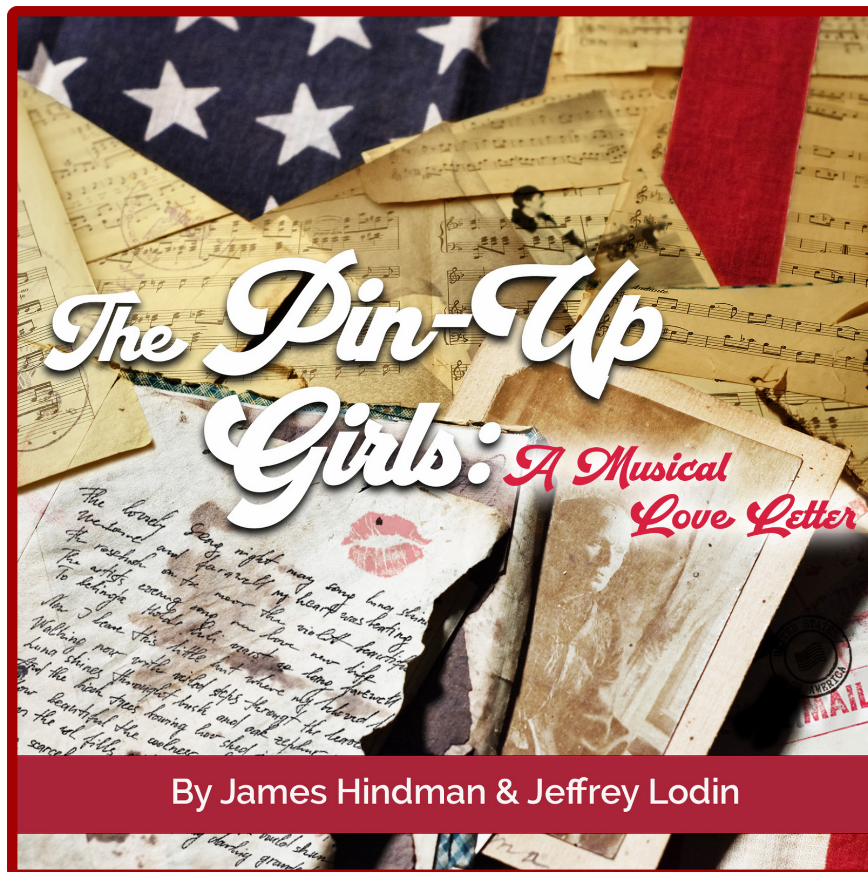
The Pin-Up Girls: A Musical Love Letter

By James Hindman and Jeffery Lodin

A Dramaturgical Casebook



Director: Darlene Zoller
Dramaturg: Liv Fassanella

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How the Civil War Taught Americans the Art of Letter Writing

by Christopher Hager

Sarepta Revis was a 17-year-old newlywed when her husband left their North Carolina home to fight in the Confederate States Army. Neither had much schooling, and writing did not come easily to them. Still, they exchanged letters with some regularity, telling each other how they were doing, expressing their love and longing. Once, after Daniel had been away for more than six months, Sarepta told him in a letter that she was "as fat as a pig." This may not seem like the way most young women would want to describe themselves, but Daniel was very happy to hear it.

Civil War soldiers and their families had abundant causes for worry. The men were exposed to rampant disease as well as the perils of the battlefield. Women, running households without help, often faced overwork and hunger. Letters bore the burdens not just of keeping in touch and expressing affection but also of assuaging fear about loved ones' well-being. Yet most ordinary American families, never having endured a long separation until now, had little experience writing letters to each other. Sometimes barely literate—Sarepta had to ask her older brother to put down on paper what she wanted to say to Daniel—Americans quickly had to learn the delicate art of recreating the comforts of physical presence using only the written word.

Much of the time, they did so by writing about their bodies. In hundreds of millions of letters sent between battlefield and home front, moving across the nation by horse and by rail in recent innovations called envelopes, ordinary Americans reported the details of how they looked, what they ate, how much they weighed. Their world had been one of doing and touching rather than reading and writing, but now, by their ingenuity and resolve to hold their families together, they reshaped the culture of letter writing.

