LETTERS FROM THE FRONT IN ALSACE

FROM RICHARD NELVILLE HALL

————————, Oct. 13, 1915.

* * * Lest I seem blasé, I will explain that term "evacuate a hospital." The hospital I referred to is the last one to which we bring the wounded in series of relays from the front. Once or twice a week, when the number of patients reaches about two hundred, a hospital train is sent up and all the men who can safely be moved are put on and sent to other hospitals in various parts of France—in all parts of the country, in fact.

This noon, when we arrived at the place, we found everything ready for the transportation of the men. Each man had a tag fastened to a button on his coat, giving his name, grade, and regiment, etc., and a word or two on the nature of his injury or sickness. There are all sorts of wounds, of course, but the most common illnesses are bronchitis and intestinal troubles.

The stretcher cases—men who could not walk, were taken to the train first, and after that came the others. As they left the hospital, the nurses and doctors and the men working around the place said good-bye and shook hands with almost everyone, wishing them *bonne chance*—good luck. Each man was given some sort of food to take along—an egg and some bread, I think it was.

At the station each man's name was checked off on a list as he arrived and the men on stretchers are put on beds in the special cars holding each about 16 men. These trains have crews of doctors and nurses and some have even emergency operating rooms.

A couple of days ago I was in a first aid post directly behind the lines. It is a well built room which is practically bomb-proof. It is under several feet of dirt and rocks, which cover a layer of immense logs and iron rails. The entrance is by a narrow ditch. I took a picture of a hill-crest which has been fought over for nearly a year. There are no living trees at all and what few are still standing were stumps. There are no green plants at all as continual shell-fire keeps the land all ploughed up. The roads of this section of the front are simply made-over goat paths. Fortunately the wagons and most of the automobiles used there are narrow tread because much of the road is too narrow for anything to pass anything else, and the "wide" places are only barely wide enough. In some places we have difficulty passing pack mules. One of the boys knocked a mule off the road. The mules are all loaded with aerial torpedoes, etc. I don't know why they didn't go off.

This letter has just suffered an interruption of a day and a half. Two nights ago I was on guard duty. That is, I slept on a stretcher in my car in the church yard so as to be on hand for the messenger in case a call comes in the night. Luckily no call came, so I had a good sleep. It was raining hard all night but I was cozy enough in the car. I am used to sleeping with my clothes on, and on a stretcher, so that I never lose any sleep on that account. We are allowed to sleep inside any of the posts where we are on duty, but the straw mattresses are usually full of fleas, and besides there is never enough fresh air in the rooms. Frenchmen hate a draught, and particularly if said draught brings in fresh air.

This morning I just got back from 24 hours at B———.

E————, Nov. 11, 1915.

I have been trying to write you for several days, but either there has been no place to write in or I have been busy all the time. We have just changed our quarters, and we are now at a little village called D————. It is nearer the posts, and will probably make a saving in the amount of running we do without loads. We are lodged in a large schoolroom, in which there are twenty beds, made out of board frames with straw ticks on them. Each man has a bed but as some men are always away, the room is not too crowded to be stuffy. There is a big tile stove and also a couple of tables. By way of luxury, we have in an adjoining hallway a sink with a faucet of running water.

For the present we are eating in a hotel where our rations are cooked, as before, but I think we will eat elsewhere as soon as we get the army cook who has been

Digitized by Google

assigned to us. Fortunately Louis and I got beds together in a corner where we are as well off as possible under the conditions.

Ostensibly I have had the last two days *au repos.* The first I spent at the evacuation of B———. Yesterday I acted as chauffeur for our French Lieutenant. His chauffeur is on his *permission,* and no officer is allowed to drive his own staff car, though he may drive any other sort of car. We went about a hundred and fifty kilometers I guess. We took lunch with another lieutenant and some *sous-officiers* and we had a fine meal. Sausage, butter, one kind of meat, another kind of meat, salad, cold duck, brussels sprouts, nuts, fruit, cakes, coffee, all served with excellent wine.

The drive would have been very nice except there was rain and snow and sleet most of the time. On the way back I stopped at the S———'s and got all my belongings. They were all very nice as usual and urged me to come back when I could. They invited both Louis and me to come there after the war and make them a visit. I think it would be very nice if you would write them a note in French as they have

RICHARD N. HALL
With His Ambulance (on the left)

been awfully nice to me for the past five months. I certainly hated to leave there. *Mais c'est la guerre.*

I have taken a couple of interesting walks lately from one of the posts. On one, I started out for a constitutional and went up a path in the woods, leading, I thought, nowhere specially. I was much surprised to come upon many small barracks for men working on roads, etc., scattered through the woods. Nonè were larger than ordinary cabins in the woods and all were well separated from each other. Thus they were easily hidden and at the same time made poor targets if discovered, as is unlikely on account of the trees, and a clever covering of clods, green ferns, branches, etc., designed to change color with other things around them.

