

“My Love to you All, Please Write Soon:”

The Invaluable Role of American Correspondence in the Second World War

Charles “CJ” Garland

HIST 495-01

27 April 2024

Introduction

“Dearest Jennifer... I must tell you first that I miss you just terrible [sic]. Yes, I am homesick for the farm, and for you. I miss the times we swam in the lake on hot Sunday afternoons. Remember how we did it?... I loved you, Jennifer, then, and I love you so much now... I’m waiting for the day when I’ll return—for I *will* return... we’ll drive to Ithaca and find a minister and we’ll get married... Is that alright? Please write and tell me it is so.”¹

This was an excerpt of a letter dated April 15, 1945, from a soldier identified only as George, discovered in an abandoned mountain jacket in the Italian Alps by an infantry soldier named John T. Bassett, and documented in his book *War Journal of an Innocent Soldier*. Little, if anything is known about George beyond the information conveyed in this letter: his full name, where he is from, other than that he was driving distance from Ithaca, or even his fate in the last weeks of the Second World War in the European Theater. Everything else may be unknown, but this letter nonetheless was a demonstration of just how important sending and receiving letters were, not just to George, or even to Bassett, but to the American people overall, especially those who were on the front lines, or knew someone that was. During the Second World War, the United States was in a national emergency. The Axis Powers had attacked it, and by the end of the war in August 1945, hundreds of thousands of Americans would be left dead, and hundreds of thousands more wounded or traumatized. In such a national emergency, one needed to be able to lean on loved ones for support and comfort, whether that be family, or friends, or in the case of George, a significant other. With many on the battlefield or stationed in hard-to-reach places, and at a time where the world was a much less interconnected place, the ability to communicate with

¹ George to Jennifer, 15 April 1945, in *War Journal of an Innocent Soldier*, John T. Bassett, ed. (New York: Avon Books, 1989), 31.

one another by writing letters and correspondence was the best way for families and loved ones to stay connected with the soldiers, sailors, and marines in their lives, and for service members to receive the comfort and support they needed from back home. Letters were a key resource for the maintenance of morale, and the American people relied on them a great deal, and more so the longer the war went on. Furthermore, letters and correspondence, in practice, served as a tool of mobilization, both for Americans and for the federal government, the significance of which has been recognized only to a small extent by historians. Although the writing of letters and correspondence was just one of the many factors which played a role in the overall mobilization of the American home front, they were nonetheless the most crucial lifeline in upholding and maintaining the morale of the American public. Due to the importance of correspondence as a means of support, connection, and interdependence between those in the military and their loved ones at home, letter writing served well the Federal Government's efforts to mobilize the American people and sustain the war effort.

To understand fully the role that letters played in the mobilization of the American people, research in a diverse number of letter collections was necessary to paint a more accurate picture of what wartime American life was like, both for those who remained at home and participated in the war effort where they lived, as well as those who fought on the front lines. The letters used as examples for analysis were sourced from individuals representing a variety of backgrounds and demographics, with the bulk of them focusing on five families. These families, like all families during the war, centered around the soldier, whether it be their father, son, brother, husband, etc. There was the Aquila family of Buffalo, New York. Philip Aquila, the son of Italian immigrants, was drafted into the United States Army Air Force and was stationed at

Wendover Field, Utah, where he trained bomber crews going to the Pacific Theater.² There was also the Elliott family of Silver Creek, New York. Frank Elliott, who was an eighteen-year-old Army Specialized Training Program (A.S.T.P.) graduate when he enlisted, became a member of the United States Army's 611th Tank Battalion in the Pacific Theater. Elliott would go on to fight in, and survive, the battle for Okinawa.³ The Masudas, a Japanese American family who, during the war, were forced to live in internment camps in Washington state and Idaho, included Minoru; he was originally from Seattle, and was a medic in the 442nd infantry regiment. He fought in North Africa and Europe.⁴ The Ogata family of Rockford, Illinois, had Kenje, a Japanese American Staff Sergeant of the 726th Bomb Squadron in the European Theater.⁵ Lastly, there was the Brown family of Danville, Virginia. Their eldest son, David Tucker Brown, Jr., was a First Lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps, but never lived to tell his story, as he was killed in action on Okinawa on May 14, 1945.⁶ Also included in this analysis are a variety of letters and correspondence written by women across America, collected and compiled by historians Judy Litoff and David C. Smith in *Since You Went Away: The War Letters of America's Women*. Overall, these families each represent different backgrounds and experiences, and as a result, give a good insight into American life from across the country. There is one commonality, however, that these families share with one another: they wrote to their service

² Philip Aquila, *Home Front Soldier: The Story of a GI and his Italian American Family During World War II*, ed. Richard Aquila (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 26-46.

³ Frank Elliott Manuscript, *Reminiscences for my Grandchildren*. (Radford University Center for Archives and Digital History, Radford, Virginia, n.d.), 88.

⁴ Minoru Masuda, *Letters from the 442nd: World War II Correspondence of a Japanese American Medic*, ed. Dianne Bridgman (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), xv-xviii. ProQuest, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/radford/detail.action?docID=3444291>.

⁵ "Personal Narratives: Kenje Ogata Collection." *Serving: Our Voices*, Library of Congress, accessed February 29, 2024, <https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.76800/>.

⁶ David Tucker Brown, Jr., *Letters*, ed. Barbara Trigg Brown, (Richmond: William Byrd Press, Inc., 1946), iii.

members every single day they were away from home and overseas, primarily out of an emotional necessity.

Previous Writings

Compared to other historical research of factors that contributed to the mobilization and motivation of the American people, little exists in the way of historical analysis on the role that letter writing played. The lack of established historiography is not a result of letters and correspondence not being impactful, but rather due to past historians being more eager to analyze and focus upon the other ways that the American home front participated in the war effort. John Morton Blum's *V was for Victory*, considered one of the most influential writings on the historical understanding of the American home front, took a birds-eye-view approach to the mobilization of the American home front. Blum's main topics of focus were on the industrial efforts of America's biggest businesses and the transformation that American culture underwent during the war.⁷ As a result, letters and correspondence in any capacity are barely mentioned. *No Ordinary Time*, a dual biography by historian Doris Kearns Goodwin about President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt during the war is also considered incredibly influential in the historiography of the mobilization of the American home front. Goodwin, much like Blum before her, overlooked the presence of correspondence, and its value to both the home front and government policy.⁸ *The Good War*, an oral history compiled by historian Louis 'Studs' Terkel, mostly focused on the individual experiences of the war for soldiers and civilians, rather than on mobilization efforts, and was written to combat the "disturbingly profound... disremembrance of World War Two" that had begun to occur in the latter part of the twentieth

⁷ John Morton Blum, *V was for Victory: Politics and American Culture During World War II* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), xi-2.

⁸ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Homefront in World War II* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 9-11.

century.⁹ Although letters and correspondence are discussed more frequently in *The Good War*, including how they affected servicemen and their loved ones, they are mentioned more so in the context of letter censorship and the difficulty for families to communicate openly with one another.

When it came to the historical focus on the ways that Americans mobilized or were mobilized into participating in the war effort, concentration was put on factors that had a more obvious and visible effect. The most common themes that were seen in historical works that analyzed the home front and the factors that mobilized the American people were economic incentives (such as war bond drives), propaganda campaigns to encourage patriotism and resentment toward the Axis Powers, and major increases in the labor force, both in terms of available jobs, and a more diverse group of people working for longer hours. In that context, the results are evident and can be easily studied, and they have. The mobilization of the labor force, as well as American industry, gave a massive and much needed jolt to the economy and launched it out of the Great Depression, due in no small part to the women who were encouraged to fill those labor needs.¹⁰ The context missing, however, was that many of those women were pushed to do so out of a desire to help those they loved in active duty, whether it be their sons, fathers, brothers, or significant other, and they continued to stay motivated because they were able to stay connected through letters. Likewise, there was a massive propaganda effort, spearheaded by the United States government, to motivate and anger the American people, and it pushed them to defeat Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and Fascist Italy.¹¹ Though the appeal to emotion and

⁹ Studs Terkel, *The Good War: An Oral History of World War II* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 3.

¹⁰ Elaine Tyler May, "Rosie the Riveter Gets Married," in *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness During World War II*, ed. Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, 140-141.

¹¹ Jones, John Bush. *All-Out for Victory! Propaganda in magazine advertising* (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2009), 5.

patriotism in the rhetoric of American propaganda was crucial to the war effort, and to getting Americans to enlist into the armed forces, they were also motivated to protect their families for even more profound reasons. So long as they were able to maintain contact with family members, whether they wore a uniform for the military or for the workplace, they knew what they were fighting for. If the ability of people to send letters and correspondence to their loved ones was taken out of the equation, the war effort would have suffered, and the war itself may have been prolonged for years more.

