

# Reader's Theater: Letters Home from Montanans at War

**Essential Understanding:** History is personal. It is not just about the famous and powerful. Primary sources (like letters) provide insight into the lives and emotions of the people who lived in the past.

**Activity Description:** Students will work in groups to read and interpret letters written by soldiers at war, from the Civil War to the Operation Iraqi Freedom. After engaging in close reading and conducting short research to interpret the letters, they will perform the letters as reader's theater.

## Objectives

Students will

- Experience the power of primary sources.
- Understand that ordinary people make history.
- Engage in close reading of complex texts.
- Recognize the sacrifices made by soldiers and their families

**Grade Level:** 7–12

**Time:** 3–5 class periods

## Materials:

Letters from Home Script (below)

Computers with internet access

Samples of original letters from the Montana Memory Project (see Source List, below.)

## Common Core, Social Studies, and Arts Standards

- **CCRA.L.3** Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening. Vocabulary Acquisition and Use
- **CCRA.L.4** Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.
- **CCRA.L.5** Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships and nuances in word meanings.
- **CCRA.L.6** Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.
- **CCRA.R.1** Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- **CCRA.R.4** Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
- **CCRA.SL.1** Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- **SS.H.6-8.5** Explain how Montana has changed over time and how this history impacts the present.
- **SS.H.6-8.6** Understand that there are multiple perspectives and interpretations of historical events.
- **SS.H.6-8.7** Analyze how people's perspectives shaped the historical narratives they created.
- **SS.H.9-12.1** Analyze how unique circumstances of time, place, and historical contexts shape individuals' lives.

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## Readers Theater: Letters Home from Montanans at War (continued)

- **SS.H.9-12.3** Identify ways in which people and groups exercise agency in difficult historical, contemporary, and tribal contexts.
- **MAS.1** Students create, perform/exhibit, and respond in the Arts.
- **MAS.3** Students develop and refine arts skills and techniques to express ideas, pose and solve problems, and discover meaning.

### **Teaching Notes:**

As envisioned, students work in small groups to interpret and rehearse the letters assigned to them. Each group has a narrator and each letter is read by a different cast member. For differentiation, note that the narrator is the easiest role with much shorter lines than the other parts. Group 3 (World War II) has the most letters; you may want to create another group and divide the material between the two.

If you are looking for a non-reading role, you can assign each group a director/researcher (someone in charge of defining unfamiliar words, providing the context necessary for good interpretation). This position can also be combined with the narrator.

Many letters will contain unfamiliar slang or references. Information can typically be revealed through a well-designed internet search. You may want to walk your students through searching techniques.

Note that most of these letters were written by men—since for most of our history, most soldiers were men. You may need to reassure your students that it is fine to have girls as readers for male letter writers.

If you have a number of students who are uncomfortable reading aloud, you might want to expand the project to include other nonspeaking roles. For example: assign a student to find appropriate images from the Library of Congress American Memory Project Photograph and Print Collection (<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/>) and/or appropriate music from the National Jukebox (<http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/>) to create a musical introduction and/or background graphics to project during the performance. Images of

Montana military enlistment cards can be found on the Montana Memory Project:

**1890-1918** - <https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/12943>

**WWI** - <https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/12944>

**WWII** - <https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/12945>

For small classes, feel free either to omit letters or combine parts.

Helena High School theater teacher Rob Holter reported that his students had trouble reading the script when a letter jumped pages. His solution was to create [this version](#) of the script. He printed two copies and placed them in binders for the performers, who alternated reading from two podiums. Students used the script below as study copies.

Where available, links to scanned copies of the original letters are included in the Source List (below.) You may want to print these out, or arrange to project them, to reinforce the idea that the words students will be reading are real. Note that the scripts were created directly from the original letters. In some instances the transcript slightly varies from the original to allow for improved readability. However, meaning was not altered. Ellipses mark places where material was omitted.

### **Pre-Lesson Preparation**

- Review lesson plan and extension activities.
- Preview the script. These were letters written by soldiers. Make sure that they are appropriate for the grade and maturity level of your students.
- Assign student groups/roles.
- Print scripts and rubric.
- Arrange to share original letters with students using links included in the Source List (optional).

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## Procedure

Divide students into 4 groups:

- Group 1 (Civil War and Philippine-American War: 4-5 students)
- Group 2 (World War I: 4-5 students)
- Group 3: (World War II: 4-5 students. Note: In this group, students will read more than one role)
- Group 4: (Korean War, Vietnam War, Operation Iraqi Freedom 4-5 students)

Explain to your students that they will be working together to perform letters written by people who served in the military during wartime. Remind them that the people who wrote these letters were real people. Their words are real, their experiences are real, and all of them deserve to be treated with respect.

Show students samples of the letters to reinforce this point. (Find links to scanned copies of the letters in the Source List, below.)

Note that in some instances the script will vary slightly from the original to allow for improved readability, but meaning was not altered. Ellipses mark places where material was omitted.

Explain that the letters express a range of emotions, (joy, despair, hope, anger, patriotism) and tones (sarcasm, tenderness, bravado).

Talk about letters in general. Note that letters are informal forms of communication. They often have misspellings and unconventional punctuation. They also often refer in shorthand to people, places, or events they expect the recipient to know about. These things can make interpreting the letters difficult. In order to perform their letters well, students will need to understand their letters' content, context, vocabulary, and emotions.

