

May 8, 1945

VICTORY IN EUROPE



Soviet and American
troops meet near Griebó,
Germany, on May 1, 1945,
during the final push to
Berlin. The wartime allies
would soon become
enemies as a defeated
Germany was divided
between East and West
in the Cold War.

May 8, 2015, marks the 70th anniversary of V-E Day, the end of World War II in Europe. This will be the last major anniversary before most of our nation's veterans from that conflict have passed away. But even when their voices fall silent, their stories can still be heard—in the letters and V-mails they wrote to their loved ones during the war. Tucked away in footlockers and scrapbooks, stored on closet shelves and bundled inside old boxes in attics and basements across this country, these correspondences are the first drafts of history and represent our nation's great, undiscovered literature.

To the current generation, who are more likely to communicate via Skype or short text messages, letters must seem like quaint, almost trivial artifacts from a bygone era. But captured in these wartime correspondences are riveting, eyewitness accounts of historic

Seventy years ago, the Allies celebrated V-E Day, closing the Western theater of World War II. Here in their own words, two Americans take stock of what happened

by Andrew Carroll

moments and incredible stories of courage, honor, sacrifice and resilience.

My own interest in preserving wartime letters began in 1990 when a distant cousin named James Carroll Jordan, who had served in World War II, sent me a letter he had written to his wife after visiting the Nazi concentration camp at Buchenwald on April 21, 1945. "Dear Betty Anne," Jim wrote, "I

saw something today that reminds me why we're over here fighting this war." He then went on to describe in graphic detail what he'd seen at the camp. When I told Jim I'd return the letter, he said: "Keep it. I probably would have thrown it out anyway."

Since then, Americans have generously shared with me more than 100,000 correspondences from every U.S. war, beginning with handwritten missives penned during the Revolution and going all the way up to e-mails sent from Iraq and Afghanistan. The collection is now part of the Center for American War Letters at Chapman University. The following letters—one by a young soldier writing to his brother at the end of World War II, and the other by an artist who sketched wounded troops as they were recuperating back in the States—are just two from our archives. Millions more are still out there, just waiting to be found.



First Lieutenant William Lee Preston, 65th Infantry Division, wrote to his brother, John, in Monroe, Ga., on May 10, 1945. The 65th, part of General George Patton's 3rd Army, raced through Germany and into Austria during the final weeks of the war.

Dear John,

The war is over. The war in Europe is over. I can hardly believe it,

for it seems only yesterday we were seeing our first action in the Siegfried line.

Two nights ago, John, I sat by an open window on the second story of the building my platoon occupies, and listened and watched for over an hour as German prisoners, thousands, passed below me on their way to a prisoner of war enclosure. I listened to the tromp, tromp of Nazi boots, no longer in cadence, no longer marching proudly, a beaten tired mob of German soldiers—surrendered.

I recalled the many pictures and newsreels I had seen of the German Wehrmacht on parade, while thousands of cheering civilians watched the spectacle before Adolf Hitler. The super race they were—the world's best soldiers then. I looked at them now—hungry, shoulders stooped by the heavy equipment on their backs, uniforms dirty, and a haggard expression on their faces. Hitler's soldiers on parade before the Yanks, and the G.I.s watched intently. Then I recalled the scene I had witnessed of those same soldiers—they had left a string of

dead and dying from Cherbourg to the Siegfried line—from the Rhine to Austria, in retreat. I had seen them lying in roads, streets, ditches, fields, wherever we went—sometimes with G.I.s near them. And still they came on the street below me, marching four abreast.

