3-5-2014

Patriotism and Plays

Samantha Zishka

University of Iowa
From Tunisia with Love

Clarence Clark, a sergeant in the 34th infantry division of the United States Army during World War II, wrote many letters to his ex-lover, Evelyn Birkby, while he was away in battle. I chose to analyze one of these letters for this assignment.

Historical Context:

The "Red Bull" division, as it was nicknamed, began training in northern Ireland on January 8th, 1942. In November 1942, the 34th infantry division experienced its first combat on the coast of French Algeria as part of Operation Torch. Following the North African invasion, in April of 1943 they were sent to aid in the battle of "hill 609," a strategically beneficial location in northwestern Tunisia. This letter was written in August of 1943, which would have been at the time they were training in Tunisia for the upcoming invasion of Italy soon to begin for them in the following month of September. I imagine Clarence must have been feeling pretty nervous about leaving for battle in the upcoming month, but the tone of his letter came off to me as being somewhat indifferent to it all, as if it were just part of his normal routine. It could be that he already expressed his emotions about fighting in the war in a different letter, but nowhere in the letter does he even mention what's been going on with relation to the war. All he mentions in his letter are his casual observations about the town he's living in and what the people are like. A couple other significant historical events
that occurred at the time this letter was written include the Allied victory over Japan for control of New Guinea and

Rhetorical Analysis:

Most of the letter consists of small talk about his day-to-day life in Tunisia. He starts off by mentioning that he's been to a few of the towns near him but he doesn't say anything specifically about each individual town... I think he had a thought and didn't really finish it or something. Then he goes on to talk about his friends who can speak the language native to their location (French) and how it attracts the locals. He shows some empathy for the local Tunisians by making light of their poor living conditions: "People haven't got much. They seem to have some money but there is nothing for them to buy. What they eat they have to raise and it's clothes and bread that they seem to need." By showing compassion for others he effectively comes off as a kind and caring person (whether actually is or not is impossible to tell from a single letter), thereby grabbing the attention and attraction of Evelyn (hopefully). Returning to the subject of languages, he goes on to point out that some of the locals can speak a little English and that if they tried they could learn English easier than they learned French. After rambling about the weather, he finishes the letter with an interesting sentence: "Once in awhile we are sort of disturbed for a time by red Jerry and it looks like a fourth of July celebration but it soon passes over."

This grabbed my attention because it contains the phrase red Jerry*, which after some searching yielded no results. So I'm left with a contextual phrase that has no meaning to
me, but I deduced that it has something to do with fighting and explosions, since he describes it as looking like a fourth of July celebration.

The overall tone of the letter is strikingly nonchalant. While being surrounded by gunfire and living across the globe from home, I would have expected him to have much more to talk about than just small talk about things such as the weather, but that seems interest him more apparently. This letter does happen to be one in a series of many more, so it's likely he may already have talked about the exciting stuff in previous letters. This looks more like just a small update to let Evelyn know how he's doing, or at least just to let her know he's still alive. My guess is that he still had feelings for Evelyn (they used to date) and wanted to remain in close contact with her as much as their situation would allow, and he was simply running out of things to talk about in his letters.

*After giving my presentation, I was informed that what I thought to be "red Jerry" was in fact supposed to be "old Jerry." The phrase "old Jerry" is a nickname for Germany used by Americans during World War Two. This makes much more sense now that I think about it.

Written By: Leslie Cooper

References:

United States Army, Division, 34th (1945). *The Story of the 34th Infantry Division - Louisiana to Piza*. Information and Education Section, MTOUSA. p. 1

"34th Infantry Division (ARNG)." United States Army Combined Arms Center. 16 June 2013