Hello, I Love You, and Goodbye

Rhetorical Analysis:

In his letter to Evelyn Birkby, Clarence Clark writes about his arrival in Ireland and describes his life fighting overseas in World War II. Throughout the letter, he uses short, choppy sentences to briefly discuss several aspects about his life in the war. He frequently mentions how challenging it is coming up with things to write that will pass the censor, “We can't write anything about where we're at, the country or even the weather. Doesn't leave much to write.” He also transitions abruptly from topic to topic, as if he does not have much to say about any one thing. For example, he asks about Evelyn’s mother and immediately follows up with “We haven’t been paid yet.” Most of the letter continues this choppy tone discussing various events from censorship to his promotion, "Looks like I'm a corporal now. How come I don't know." Once again, Clarence refrains from going into further detail.

Despite censorship, in this letter, Clarence chooses to reveal his location, Northern Ireland. He mentions that he never expected to be writing Evelyn from a foreign country, which suggests that he may have been drafted in the war. While he touches on rationing, pay, Irishmen, and Evelyn's job throughout the letter, Clarence places the most emphasis on censorship. He warns Evelyn that she will have to "read between the lines" the second time he mentions censorship in the letter. He seems very concerned with providing Evelyn an explanation as to why future letters may be sparser in
content. This indicates that he cares about Evelyn's impression of him.

Another point in the letter when Clarence shows concern with what Evelyn thinks is when he describes the trip to Europe. "I'm ok and feeling fine. Stood the trip across the ocean pretty well. Most of the fellows got sick the second day out but I had to wait until we just about got here before I got to feeling bad. I was sort of sick for about a day." Clarence clearly wants to look better than the other guys who got sick the second day at sea. He makes sure to mention that he lasted most of the trip before feeling only "sort of" sick. This is the first instance in the letter that suggests Clarence might have some romantic feelings for Evelyn since he comes off as trying to impress her.

Until the end of the letter, the relationship between Clarence and Evelyn remains generally unclear to an outside reader. In the last paragraph, he mentions that he "still would rather be a civilian" and be back with Evelyn, rather than be a corporal. This could mean a number of things about the relationship. They could be friends or lovers. However, he closes the letter with a very heartfelt sign off indicating that he has some romantic feelings for her, "Guess I haven't changed a bit. Not even in what I think of you. Just wish I could see you again but can't so I'll be waiting for a letter. Love, Clarence."
Historical Analysis:

Censorship played a major role in the letter writing of soldiers during World War II. In fact, one of the most prevalent phrases during wartime was "Loose lips sink ships." Censors kept tabs on war letters to ensure that anything that might give an enemy an advantage would be concealed. This meant that soldiers could not disclose their current location or where they were going. Letters written in a foreign language would be confiscated as well. Some soldiers were American immigrants, so they may be more comfortable writing in their first language. However, if a censor could not read or understand the letter, it would not be sent. Not all letters were confiscated; it was up to the discretion of the censor. Sometimes, if there were only a small part of the letter that needed to be censored, the censor would simply cross out the line in ink. Since there were so many letters to keep track of during the war, soldiers were not always notified if the censors confiscated their outgoing letters. Therefore, a letter from a soldier to a loved one may not have been sent and the soldier would have no idea if their letter was received. Therefore, it was expected that soldiers were familiar with the censorship guidelines. Soldiers were given pamphlets that clearly explained what to write and what not to write. As illustrated in Clarence's letter to Evelyn, it was very common in World War II letters for a soldier to say, "I can't say much or the censors will cut it out."

Another common issue in World War II that Clarence reveals in his letter is rationing. He complains, "All our luxuries are going to
be rationed to us. Just can buy a carton of cigarettes every 20 days. A candy bar and package of gum a week. Its going to be tough on us for awhile considering what we've been used to." While families on the home front were planting Victory Gardens and using ration coupons at the grocery store, soldiers on the battlefield also experienced the effects of rationing. K-rations were created in 1941 and hit the battlefield in 1942, the year this letter was written. K-rations were intended for use under extreme conditions for only a few days at a time. However, during the height of battle in 1944, K-rations became the main food source for weeks on end. K-rations consisted of portable breakfast, supper, and dinner packages containing small canned and packaged foods. Each K-ration meal came with 4 cigarettes as well. Even though rations were unpleasant for many, it was the simplest way to fairly distribute a short supply of essentials.

From this letter, I got an interesting glimpse into what it is like to experience a trip overseas, censorship, and rationing. I grew up reading about these topics in my history books, but reading Clarence's personal account brought these issues to life for me.

Written By: Amanda Harwood

References:


<http://www.usarmymodels.com/ARTICLES/Rations/krations.htm>