



Dear

John

Love and Loyalty  
in Wartime America

SUSAN L. CARRUTHERS



## DEAR JOHN

Are “Dear John” letters lethal weapons in the hands of men at war? Many US officers, servicemen, veterans, and civilians would say yes. Drawing on personal letters, oral histories, and psychiatric reports, as well as popular music and movies, Susan L. Carruthers shows how the armed forces and civilian society have attempted to weaponize romantic love in pursuit of martial ends, from World War II to today. Yet efforts to discipline feeling have frequently failed. And women have often borne the blame. This sweeping history of emotional life in wartime explores the interplay between letter-writing and storytelling, breakups and breakdowns, and between imploded intimacy and boosted camaraderie. Incorporating vivid personal experiences in lively and engaging prose – variously tragic, comic, and everything in between – this compelling study will change the way we think about wartime relationships.

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*For Joseph Romano, Again*





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## INTRODUCTION

### Picking Up the Pieces

**I**N SEPTEMBER 2011, gay, lesbian, and bisexual Americans were permitted to serve openly in the US armed forces for the first time. A few months earlier, President Barack Obama had terminated the policy in place since 1994, whereby “homosexuals” could serve in the military, but only if they kept their sexual orientation hidden. For their part, commanders were not meant to enquire into servicemen’s and service-women’s sexual identities. Nevertheless, a policy initially dubbed “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Pursue” quickly became truncated to “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT) in everyday usage. This abbreviation reflected the reality that some commanding officers remained in covert pursuit of closeted gay personnel. An estimated 13,000 men and women were discharged from the military in the DADT era as a result of their sexuality – or presumptions about it.<sup>1</sup>

*The Onion* greeted the demise of DADT with a droll satirical story, its stock in trade, headlined: “First-Ever Gay ‘Dear John’ Letters Begin Reaching U.S. Troops Overseas.” With a dateline of Bagram, Afghanistan, the spoof report noted the arrival of “hundreds of Dear John letters” addressed to “newly outed troops overseas this week, notifying soldiers for the first time ever that their same-sex partners back home were leaving them and starting a new life with someone else.” The story quoted a fictitious first lieutenant, delightedly announcing: “This is what we’ve waited so long for . . . My boyfriend wrote that he didn’t love me anymore, that he wasn’t sure he ever really had, and that he never wanted

to see me again. Those are words earlier generations of gay soldiers never had the opportunity to read.” *The Onion* relished the perversity of servicemen and women hailing heartbreak as a civil rights victory. “Now all troops, regardless of their sexual orientation, are free to have their entire lives ripped out from underneath them in a single short note,” hurrahed an imaginary gay rights advocate. This humorous take on the repeal of DADT underscored the fact that, hitherto, queer service personnel could share neither the ecstasy of new love nor the agony of lost love with their comrades at arms.<sup>2</sup>

*The Onion* offered a wry critique of homophobia in the military. By using the breakup note as its vehicle, the paper also attested the Dear John’s status as a rite of passage – as predictable a feature of military life as the “high and tight” buzzcut, Kitchen Patrol drudgery, and drill instructors’ profanity. *The Onion* invoked several well-worn tropes. It stressed the callous brevity of breakup notes, with their twin revelations that the sender wasn’t only ending things with the recipient but beginning a *new* romance – rejection and betrayal rolled into one. And the story highlighted the military’s concern over the impact of imploded intimacy on operational efficiency. *The Onion* included a spurious soundbite from Senator John McCain. A well-known opponent of DADT’s repeal, McCain was quoted warning against the havoc “gay Dear John letters” would wreak in the field: “Allowing so many utterly lonely, dejected, and newly single troops to serve on the front lines would only impair our combat capabilities and place our nation at risk.”<sup>3</sup>

To illustrate its story, *The Onion* used a photograph of a serviceman crouched in the desert, helmeted head bent disconsolately over a letter. Leaving aside this soldier’s camouflage jacket – sleeveless to better display his impressively sculpted biceps – the image could’ve been drawn from any US war since GIs first coined the term “Dear John” during World War II. The precise origins of the phrase are shrouded in obscurity. Dictionaries of slang and standard American English supply an array of possible derivations and early exemplars. Some propose the coinage took its inspiration from a popular radio serial, *The Irene Rich Show*, broadcast nationally from 1933 for a decade. This anthology of mini-dramas used the epistolary form as its hook, each episode beginning as



0.1. Irene Rich greets a canine fan of her “Dear John” radio show at CBS KNX radio studios, Columbia Square, Hollywood, May 1, 1942. (Courtesy of CBS via Getty Images.)

though Rich were reading aloud a letter she’d penned. (Hence the show’s alternative name, *Dear John*.) But though the letters began with this salutation, they weren’t what would soon become known as Dear Johns.<sup>4</sup>

As a synonym for a breakup note sent by a woman to a man in uniform, the Dear John letter made its debut in a major national newspaper in October 1943. Milton Bracker, at twenty-four already a seasoned correspondent stationed in North Africa, wired a story back for publication in the *New York Times Magazine*. His feature ran under the didactic headline: “What to Write the Soldier Overseas.” “Separation,” Bracker observed, was the “one most dominant war factor in the lives of most people these days.” Regrettably, however, absence wasn’t making all hearts grow fonder. Wherever “dour dogfaces” – from “Maine, Carolina, Utah and Texas” – found themselves in “places as unimaginable as Algiers,” “Dear John clubs” were springing up. These, the reporter explained, were mutual consolation societies formed by

officers and enlisted men who'd received letters from home "running something like this:

'Dear John: I don't know quite how to begin but I just want to say that Joe Doakes came to town on furlough the other night and he looked very handsome in his uniform, so when he asked me for a date –'"<sup>5</sup>

*Yank*, the Army weekly, had reported on "Brush-Off Clubs" months earlier, in January 1943, offering illustrative examples of these letters without yet calling them Dear Johns.<sup>6</sup> Many press stories in the same vein followed, dotting the pages of both civilian and military newspapers over the course of this war and beyond. Excerpts from archetypal specimens of this newly named genre were a common feature of reportage. According to journalists, women composed brush-off notes in a variety of registers, ranging from the naively clueless to the calculatedly cruel, but invariably beholden to cliché. When Howard Whitman explained the Dear John to readers of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* in May 1944, he had his imaginary female writer string hackneyed phrases together: "Dear John – This is very hard to tell you, but I know you'll understand. I hope we'll always remain friends, but it's only fair to tell you that I've become engaged to somebody else."<sup>7</sup> Formulaic words, Whitman implied, would do little to soften the blow. Trite sentiments might even exacerbate the pain caused by a revelation that was both belated and perfunctory.

War correspondents who brought these letters to civilians' attention were keen to preach a particular sermon about mail and morale, love and loyalty. Hyperbole was the order of the day. "It is doubtful if the Nazis will ever hurt them as much," Whitman opined, referring to the emotional wounds inflicted by women who sent soldiers Dear Johns. This was quite a claim under the circumstances. Neither the loss of limbs, sight, hearing, sanity, nor death itself – which the German Wehrmacht inflicted on millions of Allied personnel – caused as much damage as a letter from a wife or girlfriend terminating a romantic relationship. So Whitman and others insisted. But, to these commentators, it was precisely the circumstance of being at war that made rejection more tormenting – and more intolerable – than in civilian life. Since many contemporaries agreed that a broken heart was the most catastrophic injury a soldier might incur, "jilted GIs" garnered widespread sympathy, including from their COs. While the brass still tended to regard "nervousness" in combat as an



unacceptable manifestation of weakness, officers often extended a pass to servicemen who responded to romantic loss with tears, depression, rage, or violence.<sup>8</sup>

Among other things, a Dear John issued servicemen a rare license to emote. That stricken soldiers would act out, and be justified in doing so, was a widely accepted nostrum in civilian circles too. Here's Mary Haworth, an advice columnist, indignantly addressing her readership in the *Washington Post* in July 1944:

a bolt of bad news that strikes directly at their male ego – telling that some other man has scored with the little woman in their absence – can lay them out flat, figuratively speaking; and make them a fit candidate for hospitalization. This is no reflection on their manhood, either. It illustrates, rather, their civilized need of special spiritual nurture while breasting the demoniac fury of modern warfare.<sup>9</sup>

Like Haworth, many female opinion leaders condoned men's emotional disintegration under the duress of a Dear John. Eager to shore up vulnerable male egos, they joined the chorus condemning women who severed intimate ties with servicemen as traitors – worse than Axis enemies because American women were (or *ought* to be) on the same side.<sup>10</sup>

In World War II's gendered division of labor, it fell to women not only to wait but to *write*. Men battling Axis forces were fighting “for home” – as innumerable propaganda posters, movies, and other patriotic prompts reminded them. Women may have symbolized the home front, but their role was neither passive nor mute. The wartime state, along with legions of self-appointed adjutants, regularly reminded women that to “keep the home fires burning,” they had to stoke the coals of romance with regular loving letters to men in uniform.<sup>11</sup>

For their part, many soldiers endowed mail with magical properties. Facing the prospect of life-altering injury or death, men readily sacralized objects they believed might serve as amulets against harm. Some took this faith in mail's protective power so literally that they pocketed letters next to their hearts, as though note-paper – or the loving sentiments committed to the page – could deflect bullets.<sup>12</sup> But the magic could also work in reverse, or so some soldiers feared. For if

loving letters could ward off danger, mightn't unloving words invite it? Pulitzer-winning poet W. D. Snodgrass recalls harboring these suspicions as a Navy typist during World War II: "Mail call was the best, or worst, moment of each day; you approached carefully any man whose name had not been called. Only a 'Dear John' letter was worse – we felt, mawkishly no doubt, that with no one to come back to, a man was less likely to come back."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Vietnam veteran Michael McQuiston remembers his platoon sergeant's reluctance to let him go out into the field after he'd received a Dear John: "Their rule was that they didn't do that. It was bad luck." (McQuiston pestered his way into a mission only to sustain an injury, thereby confirming the wisdom of superstitious belief.)<sup>14</sup>

From Homer's *The Odyssey* onwards, soldiers have been haunted by – and taunted themselves with – the specter of female infidelity, associating disloyalty with fatality. Penelope, whose constancy Odysseus put to the test by disguising himself as a beggar when he returned home after long years away at war, ultimately demonstrated her steadfastness to her husband's satisfaction. By the time of his return, she had already fought off more than 100 suitors with her cunningly unraveled and rewoven yarn, except in an alternative version of the legend which has Penelope sleeping with them all.<sup>15</sup> That this revisionist myth-maker preferred not to copy Homer's portrait of Penelope – a model of connubial chasteness – hints at a larger phenomenon. Soldiers' and veterans' recollections have tended to accentuate the unfaithful few, not the devotedly loyal many. Dear John stories exemplify this trend, commonly treating as "universal" an experience that, though not unusual, was far from inevitable.

