

## Combat Letter from New Guinea 12 August 1944

Harry W. Webster, Chaplain (Capt) USA

Dear Loved Ones,

At long last I feel that I have a right to call myself a veteran of World War II; for I have been in the thick of flaming action since I last wrote you, whenever that was. (It seems ages ago.)

Late yesterday afternoon our unit returned to base camp, where we first landed from New Zealand. (I can now say that, since we have been gone from there more than thirty days.)

What happened between the beginning of our offensive until our return here would fill a book, so I cannot begin to give you the details.

Furthermore much of what happened would be considered military information, and would not pass the censor. So I will be able to write just now in general term. I hope to able some day to tell you in person some of my experiences.

I have seen the horrors of war at its worst. I have seen enemy dead lying all along the jungle trails, horribly mangled by our automatic rifle and machine-gun fire. In just a bit over two weeks of fighting our battalion accounted for approximately 500 Japanese. I cannot tell you the figures of our own losses, but will say that our losses were only a tiny fraction of that number.

Nevertheless, though our offensive ended victoriously, it must be admitted that the whole campaign was just an endless series of tragic, heart-breaking incidents. It would horrify you if I gave you the details, and it would be better if I myself could forget them completely, though I doubt that I ever will.

When I go to bed at night, even here at this quiet base, I can imagine that I hear the spiteful spat of an enemy sniper's rifle, and the immediate rat-a-tat-a-tat of automatic rifles answering with finality.

From tree tops, behind fallen logs, from dug-out caves and thatched-roof lean-to's they shot t our leading patrols. He courage and braver o these men who lead the advance through the jungle can never be adequately praised.

Seldom can one see more than 50 feet ahead, and often it is much less than that. Always we were exposing ourselves in order to advance, while all the enemy had to do was to lie quiet and hidden, and then open fire on us at point-blank range.

Fortunately for us, their first shots are often wild, and reveal their position; so that before they achieved accuracy, our own men would answer with withering fire.

Inevitably, however, they got in a few lucky shot, so that our sorrows multiplied as the campaign wore on. Oh! He horror of it all is indescribable! Even more tragic than the losses inflicted by the enemy were the results of our own errors.

Of these I cannot speak at present. It is sad to lose men by enemy action, though we expect that; but it is positively heart-breaking to lose men because of someone's error in judgment.

When you have eaten with men from day to day, and slept with them shoulder to shoulder night after night, and then to stand in the midst of carnage and desolation, and count them one by one, lying cold and silent in the arms of death, it puts a chill in your blood that makes your heart feel like a chunk of ice.

Yet here I sit in my tent, in the midst of a tropical paradise--not a scratch (save a minor cut from a ration tin,) not a bump, not even a bruise on my body, while others lie in eternal quiet,

deep in the heart of the jungle; and other languish in awful pain on hospital beds, with arms or legs shattered or gone, with all of life before them withered by a crippling handicap.

"A thousand shall fall by thy side, and then thousand by thy right hand, but it shall not come nigh thee." So the promise has been fulfilled, as I was positive it would be.

Through it all, I can truthfully say, I never had a fearful moment, except once when the biscuit bomber flew overhead and dropped heavy wooden boxes of rations on our very heads.

Believe me, I have never hugged a tree so hard in all my life, and with great enthusiasm I can say with Joyce Kilmer, "I think that I shall never see, a poem lovely as a tree." In the midst of it all, I was never more conscious of His overshadowing presence. And never did one of my favorite songs mean more than just then:

*I'm overshadowed by His mighty love, Love eternal, changeless, pure;  
Overshadowed by His mighty love, Rest is mine, serene, secure.  
He died to ransom me from sin, He lives to keep me day by day;  
I'm overshadowed by His mighty love, Love that brightens all my days.*

All through the night the artillery boomed, and the heavy shells rushed overhead with a combination rustling-whistling sound. Then the final impact when the shells landed, sometimes near enough to rattle your teeth, and again so far away as to sound like distant thunder, reverberating through the mountains and valleys.

