

February 2, 1918.

Sergeant Dan Neilly of the Machine Gun Company of the 18th US Infantry in France, who has been in the trenches for some time, writes in a letter received recently, that he has experienced three gas attacks by the German forces, but in his own vernacular “Kaiser Bill will have to come again if he wants me.” He reports “that when trench duty ended, he imagines the men would feel like hoops from the constant bending under the narrow roof of the trenches. The men use large quantities of candles as the trenches are almost always dark. He said that his steel helmet has protected him from many a hard crack. He wrote “we don’t have any wardrobe trunks with us in the trenches and because it has been very cold the boys wear every article of clothing they possess. My apparel now consists of four pair of socks, two suits of underwear, two C.D. shirts, two or three sweaters, a blouse, an overcoat, two pair of knitted gloves and two knitted helmets. So you see what we are doing with the gifts of the Red Cross and you know what would happen if you sent me another sweater. When my service in the trenches ends, I hope I’ll be able to take a bath, the “first one in a long, long time.”

- Daniel Neilly

May 15, 1918.

As I write, I sit in a two by six hole dug in chalky ground with high explosive and shrapnel shells bursting overhead. I just saw one of our boys have a close call. He was standing under a tree about fifty yards from here. Shrapnel burst over the tree cutting off the top and sending limbs crashing down. I said to myself “another one gone,” but when the smoke cleared away there he stood as if nothing had happened. His rifle was blown to smithers but he was unhurt.

This hole in which I am crouching looks like a grave. (Cheerful thought). In stories you read of brave soldiers, but I know in reality that no matter how brave one is, the wish that he were safe at home always crops out in his mind.

They call this sunny France, but I wonder why. I haven’t seen much of the sun since I came over. I think the French have it camouflaged to hide it from the Kaiser, so that he can’t find his place in it.

Rain, mud, cold rain and more mud all the time is our lot and then the awful smell from dead bodies is carried by the wind in all direction. At night we stand in the wet, muddy trenches straining our eyes for the Boche, and imagine every little bush and post is one of those animals sneaking up on us.

Some months ago on another front I was going along the top to relieve some of the men on watch at my gun emplacement. I was hailed by one of the sentries with the cry “Halt. Who’s there?” “Friend, with the countersign.” I answered. The sentry came back with “I have no friends, advance with the countersign, “ which I did. But his reply sounded so queer and it almost seems true when we are out here all alone. Our friends seem terribly distant and remote from us.

You ask me where I am and what I am doing. That I can’t tell you. We hike miles and miles sometimes, sleep in barns and old musty, smelling houses, eat our meals when, how, and where we can, most of the time in some dirty barn yard. Some times we are quartered many miles behind the shell zone, in some village. There we have a change to take a good bath, shave and put on clean underclothes. Then we look and feel like human beings again.

– Corporal Daniel E. Neilly

Somewhere in France, August 27, 1918

My dearest wife and mother, I have just been discharged from the hospital and am now located at a rest camp where I have been examined and passed for the Military Police. I expect to leave here very soon for England and I understand that I will be there for the duration of the war. Well, if I am not able to go back to the front, I can always feel that I did my bit and I am glad that I came to France when I did. I had been at the front for three months without being relived and with the exception of getting a little gas, came okay.

Believe me, the sights I saw were some I will never forget. All along the way German prisoners could be seen and they sure did wear a contented look on their faces as if life were all sunshine for them – which it is, now, for they are treated fine by the Allies. I do not think the war will last very long as everything is coming our way and more soldiers are coming over every day. The Germans are licked now but will not admit it.

How is my little son? I would give the world to see him, but I know it won't be long now. Well, I have to say goodbye for now as mess is ready and you know I never miss a meal."

– Johnny Kiley

Somewhere in France, Sept. 6, 1918

Dear Mother, I am feeling fine as usual. I received an even dozen of letters when mail last came in and I have read them all many times. I would rather have the mail come in than the paymaster.

McKeon and I went to vespers this evening. Father Mulligan, our chaplain, holds service in the village church each day. It seems so peaceful in there and the familiar scent of the incense brings back many bygone days. It is all so different over here in everything else, except the church. I mean the faith, not church literally. The buildings are so pitifully age-worn and dim. Tonight the French cure assisted Father Mulligan and it would bring tears of gladness to your eyes to see that old Frenchman and the strong your American on the same altar.

These French are a wonderful people. The first few months over there one wonders at the quaint old fashioned ideas, methods of business, of dress, etc. Then in a few months one becomes tire of the place and longs for home and ones' own people and then come the revelation, it takes time, but in due course once comes to realize – after months of toil, dreary toil, weariness, hunger, sometimes death, loneliness and misery and then realizing that these Allies of our have undergone the same thing for years, one can see the truth. The longer I am here the clearer I understand and why I should have been over here before. If the fellows back home that could come and will not, could only realize what they are doing, the shame of holding back would overwhelm them, if they have any shame or manliness.

