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commentary

Reading Letters Not Addressed to Me: An Examination of the Personal Correspondence of New England Soldiers

—David Palange (Edited by Karen Finogle)

My historical inquiry into the personal correspondence of soldiers in the American Revolution, the Civil War, and World War II began where most intellectual pursuits begin: nowhere near a classroom. It began with my mom reading the last letters home from soldiers who died in the current Iraq war, which were printed in the City and Region section of the Boston Sunday *Globe* on January 1, 2006. As she read those letters, she quietly began to cry. I knew she was imagining herself as one of the many mothers who lost their sons and daughters, receiving those loving words for the last time. In that moment, I put myself in the place of the soldier. Though I have read extensively about warfare and seen countless cinematic portrayals of battles, I cannot begin to imagine what battles and war are truly like. In this frame of mind, I asked myself the question, "How would I behave in battle?" If I were thousands of miles away from my family, friends, and loved ones, what would I say to them when I got the chance?



My research project, "Your Loving Sons: American Warfare Through the Eyes of New England Soldiers," was designed, in part, to be an appreciation of the actions of the soldiers in defense of their country, their freedoms, and the American tradition, as well as an admiration for the lost art of letter writing. Over the course of the summer, I read hundreds of letters from New England soldiers in the American Revolution, the Civil War, and World War II. This personal correspondence gave me a glimpse into the consciousness of soldiers in the midst of battle. Lieutenant John Doyle of Connecticut, for example, related to his father the sights and sounds of "Suicide Island" in the British Solomon Islands during World War II:

All the time you hear the bombs shrieking their way down, and you pity the poor souls in that area. The next time it may be your turn. The heavens are burst by the falling bombs. Prayers and curses run intermingled off your lips, and the earth retches and writhes. The close ones all but bash your head in. You pray that yours won't be a near miss but will take you in one blast.

Lieutenant Doyle eloquently described the life of soldiering and the state of war. The common soldier hoped and prayed first for survival, to see his loved ones again, and second, that if death should come, that it may come quickly and honorably.

In their letters to family, friends, and loved ones, these soldiers discussed not only the events of battle and camp life, but also duty, honor, love, and fear. In a letter to his unborn son, Cadet Robert A. Keyworth of Norwalk, Connecticut, wrote about the reasons that he enlisted to fight in World War II:

For these dreams of ours and of the men and women who came before us built this country. They made your country, my son, the last asylum for the decent man who desires, not the sun but only a chance to work for a place in it. The men we fight would keep us chained in the shadow of their false greatness and so we oppose our strength to theirs. In this way we give to you who come after your chance to dream as we were offered our own.

Soldiers often did not enlist for themselves, to satisfy their desire for adventure or glory; they fought instead to preserve the American dream. For their sons and daughters they wanted to maintain the American principles of opportunity and hope—that a good, hardworking American could achieve success and respect no matter his or her origins in society.

The goal of my Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) project was not to recreate the scenes of battle or the images of combat. Instead, I wanted to try to identify individual faces in battle and recreate the personal experience—the feelings and attitudes—of American soldiers in the three wars. My research culminated in an extensive article that analyzed the similarities and differences between eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century warfare as well as the impact of the battles through the perspective of the individual soldier. This research is a tribute to the service of these soldiers for our country and humbly honors the seemingly ordinary men and women who in the hardest days of their lives accomplished extraordinary feats.

During my research period I lived and breathed this project. It was an all-encompassing experience. When I was not immersed in research or sitting at my computer sorting my thoughts, I was consciously or unconsciously processing the information I was gathering. I strove to allow the powerful letters from soldiers to their families to speak for themselves and let the beauty of their words illuminate the evident emotion. The beautiful professions of love, the patriotic expressions of duty, and the painful admissions of fear and inadequacy emitted the often overlooked message that these American soldiers were ordinary men in extraordinary circumstances. At the same time, these beautiful, though sometimes simplistic expressions, were admirable written monuments to war.

One such profession of love and honor is a letter from Sullivan Ballou, from Rhode Island, to his wife on the eve of the First Battle of Bull Run in 1862. He wrote, "*My dear Sarah, never forget how much I love you, and when my last breath escapes me on the battlefield, it will whisper your name.*"

Readers can relate to the love, fear, and inadequacy in their own lives, yet personal correspondence from soldiers can be viewed as a microcosm of human emotion. After reading many letters detailing the pain of separation, loss, and failure, I was able to put these feelings in the perspective of my own life.

What was especially difficult for me was to accept my research project for what it was. I strove to make "Your Loving Sons" into a document worth inserting into the larger historical argument. But when it was all said and done, my work would not revolutionize historical thought or be honored for its originality, depth, or quality. There is a multitude of quality research being published that seeks to honor the lives of the soldiers through their letter writing. Regardless of the insignificance of my work within the larger historical context, it is significant to me.

After reading a variety of letters and collections of manuscripts, I developed a strong attachment to the soldiers. From these letters, I learned a great deal about the Revolution, the Civil War, and World War II in terms of the men and women who served. Most importantly, I discovered a great deal about myself through the course of my research and the completion of my project. The entire experience has served to better my educational career as well as my individual character. It has been my most difficult and greatest learning experience thus far. Though the distinguished faculty and staff at the University of New Hampshire have introduced me to a variety of important information and concepts that have had significant influence on my educational experience, the grant I received from the Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship program has served to extend my experience and allowed me to satisfy my own curiosity. Creating, developing, and researching my own intellectual inquiry pushed me to work outside my comfort zone on a historical question that has entertained historians for centuries. I am now at least a very small part of that continuing discussion.

I would like to thank the Undergraduate Research Office at the University of New Hampshire and its sponsors for supporting and funding this project and my academic curiosity. Many thanks to history Professor J. William Harris for his work as my advisor and friend. Professor Harris was an invaluable resource for questions, suggestions, and revisions as I struggled to find my own identity in this project.

This project is dedicated to mothers. My mom's compassion and support was the inspiration for this research, and the wives and mothers of American service men and women were largely responsible for the preservation of these incredible letters, without which I would have no project.

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Author Bio

*Senior **David Palange** will graduate in May 2007 with a degree in history, but he's not done with the University of New Hampshire just yet. In the fall, he will begin graduate school to get his M.A.T. in teaching and complete an internship at a middle or high school. "As much as I am nervous about being a teacher, I am also very excited," Palange said. "There is no better profession, and I hope to incorporate my experiences with research and primary sources into the classroom." Originally from Londonderry, New Hampshire, Palange's Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) project was inspired not only by letters he and his mom read from Iraq soldiers to their families but also by having a cousin who served in Iraq as a Marine. Exchanging email and letters with his cousin brought the reality of war home, as did a course Palange took with Professor Harris on the Civil War. His final paper was structured around a letter from a Civil War soldier. Working with Harris to pursue research on other correspondences from soldiers seemed a worthwhile and meaningful summer research project. "I loved the entire experience," Palange said.*

Mentor Bio

*In his twenty-second year at the University of New Hampshire, Dr. **J. William Harris**, professor of history, helps students expand their knowledge and understanding of southern history, particularly the Civil War and the lives of early African Americans. In his Civil War class, Harris introduces students to letters written by soldiers who fought in that war. This provides students like Palange with an opportunity to see a very human side to battle. Research projects like Palange's also provide an opportunity to work with unpublished manuscripts in the archives collection, which Harris feels is a valuable experience for students of history. Harris mentored Palange on his SURF project, and they worked on four drafts of Palange's paper before they were both satisfied. "David was motivated and conscientious, and he worked hard through the summer," Harris said.*