

St. Andrew's Military Hospital,  
Sliema, Malta.  
26th May, 1915

Dear Rene,

As I haven't written to you for some time now and as the present time hangs pretty heavily on my hands - or to be strictly accurate on my hand as I have only the use of the one I am writing with - it is up to me to let you have a few lines.

Expect you have seen the list of casualties long before this reaches you and noticed that yours truly got in the way of a bullet: couldn't help it really - didn't see it coming to tell the truth. I had survived a fortnight of the scrapping including our terrible baptism of fire on the first day we landed of which doubtless you have had the accounts in the paper: this is a day I don't like to talk of yet. Well, after 10 or 11 days up at the ~~frank~~ first landing place - Kaba Tepe - and when we had occupied a strong defensive position which the Turks couldn't drive us out of, though to do them credit they tried hard enough, we embarked on mine-sweeping boats and went about 8 miles down the coast to the extreme end of the Peninsular where the largest body of the Allied Troops British French were, and landed there. Up to this time there had been no Australasian troops here but the New Zealand Brigade of the Australian 2nd Bde (that's us Victorians 5th, 6th, 7th & 8th Battalions) ably (h'm) represented the Colonies. Our numbers were sadly depleted as neither the N.Zers or ourselves had much more than 50% of their original strength but a few reinforcements from Egypt arrived in a couple of days and strengthened us a little. We were General Reserves for two days, that is we occupied dug-outs a good distance behind the firing line till we were wanted. On Saturday morning (8th May) we got orders to move up. Previous to this a most terrific artillery bombardment had commenced. English howitzers, Australian 18 pounders, the famous 75 mm French guns & the heavy guns of the British warships on both sides of the Peninsular made it a very inferno - for the Turks.

The air simply quivered with rush of shells over our heads and the way bits of the landscape went hurtling thru the air round the Turkish positions was beautiful to watch. Huge clouds of dust & smoke indicated the ~~burst~~ of the heavy gun's lyddite projectiles which explode on percussion (or when they strike an object) and little fluffy balls of white smoke like a wad of cotton wool, - bursting fifty feet or so off the ground showed where the shrapnel shells with their rain of shot were sweeping the trenches. We advanced in open formation a mile or so forward across deserted fields of grain & open green spaces covered with glorious wild-flowers - poppies, buttercups, marguerites, daisies, irises & dozens of others I couldn't name - making a beautiful scene with a clear blue sky & brilliant sunlight over all, the picture only being marred in places by a dead body here & there: we had seen so many of these that we passed by them without comment of any sort except to remark that it was high time they were buried. We advanced into the shelter of a creek where we made dugouts in the bank & cooked our dinner. About 3.30 or 4 oc word came to advance

& the 6th & 8th Bns went forward: there was a perfect hail of bullets dropping round by this time not directed at us but at the firing line further in front. Experience has taught us by this time that the firing line is about the safest place of the lot in an action as most of the Turks are such bad shots that the shots go over the firing line but do damage among the supports & reserves further back. Indeed before we had left the shelter of the bed of the creek a chap alongside me sitting on a sort of dirt suddenly fell forward without a sound into the water: poor beggar he had got a stray bullet right thru his head. Strays were dropping pretty frequently as I found when I stood up to get a shovel from the top of the bank & thus exposed my head & shoulders. A stray came humming viciously along, struck the ground some few yards in front & then ricocheted on to my right shoulder but being spent had no effect than to make me get under cover quickly. Then we were given the word to advance & soon left the shelter of the creek for the danger zone where the bullets were humming like angry bees past your ear or else flicking up little spurts of dust on the ground, too near to be pleasant. A few wounded & dead dotted here & there reminded you that some of the bullets had found their mark.

Incidentally I might put down here what I have always felt right thru the scrapping: you might see dead & wounded Turks, English Tommies, Indians, French & other of the Allied troops lying on the field in their own blood but nothing moved me more than the sight of an Australian who was either winged or else had passed in his regimental number; probably because he wore the same uniform as yourself.

To proceed, we had to cross an open space as bare of cover as the palm of your hand and only dotted here & there as I have said with bodies. Getting across this in safety we stopped for a breather in a trench, manned by Indian troops - Punjabis - then on again at the double, literally running for our lives, rifle in hand, pick or shovel in the other (these were to dig in with when we reached our objective) & our equipment weighing hundreds of pounds so it seemed, with your knees wobbling with fatigue, your throat parched & the consciousness that the next bullet would find its mark instead of going between your legs or zipping past your head.

