

# Mud, Blood, and Bullet Holes: Teaching History with War Letters

Andrew Carroll

“Something happened to me the other day that I want you to know about,” wrote Private John McGrath in a letter to an old friend on April 25, 1944, from Anzio, about 35 miles south of Rome. American troops had just helped liberate Italy, and McGrath was recalling to his buddy back in the States the hellfire he and his fellow soldiers had endured.

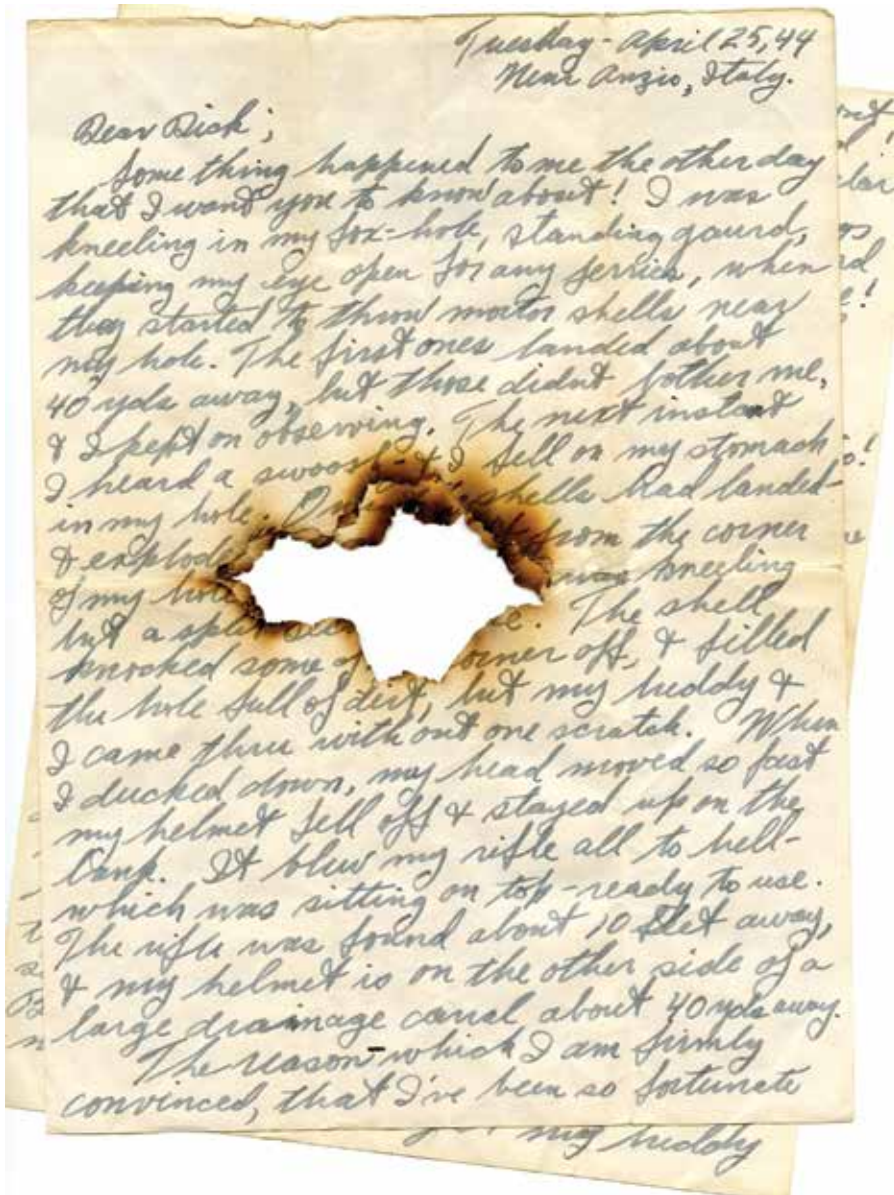
“I was kneeling in my fox-hole, standing guard,” McGrath continued, “when [the Germans] started to throw mortar shells near my hole. The first ones landed about 40 yds away, but those didn’t bother me, and I kept observing. The next instant I heard a swoosh—and I fell on my stomach in my hole. One of the shells had landed—and exploded about a foot from the corner of my hole right where I was kneeling but a split second before.”

