



Those Letters Keep Me Going: tracing resilience processes in US soldier to sweet heart war correspondences, 1942-1945

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Chapter 13: 'Those Letters Keep Me Going': epistolary spaces and resilience building processes in US soldiers to sweet heart war correspondence, 1942-1945.

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Introduction: letters in sociological research

Resilience is a complex social construct that is theoretically and methodologically challenging to research. Historically concerned with individual capacity to overcome adversity, the significance of diverse social and cultural contexts for understanding resilience is gaining in recognition (Ungar, 2008). In this chapter we examine an archive of soldier's letters home as a source for inquiry into resilience processes. What can we learn about resilience from letters? Letters can reflect the social, political, economic, historical and cultural contexts in which they are written and are connected with real lives in particular times and places (Stanley, 2004). The acts of reading and writing connect correspondents, temporarily transcending absence and the distances of time, space and location. Epistolary inquiry is an inductive process leading to a deeper analysis of the complex interconnections between writing about individual experiences and changing social contexts over time.

Despite concerns that letters are heavily mediated constructions and problematic sites of referral to real world events, scholars recognise the potential of letters as a neglected opportunity to come closer to the subjective perspective of the writer, their thoughts, emotions, preoccupations and immediate concerns. Methodological, theoretical and substantive conversations advance our understanding of 'what is a letter?' and problematise how the letter might be read in sociological inquiry (Stanley, 2004; Halldorsdottir, 2007; Jolly, 2009; Tamboukou, 2011). Following Lefebvre (1992), How (2003: 5) regards letter writing as involved in the production of epistolary spaces that open up 'new avenues for behaviour' and 'fresh actions'. Epistolary spaces can be understood as real, permanent, common spaces of connection, linking people and place, in which a state postal system might feature. Letters also produce epistolary spaces that have imaginary aspects, in the sense of bringing to mind the presence of the other in writing or reading a letter for example.

Interestingly, in his selective study of four, 17th and 18th century correspondents, How (2003: 3) observes that disappointed with their physical space, all 'seek to construct new (epistolary) spaces for their own reasons' and believe that deprived of what they desire, their letters can make a difference and 'open up spaces within which their desire can be satisfied'. Tamboukou (2011: 638) considers letters as open narratives that can intervene in the constitution of the subject and as 'opening up the future to unforeseen possibilities and forces of life'. For Tamboukou (2011) the openness of letters defies the narrative convention of closure. Reciprocal exchange, relational characteristics, social bonding and maintaining real world connections are foregrounded in Stanley's (2004) analysis of letters as dialogic, perspectival and as having emergent properties. We consider that narrative characteristics are embedded in the chronological and sequential form of letters. Each letter has its own beginning, middle and end but the expectation of writing or reading the next letter implies temporary closure only and a sense of a narrative as unfolding, letter by letter. Letters that are written in a time of war are one example in which the ordinary becomes extraordinary, demanding exceptional ways of coping, in order to survive threat and trauma. Held in the real and imaginary of epistolary spaces, war letters home provide a textual opportunity to examine social and personal factors that nurture resilience by paying attention to context, reciprocity and narrative turning points.

Mail, morale and resilience in World War II

Being actively involved in the organisational structures of an army at war requires the individual to be part of a complex system of hierarchical, disciplinary relationships, with specific work roles, duties and responsibilities, carried out to order and at times in hostile conditions. Army recruits are required to be fully immersed in their duties, committed to the shared goal of fighting the enemy, united by the vision of victory. Arguably, army membership and identity are also enhanced by the social validation of family and community for the role of the soldier in a time of war. Nonetheless, the transitions from citizen in peacetime to army recruit to soldier at war, from the home place to army training camp, to the site of battle; require the exceptional deployment of individual and institutional resources. Ungar's (2008) concept of resilience can be applied to the social and institutional capacity to deliver resources in meaningful ways. Equally important is the capacity of the individual to navigate towards the psychological and physical resources needed to survive stressful conditions and to be effective in combat. Routine and mundane work provided stability and delayed thoughts about the duration of war, according to Watson's research on the narratives

of World War I combatants (Watson, 2006: 262). Planned furlough (leave of absence) and the formal organization of leisure activities were important to soldiers' everyday life in training and combat. The American army routinely organized entertainment such as theatre shows, films and concerts for soldiers in World War II and encouraged participation in recreational sports. Belonging to an army unit required loyalty, solidarity, teamwork and mutual reliance on others (Woodward, 2008: 375). Participation in social activities and having a sense of comradeship with others helped to foster these characteristics in individuals (Pupavac, 2001: 364).

