

A soldier's reasons for enlisting, 1942

Introduction

“Our country is the entire world and mankind our countrymen!!!”

In April of 1942, Sidney Diamond, a chemical engineering student at City College in New York, enlisted in the United States Army against the wishes of his friends and family.

In this letter written upon his arrival at Fort Dix, New Jersey, Sidney described his reasons for joining the fight to his longtime sweetheart, Estelle Spero. “Stelle, I shall attempt, at least, to argue your thoughts of the unworthiness of the effort I am, through my own choosing, engaging in,” he wrote. Sidney defended his decision by quoting the literary works of Thomas Paine, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Ovid:

Our mutual friend Thomas Paine has aptly said “My country is the world and my religion is to do good!” It is true as Goethe suggests that in peace time every one concerns himself with sweeping his own doorstep and minding his own business . . . but, at present the world (which we recognize as our country) fights hopelessly in a maelstrom as it is gradually and seemingly inevitably sucked into chaos.

Even Estelle’s heartfelt petitions could not sway Sidney’s belief that enlisting was his patriotic duty. During his three years of service, Sidney wrote frequently and faithfully to Estelle, sharing his experiences, both good and bad, and especially his expressions of love for her. Tragically, Sidney was killed in action during an assault north of Manila in the Philippines in January 1945. His humorous and eloquent letters, preserved for many years by Estelle Spero Lynch, are a compelling personal account of World War II.

Excerpt

Stelle, I shall attempt, at least, to argue your thoughts of the unworthiness of the effort I am, through my own choosing, engaging in.

Our mutual friend Thomas Paine has aptly said “My country is the world and my religion is to do good!” Lets ponder over this for a moment. It is true as Goethe suggests that in peace time every one concerns himself with sweeping his own doorstep and minding his own business and things will go well; But, at present, the world (which we recognize as our country) fights hopelessly in a maelstrom as it is gradually and seemingly inevitably sucked into chaos. When a man drowns, one scarcely thinks of the future. One hardly sits down to coldly calculate the credits one loses in college, one does not dream of future happiness— —

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There is no desire to wait and see!! –

– “Love of country is more powerful than reason itself!” (Ovid)

If my neighbor [*struck*: shoots] whips his dog I “tsk tsk”. If he beats his own wife I look away – were he, however to attack a strange girl – The matter is no longer a family affair but a community problem. J. G. Holland expresses it more adequately when he points out that “The man who loves his home best, and loves it most unselfishly, loves his country best. – ‘Stelle – our country is the entire world and mankind our countrymen!!!

Whew – what brought that on – cool off Sid – take a shower!! –

Patriotism knows no time no land, no sea – it is not [*struck*: climatic]! Geographical! It is not scheduled!!

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and transcript and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer these questions. You may also wish to review this letter with an English teacher.

1. World War II is sometimes referred to as “the good war.” Would the writer of this letter have agreed? Explain your answer.
2. Toward the conclusion of the letter, the writer mentions how an attack on a girl becomes a community problem. Why do you think he inserted that argument?
3. Write a letter in response to this one as if you were Sidney Diamond’s girlfriend, Estelle Spero. Remember that you’re writing in 1942.

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Image

Co. B-1229 R.C. 1.
Fort Dix, N.J.
6. P.M. — Monday.

Ben! —

Since last we met, (ah platitudes!) much water has poured ~~has~~ violently beneath the not so steady bridge! — — yes, Estelle, the inevitable has happened, don't scold — I lost my temper!!! — — got into a combat with fists. — — — These fisticuffs (if we might call them such) started suddenly, lasted a few moments — and ~~was~~ ^{were} broken up when the party got rough! — — — Here are all the lurid details — — I'll attempt to be as rational and unprejudiced as is possible. —

1. There exists a clique of three or four gentlemen who feel it their responsibility to uphold the morale of the men by continually harassing the men with childish pranks such as half sheeting beds, smearing cold cream and shoe polish ~~with~~ on unsuspecting slumbers, forcibly shaving some.
2. All these a certain "guy" endured, realizing that it's to be expected during the first few days. As the days grew into a week and still the nuisances continued this same guy said — "enough!"
3. Mind you, this "guy" approached this thing in a coldly scientific manner.

Sidney Diamond to Estelle Spero, ca. April 1942 (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC09120.005)

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he reasoned as follows. a) These men would continue unless stopped b) not only would they molest newcomers but would enjoy battering "Veterans" — taking advantage of friendships acquired. c) They had never been subjected to the same treatment d) and most important they did not realize what it was to be humbled

4. Well, "guy" was ~~high lying~~ comfortable loafing in bed, attempting to read, suffering slightly from an overdose of cookies, a heavy dinner and an inoculation received in the afternoon when suddenly he found himself flying through the air ~~and~~ bed and all following him. — when he landed bed and all fell down on top of big guy!!

