

By Trevor Wilson,

University at Albany student

May 2010

### **Captain W. B. Smith: A Citizen-Soldier of World War II**

Despite popular culture's image of the World War II soldier as a larger-than-life hero, the typical GI was just a regular, everyday citizen—sometimes a quiet hero—who was either drafted or volunteered for the war effort. One such man was Captain W. B. Smith (of Albany, NY), whose correspondence with his wife Helga, archived at the New York State Military Museum, is both eloquent and simple.

Captain W. B. Smith served as a captain overseas for the United States National Guard from, it is assumed, 1943 to 1946. His letters have since been donated to the New York State Military Museum and Veterans Research Center in Saratoga Springs, New York. The hundreds of V-mail letters in the collection, between Captain W. B. Smith and his wife, Helga, tell much more than a single story. One can learn a lot about the life of the average soldier by reading this couple's letters. For instance, the correspondence, in its entirety, reveals the impact on their relationship of the war's experience of long separations from each other.

Before looking into the archive and beginning to read the letters, it is first important to become familiar with the time period during which these letters were written. Instant media and communication, for example, did not yet exist, and thus, it took a while for people to send and receive their messages. Depending on the season, it took anywhere from one week to one month for a response to a letter. This made it hard to maintain conversations, because the letter's news could have been from a month ago. The limits of the time's technology also made it challenging to hold on to pictures of loved ones. In today's world, one can quickly receive pictures via e-mail or the Internet. Back then, however, people had to carry physical pictures if they were to have pictures at all.

The language used at the time was a bit different from the language used today, too. It was characteristically more wholesome, and expressions such as "rascal" and "darling" were common. Finally, it is important to understand the imperatives of military censorship at this time. Every V-message examined displayed a censor's stamp in the upper left-hand corner. Such censorship eliminated the possibility of military personnel sending specific messages concerning where they were, where they were headed, and where they were going [Messner]. This created communications that were probably much duller than they could have been, if not for the censor.

Beginning with a letter from Captain W. B. Smith on April 28<sup>th</sup>, 1943, it becomes clear how average these people were compared to the common heroic caricatures of soldiers. This letter is simple: Captain W. B. Smith talks only of his daily activities such as what time he woke up ["Darling, this morning we slept till we felt like getting up (9:30)"], cleaning, reading letters, and writing letters [April 28<sup>th</sup>, 1943]. Its simplicity in style and content puts Captain W. B. Smith on a very human level.

The letters from both Captain W. B. Smith and Helga continue to be written in the same relative style throughout the spring and into summer. Then, Helga elatedly writes some life-changing news on July 18<sup>th</sup>: she has just given birth to their baby son, "Stevie." She goes on to talk about which of Stevie's features belong to Captain W. B. Smith, and which of his traits seem to be from her. For example, she notes that "...his feet look pretty big so maybe he'll be big like you..." [July 18<sup>th</sup>, 1943]. This continues in her letter from July 21<sup>st</sup>, where she talks at length about her baby son, describing what a "good boy" he is and how much of a great son he will be and how excited she is for her husband to meet him [July 21, 1943].

One week later, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of July, Helga's letter contains useful information. She explains that a letter sent from Captain W. B. Smith took 10 days in the mail for her to receive. This, during the non-eventful days of the end of July (the lack of any holidays coming up or in the recent past would usually mean faster delivery time than normal) suggests the lack of technology to effectively and efficiently deliver mail (compared to by today's standards), thus hindering two people from having a legitimate and flowing conversation from afar [July 28<sup>th</sup>, 1943].

Captain Smith first gets the news of his baby son Stevie on the 30<sup>th</sup> of July, an entire eleven days after he is born. Obviously being too overjoyed even to mention being disappointed in not witnessing the birth of his child, or even being notified about it until 11 days had passed, Captain W. B. Smith is clearly more excited than he had been in a long time. This is obvious in the way he frequently calls Helga "darling," along with the choppiness of his writing. Also, while most letters are usually 1 to 2 pages long, this one completely fills up 3 pages, and he uses exclamation marks quite generously, often grouping multiple exclamation marks together at the end of a sentence. He even underlines the name "Stevie!" and gives it an exclamation mark [July 30<sup>th</sup>, 1943]. His rushed script and use of exclamation marks allow the reader to realize just how emotional a soldier can be, much like the everyday citizen. Excited to the point of rambling, Captain W. B. Smith is far from the cool and machine-like soldier depicted in government posters of the period.

