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**5 February 1915, Adolf Hitler to Ernst Hepp**

Dear Herr Assessor

I am happy to learn that my last postcard has reached you, and I also thank you sincerely for your kind reply. I had written you a long letter, but it seems that I must repeat everything. First of all, I would like to inform you, dear Herr Assessor, that I was awarded the Iron Cross on 2 December. Thank God there were more than enough chances to earn it. Our regiment was not, as we thought, attached to the reserves, but as early as 29 October [1914] we went into battle first thing in the morning and for the last three months we have been giving them more than they bargained for both as attackers and defenders. After a glorious journey down the Rhine, we arrived in Lille on 23 October. We could see the war even from Belgium. Louvain was a heap of ash and rubble. As far as Dourmeu our journey went fairly well and peacefully but then we had nothing but trouble. In some places the rails had been pried loose despite the closest watch. And then we came across an ever greater number of blown-up bridges and smashed railway engines. Although our train was moving at a snail's pace, we kept grinding to a halt more and more often. From the distance we could hear the monotonous roar of our heavy mortars. Towards evening we arrived in a fairly badly damaged suburb of Lille. We got off the train and then lounged about our piled arms. Shortly before midnight, we at long last marched into the town along an endless, monotonous road with low factory buildings on either side, and an endless row of sooty and smoke-blackened tenements. The paving is in a terrible condition and filthy. There are no civilians about after 9 p.m., but all the more soldiers. We almost put our lives at risk as we squeezed past the supply and munition columns on our way to the inner gates. Central Lille proper is slightly better. But here, too, it's all dirty if you scratch under the surface. I was reminded of Germany time and again. We spent the night in the courtyard of the Stock Exchange. The pompous building has been left unfinished. Since we had to bed down with all our gear—we were on alert—and since it was freezing cold on the cobble-stones I did not sleep a wink. Next day we changed our quarters. This time we were put into a very large glass building. There was no lack of air, quite the opposite as only the iron framework had been left standing. The blast of German shells had shattered the glass into a million fragments. During the day we did a little training, visited the town and admired the huge army machine that had left its stamp on the whole of Lille and now rolled past our astonished eyes in gigantic columns. At night we all sang, many of us for the last time. During our third night, at 2 a.m., the alarm was sounded and at 3 a.m. we all marched out in formation. No one knew precisely what was happening, but we all believed it was a kind of drill. It was a very dark night. We had been marching for less than 20 minutes when we were ordered off the

road so that the supply columns, the cavalry, etc., could get past. At long last there was room for us again. Finally it was morning. We were a long way from Lille. The roar of the guns had gradually grown stronger. Like a giant snake our column inched forwards. At 9 a.m. we rested for two hours in a park, and then on again until 8 p.m. The regiment split up into companies, every one of which was taking cover from aircraft. At 9 p.m. we were handed our rations. I couldn't sleep, alas.

There was a dead horse four paces in front of my sleeping-bag. It looked as if it had been dead for two weeks at least. The beast was half decomposed. Just behind us a German howitzer battery fired two shells over our heads into the dark night every 15 minutes. They kept screaming and whistling through the air, followed by two dull thuds in the far distance. Every one of us listened out for them. We had never heard anything like it before. And while we lay pressed one against the other whispering and looking up into the starry sky, the distant noise drew closer and closer, and the individual thuds of the guns came faster and faster until finally they merged into one continuous roar. Each one of us could feel his blood pound in his veins. We were told the English were making one of their nocturnal attacks. Unsure of what was really going on, we all waited anxiously for the next move. Then everything died down until finally the hellish din stopped completely, except for our own battery which kept spitting its iron salutes into the night every 15 minutes.

In the morning we discovered a huge crater. After much effort, we put the dead horse to rest in it. We were just trying to make ourselves at home, when the alarm was sounded at 10 a.m. 15 minutes later we moved off. After a great deal of toing and froing we ended up in a wretched farmhouse and camped there. I was on guard that night. At 1 a.m. another alarm, and at 3 a.m. we marched out again, having first been issued with fresh ammunition. While we were waiting for orders, Major Graf Zech rode past; tomorrow we attack the English. At last! All of us rejoiced. The major then walked to the head of the column. At 6 a.m. we joined up with the other companies and at 7 a.m. the fun started in earnest. We crossed the woods to our right in columns, and reached a clearing. In front of us four guns had been dug in. Behind them were large foxholes in which we took up position and waited. Now the first shrapnel started to roar over our heads, bursting on the edge of the wood, and cutting down trees like wisps of straw. We looked on curiously. We didn't yet sense the danger, and so none of us was afraid. Every one of us was waiting for orders to advance. Then things went sour on us. We were told there were casualties. Five or six khaki-clad figures on the left made all of us shout with joy. Six captured Englishmen and a

machine-gun! We looked at their escorts. They were walking proudly behind their prisoners, and all we could do was wait, for we could see next to nothing in the foggy witches' caldron that spread out in front of us. At last came orders to advance. We fanned out and raced across a field towards a small farm. To either side of us shells kept bursting and English bullets kept whistling by. But we paid no heed. For ten minutes we stayed put, and then we were ordered forward once more. I was right out in front, way ahead of most of the platoon. Suddenly I heard that file-leader Stower had been wounded. Oh dear, I thought, that's a fine start! Because we had no cover, we simply had to press on. Our captain was in the lead now. Then men started to fall all around me. The English had turned their machine-guns on us. We flung ourselves down and crawled through a gulley.

