

Center For American War Letters

Leslie Michele Derrough looks at the importance of preserving our ancestors' wartime correspondence for future generations

All photos courtesy of the Center For American War Letters at Chapman University

As the keepers of our family histories, we tend to focus on what we can get. But there comes a time when we realize that it needs to also be about what we can give. We spend so much of our time searching for facts, photographs and stories that will enhance our personal historical record that we often forget how what we collect can add to something bigger.

As researchers, we already know the value of a handwritten letter. Even the most mundane of correspondence between friends can harbor the most valuable treasure we can learn about an ancestor: their personality. But it can also reveal how they looked at historical events that were taking place as they lived, and one of the most paramount times of their lives was war. The letters soldiers wrote home to family

War letters come in all shapes, sizes and conditions: BOTTOM LEFT: Andrew Carroll, Director of the Center For American War Letters, with a 10-foot long letter a sister wrote to her brother during the Korean War. TOP: During WWII, a soldier stationed in the Pacific sent his daughter a message on a coconut. BOTTOM RIGHT: A WWII letter written by Private John McGrath in Italy features a hole from a bullet that struck him moments after he finished his letter and placed it in his rucksack; he made a full recovery.



April 21, 1945

Dear Betty Anne:

I saw something today that makes me realize why we're over here fighting this war.

We visited a German political internment camp. The camp had been liberated only two days and the condition of the camp has changed very little. The American Red Cross just arrived.

The inmates consisted of mostly Jews, some Russians, Poles and there were six American pilots that they shot almost immediately.

When we first walked in we saw all these creatures that were supposed to be men. They were dressed in black and white suits, heads shaved and starving to death. Malnutrition was with every one of them.

We met one of them that could speak English so he acted as a guide for us. First we saw a German monument that stated 51,000 died in this camp in three years. They were proud of it. Second we went in the living barracks. Six sq. ft. per six people. Hard wood slats six ft. high. Then we went down through rows of barbed wire to a building where they purposely infected these people with disease. Human guinea pigs for German medics.

In this medical building were exhibits of human heads in jars and tattooed human flesh or skin on the walls.

After that we went up to the torture dept. Here were beating devices that I won't explain. The clubs, by the way, are still lying there with blood on them. In another room in this building were 8 cremator furnaces. The doors were open and in one I noticed one body 1/2 done. A horrible sight. After I snapped a few pictures I walked out side and noticed a truck with 50 naked dead bodies piled up six deep. Turning my head away from that I looked over against the wall and here were about 30 more. Their eyes open, mouths open, blue, purple, cut and some with holes in them.

The guide told us he lived with some of these men for years. He said most of them died with-in the past 24 hrs. In fact a medical Red Cross man told us they are dying like flies. Nothing can be done for them. It's too late. They are much too far gone.

There is another place I never told you about. The latrine. I won't tell you about it, because you won't believe me. It's unbelievable.

The letter that started it all for Carroll. Composed in 1945, Carroll's cousin wrote about the horrors he saw when visiting a recently liberated internment camp: "When we first walked in we saw all these creatures that were supposed to be men." Carroll, who has Irish and German ancestry, became fascinated with letters from the battlefield afterwards and begged his mission to collect as many as possible, and eventually to start the Legacy Project.

and friends contained the reality of what was happening or the illusion of being safe in a warzone. From the American Revolution to current tours of duty in the Middle East, soldiers became the eyes and ears of war.

Andrew Carroll was once one of us: an ordinary person who developed an interest in history after a fire destroyed his family home in the late 1980s. When a cousin sent him an old letter written while fighting in WWII,

Carroll became fascinated with war letters. He started collecting them, from anyone and everyone, related or not. But where he differs from us, is that he made this passion his life's work, creating the Legacy Project in 1998 and now currently as Director of the Center For American War Letters at Chapman University in California. And to think it all started with one letter. A letter, in fact, that may have very well ended up in the garbage can.

"We want to preserve history and we feel that those who have lived through these historic events are really the best individuals to kind of convey not just what war looks like, but what it feels like; what it's truly like to be there on the front lines or on the home front. I think this is a key thing," Carroll explained regarding not only his original personal mission, but the Center's as well. Today, the collection is over 130,000 pieces of correspondence, but Carroll knows there are thousands of more letters out there that may be headed for the dumpster if someone doesn't take steps to find them.

In 1998, Carroll reached out to Dear Abby. After her mentioning his project in her column that was syndicated out to newspapers nationwide, thousands of letters started pouring in. One of the first letters Carroll opened was from a woman whose brother had been in Vietnam. "She said, 'Dear Andy, I'm enclosing the letters that my brother wrote from Vietnam and he's missing but he's not a POW, he's not MIA; he came home but he was so traumatized by what he had seen and experienced that one day he just walked out the front door of our house and we haven't been able to find him since.' She ended it by saying, 'I just want someone to remember who he was.' And that single sentence has stayed with me throughout the twenty-two years I have been working on this project."

Unfortunately, for us, the Center can't accommodate personal research. "We just don't have the staff to do that," Carroll said sadly. However, as more and more letters are documented and scanned, they become

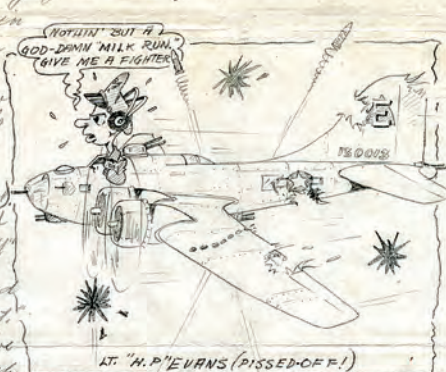
I felt quite conscience-stricken until I saw a goodly percentage of the J.W.A. crowd here and then I felt better. They were jockey races and quite exciting. All the highest and tightest in Italian were here and the whole scene reminded me more of what I've read of South America than of Italy. Being officers he walked in free as we do into many other places. It's very convenient in these days here to be in uniform, especially of a foreign nation.