Another line of trenches, more Indians in it. Another gasping dash into the shelter of a small ditch and then another long long rush across ground which was too plentifully sprinkled with the bodies of our men.

Long before this the Turks had seen our advance & shrapnel was bursting everywhere to say nothing of lyddite shells which tore huge holes in the ground amid clouds of dust & yellow smoke. Our company was lucky enough to have most of these bursting behind them as they advanced but some of the poor beggars must have got them.

The seemingly interminable run across three or four hundreds yards ended in the last line of trenches which was the firing line before

the Australians & New Zealanders made this/~~their~~ advance which I am attempting to describe: the N.Zers were on our left and a French regiment on our right.

Thinking over things later, I came to the conclusion that I must have thought I was in a race when the advance was on as I got ahead of my own crowd & was mixed up with other battalions of our brigade.

While having a breather in this last trench before advancing to the new firing line about three hundred yards ahead, I found myself alongside Billy Catron(?), Joe's brother, who has been promoted from sergeant to 2nd lieutenant, and whom I hadn't seen for months. However word came for some more men to get forward & taking my courage in both hands & my rifle in the other, I set my teeth (£2.2.0 at Blitz's) and prepared for the final dash. I don't know how any of us ever got across that last space, and indeed many of us didn't: there were bodies everywhere, Turks & Australians but you didn't have time to think of them now - it all passed like the flash of a cinematograph - but afterwards it all came back to you. I fell down for a rest halfway among a little group of dead and wounded & then up again & with one final burst like a winning dash in a half mile gained my objective - our firing line which however was crowded with men! fortunately I was lucky enough to find a vacant place & squeezed myself in between two others. When I had recovered my "fleeting breath" which I thought had gone for ever, I asked the range which was 300 yds & started to make a few Turkish widows if I could. The Turks were strongly ~~entrenched~~ entrenched this distance in front of us but our naval guns were doing marvellous shooting: it is a matter for amazement to see how, tho out of sight, they can drop their shells on an invisible target miles away with astonishing accuracy. In this instance the ships were about 5 miles behind us & yet they were shooting over our heads & dropping their shells right on to their trenches just in front. A slight mistake & we would have been blown to bits by our own shells. However the poor Turks got all the benefits this time: it must have been hell in their trenches - we could see a perfect rain of shrapnel bursting right exactly in their trenches. There was no cover where we were, the ground being flat & sparsely covered with small stunted shrubs with here & there a bigger one which no doubt concealed a Turkish sniper. As soon as you reached the firing line, you fixed your ~~large~~ bayonet in readiness for either a charge against the enemy or to resist one of theirs, and then took out your entrenching tool to dig yourself in a bit & get under cover. I blazed away a few rounds & then having nothing to fire at in the way of Turks - the shrapnel "keeping their heads down" as the phrase is - started to scrape the dirt up in front of me as a protection: I must have lifted myself up a little from the ground in doing so for in about three seconds I felt as if someone had thrown the Melbourne Town Hall at me & hit me in the shoulder & back: the force of the hit pinned me face down in the ground stunned for a few moments & then when I lifted my head blood gushed out of my mouth in a

stream. As I felt rather painful in the region of the back I concluded shrapnel had hit me there & I knew by the blood I was hit in the lungs so thought I had thrown a seven & was concluding my career. My first thought was not of home & loved ones curiously enough but a sort of peaceful feeling came over me & the thought ran thru my mind "how easy it is to die". The chap on my right turned me over on my back & took off my wet equipment meanwhile assuring me that he couldn't see any blood on the back of my tunic so I knew then it was a bullet & that it had come in the front & gone out the back. The blood had stopped coming out in a stream now & I was only coughing it up but the stunned feeling had passed & it began to be painful somewhat. I thought I would have a little revenge if I could so tried to fire a few last parting shots but couldn't lift my rifle naturally as my left arm was powerless. There was a captain of the 8th Bn near me under whose charge - as the nearest officer - I was & I told him that I didn't think I could do any more. He said I <sup>had</sup> done my bit & that if I could get back it would be the best thing to do: by this time I had given up the idea of dying & thought if I could get back to the cover of the trenches & get my wound dressed it might be more comfortable than my present position. Accordingly I said goodbye to my comrades, none of whom I knew personally tho & holding my gammy arm up started back: felt pretty sick but when your back is turned to the fire & the air is full of the vicious buzz of bullets you can make pretty good speed & I managed it with two rests en route and at last tumbled over the parapet of the trench into comparative safety. They were mostly Englishmen of the Naval Division here with a few of our chaps & some French troops & fortunately I saw one of the chaps out of our company who came along to me & dressed my wound. I had to have my clothes slit right down the back from the neck & a blunt knife made slow work of a tunic, khaki shirt & a flannel shirt but at last they hacked them off and dressed it with the field dressings we all carry & which are sufficient for two wounds: it consists of a small pad of cyanide gauze on a cotton wool pad & a small roll of bandage which however is no good for a body wound as it isn't long enough to go round. I had a small round hole about as big as a lead pencil in diameter on my left shoulder & a bigger one at the back of the shoulder blade. By this time the sun was just setting & its blood red rays tinged the faces of the dead who turned their faces to the sky for the last time. Word came along that there was a dressing station down in the creek so my pal helped me down to the next line of trenches both of <sup>w</sup>expecting every moment to get in the way of one or more of the various bullets which were still falling as thick as bills on the first of the month. This was about the only time I felt any great anxiety about being hit but I thought that a chap had got enough for one dose & would perhaps be benefited by a rest from the trials & troubles of war. At any rate literally threading our way between the bodies of our brave laddies who had done their "little bit" for the country, we reached the second line of trenches where I was amazed to find myself among a lot of our company & began to think that my training in running had led me to get somewhat ahead of my own crowd.

