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The Need for War Letters?

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The Need for War Letters?

Abstract
We are all fascinated by our own family's story - our origins. What trouble our parents were in when they were little. What our grandparents did during the war. Where our ancestors came from.

These types of stories are personal and inconsequential, but at the same time, they are informative and entertaining. While we must not confuse family lore with academic history, the two can be intertwined. All history is someone's family story because history revolves around people and their actions. I have spent the last fifteen months examining my grandfather's service during World War Two. Stories like his are the basis of microcosm history, but they are not all encompassing explanations. The job of historians is to take stories and shape them into meaningful scholarship through research and analysis.

Within the historiography of the 20th Century, war letters are some of the more remarkable documents available. In the study of World War Two, they are especially valuable because the sheer number that have survived give historians a vast range of experiences from which to draw conclusions. Written in the face of uncertain and daunting odds, they illuminate human voices in a war that could be easily reduced to a series of campaigns and grim statistics. The letters give a tiny glimpse into the experience that defined a generation around the world. Over sixteen million American men were drafted during World War Two and, for the most part, handwritten letters were their only form of communication with loved ones on the homefront. For some families, they were all that was left of their sons, brothers, fathers and uncles in September 1945 when the war ended. In many families, war letters were carefully preserved; my family is no exception.

Comments
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These types of stories are personal and inconsequential, but at the same time, they are informative and entertaining. While we must not confuse family lore with academic history, the two can be intertwined. All history is someone's family story because history revolves around people and their actions. I have spent the last fifteen months examining my grandfather's service during World War Two. Stories like his are the basis of microcosm history, but they are not all encompassing explanations. The job of historians is to take stories and shape them into meaningful scholarship through research and analysis.

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war ended. In many families, war letters were carefully preserved; my family is no exception.

My grandfather, William A. Rich, wrote over 350 letters during World War Two when he served as a volunteer ambulance driver for the American Field Service, also known by the acronym 'A.F.S.' Such a large number of letters exists because my family actually has two sets of correspondence authored by my grandfather. The first one hundred and fifty letters were from Rich to his parents and siblings. The rest he wrote to his girlfriend of the time, a woman named Mary Dickson Sayre. Rich affectionately called her 'Dickie.' The letters Rich sent to Dickie were returned to my family recently by her brother Professor Robert Sayre when he cleaned out her attic. When read together, the letters present a fascinating story of a relatively unknown and unstudied organization.

The A.F.S. was a highly unusual group in its duties and because of the men who served in it. Established at the outbreak of World War One, the original purpose of the A.F.S. was to provide medical evacuation from the front lines to the French army. During Wolrd War Two, the A.F.S. would find themselves serving with British armies around the world. During both wars, the drivers were primarily young men, from Harvard, Yale and Princeton. They were an elite group- mostly from New York society. The reason for this is not only that their families had to support them while they were in France but that each man was required to provide his own ambulance. Dominic and Vincent Rich, two brothers from New York, left Harvard in the summer of 1916 to join the A.F.S. in France; both received the *Croix de Guerre* for heroic service at Verdun. After the war they returned home and got married. Dominic Rich was my great-grandfather; in 1922, he had a son –William Rich, my grandfather.

William Rich's service with the A.F.S. began in the fall of 1942 when he also left Harvard to volunteer as an ambulance driver. Rich would see action in four theatres of war- North Africa, Italy, Germany and India- evacuate the wounded from a number of storied battles and be wounded himself. In the spring of 1945, he assisted with the liberation of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp-his most formative and awakening experience of the war. He saw the best and worst. He witnessed the ability to save a man's life by effective transportation and the attempt to eradicate an entire race from the face of the earth.

Rich embarked from New York in November 1942 bound for the Middle East, where the American Field Service had its training camp in Baalbek, Lebanon. After time spent in Lebanon and Syria, Rich and his section took part in the British 8th Army massive offensive across Tunisia to capture Tunis; they saw the surrender of Rommel's entire *Afrika Korps* and the close of the North African theatre. After a summer of rest in Tripoli, Rich was transported to Italy in October, 1943. He spent eighteen months in there; he evacuated wounded soldiers from the front lines of battles such as Termoli, Cassino, Rome, Florence and Rimini. While in Italy, he contracted jaundice; he was involved in a serious jeep accident. In December of 1944, Rich went home for a thirty-day leave. He returned to Italy and, in early April 1945, his section was transferred to France, then to Brussels. From there, his platoon was sent to Bergen-Belsen where they worked until after V-E Day. Upon the end of European hostilities, Rich elected to stay with the American Field Service for the duration of the fighting and was shipped India. He was in South Asia less than two weeks before the United States dropped the Atomic bombs and World War Two ended. In a fitting tribute to the technological advances that

had been made during the war, Rich returned to England in two short days. He flew back over all the countries and in which he had served. Rich was repatriated on Thanksgiving Day 1945. He had been gone for over three years.

