



*Walter Babbitt: a Case Study of Correspondence
Content and Censorship
in the 1940's*

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Introduction

The role of the mass media in times of war and political conflict is constantly changing. The government's desire to foster citizens' support of a war and the journalist's commitment to tell the truth have been clashing since the inception of war journalism in the Crimean War. Newspaper and journal accounts of wartime conflict and decision-making have not always been honest and, in many cases, have served as a propaganda arm of the government. Probably the greatest use of propaganda of all time was seen in World War II. An analysis of several major newspapers at the time can easily show the censorship that was enforced on war correspondents' dispatches. Too, self-censorship also

occurred as journalists, like most other Americans, wholeheartedly supported the war effort.

However, soldiers' personal correspondence, such as letters and diaries, is also subject to censorship and criticism by authority figures. Less is known about the effects of war censorship and tense political atmospheres on soldiers' war correspondence. This question is both historically important and currently relevant. Therefore, we examine here the collected letters and diary entries of former Captain Walter Babbitt of the United States Army Air Forces in World War II, as archived in the collection 2003.0212, in the New York State Military Museum and Veteran's Research Center, Saratoga Springs, NY. The letter sample used here spans from January 1944 to December 1945, and the diary sample spans from December 1945 to January 1946.

It is well known that World War II was a time of intense propagandizing in favor of the American government and the Allied cause. Philip Knightley, in The First Casualty, his account of war journalism over time, notes that censorship gave way to self-censorship as both the government and the correspondents themselves began to see war journalists as an arm of propaganda in World War II. Journalists became sympathetic to the cause of the government along with the daily plight of soldiers and, therefore, "got on side" with the United States government's public relations efforts. As then-General Eisenhower said, "Public opinion wins war. I have always considered as quasi-staff officers, correspondents accredited to my headquarters" (Knightley, pg. 344-345). The overall role of journalists in World War II was summarized by former correspondent Charles Lynch, when he said, "It's humiliating to look back at what we wrote during the war. It was crap.. .We were a propaganda arm of our governments. At the start, the censors enforced that, but by the end we were our own censors.. .It wasn't good journalism" (Knightley, pg. 364). Correspondents generally wrote in one of three manners. First, they may have emphasized individual epics of bravery. Second, they may have

focused on the general atmosphere of the time and place. Third, and relevant for our analysis, they may have embedded themselves, delving into the daily lives of the soldiers (Knightley, pg. 355-357). We will examine three types of sources in our comparisons and analyses: the accounts of Walter Babbitt, the reporting of embedded journalist Ernie Pyle, and some analytical secondary sources relevant to the time period.

As mentioned, the Babbitt files are broken down into a series of letters and a diary. The letters are written from 1941 to 1945; the cross section used here is from January 1944 to December 1945. The letter set includes a collection of 29 letters written from Florida, North Carolina, and India. The diary entries span from December 1945 to January 1946. The diary set contains a total of 32 entries written on the ship home to the United States. The letters would have been subjected to official censorship before making it home to Babbitt's family, but the diary would have been written privately with no intention of sending it immediately. However, we hypothesize that Babbitt's writing will mirror the writing of journalists at the time in terms of self-censorship. The diary entries should show fewer signs of propagandizing, but self-censorship may have taken its toll on Babbitt's writing by this point after several years of learning what was to be omitted. We hope to elaborate on the specifics of this effect in Babbitt's writing, if indeed there is an effect. We further hypothesize that Babbitt's account of daily life in the Air Force will mirror that of journalists in terms of patriotism. Overall, we believe that this analysis and comparison will be an important reminder to present-day journalists and soldiers of the effects of censorship and patriotism. We hope that analyses such as these inform future research into the effects of war on writing.

