



Principle Approach® Education

WARTIME LOVE LETTERS: *THE TIE THAT BINDS FAMILY & COUNTRY*

by Kay Brigham

With Hurricane Andrew bearing down on my Miami home in 1992, I scurried to protect my most precious possessions from the fury of the approaching storm. Among the few items I could possibly carry with me were those letters I had long treasured but never dared to read, the ones entrusted to me for posterity—the love letters of a father I hardly knew. I had always been reluctant to read them, knowing I would grieve more deeply to learn the character of a man I had already lost as a child during World War II. At age seven, I only vaguely knew my Navy Commander father when his destroyer went down near a faraway place called Salerno. The hurricane underscored how precious those letters were, yet I still dared not read and revisit my mother’s anguish.

Then in 1995, inspired by the fiftieth anniversary of the victory in Europe, I mustered the courage to open the seal. Though I encountered anticipated sadness, I uncovered a story of love and heroism so uplifting that it had to be shared with my family and the broader American family.

The letters are a virtual time capsule, revealing the human experience of a naval officer and his devoted wife, from their courtship during the Great Depression through the personal aftermath of that fateful day on October 9, 1943 when the USS *Buck* was torpedoed. Speaking for themselves, the letters of Jacqueline Coleman and M. J. “Mike” Klein portray how the power of love and faith sustained them during lengthy separation, through the most perilous times of war, and in surviving unspeakable loss. They illustrate so well the verse to which Jacqueline clung: “Many waters cannot quench love.” (Song of Songs 8:7)

On top of the neatly arranged letters was a foreword my mother had written sometime after the end of World War II:

My dear children:

You were so young that day in October of 1943. You remember your father but vaguely. I can tell by your reminiscing that he is the shadowy figure that came home from the sea and gave our home a holiday air, laughed with us and entertained us, and, with a jaunty wave of his hand and a kiss all around, left us to wait long weeks in daily routine until he returned again. He is an attractive acquaintance to you, and I want you to know and love him as I



KAY BRIGHAM & GRANDDAUGHTER, JACQUELINE
Photograph by Amy Brigham Boulis



did. I learned to know and love him through his letters, for, should I count the days I had been with him before we were married, I should not need more than your fingers to count upon. I've kept all his letters, and he kept mine and took them with him and his ship beneath the blue waters of the Mediterranean. I shall tell you our story through his letters, and, as well as I can remember, my answers to them.

*Devotedly,
Your Mother*

War history books are chronicles of cold, external events, but war letters are expressions from the hearts of those who participated in those events. Most importantly the letters helped me resolve the grief I had hidden away since childhood. Children experience grief over a loss even though they do not know how to define or articulate it. The revelations of the letters made me weep: tears of sadness over the sacrifices demanded and tears of joy over my parents' deepening faith and love. Following are some samples quoted from the letters:

Letter dated June 27, 1931 from Ensign M. J. "Mike" Klein in Pacific waters to Jacqueline Coleman in Richmond, Virginia:

Dearest,

Somehow those words of yours, "For us time is not," "Carry on," have been so comforting, the most comforting I have ever known. During the day when I'm missing you so and at night when I'm dreaming too, I just think of those words and imagine seeing your dear sweet self telling them to me. Then my soul is quiet, and I am resolved to indeed carry on as best I can, even though we are separated by such a distance.

Letter dated October 25, 1941, from Jacqueline Coleman, to her husband, Mike, on USS Benson:

Michael Dearest,

All is quiet in "camp," and though I enjoy the restfulness, I miss you even more at this hour. During the day I am so busy that I have only time for the pleasant thoughts of you and the beautiful past we have spent together, but when I sit down to think of you and rest, the thoughts of anxiety crowd in, and I feel I must run out of the house into the darkness and find you and gather you safely into my arms, like a mother hen gathers her brood under her wings. I want all my brood under my wing when night comes. Yet I know a greater Protector than I has you under the shadow of His wings, and I am comforted. Whenever the anxious fears well up inside, I read the 91st Psalm, and calmness gradually comes back to me.

Letter dated November 5, 1941 from Mike in Icelandic waters to his wife, Jacqueline:

My Dearest One,

Your picture is such a comfort to me. Anywhere I move in my room, your eyes follow me, and



I know you are thinking of me, and I gain strength because of your love. I imagine there are many men in this war who only keep going because of the love of their women back home.

Letter dated November 9, 1941 from Jacqueline to her husband, Mike, on convoy duty in the North Atlantic:

My Dearest,

I simply can't enjoy anything unless I share it with you. Even good movies make me long for you to see them. I suppose that is what is meant by marriage making two people one. My life is so wrapped up in yours that every thought or act I do has some concern for you. I knew I loved you the first time I kissed you that cold November day back in 1930 in Mrs. Lietch's front parlor [Annapolis], and that knowledge has never left me; yet it is only in separation that love knows its own depth.

Letter dated December 7, 1941 from Jacqueline to Mike at sea:

My Darling,

The awful news of Japan's attack came over the radio to me at 2:30 P.M. I was sitting here sewing, and I thought I must be hearing things. When I heard it again, I still could hardly believe it. The news just came over that the island of Oahu was attacked at 8 A.M., and a bomb hit on barracks at Hickam Field killed 304 . . . It's all so strange—I feel I'm dreaming some horrible nightmare. So now it is a world war.

