

Section 167-05

Caring for the Wounded

Individual Stories - 2/Lt Harold Edward Howse

2Lt Howse was a South African who joined the 2nd Battalion in November 1916. He was badly gassed on the 11th and was sent to the 1st General Hospital at Etretat.

He wrote home on the 17th November 1916

"Don't be alarmed! I am very fit. I was gassed last Saturday 11th November, by gas shells, with which the Hun bombarded us for five hours. I felt well till Monday, when the beastly stuff worked its will on my anatomy. I have been sent down here, on the coast, near Havre, and have practically recovered.. I don't know what will be done with me, but shall write again."

Your asphyxiated but happy son,

.HAROLD HOWSE.

Next day he writes with more details of his gassing

Etretat, 18th Nov., 1916.

Here one lives in an atmosphere of uncertainty with regard to mails and most things. I sent a p.c. shortly after my arrival in hospital, and this letter may reach you by the same mail, or the next. In any case I shall try to give you some fuller news about what has been happening to me as far as the censor will allow. First of all, let me assure all at home that I am quite well. The Bosche might have given me quite a bad time of it, but my gas helmet and my good fortune prevented me from having more than a slight whiff of the gas.

This time last week I was in the trenches. We were having fine weather, and except for some heavy shelling there was very little doing on our part of the front, chiefly owing to the fact that the earth was literally a sea of mud after the recent long and heavy rains. I was comfortable, more or less, housed in a deep dug-out, and was having a chat with none other than C. W., whom I met with his company in the same trenches as we held. It was very pleasant, this sudden and unexpected meeting in such a strange place, and we had a long chat and smoke together down in the bowels of my dug-out. And over our mugs of coffee, with shells bursting harmlessly overhead, we discussed the latest news from Walmer, and the tidings we had received of friends, some in

various theatres of war, others wounded, others gone on a long journey, neque redibunt."

Well, on Saturday night we were relieved, and I had taken two platoons of men out of the trenches, and was moving towards another trench slightly to the rear, when we suddenly heard shells whizzing about us and bursting in a peculiar manner. Of course, when an ordinary shell bursts, it kicks up the dust a lot and makes a huge noise - "whiz-z-z-z-z: crash ! ", but these shells were coming "whiz.z-z-z-z flop," with not much noise, and very little explosion. We soon we found, out the reason. They were gas shells. There was a pungent smell in the air. I ordered all the men to put on their gas helmets, and as soon as I had seen to this I put mine on, but at night when you have a lot of men to look after, you must take your thing off to shout and give orders. So that I got a good whiff of it. I got the men into the trench, but the dear old Bosche continued to bombard us for over five hours Luckily, - miraculously - no one was hit where I was, and my company escaped with only a few casualties. The Bosche wasted a lot of ammunition.

Anyway, I felt alright next day, and I sent you one of those printed post-cards, and also wrote to Mr. Mason. On Monday morning I had to march my company to X-, about two hours before dawn when the fun started. I had not gone far before I started to vomit and spit. Then I knew what was up. This new kind of gas the Bosche is using has no effect for twenty-four hours, when it starts to turn you inside out. I reached our destination, and then the men started to collapse. All Monday they were bad, so that I had to send several to the aid post. The doctor of a neighbouring battalion ordered me to go back to a dressing station as I was "cyanosed," whatever that may mean. Anyway, I couldn't leave the company without an officer - this wasn't the company I had with me when the gas came, but another one I took over when its officers were knocked out - so I waited till the afternoon, when an officer came and relieved me.

Thence I went by means of Shanks's ponies, stretchers, motor ambulances, clearing stations and Red X trains, till I reached this delightful spot on the French coast.

I got out of bed this morning, and now feel as

fit as a fiddle. The attempt of the Hun to put us out was full of evil consequences for him, because next day our artillery gave him such a trouncing as he will remember for a long time. We have got him beat. If he sends over one shell, back go five from us. Let him try as he will, he cannot get the better of us. I expect you have seen that our men have done some more fine work, and taken Beaumont-Hamel and Beaucourt. How long the war may last I do not know, nor can anyone prophesy. Roll on, peace! May the time soon come when the Borsche realises that his only course is to put down his tail, and stretch his legs and go like the devil to Potsdam.

He writes again on the 21st

Etretat, 21st Nov. :- There is very little to do here, so one can write letters. I am quite well again now, that is, as far as the gas is concerned, but I have meanwhile developed one of those French diseases which are peculiar to this war:

It is nothing to worry about, a skin disease. I have a slight touch of it and have to rub myself at night like an old Roman with an oily ointment with an unpleasant swell. It is getting better, so that very soon I shall be quite fit and stop being a burden on the British purse. I have a little room to myself in this hospital, a tiny French room, with a window which overlooks the little toy houses of Etretat, giving a view of the sea beyond: The sea has been very angry during the last few days.

I am enjoying my little holiday on the French coast. In summer this must be a glorious place. I shall think of Father on 5th December, and of Gordie on the 8th, and of you all on Xmas day. May it be the last we shall spend apart. For a long time.

On the 27th he is still in hospital,

"with only the light cough to remind me of the gas. I am having a rest with absolutely nothing to do except to take a walk now and then along the top of the cliffs. I am escaping several weeks of the worst time of the year in the trenches, so 'What's the use of worrying?' You will see my name in the list of wounded in the English papers of 22nd November, I wear a gold stripe on my sleeve now."

On the 3rd December,

"I am very fit, and off to the Base Depot at Rouen, ready for duty again."

He returned to the 2nd Battalion 16th December but soon after Christmas was seconded to a Works Company in the Bray area as his CO

believed he was not yet fit for front line duty.

He returned again in March 1917 Had some leave in England in June and was killed in the battle of Langemark 16th August 1917.

Sources

A South African Soldier and Student