5. Well, why continue — verbal argument was useless — so now they don't bother ~~me~~ "guy" anymore and people think ~~it~~ "guy" used to play football!!

Let's discontinue these distasteful details and go to something of more interest to both of us, particularly myself —

question department

? Piano lessons? romantic poetry?
Tommy Payne? Poison dye??? cold???
Tigo home? reports? natalie? Pearl? you???

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advice department

3.

again - keep clear of strange soldiers.
Hit Romantic Poetry + hit it hard. Abate all, sweet,
take care of yourself. --- you don't want
me destitute of life - I couldn't stand your
being ill -- or something!

miscellaneous

I don't like this Ray fella!!

you'll notice I've changed my
hour of writing to you. It's a lot safer and easier
on the "pot washer" Sid. It also gives me
an opportunity to write more.

At present I'm seated at the
same bench we occupied Sunday. The band
is playing "As the ^{Rolling} Cassians go marching" --- There's
a ball game not far off - The soft cool
breezes of the before night, rustle through the
paper; The sun plays gently upon the
soldier across the table --- It causes him to
shift his position to the left. Pens scratch
madly, tongues protrude, papers after paper
is filled with details of each persons life. Here
a soldier tells of a dream, there a boy writes of
love. Another gives up at a happy thought ---
yet, another saddens as he writes of fear!!

Darling, I have ~~absolutely~~ no regrets,

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no longings, no homesickness except the gnawing⁴
hunger to be near you — to speak with you —
to press your hand in mine and stroll —
I say this now with conviction — Love
~~supersedes~~ supersedes all! —

By the way, your photograph is a
little closer to my heart. I now carry it
in the money belt. — — — hmmm! —

After Joe and I left you last night
we met Bob (Med. Serv.) All of us proceeded
to the theatre where we were entertained (? ? ?) by
a motion picture of questionable worth entitled
'Jarceny due.' with Edward G. Robinson. — Home,
then & bed.

I know I'm getting tglit but what the
heck! — a very strange thing occurred today.
You recall, I mentioned our sergeant as being
the foulest mouthed chap I'd encountered and
that he seemed nothing less than riev! — Well
I discover he had a four year scholarship to
Syracuse University — quit after two years —
to get married and won, in a game of chance, for the first time
when the draft numbers were drawn! —

peculiar — very peculiar.
yes I know this is growing into a manuscript
but — well I like the new pen!!

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Stella, I shall attempt, at least, to ^{5.}
 argue your thoughts of the unworthiness of the
 efforts I am, through my own choosing, engaging
 in.

Our mutual friend Thomas Paine has
 aptly said "my country is the world and my
 religion is to do good." Let's ponder over
 this for a moment. It is true as Goethe
~~puts it that~~ suggests that in peace time
 every one concerns himself with reweaving
 his own doormat and mending his own business
 and things well go well. But, at present,
 the world (~~our recognized country~~) (which
 we recognize as our country, fights hopelessly
 in ~~the~~ ^a maelstrom, as it is gradually and
 seemingly inevitably sucked into chaos. When
 a man drowns, one scarcely thinks of the
 future. One hardly sits down to coldly
 calculate the credits one loses in college, one
 does not dream of future happinesses —
 There is no desire to wait and see!! —

"Love of country is not
 powerful than reason itself!" (Ovid)
 If my neighbor ~~whips~~ whips
 his dog I "take take." If he beats his own
 wife I look away — were he, however to
 attack a strong girl — well, you know

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~~see~~. The matter ~~is~~ is no longer a family affair ⁶ but a community problem. — ~~J. B. Hall~~ J. B. Holland ^{expresses} ~~says~~ it more adequately when he points out that "The man who loves his home best, and loves it most unselfishly, loves his country best. — 'Stille — our country is the entire world and mankind our countrymen.!!!"

When — what brought that an —
cool of Sid — take a shower!! —

Patriotism knows ~~to~~ no time
no land, no sea — it is not
~~climate~~ 'Geographical! It is not scheduled!!

Oh well — hurr — ur — ur —
allright I hear your mother shouting —
Good night sweetheart — — Love —

yours — always!

Sid

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Transcript

Sidney Diamond to Estelle Spero, ca. April 1942 (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC09120.005)

Co. B – 1229 R.C.

Fort Dix, N. J.