Talk about point of view. Letters clearly express the perspective of their authors. Discuss how this is just one point of view. A letter written by someone else (especially from the "enemy") might portray the same situation very differently. Letters are also written with their audience in mind; thus, a soldier might hide

certain information so as not to worry his family.

Tell students that they need to read closely, ask questions, and conduct research in order to gain full understanding of their texts. Let them know that most of the allusions or references can be found through well-designed online searches. Remind them that they will need to be as exact as possible in their search terms. For example: The first Civil War letter refers to "Butternuts." Search "butternut" alone and you'll find squash recipes. Search "Butternut Civil War" and you'll quickly discover that "butternut" is a slang term for Confederate. If you read further, you can find out that the term came from the homespun uniforms (often dyed with walnut oil) worn by many Civil War Confederate soldiers.

Let students know that after they thoroughly understand their letters, they will need to practice performing them. There will be unfamiliar words, so they may need to research proper pronunciation as well.

Provide each group an instruction sheet, rubric, and script. Circulate among groups to assist as needed.

After students have analyzed and practiced their pieces, have each group perform before the class.

## Extension Ideas

After practicing within the class, have students perform this for other classes or for community members (this would be particularly appropriate for a Veterans Day Celebration).

Have students investigate more about World War II by reading the "Peggy Letters" on the Montana Memory Project. The collection includes newsletters written by the Miles City branch of American Women's Voluntary Services (AWVS) from late 1942 until early 1946, to Custer County men and women serving overseas—and the letters they received in reply.

<https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/12942>

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## Readers Theater: Letters Home from Montanans at War (continued)

After participating in the Reader's Theater exercise, have students conduct additional research about the time period and then write their own letters:

1. A letter that one of the soldiers wrote either before or after the letter included in the script.
2. A letter to one of the soldiers (a response from one of the recipients).

Have students send care packages to current active duty soldiers. See Montana Supporting Soldiers for details: [mtsupportingmilitary.org](http://mtsupportingmilitary.org).

### **Additional Resources**

Read, Write, Think: Lesson Plan—Readers Theater <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/readers-theatre-172.html>

Aaron Shepard's Reader's Theater Tips: <http://www.aaronshep.com/rt/Tips.html>

### **Source List**

Special thanks to Montana Historical Society Archives staff for selecting these letters from the hundreds they have in their repository.

#### Civil War:

Archibald O. Simons Papers, 1863–1908, SC 65, MHS Archives

Harriet Keaton Smith Collection, 1863–1904, SC 75, MHS Archives (digitized as part of the Montana Memory Project: <https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/90367>)

#### Philippine-American War

Eugene S. French Papers, 1899, SC 1278, MHS Archives

Albert B. Kimball Family Papers, 1864–1957, MC 188, MHS Archives

United Spanish War Veterans, Dept. of Montana Records, 1903–1950, MC 165, MHS Archives

#### World War I

Toole Family Papers, 1886–1919, SC 859, MHS Archives (digitized as part of the Montana Memory Project: <https://mtmemory.recollectcms.com/nodes/view/90366>)

*Helena Daily Independent*, November 5, 1918

Montana Adjutant General's Office Records, 1899–1959, RS 223, MHS Archives

#### World War II

John Dorland "Pat" Blinn Papers, 1943–1951, MC 382 (17:3-2), MHS Archives

Hargis Westerfield Research Collection, MC 364, 41st Infantry Division, 1941–1994, MHS Archives

Irene Wold White Papers, 1919–2007, MC 383, MHS Archives

Harrison Family Papers, 1942–1963, SC 1913, MHS Archives

#### Korean War

John W. MacDonald Papers, 1951–1966, SC 1718, MHS Archives

#### Vietnam War

Gerald Simpson Diary, 1965–1966, SC 1409, MHS Archives

#### Iraq War

Email, Capt. Cory Swanson, from Iraq, to Lory Hampa-Chamberlain, Montana National Guard Historian, May 3, 2005, Iraq War Journals Collection, MHS Archives

# **Group Instructions**

Before you practice performing your letters, you need to understand them.

As a group, read the script aloud. Highlight unfamiliar phrases and words. Assign team members to research these words and share their meaning with the group.

Read each letter a second time. At the end of each paragraph, answer the following questions:

- What does it say? (Summarize the information and ideas.)
- What emotions do you think the author is trying to express? (Provide evidence.)
- What emotions are hiding? (Provide evidence.)

Assign parts. Have each actor read his/her part to him/herself, circling words s/he doesn't know or doesn't know how to pronounce. Help each other define and learn the pronunciation of all the words in the letters.

Read through the script out loud, each actor taking his or her part. Stop at the end of each paragraph to underline words to stress. Put two dashes (/ /) at places you plan to pause.

Note any hand motions, facial expressions, or other actions you think would convey emotions in the margins.

Practice together and provide feedback as you prepare to perform this piece.

**Remember:** You aren't going to simply read these letters to the class. You are going to perform them. Work to convey the meaning and emotion each letter expresses.

# Group 1: Civil War (1861–1865) and Philippine American War (1899–1902)

**Roles** (these may be combined):

Narrator 1

Narrator 2

Archibald Simons

S. M. Keaton

William Yost

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**Narrator:** We will be sharing letters from the Civil War and Philippine American War. The first letter is from Michigan-born Archibald Simons, who wrote to his sister Nellie on July 18, 1863, while serving with the Union Army in Tennessee. Nellie saved his letters, and Archibald brought them with him when he moved to Montana, where he was the Indian Agent at Fort Belknap.

