



COMMENTARY BY JAMES A. MOAD II

Re-imagining the Past through Letters

Young servicemen and women, some of whom didn't even graduate from high school, have penned the most compelling and unforgettable writings I've ever read.

—Andrew Carroll

ISAT IN THE COURTYARD OF A SMALL CHÂTEAU in Souvignargues, France, sipping coffee and rereading excerpts from *Behind the Lines*. It was one of four books edited by Andrew Carroll that I'd brought along on the trip. Each one was a collection of letters, journals, stories, and e-mails written by soldiers from the American Revolution on up to the War in Iraq. When the owner of the château, Bernard Nouvelle, greeted us, I placed the book in my backpack, armed my video camera, and followed along on the tour.

I listened to the energetic, sixty-year-old man, recount some of the history behind the chateau as he guided my family and me up and down the stone stairs and throughout the grounds. Part of the structure dated back to the ninth century and the wine cellar was once part of small dungeon where hundreds had perished. I watched my ten-year-old son's eyes light up at the mention of the word *dungeon*, and I wondered where his imagination was taking him. At the end of the tour we sat together in the garden overlooking the small village. Monsieur Nouvelle opened a bottle of wine, and pointed to a large bell on the southern wall of the château.

“They used to ring the bell when there was danger,” he said. “And the people from the village would gather here.”

“Danger?” I asked. It was my first full day as a guest at his home, and I was just getting a sense of our gracious host, a man well-acquainted with and proud of his region of France.

“A storm, a fire, if the village needed to be defended—those sort of things. It’s very, VERY old. When the Germans were retreating at the end of the War, my grandfather was afraid of ringing the bell, but the people came anyway. They were very afraid, you see, and they’d been taught for so long to come here; it’s all they knew.” He pointed down the hillside toward a narrow road, indicating where a line of soldiers had skirted the town in August of 1944. “The resistance was strong in the South, and my grandfather was worried the soldiers would come here and kill everyone.” He poured us each a glass of wine. “But they didn’t come. I think they were in a hurry to escape the Americans.” He gave me a half smile, and the conversation was over for the day.

I am no longer an artist interested & curious; I am a
messenger who will bring back word from men fighting
to those who want the war to last forever. Feeble,
inarticulate will be my message, but it will have a bitter
truth, and may it burn their lousy souls.

—Artist Paul Nash, WW I on a mission to create
patriotic artwork, *Behind the Lines*

I spent the next hour leafing through my books, trying to find an account of a battle from the region. In the end, I could only find one letter from the South of France. It was written by a French woman to her friend in England near the end of the War. She detailed her experience of retrieving the body of her teenage daughter, a member of the resistance, who’d been taken to a prison in Cannes, tortured and executed by the Gestapo. I closed the book, trying to imagine how difficult it must be for a mother to write that letter.

I walked to the edge of the grounds where my children were playing. Southeast of the chateau I could see row after row of vineyards stretching out toward a line of hills in the distance. Beyond them, a mere thirty miles away, lay the Mediterranean Sea, and another twenty miles further east were the cities of Marseilles and Toulon—two key ports captured quickly during the invasion of southern France.

I'd never given much thought to the Allied landings in the south, focusing instead on Normandy and the push toward Berlin, but just being there made me long to know more. The road outside the village was empty now, but after reading so many accounts from the war, it was easy to imagine a frustrated and defeated German Army in retreat, their vehicles clogging the roads, and the sick and wounded trailing along in convoys as they pushed north.

Like any other graduate of a military academy, especially a person who now teaches English, I've read regularly on the subject war: novels, memoirs, short stories, and enough nonfiction accounts to give me a clear sense of what I imagined war to be like. As a C-130 pilot, I've flown combat missions throughout the Balkans, airdropped food to refugees in the mountains of Bosnia, eluded SAM sites, landed with bullet holes in my wings, inserted Special Forces into austere locations, and airlifted out the dead and wounded. I've seen enough documentaries and photos to help paint my own picture of the fields, jungles, cities and seas where war is waged. From my father, a former Green Beret, and a survivor of two combat tours in Vietnam, I'd learned to fill in the gaps of what wasn't and couldn't be translated to the page or the screen. Short of actually being on the ground in combat, what else could I possibly experience to know more than I'd already learned? I was confident I had a clear sense of what war was like and the lessons to take away from it, but that was before I'd read any of Andrew Carroll's books.