While the story that each letters tells is fascinating in and of itself- Rich chronicled daily life wherever he was- what can be learned from analysis of the letters as a larger series of correspondence is more historically relevant. Rich was never able to go back in a formal way and revise his letters for a memoir or other publication; if he had, long passages of personal detail that exist would most likely have been omitted, though he personally may have enjoyed rereading them. The letters in their untouched form truly capture the mindset of a young man in the early 1940s. They also allow the reader to see the development of Rich's ideas about a vast range of topics over a three year period. He started out a young college student and returned a worldly veteran who had seen battles fought on three continents. The ability of letters to capture the thoughts of a moment and record a continuum of evolving ideas is invaluable. Rich wrote his letters and then sent them. His ideas remain unchanged and, at points, the deeper questions he wrestled with, are still unresolved.

War letters present a range of problems when approached as historical documents. First, and most importantly, they were censored on multiple levels. They were censored in the traditional sense- with scissors. Rich could not write about where he was exactly or what his unit was doing- It was months before he could report on the battles he had seen. This type of realization forces historians to ask how war letters should be read. We in the present age are already at a distinct disadvantage because letters are no longer a standard means of communication. The conventions of correspondence and the nuances of a

written sentence instead of a spoken one are lost. We are not as sensitive to tone changes, emotional layers and reading between the lines. This problem is compounded by the fact that we read correspondence from World War Two totally out of context. While I have endeavored to recreate the context in which the letters were written as much as possible, I did not read the letters in 'real time.'

Even though I endeavored to read Rich's correspondence in chronological order to appreciate the sequence of events, I read three or four a day. This is historically inaccurate in every way; the Riches and Dickie Sayre could not have read them in the same way. The letters came through the slow and complex military mail system. They only had one letter at a time, and sometimes weeks went by without receiving a single one. When Rich wrote, he would have to wait until he returned to HQ to mail it and his letter would sit in a pile until a censor could read it over. Then it would be sent down to a base area and put on a ship, or an airplane with any luck, to be sent back to the United States. Once Stateside, the letter entered the regular U.S. mail system and was delivered. This process could take four to six weeks, sometimes longer, if Rich was at the front and he could not send his letter back to HQ immediately. The information in the letters was, therefore, out of date when it finally reached the intended recipient.

The original readers of these letters also lived during World War Two. Though it may seem inane to state that, it is hard to read war letters without a historical narrative in the background. When a letter dated 'May 9, 1943' appears, we instantly know that Tunis fell the day before, the North African campaign will end in the next twenty-four hours, and that the larger war will go on for another two full years; Dickie and Rich's parents did not. We now know what will happen in the next letter also. There is no suspense for

us, no emotional angst. After he had written the enormous biography of *John Adams*, historian David McCollough made the crucial point

> …Nobody lived in the past, if you stop to think about it…they didn't walk around saying, "Isn't this fascinating, living in the past?" They lived in the present[,] just as we do. The difference was it was their present, not ours. And just as we don't know how things are going to turn out for us, they didn't either.

The job of historians is to reconstruct the past, as best we can, so that there is a context for letters like Rich's. The better the historian does their job, the more connection the letters have with the present and the more we learn from them.

The letters that seem to have the most historical relevance now, ones written at Cassino, Belsen, on V-E Day, may not have been the most important letters to their original readers. To the people on the homefront, simple Vmails that he was safe must have been a relief. There was constant anxiety about Rich's safety and health. A.F.S. drivers were killed on the front lines and a number died of disease. There were also 36 drivers taken as POWs, five of whom were not released until the end of hostilities in Europe, despite their non-combatant status. For Rich, the people he met and places he saw consumed a lot of his correspondence. He wrote equally long letters about his sightseeing tours and what he did with his section for entertainment and the fall of Tunis or the horrors at Belsen.

