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Mail Call: Wartime Correspondence

Ask anyone serving in the military far from home and they will tell you that mail call is the highlight of the day. Today, electronic communication can provide instant contact with loved ones; but nothing can substitute for the pleasure of receiving a package from home, curling up in a corner, and reading and re-reading the letter enclosed. It’s holding a piece of home in your hands.

Perhaps because war is such an intense experience with the real risk of loss, people have always been very careful to save letters from those in the service. Wives, parents (especially mothers), sisters, brothers, and sweethearts have kept every note from their servicemen and women. Years or even generations later, these caches are discovered and recognized for the valuable historical documents they have become. The Center for Archival Collections has many collections of wartime letters and diaries. A guide can be found in our online bibliography, The U.S. In Wartime. In an on-going project, our staff, students, and volunteers have transcribed hundreds of these letters, in order to make them available to researchers on the web.

Saving the letters

Saving letters from loved ones in the service is a common way of keeping them close, and most people do it almost by accident. Some, however, plan ahead. Robert Dilworth (MS 800), a lieutenant in the 21st Ohio Volunteer Infantry, wrote frequently to his fiancée, Lois Blakeman, and kept a service diary. As he filled in each small volume, he would send her this diary for safekeeping, sharing with her his daily activities and often addressing comments to her, almost like an extended letter. He may have intended to use this record to help write his memoirs after the war. When he was killed in action, Lois, by then his wife, preserved the diaries for the rest of her life.

Ira Conine of the 118th CVI (MS 673) and his sweetheart Jennie Byse had a more complex relationship during the war. While they were not engaged, they seemed to have had "an understanding" at the time Ira enlisted. Members of a more gregarious social circle than the Dilworths, Jennie and Ira agreed that she would save his letters, and that he was to return hers to her on a regular basis, so that they would not circulate around the community. (It was a common practice at this time to share letters in this way because they were a valuable source of news and entertainment for the community or the military unit. Jennie and Ira’s arrangement assured that their letters to each other would remain private.) As a result, this collection preserves both sides of the correspondence, providing a unique perspective on home and warfront activities, as well as on a long-distance courtship. Ira and Jennie married almost as soon as Ira returned home after the war.
Travel to Camp and Conditions of Military Life

It was the practice during the Civil War to give servicemen a big send-off when they left for camp, and often at way-stations along their route. At that time, units were recruited in and organized by geographical area, so much civic pride as well as patriotism was attached to the local boys. George Kryder (MS 163), a private in the 3rd Ohio Volunteer Cavalry, described this treatment to his wife:

"When we passed through Greenfield the people welcomed us with drums and fifes and when we got formed into line we were treated with every thing good to eat you could think of and when we got to New Haven it was the same. We ate and drank cider till we were quite refreshed and we filled our Haversacks with biscuit cakes pies roast chicken turkey apples and cheese..."

—George Kryder
Letter, January 18, 1862

Later servicemen like World War II soldier Byron Armbruster (MS 984) shared their Civil War ancestors' keen sense of being part of a huge undertaking:

"I'm going through an experience that time will be unable to erase, taking the bitter with the sweet and all in all the morale of the group is very high."
—Byron Armbruster
Letter, September 26, 1943

During World War I and II, the military made every effort to mix recruits from different parts of the country. Sailor Robert Carter (MS 964), noted the challenges that could cause:

"Our company now has a radio but there's quite a fight over it. Half of our company is from Virginia, N Carolina and around there, and want hillbilly music were getting together on it though. One day a Virginian and a N Carolinian were arguing about the tobacco raised in their respective states. You learn a lot about different countries or districts that way."
—Robert Carter
Letter, November 29, 1942
Disease went hand-in-hand with war. As soldiers gathered and moved from place to place during their service, they were exposed to new diseases. Field conditions were harsh and broke down the immunity of men serving in combat zones. Poor sanitary conditions and primitive medical care in the field during the Civil War made death rates high. Nearly twice as many troops were lost to disease as were lost in combat. It is not surprising that almost every letter of this time period mentions the health of the soldier and his unit. Robert Dilworth's "sick book" provides a look at one company's health record. George Kryder was not alone when he suffered from a long-term serious cough, and mentioned typhoid fever in the army. Alfred and Addison Searles (MS 597) both died of disease less than a year apart. Guy Morgan recounted many illnesses in his unit, including smallpox. World War I soldier Ferris Myrice mentioned the appearance of "Spanish Flu" in his company. This was one of the popular names for the influenza epidemic which killed so many people all over the world in the years following the war. Like many others in every conflict, Robert Carter got measles.

Training and Routine

One of the greatest differences in military service between the time of the Civil War and the World Wars was in the length and quality of the training before troops were sent into combat. Civil War troops, whose term of enlistment might be as short as three months, were taught how to handle their weapons and how to march or ride in formation. Parade drills were a constant of camp life and were considered a form of training and discipline.

"We have dress parade every night and we have to drill one hour in the forenoon and one-hour after supper and the noncommissioned officer drill at 2 o'clock and we are on duty every three days."

- John Dunipace, Corporal, 144th OVI, Co. I., (MS 484) Letter, June 24, 1864

When Ferris Myrice (MMS 1629) reported for service in March of 1918, he spent two full months in training before being shipped overseas, but drills and inspections were still a regular part of duty behind the lines.

Warfare had changed radically by the time of World War II, when troops spent weeks in basic training, getting in physical condition and learning battlefield skills. Byron Armbruster described the Army's conditions in Camp Claiborn, Louisiana:

"Besides our regular training, laying tank mines, building barbed wire barricades, close drill and extended drill, we have been taking five mile marches with packs and rifles on our backs. These marches will be increased and next week we are expected to do twenty miles in ten hours. Someone just said, we were going ten miles in 5 hours. I don't know how we'll come out, as some drop out on these five mile hikes. It's around eighty five and we haven't a dry stitch of clothing when we return. Old timers say it gets around one hundred and twenty in July and August. Plenty warm, don't you think?"

