

An Infantryman Reports on His Treatment by His Lieutenant after a Poison Gas Attack (August 20, 1917)

Abstract

In this letter from an infantryman to his mother (a widow who worked a farm in Haselbach/Bavaria) he shares that, after inhaling poison gas, he tried to see the company doctor, but was called a “coward and shirker” and forced instead to return to duty. (Later letters show the incident was investigated, and that the soldier was ultimately taken to a field hospital, while his berating lieutenant, praised as “one of the best company commanders of the regiment,” was given the punishment of one day’s confinement to quarters.)

Source

In the trenches, August 20, 1917. My dear mother!

Since my heart is very heavy today and I almost want to cry, you must forgive me for writing to you of my pain. It will be 2 years in November that I have been part of this swindle, but I have never experienced anything like what happened to me today. I can no longer hide it, so I must write to you about it although I don’t like writing to you, you can see from it how a soldier is being treated and what thanks he gets for his suffering and his many and hard sacrifices. Oh, dear Mother, last night at 2 am while I was on guard duty, the English launched a very heavy poison gas attack, 3 meters to my left 3 gas grenades exploded. Until I had managed to put on my gas mask and alerted those in the trenches, I swallowed some gas, so I went to the doctor because in any training they tell you if you think you may have swallowed some gas you need to see a doctor immediately. Because I did exactly that my company commander did not let me see the doctor, instead he locked me up, so you can see what they are like, he would be happy if I croaked, and then he berated me as no one had ever done before, he called me a coward and a shirker and didn’t let me see the doctor. Dearest Mother, it is unbearable, if it wasn’t for you, I would take my own life. Of the 7th company the lieutenant and 8 men have died from gas. And many of them suffer from gas poisoning, many of whom are dying too. Many among the 12th company also have gas poisoning. It usually isn’t until the next day that you become seriously ill from it. Dear Mother! I will let them lock me up and when I get out, I am going to complain and will volunteer for another company. But dear Mother! No matter how many requests you make, he will not grant me any leave. I don’t know what to call someone like him, someone like that really should be shot and it’s the same as if you didn’t make any request at all, you can submit a request to the battalion or to the regiment, but there is no point in submitting one to the company. [...] Do not send me anything anymore, dear Mother, I think I will be sent to the field hospital. 1000 greetings, your loving son, my regards to all.

Source of original German text: Feldpostbrief des Infanteristen Birzer der 11. Komp. des bayer. 6 Inf-Div. on 20 August 1917. Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv München / Abt. IV bayer. 6. Inf.-Div Bund 81. Excerpted/reprinted in Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann, *Frontalltag im Ersten Weltkrieg. Wahn und Wirklichkeit*. Frankfurt a.M., 1994, pp. 95–96.

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