

Collection of wartime letters tells of faith found at the front

by Sandi Dolbee

Andrew Carroll found his faith again as he read the letters of men and women who had gone to war.

"The beauty and wisdom of their words and the courage of their actions both inspired and humbled me," Carroll writes in his introduction to "Grace Under Fire" (Doubleday, \$16.95).

AT THE FRONT - In 'Grace Under Fire,' author Andrew Carroll includes 50 of what he says were the best letters he found about faith written by soldiers in combat. CNS Photo. Most of all, the letters "made me a believer again and showed me, as I hope they will show others, that even in the bleakest of circumstances, with God's help, we can overcome all adversity."

This isn't Carroll's first foray into the correspondence of soldiers and sailors, and wives and friends. Among his other books is "War Letters," a best-selling compilation gleaned from 75,000 letters he amassed as part of his "Legacy Project." Based in Washington, D.C., Carroll's project collects letters and e-mails from all the country's conflicts as a way to preserve and honor their efforts.

In this new book, "Grace Under Fire," Carroll includes 50 of what he says were the best letters he found about faith.

On a World War II ship, Lt. Sydney Brisker wrote his parents about "the strangest Seder I've ever had."

With only one other Jew on board, Brisker invited friends to join them at the Passover table. There was the ship's cook, a Catholic, and a handful of Protestants, including two black sailors.

Brisker was struck by the parallels of the exodus plight centuries earlier and this newest battle against oppression. He ended his letter with this:

"The United Nations can make this victory one of everlasting peace and build a world in which Jew and Gentile, white and colored, live in peace, harmony and security - just like we of different faiths and races sat down at Seder tonight."

In a Christmas letter to his cousin, Ensign Charles Sweeney, assigned to a subchaser in World War II, told of getting ready for a "handsome dinner" when another ship entered the inlet and began to unload troops who had "caught hell."

"The soldier on the stretcher had his arm and part of his shoulder torn off," Sweeney wrote. " ... The second stretcher passed up the hatch was completely covered by a blanket, and so was the third."

A couple hours later, as he wrote this letter, he told his cousin of a Christmas present he received that day. "It's a gnawing appreciation of what all this means."

There are letters from the Civil War, when both the South and the North thought God was on their side. And a letter from the American Revolution, when a Virginian wrote about fighting "by the cause of Providence."

There are e-mails from Iraq, including one from NBC News correspondent David Bloom to his wife, telling her that he was at peace. "Deeply saddened by the glimpses of death and destruction I have seen, but at peace with my God, and with you." The next day, Bloom died from a pulmonary embolism.

This spiritual closeness is a theme echoed in other wars.

In 1952, a Korean War soldier wrote his wife that he was in good spirits because he got to go to church that night.

"Picture a grassy hillside surrounded by mountains and a rugged looking - crew hair cut and all - chaplain dressed in fatigues standing by a Government Issue folding podium with a red velvet cover and brass candelabra minus candles, all placed on a couple of ammo boxes," wrote Capt. Molton Shuler Jr.

The organist sat on a 5-gallon gas can. Congregants sat on their helmets, their rifles beside them. Three young Korean boys sang hymns.

"Only a couple of times in my life before this evening, have I felt God's presence in such a way," Shuler wrote. "Perhaps it was the place and the time - I don't know. Be that as it may, I liked the way I felt."

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