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# “HOME AND ALL IT MEANT”: BOWDOIN COLLEGE, NOSTALGIA, AND MORALE IN WORLD WAR II

BY KANISORN WONGSRICHANALAI

*Why would hundreds of young men fighting in World War II maintain correspondence with their college president and dean? Based on letters between former Bowdoin students, President Kenneth C. M. Sills, and Dean Paul Nixon, this article argues that Bowdoin College, and institutions like it, helped strengthen and maintain soldiers' resolve in wartime as a nostalgia-based intermediate motivator. Instead of professing strong ideological beliefs or noting their attachment to their closest comrades, these former students openly discussed their longing for their alma mater and all the peace-time comforts it represented. For many of them Bowdoin, the “home” they had left to go to war, was a way of life worth defending and dying for. Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai graduated from Bowdoin College in 2003 and is currently a history Ph.D. candidate at the University of Virginia. While his primary field of interest is nineteenth-century U.S. history, he became intrigued by these World War II letters and their meaning after he discovered them in spring 2001. An earlier version of this essay was presented as his undergraduate honors thesis.*

AS THE PLANE slowly turned against the blue sky, Theodore D. Robb of Bowdoin College Class of 1943 glanced out the window and looked down at his campus. There stood Massachusetts Hall, the nerve center of the college. A stone's throw to the west was Memorial Hall, which housed the theater. There was Searles, the science building, and further south the Walker Art Building and Hubbard Library. The first-year dorms lined the other side of the quad beside the Chapel and its graceful spires. The plane circled the campus and the town, which Robb had been a part of just months earlier. As Robb finished the turn, his reminiscence complete, he set the plane back on its original course and headed across the Atlantic towards the battlefields of World War II.<sup>1</sup>

Hundreds of thousands of Americans like Theodore Robb left their homes and communities for the front lines after the Japanese attack on

Pearl Harbor in December 1941. A majority of these soldiers and sailors left the United States for the very first time, and in the months of war they traveled to all corners of the earth. No matter how far they went, however, they remembered, with vivid detail, the world they left behind. Postcards, pictures, letters, and other reminders of home reached the troops as they marched towards unknown dangers.

The soldiers' families, loved ones, and acquaintances also mobilized for war. By donating supplies, volunteering for government work, and writing supportive letters to the troops, civilians, and civilian institutions played important roles on the home front. One of the most crucial ways in which these home-based elements aided soldiers was by influencing troop morale.

In 1943, at the height of the war, advice books and manuals encouraged parents to keep in close touch with their sons at the front. In one such publication, Clella Reeves Collins argued that "mail is the best single morale builder there is. News of family and friends and pets, of all the little old things of homely interest, is priceless to the lonely soldier where everything is new and strange. The more letters he gets, the happier he is."<sup>2</sup> This advice seems to have been well heeded by the Bowdoin College administration. A small, private institution of higher education located in Brunswick, Maine, Bowdoin College was founded in 1794. The college fostered a close-knit community and the extent of this intimacy became evident during the war years. This study focuses on correspondence between graduates and administrators of Bowdoin College and investigates the role these letters played in sustaining and boosting troop morale.

### **Nostalgia as a Motivator**

In recent times, two schools of thought have emerged regarding soldiers' motivations: ideology and small or primary-group cohesion. Supporters of the latter theory argue that soldiers are barely affected by high-sounding patriotic prose. Rather, they are motivated by their comrades in arms. The men who fought beside them became their world, and these bonds grew so strong that talk of ideology and patriotism did not matter. S.L.A. Marshall, the famed military historian and a strong proponent of small-group cohesion, proposed that in the heat of battle—at the height of ultimate danger—men reverted to their animal instincts and sought the comfort of fellow human beings. When "the chips are down," Marshall wrote, "a man fights to help the man next to him, just as a company fights to keep pace with its flanks." In situations of life

and death, Marshall reasoned, “the words once heard at an orientation lecture are clean forgot, but the presence of a well-loved comrade is unforgettable.”<sup>3</sup>

Patriotism and small-group cohesion, however, cannot account for the complete range of motives that make men enlist and fight. This essay suggests an intermediate motivational theory and proposes that nostalgic memories can serve a practical military purpose. Manifestations of this nostalgia-based ideology include such elements as family, friends, and home institutions such as Bowdoin College.

Sociologists too have largely overlooked the uses of nostalgia as a positive motivator. First coined by the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer in the seventeenth century, the term “nostalgia” was identified as a disease that needed to be cured. This negative connotation prejudiced future approaches to the topic. Comprised of the Greek words *nostos* (return home) and *algia* (a painful yearning or longing), nostalgia originally referred to the condition of Swiss soldiers campaigning far from their homeland. Hofer identified the symptoms as despondency, melancholy, weeping, anorexia, and even suicide. Those who had succumbed to the disease were said to have vividly remembered the sensations, tastes, sounds, and smells of their homelands. As a perceived threat to the morale and functioning capacity of troops, doctors and military commanders sought to find a cure. More modern studies of nostalgia have elaborated on these manifestations. In his classic work, *Yearning for Yesterday*, Fred Davis maintains that “the material of nostalgic experience is the past.” Immediate circumstances summon this past in response to a fear of “impending change.” Present conditions are “felt to be and often reasoned to be ... more bleak, grim, wretched, ugly, deprivational, unfulfilling, frightening” than the idealized past. Davis suggests that radical transitional events such as wars may “cause masses of people to feel uneasy and to wonder whether the world and their being are quite what they always took them to be.”<sup>4</sup>

