

The Arthur Gist Collection Will Shull

This paper will examine the letters from students from Humboldt State College (HSC) to president Gist during World War Two. First, a brief background history of HSC will be given, then it will explore what soldiers were writing about, why were they writing to President Gist, and what was going on during the period when the letters were written; both abroad and at HSC. Finally, it will talk about the advantages and disadvantages of working with this source.

Humboldt State College started classes April 6th 1914, with the primary goal of training school teachers. Other elementary school subjects were taught as well. In 1921 it was renamed Humboldt State Teachers College and Junior College (HSTC). In 1930, Arthur Gist became the new president of the college and the college newspaper was renamed to *The Lumber Jack*. This remains the name of the newspaper today. By 1935, the college offered a B.A. in Biology, English, and Social Science. The college was renamed Humboldt State College, (it was changed to Humboldt State University in the fall of 1974). In 1939 a copy of Adolph Hitler's *Mein Kampf* was in the college library. In 1940 there was track and field, football, and other sports. HSC joined the Far Western Conference in sports; there was a ski club and in 1941 the Mutsuhito club had a "Queen of the Campus" contest. There also was a record high of 438 students that year.¹ On December 7th 1941, Pearl Harbor was attacked and by Dec 11, 1941, the U.S. was in a state of war with Germany, Japan, and Italy. World War II officially began in America.

¹ William R. Tanner, *A View From The Hill A History of Humboldt State University*, (Arcata: University Graphic Services, 1993), 135-136.

Students, particularly male students, either enlisted or were drafted into the service. They were sent to different service areas during the war. President Gist kept track of the addresses of several alumni and students in the military during the war. He sent them copies of the HSC newsletter and this helped to keep the soldiers in touch with the events at HSC. Several students wrote back to the President.

Most of these letters show appreciation to President Gist for sending the newsletter and most stated it was nice to hear about news from home. Some ask for the addresses for friends in other areas of the war.

A letter to President Gist by Hans Nicholiason, who was stationed with the Army in North Africa in June of 1943, talks about how happy and surprised he was to get a newsletter from Humboldt. He continues to state he would be one year over seas next month, and that was a long enough time for him. He also talks about his travels in the world:

The Navy advertises that young men should join the Navy to see the world.

Apparently the Navy was wrong because all I did was join the 343 Europe, and I am in a fair way to see the world. So far we have rambled over a large part of the U.S., England, and North Africa. The question now is where do we go from here?²

Although he talks about his travels, he doesn't talk about his duties, or what the conditions were. I do not know if this was because Mr. Nicoliason only wanted to make the letter topic lighter, or if he knew the letter would be reviewed and censored.

² Hans Nicoliason to President Gist, June 19, 1943, Arthur Gist Papers, Box #2 (Special Collections, Humboldt State University Library, Arcata, CA).

Another letter is dated September 1943 from Lieutenant JW Porter, a soldier in a bomb squadron, from somewhere in Sicily. It discusses his recovery from a wound in his arm and supports the “boys” in his unit who were working during his recuperation. In the letter he also states he is looking forward to a return to duty soon. He also states: “We have been holding the upper hand in this theatre and have been doing quite well.” He talked about how beautiful Sicily is even though the major cities are severely damaged from bombs. He further went on to say:³

“ I hope the rumpus hasn’t affected the enrollment of the college too much.”

This letter indicates how the war in that part of the world was going at that time. It also indicated that Lt. Porter was thinking of the college enrollment during the time of war, and what sort of effects the draft would have on the school.

In another letter dated July 1945 from Private Gene Orlandi, talks about how he was among the first troops to be redeployed to the Pacific, and spoke about his trip from Germany to the Pacific theater: “I have more places to see before I get home, but when will that be?” He also is proud of the letterhead he is writing the letter on:

“ This is genuine German made paper, proof that I was in Germany, I don’t know what the heading says, perhaps you can figure it out.”⁴ This letter is interesting in my opinion because it links the letter to the end of the war in Europe, and to the shift of the fighting to the Pacific Theater.

An HSC Alumni, David Nielson, also wrote president Gist from Manila in the Philippines, on November 5, 1945. In the letter he talked about what he had done since graduating in June of 1935. At the time of the letter he was a lieutenant and executive

³ JW Porter to President Gist, September 7, 1943, Arthur Gist Papers, Box #2.

