

Final portion of a series of letters telling of the three days and nights fighting – Friday 6th to Monday 9th August 1915.

HUT E 5. WOODCOTE CAMP,

EPSOM, Oct. 5th, 1915.

Dear People,

Sunday's doings, owing I think to some mental re-action, are a blur. I know I did not sleep. Major Luxford, Chaplain, came up and held service – the briefest I have ever heard. It consisted of the Lord's Prayer and the prayer about the perils and dangers of this life. We were told to dig bivvies, and Gus Lovitt and I worked together. First Gus struck a bullet, evidently fired from Quinn's across the Turkish salient of the Chess-Board. Then I struck what I took to be a relic of the Stone Age, a Grooved Pebble, apparently a weight of some kind. I had a good laugh and put it in my haversack. Everyone was irritable and we quarrelled violently with the Main Body man beside us, he beginning it by the usual references to "you Reinforcement fellows." I had the first horizontal rest since Friday, but it did not last more than three-quarters of an hour, for at about five o'clock we were roused to get our water-bottles filled and gear in order. In the dark we were marched up the steep track to the gully-head where we waited for darkness. We seemed to be under heavy fire from the upper slopes of 971, but I did not see anyone hit. Of course it was dark. An unending stream of wounded went groaning and gasping and stumbling by. Our only guide was the rifle flashes ahead. Gus and I were joined by L.G. Wilson, a Corporal, and Hector Laws, a fine chap terribly down with dysentery, and all four went stumbling on separated from the rest of "D" Company. I wore puttees, shorts, and the black jersey which Harry Kirkwood, son of the Artist, had taken off and insisted on my wearing the previous night in place of the tunic lost on Rhododendron. It was a kind act then, and later it rendered me less conspicuous than I would have been in my light singlet. We were to relieve Otago Mounted and Wellington Infantry and some details of Sherwood Foresters, who with the Gurkhas and some Australians (a brigade I think) had forced their way up almost on to the summit of 971 and had dug themselves in across and along this spur. From their fire-trench they could see the Narrows eight miles or more away, and the Turkish reserves and guns and mules sweating and straining up distant roads to meet the attack.

Where were the twenty thousand men to push home the attack and finish the war on the peninsula at a stroke? We were the sick and weary dribble on whom the task fell. There you have the history of the whole campaign in epitome. They had been bombed out of their fire-trenches and were holding on in the reserve trench on the reverse slope. Into this tiny furrow with its fringe of the dead who had been heaved out to make room for the living came the Otago Infantry. I was sent off by the Captain of the Foresters with a message to our Colonel. Stumbling along over bushes and boulders and abandoned equipment, I got at last to headquarters and gave my message to a Major, the Colonel, I believe, already gone to the rear wounded. Then I crawled back, constantly challenged. Wellington had had their little foretaste of hell and were keenly anxious to get back to their reserve. They vanished, loaded with wounded. Gus and I were in the extreme habitable end of the reserve-trench. On our right it continued, but had been blown to bits by bombs. Six or seven yards in rear of

us, therefore, Auckland Mounted began to dig a rough trench which was to be carried along towards Rhododendron on our right. We set to work to improve the end we were in.

On our right front, some twenty yards away, was a little fire. It was below the crest and so invisible to the Turks, but we did not know this and thought it was drawing their fire. I decided to crawl forward and put it out, and Gus for some unknown reason, insisted on coming too. I passed the word that I was going down the Auckland lines a dozen times and heard it go. Then I went out on hands and knees, Gus with me. I found that the fire was a dead man burning. His middle was burnt away and the flames lit up his clenched fists and wild eyes staring at the stars. Bang went a rifle in our lines fifteen yards away and the bullet kicked the earth between by knees and hands, ricocheting by Gus's cheek. That will show you what our nerves were like. I threw myself flat on my back into a hollow beside Gus and shouted. When our shouts had rendered matters safe again we crawled back, leaving the fire to burn. Soon it went out. Our field of fire reached to the crest line and was some ten yards deep.

At midnight the Turks began the general debate which always precedes a charge. As they were just beyond the crest we could hear all that was said. At length the shout of "Allah" into a roar and they charged. All we saw of them was a scattered flashing of rifles, ten yards or so above us which vanished under our "magazine rapid." Then out of the dark came staggering and shouting a wounded New Zealander who stopped one of our own bullets before he established his identity.

Away on the left the Māoris were chanting a haka and calling the Turks to come on. Then a search light from a warship away below us turned full glare on us, and then the lyddite came. The shell comes screaming by, plunges into the earth – whuff – and explodes with a sound like a sudden tearing up of forests by the roots. And the bombardment was aimed at us. We crouched cursing in the bottom of the trench. The shells hit to our left and none of the men killed were in our platoon. A man went back to the telephone and the guns ceased.

Again I must stop. The next one really will bring you to Malta.

Your loving

H. D. Skinner.