Nostalgia, Davis adds, is also important to “constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing our identities.” Nostalgic memories reassure individuals, give them confidence, and sustain their identity against “threats of discontinuity.” Nostalgic memories “can make the present seem less frightening and more assimilable than it would otherwise appear.”<sup>5</sup>

In his study of the formation of German nationalism, historian Alon Confino suggests the importance of *Heimat* (home) ideology and its influence on citizen unity. Images of hometown everyday life were

crucial in uniting German soldiers during World War I. Propaganda and recruitment posters drew upon *Heimat* pictures, which were, as Confino writes, “the antithesis of war ... havoc, suffering, disorientation.” Women and *Heimat*, far from the battlefields, were the “subjects of dreams and fantasies, personifying the home to which men yearned to return and the just cause for which men fought.” Confino is not describing a reactionary response, or a return to the past, but rather a fixation on a goal—the future. Home and peace lay ahead and beyond the battlefield, not in nostalgic remembrances of the past.<sup>6</sup>

S.L.A. Marshall wrote that one of the “simplest truths of war [is] that the thing which enables an infantry soldier to keep going . . . is the near presence . . . of a comrade.” Marshall insisted that this “comrade” need not be physically present, but rather “he must be there somewhere within a man’s consciousness.”<sup>7</sup> Men and women who were not immediately present, therefore, could still influence a soldier’s will to fight. The idea of home was a middle ground between ideology and small group cohesion that may have played a large part in motivating fighting men.

### Letters to Bowdoin

To demonstrate the nature of this nostalgia-based intermediate motivator, we turn to the correspondences between soldiers and Bowdoin administrators. In 1941, Bowdoin’s president was Kenneth Charles Morton Sills, who had served in this role since 1917. Himself a Bowdoin man (Class of 1901), Sills believed in the promise of the college and strove to maintain personal attachment and interaction between faculty and students, as well as among the students themselves. Working side-by-side with Sills was Dean Paul Nixon. These men served as the college administration (both also taught classes) and made the “Bowdoin Experience” for many generations of students. Sills and Nixon considered correspondence with students who went overseas to be one of their major duties. Writing to one student, the president admitted, “since Pearl Harbor I have made it a rule to answer every letter I receive from Bowdoin men in the service.” Sills and Nixon seem to have been successful in this attempt. A recipient of this correspondence wrote: “it was truly a pleasure upon entering the army, to have one of my first letters come from you, there at Bowdoin. I appreciated it the more realizing that the Dean of Bowdoin at War must be two or three times as busy as the very busy Dean of Bowdoin at Peace.”<sup>8</sup>

The college president and dean received hundreds of replies from the men and their family members. Some students wrote only to request



Bowdoin College President Kenneth C.M. Sills and Dean Paul Nixon stand in front of Massachusetts Hall, Bowdoin's oldest building and the administrative hub of the college. Throughout the war years both Sills and Nixon considered it their duty to maintain correspondence with those students who were overseas. This correspondence served as a vital link to home for more than a hundred Bowdoin soldiers. *Courtesy of the George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections and Archives, Bowdoin College Library.*

a recommendation for Officers Candidate School (OCS) or other such programs. Bob Coombs, for example, reported that “Bowdoin is well known among the men of the United States Marines especially among the commissioned officers,” and requested a recommendation. Sills dispatched a letter to the commanding officer at Quantico and also replied to Coombs: “the college has a very real concern for each and every one of her sons now in the service and I hope you will feel that we are always glad to hear from you and to know what you are doing.”<sup>9</sup>

Other Bowdoin graduates wrote to describe their adventures in distant lands. Robert L. McCarthy of the Class of 1941 wrote from India:

Just now we are in the monsoon season and it rains at least once during every day. That “once” proves to be an all day rain most of the time. Rain weds with earth to make mud and, in general, stalls every sort of military activity.... I am finally convinced that half of the insects I see around here are just products of my imagination. Be that as it may, there are plenty of them and the most plentiful of all, the mosquito, is the most dangerous.<sup>10</sup>

Of a more serious nature were battle reports from the front lines in Europe and the Pacific Theater. Following the Battle of Iwo Jima, Richard C. Johnstone of the Class of 1944 narrated his sobering experience:

It was a real battle and the Marines suffered many casualties.... During the first 10 days we were under heavy mortar and artillery fire almost constantly. This was because the Nips held the high ground and were looking down upon us and watching our every move.... After their artillery had been taken care of, the fighting became a close-in affair where small arms, hand-grenades and flamethrowers played a major part. The terrain became very rough and rocky and a 200 or 300 yd. advance was considered a good days work. The Japs had an amazing network of caves, so deep that our naval guns and air support had little effect on them. The Nips had to be dug out, blown out, or burned out.<sup>11</sup>

These personal letters were neither rare nor limited to a few individuals. The number of writers on file totals 796, yet this does not account for the total number of letters, for while some files hold material other than letters (newspaper clippings, medal citations, letters from parents), others contain more than one letter. The actual number of letters exceeds one thousand.<sup>12</sup> Why did these men, often in combat situations, write back to the president and dean of their undergraduate institution? And as the war went on, why did they continue to write?

Before the men entered the military, they had been accustomed to an easy life as college students in rural Maine, where their greatest worries were grades and dates. Here, the men made friendships, enjoyed themselves at parties and football games, and worried little about matters of life and death. They looked back fondly on their college days because those times were spent under happier circumstances. Their letters suggest that Bowdoin College lay at the very heart of what they fought and died for.