Through the day we would sigh, Will night time never come? But then in the wee, small hours of the morning the tune would be changed to, Would God that it were morning, as we tossed upon sleepless beds.

Did I say beds? Well, for me, yes, because I had my air mattress; so that no matter how hard the ground, how covered with roots and rocks, how sticky with mud, I floated above it all as on a fleecy cloud. I believe I never closed my eyes in sleep without thanking God for that wonderful luxury. I was the object of unconcealed envy upon the part of the whole battalion. Doubtless I could have sold it for \$100, but I would have not have sold it for twice that much, thought it only cost me \$10.50 in the States. I had to sleep two nights without because there was not time enough to dig a hole large enough.

In the morning every joint and muscle of my body was stiff and aching because of the hard ground and uneven surface.

But most taxing of all were the hardships of the trail. It is absolutely incredible that an army of men could cross over such rugged terrain. We scaled mountainsides that were not far from perpendicular, carrying all our equipment on our backs.

Sometimes it was necessary to crawl up on all fours, pulling our weight by clinging to roots and saplings or trailing vines. At other times we slogged hour after hour through jungle swamps, with mud as deep as the knees, wading streams that came to the hips, climbing up head-high boulders which choked the mountain stream-beds we often used for trails, where at any moment a slippery rock could throw one and sprain an ankle or break a leg.

Tripping over innumerable roots on the trail, tangling equipment in over-hanging vines, and piercing hands with palm thorns as one grabbed wildly for support when the feet slipped in the gluey mud -- so we toiled on day after day, while muscles ached and feet burned, and breath came in short, hot, gasps.

And at the journey's end, each day, to have to dig a pit and fell logs to build ramparts for

protection from the enemy--this was the climax of exhaustion. Weakly stretching our shelter-halves over our muddy fox-holes, we would lie down, too tired even to talk. Then, though so fatigued we could hardly turn over in bed, we would be wakened every hour on the hour by our own artillery fire, harassing the enemy.

Up at 6:30 a.m. the first task was to prepare our breakfast. K-rations constituted the daily diet: for breakfast, a small tin of park and egg-yolks, heated over a fire made from the wax-coated cardboard in which the rations are packed; for dinner, a tin of corned beef-loaf, perhaps, or a few ounces of American process cheese; for supper, another tin of canned pork-loaf, or some other similar combination.

For bread each box contained seven small wafers of wheat which tasted like compressed sawdust, though really a scientific vitamin concoction containing all the necessary elements of a balanced diet.

For beverage there was an envelope of soluble coffee, lemon extract powder, or beef bouillon powder. The bouillon was especially tasty, though coffee is always the favorite with American boys.

The lemon powder made a good drink for a few times, and then became nauseating, so that few ever used it. And in every package was a stick of gum, and a small package of the inevitable cigarettes. Water we heated in our canteen cups, and the meats could be heated in the tin, or in a mess-kit (though few of the men cared to burden themselves with such luxury equipment).

Most pitiful of all was the task of the litter-bearers. Can you imagine carrying up litters over trails that even a mountain goat could not scale? In some places it required ten men to handle one litter -- four on the corners lifting and the other six pulling up or pushing from behind-- while the stretcher was so tilted that the patient had to be tied on to keep him from sliding off.

Then the rains -- such torrents as would soak you to the skin in two minutes. Or if at night, the water would become so deep in the dug-outs we had to stay awake and keep bailing to keep from being flooded out.

We would go to bed, of course, with all our clothes on, no matter how wet, including muddy boots and leggings.

There was no such thing as a change of clothing, except socks, and perhaps underwear. Beards were allowed to grow, either because we were too tired to do anything that was not necessary; or, as a flimsy excuse for laziness, to keep the mosquitoes off our faces.

If you could have seen me at the end of two weeks, with a beard over a quarter of an inch long, you would have hardly recognized me; or, recognizing me, would not acknowledge the acquaintance.

Now it is all over, and a good shower bath, clean clothes, and a shave can make a new man out of you. And an abundance of good, warm food, cool water, and quiet sleep can make one forget the rigors of the trail. But as for me, I hope never to experience such an ordeal again.