The next few months go by without much change. Likely because of her new responsibility as a mother, Helga's letters become much less frequent, while Captain W. B. Smith continues to correspond steadily. Helga talks mostly about Stevie and their daily activities, along with his development. "He was such a good boy today" and similar comments are quite frequent. It becomes clear that Helga is very devoted to her new son. Captain Smith, similarly, writes mostly about his excitement regarding Stevie. Military speak, as always, is completely absent in his letters.

The second major expression of human emotion can be found in the letter Captain W. B. Smith, writes on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1943. His realization that he won't be able to be with his family during the upcoming holidays, such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's, gives this letter a more somber tone than those previous. His love for Helga and his need to be with her is evident in his request to Helga to, "Add several pictures of yourself to my Christmas list." [October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1943]. Later in the month, on the 24<sup>th</sup>, Captain Smith realizes that his "Norse Nectarine" does not seem to be herself. He becomes concerned and asks her questions regarding her health and how she is feeling emotionally and psychologically [October 24<sup>th</sup>, 1943]. Two days later, he receives a letter from Helga in which she goes into details about trying to find a new place to live, mostly looking for suitable apartments in the Albany area [October 26<sup>th</sup>, 1943]. This, along with the combination of basically being a single mother and having a husband overseas in the military, is likely the cause of her stress, which Smith clearly discerned and became worried about. Dearly missing the woman he loves and just wanting pictures of her and Stevie as Christmas gifts also reveals Captain W. B. Smith's more human side.

On November 11, 1943, Captain W. B. Smith got creative and artistic. On his paper, he used an assortment of stamps to create a make-shift Christmas card-- something similar to a postcard. The stamped ink spells out, "Wishing You A Merry X'Mas." [November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1943]. The "postcard" is complete with stamped ink in the shape of holly leaves, bells, and a tree. This can be linked back to his heartache concerning the holidays and could possibly be his way of coping while still being thoughtful of his beloved Helga back home. The month continues with W. B. Smith asking for more letters from Helga and people at home as they are, apparently, his way of coping with holiday-time separation.

A further example of Smith's emotional expressions during holidays can be found in the spring of 1945. In a letter on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1945, he describes his Easter experience: "Darling, it's been a good Easter this year, considering the weather and news only. Can't say anything else in its favor, though." [April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1943]. Come to find out, he is dispirited because they did not have a parade as they had in previous years, and because he misses his wife. Later letters indicate that Captain Smith sent a teddy bear to Helga and Stevie. When he learns that it has been delivered, he responds: "Darling, so the teddy bear arrived?!! It wasn't to be delivered till on or about July 8<sup>th</sup>. I ordered it a couple months ago, giving July 8<sup>th</sup> on the delivery date. I'm glad you both like it so. I thought he should have one: it seems to be a conventional gift and childhood companion." [April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1945].

These examples suggest that this military man—and perhaps the typical soldier-- is not the cool, controlled person that dominates some public images. Rather, Captain W.B. Smith was a man who loved his wife and newborn son, who felt the pain of separation from them, and who freely communicated this. In many ways, he comes across as a regular, everyday family man—the citizen-soldier of World War II.

### Sources consulted

"B-17-Studebaker." *Index of/photos/ads/images/slides*. Web. 10 May 2010.

<<http://www.skylighters.org/photos/ads/images/slides/B-17-Studebaker.jpg>>.

Goodwin, Sue. "American History-Decade 1940-1949." *American Cultural History*. Lone Star College-Kingwood Library, July 2009. Web. 10 May 2010.

<<http://kclibrary.lonestar.edu/decade40.html>>.

"Man the Guns, Join the Navy." *WWII Propaganda Posters*. Web. 10 May 2010.

<<http://www.propagandaposters.us/manguns.jpg>>.

Messner, Cassie. "V-Mail Service." *National Postal Museum*. National Postal Museum, n.d. Web. 11 May 2010. <[http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/museum/1d\\_V-Mail.html](http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/museum/1d_V-Mail.html)>.

"Next." *WWII Propaganda Posters*. Web. 10 May 2010.

<<http://www.propagandaposters.us/nextposter.jpg>>.