### **Comradarie**

Establishments like Bowdoin College became powerful symbols for soldiers fighting in foreign lands. Letters linked them to their home institutions, assured them of home support, and allowed them to reminisce about what they had left behind. This, in turn, helped them to remember what they were fighting for. Theodore Saba of the Class of 1942 put it simply: "the big thing (in my world) is the mail." Saba represented thousands of soldiers worldwide who eagerly awaited mail call as the most important part of their day. When letters did not arrive, soldiers found themselves re-reading old ones. Saba admitted: "at this moment, due to the lack of mail for almost three weeks, my world is small. The shreds of my last letters cannot hold out for many more re-readings."<sup>13</sup> Letters relieved the intense boredom of some military assignments, brought news of loved ones, and reminded soldiers why they were on the line.

Robert Hugh Allen of the Class of 1946 wrote to Dean Paul Nixon: "today I was thinking of how it must be back 'neath Bowdoin pines' and writing a letter seems to bring it all nearer." If the act of writing brought soldiers nearer to the places to which they were writing, the return mail must have had an equal effect. L. Damon Scales wrote, "it's a most inspiring thing, to hear from the College now and then ... and to know that ... there's still a bond between me and them." Or, as another graduate put it, "out here it is heartening to think that someone outside of your immediate home circle has an interest in your welfare." The letter was more than just a piece of paper; it represented the people the soldiers had left behind in their peacetime world. More than words, letters carried powerful images of home that fueled the soldiers' motivation. Theodore Saba implored Dean Nixon to do "a little propaganda" and remind "the lovely ones still left at home ... not to forget us with a little letter now and then." Unable to describe his feelings, Saba simply noted:



Photograph of two Bowdoin graduates — Gerhard Rehder (Class of 1931) and Latimer Hyde (Class of 1938) — in Sicily. This image was mailed as a postcard to President and Mrs. Sills on April 14, 1944. The letter reads: “In the last *Alumnus* we were mentioned as having had a reunion ‘Somewhere in Europe.’ Here is visual proof of a second such reunion. Met Al Gammon (Class of 1943) and Larry Stone ’43, Dan Healy ’37, and Bud Green ’39 here too, recently. Quite a crowd of good Bowdoin men.” These connections to the Bowdoin community were maintained abroad, as well as through correspondence with those “back home.” *Courtesy of the George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections and Archives, Bowdoin College Library.*

“would that I could put down what the value of a letter is in terms that the civilian mind could understand.”<sup>14</sup>

Letters were important motivators because they represented personal relationships. Meeting individuals who shared this background also strengthened bonds between soldiers and their home institutions. Thousands of miles away from campus, Bowdoin men sought others who had gone to their college. Robert L. Edwards of the Class of 1943 reported his eagerness to join “the Solomon Island Bowdoin Club,” referring to a number of graduates in the First Marine Division. Serving on the U.S.S. *Crescent City*, Marshall W. Picken of the Class of 1943 commented that there were about twelve other Bowdoin men onboard, and they “spent quite a few evenings talking over those good old days. Sev-



President Sills with Major Everett P. Pope, USMC and Bowdoin Class of 1941. Pope received the Congressional Medal of Honor for actions at the Battle of Peleliu in 1944. His alma mater awarded him an honorary Masters of Arts in 1946. *Courtesy of the George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections and Archives, Bowdoin College Library.*

eral men aboard have remarked that Bowdoin must be quite a large college to have so large a representation out here.”<sup>15</sup> After the Battle of Guadalcanal, Richard Hanson reported to Paul Nixon that:

There are three of we Bowdoin lads here on the island, “Ev” Pope, Andy Haldane and myself. We have been here just three months now and I haven’t seen Andy since last fall at College, which is surprising considering the small area we are covering here. I haven’t seen “Ev” in well over a month but when last seen he was still going strong although he had lost considerable weight.... I have heard nothing about both of them so trust they are well.<sup>16</sup>

Everett Pope also wrote to Dean Nixon, reporting that he was fine and in good health. He then turned to the others: "I saw Andy [Haldane] a few days ago—he's o.k. too— had a little malaria (who hasn't)—but is on his feet again. Both of us certainly wish that we were spending this December in Maine, instead of in this tropical hell. Dick Hanson is here too, but I haven't seen him lately. I'm sure he's o.k. too however."<sup>17</sup> Dozens of similar letters suggest that reporting back to the college was one of the responsibilities soldiers felt to their undergraduate home—perhaps to show that they were looking out for each other.

Parents also joined the correspondence. Perhaps the first word that Sills received about Everett Pope and others on Guadalcanal came from Pope's father, Laurence, who like other parents of Bowdoin graduates, forwarded information about their sons to Sills and Nixon. Pope's letter to Nixon read:

In the same mail as your letter, we got an air mail letter from Ev, written on Jap paper, headed Guadal-Canal Island, September 24. He was well, complained a little about the captured Japanese food—too much rice—took time out from his writing for an air raid; otherwise not a great deal of news. They have had no mail since leaving home. The date of the letter was after the really heavy fighting on that island, which took place on August 19. The news dispatches mentioned his immediate Commanding Officer, Lt. Col. Cresswell, as being in command of the encirclement that wiped out some six or seven hundred Japs. It is a great comfort to hear from Ev after that date.