Letters were close cousins to newspapers: Only a few centuries before, in early modern England, had private letters and commercial news reporting gone separate ways (though the habit of calling journalists "correspondents" remains)—and early Americans still considered a good letter one that could "tell all the news."Yet news was something soldiers sorely lacked. Isolated from the world beyond their regiments, awaiting orders they rarely understood, men could not satisfy their families' yearnings for news of the war.

"You can see more in the papers," a typical soldier wrote home. Modern historians have sometimes been frustrated to find rich archives of Civil War letters that seem curiously silent on political and military affairs, but these were subjects ordinary Americans thought newspapers were covering perfectly well. What was left to them was reporting the news of their own physical selves. It may have felt a little odd at first—had Sarepta Revis gone around the house comparing herself to livestock?—but it was what families wanted, and writers found ways to oblige.

Reporting a healthy weight was one of the readiest ways to assure a distant reader you weren't sick or malnourished. A wife as fat as a pig certainly wasn't starving, a husband like Daniel Revis could be relieved to know, which was more important in wartime than anyone's notions of beauty. Soldiers enjoyed the small luxury of reporting healthy weights to the folks back home in exact numbers, because they had access to scales. When regiments were encamped and relatively idle, medical staff could hold regular "sick calls," examinations that included being weighed.

The resulting numbers made their way into hundreds, probably thousands, of letters from soldiers. Loyal Wort, a 31-year-old Ohioan in the Union Army, wrote to his wife, Susan, "i was waid the other day and waid one hundred and seventy one pounds So you See i am pretty fat." Thomas Warrick of Alabama assured his wife, Martha, "My helth is good at this time" and, as evidence, reported, "I waide one hundred and seventy-fore pounds the last time I waide and that was the other day." A Georgia private named Andrew White enthusiastically declared, "I way more now than I ever did in my lief I way 197 pounds." He believed that if only he hadn't spent an entire night out in the rain on picket duty, "I would have reached 200 pound in a Short time." In a war that would see men's bodies torn apart by shells and reduced almost to nothing by privation—one Union soldier lucky enough to survive the notorious Andersonville prison weighed 80 pounds at his release—numeric snapshots of the physical self acted like needles on the gauges of anxiety.

Pictorial snapshots had appeal, too, of course, and the relatively new technology of photography became tremendously popular among military families for similar reasons. Virtually all soldiers and soldiers' wives who had the money and the opportunity got their portraits taken and exchanged them in the mail. An Iowa coupled joked that their photographs of each other were getting "all rubbed out" by too-frequent kissing. But photographs captured only a moment in the past. The back-and-forth of letters could document change.

For younger soldiers, especially, going to war meant proving themselves to be men and not boys, and they strove to picture themselves that way for their families. William Allen Clark wrote to his worried parents in Indiana, "If you was to see me, your doubts in regard to my health would certainly be dispelled. You wouldent see the same Slim, stoop shouldered, awkward, Gosling."

He weighed 12 pounds more than he had the previous summer. William Martin of South Carolina told his sister, “I am Now Larger than My Father My weight is Now 175 pounds.” He also wanted her to know “my whiskers is getin prity thick and they are two inches Long.” A young Georgian named James Mobley was engaged in a kind of competition with his friends: “I wayed 170 pounds and I now weigh 175 and if I keep on I will weigh 180 before long . . . Father wrote to me that John Reece said I weighted 170 and he said he weighed 177 he is only 2 pd larger than I am and I will get them on him if I dont get sick.”

When times were good—when fighting slowed, medical staff had time to make the rounds, and winter’s hardships had not set in—reports of good health prevailed, like the boasts of Wort, Warrick, and White. But the news was not always as good. If some men and women tried to spare their loved ones by withholding worrisome information, many did not. Ebenezer Coggin wrote home from a Richmond hospital that his weight had bottomed out at 105 pounds, although he insisted he was on the mend. Daniel Revis replied to Sarepta that, for his part, he was “as pore as a snake, we dont get anuf to eat.” (In 19th-century vernacular, the opposite of “fat,” “stout,” or “hearty” was “poor.”) It wasn’t what Sarepta wanted to hear, but one didn’t need a formal education to insist on honesty. “Dont tell me you feel better when you dont,” Betsy Blaisdell admonished her husband in December of 1864. She had received no letter from him in the previous day’s mail and worried it meant his recent illness had worsened. Forlorn in the cold of upstate New York—“I never dreaded winter before” Hiram left for war, she wrote—Betsy told him, nothing could “fill your place.” When Hiram’s letter of reassurance finally arrived, it featured his best effort at recreating his physical self: “I have just washed up all clean and nice,” he reported. “I guess if I was there I would have a kiss and it would not mess up your face much.”