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**Archibald Simons:**

Dear Sister,

You no doubt have heard of our advance before this. We left Murfreesboro June 24th. [On the] first day, long towards evening, we fell in with the rebels and had a light brush with them, when they commenced their old game...that is retreating which they had rather did any day than to stand right up to a square fight. They fell back to a place called Hoover's Gap where they thought they could bring us to a halt.

*(continued)*

They had chosen a good position; the country around there was very hilly. The way we had to go was between two hills. The rebels had taken their positions on the hills while their batteries were so placed so as to have the command of the grass. But the boys that know no fear soon made the Butternuts get and climb. We lost a good many killed and wounded, [and] we took a good many prisoners. We thought surely they would give us battle at Tallahoma where they had fortified so strongly. But we were disappointed. Had it not of rained so much we would of out-flanked them and they would have been obliged to fight or surrender. But owing to the rains it made the roads almost impassable and they found out what we were trying to do. So they got out of Tallahoma as quick as they could. They tried to get away their siege guns but they got stuck in the mud and they could not get them out so they burnt the carriages and left them in the mud.

We are now camped near a place by the name of Deckard, waiting for supplies. We don't know how long it will be before we will move. It may be some time, yet deserters are coming in every day from the rebel's ranks. They report that the mountains are full of deserters, mostly Tennesseans who swore that they would not leave the state.

I will have to bring my writing to a close on account of nothing of importance to write. Do not forget to write and tell me all the news.

From your affectionate brother, A. O. Simons

*(continued)*

**Narrator 2:** The following letter was written by S. M. Keaton, a Confederate prisoner of war at Fort Delaware, to his sister Harriet Keaton Smith in Denver on September 19, 1863. She brought the letter with her to Virginia City, in Montana Territory, where she kept house for her miner husband.

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**S. M. Keaton:**

My very dear Sister,

I will write you a few lines for the last time while I am a prisoner. I hope we are going to leave tomorrow morning but I do not know where we are going to. Some say we are going to Camp Chase (in) Ohio. I hope we are going to be exchanged; if not I will write to you when we stop.

My Dear Sister you must keep in good spirits. I assure you that I will turn up home someday if I live. I have written several letters to you and sent you and Josephine a ring a piece. O, how I wish I could get one or two more letters from you.

Josephine, my dear and most esteemed friend, I think of you and Hattie a great deal. You must try to be satisfied. I am coming home sometime surely, if the Lord spares me. I cannot write any more.

Hattie, Lieutenant Steven Price sends his respects to you and mother. So farewell until you hear from me again.

PS—Sister, since writing the above I received your letter of the 7th of September this evening at dark and was glad to hear from you once more. Hattie, it is impossible to send you my likeness but I wish you had

*(continued)*

sent me yours before I left. Tell Josie that I am ever her well-wisher and that I hope she will marry. Well, tell her to give my best respects to the lucky man, her intended. We will leave in the morning. I am glad to hear you are in Denver awhile. Father is gone; I hope you will stay there. Do not look for me until you see me coming.

Farewell,  
S. M. Keaton

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**Narrator 1:** Corporal William Yost, a friend of the Hanson family of Butte, Montana, fought in the Spanish American War in the Philippines in 1899. Not much is known about William aside from his letters to Montana. Yost's letters were sent to Hilma Hanson, daughter of Peter and Anna Hanson. Peter Hanson was the foreman of a smelter company in Butte where Yost had worked. Hilma herself graduated from the Garfield School in Butte and worked as a teacher in the mining town of Coloma in 1896.

**Narrator 2:** On Board N.S. Hospital Ship *Relief*  
Manila Bay

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**William Yost:**

May 5, '99

Dear Hilma,

Please excuse this paper but it is all I can manage to find and am lucky to have it as writing material is a scarce article here at present.

(continued)

Yes, I did succeed at last in getting shot, and with an old time brass bullet at that. It happened on the evening of the twenty-seventh about 10 o'clock. It struck me in the left hip. Entering in the front, it struck the hip bone and glanced downward, passing through the thigh, and lodged just half an inch under the shin at the rear from where the field surgeon removed it.

I couldn't realize for a moment that I had been shot—it felt much more like standing on a railroad and getting knocked off by the lightning express. I let a yelp out of me, and slapped my hand over the place in my trousers where it entered. Then the Dr. and litter bearers came up. The Doctor had that old slug cut out, a bandage put on, and was off to the next one quicker than you could wink. Then I crawled onto the litter and got a full ride back to the road where they dumped me off to wait for an ambulance to put in its appearance. I was lying by the side of the river when a bullet threw up a cloud of dust about three feet of me... so of course that was no place for me. I didn't stop to ask any questions but pulled myself off into the bushes out of sight where I lay until eight o'clock.

In the meantime an ambulance had passed by but I had failed to attract their attention, or else they were already loaded. But I sure got a berth in the next one and after it got a load—which didn't take long,—it started for the railroad, and you talk about your rides! I don't care for another such as that very soon, there was one poor fellow next to me who was shot through the neck and didn't have any shirt. So I gave him mine as I had an undershirt left, but that poor fellow suffered untold

*(continued)*

agonies. We finally reached the train and were loaded into box cars, lying on cots, which was a great relief to most of us. We were brought into Manila as quickly as possible. There we transferred to the river launches and were taken up the river to the first reserve hospital.

