



# LETTERS FROM THE PACIFIC

The World War II Correspondence of Pfc. Fred I. Rish

## Learning Activity 1. War Letters as Historical Sources and Evidence



Letter from the Pacific, 1944-1945 presents a microhistory of World War II through the lens of a single soldier for a 1 ½ year period. Although microhistories have a small unit of analysis, they may help us reflect on broader historical questions. In this introductory activity, students read a sample of the letters collection and evaluate the potential usefulness and limitations of the letters as sources of historical evidence.

**Compelling Question:** How useful are war letters as historical sources?

### Learning Standards

- D2.His.10.9-12. Detect possible limitations in various kinds of historical evidence and differing secondary interpretations.
- D2.His.11.9-12. Critique the usefulness of historical sources for a specific historical inquiry based on their maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose.
- D2.His.12.9-12. Use questions generated about multiple historical sources to pursue further inquiry and investigate additional sources.
- D3.2.9-12. Evaluate the credibility of a source by examining how experts value the source.

(College, Career, and Civic Life Framework)

## Readings

Read the following letters to gain an overall sense of the letters collection:

**5 August 1944**

Saturday Night

August 5, 1944

Camp Fannin, Tex

Dear Mom:

I got some time now, so I better write you a note. I sure did get a lot of mail from you lately — thanks. I haven't received any boxes from you yet but I guess I will soon. I really think you are sending me too much. Such treatment will spoil me when I get overseas and have to live on Army grub alone. The food here is not so hot — beans, and peas and black eye peas, and everything is swimming in grease. Lots of us don't even bother going to chow sometimes. Once in a while they have a good meal. But they don't know how to cook food down here. As for sleep it is our toughest problem. Some days we work 20 hours — sleep 3 hours. Then be ready for another day. But remember this is Basic Training, and the idea is to see how much the men can really take. After basic is over we will get a regular working day — shorter too. Everything we do now is done under battle conditions or worse, to toughen us up. The Colonel said today it is better to lose 10 men right here than 100 over there and he really meant it.

I think you better soon ease up on some of that work up there. There is no sense in killing yourself. Please forgive me for not sending you a birthday card. I spent the night of your birthday in an almost jungle woods and never did get to buy you one. But I did think of you. In this place a man's mind does not seem to function correctly at all times, sometimes mine wanders back home where I know it shouldn't. The 17th I was out on a simulated combat patrol, and couldn't seem to concentrate at all. After a man goes so long without rest, his body just seems to be far away. Well tomorrow I am going to rest.

I sent Freda a little booklet showing some of the things I am learning. You can ask her to see it. I could only get one mom.

How is your financial condition these days? I hope you are doing well. Say hello to Pop + George. Tell them to behave.

Love from

Your Son

Fred

15 December 1944

Letter No 1

Friday A.M.

Dec 15, 1944

Somewhere at Sea

Dearest Mother:

I know that by the time you get this letter Xmas will be over, so I'll say "Happy New Year." I am still riding the same ship. We have had an uneventful trip so far. I am getting a little tired of seeing just sky and ocean. Time goes very slowly. However, I didn't get sea-sick and I do like ocean travel — strange as it may seem.

I spend most of my time reading magazines and staring at the ocean. So far the only fish I seen were small flying fish, which leap up out of the water. At night we generally get together on the deck and sing, or talk about what we have left behind us. As for the future, we are still in the dark. We get three meals a day and the food is good, considering everything. I am getting fat anyway.

I would like to tell all the details of the trip, but we are not allowed, so I just have to remember and tell you about it some time.

After I arrive and get a new address I will write and tell you what I would like for your to send me — and I can think of lots of things right now. However, there are some regulations on this and I don't know them yet. Food is going to be a problem in this climate.

I hope everybody is well, and do take it a little easy. Say hello to George + Pop. Hope they took care of my hunting up there this year.

Love

Fred

21 February 1945

Letter No. 1

Wednesday

Feb. 21, 1945

Dear Mom:

I have a little time this morning, so I'll try to write. I wrote a short letter to you and one to Freda yesterday. Its a beautiful day here -- very hot in the day -- cool at night. It's a much nicer country than New Guinea. There are people here too.

I am enclosing one dollar that we used in the [ ] and some Jap money. Freda should have coins for you too -- I hope! Wish I could send you some of our coconuts, sure is lots of them here. But alas! I don't care much for them nor their milk. Not much else I can tell you. I sure would like to get some mail. I am fine — hope you are too.

Love

Fred

15 March 1945

Pvt. F. Rish 33940161  
C.K. 169th Infantry  
A.P.O. 43 c/o Postmaster  
San Francisco, Calif.

Mrs. Bessie Rish  
R.D. 3. Box 310  
Johnstown, Penna.

March 15, 1945

Dear Mom:

Yes, I am still alive; just too busy fighting to write any sooner. I have lived through Hell these past couple weeks, but I haven't had a bullet touch my skin yet. I've had at least a hundred go through my clothes and equipment! I guess I am just plain lucky. If you think you have mountains back there, you ought to see where the Japs are dug in! This is the hardest fighting country you can imagine.

I don't know when I will get a chance to write again, so please be patient. I still haven't gotten any mail, so I don't know what to write. It's been 2 months since I got a letter from Freda.

I hope you are well and happy. Say hello to Pop and all the rest. And thanks for the prayer -- I need it.

Your Son

Fred

20 May 1945

Sunday

May 20, 1945

Dear Mom:

Another week has gone by, and that means I am a week closer to home. That's the way I count my time over-seas. In just three days Leonard will be one year old. In some ways it seems like 10 years to me; and in other ways seems like only a few weeks! Yes, time flies.

It's a beautiful morning here. The days are still very hot, and we are starting to get our rain. I'll be glad when I get out of the tropics.

All this bunk about the "South Sea Islands" etc. will never fool me again. I haven't seen Dorothy Lamour in her sarong. That's the movies for you -- just propaganda!

I am feeling fine, and have gained a little weight. Yesterday I had a front tooth fixed up that was broken. Guess I'll have to get all false teeth one of these days! False teeth, bald head, wow! am I getting old! And it won't be long until I have another birthday. I haven't had any mail for about 20 days, so I really can't write a letter. I am anxious to get some of your letters and see how everything is going. I feel like murdering my mail clerk! He had better have a good excuse. I have been wondering about Maude -- how is everything down there? Is Lint going to move? I am always curious about what is going on back there.

Well, I hope you are still stopping in at 636 once in a while. Any news, views, or comments are welcome. Your letters are good on that.

If you get any pictures this summer, this will be a good place to send them. Don't forget a good picture of you and Dad would be most welcome. We don't get any younger.

Last night I saw the movie "Wilson". What a farce the whole world war number one was. It seemed like the wrong time to show that kind of a picture. But we are glad to see most any kind of a picture. Well, that's about all for today. Take care of yourselves.

Love,

Fred

## Questions

1. What was the purpose of the letters? Were they intended to be used as historical evidence? How does the purpose of the letters affect their usefulness in historical research?
2. Why would historians consider the letters to be credible sources about soldier experiences during World War II in the Pacific?
3. What are the limits of this collection as a source of historical evidence? What type of information is left out of the letters? What limitations are evident in the letters from 15 December 1944 and 21 February 1945?
4. Why would historians be reluctant to use this collection to gain a full and accurate understanding of World War II in the Pacific?
5. How could a historian corroborate some of the information presented in the letters?