I. Summary / Analysis of Letters

The first letter in this sample is dated January 4th, 1944. Walter Babbitt writes about his

experience dealing with localized prostate pain in the hospital in Coral Gables, Florida. After he gets out of the hospital, the reader discovers by following his letters that he is in technical training school in Miami, in the 304th Technical School Squadron, but is anxious to get overseas (Letters, 2/14/1944). Two days later, he indicates that he has been transferred to the 724th Training Group, Seymour Johnson Field, in Goldsboro, North Carolina (Letters, 2/16/1944). He is happy here and able to use the training he has acquired in teaching others. Between March 3rd and October 3rd, 1944, there is an unexplained break in the collection with no letters. However, the reader discovers on October 3rd that Babbitt is finally stationed overseas, in India as part of the Air Force 148th Replacement Company. The rest of his letters are sent from different points in India, and the diary picks up on his return trip home to the States. Although his letters are not necessarily focused or theme-oriented, a few relevant themes come up in the letters that give insight into both Babbitt's circumstances and the atmosphere of the time.

The first theme in these letters is his focus on immediate events and daily activities while still training before his leave to India. From the very first letter, his focus is on himself and on those around him. Many of the issues he writes about concern his health, his finances, and his daily schedule. Even when discussing war-related issues, there is a very immediate, schedule-based, focus and almost no broad statements or generalizations. For example, he describes a new assignment in his letter dated February 14th, 1944: "Yesterday Colonel Starch called me to his office and told me that he was sending me on a new assignment. I'm due to leave tomorrow night.. Personally, I hope it's overseas before long." Much of the reporting before India is done in this way - event-and schedule-centered. Besides censorship, there could be a few reasons for this focus. First, the received message is that he did not know much himself except for what he was told. For example, he notes in his letter dated February 16th, 1944, "I wish I could tell you more, but since we

just arrived we know nothing more ourselves.. .so let's just take what comes the best we c a n .”

Second, with his family as his audience, he wanted to keep them caught up with his life and seemed therefore to include less general war information. Finally, he may be legitimately happy, as his letters suggest, with the way he is being treated, because he is still comfortable in the States. In fact, his letters suggest that any annoyance with the war abroad is quelled by an appreciation for the training and services at home. For example, in his letter dated February 16th, 1944, he notes “that this damn war must end [and] it will take all our combined efforts in the service and at home. I’m well prepared for anything since I’ve had a long training period.”

Another prevailing theme, specifically in the India letters, is Babbitt’s desire to provide information to his family. He wants to give more information about his plans, his missions and his circumstances but seems to be limited on space and, perhaps, on appropriate information to disclose. This can be seen in a few ways in the letters. First, he is often advising his mother to search and learn more about the issues he is discussing, especially when he cannot say much himself. In some cases, he is eager to learn more himself through his mother’s research. For example, in his letter dated October 3rd, 1944, he writes, “I’m sure you’ll have to look up a book on Hindu mythology for a complete story on Gun-Putti. I can’t tell you all about him - in fact, all of my data is from natives, so I’ll let you tell me what you find, and, in the meantime, I’ll endeavor to find more.” In another letter dated February 26th, 1945, he writes, “I’m glad you’re reading some articles on India, for I’m sure you’ll find them interesting.” This desire for accurate information transmission also appears in Babbitt’s incessant verification of the war news that his family is receiving in the States. Babbitt wants to be sure that his family is getting the right news about the war as far as he understands it. For example, in his letter dated February 4th, 1945, he writes, “War news sounded fine today.. .deeper pushes through Southern China and the Burma Road now open. I’m far from it now, but I do know the

real struggle for it.” One final way that this trend manifests itself is in Babbitt’s reporting of new events or predictions. When Babbitt does manage to break away from immediate needs and speak of the larger political picture of the war, his writing is vague and ambiguously predictive. For example, in his letter dated January 10th, 1945, he notes, “As you probably know, we’re no longer CBI but the India- Burma theatre. China is now a separate and distinct theatre commanded by General Wedemeyer. I certainly believe something will be forthcoming soon.” This general trend could have several causes but the most likely cause is twofold. First, Babbitt’s promoted position of Captain in an active area gave him access to more information about the war that he wanted to tell his family. However, censorship was still a major stumbling block to Babbitt; therefore, he self-censored but his desire to share is obvious in his letters.

A final theme that is seen in his India letters, specifically in the later letters, is exhaustion with the war effort but a spirit of persistence until the end. For example, Babbitt states in his letter dated July 2nd, 1945, that although he was eligible for leave in eight months, he hoped “to stay on ‘till the whole mess is over for that was my original idea in enlisting.” However, it is clear that the war, at this point, had turned much of his patriotism into a desire for the war’s end. He notes in his letter dated September 8th, 1945 that, “It won’t be long and we’ll have a swell time when we’re all together again.” It is also clear that his desire for the war’s end is based on his desire to end the affliction and violence. For example, he states in his letter dated August 16th, 1945, that “to think that all the suffering will cease is truly marvelous and a thing for us all to fall down in prayer.”