The other primary reason letters have not been considered as a major factor in the success of the American war effort is because so few letters survived the war, compared to the number written, and even fewer were preserved or saved in the years following the war. Rebecca S. Rohan, in her bachelor's thesis "*You Write, He'll Fight*": *An Analysis of World War II Letters from American Women 1941-1945*, recognized this issue herself, stating that "many of the published compilations are composed of letters from soldiers which were saved by their stateside recipients."¹² The primary purpose that letters and correspondence served was a temporary one; they served to inform the reader what was occurring in the moment, or in a short timeframe preceding it. Once a new letter came, the previous one became obsolete. Most of the letters that were sent to soldiers that got saved either were sent back home by the soldier or held onto for reminiscing. This resulted in a relative scarcity of correspondence in this era, for not everyone was the reminiscing type. In the preface of *Since You Went Away*, Litoff and Smith concede that the collecting of letters for their book was a massive undertaking and proved difficult to find the number of surviving letters that they did from the home front.¹³ It is the historical contributions,

¹² Rebecca S. Rohan, "'You Write, He'll Fight': An Analysis of World War II Letters from American Women, 1941-1945" (B.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 2011), 10.

¹³ Judy Litoff and David C. Smith, *Since You Went Away: The War Letters of America's Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), viii-ix.

therefore, of Lutoff and Smith, as well as Rohan, that provide the best historiographical analyses of the deeper impact that letters had on the mobilization of the American home front and their contribution to the war effort. Though their primary focus was limited to letters' impact on American women, they nonetheless established their importance in the mobilization efforts. Another equally important work to the historical scholarship of letters and correspondence as a mobilization tool is *The Greatest Generation Speaks: Letters and Reflections* by journalist Tom Brokaw. In this work, he told the story of dozens of veterans and soldiers of the Second World War, primarily through their letters: how it affected them, how it motivated them, and how it motivated their loved ones in turn.¹⁴ It is in this motivation that historians who have analyzed letter writing agree upon as the primary factor in American mobilization: the idea that correspondence overall was the greatest morale builder, both for the home front, as well as on the front lines.

Letters and the Home Front

Letters provided a connection between loved ones. The maintenance of such a vital connection was a necessity in the upkeep of morale for soldiers and civilians alike. Rebecca Rohan stated this most effectively when she said that “for soldiers in a time of war, the importance of receiving mail cannot be overstated.”¹⁵ For those who were left at home, separated from their family, friends, or anyone else they loved, receiving letters was just as important, if not more so. Of the letter collections analyzed as case studies, the overwhelming majority were sent to and from immediate family members, defined as parents, siblings, spouses, or children. If a letter was not sent to an immediate family member, it was almost always addressed to an

¹⁴ Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation Speaks: Letters and Reflections* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1999), 233-237.

¹⁵ Rohan, “‘You Write, He’ll Fight,’ 6.

extended relative (such as a grandparent, aunt or uncle, or a cousin), or to a close friend. For example, of the letters that Frank Elliott wrote and received in June 1944, his first full month as an enlisted soldier, all but two were sent between him and his parents and siblings; the two exceptions were a letter from his neighbor, Helen Mohart, and a letter from his best friend, Charlie Galloway.¹⁶¹⁷ Every letter documented from the Ogata family was between Kenje and his wife, Wilma.¹⁸ Richard Aquila, who published his father Philip's letters as part of his book *Home Front Soldier*, noted that "all... are addressed to [his] older sister, Mary," who read them to the rest of his family, which included his parents, siblings, and wife, also named Mary.¹⁹ Similarly, in *Letters*, published by David Brown's mother, Barbara, after his death, it is stated in the introduction that "when not otherwise addressed the letters are written to his mother," and a majority of the letters that were not, were addressed to his brother, Ned.²⁰ Of the 120 letters featured in Minoru Masuda's *Letters from the 442nd*, all were addressed to his wife, Hana.²¹ Overall, it was the ability to send correspondence that kept familial ties whole. With the war raging, letters from loved ones proved to be a much-needed escape from the bleakness.

For separated families, the mental and emotional strain that they were dealt with could not be overstated. Both sides of the war effort experienced their own unique personal turmoil. For family members who remained at home, they were subjected to the fear and paranoia that was brought about by an active state of war, and the hardships that came with it. The rationing of everyday commodities, for one, meant that those on the home front had to get by with less food,

¹⁶ Frank Elliott to Helen Mohart, June 1944, letter box 6, Frank N. Elliott Papers, Radford University Center for Archives and Digital History, Radford, Virginia.

¹⁷ Frank Elliott to Charlie Galloway, 7 June 1944, letter box 6, Frank N. Elliott Papers, Radford University Center for Archives and Digital History, Radford, Virginia.

¹⁸ "Personal Narratives: Kenje Ogata Collection." *Serving: Our Voices*, Library of Congress, accessed February 29, 2024, <https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.76800/>

¹⁹ Aquila, *Home Front Soldier*, 49.

²⁰ Brown, *Letters*, 2.

²¹ Masuda, *Letters from the 442nd*, xi.

utilities, and materials and live a more constrained lifestyle. For many, this new way of life left them struggling more than during the Great Depression. A strict cutback on goods such as gasoline, rubber, sugar, and especially canned goods and meat, as well as household supplies such as blankets and clothes, led to shortages across the country, and record levels of hoarding.²² Frustration with rationing measures and shortages, as a result, were incredibly commonplace, and in some cases, letters provided a useful means of communication to express such frustration. Catherine “Renee” Young, a housewife from Esmond, Rhode Island, utilized this medium quite well. In a letter dated February 3, 1943, she had this to say about a butter and meat shortage in her county: “I hate dry bread!... Yesterday I didn’t take any meat... I’m sick of the same thing... people can’t keep eating [sausages] every day.”²³ Letters also helped remedy the despair that shortages brought through reminiscence or as a distraction. In a letter dated February 26, 1944, having complained about the frustration of much smaller portion sizes, a cousin of Frank Elliott’s, identified only as Katie, imparted the following wisdom: “we don’t know what is ahead of us. Just try and not worry and fret but just trust Him who doeth all things well.”²⁴ Lastly, letters often served as a helping hand in combatting the struggles that came with rationing and supply shortages. Philip Aquila’s brother, Tony, was no longer able to buy more than two packs of cigarettes a month, and so, in a letter dated November 18, 1944, Philip made this offer to him: “I’ll send Tony... a box of Camels, Lucky, or Chesterfield. Okay?” In that same letter, Aquila also gave his own forecast of the future: “Peace with Germany by Christmas or New Year’s [eve] 1944 is my strong prediction.”²⁵ Though he may have been optimistic in his prediction, what can

²² Blum, *V was for Victory*, 94.

²³ Catherine Young to George Pike, 3 February 1943, in *Since You Went Away*, 84-85.

²⁴ Frank Elliott to Katie, 26 February 1944, letter box 2, Frank N. Elliott Papers, Radford University Center for Archives and Digital History, Radford, Virginia.

²⁵ Philip Aquila to Mary Aquila, 18 November 1944, in *Home Front Soldier*, 75.

be seen with letters like these is that they got people through struggles, such as rationing, by writing to one another about a better, brighter future to come.

On top of the stress that the average American family was under due to the rationing policies, many left at home, including and especially women, found themselves with a sharp increase in responsibility. The large numbers of men who had left home to fight created a massive and sudden shortage in the labor force that needed to be filled. This, coupled with the numerous jobs created in the effort to mobilize industry, meant that these Americans had to take on responsibilities that had never been asked of them, such as becoming the breadwinner of their household and working more than one full time shift in physically and mentally demanding jobs, which were usually male dominated. Even if women, or anyone on the home front, had the luxury to avoid working, they still found themselves with a heavier weight of responsibility on their shoulders. Although most women welcomed this opportunity happily, this added responsibility, put on top of the fact that they were still expected to have and manage a family, left them with much to handle.²⁶ Take the daily routine of Frances Jankowski, discussed in historian Perry R. Duis's essay, *No Time for Privacy: World War II and Chicago's Families*:

“[She] rose at 4:45 A.M... after feeding her family and riding a streetcar to the Swift and Company stockyards plant, she spent the next eight hours trimming pork scraps for sausage. After the ride back to her South Rockwell Street home, she did the family shopping, cleaned their six-room apartment, cooked dinner, and still found time to cultivate a victory garden... collect scrap, and participate in neighborhood civil defense exercises.”²⁷

Much in the same way that families on the home front used letters as a distraction and an outlet for frustration over the supply shortages that necessitated rations, so, too, were letters to their soldiers used to distract from the hardships of the home front. Edith Sokol, who worked as a

²⁶ May, “Rosie the Riveter Gets Married,” 129-130.