I kept out with a Red Cross lieutenant named Hemingway, who comes from Oak Park by the bay - lives over on the same street "Kitty Wright" did. He has been here in the hospital of wounds and

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Dear Hugh,

guyll be surprised to know that your letter arrived safely here in Italy. yep. I said Italy! We been here for a short gull and have in that time grown to like this place quite a bit more than that "king" island. A fellow at least sees the sun here and can acquire a nice tan in three or four days. I know you'd really enjoy it here for we can take daily swims in the Mediterranean sea, sun bath daily and now and then we do get nations of good American "civilized" come you sounded rather "pissed off" your letter how you refused flying the spit. Listen, Hugh, you're wishing to hitch hant after you have heard my sad story. I'm the man behind the pilot, the so-called the navigator, the crew chief. I'm the radio operator. I have to go thru "Channels" to reach the front cockpit. And you hitch "Huh! Huh!" what else can I tell my grandchildren but that "I listened to Dinah Shore while crossing the English channel" or that "Lobby Mope and Mally had a swell show the nite I flew over the French Riviera". Wont they think I was a



LT. "H.P." EVANS (PISSED-OFF!)

LEFT: Page from a 1918 letter by Lieutenant Walter Boadway, who writes about a Red Cross ambulance driver named Ernest Hemingway in hospital with him. "He got 247 wounds from the mortar shell and machine guns," Boadway wrote about the injuries of his new friend, who had been there recovering several months before Boadway arrived. RIGHT: A cartoon sketched onto a letter by an airman in WWII who was supposed to start a job at Disney when he returned home; unfortunately, he was shot down after this letter.

available online. Start at their website by entering the URL: warletters.us, and then click on the red-highlighted box titled 'View The Digitized War Letter Collections'. From there, you can enter names, places, years and wars. I typed in 1944 and received 231 hits. I then clicked on "1944-10-16, Jack To Evabel". This brought me to a visual of the actual letter plus a transcription. Addressed to his "Darling Fink," Private John P. Bell wrote, "We're far out on the briny deep now, and so far I'm feeling tops. We eat twice a day and my appetite is right there at meal time." It's just an ordinary letter from an ordinary soldier to his wife.

But it says so much, especially if you keep reading his correspondence. Then you feel like you know him, he has become human and you care.

And that is why these ordinary letters are so important to our history. Carroll has traveled the world collecting letters like these, letters that tell the true stories of our fathers, grandfathers, and now more than ever, our mothers, aunts and sisters. "People are throwing away war letters because they think no one wants them," stressed Carroll. "But that's our whole reason for being, is that we want those letters, even if they seem 'everyday', because even

in those letters, we come across something extraordinary."

Continued Carroll: "We have eyewitness accounts of Pearl Harbor. We have a letter by a woman who was at Ground Zero on 9/11 and wrote this fourteen page letter to her family about what she went through and almost died. We've got letters from the American Revolution and the Civil War and Iraq and Afghanistan." A few of the more unique items he has acquired include a ten foot long letter written on what seems to be wallpaper that a sister sent to her brother during the Korean War, a coconut sent to a daughter during WWII, a letter



Major Oscar Mitchell, who wrote home about the realities of war: "People may think they know what war is like. Their knowledge is facts of the mind. Mine is the war-torn body, scared to soul's depth. When I was in the States, war was far away, unreal. I had read, I had seen pictures, but now I know."

mentioning Ernest Hemingway from WWI, and personal correspondence from General John Pershing, the highest ranking general in American history, whom Carroll wrote about in his book, *My Fellow Soldiers*.

Carroll has also published several books featuring letters he has collected, such as *Behind The Lines* and *War Letters*. The proceeds from his published works help fund his travels to

collect letters. "I've been to all fifty states and to almost forty countries around the world collecting letters, because often what happens is, I find out new stories that people may not put in a cover letter or there's some extra detail; plus I just love meeting these people." Carroll considers himself as the "Historian who makes house calls."

So it is now our job to give. Most of us have treasured war letters in

our collections that we plan to hand down to our descendants. What we can do now is to help preserve these normal, everyday letters for generations to come by making copies of them and donating those to the Center, along with the soldier's photograph if you have one. Carroll asks that readers also reach out to friends and family who are not conscious of the importance of these letters and ask them to donate rather than destroy. Again, the website, warletters.us, has a tab to click on which will explain how you can donate.

Carroll especially wants to reach out more to the African-American community since they have very little representing them so far. In fact, one of the letters that has touched him the most in all his years of collecting war-related letters, was one written by Major Oscar Mitchell, an African-American soldier during WWII. In it, Mitchell wanted to dispel the gilded illusion of war: "Do they die as you see them in the movies? I don't think so. Not with a smile on their lips and a happy gleam in their eyes, but rather painfully and with the knowledge that *this is it*." Their experiences, as well as those of the women who served, indigenous people and people from other countries, need to be shared and learned from. The more diversity, the more knowledge we gain. ☞☞



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