Digitized by Google

Another time I went into a block house, unused, which was made for machine guns. I don't dare describe it exactly, but it was certainly well designed and well made. It was in sight of the Germans, but I couldn't see much of them on account of the fog which covered the valley. From the hill tops the fog looked like the sea. It was dense in the valleys but at a certain altitude it ended very abruptly and the air above was very clear. I got a very good view of the Alps that day. They make a magnificent panorama.

I hope to go to Paris in a few days. I can stay ten days if I want. I am going to get my teeth fixed and I am going to try to find a box of books you sent me. I was notified as I told you, by the American Relief Clearing House at Paris that they had sent the box to Neuilly and soon after that one of the boys went to N——— from here and he tried to find the box, but could not.

Since starting this letter, I have made two 30 km. trips and eaten dinner. The dinner was good enough as they gave me two cups of wine and some very good jam with cherries, figs, oranges, etc., in it, and also beef, rice and bread. But the two trips were no joy rides. It is cold and rainy and on the mountains it is snowing and hailing.

In spite of the discomforts there is a certain pleasure in the trips—in feeling independent of the elements. It is rather nice to know I can be happy in the face of some hard and dirty work, even with the privations. I am extremely happy. I am sure of food enough and sleep enough. What more do I want? I will have to do without jam, and I will have to cut down my camera expenses, by not having any more pictures printed, as I have had lately, but nevertheless I shall continue to be happy. I am not talking or thinking about Christmas. I don't dare.

Some of the fellows are getting sick of the job, and are going home, but, barring the chance that I meet something very special in Paris, I will stay on here till Louis' time is up. In Paris I will find out how much traveling we could do in France. I am told that early spring is the best time of the year in the South of France. It is certainly good of you to offer to let us take a trip together, and I hope we can do it in France. We both want to get more knowledge of French, as well as of France.

Another trip now, so will stop.

FROM LOUIS PHILLIPS HALL, '12*E*.

To-night and for the next two days, I am stationed at a *poste-de-secours* high up in the mountains. The place is something of an army post as well, but there is a much larger camp two or three kilometers beyond. Until two weeks ago our cars maintained a service from a little Boche town fifteen kilometers over into the next valley. But the snow came and made the road impassible to even our trusty Ford ambulances. The *blessés* and *malades* have since been transported on small sleds with great difficulty from that post beyond. It takes them about four hours to make this trip through the deep drifts when there is snow. Just recently it has turned warmer and rained hard and incessantly for over a week, though we expect it to turn cold and bring snow soon.

This place is so high that often, when it is cloudy and rainy in the valley, we will have a bright clear day up here and can see the highest peaks of the Alps rising out of a perfect sea of clouds, off to the south. And on clear days the views on the valley below are sights worth seeing. We are just above the tree line.

In this little room there are two tables. At one four Frenchmen are playing bridge, very noisily. At my table two other Frenchmen and the other Americans here with me are writing * * * * * * * * * like myself. In the corner is a diminutive stove which gives out a prodigious amount of heat at times. The last time I was stationed here it was cold as could be, with deep snow everywhere. To-night the snow is all but gone and the wind and rain are doing their worst to blow this little shack down the side of the mountain. But the Frenchmen know how to build, though they fail utterly in adequate preparation for severe cold weather. Every day, early in the morning, a crowd of men drift in here and receive treatment for various minor injuries and colds, rheumatism, etc. Some of the treatments for the latter are very interesting. During the cold wave it was pitiful to see these men standing around in a cold room, stripped to the waist, waiting for examinations and treatments. If they kept them here a little longer they could safely do away with the examinations. There were dozens of frozen feet cases from the trenches beyond. These and all major cases of

Digitized by Google

course go down in our cars to the nearest valley hospital. Then they are sorted and moved on down the line, the worst cases eventually reaching the evacuation hospital located at the terminus of a railroad running into the interior.

Our section head-quarters are in a little village about fifteen miles from here. We have about twenty-five ambulances in all, and maintain continuous service with two cars at each of five places, two in the mountains and three at valley hospitals. Then there is one contagious car which runs anywhere at any time, on call, and serves for both civilian and military cases—a very busy car. There are also several other special runs which we make on call to all sorts of places. The valleys are full of little towns and poor but interesting people. There are four languages spoken among them, French, German, Alsatian and *patois*. This last as you know is a mixture of French and German though unlike either and quite the most disagreeable sounding language I ever hope to hear. And the people who speak it are as low and dumb as their language is unpleasant, though as picturesque as well. I have made many friends of all ages and kinds, many of whom I have become greatly attached to, especially some of the children. At one of the military hospitals, or *ambulances*, as they are called in French, there is a little boy who lives nearby whom I can usually count on a welcome from. Sometimes at night when I pass through a narrow road between some of the buildings of an immense cotton factory, a part of which now serves as the hospital, I see this little chap running along beside my car looking for my number. When he sees it, it is No. 166, he climbs up into the seat and says *ca va bien?* and insists on shaking my hand just as I am making a sharp curve down grade and over a little narrow bridge and up to the entry. I've given him rides and taken his picture "at the wheel," which pleased both him and his mother greatly.