Pope ended his letter by noting that "his mother and I deeply appreciated your personal interest and the fact that friends at his beloved Bowdoin are thinking of him."<sup>18</sup> President Sills also wrote to parents asking for news and offering support in times of anxiety. For example, he sent a note to Stanwood Hanson, father of Richard Hanson, who was at the time battling Japanese forces on Guadalcanal:

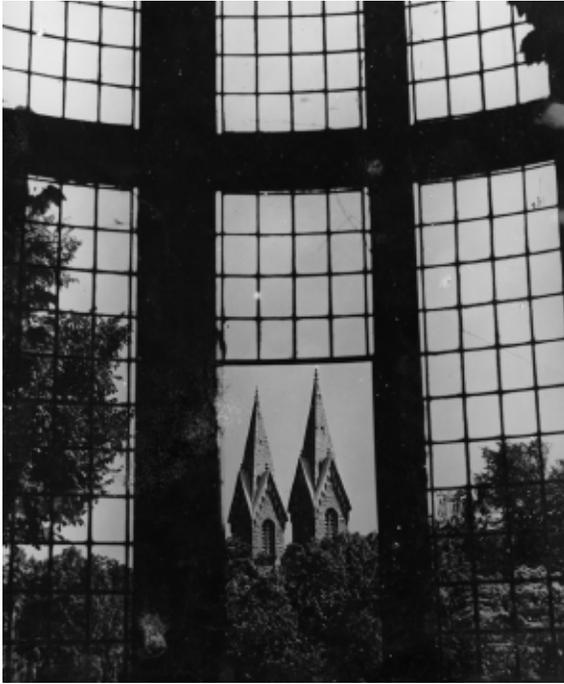
The Dean told me the other day that Dick was probably now in the Solomon Islands. I just want you to know that we think of him very often here at Bowdoin. I remember seeing him down at Philadelphia last winter at the time of the alumni meeting there and thought what a splendid officer he was making. I can well realize that you must be very anxious these days. I hope you will let us know if you have any news. I suppose it is hard to get messages to Dick but if you do write him assure him of our interest won't you?<sup>19</sup>

After hearing of a friend's death, Charles I. Arnold asked the college for the parents' address.<sup>20</sup> Roger Eastman, the father of a graduate who died during the war, wrote to President Sills:

Bowdoin College during the past week has meant more to me than ever because of your fine telegram and very sympathetic letter. A fine letter from Dean Nixon has helped a lot. Further we were privileged to have with us on the day of the funeral these fine young Bowdoin men. Pete Hans, Tom Donovan and John Woodcock. John came down from Bangor which Mrs. Eastman and I both appreciated. . . . This sight of these fine young men in uniform quietly standing by will not soon be forgotten.<sup>21</sup>

With such a sense of community, it is no wonder that the men who served felt a strong connection to their alma mater. Philip M. Johnson wrote from the *U.S.S. Henley* that it was "my great instructors who keep the name of Bowdoin forever in my mind." The college, its instructors, and its administrators were important to the soldiers' construction of "home." Correspondence from the college reinforced memories and helped soldiers imagine the "good old days" as part of their nostalgic motivation. Former students held strong memories of the college, and in the midst of their military activities, many confessed that their thoughts wandered back to Brunswick. Robert H. Allen wrote that, "on a quiet night when I'm in a fighter, preparing it for a flight, I can hear the chimes in the Bowdoin Chapel playing 'Bowdoin Beata' in the fall twilight."<sup>22</sup>

Robert Coombs was probably the most sentimental of the four Bowdoin graduates in the First Marine Division. In November 1942, he wrote to Paul Nixon, "Andy [Haldane] and I both really miss Bowdoin and all of the pleasant times that we had there. Memories help keep one going down here, so our college days provide no end of happy dreams." On Christmas day, Coombs wrote again, "Andy Haldane, Ev Pope and I have often remembered in our visits the days we spent at Bowdoin and the knowledge that what we've received has done much to keep up our spirits in these trying times." A few weeks later he noted via V-Mail: "Bowdoin means more to me today than I ever dreamed possible. Many happy memories of college life come to me every day and life is much more pleasant because of these recollections." Writing from "a 2100 ton destroyer in the South Pacific," Robert W. Ellis noted: "I have traveled quite some distance from Bowdoin in the past three years but no matter how far I seem to go hardly a month goes by that I don't meet someone



A view of the Bowdoin Chapel from Hubbard Library. In their letters home, many Bowdoin soldiers reminisced about the Chapel and various other buildings on the Bowdoin campus. The memory of that landscape provided a link to home for soldiers overseas. *Courtesy of the George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections and Archives, Bowdoin College Library.*

or receive some correspondence that refreshes the pleasant memory I have of Bowdoin.” Indeed, Sills received letters from all over the globe during the war years; “the sun never sets on the sons of Bowdoin,” he remarked.<sup>23</sup>

Many soldiers were eloquent in spelling out what they missed about their undergraduate institution, again suggesting how sharp these memories of place were. Basil J. Guy wrote to President Sills explaining the images he associated with Bowdoin: “I miss the College most of all, when I think of such beautiful, common scenes as red and gold leaves scattered around the chapel door, snow seen lightly sifting onto the campus through the broad bay window of the Alumni Room, and ferns slowly unfolding on the first warm May day.” Following intense combat during the battle for Tinian, in the South Pacific, Charles T. Ireland dreamed of visiting the campus and walking “across the campus with a light snow-fall in the air and the library’s lights beginning to twinkle in the late afternoon of a cold New England day.” Robert Whitman likewise

remembered “the hollow sound of heels on the boardwalks, multi-colored sunlight in the Chapel, shadows of bautrees on the snow at night, bull sessions, bridge games, ‘flid’” groups, classes, and all the rest.”<sup>24</sup>

These vivid memories demonstrate the soldiers’ devotion to their peacetime homes. These thoughts were profoundly inspiring. As Robert H. Allen wrote, “if only we feel there’s something to come home to when this is over we’re happy. If I can only return to Bowdoin I’ll be satisfied to fight ’till all this is over.”<sup>25</sup>