Although this is not a general trend, some of the last few letters mention something interesting about differential perceptions of censorship. After Japan had surrendered to the Soviet Union, Walter writes, in his letter dated July 2nd, 1945, that “our censorship regulations have loosened recently and I can now tell you I’m stationed in Kanchrapara, 35 miles from Calcutta.”

However, in a response to his mother's statement as recorded in his letter dated August 27th, 1945, Babbitt writes, "You say, 'Censorship has been abolished.' No change has reached us. Do you mean regarding newspapers telling of our whereabouts, or what?" It seems, then, that differential information is reaching the lay citizen and the lay soldier at this late stage of the war. As Babbitt would be in a good position to know this information had it been available to him, it is likely that this differential censorship perception, whatever its cause, was a higher command.

As can be seen from these letters, there are several themes that emerge over time for Walter Babbitt in the 1944-1945 range. The letters paint a picture of an honest man wanting to keep his family aware while at the same time trying himself to stay knowledgeable. They offer the reader a glance at the frustration of ambiguity and the constant shadow of self censorship that followed from the extreme patriotism of World War II. However, the story is somewhat different when Babbitt knew that his writing would not be censored. His personal diary did not go through any mailrooms or checkpoints while he was writing it, and the war was essentially over at this point, albeit only recently won. It should be informative, then, to search for trends in the diary, and to compare the diary and the letters.

II. Summary / Analysis of Diary Entries & Compare / Contrast

Letters were not the only way that Water Babbitt preserved the memories of his experiences overseas. Starting on December 22, 1945, Babbitt began a journal to preserve the memories of his trip home from India. Babbitt had been overseas with the 148th Replacement Company since the unit was activated on June 24th 1944, according to his entry on December 22, 1945. The ship that he sailed on

for his trip home was the Northeastern Victory, San Francisco.

In even keeping a journal, Babbitt represents the difference between war and peace. Soldiers and sailors are often discouraged or prohibited from keeping journals especially when in the field or on ship, even in peace time. This is because a soldier's diary could contain any number of pieces of information that could be incredibly valuable to the enemy if it were to be captured (Sontag, chapter 8). In fact, early in the Pacific war, American and Allied soldiers were able to gain intelligence about the Japanese forces against them by finding and reading diaries found in the packs of dead Japanese soldiers. However, with the war finally over after so many years, the rules became a little slack, and most likely few would care about the journal of an army officer who was being shipped home, and then discharged from the army. His entry also speaks to the change from war to peace as he notes that the ship he will travel on has been restored to its peace-time colors, "white bulkheads and cream stacks and rigging," instead of still having its wartime camouflage (Diary, 12/22/1945).

One piece of information that Babbitt wrote in this entry which certainly would have been highly classified in wartime was the course that the ship was going to take: "for the journey - tentatively scheduled to take us thirty-odd days via Ceylon, Tuticorin, Red Sea, Suez Canal, Atlantic Ocean, and home." This is the kind of information that was highly classified during wartime, and was often not told to troops who were on the ships, for fear that somehow it would get out, and that potentially a submarine could find and sink the troopship with its cargo of men and war materials. For example the security of this information was so tight that even the captains of the converted cruise ships RMS Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth, were not allowed to open their orders to find out what route they would take until after they had cleared New York Harbor (Butler).

His entry on December 22, 1945, also inadvertently brings up another issue that was quite

common for American GI's in the CBI (China-Burma-India) theatre. This comes through Babbitt's comment about the room he was assigned to on the ship. "The room was unusually comfortable with double deck beds, table, upholstered built in couch, metal clothes closets, forced air conditioning, and sink with hot and cold water." Babbitt, like many GI's, would have found these quarters, "unusually comfortable," after the living conditions that he had endured during his time in India since, "American living quarters were Spartan and primitive by US standards" (Spector, p.404). The point was re-enforced by a comment made about the city of Colombo in his diary on December 27, 1945, "The first impression we had [of Colombo] was cleanliness - the cleanest Indian city we had seen."

