

Letter from Stull Holt

Sept. 1, 1917

Dear Lois,

At last the long delayed and promised letter. You mustn't complain tho because I wrote to no one. All I did when I had a chance to rest was to throw myself in bed, dead to the world. I am in Paris now on permission, a month late, and am enjoying the luxuries of life including ice cream, sheets, cafes and things. What I have done and am doing here I will tell you in a few days, at present I'll only say your last letter (Aug. 13) speaking of my trip to Paris, came a day too late.

Now for the Verdun attack you know of course that the French made (Aug. 20) a very successful attack there taking over 10,000 men and, what is far more important hills, which cost the boche thousands of lives to take.

The French have a saying to the effect that no one comes out of Verdun the same. As the fighting is stiff there always the statement is probably true for all times, it certainly is true of Verdun during an attack. It would take a book to tell about all that happened there and when I try to write, little incidents entirely unconnected come to my mind so I don't know where or how to begin.

We were in historic ground and it looked it. All the hills (and the country right in front of Verdun is all hills) have been fought over many times and the result is that they are in waves of dirt with one shell hole overlapping the next; no grass or anything growing; no trees but where there used to be a forest you can see some black spots where the roots remain. One of our posts was out beyond and between Forts Douamont and Vaux. Everybody even in America must know of Douamont and Vaux. That post incidentally was about 1800 meters from the boche and they could see us thru a gap whenever we went out there. We were practically the only vehicles to do so. We used to pass thru the former village of Fleury but I went thru it many times before I knew where it was and only located it finally when I was told that where the road turned there used to be a railroad station. Besides the desolation visible to the eye there was the desolation visible to the nose. You could often see old bones, boots, clothing and things besides lots of recent ones. Every night before the attack the roads were packed with traffic, guns, munitions and all manner of stuff. These made it bad for us so we preferred and did (counter to orders at first) run in daylight when it was supposed to be more dangerous. The traffic at night would move very slowly, would run into you, would always get blocked either because someone went in the ditch (it was very rainy and muddy at the first) or because as was more often the case some vehicle would get hit by a shell. The roads were being shelled nearly all the time. Every ambulance (all 20) was hit by one or more pieces of éclat and three were badly hit killing some of the wounded in them. Just before daylight every morning the traffic would all fade away leaving the roads all day to us alone. Then we could count the nights wreckage. On one curve about 100 yds long we counted 15 horses and 8 wagons one morning, all hit during the night. The horses were generally left until after the attack but the pieces of men were usually collected and buried immediately but not always. There was one spot I remember where nothing but a mans leg (naked) lay for over a week. We saw a lot of nasty sights and smelt a lot of nasty smells. I've seen them burying bodies so rotten and full of maggots that the buryers had to wear their gas masks while doing the job, which consists of digging a hole and rolling the body in it.

We did excellant work which brought praise to us from everyone. Now that it is over it doesn't seem so bad but during it we were almost exhausted. The hardest time for us was during the artillery preparation for the attack, the attack itself being so successful we were agreeably surprised. There were on the day of the attack only 500 wounded in our division. We would drive every other 24 hours and frequently would be called out on our off day. It was a routine of work to exhaustion. Throw yourself into bed, drag yourself out to work again. That was why I didn't write and why it helped so to receive letters. There were 3 of us Americans wounded, the worst will probably lose his arm. One fellow got hit but was carrying a watch in his pocket. The watch was bent in a U shape and he only got a bruise.

I had a very close call with gas which they used a lot especially in one little valley that formed a pocket for it. There was another American section that came up to take over one of our many posts during the attack and luckily on this night I took one of their men to show him the road. It was just about dusk when we started (my fifth trip that day to the worst post the section has ever had) and we got without much excitement to within about 1,000 yds of the post when a big motor truck 100 yds in front of me got hit by a shell (they were coming in pretty fast) and completely blocked the road. I couldn't get by and there were too many shells coming in for anyone to

try and clear the truck off the road so I and this other fellow crawled in a trench alongside the road and waited. We huddled there a long time getting splashed several times by mud thrown by shells exploding, when gas shells started to come in great numbers. I decided we had better go on to the post where we would be safer and from where we could warn the others by telephone. We started crawling throwing ourselves flat, crawling again (gas masks on of course). To make a long story short and leaving out several interesting steps we got to within about 100 yds of the post (a great big dug out almost a tunnel in the hill) when I was about buried by a shell and a few seconds later a big gas shell went off within 20 ft of me. Something hit me on the head, making a big dent in my helmet and raising a bump on my head. If it hadn't been for my helmet my head would have been cracked. As it was I was dazed, knocked down and my gas mask knocked off. I got several breathes of the strong solution right from the shell before it got diluted with much air. If it hadn't been for the fellow with me I probably wouldn't be writing this letter because I couldn't see, my eyes were running water and burning, so was my nose and I could hardly breathe. I gasped, choked and felt the extreme terror of the man who goes under in the water and will clutch at a straw. The fellow with me grabbed me and led me the hundred yards or so to the post where the doctor gave me a little stuff and where I became alright again in a few hours except that I was a little intoxicated from the gas for a while. I had other close calls but that was the closest and shook me up most.

I think the hardest thing I did was to go back again alone the next night. I had to call myself names before I got up nerve enough.

I could keep on telling incidents almost indefinitely; how one fellow had a badly gased man that somehow managed to get out of the ambulance and who ran around asking the fellow to kill him and after they got him in the ambulance again, was dead when they reached the hospital; how often you had to get out and drag dead or wounded horses out of the way; how sometimes a fellow alone with badly wounded men would have to run over a wounded horse; how I picked up some men on the road before the doctor had bandaged them; how the new gas burns horribly; how a piece of éclat big as a fist came in our tent one night; how an automobile was blown on a housetop; how a munitions depot nearly gave us some thrilling fireworks one night; how I talked 20 ft underground for 5 or 6 hours with some boche prisoners, much to my surprise I found that my German was good enough after _ an hours practise to carry on quite an intelligent conversation; how we saw several thousand prisoners; how some of the fellows collected their helmets, gas masks and other souvenirs; how well the fellows showed up so that it was a pleasure to work with them, with one or two exceptions; how the guns would flash so at night that for some time the next day your eyes would quiver; how through a mistake we did for two weeks twice as much work as any section was supposed to; how the roads were so bad and shot up that the wounded would be thrown about no matter how slowly you went whereat they would sometimes yell in agony.

All that and more I could tell you but I won't. Instead I'll say that you can't complain that this is a short note. Also that one reason why I never have put stamps on my letters is because the soldiers mail is supposed to go free F.M. (franchise militaire) the other reason being that you couldn't buy stamps anywhere at the front if you wanted to.

I sure wish I could have been at H.L. when you were but that isnt all I wish so what's the use of starting and what's the use of telling you when you are so far away.

I have about 10 letters and want to get them all off to-day and to-morrow if possible so that I can enjoy myself with an easy conscience. Altho by that time I will have to write again and tell you about how I have - it almost slipped out. Perhaps I'll have two things of importance to tell you. One you'll like and the other you ought to.

You know how I want to end that way,
Stull