Arrived here, we were laid out in rows under the trees awaiting our time on the operating table, it was not a very pleasant sight by any means, sixty one wounded, some of them covered with their own blood from head to foot, and way down at the foot of the line lay five silent forms covered with blankets, which told plainer than words that they would not need the operating tables. And during the next week five of the others had their last sleep.

...My friend who was shot in the neck died the second night in the hospital. He was a brave young fellow, handsome and courageous, always cheerful even up to the last. ....

On the twenty fifth they sent sixteen of us to this boat and I am not sorry either as this is the nicest place I have been in since I joined the army. It is a regular floating palace with nearly all the modern improvements. We have the finest kind of a breeze and no mosquitoes which is a Godsend, as on shore the air is so bad that every time you draw your breath you run big risks of scorching your lungs, and at night the mosquitoes carry you away by sections. Then again, we have a lovely view of the whole bay and of Manila for a back ground.

*(continued)*

**Narrator 1:** Yost continues to describe two of his good friends in his company, George and Guy.

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**Yost:** Our poor little company had got more than its share of the hard fighting, out of forty-eight men we have lost four—killed—and fourteen wounded. With a good prospect of losing more before this thing is settled but I sincerely hope it won't be George and Guy. Yes we are laying down our lives for a noble cause....but I have only one life to lay down....and when that is gone I'll be out of a job....

Regards to your father and mother, to the boys, and all the rest of my friends. Good bye for this time hoping we may be home before the snow falls. I remain your sincere friend,

Will

*(continued)*

# Group 2: World War I (1917–18)

**Roles** (these may be combined):

Narrator 1

Narrator 2

Lieutenant Joseph Porter Toole

Captain Charles T. Busha

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**Narrator 1:** We will be sharing letters from World War I by and about Joseph Porter Toole. Joseph Porter Toole was the son of former Montana governor Joseph K. Toole and Lilly Rosecrans Toole. He was called into service December 3, 1917, from the Officers' Reserve Corps (organized under the National Defense Act of 1916) and received his training at the Presidio in San Francisco, California. Commissioned as a 1st Lieutenant of Infantry, he was assigned to Company D 364th Infantry Regiment as part of the 91st Infantry Division—known as the Pine Tree Division or Wild West Division. He arrived in France on July 12, 1918, and served with distinction during the St. Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne offensives in the fall of 1918. Here are excerpts from one of his letters home.

**Narrator 2:** On active service November 28, 1918

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**Joseph Porter Toole:**

Dearest Mother and Father:

“Your prayers and thoughts are with me” that is what your letters tell me and that is why I’m safe and well this Thanksgiving evening as I write to you by  
*(continued)*

the candlelight in a room recently occupied by a German officer in a city that has been shelled and looted by the hellish Huns. That your prayers and thoughts have been with me has helped me to do things that I might otherwise have faltered in doing. ...

I thought of you and your prayers yesterday when I marched the company down the street and, as a little priest (chanting) heading a funeral approached, mother with tears in her eyes. I gave thanks that you were spared such grief. You will never know how close death came to one who loves you and longs to be with you again. I believe that every man in the company thought of his parents as the little procession passed by and breathed the same thanksgiving that was on my lips and in my heart at that moment. ...

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**Narrator 1:** Further into the letter, Toole mentions that his parents had asked for details about how he was wounded in action. He provides a brief account.

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... On the morning of the 28th [of September] we were again the leaders of the attack. We had many machine gun nests to contend with. There were many casualties. Our battalion stopped a German counter attack and then one company lead an attack on the strong point held by the germans. It was in this rush that I was hit by a machine gun bullet and sent "Spinning on my ear". I was taken back about a half mile and there lay overnight in the rain until the stretchers got me in the morning and I started back through the chain of

*(continued)*

dressing stations and evacuation hospitals that finally sent me to Base #6, Bordeaux.

I must close now with much love and best wishes for you.

Your loving son,  
Joedy.

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**Narrator 2:** Unbeknownst to Lieutenant Toole, his friends also shared the story with his parents. Toole's mom and dad first learned the details of the incident from a letter Toole wrote to schoolmate Lieutenant David Rowand. Lieutenant Rowand shared that letter with the press and it was published in the *Helena Daily Independent* on November 5, 1918, a little over a month after Toole was wounded. Here's a short excerpt:

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**Toole:**

...the major ordered me to rush the strong point with my company. We got it but they got me on the last rush. A machine gun bullet went through my left arm and shoulder and stuck its nose out just behind the shoulder blade in my back. One of the corporals—God bless him!—dropped by my side and cut my blouse off. I told him I thought I felt the bullet still in my back. He found it and cut it out for me. Then he left me, and I forgot just what happened for a while.

(continued)

**Narrator 1:** Six months later the Tooles received another letter. This one was from Captain Charles T. Busha, Jr., Company D 364th Infantry Regiment 91st Infantry Division, writing from St. Georges-du-Rosay, France, Sunday, 2nd March, 1919.

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**Captain Charles T. Busha:**

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Toole:

Through chance I have been in close association with your son Joe since his enlistment in Uncle Sam's forces to the present time, and for fear the praise due my pal—I term him—will never reach you otherwise I take the liberty of this letter.

...I was in the fight beside Joe, and I want to say he was an officer and leader who deserves a bit of mention to you at home. When our forces were a bit shattered by some severe shelling, Joe was placed in command of a company not his own and led them in battle; then he reverted to his own company and I was nearby when he was ordered forward under deadly machine gun fire. He went readily and was doing bravely the severest task that ever confronts a man in battle when he was wounded. ...