Babbitt's entry on December 23, 1945, also speaks of another issue that plagued many GI's serving all over the world during the war, this being the issue of food, and at times having to live off just army rations, or even meals at mess halls, in which certain ingredients were nearly impossible to obtain. According to this entry, Babbitt's dinner the night before covered many of the sometimes missing pieces, "Last night for dinner we had steak, French fries and best of all - real American butter, our first in twenty one months."

The diary entry on December 26, 1945 mentions two other events that wouldn't have occurred if the war were still going on. First, Babbitt got a tour through the engine room from the Second Engineer Kermit Summers, in which Babbitt was shown a variety of equipment, including the degaussing machine, - a machine that negates a ship's magnetic signature in order to prevent magnetic mines and torpedoes that explode when they detect a ship's magnetic field - which would have been classified equipment during the war.

The second event that might not have occurred during the war was the sending of light

signals between the ship and other ships and shore stations. This was likely not to happen during the war, as the sending of light signals, especially at night, could be seen by an enemy aircraft overhead and give away the position of the ship, putting the ship at risk of being attacked.

On December 27, 1945, Babbitt wrote something in his diary that certainly would have been heavily confidential information during the war. This information was the location of a number of very valuable ships including, “several British troop ships, American oil tankers, and a baby aircraft carrier.” The locations of valuable ships like this would have been highly

classified during the war, and that Babbitt was able to write about their locations shows how security and censorship had been loosened since the end of the war.

The ship's schedule is also a reminder that the war is over, and that the world is trying to change back to a peacetime footing. Before leaving India, the ship stops at the port of Tuticorin in order to pick up a load of cargo. The cargo that the ship carried was a load of leaves that were a major ingredient in the manufacturing of laxatives. Despite the potential uses of the cargo, it is highly likely this cargo represents the switch to a peacetime economy, as it seems rather likely that a load of laxative ingredients probably would not be a very high priority for the war effort.

Babbitt's entry on January 2, 1946, speaks about the good and bad times that he experienced while in India. "Farewell to India - the romantic, Taj Mahal, dysentery, Parsee, untouchable, Gateway of India, Limey, and malarial romantic far East."

However, with peacetime at hand, not all activities on the ship were quite as mundane or regulated as they were during the war. One example of this comes from the entry on January 4, 1946, in which Babbitt speaks of a new activity, which he partook in with Kermit Summers, a chair building project in the ship's engine room work shop, which he claimed to enjoy despite it being "hot as the shades of hell in that workshop."

By January 8, 1946, Babbitt's ship has reached the Red Sea, and is cruising towards the Suez Canal, "with Arabia on our starboard and Egypt on the port."

Additionally on this day Babbitt mentions a book he was in the middle of reading and enjoying, *Earth and High Heaven* by Gwethalyn Graham. He mentions how the book deals with religion and love, but he feels the main message of the books comes from a certain passage in chapter

six, “There are people who are born superficial, whose superficiality is usually related to ideas, to their ideas towards politics, economies, art, literature, and the objective world, but also occasionally to their attitude towards other people. They prefer to not have to deal with more than a limited number of over-simplified ideas.” Through reading books such as this, as well as extensive travel and other new wartime experiences, it appears that Babbitt, and likely a large number of returning U. S. servicemen, had their eyes opened by the war. Their experiences made them likely more willing to accept new ideas that differed from what they had been told as kids. This, in part, may have helped to build eventual support for concepts such as equal civil rights for African Americans, which as a movement began to gain steam in the United States about a decade after the war.

This theme of an open mind continued in the January 10, 1946 entry. At this point the ship had reached the beginning of the Suez Canal, and Babbitt was able to see the King of Arabia and King Farouk of Egypt, both of whom had been out in their personal yachts as the ship neared the canal. In this entry, Babbitt admires the history and culture in the region and laments the lack of a chance to go ashore and check out different parts of Africa. His curiosity about these lands, and desire to find out more is mentioned near the end of the entry. “I hope it will be my opportunity some day in the future to visit Egypt, and North Africa, including possibly a trip to South Africa and the Sudan. A country so deep in the world’s treasures certainly warrants our knowledge.” Babbitt’s last comment really goes to show how much US servicemen had their minds opened to the world during the war, for how much did the average American know about Africa at the beginning of the war?