You don't seem to realize that I've been living practically
like an animal for the past seven months... there is no
glamour, or color, or dash to the life of the Infantrymen.
All there is, is dirt and death.

—Private William Rigby, WWII, *Behind the Lines*

I met Andrew in the spring of 2007 during his visit to the United States Air Force Academy. He was there to speak to the cadets, but also to discuss the *Legacy Project*, a nonprofit initiative he'd established in 1998 to preserve war letters. I was teaching his book *Operation Homecoming* to my cadets—second-semester seniors—a jaded and tired bunch, who were literally counting down the days to graduation. It was the last required English text standing between them and tossing their hats in the air, and I wasn't optimistic about the response to my assignment: read the entire book—all 377 pages—in four lessons, and then write an essay about how it affected them.

While I was correct about the initial response, I was surprised at the rich and candid discussions sparked by the readings. The same students who barely spoke during *Catch-22* or *Flight to Arras* were suddenly eager to express themselves. I was surprised, wondering why the response was so different, but in hindsight, I shouldn't have been; the answer was simple. Unlike Andrew Carroll's first two books, *War Letters* and *Behind the Lines*, which included letters from as far back as the American Revolutionary and on up to the War in Iraq, *Operation Homecoming* focused exclusively on the post 9/11 world: letters, eyewitness accounts, journals and stories written by US troops and their families. This volume wasn't steeped in conflicts from the past—World War II, Vietnam or even the First Gulf War—all of which might as well be ancient history to the cadets. Instead, *Operation Homecoming* is about the present—their world—filled with the events that helped define them, and in some cases, motivate them to become cadets in the first place. The words in this book issue from their peers in Iraq and Afghanistan, soldiers their age, people who write, speak and think the way they do. When they read about what it means to kill, to watch friends die, to see children crushed beneath a convoy, or smell the burnt corpses of friend and foe alike, they listen. Their imaginations are able to make the crucial connections necessary for learning to take place. I think they began to understand, that in many ways, the book is about them.

This week he's due home, this son of mine. I wonder: Is he nervous? Is he excited? This child who was so kind and sensitive, so caring of his mother. I can't even imagine what war has done to him.

—Becky Ward-Krizan, War in Iraq, *Operation Homecoming*

The success of teaching *Operation Homecoming*, coupled with meeting Andrew Carroll, kindled my interest in exploring his three other books associated with the Legacy Project. It was clear to me that letters from past wars might be a perfect complement to the poetry and the fiction of war I was teaching in other literature courses. I was familiar with *War Letters*, a best seller, and I knew his most recent book, *Grace Under Fire*, had just been published, but I hadn't heard of *Behind The Lines* at the time. I collected the books and put them aside while I graded essays and prepared my final exams.

By the end of the semester, I began to realize that the experience of teaching *Operation Homecoming* had affected me as much, if not more, than the cadets.

It made sense. After all, several accounts in the book were from my peers too (one account was by a flight engineer in my old Air Guard Unit—167th Airlift Squadron), but for me, the impact resonated far beyond such simple connections. The ideas and thoughts expressed seemed to transcend the present conflicts, and the voices on the page were echoing the same sentiments from past wars. I could sense that there was much to be learned from the letters of past conflicts, but it would take reading Carroll's other three books and a week of touring in the south of France before I could piece together my thoughts.

Built to accommodate 23,000 spectators, the Roman amphitheater in Nimes is remarkably well preserved. Live concerts and bullfights are still staged in the oval ring once reserved for gladiator fights and executions. I climbed the stone stairs, and from high atop the amphitheater it was easy to envision the citizens of Nimes cheering at the battles being waged below. Later on, as I strolled beneath the stone archways that led down onto the ring, I thought of Carroll's last book, *Grace Under Fire*, composed of letters of religious faith in times of war. Looking out on the oval ring, I could imagine terrified Christians, chained up and waiting to be thrust into the ring. How many lives, I wondered, had been sacrificed to satisfy the crowds?

