

Arundel
17th December 1899

Dear Mrs Chaytor

I have been trying to get time to write a few lines to you and acknowledge the kind note I received as the steamer left the Wellington wharf but the contingent has been so harried hither and thither that one really has no time to collect his thoughts sufficiently to write a connected narrative. It is not so much the quantity of work that has to be done but it is the state of uncertainty to all on. In an Easter encampment the work of the day is known, probably, the day before, but here before the evening lying in one's tent, perhaps thinking now is the chance to write to one's friends, you hear the boom of the enemy "Long Tom" then all is bustle. Sharp comes the order "Saddle your horses, fill your nosebags, draw your rations." Next, "Stand to your horses, prepare to mount, mount sections right," and away we go not to get back, perhaps till dark and then after watering, feeding and grooming, it is probably 9 o'clock, and we are ready for our tea and biscuit and for bed. At two or three in the morning we are generally called out to saddle up again so as to be ready for a daylight attack or to go out in the grey dawn to fossick out the Boers.

I laugh often when we are feeding here at the contrast between it and the New Zealand fare. We eat anything – meat that has been cooked in an atmosphere of sand. I generally find about a tablespoon full of it on the bottom of my canteen and one can reckon on swallowing an ounce or so at every meal, but notwithstanding this the meat is eagerly swallowed as on some days it is "like the baseless fabric of a vision." We dream of it but don't see it. However, when we do get it we never leave the slightest "wreck" behind. An ant couldn't live on the remains of our sumptuous repasts.

On board the Waiwera we were fed like fighting cocks. What with good fare supplied by the ship and the luxuries sent by N.Z. friends, we fed almost as well as 1st class passengers. It was a real good time that trip and one had time and opportunity to find out what first class fellows most of his comrades were. Rough, no doubt, some of us are from the common trooper worth £800 per year (a fact) to the uncommon worth only his pay, but most, I think, with "hearts for any fate." This has been proved under most aggravating circumstances as the contingent has been under fire (meandering) at the walk as on a parade ground with bullets whistling around us and no chance of returning a single shot. This was done to draw the Boer fire so that our Royal Horse Artillery could locate and shell them. It is a matter of satisfaction to us that they are not as good shots as rumour made them, otherwise some of us might not have had an opportunity of writing to our friends. With regard to the Marlborough fellows – six of us are together in the tent I am writing from. Bill Dick, McConway, Ted Moore, Harry Boroughs, Pawson and yours truly, along with six other fellows including Sergt. Grant who went home with the N.Z. Contingent. Twelve in a tent and on a hot night (the nights here are generally hot altho we are between 2000 and 3000ft above the level of the sea). I often wish I could do as some writer advised, "Take off my flesh and lie in my bones and feathers knock the marrow out and let a draught through.

Of the sun in the daytime I shall not say much, writing cannot describe it. Lying out on the tops of the hills as we often have to do in the heat of the days to guard our position (for the Boers are constantly threatening us). No shelter only the bare stones which are often too hot to touch, while the water in our bottles will almost scald one. It seems sometimes almost unbearable, but we always turn up in the evening at the camp after a canteen of tea as jolly as sandboys. I suppose some day when we don't all turn up for the evening meal things will not be so merry. To show you what the heat is, have burnt my face by picking the field glasses off a stone in a hurry to look at some body of troops advancing.

We had a great charge the other day. I described it in a letter to my sister which she will show you. I can't describe to you in words the splendid excitement it stirred up in one and all. We were jaded and tired when ordered up but afterwards, what a change! The mad gallop which we ended up with seemed to have sent the blood charging through the veins at a like speed and I felt it was a good thing to be alive. I must tell you that just as we neared the house, the Maori war cry was yelled out as if by a lot of fiends. The Boers (loose luck) had got away, but our intentions were real good all the same. There is no doubt our enemy is as cunning as the proverbial fox and no bait, however alluring, will entice him out of his lair. Artillery is the only thing. Blow his native socks about his ears and smash up his cannon and this is where the mounted infantry and cavalry come in, they patrol the country and get near enough to draw the Boer fire, then the artillery, who are waiting, shell the places. There is some talk now of sending us up to the Modder River where there is lots of fighting and I think it likely we shall go, but General French will not like parting with us as he has more than once expressed his opinion of us both as to our steadiness under fire and our ability as scouts. He says we are born scouts.

The Orderly Sergeant has just stepped in to tell us we are detailed to escort the Royal Horse Artillery into action tomorrow. This I need not tell you is a great honour, our little two hundred picked out of a whole camp of mounted men, to escort the finest body of Artillery in the world, into action. We rise at 2am and mount at 3. I'm glad Lieutenant Chaytor is to be in charge of our division again. He has been unwell lately but is himself again. And here, without any flattery, I may as well say that he is recognised as far and away the best of our N.Z. Lieutenants and very popular with all our fellows, who all recognise his coolness and pluck. By the way, his beard is coming on fast, in fact all of us are looking a bit in the rough as regards hair. I'm afraid we shall come back frightful savages both in manners and appearance. Our faces are getting into masks of hairy parchment and we have a way of grabbing at things and talking to each other which I think would astonish civilised N.Z.

This is Sunday and the Marlborough fellows are all wishing they were back at Spring Creek just for a couple of hours this evening and I heartily echo the wish. One remembers and, perhaps, regrets old happy evenings in this wild desert looking country where life is so uncertain, but still there is an excitement about it that extinguishes regrets and not one of the contingent would return at present, I think, if he had the chance. McConway, Bill Dick and the rest of the Spring Creek boys wish to be remembered to you all, they are all well and hearty and I must now close this as it is just upon tea time and then we shall to turn in so as to get some sleep before 2am.

I wish you all a Merry Xmas and a Happy New Year altho you will receive this rather late.

I suppose Miss Eleanor got my photographs. I will never forget the girls waving the train onto Picton on the day we left.

With kind regards to all who enquire,

Yours sincerely

Arthur McBeth