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Thinking of Home: The World War Two Letters of Gerald Koster

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Abstract

This paper covers the letters of Gerald Koster, who served aboard the USS New Jersey during World War Two. This paper covers his letters from the time of his enlistment in January 1943 through November 1943, and shows how his attitude towards the Navy, his parents, and his home changed over that period, as Koster became homesick and lost enthusiasm for Navy life.

Keywords

Gerald Koster, World War Two

Disciplines

History | Military History | United States History

Comments

Written for HIST 300: Historical Methods.

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On January 17, 1943, 18-year-old Gerald Koster marveled at the sight of himself in his Navy uniform, writing home to his parents in West Toledo, Ohio, “Boy do I look swell. Tell the girls to be prepared.”¹ Koster initially looked about the United States Naval Training Station at Great Lakes, Illinois, with a sense of excitement. However, the novelty of Navy life gradually wore off as months passed, and he became more easily homesick, lashing out at his parents and sister when they were slow to reply to his letters. Growing less enamored of the Navy life, Koster’s thoughts lingered often on past memories and the loved ones he left behind.

Gerald John Koster was born on January 16, 1925 in Ohio.² His father was Erlin J. Koster and his mother was Helen Marie Schaefer.³ Sometime in between 1925 and 1929, his mother left and remarried.⁴ Erlin Koster remarried in 1937 to Wava Dorrell Hazlett, who had a daughter, Phyllis E. Hazlett (b. 1929), from her previous marriage.⁵ However, despite the fact that Wava was not actually his mother and Phyllis was not his sister, Gerald insisted on addressing them and treating them as so in his letters. In 1940, the family of four was living in Bedford, Michigan, where Erlin worked as a clerk for gas appliances.⁶ Sometime between 1940 and

¹Gerald Koster to his parents, January 17, 1943, box 1, folder 1, MS-084: The Letters of Gerald Koster, World War Two, Special Collections and College Archives, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

²Ancestry.com, Gerald John Koster, *U.S., Social Security Applications and Claims Index, 1936-2007* [database on-line]. Provo: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2015; Ancestry.com, Gerald Koster, *1940 United States Federal Census, Bedford, Monroe, Michigan* [database on-line]. Provo: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012.

³Ancestry.com, *Michigan, Marriage Records, 1867-1952* [database on-line]. Provo: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2015.

⁴Ancestry.com, Helen M. [Schaefer] Hodge, *1930 United States Federal Census, Toledo, Lucas, Ohio* [database on-line]. Provo: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2002.

⁵Ancestry.com, *Michigan, Marriage Records, 1867-1952* [database on-line]. Provo: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2015; Ancestry.com, Phyllis [Phyllis] Hazlett, *1930 United States Federal Census, Ypsilanti, Washtenaw, Michigan* [database on-line]. Provo: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2002.

⁶Ancestry.com, Gerald Koster, *1940 United States Federal Census, Bedford, Monroe, Michigan* [database on-line]. Provo: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012.

January 1943, the family moved to West Toledo, Ohio, where his father established a grocery store, Hopewell Grocery.⁷ It is evident that Gerald Koster looked towards his service with an air of impatience, as he enlisted the day before his eighteenth birthday, on January 15, 1943, and the muster rolls list him as a seaman second class.⁸ Looking at an envelope postmarked January 24, 1943, it seems that Koster was enlisted in Company 94, 52nd Battalion, 29th Regiment.⁹

Koster was eager to be in the Navy and seemed to be in awe of the people and setting around him, as he wrote to his parents on January 17, 1943 from his training station, “So far I like it swell.” He explained one of the best parts was the food, exclaiming, “Boy[,] the meals they give you. They sure are good.” But then, perhaps to evoke a laugh from his parents, he added, “The other day we had beans and bean broth. Did things cut lo[o]se that night. I never heard so much noise.” He expressed surprise at the new slang around him, noting that “around here they all call you Mac. You ask anyone something[,] you say[,] hey Mac.”¹⁰ But a few days later, he found himself worn down by the rigorous training. On January 22, he explained to his parents that he had “fire watch last night from 12 to four” in the morning. He also noted that “today I lost my hair” and expressed surprise at how quick of a process it had been, taking “a minute + 40 seconds.” Then he described that he had felt sick earlier in the day after he had been administered several shots that were pure “hell.” However, he recovered enough to help other sailors “wax the joint,” during which he dirtied his uniform. He then had to scramble to look

⁷Krystal M. Thomas, “Finding Aid for MS-084: The Letters of Gerald Koster, World War II” (February 2007), Special Collections and College Archives, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, 4, <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1076&context=findingaidall>.

