



To the Letter: Contemporary Perspectives on Epistolarity

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“Soldiers’ Letters: the evolution in form and content of correspondence between the second South African and Vietnam wars”.

Traditional perceptions of Australian involvement in the second South African and Vietnam wars places them at extremes, with pictures of eager soldiers volunteering by the thousand and eagerly fighting their war as a duty to the Empire applied to the former, and disillusioned conscripts forced to fight one of the harshest wars in history to the latter. While this is accurate in some cases, a closer study of the first-hand narratives of soldiers during each of these wars reveals opinions that are not so consistent with these views.

I am currently working on my doctoral dissertation in History at Flinders University on the subject of the behaviour and attitudes of Australian soldiers during each of the above wars, basing my research on letters and diaries written by soldiers from the war front. I am using specifically twentieth-century theories of soldiering to analyse soldier opinion from each of these wars, a comparison that has never been made in Australia for the earlier war. I have published an article, ‘Never again my boy, never again: Australian Soldiers’ Reactions to the South African War 1899-1902’ in the Flinders Journal of History and Politics which, through a predominantly letter-based assessment, proves current views of soldiers in this war to be outdated.

One aspect of my research has been concerned with the changing form of war correspondence between soldiers and their families, as many of the ‘letters’ from soldiers during the Vietnam War are either physical tape recordings or their transcripts. Close attention has been paid to these records in an attempt to discover whether such changes in epistolary techniques or technology has changed the general content of the soldier’s letter. As such communication is continuing to evolve, seen by the popularity of email among current and recent soldiers, this has prompted interest in further – and more recent - research on the topic.