²⁷ Perry R. Duis, “No Time for Privacy: World War II and Chicago's Families,” in *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness During World War II*, ed. Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 17.

social worker full-time during the war while her husband, Victor, was overseas, ended her day by writing letters like this one, dated May 8, 1945: “it just wouldn’t seem right not [to] kiss you ‘good night’ even though it’s via the mails,” a practice she found “relaxing.”²⁸ In essence, letters and correspondence may not have contributed directly in the mobilization of either the American industry or economy, but they did provide a source of comfort that, in turn, helped families at home be better contributors to the war effort. The letters themselves played one of, if not the greatest roles in the regulation of Americans’ morale.

The worst of the emotional strains that troubled families on the American home front was not knowing how their loved ones overseas were doing at present, or if they were okay. Separated by oceans, and in an age before instant communication, it was impossible for a mother, for example, to know if her son was alive or unhurt at any given moment. That fear of not knowing led to a stateside culture of immense anxiety and dread. Therefore, families receiving a letter and getting an update from their soldiers was one of the most important impacts that correspondence had on motivating the war effort in the states. Throughout the war, with hundreds dying in combat daily, each letter that was sent home was confirmation for families and friends that the soldiers they loved lived to see another day. This fact was more crucial during the periods of war when the fate of soldiers was much less certain. In the wake of major advances by the Allied forces, such as with the invasion of Normandy on ‘D-Day,’ or in the various island-hopping campaigns in the Pacific Theater, news about the aftermath of the resulting battles was sparse. Ray Woods, for example, was on the USS *Pennsylvania* in Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941; when his sister, Alice, received a letter from him four weeks later stating that he was alive and unharmed, she replied in her letter by saying “I couldn’t put down on paper *how* we felt

²⁸ Edith Sokol to Victor Sokol, 8 May 1945, in *Since You Went Away*, 155.

when we received your letter... to say we are elated is putting it mild.”²⁹ If a battle or major push by the military ended in failure or with many casualties, morale at home would plummet. Letters eased that burden, especially if the soldier writing said letter was a participant in such a battle. For the Ogata family, this point was especially true. Each time Kenje wrote home after a successful bombing campaign without being shot down, he would open the letter with this light and witty line, which he started doing on April 11, 1944: “Sorry I’ve been bad with my correspondence, however they’ve kept us very busy.”³⁰ Overall, for the average soldier, when mail call arrived, the letters and postcards they received provided an escape from the battlefield. These messages provided a distraction from the upfront and ugly reality of war, if even just for a little while. Furthermore, each letter sent and received was proof of life, and loved ones could learn how their soldier is doing.

Letters on the Front Lines

For the soldiers who were overseas and on the front lines, “the loss of their buddies was as traumatic as the loss of a family member.”³¹ As a result, letters from their families proved to be just as much of a remedy to the mental and emotional toll of war as they were for those who were back home. On an almost daily basis, soldiers on the front lines were subjected to traumatic scenes of active combat, which usually left someone in their unit dead or seriously injured. John Bassett, in his book *War Journal of an Innocent Soldier*, recalled such a traumatic event when he watched his platoon leader die. “‘I’m hit in the stomach!’ he yelled... ‘Help! Don’t leave me to die!’... After a while, [he] stopped yelling.”³² Such events led to stress and battle trauma, something that was made worse since soldiers were constantly under threat of death or bodily

²⁹ Catherine Woods to Ray Woods, January 1942, in *Since You Went Away*, 7.

³⁰ Kenje Ogata to Wilma Ogata, 11 April 1944, in “Personal Narratives: Kenje Ogata Collection.”

³¹ Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation Speaks*, 87.

³² Bassett, *War Journal of an Innocent Soldier*, 12-13.

harm. To make things worse, they had to manage all this while they were hundreds, sometimes thousands of miles from their loved ones. For some, when they enlisted or were drafted, they were leaving home for the first time in their lives. For many more, they would go years without being home or seeing their families. One of the main ways that letters and correspondence helped was by letting soldiers know that, even if they were not safe, their family was. Although the risk of death and bodily harm was significantly lower, soldiers, especially those who had left home for the first time, often worried about the well-being of those they loved. This was particularly true for Minoru Masuda, for the simple reason that his parents were in an internment camp. During his time in basic training, his wife, Hana, was still interned; in his first letter after joining the 442nd, dated October 25, 1943, he expressed deep concern about her as well as his parents' well-being and insisted on allotting most of his first paycheck: "The gov't will mail you a check... If I make it \$85.00 to you, I'll have \$36.35 left. I think I can use all of that—let's see how that works out."³³ Hana was released six weeks later, but his parents remained interned for the remainder of the war. On October 9, 1945, in the first letter written following his parents' release, Masuda wrote to Hana that "they haven't told me too much about their life as yet, but it does my heart good to know that Mom and Pop are once again enjoying the pure air of freedom."³⁴ From January to March 1945, Philip Aquila's mother, Clara, was hospitalized with stomach cancer; though she recovered enough to be discharged, Aquila included in almost every letter onward "I hope ma is doing better."³⁵ In essence, getting a letter from a family member meant a great deal of relief, both for a soldier who needed a distraction from the war, and for the peace of mind that their family was doing all right without them, or that their situation was improving if they were not.

³³ Minoru Masuda to Hana Masuda, 25 October 1943, in *Letters from the 442nd*, 10.

³⁴ Minoru Masuda to Hana Masuda, 9 October 1945, in *Letters from the 442nd*, 253.

³⁵ Aquila, *Home Front Soldier*, 109-259.

Another issue that was brought about by the separation of soldiers and military personnel from their homes, and one that was especially true for those who had left their families for the first time in their lives, was the disconnection from important family celebrations. When they were overseas, in training, or on duty and away from home, they often did not know what was happening. They could not keep up with the events occurring in their home lives, or what the people they knew were doing. Often, they missed important events such as birthdays, weddings, parties, and holidays. The soldier simply did not know what was happening at home. With the ability to regularly and frequently communicate via letters and correspondence, soldiers were able to continue their civilian lives in spirit, wherever they were. On Thanksgiving Day 1944, for example, Frank Elliott's mom, Ima, set the scene of what the day was like for the family, discussing how his father had raked the leaves out of the front yard, how she and Lois, his sister, had cooked the meal, and how after dinner, they played the card game 'Old Maid.' She then finished the letter by saying "This is your second away from home. We will keep hoping the war will be over before another Thanksgiving."³⁶ Similarly, on December 17, 1944, David Brown, Jr., who may have been homesick after nearly three straight years away from home, asked his brother, Ned to give out details of their family's Christmas, while "I'll be enjoying mine," on an undisclosed island in the south Pacific, "while it's still Christmas Eve with you."³⁷ In some instances, soldiers missed milestones such as a graduation from high school or college. For Elliott, this was especially true, considering he had entered the Army Specialized Training Program in place of a high school education, and was separated from his friends. Charlie Galloway would fill him in on what he and their friends were up to at school, including yearbook pictures ("I imagine I struck a Napoleonic pose. It will look terrible.") and school functions ("It's

³⁶ Ima Elliott to Frank N. Elliott, 23 November 1944, letter box 11, Frank N. Elliott Papers, Radford University Center for Archives and Digital History, Radford, Virginia.

³⁷ David Brown to Edward Brown, 17 December 1944, in *Letters*, 76.

6:10 and were going to the game at 7:00. Brocton [High School] plays tonite [sic].”³⁸ If soldiers were married, they would be missing wedding anniversaries, dates with their wives, and, if they had children, the ability to raise them and watch them grow. Philip Aquila, in a letter dated March 25, 1945, his wedding anniversary, stated that he wanted to hear his wife, Mary’s voice: “I’m putting in a call to you tonight, and I hope to find you... at home.”³⁹ Furthermore, on February 4, 1945, the day his first child was born, Aquila wrote that “I sure feel proud... I sure wish I can get [a furlough] to come home,” which he did get.⁴⁰ On May 28, 1944, their fifth anniversary, Minoru Masuda expressed his frustration and devastation to his wife, Hana, that “I couldn’t send you anything... I tried sending roses, but no dice.”⁴¹ Kenje Ogata, in a Hallmark card sent March 1, 1944, a few days before his first anniversary with Wilma, wrote “[I] would like very much to have a date with you, if your [sic] not busy” and asked her, rather humorously, to “please hold about fifteen consecutive dates open for me!”⁴²

Loved ones would also go to great lengths to maintain the presence of their soldiers at home. It could not be overstated how important the maintaining of a sense of community was to the morale of soldiers. The commonplace etiquette of home front letters, for one, reflected an almost journalistic writing style, all to make the soldier feel as if he were at home, to give them a sense of normality. Most letters opened with or contained one or more sentences about the weather that day. In one example of many, Ima Elliott wrote to Frank in January 1944, opening by saying “well, we are having some more cold weather, but not too bad today.”⁴³ Furthermore,

³⁸ Charles Galloway to Frank N. Elliott, 15 February 1944, letter box 2, Frank N. Elliott Papers, Radford University Center for Archives and Digital History, Radford, Virginia.

