

**FROM LIEUT. W. D. WILKINSON**  
**Tells His Experiences in Big Battles**  
**On Western Front.**

The following letter was received by Mr. Lewis Perrin, who kindly offered it to us for publication:

Officers Division,  
74th General Hospital,  
B. E. F., France, Oct. 27, 1918.

Dear Mr. Perrin:

We have been most too busy with Fritz lately for much correspondence and we are still entertaining him but made the acquaintance of one of his gas shells and have been paying the penalty for the past ten days. I am glad to say though, that once more I have been declared fit and will leave here tomorrow for the front again. For fear the next shell meet will not be so considerate of me I will write you another installment of that "history for future generations" giving just a few of my experiences in the famous old Hindenburg line.

For several days we were entrenched in front of it and I hope I never see a hotter place. Dead Germans lay everywhere but it was out of the question to bury them. Our own dead were removed at night. Behind us we had the heaviest concentration of artillery since the beginning of the war. I might say, in the history of the world. I was told by an artillery officer afterwards that they were sending over 50,000 shells a day over our head. It is impossible for you to imagine the terrific noises. The earth shook continuously like a big earthquake. The night before the attack we had to advance 400 yards to straighten the line. My guns were to go forward. The advance began at 9:30 and it was as dark as pitch. We didn't go fifty yards before two of my men were shot down right beside me. I pulled them in a shell hole and dressed their wounds. One was Charles Armour, (from J. R. Glenn's). There we had to leave them. On we went jumping from one shell hole to another. Then I heard a cry of warning but too late—we all blundered into his barb wire and eight of us were caught. One of the boys in trying to get loose tore his clothing and the white underwear gave us away. It seemed like all the machine guns in the world opened up on us. We came out but minus everything and most of us left some perfectly good skin as a warning to others.

We eventually reached our objective and mounted my guns. We kept them up during the night until the engineers put down what is known as the jumping off tape—a white line about two inches wide stretched across the whole front to insure the advance getting the right direction. Our work finished we withdrew at daylight to our old position.

Next morning the big show started—its beyond description. Every town weapon was used—The Tanks, our infantry next, then the cavalry waiting for a chance to break through. The sky was simply filled with aeroplanes and during the show we saw a good many luckless chaps come down in flames. Our men were wonderful. Two hours after zero they were through the Hindenburg line and still going.

Part of this line was an old tunnel built by Napoleon—a wonderful engineering feat. The canal at its point runs under the city of—through this massive tunnel—two miles long and fifty feet in diameter. Large boats were moored in it and the Germans had used them as bilbois. Branching off from the main tunnel were many small ones used as dwellings. In one of these we had one of his much talked of glycerine extracting plants. I know you won't believe what I now tell you but I vouch for the truth of it. One end of a large room we found a furnace very much like a baker's stove, built of brick. On it were three copper caldrons which would hold about three bushels each. One was filled with water and parts of a man body cut into pieces about as big as your hand. The head was washed but not beyond recognition. The next was plain water. The third had water with a coat of heavy grease about an inch deep. By this process were fourteen bodies stacked like cord wood. In the back of the room was a large chopping block with a severed hand lying on it. Beside it a large meat axe. The fur-

nace was still warm. We had evidently surprised him at his horrible task. The roof and windows bore an immense red cross. Can you imagine anything more horrible.

I will skip a bit here and go into the last stage of the fight. In five days we pushed him back nearly twenty miles. It was great sport but a little trying on the nerves. We sat up all night the night before the push began discussing plans. Everything suited me fine for it looked like I was out of it but at the last minute I was ordered to get ready to go with the first "wave." I was too late to start with them but to my sorrow, I caught them and then "business picked up." I started through a village which I had reason to believe our infantry had passed through but when I reached the center of the town I had better reasons to believe that they had not. Machine guns opened up on every side and we had a merry half hour. There was only one thing to do and we did it. That was to fight our way out and as there were as many behind us as there was in front, we kept on pushing. Fritz couldn't understand that move so he quit and as usual called "Kamerad." We took five officers and 150 men prisoners and counted twenty-five killed. Pretty good I think when there were less than fifty of us and we only lost two men killed and a few minor casualties. He must have found out how few of us there were for he tried to counterattack, but he was too late. We had my four guns mounted then and we cut them to pieces. I had the distinct pleasure of sending three to the happy hunting grounds. It sounds heartless to talk that way but after you have seen evidences of their work in French villages you cease to regard them as human. Our outfit killed and took prisoner more that day than we had men involved.

Next day we pushed again and captured a little town with about a thousand civilians in it who had been prisoners for four years. They were wild. After I saw their condition and their joy I felt that the war was worth while. They were kept in ignorance of what was taking place in the outside world and none of them knew that the U. S. was in the war. Every able-bodied person (both sexes) had been drafted and sent to the rear long ago.