American men in uniform began to broadcast tales of being "given the air" by mail long before GIs conjured the term "Dear John" in World War II. Some of these notes, or perhaps apocryphal versions of them, swiftly found their way into public circulation. One Civil War specimen, an uncanny harbinger of things to come, appeared in September 1863, in Point Lookout, Maryland. The *Hammond Gazette*, a hospital newspaper, excerpted a letter that had apparently just been received by a rebel soldier, "Henneri," then recovering on the ward: "Kind Sir – I received your letter – glad to hear from you. We have been corresponding for some time together. Now we will have to quit our corresponding to each other,

as I have placed my affections on one I wasn't dreaming of, and soon will be joined in wedlock."<sup>16</sup> Civil War scholars have identified several Dear John letters (anachronistically so-called) sent to both Confederate and Union soldiers.<sup>17</sup>

What's often billed as the "most famous" Dear John in history was sent to another hospitalized invalid shortly after the end of World War I, a quarter century before the phrase was coined.<sup>18</sup> In March 1919, nurse Agnes von Kurowsky wrote to tell "Ernie, dear boy," that their dalliance during his recuperation in a Milan hospital was over. For her, it had been an immature and platonic infatuation: "Now, after a couple of months away from you, I know that I am still very fond of you, but, it is more as a mother than as a sweetheart." Agnes's opening salvo anticipated that her words would "hurt," but she expected they wouldn't harm the recipient "permanently."<sup>19</sup> Literary scholars have debated the acuity of her prediction ever since. Some insist that Ernest Hemingway, the "dear boy" in question, never did recover from this blow to his adolescent ego. ("Ernie" was nineteen at the time; "Aggie" a venerable twenty-six.) Hemingway suffered bouts of severe depression throughout his life, committing suicide in 1961. He did, however, exact his revenge early on. In one of Hemingway's first pieces of published fiction, "A Very Short Story" (1924), a nurse jilts the narrator, whom she'd pledged to marry, sending him a note that theirs had been merely a "boy and girl affair." She is in love with a major and expects to marry him. But this union does not come to pass. The nurse is betrayed by the major on his return to Chicago, and the story ends with his contracting gonorrhea "from a sales girl in a loop department store while riding in a taxicab through Lincoln Park."<sup>20</sup>

If Dear Johns existed *avant la lettre*, why weren't they recognized as a distinct genre and given a name until World War II? This book doesn't provide a definitive answer to that question. Since the term emerged from oral tradition not bureaucratic decision, no official memorandum filed in an archive can tell us precisely who invented the term, when, and why. Enlisted men did this work unbidden. We might speculate, though, that the Dear John's crystallization resulted from several factors that set World War II apart from previous conflicts.

This globe-spanning cataclysm required mobilization on an epic scale. All told, about 16 million American men served in uniform, along with nearly 400,000 women in the auxiliary services. Of this total, around 73 percent were shipped overseas. Although the average period of service abroad was sixteen months, many spent far longer away from home, including months as occupation troops after the war ended.<sup>21</sup> With hindsight, knowing the dates of VE Day and VJ Day, we tend to forget just how much uncertainty Americans in uniform and their loved ones lived with during a war that stretched on and on across multiple fronts. Even in early 1945, as the Third Reich crumbled, many War Department planners expected that Japan mightn't be beaten into "unconditional surrender" until 1947. Separation, as Milton Bracker noted, was indeed the most formidable aspect of wartime life. Not knowing when – or, yet more achingly, whether – a lover, husband, or father would return home severely tested emotional ties between "here" and "there."

Unlike in World War I, when fewer Americans served overseas for a shorter period, millions of married men were mustered into the ranks in the 1940s. Marriage, already corroded by the increasing incidence of divorce, became yet more precarious.<sup>22</sup> Despite, or perhaps because of, the greater number of husbands in uniform, romantic love achieved pre-eminence as a "sinew of war" in this conflict. "Mother love" had been the Great War's most valorized bond between the home front and men at war. "The emphasis somehow has been on the mothers, or sometimes the wives the youths were leaving," sighed a writer in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in September 1917. "Nobody has been talking about the sweethearts, although everybody must have known that draft age and enlisting age was also lover age."<sup>23</sup> No one could convincingly have made the same complaint in the 1940s. In the sentimental culture of World War II, intimacy between men and women – whether between husbands and wives, or young men and their girlfriends or fiancées – sidelined maternal affection.<sup>24</sup> With more emotionally attached men sent off to war, the probability that some relationships would not survive separation exponentially increased, as distance, danger, uncertainty, and unreliable lines of communication strained even the strongest connections. The Dear John condensed – and confirmed – pervasive fears that love mightn't conquer all.

## INTRODUCTION

If it's impossible to pinpoint categorically why the Dear John came into existence when it did, it has undoubtedly remained a fixture of American war culture ever since. Five years after World War II ended, the younger siblings of the greatest generation – along with some veterans – were drafted to fight another war, this time in Korea. The armistice that ended what the Truman and Eisenhower administrations had dubbed a “police action,” signed in July 1953, coincided with the Dear John's inaugural etching onto vinyl, courtesy of Jean Shepard and Ferlin Husky's hit, “A Dear John Letter.” In the duet, Shepard's character plaintively writes to her former beau, John, serving far away in Korea, to break the difficult news that she no longer loves him:

Dear John oh how I hate to write  
Dear John I must let you know tonight  
That my love for you has died away like grass upon the lawn