Here was comparative shelter & I walked the remaining half mile or

so to the dressing station in company with a pitiful procession of groaning forms on stretchers, others who limped along with or without assistance, wounded helping the wounded and all making the best of it. Guiding shouts led us to the field dressing station which was in the shelter of a dip in the ground and where the Army Med. chaps & the stretcher bearers brought the wounded to the doctors where they received what aid they could give them before being taken to the Base Hospital on the Beach. I don't think the scene I saw there will ever fade from my memory. It was now dark & cloudy and coming down into this little hollow towards which the slowly moving lines of stretcher bearers & wounded converged you saw at first dim lights moving round lighting up a face here & there but getting closer you saw lines of men laid out some on stretchers but mostly - because the stretchers were wanted for the return trip - lying on the ground. The majority of them bore their pain stoically but some poor devils so blown about that you wondered how they existed moaned for water or to be put out of their agony. A little group round a wounded man, doctor and a couple of orderlies, the temporary bloodsoaked bandages tenderly unwrapped & the light of an electric torch on the wound and you turned away with a taste in your mouth. One gets used to seeing blood but when you see some of the wounds caused by the soft nosed bullets which those inhuman devils use you taste blood & long to avenge your fallen comrades with the point of the bayonet. It is a notable fact that the E.Zrs & Australians have made several bayonet charges against the Turks but we have never reached them yet with the steel: they don't wait. They are plucky enough behind entrenchments but they can't stand a charge. But to revert to wounds, they clip the nose off the bullet which when it strikes a man spreads & makes the most awful ghastly wound imaginable. Of course this is prohibited by the rules of modern war but the Turks & Germans - there are many of the latter with the Turks - care nothing for rules; expect they will be introducing poisonous gas against us soon.

To get back to the dressing station, I saw that there were so many serious cases here that I decided to try & walk down ~~the~~ to the Base Hospital on my own & got another walking case to accompany me: the way lay across broken ground thru fields, across ditches & creeks & after stumbling along a little way in the dark, we decided that the risks of losing our way or of being shot by our own troops were too great & we turned back. An Englishman gave me an overcoat as my clothes were cut about so much that they hung round my waist & it was getting bitterly cold as it always does here at night, so I got back to the dressing station & laid down with the other cases: the pain was bad enough when I was standing but lying down was agony & as I couldn't get up once I laid down I had perforce to wait till some one came past & pulled me into a sitting position. After an hour or so a party was made up of a couple of stretcher cases & a dozen or so walking cases to go to the beach and the procession started off with a guide so I joined it. Won't forget this excursion in a hurry, dark as your hat and the unevenness of the ground giving me exquisite thrills in the shoulder every time I stumbled which I managed to do pretty often. The distance was nearly three miles & near the end I wanted to lie down in a field till the morning but luckily for me some chap

