3-4-2014

The Peace of a Play at Wartime

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During the Second World War, letters were one of the most valuable weapons the U.S. had. They boosted morale, and motivated the troops. One service man, Paul Fassell, even stated that “We couldn’t have won the war without it.” As Evelyn said during our phone call, service men were lonely, and they needed to feel connected to home. Letters provided an escape from the reality of war.

The document I choose to analyze is no different. This letter was written to Evelyn by Harry I.J. Slack, a marine during the Second World War on the 15th of March, 1943. Harry and Evelyn were never anything more than good friends, but letters from her were still very valuable to him. Through the course of his letter to her, Harry uses sympathy, humor and a well phrased apology to appeal to her. He hopes for her continued correspondence, as it is a source of great comfort to him. It helps him take his mind off of the war, which is a task easier said than done. In this letter, Harry shows the harsh contrast between the reality of war, and the escape from it these letters give him.

Harry begins his letter by asking her to write to one of his old buddies, Fred, so that he might receive more mail and news from home. He appeals to Evelyn by invoking sympathy for his loneliness. While alone at war, the more mail the better. He does this without offending her by differentiating the comfort given to him by letters from Evelyn and letters from his friends. While he
enjoys mail from Evelyn, his folks, and Helen, mail from one of “the gang” would provide him something they can’t. It’s a different kind of relationship. By distinguishing the difference between Evelyn’s letters and theirs, he also sets her apart. Her friendship is different and special, and provides him with something that his buddies cannot. Harry and Fred were also good friends. And as Fred was rather in love with Evelyn, Harry was helping his friend out. A letter from Evelyn would lift Fred’s spirits. By encouraging her to write to him, Harry was being a good wingman. To the right is an actual image of the March 15, 1943 letter.

He apologizes for not writing back sooner, continuing to endear himself to her. He uses a valid excuse, having lost her address, to give a reason for his late response. He mentions the Battle of Guadalcanal in his apology, further validating his excuse. In the chaos of war, losing an address is understandable and forgivable. When contextualized to a place where Harry’s life was in danger, the loss of her address seems trivial.
Harry’s involvement in The Battle of Guadalcanal provides a historical context in which to view this letter. The Battle of Guadalcanal was a major victory for the Americans, stopping the Japanese advance through the Pacific Islands to Australia. In May 1942, the Japanese arrived on the island and began construction of an airfield at Lunga Point. The situation then became critical, as it presented a threat to Australia. The U.S. Marine Corps landed on the 7th of August 1942, and secured the airfield. The struggle was in holding it for the next six months. To the left is an image of the Guadalcanal Amphibious Landing.

After six months of fighting, the Japanese left the island in February 1943, and the U.S. finished construction of the airfield, naming it Henderson Field.

Harry continues, and he seems genuinely interested in her life, saying he’s glad she’s liking her new job teaching Sunday school. By mentioning this, he also lets her know how much he wants to see her. He says he hopes to someday be able to visit her class. He hopes to be able to see her in person soon, letting her know that he won’t forget about her when the war is over and he is home. He hopes their friendship will last.

Although he references the Battle of Guadalcanal earlier in the letter, he clearly does not want Evelyn to worry too much about
him. In the last line, he says “I’m enjoying myself and getting fat. Ha Ha” This serves to put Evelyn’s mind at ease. He’s having fun, no more major battles are breaking out where he is stationed. Everything seems to be going fine for him, other than missing home. And by including a joke about getting fat he adds levity to the subject. He makes her think that he can’t be doing anything too taxing if he’s gaining weight. This is also part of the escape letter writing gives him. In addition to taking Evelyn’s mind off the war, he takes his own mind off of it.

Mail was so important during this war, as a source of escape and connection to home, that a special mail service was developed. Victory Mail, or V-Mail was a project headlined by the U.S. Postal service to insure speedy delivery of mail during times of war. It was used for overseas communication with military personnel and their families and friends. V-Mail letters were copied onto microfilm, which was shipped overseas and reproduced at one quarter of the original size at a processing station where it was then delivered to the addressee. V-mail was developed in addition to regular post, and its use was optional. V-mail, for its 41 months of service, provided speedy and reliable mail to overseas troops.

Although letters provided an escape from it, the war was still very real. Even during his joke, Harry states, “I can’t say much about where I’m at.” Harry can’t include anything about
where he is due to censorship during the war. Letters by enlisted soldiers were censored by an officer in the unit. Considered to be unimportant, this job generally went to someone like the dentist or chaplain. The letters of the officers were self-censored, unlike those of the enlisted men. Censors were looking for two things in the letters: location and low morale. These things were looked for as they could be valuable information to the enemy. Letters with graphic language were oftentimes confiscated. As were letters in a foreign language, as the censor would not be able to read it. In the eyes of the soldier, you didn’t know what was going to get through. While they were given guidelines, many letters still did not make it through. Harry leaves out detail in his letter in order to make sure it reaches Evelyn. It’s not worth the risk of including details, and not receiving the mail that he so desperately needed as a form of comfort. To the left is an image of a censorship propaganda poster.

Of the many letters sent to Evelyn during World War II, this letter distinguishes itself with its genuine friendship. Harry endears himself to Evelyn through sympathy, jokes, and apologies. While he misses home and his friends, he doesn’t want it to worry her too much. His letter manages to indicate the reality of war, and its effects on him, while also distracting her from the dangers of it. Letter-writing was very important during this war, as a source of escape. And as Evelyn and her scrapbook have demonstrated, mail was of the utmost importance to all of them.

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References


