

Jesse Vandenberg, Age 17
Calvin Christian School
Diamond City, Alberta

November 7, 1917
West Flanders, Belgium
Dear Mr. Atkinson:

This letter needed to be written with the headlines I have send back to Toronto. I must admit that after several weeks with the Provisional 10th Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Forces, I am a different man. From an eager reporter, scurrying around Toronto, compiling stories about the tram line, expecting to report great feats of bravery on the front lines and thereby achieving literary notoriety, I have become a humbled journalist having experienced the trauma of battle in a manner that words can not describe. The numbers and names of the casualties that I once read about have now become personal. I heard their cries, witnessed their death, slipped in their blood. Yesterday, our boys finally took Passchendaele itself. Knowing the strict censorship of the media, I prepared a quick appraisal of yesterday:

Yesterday, November 6th, an attack on Passchendaele was nearly overwhelmingly successful. The 2nd Canadian Division encountered minimal resistance and the town was solidly occupied by Canadian Troops by 9:00 AM, only three hours after the attack was initiated. However, the 1st Canadian Division encountered serious resistance as one of the battalions found itself isolated in a bog. Although the number of fatalities from the attack have not been finalized, it is estimated that over 15 000 Canadian soldiers have already been killed in the past three plus months at Passchendaele. Due to the advances of the attack, the Allied forces have secured Passchendaele, which amounts to less than a total of nine kilometers since the operation started. Yet, the general objectives of breaking through the German lines to damage the German U-boat offensive off the coast of Belgium have not been met.

In completion of the article, I imagine the vast Toronto population skimming through the newspaper while sitting on the tram or while drinking their morning coffee. They nonchalantly read the headlines - "Canadians Push on in Flanders", "New York State Allows Women to Votes", "Bolsheviks Capture Winter Palace" - and return to nibbling their morning pastry and contemplating their lawn bowling game taking place that evening. However, I want you, as the acclaimed editor of the Toronto Star, to get a true glimpse of what is going on out here.

As part of the 1st Canadian Division, the 10th Battalion was called out of reserve and was involved in some of the heaviest resistance yesterday. Although I realize

that a journalist is supposed to keep an open mind, the events of yesterday have bridled me into accordance with mentality of many of the men in the battalion – indignant at the lack of morality of the enemy. The shelling yesterday was the worst I have ever seen. The earth boomed, the ground heaved, the night roared and flashed with explosions. The shells turned the muddy soil to a treacherous quagmire. The Germans let two or three of the stretcher-bearers step into the area to pick up the wounded and systematically mow them down. One boy, sprinting through the shell town field, caught a piece of shrapnel directly in his neck. He turned, dazed, clutching his neck. His eyes were frantic, pleading for help, begging to live. They bore into me, engraving an image into the bottom of my being. Even as he fell to the ground dead, I could not erase those eyes from my mind. Everything else danced about, black and red. Our boys, compared to the Germans, were commanded to hold fire against the stretcher-bearers. How can I convey the indignation at that kind of a slaughter of men, into the lines of a newspaper?

Or, how can I describe the results of the resistance the 1st Canadian Division encountered in an article? Shrapnel and highly explosive gas shells rained down incessantly on the lines. There was an explosion in a trench directly in front of me. When I dared to look over the edge of the embankment, I almost fell back into the rat-infested mud at the bottom of the trench. A solitary shell of a tree was between the two trenches. Hanging on a forlorn branch was a man. Bloodied. Legless. Mutilated. Later on, as I followed the movement of the division, I came across an abandoned trench, inhabited by a victim of mustard gas. I will never forget the image – the gas had eaten through his clothes. He was left naked, his skin pigments of purple and red, swollen. His arms positioned above his head in surrender to death. And men like him are just numbers in my article. The words do not do justice!

Censored or not, I had to try to let you know the truth, sir. These men have a hardiness I have never seen before, a courage I have never experienced before. A shell struck a pill-box, driving splinters deep into the face of one of the men. Yet, he did not quit. It was not until the end of the day that he could have his wounds looked after. This is what I see on a daily basis and it has driven me to persevere here. I just ask your permission that some recognition may be mentioned in your paper, something to show that the countless Canadians lying in those mud filled trenches are something more than numerous numbers and names.

Your humble employee,

Charles Higgs