⁸Fold3.com, Gerald J. Koster, *U.S. World War II Navy Muster Rolls, 1938-1949* [database online], National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D. C.

⁹Gerald Koster envelope addressed to parents, postmarked January 24, 1943, box 1, folder 1, MS-084: The Letters of Gerald Koster, World War Two.

¹⁰Gerald Koster to his parents, January 17, 1943, folder 1, box 1, MS-084: The Letters of Gerald Koster, World War Two.

presentable for military inspection, and Koster groaned that it was then that “the hell comes in.” It was such hell for Koster because “we stood at attention for I don[’]t know how long. I almost died.” He had not had enough time to clean his “rubbers,” presumably his rubber shoes or boots. The officer conducting the inspection noticed Koster’s shoes, but to Koster’s relief, the officer let it pass. The last few days had been long for Koster, and he admitted that everyone else felt worn out, writing, “Put off all exercise till Mon. [til Monday] [’]cause all are feeling pretty low.”¹¹ Navy life proved to be exhausting.

On January 26, he wrote to his sister, remarking, “Boy is this the life,” but perhaps he was being sarcastic, as he went on to describe his exhausting routine for the day, starting at five in the morning. After breakfast, the sailors faced long hours of exercise and marching, and once exercise was finally finished, they ran all the way to their next meal. “If the exercise didn’t kill us[,] that run did,” Koster complained. Despite the fact that his training made him feel completely spent, he admitted that he was adjusting better than he had before. “I sure like it a lot better now,” Koster wrote, explaining that he now had “a scheudel [schedule] to follow. Know what I have to do and do it or else.” He signed off “Jerry the sailor,” showing that despite his complaints, he felt that he had now earned the title of “sailor.”¹² One World War Two army veteran, George W. Neill, also noted in his memoirs the discipline of his training camp, detailing how one officer told them, ““You don’t question us. If you want to think differently, we’ll knock

¹¹Gerald Koster to his parents, January 22, 1943, folder 1, box 1, MS-084: The Letters of Gerald Koster, World War Two.

¹²Gerald Koster to his sister, January 26, 1943, folder 1, box 1, MS-084: The Letters of Gerald Koster, World War Two.

that out of you in ways you won't like," prompting Neill to remark that uniform "dress, haircuts, and inspections were all tools to turn independent-minded civilians into obedient troops."¹³

Koster could joke about his duties, as on February 2, he quipped, "There's so much rubber on them [the] floors that we scraped it up + sent it to firestone," presumably meaning the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company.¹⁴ He was able to make a joke out of his work but in doing so, he also drew attention to how exhausting and extensive it was. On February 20, he noted that he received a shot in his arm but unlike earlier, this shot did not hurt.¹⁵ He was slowly learning the ropes of Navy life and growing accustomed to the training grounds at Great Lakes. The Naval Training Station at Great Lakes was the "biggest naval installation in the midwest" and had greatly expanded since its start in 1911.¹⁶ In 1911, "39 buildings" were in place and a mere "1500 men" were able to be housed on the site.¹⁷ When the United States entered World War I, the station grew rapidly to prepare large numbers of sailors. After the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, thousands of people worked quickly to set into place a new batch of buildings at Great Lakes for the incoming sailors. In 1945, the training station contained more than "1000 buildings."¹⁸ A total of "one million sailors" were sent to the naval station during the war.¹⁹ Gerald Koster was one of many sailors who was sent to Great Lakes, a training ground that seems like a city itself.

¹³George W. Neill, *Infantry Soldier: Holding the Line at the Battle of the Bulge* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), 11.

¹⁴Gerald Koster to his parents, February 2, 1943, folder 1, box 1, MS-084: The Letters of Gerald Koster, World War Two.

¹⁵Gerald Koster to his parents, February 20, 1943, folder 1, box 1, MS-084: The Letters of Gerald Koster, World War Two.

