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Love that Lasts

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Clarence Clark: Man on a Mission

Clarence Clark was a man who faced conditions many cannot relate to. He watched comrades die. He was shipped around the world at the army's will. He slept in a tent during harsh winters. But thoughts of Evelyn Corrie kept him warm. He was a soldier at war, holding onto a dear love from the past. This makes him a man on a mission in more ways than one. He wrote a letter to Evelyn on December 11, 1941 - the day that Germany declared war on the United States. Just days following the attack on Pearl Harbor, this time period proved to be dark for America's soldiers.

Yet Clarence still wrote to Evelyn with casual charm.

He discussed the day's events in casual tone and included signs of optimism throughout the letter. He wrote this way, most likely, to put Evelyn at ease. We can assume that Evelyn was concerned with Clarence's status given the recent global events. He employed humor when he wrote, "It's a lot better than getting my head shot off over in China or someplace." This line shows Clarence making the best of the situation. He was basically telling Evelyn that even though he’s a soldier away at war, it’s better than being in combat and dying. By doing so, Clarence assured Evelyn that his situation is really not that bad. So why worry?
Yet Clarence's casual tone may also be one of uncertainty. He wrote, "If you write," as if he didn't know where he and Evelyn stood. The casual language may have been a tool for him to match the tone Evelyn had written to him with. Because he was uncertain, he wrote, “Don’t tell me all the boys up in that end of the country are in the army. I didn’t beleive [sic] you when you said you were going to be a [sic] old maid.” By hinting, Clarence could have effectively found out if Evelyn had met someone else (without getting painfully rejected by her). Because he was away at war, Clarence may have had nothing else to hold onto if he was declined.

Clarence livened up his letter by ending on a sarcastic note:

“Our mail will probably be a little late but they will forward to us. It only has to come to Claiborne, then down to New Orleans, back to Baton Rouge to another company and then on to me.”

The word “only” is insufficient for a description of mail that has to zigzag around the country. By using sarcasm to end his letter on a light note, Clarence made Evelyn's wait for his next letter a little more bearable. Making a joke about the mail was an effective way to take Evelyn's mind off of the harsh reality Clarence faced. He signed his letter "Love Clarence," showing Evelyn his affection in a more subtle way. It wouldn't have shocked Evelyn when reading it; it's casual. As a result, Clarence had an increased chance of receiving a letter in return.
Though we can see Clarence's calm optimism from the words on the page, a rich historical background lies hidden behind the lines of his letter. Written on December 11, 1941, this letter addresses a significant shift in the status of WWII. Days prior, on December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor was destroyed. In response, President Roosevelt delivered his “Infamy Speech” to Congress, calling for the declaration of war on Japan. Congress fulfilled his request in less than an hour. Four days later, on December 11, America received its second painful blow. Hitler delivered an 88 minute speech to the Reichstag in Berlin... He had declared war on the United States.

Yet this day meant different things for Clarence than it did for the globe's superpowers. On this day in history, Clarence started out in New Orleans, La, writing a letter to Evelyn. He traveled with his division- the 34th infantry (also known as the Red Bulls). Clarence mentions how in the span of a day, he's traveled about 100 miles from where he was- from New Orleans to Plaquemine, La. Plaquemine was a small town of about five thousand inhabitants. Nicknamed "The City of Hospitality," it hosted Clarence's troop with utmost respect. While there, the Red Bulls ate in a restaurant and stayed in 'Elks Hall' overnight. The town has a lock on the Mississippi River, and increased traffic during WWII meant the lock had to be guarded. Clarence wrote how some of the soldiers went down to guard it during their time spent there.
Clarence's division had a lasting impact on the places it advanced through.

The 34th has its roots in Camp Claiborne, Louisiana. The camp was used to train the division to participate in the "Louisiana Maneuvers," a 400,000 man training program depicting two imaginary countries fighting against each other. The Red Bulls went on to become the first American forces to be sent to the European Theater of Operations (ETO). This brave group of men suffered about 21,000 battle casualties, considered to be the highest of any division in the theater. Throughout World War II, they fired over one million rounds combined. Few divisions had the effect that Clarence's did on the outcome of the war.

The rich historical context of Clarence’s letter opens the pages to what the beginning of the war meant for different types of people. Small towns like Plaquemine hosted gracious soldiers, major political powers were changing the course of history, and the Red Bulls trekked through place after place, fighting for their country. Everything was changing for everyone. But through the lonely nights, dangerous combat, and harsh conditions, Clarence was still a man on a mission.

Written By: Liz Smith


