

SOLDIERS' LETTERS.

MAJOR C. H. RAITT.

The following letter, dated September 4, has been received by Mrs Raitt, from her husband, Major C. H. Raitt, 21st Batt., 6th Brigade:—

By the merciful will of the Almighty, I am still alive, fairly well in mind and body, but nerves badly rattled. You in Victoria may have heard very exaggerated reports of what happened to the 21st Battalion A.I.F., general staff and brigade staff. Well, we started from Alexandria on Monday about 4 in the afternoon, having come by train on Sunday night along side a steamer called the Southland, which we came aboard in the middle of the night from Heliopolis. We started in lovely weather in a fine big ship, officers and men all well and happy. We steamed along to a certain destination, great precaution being taken for submarine work (Germans and Austrians being active somewhere in the Mediterranean). Everything went all well until the fourth day (Thursday) at 9.45 a.m. we were struck by an Austrian submarine close to an island. The torpedo struck about 30ft. forward of the bridge, which is in the middle of the steamer, luckily for us. Of course, for the moment, we all—the regiment and portions of regiments—were too thunderstruck to do anything. We had boat drill with our lifebelts the day before, so most of us knew what to do and where to go. I was in my cabin at the time, on the top deck, trying on my web equipment, with George Hunt at the time helping me. I ran out to the deck and saw the men falling in on their stations with life-belts on, and I then saw it was serious. I rushed back to my cabin, got a life-belt and went

saw it was serious. I rushed back to my cabin, got a life-belt, and went to where my company was. It had to be the first to go off. I then saw some of the most horrible sights of my life. I do not know how I kept my mind and head. I saw one boat as it was being lowered with about 20 men in it suddenly overbalance and throw everybody in it into the sea. Then another boat got down into the water safely with about 40 men, and full of water. I was going to get in, but it floated away. I then hung on to the bottom of the rope ladder for about a quarter of an hour, while another boat was being loaded. It was lowered safely with most of my men on board, who dragged me in. It was full of water, and I took charge after a little while and got them baling and rowing a little, so as to keep the boat's nose to the wind and waves. We floated by the stern, fully expecting the ship to sink and plunge down below, head foremost, but still she did not, and the work of lowering rafts and other things went on. I saw other horrible happenings, but we did not dare take any more souls on board, we were so full, and the water filling the boat rapidly. Anyhow, we headed towards the island, which was 10 miles away, to try and reach it. We then managed to get three oars out on each side, and things were better. Two men were being dragged along by us, and after we got into calmer water we dragged them in, and the boat kept getting under control better. Then we saw smoke on the horizon from different parts, of cruisers, torpedo boats, etc., coming to our rescue. There were five boat-loads, about 48 men on each, trying to make for the island, when a French torpedo boat came to our particular part of the sea and took us on board. When I

sea and took us on board. When I had time to regain my nerve I had a look round, and, to my wonder, saw our transport steamer still above water, and trying to make port under her own steam, which she eventually nearly did—only had to be reached some two miles on the coast. Our French torpedo boat brought us into port, and we then had to tranship on to the one I am now writing this in. Everything is sixes and sevens just now. Well, while we were getting on the torpedo boat Colonel Linton (the brigadier) was brought on board off one of these small life boats, in a very bad way. His boat had been upset by some of the stokers getting on to it when their boat was upset, consequently he was in the water for an hour or more, and when picked up was in a state of collapse. Anyhow, he spoke

when in the small boat, but when on the torpedo boat he was unconscious. The French sailors cut off his clothes and tried every way to resuscitate him, but with no avail, and he died at 2.35 p.m., to our great grief. It was simply awful to see the boats in the sunlight on the waters, and the heads of swimmers in the life belts all over the place. Of course, nobody knew that the ship was going to keep up for such a long time, otherwise we could all have stayed on board. The hole has been found by divers to be 40ft. x 20ft.; i.e., 800 square feet, which let the water in, but the partitions held, and consequently the water did not get into the engine room, and so the engines and boilers were intact. It was touch and go with the boat and with all of us, but God in His mercy kept us all alive and safe, except about 30 poor fellows, who were either killed by the explosion, crushed by boats falling on them, or drowned. We are now refitting and have to be

are now refitting, and hope to be finished in a day or so. Now, of course, if the news of the torpedoing of transport was sent to Melbourne it would have naturally created a great furor, and you must have thought the worst, as the news was received by certain other boats that our transport had gone down with all hands. However, I sent you on a wire, stating that Bateman, self, George Hunt, Fred. Harling, were all saved. As regards the whole matter, it now appears to me like an awful nightmare, but it was only too real. Awful, it was! I feel quite broken up and unwell at the present, but am keeping my health fairly well. When I got into the boat I got the men going hard, and kept at it, standing up on a seat, calling out when to pull and when to back their oars, and my mind was fully taken up to try and save myself and the men in the boat. The French torpedo-boat people were awfully good to me and all of us. The Rev. Macrae Stewart was also rescued by the torpedo boat. They gave us hot tea, whisky, French wine, biscuits, and bread. They left the boats empty in the middle of the ocean, and they looked so forlorn; and then at 3 p.m. we started off at full speed to an unnamed port. In any case, we were 60 miles away, and we did it in two hours. The torpedo boat simply flew! I am sending you a ribbon and card given me by the commander. There is no doubt about the kindness extended to us. It was wonderful. Tell Canon Davies that his son is safe on the other boat, and that he may well offer up prayers of thanksgiving for the safety of our Victorian regiments of this brigade. If I could only have taken a photograph of the sea and all that there was on it a

sea and all that there was on it a quarter of an hour after we were torpedoed you would all be aghast.

With regard to other letters received from Major Raith, Mrs Raith summarises them as follows:—

I've had other letters from the trenches, and both Majors Raith and Bateman have had narrow escapes from shell fire. At one time Major Bateman had just left his trench when a shell burst, doing a lot of damage, so he was fortunate to be out of it. Then Major Raith happened to be reading a letter sent to him by a Melbourne friend, when the same thing happened in his trench, but it just missed him. All the same, it made him nearly jump out of his skin. George Hunt says that they have had a pretty hot time in the trenches, etc. He sent me a few lines re Major Raith's illness which caused him to be taken to the hospital. He says that my husband worked too hard in all the heat in Egypt. He wouldn't give in until compelled by a high temperature caused through dysentery and gastric trouble. Then the doctors did not want him to go to the front—not being fit—but he wouldn't let his men go without him. Then came the ship's disaster, and later on the nerve-racking strain of shell-fire in the trenches for a month or so. Consequently, my husband must have had a relapse, and been taken away again to another hospital, from where I've received a second and third letter but the first one hasn't turned up. The major has told me all about the illness, and naturally thinks I've received this letter. He seems all broken up, and just lies on his back helpless and weak. His strength seems to have all gone, and he is feeling so wretchedly ill. Of course he didn't know then that he would

be invalidated home, so I can only presume that he is medically unfit; otherwise they wouldn't let him come back for awhile. I can only hope the voyage will do him good. George Hunt says that the major is beloved by all his men. They will miss him.