- Byron Armbruster Letter, April 1942

Specialized training then followed for many servicemen. Robert Carter was assigned to submarine school at New Haven. Gerald Rees (MS 1007), called up following his freshman year at BGSU, was transferred from one advanced training program to another, and eventually served in the 292nd Field Artillery Observation Battalion in Europe. His detailed letters describe both his classes and the plays and concerts he took in while studying in New York City.
Deployment and Action

Servicemen's letters are difficult sources to use for research into particular combat action. They knew what had happened around their position and could pass along reports and rumors of the battle in general, but they were often constrained by trying to protect their loved ones from worrying about their safety. Their only time to write was between actions, and when they were thinking about the battle to come, the battle just passed seemed less important.

Dilworth's Civil War diary for October and November of 1862, however, is full of troop movements and the clash of arms. Most Civil War letters describe small skirmishes or incidents on picket duty (similar to sentry duty today).

World War I & II censorship didn't allow discussion of troop movements or actions, for fear of the letters and their information falling into enemy hands. Many letters from this era bear the marks of the censors' hand. Some soldiers, trying to be sensitive to this concern, found it nearly impossible to describe anything they were doing, and would simply recommend that family and friends back home read the newspapers.

"I wish I could tell you where and how I am living, but that is impossible at present. I'm sure it's not like you think. It's to my advantage. I'll have plenty to tell you when I get home and it won't be about the Army. I'll never want to speak of that."
Byron Armbruster
Letter, October 28, 1943

Mail Service

Letter-writing was a good way for troops to relieve boredom, bringing them home (at least in thought) and away from the tedium that military life behind the lines can be. Some of the CAC holdings include single letters or just a few that have survived from one writer, but there are many collections of nearly complete correspondence. Judging from these collections, many men tried to write home once a week and often succeeded in writing more frequently, as did their family and friends back home.

Civil War soldiers were encamped in the field for most of their service. They wrote in the shelter of their tents with a board for a writing desk, but sometimes mention that they are sitting in the open, perhaps on a rock, writing on their laps. Still, they had commercial stationery available for use, some with very elaborate patriotic or political letterhead. Samples of these letterheads form the background of this article. Postage, however, was another matter, and soldiers frequently requested stamps and other small items from home.

"Please send me a few coarse needles and some black thread and some more stamps. I had to borrow stamps and I have but one left but I got a few stamped envelopes."
George Kryder
Letter, September 25, 1863

Thanks to an excellent rail system, the mail moved quite quickly, often travelling to and from troops in the field within a few days. However, as troops moved, it was difficult for the postal service to keep track, and the trains were vulnerable to enemy attack. Soldiers in the field were sometimes visited by friends and family from home, even when they were stationed close to action, and these friends were often used as messengers for letters, and especially to transfer money and property.

By the time of the first World War, troops behind the lines were usually housed in barracks buildings. Service clubs, especially the YMCA, were established to provide a home away from home for soldiers. Stationery, postage, typewriters, and a clean pleasant place to relax and write are described by lonely soldiers. The biggest problem was mail delivery once the soldier was posted overseas:
The longer I am in the army, the more inefficient I find the army to be - 40 days and no mail has reached home as yet. I hope that one who is holding it up died before morning. I don't care - if don't get mail - just so mother gets mine. I do believe I am getting tired of the army.

Ferns Myrice
Diary, August 22, 1918

World War II provided the same challenge to overseas soldiers.

It's been over five weeks since I have received any mail and don't expect any for about two weeks yet. There should be a goodly number awaiting me whenever I do catch up with it.

Byron Armbruster
Letter, October 11, 1943

V-Mail was the answer. Letters were written on special stationery which could be folded to provide its own envelope. The letter was microfilmed along with thousands of others and shipped overseas, saving cargo space for war supplies. Once at a central location near the addressee, the letter was reproduced at mail size and delivered to its recipient. The Gerald Rees letters from 1944 show how he and his family experimented with regular mail, air mail, and V-mail, finding at last that V-mail, which had priority, was the quickest and most efficient way to communicate. Byron Armbruster agreed.

We arrived yesterday and had twenty seven letters awaiting me plus several papers. The last one was dated October the eighth. It was from Marilyn Ann. Continue to use V-mail as they come through photographed very well with the exception of one from Mother. Please use a well sharpened dark lead pencil or a pen or typewriting. Please inform the North-West News of my change in address. They are now going through my last camp and it takes for ever to get here. It even takes mail from two weeks to two months to get here.

Byron Armbruster
Letter, October 20, 1943

Continuing the Transcription Project

Researchers in years to come will continue to find the transcriptions we have made today useful in their work. As we complete each collection, we also move forward in time, from the Civil War on into the twentieth century. At present, we have very few manuscript collections from the Korean War or Vietnam War era. Should you have knowledge of or wish to donate such material, please contact the Center at +1-419-372-2411 or e-mail Lee McLaird, Reference Archivist. It will be fascinating to see how these very different conflicts are reflected in the letters and diaries of those who served.

--Lee N. McLaird

THE ILLUSTRATIONS IN THIS ISSUE show samples of letterheads and stationery used by soldiers in wartime correspondence. Patriotic themes were always popular, especially during the Civil War, and political cartoons sometimes appeared on the envelopes as well. Red, white, and blue remained the dominant colors of American wartime stationery in later conflicts, but servicemen's clubs often used smaller, more subdued designs--it left more room for correspondence.