It's easy to think of war in statistical terms—whether the conflicts are from the past or the present. What does it mean that there were over a million casualties at the battle of the Somme, 1.2 million soldiers and civilians perished in the siege of Leningrad, over two hundred Americans were killed at Khe Sanh, or that nine fatalities occurred in a helicopter crash in Baghdad? These are numbers, and it's easy to distance ourselves from the statistics. Numbers, of course, don't write letters; they don't have names, hopes, fears, doubts, dreams, or a story to tell. Reading the words, though, of those who fought and died in combat forces us to see behind numbers, and engages our imagination in a way other genres can't. It's the immediacy of the writing in the moment—a need to express the inexpressible—emotions, raw and unfiltered by time that make this genre unique. We read the words and we're there with the writer, surrounded by the dead and wounded, as he reflects on the Battle of Bull Run. We're in the hedgerows of France recounting the landing at Normandy. We're in the Warsaw Ghetto, Dien Bien Phu and Sarajevo, enduring the sieges and feeling the desperation and fear. We're there. We're there. We're there.

All the firing had ceased, everything was calm and still after the awful storm save the awful shrieks of the dying and wounded which were great and came from every quarter in every direction. Cries for help, for water, brother calling to brother, comrade for companions....

—Confederate Capt William Hardy,
Civil War, *War Letters*

We slept in on our third day, and after a late breakfast, we strolled through town and found our way to the winery outside Souvignargues. We toured the facility and capped it off by sampling a dozen or so wines. A special local blend from several different grapes stood out above the rest, and I purchased two cases. On the walk back to the chateau, the heat was subsiding and the small town came alive in a way I hadn't noticed before. I looked at mothers with small children in strollers, boys and girls playing in the streets, and old ladies on bicycles as they worked their way through narrow, winding streets of town.

I'd finished *Behind the Lines* for a second time that morning, and it was the one book that wouldn't let go of me—the one I wanted to talk about with Monsieur Nouvelle or to anyone who'd care to listen, but is there ever a right moment to bring up the subject of war? What makes *Behind the Lines* unique is that it reaches out beyond America's borders, incorporating letters from throughout the world. The diverse accounts from so many nations are matched only by the repetition of ideas—ideas that I found consistent with what American soldiers have expressed in everything else I've read. Whether it was a Turkish soldier expressing the need to defend his country against the British at Gallipoli, a Confederate soldier detailing the righteousness of his cause to his northern brother, or an American describing the horrible conditions of Iraqi civilians, the situations may have varied slightly, but the sentiments are always the same. They wrote of God, duty, country, and of defending a way of life.

I opened my hands, looked up to the heavens and said:
“God of Turks, Master of the Birds, the sheep, the leaves,
the mountains. You have given all this to the Turks.
Please leave it to the Turks.”

—Turkish Soldier in a letter to his mother,
WWI, *Behind the Lines*

Following a forty-minute drive south through a series of narrow, winding roads, we reached the beach at L'espiguette. It was a well-needed break from the sightseeing, and we all needed a quiet reprieve from the pressure of being guests. We spread out our towels and tried to build sand castles near the water's edge, but the strong wind and erratic waves thwarted our modest attempts. Overhead, an airplane paralleled the coast with its banner advertising something in a language I hope to learn someday. The plane conjured up the image of Antoine de Saint Exupéry, the great French aviator and author who'd written *The Little Prince*. He disappeared over the Mediterranean somewhere east of where I stood in his P-38 Lightning, just weeks before the Allied invasion of Southern France. I'd taught his book, *Flight to Arras*, to my cadets a few months before, and despite my best efforts, most had dismissed the book. Unlike the writers in *Operation Homecoming*, St. Exupéry's stories were perhaps too distant and too philosophical to engage them.