Babbitt’s entry on January 11, 1946 is clearly the writings of a peacetime, post-war soldier. This comes from two different types of writing that can be found in this entry. The first is another open -minded statement that many people would not have thought of, and even less so

before or during the war. Babbitt comments on just how profitable the Suez Canal can be for the British, with the cost of using the canal coming to about \$8,000. The second type of writing contains information that wasn't in the earlier journal entries, and certainly would have been heavily censored and guarded during the war, but here is Babbitt openly writing about the route and schedule that the ship plans to take for the rest of the journey to the United States, even mentioning that they will be taking a "southern route to avoid high[ly] turbulent seas and cold weather as much as possible." In addition, Babbitt gives the ship's exact location in the next day's entry, placing the ship at "25 E, 34 N which places us almost between Crete and Tobruch (in Libya)."

The journal continues through the rest of the journey, but finally ends with a comment that could only be made by a serviceman: "Well, tomorrow is D-day for the Northeastern Victory." The entry on January 26, 1946, marked the day that the Northeastern Victory reached the United States and came into the port of Providence, and Babbitt writes one of the happiest phrases in his entire collection of writings, "Tomorrow - that will be possible - I can already visualize myself talking to Mom and Gram. We expect to debark sometime tomorrow morning."

As a final note, it is instructive to compare what Babbitt wrote about his experience with an article written by the noted war correspondent Ernie Pyle. Pyle reported about spending time with American Air Force personnel in Italy in January 1944. Pyle spoke about how, for the most part, servicemen in the Air Force seem to have a better deal than their infantry counterparts. Pyle wrote that Air Force men have some semblance of an ordinary life to come back to after each day's mission, and for the most part were well fed and clean shaven. While the conditions are not perfect by American standards, he writes, it is still far better than being in the mud. The airmen recognize this, and are always eager to help out their brothers in arms on the ground. Pyle's

account partially matches Babbitt's account, although Babbitt had a large number of complaints about the lack of cleanliness in India, as well as the diseases that existed there and infected many Americans, which included dysentery and malaria (Pyle, 2009).

III. Personal Interview

As important as it may be to review primary and secondary sources from the time of an event, it is always possible to learn more about the circumstances and situations surrounding those sources from an eyewitness. The authors have had the pleasure of interviewing Robert Babbitt, brother of Walter Babbitt, for this analysis. We hoped to gain a deeper understanding about the life of soldiers and civilians during the time of WWII from the perspective of another Babbitt brother. This interview was conducted on April 15th, 2009, at 8:46 PM, in Delmar, NY, at Robert Babbitt's house. The authors would like to thank Robert Babbitt for his time and help.

Question: When did Walter leave for the army and how old were you at the time?

Answer: Well.. .He enlisted in the Army Air Corps after attending [college]. I don't remember the exact date, but there was a difference of nine years between Walter and me. Walter was probably twenty two and I would be thirteen.

Q: When Walter left, how close were the two of you?

A: Walter and I, again, are.. .nine years apart, and the thing that pops into my mind.. .is that I gave him a black eye for his eighth grade graduation and he always reminded me of that. But the difference in our ages meant that we almost had separate lives.

Q: In your correspondence between your brother and your family, did you all feel like you had the freedom to write back and forth whatever you chose or did you feel watched at all?

A: No, I don't think that we had any kind of feeling that we were being watched in what we wrote, and I know that some of things that were written.. .by my brother home were blocked out.. .We all realized that this had military meaning, and we agreed with it.

Q: Could you describe, in your memory, the general picture of the war that you got from reading Walter's letters?

A: That's a difficult thing because we were reading newspapers at the time; that's where we got most of the news. Anything military from Walter would have been his progression in rank and his change from one station to another. No real war information came in his letters; I don't think they would have allowed it.

Q: How was the picture received from Walter's letters of WWII different than that portrayed by the media at the time? What was your general opinion of the media portrayal of WWII?

A: This is an interesting question because there's an entire difference between the war going on at the present time and WWII. The general public was completely behind WWII. There were no ifs, ands, or buts about it. Everybody took part in the war; everybody sacrificed in the war. In the war that's going on at the present time, you have to really read the newspaper, but nobody is really sacrificing except the men who are in the service.

