

HUT E 5. WOODCOTE CAMP,

EPSOM, Oct. 6th, 1915.

Dear People-

The night wore on towards dawn. Gus and I worked on at deepening the trench. Most of the others fell asleep, lying packed in the ditch or in the open. Our entrenching tools lift a teaspoon full of earth at a time. I got out and stripped the dead bodies of their equipment. Their sandbags we filled and built up round the end of our trench to prevent enfilade; their haversacks we turned to like purpose. I divided the food and tobacco among those around us and Gus cleaned a couple of the abandoned rifles and fired at the shadowy figures on the skyline. I went up the bombed-out part of our trench and got some more sand-bags and a pick and spade. Below us the sea was calm as glass, reflecting the countless lights of the fleet, among them those of five hospital ships. Search-lights swung back and forth and red flashes showed us where the warships swung. Then came the grey light of dawn.

Over the sky-line some seventy yards away walked a Turkish officer in khaki, bearded stout, and crowned with the conical elongated cap that has taken the place of the fez. I fired some shots at him, but they all missed! He was examining the ground, pointing here and there and speaking to men who were lying unseen behind him. Then a score of Turks with bayonets fixed rushed out along a spur which forced a salient to our right. We opened rapid fire and they fell flat among the herbage. Then came a bomb, and then another and then they came flying over the crest thick and fast. Our trench had no protection to prevent them rolling in, and would have been a death-trap had the Turks known. I jumped out and lay on the bank behind where Gus joined me. On the left the line wavered and broke, the men crowding out of the trenches. Shouts and orders brought them back. They were the unfortunates who had got the full blast of the lyddite. The line pulled itself together, steadied, and opened a blast of fire on the skyline. The Turkish bayonet attack never matured. I forgot to tell you that before the bomb attack came off we had been shelled by the Turkish field artillery in our rear. On leaving the old Anzac position we had executed two right-wheels.

The landing force, Kitchener's Army, at Sulva Bay was allotted the comparatively easy task of clearing the hills and flats to our rear. Of this they made a failure. Sir Ian Hamilton says in his dispatch "The failure of the landing party at Sulva Bay to execute their share resulted in the loss of the hill." In the Special Order which I enclose you will see what he thinks of the Anzacs under Birdwood and will correctly guess from his silence what he thinks of the rest of the force. An officer came up to the rear parapet of our trench and asked us some questions. There was a stunning concussion and we were wrapped in pink flame. We all collapsed and then scrambled to our feet again, each expecting to see the others blown to bits, but no one had a scratch. A shrapnel shell had burst over our heads.

The sun rose, and the day dragged on. Our water-bottles were dry. Those of the dead had been emptied long before. Our naval guns shelled the Turks in front of us and that wonderful Indian mountain battery, of which papers have said so little but which has done so much, did its valiant share. By a foolish mistake on our part in placing the directing flag it opened fire on our trench. The

mistake was corrected before there were any casualties. A Turkish shell burst in the air a hundred yards away. The group of us, now in the open behind the trench looked up and someone cried "Look out". A black speck, growing magically in size, flew into our midst, grazing the outer side of my left thigh a little above the knee and scarcely drawing blood. It was a perforated iron disc called the diaphragm, weighing a pound or so.

Oliver, the Wellington barber, was a hero. He laughed and kept our spirits up in the circumstances which were, to say the least, depressing. Gus played the man. The only Otago officer was Lieut.....His nerves were worn to shreds, but he set an example by digging. By and by he fell out with an Auckland mounted man and finally reported his rudeness to Captain... of the Wellingtons. Here were we, men falling all about, wounded men groaning, water and food run out, and he stood on his dignity.

This plan, which has no pretensions at all to scale, gives some idea of the lay of the land immediately in our rear. A triangle of flat land, enclosed by two gullies, stretched down from us, its apex pointing (about 2/3 mile away) rearwards. At the apex was a knoll from which two ridges ran back enclosing our Reserve Gully. Early in the morning the Turks placed men and guns to sweep the triangle from the left, while snipers cross-fired from the right front. A sniper, perhaps two, crept down the spur to the spot marked on our left. The distance between him and me was about 70 yards. Thence he began to pick off one by one, the men on my right. All along the line on the right, the fellows lay in dugouts that had not been joined to form a trench and were absolutely open to enfilade. So he picked them off at leisure. I asked three officers (one of them twice) if we could not dig him out with the bayonet. He was only a few feet from our part of our trenches. But what is the use of recriminations. Nothing was done. One body the sniper set alight with an explosive bullet and the cartridges in his equipment went off one by one as the flame reached them. One wounded man lay rigid on his back. The fellows started shouting and throwing clods at him. I looked and saw he had the muzzle of the rifle in his mouth and was trying to push off the trigger with the point of the bayonet. Each time it slipped off. He lay in the middle of the death-patch and no one dared to help him. Suddenly a man – I have never been able to find who he was – jumped and ran to him and dragged the rifle from his hands and got back to shelter untouched. It was the bravest thing I have ever seen, but whether it was merciful or not, I am not prepared to say.

