

My One and Only

American Love Letters from the Civil War to the Iraq War

This exhibit displays love and heartbreak through letters, photos, and greeting cards from the Civil War to the war in Iraq, a century and a half later.

Featured here, among other extraordinary correspondences, are letters by a Navajo Code Talker, who served in three different conflicts (the Second World War, Korea, and Vietnam); an impassioned and poignant love letter from the notoriously stern General John “Black Jack” Pershing; a message of longing by a female soldier to her fiancé, who was also a soldier, that was returned to her with the dreaded word “Deceased” written on the envelope; transcripts of audio “letters” between Colonel George Patton IV and his wife, Joanne, during the Vietnam War; and a letter penned on Valentine’s Day itself -- in 1863.

Valentine’s Day has a murky origin, but as early as the Middle Ages the holiday was associated with romance. In America, hand-made Valentines were exchanged in the 1700s. The first mass produced Valentine’s Day card was created in 1848 by Esther Howland, the daughter of a stationery printer. Valentine’s Day cards became increasingly popular during the Civil War, when couples were separated from each other for extended periods of time and sadly, in many cases, forever.

Although the acronym “O.A.O.” -- which indicated to recipients that they were each other’s “one and only” -- was mostly used by troops in the Second World War, the sentiment, of course, is a timeless one; throughout the history of warfare, lovers have exchanged letters to express their affection and longing for each other and to distract themselves from the dangers of combat with the possibility that they would never see each other again. The letters gave troops a further reason to fight and stay alive with the hope, above all, that they would come home safely and once again be reunited with their very own “one and only.”

~

Exhibit curated by

Wynter Salazar, Assistant Archivist, Leatherby Libraries

Andrew Carroll, Founding Director of the Center for American War Letters

John Encarnacion, Project Archivist, Leatherby Libraries