At the outbreak of the Civil War, the U.S. Post Office Department had been delivering about five letters per capita annually. During the war, the average soldier sent more than five times that many. People who felt little capable of long, expressive narratives about their mental and physical well-being proved all the more resourceful in approximating bodily presence. For Americans during the Civil War, embracing loved ones on paper was a hardship they could only with difficulty overcome. Most of them, no doubt, would have rather not had to resort to it. For us, their efforts created a record of something we rarely get to see: glimmers of the emotional lives of ordinary people long gone.

Martha Poteet of western North Carolina endured labor and delivery, for at least the ninth time, during her husband’s absence in 1864. When she wrote to Francis a month later, she cheerfully described the easiest postpartum recovery she ever had experienced. “I had the best time I ever had and I hav bin the stoutest ever sens I haint lay in bed in day time in two Weeks today.” Of the baby, a girl she was waiting to name until Francis came home, Martha could report no weight—scales and doctors were rare things in the Blue Ridge.

She had a better idea. She laid the baby's hand on scrap of paper, traced a line around it, and carefully cut it out to tuck into the envelope. Some days later, in a long-besieged trench outside Petersburg, Virginia, Francis Poteet opened that envelope and held his new daughter's hand in his.

Letter to Mrs. Nancy McCoy from her son, Private Isaac McCoy of Co. A, 9th Pennsylvania Cavalry Regiment, postmarked Feb. 2, 1863. Image courtesy of Library of Congress

Letter to Miss Lydia H. Weymouth of North Braintree, Massachusetts, sent during the Civil War. Image courtesy of Library of Congress

Letter From the Trenches

From facinghistory.org

The following is a 1916 letter from playwright J. B. Priestley about what he saw a soldier in the First World War.

My Dear Parents,

I am writing this on the evening of the first day of the new year. We came into the trenches (an emergency call) the day before yesterday, but we are in the reserve trenches, not the firing line. I am writing this in my dugout (about two feet high and five feet long) by the miserable light of a guttering, little bit of candle. Soon it will go out, and then (for it's only 5.30 and a wild night) come the long, long dark hours until 'stand to' in the morning.

Last night, old year's night, was a nightmare evening. At 1 o'clock, the troops in the front line made two bomb attacks on the German front line, and we'd to support them. For an hour, it was literally hell upon earth. I had to spend most of the time crouched in the mud by the side of a machine gun. It was going nearly all the time, and the noise nearly stunned me, then the sickly smell of cordite, and the dense masses of steam from the water cooler didn't improve matters. Both our artillery and theirs were going for all they were worth, and they lit up the sky. You could see some of the shells going through the air, swift, red streaks. Then an incessant stream of bullets from both sides, bombs, trench mortars, making a hellish din, and the sky lit up with a mad medley of shells, searchlights, star lights, the green and red rockets (used for signalling purposes); just about an hour of hell, and that was our introduction to the year of 1916! This morning I learned that we lost about 80 men and several officers, so that it cost us pretty dearly.

I enjoyed the parcel hugely, and the pudding was splendid! Please thank Mrs What's-her-name for her kind gift. It is very comfortable. I'm afraid that you would hardly recognise me if you saw me now. It is three days since I had a shave, and two since I had a wash. I'm a mask of mud. My hair is matted, and I resemble an Australian beachcomber.

This is morning of Jan. 2nd. We go into the firing line this afternoon for four days. By the way, if you can get hold of any old paperbacked sixpenny novels (such as Jacobs, Stanley Weyman – light stuff) please send some in your next parcel. No magazines; there's not enough reading matter and the quality is bad. Only old copies, you know, don't buy new ones.

