

■ A Soldier's Letters Home

Date: October 18–29, 1918

Author: Samuel Edward Avery

Genre: letter

Summary Overview

Sergeant Samuel Avery was a Boston native who first joined the military in 1912 as part of the Massachusetts National Guard. After serving in the Mexican Border Campaign near El Paso, Texas, in 1916, he was assigned to the American Expeditionary Forces and sent to France. During the time when these letters were written, Avery was fighting with the 103rd Infantry in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, a series of engagements along the Western Front that began in September 1918 and ended with the armistice of November 11. Avery's "Yankee" Infantry Division, the 26th, saw 210 days of combat in France and was involved in all major offensives in 1918. Avery's letters to his sister Emily convey a lively sense of humor and an engaging, conversational style. Despite his dangerous surroundings, Avery is concerned with conditions back home, particularly regarding the Spanish influenza outbreak, which he refers to in nearly every letter. Despite imminent danger and worries about his family's health, Avery remains positive.

Defining Moment

Sergeant Avery wrote these particular letters to his sister about a month after being released from a hospital where he was recovering from a poison gas attack. Avery returned to the ranks in late September in time to join his division in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. From September 26 until the armistice on November 11, 1918, Allied troops engaged the German Army along the Western Front and made steady but hard-fought gains. The Yankee Division had taken part in clearing the St. Mihiel salient, a triangular wedge of territory in northern France that had been occupied by the German Army since 1914. The army then turned its attention further to the north along the Meuse River and

the Argonne Forest, and during October, Avery and the Yankee Division were in the heart of the offensive in the Neptune sector fighting in the wasteland around the town of Verdun, which was the scene of some of the bloodiest fighting of the war.

Key to the Meuse-Argonne Offensive was penetrating the Kriemhilde Stellung, which was a dense network of defensive positions that included concrete pillboxes, trenches, poison gas, and barbed wire that was sometimes half a mile deep. The Kriemhilde Stellung was defended by artillery and was laid out in a nonlinear way in order to confuse and trap attacking forces. This line had remained nearly static since the beginning of the war and was considered by many to be impregnable. It was finally breached between October 18 and 23, 1918, and 18,600 prisoners, 370 cannon, and 1,000 machine guns were captured. By the end of October, the Allies had pushed the German Army back nearly ten miles.

Avery and other soldiers at the front had to contend with shell fire, artillery, and gas attacks, but they also worried about the Spanish influenza epidemic that was sweeping through the ranks and decimating their families back home. In one year, the epidemic killed 675,000 Americans and millions of people worldwide. Fort Devens in Massachusetts saw one hundred soldiers die every day. The beloved major general of the Yankee Division, Clarence Edwards, lost both his trusted aide and his daughter to the flu in mid-October, and Brigadier General George Shelton also fell ill. Avery worried constantly about his family back home, and though he takes a lighthearted, teasing approach with his sister, ordering her to "stay clear of that Spanish stuff," he also knew men who contracted the flu at the front or who received news of the death of family members.

Author Biography

Samuel Edward Avery was born in 1892 in Boston, the third son of a close-knit Irish American family. Avery worked for the Bristol Patent Leather Company in Boston and joined the Massachusetts National Guard in 1912, qualifying as a sharpshooter. He served in 1916 in the Mexican Border Campaign and was sent to France the following year with the 26th Yankee Division. Avery spent time in the hospital during the summer and fall of 1918 recuperating from a German gas attack, and he

then rejoined his division for the last two months of the war. He was discharged from the United States Army on April 28, 1919. Samuel Avery re-enlisted in the Massachusetts State Guard in May 1942 and served on the home front until the end of World War II in 1945. After the war, Avery returned to the Bristol Patent Leather Company until after it closed and then worked for Bridgewater State College, where he remained for the next twenty-seven years, retiring as chief custodian. He died in 1974 and is buried in Everett,

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

Somewhere near Etrepilly, 7/27/1918
July 27 I guess

Dear Folks

This is a sheet of paper that Miss Treat sent in a letter I just received but I guess she will excuse me for using it to send a few lines home to let you know Im still O.K. Yes, I came out of it all right but let me say I was lucky more than once for we were in it proper this time. Of coarse the papers are full of it now telling the objectives and successes that have all ready been obtained, and as for my own personal experiences (which are a few) I will leave for a latter date when after going back over them Im sure will loom up so that I can better relate them. I want to admit right here that I was not the bravest guy in the world for I wasn't just where the brave stuff was pulled.

We are now where we left off following up the Hun which is well behind the lines now for they are still going. We don't know if we are to go right back at them again or not, for here we are just within ear shot of the guns neither going ahead nor back, and being replaced by new men for those that have been knocked off in the recent fighting. For mine I hope it is back for a rest for beleive me we surly nead it after putting in three weeks on this front.

I got Em's two letters, one telling of your moving to Everett, but for safty I will send this to 297 so it will not get lost. If we go back for a rest you can expect some real letters from me but I can't promise much while living this life.

It has been raining now for three days and being out in it can't be called the best of luck. Was very much pleased with Lena's letter and will answer you bet.

