winter without much discomfort with the cold. When I tell you of our soldier life I don't want you to think I am complaining in any way. We do not expect feather beds and a white table-cloth in the army.

As a matter of fact I am only too proud to
be able to do my little bit and make my
little sacrifices of comfort etc. for the sake of
my country and you dear folks at home.

Don't forget to write as often as you can.
I get all your letters although some of them
are delayed a while. I shall have lots to
write about now I am in old England once
more.

Your affectionate son
Martin J. Brown.

Mr. J. B. Brown
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N. Z.