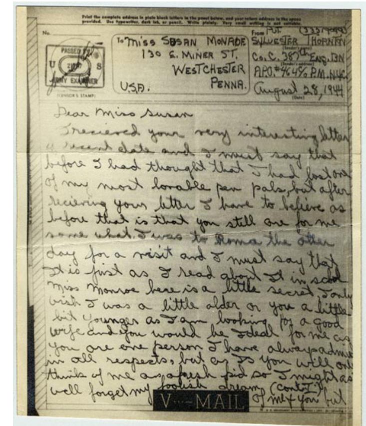
I saw a tin the other day, labelled Mackintosh's Chocolate Toffee de Luxe. It sounds so weird that I'd like some if you can procure any, please!

Yours affectionately,

Jack P.

Letter Writing in WWII

From the National Postal Museum



To Miss SUSAN MONADE
130 S. MINER ST.
WESTCHESTER
PENNA.
U.S.A.

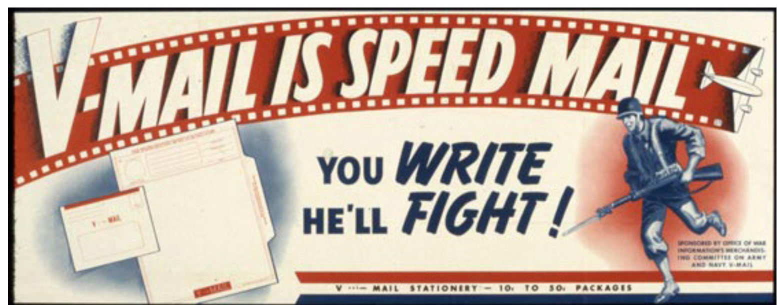
From Pvt. Sylvester Thornton
Co. C. 387th Eng. BN
A.P.O. #464 % P.M. N.Y.C.
August 28, 1944

Dear Miss Susan

I recieved your very interesting letter of recent date and I must say that before I had thought that I had lost one of my most lovable pen pals, but after recieving your letter I have to believe as before that is that you still are for me some what. I was to Roma the other day for a visit and I must say that It is just as I read about It in school. Miss Monroe here is a little secret, I only wish I was a little older or you a little bit younger as I am looking for a good wife and you would be Ideal for me as you are one person I have always admired in all respects, but as Is you will only think of me as a fresh kid so I might as well forget my foolish dream (Cont. I) of my you but

V-MAIL

For members of the armed forces the importance of mail during World War II was second only to food. The emotional power of letters was heightened by the fear of loss and the need for communication during times of separation. Messages from a husband, father, or brother, killed in battle might provide the only surviving connection between him and his family. The imminence of danger and the uncertainty of war placed an added emphasis on letter writing. Emotions and feelings that were normally only expressed on special occasions were written regularly to ensure devotion and support.



Military personnel felt the most connected to home through reading about it in letters. Civilians were encouraged to write their service men and women about even the most basic activities. Daily routines, family news, and local gossip kept the armed forces linked to their communities
.

Wartime romances adjusted to long distances and sweethearts and spouses separated by oceans used mail to stay in touch. Couples were married on furlough and babies were born while their fathers were away at the battlefront. Letters kept America's troops informed about home life and detailed accounts allowed them to be in the war and have that critical link back to their families. Others wrote to kindle new relationships and fight off the loneliness and boredom of wartime separation.

Mail played a significant role in maintaining morale on the battlefront and at home, and officials supported that role by working to ensure mail communications during wartime. V-Mail service could ensure this communication with added security and speed. The Office of War Information and the Advertising Council worked with commercial businesses and the community to spread the word about this new service and its benefits.

V-Mail was promoted as patriotic with advertisements emphasizing contributions to the war effort, such as saving cargo space and providing messages to lift spirits. To allay the fears and misconceptions of would-be V-Mail writers, news reports explained how the letters were processed and sped to military personnel.

An Illustrated History Of The Pin-Up Girl

By Erin Kelly | Edited By John Kuroski

Sexy and sultry (yet typically leaving something to the imagination), pin-ups cause many of us to think of the time surrounding World War Two. But in reality, the pin-up even precedes World War One. And, bizarrely enough, it came about thanks to the bicycle.

