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"If anything should happen to me"

The Last Letter of Private Leslie Abram Neufeld, 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion

Siân Price

Just over three years ago, I started work on a radio documentary with a colleague, Siobhan McClelland. It was to be a montage of soldier's farewell letters – partly inspired by a letter Siobhan's uncle had written before deploying to Northern Ireland and partly by a newspaper article about such letters being sent home from Iraq and Afghanistan. I'd grown up with a passion for military history and had made a number of military history programmes so it was a subject that immediately gripped my imagination. In the three years since that programme, it has utterly consumed me. I realised that farewell letters had a much longer history than I'd imagined and that soldiers had been writing these poignant missives for centuries. It led me on a global

journey into archives, museums, military centres and families in search of farewell (or "in the event of my death" letters) and the stories of the men who had written them. It was a difficult and emotional journey. Many of these letters were never intended to have a public audience and most men fervently hoped they would never have to be read. Upon reading these letters, one becomes privy to intensely private thoughts and emotions, poured out under the most unimaginable and difficult of circumstances. Meeting families and being there as they re-lived their loss was both powerful and humbling. All talked of the farewell letter not only as priceless but as a tangible link with their loved one. To touch a physical piece of paper was to touch their loved one.

Born in a small log house on 17 January 1922, Leslie was the third son of Anna and Henry Neufeld, a noted specialised seed grower. He grew up on a farm in the Lost River District of Saskatchewan – a pioneering Mennonite community – in a large family of nine children. When not helping out on the farm, he was a keen gymnast, promising poet and loved to sing. After graduating high school, he worked as a store clerk.

On 13 January 1942 Leslie followed his two older brothers, Leonard and Richard, in enlisting in the Canadian Army. Most young men in the community were volunteering at this time, simply feeling it was the right thing to do. He joined the

Abstract: For centuries men have penned letters to their loved ones on the eve of battle in case they did not return. These letters often reveal intensely personal thoughts and emotions written under the most unimaginable and difficult of circumstances. Just before the D-Day invasion of June 1944, Leslie Neufeld, a private in the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, wrote a farewell letter to his parents in case the worst were to happen. Sadly, Neufeld was killed on the first day of the invasion. This article highlights this final letter and reveals the man behind it.

The ability to talk to a living relative was also one way I could really delve into the character and personality of an individual. I was lucky enough to make contact with the family of Canadian Private Leslie Abram Neufeld, tragically killed on D-Day, 6 June 1944. The Canadian War Museum had alerted me to Leslie's letters within their archives. They were able to put me in contact with Leslie's brother Edward, who was incredibly generous with his time, memories and photographs.

Résumé : Pendant des siècles, à la veille d'une bataille dont ils auraient pu ne pas en revenir vivants, des hommes ont expédié des lettres à leurs êtres chers. Rédigées dans des circonstances difficiles, pratiquement inimaginables, les lettres révèlent des pensées et des émotions profondes. Tout juste avant le débarquement du jour J, en juin 1944, Leslie Neufeld, un soldat du 1er bataillon de parachutistes canadiens, dans l'éventualité du pire, écrivit une lettre d'adieu à ses parents. Ce fut malheureusement le cas : Neufeld fut tué le premier jour de l'invasion. L'article présente cette lettre ultime et son auteur.



Above: Private Leslie Neufeld and his younger sisters.

Left: The Neufeld children.

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was imminent. On 24 May 1944, the unit moved to Down Ampney in the English Cotswolds where they were briefed on "Operation Overlord" – better known as D-Day. Neufeld's C Company would be the lead Canadian company dropped into Normandy on 5 June 1944. In fact, the company had prepared to depart on 4 June, but at the last minute, the invasion was postponed. During that agonising wait, Leslie wrote a farewell letter to his family.

Dear parents, brothers and sisters,

My time for writing is very limited. However, I must write a few words just to let you know how things are going.

First of all, thanks a million for the cigs and parcels and letters.

Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps, and arrived in Britain on the same boat as his brother Leonard. When the Canadian Army called for volunteers for the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion in February 1944, Neufeld enthusiastically put himself forward. Between February and May 1944, the unit underwent

intense training on the British X-type parachute (which had no reserve chute and was designed to be used at much lower altitude) as well as mortar, machine gun and anti-tank fire, and wireless communications. They were becoming a well-oiled, battle-ready machine and would have known that an actual operation

June 4 1944

Dear parents, brothers & sisters
 My time for writing
 is very limited. However
 I must write a few words
 just to let you know
 how things are going.
 First of all, thanks
 a million for the
 cigs & parcels and
 letters. Received your
 letter, Dad, just a day
 ago. By mistake I
 received Len's cigs
 too.
 Sorry Mum that
 I don't have time to
 answer all your
 questions now.

II

Dad, the time has come
 for that long awaited
 day, the invasion of
 France. Yes, I am in it.
 I'll be in the first one
 hundred Canadians to
 land by parachute. We
 know our job well.
 We have been trained
 for all conditions &
 circumstances. We have
 a fair chance. I am not
 certain but I expect.
 Len will be coming in
 a few days later.
 To go in as a Para-
 trooper was entirely my
 own choice. I am in no
 way connected with any

Received your letter, Dad, just a day ago. By mistake I received Len's cigs too.

Sorry Mum that I don't have time to answer all your questions now.

Dad, the time has come for that long awaited day, the invasion of France. Yes I am in it. I'll be in the first one hundred Canadians to land by parachute. We know our job well. We have been trained for all conditions and circumstances. We have a fair chance.