Q: Besides your brother's letters, what other sources contributed to your understanding of the war?

A: Information from military people who came home on leave, and that was very seldom.. .most of the information we got was from newspapers.

Q: How much or how little did government propaganda influence your opinion of the war in high school?

A: We didn't think of government propaganda. We were fully behind the government; there

was no question about that in anybody's mind. I don't think anybody questioned anything.

Q: With the information you had, were you for or against WWII and why?

A: I think there's no question - we had to go to WWII. We had to take part in it.

Q: Were you, or was your family, aware of any misinformation, lies, or excessive optimism coming from the government about the war? Explain.

A: I don't remember of anything like that at all. When you saw gold stars in the windows of homes, you didn't question that - that meant a death in the family. People sacrificed food, clothing and everything else so they could support the war effort. There was little difficulty that people recognized because they were all sacrificing.

Q: After the war, can you remember anything in particular that Walter told you in person, that he could not tell you in writing?

A: No, I don't - no, not a thing.

Q: What do you remember as Walter's general opinion towards the media or censorship during or after his time in service?

A: I don't recall that he ever commented on it; I don't think he had a problem with it.

Q: What is your opinion of WWII journalists like Ernie Pyle who tried to make themselves part of the action, versus journalists who were not as involved in the daily lives of the soldiers? Also, can you comment on some of the difficulties for journalists that want accurate information in the war today?

A: I don't know of any journalists who have been.. embedded, as they call it, who have given any bad information. Ernie Pyle was there; any journalist who was there, I think, can give good information. [Today, journalists that want to set themselves apart have to] go after the facts and really dig up the dirt, because they'll only do it once. The people won't let them back in again

to get that kind of information a second time. So they're put at a loss trying to get real, detailed information.

Q: How well do you think the lessons of WWII regarding the media or any of these issues discussed here were learned and passed down in history?

A: The big difference between WWII and the present war is that, in WWII, everybody sacrificed. In the present war, the military sacrifices and the family of the military is sacrificing. The rest of the people almost don't know what's going on, and that's unfortunate.. I don't think there's any question.. In WWII, you had two wars going in, in the East, in Europe, and in the South Pacific. Everybody sacrificed whether they were civilian or military, and it's unfortunate that people don't have to sacrifice in this war, more. There is no draft in this war; that's unfortunate. If you're gonna have a war, people should sacrifice, and not just the military.

It seems, then, that the issues discussed here concerning wartime media and censorship become less important the more people are sacrificing. This interview has made the concept of total war much more real, and its effects, far from producing a cynicism towards the government, seemed to harbor in the minds of both families and soldiers a sense of unity in action. Although critical analysis is important, it can be tainted both by opinion of the present war and removal from the time of WWII.

IV. Conclusion

The letters and journal of Walter Babbitt provide a very important link back into American history into a World War Two theatre that is often swept under the rug instead of being held up with the more prominent Atlantic, European, and Pacific theatres of war. The lack of coverage in the

China-Burma-India theatre did not mean that these men were any less brave or courageous than any other Allied servicemen anywhere in the world. It was in the CBI theatre that allied armies fought and succeed in defeating the Japanese in the incredibly rugged and jungle-covered land of Burma, stopped the invasion of India, and succeeded in re-opening the supply line to China (Spector).

Each of the Babbitt files also provided a nice contrast to the other. The majority of the letters was sent during the war and was viewed by censors; the diary was written after the war as America began to stand down. The censors were no longer watching; we were able to see the difference in the levels of information, which helped us figure out what the censor would prohibit and what they would allow. We were then able to check the information in a similar article written by Ernie Pyle as well as check secondary sources relevant to the time. Limitations include the small amount of time given to complete this study as well as a lack of prior knowledge about the CBI theatre. Future research could go in two directions. First, it would be interesting to similarly compare the personal accounts of soldiers in other theatres and in the infantry. Also, it would be instructive to do a more thorough comparison between this sort of writing and Ernie Pyle's war journalism. Despite the limits of this study, this analysis has been invaluable in helping us to continue putting together the pieces of history over 60 years later.

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