Ironically, the near-death experience that McGrath described in his letter wasn’t even the closest he came to dying that day. The letter itself is proof of how narrowly he escaped being killed at Anzio; soon after placing it in his backpack to send later, a bullet smashed into the pack and tore a hole right through the center of the letter. Fortunately McGrath, himself, sustained only minor injuries.

McGrath’s letter is just one of an estimated 100,000 correspondences donated to the Legacy Project, a national initiative launched in 1998 to preserve war letters by U.S. troops and their loved ones. Beginning with handwritten missives penned during the American Revolution and continuing up to typed emails sent from Iraq and Afghanistan, these letters show the full spectrum of emotions that military personnel and their family members experience in times of armed conflict.

Since the beginning of this effort almost 15 years ago, one question, in particular, has been asked repeatedly about the Legacy Project: Why letters?

Indeed, at a time when letter-writing



itself seems so archaic (today's troops, for example, can speak with their spouses and children over Skype or satellite phones), what makes correspondences so unique and, most important, such an invaluable part of teaching history?

For one, and McGrath's bullet-pierced letter from Anzio is a perfect example, the very condition of the letters often conveys the hardships that service members encounter on the front lines. Visually, McGrath's singed letter is a stark reminder of the dangers that he and his fellow soldiers faced daily. Numerous Civil War letters contributed to the Legacy Project are stained with mud and blood, the ink of several letters from Vietnam are smeared because the letters were written in driving rain storms, and letters from the Gulf War—the last conflict where letter-writing was still the main form of communication—are covered with a thin film of sand because they were written in the middle of the desert.

Another letter that emphasizes what troops have endured was written by a 21-year-old lieutenant named Tommie Kennedy. Kennedy was captured by the Japanese during the invasion of the Philippines. (The initial assault came hours after the December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor, but thousands of American and Filipino soldiers held out until May 1942, when they were ultimately forced to surrender at Corregidor.) Lt. Tommie Kennedy was among those taken prisoner, and he spent nearly three years as a POW. Fatally malnourished and incarcerated on a Japanese warship, by early January 1945, Kennedy sensed that the end was near. On the back of two family photographs he had saved, Kennedy handwrote in tiny letters a farewell message to his parents. He began with a note to whomever found his body.



I am sending Walt's medals to his mother. He gave them to me Sept 42 last time I saw him & Bud. They went to Japan. I guess you can tell Patty that fate just didn't want us to be together. Hold a nice service for me in Bksfield & put head stone in new cemetary [sic]. Take care of my nieces & nephews[,] don't let them ever want anything as I want even warmth or water now.

Loving & waiting for you in the world be[y]on[d].

Your son,  
Lt. Tommie Kennedy

Kennedy's final letters were smuggled from one POW to another, and each man made certain that, before dying, the items were passed to someone else. When the survivors were liberated at war's end, Kennedy's belongings were mailed to his parents in late 1945—well over four years after their teenage son had left for the Pacific. His grandniece came across the photos/letters almost by accident. Had she not found them, they would have likely been tossed in the garbage.

Five months after Kennedy wrote to his family, a staff sergeant named Horace Evers was in Munich, Germany, hunting down members of the Nazi high command. (Like John McGrath, Evers had fought at Anzio.) On May 2, just two days after Adolf Hitler had killed himself in his Berlin bunker, Evers and his unit found themselves in a lavishly furnished apartment. It was, they were shocked to discover, Hitler's private Munich residence. In an adjoining room Evers noticed a long wooden conference table, where sheets of Hitler's personal stationery, with the Nazi swastika embossed in gold over Hitler's name, lay scattered. Evers sat down at Hitler's desk and wrote to his mother and stepfather on Hitler's stationery about the horrors of the Dachau concentration camp, which he had just walked through the day before.