I am not certain but I expect Len will be coming in a few days later.

To go in as a paratrooper was entirely my choice. I am in no way connected to any medical work. This job is dangerous,

medical work. This job
 is dangerous, very dan-
 gerous. If anything
 should happen to me,
 do not feel sad or burdened
 by it, but take the attitude
 of "He served his country
 to his utmost." With
 that spirit I am going
 into battle. And let it be
 known that the town of
 Nipawin did its share
 to win the war.
 But I have full ex-
 pectations of returning
 and with God's strength
 & guidance I'm sure
 I'll see me thro' all
 peril. My trust is in God.
 Your loving son
 Leslie

very dangerous. If anything should happen to me, do not feel sad or burdened by it, but take the attitude of "He served his country to his utmost."

With that spirit I am going into battle.

And let it be known that the Town of Nipawin did its share to win the war.

I have full expectations of returning and with God's strength and guidance I'm sure He will see me thro' all peril. My trust is in God.

Your loving son,
Leslie

Neufeld's final letter.
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Private Leslie Neufeld boards a troop train.

Unfortunately, the projectile fell short. The enemy retaliated with a high explosive shrapnel shell which penetrated the chateau's wall and set off Oikle's remaining PIAT bombs. Private Neufeld was killed instantly, buried beneath a pile of masonry. He was 21 years old.

Neufeld's letter arrived after his parents had received the telegram notifying them that Leslie had been killed. The telegram was a profoundly bitter blow, and "the only time I ever saw my father cry" recalled his brother Edward. His mother was bereft, in deep despair, comforted only by her religious faith. While the letter did not ease the pain, "by bringing Leslie's voice and spirit into the home as he had been so close to the day he died, [it] was forever a precious balm to help my parents and all the family live with the bitter reality of his death. It was as if his voice was forever there. It enriched enormously the family's memory of him," remembered Edward. Neufeld's mother, who lived to ninety-nine, held Leslie's memory dear, and every year until she died, placed a wreath on the local cenotaph in his remembrance.

Edward Neufeld felt Leslie wrote his farewell letter because they were such a close family, having all grown up on the farm. Letters had flown back and forth between the boys and parents during the course of the war and Leslie would have been keenly aware of the pending danger of the D-Day operation. "He probably wished his parents to have a last word from him just in case, a sort of Good-Bye, and he wished in particular to assure them that he placed his fate in the hands of God. Leslie certainly would have known that his mother, a devout Christian, would have wanted to hear just that."

Just before midnight on 5 June 1944, Neufeld's company took off in 12 Albemarles from Harwell Airfield. C Company would lead a clandestine operation to parachute into Varaville while a Mosquito fighter-bomber conducted a night strafing raid to help the soldiers land undetected by the enemy. Leslie's platoon was ordered to conduct a direct assault on the trench position and the trench's anti-tank gun position. There was to

be no sleep for the men as they made ground throughout the early hours towards Varaville (a town where the Germans were dug in) to seize the depot. During the jump, material and men had been widely dispersed, leaving them only with light arms. By six o'clock on the morning of 6 June, Private Neufeld was with Corporal Oikle at Chateau Varaville, and using the only arms they had available – a PIAT gun – fired against the enemy.

Leslie and his brother Leonard at the end of embarkation leave.

The farewell letter became a cherished family heirloom and was something they could all return to, re-read, and once again feel close to Leslie. More than 60 years later, his words still resonate with the optimism, fidelity and stoicism of so many young men who died in that war.

Leslie's was one of more than 70 letters reproduced in their entirety in the book, which covered farewell letters from the Napoleonic Wars, American Civil War, Zulu War, Boer War, First and Second World Wars, The Falklands Conflict and Iraq and Afghanistan. I featured letters from different ranks and different nationalities. Every single farewell was unified by a message of love – the simple words "I will always love you" capturing a lifetime of memories in a single line – but each conflict produced farewell letters with distinct themes. Those from the Napoleonic era throbbed with the excitement of dying gallantly in a noble cause. The farewells of the American Civil War were bound up in patriotism and religiosity that meant men faced death squarely and proudly – death would serve to bring them closer to God. The Victorian letters of the Zulu and Boer Wars personified the Victorian stiff upper lip – stark, impersonal and matter of fact. The First and Second world wars provoked letters with passionate views on the cause and a fervent desire that death should not be in vain. Men overwhelmingly used their farewell to hope that they were leaving behind a world fit for future generations. Into the modern era and farewells have reflected a changing motivation for the reasons for going to war. They have emphasised a love for the job and their comrades; huge pride in a job done well, but less enthusiasm for the cause itself.



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It has been impossible to choose a favourite letter. All are incredibly moving, offering a remarkable and unique snapshot into hearts and minds. In writing the book I wanted to shine a light behind the grim statistics of warfare and put human stories at the foreground. In doing so, I hope I paid tribute in some small way to the fallen – including Private Leslie Neufeld.

The letter and photographs have been used with the kind permission of the Canadian War Museum and the Neufeld Family.

Siân Price is an award-winning television and radio producer whose credits include Time Team and Coal House. She has a BA in History from Warwick University and an MA in Film Archiving from the University of East Anglia. This article is derived from her first book, *If You're Reading This...: Last Letters from the Front Line* (Pen and Sword Books, 2011). The Radio 4 documentary from which the book has grown won a New York World Radio Award for History