And tonight I wed another dear John

As if this weren't bad enough, it's his brother, Don, she plans to marry – and Don wants John to return her photograph! The record soon topped the Billboard country charts, making nineteen-year-old Shepard the youngest country musician to score a number one hit, and remained on the charts for twenty-three weeks. The song, along with the coinage it helped popularize, became a fixture of the Country music canon, recorded many times over by various artists as a timeless anthem for doomed love. In 1990, the song was still believed so emotive that some local radio stations banned it from the airwaves, fearful that it might cause too much dejection among men in uniform bound for the Persian Gulf.<sup>25</sup>

America's war in Vietnam elevated the profile of Dear John letters yet higher, while further lowering the reputation of women who wrote them. In 1969, prominent forensic psychiatrist Dr. Emanuel Tanay (an expert witness at Jack Ruby's trial) announced that more wives and girlfriends were sending these notes to men in uniform than in any previous conflict.<sup>26</sup> The fact that he couldn't substantiate this claim didn't stop many soldiers and veterans from repeating an anecdotal assertion, then and thereafter. As a statement about the faithlessness of women at home,

it evidently rang true, whether empirically verifiable or not. “Everybody gets a ‘Dear John’ letter at some point,” Vietnam veteran Tom Nawrocki recalls in the continuous present tense of war memory. The 48th Army Postal Unit even named itself the “Dear John Express,” embroidering this legend onto its patches.<sup>27</sup> Of course, nearly three million American men who served in Vietnam were *not* all jettisoned or betrayed by their wives or girlfriends. But to some more jaundiced observers, Dear John letters seemed of a piece with other forms of treachery on the home front, like antiwar protestors who spat at returning veterans – a widely recounted experience that has been challenged as a myth.<sup>28</sup>

The Dear John letter imparts a bitter tang to many poems, plays, novels, and memoirs Vietnam veterans wrote on return to “The World,” as well as innumerable books written about grunts. Hollywood’s dramatizations of the Vietnam war also commonly accord the Dear John a bit-part, if not a starring role. Movies such as *Hamburger Hill* (1987), *Platoon* (1986), and *Love and War* (1987) tapped into a longer tradition founded by celebrated veteran-novelists of World War II, like Norman Mailer, Leon Uris, and James Jones. Their semi-autobiographical blockbusters and the movies subsequently based on them – *The Naked and the Dead* (1948/1958), *Battle Cry* (1953/1955), and *The Thin Red Line* (1962/1998) – all feature soldiers or marines receiving Dear John letters while serving overseas.<sup>29</sup>

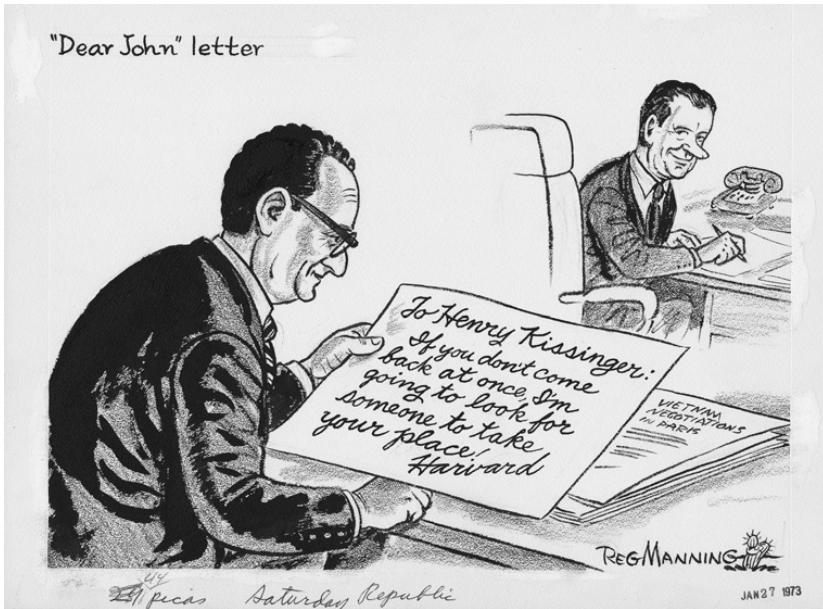
The Dear John tradition has been kept alive over subsequent decades. Participation in the Persian Gulf War (1990–1991) inspired Marine Corps veteran Anthony Swofford’s *Jarhead* (2003), which, like Sam Mendes’s screen adaptation, made considerable play with female infidelity and the technologically inventive Dear Johns that alerted marines to their cuckolding.<sup>30</sup> More recently, the “forever wars” – America’s military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, launched in the wake of 9/11 – have ushered the Dear John into the twenty-first century. Nicholas Sparks’s novel and Lasse Hallström’s lachrymose movie, *Dear John* (2010), introduced this expression to a new generation of “born digital” Americans, ensuring it wouldn’t become as unfamiliar as the practice of letter-writing itself.<sup>31</sup>

Over the decades since World War II, a lexical counterpart to mission creep – the unplanned expansion of an operation’s objectives – has been

## INTRODUCTION

evident. Locution creep has seen the Dear John proliferate in non-military settings, just as fresh meanings for the term have mushroomed. By the 1960s, if not before, a note terminating employment might, with dark humor, be referred to as a Dear John. In January 1973, cartoonist Reg Manning imagined Henry Kissinger being sent a pre-emptive Dear John by the President of Harvard, warning the National Security Adviser not to let multiple rounds of peace talks with the Vietnamese detain him from his academic duties too long. Young missionaries, sent out into the world to proselytize on behalf of the Church of the Latter Day Saints, have also found the Dear John to be a regrettably common rite of passage. LDS channels on YouTube offer teenage Mormons advice on how to cope with this seemingly unavoidable accompaniment to their mission.<sup>32</sup> Giving the phrase a different twist altogether, anti-prostitution campaigners, operating in many US towns and cities in the early 2000s, accosted the consumers of commercial sex with the sardonic salutation, “Dear John.” The city of Atlanta led the way, with the Mayor’s office issuing posters warning sex-workers’ “johns” that they were “abusing our kids, prostituting them and throwing them onto the streets” when they were “done.” Some local police departments sent “Dear John” letters to men whose cars were regularly seen in, or clamped and towed from, red-light districts with a warning to cease and desist from procuring sex.<sup>33</sup>

