

The Leland Rowberg Papers

"Well, I really am in the army. I got my uniform and my outfit today."
—Private Leland Rowberg, March 23, 1943

DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR, the Fort Snelling Reception Center processed more than 300,000 men and women joining the US armed forces. Historians can better understand the insights and experiences of these recruits by studying the Leland Rowberg Papers housed at the Minnesota Historical Society's Gale Family Library in St. Paul.

Leland R. "Lee" Rowberg was born in 1922 in Northfield, Minnesota. His father, Andrew Rowberg, was the editor of the *Northfield Independent*. A graduate of Northfield High School, Leland Rowberg enrolled at St. Olaf College in 1941. The US Army sent a draft notice to the college sophomore in 1943. He became one of more than 300,000 Americans who began their military service at Fort Snelling.

On March 19, Rowberg began chronicling his experiences in the army in the first of scores of letters to his parents and sister. He received his first uniform, barracks assignment, and examinations. He encountered friends, neighbors, and classmates who were all undergoing the same mystifying transition ("Most of the fellows got general service or basic training, what it means I don't know"). He declared his first mess hall meal of fish, soup, bread and butter, corn, potatoes, coffee, and peaches "not bad food at all."

Leland's letters, written between March 1943 and October 1944, describe his hopes, fears, and friendships. He withered in the heat of his Texas basic training camp, marveled

at his growing skill at soldiering, expressed an ambition to qualify for Officer Candidate School, and worried about squaring the "kill or be killed" reality of combat with his Christian upbringing. The flow of letters continued as Leland received advanced training in New Jersey, then shipped to England in the summer of 1944. He worked hard to assure friends and family, frequently adding small postscripts such as, "Don't worry, Mom, I'm ok."

Such assurances became more common as Leland Rowberg joined the action in Europe as a rifleman in August 1944. One letter describes a run-in with German troops: "Some are quite fanatical in their devotion to the Nazi cause while others seem quite reticent about sacrificing their lives for the Fuhrer [sic]." He often downplayed his personal danger to his parents. But to his sister Bryn, then working for the State Department in Washington, DC, he was more candid: "The Germans are more determined than ever to stop us and are really tough customers."

On October 9, 1944, only a week after last writing Bryn, PFC Rowberg died in combat near Sivry, France. The family received—and carefully preserved—all the letters and telegrams from the War Department, Leland's commanding officer, his chaplain, and a buddy describing his last moments. One letter in the collection announces the posthumous



PFC Leland R. Rowberg, c. 1943 (MNHS COLLECTIONS)

award of a Purple Heart. An entire folder holds scores of condolence cards and letters from friends and family. A scrapbook contains articles about Leland's last campaign. Another holds correspondence between Lee's anguished parents and the War Department, seeking to clarify the details of his death and service.

Leland Rowberg's letters and scrapbooks bring to life the thoughts and experiences of a young man transformed from civilian to battle-hardened soldier. They show that while Rowberg had occasional doubts about his ability to perform in combat he achieved his goal to become "the best soldier I can be." His writings ensure that the memory of his idealism, his humanity, and his sacrifice remain evergreen.

—William Convery



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Dear folks,

You can probably tell where I am staying. I don't feel like bothering Auntie Sala and I want to stay with the fellows.

Well, I didn't get called today. They called those who took their physicals on Tuesday and assigned them to barracks and companies. Quite a few of us are to report tomorrow morning at 10 and we will in all probability get called then.

We ate dinner in one of the mess halls today. Not bad food at all. We had fish (very good) soup, bread, butter, corn, potatoes, coffee and peaches for desert. It tasted very good.

Letter from Leland Rowberg to his parents, Andrew and Marie Rowberg, March 19, 1943 (MNHS COLLECTIONS)

I don't know what we are going to do tonight. Sarge and I are in one room while, Al Offen, Orlan (allergies) and Howie Rose are next door. The rest of them are coming down later and will stay here also. Claude didn't get called today either.

Amo Winder (asthma?), Lund (hernia), Nygren (feet), Burlic (heart), Seardes (head) are the fellows that flunked out.

Will write again when I get foned or sooner

Lots of love,
Lee

Don't worry mom
I'm O.K.

For further reading:

Kenney, Dave. *Minnesota Goes to War: The Home Front during World War II*. St. Paul: MNHS Press, 2005.

Smith, Hampton. *Confluence: A History of Fort Snelling*. St. Paul: MNHS Press, 2021.

In September 2023, the Minnesota Historical Society opened a new exhibit in the restored visitor center at Historic Fort Snelling. The *Many Voices, Many Stories, One Place* exhibit is designed to help orient visitors to the 10,000-year history of Bdote (the homeland of the Dakota) and the 200 years of Fort Snelling. Private Rowberg's letters, along with his posthumous Purple Heart, are a centerpiece of this exhibition.



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