UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-EAU CLAIRE

"YOU WRITE, HE'LL FIGHT": AN ANALYSIS OF WORLD WAR II LETTERS FROM AMERICAN WOMEN 1941-1945

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Abstract

In the age before instant electronic communication, letter writing played a key role in maintaining personal relationships. During World War II, women on the home front expressed their delight and frustration with wartime life through their correspondence to soldiers overseas. In the 1940s all available resources were utilized in the war effort, including the potential of home front letters to raise the morale of soldiers overseas. Additionally, the necessity of timely mail delivery combined with the limited availability of valuable cargo space resulted in the new government-developed Victory Mail program. A media campaign that advised women on appropriate topics also promoted frequent letter writing. By juxtaposing two types of primary source documents, women's letters and the writing guidelines they were supposed to follow, this thesis analyzes the degree to which women adhered to the letter writing recommendations.

We'd be so happy we could cry together
and then we'd love the way we used to do.
I wish that I could hide inside this letter
and seal me up and send me off to you.
Special delivery,
I'd V-Mail this female to you.

—Nat Simon and Charlie Tobias, 1943

Introduction

One of the realities of war is the separation of loved ones. As the lyrics Nat Simon and Charlie Tobias wrote for their 1943 hit song "I Wish That I Could Hide Inside This Letter" suggest, the separation was difficult. In an effort to maintain their relationships and connections with husbands, sons, brothers and friends who served in the military, women who remained stateside during World War II wrote letters. Various agencies from the Red Cross to the United States Government suggested proper and improper topics for letter writers. In the turmoil brought on by the war, women did not always follow protocol, especially in times of great psychological distress. Patricia, a twenty-one year old Army Air Corps worker at the Pentagon, was one example. On April 24, 1943, she wrote a startlingly frank letter to her new husband, "Big Al" Aiken, a pilot in the Army Air Corps stationed in Alaska. She began, "I shouldn't be writing to you and lowering your morale—but as I always say, what the hells [*sic*] a husband for." Patricia was in mental anguish when she added in the same letter "I wish some kind soul would blow the whole damn world to hell—and I'd be glad to be among the missing."[1] As her grief intensified over the loss of a close friend's husband who was recently killed in combat, she continued,

> I think it would be better to be in Poland or Greece where they kill all the family instead of just one person and leave the others grubbing around trying to make a life out of nothing…I can't even feel good about us—if we do get out of it, we'll probably be…frightened and always running around trying to save our own necks like most of the people around here.[2]

Patricia's disturbing letter reflected her thoughts on the horrors of war, which for her had grown to be unbearable. She could not hide her pessimism about the continuation of humanity, or even

[1] Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, eds,. *Since You Went Away: World War II Letters from American Women on the Home Front* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 241.

[2] Litoff and Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away*, 241.

her own marriage, nor could she mask her stark empathy for those who lost people close to them. For her, the war brought terror to her front door even though none of the actual fighting in World War II took place on American soil. The phrase "total war" meant that all of the United States resources were redirected to support the war effort, and Patricia, as a war worker and a wife, was certainly affected by the conflict.

Total War and the Importance of Letters

When Japanese fighter pilots staged a coordinated early morning attack on the United States Naval Base at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the United States became directly involved in World War II and began an effort to mobilize American society toward total war. In a series of sweeping federal maneuvers, manufacturing production and national resources were redirected toward the production of war materials. The center of the conflict in World War II was overseas which meant that women who remained home lived through a time of great change. The traditional role that women occupied in society as wives and mothers was temporarily modified as women were needed to fill the skilled labor positions vital to the war effort, vacated by men now employed as soldiers.[3]

Although the war opened up new employment opportunities, women were faced with two challenges: fulfill the needs of wartime production and continue to occupy traditional caregiver and homemaker duties. Despite the increase in higher paying jobs and military stipends paid to wives of serviceman, many women struggled economically to sustain the household and care for children as a single parent. In addition, women also faced government rationing of everyday goods and food that added to the difficulty of maintaining a home. Wartime women also had to bear the psychological burden of constant worry that their husbands, brothers, or sons would

[3] Susan Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 20.

perish in the fight. These changes in the lives of everyday women were challenging enough, yet society and the government called on women to complete another seemingly small task to contribute to the war effort: write frequent, engaging, and cheerful letters to soldiers away from home in order to keep the troops in positive spirits.[4]

For soldiers in a time of war, the importance of receiving mail cannot be overstated. Troops stationed overseas relied on letters from home to keep them connected to their civilian lives. An oral history interview conducted in 1993 by the Wisconsin Historical Society as part of the *Voices of the Wisconsin Past* series revealed the significance letters held for serviceman. Loa Fergot spoke about how the general election in the fall of 1943 affected the timely receipt of home front mail. She remembered that officials held back other mail to ensure that every serviceman received a ballot for the upcoming vote. Loa observed that "when they [the servicemen] realized what was happening…they said they were going to revolt if they didn't get their mail." In her recollections, Loa noted that the mail service was "pretty good" after the officials reprioritized letter delivery.[5]

The United States government was committed to wartime mail delivery and encouraged home front letters to soldiers abroad. According to an online exhibition from the Smithsonian National Postal museum, "officials believed that an efficient mail system was a key factor for success during the war. They understood that frequent letters between members of the armed

[4] Victory Mail Online Exhibit, "Letter Writing in World War II," Smithsonian National Postal Museum http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/VictoryMail/letter/letter.html (Accessed April, 7, 2011); Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, Domestic Revolutions; A Social history of American Family Life (The Free Press: New York, 1988), 158-163.