Cohn and McKeon are still with me and both are well, do you know that it is a comfort to have someone you know in the same regiment? It is strange that I have never met any of the boys of the 112th. Our 61st regiment has been on many fronts and I have not been able to locate the Oil Country Regiment and have not heard from them where they are.

Lots of times, of course, I wish to be back home with you and see you all again and then at other times there is no other place I would be rather than here. At nightfall when the noises cease and the shadows are softening the sights of ugly things, and when the bugles call "retreat" and "taps" why, there is something about it all that grips me somehow – and if I ever come back home I know that I will always seem to hear those notes in "taps" and think of the hours I have spent with the best and the bravest fellows on earth over here.

– Charles Green, Medical Department, US Army

October 6, 1919.

Ink is a luxury 'over here' – in fact, everything is – so I had to make this out of a stub of an indelible pencil. A piece of candle in a tomato can makes a good flashlight which is shut off by using a cover. A cartridge makes a fine point on a cane; a pick makes an excellent tool for splitting wood; a "mess" will do for 'dinner' and water will fill up a vacant spot, but damn't there's no substitute for a letter!

A fellow – my Bunkie – just came in and handed me a two-bit cigar "from the states" and I'm smoking it! Going to the dogs fast? Well, no. Now I can go home and say that I smoked a cigar, saw Europe, was in the big fight, had a great time and it didn't cost me a damned cent. Pass the fudge now. Oh, yes, I smoked a cigarette, too. They're no good. Maybe I'll smoke another cigar tomorrow if Germany signs the peace that we hear tonight she is about to sign. We sure have 'em going now, eh? Reminds me of a chicken flopping around just after its head has been cut off. The Frenchmen are celebrating tonight already. D'you know I wouldn't take any amount of money for the experiences I've had over here.

I've eaten, slept and traveled under all conditions – seen and heard an encyclopedia full, but I haven't got a Hun yet, and that's just the one thing I came over for.

– Vincent Roy

November 6, 1918

I suppose you are frightened almost to death since receiving word I was gassed, but there is no need for worry. Fritz didn't hit me as hard as most of the fellows. You will know that I am not in bad shape when I tell you I walk to my meals all by myself and don't need much attention.

I was gassed with mustard gas about 3PM, September 6, 1918. My companions and I started immediately for the first aid station in the rear, but were cut off several times by barrages from one pounders and machine guns. We finally arrived at the station about 4:15PM and were quickly tagged and shipped out in an ambulance to the field hospital. We have been evacuated to hospitals farther behind the lines, once by ambulance, and lastly by hospital train to Paris, where I am at present.

I get pretty short of breath, though, but of course it takes a bit of time for one to get over it.

Won't there be a bunch of heroes back in the states after the war? But to me, the heroes are the ones who shall never return - the ones who gave their all.

A big squadron of Boche planes made a raid on Paris last night but the anti-aircraft guns and monster search lights were a bit too much for them. They dropped two big bombs just outside the hospital gate about 500 feet from here, making holes you could put our house into. Fritz is an awful cruel coward and makes hospitals a specialty in his air raids. He paid dearly for this raid, though, for the anti-aircraft guns brought down two of his great planes.

A queer thing happened to me at the first evacuation hospital I was taken to. I lay on a stretcher with a cloth over my face and I heard two fellows say something about my getting gassed. So I raised up on my elbows and took a look and there was a row of fellows from my company that took up the length of the whole tent. Some welcome, wasn't it?

- Corporal G. Vincent Williams. (He's a Mt. Jewett boy).

November 11, 1918

Dearest Mother, this is one of the great days in history, especially our history, as it means only a short time now until we will all be together again.

It was just six months ago today that I set sail from old New York, arriving here on the 25th of May. This entitles me to a six months' service stripe. Now that this thing is practically at an end, I am anxiously awaiting the time when I can come home and see you all for the glorious news has just arrived that the armistice with the last and greatest of the Central Powers has been signed. This was announced by church bells ringing and cannon firing in Paris at 11 o'clock which made a deafening roar all over the city.

I should like to be at home tonight when word reaches the states and participate in the rejoicing. We will hope and pray that Germany lives up to her signature and is not trying one of her old tricks to gain time. We didn't let the old Kaiser as we wanted to, but we will overlook that now as there is an opportunity of being home soon. This may take longer than we expect but as long as we are sure of it we all have something big to look forward to as it will be at least a month before peace is signed.

You can see that I have been thinking of little else except home and will prove it to you when I get there as I am going to stay right there.

-Vincent Collins, 43rd Artillery, Coast Artillery Corps., American Expeditionary Force,

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