Two afternoons ago I saw another group, a column of Hitler's SS troops who had surrendered. I watched as M.P.s took them to a prison camp. They still wore their insignia, the skull and cross bones, but they were no longer arrogant, their pride had gone with surrender. Hitler's crack troops with the insignia that had meant terror and torture to the people of Europe for years. And not only to Europeans, but terror and torture to American soldiers surrendered. And now I saw them stop for a rest, and was amazed to see them begging G.I.s for a smoke, a cigarette butt. We felt like spitting on them. The terror of Europe—begging for a smoke. How things change. The M.P.s moved them off again. They walked with shoulders stooped, head bowed looking at the ground—beaten. I was glad to see them so. We didn't mock them as they passed, for our hatred was deeper than mocking.

Another column of German soldiers came by. I was amazed. Can you imagine Kent Lawrence, Jo, and men dad's age fighting the war for America? Most of them were 14, 15, 16 years of age, with an old man here and there in the column. The youngsters were the Hitler youth (*Jugend*), fanatical boys fighting for der Fuhrer. In America, kids the same age are reading Superman and going to junior high school, I hope. Yet these German boys were old soldiers, prisoners of war. A shame, I agree, but indicative of the desperate measures the Nazi leaders took in a last ditch fight against us.

Yes, the war in Europe is over. I don't know what the reaction was in the states on a whole. Over a patched up radio we heard that ticker tape and paper floated down from New York buildings. We heard that there were wild celebrations in the streets in London by civilians, English and American soldiers. But, John, the front line troops didn't celebrate. Most of the men merely read the story of victory from the division bulletin sent to the troops, said something like "I'm glad," and walked away. Perhaps it was a different story in their hearts, or perhaps they were too tired, or thinking of home too much, or thinking of their buddies who didn't live to see the victory, to do much celebrating or merry making. But I'm sure of one thing—the troops were glad they wouldn't have to fight anymore—I was.

What our future is we don't know, but everyone is sweating out the South Pacific troop movement.

My love to Eleanor and Troy.

Your brother,
Bill

P.S. Some boys who left Camp Shelby with me didn't get to see V-E day. Others are in hospitals in the U.S., England and France who used to be in my company. I'm thankful John, to be sitting here writing to you, and I'm still a very lucky fellow. Yes, I'm thankful.

Lila Oliver was a 22-year-old artist when she volunteered in 1943 for the USO Camp Show, which included a sketching unit that visited recuperating soldiers in military hospitals. Oliver, who continued with the program through 1946, wrote to a female friend, Terry, about her experiences.

Dear Terry,

Time skips by. My work, photography, the canteen, and the local hospital sketching trips, all conspire to keep me busy.

That was a grand long letter. More of the same, please. You're thinking, of course, of [your husband] Allan when you ask if the boys have changed much. Funny thing—but I don't think they do. Some, having had experiences enough for a lifetime, are older, even have gray hairs. They are a little older, yet have such a great zest for life. Sound contradictory? T'isn't. They've seen much, so they are older, but what they have lived through makes them appreciate each day and each hour. To be sure, I never before knew these individual kids, but among my models are the kind of people I knew. There are the students and jitterbugs, the smart kid, the man-about-town,

the college smoothie, everybody's kid brother, the pessimist and optimist (more of the latter), and even Mamma's boy has retained his individuality.

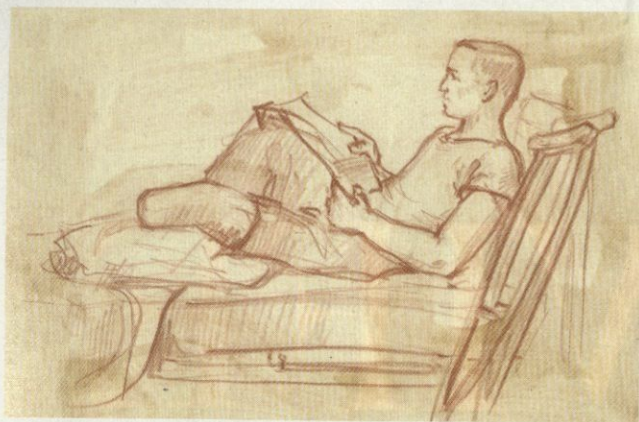
You ask what I think of the boys' coming home changed and different, and, truly, I don't think it happens. They have new ideas, more mature outlooks, enough to make an adjustment a real consideration, but it's my conviction that most GIs bring back the same essential structure of character with which they joined the service. I s'pose others will disagree. Really, the reactions of their families when the boys first come home creates as many problems as the kids bring with them. They want to be treated as normal and left alone. They haven't forgotten what home is like, or how to act among civilians. From the time they shipped over, all the little memories they could gather were held carefully together. The kids haven't forgotten. They'll offer a woman a seat in the streetcar as quickly as some of the people who never left town, without lectures, books of instructions, or ten easy lessons in how to be a civilian. Most of them can't understand why people think they need hints on what to do on their first furlough in the States. They've told me so.