Every so often we had to stop because someone had been wounded, and couldn't go on and had to be lifted out. And so we crawled on until the gulley stopped and then it was the open field for us once again. Some 15 to 20 meters beyond was a large pond. One after the other we dived in, took cover, and got our breath back. But we couldn't stay there forever. And so out and on to a wood some 100 meters in front of us. Here we all reassembled. It looked as if we had been pared down a lot. We were now led by a mere vice-sergeant, Schmidt, a magnificent hunk of a man. We crawled to the edge of the wood. There was a constant howling and roaring overhead, with tree-trunks and branches flying in pieces through the air. Then shells burst into the wood once again and threw up showers of stone, earth and sand, tore up the heaviest trees by their roots and smothered everything in a horrible, greeny-yellow, stinking vapor. We couldn't lie there for ever, and if we had to get it, far better to get it outside. Then our major appeared.

On we went again. I leapt and ran as best I could across meadows and turnip fields, jumped across ditches, negotiated wire entanglements and hedges, and then I heard a shout right in front: "All of you, in here!" A long trench stretched out before me; a moment later I had jumped in and countless others all round me were doing likewise. By my side were Würtembergers, beneath me dead and wounded Englishmen. The Würtembergers had taken the trench by storm. Now I realized why I had had so soft a landing. Trenches 240—280 meters to the left of us were still held by the English and so was the road to Becelaire to our right. A hail of steel whistled across our trench. At 10 a.m., our own guns began to reply at last. 1-2-3-5 etc. Again and again one of our shells landed in the English trench. They poured out like ants from an anthep, and then we attacked. We crossed the fields at lightning speed and after many bloody hand-to-hand

skirmishes we cleared the lot of them out of their trenches. Many came out with their hands up. Those who did not surrender were mowed down. And so we cleared up trench after trench. Finally we reached the main road. A plantation stretched to either side of us. In we went, and chased them out in droves. And so we reached the other edge of the plantation and the open road. To the left a few farms were still held by the enemy, and we came under blistering fire. Comrades collapsed all round me. Then our madcap major arrived, smoking quite unconcernedly. With him was his adjutant, Lt Pyloty. The major quickly surveyed our position and ordered us to assemble on either side of the road and then to attack. We ourselves had no officers left and hardly any non-commissioned officers. And so every one of us who was worth his salt raced back to get reinforcements. When I returned for the second time with a band of dispersed Würtembergers, I found the major lying on the ground with his chest torn wide open, and a heap of bodies all round him. The only officer left was his adjutant. We were boiling with rage. "Lieutenant, lead us into the attack," all of us yelled. And so on we went to the left of the wood, for we couldn't possibly make it on the road. 4 times we advanced only to be thrown back. Of my entire lot, only one other was left and at last he fell as well. Then a bullet tore off my right sleeve but by a miracle I myself was saved. At 2 p.m. we advanced for the 5th time and this time we took the edge of the wood and the farmsteads beyond. At 5 p.m. we re-assembled and dug in a hundred meters in front of the road. And so we fought on for 3 days until finally we got the better of the English. On the evening of the 4th day we marched back to Osterwick, where we could take stock of our losses. In 4 days, our regiment had shrunk from 32 thousand to 600. We were left with only 3 officers. 4 companies had to be dissolved. But we were all proud of having beaten the English. Ever since we have been right in the front lines. In Messines I was recommended for the Iron Cross and again in Wyschaete, the 2nd time with four others, by Lt-Col Engelhardt, our regimental commander. On 2 December I received it at last. I am now a staff runner. It's slightly less dirty work but all the more dangerous. In Wyschaete alone 3 of us 8 were killed on the first day of the attack and one was badly wounded. That time we were saved by our decoration. For when the list of recommendations for the "Cross" was being discussed, 4 company leaders came into the tent, or rather into the dug-out. Because there was not enough room, we had to step outside. We had been waiting there for less than 5 minutes when a shell hit the dug-out, wounding Lt-Col Engelhardt badly and killing or wounding the rest of the staff. It was the worst moment of my life. All of us worshipped Lt-Col Engelhardt.

I must close now and beg you, dear Herr Assessor, to forgive my poor hand. I am very nervous right now. Day after day we are under heavy artillery fire from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., and that is bound to ruin even the strongest of nerves. For the two parcels you were kind enough to send me sincerest thanks to you and your

esteemed wife. I often think of Munich, and each one of us has only one wish: that he might soon get a chance to even scores with that crew, to get at them no matter what the cost, and that those of us who are lucky enough to return to the fatherland will find it a purer place, less riddled with foreign influences, so that the daily sacrifices and sufferings of hundreds of thousands of us and the torrent of blood that keeps flowing here day after day against an international world of enemies, will not only help to smash Germany's foes outside but that our inner internationalism, too, will collapse. This would be worth much more than any gain in territory. Austria will fare as I have always said she will. Once more my sincerest thanks and respectful regards to your dear mother and wife,

Yours most sincerely, Adolf Hitler.~