Women on bicycles meant more than just decreased travel time; it introduced an era in which women no longer required a man's help to get from A to B. But there was a hang up: the bicycle's composition did not exactly make it easy for women of the 19th century–typically donning floor-length dresses and skirts–to use. Because of this, ladies started to warm to more functional and form-fitting pants, inevitably highlighting the shapes that their skirts had once concealed.

As ministers and doctors campaigned against bicycles under the pretense of "safety"–women, according to these supposed experts, could damage their fragile internal structure (as well as the possibility of seat friction causing arousal) if they rode a bike–the women's suffrage movement adopted the freedoms that the new mode of transportation afforded them wholeheartedly.

In discarding the petticoats and ground-length skirts for bloomers, the artistic inspiration that is the female form would soon assume new roles.

In 1895, Life Magazine illustrator Charles Dana Gibson forever changed the future of women's fashion with images of what he saw as the personification of the feminine ideal of beauty. The renderings of well-endowed women with hourglass figures and full lips became known as the Gibson Girl, which Gibson considered to be the composite of "thousands of American Girls."
The pictures would run in the pages of Life Magazine for the next 20 years and would inspire countless imitators. As printing technology made gains, more and more magazines featured images of this unattainable idealistic beauty. For the first time in the United States, men had an easily attainable source of feminine fantasy at their fingertips.

by Charles Dana Gibson

Zoe Mozert painting Jane Russell for The Outlaw film poster in 1943.

By the late 1800s, the calendar's use had extended into advertising. While the first calendar featuring George Washington failed to make the markets clamor for more, the concept still held great promise. The 1903 birth of the "calendar girl", Cosette, would prove this.

What would become the familiar pin-up began to take shape in 1917, when the Wilson administration created the Division of Pictorial Publicity during World War One.The division mobilized all media outlets in the creation of propaganda that would further the US war effort. Sex, sells, after all; and in the early 20th century, the US made it so that it would recruit, too.

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When men returned from the War, the women of the Roaring Twenties were not willing to surrender the freedom they had acquired while their husbands were away. Combine this with the overall atmosphere of rebellion that helped define the Prohibition period, and increasingly-revealing clothing mirrored an ever-opening society.

Calendar artists followed and helped shape these changes in dress and attitude: over time, the woman's pin-up became much more teasing and flirtatious.

The art form's ever-growing popularity inevitably bled into other mediums. It didn't take long for Hollywood to jump upon the bandwagon; soon movie execs began using sexually-charged imagery to promote many of their films.

Following the Division of Pictorial Publicity's overwhelming success, it came as little surprise that propaganda efforts would only increase as the United States became involved in World War Two. This time around, pin-ups were used in recruitment materials, posters and calendars promoting the purchase of war bonds.

Many considered this to be the pin-up's "Golden Age", and thousands of images were commissioned to raise soldier morale while fighting overseas. A US soldier couldn't really go anywhere without seeing a pin-up girl: pinned in barracks, taped to submarine walls, and carried in pockets – the men of World War Two were never far away from reminders of what they were fighting for.

As pieces of propaganda, it makes sense that pin-ups were drenched in nationalistic symbols.

But they were also used to make normative claims about what an "ideal" woman did: when the pin-ups themselves were not adorned in red, white and blue, they were seen going through their daily housekeeping duties. Whatever the activity, though, it was always done in a cheeky manner.

Probably the most famous pin-up of them all, Bettie Page is highly credited for pin-up's successful transition from illustration to photography. Beginning as a model for camera clubs, Page's popularity quickly escalated, with her face appearing in countless magazines and calendars.

To this day, she is considered to be the most photographed and collected woman in history.

With the launch of Playboy Magazine in 1953 (and the centerfold pictorial of the soon-to-be superstar Marilyn Monroe), Hugh Hefner successfully modeled his own publication around the image of the pin-up girl. Knowing the future was photography, he pushed the limits further and further in the growing medium.

As "retro" becomes a point of interest and inspiration for many today, the pin-up's popularity is on the rise again. Entire websites are dedicated to the genre, with models of all shapes, sizes, and ethnic backgrounds carrying the tradition into the future.