The disabled ones? They want to be treated squarely and honestly. Most of the boys have more courage than I knew existed. If we don't pity and stare sideways with long sad glances they'll be O.K. They need a chance. I say we shouldn't pity them; I didn't say we shouldn't help them; most assuredly we must not forget them. How can we repay the loss of a leg to a twenty-year-old?

I sketched a hospital corpsman, a patient in one of the Atlantic City hospitals, last Sunday. His two roommates had recently been transferred and he was lonely. That's why they sent me in. He was a youngster with the most wonderful disposition and bright red hair, with a cowlick in back that stood straight up. This kid was in the midst of a series of neuro-surgical operations. He told me how it was to be a medic in the European theatre.



Citizens of Ludwiglust visit a concentration camp by order of the U.S. Army. "Within four miles of your comfortable homes," said an Army chaplain, "4,000 men were forced to live like animals."



"How can we repay the loss of a leg to a 20-year-old?" asked Lila Oliver, who made some 3,600 charcoal sketches during her time with the USO.

"You stay behind the lines mostly. Then when the guys get hit, why, you just go help them, and then pull 'em out. If things get extra tough, you fight, too. Then there's always one guy who does some fool thing, goes out and gets himself hurt, and you go risk your neck to drag him out. Of course, you swear up and down that you won't do it again—isn't your fault if those guys want to take silly chances! But the very next time you go right after 'em and do the same damn thing all over again."

He told me how he got hit.

"We were taking a machine gun nest and there had been a lot of fire. I crawled out to take care of some of our men. Nearby was a wounded Jerry so I inched myself over to give him first aid. He was pretty bad. The Krauts saw me and ceased firing. They waited until I finished bandaging that guy up and then opened up on me—got me in the leg! Naturally, our guys were mad as hell 'cause they could see the whole thing. They took that whole gang and when the few Jerries that were left marched out with hands up they all waited for the one who got me. He was the last one to come out. Then all together our guys yelled to me, 'Hey, look, kid!' and all together they gave it to him. We took the others prisoner."

When I had finished the sketch and he had approved he told me his name. It was Goldblatt. "Just call me Goldy."

This has been another long letter. You asked a question which I feel very strongly.

My wisdom tooth is making its presence known—the one on the upper right side. It hurts when I chew and cramps my eating style. I can't even enjoy a good yawn, but I am sleepy. Bedtime.

Love,
Lila ■

If you have a letter to share from any American war, please visit the Center for American War Letters at www.WarLetters.us. American History will feature V-J Day letters in the October issue.



New Yorkers celebrate the end of the war in Europe. The Pacific war would rage for another three months.

