

**NJS Presents****Teaching NJ History****In this Issue:*****Every Soldier's Letter*****By Mary Schurter****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v5i1.198>**

*NJS presents a student-authored poem that is the outgrowth of an in-class assignment about World War I. We thought it particularly timely as the Treaty of Versailles went into effect just over 100 years ago, on January 10, 1920, officially ending the Great War.*

From Steve Santucci: Over the past 12 years I have collected original WWI soldier letters from basic training through the war and into 1919. I have from time to time utilized some of the letters in my United States History 2 classes. The past few years I have neglected the activity because script is a foreign language to many if not most students. This year I took a survey to determine if I could use the letters with my current group of students. Enough students felt competent in their ability to read script, so I chose the most clearly written letters. The students used the Advanced Placement Method of analyzing documents through the HIPPO method (in which they seek to understand the Historical context, Intended audience, Point of View, Purpose, and Outside information). We look at the documents and understand and evaluate the reliability of the primary sources. The goal was to understand what information was absent from the letters and why? Students discuss and share their answers. We discuss the documents' reliability and usefulness for understanding what was occurring. I followed with a showing of *They Shall Not Grow Old*, Peter Jackson's WWI documentary which utilizes original servicemen's interviews and period footage, digitally restored. The goal of the activity was for students to recognize that the

letters blurred the reality of war, and to try to understand what the letters represented to the soldiers: an escape from reality, and piece of home. My student Mary Schurter was inspired by the activity and the film to create a poem that captures the essence of the activity.

From Mary Schurter: I was inspired to write this poem by a lesson taught in my United States History class. I combined my understanding of the lesson with my passion for writing and composed this poem, which I titled “Every Soldier’s Letter.” It draws upon the fact that World War I soldiers were limited when it came to expressing their feelings and describing their experiences in their letters to their families.

“Every Soldier’s Letter” can be read in three different perspectives from a single soldier. From top to bottom the soldier addresses both the positive and negative aspects of war. Every vague, positive aspect (odd lines 1-31) is followed by the disclosure of a negative aspect (even lines 2-32). The message that I conveyed in the poem is that WWI soldiers’ letters might seem to lack emotion and be generally boring, but the soldiers’ desire to communicate the harsh truth of their new lifestyles to their families is often just beneath the surface. Overall, this poem is based on the military censorship, which sometimes stifled soldiers’ expression in order to prevent the enemy from discovering sensitive information that might jeopardize the Allies’ victory.

*Every Soldier’s Letter*

By Mary Schurter

To my family,

2 My dear family,

Every soldier’s letter is monotonous, so I will tell you

4 I am writing to you how every soldier wishes he could

The air is cold

6 I want to come home

The snow is heavy

8 My uniform does not keep me warm

But I am well

10 Men are dying every day

But everything is well

12 My heart aches

But the scenery is lovely

14 It may be missing something

Because I can see so far

16 War is devastating

It is not too quiet

18 There is always sound

I laugh with my friends

20 The enemy is loud

I learn lessons

22 I have learned to read between the lines

War is not bad

24 War is horrific

I call this military my family

26 These trenches do not serve as a home

You have naught to worry,

28 I am writing to you how every soldier wishes he could

Yours truly,

30 I miss you,

Your soldier...

32 Your endangered soldier

*Mary Schurter is a sophomore at West Morris Mendham High School. She shares, "I take my academics seriously and I especially enjoy writing. I am also involved in extracurricular activities such as peer tutoring, the photography club, and the cross country and track teams."*

*Steve Santucci has been teaching High School History and Social Studies for the past 20 years, concentrating on both US I & II, as well as World and European History (on the Advanced Placement level). He has also taught electives in Economics, American Government, and politics and sociology. Mr. Santucci currently works at West Morris Mendham High School.*