shot in the hand urged me to stick it out a little further and I stumbled on till we reached the road where we could see a lantern shining a few hundred yards on & at length reached another dressing station for serious cases that could travel no further: I stopped here & got a drink of water & laid down till about three oc in the morning trying to find a position which wasn't painful & composing a new Hymn of Hate against the blighter that shot me. However the worst was to come as at this time they harnessed up their horses into some ammunition wagons which incidentally are without springs & after labouriously getting into a sitting position on the hard floor, experienced the most agonizing ride I ever want to experience over a rough road for a couple of miles or so. At length we reached the Base at 4 oc. & were taken into a large tent where we were ~~xxxx~~ taken over by two doctors equipped with big acetylene lamps like a buggy lamp, had our bloodstained uniforms cut off & our wounds dressed: walking cases had to lie out in the open as the wards were full, 694 cases having come in this night alone. However they adjudged me a stretcher case & I was put in a ward where there was hardly room to walk in between stretchers & given some morphine which however didn't have any effect. There were some awfully bad cases here, an abdominal case being on either side of me each of them calling pitifully for water which however the poor beggars couldn't get. As they didn't have enough stretcher bearers, the walking cases who could get down to the landing stage on their own got away on the Hospital Ship first & we laid here from Saturday night till Tuesday morning. By this time my internal bleeding had stopped only bringing up a little when I coughed - a painful process: hadn't been able to sleep yet, the only position I could obtain any relief in being that of a sitting position, bowed forward with my head resting on something.

A few of the poor beggars had snuffed in the interim, one abdominal patient being refused water waited his opportunity when the orderly was absent crawled off his stretcher & drank out of a bucket of soapy water, the other patients being powerless to stop him: he paid for his folly by dying two or three hours later. One chap was brought in with his brains shot out but still lingering on: I sat & watched him die with absolutely no other feeling than that of indifference at the time: your brain gets numbed with the sight of pain & suffering I expect. On Sunday morning a German ~~kamm?~~ came over & dropped bombs on the hospital - the dirty dogs - but a couple of them were fizzers one of these dropping at the door of a tent without exploding and another hitting the edge of the cliff nearby. They have absolutely no respect for the Red Cross & the Turkish snipers make a specialty of picking off stretcher bearers & A.M.C. men. Well I got down to the landing stage & who should I see but Joe Catron sitting waiting for the next boat load. He told me that when he saw me he had to laugh at the sight I presented in a pair of trousers, boots & socks, minus my puttees & with a slouch hat on & a bloodstained hospital shirt, the whole ensemble set off with an awful look of misery. Don't doubt the latter as I felt very miserable and at that precise moment was cursing the Kaiser in a minor key. Found that Joe had got a bullet thru his left knee just

at the kneecap making a clean round hole both sides & was quite cheerful. We were put into the navy cutters that were hot(?) alongside in tow of a pinnace and then taken out a few hundred yards to a trawler - or rather an ex-trawler - for there are dozens of these little steamers performing the hazardous occupation of mine-sweeping round here: this boat took me out a mile or so alongside a large mail steamer which for the nonce was acting as hospital ship. This was R.M.S. "Royal George" a fine boat of 12000 odd tons formerly on the Atlantic between England & Canada but engaged as a transport, and a couple of hours later she had her full compliment of wounded - about 490 - the stretcher cases being hoisted on board in a flat wooden tray by means of the winch and about 12 oc we began the journey to Alexandria. I had got off my stretcher as it was less painful sitting up than lying down and found it was possible to walk about slowly. After we had had our names, regiment & nature of wounds recorded they gave us dinner, the best meal we had had for many a week and didn't we enjoy it: must explain here that I was on milk diet the first couple of days but got so ravenous that took the opportunity of the coming of a strange orderly at the base to say I was on ordinary diet & found that solid food did me no harm. The wounded officers had saloon cabins on board & the men had second & third class cabins ~~xxxx~~ - two in each. I was put in a third class cabin with a chap from the Royal Scots Fgt. who had got a bullet wound in the leg. Who can describe the comfort of having a real bed & a soft pillow to lie on with nothing to worry over: it was a foretaste of heaven altho I hope Paradise won't be so inconvenient as to make it necessary for someone to lift you up from lying to sitting positions & vice versa.

