



Letters From New England Soldiers Offer Glimpse Of Life On The Front

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DURHAM, N.H. – Some express love of their wives and unborn children. Others detail the horror of war. Still others reveal daily camp life. But in all, letters from New England soldiers who fought in the Revolutionary War, Civil War and World War II tell an inspirational story of life on the front.

David Palange, a graduating senior at the University of New Hampshire, researched what it is like to go to war by reading hundreds of personal correspondence from the three wars. An article about his research project, "Your Loving Sons: American Warfare Through the Eyes of New England Soldiers," appears in the latest issue of UNH's undergraduate research journal *Inquiry*: <http://www.unh.edu/inquiryjournal/07/commentary/palange.html>. He relied on original letters in the Milne Special Collections at the UNH Dimond Library and the New Hampshire State Archives in Concord.

"All too often the personal correspondence of ordinary men and women have been lost in the sea of strategic histories of warfare, or stories of famous and compelling people or places. Beneath the onslaught of facts and statistics are the most revealing aspects of human nature in the form of personal correspondence, such as the letter of a father to his unborn child, or a simple love letter from a loving husband who senses his impending death," says Palange, who is from Londonderry.

Palange's interest in researching letters from New England soldiers began as he watched his mother start to cry as she read the last letters home from soldiers who died in the current Iraq war, which were printed in the Boston Globe Sunday, Jan. 1, 2006.

"I knew that she was imagining herself in the place of the many mothers who lost their sons and daughters, receiving their loving words for the last time. In that moment, as my mother put herself in the place of the soldiers' mothers, I put myself in the place of the soldier," he says. "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?"

Many New England soldiers express a deep sense of patriotism. Palange finds that their loyalty to the nation and willingness to defend its ideas and honor were central factors as to why they fought. Among the letters Palange cites is one from Samuel Storrow, a corporal in Company H, 44th Massachusetts Volunteer Regiment, who asks his father during the Civil War, "What is the worth of this man's life or of that man's education, if this great and glorious fabric of our Union, raised with such toil and labor by our forefathers and transmitted to us in value increased tenfold, is to be shattered to pieces by traitorous hands and allowed to fall crumbling into the dust."

Other soldiers simply want to hear news from home – what the weather is like, how the neighbors are doing, and how local sports teams are doing. World War II soldier David Roche asks his mother Annie Roche of Manchester about the news of the “square” and whether the any of the “football players of Manchester” are “any good.”

“Knowledge that life continues in the middle of a horrible war maintains a soldier’s bearing and perspective in the hazy and disorienting fog of war that surrounds him on the battlefield and haunts him while he is separated from friends, family, and loved ones,” Palange says.

Palange’s research underscores the bonds soldiers develop during wartime. Many soldiers talk about their loyalty to their new “family” on the front. James Edward (“Ned”) Holmes, a soldier from Maine describes his experiences in the Battle of Chancellorsville in 1863. He writes, “Associated as I have been with many of the men for two years, we had become as one family, we had become endeared to each other by the strong ties which our dangerous occupation will not be likely to weaken.”

But disloyalty often prompted an exactly harsh response. Abigail Grant of Connecticut is so distraught when she learns her husband ran in fear from the Battle of Bunker Hill that she sends him this curt response in August 1776: “And if you are afraid pray own the truth & come home & take care of our Children & I will be Glad to Come & take your place, & never will be Called a Coward, neither will I throw away one Cartridge but exert myself bravely in so good a Cause.”

Soldiers express a fear of death and describe the horrific scenes of bloodshed they have witnessed. Palange finds that accounts of battle and bloodshed evolve from the Revolutionary War to World War II. In the 18th century, soldiers often write glorious descriptions of battle, comparing them to beautiful music. By World War II, soldiers provide detailed accounts of not only of the horrific events, but the psychological effects of those events.

Letters from soldiers fighting in the later years of the Civil War – its bloodiest period – are indicative of this shift. Rendered almost speechless by the events of the Battle of Gettysburg in June 1863, Private John H. Burrill of the Second New Hampshire Volunteers describes the horror and bloodshed to his fiancée: “You will want me to tell you of the battle. It was awful. Language will not convey an idea.”

And then there are the love letters to wives and families, which Palange says confirms that men who experienced battle were men with lives and families. “The sacrifices that hundreds of thousands of soldiers made were often more than death. Defending their country and their principles, these men risked their physical well-being as well as their lives as husbands, fathers, and sons,” he says.

Even after the battles end, letters from soldiers to loved ones reveal how they struggled to make sense of war. Some reflect on how it had changed them personally; others write about how it has changed the country.

“The face of battle is not in the famous general or the well-known battle sites. It is in the common soldier, in his hopes, dreams, and fears that act as the conscience of battle. Their letters to family and loved ones expressed the feelings, attitudes, and experiences that shaped and defined their lives as soldiers and as men,” Palange says. “And although their actions were not considered noteworthy by historians of battles and warfare, they were nevertheless important to the outcome of their respective wars and the history and culture of the United States. It is important to keep in mind each of these faces in battle, to keep them from being obscured by statistics and facts about the larger war at hand.”

PHOTOS (High Resolution)

David Palange

http://unhinfo.unh.edu/news/img/david_palange.jpg

David Palange reads letters written by New England soldiers at the Milne Special Collections at the UNH Dimond Library.

Letter from World War II soldier David Roche

<http://unhinfo.unh.edu/news/img/davidroche.jpg>

World War II soldier David Roche asks his mother Annie Roche of Manchester about life back home in this letter.