[5] Michael Stevens, ed., *Women Remember the War 1941-1941* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1993), 130.

forces and their families would satisfy the need for communication and keep morale high."[6] During World War II, there was an astonishing increase in the volume of mail sent. A 1945 document entitled "Annual Report to the Postmaster General" compared the volume of mail between the fiscal years 1943-1945. In 1943 when the war was well underway, 570 million pieces of mail were sent. This increased to 1.4 billion in 1944 and rose again in 1945 when 2.5 billion pieces of mail were dispatched. These figures reflect only the letters sent to the Army, a similar increase can be seen for letters mailed to sailors in the Navy.[7] Furthermore, a radio broadcast by the Marine Corps in 1943 announced that "the army postal service is now dispatching some twenty million pieces of mail overseas every week, making this the greatest overseas mail handling problem ever confronted by any postal system, either in peace time or during war."[8] The timely delivery of such an enormous volume of mail was further complicated by the threat of German U-boats in the Atlantic coupled with limited aircraft space for overseas mail. The solution was the development of new mail technology in the form of Victory Mail.

Victory Mail, or V-Mail, was implemented on June 15, 1942 and was the result of a partnership between the United States Post Office and the War and Navy Departments.[9] It consisted of reproducing a standard size letter, about eight by eleven inches, on microfilm. The ninety foot reel held 1,500-1,800 letters, and weighed just four ounces. The process was initially expensive as the military had to purchase specialized equipment and train individuals to operate

[6] Victory Mail Online Exhibit, "Letter Do's and Don'ts," Smithsonian National Postal Museum, http://npm.si.edu/VictoryMail/letter/letter.html (accessed April 7, 2011).

[7] Victory Mail Online Exhibit, "Introducing V-Mail" Smithsonian National Postal Museum, http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/VictoryMail/introducing/how.html 9 (accessed April 7, 2011).

[8] *Report on Sending Mail to Servicemen*, Library of Congress, Marine Corps Combat Recordings RGA 8763 PNO 22-25, 1943, quoted in Victory Mail Online Exhibit, "Letter Do's and Don'ts," Smithsonian National Postal Museum, http://npm.si.edu/VictoryMail/letter/letter.html (accessed April 7, 2011).

[9] Victory Mail Online Exhibit, "Re-sizing Lifelines: Planning V-Mail," Smithsonian National Postal Museum, http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/victorymail/introducing/resizing.html (Accessed April 7, 2011).

the photographic machines. Each letter was catalogued and saved until a delivery confirmation was received so that a lost letter could be reprinted if the plane or boat carrying the shipment was shot down. V-Mail guaranteed the speedy delivery of letters via airmail and also saved valuable space on overseas flights.[10] The system was unquestionably successful in achieving these goals. One hundred and fifty thousand ordinary sized letters about eight inches by eleven inches weighed 2,575 pounds and filled thirty-seven mail sacks. The same number of V-Mail letters weighed much less at only forty-five pounds and could be contained within a single mail sack. The Victory Mail online exhibition hosted by the National Postal Museum stated that "officials estimated V-Mail saved up to ninety-eight percent on cargo weight and space."[11] This was a significant savings. The result was a win-win situation where the mail was efficiently shipped overseas and new cargo space was opened up for the transport of vital materials also needed by the troops, such as medical supplies and ammunition.

The cooperation of the United States Post Office with the War and Navy Departments indicated that letter writing had become an essential component in assuring an Allied victory in World War II. The propaganda campaign in posters, radio, and magazine advertisements, which encouraged the use of victory mail and letter writing, further illustrated this concept. The campaign also provided guidelines for letter writers by suggesting topics to include and also to avoid when composing letters to overseas troops. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the degree to which women letter-writers followed the suggested content guidelines recommended

[10] Victory Mail Online Exhibit, "Accelerated Service: Shipping V-Mail," Smithsonian National Postal Museum, http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/victorymail/introducing/accelerated.html (Accessed April 7, 2011).

[11] Victory Mail Online Exhibit, "How Did V-Mail Stack Up?" Smithsonian National Postal Museum, http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/victorymail/introducing/how.html (Accessed April 7, 2011).
For a thorough discussion of Victory Mail visit the Smithsonian online exhibit at http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/victorymail/index.html or visit the exhibition which opened in March, 2008 at the National Postal Museum in Washington D.C.

by the government, handbook writers, and product advertisements in magazines when writing to servicemen overseas.

Historiography and Methodology

Within the array of topics available to research related to World War II, the study of wartime mail sent by women represents only a very small portion of the scholarship. This is due, in part, to the fact that letters were rarely preserved. Many of the published compilations are composed of letters from soldiers which were saved by their stateside recipients. The editors who assembled a book on Wisconsin women during the war observed in their preface that "relative to those of male veterans, few…women's letters from the World War II era have been donated to archival repositories, and those letters that have been preserved frequently came from women who served in the military rather than from the great majority who did their work on the home front."[12] Letters sent from the home front by women were not usually saved by the soldiers as they travelled often and were encouraged to leave personal materials behind. Some of the relatively few letters that were saved exist today because a soldier resent the letters he received back home. They were sometimes mailed back in an empty K-ration box.[13] Other letters that can still be read today are from women who wrote drafts and saved them after mailing the final version of their letters.[14]

The most important collection of primary source documents is a book that takes its title from a fictional novel published in 1943. It was later made into an Oscar winning Hollywood movie. The book, *Since You Went Away*, is the result of a nationwide search started in 1988 by

[12] Michael E. Stevens, *Women Remember the War* (Madison, WI: Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1993), vii.

[13] K-ration boxes contained soldiers' meals and sometimes included cigarettes.