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April 1865

150 years ago, the Confederacy fell, Abraham Lincoln was assassinated and the nation began its long journey back from the war that tore it asunder

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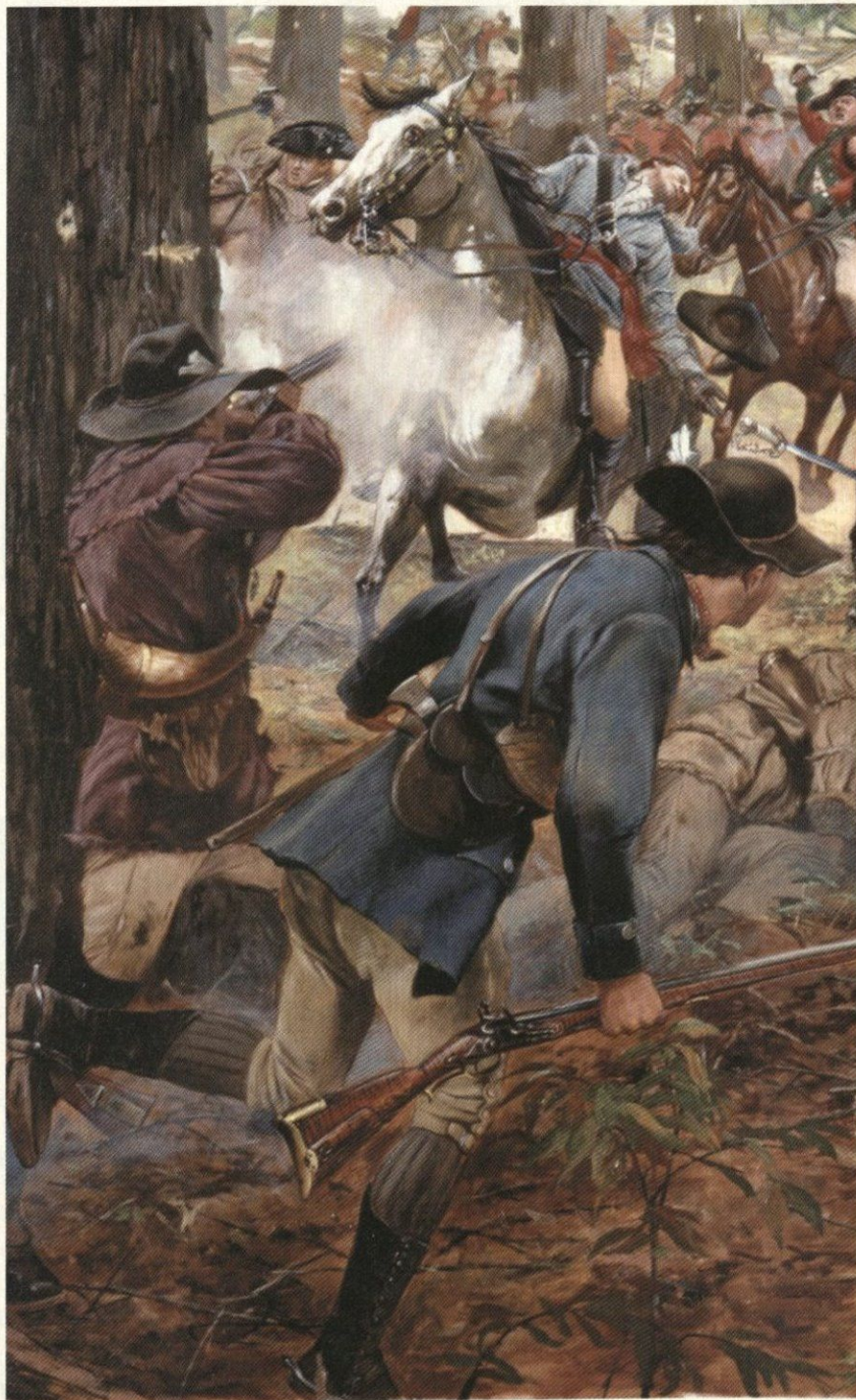
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Call the Midwife

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A patriot militiaman shoots loyalist commander Major Patrick Ferguson from his horse in a detail from Don Troiani's *The Battle of Kings Mountain*. In the South, the American Revolution devolved into a brutal civil war.

ON THE COVER:

Confederates weep at Appomattox in Richard Norris Brooke's *Furling the Flag* (1872).

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