³⁹ Philip Aquila to Mary Aquila, 25 March 1945, in *Home Front Soldier*, 134.

⁴⁰ Philip Aquila to Mary Aquila, 4 February 1945, in *Home Front Soldier*, 116-117.

⁴¹ Minoru Masuda to Hana Masuda, 28 May 1944, in *Letters from the 442nd*, 30.

⁴² Kenje Ogata to Wilma Ogata, 1 March 1944, in “Personal Narratives: Kenje Ogata Collection.”

⁴³ Ima Elliott to Frank N. Elliott, January 1944, letter box 1, Frank N. Elliott Papers, Radford University Center for Archives and Digital History, Radford, Virginia.

families on the home front would keep their names present in the community by talking about them to numerous people. This would include discussion about what their soldiers were up to, or even a trading of letters with friends and neighbors, when appropriate. People of all ages in the community were a participant, including children, as demonstrated by Sheril Cunning, who was seven years old at the beginning of the war, in an interview with historian Louis ‘Studs’ Terkel: “Lotta kids, their fathers were actively in the war... we would always look at [each other’s] letters... we talked about it at school all the time. Absent fathers.”⁴⁴ The way that this practice would reflect in letters sent to the front lines would usually be mentions of someone in town asking how the soldier was doing. In a letter dated October 1944, Ima Elliott wrote the following to her son following a lunch with the town dentist: “[Dr. Augustine] asked how you were making out, and if you were still interested in dentistry.”⁴⁵ This demonstrated both how town residents remembered those who have went away, as well as their hopeful return at war’s end. Similarly, in a letter written following American victory in the Pacific, dated August 19, 1945, Marjorie Larson, whose husband John was ordered to continue occupying conquered Japanese islands, expressed how those in the community wondered about his return: “Everyone [at church] asked if I wasn’t expecting you home soon... now that we have victory... well, I had to tell them no.”⁴⁶ Those at home would, conversely, discuss the happenings and events of other servicemen in their community, either from what they had heard directly from them or from what they had heard from their loved ones. Charlie Galloway did this often, such as on January 7, 1945, where he discussed what had become of some people both he and Frank Elliott knew: “Sam Guiso and

⁴⁴ Terkel, *The Good War*, 236.

⁴⁵ Ima Elliott to Frank N. Elliott, October 1944, letter box 10, Frank N. Elliott Papers, Radford University Center for Archives and Digital History, Radford, Virginia.

⁴⁶ Marjorie Larson to John Larson, 19 August 1945, *Since You Went Away*, 278-279.

Louis Meck are in the navy at Sampson. They say in the paper that Milt Paul made Annapolis (which he always seemed to want anyway).”⁴⁷

The opposite was true, as well; soldiers often kept the memory and presence of their loved ones alive, wherever they were. For one, they would, much like their families at home, talk about what was happening to them, so long as it was light, and so they would not worry about the ones they loved. Common things discussed by soldiers would be what duties they performed that week, such as with David Brown, on December 18, 1942: “Last week and this week we had field instructions sited where the Battles of Bull Run took place. The park is very interesting and beautiful.”⁴⁸ Others would talk about what they did in their leisure time, like Masuda, who, on March 26, 1945, “went to see a movie last night on the sandy field out here— Brazil it was,” and though he did not like it, he would “probably go again.”⁴⁹ What they would most commonly talk about was fun they had, partly in the effort to alleviate the worries, even if only a little, that their families had about their well-being. On February 14, 1944, when his quarters were in a snowstorm, Frank Elliott reported to his mother that “even though it was plenty cold we had a lot of fun. We had a 20-minute break and a grand snowball fight during it.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, when they had downtime, or even if they were off-duty, soldiers would read letters from their loved ones to one another. If good news had come to the family of a loved one, it would typically be shared. Though this practice was more common during times of low morale, such as after a lost battle or a high-casualty event, soldiers nonetheless enjoyed talking about their loved ones with their brothers-in-arms, even if generally, when given the chance. Garson Kanin, who

⁴⁷ Charles Galloway to Frank N. Elliott, 7 January 1945, letter box 13, Frank N. Elliott Papers, Radford University Center for Archives and Digital History, Radford, Virginia. Note: Galloway referred to how Milt Paul gained entrance to the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland.

⁴⁸ David Brown to Barbara Brown, 18 December 1942, in *Letters*, 20.

⁴⁹ Minoru Masuda to Hana Masuda, 26 March, 1945, in *Letters from the 442nd*, 175.

⁵⁰ Frank N. Elliott to Warren and Ima Elliott, 14 February 1944, letter box 2, Frank N. Elliott Papers, Radford University Center for Archives and Digital History, Radford, Virginia.

collaborated with fellow soldiers while stationed in England, talked about the practice of trading letters with one another, and remarked that “I read some of the greatest prose in the English language, written by eighteen-year-old kids who couldn’t spell. It didn’t matter. It was the feeling.”⁵¹ The line “it was the feeling” is important in understanding why this occurred. There was no greater morale booster for soldiers than a motivating letter, regardless of whether it was addressed to, or had anything to do with, the person reading it. It is why John Bassett, who had not gotten any mail from home for several weeks prior, retrieved and saved that unfinished love letter from George. “I could not help myself. I had to read it.”⁵²

Perhaps most crucially, however, letters were a way for soldiers to process trauma, or a way to distract from it. Given the realities of war, the inevitability arose when soldiers were subjected to traumatizing events, especially battle and the costs that came with it. As a result, they would write letters home for a distraction in the wake of such an event. Although they would very rarely mention details of whatever ordeal they had to overcome, if they talked about it at all, their ability to hear from home and write about their survival helped them process the most horrible parts of their service. Such was the case for Ogata who, on two separate occasions, had his plane shot down over enemy territory while conducting an air raid. On December 26, 1944, the second day he was shot down, Ogata noted in an oral interview he gave later in life, that he was “dozens of miles in enemy territory,” and “didn’t even know what country [he] was in.”⁵³ For over a month, he was missing, presumed dead, and when he got himself to an allied base on January 21, 1945, he wrote the following letter, knowing that his family likely had believed the worst:

⁵¹ Terkel, *The Good War*, 373.

⁵² Bassett, *War Journal of an Innocent Soldier*, 31.

⁵³ Kenje Ogata, interview by Jeanette I. Calkins, *Serving: Our Voices*, Library of Congress, August 18, 2008, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/afc2001001.76800.mv0001001/>.

“Hi Darling. Remember me? A bad penny always returns you know. I hope I didn’t cause too much worry for you all- that’s the sad part of it all... As soon as I get back to [my] base tomorrow, I’ll write you a big, long letter. We’re all okay and in perfect trim so please don’t worry...Forgive such a short note, but I do want you to get this right away.”⁵⁴

To be able to write a letter which announced his survival and that he was unharmed likely had a huge impact on Ogata’s well-being and helped him move on from the assured terror he would have felt from such a close call with the enemy. Soldiers also used correspondence to help themselves work through witnessing the vilest acts committed during the war, something which was especially true for those who bore witness to, or participated in liberating, the concentration camps used to conduct the holocaust against Europe’s Jewish populations. In an interview of Olga Nowak, she talked about the following letter she received from her husband, Walter: “Last letter I have [about it] is January... He said all the fences have been taken down ... ‘Oh my goodness, the Jewish people were all killed.’”⁵⁵ Similarly, when subjected to the worst of humanity, like Nowak had, having a support system allowed soldiers to continue their duty into another day. This was true for Judah Nadich, a Rabbi who served as a Jewish chaplain in the European Theater. In the last days of the war, he was assigned a horrible task: surveying the recently liberated Dachau concentration camp, and to get an understanding of the needs of its survivors. In an interview with Tom Brokaw for *The Greatest Generation Speaks*, he expressed how his beliefs were challenged as a result: “I was wrestling with the idea that of course occurs to any person who believes in God—how could a good God permit this to happen?”⁵⁶ He later went on to explain that letters from home, particularly from his congregation, helped him keep the faith. He quoted one such piece of advice given to him in that matter: “If I believe in God [I

⁵⁴ Kenje Ogata to Wilma Ogata, 21 January 1945, in “Personal Narratives: Kenje Ogata Collection.” *Serving: Our Voices*, Library of Congress, accessed February 29, 2024, <https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.76800/>.