Others expressed their determination to return to Brunswick after the war. W. Streeter Bass wrote from Camp Blanding in Florida that he had “come to regard that town [Brunswick] as home. The day after I left I resolved to come back there to live, and subsequent events have in no way altered this resolve!”<sup>26</sup> Edward B. Burr also professed his intention “to return to Maine and the whispering pines of Brunswick,” but admitted that his “chief worry” was “which fall [semester] will it be?”<sup>27</sup> Reminiscing about Bowdoin with a fellow graduate on the front lines in Germany, Robert Whitman wrote:

Every once in a while Bob Hall ‘47 (in my company) and I will drag it [a copy of the *Alumnus*, the College’s alumni magazine] out. Check up to make sure we still know the names of the buildings—Is this Maine or Appleton? —what about this? —and I point. Let’s see—a pause—oh, that must be the top of the AD House. And inevitably we desire to reminisce. “The Hole In The Wall,” Mike’s Italian sandwiches, Tillie’s shirts, boardwalks, cold moons, burning leaves, smokes at the union about 10:30 at night—and so on long after everyone else is asleep. All this in a cellar “somewhere in Germany.” A tankful of gasoline with a necktie wick for a light. Who woulda thunk it? And of course it goes without saying that when we speak or think of Bowdoin, it’s always that we’ll be back, “after the war.” Could it be otherwise?<sup>28</sup>

Soldiers who hoped to return to Bowdoin made it clear that they did not want to see change. The institution they left behind—the place they reminisced about—kept them going. It was for the preservation of these old peacetime environments that they were fighting. Robert Whitman declared: “I’ll come back to all those things after the war, and as they exist then—I hope they don’t change. They are too worthwhile.” From the *U.S.S. O’Bannon*, Lendall B. Knight hoped to “return to the College and find her as all want to find her: the same dear old Bowdoin.”<sup>29</sup>

Soldiers’ nostalgia was also a hope for the future. Many expressed interest in sending their children to Bowdoin. One graduate wrote to inform Paul Nixon that his newly born son would “probably be bothering

the living daylight out of you one of these days.” James A. Bishop hinted that his children would come to Bowdoin one day: “with luck, you can expect them knocking at your door in the fall of ‘61 or thereabouts with hayseed in their hair, and a glint in their eyes, much as ... I did, not too many years back.” William H. Rice of the Class of 1938, campaigning in France, put it bluntly: “there isn’t a real Bowdoin man alive that wouldn’t gladly lay down his life so that he CAN send his son to Bowdoin in the fall and be assured that his son will have the advantage he is now fully aware of.”<sup>30</sup> Soldiers fought not only for their home institutions, but also for the right of future generations to enjoy those institutions. Nostalgia not only motivated soldiers, but it informed their vision of the future peaceful world for which they fought.

Strong emotional connections to Bowdoin created a sense of nostalgia far more influential than abstract ideology or abstract nationalism. Soldiers remembered “the simple things in life.” “What we do now isn’t too interesting,” wrote Theodore Saba, “the glamour of war just doesn’t seem to be.” Saba admitted that in his wartime experience, “there isn’t any room for nights of romance with the Queen’s ladies-in-waiting or of charging on pearly white steeds.” The reality was “mud and heat and rain; dust, sweat, politics within and politics without.” One night, Saba noted, he and his comrades began talking “about home and all it had meant ... what it would mean again someday. Why we were out ... how we felt ... What we fought for.” In attempting to describe that conversation, Saba explained that although in times of war “you’re supposed to be fighting for ‘Democracy’ or the ‘Four Freedoms’ or something,” he and his companions thought in more concrete terms. Rather than for ideas “fine and glorious,” the Bowdoin graduates were fighting for “a lot of little things,” which didn’t have “any fancy phrases for them.” I think what I am fighting for is something like a nickel coke at the corner drugstore with the sucking noises the straw makes when you go after that last dreg in the bottom. Or maybe it’s something like listening sedately with your ears while your body goes all a-jumping when Benny Goodman “starts to ride.”... the tender scent of a lovely girl beside you on the sands, her face bathed in the silver of a Florida moon ... it’s the whip of the pine-filled wind as you cut down snow-dressed slopes in New Hampshire ... or the smell and the roar of the Seventh avenue Express pulling into 14th Street ... it’s little kids playing hop-scotch on the cement walk in front of the Methodist Church and the rapture filled crowd listening to a Goldman Band Concert at Central Park Mall. It’s blind dates and cramming for final exams... it’s juke-boxes, sweaty workers with pay envelopes, Sunday joy-riding, boating on the river and dancing under the

  
 Southwest Pacific  
 12 September 1943

Dean...

Sort of moping and thinking around things today, what with the world of these parts being so quiet, until your V-mail came in. That did it...pulled me up out of my boot straps and set me square again.

What we do now isn't too interesting...the glamour of war just doesn't seem to be. Guess it has grown too big and there isn't any room for nights of romances with the Queen's lady-in-waiting or of charging on pearly white steeds. It's mud and heat and rain; dust, sweat, politics within and politics without. We talked these things over last night in the blackness of the moon...the CO, and Sgt. Vogel and Lt. Colton and I...we talked about home and all it had meant...what it would mean again someday. Why we were out...how we felt... What we fought for...and it wasn't any of the great or laudatory things that President Sills told us in chapel or any of the high phrases that they used in Round-Table Discussions. I tried to put mine in words last night...I try again now...

