

Raymond Monahan

Hist 402

Dr. Kim

4/23/2018

Word Count: 2084

The following letter from Vizefeldwebel Herbst Neusser of the 11th Bavarian Infantry discusses his change in perspective on the war. Supported by experiences in combat, Vzfw Neusser also develops a differing view of different enemies he faces. As he is waiting to engage in the Brusilov Offensive, he reflects on why he fights.

June 2nd, 1916

My dearest Anna,

Forgive my lack of writing, for we have been on the move for many months now. As I sit in camp tonight, I have taken time to write and reflect. I have not the same excitement for this war that I once had. After facing such different adversities on each front and experiencing such disregard for life from the German High Command, I cannot know for certain who the real enemy is. This same disregard for life, as well as the never ending death has me questioning why I fight. This war has taken a great toll on my mental health. I am not the excited soldier you once knew. I doubt you nor my own mother would recognize me now. My dearest darling, how I hope you remain unscathed by this war. With the prospect of seeing you once again being the only

exception, death seems to be the greatest form of peace. “I am counting more than ever on that, for truly the war-horror seems to have reached its climax. O God! How many have those hours been when on every side gruesome Death was reaping his terrible harvest.”<sup>1</sup> You would not think such if you remember the energy I enlisted with last spring. Me and the boys celebrated all night long when we received our orders. I doubt any of us, even those who survive, will ever celebrate again. The excitement we had, believing in the “old lie” that is honorable to die for one’s country, matched the excitement of holy matrimony.<sup>2</sup> This war began as the adventure of a lifetime, gave us a chance to defend our country and honor, and introduced us to manhood. “We were eighteen and had begun to love life and the world; and we had to shoot it to pieces.”<sup>3</sup>

The early days of the war, though bloody, developed my pride in being a German soldier. Fighting in the East was a glorious campaign against the “lousy Russians” who were more like farmers with their grandfathers hunting rifle than soldiers.<sup>4</sup> When our fighting began in May, we aggressively reduced the Russian defenses to nothing.<sup>5</sup> Many of the Russian fortifications were “more ditches than trenches.”<sup>6</sup> Our artillery rained down upon the Russians like the worst Wintersturm. We “went through the captured position. A swampy stretch of forest, consisting of shell-smashed trees and battered trenches, surrounds the hill. The whole place looks as if it had been ploughed up. Blown in dug-outs. Huge shell-craters. Fragments of wood and clothing; corpses; rifles; knapsacks.”<sup>7</sup> The enemy continued to yield to the might of the German Army

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<sup>1</sup> Witkop, Philipp. *German Students’ War Letters*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Himes, Andrew, and Jan Bultmann. *Voices in Wartime Anthology: A Collection of Narratives and Poems*. Seattle, WA: Whit Press, 2005, Poem: “Dulce Et Decorum Est.”

<sup>3</sup> Remarque, Erich Maria. *All Quiet on the Western Front*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1975, 121.

<sup>4</sup> Witkop, 354.

<sup>5</sup> *Histories of Two Hundred and Fifty-One Divisions of the German Army which Participated in the War (1914-1918), compiled from records of Intelligence section of the General Staff, American Expeditionary Forces, at General Headquarters, Chaumont, France 1919*. 1920, 208.

<sup>6</sup> Stone, Norman. *The Eastern Front 1914-1917*. London: Penguin, 1998, 92.

<sup>7</sup> Witkop, 323.

even beyond the 11th's transfer south. The Gorlice–Tarnów Offensive allowed me to not only see Eastern Europe, but also gave me the first taste of victory. T'was a glorious time to be a German soldier. Chief of Staff Falkenhayn and Field Marshal Mackensen led our grand army to crush the Russian 3rd Army and capture the Polish lands. Under General Gallwitz in Serbia, we continued to be victorious, capturing Belgrade in early October.<sup>8</sup> Our commanders led us in glorious campaigns across Eastern Europe, bringing glory and honor to ourselves and the German army. We took a reserve post in Syrmia that winter, anticipating our newest set of orders.<sup>9</sup> Though we had suffered casualties, we felt as though our commanders would not let us down. We were alive, on the move, and victorious. We thought we were fighting for the glory of Germany. We thought we were invincible. We thought wrong.