⁵⁵ Terkel, *The Good War*, 426.

⁵⁶ Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation Speaks*, 120.

will] have difficulty. If I don't believe in God, I have more difficulties."⁵⁷ Overall, the mail that soldiers sent and received were incredibly crucial to their success as soldiers, as well as to their survival.

Letters and Tragedy

The following excerpt was written by Warren D. Elliott, Frank Elliott's father, on July 5, 1944, which relayed sudden and terrible news about their ten-year-old neighbor, Carl Sallberg, someone that Frank used to babysit:⁵⁸

"As Lois has written you yesterday Carl Sallberg was drowned at Hanford Bay Monday... The funeral is at two PM Thursday from the house, and they are going to bury [him] at Silver Creek. poor Dean (Frank's brother) feels very bad about it and as you probably know Carl and Dean were [going] to share the same tent."⁵⁹

When it came to dealing with a tragedy, usually the death of someone who a soldier or their loved ones knew, or of a national tragic event, letters played an important role in helping them heal and process the terrible news. Whether it be a national tragedy, a tragedy in a hometown, similar to what Sallberg's death was, or especially a personal tragedy, letters would be sent between families and loved ones to help with processing grief. Despite the home front being a much safer place than the war front, death was still very much something that regularly happened, and letters sent to soldiers would break the news of unfortunate events of this nature. In November 1944, the Mitri family, neighbors of the Aquilas, learned that one of their two sons had been killed in action; later that same month, the mother of the family, Theresa, died as well. When Philip received word of this double tragedy on November 24, he wrote in response that "I'm really sorry to hear that. I can't help but feel [now] that this war ruined that whole

⁵⁷ Unknown to Judah Nadich, n.d., in *The Greatest Generation Speaks*, 121.

⁵⁸ Charles Galloway to Frank N. Elliott, January 1944, letter box 1, Frank N. Elliott Papers, Radford University Center for Archives and Digital History, Radford, Virginia.

⁵⁹ Warren Elliott to Frank N. Elliott, 5 July 1944, letter box 7, Frank N. Elliott Papers, Radford University Center for Archives and Digital History, Radford, Virginia.

family.”⁶⁰ Early the next month, their other son, Nick, was ordered home. Because the father of the Mitris, Carmen, had died the year before, Philip asked in a letter dated December 5 for his family to check on him, and followed up with this: “I guess is sure is tough for him because he [will not] find his mother and father there.”⁶¹ These examples further demonstrate the maintained bonds that soldiers had with their community, even during the worst of events. Unfortunately, for all, the death of a neighbor while the soldier was fighting overseas was a common occurrence, but because of letters, those who knew them could better persevere together.

When a tragedy occurred on the national level, correspondence also helped both the front lines and the home front move forward. This most occurred when there was a significant setback in the war effort that resulted in either heavy American losses, as seen early on during the Pacific Theater and in North Africa, or after a major battle. It was easy to get overwhelmed, or even discouraged, when news broke about such events. Furthermore, when such news occurred, families would be more worried about the well-being of their loved ones overseas, more so than they normally were. Upon receiving a letter that the husband of a friend of hers had been killed in action during an island-hopping campaign in the Pacific, making her further overwhelmed from the state of the allied war effort, on April 24, 1943, Patricia O’Brien, who worked for the Army Air Corps at the newly opened Pentagon, wrote to her husband, Al, that “I think it would be better to be in Poland or Greece where they kill all the family instead of just one person and leave the others grubbing around trying to make a life out of nothing, like those two kids will have to do,” referring to the two children of her widowed friend.⁶² Such venting of anxiety and frustration was very commonplace in the event of a major setback. The other primary way letters helped Americans move forward after such a large loss of life was to either focus on the positive

⁶⁰ Philip Aquila to Mary Aquila, 24 November 1944, in *Home Front Soldier*, 77.

⁶¹ Philip Aquila to Mary Aquila, 5 December 1944, in *Home Front Soldier*, 82.

⁶² Patricia O’Brien to Al Aiken, 24 April 1943, in *Since You Went Away*, 241.

or focus on the victories the Allied Powers had achieved up to that point. A notable example of such an occurrence came in the immediate aftermath of D-Day; though thousands of Americans died during this operation, the day nonetheless ended in victory for the Allied Powers. When Barbara Sanz, a beauty salon owner, heard the news of the invasion on June 6, 1944, she wrote a letter to her future husband, Mac, about how “were happy that it is started, so it can all end soon” and that “I just don’t feel real cheery tonight, although I hope I’ve cheered you up a little by letting you know I’m... proud of you.”⁶³ In essence, when families were reeling from national tragedy, they comforted each other through letters, and when there was cause to celebrate, they celebrated together. Bassett did so in the one letter that he shared in *War Journal of an Innocent Soldier*, sent to his parents on May 2, 1945, the day war was declared over in Northern Italy, where he was stationed:

“It has been a truly wonderful day... The men in this village shot their rifles over the lake all afternoon and tonight there is a big victory celebration going on in the middle of town. I know you are as happy as I am. I can’t wait now until we return to the states.”⁶⁴

Two of the greatest national tragedies to shake the American people and threatened overall morale the most were the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, which led to direct American involvement in the war, and the death of Franklin Roosevelt, just as war in the European Theater was winding down. Correspondence was used, typically from soldiers to their distraught families at home, to comfort them and put their minds at ease after these events. In the case of Pearl Harbor, the letters sent home conveyed an optimistic outcome for the United States. David Brown, who had already been enlisted in the Marines for six months when Pearl Harbor was attacked, gave his mother plenty of assurance in a letter sent three days later: “If the Axis continues as energetically... I fear we shall have a long war [but] be cool and do not worry... the

⁶³ Barbara Sanz to Lester McClannen, 6 June 1944, in *Since You Went Away*, 45-46.

⁶⁴ John Bassett to Mr. and Mrs. Bassett, 2 May 1945, in *War Journal of an Innocent Soldier*, 137.

morale amongst the Marines is very good.”⁶⁵ Likewise, in the aftermath of Roosevelt’s death, letters served to reassure families on the home front that nothing was going to change on the front lines. This was a genuine concern considering his death came at a crucial point in both theaters of the war, with the tragedy recognized as such as he “could not have lived to see the fruition of his greatest undertaking.”⁶⁶ Aquila wrote to his family on April 13, 1945, the day after Roosevelt’s death, to reassure them of the following: “His death isn’t affecting the war none, so don’t worry. Germany is being cut to bits and as far as I’m concerned, the war in Europe has ended... and I don’t think [Japan] feels like playing around any too long.”⁶⁷ This was the common sentiment among soldiers on the front lines, even though their letters were filled with somber tones. Such was the case for Brown who, amidst the fighting on Okinawa, found the time to write on May 1, 1945, that “his death is regretted by most of the servicemen who... were men enough to discern and approve his true greatness as a leader.”⁶⁸ In a tragic irony, this letter would be the last one he ever wrote.

For many families like Brown’s, the most intimate and heartbreaking tragedy, the one that threatened the morale of the individual family the most, would be the death of their own service member. In some cases, especially late into the course of the war when the number of casualties started getting high, a letter or other piece of correspondence would break the news of their death. If a telegram or someone in the community did not inform the family, it would be those who served with the deceased who did, sometimes through a letter. Roland Cocker, an Army Lieutenant in the Pacific, fulfilled this somber task when he wrote this letter to the parents of a soldier in his unit who died in a plane crash that he survived, informing them of his death: “Your

⁶⁵ David Brown to Barbara Brown, 10 December 1941, in *Letters*, 8-9.

⁶⁶ Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 606.

⁶⁷ Philip Aquila to Mary Aquila, 13 April 1945, in *Home Front Soldier*, 146.