St. Exupéry had been a military pilot (a career many cadets aspire to), yet few, if any, expressed much interest in discussing his work. Was teaching the book a waste of time, or had I simply failed to make the story come alive? I tried to recall if I'd been enthused by the book when I was a cadet, but I had no distinct memory of ever reading it. Surely, I had, though. I knew what the book was about, and I was aware of St. Exupéry's frustrations as an aging aviator in a time of war. He was a man lost between the past and the present, and that's when I realized that for me, the book itself had become a *peer* of sorts. The book had been with me all along just like all the other books I'd read. The cadets were just beginning to find their literary peers, and although I wasn't aware of it, all the books I'd read were part of all the subconscious voices I'd been listening to across the years. The letters in Carroll's collections had given the past a new opportunity to assert itself alongside the literature, memoirs, and stories I'd read. I could hear the voices of those writers, working in concert, supporting and defending all the assertions that had been

lost or forgotten—a stern warning from the past to keep all the stories alive. Yes, I needed to keep teaching *Flight to Arras*.

Someone helped him over the gangway to our ship and as he walked past us one of the assisting sailors said, “shell shock” and we noticed the vacant look in the soldier’s eyes which seemed widened by the recent horror.

—Ensign Charles Sweeney, WW II, *Grace Under Fire*

Reading the guidebook atop the walled city of Aigues–Mortes, it was easy to imagine myself as a medieval warrior defending the city or preparing for battle. Built a few miles inland near a swampy lagoon (Aigues–Mortes means “dead waters”), Louis IX had constructed the city to be the launching point for the Seventh Crusade. The imposing walls surrounding the inhabitants are still intact, and the Tower of Constance still dominates the skyline, rising 105 feet into the air. It’s a testament to the wealth and power of France in the mid-thirteenth century when Louis IX gathered an army of 25,000 soldiers and embarked on the crusade. Six years later he would return home barely alive, defeated and bankrupt, but unwilling to give up the fight for the Holy Land. Undaunted by his past failures, the future saint, would embark on another crusade nearly thirty years later, but he would die of the plague without achieving anything.

My eighth-grade history teacher, a veteran of the Korean War, was the first of many to teach me the importance of learning the lessons of history. He was also the one to assign our class the task of interviewing a veteran. It was simple: ask five questions, write the answers down, and talk about it in class. Although my father had never spoken to me of his experiences in Vietnam, he agreed to participate. While I barely recall sitting down with him, I can still remember the last question I asked him, and that’s because the answer was related to something we shared together—something I’d always enjoyed. “What’s it like to be in war?” I asked, unaware of the complexity of my final question. I don’t recall if he hesitated, or if he’d anticipated what I would ask, but the answer has stayed with me ever since. “It’s like you’re camping for a whole year—real camping on the ground out in the middle of nowhere,” he said. “Except some crazy person has let a huge, wild beast loose in the hills—a terrible, hungry beast that never-ever sleeps and can see in the dark. And every night you can hear it moving out in the distance; you know it’s hunting you, and the only thing you can do is kill the beast before it kills you.”

When I turned to fire I saw a kid I had trained go down
in a heap... What has been happening and will happen in
the future is better left forgotten. What I've almost done,
will have to do, or have already done is better forgotten,
too.

—Cpl. Mike Jeffords, Vietnam, *War Letters*

Not only did the image curb my enthusiasm for camping, but in my young imagination, war itself had been transformed into a horrible beast—a thing to fear. As a cadet and a young officer, though, I'd learned to push aside the fear. I was taught that war could be waged properly, and I came to accept the plausibility of that concept; it was just a matter of taming the beast, I reasoned. After all, wasn't that what being an officer was all about? As a lieutenant and a young captain, I held on to that notion, and even defended it, shielding my arguments behind the American military successes of the Twentieth Century. But hiding behind success can be a dangerous and seductive thing. It can make you deny or forget what the literature and poetry of war is always reminding us—that the beast can never fully be tamed.

It's clear to me now, that my father was right to instill in me a fear of war, even at such a young age. It was an educated fear, imparted through experience, and I've come to see that Andrew Carroll's books play a similar role. Like my father's stories, they reach out to the imagination of those who've never experienced combat or seen the effects of war unfolding all around them. By using a series of vivid historical summaries throughout the books, Carroll puts all of the wartime correspondences in context. In doing so, the books encapsulate the history of war in a way no other form can, reacquainting us with the events that precipitated the letters, and reminding us of the devastating consequences of war. The combined effect allows us to see clearly, across more than two centuries of warfare, just what the beast is capable of: British prisoners being brutally executed during the revolutionary war, Sherman's march to the sea, the massacre of African-American soldiers at Fort Pillow, the rape of Nanking, the Dresden fire bombing, Dachau, Nagasaki, My Lai, Srebrenica, Abu Ghraib... and one can't help but think about all the unacknowledged and undocumented atrocities from the past. After all these years, it's clear to me now, that what my father was trying to tell me, was that in order to fight the beast, you're forced to become one.