6. P.M. – Monday

Bun! –

Since last we met, (ah platitudes!) much water has poured [*struck*: has] violently beneath the not to steady bridge! – – yes, Estelle, the inevitable has happened, don't scold – I lost my temper!!! – got into a combat with fists. – – – These fisticuffs (if we might call them such) started suddenly, lasted a few moments – and [*struck*: was] [*inserted*: were] broken up when the party got rough! – – – – Here are all the lurid details – I'll attempt to be as rational and unprejudiced as is possible. –

1. There exists a clique of three or four gentleman who feel it their responsibility to uphold the morale of the men by continually harassing the men with childish pranks such as half sheeting beds, smearing cold cream and shoe polish [*struck*: with] on unsuspecting slumberers, forcably shaving some.

2. All these a certain “guy” endured, realizing that its to be expected during the first few days. As the days grew into a week and still the nuisances continued this same guy said – “enough!”

3. Mind you, this “guy” approached this thing in a coldly scientific manner. [2] he reasoned as follows. a) These men would continue unless stopped b) not only would they molest newcomers but would enjoy bothering “Veterans” – – taking advantage of friendships acquired. c) They had never been subjected to the same treatment D) and most important they did not realize what it was to be humbled

4. Well – “guy” was [*struck*: [*illegible*] lying] comfortable loafing in bed – attempting to read. – suffering slightly from an overdose of cookies; a heavy dinner and an inoculation received in the afternoon when suddenly he found himself flying through the air [*struck*: as], bed and all following him. – When he landed bed and all fell down on top of a big guy!!

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5. – Well, why continue – verbal argument was useless – so now they don't bother [struck: him] [inserted: “guy”] anymore and people think [struck: it] [inserted: “guy”] used to play football!!

Lets discontinue these distasteful details and go to something of more interest to both of us, particularly myself –

question department

P. Piano lessons? Romantic poetry? Tommy Payne? Poison Ivy??? cold??? trip home? reports? Natalie? Pearl? You???

[3] advice department

Again – keep clear of strange soldiers. Hit Romantic Poetry & hit it hard. Above all, sweet, take care of yourself. – – – You don't want me destitute of life – I couldn't stand your being ill – or somethin'!

miscellaneous

I don't like this Roy fello!!

You'll notice I've changed my hour of writing to you. Its a lot safer and easier on the “pot washer” Sid. It also gives me an opportunity to write more.

At present I'm seated at the same bench we occupied Sunday. The band is playing “As the Caissons go [struck: marching] [inserted: Rolling]” – There's a ball game not far off – The soft cool breezes of the before night, rustle trough the paper; The sun plays gently upon the soldier across the table – – – It causes him to shift his position to the left. Pens scratch madly, tongues protrude, paper[struck: s] after paper is filled with details of each persons life. Here a soldier tells of a dream. There a boy writes of love. Another grins at a happy thought – Yet, another saddens as he writes of fear!!

Darling, I have [struck: absolute] no regrets, [4] no longings, no homesickness except the gnawing hunger to be near you – to speak with you – to press your hand in mine and stroll – I say this now with convictions – Love [struck: supesade] supersedes all! –

By the way, your photograph is a little closer to my heart. I now carry it in the money belt. – hmmm! –

After Joe and I left you last night we met Bob (Med Stud.) All of us proceeded to the theatre where we were entertained (???) by a motion picture of questionable worth entitled

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“Larceny Inc.” with Edward G. Robinson – Home then & bed.

I know I'm getting glib but what the heck! – A very strange thing occurred today. You recall, I mentioned our sergeant as being the foulest mouthed chap I'd encountered and that he seemed nothing less than [rien]! – Well I discover he had a four year scholarship to Syracuse University – quit after two years – [inserted: to get married] and won [struck: .] in a game of chance, for the first time when the draft numbers were drawn! –

Peculiar – very peculiar.

Yes I know this is [struck: going] [inserted: growing] into a manuscript but – well I like the new pen!!

[5] Stelle, I shall attempt, at least, to argue your thoughts of the unworthiness of the effort I am, through my own choosing, engaging in.

Our mutual friend Thomas Paine has aptly said “My country is the world and my religion is to [struck: go] do good!” Lets ponder over this for a moment. It is true as Goethe [struck: puts it that] suggests that in peace time every one concerns himself with sweeping his own doorstep and minding his own business and things will go well; But, at present, the world ([struck: one recognized country]) (which we recognize as our country fights hopelessly in [struck: the] [inserted: a] maelstrom [struck: .] as it is gradually and seemingly inevitably sucked into chaos. When a man drowns, one scarcely thinks of the future. One hardly sits down to coldly calculate the credits one loses in college, one does not dream of future happiness– – There is no desire to wait and see!! –

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– Love –

yours – always!

Sid