There isn't much relief under a pyramidal tent set astride the equator when the sun is beating down and the thermometer (if you had one) reads ninety degrees in the shade. There is a war going on and you're supposed to be fighting for "Democracy" or the "Four Freedoms" or something...but I don't know what. Maybe it is worth laying down your life for things intangible, fine and glorious, yet that is not for me... I think what I am fighting for is something like a nickel coke at the corner drug-store with the sucking noise the straw makes when you go after that last drag in the bottom. Or maybe it's something like listening sedately with your ears while your body goes all a-jumping when Benny Goodman "starts to ride." It's fighting for Cuba-Libres, long and cold, in dim-lit rooms with soft music coming from out of the walls...the tender scent of a lovely girl beside you on the sands, her

This letter from Theodore Saba (Class of 1942) reveals the author's attachment to home front institutions like Bowdoin College. Thousands of other such notes made their way back to Brunswick during the war years. Saba's letter, addressed to Dean Paul Nixon, was sent from the Southwest Pacific on September 12, 1943. The first paragraph reads: "Sort of moping and thinking around things today, what with the world of these parts being so quiet, until your V-mail came in. That did it . . . pulled me up out of my boot straps and set me square again." *Courtesy of the George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections and Archives, Bowdoin College Library.*

stars, Class Day, Social Security Cards, chicken dinner and the whole family gathered with all the kids yelling for white meat and the wish-bones.

Saba was not out to save the world: “let someone else have the ‘war to end all wars,’” he wrote. All he wanted was “to finish this one and come home to important things like ducking scholastic pro and finding a way to carry an extra course in Art.”<sup>31</sup>

For soldiers such as Theodore Saba, the war was not merely about the glorious flag or the man beside him; nor was it directly about Bowdoin College. He fought because the very essential elements of his peacetime life—the simple, every day objects that he so nostalgically listed—were at stake and the war was in the way. The powerful images he conveyed show how strong the nostalgic motivator was to soldiers. Stronger than patriotism and perhaps just as strong as small-group cohesion was the vision of life before the war: home, friends, and peaceful times.

Corresponding triggered memories of personal interactions with friends, family, or former colleagues. The power of the pre-war memory is clear in the quantity of letters and in their content. Reports on friends helped the soldiers maintain personal contacts, and so Bowdoin College became a center of information, helping graduates maintain a supportive community abroad. Without these seemingly arbitrary formations—a common bond simply because they went to the same college—many friendships would have disappeared as soldiers went off to war. The college and places like it helped soldiers remember their peacetime lives and aided in sustaining their morale.

Nostalgic motivators provided soldiers with an idealized memory of the past and hope for a peaceful future. Soldiers often reminisced about their last days before they joined the armed forces: “many of us look back at our College days especially fondly for they were our last days in the States out of the service and it was for many, our last house before the war.”<sup>32</sup> Thoughts about friends, mentors, and simple activities connected the soldiers with home.

These nostalgia-based intermediate motivators worked in different ways. One of the most important was the fact that they encouraged soldiers to defend their peacetime lives. Memories encouraged them to continue serving to the end. The world they wanted back was their future, if they could outlast the war. Soldiers believed that the enemy stood between them and their idealized peacetime experiences, and they fought to protect the institutions that they associated with those fond

memories. Some also fought so that others—in many cases their children—could enjoy the opportunities and experiences that places such as Bowdoin College afforded.

Charles H. Mergendahl of the Class of 1941 wrote to President Sills praising him as “perhaps the only college president in the U.S. who would and could find time among pressing and important duties to write a letter to a young grad without being forced to do so out of courtesy.” Mergendahl continued, “I can’t tell you how much that kind of thing means to a sailor who has been away from the U.S. for months, and who worries occasionally, along with all other servicemen, that he may be forgotten.”<sup>33</sup> Luckily for American servicemen, Bowdoin College President Kenneth C. M. Sills was not the only one who wrote to the boys “over there.” The letters and the memories kept them going, and they were not forgotten.

### **Memory and Morale**

The Second World War cost Bowdoin College ninety-four sons—ninety-five if one counts the Bowdoin professor who also lost his life during the conflict. The dead came from classes as far back as 1902, but the Classes of 1941 and 1945 saw the greatest losses with eleven each. When the dust had settled there were many graves and many heroes. Many returned home with medals on their chests—including one Congressional Medal of Honor. In the field, these sons of Bowdoin met men from other walks of life who became their world and their comrades in arms. In time the bonds of small-group cohesion must have touched the hearts of these soldiers and sailors.

Of the Bowdoin Collection, recent graduates were more likely to write than the men who had graduated decades earlier. The class that had the greatest number of correspondents—the Class of 1943—was distinct in having their education cut short by the war. These men had just accustomed themselves to the college life when they left for the armed services. Their last civilian home was the college, and it was to this institution they owed their allegiance. Fraternity houses, classes, and football games represented the American way of life and these memories took on a powerful life of their own. Those men who had been apart from the Bowdoin community for a greater period of time were less likely to write, although some—perhaps those who had not yet found an environment as comfortable as that which they had experienced in their college days—did correspond with the president and the dean. The Class of 1935 had twenty correspondents; the Class of 1936, twenty-seven; and

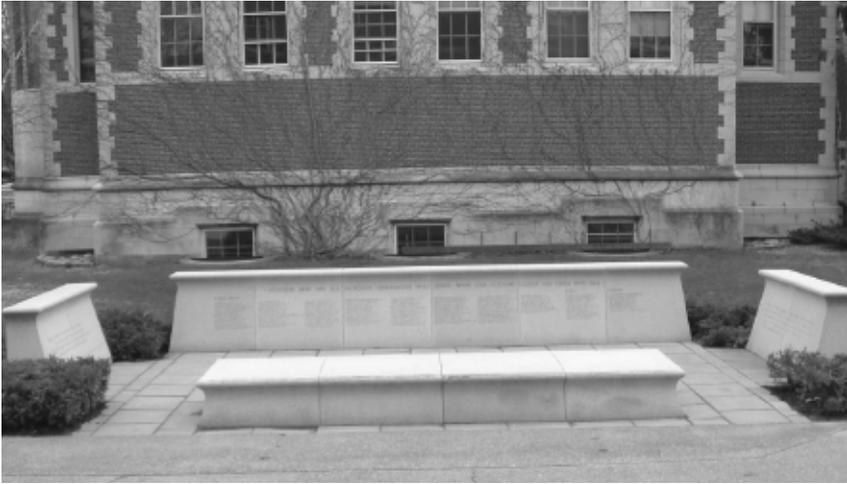
the Class of 1937, thirty-five. Correspondents peaked with the Class of 1943, at eighty-two. Soldiers in the 1944 and 1945 classes, it may be argued, had not been at Bowdoin long enough to form strong bonds before they went to war.

