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Article Title: Their Letters Home

Full Citation: "Their Letters Home," *Nebraska History* 25 (1944): 37-42.

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1944LettersHome.pdf>

Date: 9/11/2013

Article Summary: This article presents a collection of letters from Nebraska servicemen received during World War II.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Mark T Martin, Charles R Patton, Edward L Daft, Robert Kinnie, Robert L Avery, Jerry Simpson (Kearney), Earl L Porath (Neligh), Robert Merchant (Wayne), Lloyd Hall (Exeter), Duane Hartman (North Bend), Edwin H Sorensen (North Bend), Henry Williams (North Bend), Tom Baker (Bloomfield), Don G Willy (Geneva), Edwin B Wessner (Daykin), Marvin Fredrickson (Wayne), William Hughes (Lincoln), Mark T Martin (Elkhorn)

Photographs / Images: Mark T Martin, Charles R Patton, Edward L Daft, Robert Kinnie, Robert L Avery



NEBRASKA'S HEROES :
A Representative Group

TOP (Reading left to right): Major Mark T. Martin, Lt. Charles R. Patton, Sgt. Edward L. Daft.
BOTTOM: Lt. Robert Kinzie, Pfc. Robert L. Avery.

Their Letters Home

Private Jerry Simpson, of Kearney, wrote to his parents:

"I am somewhere in England—a beautiful place, and everything is o. k. . . . The colored boys are going with the English girls and telling them they are the real true American Indians, and they get away with it. . . . Today we got our first piece of meat in a month, and it will probably be another month before we get more. . . . I don't like the blackouts, especially when they have fog along with them. You nearly have to crawl. And money is no good here. You must have English money or you don't buy anything. . . . and when you do buy, you put out your hand and let them dig. When you think they have enough you pull it back. Last night when we went to town we nearly passed by [the stores] because hardly a light showed, and unless you tried the doors you wouldn't know anything was open. . . . When you get this it will have been nearly a year since I was drafted, and I never cussed the day. . . . Our little stove is putting out the heat, and it makes us very comfortable if within a radius of two feet. . . . It is getting close to Christmas and I wish I could be with you, but that night we'll probably be bombing Berlin. That is what we are here for, and we don't mind so long as you people at home can still see the lights in the windows that hold the Christmas trees. . . . The gang is having an argument about the girls at home and wondering whether or not they are true to the boys fighting here. We surely hope so. . . . When we go to bed at ten you are just eating supper at five. Strange, isn't it?"—*Kearney Hub*, 1/13/44.

S. Sgt. Earl L. Porath (Neligh) was reported a German prisoner some months ago. The August letter below is the first direct word from him since he was taken in a bombing flight over Germany.

"Dear Folks: I hope you have not been worrying about me. They sent me here from Darag and it sure is different. The prison is a large one, but Americans are not allowed outside our stockade, which is not large.

"Each of us cooks his own meals. Wood is getting scarce because no one can get out to find any, but they have promised to let a few men out for wood. The Red Cross gives each of us a box of food each week or ten days, and with what the Germans give us we make out o. k. . . . I can't write many letters, but am allowed to receive all sent. So write often!"—*Neligh Leader*, 1/12/44.

S. Sgt. Robert Merchant, of Wayne, wrote his parents from New Britain, to which island he had been transferred from New Guinea.

"A few lines after a hard day's work and a brief pause for this holy evening. There are no pipe organs, no choirs singing Christmas hymns, but far in the distance some soldier is playing hymns on an accordion,

which gives a little of the old spirit. This Christmas is hotter than our Fourth of July, and an evening which seems as though it will never cool off."

It was a tremendous task to move their outfit to the new location. "We worked straight through two days and a night in packing, typing, loading, and still operating up to the last minute. Can you imagine packing up Dad's business, loading it into airplanes and moving? Or picture hundreds of farmers packing their equipment and moving by plane? These are small comparisons. When we move, we move fast. 'Our humble abode' we left behind, and certainly hated to leave it. I am sure we will never have another so permanent. The new home is called Jungle Inn and is certainly suited to the name. We have fixed it up as nicely as possible, but with such a short time and being so busy, we just have a bunk in which to sleep. Our Christmas dinner will consist of corned beef, or beef stew, but we are not complaining even if we do miss our steaks and turkey. We know that each move is a step closer to home and that the Nips are well on the run.

"My friend Lt. Smeltzer, and Lt. McKinnie, the pilots about whom I wrote you, are leaving for the States. Their whole crew baled out of a plane and were lost twenty-five days in the jungle. . . . They used parachutes to make cross-bone signs which led to their rescue.