In February, we arrived in Verdun.<sup>10</sup> Little did we know, the Rhine is a modern day river Styx. In Verdun, we experienced our first sufferings in the trenches of the Western Front. What a disgusting sight to see for the first time. The trenches were merely earthworks with little upgrade. Water up to our knees in some places. Mice ran rampant, and often you could hear men waking up at night to a rat testing to see if he is still alive. Lice had to be scraped off by the blade of our knife. Frogs, slugs, and other bugs could often be found among the terrible conditions. Men were soaked, tired, muddy, and in the worst of states.<sup>11</sup> Trench foot made the rats and lice look like a luxury. With trench foot, “your feet swell to two to three times their normal size and go completely dead. You can stick a bayonet into them and not feel a thing. If you are lucky enough not to lose your feet and the swelling starts to go down, it is then that the most

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<sup>8</sup> *Histories*, 208.

<sup>9</sup> *Histories*, 209.

<sup>10</sup> *Histories*, 210.

<sup>11</sup> Witkop, 120.

indescribable agony begins. I have heard men cry and scream with pain and many have had to have their feet and legs amputated. I was one of the lucky ones, but one more day in that trench and it may have been too late.”<sup>12</sup> It was truly the most terrible sight to experience, or so I had thought. On the 20th of March, we finally got our orders to go over the top.<sup>13</sup> After hours of thunderous bombardment, we assaulted the Bois d'Avocourt and Bois de Malancourt. Once again we tasted victory, but General Gossler ordered a halt to regroup. On the 22nd, we shifted our sights on Termite Hill. Unrelenting artillery tore us to shreds. Men and shrapnel were thrown across the field. Death, pain, suffering, and horror surrounded us. The French hit our ranks, our assembly points, and our communication lines.<sup>14</sup> We stood little chance. Orders came to pull back to our lines while attacks resumed in the following days on our old targets continuing the loss of life in a land of destruction. It is here in this Hell on earth that the glory of Germany died, for me at least.

We returned to the trenches. Even in this so called “safety” the hell never ended. “I stayed ten days next to a man who was chopped in two; there was no way to move him; he had one leg on the parapet and the rest of this body in the trench.”<sup>15</sup> The trenches stank of rotting flesh and smoldering earth. Daily did French 210’s, 305’ and 380’s rain down on us.<sup>16</sup> The shelling induced a state of madness for many. Hans developed a terrible shaking, but would not be pulled off the line in fear of being a coward. No man would consider him one. For every man killed, twice as many were wounded and lived, if only briefly, to endure the mangling of their body and melting of their flesh. “There is no limit to the measure of ruin and of slaughter; day by

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<sup>12</sup> Witkop, 122.

<sup>13</sup> *Histories*, 211.

<sup>14</sup> *Histories*, 211.

<sup>15</sup> Browne, O'Brian. "Voices from Verdun." *Relevance* 7, Winter 1998.

<sup>16</sup> Browne.

day the earth is drenched with newly shed blood and is covered with the bodies of the wounded and of the slain.”<sup>17</sup> Their cries for their mothers, lovers, or God are enough make the strongest of men go mad. I lost a buddy who got hit by a French mortar shell in the stomach, but it did not explode on impact. He sat in a shell hole bleeding and screaming for help for almost an entire night. We could not help him for fear of the live round taking more of us with him. The morning barrages the next day, mercifully, ended his suffering.<sup>18</sup> I cannot say how I survived the horror. Some may thank luck or God, I choose to thank the Earth. “To no man does the earth mean so much as to the soldier. When he presses himself down upon her long and powerfully, when he buries his face and his limbs deep in her from the fear of death by shell-fire, then she is his only friend, his brother, his mother; he stifles his terror and his cries in her silence and her security; she shelters him and releases him for ten seconds to live, to run, ten seconds of life; receives him again and again and often forever.”<sup>19</sup>

French counter-attacks in April saw 9 out of 10 French assaulters be slain by our hot lead, and yet the survivors fought on.<sup>20</sup> Willy translated some of letters found in French letter-cases. These men fought for many of the same old lies we did. “It’s queer, when one thinks about it,” Willy said, ‘We are here to protect our Fatherland. And the French are over there to protect their fatherland. Now who’s in the right?’<sup>21</sup> In some sense, they were our brothers-in-arms, enduring in the trenches and raining metal.<sup>22</sup> The strength and resilience of the French, much like that of

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<sup>17</sup> “Ad Beatissimi Apostolorum: Encyclical of Pope Benedict XV Appealing for Peace.” Pope Benedict, XV to the Patriarchs, Primate, Archbishops, Bishops, and other local Ordinaries in peace and communion with the Apostolic See. November 1, 1914.

