

Buffalo Tales

September/October 2012

Lifelines (pt. IV)

By Nathan Piper



As seen in Robert Sinkler's 1943 letter—and evidenced by Homer Farley—Nebraska servicemen did write numerous letters home to nurture relationships with sweethearts. But others, like Clarence Brott, were writing home in order to fill voids left by their absence. Men also wrote to parents, brothers, and others with the purpose of describing in some discernable way their experiences in war. Richard P. Murphy, a Nebraska soldier who served, like Brott, in the war's European theatre, authored numerous letters during his time overseas to his parents anxiously awaiting his return in rural Nebraska. Sgt. "Dick" Murphy, attempting to stay connected with home and family, shared in one particular letter his having narrowly survived a German attack. In that letter published by *The Greeley Citizen*, Murphy exerts great efforts in assuring his parents of his safety—efforts that may, in fact, have been meant to convince himself of the very same fact.

Now I'm going to tell you something you don't know about, but do not be alarmed. On December 28 we were crossing the English Channel on what was called a Liberty ship. It was a clear, sunny day, about three o'clock in the afternoon. I was playing cards on the second deck with three of my buddies and we were knocked from out of our seats by a torpedo. A lot of thoughts went through our minds as the officers told us to file to one end of the ship... When we reached the end of the ship we could see the other end of it going down... We were given orders to abandon ship and in about 15 minutes the ship was clear of all men but 11, who were trapped in a hole... They cut one boy out with an acetylene torch but were unable to reach the others... We finally made it to the shore and did I get down on my knees and kissed the French soil—you bet your life I did... I never want to go through it an experience like that] again.

Other Nebraska servicemen experienced similar dangerous encounters and wrote home to their parents to offer evidence of their survival. These letters, not unlike Robert Sinkler's, were authored with great purpose. Some were looking for more than just a way to describe what they were experiencing. They were also looking for support and encouragement. But regardless of

the circumstances, all of these Nebraska soldiers were using letters to connect with home in a way they hoped would sustain them during difficult and dangerous times. One example, found in John B. Davis's book *The War Letters: A Young World War Two Naval Officer Writes Home*, shows Davis, a young officer from Omaha, Nebraska, writing home in January of 1945 following a German submarine attack:

We made the crossing alone and found that our original convoy arrived two days ahead of us. You can't imagine the size of the waves we encountered. I think it's a miracle this tiny ship held together. We got here too late to enter the harbor—it was snowing and the temperature was below freezing, so our watches were miserable.

War letters written home complained of uncomfortable conditions, recounted "close calls," and celebrated survival. They described comrades and begged for information that would allow them to stay connected to the everyday affairs of home. Letters conveyed concern for children, puzzled over concerns with money, and speculated always about when they would come home. And in some letters, soldiers gave themselves the role of a bearer of ill news. In a letter written by Nebraskan Glendal T. Harper to Evelyn Taylor of York, Nebraska, the soldier informs a young wife of the loss of her husband, Edwin L. Taylor, who had been a medical officer killed in December 1944.

My dear Mrs. Taylor, shortly after the first [Japanese] plane crashed, it was reported to me that Dr. Taylor had been seriously wounded by shrapnel... His legs were paralyzed, multiple shrapnel wounds in the chest, abdomen and back with clear evidence of internal hemorrhage. He spoke of you and your son with neither sadness nor worry. He would miss you and knew that you would miss him... Finally, he requested that I write you but all that he had to say was, "good-bye."... Dr. Taylor was either unconscious or heavily doped... when his veins collapsed... Near the little town of Lingagen, looking out towards the wide gulf whose endless breakers roll on the white shores, palm fringed and spotted here and there with the palm-shroud huts of fishermen, lies your husband with many other brave men.

But often what was not said can be as telling as what is. This is illustrated in a letter written to World War II veteran and resident of Kearney, Nebraska, Tony Shada. This particular letter represents the last words of a fellow Nebraska soldier and close friend Shada refers to affectionately as Del. In an interview conducted in September 2010, with Shada, the Nebraska veteran

related at length the dark and extraordinary events in which he was involved during World War II. Tony Shada survived five major engagements in the war's European Theatre. And among his many vivid stories lies one relating the importance of correspondence, and in particular, what *cannot* be said.

The letter in Shada's possession is the last letter a soldier named Del sent to Shada only days before Del was killed in action. In his 2010 interview, Shada only mentioned the letter briefly, and with obvious pain. Tony Shada retains the letter from this fallen friend reverently in a suitcase rich with World War II history in the fashion of a holy relic. And though Shada has survived harrowing experiences—many of which he openly shares—a single letter renders him to near silence. And that uncharacteristic silence speaks volumes.

Shada left Nebraska for basic training in Texas after his enlistment into the United States Army in 1941. Following this, he was deployed to Oran, North Africa, with members of the Army's 8th Corps. En route, Shada's troop transport became damaged. It was while listing aimlessly on the rough Atlantic waters—and with two naval destroyers circling his transport keeping enemy submarines at bay during generator repairs—that it became very clear to Shada that he was no longer in Nebraska. Not long after arriving in North Africa, Shada became bogged down with Allied forces in an attack later known as the Anzio Invasion.