How World War II's 'Dear John' Letters Changed American Society

BY SUSAN L. CARRUTHERS

As a synonym for a break-up note sent by a woman to a man in uniform, the Dear John letter made its debut in a major national newspaper in October 1943. Milton Bracker, a seasoned correspondent stationed in North Africa, wired a story back for publication in the New York Times magazine. "Separation," Bracker observed, was the "one most dominant war factor in the lives of most people these days." Regrettably, however, absence wasn't making all hearts grow fonder. Wherever "dour dogfaces"—soldiers from "Maine, Carolina, Utah and Texas"—found themselves on the frontlines, "Dear John clubs" were springing up.

These, the reporter explained, were mutual consolation societies formed by officers and enlisted men who'd received letters from home "running something like this: 'Dear John: I don't know quite how to begin but I just want to say that Joe Doakes came to town on furlough the other night and he looked very handsome in his uniform, so when he asked me for a date…'"

Yank, the Army weekly, had reported on "Brush-Off Clubs" months earlier, offering illustrative examples of these letters without yet calling them Dear Johns. Many press stories in the same vein followed, dotting the pages of both civilian and military newspapers over the course of this war and beyond. Excerpts from archetypal specimens of this newly named genre were a common feature of reportage. According to journalists, women composed brush-off notes in a variety of registers, ranging from the naively clueless to the calculatedly cruel, but invariably beholden to cliché.

When Howard Whitman explained the Dear John to readers of the Chicago Daily Tribune in May 1944, he had his imaginary female writer string hackneyed phrases together: "Dear John: This is very hard to tell you, but I know you'll understand. I hope we'll always remain friends, but it's only fair to tell you that I've become engaged to somebody else." Formulaic words, Whitman implied, would do little to soften the blow, while trite sentiments might even exacerbate the pain caused by a revelation that was both belated and perfunctory.

War correspondents who brought these letters to civilians' attention were keen to preach a particular sermon about mail and morale, love and loyalty. Hyperbole was the order of the day. "It is doubtful if the Nazis will ever hurt them as much," Whitman opined, referring to the emotional wounds inflicted by women who sent soldiers "Dear John" letters. This was quite a claim under the circumstances. Neither the loss of limbs, sight, hearing, sanity, nor death itself caused as much damage as a letter from a wife or girlfriend terminating a romantic relationship? So Whitman and others insisted.

To these commentators, it was precisely the circumstance of being at war that made rejection more tormenting—and more intolerable—than in civilian life. Since many contemporaries agreed that a broken heart was the most catastrophic injury a soldier might incur, "jilted GIs" garnered widespread sympathy, including from their COs. While the brass still tended to regard "nervousness" in combat as an unacceptable manifestation of weakness, officers often extended a pass to servicemen who responded to romantic loss with tears, depression, rage or violence.

Among other things, a "Dear John" issued servicemen a rare license to emote. That stricken soldiers would act out, and be justified in doing so, was a widely accepted nostrum in civilian circles too. Here's Mary Haworth, an advice columnist, indignantly addressing her readership in the Washington Post in July 1944: "a bolt of bad news that strikes directly at their male ego —telling that some other man has scored with the little woman in their absence—can lay them out flat, figuratively speaking; and make them a fit candidate for hospitalization. This is no reflection on their manhood, either. It illustrates, rather, their civilized need of special spiritual nurture while breasting the demoniac fury of modern warfare."

Like Haworth, many female opinion leaders condoned men's emotional disintegration under the duress of a "Dear John." Eager to shore up vulnerable male egos, they joined the chorus condemning women who severed intimate ties with servicemen as traitors—worse than Axis enemies, even, because American women were (or ought to be) on the same side.

So in World War II's gendered division of labor, it fell to women not only to wait but to write. Men battling Axis forces were fighting "for home"—as innumerable propaganda posters, movies and other patriotic prompts reminded them. Women may have symbolized the home front, but their role was neither passive nor mute. The wartime state, along with legions of self-appointed adjutants, regularly reminded women that to "keep the home fires burning," they had to stoke the coals of romance with regular loving letters to men in uniform.

For their part, many soldiers endowed mail with magical properties. Facing the prospect of life-altering injury or death, men readily sacralized objects they believed might serve as amulets against harm. Some took this faith in mail's protective power so literally that they pocketed letters next to their hearts, as though notepaper—or the loving sentiments committed to the page—could deflect bullets. But the magic could also work in reverse, or so some soldiers feared. For if loving letters could ward off danger, mightn't unloving words invite it?