[14] Litoff and Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away*, ix.

two historians interested in home-front letters from American women. The historians, Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, amassed a collection which includes 25,000 letters written by four hundred American women representing all fifty states.[15]

Because letters sent to soldiers during the war rarely made it back to United States soil they have not been examined to the extent of letters written by soldiers. Therefore, the scope of this study will be limited only to letters written by women to soldiers. There are several collections of wartime letters written by women on the home front such as *Dear Boys,* which is a compilation based on a newspaper column written by a southern woman, Keith Fraiser Somerville, and the aforementioned *Since You Went Away*. However, these two books, which represent the main body of primary source literature available on the topic, do not contain an analysis of the content of the letters. The book *Since You Went Away* was used exclusively to provide source material for analysis due to the variety of letters and writers contained in the collection.

This area is rich in opportunity because these letters offer a personal account of the daily struggles women confronted during a time of war. The letters provide a revealing look at the home front challenges women faced such as separation from loved ones, raising children in a single parent home, and economic struggles compounded by wartime rationing. Amy Bentley, a professor at New York University, wrote about the role American women played during the war by focusing on food rationing. She acknowledged in her introduction that "although several solid studies of women and World War II provide broad assessments of women's experiences, most have focused on the nontraditional "Rosie the Riveter" role and the demobilization of

[15] Litoff and Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away*, viii.

women after the war."[16] This paper will examine women's home front experiences in their own words and measure their writing against a nationwide campaign by various media outlets including the federal government, radio broadcasts, and women's magazines, which introduced a specific set of guidelines that sought to regulate how women should express themselves. A theme that will be developed includes the act of patriotic letter writing encouraged through propaganda campaigns. These campaigns provide useful parameters through which the content of wartime letters can be evaluated. This will allow an in-depth evaluation and advance a broader understanding of women's letters from the home front during World War II.

Home Front Challenges

The entry of the United States into World War II affected women on the home front. Almost one in every five families was faced with separation from a family member serving in the armed forces. The shortage of male workers caused American women to enter the work force in record numbers. The historian Susan Hartmann found that "between 1940 and 1945, the female labor force grew by more than fifty percent…by the end of the war one of every four wives was employed."[17] Another difficulty that women on the home front confronted was the shortage of child care services. Hartmann argued that "of all the traditional female duties, that of child care was the most difficult to reconcile with work in the public sphere."[18] The government tried to solve the problem in the summer of 1942 by passing new legislation. The Lanham Act provided day-care for children in government-sponsored centers; however, the act only covered 105,000 children out of the estimated two million children who needed care. Women struggled to raise

[16] Amy Bentley, *Eating for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 2-3.

[17] Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond*, 21.

[18] Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond*, 84.

their families while also seeking to take advantage of the new economic opportunities available in war production work. [19]

In addition to the difficulty of reconciling work outside the home with the responsibilities of motherhood, women's domestic duties were also complicated by the war. A 1942 Congressional vote gave the Office of Price Administration new authority to begin rationing items that were in short supply. Eventually the rationing of sugar and coffee was expanded to include processed and canned foods, meat, fish, dairy products, tires and gasoline.[20] Hartman argued that "shortages of food and clothing, rationing, the unavailability of household appliances, and inadequate housing all had made housekeeping more arduous and time-consuming [for women in the 1940s]."[21] The war directly impacted women's ability to provide for their families and made their household duties more difficult. However, women's sacrifices were necessary in a time of war. Bentley pointed out that "women, of course, have always been crucial in making and sustaining war…women have been called on to intensify their traditional role…to contribute to the war effort thorough domestic endeavors…this 'behind the scenes' cooperation and participation in the making of war is vital to the outcome." [22] The 1940s housewife made do and went without as part of a larger effort to win the war.

All of these changes put women in a unique situation during the war years. Hartmann identified the main cause of women's difficulty in the 1940's. She concluded that "the nation desperately needed the services of women during the war, but it was equally resolutely attached

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[19] Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions*, 167; Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 416.

[20] Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions*, 159.

[21] Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond*, 25.

[22] Bentley, *Eating for Victory*, 2.

to the traditional sexual order."[23] Women were now expected to perform the tasks associated with motherhood and to also work outside the home. This change came at a time when the family support system was fractured by war and women had fewer resources available to sustain their families due to rationing.

Magazines such as the *Ladies Home Journal* advised women coping with the challenges of life on the home front. The government knew magazines would reach a large audience. By producing a *Magazine War Guide*, the government even gave suggestions to the editors on how to gear their articles toward supporting the war. Emily Yellin, a regular contributor to the *New York Times* and the author of *Our Mothers' War*, observed that with a circulation of four million, *Ladies Home Journal* was the most read women's magazine during the war years. Yellin also found that "women's magazine editors were encouraged to highlight women coping, nobly, unselfishly, and efficiently with their sacrifices and pressures during wartime."[24] A November 1943 article in *Ladies Home Journal* entitled "How to Live Without Your Husband," written by Lieutenant Commander Leslie Hohman sought to empower women to manage on their own. In addition to serving in the United States Navy Reserve, Hohman was also an associate instructor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University. The article examined the wartime trials of women who had difficulty navigating through life without a husband. The problem with these women was their "futile efforts to cling to companionship." One depressed woman realized her husband was no longer emotionally invested in their home life after he wrote her a "snappish" letter asking her not to write about the children any more. The article blamed his lack of interest on her spending too much time dwelling on the difficulties of her life. The problem began because

[23] Susan Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond*, 23.

[24] Emily Yellin, *Our Mothers' War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 25.

"she did not notice that complaints filled such a large part of every letter" and the result was "that he could hardly avoid being annoyed." The author offered rules for women on the home front: acknowledge the reality of your situation and keep busy.[25] Wives who followed the rules sailed through the trials of wartime life with courage and confidence.

