

Search and Seizure 4: Letters

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For this Search and Seizure assignment I read through letters from servicemen during World War II who were previously students at Humboldt State University, then called Humboldt State College. The letters were sent to the President of HSC during that time, Arthur Gist. I was assigned to look through the J, K and L folders in Box #1. There were no K or L folders in Box #1 but there were 3 folders for J, so it was not difficult at all for me to find more than enough letters that were diverse enough for me to write on. Though most of the letters to Gist were from servicemen still stationed in the United States there were plenty from people who served abroad too. I chose about 6 letters that seemed to illustrate the broad spectrum of the War and what it meant to people serving in different areas of the world. These letters all contain messages that are both very similar and completely different.

In all of the letters that I read there was a similar theme in the beginning of nearly every one. They all seemed to start out with an apology for not replying to Gist sooner, and would then move on to express gratitude for the letter that Gist had written to them. Many of these people had received newsletters from HSC and lists of other students who were serving in the war and where they were and what their duties for the war effort were. They are all very interested and awe struck to hear about how people they have known are now scattered all over the globe, and sometimes tell Gist about a former classmate or Humboldt local that they bumped into in whatever part of the world they were stationed in. A man who is stationed in the Netherlands East Indies in the pacific

expresses his gratitude to Gist for a list of his classmates that are serving elsewhere, “Guess you have a few of your boys in every corner of the world”¹.

One letter that I found interesting was from Leonard Juell, who was stationed in India at the time. Like many other young men, this was one of the first times he’d ever been in a distant country and was exposed to a culture that he found very interesting. “India seems to be the crossroad of the worlds²” he says as he talks about the meeting of different cultures and lifestyles that he has witnessed in India. He is awestruck by the clash of modern technology in what he views as a poverty stricken and primitive society, “It is strange to see the ox-cart and an army truck going down the same road together”³, he exclaims. Another man writes home from China talking about how different things are there, how it’s strange for him to be in one of the oldest civilizations in the world and, like Juell, comments on the clash of technology and primitive ways of living. He also goes on to talk of the people and how they are friendly and, though very poor, decorate themselves and their homes and shops with vibrant colors⁴. All of them, though, talk about how they can’t wait to get home to the good old U.S.A.

Not everyone went to places that were entirely new and different to them. A couple of letters were from young men stationed in England. The difference I found in these letters was that these men seemed to be given more freedom to go and partake in more leisurely activities, “Here, somewhere in England, I am finding life interesting and

¹ Francis Kane to President Gist, 13 March, 1945, ¹ E.E. Jackson to President Gist, 17 November 1945, Arthur Gist Papers, Box #1 (Special Collections, Humboldt State University Library, Arcata, CA).

² Leonard Juell to President Gist, 26 December, 1943, Arthur Gist Papers, Box #1 (Special Collections, Humboldt State University Library, Arcata, CA).

³ Leonard Juell to President Gist, 26 December, 1943, Gist Papers, Box #1.

⁴ E.E. Jackson to President Gist, 17 November 1945, Arthur Gist Papers, Box #1 (Special Collections, Humboldt State University Library, Arcata, CA).

quite enjoyable”⁵. Another wrote to Gist about his walks around town and how beautiful everything looked during the different seasons and of fun activities he did, “Among the interesting things I’ve accomplished on these outings is one that most people would enjoy doing – taking a ride in a troop-carrying glider”⁶ Both of these people write home about having a good time. This seemed to be the sentiment among most servicemen who were stationed in England.

There were not many accounts of actual fighting. The letters mostly consisted of questions about old friends and other happenings in Humboldt. Occasionally someone would mention fighting but there was no details given in these letters. One man was unable to expand on the details of the skirmishes that he had been in because of censorship, the ship he was on (the U.S.S. Helena) may have been on a mission with some degree of secrecy, “The news from here is strictly censored, so there isn’t much I can tell you about. I have seen action and it is a long way from being a pleasure. We all look forward to the day when this is over and we can sail back to the good old U.S.A”⁷. In the letters from men that said they had seen “action” their tone is a little more direct and less jovial or flowery. It is obvious to see that to them the war was more than a trip to a foreign country. “The passage through the East China Sea and the Yellow Sea was also dangerous. Floating mines could be seen around our vessel”⁸, says Jackson when he talks about his voyage from the Philippines to China. Another man who had been over seas for 14 months and had landed on the shores of Morocco in 1942 briefly writes of his journey

⁵ Herbert C. Jenkins, 14 January, 1943, Arthur Gist Papers, Box #1 (Special Collections, Humboldt State University Library, Arcata, CA).

⁶ John H. Joquel to President Gist, 10 April, 1944, Arthur Gist Papers, Box #1 (Special Collections, Humboldt State University Library, Arcata, CA).

⁷ Stanley E. Johnson to President Gist, 28 December, 1942, Arthur Gist Papers, Box #1 (Special Collections, Humboldt State University Library, Arcata, CA).

