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Picking Up the Pieces

IN SEPTEMBER 2011, gay, lesbian, and bisexual Americans were permitted to serve openly in the US armed forces for the first time. A few months earlier, President Barack Obama had terminated the policy in place since 1994, whereby “homosexuals” could serve in the military, but only if they kept their sexual orientation hidden. For their part, commanders were not meant to enquire into servicemen’s and service-women’s sexual identities. Nevertheless, a policy initially dubbed “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Pursue” quickly became truncated to “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT) in everyday usage. This abbreviation reflected the reality that some commanding officers remained in covert pursuit of closeted gay personnel. An estimated 13,000 men and women were discharged from the military in the DADT era as a result of their sexuality – or presumptions about it.¹

The Onion greeted the demise of DADT with a droll satirical story, its stock in trade, headlined: “First-Ever Gay ‘Dear John’ Letters Begin Reaching U.S. Troops Overseas.” With a dateline of Bagram, Afghanistan, the spoof report noted the arrival of “hundreds of Dear John letters” addressed to “newly outed troops overseas this week, notifying soldiers for the first time ever that their same-sex partners back home were leaving them and starting a new life with someone else.” The story quoted a fictitious first lieutenant, delightedly announcing: “This is what we’ve waited so long for . . . My boyfriend wrote that he didn’t love me anymore, that he wasn’t sure he ever really had, and that he never wanted

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to see me again. Those are words earlier generations of gay soldiers never had the opportunity to read.” *The Onion* relished the perversity of servicemen and women hailing heartbreak as a civil rights victory. “Now all troops, regardless of their sexual orientation, are free to have their entire lives ripped out from underneath them in a single short note,” hurrahed an imaginary gay rights advocate. This humorous take on the repeal of DADT underscored the fact that, hitherto, queer service personnel could share neither the ecstasy of new love nor the agony of lost love with their comrades at arms.²

The Onion offered a wry critique of homophobia in the military. By using the breakup note as its vehicle, the paper also attested the Dear John’s status as a rite of passage – as predictable a feature of military life as the “high and tight” buzzcut, Kitchen Patrol drudgery, and drill instructors’ profanity. *The Onion* invoked several well-worn tropes. It stressed the callous brevity of breakup notes, with their twin revelations that the sender wasn’t only ending things with the recipient but beginning a *new* romance – rejection and betrayal rolled into one. And the story highlighted the military’s concern over the impact of imploded intimacy on operational efficiency. *The Onion* included a spurious soundbite from Senator John McCain. A well-known opponent of DADT’s repeal, McCain was quoted warning against the havoc “gay Dear John letters” would wreak in the field: “Allowing so many utterly lonely, dejected, and newly single troops to serve on the front lines would only impair our combat capabilities and place our nation at risk.”³

To illustrate its story, *The Onion* used a photograph of a serviceman crouched in the desert, helmeted head bent disconsolately over a letter. Leaving aside this soldier’s camouflage jacket – sleeveless to better display his impressively sculpted biceps – the image could’ve been drawn from any US war since GIs first coined the term “Dear John” during World War II. The precise origins of the phrase are shrouded in obscurity. Dictionaries of slang and standard American English supply an array of possible derivations and early exemplars. Some propose the coinage took its inspiration from a popular radio serial, *The Irene Rich Show*, broadcast nationally from 1933 for a decade. This anthology of mini-dramas used the epistolary form as its hook, each episode beginning as

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0.1. Irene Rich greets a canine fan of her “Dear John” radio show at CBS KNX radio studios, Columbia Square, Hollywood, May 1, 1942. (Courtesy of CBS via Getty Images.)

though Rich were reading aloud a letter she’d penned. (Hence the show’s alternative name, *Dear John*.) But though the letters began with this salutation, they weren’t what would soon become known as Dear Johns.⁴

As a synonym for a breakup note sent by a woman to a man in uniform, the Dear John letter made its debut in a major national newspaper in October 1943. Milton Bracker, at twenty-four already a seasoned correspondent stationed in North Africa, wired a story back for publication in the *New York Times Magazine*. His feature ran under the didactic headline: “What to Write the Soldier Overseas.” “Separation,” Bracker observed, was the “one most dominant war factor in the lives of most people these days.” Regrettably, however, absence wasn’t making all hearts grow fonder. Wherever “dour dogfaces” – from “Maine, Carolina, Utah and Texas” – found themselves in “places as unimaginable as Algiers,” “Dear John clubs” were springing up. These, the reporter explained, were mutual consolation societies formed by

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officers and enlisted men who'd received letters from home "running something like this:

'Dear John: I don't know quite how to begin but I just want to say that Joe Doakes came to town on furlough the other night and he looked very handsome in his uniform, so when he asked me for a date –'"⁵

Yank, the Army weekly, had reported on "Brush-Off Clubs" months earlier, in January 1943, offering illustrative examples of these letters without yet calling them Dear Johns.⁶ Many press stories in the same vein followed, dotting the pages of both civilian and military newspapers over the course of this war and beyond. Excerpts from archetypal specimens of this newly named genre were a common feature of reportage. According to journalists, women composed brush-off notes in a variety of registers, ranging from the naively clueless to the calculatedly cruel, but invariably beholden to cliché. When Howard Whitman explained the Dear John to readers of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* in May 1944, he had his imaginary female writer string hackneyed phrases together: "Dear John – This is very hard to tell you, but I know you'll understand. I hope we'll always remain friends, but it's only fair to tell you that I've become engaged to somebody else."⁷ Formulaic words, Whitman implied, would do little to soften the blow. Trite sentiments might even exacerbate the pain caused by a revelation that was both belated and perfunctory.

War correspondents who brought these letters to civilians' attention were keen to preach a particular sermon about mail and morale, love and loyalty. Hyperbole was the order of the day. "It is doubtful if the Nazis will ever hurt them as much," Whitman opined, referring to the emotional wounds inflicted by women who sent soldiers Dear Johns. This was quite a claim under the circumstances. Neither the loss of limbs, sight, hearing, sanity, nor death itself – which the German Wehrmacht inflicted on millions of Allied personnel – caused as much damage as a letter from a wife or girlfriend terminating a romantic relationship. So Whitman and others insisted. But, to these commentators, it was precisely the circumstance of being at war that made rejection more tormenting – and more intolerable – than in civilian life. Since many contemporaries agreed that a broken heart was the most catastrophic injury a soldier might incur, "jilted GIs" garnered widespread sympathy, including from their COs. While the brass still tended to regard "nervousness" in combat as an

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unacceptable manifestation of weakness, officers often extended a pass to servicemen who responded to romantic loss with tears, depression, rage, or violence.⁸

Among other things, a Dear John issued servicemen a rare license to emote. That stricken soldiers would act out, and be justified in doing so, was a widely accepted nostrum in civilian circles too. Here's Mary Haworth, an advice columnist, indignantly addressing her readership in the *Washington Post* in July 1944:

a bolt of bad news that strikes directly at their male ego – telling that some other man has scored with the little woman in their absence – can lay them out flat, figuratively speaking; and make them a fit candidate for hospitalization. This is no reflection on their manhood, either. It illustrates, rather, their civilized need of special spiritual nurture while breasting the demonic fury of modern warfare.⁹

Like Haworth, many female opinion leaders condoned men's emotional disintegration under the duress of a Dear John. Eager to shore up vulnerable male egos, they joined the chorus condemning women who severed intimate ties with servicemen as traitors – worse than Axis enemies because American women were (or *ought* to be) on the same side.¹⁰

In World War II's gendered division of labor, it fell to women not only to wait but to *write*. Men battling Axis forces were fighting “for home” – as innumerable propaganda posters, movies, and other patriotic prompts reminded them. Women may have symbolized the home front, but their role was neither passive nor mute. The wartime state, along with legions of self-appointed adjutants, regularly reminded women that to “keep the home fires burning,” they had to stoke the coals of romance with regular loving letters to men in uniform.¹¹

For their part, many soldiers endowed mail with magical properties. Facing the prospect of life-altering injury or death, men readily sacralized objects they believed might serve as amulets against harm. Some took this faith in mail's protective power so literally that they pocketed letters next to their hearts, as though note-paper – or the loving sentiments committed to the page – could deflect bullets.¹² But the magic could also work in reverse, or so some soldiers feared. For if

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loving letters could ward off danger, mightn't unloving words invite it? Pulitzer-winning poet W. D. Snodgrass recalls harboring these suspicions as a Navy typist during World War II: "Mail call was the best, or worst, moment of each day; you approached carefully any man whose name had not been called. Only a 'Dear John' letter was worse – we felt, mawkishly no doubt, that with no one to come back to, a man was less likely to come back."¹³ Similarly, Vietnam veteran Michael McQuiston remembers his platoon sergeant's reluctance to let him go out into the field after he'd received a Dear John: "Their rule was that they didn't do that. It was bad luck." (McQuiston pestered his way into a mission only to sustain an injury, thereby confirming the wisdom of superstitious belief.)¹⁴

From Homer's *The Odyssey* onwards, soldiers have been haunted by – and taunted themselves with – the specter of female infidelity, associating disloyalty with fatality. Penelope, whose constancy Odysseus put to the test by disguising himself as a beggar when he returned home after long years away at war, ultimately demonstrated her steadfastness to her husband's satisfaction. By the time of his return, she had already fought off more than 100 suitors with her cunningly unraveled and rewoven yarn, except in an alternative version of the legend which has Penelope sleeping with them all.¹⁵ That this revisionist myth-maker preferred not to copy Homer's portrait of Penelope – a model of connubial chasteness – hints at a larger phenomenon. Soldiers' and veterans' recollections have tended to accentuate the unfaithful few, not the devotedly loyal many. Dear John stories exemplify this trend, commonly treating as "universal" an experience that, though not unusual, was far from inevitable.