Letter Writing Propaganda and Advertising

Letter writing as a measure of patriotism was encouraged by corporations and organizations as varied as electrical equipment manufacturers to the Red Cross. Wartime correspondence was also promoted in radio broadcasts, magazine articles, and through government posters and programs such as Victory Mail. The following poster produced in 1945 showcases this phenomenon:



Figure 1. Lejaren A. Hiller, Recruiting Publicity Bureau, United States Army, 1945. Public domain image courtesy of Northwestern University Library World War II Poster Collection.

[25] Leslie Hohman , "How to Live Without Your Husband," *Ladies Home Journal*, March 1944, 148.

The message on the reverse of this widely distributed government poster reads: "This Poster Is Important: Mail from home is more than a fighting man's privilege. It is a military necessity, for there probably is no factor so vital to the morale of a fighting man as frequent letters from home."[26] The message was clearly aimed at women and encouraged them to "be with him at *every* mail call" by writing letters.

The advertising executives of the 1940s were eager to participate in a mutually beneficial relationship with the government to advance war aims, such as letter writing, and of course, to sell products. Advertisers worried that consumers would forget brand loyalties to products that were barred from production during the war such as ladies stockings and home appliances. The historian Amy Bentley contended that "both private manufacturers and advertising companies …seized the chance to combine government wartime programs with private advertising."[27] This partnership between the advertising industry and the government was not accidental. Robert Lingeman contended in his book *Don't You Know There's a War On?* that the War Advertising Council was formed to coordinate "the wartime public service activities of advertising with the government's publicity demands."[28] The Treasury Department's view that the cost of a "reasonable" amount of advertising could be deducted as a business expense encouraged the production of advertisements by private companies that aligned with government interests. Therefore, businesses that geared their advertisements toward letter writing as an act of patriotism achieved two aims. Their main objectives of selling products and increasing their profit margin were achieved while the company also benefited from a tax write-off.

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[26] Lejaren A.Hiller, Recruiting Publicity Bureau, United States Army, 1945 quoted in Litoff and Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away*, 120. Northwestern University Library, *World War II Poster Collection*, http://digital.library.northwestern.edu/wwii-posters/img/ww1647-79.jpg (accessed April 11, 2011).

[27] Bentley, *Eating for Victory*, 32.

[28] Richard R. Lingeman, *Don't You Know There's a War On?* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1970), 294.

Some of the advertisements created during wartime promoted home front cooperation by making Americans feel guilty or equating a letter writer's ability to keep soldiers' spirits high as more valuable than war material. An advertisement touting the use of V-Mail exemplified the guilty conscience approach when it asked "Can you pass the mail box with a clear conscience?"[29] Advertisements, handbooks, and military broadcasts also provided instructions and suggestions for proper letter writing. One example was a Westinghouse Electrical & Manufacturing Company advertisement featured in the December 1942 edition of the *Ladies Home Journal*. The text of the advertisement encouraged women to leave out bad news and only include "the things he wants to hear" in their letters. The manufacturing company acknowledged their business was not connected to letter writing, as they manufacture electronic equipment for tanks and planes, but the ad stressed the idea that boosting soldier morale was a more important "victory weapon" than an automated device.[30] (See Appendix A for the full text of the advertisement.)

The culture of letter writing was so pervasive in 1940s advertising that it was used to sell products in novel ways. An advertisement for Fletcher's Castoria in the November 1942 issue of *Ladies Home Journal* depicted a woman living with her mother-in-law while her husband, Tom, served in the war. The mother-in-law was seated at a desk next to a portrait of her uniformed son with her pen poised over a sheet of paper. The woman, as she held her child, told her mother-in-law "you've got no right to tell Tom I'm spoiling the baby!" The advertisement was selling a baby laxative that the mother-in-law presumably believed unnecessary. She was determined to

[29] Lingeman, *Don't You Know There's a War On?*, 295.

[30] Westinghouse Electric & Manufacturing Co., "When Someone You Love Goes to War," advertisement, *Ladies Home Journal*, December 1942, 53.

share her daughter-in-law's excessive and wasteful parenting style in a letter to her soldier son.[31] In this case, letter writing to men at war was incorporated into an advertisement for a product totally unrelated to the war effort.

Letter Writing Guidelines

The number of media outlets that produced guidelines and recommendations that home front women were expected to follow offered evidence that the business of proper letter writing was a persistent feature in American society during World War II. One piece of letter writing etiquette that appeared in a 1945 edition of *The New Yorker* was an advertisement for the Glenn L. Martin Company. The piece advised women to follow three guidelines: "1. Short, frequent letters are better than occasional long ones. 2. Write cheerful newsy letters about familiar places and faces. 3. Use V-Mail…" The advertisement went on to ask, "Why not read this magazine later and write a V-Mail letter now?"[32] The three points listed above were the most common letter writing rules in World War II. However, some suggestions were much more detailed. Rosemary Ames, a Red Cross Correspondent offered the following cautionary advice to letter-writing women:

> Men in war have neither the time nor the emotional energy to be interested in boring details about housekeeping, rationing problems and family troubles. Unfortunately, many women's minds run that way. They had better change routes for those letters are often not even read to the end. Men have told me as much. Soldiers are occupied with the fundamentals of existence. Yours, as well as theirs, only most of you are too far away from the terribleness of war and what a Nazi-dominated world could mean, to realize it. Yes, I know. It's very hard to suddenly become a psychologist and an author overnight merely because your man went away. But it's worth your while to try. For just as the right kind of letters will tighten your romances -- or your bonds of affection with son, brother, or husband -- so will the wrong kind loosen them.[33]

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[31] Chas H. Fletcher Castoria, "You've got No Right to Tell Tom I'm Spoiling the Baby!" advertisement, *Ladies Home Journal*, November 1942, 62.

[32] Shannon Sharkey, "Pigeon Post and Victory Mail?" *History Magazine,* February/March 2010, 11.