Individual resilience may also be tied to the use of humour, sarcasm and the development of a fatalistic outlook, according to Watson (2006). Bartone (2006) highlights having a sense of purpose and being future-oriented as important for developing resilience. While compliant with the uniformity and purpose of army life, soldiers were concerned to remain in close and in frequent contact with family and friends throughout the duration of the war, affected primarily through correspondences. In a study of the popular support campaigns for letter writing in the US media, Litoff and Smith (1992) document the significance of sending and receiving letters in encouraging public support for the war and for building soldiers' morale. In 1945 the US Post Office handled 3.5 billion mail items to be sent overseas, while processing more than 38 billion letters from soldiers who wrote home daily. Church, school and communities were engaged in sending letters to US soldiers overseas, perceived as essential to soldier and citizen morale. In newspapers and popular magazines, women at home in particular were reminded that 'Writing is Fighting, Too' (Litoff and Smith, 1992: 437). Guidance on what to write to soldiers was available in popular and military magazines, stressing the importance of 'good news', a focus on the everyday and writing about routine family events and activities. In advertisements for letter writing products, letters were described as 'mental food and ammunition' (Litoff & Smith, 1990: 31), forging connection and relationship with home while recognizing the materiality of the letter as an object that could enhance the attack or defence capacity of the soldier.

Despite interceptions imposed by military censorship and constraints on content, soldiers wrote home on a regular basis, sending at least six letters a week (Litoff and Smith, 1992). The support of the US government and military for the frequent exchange of letters between soldiers and civilians is also significant to the maintenance of epistolary spaces. Reflecting more deeply on the activity of writing across silence and absence, the censored and bounded

war letters can be considered as a semi-fictional 'story world' (Herman, 2002). In this story world, occupied by letter writer and recipient, anxiety-provoking elements of the real world are actively managed, sometimes admitted, other times prohibited. In the safe space of the bounded letter, the gap between the real and the written is negotiated as soldier and sweetheart safely connect. Felt absence and physical distance temporarily fade. Founded on intimate relationship, the acts of writing and reading create epistolary spaces, rooted in imaginary processes that allow the exchange of everyday stories of the mundane. Given the threats and risks of war, these aspects of epistolary spaces are not without mental anxiety, physical distress or emotional unease. Nonetheless they are necessary creations for the expression of connection and the unfolding of resilience processes, as we will show.

Epistolary sources and narrative methodology in researching resilience

The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour in Hawaii, seventh of December 1941 was promptly followed by the US declaration of war on Japan on the eighth of December and on Germany and Italy from the 11th of December. From 1941-1945, 16 million personnel were recruited to the US Army, with the majority of soldiers being deployed in North Africa, Europe and the Pacific. The average length of overseas service was 16 months. Over a million US soldiers died or were wounded, while an estimate of 30,000 personnel were reported missing (Chambers, 1999). Our combined interests in socio-biographical sources and resilience research coincided with the accidental acquisition of letters written by two US soldiers from the moment of US entry to the war to months after the declaration of Japanese surrender in the Pacific (15th of August 1945). Gene H. and Woody W. write home to their wives from US training camps and overseas war theatres in North Africa and the Pacific¹. Gene is a member of a Quartermaster company of the Army Air Force (AAF) while Woody joins the US Navy Construction Battalion, known as 'Seabees'. While both are trained in military discipline and the use of light arms in battle, their work concerns the support and supply of goods to frontline troops; in Gene's case food, laundry, uniform repair and maintenance, while Woody is involved in land clearance, garrison, road and airstrip construction. To begin with both men are of ordinary rank and theirs is a perspective on war that receives little research attention. The period of Gene's correspondences to his wife Mary spans two years, from 25/1/1942 to a letter written from North Africa on 17/11/1943. The first 24 letters are from various AAF training camps in the US, while the remaining eight letters are from unknown sites in North Africa. Woody's 38 correspondences with his wife Carmen begin in 17/7/1943, sent from Seabees naval training stations and continue until the 25/9/1945 when he is based in the

Marianas Islands in the Pacific. Though providing a focus on the subjectivities and everyday concerns of ordinary army recruits in a time of war, our archive is partial and incomplete. With the exception of two letters from Carmen, the daily replies from her and Mary are not available to us, except as an echo in our close readings of their husbands' letters home. Given the constraints of partial accounts, of one-sidedness, our re-readings, interpretive strategies and re-presentation of the material requires careful consideration of claims we can make with confidence and those we can only suggest.

