

TELLING IT LIKE IT WAS

by Frances Spatz Leighton



It was the last letter the lieutenant would ever write, a letter from Vietnam to his girl back home. First Lieutenant Stephen W. Davis took a sheet of Red Cross stationery, datemarked it August 15, 1967, and scrawled:

"Dear Sandie,

"... all is well. We are now at Chu Lai awaiting our mission in Operation Benton.

"We all went over to the local Marine Corps Officers Club and ... it was the first time any of us had seen a bar in about two months, so you can imagine what went on ...

"It's still a long way off but I'm thinking seriously of putting in for assignment to the Old Guard at Fort Myer when I get out of here. It will be close to home plus I'm still crazy about parades. If I put in for it now, I'm pretty sure I can get it. Thanks for the letters, koolaide and above all

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'Peanuts' strips from papers.

"Love,
Steve"

Three days later he was dead, killed in "Operation Benton."

Syracuse University is engaged in a history hunt for letters such as that one from Vietnam which has been contributed to the university by Stephen's father, Brigadier General F. M. Davis, Jr., of the United States Army.

The university's historic collection of letters from soldiers in all of our country's wars tell the true, human story of the fighting fronts, the mental turmoil of many of the soldiers, the resignation of others, the make-the-best-of-it attitude of still others.

From somewhere in Vietnam an army sergeant writes his mother, "Well, I'm sorry to say that I've finally found out what their [sic] going to do with me. And I hate it. It was bad enough sending me to an infantry unit in the beginning, now their sending me to an armored unit, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, which I've found that only one man from this battalion is going there. (ME.) And I've also found out that I'll be going to one of two base camps. Quan Loi or Loc Ninh. This is one time I'd really like to go AWOL. But my only hang up is there's nowhere to go. (Smile.)"

"Love, your respectful son,
Jim"

In a different mood, another soldier writes his parents:

"Monday, August 11, 1969
"Dear Mom and Dad,

"We are still camped in relatively the same place as we have been the last few days. The weather has been good for the most part the past few days. I'm starting to get my tan back. Down the road a little way is a

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bomb crater we go swimming and bathing in.

“Our resupply has been pretty good. The one hot meal has usually been good and yesterday they brought out cold sodas. We had been getting sodas out here every day but then the colonel said no. I guess he figured we had it too easy. Anyway, I guess he changed his mind.

“The road we are camped on looks like tent city. Some people use their own poncho to make a shelter, others get together with a buddy or two to make elaborate poncho tents. Some of them are experts and the engineering would amaze you.”

A dramatic picture of how it feels to be under fire comes from this soldier in Vietnam and Cambodia, dated March 28, 1970, 8:58 P.M.

“You know mother, since I’ve been over here I’ve been refraining from mentioning all the bad things that are happening but to be truthful with you things are really getting bad. My troop has been operating on the Cambodian border along the north western front. And I’ve never seen so many N.V.A. in my life. The ‘damn’ C.O. had us almost 500 meters into Cambodia the other day and didn’t know it. We were just lucky we didn’t have any contact at *that* time. We didn’t need any, anyway. We’ve been having enough inside the border. On the 26th *one of my best friends got killed*. We killed an estimated 60 to 100 N.V.A. We also had 30 casualties.

“On the 25th another buddy of mine was killed with two other guys in the troop. This happen(ed) at our night defensive position. We had been set up for about an hour and right after dark we were firing mortars around our perimeter as we

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usually do from time to time to harass Charles if he happen(s) to be out there. But that time one of the rounds exploded in the tube and killed all three guys in the mortar track. A fire broke out and started the other rounds in the track exploding. It was dark as hell and we had to get in the tracks and move into the woodline. I had never been so scared before in my life. We were so defenseless for about an hour that they could have done us a job. I certainly am looking forward to the R&R on the 6th. And when I come back I'll have 80 days left and it's no way for them to go too fast. . . .

"Your loving son,
James"

Sad to say, James never made it to R&R, rest and recreation. Instead the upcoming action he mentions landed him in the hospital in Japan with wounds, especially a shattered leg. A letter from him dated April 20, 1970, 6:20 P.M., says:

"Hello Everyone,

"Just a few lines to say hello. Right now I'm lying here with my thigh all wrapped up and my leg hanging from some type of gadget that I won't even try to describe to you. I'll just tell you that it's called traction. There's a pin through my leg just below the knee with twenty five pounds pulling on it. This is to keep the broken bone in my thigh from slipping back out of place.

"As far as my back is concern, the doc says he's surprised I recovered so fast.

"One thing that really almost makes me want to cry is the fact that it will be so long before I'll be seeing you all. I'll be going to surgery Wednesday (today Monday) and they'll draft skin from my other thigh to cover the one that's been

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laserated.

“Well, so much for me and my problems. How’s everyone at home at a time like this. I trust everyone fine. . . .

“Well, I’m starting to feel kind of miserable so I’m going to close now. I’ll be writing again soon.

“My love to everyone,
James”

In a letter to his folks, dated May 14, 1969, Evening,” Lieutenant Samuel B. Cupp writes:

“With fighting as sporadic as it is in our AO, it almost seems as if we inflict as many casualties upon ourselves as the enemy does. A short while back, an APC (Armored Personnel Carrier) killed 2 and wounded 1 of another of our companies. Plus the fact that the ARVNS [South Vietnamese troops] shoot at everything that moves.

“Right now we are tearing down FB Gongaley, which is sort of appropriate for the Army since they had just finished building it to the point where it was a good firebase.

“On those college riots, sit-ins, and violences, the thing that really gets me is that they take weapons with them and I guess that makes them really feel brave. I wonder if they have ever seen the horror which those weapons can produce and which could happen to them if someone decided to oppose them. In my time with the company, I have seen anger between one another, but never a weapon pointed, even in jest.”

Included in the Syracuse University collection are letters from Korea like this one:

“Dear Ma and Dad:

“I hope you don’t take this too hard . . .

“I . . . got wounded in both of my legs and they had to be amputated. I

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don't remember exactly how it happened—I only remember the explosion and the hospital at Inchon. They are in good condition at the present and it will be no more than a month before I will see you all again.

“I'm relieved to get away from it all, mom and dad, and there will be something to look forward to when I see you people again. The only thing I'm worried about are you folks. I don't want you to be worrying and going around with tears in your eyes. The best years of my life are ahead of me. For your information they amputated from my knees down.

“Well that's all for now. The rest can wait. I'll be writing you more often now, and once again I beg of you to keep cool and I will see you soon. Please excuse the handwriting as I am a bit shaky at the present.

“I will write again soon.

“Your loving son,
Bob”

Or from World War II, when Second Lieutenant Linton A. Barling, of Clinton, Mass., wrote to a buddy in England, just before he flew off to be parachuted into the battle for Holland, a mission from which he never returned:

“If I die, I would like my body to be sent back to the States. I wouldn't want to be buried on foreign soil. And besides, if I give my life for my country I think I am entitled to 6 feet of its soil.”

“Your pal,
Lin”

As soldiers write it, you get the story of American wars, *telling it like it was*. That's why Syracuse University has enlisted the aid of CORONET to help round up letters of recent wars before it is too late.

As Philip Mooney, head of the OldMagazineArticles.com