⁴ Gene Orlandi to President Gist, July 28, 1945, Arthur Gist Papers, Box #2.

officer aboard the U.S.S. Hydrus, a troop and cargo ship that had traveled much of the Pacific since the beginning of the war. He ends the letter by asking for a copy of the HSC newsletter.⁵

Another student who wrote letters to President Gist was William Nellist, who won a Bronze Star in the war. In a letter dated July 8th (year unknown), he talked about being in the Alamo Scouts in the Philippines, and looking forward to getting back to duty after getting wounded. He asked President Gist to say hello to any of his friends who may have been around still.⁶

All of these letters seemed to be personal. There does not seem to be a formal style, nor a commentary of how bad the war was. Most of the correspondence was like the correspondence between friends, and reflected a desire to hear news from home. These letters were written during the midst of the war and the fact that the letters could be delivered at all is astounding. In 1943 German submarines, AKA U-boats, were wreaking havoc on American and British ships in the Atlantic. American forces also landed in Sicily, and Italy surrendered. 1944 was the turning point for the war in Europe against Nazi Germany. In June the D-Day invasion of Normandy commenced, and in December the Battle of the Bulge began. Also that same year, heavy bombing of Japan began. In 1945 U.S. forces, led by General MacArthur, returned to the Philippines, and the battles of Iwo Jima and Okinawa occurred. In May Germany surrendered; in August the nuclear bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, followed by the Japanese surrender in

⁵ David Nielson to President Gist, November 5, 1945, Arthur Gist Papers, Box #2.

⁶ William Nellist to President Gist, July 8, 194?, Arthur Gist Papers, Box #2; Tanner, *A View From The Hill*, 54.

1945.⁷ These events were hinted at in the letters; such as the letter from JW Porter for example, noted that things were going well in Sicily. Gene Orlandi's letter talked about his redeployment from the European to the Pacific theater.⁸

At HSC campus life was being affected as well. The *Women's Mutsuhito Club*, which sponsored the queen of the campus contest, was renamed after the bombing of Pearl Harbor to the *Favonians* to avoid any connection to the Japanese culture. An observation for aircraft activity was set up on the roof of the industrial-arts building, with the faculty and their spouses acting as a civilian air patrol. Founders Hall was painted camouflage green in 1944. Also in 1944 war stamps and bonds were sold on campus. Commando training for men, to prepare them for war, replaced football. Enrollment dropped from 436 in 1939 to 159 in 1945.⁹

During this time the *Humboldt Lumber Jack* reported on some of these events. In the June 2, 1943 issue, page one, addressed the falling enrollment by stating that the Senior Ball was cancelled because only 4 men were graduating that year. Page 2 had a cartoon portraying U.S. Marine war heroes, the faculty women, and an ad urging people to buy war bonds held a draft themed party. On the bottom of the pages little paragraphs encouraged students to keep up their letter writing to troops in summer time and gave instructions to HSC students to "Talk up" HSC to graduating high school seniors and to "Be a booster". Page 3 showed a student being commissioned as a pilot. In the February 7, 1945 issue of the *Humboldt Lumber Jack*, a column called "With the Armed Forces", talked about what service personnel from HSC were doing and where they were at that

⁷ Second World War History.Com, *World War 2 Timeline*,
http://www.secondworldwarhistory.com/worldwar2_timeline.asp

⁸ JW Porter to President Gist, September 7, 1943, Arthur Gist Papers, Box #2; Gene Orlandi to President Gist, July 28, 1945, Arthur Gist Papers, Box #2.

⁹ Tanner, *A View From The Hill*, 47-51.

time. Page 4 reported that General MacArthur 's "I shall return pledge kept", referring to U.S. troops returning to the Philippines. Also included in the newspaper was a photo of a German city destroyed by bombs with the caption "Germany gets real taste of war."¹⁰

Although these letters provide a lot of interesting information, there are both advantages and disadvantages to this type of primary source. As stated in the text *Going to the Source, Volume 2*. Letters show some of the personality of the writer: whether the writer maybe out going, reserved, or business like in their writing style. Although the letters provide an insight into the mind of the writer when the letter was written, they may not truly reflect the writer's thoughts. The writer's educational and social background, to whom the letter was written, and what the subject matter was about all have to be taken into account when you use letters as a source. For example, would the soldier be as friendly to his commanding officer in a letter as he was to President Gist? Since these letters were written in a time of war and the writers were soldiers and sailors, military regulations dictated what could be written in the letter. Each service branch screened the letters to make sure they did not contain inappropriate content about the war. Another draw back is that we only have access to the letters the soldiers wrote to President Gist, and we do not know how he responded. We know he sent the *Humboldt News Letter* to them, but we do not know the content of the letters he sent to the troops. Were they form letters or personal letters? Also you cannot get a true understanding of an event, or a person's feelings from one letter. It is much more helpful to look at a group of series of letters to help put the letters in context of what was occurring at the time. Also, it is helpful if you have a background on the events happening in that time period to place the

¹⁰ *Arcata The Lumber Jack*, 02 June, 1943, 1-3; *The Lumber Jack*, 07 February, 1945, 2, 4.

context of the letters. All of these questions need to be considered in using personal letters as a primary source.¹¹

I found this assignment the most enjoyable search and seizure paper yet. Reading the letters gave me a local feel for the events of World War II, for I felt like I was reading the letters at the time they were written. Although there are concerns that arise from using letters as a primary source, I also see them as a valuable tool to reconstruct history through the words of the writer.

¹¹ Victoria Bissell Brown, and Timothy J. Shannon, *Going To The Source*. Volume 2: Since 1865, (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004), 253-256.

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