⁶⁸ David Brown to Barbara Brown, 1 May 1945, in *Letters*, 88.

son was at his post performing his duties to the best of his ability... through no fault of any of the crew members, this incident occurred, and it was only a miracle that the three of us got out.”⁶⁹ If it were not the soldiers who knew the deceased that informed the family of their death, they would still write to them letters of condolence, stories, and other kind words. This helped them process the death of their friend and comrade just as much as their family, sometimes more so. After Brown died, several of his brothers-in-arms wrote letters to his family about him. On June 22, 1945, Captain W.H. Bunger, Jr. wrote the following:

“With Dave’s passing I have lost the best and sincerest friend I had. Every man in this Company felt Dave’s loss as that of a personal friend. He was a friend to everyone from the highest officer to the lowest ranking private in the Company. No task was too hard for him... He was a fine officer, and his men thought he was tops. What better compliment could an officer receive?”⁷⁰

In some cases, the brothers-in-arms or commanding officer of the fallen soldier would collect any correspondence in their personal belongings to send back to the family. If there were any letters to send back, it would contain the last things they ever wrote. Any letters written by the soldier, especially those that were never sent before their death, were incredibly important to their family in processing their grief as it would be all they had left of them. Years, even decades after the war ended, loved ones of the fallen soldier would refer to their letters, and even read them aloud, as a way to keep their memory alive long after they were gone. It helped them heal. Patricia Gaffney-Ansel experienced this first-hand; her father, Second Lieutenant George P. Gaffney, Jr., disappeared on March 11, 1944, over Papua, New Guinea, when his wife was six months pregnant with her. In an interview with Brokaw, she talked about how “several times during my childhood... mother would talk about him as we held his precious letters and the few

⁶⁹ Roland Cocker to unknown, May 1945, in *The Greatest Generation Speaks*, 87

⁷⁰ W.H. Bunger to Barbara Brown, 22 June 1945, in *Letters*, 92.

personal effects that had been returned... after he disappeared.”⁷¹ The letters of a fallen soldier were so important, in fact, that loved ones would take whatever measures to preserve them, and in turn, their memory. The existence of *Letters* as a publication came from that necessity to preserve Brown’s memory by his mother, Barbara. Even if it had been years or decades since the soldier died, if there was any new development or uncovering of their personal effects, in this case letters, from their time overseas, the loved ones left behind would latch on to it. Michael Kuzmenko, a ‘young companion’ of Terkel’s, explains its frequency: “Very often, soldiers, deathly wounded... squeezed messages to their wives or relatives [into cartridges] ... When [locals] finds these cartridges, with these letters, they are delivered to wives.”⁷² Even today, nearly eight decades after the end of the war, such personal effects are found in the places that used to be war zones, and sent back to the descendants, or in some rare cases, the loved ones of the deceased soldier.

The opposite held true for soldiers who lost a close family member while they were absent. Any letters they received from that person before their death would be the only thing they had left of them for the rest of their service. The last letter from a deceased family member would be invaluable. Furthermore, writing about a deceased family member would help them process the death just as much as it would for the rest of the family at home. After the Masuda family was forced into internment camps, Minoru’s brother, Hakaru (who he affectionately referred to as ‘Hack’) contracted tuberculosis and died on May 9, 1944; in a letter written to Hana on the one-year anniversary of his death, Masuda remarked that “thinking about Hack

⁷¹ Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation Speaks*, 82.

⁷² Terkel, *The Good War*, 436.

certainly makes me feel sad although I don't think of him often. I'm glad for that, [because] when I do, I can feel the void that his passing created in me.”⁷³

Letters and the Federal Government

Given how crucial letters were to the morale of the American people, there was a clear incentivization on the part of the Federal Government to utilize and deploy letters as a tool to motivate war effort. By the end of the first year of direct American involvement in the war, it was reported that “The army postal service is now dispatching some twenty million pieces of mail overseas every week, making this the greatest overseas mail handling problem ever confronted by any postal system.”⁷⁴ In other words the number of letters sent to and from the United States had become unprecedentedly high. As a result, government officials understood two important things: one, given the monumental rise in letters, there was an incredible opportunity that had to be capitalized on, and two, that there needed to be a system put in place to streamline the process of sending letters to and from the home front, and ease the burden on the overworked postal service. To take advantage of the first understanding, several government entities, chief among them the Office of War Information, began distributing propaganda in several mediums that stressed the importance of writing letters. The primary ways were through advertising in magazines and newspapers, and through posters that emphasized and encouraged writing letters at every given chance.

At the suggestion of former Postmaster General James Farley to reorganize the war effort after the United States got directly involved, the Roosevelt administration, beginning in 1942,

⁷³ Minoru Masuda to Hana Masuda, 9 May 1945, in *Letters from the 442nd*, 211.

⁷⁴ United States Marine Corps. “Report on Sending Mail to Servicemen,” 1943, in Smithsonian National Postal Museum, website, audio recording, <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibition/victory-mail-letter-writing-in-wwii/letter-dos-and-donts>.

started to incentivize American industries to encourage American mobilization in any way possible.⁷⁵ In many ways, this included the process of sending and receiving letters, as well as any products associated with it, such as the paper or ink industry. Such was the case for the Parker Pen Company, a major office supplier, which was given permission by the War Production Board to disregard ration policies that were in place if it meant they would focus and advertise sending mail to servicemen; furthermore, *Fortune* magazine at the time had noted that “by helping the government advertise the morale-building value of mail for servicemen, Parker naturally created a blue-sky demand for ink.”⁷⁶ As a result of deals such as the one that was made with Parker, many industries pushed the message of letters and correspondence building morale in their advertisements (see figure 1). Magazines and newspapers themselves played just as important a role in pushing the government’s message of encouragement of sending letters. They frequently published testimony from soldiers demonstrating how much letters and correspondence meant to them. For example, in *Post* magazine, they published a “nearly full-page portrait of General A.A. Vandegrift, Commandant of the United States Marine Corps,” who pushed the message that “mail is morale. Ask any man overseas. He’ll tell you that a bright cheerful letter from home is like a five-minute furlough.”⁷⁷ During holidays, such as Thanksgiving or Christmas, these advertising campaigns substantially increased. *Life* magazine did so, as it posted advertising starting in September that was “encouraging folks at home to mail Christmas packages to GIs overseas by October 15 to ensure they arrived by December 24.”⁷⁸ Advertisements also encouraged families to talk about their role in the war effort in their letters, as well (see figure 2). Furthermore, posters, specifically those commissioned directly by various

⁷⁵ Daniel Scroop, *Mr. Democrat: Jim Farley, The New Deal, and the Making of Modern American Politics* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2006; Internet Archive, 2020), <https://archive.org/details/mrdemocratjimfar0000scro/page/n7/mode/2up>.

⁷⁶ Blum, *V was for Victory*, 107.

⁷⁷ Jones, *All Out for Victory*, 175.

⁷⁸ Jones, *All Out for Victory*, 158.

government agencies, were just as impactful to the encouragement of the writing of letters. However, the primary message that came from government-issued posters focused on the answer the government produced to solve the strain put on the post office and other mail carrying agencies.

The Federal Government responded to the unprecedented rise in correspondence and letter writing since the entering of the United States into the war by making it easier, cheaper, and more convenient to do so. As a result, the Office of War Information and the Post Office introduced and encouraged the use of Victory Mail, known simply as “V-Mail.” As explained by a film that the Office of War Information released following the rolling out of this service, correspondence written on V-Mail letters were “reduced to a tiny strip of film” and then “dried, carefully inspected, and cut into individual letters” once they were shipped to the front lines.⁷⁹ The introduction of V-Mail was crucial, as any potential slowdowns brought serious risk to the morale of soldiers on the front lines. Timuel Black, who was part of the liberation of France, experienced the damage to morale due to sidetracked mail during the holiday season: “We had no idea what was happenin’ outside... Psychologically, it did somethin’ to me.”⁸⁰ As a result, it threatened the war effort, as focus would be taken away from fighting the Axis Powers. Therefore, the United States Post Office, under the leadership of Postmaster General Frank Comerford Walker, had its powers increased in the name of efficiency regarding the shipping of letters and correspondence. His main goal was to eliminate the “air mail rates for soldiers,” and allow for “free mail for soldiers out of the country,” which V-Mail helped to achieve.⁸¹ As a result, the government began to push the idea of V-Mail being the best way to conduct letter

⁷⁹ “Victory Mail,” produced by Office of War Information, Smithsonian National Postal Museum, 1944, video, June 2, 2009, 2:17, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tj_Log7wStY.

⁸⁰ Terkel, *The Good War*, 281.