We can imagine their fate—The houses were looted of everything of any value and things they couldn't carry away they destroyed. They made no effort to bury their dead.

At this stage of the game I had to drop out I had been gassed several days before but thought nothing of it. But when the excitement was over, I realized what a sad condition I was in so I reported to the nearest first aid station and was sent to the rear and here I am one hundred miles behind the lines enjoying all the comforts of home.

Perhaps it would be interesting to know how the wounded are handled. It is the greatest proposition we have. When our stretcher bearers are with us its easy but its very seldom we ever see one so we have to devise all manner of methods to get them to the rear. If we have prisoners it simplifies matters a great deal. We make a stretcher out of a blanket or an overcoat and two rifles and detail a couple of prisoners to carry him back. During the village fighting we used old doors for stretchers for the bad cases. The wounded are sent to the nearest "First Aid Post" where they are hastily bandaged. From here they are relayed on more stretchers to the Advanced Dressing Station, where a fresh bandage is put on if necessary and the wounds bathed. Hot coffee and warm food is always waiting here and if you are lucky and fall in a British station a good stiff Scotch awaits you. The ambulances meet you here and back to the Casualty Clearing Station you go. (about 20 miles behind the line). Here an antitetanus injection is given and minor operations performed. Here the patients are classified—Some go back to the line and some to the hospitals in the rear. The ones to go to the rear are divided into three classes—"Walkers", "Sitters" and "Stretcher Cases." About midnight the orderly wakes you and you are again joy riding in an ambulance. This time to a Red Cross train. The one I came down on was the most complete I ever saw. Each coach accommodated 24 stretcher cases and carried a nurse and two attendants.

As soon as we were comfortably settled an orderly came around with a tray of whiskeys. A little later he came along with tea and crackers. Eventually we reached our destination, a tremendous British hospital where we were again classified and the slightly wounded took the journey again. This time to the sea coast. The hospitals near the line are cleared as fast as the patients recover sufficiently to travel in order to make room for emergencies.

You cannot realize the horror of war until you stay a day in a Casualty Clearing Station and see the physical wrecks come in. In one station I know of nine hundred Americans who passed through in twenty-six hours. These stations are located in trios. One receives a day—evacuates the next—then tidies up and gets in shape again the next—but during our push they were all forced to work almost continuously. The slightly wounded are put to work at once caring for their more unlucky brothers.

The most remarkable thing I noticed was the fact that no one lost consciousness, and some of them were horribly mangled. One poor fellow (a German) had both legs and one arm broken and a gaping wound in his side but he was still able to "Kamerad." Thirty minutes later he was dead. I don't understand it.

We, of course have to care for German wounded as much as possible, also. During the scrap at one place I had collected a bunch of German wounded and placed them in a cellar out of danger. As fast as we could put our hands on prisoners we sent them to the rear. I had evacuated all but ten when orders came for me to go forward again and I had to leave them. Three days later, when the battle was over, I passed through this village and I thought of my wounded prisoners. I went to the cellar and found them "all dead." I have never had such a sensation in all my life—but of course it was unavoidable on my part. Such is war.

There is another subject which few people like to discuss but its one we can't overlook over here, and that is the care of the dead. In trench warfare its simple. The bodies are sent to the rear at night and entered in cemeteries chosen at leisure and generally beautiful spots. Permanent details care for them and they are admirably kept. A small wooden cross with the name, rank, and date of death marks the resting place. Then when the regiment comes out of the line a day is set apart and one service is held for all. It is very impressive. In a drive like the past six weeks this cannot be done. Burial parties are formed and these follow the advance about twenty four hours behind. Sites are selected near cross roads or some spot easily described on the map and all bodies in the immediate vicinity are collected and buried there. Where crosses can be obtained they are used but generally a steel helmet on a bayonet with a small identification disc is the only record but a very appropriate one I think. All these are later exhumed and removed to one of the larger cemeteries.

We have suffered heavily in the past few weeks, but we have won a reputation which won't be forgotten soon.

I don't know how the Abbeville boys came out and I won't be able to hear until I return to the company. Any way you will have the casualty list long before you receive this.

Some parts of this are a bit black and not what you could call "choice literature" but its all facts, and I hope you will pardon my blunders. Whatever you do don't let anyone read this who has a son in the army. It might destroy their sleep. After you have been over here a bit you get accustomed to such but for the ones at home these thoughts are not good. Its tough at times but it grows on you and like the Hudson—the farther you go the better you like it.

But don't you get foolish and come over. We have enough over here to finish the job and we need some one at home to keep them from signing peace until we have leveled Berlin to the ground and revenged France. If they let the army make peace—there won't be a spot of Germany left on the map. No one who has seen this country can talk peace.

Give my regards to everybody.  
Yours,  
W. D.

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**Mr. & Mrs. R. KIRKWOOD**

Parties having repair work here will please call for same before January 10th, 1919.