Over the knolls below the apex there suddenly slid a little group – 25 all told – of Tommies of the New Army. They wore the death-trap hat known as a solar helmet. Shrapnel opened on them but they dashed into cover in the gully on their right and came up to reinforce us. Roughly they followed my track marked on the plan. For the last few yards they came into the sniper's field of fire and three of them double up like shot rabbits in the short rush. One or two wounded went crawling or staggering down the triangle to be cut to bits by the machine gun across the gully. A man went by, a Turk in disguise, quite near, and we did not drop to it until he ran into the safety of the gully. At about eleven a second reinforcement came round the knoll to be greeted by a blast of fire mainly from the left. They did not run into the safety of the gully but disappeared in a little hollow below. At about 1.30 a third group appeared to vanish in like fashion. The interminable hours wore on. At 2.45 I was sitting on the edge of a knee-deep trench, my fixed bayonet passing upwards across my temple. The sniper fired, at perhaps 60 yards. The bullet snapped the bayonet an inch above the hilt, where it crossed the temple, giving me a sledge-hammer blow as laid me flat in the trench. Gus was by me in a second, and Ollie. I got to my feet a bit dazed, and pulled off the old felt hat. Blood came

trickling down my face like a tar-baby. The edge of the bayonet, or perhaps the nickel casing of the bullet had scratched the top of my head, causing disproportionate bleeding. Gus took out his own field dressing and put a wreath on me, on which I rammed my hat.

The captain came up and said the Colonel (or Major) wanted a letter taken back asking for help as we were cut off. I did not feel fit for bayonet work so I volunteered. "Can you run fast" "Yes". "How about your leg?" "That doesn't affect me in the least" "Right", "Tell the commander of the reinforcements in the hollow there, to get them into the gully, where they will be safe. Get the letter about help from the Colonel and take it to the Headquarters in Reserve Gully". Then I showed him how I proposed to cross the ground where the bodies of three Tommies lay, and I started on the track marked on the plan. I crawled to local head-quarters, got the letter, and crawled into the little watercourse mentioned in Clutha Mackenzie's Reuter interview. Thence I bolted like a rabbit over the rise and into safety. I judged from the sound that the snipers got in a couple of shots.

In the gully matters were very quiet. An occasional bullet spattered in, and when I got further down the artillery were attempting with scant success, a searching fire on it from the left. I came on the body of a Gurkha, dead three days, swollen and terrible, the face black, the tongue out, the eyes staring from their sockets. Then two more. Then a wounded New Zealander – leg broken, a crutch improvised from a cross-handled spade. I did not recognise the grimed white face, but he knew me after five years and we shook hands. It was Robinson, a law student of Victoria College, a great footballer, and a Rahotu man. I told him to keep moving towards the rear. Then more dead New Zealanders, one of them sitting erect in awful loneliness against a rock. Further on one was sitting propped against a bank. Here they lay so thick in the narrow bottom that I had to pick my way. Everywhere came cries of "Stretcher-bearer" Water". Some were in delirium. One cried out for warm milk. I stopped to tell them we were holding on and that help would come after dark. And I may say that help did come – 600 men with stretchers scoured the hillsides before the Bazouks could reach them.

They said that there were snipers on the ridge picking off all who tried to cross into the hollow and pass round the knoll to Reserve Gully. Every minute they were expecting them down with bayonet. The slope from the bottom to the hollow was high and steep and rocky. I ran up it fast, and when at about half-way, the snipers opened on me, I flew. In a twinkling I was in the little hollow and there, in a pile, lay the bodies of our reinforcements – all dead. How they had been killed I do not know, but I suppose the shrapnel had found them. So the Captain's message was not delivered. I lay flat and got my breath. Then I discovered a man still living and to all appearances un-wounded. "Where's the track?" "It leads away from my feet". He was, in fact, lying in it. Apparently he did not dare move. I knew that the next patch of track, about a hundred yards would be the warmest part of my travels, and I lay quiet. There was a terrific bang as a shrapnel shell exploded not more than six feet overhead. It was the signal, and I sprang out on to the slope. I was not out three seconds before the machine gun got going, tracing patterns on the track and pattering about above and behind me. Never in the world's history has a hundred yards been covered in such time. There was a bang under my very heels – an explosive bullet I suppose. I gave one heave and bound and dived on my chest over the crest and into Reserve Gully.

Here I must stop as it is mail time again. Love to all.

H.D.S.

8/1837, N.Z.R.