Our methodological *modus operandi* is inspired by narrative analysis which provides a time, space and context sensitive frames for research questions, informs a systematic approach to analysis, provides a basis for interpreting the meaning of an account and crucially gives primacy to the narrator's voice and perspective while allowing for researcher reflexivity (Bruner, 1986; Mishler, 1991). Narrative analysis recognizes the importance of telling (or writing) to understand experiences while acknowledging the dynamic aspects of accounts as exposure to new events occurs. Despite the partiality of accounts, sequences of letters written over time, from a specific addressor to a specific addressee in a particular social context, lend themselves well to a narrative analysis of the meaning of the form and content of letters and the dynamics of correspondents' interactions (Elliot, 2005; Byrne, 2011). In our narrative analysis of soldiers' letters home, we focus on context, reciprocity and narrative turning points as we trace resilience-building processes in soldiers' letters to home. The 70 letters and envelopes in our archive were sequenced, transcribed and catalogued. We mapped the movements of correspondents within the US and overseas. The time line of the letters was linked to military and popular culture, and political events in the unfolding of the history of the war providing a crucial tie to the diversity of contexts in which the letters were written. A thematic analysis across both sets of correspondences followed, noting common responses to structural constraints and opportunities (for example, experiences of separation from home, recruitment, furlough, training, economic benefits of war service, overseas transfers, labour, leisure and comrade relationships). A narrative analysis complements the thematic approach, giving attention to narrative progression, the whole story of each narrator, working with his subjective accounts of spousal relationships and experiences, in the context of his evolving narrative from the first to the last letter. Bell (2011: xiii) advocates the use of turning points as a way of understanding the history of the complexity of World War II, '[...] key moments at which a decisive or important change takes place' which brings the 'shape and patterns of the war' into perspective. Turning points are also relevant to resilience research,

understood as critical incidents occurring in an individual's life (Strauss, 2007: 95). Gilligan (2009) claims that turning points require the capacity to be open to opportunity and are potentially transformational. Denzin (2001: 145) refers to 'epiphany', when a '(m)eaningful biographical experience occurs during turning-point interactional episodes. In these existentially problematic moments, human character is revealed and human lives are shaped, sometimes irrevocably'. Hyvärinen (2008: 3) advocates an analytical focus on beginnings, ends and turning points of narratives, noting that '(i)n decisive turning points, identities and life expectations are often re-negotiated'. Turning points can be discerned in epistolary narratives and provide an analytical tool for comparison of responses to similar events while retaining the particularity of the narrator's perspective. Interested in resilience processes, we highlight key moments, turning points, in which Gene and Woody contend with points of stress, noting how they write about these in their letters home and how they resolve the dilemmas and disruptions of home and war.

Narratives of resilience

The arc of the narrative in both accounts begins with letters written while training in the US. Narratives of separation and attachment can be discerned, both in the story world of the letters and in the real world experiences of the two soldiers. Being away from home, experiencing loneliness, feeling the effects of physical separation from one's spouse and having to deal with unfinished business from a distance, are compounding elements requiring significant individual coping skills. In parallel, becoming a member of the army, subject to military discipline, scheduling and training, ceding control and learning how to fit in as a member of a schooled and skilled battalion requires new dispositions, a mental and physical orientation that is ideological and collective. A narrative analysis of turning points in letters home brings Gene's and Woody's coping skills to the fore.

