



South Dakota State Archives

World War II Basic Training Letters - Steve Cihak

Steve A. Cihak sent 552 letters to his sweetheart Mary I. Paul from September 9, 1942 to November 11, 1945. This correspondence covers Steve's entire World War II service, including eight months in basic training, three months in North Africa, and two years and one month in Italy. The excerpt below is from three letters Steve wrote to Mary from Camp Robinson, located about seven miles from Little Rock, Arkansas.

Steve's indoctrination into the military life emerges during his two months at Camp Robinson. Mary learned about K.P., the P.X., drilling, hiking, the firing range, digging spider holes, receiving vaccinations, and the ambulance corps. Steve also writes about visiting Little Rock, a local dance hall, his time in church, bunking with his fellow South Dakota soldiers, and receiving the Tyndall, SD newspaper. Although removed from his state, you can see in Steve's letters that he is keeping up with what is happening back home in South Dakota.

Excerpts from Steve Cihak's Letters from Basic Training at Camp Robinson

We are in the army now, out here in the Arkansas Ozarks, where the hillbillies live, it looks like a pretty fair country, but not like northeast of Tyndall, that's a real country...I'm bunking with 3 Tripp fellows and 2 Vermillion fellows. So I think I'm pretty lucky...We are going to stay here 6 weeks, then we move again...Please write me all the news around there, and a lot about yourself, I wouldn't like anything better than to hear about you, besides seeing you.

Am writing this letter to you, now after the lights went out, so I walked over here to the latrine, if you know what it means or what it is. The lights go out at 15 minutes to 10 at night. But the lights in the latrine burn all night. So that helps. It's a heck of a place to write a letter to a good and beautiful girl like you...today I was on K.P. we all get K.P. about every 2 weeks here and there, so don't think I did something wrong (ha)...We are doing a lot of drilling, walking, handling a rifle, and a nice looking rifle, haven't shot it yet but I have an idea when I do, it will knock me over, as it's a big rifle, if you would see me handle a rifle now, You would say them tricks are not possible, but we all had to learn them, they handle rifles and other things different then in the last war. Yesterday we went through the gas chamber, boy! Did I bawl, but I got my gas mask on in time so it didn't hurt me any...we train a little of everything, and then we are going to be shipped out of here for our actual training, like Ed Carda, or others, so we get out of here in about 5 weeks, they said, we will all be picked out for a certain job, like mechanics, military police, infantry,

machine gun, airplanes, etc....The army life isn't so bad, it isn't like home by a long shot, but it has its good, bad, sad, funny side to it. For example lets take the good -- Well there is a lot of good boys here, I have seen it in church Sundays, by the way we have two churches, Catholics I mean, in our camp. The bad -- well there's a lot of bad over here too. They don't obey orders, stay away from camp, steal, drink, etc. sad...Well one day I seen 3 men go down and out from the heat. It's damp, but here the boys aren't use to it. If one man falls in our platoon, we don't stop, we have to keep on going even if we have to step over him, that's what the ambulance corp. are for, they drive behind us and pick us up if we fall. I'm still going strong so far. I hope I can keep it up. The funny side for example is like when we come home, or what we call home...We have one fellow from Vermillion, SD he is a pretty good auctioneer and he makes it sound funny and a few laughs make us all feel good and of course I am usually making a fool out of myself by doing things to make them laugh. I have to do it at least every other day as the boys come over some evenings from other companies to see us do foolishness. I even bought a mouth organ here at our store or what we call the P.X....Little Rock, Arkansas is about 6 miles form here but I don't think I'll go to town. It would not be the same without you.

I hope you prayed for me this Sunday as this is the first Sunday I missed church in the army, bu tI'll go tonight if there is mass...We had to go on detail this morning. By detail I mean we had to work. We dug a spider hole in the ground; it's a hole in the ground deep enough to cover a man to protect him from bullets. We finished 10 minutes to 11 [this] morning. It wasn't so bad...There hasn't been a day or night since I'm in the army or even before that I haven't pulled out my wallet and looked and talked to you. It seems you understand what I say and mean and you seem to talk back. I hope you don't think I'm going nuts in this army...and we cannot get Yankton [WNAX] on the radio. Maybe we will get it when the will build the new tower...Yes I was to a dance here. But was there only about half an hour. They had a real nice floor and orchestra but I couldn't dance, Mary wasn't there, and another thing, I couldn't dance with my big clumsy number 9 shoes Oh! Boy!...I don't know if I wrote you but I met the major of this camp he sent for me because I was the best shot with the rifle. He gave a good talk. I'll never forget [it] and he gave me \$6.00 and to boot my name will be in a lot of papers, even in the Tripp Ledger then they gave me \$5.00 more from the Lieutenant of our company and a beautiful badge.

Before I forget, I received the Tyndall paper. It sure is good to read the home paper here...We are not all through with our drilling or shooting yet. We shoot once more with a different kind of rifle next week. So far we had our own rifle shooting, machine gun shooting and bayonet for record and I made expert for all three and I'm 23 years old, so I'm thinking I'm going to land in the infantry....In about 2 weeks we expect to be moved, where we don't know. I would like to stay here as I think it's a pretty good place...I

believe I really could help you with moping floors, washing clothes and so forth and I think I'm going to make expert for that too, without a badge (HA).

Questions

Name two military-related activities Steve did during basic training at Camp Robinson.

What things reminded Steve of life back home in South Dakota?

What were some of the good and bad things about army life that Steve mentions?

In your own words, what do you think is the purpose of basic training?

If you were in Steve's situation, who would you write letters to and what would you talk about?