As these examples suggest, Dear John letters have surfaced in diverse contexts and for divergent purposes. Sometimes they provide a comic hook, as when hapless sit-com characters for whom romance presents particular challenges receive their marching orders, like *M\*A\*S\*H*’s Radar or, before him, Sgt. Carter from *Gomer Pyle: USMC*.<sup>34</sup> But despite their humorous applications, Dear Johns have – from the outset – also been associated with depression, self-harm, and suicide. Bill Mauldin, the army enlistee responsible for *Stars and Stripes*’ wildly popular Willie and Joe cartoon strip, noted darkly in 1945: “A man feels very fine fighting a war when his girl has just written that she is thinking that perhaps they made a mistake. He might figure: What the hell, the only thing I was living for was that I knew she would wait for me. He’s going to feel pretty low and he might get a little careless because of it, at a place where he can’t afford to be careless.”<sup>35</sup>



0.2. Henry Kissinger, having tarried too long at peace talks in Paris, receives a “Dear John” from the President of Harvard. Reg Manning, *Saturday Republic*, January 27, 1973. (Courtesy of the Reg Manning Collection, Greater Arizona Collection, Arizona State University Library.)

The dire outcomes Mauldin hinted at have been made explicit over the past fifteen years, as the Army and Marine Corps have tried to arrest an alarming rise in the rate of suicides committed by active duty personnel and veterans. Numerous military investigations, as well as testimony delivered on Capitol Hill, have linked Dear John letters to these deaths of despair – a topic explored at greater length in this book’s [final chapter](#). The enduring nexus between ended relationships and ended lives has entered public consciousness in more exploitative ways too. For instance, visitors to the *USS Hornet*, berthed at Alameda, California, can pay to go on a night-time “history mystery” tour that includes a “ghost hunt for the spirit of a sailor who supposedly hanged himself after receiving a ‘Dear John’” – personal tragedy appropriated to inject a ghoulish frisson into this commercial venture.<sup>36</sup>

Given the ubiquity of the Dear John in American military life, veterans’ lore, and popular culture, it might seem surprising that no previous



author has charted its history. This book offers the first full-length study. Other types of wartime correspondence – love letters and last testaments, soldiers’ mail to mothers and children’s scribbles to soldiers – have received their due share of recognition in print. Published collections of war letters have appeared during and after all the United States’ major conflicts.<sup>37</sup> Soldiers’ missives have also figured prominently in documentary films: none more memorably than Sullivan Ballou’s majestically lyrical paean to his wife, Sarah, written in July 1861, shortly before the First Battle of Bull Run. This love letter – also a last testament, albeit unbeknownst to its author – was etched into national memory by the first instalment of Ken Burns’s *The Civil War* series.<sup>38</sup> In September 1990, when this program was broadcast, thousands of American troops were massing in the Saudi Arabian desert bordering Kuwait, part of a vast Coalition “Shield” assembled before the launch of “Operation Desert Storm” in January 1991. The United States Postal Service would later produce a compilation volume, sold together with four commemorative 29 cent stamps, entitled *Letters from the Sand*. Mail to and from service personnel in Vietnam had already received their turn in the spotlight in Bill Couturié’s documentary *Dear America* (1987), based on an anthology of the same name.<sup>39</sup>

War letters form a recurrent focal point of public history exhibits, online and in more tangible locations. Since 2011, the Smithsonian’s National Postal Museum, adjacent to Union Station in Washington, DC, has devoted a permanent exhibit to “Mail Call.” Strikingly, however, “Mail Call” – in both its physical and digital variants – contains no mention of the genre that soldiers and veterans have memorialized with more feeling than any other type of letter: the Dear John.<sup>40</sup> Anthologies of wartime correspondence tend to fight similarly shy. The dust jacket illustration of *Dear America* is a photograph taken by David Burnett that belongs to the collection at Salt Lake Community College. In its archival setting, the image – which depicts a forlorn young GI holding a letter – is labeled, “American Soldier Reads a ‘Dear John’ Letter from Home.” *Dear America* uses the photo, and attributes its creator, but makes no mention of the Dear John.<sup>41</sup>

The sentimentality of American commemorative war culture helps explain these strategic omissions. Dear John letters invert the Platonic ideal: the loving letter that reassures men in uniform, facing mortal

danger far from home, of the sender's constancy, love, and gratitude. In the patriotic imagination, mail and morale march together in unbreakable lockstep. Inconveniently, however, as the Dear John attests, some types of mail can have the opposite effect on soldiers' esprit.

If it's readily guessed why many federally subsidized initiatives prefer to omit Dear Johns in their celebration of the ties that bind home and fighting fronts in shared commitment to duty, honor, and country, it requires more explanation why a phenomenon otherwise so richly recorded in soldiers' stories, and so well preserved in numerous popular cultural forms, should have escaped other authors' attention. After all, historians boldly go – and sometimes even prefer to venture – where patriotic flag-wavers fear to tread. Why not, then, to the scene of soldiers' experiences of emotional desertion?

