

ATLANTIC MONTHLY

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World War I Letters from the Dying Americans

One young officer who was hopelessly wounded seemed to have no idea that he was dying. We knew that it would make his last hours terribly unhappy, so we did not tell him. As I was talking to him he said: 'I wrote a letter to my mother just before I went into the fight. I just told her what a good mother she had been to me, and now it won't have to be posted, because I'm going to get all right.'

The officer who wrote this letter was brought in during the battle of the Argonne. He was suffering a great deal, but never a murmur or complaint to show his agony, and this might be said of almost all the men who came in. He was taken in to the resuscitation ward, as he was too sick to be operated on at once, and there he was treated, with hope that his condition might improve. He asked what his chances were of pulling through and he was told that they were a little against him. Everything that was done for him he appreciated, and he put up a great fight. He asked me if I would send this letter to his wife in case he died, and as he dictated this to me he said: 'We have been married only a year and a half, but we have been so wonderfully happy. I am so thankful even for that short time of happiness.' He was only twenty-one, and so full of health that we felt he could not and must not die; but when I went into the ward the next morning, his bed was empty, he had died in the early hours of the morning.

Here is his letter: —

'My darling brave sweetheart, —

'Please don't worry about me, darling, because I am in good hands; I was hit this morning, and am now away down from the front in a nice warm bed. I am going to be operated on in a few minutes, and I feel fine. I have been hit by two pieces of shell, and the only thing is, it hurts a little bit once and a while. I was behind an American tank when some German shrapnel came overhead and got me in the chest. Darling, I make my hope all for the future happiness of us. Good-bye, God bless you.'

World War I Letters

This is the answer I received from his wife: 'I cannot express in words my gratefulness to you for the letter you wrote me when my husband died. So many boys have left us and all we know is that they have died, but your kind letter is so comforting. I have so much to be thankful for, in just knowing he was in a warm bed, and just fell asleep.'

'Your letter was the first notice I had received of his death. The last letter I got from him was written September twenty-sixth. He was then leaving for the front and he was wounded October fourth. All the time he has been there, in nearly every letter he has warned me of the chances but always reminded me that if anything should happen it would be for the best. But I have felt so sure he would be spared for Baby and me, and our little home. Now we know that he is n't very far away from us, and is just waiting for us to come to him. But oh! it's so lonesome when I think that he is n't coming home. . . . But for the note he dictated I'd have hopes of probably his death being a mistake; but his note was like his letters, always thinking of my happiness.'

Here is another typical letter from a mother: 'We received your most welcome letter from France, and we thank you one and all from our hearts for the information you have given concerning the death of. . . . I am glad and thank God he had such a quiet peaceful death. It is a very hard thing for a mother to realize and believe when she cannot be with him in his last moments, but still we hope to meet in another world and I am proud to give up my only boy to his country, and that alone is a great consolation.'

The men, themselves, did not often realize they were dying; they thought they were going to sleep, and would loose consciousness and go quietly.