I think we buried 14 on the voyage of two and a half days to Alexandria: as there were hostile submarines we pursued a zig-zag course & traveled without lights at night. However we reached Egypt safely but found that so many wounded had come in before us that hospital accommodation was taxed to the utmost & there was nothing for it but to take us to Malta, which after two days in port here, they did. There were only three doctors including the ship's surgeon & 16 orderlies to look after close on 500 wounded so you as a "pro" can appreciate the magnitude of their tasks especially as there were operations & bad abdominal & head cases who must have needed almost constant attention. My wound hadn't been dressed for 8 days now, since the cursory examination when I was first in & the pain was getting unbearable: couldn't sleep at nights for it & I would try to read or walk about the passages. At last the doctor got round and took the dressings off me: as I had been bleeding all this while it was only ~~four~~ or five tremendous pads of cotton wool over the dressing which had ~~saved~~ a mess & now these were soaked & the blood was trickling down my back. He examined me & said I had a shattered shoulder: I had long ago come to the conclusion that there was something beyond a mere bullet hole and felt greatly relieved when I got the dressing renewed & my arm put in a sling.

my bunkmate up to lift me

used to have to wake

Well to get off this subject we arrived at Malta about three days later coming in sight of the island in the dawn of a glorious morning & very picturesque it looked in the early sunlight.

I know that ere this you are wondering what has affected me that I should be writing at such length and writing what must be jolly uninteresting stuff too but time hangs heavy on my hands and thought that being in the "perfection", a description of the hospital side of war might help you to wade thru what is one of the longest of my literary efforts. So I hope I haven't bored you, old chap, but page 24 does seem a huge number to have arrived at tho they are only small pages. It has taken me days to write as much as this, having a spasm every day or so.

All the inmates of our ward have had their photos taken in a group & I hope to be able to send you one by next mail or probably this one if it comes along in time. Will just ask you here in case you see any of my people don't let them read this as the descriptions might be too detailed for them. I just told them I was hit in the shoulder & that it was a slight wound. So it is but omitted to say that the bullet had touched my lung & smashed my shoulder: you won't enlighten them will you, Fene, there's a good girl? Of course you are welcome to tell them anything else especially the fact that I am having the time of <sup>my</sup> life now with no worries, good food & bed tho whatever romantic ideas I may have had - culled mostly from novels I admit about nurses (Army ones - I hasten to add) & their soft and soothing presence etc etc, have been rudely dissipated, for our nurses rush wildly round, tear the bandages off you, rip off the dressing (several shudders here) & do you up again in record time. When they are not doing this they are grouseing (?) about something or other or making the orderlies' lives a hell I mean hospital on earth. I will grant you that there are nice ones somewhere. Geelong for instance eh?

What I would like most now is the collection of letters which must be chasing round the map somewhere but which something darkly hints it would be better to abandon all hope of. Your regiment loses sight of you once you are wounded and indeed you are off their roll as a "casualty".

As I write this there are persistent rumours of a great event in the campaign we are all engaged in which will change the current of events considerably but cannot mention anything less vaguely than this for fear of that omnipotent old gent - whom I always imagine with white whiskers, spectacles and huge pot of paint - the Censor. Only hope the rumours are true anyhow.

To get away from the all pervading subject the War (damn it) - hope that you are well & chirpy & that your fellow - rather sister nurses & yourself still banish dull care with a discreet rag now & then but must express my severe disapprobation with the bathroom episode as described by you: naughty girl!

Trust all your people are in the best of health & be sure that you

remember me to them when you write (if you ever do). Haven't seen my pal Les Walker since the first day we went into action over five weeks ago: lost sight of him in the first advance & was told that he was wounded either in the leg or foot but not seriously: expect he is at Alexandria.

Wish you could be here to see the beauty of the scene spread out before us as we look from the windows of our ward. The brilliant sunlight & the intense blue (see several novels) of the Mediterranean with glorious pink splashes of rhododendrons in the foreground make a picture that is quite Italian in its setting: indeed everything here looks Italian to me, even the people can't be distinguished in looks from them. Considering we are only about 60 miles from that Sunny land the resemblance is not remarkable. Looking in the other direction - that is from the back windows - an even more beautiful scene is spread before your eyes for you can discern the canteen. As we are only allowed a tot a week & can't buy eatables or drinkables (beer being included in the latter) it won't be long before this sacred building becomes a shameful blot on the landscape. We can only assuage our grief by smoking ourselves to death, the kindly Red Cross Society ladies having provided us with a sufficient quantity of cheap cigarettes to achieve this end with ease, facility and precision. But they have been very kind to us, joking apart, and have made us several little gifts from time to time.

Remember me to Mr & Mrs Dickins if you go out to see them & any other friends of mine down in G'long that you know including Nurse Graham. Don't know her but know her brother Alf so that will excuse me.

Will be getting back into the field again soon so that letter writing on my part will be at an end tho not permanently I hope and will look forward to more of your letters. They will make arrangements no doubt for us to get them in the trenches as in France.

With best wishes & regards

from your old pal,

Bert

Don't tell any of my people I wrote you so much.