This may not be due to the fact that he felt these civilian topics were more important. They may have been all he wanted to talk about. The awfulness that war produces on a daily basis has led historians who study war letters to conclude that they were a way soldiers, and A.F.S. drivers, distanced themselves from the realities of what they saw. Martha Hanna, historian and author of a recent book *Your Death Would Be*

Mine, a study of one French couple's correspondence during World War One, has observed "letter writing was the means by which soldiers maintained their civilian idenitity in the midst of war…it kept them in contact with the reassuring familiarity of home, [so] they turned to it eagerly and often."[1] Though A.F.S. volunteers were able to keep their 'civilian identity' much more easily than any soldier, because of the fact they were non-combatants and did not face questions about the morality of killing other people, they were on the front lines; they dealt with death every day. Men routinely died in their ambulances. Rich's letters home that mention nothing about the war tell us as much about his state of mind as his clinical descriptions of battle do- where they exist.

The two military actions that Rich described in any detail were the advance on Tunis in late April 1943 and the battle for Termoli in early October of the same year. Rich wrote lengthy accounts of both these engagements to Dickie and his parents. They are, however, very clinical and factual. He never mentioned how he felt or whether he was afraid. There is also no indication that anyone died on either occasion. The sights must have been too real, too vivid for Rich to put into words. It is only through later memoirs and Rock's secondhand account of the A.F.S.'s duties that we know men died in great numbers being transported during evacuation. Hanna reflects on this point also and her thoughts echo my own. She wrote

> a profound cognitive divide separated those who fought, and thus knew the war firsthand, from those who did not and thus remained ignorant of its horrors…combatants rarely told civilians what the war was really like. Anxious not to overburden their wives [or girlfriends] and mothers with a knowledge that could only be distressing, they chose to remain silent.

[1] Hanna, Martha. *Your Death Would Be Mine: Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006. Page 9.

Rich seems to want to spare his mother and, to some extent, Dickie, the truth about what he saw.

Helen and Dominic Rich had both been involved with the medical services during World War One and had some idea of what their son experienced, though not exactly. Dominic Rich should have been especially sensitive to the horrors of war; his Field Service section had evacuated from the front lines at Verdun. The one time that the pattern of omission is broken was in April and May 1945. Belsen was something that Rich knew his parents and Dickie would never be able to comprehend. Images of mass graves and thousands of people sick with every imaginable virulent disease was too much for him to repress. He broke his silence on the horrors of war just that once, but this tells us there was something deeply unreal and totally new about what Rich saw there. He had already seen action in three different campaigns and had lived through many battles, but the unreality of Belsen still had the power to shock him. Through a reading of the entire correspondence, this becomes clear.

The entire correspondence tells a fabulous story, if at times the narrative is patchy or convoluted because the details are not related until much later letters when censorship relaxed. The particulars and events Rich omitted because of censorship seem to always have been filled in. It seems that whatever went unsaid in the letters is mainly due to Rich's own desire to leave certain aspects of his experience behind. The letters show that an intentional focus on the mundane and civilian aspects of life allowed Rich to create space between himself and the war. It also speaks to a subconscious yearning for a return to his life in peacetime. These letters are historically important because they capture moments in the mind of one young man whose experience was vastly different than most

other men of his generation during World War Two. He served as a volunteer and did not bear arms, and yet Rich saw the reason for the war first hand. His story as related through his letters is historically important because it is different.

Rich's story is also a very personal story. My belief that it is an important historical record, and my interest in the narrative, come from my proximity to the main characters. I have endeavored, however, to be as objective as possible in my representations of Rich and have not omitted anything to make his story seem more glorious than it was or make him seem any less flawed. The story of his service is what it is. And for the moment, it is of importance. As more and more men who served in World War Two die, their recollections are being lost. Historians and the Library of Congress are even now engaged in a monumental project to amass veterans' memories of the war and assemble collections of letters. We must ask if a hundred years from now historians will be interested in the common soldier's perspective on World War Two. What about in five hundred years? The stories of everyday people, and their struggles, are fascinating as long as we feel connected to them. This relationship comes from temporal proximity and personal interest. The truth of the matter is that history is pushed forward by men like Montgomery, Rommel and Eisenhower. Their actions are much more important and historically relevant.

Rich's letters do, however, provide historians with a microcosm. Some of the most important events of the war, especially the medical advances made, are recorded in detail. Rich's perception of the introduction of penicillin and air evacuationsare prime examples. He also recorded cultural details that are of interest. Through Rich's letters we know what Harvard-educated men read and what magazines they subscribed to.

Historians must be very careful about making generalizations from specific cases, like one set of letters, but when confirmed with other correspondence series, they provide valuable information. If historical schools continue to be interested in tiny details of everyday life, war letters will remain of importance.

War letters, with their many layers of problems, are historical documents that have definite limitations. These limitations may cause them to become irrelevant or forgotten at some point. It has been my intention to prevent this from happening to my grandfather, in some small way. William Rich had a great tale to tell though his correspondence and, in the end, history is about stories.