

SAVING THE WAR LETTERS



This letter, found in a dumpster, was written by a U.S. servicemember in the Vietnam War who was going "a little stir crazy," according to Andrew Carroll.

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Connecting to the past

The seed of the impulse to amass the old letters, he said, was planted by a great loss — a fire that consumed his family's home when Carroll was a sophomore in college, leaving the family grasping for elements of the past.

"It wiped out everything," he said. "Photos, old letters, family history."

In a sense cast adrift by the fire, Carroll was mesmerized by a World War II letter shared by a distant cousin who had witnessed some key moments of the conflict in Europe, including the liberation of a concentration camp. It provided inspiration for Carroll's first book several years later, "Letters of a Nation," a collection of letters from different eras about a variety of themes.

Although he had never served in the military, Carroll realized war letters in particular were infused with a sense of history and drama that few others possess, and he decided to focus on them. In 1998, he persuaded Jeanne Philips, who writes the Dear Abby advice column and is active in support of military and veterans groups, to put out a call for families to submit war letters they were willing to share.

"At first we were only asking for photocopies, but people sent us originals," he said. "They said, 'Hey, we're going to throw these out otherwise.'"

One of the people who responded to that Dear Abby column was Joyce Hallenbeck. Nearly 20 years earlier, she had received a letter from her husband, Dean Allen, in which the Army first lieutenant, writing from the field during an operation in Vietnam, poured out his doubts and fears about leading men into battle.

"Being a good platoon leader is a lonely job," Allen wrote. "I don't want to really get to know anybody over here because it would be bad enough to lose a man — I damn sure



PHOTOS BY C.J. LIN/Stars and Stripes

These photos are of a Japanese-American man who was imprisoned in an internment camp during World War II and later joined the U.S. Army's 442nd Infantry Regiment, the unit composed of mostly Japanese-American soldiers. A letter the soldier wrote is part of the Legacy Project, an effort to collect letters written by U.S. troops during the nation's wars.

don't want to lose a friend. I haven't even had one of my men wounded yet let alone killed but that is to much to even hope for to go like that. But as hard as I try not to get involved with my men I still can't help liking them and getting close to a few."

It was Allen's final letter home. Within days, he was dead from wounds suffered when he stepped on a land mine.

Hallenbeck, widowed at 25, after

a while moved on with her life. When she remarried several years later, she packed away the medals and the flag that draped her dead husband's casket. Except for his final message, she threw away the letters Allen had sent her from Vietnam.

Years later, now divorced, she saw the Dear Abby column, and something prompted her to take out the letter she had packed away long before. What had once been

simply a souvenir of loss and grief now provided moving insight from the husband taken from her in Vietnam.

"I think I was just plain too young to even appreciate it at the time I received it," she said. "But then after reading about Andy's project and pulling it out and reading it again, when I was in my 50s, it struck me as, 'Hey, this is moving. Here's a guy who's got to decide who's going to go out and possibly get killed, and he's really struggling with it.'"

She sent the letter to Carroll, who included it in its entirety in "War Letters," and then she did something else — she took out her dead husband's military honors and put them on display in her house.

"It would have stayed in my chest until I died," she said. But because of Carroll's war letters project, "Those things are now back out for all the world to see."

"Being a good platoon leader is a lonely job. I don't want to really get to know anybody over here because it would be bad enough to lose a man — I damn sure don't want to lose a friend. I haven't even had one of my men wounded yet let alone killed but that is to much to even hope for to go like that. But as hard as I try not to get involved with my men I still can't help liking them and getting close to a few."

— Army 1st Lt. Dean Allen, days before he was killed by a land mine in Vietnam

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