He did not receive a medal nor did he receive a promotion, but he gained the highest esteem and regard from his fellow officers and I will say almost the love and worship of the men of Company "D", and that is the biggest reward after all.

*(continued)*

# Group 3: World War II (1941-1945)

## **Roles** (these may be combined):

Narrator 1	John Harrington
Narrator 2	Bob Harrington
Irene Wold	Corporal Armel
Dr. Mark Holcomb	John Pat Blinn

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**Narrator 1:** We will be sharing letters from World War II. The first is from Lieutenant Irene Wold, who grew up in Butte, Montana. She joined the Army Nurse Corps in 1943. She was stationed in North Africa from 1943 to 1944, and then in France.

**Narrator 2:** North Africa, September 19, 1943

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## **Irene Wold:**

Dear Mom, Marg. Erick George and Bea,

Today, Sunday, everything is very quiet in the wards. Boys are all quiet. No rough play so far. It's certainly different taking care of these kids—they really appreciate things done for them. What they enjoy most—and they themselves admit does them most good is to have an American nurse to talk to. We listen to them talk about the battle front. They can't write about it and have to get it off their chest some way.

There is an Italian boy from New York in my ward. He has a long first name and for short he has always been called Buddy. I came in the other morning and just nonchalantly in passing said "hi Bud". He wrote a letter later to his mother and told her about it—He said it

*(continued)*

sounded to him so much like he used to be called at home and he hadn't heard it for so long. He told her it was the highest morale builder he had for a long time. It's just simple little kindnesses sometimes that helps so much.

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**Narrator 1:** After briefly mentioning a recent dance she attended, and begging her mother to send her some warm pajamas, Irene continues....

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**Irene Wold:** Mom will you get the September American Magazine and send it to me? There is a picture in it of Captain Douglas Smith who is the world's leading Guerrilla war fighter. I got to know him quite well on the ship. He embarked in New York with us. He used to call me Margo and I couldn't figure a reason why. I told him time and again my right name was Irene, and he'd always say "Yes I know, but I prefer to call you Margo."

Anyway, later after we arrived in Africa he stayed in the same vicinity....

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**Narrator 2:** Irene continues to describe an encounter with Captain Smith as he introduced her to another Captain.

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**Wold:** He called me Lt. Margo— I again reminded him of my right name and he broke down and said before he met me, when he first saw me, I reminded him of Margo the screen and stage star. I just laughed at him. To me it was very funny.

*(continued)*

He gave a 2 hour lecture that night on the boat to all officers and nurses .....He told us all about the guerilla warfare he'd led in the desert. When he left here he had a conference in the near future with General Eisenhower to discuss the next assignment.

Since being her I've met General Roosevelt— son or nephew of Teddy Roosevelt. I was with a group of officers at the Villa and he was there with the Marquis of Morocco and his wife. The General invited us to join their party. He's also a most interesting person having been all over the world. We all chatted together for about an hour and drank some wine with him.....

One meets people from all over the world, people of once fame and otherwise, down deep inside though we're all the alike all fighting for same cause and freedom for our families, friends, and allies... for the preservation of the generations to follow us.

It isn't helping our generation too much considering the number of our boys that are dying in the battlefield and keeping "Old Glory" flying in all the corners of the globe.

Guess I've gone on and on. But one thing we've all discovered—after this war is over and we're all back home again—among us there will be less griping and more appreciation for the simple things that all our lives we've expected and taken for granted. I don't regret leaving though. I'm glad for it—to see how other peoples of the world live and the manner in which they derive happiness out of life.

Love and Kisses,  
Irene

*(continued)*

**Narrator 1:** Mark D. Holcomb was born in Missouri in 1907. He taught school in Missouri for a time and then went to medical school. After graduating from medical school he did his internship at St. James Hospital in Butte. He then set up a medical practice in Whitefish, where he worked until enlisting in the 163rd Infantry Regiment during World War II. He served with his regiment in the Pacific Theater, including in Papua New Guinea and the Philippines.

**Narrator 2:** To his wife, June 20, 1944

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**Dr. Holcomb:** We are still at it hot and heavy, as you may surmise from listening to the radio. Last night while listening to the radio—Tokyo incidentally—an artillery shell hit 30 feet from me. A few got peppered but no serious wounds. A kid from Norborne, Missouri, sitting by me got a few souvenirs. I'll write his family, whom I knew while teaching school there, and assure them he is OK. Didn't send any to the hospital.

Don't think one doesn't hug the ground when they whistle about three feet over your hole. Somehow I always manage to think of you and the kids at such times.

Everybody laughs and jokes at such times, so our morale can't be too bad. At least we can take it as well as dish it out. Bucky Moore and Hanson (Whitefish) were close by and didn't get scratched so Whitefish luck is still holding out. Duff is back with us and doing OK.

I've got the prize dugout of the battalion—about 2 feet deep in solid coral—built up and covered with sand bags. The mold is getting a bit thick—but it is pretty good sleeping. Slept like a baby last night.

*(continued)*

I had been picking up shells (which I hope will ultimately reach you) most of the afternoon. Finished up with about an hour's swim—so had all the muscles pretty well relaxed.

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**Narrator 2:** June 22, 1944, likely in response to a question from his wife...

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**Holcolm:** As for my job, it varies. In one of the four beachheads I helped establish in one month I went in with one company in the first wave. Resistance was light so casualties were light. I did sew up a sucking wound of the chest on the beach—under gun fire—and I was scared. Gave the same man a plasma unit which meant I stayed there for about half an hour.