When I first came, our section headquarters were over the line, in France. Since then they were moved across the line into our present town which is more centrally located among all the various towns to which we run. In the other town, over in France, there were many very nice people. Never before have I seen people in comparatively humble circumstances so genuine and nice in every way. I think the feeling between them and us Americans was quite mutual for it was really touching to hear the many expressions of regret when we were suddenly told to move.

The other night late in the afternoon I had a run from the place where I was then stationed, over the *col* to the evacuation hospital. When I got there the *medicin-chef* said he had a bad case and wanted a special car to take it down the line to a special hospital further into France. It was a horrible night, very dark and raining in torrents. I got them to get hold of our section commander by phone for me. I offered to take the run so as to save some one else a long trip over the *col*. This took me beyond our old headquarters. My lights went out on the way and my matches all got wet and I had the devil's own time till I got to a house where I could get matches. Meantime my *malade*, whom I had insisted on being put on a stretcher instead of being sent as an *assis*, was not enjoying his long trip any too much I'm afraid. He was a pretty sick man. But if the sight of a very nice looking French girl, a nurse I saw at the hospital, meant as much to him as it did to me, he must be better now. You see there are no regular nurses in most of our military hospitals. All the work is done by men, and hospital comforts, when we think of them, are woefully lacking.

I'm afraid I'm talking too much about the incidentals of my life and not telling you enough about our actual work. But you must remember that it isn't every one that I can tell about these minor things and they mean much to me and I like to write of them even as little as I have here, comparatively. I say comparatively because our life is full of them and after all it is these things which give color to our work, and personality. Our cars provide all the ambulance service in this region. We serve the —— division of the 7th army, and on the whole I think we do it well, and for my part I love the work, in any weather. It is remarkable how one can become indifferent and immune to the most disagreeable weather. Yesterday I worked all the morning on my car in a pouring rain, tuning it up generally and doing several little things which I have wanted done for some time—and enjoyed it. I have never known what it was like to be in some sort of service in which I was at the beck and call of authority at all times. Instead of finding it hard to do disagreeable things I find it easy. And there is great satisfaction in knowing that we can "produce the goods" under any and all conditions. It is our Fords that deserve the credit. I've only been

Digitized by Google

here two months but I love the country and its people and the work with all my heart and hate to think I must leave it soon. Just now it looks as though there was a movement on foot, by the army, to concentrate all the American services. In this case we will be moved, and it is a great pity. Until our cars undertook this work and displaced the former French service last April, no cars had even attempted our mountain work. Indeed it was with difficulty that our section commander persuaded the *Divisionaire* to allow us to try it, but once done we have increased this branch of our service remarkably. That is one of the great points of our work. Until we came, all the wounded were transported miles on mules, both sitting and stretcher cases. We have one bad run, close to the trenches which we only make in daylight, when the road is concealed from view by the trees and artificial screens erected along the edge in open places. At night our lights would immediately draw fire from the German mitrailleuses below. The last time I made this run I got stuck on a very steep place with a terribly wounded man inside. I had to stop for a wagon to get out of my way and when we stop we have to get help to start again. I called up some men, mule driven, but they couldn't push hard enough. I got them to put a stone under a rear wheel so I could get out. Then I got them to bring up three mules and the mules saved the day and hauled me up to the next "landing," where I could start my motor. It was pretty late but a great old moon helped me out till I got to the next post, beyond which we can use lights. From there (and it is here where our cars are stationed, each one three days at a time), the descent begins and couches are always taken out and put back into the car feet first. All this mountain work is done on low-gear, both up and down—to save the brakes. Our worst cases come over that road and now and then we lose a man on the way. That post is one of the most interesting as at it a great many kinds of work are going on. The mountain side, among the trees, is covered with cabins and buildings of all sorts. All the ammunition, food, hay, wire, and every sort of supply passes over our road and through this poste. At the turn in the road is a little cemetery, with the graves close together and each marked by a carefully made wooden cross with the name, regiment, and company marked upon it, with the date of death. Just beyond this is an open chapel with its crude little altar erected under a wooden shelter, and in front of which is a space paved with stone and fenced off from the cemetery on one side and the outdoor eating tables on the other. By walking away from the post a little ways one can get to a prominent little peak from which can be seen the Rhine valley below. In this valley, what moves, in the daytime, is dead, for both the French and Germans, from their trenches are on the job every minute. At certain times we get chances for long walks from the posts. In my last excursion I went into some communication trenches and went for a long ways through them expecting, at first, to be sent out any minute. But I passed a great many men in my wanderings through the labyrinth, none of whom said anything but *bon jour* to me and gradually, having passed first a corporal and then a lieutenant safely, I began to feel quite at home. There was intermittent firing down below in the first lines, and from the artillery behind, but excepting during the occasional attacks the firing is never very great. The trees around these communication trenches were many of them shot away and crosses here and there marked the graves of many who had fallen during an attack which took place soon after I joined the section. It was made by the Germans, who succeeded in overrunning this ground at first but were driven back by the French counter-attack. In the end of two days' hard fighting the French, by the good fortune of distribution of reserves at the time, gained a little ground. Those were busy days and nights for us. All our cars were called to that end of the service and we drove and drove till we couldn't drive any more for fear of going to sleep on the road. In all we carried 503 men, mostly *couchés*, down from the mountains at that point. Of course this meant constant evacuations all along the line of hospitals. Much of the work was at night which was fortunate as then the roads are fairly clear of the enormous military traffic which streams over the *col* and through the valleys every day—day in day out.