The answer hinges on evidence. Professional historians are creatures of the archive, and Dear John letters are simply not to be found en masse in box files on the shelves of climate-controlled vaults. Most men in receipt of Dear Johns brooded on their contents at leisure, but disposed of the letters themselves in haste. A whole strand of soldiers' story-telling documents the inventive ways in which they've consigned these missives to oblivion: tearing them to shreds, throwing them overboard, igniting them or, in cruder versions, using these notes as "bumf" (shorthand for "bum fodder"). In January 1971, Specialist 3 Roger Hicks submitted a verse on this subject to the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, a Black weekly newspaper, while he served in Vietnam:

What is left at the end  
A crumpled envelope  
A misting of the eyes  
Thirty-eight pieces of her letter.<sup>42</sup>

Like Hicks, few recipients preserved hard evidence of rejection for later inspection. It takes a certain kind of personality – precociously endowed with a grandiose sense of self, like Ernest Hemingway – to retain a Dear John for posterity, imagining that future greatness would imprint an early heartbreak with historical significance.

Whatever else they may have done with Dear John letters, veterans have not bequeathed them to posterity. Most, after all, did not exist to be handed down to descendants, along with other war memorabilia, and donated to archives for permanent preservation. As I discovered early on while researching this book, libraries and historical societies instead contain phantom Dear John letters. Several archivists I approached for assistance, including at the Marine Corps History Division, Archives Branch, the US Army Women's Museum, the Center for American War Letters Archives at Chapman University, and the Institute on World War II and the Human Experience at Florida State University, expressed initial certainty that their collections contained specimens, only to come up empty-handed after further digging.

A collection of women's letters from World War II assembled for publication by historians Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, now housed at Bryant University, boasts just one Dear John.<sup>43</sup> A stinging one-liner, this note is characterized by both brevity and irreverence, unlike the cliché-laden apologies of journalistic reportage. It takes the form of a V-mail: pre-printed stationery that was microfilmed for despatch overseas, introduced by the government in 1942 to speed the flow of supportive sentiment between men at war and loved ones at home. And it was written by twenty-one-year-old Anne Gudis of Newark, New Jersey, to her soldier boyfriend then stationed "Somewhere in Britain."<sup>44</sup> Enraged by a string of insulting messages he'd sent her, she dashed off a furious zinger. Stripping him of rank, Anne addressed herself to "Mr. Kramer." Then she got straight to the point. "Go to Hell!" runs the body of the text, at a diagonal slant expressive of pent-up rage. Its recipient, twenty-six-year-old Corporal Samuel Kramer, was so piqued that he promptly sent Anne's missive to the editor of *Yank's* "Mail Call" feature, claiming to have received the "shortest V-mail letter" in the European Theater of Operations (ETO). Three weeks later, the army weekly reproduced the offending V-mail in facsimile under the headline: "The Importance of Being Terse." Anne's return address was clearly legible in the top right-hand corner, ensuring that she received dozens of letters from *Yank's* readers – some eager to chide her, others to chat her up.<sup>45</sup>

*Yank* published Anne's "Go to Hell!" message just days before the *New York Times* introduced readers to Dear Johns and the associated

phenomenology of heartbreak in uniform. As World War II veteran and literary scholar Paul Fussell subsequently glossed the term, “This was the feared letter from home beginning harmlessly enough but exploding finally with the news that the beloved female writer has (of course, experienced soldiers would say) taken up with someone more accessible.”<sup>46</sup> Gudis’s V-mail upended that paradigm. It began explosively, but ended affectionately, “With Love.” That “something doesn’t quite jibe” prompted curious GIs to write to *Yank* for elucidation. In its issue of October 10, 1943, the magazine published a note from two soldiers, also stationed in Britain, wanting to know what Cpl. Kramer had “said to the girl.” Those more eager to satisfy their curiosity than to garner publicity addressed their inquiries directly to Anne herself.<sup>47</sup>

Gudis preserved all the correspondence she received in response to a message she’d never intended for publication. The letters and V-mails strangers sent her offer sharp insights into how Americans processed issues of love and loyalty in wartime: the intricate quickstep between observing rules and breaking them. The story of Anne Gudis and Sam Kramer’s public/private, love/hate relationship runs through this book’s chapters. Anne (or rather Sam) provided third parties with something remarkably rare: a Dear John whose provenance is beyond dispute. The young Newarker told her boyfriend to “Go to Hell!” Not just categorically, but indisputably. Moreover, we know what scores of Americans, and a few bemused Brits, made of Anne’s note.

If Gudis’s V-mail was an unorthodox breakup note, Kramer’s sharing it was much more typical of how Dear Johns traveled from servicemen’s hands into the public sphere. Men who’d been “Dear Johned” regularly passed these letters around among their peers. Critiquing the composition, defacing the note-paper, destroying or “recycling” Dear Johns was often a collective activity undertaken in solidarity with the recipient to aid his recuperation. The Air Force University’s library contains one bona fide but second-hand Dear John, duplicated in a former POW’s scrapbook. Received by a fellow American airman in German captivity, this rejection note had done the rounds, with scathing annotations penciled in the margins by its recipient.<sup>48</sup> Wider dissemination offered a way to alleviate the sting of rejection. Men in uniform sometimes submitted

## INTRODUCTION

**The Importance of Being Terse**

Dear YANK :

I desire to lay claim to having received the shortest V-mail letter ever received in ETO.

Cpl. S. J. KRAMER

*Britain.*

PRINT THE COMPLETE ADDRESS IN PLAIN BLOCK LETTERS IN THE PANEL BELOW, AND YOUR RETURN ADDRESS IN THE SPACE PROVIDED. USE TYPEWRITER, DARK INK OR PENCIL. WRITE PLAINLY. VERY SMALL WRITING IS NOT SUITABLE.