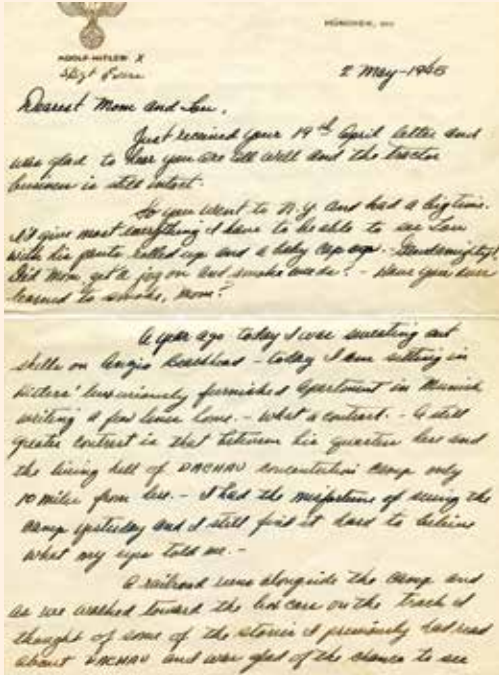
Notify: C.R. Kennedy, Box 842 Maricopa, California.  
Death of Son. Lt. Thomas R. Kennedy 0-89034.

Momie & Dad: It is pretty hard to check out this way with out a fighting chance but we can't live forever. I'm not afraid to die, I just hate the thought of not seeing you again. Buy Turkey Ranch with my money and just think of me often while your [sic] there. Make liberal donations to both sisters. See that Gary has a new car his first year hi-school.

2 May—1945

Dearest Mom and Lou,

... A year ago today I was sweating out shells on Anzio Beachhead—today I am sitting in Hitler's luxuriously furnished apartment in Munich writing a few lines home. —What a contrast. A still greater contrast is that between his quarters here and the living hell of Dachau concentration camp only 10 miles from here. —I had the misfortune of seeing the camp yesterday and I still find it hard to believe what my eyes told me. —



A railroad runs alongside the camp and as we walked toward the box cars on the track I thought of some of the stories I previously had read about Dachau and was glad of the chance to see for myself just to prove once and for all that what I had heard was propaganda.—But no it wasn't propaganda at all.—If anything some of the truth had been held back. In two years of combat you can imagine I have seen a lot of death, furious death mostly. But nothing has ever stirred

me as much as this. I can't shrug off the feeling of utter hate I now hold for these people. I've shot at Germans with intent to kill before but only because I had to or else it was me—now I hold no hesitancy whatsoever.

The first box car I came to had about 30 what were once humans in it.—All were just bone with a layer of skin over them. Most of the eyes were open and had an undescrivable [sic] look about them. They had that beaten "what did I do to deserve this" look. Twenty or thirty other box cars were the same. Bodies on top of each other—no telling how many. No identification as far as I could see. —And then into the camp itself.—Filthy barracks suitable for about 200 persons held 1500. 160,000 persons were originally in the camp and 32,000 were alive (or almost alive) when we arrived.—

There is a gas chamber and furnace room in one barracks.—Two rooms were full of bodies waiting to be cremated.—In one room they were all nude—in the other they had prison clothes on—as filthy as dirt itself.

How can people do things like that? I never believed they could until now...

I guess the papers have told you about the 7th Army taking Nurnberg and Munich by now.—Our division took the greater part of each place and captured many thousands of prisoners. We also liberated Russian, Polish and British and American prisoners by the thousands—what a happy day for the people.

Well enough for now—

Miss you all very much

Your Son  
Horace

Had Evers written *anything* on that stationery, it would have been historic. But the fact that he chose to recount what he saw at Dachau makes it all the more valuable, and it serves as one more irrefutable piece of evidence attesting to the horror of what Hitler and his sadistic cohorts inflicted on innocent civilians.

While the war in Europe ended in early May 1945, Allied troops continued to battle Japanese forces in the Pacific for three and a half more months. Nine days after Japan officially surrendered to the Allies on September 2, 1945, the nation's ex-prime minister (and the architect of the attack on Pearl Harbor) Hideki Tojo was arrested at his home in Tokyo for war crimes.