Gene's story: 'All I can do is wait and hope'

Mary writes twice to Gene in his first week at training camp in Wyoming. He responds with details of having to wait in line for a haircut, the strictness of the rules and the over crowdedness of the camp. In almost every letter until he is sent overseas, Gene's expressed focus is on obtaining leave to return to Mary. In his first letter he writes 'I miss you so much Mary, I will try to get a furlough as soon as I can but I think I will have to wait until my training here is over (8 weeks)' (25/1/1942). While aware of army advice to participate in sports or be with others when feeling homesick, thoughts of Mary preoccupy him:

They tell us here to go out and play ball or go for a walk when we get lonesome but I can't Mary, I just keep thinking of the day when I will be with you. Mary, I love you more each day. You are the only one I have in the world. (25/1/1942)

Gene and Mary are very recently married, probably on December 15th 1941. Gene joins the army in the post Pearl Harbour call for recruits. His enlistment date is January 15, 1942 (U.S. World War II Military Records, no date). The marriage of Gene and Mary begins with a separation that has no immediate prospect of an ending. This is a disruption to the normal course of events in which two individuals have the opportunity to transform themselves into a marital couple by living in close and intimate contact on a daily basis. In Gene and Mary's case, their marital relationship is conducted through letters for a period of at least two years. He addresses his letters to her as Mrs Gene H., declaring his love for her and signing off as 'Your husband, Gene'. Gene writes about his persistent efforts to seek permission to transfer to a training camp closer to home, to apply for furlough or for Mary to come and visit him. Coping with the separation from his newly wed wife is a consistent theme for Gene and he advises Mary to be 'brave', pointing out that there is no special treatment for married men in combat. Throughout these letters there is a sense in which Gene produces and uses the epistolary space to constitute himself as spouse. Two turning points in the letters are of relevance here; the first concerns the unexpected news that Mary may be pregnant. Gene mobilizes the resources of army leave or application to transfer out of active service to be with his wife, without success. Writing about his efforts to overcome these barriers may have provided some solace to him and Mary. The letters build in intensity in mid-summer. Mary's pregnancy is confirmed; Gene writes about his love for her and his happiness in becoming a father:

You wrote a swell letter Mary and I'll say I'll be the happiest and the proudest man in the world to be a daddy. And Mary you are the most beautiful wife a man ever had and I know you will be the best mama in the world Mary. I will love you forever.
(16/6/1942)

As direct participation in combat becomes a reality, Gene urges Mary to have no regrets and together they will cope with the unexpected pregnancy.

Of course it's a tough break for us, Mary. But some day we will have good breaks and happiness. But I can take all the bad breaks as long as I have you Mary. There is nothing too tough for me when I have someone like you to love me. Mary I don't want you to feel bad about having our baby. I know I would like nothing better than to have you with me. But I think its worth all the sacrifice we can make. (16/6/1942)

His hope of transfer is tangible in his letter of the 16th of July 1942. 'I hope someone will want to transfer with me. All I can do is wait and hope. I will pray like you want me to Mary every night, that I will be with you when our baby is born'. Gene begins preparations for engagement overseas in August, a transfer over which he has no control, marking the second turning point.

So I guess I am out of luck for my transfer Mary. I tried hard to get it Mary and I'm disappointed because I can't be with you when our baby comes. But we must keep our chins up. And I know you will make the best mother in the whole world Mary. (17/8/1942)

These later letters become more expressively intimate, his relationship with Mary taking on a particular intensity, as he focuses his concern on providing sufficient money, taking out insurance policies, giving her advice on self-care and engaging wider family support for her during her pregnancy and afterwards. Gene's son is born in October 1942. Gene remains in active service in North Africa for 11 months in 1943. We have no evidence that his persistent quest to return home was realised. Given the particular political and personal contexts which frame the series of events that precipitate alterations in Gene's circumstances, from citizen to soldier, from single to married man and from husband to father: sending and receiving letters to and from Mary, carries a weighty burden. 'I didn't get a letter from you today Mary and I missed it. We will leave here soon Mary, maybe tomorrow, but keep on writing. I will get all your letters' (19/8/1942).

Throughout, Gene keeps track of the number of letters sent and received, a form of reassurance that this channel of communication and exchange of letters between husband and wife will continue, come what may. 'I received your No. 24 and 25 letters and I get a letter just about every day. Mary keep up the good work because I look for your letter every day' (16/7/1942). Six months after joining the army, Gene has written 28 and Mary has written 25

letters; by mid-August the count is 60 and 54 respectively. The letters convey Gene's commentary and evaluation on how his life has unfolded. The last letter in the archive concludes with thoughts of the future and his belief that he will be shortly reunited with Mary and his son.

