



German History in Documents and Images

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Soldiers Describe Combat III: Hans Stegemann (1914)

This young soldier's letters suggest the attitude of German infantrymen at the front in the opening months of the war. With the promise of death and annihilation everywhere, Stegemann (1893-1916) nonetheless remains unfazed and resigned to his fate. Personal sacrifice for the larger cause of German victory remained a powerful motivating force during the Great War.

Hans Stegemann, Student of Forestry, Technical University, Eberswalde
Born March 28, 1893 at Wutzenow, district of Prenzlau
Died September 20, 1916 near Swinjuchy, in Volhynia

France, about 100 kilometers from Paris, on the Cambrai-Peronne Road, August 28, 1914.
[. . .] Our men, like heroes, did not yield a foot. Sergeant Struck, a good comrade, fell close to me, shot through the lungs – dead immediately. We buried him with our Lieutenant Lorenz in the churchyard at Caffenciers. I wrapped the body in pine branches, as no coffin was to be had. We put up a cross on the burial mound. My Lieutenant Rogge had the top of his skull grazed by a bullet going through his shako; he fell to the ground immediately, but he was only stunned. He is now quite fit and back in the saddle with us again. Lance-Corporal von Heimburg fell, saying with a smile, "We shall win all the same!" On the day after the battle, I was at the church, which had been turned into a hospital. All the men with lung wounds were getting on very well, almost better than the slightly wounded. Lungs heal quickly, as a clean shot makes only a small hole and goes right through. Their one and only question was: "How are things going, Sergeant? Is it all right again?" "Lads, I've come straight from the line; everything is going well; we have advanced a bit. The English have really taken a beating!" They smiled and fell asleep like happy children, all of them calm and confident, they suffer without complaining. It is dreadful to see the seriously wounded, especially those who are unconscious and delirious. I rode across the battlefield yesterday. There were about ten English dead for every one of ours. I will write no more about the battlefield. It is difficult to imagine how anybody can come out of battle unharmed. One gets quite cold-blooded and indifferent. My pipe has not gone out all day. – All the armies are marching toward Paris, and so are we!

Coucy-le-Château, September 18, 1914.

A cyclist comes sliding rather than riding down the steep hill on the right. Breathlessly he shouts: "Order from Major (name unintelligible) – the rifle battalion is out of ammunition!" I put spurs to my bay, swing him round and gallop back. I find some ammunition wagons belonging to the rifle

battalion. “Gallop! Right wheel! March!” Off we go at the gallop, flogging the horses! Up the hill, on and on, through the heavy guns that are blazing away over our heads – we can see the great “sugar loaves” in the air, because we are straight behind them, so that our eyes can follow their flight. On we go! “Where is the rifle battalion?” I shout to everybody. Shrapnel bursts. Wounded hobble and crawl back. Among them is a rifleman. His arm is busted. “Well, old chap, how goes it?” He smiles gaily all over his face. “Jolly well, we’re really knocking them around again! Only they want cartridges, Sergeant!” “Good bye, take care, get well soon!” All this in passing – – the last words shouted over my shoulder.

Another green coat. A corporal is on his way back. “Hey, what’s wrong?” “Not a single cartridge left!” “Good Lord! Here they are!” “Thank God!” “Hop on the wagon. Now show us the way.” We trot a little further, and then there they are. When they catch sight of me, they fire off their last ammunition. For now there is a fresh supply! I’ve got four thousand. Meanwhile things are starting to get serious; the man who was sitting on the wagon just a moment ago is now lying beside it with a smashed leg, which has since been amputated. I am still perched on my horse beside an ammunition column – six wagons as well as my cartridge wagon. The enemy has got the range, and now the fun begins: “sss . . . rrrr . . . sch!” it goes, as if a giant were beating the leaves of oak trees with a stick. All the horses of the fifth ammunition wagon – three on the right and three on the left – lie struggling, their legs in the air, while the next ammunition wagon is safe. The soldiers operating the wagons are crawling about on the ground. Many have been killed. A moment ago the column was safe and sound: now it looks as if somebody had brought an enormous flyswatter down on it. My wagon stops in the middle of it all. The whistling continues. For the moment I don’t dismount. “Whoever gets hit, gets hit!” my rifleman says and he is right. My men unload as calmly as if we were standing in the village square at Görlitz on a Sunday. They count slowly: one hundred, two hundred, three hundred, four hundred, and so on, as they pile up the packages. The riflemen come and calmly fetch the little pointed things: the English won’t go anywhere, and nothing upsets the composure of a Holsteiner. When a “heavy” comes whistling over they grin and whistle, imitating the sound. Upon seeing my pipe one of them says, “By gosh, that’s a good idea!” and pulls out a battered cigar and begins to smoke: “That pretty nearly got spoilt in my pocket.” They stay calm. One takes off his shako, which is full of bullet holes and looks at it: “Well, I hope it won’t let the rain in,” he says, and puts it on again. “Alright, now you’ve got cartridges.” Suddenly my horse sinks beneath the saddle and founders. I have no time to see to him right now; I am carrying cartridges to the firing line. When I come back he comes to meet me, whinnying quite gaily, and snuffles at me. Three bullets have grazed his back, but have only given him a fright. I have a bullet through my gaiters, in the same place as last time. I’ll have to buy another pair for the third time. A bullet has gone through the sleeve of my coat; that can be sewn up; my precious skin is unharmed.

Source: Hans Stegemann, in Philipp Witkop, ed., *Kriegsbriefe gefallener Studenten [War Letters by Fallen Students]*. Munich, 1928, pp. 211-14.

Translation: Jeffrey Verhey