[33] Rosemary Ames, "Sabotage Women of America," *OWI Intelligence Digests*, (Office of War Information, Record Group 208; National Archives at College Park, Maryland), 4-5 quoted in Victory Mail Online Exhibit,

This advice underscored the importance of letter writing in maintaining personal relationships. Women were accused of not realizing the threat that soldiers, and the rest of the world faced, if the war was lost. The mundane trials of everyday life were meaningless in a time of war, although women, without support from their husbands, were obviously dealing with the fundamentals of their own existence as well. Ames encouraged women to become therapists when writing to men overseas and urged women to not mention their own hardships for the sake of their relationships. Another source for letter writing advice to wartime women was a radio broadcast by the Marine Corps in 1943. The broadcast stressed the importance of properly addressing letters to avoid lengthy delivery delays and added that letter writers should strive to "make your letters cheery, eliminate bad or depressing news."[34] Multiple agencies encouraged women to keep their struggles to themselves and to cope without the help of their loved ones.

Perhaps the most thorough example of letter writing guidelines was produced by fashion writer and war wife Ethel Gorham. She composed a useful handbook for women who faced life without their husbands. The book entitled *So Your Husband's Gone to War!* featured an entire chapter devoted to the process of letter writing, which in her opinion was a lost art. Gorman's guidelines on writing to a wartime husband echoed Ames' rules in many respects. Gorman warned women, "If you don't write to your husband and he doesn't write to you, you have only memory and furloughs to fall back on." She pointed out that "The fuller and stronger you make this new written bond between you, the closer your relationship will grow." Gorman also

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"Better Letters," Smithsonian National Postal Museum, http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/victorymail/letter/better.html (accessed April 7, 2011).

[34] *Report on Sending Mail to Servicemen*, Library of Congress, Marine Corps Combat Recordings RGA 8763 PNO 22-25, 1943, quoted in Victory Mail Online Exhibit, Letter Writing Do's and Don'ts, Smithsonian National Postal Museum, http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/VictoryMail/letter/letter.html (accessed April 7, 2011).

explained that conducting a relationship through the mail involved a learning curve. She acknowledged that the immediacy of talking on the phone was lost in letter writing and explained that women must adjust to the lapse in continuity. Gorman also advocated keeping the difficulties of home front living out of letters. She prompted women to keep in mind "one of the best rules to remember, if you want to spare yourself the unhappiness of wishing you hadn't sent yesterday's letter, is to leave out all personal upheavals."[35] Women were expected to deal with the difficulties of life on their own, without a man's help, and omit from their correspondence any mention of the negative realties of their lives.

Gorman also dealt with the emotional upheaval brought on by the war. She asked, "Are you feeling lonely and upset and vaguely suicidal?" She admonished women to not "put it into written words unless you're prepared to jump out of the window and this is your last message on it all." The letters were not only a permanent record of what might be a temporary emotional state, but also a soldier's only connection to home. Gorman reminded women that "your letters arrive as the only link he has with his outside life. In your letters he feels the pulse of normalcy." Loved ones forced to live apart faced the reality of coping with the separation. To ease the separation Gorman appealed to women to write letters "as warm and intimate as you yourself have been with the man to whom you are writing." Gorman argued that letters could be counterproductive "if you pout, if you sulk, if you complain" and the end result would be that "it will sadden him for days and yield you no profit."[36]

However, there were benefits to some women who upheld their relationship through letters. Gorman wrote of a woman who felt her husband's letters "carry a warmth he was never

[35] Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, eds., *American Women in a World at War: Contemporary Accounts from World War II* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1997), 149.

[36] Litoff and Smith, eds., *American Women in a World at War*, 149-150.

able to give me before. And, in return, I find myself writing things I never dreamed I could say or get Tom to understand…we are like different people…more unashamed, more revealing."[37] In the uncertainty and anxiety of wartime, letters allowed women to express their emotions. Some women found that writing letters brought about a deeper connection to their spouses than they had experienced before the war.

At the very heart of a well composed letter was a connection between two people that care for each other. Gorman believed that the main point of a letter was to make a soldier feel that "each time he answers you…he has never gone away." She acknowledged that "it is hard to practice seduction a thousand miles away, but that's what your letters should do."[38] Another important element in letter writing was consistency in a letter routine even though soldiers were understandably unable to regularly answer letters. Gorman's husband told her what happened at mail call. He observed that "everyone waits at the window…the lads who don't get a letter turn away as if lost." If women could not write often they should "avoid at all times the statement that you are having such a riotous good time back home that of course you can't find time to write." For those women not accustomed to writing letters Gorman gave simple advice. She wrote, "The best way to get into the writing habit is just to write." The result of a cheerful, well composed letter was that "the worst part of the hiatus in your emotional life can be bridged over. You cannot be separated truly if you find yourself held together by a constant stream of words."[39]

[37] Litoff and Smith, eds., *American Women in a World at War*, 152-153.

[38] Litoff and Smith, eds., *American Women in a World at War*, 153.

[39] Litoff and Smith, eds., *American Women in a World at War*, 154-155.

The most valued letters from home included neighborhood news. Gorman postulated that a "letter should be as much like your best moments as possible…most men like newsy letters, with lots of detail. If you are the whimsy type and he likes whimsy, you can give him the news the whimsical way." She advised women to "thread it through with detail and gossip and he will live for your letters." It was also important to comment on current events, reactions to the latest war developments and to include newspaper clippings. Gorman told the story of a wartime wife she was acquainted with who "has made a habit of getting out and seeing people only because she had to find something to write to her husband about." Letters from the home front served not only as a means of maintaining a relationship and strengthening troop morale, but also functioned as a form of entertainment for the soldiers. Gorman also recommended that women relate as much as possible about what local communities were doing to advance the war effort. Gorman believed that "the most important thing to a soldier is knowing that the home front is at war with him."[40] However, some war efforts that caused difficulty for women in managing their domestic duties, such as food rationing, were to be omitted from letters. To minimize the guilt and worry that a soldier overseas felt, Gorman advised writers to "leave out all reference…to the high cost of living."[41] Letter writers had to consider their audience when composing their lines and be sure that the news they included would not leave an absent husband feeling powerless to help in a situation beyond his control.