Letter dated Christmas Eve, 1941 from Jacqueline to Mike at sea:

Michael, dearest,

The children are tucked "all snug in their beds" while I am sitting here in the glow of the Christmas tree, thinking and longing for you. This is the first Christmas since we were married that we have been parted—and when the tears well up in my eyes at the thought of it, I feel ashamed, since I have so much for which to be thankful. The very fact that we are married is enough to keep me happy all the days of my life. Though I am impatient for our heaven together, I realize we are both fighting to have that heaven for ourselves and our children, and we shall cherish it the more for the fact that we had to fight and sacrifice to attain it. Of course, it is natural and human for me to miss you so frightfully and to be filled with anxiety for your safety, but when I begin to slip into the abyss of worry and despair, that still, small voice says to me, "Be still, and know that I am God" [Psalm 46:10].

Last letter dated September 22, 1943 from Lt. Comdr. M. J. Klein in the Mediterranean theatre to Jacqueline:

My Darling,

Today we have been married nine glorious years . . . Every year that passes I feel more fortunate in having had you for my wife. I can only thank God that He has been so good



to me, and ask Him to preserve me so that I may return to you and our children for many more years of happiness. I wish I were there today. I would send you the biggest bunch of roses I could find.

One of last letters dated October 6, 1943 from Jacqueline to Mike on USS *Buck*:

Michael, my dearest,

There aren't enough roses in all the world that mean as much to me as this dear, lovely letter telling me your thoughts and love for me. That's the most wonderful anniversary present you could have sent, and I shall treasure it through the years and show it to my grandchildren to tell them how much their grandfather loves me all through the happy years. I know God is going to see you through this frightful war, Michael, for your safety and nearness mean so much to me and our little ones—and it is something right to pray for—that I know He will see that you are restored to us in a world of peace for which you have so valiantly fought . . . For I do love you, my one and only love, I do, I do, I do! I kiss you Good night, dearest, across the many miles between us and ask God's angels to hover near that bridge always.

Airmail envelope stamped “Officers Mail Room Bureau of Naval Personnel—Returned to Sender,” “Unclaimed”

Among the estimated 180,000 American World War II orphans, many know little of their fathers killed in action. For them there are no letters that were kept, no records of their fathers' military service or the place where they are buried overseas. So my sister, brother, and I are fortunate indeed to come to know the character of our parents through their letters written in extraordinary circumstances. My sister, Cissy, commended:

Can you imagine what our parents would think if they knew that what they wrote to each so long ago would spring to life as a beacon of love and devotion, courage, and faith for their children and, hopefully, millions? And that through their letters we could get to know them too as we never had!

My brother, Mike, said the letters reminded him of the sacrifices the World War II generation made for the cause of freedom—sacrifices that even today men and women in the U.S. military are continuing to make. My daughter reflected that she had always known her grandfather was a war hero. The Navy awarded him the Navy Cross for the *Buck's* destruction of the Italian submarine *Argento* and the dramatic rescue of her crew on August 3, 1943. But the letters helped her know her grandfather as a real person. Although she knew and loved her grandmother, the letters made her aware of something new: her grandmother's heroism on the home front during the war.

In 2002 these old letters, published in a new book, have inspired a young military wife (see Web Site www.ussbuck.com). Her husband is in the U.S. Navy serving with the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit in Afghanistan. She wrote me: “Since he left back in September, I have kept copies of all our



correspondence in hopes to organize them into a scrapbook to show our children one day.” War letters are a family heirloom of courage, love, and faith that war and death can never destroy.

The letters of Jacqueline and Mike are not only examples of war’s impact on individual men and women, but also a window into the life and times of the 1930s and 1940s: living life in suspension and coping with anxiety; making ends meet in the depression; finding distraction in Hollywood movies; knitting heavy woolen socks for bluejackets on convoy duty in the North Atlantic; sharing humor, tunes, and lyrics; and in the face of death making punctual payments of life insurance premiums. How many thousands of military wives like Jacqueline received Western Union telegrams marked with the red stars: “THE NAVY DEPARTMENT DEEPLY REGRETS TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR HUSBAND LIEUTENANT COMMANDER MILLARD JEFFERSON KLEIN US NAVY IS MISSING FOLLOWING ACTION IN THE PERFORMANCE OF HIS DUTY AND IN THE SERVICE OF HIS COUNTRY.”

Letters written during times of national crises are historically valuable and contribute to the growing body of research on the personal implications of war. Archives, such as the Veterans History Project (American Folklife Center, The Library of Congress) and the Institute on World War II and “The Human Experience” at Florida State University, are seeking to preserve these letters that reveal how veterans and military wives persevered and survived on the battle and home fronts.

With the popularity of instant e-mail, letter writing is becoming a lost art in the twenty-first century. Electronic messages from cyberspace are usually terse and practical, but lacking in depth and fervor. Letters from the very hand of the writer are thoughtful, imaginative, ardent, intensely personal—ties that bind family relationships over time and distance. In addition, war letters are primary sources that complement our nation’s history. They become ties that bind Americans together in respect for what veterans and their families have endured to defend the ideals of our country.

Visit the Web Site www.ussbuck.com for a USS *Buck* Action Report and photographs from *For Those Who Love, Time Is Not: A World War II True Story of Unconquerable Love and Faith* (Hardback, 570 pages).