<sup>18</sup> Witkop, 241.

<sup>19</sup> Remarque, 54.

<sup>20</sup> Browne.

<sup>21</sup> Remarque, 35.

<sup>22</sup> Witkop, 278-281.

us Germans, will continue the war and death for many years past my time's end. The "Men of Steel" among the ranks of trenches will continue this brutal fighting. These men seem unphased by the bloodshed and horror. These die-hard soldiers may not enjoy so many men dying, but this war to them is so fun, and they are so good at it, that the fighting may not end until they themselves end.<sup>23</sup> In May, my time in the West had come to an end. We were pulled off the line and loaded onto a train to head East.<sup>24</sup> Crossing the Rhine, we got our first view of Germany and what a beautiful sight it was. For the briefest time, "I was at home, and everything was just as it used to be, we were all so merry."<sup>25</sup>

Tonight I write you from my encampment outside of Brest-Litovsk. The Russians have pushed through Austrian lines, and now Field Marshal Hindenburg has called upon many battle hardened units in the West to come halt the Russians and save the Austrians.<sup>26</sup> The unit, or what is left of it, is glad to be back here in the East. No more will we have to endure the rotting flesh, the daily shelling, the mud or the stench. We are to face off against an inferior opponent. Among many men, the prospect of an almost guaranteed victory has uplifted their spirits. So many men are no longer with us. Some killed. Some wounded. Some deserters. We sit here with a fraction of the original muster left.<sup>27</sup> I can't say if I could ever pick up arms again following this Great War. Many comrades have given their lives for the Fatherland. I can't say I will give MY life for the Fatherland. The carelessness which we were thrown into assaults trying to conquer

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<sup>23</sup> Jünger, Ernst. *Storm of Steel*. New York: Penguin Books Ltd, 2016, 59.

<sup>24</sup> *Histories*, 213

<sup>25</sup> Witkop, 136.

<sup>26</sup> *Histories*, 213.

<sup>27</sup> *Histories*, 213.

untraversable terrain and a well fortified adversary at Verdun has shaken my faith in the German High Command and in what we thought we were fighting for.<sup>28</sup>

This war is just another example of the pawns being sacrificed to benefit the king. We were a first class division by the end of 1915. We were victorious in every engagement in the East. Then we were thrown into a meat grinder, with no regard for the lives of the men who brought so much glory to Germany only a few months earlier. This war has taught me that dying for Germany or Germany's leaders has the same amount of honor as a pawn dying to for the life of an enemy pawn in a game of chess.<sup>29</sup> Now I am determined to survive to see you once again. There is no glory in dying for Germany, only death.<sup>30</sup> When combating the madness and horror, I fight for myself. Tomorrow, I will fight for my comrades. My brothers who have gone to hell and back with me. "I believe we have a more complete communion with one another than even lovers have."<sup>31</sup>

"War is hell."<sup>32</sup> I have survived hell and returned so do not fret for me my darling. In these early days of summer, "we are blessed with glorious sunshine. How glad I am to greet it once more after all the horrors! I thought never to see it again! Terrible were the days which now lie behind us."<sup>33</sup> I am glad to be alive to see another beautiful German summer. I hope you write to me the beauty of my home. Have the bellflowers bloomed? Have you been south to see the edelweiss? Give my love to Mother and Father. Tell them that I am alive. Did you hear about

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<sup>28</sup> Witkop, 287.

<sup>29</sup> *The Murderers Are among Us*. Directed by Wolfgang Staudte. By Friedl Behn-Grund, Eugen Klagemann, and Ernst Roters. Performed by Hildegard Knef, Ernst Wilhelm Borchert, and Erna Sellmer.

<sup>30</sup> Witkop, 50.

<sup>31</sup> Remarque, 94.

<sup>32</sup> Sherman, William T. "Michigan Military Academy Commencement Speech." Speech, Graduation, Michigan Military Academy, Orchard Lake, June 19, 1879.

<sup>33</sup> Witkop,

poor Arnold? He did not suffer long from what I was told. I know this war has brought you many fears as to my return. You could not comprehend my desire to see you again. I wish you good fortune and well being. With luck, my fears will not be realized and this war will end soon. Stay safe and beautiful,

Your most affectionate soldier,

Herb



## Sources

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