⁸¹ Frank Comerford Walker, *FDR's Quiet Confidant: The Autobiography of Frank C. Walker*, ed. Robert Ferrell. (Denver: University Press of Colorado, 1997), 247.

writing from the home front to soldiers overseas, mostly through the medium of posters (see figures 3, 4, and 5). Overall, with V-Mail, soldiers were now able to receive mail, not only faster than before, but cheaper. Furthermore, the Federal Government benefitted from this maintenance of the war effort, both at home and abroad, which helped in a substantial way to achieve victory for the Allied Powers.

Although the encouragement to send letters to and from the states did occur to preserve the mobilized home front for the good of the American people, the federal government nonetheless had ulterior motives. With the advent of V-Mail, it became much easier for the Federal Government to censor letters that contained sensitive or undesirable information that could lead to disorder. Mostly, this effort was driven to maintain the integrity of the American war effort. Censorship was a known, accepted reality during the war, and was even advertised as a benefit when V-Mail was introduced: “In the censorship section, anything that might reveal vital military information is cut out.”⁸² It was taken very seriously, and there was very rarely a letter sent back to the states that was not reviewed for censorship. Peter Bezich, an infantryman in the Pacific Theater, almost learned this the hard way: “I gave my coordinates of where I was, [and] I gave it to my commanding officer to censor... He wanted to court martial me for disclosing my position.”⁸³ What was less advertised, however, in why the government felt it had to control letter writing through censorship and the V-Mail service, was that it better helped them monitor certain demographics, namely Japanese Americans. In the wake of the Pearl Harbor attack, the Federal Government felt obligated to keep a particular eye on Japanese Americans, something that was borderline obsessive, not just for them, but for the broader population. “With

⁸² “Victory Mail,” produced by Office of War Information, Smithsonian National Postal Museum, 1944, video, June 2, 2009, 2:17, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tj_LoG7wStY.

⁸³ Terkel, *The Good War*, 80.

few exceptions, Americans were obsessed with the uniquely evil nature of the Japanese... they saw a ‘Yellow Peril’” throughout the course of the war.⁸⁴

At the same time, however, there was a significant number of soldiers who intentionally tried to bypass the letter censoring system to communicate with their loved ones at home, and the reverse was just as true. Although not everyone was successful in doing so, some were. The main way these families would try to get around censoring would be by communicating in coded language or cyphers. This was only the case if it were not obvious to anyone outside of the letter writer and recipient. Of the overwhelming majority of those who did try to bypass the letter censors, their motivations were not ill-intentioned. Usually, they just wanted to inform their loved ones of the full truth of what was happening to them. When Frank Elliott had finished his training after officially enlisting, and was sent to the Pacific, he wrote coded letters for this exact purpose: “my dad and I had come up with a code so I could tell him where I was. I learned well after I got home that he would plot where I was on a map in his study, so he’d know for sure where I was.”⁸⁵ Overall, the role that writing letters played in mobilizing the war effort on the American home front was much greater and more pronounced than it seems at first glance. For multiple reasons and motivations, the Federal Government saw fit to mobilize letters and correspondence to mobilize better every part of the American war effort.

Conclusion

Letters were a means of support; they were a way for American families to stay connected during a time where those in the military and the ones they loved that remained at

⁸⁴ John W. Dower, “Race, Language, and War in Two Cultures,” in *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness During World War II*, ed. Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 169-170.

⁸⁵ Frank Elliott Manuscript, *Reminiscences for my Grandchildren*, 107-108.

home needed an established interdependence. As a result, it gave the Federal Government another avenue to get the American people mobilized and willing to support the war effort. The writing of letters and correspondence may not have been the principal factor in the overall mobilization of the American home front, but they were incredibly important to the upkeep of morale. In fact, there was no factor that affected the morale of the American people more crucially than a letter. It was what got the American people through one of the darkest chapters in their history, and it was also what made living life through a national emergency most tolerable. It was so important to establish and maintain relationships during such a time, and letters allowed this to happen. When there was a major victory for the Allied Powers, families celebrated together across continents and oceans through letters. When tragedy struck, either on a personal or national level, families comforted one another and cried together through letters. It also gave soldiers in the most precarious or dire of environments something to look forward to, the idea that even if someone was “thousands of miles from home and going nowhere... at least there would be mail” waiting for them.⁸⁶ When analyzing the Second World War, it is easy to credit victory for the Allied Powers, specifically the United States, to the obvious factors: major battles that decided the course of the war, economic mobilization, or important individuals with enough power and in the right place to create success. What is lost in such an assessment, however, are the individuals who made such a victory happen, the millions of Americans who got directly involved in the war effort and sacrificed much to achieve such a victory. These were real people, people who loved one another, worried about one another, and fought for one another, whether it be at home or abroad. Overall, the idea that these people, being able to communicate with those whom they loved, through a medium as simple as a letter, was powerful enough to bring about

⁸⁶ Blum, *V was for Victory*, 3.

the end of an international crisis, and lead to their victory in the largest war in recorded history up to that point, is something that has been critically understated.

Appendix



Figure 1: Posters such as this one were made by advertisers on the government's behest and encouraged written letters to be optimistic in nature. It also demonstrated the government's awareness of the immense effect letters had on morale.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Veterans of Foreign Wars of U.S., *Keep 'em Smiling with Letters from Folks and Friends!* (poster), in Hoover Institution Library and Archives, (1941, accessed April 9, 2024), <https://digitalcollections.hoover.org/objects>.

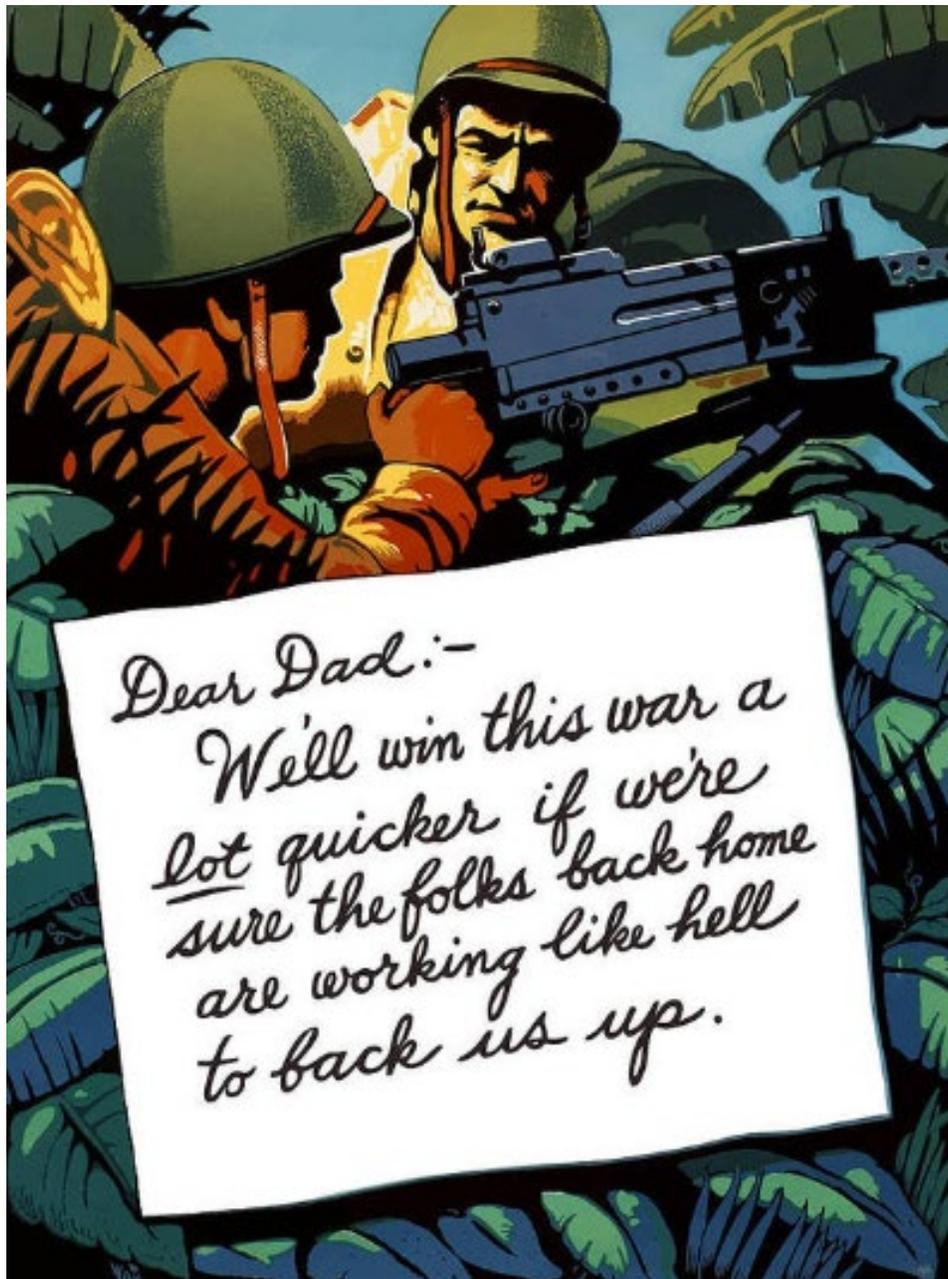


Figure 2: Advertisements such as these were commonly found in all sorts of magazines. In this advertisement, it is suggested that families talk about their routine to their soldiers, which would make them better fighters.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Jones, *All Out for Victory*, 88.