American men in uniform began to broadcast tales of being "given the air" by mail long before GIs conjured the term "Dear John" in World War II. Some of these notes, or perhaps apocryphal versions of them, swiftly found their way into public circulation. One Civil War specimen, an uncanny harbinger of things to come, appeared in September 1863, in Point Lookout, Maryland. The *Hammond Gazette*, a hospital newspaper, excerpted a letter that had apparently just been received by a rebel soldier, "Henneri," then recovering on the ward: "Kind Sir – I received your letter – glad to hear from you. We have been corresponding for some time together. Now we will have to quit our corresponding to each other,

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as I have placed my affections on one I wasn't dreaming of, and soon will be joined in wedlock."¹⁶ Civil War scholars have identified several Dear John letters (anachronistically so-called) sent to both Confederate and Union soldiers.¹⁷

What's often billed as the "most famous" Dear John in history was sent to another hospitalized invalid shortly after the end of World War I, a quarter century before the phrase was coined.¹⁸ In March 1919, nurse Agnes von Kurowsky wrote to tell "Ernie, dear boy," that their dalliance during his recuperation in a Milan hospital was over. For her, it had been an immature and platonic infatuation: "Now, after a couple of months away from you, I know that I am still very fond of you, but, it is more as a mother than as a sweetheart." Agnes's opening salvo anticipated that her words would "hurt," but she expected they wouldn't harm the recipient "permanently."¹⁹ Literary scholars have debated the acuity of her prediction ever since. Some insist that Ernest Hemingway, the "dear boy" in question, never did recover from this blow to his adolescent ego. ("Ernie" was nineteen at the time; "Aggie" a venerable twenty-six.) Hemingway suffered bouts of severe depression throughout his life, committing suicide in 1961. He did, however, exact his revenge early on. In one of Hemingway's first pieces of published fiction, "A Very Short Story" (1924), a nurse jilts the narrator, whom she'd pledged to marry, sending him a note that theirs had been merely a "boy and girl affair." She is in love with a major and expects to marry him. But this union does not come to pass. The nurse is betrayed by the major on his return to Chicago, and the story ends with his contracting gonorrhea "from a sales girl in a loop department store while riding in a taxicab through Lincoln Park."²⁰

If Dear Johns existed *avant la lettre*, why weren't they recognized as a distinct genre and given a name until World War II? This book doesn't provide a definitive answer to that question. Since the term emerged from oral tradition not bureaucratic decision, no official memorandum filed in an archive can tell us precisely who invented the term, when, and why. Enlisted men did this work unbidden. We might speculate, though, that the Dear John's crystallization resulted from several factors that set World War II apart from previous conflicts.

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This globe-spanning cataclysm required mobilization on an epic scale. All told, about 16 million American men served in uniform, along with nearly 400,000 women in the auxiliary services. Of this total, around 73 percent were shipped overseas. Although the average period of service abroad was sixteen months, many spent far longer away from home, including months as occupation troops after the war ended.²¹ With hindsight, knowing the dates of VE Day and VJ Day, we tend to forget just how much uncertainty Americans in uniform and their loved ones lived with during a war that stretched on and on across multiple fronts. Even in early 1945, as the Third Reich crumbled, many War Department planners expected that Japan mightn't be beaten into "unconditional surrender" until 1947. Separation, as Milton Bracker noted, was indeed the most formidable aspect of wartime life. Not knowing when – or, yet more achingly, whether – a lover, husband, or father would return home severely tested emotional ties between "here" and "there."

