

AT SEA



2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Roscoe E. Stewart  
En route to Europe, January 15-30, 1918



At Sea

January 19, 1918

Dear Mary Ann,

You have probably received my card or letter or both by this time, but I doubt if you have had enough time, as yet, to decipher the writing in them. I certainly did scribble them off in a hurry. From now on - for a while at least - I will probably have more time in which to write, and will try to write a more legible hand.

There are any number of things to tell about - things in which I am sure you would be interested - but I cannot mention more than half of them without giving the censor an excuse for "camouflaging" this letter into the appearance of a record of my past life. We are not permitted to give dates of sailing or arrival, nor the names of ships, ports of embarkation, points touched en route, or ports of destination. The idea is, of course, to have nothing said which might aid the enemy's interference with our shipping or endanger the transportation of our men across the

Atlantic. Being one of these men, I am naturally "strong for this idea". (How is that, Mr. Censor?)

Mail censors remind me of "Pige is Pige"; there are so many of them and no two alike. There is one species with young ideas which specializes in love letters. Anything else which falls into his hands need hope for no quarter. This species is very numerous, remember the days of its youth, and has lots of business. I was talking with a captain in - well, at the port of embarkation, who was in charge of the censorship there. Among other things he said:

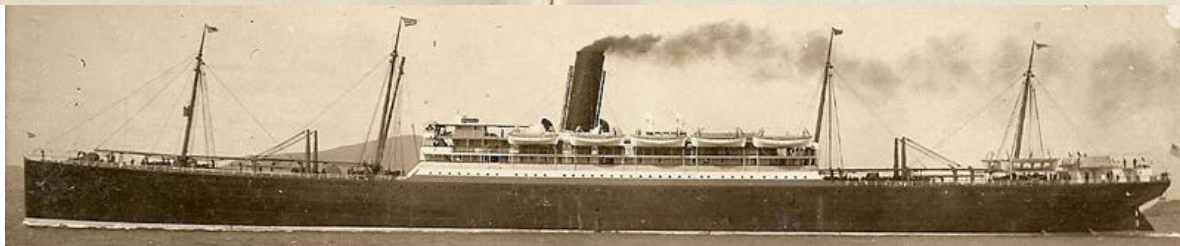
"Go to it, you love sick youngsters. Tell them that you love them. Tell them how much you love them. Tell them how much you would like to love them. Go your limit. We read thousands of letters just like yours every day. You may think that you are saying something new but you are not. We have read it a thousand times and know it by heart. Tent one 'she' does too."

I can't see why he should tell me that, can you? He must have meant it for some of the other fellows who were standing by and listening.

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Well, as I was saying, there are all kinds of censors. There are some who use a brush and pail of paint or printers ink, some for whom a fountain pen will suffice, and others who waste neither time nor money on either of these, but tear a hole in the middle of the most important page of your letter if you so much as forget and say that "the sun is casting a shadow of the North Pole across the bow of your boat", or that "the stokers must be unusually busy in the center of the earth, because it is hotter than the mischief around the equator", or anything else that might indicate your location anywhere on the face of the earth. About the only way that you can let your friends know where you are located is to tell them that you are dead.

Yes, there are censors who "have a heart" and censors who haven't. Some say that there are censors who have brains and censors who haven't, but why pick on the censor? From what I hear the censor without a heart would have the fellow



SS Mongolia

who accuses him of having no brains, in the bottom of the Atlantic with all the rest of us before we reach Europe if he did not have intelligence enough to counteract the "zero height of burst" of his accuser. They tell me that some men on this boat have actually written home saying that they left — at — o'clock, Jan —, 1918, bound for —, —, and expected to stop at — about Jan — where they would lay over for — days, and where their mail would be taken up and sent back to the United States. They had the places filled in, however, which I have left blank. What the "brainless censors" didn't do to these letters is not worth telling about. Let us hope for more "brainless censors." Tell your friends not to "kick" on the censorship of the mails, or try to "get things by." In the first place it is not liable to do any good and, in the second place, if it does "get by" it may mean the lives of hundreds of men. This sub-marine business is much more of a menace than I had ever dreamed. We are all keeping diaries

and will be able to tell a great deal more about the war after we have been through the things we are telling about, and the danger is over; so tell them to be patient.