### After the War

After the peace treaty was signed in Tokyo Bay, the men returned, but sadly the Bowdoin College they remembered had changed. War—total war—causes changes, and the irony is that the world these men had struggled and labored to protect had, despite their efforts, moved on. The most obvious change was the growth of the college. Returning veterans made up three-fifths of the student body by the spring of 1946. Applications for admission grew rapidly, with 850 prospective students vying for 150 spots. With the increase in the number of students, housing became an important issue, and some found themselves in the barracks of the Brunswick Naval Air Station, which had been deactivated.<sup>34</sup> The college initiated a three semester system so that students could clear out faster. Sills hoped to return Bowdoin to its normal size of approximately 600 students. Bowdoin's fall 1947 class was the largest in its history to that point: 1,086. Eight hundred men had left Bowdoin during the war with varying number of credits; many returned, hoping to complete their degrees.<sup>35</sup> The graduating class in June of 1946 included men from seven different classes.

The returning veterans hoped to reestablish the college of their youth. In a poignant letter to the editor of the *Orient*, the Bowdoin College paper, five veterans noted that they had heard “the numerous pleas from all sources for a return to Bowdoin of that certain spirit, present in pre-war days, but sadly lacking in the present collegiate life of Bowdoin College.” They outlined their vision of Bowdoin: “those of us who were at Bowdoin during the ‘golden’ days of 1940-41-42 can probably recall without any effort, the monster rallies, the peanut fights in Mem Hall, the awe-inspiring rigors of Proc Night and the ‘Hello’s’ that came from upperclass as well as Freshman lips.” These, they admitted, were the memories they had “tucked away in our army musette bags or in some corner of a ship at sea ... memories that were brought forth upon occasion to remind us of those days at Bowdoin before the war took us away.”

Yet, Bowdoin had changed. The authors noted that they could not get a decent “Hello” when they walked around campus, and blamed the loss of comradarie on those students who did not conform to or spoke against the hazing traditions of old.<sup>36</sup> A student replied in the next issue



Bowdoin College honors its fallen sons from World War II, Korea, and Vietnam with this memorial adjacent to Hubbard Hall. *Photo courtesy of Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.*

of the *Orient*: “Gentlemen I am truly sorry that fate has dealt you such a cruel blow in not returning these cherished institutions to you. But doesn’t it stand to reason that we have changed our ways of thinking in the past few years? We can’t cry about our long lost ‘Golden Age’ because it is something we cannot recreate.” The author, Roger Lee Kenvin, called freshman hazing and harassment “hog wash” and accused the veterans of attempting to create a caste system, which had “no place in a democracy.” This reply suggested that post-war Bowdoin had no place for the pre-war world. Colleges such as Bowdoin, Kenvin continued, were “institutions of learning,” not “a ‘Rah-rah’ social club.”<sup>37</sup> This debate between the veterans and the new generation continued, not just in the College’s newspaper, but also in dining halls and dorms.

Eventually the calls for a more open college life succeeded. The Sills vision that had survived for three decades, many new students believed, was finally beginning to get old at the expense of the College’s reputation. When a reporter asked a Brunswick Associated Press correspondent to describe the important changes at Bowdoin, the latter replied: “That is one of the big troubles. It doesn’t change.”<sup>38</sup> Kenneth Sills had done what his student vets wanted: he had done his best to keep Bowdoin the same.

With new challenges and new students, Bowdoin underwent a trans-

formation. Aside from the expansion of the college and the increase in administrative staff, the college also stood on the verge of reorganizing its curriculum and reclaiming its reputation among modern liberal arts schools. Much of this would continue through the years after Sills's retirement as president of the college in 1952. Gone were the days of roaring fraternity parties and innocent chats by the firelight. Gone were the student-soldiers who had sustained themselves with the memories of college times long ago. Bowdoin College and its memories helped its soldiers through the largest war in human history, but times had changed and so too had the college they loved and cherished. The college had shaped their lives, and the war had changed them again. Even though they did not return to the world they had wished for, the music, in their hearts, would echo long even after the song had faded.