Analysis of Wartime Letters

The letters written by wartime women varied greatly in the degree to which they conformed to letter writing guidelines advanced by Gorman and others. Some followed the

[40] Litoff and Smith, eds., *American Women in a World at War*, 150-153.

[41] Litoff and Smith, eds., *American Women in a World at War*, 150.

guidelines closely such as the letter Dawn Dyer wrote to her friend Jack Sage who had left Washington for Army Air Corps training in Nevada. It was apparent by her letter that she was optimistic about the lives young people, like she and Jack, might have after the war ended. She told him, "Don't be discouraged. Just keep thinking that it will be over someday, and then we all can have a chance to build our futures." She had a clear purpose in writing which was evident in her closing line: "I hope my little bit of philosophy can cheer you up."[42] Dawn was putting aside her feelings of uncertainty and concentrating on lifting Jack's spirits. This was exactly the type of letter women were expected to write to boost troop morale.

Another example of a woman who refused to write about the negative aspects of war was Alice Woods. When she wrote to her brother, Ray Woods, on December 21, 1941, she knew that he was wounded in the attack at Pearl Harbor, yet in her letter she glided over her worry. Instead, she included her sentimental reflections on the defining characteristics of the Christmas season which included snowy weather and "the dear little children who pop you in the kisser with a snow ball when you least expect it." She seemed to be trying to cheer her brother up with light happy stories of home, just as Gorman advised. She lightly glossed over the family's uncertainty about Ray's whereabouts by saying only that she hoped he was not upset about not getting a Christmas package. The reason for the lack of a package was of course that they did not know exactly where he was or if he was in good health. Alice went on to tempt her brother by writing about some of his favorite foods which included "mushrooms fried in butter" and "a fried cheese sandwich." [43] Alice must have thought that if Ray received her letter while he was in recovery the familiar reminders of comfort food from home would soothe his wounded spirit.

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[42] Litoff and Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away*, 15.

[43] Litoff and Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away*, 7.

Some women like Isabel Kidder of Durham, New Hampshire, combined reflective and detailed accounts of their daily lives. In a letter to her husband, Maurice, who was leaving for England in October of 1942, Isabel wrote, "There will be many details which I shall never know, and that seems hard to bear. It must seem equally hard to you to feel that there are things which are going to happen to 'we three' [Isabel and the two children] which you cannot know." She continued on to relate with pride how she was able to successfully build a fire in the coal furnace and she poetically described an afternoon lunch near a reservoir with her children. She then signed off with "Good night you nut."[44] Even though Isabel was able to retain her sense of humor, it seemed that letter writing did not provide a strong enough connection with her husband. She lamented the fact that life would go on without him, although she tried to convey a sense of what was happening in his absence. She acknowledged that the separation must be just as difficult for her husband as it was for her. At least for Isabel and her husband, the hardships of maintaining a long distance relationship were experienced equally between them. It was telling that Isabel did not complain in her letter, but rather pragmatically stated that there were things they both would miss because of the separation caused by war. Isabel left no doubt in her husband's mind that she could handle being on her own.

Against the recommendations of Gorman and the government, other letter writers were unable to offer that kind of reassurance. This was understandably the case with some letters written after major news stories broke. A woman named Rubye Seago from Virginia wrote to her future husband Richard Long shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Although Richard was safely stationed stateside at Camp Wheeler, Georgia, the bombing shook Rubye to the core. She wrote, "Do you realize that we may *never* see each other again…this is awful—I know I am hurting you. And I can't help it…I'd give everything I own, or ever hope to have, to see you

[44] Litoff and Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away*, 11.

right now."[45] The devastation of the surprise attack exposed the potential danger that her soon-to-be husband faced. Rubye's letter expressed her deepest fears and she was unable to conceal her concern for her lover's life. She was aware that her letter would not ease Richard's mind, but she was overwhelmed and psychologically overburdened by the thought of losing him. Rubye was in no position to provide solace to her soldier; rather, she was the one in true need of reassurance.

Although women were discouraged from writing about the difficulties they faced while trying to maintain a home in wartime, sometimes the triumph over shortages and rationing was an event worth sharing. Audrey Davis could not contain her enthusiasm at finding bed sheets when she wrote to her future husband Carleton Kelvin Savell. In letters addressed to "My Precious Darling Sea-Daddy" or "Angel Darlin," Audrey wrote about the trials of being a war worker and the trouble she faced locating household goods. On April 18, 1945 Audrey relayed the details of an event that happened when she was out shopping at J.C. Penney's. Her letter described an exchange she had with a shop girl when she requested bedding. The shop girl went into the back room and brought out a wrapped package that Audrey bought without knowing what it contained. She wrote that she "felt like someone buying hooch during Prohibition" and added that "towels are also very hard to get."[46] Everyday household products, such as linens, were now secretly sold out of back stockrooms. Audrey's letters did not highlight her difficulties so much as they trumpeted her success and luck at finding what she needed. No matter what adversity she faced, Audrey learned to cope and celebrate her small accomplishments.

The letters analyzed so far were written by women to a sibling, a friend or a future husband. It seemed that these women were more able to generally abide by the letter writing

[45] Litoff and Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away*, 9.