Unlike in World War I, when fewer Americans served overseas for a shorter period, millions of married men were mustered into the ranks in the 1940s. Marriage, already corroded by the increasing incidence of divorce, became yet more precarious.²² Despite, or perhaps because of, the greater number of husbands in uniform, romantic love achieved pre-eminence as a "sinew of war" in this conflict. "Mother love" had been the Great War's most valorized bond between the home front and men at war. "The emphasis somehow has been on the mothers, or sometimes the wives the youths were leaving," sighed a writer in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in September 1917. "Nobody has been talking about the sweethearts, although everybody must have known that draft age and enlisting age was also lover age."²³ No one could convincingly have made the same complaint in the 1940s. In the sentimental culture of World War II, intimacy between men and women – whether between husbands and wives, or young men and their girlfriends or fiancées – sidelined maternal affection.²⁴ With more emotionally attached men sent off to war, the probability that some relationships would not survive separation exponentially increased, as distance, danger, uncertainty, and unreliable lines of communication strained even the strongest connections. The Dear John condensed – and confirmed – pervasive fears that love mightn't conquer all.

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If it's impossible to pinpoint categorically why the Dear John came into existence when it did, it has undoubtedly remained a fixture of American war culture ever since. Five years after World War II ended, the younger siblings of the greatest generation – along with some veterans – were drafted to fight another war, this time in Korea. The armistice that ended what the Truman and Eisenhower administrations had dubbed a “police action,” signed in July 1953, coincided with the Dear John's inaugural etching onto vinyl, courtesy of Jean Shepard and Ferlin Husky's hit, “A Dear John Letter.” In the duet, Shepard's character plaintively writes to her former beau, John, serving far away in Korea, to break the difficult news that she no longer loves him:

Dear John oh how I hate to write
 Dear John I must let you know tonight
 That my love for you has died away like grass upon the lawn

And tonight I wed another dear John

As if this weren't bad enough, it's his brother, Don, she plans to marry – and Don wants John to return her photograph! The record soon topped the Billboard country charts, making nineteen-year-old Shepard the youngest country musician to score a number one hit, and remained on the charts for twenty-three weeks. The song, along with the coinage it helped popularize, became a fixture of the Country music canon, recorded many times over by various artists as a timeless anthem for doomed love. In 1990, the song was still believed so emotive that some local radio stations banned it from the airwaves, fearful that it might cause too much dejection among men in uniform bound for the Persian Gulf.²⁵

America's war in Vietnam elevated the profile of Dear John letters yet higher, while further lowering the reputation of women who wrote them. In 1969, prominent forensic psychiatrist Dr. Emanuel Tanay (an expert witness at Jack Ruby's trial) announced that more wives and girlfriends were sending these notes to men in uniform than in any previous conflict.²⁶ The fact that he couldn't substantiate this claim didn't stop many soldiers and veterans from repeating an anecdotal assertion, then and thereafter. As a statement about the faithlessness of women at home,

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it evidently rang true, whether empirically verifiable or not. “Everybody gets a ‘Dear John’ letter at some point,” Vietnam veteran Tom Nawrocki recalls in the continuous present tense of war memory. The 48th Army Postal Unit even named itself the “Dear John Express,” embroidering this legend onto its patches.²⁷ Of course, nearly three million American men who served in Vietnam were *not* all jettisoned or betrayed by their wives or girlfriends. But to some more jaundiced observers, Dear John letters seemed of a piece with other forms of treachery on the home front, like antiwar protestors who spat at returning veterans – a widely recounted experience that has been challenged as a myth.²⁸

The Dear John letter imparts a bitter tang to many poems, plays, novels, and memoirs Vietnam veterans wrote on return to “The World,” as well as innumerable books written about grunts. Hollywood’s dramatizations of the Vietnam war also commonly accord the Dear John a bit-part, if not a starring role. Movies such as *Hamburger Hill* (1987), *Platoon* (1986), and *Love and War* (1987) tapped into a longer tradition founded by celebrated veteran-novelists of World War II, like Norman Mailer, Leon Uris, and James Jones. Their semi-autobiographical blockbusters and the movies subsequently based on them – *The Naked and the Dead* (1948/1958), *Battle Cry* (1953/1955), and *The Thin Red Line* (1962/1998) – all feature soldiers or marines receiving Dear John letters while serving overseas.²⁹

The Dear John tradition has been kept alive over subsequent decades. Participation in the Persian Gulf War (1990–1991) inspired Marine Corps veteran Anthony Swofford’s *Jarhead* (2003), which, like Sam Mendes’s screen adaptation, made considerable play with female infidelity and the technologically inventive Dear Johns that alerted marines to their cuckolding.³⁰ More recently, the “forever wars” – America’s military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, launched in the wake of 9/11 – have ushered the Dear John into the twenty-first century. Nicholas Sparks’s novel and Lasse Hallström’s lachrymose movie, *Dear John* (2010), introduced this expression to a new generation of “born digital” Americans, ensuring it wouldn’t become as unfamiliar as the practice of letter-writing itself.³¹

Over the decades since World War II, a lexical counterpart to mission creep – the unplanned expansion of an operation’s objectives – has been