The Pulitzer-winning poet W.D. Snodgrass recalled harboring these suspicions as a Navy typist during World War II: "Mail call was the best, or worst, moment of each day; you approached carefully any man whose name had not been called. Only a 'Dear John' letter was worse—we felt, mawkishly, no doubt, that with no one to come back to, a man was less likely to come back."

Similarly, Vietnam veteran Michael McQuiston remembers his platoon sergeant's reluctance to let him go out into the field after he'd received a Dear John: "Their rule was that they didn't do that. It was bad luck." (McQuiston pestered his way into a mission only to sustain an injury, thereby confirming the wisdom of superstitious belief.)

From Homer's The Odyssey onwards, soldiers have been haunted by—and taunted by—the specter of female infidelity, associating disloyalty with fatality. Penelope, whose constancy Odysseus put to the test by disguising himself as a beggar when he returned home after long years away at war, ultimately demonstrated her steadfastness to her husband's satisfaction. By the time of his return, she had already fought off more than one hundred suitors with her cunningly unraveled and rewoven yarn—except in an alternative version of the legend which has Penelope sleeping with them all, as historian and archaeologist Robert E. Bell noted in his book Women of Classical Mythology.

That this revisionist myth-maker preferred not to copy Homer's portrait of Penelope as a model of connubial chasteness hints at a larger phenomenon. Soldiers' and veterans' recollections have tended to accentuate the unfaithful few, not the devotedly loyal many. "Dear John" stories exemplify this trend, commonly treating as "universal" an experience that, though not unusual, was far from inevitable.

A view of off-duty soldiers socializing at bonfire in Fayetteville, North Carolina in 1942. Michael Ochs Archives—Getty Images

A Grandmother's letters to troops at war…

By Mr. Loran Doane
From army.mil

LAGHMAN PROVINCE, Afghanistan -- During wartime, separation from loved ones has always been a hardship that both soldiers and their families have had to overcome.

Letters crisscrossed vast continents, oceans and battlefields bringing troops up to date on the latest hometown news, weather and gossip. Most importantly, the letters brought them fond memories from home and the reminder that they are missed, but not forgotten.

Though the methods of communication are now near instantaneous, for many, there is nothing that can replace the feeling one gets when receiving a good old fashioned hand written letter from home.

For U.S. Army Capt. Bryson Shipman in Afghanistan, this couldn't be more true.

Shipman, a 30 year-old native of Cedar Park, Texas, and commander of Headquarters and Headquarters Troop, 3rd Squadron, 3rd Cavalry Regiment, has received hand written letters from his grandmother every single day of his current deployment.

In fact, he's gotten daily letters from his grandmother throughout his previous overseas deployments and received weekly letters and care packages during the four years he attended the United States Military Academy at West Point as well.

In all, Shipman estimates he's received more than 1,000 letters over the years, and he's saved every one.

Sitting on a coffee table in his sparse plywood office is an opened three-ring binder containing hundreds of neatly filed letters and cards.
As Shipman flipped through the trove of letters before him, he explained what he believes drives Mrs. Peggy Shipman, his 77 year-old grandmother, to go to such lengths.

"We are a tight knit family from small communities just outside of Austin, Texas," Shipman said. "My grandmother always made sure that we remained connected as family. She is all about staying in touch and keeping the family together, but I think she also does it in large part out of a sense of duty."

Peggy's acts of kindness aren't just for today's troops in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Her first letters and packages were to family friends fighting the war in Korea.

When that conflict ended and her brother Bobby was sent to Vietnam, she once again took up the cause, shipping tins of snicker doodle cookies to Bobby and his friends every chance she got.

"I was never sure the cookies were even edible until I received a letter from one of Bobby's friends in Da Nang, thanking me for the hard little biscuits", laughed Peggy.
"Even though the once soft chewy snicker doodles had turned to stone, Bobby's friends were appreciative," Peggy said. "That's when I realized that the guys over at the air base were simply starved for anything that reminded them of home."

Peggy's gifts weren't reserved just for those serving overseas.