"We don't mind working like Trojans, as the captain works right along with us. He is the type of fellow who doesn't ask one to do what he wouldn't do himself. . . . We had a rain last evening that compared with the Johnstown Flood. We haven't been here long enough to get our tents built up in a way to protect us from the rain. So we just sat up in bed and watched the water rushing through like the Mississippi when it is on a rampage. I watched my shoes (gun-boats) float out the door. Now you know there was lots of force and water to move those big G. I. shoes of mine. You would have laughed to see the captain wearing a pair of hip boots last night. They were nearly as big as he. One of the boys hurried to unpack the camera and took a picture."—*Wayne Herald*, 1/13/44.

Lieut. Lloyd Hall of Exeter, pilot in the U. S. Air Force who has participated in some of the bombing raids over Europe, wrote to his parents from "Somewhere in England."

". . . I am going to spend a very quiet Christmas this year. Our crew and the other crew that lives with us were given a short vacation at this 'Rest Home.' The men in the air corps get these occasionally, although it is usually about six months after our arrival. . . . Life is rather ideal here in this castle with its huge dining rooms, libraries, ball room, etc. Beautiful fireplaces are all over the castle. We can sleep as late as we like, but the butler, an Irishman named Mike, all dressed up in a black-and-white uniform, wakes us up at 8:30 and brings fruit juice to us in bed. At nine o'clock we have breakfast, and we then do what-

ever we like. We ride horseback, play tennis, shoot skeet, practice archery, or go golfing around the grounds.

"Tomorrow is Christmas Day, and we are having a party for sixty English boys who are all orphans, due to the London blitz. We have a lot of toys and candy fixed up for them. Tonight we will do nothing but read and write to while away the hours. One certainly does get to rest here, anyway." — *Exeter News*, 1/13/44.

Duane Hartman of North Bend, in the training camp at Fort Benning, Georgia, wrote on Paratroop stationery to a friend:

"I am now going to the Riggers School here and it will last for four or five weeks. There is a terrible responsibility to this work, for the chutes have to be packed just right or they won't open. The Riggers also learn to drop supplies and equipment. . . . Our class was the first in this school to make a night jump. Now I have my wings — small, but they mean a lot to me.

"In our plane we started singing to take our minds from the jump, but when the order came we sang no more. I don't know how I reached the door, for my knees were shaking pretty badly. I was No. 2 man. They cut the plane close to 100, and when you jump with the wind from the propellers you really sail along. It usually opens on the second count, and that's after you've fallen about 75 feet. You sure have a swell view up there with nothing but a little silk above you." — *North Bend Eagle*, 11/4/43.

Sgt. Edwin H. Sorensen of North Bend wrote from Italy: "I have seen some wonderful sights in my travels so far. Ever since leaving Casablanca it has become more and more interesting. I believe Italy has both Sicily and North Africa far surpassed as to scenery. Already I have seen some very interesting and beautiful Roman ruins, monasteries and gardens. This country appeals to me more than any I have seen over here. They also have some beautiful farms which are quite modern." — *North Bend Eagle*, 11/4/43.

Cpl. Henry Williams, at Camp Robinson in Arkansas, wrote to his home paper in North Bend: "Our division received its basic training in Florida before moving here. Very little can be said of that camp, as it was mostly sand and swamps with the nearest real town forty-five miles away. But it was a good place to weed out the men who lacked physical stamina, as the excessive heat and humidity made the training doubly hard. You might say the Combat Engineers were hand-picked almost to a man, and we lost very few. Most of them had been construction workers and skilled workmen, so they learned to cooperate a lot sooner than most of the others in the division. This was proved when they received first place in the army tests at the end of their training." — *North Bend Eagle*, 11/4/43.

Tom Baker of Bloomfield, radioman in the Navy, spent much time in Caledonia and the Fiji Islands, and was on Guadalcanal for eight months. Then, ordered to the rear for a rest, he wrote his parents:

"So glad to get your letter. . . . We flew up to an island not far from where we were. . . . The only difference between this and that is the absence of mosquitoes. It was time something happened! Ninety-nine per cent of our battle is the battle against boredom. . . .

"I am reminded constantly of Yellowstone Park. The place is picturesque. There are no palm trees. The other night I took a jeep-ride. This country is just twice as interesting because it was so recently evacuated by the enemy. The mosquitoes have been replaced by huge land-crabs. The little dears sleep, work and eat with us, hand in claw with an occasional rat. The favorite pastime here is to pinch your shipmate, causing him to spring from bed, grab the nearest weapon available, and go crab-hunting. As I write there is a big six-incher climbing down the bulkhead in front of my receiver. When he comes about a foot closer he'll be crab-meat." — *Bloomfield Monitor*, 1/13/44.

Don G. Willy, PhM 2/c, serving in the Navy, wrote to a friend: "My company took part in the landing on Bougainville Island in Empress Augusta Bay. It is the largest island of the Solomon group. . . . One of our major engagements was the battle of Cocomat Grove, where the Third Marine Division was highly commended for its work by one of the high-ranking admirals and also a general. The artillery and the air force were superb. On the whole the Jap artillery and air force were not nearly as good as ours. Their snipers were clever, but our men were always a little more clever.

