

Battle of Givenchy

In the Field.

27th December 1914

Dear Mother + Father

I am so sorry I have not been able to write to you very fully before, as I have been suffering from very bad rheumatism in my right arm, & all the nerves in it are upset, & I have been unable to use it at all. However the power is coming back by degrees all though it is with the greatest difficulty that I write now. I will now relate to you my experiences which have been many during the last week. As you already know I have been sometime in the trenches I will just outline to you the events leading up to the critical day on Dec. 21st. The companies were divided along the front line of trenches. I was in the trenches with my half Coy. who were usually relieved by E. Coy every forty-eight hours, but one of our Coys. attacked a German Sap-head & captured their trench but were enfiladed by two machine guns & were very heavily cut up, only two men returning out of the fifty men that attacked. Lt Kerr was killed while trying to get back to our trench. E. Coy. went to their support & we were not relieved until our trenches were blown up. Capt. Baird was with me in the trenches & he was very ill suffering from acute rheumatism, so I did all the defence work & was up day & night soaked through & no sleep for five nights. It was hard & nervous work as we expected attacks every night & were attacked on the night of the 19th but it was repulsed. I was in charge of the bomb-throwers & we did good work getting no less than twenty bombs into the sap-head which was fifteen yds. away from the centre of the trench. One night we had a duel with them & we came off best getting 12 bombs at them & they got 4 bombs back at us, but did no damage, above an empty jam-pot getting me on the back. It was extremely cold & wet in the trenches & we had little chance of rest under such conditions. We were heavily

shrapnelled on the morning of the 21st but we were not very much perturbed by it. However about 9.30 a.m. after we had finished our breakfast & were cleaning our rifles a rumbling noise was heard & all the trenches shook. The parapet & traverses gave way & the ground opened up all round us. Above this was heard the cheer of the Germans 10 yds. away, charging with fixed bayonets & extended line on top of us. Some of us charged & captured the German trench but eventually had to retire back. I was opposite the saphead from which the mine was laid under our trenches. Some of my men were smothered alive, others bayoneted. I managed to lead a small party of men down the communication trench under heavy shrapnel & rifle fire also bombs. We met the remainder of the 4th Ghurka who had left their front trenches & retired to the support trench. I joined in on their right & we prepared to meet the Germans, who kept to the communication trenches & would not advance over the open. We started bombing them back & made a counter attack with my ten men & thirty or forty of the Ghurka Regt. Some of us charged without weapons at all, I gave Serjt. — (Brisbane?) my revolver as his was useless but he got shot through the head by my side. I had nothing on me when we charged. By the Grace of God the Germans did not face us but turned about & clambered out of the trench into their saphead. We regained part of the front trenches & opened fire on the retreating Germans. I picked up a rifle & accounted for seven Germans all hit in the middle of the back, & fell stone dead. I also shot a German officer with my revolver at 20 yds range. So at any rate I sold my life dearly if they got me. After we had retaken the trench, Capt. Money (4th Ghurkas - killed) began bombing the Germans with hand grenades & we were successful in keeping the Germans from threatening our right flank. We then started

drawn during the night. At 2.40 p.m., to assist in pressing the attack more vigorously, a composite brigade was placed at the disposal of the Lahore Division, and was ordered to

to clean rifles preparatory to making a stand. I took on the bombing with hand grenades & managed to get quite a number into the Germans. But the Germans began to bomb us out on our left working from traverse to traverse until they threatened our communication trench & we finally retired to the reserve under heavy fire & after making two more stands. We lost heavily & in the battalion we lost 14 officers & 516 men which was terrible. However it was under impossible circumstances & those who died, died bravely fighting to the last. The honour of the regiment has been upheld with great glory & it is on everybody's mouth, & how well the regiment did. Well, Mother & Father I must stop now as I must send this by the post. I will give you the rest of my experiences in my next letter. I can tell you I was lucky to get through. One shot went through the top of my Balaclava helmet. etc. etc. etc. John Robert Cowan.