

What to Write the Soldier Overseas

By Milton Bracker
By Wireless from Allied
Headquarters, North Africa.

Do's and don'ts for those who want to give the
news from home and keep up morale at the front.

THE doarest dogfaces in Africa these days are strictly non-dues-paying members of the "Dear John" club. That the depth of their despair is matched by members of other chapters throughout Uncle Sam's Army is entirely probable; but that does not matter. In this theatre their melancholy is supreme.

"Dear John" clubs are composed of G.I.'s—and officers, too—who have 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—"

Obviously the letter has infinite variations, but the impact on the recipient is always the same. He is "brownd off"—and a deep, dark, blackish sort of brown it is.

This cropping up of "Dear John" clubs is symptomatic of the effect mail has on a soldier, no matter where he serves and what his job. Probably the one most dominant war factor in the lives of most people these days is separation—a concept which to many who grew up in traditional American homes was virtually unthinkable before the war. Now sons, brothers, sweethearts, husbands and fathers from Maine, Carolina, Utah and Texas abruptly find themselves in places as unimaginable as Algiers. And the link between them and what they know and love best is much less an abstract patriotic ideal than a very tangible if often humbly written letter from home.

A LONG-LEGGED G. I. lounging in front of the Red Cross club here the other evening was asked what kind of letter he liked most to receive. "Brother," he said, and you knew at once he came from Carolina, "all Ah evah want is a lettuh." As a matter of fact, soldiers repeatedly tell you they would rather have bad news than no news.

Recently an OWI bulletin was credited here with giving these suggestions for the kind of things to write soldiers: (1) How the family is doing everything to help win the war. (2) How anxious the family is for the soldier's return. (3) How well the family is—giving details. (4) How the family is getting along financially. (5) What is doing in the community, news about girls, doings of friends, who's marrying whom, exploits of the home team, social activities, effects of the war on the home town.

When Private John Welsh 3d of Houston, Tex., saw the bulletin he did a little letter writing himself, and what he did to the suggestions approximated what Allied blockbusters have been doing to German cities. Sgt. H. Bernard Bloom, a former

Indianapolis advertising man, has some equally strong opinions on "type letters," although the categories are his own, not OWI'S.

Like his buddies, Bloom regards the "Oh, you poor boy" type as one of the commonest and "most disgusting." This is the kind in which the correspondent "weeps over your body" before anything happens to it. He is equally bitter about the "I'm having fun" type. This is the kind of letter, first cousin to the "Dear John" species, in which the sender tells all about her gay whirl of parties, dances, cocktail parties, romantic walks in the park with Air Force officers on leave, etc. Bloom goes on to list the "Gee, things are terrible," "I'm sorry to tell you," "I wish I could be with you" and "Look up Cousin Zeke" type as others which plague him and his comrades.

But it would be grossly misleading to suggest that men in uniform are more critical of mail than appreciative. On the contrary, it means everything to them, and certain types of mail in particular can buck up a soldier more than any pep talk by his general. Soldiers carry their letters around with them, save them in

footlockers, pull them out at mess table. Their faces light up when letters come, and drop when they don't.

At the risk of attempting a formula, just as OWI did, it would appear safe to say most soldiers and Wacs like to get letters from their loved ones telling, first, that all is well at home; second, that the folks are proud of them—without laying it on thickly—and, third, amiable, chatty details of things close to the soldier's peacetime way of life. And they like answers to direct questions they have written home; nothing is more exasperating than to ask for the specific address of a friend or how certain crops are doing and to have the query completely ignored.

In letters from their sweethearts and wives, soldiers want what every lover since the world began wants—that he is still the sole object of the girl's affection, that she misses him and will wait till kingdom come. There is a difference of opinion on love letters as such, some soldiers saying they don't trust girls who "give out a lot of that goo." But they are not representative of those who have left behind sweethearts, fiancées and wives who mean the world to them.

There was a sergeant named Eddie whom I met in a London restaurant last spring, because they always double up male patrons who come along. He began telling me of the woman he had married just a month or so before leaving. He had a letter with him and in the few paragraphs he read aloud he somehow communicated more of the terror and beauty and solemn anguish of separated lovers than I have ever heard: "And so I don't really worry about you, my darling," his girl wife had written, "because I know that my husband is the best and the bravest and the strongest of all the men who have gone out to fight. Yes, and the gentlest. And I know God will not let anything happen to him because he is like that and because he isn't anyone else's husband. And that makes me very happy."

Maybe the impact is not in the words themselves; perhaps it was in the way the boy read them, eyes aglow, his voice low. And perhaps you had to realize that he was a rear runner in a Flying Fortress assigned to a station that had had and was having particularly heavy casualties.

SOLDIERS are more likely to be inspired and bucked up by personal things—how a namesake nephew is growing up or how the girl friend loved his picture in uniform—than by impersonal notes. They like to know how the war effort is continuing at home, but prefer to take for granted that it is going smoothly than to hear about strikes and wage arguments. They hate complaints about shortages of gasoline, rubber, candy, silk stockings or anything else.

One soldier here was infuriated the other day by a letter from a friend complaining that you could no longer get a hot dog big enough to see for a dime, while on meatless Tuesday you had to eat, etc., etc. "That so-and-so should have had what we had to eat in Kasserine Pass," the soldier said, "and the sound effects, too."

In general the men dislike the approach of those who write, "Don't let anyone tell you we at home don't know there is a war going on." He doesn't like to hear of his girl friend going out with other men, but he is likely to be pleased and amused by her lament that the only men left in town are "4F's, old men and babies." And he is also a sucker for all sorts of photographs of his family, his girl friend, his pets and friends, as well as for any clippings about him that may have broken into the local newspaper. Pictures and clippings never fail where written words may. One soldier said candidly his girl friend wrote him eight pages twice a week—and "frankly, after the first two pages I don't know what the hell I'm reading." He said he would prefer one V-mail letter every day and a longer letter every week or ten days.