At approximately 4:17 p.m. on September 11, Tojo, intending to spare himself the dishonor of certain punishment, picked up a pistol and fired a single bullet into his chest. Police guards, correspondents, and several U. S. military officers who had been outside Tojo's house rushed in as soon as they heard the gunshot. Although no one expected him to survive, Tojo was taken to the 98th Evacuation Hospital in Yokohama. The bullet, doctors learned, had just missed Tojo's heart, and they were able to stabilize him. Corporal Robert S. Easterbrook, an assistant to the army physician, was instructed to monitor Tojo and keep him alive. Writing to his parents in Davenport, Iowa, Easterbrook reported what it was like to tend to a man directly responsible for the deaths of millions of men, women, and children throughout the world.

The American doctors were successful and Tojo recovered from his wound. But, as Tojo feared, he was tried before the International Military Tribunal for the Far East and sentenced to death. He was hanged on December 23, 1948. Corporal Easterbrook's letter was purchased at a yard sale for less than \$1.

Millions of war letters remain tucked away in attics, closets, and basements throughout America, just waiting to be found. (Many of the best submissions sent to the Legacy Project are from students who asked their parents or other relatives if they still had their wartime correspondences, and the search for these letters can be educational in itself.) Original letters are no more or less historically significant

(12:00 Noon) 12 Sept. 45

Dear Mom & Dad: —

I don't imagine you could ever guess where I am as I write this letter. At present, I'm sitting in a chair about 3 ft. from the bedside of the ex-Premier of Japan—Hideki Tojo.

We were in duty last night, in surgery—when he arrived at approximately 9:40PM—& I've never seen so much "brass", correspondents, & photographers in my life. From Lieut. Gen. Eichelberger (C.O. of 8th Army), on down to a smattering of Lieut. Colonels. And when Capt. Speelberger (attending physician) shoved the stethoscope in my hand & said to check him every 5 minutes, I didn't know whether to "shi—or wind my watch." Ha!

As there was no whole blood available at the moment, we gave him 600 c.c of blood plasma after which he perked up enough to make a statement. He told Gen. Eichelberger (thru the interpreter) that he was sorry to cause so much trouble. He had planned on shooting himself in the head, but had been afraid it would muss up his face to[o] much—so had decided on the heart. He used a 38 Cal. automatic, & the bullet entered just below & medial to the left breast & emerged from the back about two inches higher. I'm damned if I know how it missed his heart.

It's almost 1 o'clock & time to check him. Back in a few minutes.

—1:15PM—

Blood transfusion started. It will take about an hour. So far he has shown very little improvement over last night & they hope this fresh blood will help. The photographers have just left. They were allowed in for a few minutes just after the transfusion began.

—3:40PM—

The transfusion has ended & everyone except the two nurses, the guard & myself has cleared out. Tojo is resting quietly & the color is coming back a little. In a way I hope that he recovers, so that he can stand trial & be executed the proper way. I believe if he died now, the Japs would



have him up as a national hero—but if we finish him off, I don't think they'll have much to say. He has admitted that he was the cause of the war —

something's wrong

—4:25PM—

Phew, that was nice! He developed a severe chill & pain in the heart & wound from the blood given him. It was a little questionable there for awhile, but he came out of it O.K. (damit). You know it's funny to be taking care of some one, & not knowing whether you want him to live or not.

Well folks, it's almost time for my relief; so I'll close off for now, take another check on him & call it a day.

Love,  
Bob

P. S. In my next letter I'll send a piece of his shirt. It has blood on it—but don't wash it. Just put it away in my room.

than other primary sources, like personal diaries, photographs, or oral histories. Together, however, all of these media complement each other well and give us a fuller understanding of war's impact on those who serve and their families on the home front.

All primary documents should be read with the caveat that they may contain mistakes and reflect only the viewpoint of a single individual. But their value lies in the fact that they help us forge a

tangible connection to those who've come before us. They remind us that studying the past isn't solely about memorizing places, events, and dates or arguing abstract theories. It's about actual people, who have seen history unfold before their very eyes, and their words bring these eyewitness accounts vividly to life. And they capture a wide range of emotions—fear, grief, anger, love, resilience, courage, hope—that every one of us can relate to, regardless of our background.

Ultimately, their letters and stories are not just about war. They are about the human experience, itself. 🌍

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