...I'm in a hole of course. Pigs can be quite a nuisance at such times—also dogs....

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**Narrator 1:** Brothers John and Robert Harrison were raised in Harlowton, Montana. They both joined the U.S. reserves and during World War II served in Europe. John Harrison was stationed on Utah Beach coordinating efforts to identify and bury the Americans lost in the invasions of Normandy and later investigating war atrocities against U.S. servicemen. Robert served in the 101st Airborne Division and its efforts during D-Day and the Battle of the Bulge.

**Narrator 2:** John C. Harrison to his father, on January 16, 1945. From Belgium regarding news of

*(continued)*

younger brother Bob Harrison who is declared Missing in Action ...

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**John Harrison:** This is going to be pretty rough medicine for you old timer, but things being as they are I think we had better face the facts.... Bob is missing in action. There are things giving us hope and there are others that look bad....

Bob's unit was thrown into the defense of Bastogne on 18 Dec. ....they were overrun by 10 tiger tanks and infantry. From that time on the picture gets a bit dim. After 3 days all but 20 of the company got back to Division. Some reported, but this has not been verified, nor am I writing this to mother, they saw Bob get hit. In the confusion, nothing more was seen...

Several things may have happened: 1st Bob is a PW and unwounded.

If so his chances are 70-30 because he was not taken by SS troupes...

2nd He may be wounded and if so his wounds will determine how he makes out. They took the division medics the next day so he could have been loaded after them. If so his chances are 80-20.

3rd If he does not show up as a PW or Killed in Action in the next 90 days it will mean that the Krauts murdered him. I am working through the Red Cross and Military Channels...

I am sorry old timer but keep your chin up for our Irish luck may still be with us. Your loving son John

*(continued)*

**Narrator 1:** After two weeks Robert writes to his father, January 25, 1945, from POW camp, Germany...

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**Bob Harrison:**

Well old man, here I am in a permanent camp or stolog ... so when this letter makes the rounds let all know they can write me here. Waiting the war out is tedious, but not dangerous. Lord though it makes one think of home. Believe the wander lust is gone. Had so much time to evaluate what I want and it all adds up to Montana and my family.

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**Narrator 2:** The family then goes nearly three months without any more news, but in a letter from John C. Harrison to his wife, China, on April 23, 1945, he shares news that Bob's camp may have been liberated...

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**John Harrison:** ...Of course the news of Bob is the most wonderful thing that has happened in a long time. I am now trying to contact the Third Army to find out if he has been liberated...troops overran that area where his flag was located several days ago. If he is liberated he will be sent home just as soon as transportation can be provided so it's quite possible that he is on the way. Of course there is the chance that the Krauts evacuated the camp but the way our troops were traveling the likelihood is slim. While I was in London and Paris I tried to find out all I could about Bob, but...they said he was still Missing in Action!

*(continued)*

**Narrator 1:** Finally John wrote to the family on May 14, 1945, from Germany, conveying news of Bob's death.

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**John Harrison:** Please forgive me for writing this one letter to you all, but I do not want to have to sit down and write to each of you individually. In fact I just do not think that I have it in me to say more than once what I have to say now. By the time you have this letter you will have heard from the War Department. I received the letter from the Adjutant last evening and have been so shocked by the news that I hardly know just what to write. I have asked myself a hundred times, why? Why couldn't he have waited? I am sitting here trying to work it all out for myself, but will try to help you see the picture...

In the first place, it is like him to decide that he had enough pushing around from the Krauts and decide that he was coming home...so when the opportunity presented itself, he just took off. The only thing wrong with the idea was it was too soon.

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**Narrator 2:** Germany was officially liberated by early May of 1945.

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**John:** The following is an extract from the official report of Corporal Granvel Armel who was with Bob on the escape:

**Colonel Armvel:** On the morning of 6 April 1945. Lt. Harrison and I escaped near Burgwindheim

Germany. Around 200 hours, 11 April on the Erbrach-

*(continued)*

Wurzburg Highway we started across a bridge about 13 kilometers west of Erbrach. Just as we reached the center of the bridge a German sentry fired on us. Lt. Harrison, who was leading, was hit and died instantly. ...

**John:** I realize that nothing I say can soften the blow, nor do I know just what to think. After that terrible long wait when we were all holding back our thoughts... and with the wonderful news that Bob was a PW, this seems too cruel a blow. Like all of you it has taken my very breath away and left me numb.

Now I want to talk to you as I know Bob would want me to ...and as I would have wanted if something had happened to me...there is nothing in the world that can change that which has happened and though we will miss him more than any of us can tell, we must go on and live our lives.....

I cannot tell you how much I am worried about each and every one of you. Being so far from home I feel completely helpless in this emergency, and though I would give anything in the world to be with you now, that is impossible. If anything should happen to any of you, if any one of you should be sick from worry ...it would be just about more than I could take. Right now I need the strength and all the good news that you can give me from home. Ours is a family strong in love for one another and that strength is going to help us over this rough spot. ...

I have hopes that in the not too distant future we can be together again. A few years ago the country needed me more than even my family, but now after 4 ½ years in the service I feel that I have done my job. I promise that  
(continued)

if possible I will come home. In the mean time you must carry on and wait for what happens next.

My love and every thought is with you ...