Sam

Samuel E. Avery Hdq. Co. 103rd Inf.

* * *

Somewhere advancing on Trugny, 7/21/1918

Dear Em and the rest.

I do not intend to write much, for to tell the truth I am far from the writing mood just now. We are going through a critical period right now, and it is just to let you know that Im all right physically, that Im writing.

I received a letter from Al and one from you dated June 23, in which I got the pictures I appreciate them very much. Leonard sure is some boy. To sum it all up, every one looks natural and I thank you very much for sending them. I recognize Old George's House all right. Glad to know that Pa is up and about. I hope Pa enjoys his vacation.

Now Em the papers have no doubt imparted the news to you folks at home. It is too much for me to discribe the happenings especially now. As I said before Im O.K. and hope to get through all right.

Give my regards to all, for I can only seem to write only what is nessessary. Trusting this finds to all well

Sam

Samuel E. Avery Hdq. Co. 103rd Inf. Am. Ex. Forces.

* * *

Somewhere in the Pas Fini Sector, 7/6/1918

Dear Em and the rest.

As usual I am at this writing, O.K. and although we are now in the thick of it, I am very confident that Ill be all right when things are settled. I try to send a letter from no matter where I happen to be, and at present Im writing this because I have the opportunity, and the inclination (for Im never minus this latter).

Ive answered the two letters you last sent and Im in hopes of getting some more mail soon. Of late Im always pleased, yes, and feel lucky beleive me, to be able to say Im as usual. Some time I hope to be able to relate to you some of the things Ive seen and experienced but at present they had better be left unsaid. Every thing is forgot-

ten as soon as they happen and for this reason I think I would make a very bad story if I tried to explain what is and what has been going on.

I don't know how you have been receiving my mail, but I hope the few I do write get to you in a reasonable length of time. I hope this mistle [missive] finds every one in the best of health and spirits. Rest assured that I will be unless that bunch on the other side of us here don't spill the beans, and put into reality (for me) that song "I don't want to get well."

You say Em that by my letters you can tell how Im feeling and just what mood Im in. Well Em if you follow them very close latly you will see that Im in the mood to just let you know that they havent got me yet and that is all.

I am going to grab off a little chow now and am in hopes of getting a little pound [sleep] tonight, and so Ill close as ever.

Sam

Samuel E. Avery Hdq. Co. 103rd Inf. Am. Ex. Forces.

Document Analysis

From 1916 to 1919, Samuel Avery sent copious letters home to his family, particularly his sister Emily, or "Em" as he addresses her in the letters. In the letters included in this selection, Avery's general optimism and sense of humor come through. He writes in an intimate, conversational tone appropriate in letters to a close sibling. Although he writes while stationed in one of the most dangerous areas of the front line and while in constant danger of attack, he asks Em about dancing and her kitten, and he jokes about being constantly shelled to the point that he is soothed to sleep by the sound of explosions. In his letter of October 18, Avery and eight of his fellow soldiers have found a dugout to hide in, and he is eloquent about the improvement this represents. Although they are still being shelled by long-range guns, the dug-out allows for the luxury of a lit candle that can't be seen from the air, which, if it had, would have given a German plane "a good excuse . . . to drop a few iron foundries." After many nights at the front, a dry trench was a luxury, and Avery explains to his sister, "We try to get into the ground when it is possible."

Avery uses humor to relate even the most irritating elements of his wartime experience. He describes the body lice that he and most other soldiers at the front suffered from as "the meanest animal that crawls." He described himself as "scratching in two places myself"—on the writing paper and on his body. As long as Avery gets enough to eat, he is happy, and he has been at the front long enough to know that food could not be taken for granted. He describes a dinner of donuts as offsetting the terrible lodging and weather, and he later reassures his sister, "We are eating good, which is half the battle while in the trenches." His one lingering worry is the Spanish influenza epidemic that was in full swing by October 1918. He mentions it in every letter during this time, but again in a humorous way. "Keep away from that new Spanish rage won't you?" he teases, and again, "stay clear of that Spanish stuff." By the time Avery is discharged in April 1919, he would have been aware of the many soldiers who had fallen ill themselves or had lost family members to the epidemic, including several high-ranking officials in the Yankee Division.

Essential Themes

Samuel Avery's letters home paint a vivid picture of an easygoing and optimistic young man whose close relationship with his family brings him great comfort, but also causes him to worry. In one letter, he is being shelled in a wet trench, and he is concerned about when his sister will get her winter coal shipment. In another letter, he reassures Em that the weather will soon be cool enough for her to enjoy dancing again. He is looking forward to going home, but he will keep fighting until Germany surrenders under the best possible terms. Avery suffered a great deal during his time at the front—from minor discomforts, like lice and damp, to an extended stay in the hospital recovering from a gas attack. Still, his optimism is expressed in the letter's closing when he tells his sister that after he puts the letter in an envelope, he plans to "strike up a song, blow

out the candles, [and] listen to the exchange of iron . . . which will finally coo us to sleep."

—Bethany Groff, MA

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