## NOTES

1. See Edna L. Robb to Paul Nixon, October 6, 1944, Kenneth C. M. Sills Administrative Records (1882-1958), George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections and Archives, Hawthorne-Longfellow Library, Bowdoin College, Brunswick (hereafter cited as "Sills Papers"). The author would like to thank Bowdoin College Profs. Patrick J. Rael, Daniel Levine, Thomas D. Conlan, Purnima Dhavan, Matthew W. Klingle, and Kidder Smith. Thanks also to Profs. David J. Silbey of Alvernia College and Jeffrey K. Olick of the University of Virginia. I would also like to thank Everett and Eleanor Pope, Laurence Pope, Edward Langbein, John Cross, Robert and Janet Cross, Sherman D. Spector, Richard Burston, Richard Johnstone, Henry Shorey, Robert Page, Kevin Wesley, Charlotte Magnuson, and the staff of the George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections and Archives. Finally, I would like to thank Kathryn A. Ostrofsky, whose strength, friendship, and love sustains me always. The project is dedicated to Everett P. Pope of the Bowdoin College Class of 1941.
2. Clella Reeves Collins, *When Your Son Goes to War* (New York: Harper, 1943), p. 210.
3. Samuel Lyman Atwood Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War* (New York: William Morrow, 1964), pp. 141, 161. See James M. McPherson, *What They Fought For, 1861-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), p. 35; Richard Holmes, *Acts of War: The Behavior of Men in Battle* (New York: Free Press, 1986), pp. 278, 284-85.
4. Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: Free Press, 1979), pp. 1-2, 8-11, 14-15, 49; Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), pp. xiii-xiv, 3-5.
5. Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, pp. 31-36. See Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 8, 64-65, 78-79.
6. Alon Confino, *The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Württemberg, Imperial Ger-*

many, and *National Memory*, 1871-1918 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), pp. 103, 165, 171, 185. See Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, pp. xiii-xvi, xviii, 41, 43, 49.

7. Marshall, *Men Against Fire*, p. 42.

8. Kenneth C. M. Sills to William M. Moody, June 20, 1945; Franklin Eaton to Paul Nixon, September 21, 1943, Sills Papers.

9. Robert Warren Coombs to Kenneth Charles Morton Sills, March 11, 1942; Sills to Coombs, March 14, 1942, Sills Papers.

10. Robert L. McCarthy to Paul Nixon, July 3, 1944, Sills Papers.

11. Richard C. Johnstone to Paul Nixon, April 29, 1945, Sills Papers.

12. The letters presented here are merely a fraction of those still unclassified by Bowdoin College. The College has a policy of restricting sensitive material until the deaths of the authors.

13. Theodore Saba to Paul Nixon, October 8, 1943, Sills Papers.

14. Robert Hugh Allen to Paul Nixon, December 1, 1944; L. Damon Scales to Kenneth C. M. Sills, January 28, 1944; William L. Talcott to Kenneth C. M. Sills, February 15, 1945; Theodore Saba to Paul Nixon, October 8, 1943, Sills Papers.

15. Robert L. Edwards to Paul Nixon, ca. August. 1943; Marshall W. Picken to Kenneth C. M. Sills, February 4, 1944, Sills Papers.

16. Richard Curtis Hanson to Paul Nixon, November 10, 1942, Sills Papers.

17. Everett Parker Pope to Paul Nixon, December 6, 1942, Sills Papers.

18. Laurence E. Pope to Paul Nixon, October 8, 1942, Sills Papers.

19. Kenneth Charles Morton Sills to Stanwood Hanson, October 22, 1942, Sills Papers.

20. Robert H. Allen to Paul Nixon, ca. July 1945; Charles I. Arnold to Kenneth C. M. Sills, (undated), Sills Papers.

21. Roger K. Eastman to Kenneth C. M. Sills, June 24, 1944, Sills Papers.

22. Philip M. Johnson to Paul Nixon, April 14, 1943; Robert H. Allen to Kenneth C. M. Sills, January 6, 1944; Charles M. Barbour to Sills, April 20, 1945; Norman E. Duggan to Sills, December 9, 1943, Sills Papers.

23. Robert Warren Coombs to Paul Nixon, November 22 1942; Coombs to Kenneth Charles Morton Sills, December 25, 1942; Coombs to Nixon, January 19, 1943; Robert W. Ellis to Sills, February 18, 1944; Sills to William L. Mansfield, March 31, 1943, Sills Papers.

24. Basil J. Guy to Kenneth C. M. Sills, November 5, 1944; Charles T. Ireland to Nathaniel Kendrick, December 22, 1944; Robert Whitman to Paul Nixon, January 24, 1943, Sills Papers.

25. Robert H. Allen to Kenneth C. M. Sills, July 22, 1944, Sills Papers.

26. W. Streeter Bass to Paul Nixon, October 31, 1944, Sills Papers.

27. Edward B. Burr to Paul Nixon, March 5, 1945, Sills Papers.

28. Robert Whitman to Paul Nixon, December 12, 1944, Sills Papers.

29. Robert Whitman to Paul Nixon, January 24, 1943; Lendall B. Knight to Paul Nixon, November 25, 1942, Sills Papers.
30. Sidney M. Alpert to un-addressed recipient (undated); William Bellamy to Paul Nixon, January 20, 1944; James A. Bishop to Nixon, December 5, 1944; William H. Rice to Nixon, July 25, 1944, Sills Papers.
31. Theodore Saba to Paul Nixon, September 12, 1943, Sills Papers.
32. Richard W. Hyde to Kenneth C. M. Sills, January 9, 1944, Sills Papers.
33. Charles H. Mergendahl to Kenneth C. M. Sills, April 29, 1944, Sills Papers.
34. Brown, *Sills of Bowdoin*, pp. 370, 372.
35. Jeffrey Millard Werner, "Staying the Course: A Study of Bowdoin College and The Sills Presidency, 1918-1952," Senior Honors Project, Bowdoin College, 1996, pp. 81, 83; Brown, *Sills of Bowdoin*, p. 373.
36. John P. Donaldson, John J. Fahey, Donald M. Lockhart, Robert L. de Sherbinin, and Cort Mathers, letter to the editor, *Bowdoin Orient*, November 20, 1946, p. 2.
37. Roger Lee Kenvin, letter to the editor, *Bowdoin Orient*, December 11, 1946.
38. Quoted in Brown, *Sills of Bowdoin*, p. 376.