During Shipman's college years at the United States Military Academy at West Point, he began receiving weekly deliveries of letters, cards and cookies from his grandmother, which he shared with fellow classmates.

"Many of his friends at West Point sent me a birthday card addressed to "Grandma Shippy" to say thank you for all the stuff from home," Peggy fondly recalled. "It touched my heart."

"The day Bryson left for Afghanistan on his first deployment, I started writing him daily," Peggy said. "Care packages to Afghanistan became nearly a weekly love offering. We started out sending three or four boxes to some of the other soldiers in his unit and by the time that group came home, we were sending care packages regularly to 16-17 young men and women."

"Now that Bryson is serving again in Afghanistan, I try to write him a letter daily," Said Peggy. "I write letters, because to me, there is more of a true connection than with a text or email. He knows I sit down here at our old kitchen table and really think about him, if only for a little while each day. I talk to him as though he were here with me. I ask questions knowing I will not get a reply, at least not for weeks."

Besides being the commander of Headquarters and Headquarters Troop, Shipman also wears the title of "mayor" at TB Gamberi.
"As mayor, I'm responsible for the day to day functions needed to keep Gamberi running smoothly," said Shipman. "Our base functions much like a city, only on a somewhat smaller scale. We have buildings to maintain, waste to be removed, medical clinics to keep open and mail to be delivered."

What better man for the job?

The tiny plywood post office Shipman oversees serves several hundred troops and doubles as a miniature retail store selling assorted snacks and sundry items to the troops.

Tightly packed inside helicopters or slung underneath in nets on 100 foot tethers, crates of mail are delivered to the base several times per week.

"For the troops, receiving letters from home goes a long way in keeping up their morale," Shipman said. "I think there are few people in this world who truly appreciate and understand this more than me, and I want it to reflect in the service we provide."

Shipman says the letters he's received from his grandmother over the years have special meaning and are being preserved to serve another purpose as well. For him, the letters are a record of family history - a history he plans to share with his children.

"Through these letters, I want my children to know what great grandparents I had and what they meant to me," Shipman said. "I want them to know how uplifting, supportive, loving and kind they were to everyone they met."

(Photo Credit: U.S. Army)

(Photo Credit: U.S. Army)

About VFW (Veterans of Foreign War)

From vfw.org

Who We Are
The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States is a nonprofit veterans service organization comprised of eligible veterans and military service members from the active, guard and reserve forces.

We trace our roots back to 1899 when veterans of the Spanish-American War (1898) and the Philippine Insurrection (1899-1902) founded local organizations to secure rights and benefits for their service. Many arrived home wounded or sick. There was no medical care or veterans' pension for them, and they were left to care for themselves.

In their misery, some of these veterans banded together and formed organizations that would eventually band together and become known as the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States. After chapters were formed in Ohio, Colorado and Pennsylvania, the movement quickly gained momentum. Today, membership stands at approximately 1.5 million members of the VFW and its Auxiliary.

Our voice was instrumental in establishing the Veterans Administration, development of the national cemetery system, in the fight for compensation for Vietnam vets exposed to Agent Orange and for veterans diagnosed with Gulf War Syndrome. In 2008, we won a long-fought victory with the passing of a GI Bill for the 21st Century, giving expanded educational benefits to America's active duty service members, and members of the guard and reserves, fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. We were the driving force behind the Veterans Access and Accountability Act of 2014, and continually fight for improved VA medical centers services for women veterans. The VFW's legislative advocacy efforts were also the driving force behind the passage of the 2019 Blue Water Navy Veteran Act, and the passage of the 2022 Honoring Our PACT Act, which the VFW considers one of the most significant pieces of veterans legislation in history.

Besides helping fund the creation of the Vietnam, Korean War, World War II and Women in Military Service memorials, in 2005 the VFW became the first veterans' organization to contribute to building the new Disabled Veterans for Life Memorial, which opened in November 2010. And in 2015, we became the first supporter of the Desert Storm and Desert Shield Memorial which broke ground in July of 2022.

We have many programs and services that work to support veterans, service members and their families, as well as communities worldwide. Please check out our latest fact sheet or spend some time browsing our site to learn why No One Does More For Veterans.