How often I paused to thank God for the strength He gave, or for His help over a particularly difficult spot on the trail. I kept up with boys scarcely more than half my age, and never did I have to ask for special help or consideration. I know I could never have done it in my own strength. Yet I felt no ill effects; my heart was always regular and without pain; my muscles were toughened, and my spirit never sagged. To God be all the glory and praise. No missionary will ever need describe to me again the hardships of mountain and jungle travel -- I can fully

sympathize with them in their experiences.

It was impossible to hold religious services during the campaign, except for the brief rites at the interment of the dead. It was my sad and gruesome duty to search the pockets of the dead, remove rings and watches, and register identification tags. Blood soaked my clothes and stained my hands till I must have looked like a butcher.

I always thought that such a horror of mangled bodies would make me sick at my stomach; but though others vomited around me, I never felt the least bit nauseated. The odor of decaying flesh is simply indescribable.

The day before we launched our offensive was Sunday.

I had three services for our battalion. My Scripture for each service was Ezekiel 33:1-20, and you can easily imagine what I had to say, as I spoke of the Watchman's Responsibility, the Watchman's Liability, and the Watchman's Possibility.

At each service I gave an invitation for public confession of Christ. At the first service a young Lieutenant took his stand and asked for baptism. At the second service four soldiers came forward and took my hand in token of decision for Christ; and at the third service, still another came, this one weeping brokenly, and standing there before his buddies spoke to them through his tears of his acceptance of Christ.

Sadly enough, the first man killed in the campaign was one of those four who gave his heart to Christ in that second service.

I remember how he came forward with a firm step, a sober look in his eyes, and gave me a tight handclasp. I felt my own throat muscles tighten, and my eyes were misty as I managed with difficulty to control my voice enough to say, God bless you, my boy!

Two days later he was morally hit, and died on his way to the hospital. How thankful I am that I was true to the Watchman's Responsibility when I pled with him and others to take Christ as his savior.

It will be much easier to write to his mother now and comfort her heart in her sorrow. And to his young wife, too, with her precious baby whom the father had never seen the baby, by the way, having recently been judged the winner of a perfect baby contest--and how proud the young father was. If only this one immortal soul has been saved because of my ministry during my Army service, I would feel that all the hardship and suffering we have endured was truly worthwhile, and not in vain.

And now, just to show you how calloused and unfeeling we get when we constantly witness the suffering of others, my biggest scare came after I got back to camp.

I left my wristwatch (the one my dear congregation gave me before I left) lying around somewhere; and I could not remember for the life of me, where it was--couldn't find it high or low.

I am ashamed to say I was more weak and trembly over the thought of having lost my watch, than over all the terrors of our worst day in the campaign. (Incidentally, I found the watch eventually, praise the Lord!) Isn't it a strange commentary on the selfishness of human nature that we would be more troubled over a personal loss, such as a fine watch, than over the tragedy that engulfs a score of homes in sorrow and desolation?

But I do myself a bit of injustice, even so; for truly I did lie awake more than one night and cried and prayed through my tears, because of the horrors witnessed that day: wives made widows at the tender age of 19 or 20; wives who only lived with their husbands a week before they were left behind; wives with young children who had not yet learned to lisp "Papa," and

now never need to learn the word; others with broken hearts when the telegram is received, saying, "The War Department regrets to inform you" young men who had been overseas 22 months, expecting to be "rotated" within two months--now never to return to their homeland.

All of this, and more, nearly broke my heart. But how soon do we forget tragedy, unless it touches our home or our family. So that now we rejoice that we came out alive and unharmed, though others, not less worthy than ourselves, went down into the valley of the shadow of death. Dear ones, that is enough for one time, and one campaign. Thank you for all your prayers on our behalf.

I am well in body, happy in the work, rejoicing I spirit, and sweetly trusting in the overflowing love of my precious Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Please continue to pray that never-dying souls shall continue to be won through the faithful ministry of His holy Word.

Yours in the love of Christ,

Harry W. Webster Chaplain (Capt) USA

*Chaplain Webster victoriously marched into heaven on September 22, 2007, at the age of 99.*