[46] Litoff and Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away*, 166-170.

guidelines put forth by Gorman and the government. For women who were married before the war began, the possibility of being separated from their husbands did not figure into their relationship until it actually happened. These women were sometimes also faced with raising children as single parents. Perhaps the stakes of losing a husband were raised for these women. Their wartime letters show that the unexpected reality of being apart from their husbands and parenting alone was a significant disturbance in their lives. As a result, they tended to express their true feelings in letters.

This was especially the case in a letter from Sigrid Jensen of Caldwell, New Jersey, written to her husband Karl after he left for training in June of 1943. She wrote, "No words can get down to the awful unreality…of it…that you, the best natured and most tolerant person in the world, should have to learn to hate and kill is just as incredible to me as the fact that the peculiar oneness of us as a family should be broken." Sigrid did not offer her husband, a man she must have known well, patriotic words of encouragement or soothing words of comfort. She was unmistakably disturbed by her husband's new role as a soldier and confessed that she could not launder the shirt he last wore.[47] Sigrid's new life without her husband was a difficult reality for her to face and her letters reflected her struggle.

Another war wife, Natalie Maddalena, wrote about raising her two children alone in New York City. Natalie was married in December of 1941 to a twenty-nine year old man named Frank, who was then drafted in February of 1944. Against the prescribed guidelines, Natalie wrote about the tough time she was having raising their young son, Frankie Jr. She described him as "a rascal" and admitted that there were times that she would "like to wring his neck." Natalie's letters changed tone after Frank was deployed overseas. She wrote less about the

[47] Litoff and Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away*, 12.

children and her anxiety increased. She wrote, "I'm beginning to lose courage and faith…I'm so burdened with responsibilities that I fear my shoulders can't carry them all." She was constantly writing letters to Frank that expressed her worry that he would lose his life. Unfortunately Natalie's worries were not just the expressions of a nervous wife. On November 22, 1944 Private Maddalena was killed in battle. Even though Natalie's last V-Mail to her husband conveyed her inability to enjoy her children without him, she raised her children alone and never remarried.[48]

Perhaps the most revealing letters concerning the do's and don'ts of wartime correspondence were penned by Anne Gudis from Newark, New Jersey. She began writing Samuel Kramer after he was sent to England in the Army Special Services. The couple had only met a few times before Samuel departed. Their efforts at forming a firm relationship were challenged when they failed to connect at two planned meetings. Unfortunately, Samuel's letters were not preserved, but he evidently wrote Anne of his disappointment over their missed connections and revealed that he had strong feelings for her.[49] She responded in December of 1942 by writing a "brutally frank" letter informing him that he was "so damn conceited [to] think that if a girl so much as looks at you she wants to marry you." She continued on her angry rant by saying "don't tell me what to do either. You nor anyone else will dictate my life for me."[50] The couple was obviously in the midst of a heated argument. Anne even responded to Samuel that she was "relieved to learn that [he] had burned my letters."[51] Anne and Samuel continued to write letters throughout the spring of 1943. The argument peaked when Anne wrote a now

[48] Litoff and Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away*, 244-248.

[49] Litoff and Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away*, 53.

[50] Litoff and Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away*, 54.

[51] Litoff and Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away*, 55.

infamous "Dear John" letter which was preserved because Samuel submitted it to the weekly magazine published for servicemen called *Yank*. The following V-Mail message was included in *Yank* under the headline "The Importance of Being Terse" on September 27, 1943: "Mr. Kramer: Go To Hell! With love, Anne Gudis."[52] While Anne must have felt she was expressing her true feelings to a persistent and unwanted suitor, others saw her V-Mail differently. Her message caused outrage and she received approximately one hundred unsolicited letters, some which decried her for "damaging morale…putting Samuel in danger, or for otherwise not living up to the 'unwritten law' of how women should behave in wartime." Those who disapproved of her actions included Samuel's commanding officer. He wrote to Anne and expressed his concern that her letters were undermining Samuel's morale.[53]

Anne and Samuel's correspondence illustrated the difficulty of developing a strong relationship through letter writing. The desire for an Allied victory meant that every opportunity to strengthen a soldier's morale should be ardently seized by the home front. Letters from home could either positively or negatively impact a soldier's outlook. Anne's "Dear John" letter and the aftermath showed that the public was unwilling to accept any home front action that could potentially weaken the troops' resolve. Anne faced the scorn of a patriotic public who judged her actions through the lens of either contributing to or detracting from the war effort. In a final ironic twist to the story, Anne Gudis and Samuel Kramer were married in November of 1945 after writing letters to each other for three years. They had three children and were happily married for over forty-five years.[54]

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[52] Litoff and Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away*, 55-56.

[53] Litoff and Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away*, 56.

[54] Litoff and Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away*, 63.

The Postwar Home Front

After the Allied victory, officials assessed women's wartime contributions and continued to dispense advice. Women were reminded of their responsibilities as mothers, opposed to workers earning a wage. The economic prosperity of the postwar period foreshadowed the rise of the idealized full-time mother who was to become a fixture of middle class society.[55] Hartmann argued that returning soldiers "wanted 'feminine' women who would display 'tenderness, admiration, or at least submissiveness.'" [56] Women were also charged with easing the transition of soldiers back to civilian life. After the war, some critics, such as the editor of a *Life* magazine article published in January 1945, accused women of failing to fully support their country in a time of war. The editorial charged that women were "lazy, apathetic and ill-informed."[57] Leila Rupp, a feminist historian, viewed the harsh criticism as a demeaning effort to label women's war contributions as insignificant and make it clear that women were expected to return to their traditional roles as homemakers.[58] Other articles such as "War Anxieties of Soldier's and Their Wives," included in the academic journal *Social Forces*, tried to garner support for war wives by informing citizens of the special emotional challenges they endured. The postwar article published in December 1945 pointed out that war wives were concerned that their spouse would no longer find them attractive, or worse, they feared their children would not recognize their father when he returned. Penned by a husband and wife team, the article

[55] Kathleen Gerson, *Hard Choices: How Women Decide about Work, Career, and Motherhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 4.