The sight of an army at work is tremendously impressive. The amount of actual hard labor connected with it is tremendous. This traffic, especially on the narrow mountain roads, is, I think, what makes us all so tired when we turn in at night. I can't conceive of any better place or work which would give one a better or safer opportunity to see practically all of the armies' activities back of the line. One of our

Digitized by Google

towns is bombarded now and then for some unknown reason. I was stationed there when this last occurred and I can't say that being in a town under shell-fire is my idea of the king of out-door sports. It is about the most helpless situation one could be in. The shells began to arrive that bright Sunday afternoon, Oct. 31, about four o'clock, from probably nine miles away over the hills. You can hear the shells coming, a piercing roar, but they don't give much time in which to decide just where they will land. One place is just as safe as another, which strange to say, is more or less of a consolation to an ambulance driver. Fortunately, out of a dozen or more shells that afternoon, only one did much damage in the human line. That killed four and wounded five. The civilians got terrified and disappeared from view completely, as though their thin roofs were protection against a shell at the end of a nine mile journey, and itching for a chance to let loose their contents of high explosives. Oh if you want to feel insignificant just be in a town while big shells are coming that way! But this is an exception (thank the Lord for that) and has only happened to me once. As the general thing, our lives are quite free from all danger, but none the less interesting. It is a life of extremes—one in which all the emotions are appealed to alternately, from one hour to the next. I've never been more tired, colder, or more hungry (and believe me this last is a blessing at meal time in these mountain postes) than I have been since coming into this work—I might add that I have never been more scared also. People asked me that Sunday afternoon if I wasn't scared and I told them no, but it took a lot of philosophy to justify my answer. It was thrilling though—and pitiful, and I guess I was too excited to be much worried.

During the attack earlier, our section as a whole was "cited" for our faithful and arduous service. Our section commander will in due time receive a *croix de guerre*. Two of our men received individual citations for bravery under shell fire one time last summer, and now each wears his *croix de guerre*. I'd like one myself, but no chance I guess.

THE CLASS SECRETARY'S MISSION*

For years some of the younger members of the Association of Class Secretaries have thought they perceived the need of a sort of manual to assist new secretaries in their work. They have maintained that novices desired the advice of their elders as to the material to be included in class reports and the manner in which they should handle it. The writer has been asked to contribute to such a manual some suggestions on these points, chiefly on the assumption that somebody ought to do it and it might as well be he as anybody else, and also, possibly, because he had prepared a considerable number of reports of his own class, and had read with avidity as many of those of other classes as he could lay his hands upon. He starts out with the distinct understanding that he is expressing only his own opinions, to which no more deference is to be paid than they may be worth *per se*. On some matters he may express the general consensus among his brethren of the Association of Class Secretaries; on others he may be entirely without support from any of them; on none does he speak with any authority save such as the good sense of the younger secretaries may concede full consideration of what he has to offer.

To begin with, a new class secretary should undertake his duties with a certain degree of seriousness. They are of far more import than he probably conceives. It is the glory of American universities—at least of such as are not sustained by public taxation—that their success, not to say their very existence, depends upon the support of their alumni. European visitors, however grudging their praise of American educational institutions,

* From the Yale "Handbook for Class Secretaries," 1910.

Digitized by Google