No. 391463	From MISS ANNE GUDIS
CENSOR'S STAMP	SENDERS NAME
	61 BORDEN STREET
	SENDERS ADDRESS
	NEWARK, 8, NEW JERSEY
	9 SEPTEMBER 1943
	DATE

To CORPORAL SAM J. KRAMER  
3225LON 1st SPECIAL SERVICE UNIT  
A.P.O. 631 C/O POSTMASTER  
NEW YORK, NEW YORK

MR. KRAMER:

*So to hell!  
P.S. very funny!*

WITH LOVE  
ANNE GUDIS

**V...-MAIL**

0.3. Anne Gudis's V-mail to Sam Kramer as published in *Yank*, annotated by a stranger, and mailed to Gudis in Newark, New Jersey. (Courtesy of Cornell University, Kramer Family Papers.)

their Dear Johns to military newspapers for publication, as Sam Kramer did, or gave them to the Armed Forces Radio Service for broadcast on air. Several veterans of World War II, including celebrated novelist James Salter, recall having heard Dear Johns read aloud on the radio, sometimes to the accompaniment of a sobbing string section. *Variety*, the Hollywood trade paper, published a story about this phenomenon in 1946.<sup>49</sup> More recently, an anthology of women's breakup notes

published in 2002 includes a transcription of a lengthy Dear John letter, received by an unnamed GI in Vietnam, who read it aloud over a military PRC-25 radio. He was recorded doing so by his buddy, Dave Syster. Like many other artifacts of the analog age, this recording can now be listened to online.<sup>50</sup>

How Dear John letters became common currency – their absence from the archives, but ubiquity everywhere that servicemen talk or write of their war experience – tells us something fundamental about this genre. Namely, that *men* invented, authored, and have kept rewriting the Dear John. GIs coined the phrase. Then they verbed it. Men could be (and quite often were) “Dear Johned.” Sometimes, they referred to authors of such notes as “the Dear John ones,” as though the term denoted a certain kind of woman, not a particular type of letter.<sup>51</sup> Rather than understanding the Dear John as an exclusively female epistolary form, we’d do better to approach it as a predominantly male vernacular tradition.

*Dear John* is consequently about both letter-writing and story-telling. It has less to say about why individual women wrote Dear John letters than about why other people have had so much to say about the severance of romantic ties between men and women in wartime. Why has the Dear John served as such a durable lightning rod for soldiers’ feelings of alienation, grievance, and injury? Spanning the period from World War II to the present, this book examines the precariousness of romantic love in wartime. It explores how American civilians and service personnel have made sense of relationship breakdown in wartime: why it happens, who or what to blame, and how to mitigate the consequences, or (better yet) prevent the occurrence of men’s emotional injury. Examining how the armed forces have attempted to make heterosexual coupledness serve martial purposes, *Dear John* illustrates the fraught and failure-prone nature of efforts to channel feeling in approved directions. The book also highlights how many different individuals and institutions have been – and remain – invested in trying to discipline and dissect the emotional lives of soldiers and their romantic partners. Not only members of the military establishment but civilian opinion-leaders, journalists, advice columnists, social workers, religious authorities, as well as

“psy-” professionals, psychologists and psychiatrists who serve in uniform or practice as civilians.

On all these topics, there’s an abundance of evidence. *Dear John* draws on a wide array of source material: declassified official documents that detail military policy on marriage, mail, and morale; Chaplaincy records; the papers of the American Red Cross; military psychiatric reports and other professional literature dedicated to fathoming the mysteries of why women break up with men at war, and why men break down as a result. Movies, novels, memoirs, and popular songs chart the contours of the Dear John letter’s public reputation. Letters and private papers reveal how Americans *actually* wrote to one another in wartime, while the civilian and military press convey copious instructions on what they were *meant* to say, and to suppress. Women’s magazines issued a torrent of prescriptive advice on matters of dating and mating, waiting and writing.

Above all, research for this book involved listening to hundreds of hours of oral history testimony recorded by veterans about their military service. The Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress has amassed the largest repository of such material. Well over 100 taped interviews include Dear John vignettes, apocrypha, and jokes. Other collections, such as the National World War II Museum in New Orleans, the Rutgers Oral History Archives, and Texas Tech University’s Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, all contain veterans’ recollections of the Dear Johns they, or their unfortunate buddies, received.<sup>52</sup> These stories are narrated in distinct registers – tragic, comic, and all points between – by servicemen of every rank, race, and class. Romantic rejection was an experience shared by men across otherwise firmly entrenched divisions. In successive wars, Black, Chicano, and Puerto Rican soldiers received, and lamented, the arrival of Dear Johns, as did their white ethnic peers. Officers who took a dim view of how young enlisted men crumpled on receipt of a Dear John were sometimes surprised to find themselves served notice of divorce proceedings by the wives they’d believed unwaveringly loyal. On occasion, they were also chastened by the discovery that maintaining their own emotional equilibrium wasn’t easy.<sup>53</sup>

I listened to women's voices, too, where they've been recorded. Most archival collections, however, contain significantly fewer oral histories featuring female veterans or women who served in civilian capacities in America's wars since the 1940s. The Betty H. Carter Women Veterans Historical Project at the University of North Carolina-Glassboro is one of a handful of exceptions to this general rule.<sup>54</sup> The imbalance in part reflects an undeniable statistical truth: far more men than women served in uniform. Collections of private papers – letters, diaries, scrapbooks, unpublished memoirs – also tilt heavily in favor of male-authored ego documents (as historians call these personal materials). Far more letters written by, rather than *to*, soldiers survive in US archives. This lopsidedness could also be attributed to wartime circumstance. Soldiers often destroyed letters, not just Dear Johns, soon after reading them. During World War II, and again in Vietnam, officers sometimes encouraged, or even ordered, men to destroy mail from home. Among the many “things they carried,” in Tim O'Brien's phrase, letters could be an unnecessary burden. Worse yet, correspondence could fall into enemy hands, inadvertently betraying valuable intelligence.<sup>55</sup> But neither of these matter-of-fact explanations for archival asymmetry does justice to more purposeful issues of preservation practice.