[56] Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond*, 169.

[57] Leila Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 160.

[58] Leila Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War,* 161.

encouraged citizens to be sensitive to families torn apart by war and stressed the importance of expressing gratitude to couples who had made substantial sacrifices.[59]

Twenty-first century scholars also sought to explain the past and offered differing opinions on home front life. In her book *Beyond the Home Front,* a collection of autobiographical writing by women during the two world wars, English Professor Yvonne Klein made an observation about home front experiences. She wrote, "The overall impression left by accounts of life on the home front is of crushing boredom and grinding deprivation punctuated by moments of terror."[60] This characterization may be a bit overdramatized and uncharacteristic of the majority of women's experiences. Another writer saw the difficulties experienced by women on the home front as a necessary function of the war. In *America's Home Front Heroes: An Oral History of World War II,* compiled by Stacy Enyeart, the civilian contributions to the war effort are viewed as a give and take relationship between the home front and the military. She proposed that "a wartime home front should be demanding of personal time, energy, skills and daily sacrifice; otherwise, there is a disconnect between the outfield and home plate."[61] In this analogy the American home front protected and guarded home plate and supported the distant soldiers in the outfield. It seemed the home front conformed to this paradigm during World War II. Letter writing exemplified one of the ways the home front contributed to the war effort and was also a daily ritual for many women.

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[59] Edward and Louise McDonagh, "War Anxieties of Soldiers and Their Wives," *Social Forces* 24, no. 2 (December 1945): 198-200.

[60] Yvonne Klein, ed., *Beyond the Home Front: Women's Autobiographical Writing of the Two World Wars* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 10.

[61] Stacy Enyeart, *America's Home Front Heroes: An Oral History of World War II* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2009), xxv.

Conclusion

The letters women wrote during World War II represented a private correspondence between loved ones. Tom Brokaw, a television journalist, wrote in his book *The Greatest Generation Speaks* that "World War II may have been the last great age of the love letter…letters brought news of family, neighborhood gossip, confessions of loneliness and fear…but most of all, love."[62] Letter writers were certainly motivated by the desire to convey love in their letters. In fact, some V-Mail letters were plagued by the "Scarlet Scourge," a term coined by newspapers in reference to the kissed-on red lipstick stains that caused jams in the microfilm machines. The kisses were rendered as grey splotches when the V-Mail was reprinted, but the message was clearly one of love.[63] Letters helped to connect people separated by war. Women followed the general guideline to share only good news in some instances, but in many, they did not. For some writers, the reality of war was difficult to cope with and they expressed their hardships in letters. Being separated from friends and family members was an agonizing experience for some women, while other women thrived despite the adversity of the war years. The purpose of letter writing was to bolster the spirits of troops overseas and to maintain relationships with loved ones who may not return. An analysis of the preserved letters showed that many factors influenced the degree to which the writer conformed to the suggested guidelines. If a woman was writing to a brother, a potential husband or was married after the war began she tended to more closely follow the letter writing recommendations. Women who were married and had children before the war wrote their letters straight from the heart, and were less likely to conform to the guidelines. Well publicized war events, such as Pearl Harbor affected the ability of all letter-

[62] Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation Speaks: Letters and Reflections* (New York: Random House, 1999), 152.

[63] Victoria Dawson, "V--as in Victory Mail," *Smithsonian*, May 2004, 38.

writers to abide by content suggestions regardless of relationship status. However, frightening news such as an impending overseas deployment or a notification of a soldier's injury affected the conformity of letter writers to the standards with much less regularity.

Appendix

Advertisements for a wide variety of products such as this Westinghouse Electric & Manufacturing Company advertisement, featured in *Ladies Home Journal* magazine in December 1942, encouraged frequent and cheerful letter writing to overseas troops to boost soldier morale. The advertisement began with the headline "When someone you love goes to war" and the text of the advertisement read:

It isn't easy, saying good-by to a soldier.
It isn't easy, thinking of the dangers and hardships that may lie ahead for him.
But he has a *job* to do. A grim, unpleasant job at best—*but he's doing it*. Doing it for his country, and the things he believes in. Doing it for *you*. And you wouldn't have it any other way.
You have a job to do for *him*.
Keeping your chin up. Making the best of things. *And letting him know it while he's away.*
So write him often. Make your letters cheerful and encouraging. Leave out news about the rainy weather and Junior's siege of the grippe and the trouble with the hot-water system. Tell him, instead, the things he wants to hear…That you're well, and that things at home are fine. That the baby has a tooth, or you got a raise, or you went on a picnic with Harvey and Jean, or you've saved up almost a hundred dollars in War Bonds.
The *good* news.
The news that makes it easier for *him*.
Send it to him *often*.
Why is an *electrical manufacturer* asking you to do this?
We don't make fountain pens, or stationary, or anything connected with letter-writing. We probably never shall.
But we *are* building the weapons of Victory…the very weapons that are helping *your* fighting man to do his wartime job better.
We're building electrical equipment and devices of many kinds for tanks, planes, guns, ships—from giant turbines and generators to tine incredibly precise aircraft instruments. Building these weapons *better* and *faster* than they have ever been built is *our* wartime job.
But we believe that *the morale of our fighting men* is a bigger and more important Victory weapon than anything we have ever made, or ever shall make.
That's where *you* can help out.
That's *your* job. *Good news*—often![64]

[64] Westinghouse Electric & Manufacturing Co., "When Someone You Love Goes to War," advertisement, *Ladies Home Journal*, December 1942, 53.

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