⁸ E.E. Jackson to President Gist, 17 November 1945, Arthur Gist Papers, Box #1 (Special Collections, Humboldt State University Library, Arcata, CA).

from there to “somewhere in Italy” through Tunisia and Sicily, “All the way had been hard, rough battling and I hope our efforts soon bring an end to this struggle”⁹. Whether because information is censored or not, the writers do not expand on their experiences in battle and it is clear to see that they want nothing more than for the fighting to be over.

Nothing was more evident and similar in the letters than the strong yearning for home. Wilbur Jensen captures the spirit of the returning soldier the best when he writes to Gist just before his homecoming, “I can see the redwoods now! I can also see the man shortage.....tell the women to practice their judo technique, and feed on Frankie Sinatra; tell them to get well dosed ‘cause lad W.D. is about to descend on them, and I don’t want too many of them swooning when I make my entrance! Hubba hubba.”¹⁰. I actually found myself having trouble containing my laughter when reading this particular letter. I couldn’t help but be moved by the gleeful expressions of a young man returning home.

When I looked through the Lumberjack archives for the years during World War II, I noticed that nearly everything reflected the war. Coca Cola had an advertising campaign that depicted servicemen all over the world handing out Coke as the “International sign of friendship” in every issue of the paper. There were many advertisements to buy war bonds, and stories of local heroes who were receiving awards for bravery, such as Bruce Wiley, a former student at HSC¹¹. Also there were stories that glorified women who signed up to work in factories that produced military arms, like Jane A. Whiteman who was the first person to pass the physical exam with 100 percent

⁹ Arthur E. Johnson to President Gist, 10 January, 1944, ⁹ E.E. Jackson to President Gist, 17 November 1945, Arthur Gist Papers, Box #1 (Special Collections, Humboldt State University Library, Arcata, CA).

¹⁰ W.D. Jensen to President Gist, 24 January, 1945, ¹⁰ E.E. Jackson to President Gist, 17 November 1945, Arthur Gist Papers, Box #1 (Special Collections, Humboldt State University Library, Arcata, CA).

¹¹ *The Lumberjack*, 6 October, 1943, 2.

marks for an aircraft fuselage production factory¹². Student life in general was greatly affected by the War. There were many fund raisers and awareness meetings and things of that nature. There was also a play that was put on at the Humboldt State College auditorium and was written and performed by HSC students. The play was called “The Three Little Angels” and was selling out seats like crazy. The play was a satire depicting the three leaders of the Axis nations, Toju, Hitler and Mousolini, as three little angels singing¹³. The article didn’t go into too much detail about what was said in the play exactly, but went on to tell about other parts of the play. One was written by Wilbur Jensen, the student whose letter was full of joy at the prospect of coming back to Humboldt. The story depicted the tragedy of a war soldier who would not be coming home to his girl¹⁴.

When I looked through the yearbooks I was able to find Leonard Juell, who was serving on the ship the U.S.S. Helena, whose letter I read and wrote about. I found him among the senior class of 1942. In the same yearbook I saw how the War was affecting the lives of students by determining a topic for a student forum in which the captions are “Charles Moore favored ‘War Now’” while next to this picture there was another with the caption “ Jack Sutherland cautioned against hasty entrance because of unpreparedness”¹⁵. One of the more prominent articles I found in the wartime yearbooks at HSC was on how some of the men’s athletic teams, under Coach Matheson, were doing different training styles, “Besides the good workout Coach Matheson gives the fellows in the gym each

¹² “The Perfect WAAC”, *Lumberjack*, 14 April, 1943, 2.

¹³ “Large Crowd Acclaims Tues. Nite’s Performance Success”, *Lumberjack*, 14 April, 1943, 2.

¹⁴ “Large Crowd Acclaims Tues. Nite’s Performance Success”, *Lumberjack*, 14 April, 1943, 2.

¹⁵ *Humboldt State College Yearbook*, 1942, (Special Collections, Humboldt State University Library, Arcata, CA).

day, the ‘commandos-to-be’ are trained in running the obstacle course”¹⁶. It was also necessary for the editors of the yearbook in 1943 to put stars by the names and pictures of those seniors who were unable to graduate that year because they were called to war. Also, the emergence of a new section in the yearbook was published in 1943; A list of students in the service. On this list in 1943 was Wilbur Jensen, who had been pictured in the yearbook for 1942.

I think that using letters as a primary source was by far my favorite. For me, it was the most interesting and emotional source to work with. Seeing letters written by men who fought in World War II who were once students of the very school that I am currently attending was a very great experience for me. I think that letters are a great way to get a look into the life of an individual and their personal experience in a situation. Though, just like we learned in *Going to the Source*, I had to be careful to choose letters from people who were all experiencing different things at the time in order to broaden my view of the war. There is no way you can take letters from one person and get a general view of the war. It was important for me to remember to try to find letters from many different angles, because what one soldier is experiencing another may never have had to deal with at all and vice versa. Once I was able to get viewpoints from many different servicemen I was able to get a better view for myself of the big picture.

¹⁶ *Humboldt State College Yearbook*, 1943, (Special Collections, Humboldt State University Library, Arcata, CA).

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