“We had spent three days and nights on LCI's, eating K rations and puking,” remembers Shada. “It was the roughest ride I ever had... It was a stinking mess.” Fortunately for Shada, sea sickness and rough waters represented the worst of his journey from North Africa to Italy. “Luckily there was no fighting... We landed in a staging area. The way we were... they'd a-had us.” Almost immediately Shada and the 6th Field Artillery Corps (the 8th had been absorbed by the 6th) were committed to the Battle of Cassino Abbey. It was here at a medieval abbey that Germans had fortified themselves in a holy mission that maintained an elevated position, providing them with a tactical vantage of the countryside. Ultimately, after fierce fighting and “a hell of a-time,” bombers were finally called in and the Abbey was destroyed.

Sources:

Childers, Thomas. *Soldier from the War Returning*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009.

Davis, John B. *War Letters: A Young World War Two Naval Officer Writes Home*. Lincoln: Kubicek, 1990.

Harper, Glendal T. Letter to Evelyn Taylor, widow of Edwin L. Taylor. April 10, 1945. "War Letters." http://www.nebraskastudies.org/0800/stories/war_letters/wlintro.html (accessed November, 2010).

Murphy, Richard P. letter to his parents, "Letters from the Men in Service, *The Greeley Citizen*, June 28, 1945.

Shada, Tony. Interview by author. September 17, 2010. Kearney, NE.

Ghost Hunting with MPI

The next night for Ghost Hunting is August 31st and is SOLD OUT!!! There are still spots open for the September 28th Hunt. To pre-register, contact the Trails & Rails Museum or MPI at midwestparanormalinvestigators.com. Cost is \$40/person or \$75/couple.

Come Ghost Hunting for Halloween, too!!!

Special October dates that still have openings are October 12th and 13th! Cost is \$49/person or \$89/couple.

TRICK OR TREATING AT TRAILS & RAILS

Join us for our 2nd Annual Old Fashioned Halloween Party at the Trails & Rails Museum October 27th! Costume contest, old fashioned games, prizes, and candy for the kids in the afternoon and scary fun for the adults after sundown!

BUFFALO TALES is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization, whose address is P.O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848-0523.	
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Katherine Wielechowski, Editor	
2012 Annual dues, payable January 1, are:	
Individual.....	\$35.00
Family.....	\$40.00
Institutional Membership.....	\$50.00
Supporting Membership.....	\$75.00
We have replaced the word 'Basic' to 'Family'.	
Directors	
Term expiring June 1, 2013: Vicki Bissell, Chad Henning, Lynn Rauner, Lance Hehner	
Term expiring June 1, 2014: Mary Beth Lowe, Sharon Martin, Duane Muhlbach, Mike Peak	
Term expiring June 1, 2015: Corene Philips, Dan Speirs, Gary Straatmann, Bernie Hascall	
Officers (1 year term)	
President.....	Gary Straatmann
Vice-President.....	Mary Beth Lowe
Secretary.....	Sharon Martin
Treasurer.....	Lynn Rauner

2012 Calendar of Events

Saturday, Oct. 27 (time TBD): 2nd Annual Old-fashioned Halloween Party

All of November: Christmas Decorating (during regular business hours)

Saturday, December 1st from 12-1pm: Members Only Preview of the 25th Annual Christmas Tree Walk

First two weekends in Dec. (1st/2nd & 8th/9th) from 1-5 pm: Open to the public: 25th Annual Christmas Tree Walk

Education notes:

Wild Science Thursdays will return in the summer!

Ghost Hunting classes with the Midwest Paranormal Investigators-check web site for more info.!

Fabulous Fridays will continue to be held on the 2nd Friday of each month. Check web for topics.

Kearney Public Schools have the museum reserved for two weeks in May 2012!!

Volunteers, chairpersons, and sponsors are still needed. Please contact the office for more information on supporting your Buffalo County Historical Society!

PO Box 523, 710 W. 11th St., Kearney, NE 68848

(308) 234-3041 www.bchs.us bchs.us@hotmail.com

We hope you enjoy these stories about Buffalo County. We would love to have a stock pile of Buffalo Tales ready so they can go out in a more timely manner. Please submit your memories and stories to us by e-mailing them to bchs.buffalotales@hotmail.com or sending them to the post office box: BCHS, PO Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848.

We appreciate your support!

Director's Report

-Please help us thank MidTown Communications for donating funds to have the Church, School, Hotel, Pony Shed, and Outhouses painted!

-We are partnering with the "Her View From Home" Facebook page and website to get our Buffalo Tales to a larger audience. A teaser will be posted on Facebook with a link to the BCHS website and the full Buffalo Tale story for the reader to enjoy.

-The Blacksmith Shop is coming along quite nicely. The roof is on and they are working on getting it sided. We have had a lot of interest in it from visitors to the Trails & Rails in addition to members of the community.

-Coming soon: the Shea Barbershop will be on full display in the former blacksmith area

-The Smithsonian exhibit "Journey Stories" was a huge draw this summer! Over 1800 folks experienced this traveling exhibit, which includes the Wagons West crowd. BCHS is very fortunate to be able to host these exhibits and the new building will allow us to request additional titles.

-Find up-to-date information, Q&A, and announcements on the BCHS Facebook page.

Be sure to join the Buffalo County Historical Society group or the Buffalo County Historical Society/Trails & Rails Museum fan page on Facebook!



Trails & Rails Museum

Buffalo County Historical Society

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Kearney, NE 68848-0523

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www.bcbs.us

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