Your loving son,

John

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**Narrator 1:** Butte native John Pat Blinn served 34 months Marine Corps in World War II, including campaigns at Tarawa, Saipan, Guam, and Iwo Jima. The letter is one the he wrote while in Iwo Jima, where he served with the 5th Marine Amphibians Corps.

**Narrator 2:** March 14, 1945, Iwo Jima

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**John Pat Blinn:**

Hello Darling,

I'm writing on the edge of my foxhole as I write this—the guns a pounding away and to top it all off—I can't think of a darned thing to say.

Pardon me while I light my pipe.

Betsy—I feel like a heel. You've been so swell about writing and I've been so negligent. I haven't any excuse for not writing—that's what baffles me. Every time I get a blank piece of paper in front of me—my mind gets just as blank. That psychiatry course you are taking will come in darned handy when we finally get together. Things are tough all over even on Iwo Jima.

Golly—another blank sheet. Gee Snooks—thanks a lot for those snaps. You look just as sweet as you did two

*(continued)*

years ago. Keep 'em coming—they're great for my morale. When the weather gets warmer—how about some in a bathing suit?

Say—when you and D.J. go to Butte—drop up and see my Mums. She'd be glad to see you.

This darn pen has so much sand in it—the darned thing clogs up every 5 letters or so.

Well Betsey—I'm going to change to pencil, this pen is driving me crazy.

Much better—at least I think so. The dust and the sand on this rock is terrific. If we stay here much longer I'll go sand sappy—the same thing as jungle jolly—only we no jungle.

Golly it's been a long time since we've seen each other. Just another 18 or 20 months and then I'll be back for thirty days. Thirty short days —isn't that wonderful. After that I'll more than likely be right out here again.

Well Snooks—I'm going to secure this—I've got some work to do. Take care of yourself darling and keep on writing.

All of my Love,  
Pat

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**Narrator 2:** Private First Class Pat Blinn had a hard time readjusting to civilian life. He reenlisted April 1950 and was killed in action with the 5th Regiment of the 1st Marine Division in the fighting against North Korean Armies in the Changin Reservoir Area on December 2, 1950. Unfortunately, his remains are still missing.

*(continued)*

# Group 4: Korean War (1950–1953), Vietnam War (1961–1973), and Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003–2011)

**Roles** (these may be combined):

Narrator 1

Narrator 2

John MacDonald

Gerald Simpson

Cory Swanson

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**Narrator 1:** This letter from the Korean War era was written by Major John W. MacDonald. John was born in 1928 in the Philippines where his parents were missionaries. He and his family experienced war early in life when the Japanese invaded their island home in December 1941, beginning American involvement in World War II. He and his family suffered internment during the war. After the war, John graduated from Missoula County High School, attended the University of Montana, and then enlisted in the U.S. Air Force for pilot training. He flew propaganda and transport missions during the Korean War. His letters from Korea reveal that he saw his service in the war not as a duty per se but more as a good job that paid a decent salary for a young man. More than anything it allowed him to fly planes—something he obviously loved. Here’s one of his letters written to his brother, Bob MacDonald, on May 29, 1952.

*(continued)*

**John MacDonald:**

Dear Bob,

If my writing is loused up on this letter it's because the plane is bouncing all over the sky. There's a hellacious wind blowing and it makes all sorts of turbulence over the mountains here. It would be a lot smoother up at 9 or 10 thousand, but I'd have a lot stronger headwind up there, too. So I'll stay low till I come to the central range of mountains, then climb on top of the clouds + turbulence. I'm on my second trip to Seoul from Pusan today and will come back again to Pusan before I'm thru today.

Your letter + picture (damn, but it's rough as a cob!) got to me this morning. That's a pretty good picture. George looks like he's getting fat—he'll have a double chin pretty soon if he doesn't watch out. From his infrequent letters I gather that he's fairly happy. (To hell with these bumps— I'm going up on top. Back later!) I'm now at 8500' and it's still rough, but not too bad so I'll probably stay here.

So you're getting out in October—what then? (Just caught an up-draft up to 10,500—smooth here so will stay.) You have never mentioned what you plan to do after you get discharged. I don't imagine you feel like teaching any more—you didn't seem to like it much. Photography? Writing? Or can't you decide—like me? Are you going back to Missoula to live—you mentioned going "home" in October. Any plans for marriage? If I'm getting nosey, just say so. I'd like to get married, but I don't know to who. I'm afraid I'll be

*(continued)*

easy pickings for some gal. Oh well, such is life. Going to quit now + write a note to George.

See you (this fall?)

John

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**Narrator 1:** John MacDonald stayed in the Air Force into the 1960s and served in Japan during the Vietnam War. He retired from the Air Force with 20 years' of service. He then taught at Sentinel High School in Missoula before retiring to Stevensville.

**Narrator 2:** The next letter is not a letter at all. It is a diary from the Vietnam War. But perhaps we should think of it as a soldier's letter to himself, and to future generations.

**Narrator 1:** Gerald Simpson was born in 1943 at the height of World War II. His father, Orvil, worked for the Peavy Company Flour Mills in Billings. At age 20, in 1963, Jerry joined the United States Marine Corps as a cook. As part of the first major U.S. military build-up in Vietnam, the 3rd Marine Division, including Jerry Simpson, was deployed to Da Nang in the summer of 1965.

**Narrator 2:** Jerry writes in his first entry on May 5, 1965, the day they embarked from San Diego:

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**Gerald Simpson:** We are supposed to go to Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and operate out of Okinawa. Some feel we may end up in So. Vietnam. God only knows what lies ahead.