Well today our Chubby is 14 months old, huh, and I sure would love to see him soon and I think it's a pretty good bet that I will. It's terribly hard to wait so long. It seems like a million years since I last saw you but I'll never forget all the things you did to make me happy and every extra day I am away from you my love for you grows deeper and stronger. (17/11/1943)

Gene was officially discharged from the Army Air Force Base Unit on September 21, 1945 (U.S. World War II Military Records, no date).

Woody's story: 'Can't last forever, I'd say'

Woody's 36 letters to Carmen are written between July 1943 and October 1945. In the five letters from the US, he describes his daily work, delivering food supplies, loading equipment, preparing materials for overseas transport. He writes that hard work helps to pass the time. Within five months Woody is transferred overseas. The bulk of his letters are written and sent from the Pacific theatre of war. His battalion is moved from island to island in the central Pacific, ranging in size from small coral reefs to larger populated islands. Woody cannot reveal where he is or write about what he is doing or make any direct reference to military actions. He appears to cope well and communicates the rhythm of his days to Carmen that include communal letter writing with comrades.

Another day here in the islands, as days go, same do routine, eat, sleep a little and work the rest of the day. We are having a letter writing session down at Joe's. Tokyo Rose...directed a threat to the forces in this vicinity last night, but only brought a laugh from the boys here. (29/3/1944)

This is the first letter in which Woody wishes that he were at home '[...] to help plant a Spring garden and raise some chickens.' He habitually looks for news about friends and family and tells Carmen about his acquaintances in the army. He writes about the heat and dust and the relief of swimming in the clear blue coral sea, reminiscing about home and

summer time memories of friends and Carmen. Daily letter writing is composed of continuity and repetition, assuring Carmen that he is well and despite the setting and context of war, the mundane prevails. 'Not much news of interest out here about the same daily routine. Still talking of moving in a few weeks, but nothing definite yet' (25/4/1944). Riessman's (1990) concept of 'habitual narratives' describe well the kind of story telling in Woody's letters home, at this point. By July and August 1944, the letters communicate the difficulties of living with uncertainty about the future.

Boy it is really 'dead' on this rock right now. Very little work going on and no scuttlebutt... everyone has been rather quiet the past few days. Seems like there is more men than work out here at the present time, but all this might change in the next few weeks or months. All depends on strategy that will be used on Japan...but it is really hard to tell just what will happen next out here. (16/8/1944)

Though he attends shows, films and drinks a few beers with his comrades, he is more revealing of his personal disposition towards the end of 1944. Woody complains of being ill, anxious and not feeling well. His health and well-being becomes a recurring theme of his letters home as he recounts his experiences of illnesses and the importance of letters from Carmen to his recovery.

Well sweet I know you think that I have neglected you the past few days, but I really haven't felt like writing as my nerves have been a little jumpy [...] I believe your letters have done me more good than the medicine that I have been taking.
(23/10/1944)

The 16th of February 1945 marks another turning point in his correspondence.

Well today was a big day out here in the Pacific with the war on the Japs and hope that it will help to bring this war to a more speedy end. You will hear this island mentioned in the news now and will hear a great deal more from here as the time goes by.

The date corresponds with the US bombardment and subsequent invasion of Iwo Jima with fatalities of 20,000 among Japanese soldiers and 6,981 US soldiers killed. Woody's thoughts are on the promises of winning the war and that he is in 'pretty good shape, physically and

mentally' (16/4/1945). He is transported to a 'new rock' and he doesn't know '[...]' how things are going to work out here but it looks like everything will be O.K.' (16/4/1945). He promises Carmen that he '[...]' will write every day so you will know I am getting along here. Think everything will be O.K' (16/4/1945). Woody's next letters are from Guam and his first thoughts are of coming home. This is prompted by a major turning point in the war against Japan. Though the European phase of the war had ended by eight of May 1945, the ending of the war in Pacific would bring the world conflict to its final conclusion, marking '[...]' the great transition from war to peace' (Bell, 2011: 233). On sixth and ninth of August, the US engaged in the atomic bomb attack of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, delivered by a B-29 bomber based in Tinian. On the eight of August, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan. A week later, 15th of August, Japan announced their surrender to the Allies. In his letter of the 16th of August, Woody writes about the impact of the end-of-war news.