A more fundamental reason why male testimony predominates is that archives (and the publics they serve) have tended to value front-line combat as *the* quintessential war experience to be celebrated and preserved. If this gendered imbalance is starting to break down, as more archivists seek to incorporate a broader spectrum of experience into their collections, inclusivity often remains more aspirational than achieved.

Yet, despite these caveats, women's voices reverberate more loudly through this book's chapters than might be expected in the absence of bona fide breakup notes. My proposition that men carved and embellished the Dear John totem is not meant as a denial that some women did indeed write to men in uniform announcing the end of unsatisfactory relationships. We know they did – not only from men on the receiving end, but because women sometimes acknowledged authorship in public commentary on the phenomenon. They did so almost as soon as the term was coined, not because they found writing Dear



Johns “empowering” – a claim later made – but attempting to redress the balance of culpability.<sup>56</sup> Men too, they wanted fellow Americans to know, were unfaithful to the women they’d left behind. Yet male soldiers enjoyed wide latitude for sexual “adventurism” emphatically denied to women. Men sometimes penned breakup notes. Tellingly, however, the phrase “Dear Jane” trailed more than a decade behind the “Dear John.”

Where some women raised their voices in protest against pronounced double standards surrounding love and loyalty in wartime, demanding both greater equality and greater empathy, others sided with men in uniform. Many of the busiest disciplinarians of female behavior and affect were other women, particularly those empowered to issue commandments and deliver judgment from the advice columnist’s lofty pulpit.

*Dear John* encompasses several different kinds of relationships: romantic bonds between men and women; comradely bonds between men; and interactions (often tutelary, sometimes sisterly) between women. The book’s focus on heterosexual love reflects the military’s insistence – until the repeal of DADT – that this kind of intimacy was the *only* permissible variety for uniformed personnel. Before 2011, same-sex relationships necessarily had to remain under wraps in the services. Although they undoubtedly occurred nevertheless, they weren’t the target of prescriptive military and civil advice. These partnerships weren’t, after all, meant to be happening. For decades, all branches of the armed forces policed sexuality intensively, though not always identically. Many scholars, activists, and veterans have documented these repressive practices, and resistance to them, in print.<sup>57</sup> They remind us that the military is a peculiar institution, embedded within yet also set apart from civilian society. Thus while the armed forces draw recruits from the country at large, they also draw up different rules for their conduct than those enshrined in civil legal statutes. The military’s governance of sexuality strikingly illustrates this fault-line. The Uniform Code of Military Justice still outlaws “adultery,” long after it ceased to be illegal in most states, and for decades the UCMJ made “sodomy,” which it linked with “bestiality,” a crime.<sup>58</sup>

It would be easy to imagine that an institution which, for so many decades, outlawed gay and lesbian partnerships must have perennially

encouraged heterosexual conjugality – not just as a mandatory norm, but a celebrated ideal. For years, the army has boasted its “family friendly” credentials, recently bringing non-traditional families under that extended umbrella. Yet, as this book shows, the armed forces have long struggled with romantic love in *all* its iterations. And they still do.

This claim may seem paradoxical: how can maritally oriented institutions simultaneously harbor profound mistrust of marriage? Or, perhaps more specifically, of *wives*? Going back to the very first press reports on Dear John letters we find indelible traces of this skepticism – expressed by soldiers and amplified by journalists attuned to their emotional tribulations – about whether romantic relationships with women were either worth saving or deserved mourning. Woman-hating courses through these reports, sometimes a subtext, but often on the surface. Correspondent Hal Boyle, reporting on Dear John clubs in Algiers in 1943, noted that, amid the “lovesick GI Joes,” “A lot of the soldiers are grateful to the Nazis for postponing the day when they have to return to meet the loving arms of some girl friend they have since decided has a face ‘like a pailfull of worms.’”<sup>59</sup> For their part, female authority figures could be just as quick to berate “philandering war wives” as men in uniform. Prominent advice columnist Dorothy Dix had this to say on the subject of “flighty women” in August 1943: “Their hearts are not flesh and blood. They are made of flimsy. It is not in them to have any deep feeling, or any loyalty, or sense of duty or responsibility. All they want is pleasure, excitement, pretty clothes, and they will change to any man who will give these to them . . .” Lest any reader missed her point, she concluded with an admonition that “the man who grieves over losing one of them is as foolish as if he spent his days weeping over a broken doll.”<sup>60</sup>

Misogyny and heteronormativity make an awkward, if not uncommon, pairing. Where the latter mandates heterosexual coupledness, the former remains mistrustful of the women to whom men in uniform are flimsily tethered. To the misogynist, wives and girlfriends pose a severe “flight risk,” liable to take off – and tear up men’s morale – at any moment. Viewed this way, the only bonds that men in uniform can *truly* trust are those between male comrades-at-arms – a mystical communion far more durable than any conjugal union. For misogynists, Dear John letters offer proof that mistrust of fickle females was warranted all along. As both