*(continued)*

**Narrator 2:** Jerry often mentions his girlfriend, Rita, back home in Billings. On May 24, 1965, he writes,

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**Gerald Simpson:** Rita wrote me a Dear John last night. She feels she would rather have a career than marriage. She asked me to go see her next June before I become involved. The trouble is I am involved. Why did...

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**Narrator 2:** And then he doesn't write any more that day. In his next entry is not until June 29.

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**Gerald Simpson:** We finally mounted out for Vietnam. I don't really care. I quit caring last month. Some of us won't be coming back. We're supposed to be back in Okinawa in September.

**Gerald Simpson:**

July 7, 1965:

Arrived in Da-Nang So. Vietnam. No resistance; the temperature is 120 degrees. We are now about 3 miles from the air strip. Man, am I shook, didn't think I would be.

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**Narrator 2:** On September 1, 1965, when he had expected to return to Okinawa, Jerry simply states:

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**Gerald Simpson:** Well, we're still here, and we are to be here for a long while.

*(continued)*

Oct. 17, 1965:

Rita wrote and said she loves me. She said forever isn't too long. Man, I am the luckiest and happiest guy alive. My life now has a purpose and meaning to it. I love her so very much. I hope and pray I never let her down and can make her happy.

Feb. 21, 1966:

I have been in a very low frame of mind for the past 24 hours. As yesterday in a letter from Rita, she told me of a date with some other guy. I was hurt, angry, and jealous. Though the hurt and jealousy still remain, the anger has cooled, as I do love her. She told me about it, and that counts for something. I believe she loves me. It will take more than one little rough spot to break us up. This can only serve to strengthen our love. Sweep tomorrow.

Feb. 27, 1966:

Gunnery Sgt. Gardner told me I am going to Hill 22 tomorrow. Lima Company is on the hill. I can't help but feel a little shook as over there is where the war is. Yet that's why I am being paid combat pay. . . Didn't hear from Rita today, of course I would like to every day. As I looked at her picture she was the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. I wanted her to step out from the picture into my arms. I love her so much and need her.

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**Narrator 2:** On March 6, 1966, Jerry reflects:

*(continued)*

**Gerald Simpson:** Since being overseas I have seen how wasteful Americans are when it comes to eating. We have had it so good. About 11 or 11:30 P.M. caught two V.C. probing the lines. Lance Corporal Meyer died. Damn V.C. Got 20 V.C. for him. Wasn't worth his life.

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**Narrator 2:** Ten days later:

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**Gerald Simpson:** This place is beginning to really get me down. Home seems a million miles away, and like I'll never get there.

Today I feel really let down. The U.S. Army sent out a 3 man pacification team to talk to the villagers around here. They have talked to these people for over a year and are no better off than before.

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**Narrator 2:** But he ends that day's entry by writing:

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**Gerald Simpson:** Heard from Rita today, and I wish I could be with her. The love I feel for her could never be the same for any other woman.

June 27, 1966:

Today will be my last entry in this diary after 1 year, 1 month & 12 days of writing. I wish I had been more diligent about this thing. We have left Salt Lake City & Jackson Hole & are 15 minutes from home. This last year has left its mark on 598 of us from 2nd Battalion,

*(continued)*

9th Marine Regiment. That is all that made it home. I was lucky. They better think twice before trying to send me back over. I hate that damn hole and sure as hell am not going back. They will get over it. I will never forget such people as Lance Corporal Larry Chadwick, P.F.C. Howard Lovan, Cpl. Harold Raines, P.F.C. Tom Leed, 1st Lt. Richard Williams (a maurader) & 1st Lt. Jim Palmer. These are men who were basterds by Marine Corps standards, because they dislike the Corps, but got the job done. Howard was the only casualty having received 2nd & 3rd degree burns last Sept. Will look him up when I return to the West Coast. He was also the youngest, just turned 18.

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There is nothing more to say. God it's grand to be back.

**Narrator 2:** Jerry returned to Billings, where he married Rita. Together they had two children and eventually moved to California.

**Narrator 1:** This last excerpt is from an email, rather than a letter, a testament to changing technology. Captain Cory Swanson, of Helena, who served in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom, sent the email to the Montana National Guard Historian on May 3, 2005.

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**Narrator 2:** Subject: Eye of the Storm

**Cory Swanson:** Oddly, we have been through so many crises already that now we all act coolly, quickly and efficiently. I have been able to channel my worry and intensity into a calm delivery, because I have found everyone around me responds and works better when I

*(continued)*

do. It is like being in the eye of the storm, knowing all is swirling around you.

Three nights ago, the storm hit us. An IED detonation killed a soldier and wounded four others in the blink of an eye. Immediately after a massive storm (literally) hit us and the patrols going out to help couldn't even see. We were calm, efficient, tough and professional. But we still had a dead soldier we couldn't bring back.

...The young staff Sergeant who led that patrol was extraordinary, beyond what is expected of soldier. When we were done that night, he could no longer hold back the tears, and he broke down in the safety of the Battalion Aid Station among his teammates....

We have had many days like that where I felt myself being taken to the edge and stretched ... and strengthened in a way only blood and fire can do. Unfortunately, we will probably have many more. When I first came here I saw and wrote of all the good in Iraq. It is still teeming with promise, pregnant with potential.... But I don't think many of us will leave our hearts behind here. We pour our hearts out... for each other, and by the grace of god we will all return safely home.