"One of the things that scared me most was the artillery, both ours and the Nips'. It makes the strangest noise—a scrunching, screaming, hissing sound. Every burst that goes over, from sundown to sunset, sounds like it was headed for your foxhole. At first we couldn't sleep, but as time went on we got used to it.

"The jungle is the thickest and densest of any in the South Pacific, and makes the toughest possible kind of fighting. You cannot see the enemy, but you know they are there. The great majority of Nips killed were never seen until they were dead, and many of the boys who shot dozens have never seen a live one. You can smell a Jap at twenty-five yards. On the whole, the fellow who said 'War is hell!' knew what he was talking about. . . . There is quite a lot of fungus infection from jungle plants, but it heals fast with prompt treatment. One cannot realize how much home means until he is far away. It is a pity we had to have war to realize this." — *Geneva Signal*, 1/13/44.

S. Sgt. Edwin B. Wessner, in his second year away from home (Daykin), was at a rest camp in Italy when the following was written. "This is a new idea that is being tried now, and I think it's quite all

right! It gives us a chance to get away from the grind for a few days of peace and quiet. . . .

"The latest G. I. craze here is to have five or six inches of leather sewed to our regular shoes in the local repair shops, making a three-quarter length boot. I am sporting a pair and must say they are o. k. in this mud. The weather has been miserable: rain day and night, and of course we are right out in it most of the time. The roads must be worked constantly, and I've even done my share of that. The mountains are rugged, and I've been in places where every bit of equipment and supply must be taken in on pack-boards on your back. There are quite a few horse and mule pack-trains, and in places the fighting is far from mechanized. It makes it quite a slow process, but we are steadily moving on." — *Daykin Herald*, 1/14/44.

Pvt. Marvin Fredrickson of Wayne, leaving New York in May, reached China via Ceylon and India in July and reported home:

"The days are extremely hot but the nights are fairly cool. Our barracks are made of bamboo with a roof of dried grass and brick floor. . . . I have seen more ox teams driven here than I ever knew existed. All of the farming is done with cattle or water buffalo. . . . There are no towns and no post exchange, so we hardly need money. I suppose you have heard a little about inflation here. For three of our dollars we get 260 Chinese dollars, and it would take all of it to buy a good meal in one of the cities. Things imported from the United States bring terrific prices. I bought a bag of salted peanuts last night for twenty yuan or dollars." — *Wayne Herald*, 8/19/43.

Lieut. William Hughes of Lincoln wrote his wife:

"Most of the population in India is gentle, kind, lazy, filthy and poverty-stricken . . . or so it seems to the newcomer. If someone isn't begging from you, someone else is trying to sell you something. With them, bargaining is a game. You cannot consider them dishonest, since their economic life has always been characterized by this sort of thing."

Describing political conditions, he says three-fourths of the population are governed by the King of England. "In the Indian states, as in no other place in the world, does a very lowly cat gaze upon a most majestic king. . . ."

"If you've heard about the Cripps mission you know that England has half-heartedly offered India her freedom after the war. It is the congress party in India, under Gandhi, that is agitating Indian independence. Gandhi is a good man, has done a lot for the untouchables, and is to be praised for desiring independence. But he also wants non-violence—yet wants England and America to defend India and, paradoxically, doesn't want the Indian military to aid the allies to do this very thing. Very complicated! If India is given entire independence, how in the world will she unify the myriad divisions and factions here? The

ninety million Moslems alone are opposed to absolute Hindu control over India." — *Lincoln Evening Journal*, 2/11/44.

Lt. Mark T. Martin of Elkhorn, who a year ago was leading American scouts through Tunisia, wrote some colorful letters to the papers on which he used to work, though such letters came seldom. The commando-like troops crept into Axis territory to obtain vital information on positions and to keep a constant pressure on enemy troops.

"We were out in the hills for five days at a stretch, traveling 60 to 100 miles, and feeding the whole time on emergency rations in our light packs. It certainly is great training for a leg-man. We would like to have a blanket or two, but they take up space and slow us down, so all we carry besides food is our weapons. We are lucky if we get two hours of sleep out of twenty-four."

The patrols include thirty men who reconnoiter by night and dig in by day to avoid observation. Although casualties are comparatively heavy, the spirit of the men is very high, he said, and they are anxious to take on even more risky assignments. Three of his sergeants were promoted for valor and efficiency. One of these was a boy from Council Bluffs who had talked to Harold V. Boyle of the AP. His dispatch to the *World-Herald* of Omaha shows part of the picture:

"It is like rabbit hunting. On our last trip we walked all over Africa for five days—and found nothing the whole time but mud and hills and Arabs. Yet we might have bumped into Jerry in the very first mile, and to keep him from slipping through our flanks is our present job."

"We look and we shiver," remarked another of these men to Boyle. "At night we are freezing, and the cold alone would keep us on the move. Wind and rain are tougher opposition in patrol work than the bullets are."