The first day out of port and, in fact, all of the time until the morning of January seventeenth was windy with a fairly rough sea; not a high sea, but just rolling enough to give the boat what Lieut. Gule and I agreed to call "a tantalizing roll." That would be a good name for a song, a poem, or a pipe dream, wouldn't it? We both expected to be sea-sick but did our best to "stall it off." We were safe the greater part of the day because we could go to our staterooms and lie down whenever the "furious feelings" began to come over us. Meal time, however, brought real danger. It takes just so long to serve a dinner, and you either have to "stand by the ship" or admit defeat and let your friends see you in full, undignified retreat. I tell a

you, we did not waste any time in idle conversation over our meals those first few days. We both succeeded in "weathering the gale" after a fashion, however, although, as Halse said afterwards, we felt "pretty low" most of the time. I think it was worse than being really sea-sick - and see what we missed. We have not done very much bagging so far; the voyage is not yet over.

One man on the boat was so badly affected that he threw himself into the sea. That is what I call the extreme sea-sickness. It was on the second day out when Lieut. Halse and I were standing in the stern of the ship on the lower deck talking to the engineer, that the lookout just above our heads began calling "man overboard." We looked over the rail against which we had been leaning and there, in the water just below us, so close that it seemed we could almost touch him, was the man - a stoker from the ship's crew - face turned upward, hands held over his head, making no outcry and apparently no effort to save himself.

The ship passed and rapidly left him behind. It seemed an age before anything was done. There were no life-preservers where we could get at them. Finally, one after another, three of them were thrown overboard from some where amid ship, but by this time the man was between two and three hundred yards in rear. At one time he was so near the logline that we thought he might grab it, but he did not seem to try. Finally we saw him sink and, in less than a minute, come up again. A few seconds later he sank a second time and, so far as we know, never came up. The ship circled three times around the place where he was last seen and went on its way without him.

When inquiring the fact was brought out that he had been on shore leave in ~~the~~ there, nearly gave the censor a job for twenty days, and had been drunk all of the time. His trouble was laid to booze. Some of the men on the forward

part of the lower deck had seen him run along the deck, look behind him two or three times, climb upon the rail as if to fix something overhead, and then drop into the ocean below-deck first and hand-over-head just as we saw him pass the stern of the ship. There was a lot of excitement and discussion for a few hours and then new interests came along to claim our attention and the incident was forgotten. The seriousness with which it was taken by the passengers and crew in general is pretty well illustrated by the attitude of one sailor who, by way of dismissing the subject, called back over his shoulder as he disappeared below:

"Aw-well, w'at's de difference anyway? 't's just one more poor devil gone 't'ill."

Everyone in a while a man sees just how much he really amounts to in this world. Thank God, he also has a chance once in a while now and then

to see what he can amount to if he will.

It seems that I cannot bring this letter to a close. What I have told about is only a beginning to the interesting things which have happened since I left the Middle West, and of which I could write if I were not ashamed to ask you to read it all, and afraid of what the censor might do if I were within ink-bottle range from him when he opens this letter and sees what a job he has before him. I will take a chance on writing some more letters, however, for I have plenty of time on my hands these days. If a half dozen such letters as this should be dumped into your mail box all at the same time I am sorry for you and very repentant, and I hope that matches are cheaper in the United States than they are reported to be in England. The mail is all censored aboard ship and held until the end of the voyage for re-mailing. Hence the possibility of several letters arriving together.

Please remember me to your father and mother, and Jane, and tell them that, cold as it now

is in Illinois, I'm glad for you all that you are there instead of out there on an army transport rolling around in the Mid-Atlantic.

Most sincerely yours  
Roscoe.