My dear parents, if the sky were paper, and all the seas of the world an inkwell, I could not describe my suffering and all that I see around me.

—Fourteen-year old Polish boy, Chaim, writing from a labor camp, WWII, *Behind the Lines*

I opted out of the last day's excursions, deciding instead, to go through my notes, read and take some time to write. It was late in the afternoon, when Monsieur Nouvelle sat down beside me, curious about my reading. We spoke briefly of the War in Iraq, the French and American failures in Vietnam, and of World War II. Although it was before he was born, he told me the story of how his father had been captured by the Germans, and spent more than four years as a prisoner of war.

"Did he write—any letters, a journal—anything about what happened to him, or did he say much about it?" I asked. "No," was his reply. "It was a terrible, terrible war for him, terrible for everyone, and he didn't talk about it. Nobody did."

I couldn't help but think of my own father's silence over the years. He'd only spoken a few times to me about Vietnam, and when he did, it was mostly to add to the things I already knew or to hint at things he never wanted to repeat. Over the years, I've come to see the silence not so much as a need to forget, but rather more as having no desire to remember. Those who fight and kill for their country understand that people who haven't experienced war can't begin to imagine what it's like. So, why discuss things that people don't want to hear anyway, and why conjure up images that return unasked for on their own?

It's clear to me now, that the pervasive silence accompanying soldiers who've experienced combat makes The Legacy Project all the more important. It's striking to learn that men who never spoke of their combat experiences to family and friends had penned incredible letters or journals when they were young men away at war. Letters that went beyond the battlefield, expressing love, hope, and a longing for what they'd lost in the wake of their experiences in war. For many, these letters are a final expression from the person they once were, and they defy the silence. They are voices calling from the past, youthful voices pleading to future generations to stop and *imagine* another way of solving the conflicts of the world... to stop and *imagine* all the horrible consequences of war before they send another generation off to fight... to stop and *imagine* the cost—the terrible, indefinable cost of all that silence.

Your place on this wall shows our future leaders and warriors that we cannot repeat Vietnam. They have a choice in their future, and I know if you were able to give them direction and strength of conviction, your words would echo my own, and lead them away from the mistakes of the past.

—anonymous letter to a fallen comrades
from Vietnam, *Behind the Lines*

I realize now that I've been working all along to sharpen the imaginative skills of my cadets—the future leaders with whom I share a mere forty hours a semester. As an officer, I'm acutely aware that in the end, everything at a military academy is about training—preparing young men and women for the unknown roles they may be called upon to play—and I wonder, is it possible to train an imagination, too? Maybe that's what Andrew Carroll's books are ultimately about, providing lenses through which to imagine the past. It's one thing to teach the literature, poetry and history of war, but it's another thing to have the cadets read the letters from people their age, written across the years, and to hear the reflections on what it's like to question things, to know fear and doubt, loneliness, to understand what it means to kill, to be exposed to death and terror in its infinite varieties, and to sense what it means to wake up and wonder if this day is your last.

The ghosts of American soldiers
Wander the streets of Balad by night,
Unsure of their way home...

—Sgt Brian Turner, War in Iraq, *Operation Homecoming*

After reflecting on all the stories, letters and anecdotes from across the years, I find myself considering how lives are reshaped by the experience of war—those who return home and those whose voices are silenced forever. And I can't help but

dwell upon the silence that follows “last” letters home. Interspersed throughout the books, those final letters to spouses, children, parents, lovers and friends, are the convincing reminders of the individual cost of war.

EDITOR’S NOTE: For more information about Andrew Carroll’s Legacy Project, please visit www.WarLetters.com.

JAMES A. MOAD II, the assistant fiction editor for **WLA**, teaches in the English & Fine Arts Department at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado. He has over 3000 hours of flight time and over a hundred hours of combat time as a C-130 pilot.