Figure 3: Posters such as these were commonplace after the V-Mail service was rolled out in full.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ "Letter Writing in WWII," *Victory Mail*, Smithsonian National Postal Museum, accessed March 7, 2024, <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibition/victory-mail>.

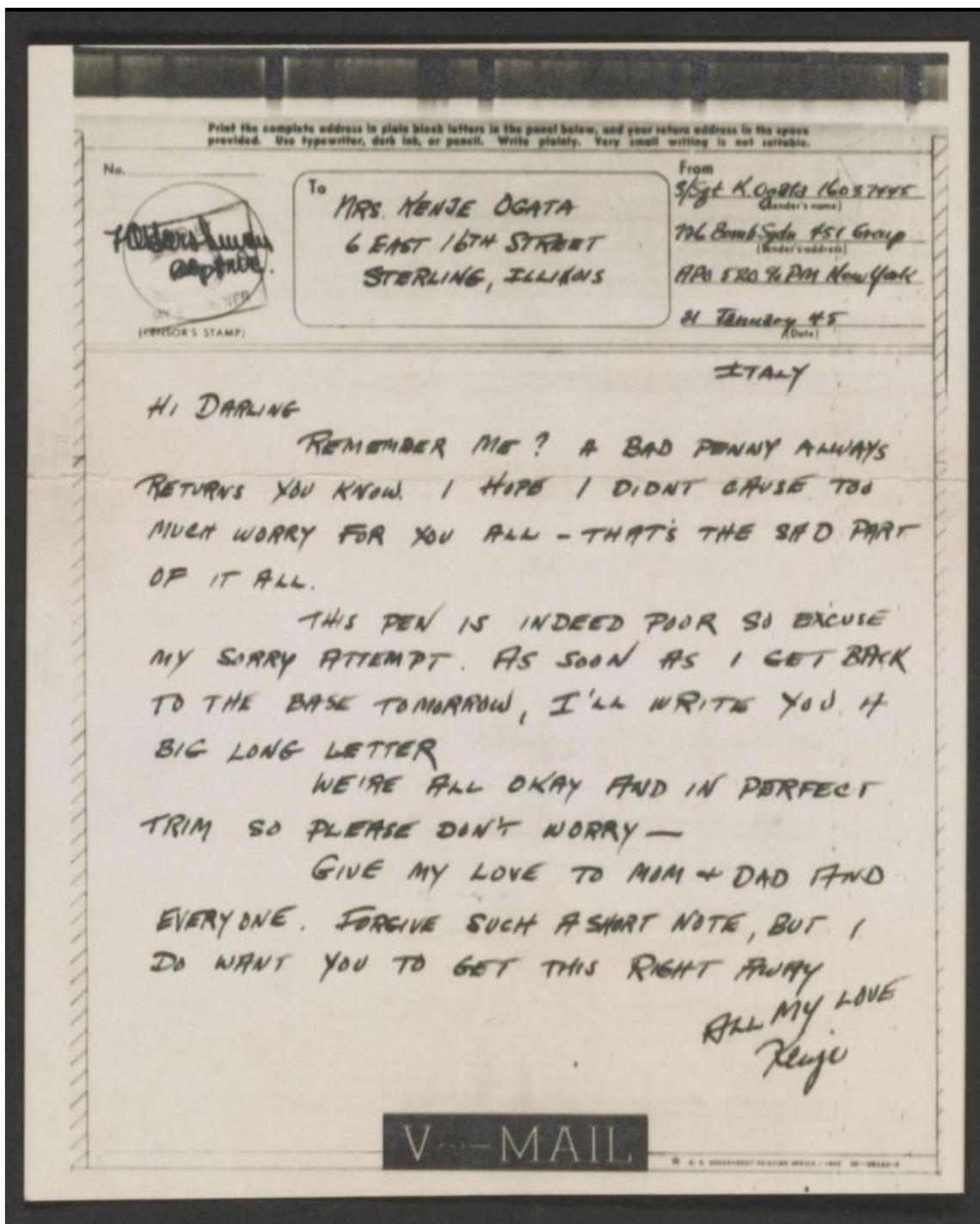


Figure 4: An example of what a V-Mail letter would look like after it was sent. This was the first letter Kenje Ogata wrote after being shot down over enemy territory and making it back to an American base.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Kenje Ogata to Wilma Ogata, 21 January 1945, in "Personal Narratives: Kenje Ogata Collection."



Figure 5: This is what the back side of a V-Mail letter would typically look like. Instructions for letter writing were common, not just on the letter itself, but on posters and advertisements, too.⁹¹

⁹¹ "Letter Writing in WWII," *Victory Mail*, Smithsonian National Postal Museum, accessed March 7, 2024, <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibition/victory-mail>.

Bibliography

Primary:

Aquila, Philip. *Home Front Soldier: The Story of a GI and his Italian American Family During World War II*. Edited by Richard Aquila. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.

Bassett, John T. *War Journal of an Innocent Soldier*. New York: Avon Books, 1989.

Brown, David Tucker. *Letters*. Edited by Barbara Trigg Brown. Richmond: William Byrd Press, Inc., 1946.

Elliott, Frank N. Papers. Radford University Center for Archives and Digital History, Radford, Virginia.

Frank Elliott Manuscript, *Reminiscences for my Grandchildren*. n.d. Radford University Center for Archives and Digital History, Radford, Virginia.

Library of Congress. "Personal Narratives: Kenje Ogata Collection." *Serving: Our Voices*.

Accessed February 29, 2024. <https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.76800/>

Masuda, Minoru. *Letters from the 442nd: World War II Correspondence of a Japanese-American Medic*. Edited by Dianne Bridgman. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008; ProQuest, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/radford/detail.action?docID=3444291>.

Ogata, Kenje. Interview by Jeanette I. Calkins, *Serving: Our Voices*, Library of Congress, August 18, 2008, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/afc2001001.76800.mv0001001/>.

United States Marine Corps. "Report on Sending Mail to Servicemen," Smithsonian National Postal Museum, 1943. Audio recording, <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibition/victory-mail-letter-writing-in-wwii/letter-dos-and-donts>.

"Victory Mail." Produced by Office of War Information, 1944. Smithsonian National Postal Museum, June 2, 2009. Video, 2:17. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tj_Log7wStY.

Walker, Frank Comerford. *FDR's Quiet Confidant: The Autobiography of Frank C. Walker*. Edited by Robert Ferrell. Denver: University Press of Colorado, 1997.

Secondary:

Blum, John Morton. "*V*" Was for Victory: *Politics and American Culture During World War II*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976.

Brokaw, Tom. *The Greatest Generation Speaks: Letters and Reflections*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1999.

- Dower, John W. "Race, Language, and War in Two Cultures." In *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness During World War II*, edited by Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch, 169-201. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Duis, Perry R. "No Time for Privacy: World War II and Chicago's Families." In *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness During World War II*, edited by Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch, 17-45. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Goodwin, Doris Kearns. *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994.
- Jones, John Bush. *All-Out for Victory! Magazine Advertising and the World War II American Homefront*. Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2009.
- Litoff, Judy, and David C Smith. *Since You Went Away: The War Letters of America's Women*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- May, Elaine Tyler. "Rosie the Riveter Gets Married." In *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness During World War II*, edited by Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch, 128-143. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Rohan, Rebecca S. "'You Write, He'll Fight': An Analysis of World War II Letters from American Women, 1941-1945." B.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 2011. <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1793/53696>.
- Scroop, Daniel. *Mr. Democrat: Jim Farley, The New Deal, and the Making of Modern American Politics*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2006; Internet Archive, 2020. <https://archive.org/details/mrdemocratjimfar0000scro/page/n7/mode/2up>.
- Smithsonian National Postal Museum. "Letter Writing in WWII." *Victory Mail*. Accessed March 7, 2024. <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibition/victory-mail>.
- Terkel, Studs. *The Good War: An Oral History of World War II*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.