It has been an exciting week and yesterday was the climax for this outfit. The news came in at 9.00 am Guam time and immediately work was over – we then got 6 bottles of beer each – began to celebrate. Well I can't describe all that happened but you can imagine several thousands men anywhere from sober to well past drunk and what do you get [...]' we can begin to make plans to really lead a normal life again.

The end of the war precipitates a change in his concerns in his letters home. Woody no longer writes about daily activities but explains the complexities of the 'points system' deployed to release soldiers from active service. Those who served overseas for longer periods accumulate more points and though it is frustrating to wait, Woody tells Carmen that this system is 'fair'. He makes plans for the future, imagining a life after the war. His last letter is sent late September 1945.

I have been passing the time away reading books on farming [...]' Yes, I have had plenty of time to think these past three weeks and the thoughts were all concerning our future, hope we can make a lot of them. (22/9/1945)

He observes that their letters are shorter and shorter as the date for leaving Guam comes closer. 'I don't know anything new about leaving, but as far as I know a lot of fellows are in the same shape I am in – just sweating the days out. Can't last forever I say' (25/9/1945). He signs this last letter as usual, 'I will write every day until I leave sweet. Goodnite sweet – I

love you lots, lots and lots'. The Seabees unit is deactivated on the 1st of October and Woody is enlisted for transfer to the U.S. on October 15, 1945, preparing for the transition from soldier to civilian (U.S. World War II Military Records, no date).

Conclusion: epistolary spaces and resilience building processes

Documents of life such as letters are an exciting resource for researching resilience. The letters under consideration here span two-year periods for each correspondent; we do not know very much about the lived life, before or after. From military archival sources we now know that Gene died in 1957. He was 29 at the time of writing his letters (U.S. World War II Military Records, no date). Woody was likely to be in his early thirties but at the time of writing, we have no further information on his life after he was released from service. In working with letters, we trace how people engage with social support systems, negotiate relationships and navigate towards resources to enhance the present and to plan for the future. These resilience processes can be discerned in soldiers' letters to spouses in World War II, processes mobilized by the state in service of the war but also in the activity of letter writing. From the evidence presented here, the letters and the epistolary spaces produced were recognised by their authors as significant to own resilience-building processes. Letters illustrate what happens in the 'here and now' (Halldorsdottir, 2007), which is especially relevant for tracing resilience processes as they emerge. By paying attention to epistolary spaces, we suggest that narrative inquiry has the potential to show resilience in action, essential for a better understanding of the unfolding personal and social dynamics of people's responses to life challenges. The active participation of all correspondents in creating and maintaining real and imaginary epistolary spaces (comprised of writing, sending, receiving and reading letters) is crucial to the constitution of a safe space in times of insecurity. In these epistolary spaces, the converging personal and social factors that facilitate resilience processes can be traced, much of which can be attributed to the letter writing process itself.

Despite the changing contexts of the lives of the correspondents, living with war and its effects, living without the other, coping with unexpected events such as an unplanned pregnancy or military transfers to unknown territories, not knowing what lies ahead, the correspondents are persistent in their expressed desire to be with their wives, to return home, to plan for a future and in the meantime to keep writing. Gene's letter to Mary, sent on March 12, 1942 is particularly expressive in this regard; 'Please write every day will you Mary? Those letters keep me going'. Whether or not the initiators of the 'Writing is Fighting'

campaign were aware of the transformative potential of the initiative, it is clear to us that resilience building processes occur in epistolary spaces produced by letter writing in a time of war. These processes are made evident through a narrative analysis that considers context, reciprocity and turning points. We suggest that used in combination with other research approaches, understanding resilience-building processes is enhanced through the narrative analyses of letters and letter writing.

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ⁱ We have not altered the first names of correspondents but have omitted surnames and references to information identifying specific military units. Though the letters were found in a military clothing and paraphernalia outlet in Northern France and offered for sale in the public domain, to preserve the confidentiality of correspondents we have decided to omit fuller identifying information.