

## SAVING THE WAR LETTERS

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From thousands of contributors who have read about his letters project or seen him on television, Carroll has amassed what he calls a “small hill” of war letters. His conservative estimate is 100,000 letters; he’s never fully accounted for them all as they’ve poured in over the years, filling storage lockers and safe deposit boxes and bins on the floor of his apartment.

That’s partly why, despite his passion for the collection, he gave it all away last year to Chapman University, a liberal arts college near Anaheim, Calif. Chapman is eager to take on the tasks Carroll admits he’s never had time, expertise or resources for — professionally preserving the letters, and scanning and archiving them in a database so they’ll be available for teachers, students and history buffs.

He had been collaborating with John Benitz, a Chapman associate professor of theater and playwright, on two productions based on the letters. He was increasingly wooed by the atmosphere of the campus, and decided to approach administrators about setting up a center to preserve and make them accessible. The answer was an enthusiastic yes.

“For years I’ve wanted to find an institution to give these letters,” he said. “I just had the feeling the letters would be locked up in storage and never see the light of day.”

Reassured that would not be the case at Chapman, he hired Two Marines Moving, a veteran-owned moving company, to haul the trove to the university last fall. He’s holding on to only a handful of letters that were key parts of his books “War Letters” and “Behind the Lines.”

He plans to spend much of this

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— Marine officer David Bellon, from Fallujah, Iraq, in 2004

spring and summer on a new phase of his project, in which he’ll visit all 50 states to speak at veterans halls, history museums and military bases about the value of historical letters — hoping to collect some along the way. The tour will kick off at a May 20 event on Capitol Hill sponsored by Chapman alum Rep. Loretta Sanchez, D-Calif.

Current plans call for Chapman’s Center for American War Letters to open Nov. 5, the week before Veterans Day, Carroll said. He will divide his time between Washington and the university, where he will work as a chancellor fellow overseeing the collection, and helping to study and expand it.

“It’s a huge relief, because I always wondered — what if something happens to me, or there’s a flood or a fire in the building?” he said. “It got so scattered that it came to the point that a real historian would have had a heart attack if they’d walked in and seen it.”

Not that he’s struggling with feelings of guilt. Carroll says his part was to save the letters from oblivion, and now it’s time to hand them off to professional archivists.

### Lost history

Carroll seems tormented by the fact that the often beautifully descriptive, passionately written

letters from the front lines are just languishing unread in boxes, or even worse, about to be stacked out on the curb for recycling.

He wants all of it.

“The history that’s being lost every day is just incalculable,” he said. “So saving that is my priority right now.”

Given the choice of reading a dry, magisterial analysis from a scholar or a general, or of reading a pile of letters from troops in the field, he’ll opt for the latter every day. It’s more enjoyable, and you might just learn more, he said.

“I genuinely believe nobody can tell these stories better than the men and women who’ve been there and experienced these episodes first-hand,” he said. “What we get from their experience is not just eyewitness first-person accounts, but their distinct personalities and voices.”

“That makes the wartime experience more human than reading a dry history book.”

At home in Washington earlier this year, he showed off a few letters he’s holding onto for just a little while longer. He delicately cradled a beautifully handwritten letter he said was the first he’d obtained from Revolutionary days.

On it, Continental Army officer Alexander Scammel thunders to a

college friend about the necessity of freedom from British tyranny, something he predicted would require the shedding of blood.

“But every man of true honor & virtue will rather contend for the honor of first spilling his blood in so glorious a cause,” Scammell wrote in 1774 — seven years before his death in the climactic siege of Yorktown proved his words weren’t just bravado.

Fast-forward 230 years, and Carroll picked up a printout of a lengthy email home in 2004 from a Marine officer, David Bellon, who was revolted by the violence gripping the city of Fallujah and sensing an inevitable showdown coming.

“Its siren call for extremists and criminals has only increased steadily ... If there is another city in the world that contains more terrorists, I would be surprised,” he said. “For the last two years, I just don’t see a way we can succeed in Iraq without reducing this threat.”

And then a note to family from a conquering American G.I. written on Hitler’s own stationery. On it, the soldier had helpfully crossed out the dictator’s name and filled in his own: “S/Sgt. Evers.”

The letter itself is haunted more than it is celebratory, describing what Staff Sgt. Horace Evers had recently seen in a train car at the Dachau concentration camp: “All were just bone with a layer of skin over them. Most of the eyes were open and had an indescribable look about them.”

Taken as a whole, American war letters comprise a massive, rich historical tapestry, and Carroll says he doesn’t want a single irreplaceable thread to be lost.

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These letters from the Legacy Project were written by U.S. troops in World War II. Left: Sgt. Horace Evers penned this letter on Adolf Hitler’s private, personal stationery. Center: The last letter written by an airman who was set to become a cartoonist for Disney after the war contained this drawing. Right: A letter written by a U.S. soldier in Anzio, Italy, was stored in writer’s pack and bears a bullet hole from when he was shot. The soldier survived.