

A WEST AUSTRALIAN AT POZIERES

One of the most interesting letters written by Australians from France is that addressed by Private John Smith, of the Western Australian expeditionary forces, to his friend, Mr. P. McKenna, of Bunbury. Private Smith wrote on August 24, from a hospital at Boulogne, where he was lying with throat trouble, and his letter contains several realistic touches, as well as being typically Australian in diction. He says:—

"We have not had much chance to do any writing lately, because we have been on the march all the time, and in and out of the firing line, and during these periods our mails are closed, and we can't receive or send any letters at all. I am in hospital just at present with a bad throat, but I will be out again in a day or two. I was in the firing line in the big push, when I was taken ill with my throat, and I was ten days before I got any treatment at all. Of course, I could have gone to the doctor there had I wished, but there were too many wounded men waiting to be attended to, so I did not worry him with my little sickness. The day we came out of the trenches I went to him, and he ordered me straight away to hospital, and here I am, home and dried, on the pig's back. We get well treated here, and everything is nice and clean and quiet, very different from Pozieres. It seemed rather strange for me to get into a nice soft bed, with snow-white linen on it, the first bed I have slept on since I left Australia. I shied at it a couple of times, but I eventually got into it, and I stuck to it pretty well. I met young Punch Donovan the other day up in the firing line, and he is just the same as ever, but awfully fat. He must weigh 11 stone. I can tell you this

the same as ever, but awfully fat. He must weigh 11 stone. I can tell you this about him; he is one of the gamest lads in France. He has done some splendid work up in the line, carrying messages from the firing line to headquarters across No Man's Land, always under heavy shell fire. It does not sound much, but you want to be here to realise it. No Man's Land is swept by machine guns day and night, and is commanded by snipers, and is continually being shelled with 'coal boxes' and shrapnel falling on it like raindrops. You would think it almost an impossibility for a bird to fly across it without being hit. Besides carrying messages he has picked up wounded men on No Man's Land and helped them to the dressing station. There is no doubt he is a fine lad, and I am proud of him. He does not know what fear is. Kroeber is still going strong, and wishes to be remembered to all. He wants Charlie to make him a step-ladder and send it over here, because it takes him all he knows to reach up to the top of the parapet. It was very funny to see him trying to scramble over the parapet the night we charged. The top of the parapet was about 7ft. 6in. from the bottom of the trench, so you can imagine the trouble he was in. Anyhow he got over all right, and was in time for the fine work. I can't give you the details about the charge, because if I did I would have to tell you about our artillery, and it would not do to mention that. Anyhow, it was about 250 yards across, and we got over alright. Of course, we lost a good few men going

across, but still we were very lucky as regards casualties. We did not have much opposition when we got there. Page 114

gards casualties. We did not have much opposition when we got there. Fritz did not wait for us; it began to rain—and he left. We got about 100 prisoners and two machine guns, also a cylinder gas plant, all rigged up ready for use. They evidently did not have time to use the gas on us. When I jumped into the trench I ran along for about six or seven yards, and came across one of them standing in a corner. I made a bulldog rush at him, and when I got close up to him he sang out 'Mercy, komarad,' and held his hands out in front of him, and I was just able to see that he was wounded in both hands. He was very lucky that I was able to pull up in time; it was touch-and-go. Anyhow I looked close into his face, and he was only a boy; I'll swear that he was not more than 16. Poor little beggar, I did pity him. I went along a bit further, and there was nothing doing, so I started to dig in and kept digging till daylight. I went back then to have a look around, and saw young Fritz lying in the trench dead. Someone had got him during the night; it was bad luck for him, but anyhow, war is war and it is all in. They made a counter attack on us, but we made things too willing for them, so they 'skun' out. Their artillery opened after that and they kept bombarding us at intervals all the time we were in. The day before we were relieved they gave us an extra special dose. They started at 3 o'clock Friday afternoon and kept going till daybreak Saturday morning, and I can tell you they wasted no time. The shells were falling almost as fast as we could count them. They fired every sort of shell they had at us, including gas and tear shells. In fact, they threw everything at us but half-crowns. I got buried twice during

... they threw everything at us but half-crowns. I got buried twice during the performance through the trench being blown in on me. The first time I had to get dug out with a shovel; the second time I was able to scratch out myself, and I don't mind telling you I was not running stiff. When daylight came you could not see where our trench had been; it was all shell holes—there was no sign of a trench. They practically blew us out of the ground. We were all lying about in shell holes, with our bread knives fixed waiting for them to attack us, as we fully expected they would after such a bombardment, but they never came, and a good job for them they did not, because they would have found a lot of sour men waiting for them. We used to get five or six prisoners every morning while we were there. They would sneak out from their own lines during the darkness, and come to within forty yards of our line, and get into shell holes and wait for daylight. As soon as it got light enough for us to be able to see them they would make a noise to attract our attention, and we used to whistle to them, just like calling a dog, and they would come in at the double for fear their mates would see them and fire on them. When they got into our trench they would offer us everything they had, wristlet watches, rings, cigarettes, tobacco, and everything they had on them. You cannot help but pity the poor wretches; they are all worn out and nearly starved, and they have a look on their faces like hunted men. There is no doubt they are hunted, because we are pushing them all the time. There is not a day goes by without some part of our line being pushed ahead. The prisoners all reckon we will win the war; but they say it is going to cost us a

...but they say it is going to cost us a heavy price. One chap, a bit cheekier than the others said it would be a very small boat that would take the Australians back home. Needless to say, we very soon gave him to understand that he was not in a position to give cheek; he took our word for it, too. Well, Fritz is a poor old thing as a fighting man; any respectable man with a good heavy stick would beat a company of them. They will fight like steam as long as they can use a machine gun on you or throw bombs at you, provided you don't throw too many back at them; but when you get up close to them they drop their rifles and equipment, and run like rabbits; or else surrender. There is only one lot will put up any sort of a fight at all, and that is the Prussian Guard and he is only a third-rater and that is making the best of him. We had some of the Prussian Guard against us the night we paid them a visit and they never put up a go at all that night. I don't think many of them earned an Iron Cross that night, but a lot of them got a wooden one. I suppose you have read in the papers about the dugouts the Germans had; I would not believe it when I first heard about them, but I have seen them since, and been down in them. They are real underground palaces; water laid on, stoves and beds in them, carpets on the floor and electric lights, and they are about forty to fifty feet deep. Evidently Fritz had come to stay. I would not be surprised to hear that they had a butcher and baker calling on them every morning."

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Private Hubert Farmer, of Victoria Park East, of the 28th Battalion writing to his mother on August 28, says:—Our battalion on July 28 made a charge upon Pozieres. We were approaching the Huns' barbed wire when they spotted us, and opened fire with machine guns and shrapnell. All the chaps in my section were either killed or wounded, so I thought I would try to get a message back to the officer commanding telling how we fared. Four of us started, but I was the only one to reach the headquarters. Two of the others had their heads blown off, and the other was shot in the lungs. I carried him in but the poor chap died in hospital. Well my colonel gave me a written order for the boys to retire to the first line of trenches taken from the

German. I went out. It was rough work, but luck was with me, and I got through. The following night volunteers were called for to bring in our wounded from no-man's-land. I went. At 2 a.m., while carrying a man a shell burst right behind us and we were both thrown down an old German dugout. I dislocated my ankle and my poor mate broke his neck. Here is the despatch I carried. I hope you will frame it as a souvenir." In a later letter Private Farmer says he had just received news that he had been awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal, adding that luck had again favoured him.