¹⁶"This is NTC Great Lakes" in *All Hands: The Bureau of Naval Personnel Information Bulletin*, no. 512 (September 1959):16, https://www.navy.mil/ah_online/archpdf/ah195909.pdf; *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 18-19.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 17.

Koster seemed impatient to get into the action overseas, as that was what he had signed up for. Ten days before his ship, the U.S. S. *New Jersey*, was commissioned, Koster complained on May 13, “It looks as though, by the time we get out there [overseas] with the U. S. S. Never Sink[,] it [the war] will be over with.”²⁰ Presumably to avoid having his letters censored, Koster referred to the *New Jersey* as the “U. S. S. Never Sink.” Koster remarked that the ship would be sent to Africa first and then onto “Der Furher,” Adolf Hitler, and “His Honorable slants,” meaning the Japanese.²¹ He was influenced by American propaganda that dehumanized the Japanese people and often portrayed them as “rat-like, yellow, and slant-eyed.”²² After the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, visual media distorted the image of the Japanese and fueled further hatred against them.²³

Koster’s wish to serve overseas was granted once the *New Jersey* was commissioned on May 23, although he would not see much action for the remainder of the year. According to the battleship’s website, the *New Jersey* (BB-62) spent the rest of 1943 in “the Western Atlantic and Caribbean.”²⁴ In early 1944, the *New Jersey*, under the direction of the admiral of the Fifth Fleet, played a part in the invasion of the Marshall Islands. For the rest of 1944, the battleship focused on attacking islands in the Pacific held by the Japanese, including the Caroline Islands and the Mariana Islands. In October 1944, the *New Jersey* took part in the Battle of Leyte Gulf near the Philippine Islands. In February 1945, the *New Jersey* aided other ships and planes in the attack of

²⁰Thomas, “Finding Aid for MS-084: Letters of Gerald Koster, World War II,” 4; Gerald Koster to his parents, May 13, 1943, folder 4, box 1, MS-084: The Letters of Gerald Koster, World War Two.

²¹Gerald Koster to his parents, May 13, 1943, folder 4, box 1, MS-084: The Letters of Gerald Koster, World War Two.

²²George H. Roeder, Jr., *The Censored War: American Visual Experience During World War Two* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 87.

²³*Ibid.*, 86-87.

²⁴“The Ship: Full History,” Battleship New Jersey, accessed February 28, 2020, <https://www.battleshipnewjersey.org/the-ship/full-history/>.

Iwo Jima and played an extensive role in the attack on Okinawa in March and April 1945. The *New Jersey* then returned to the United States for repairs before setting off again overseas. The ship was stationed in Japan for the fall and winter months of 1945 before its final return to San Francisco in February 1946.²⁵

As time dragged on aboard the *New Jersey*, Koster became homesick. When his parents failed to write often enough, he expressed resentment towards them. When he was in Philadelphia in April 1943, he was happy that the sailors did “little work” and exclaimed, “Boy this sure is the life. I like it here.” But then, he contradicted himself, writing, “Boy I sure miss the outside,” and wished for a moment that he had been stationed close to home. Yet he seemed to shrug off any feelings of homesickness or regret, affirming, “But I like it here so I guess that[’]s all that[’]s necessary.”²⁶ However, once aboard the ship in May, he grew irritated with his parents’ slowness to respond. He sent one letter on June 8 and he wrote another on June 26, asking, “Say[,] do you know a sailor by the name of Jerry Koster. You ought to write to him once in a while,” and he demanded that his parents should “sit right down + ans.[answer] this” once they received it.²⁷ His next letter to his parents opened with a sarcastic line, writing on July 7, “I finally got your long lost letter. I think it came by the way of Alaska.”²⁸ It appears that Koster, feeling angry and alone in the middle of the ocean, flung his anger at his parents and anyone else who failed to write to him on a regular basis. Some of his anger stemmed from his interactions with higher ranking sailors, as on August 15, Koster complained, “I don’t like some

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶Gerald Koster to his parents, April 14, 1943, folder 3, box 1, MS-084: The Letters of Gerald Koster, World War Two.

²⁷Gerald Koster to his parents, June 26, 1943, folder 4, box 1, MS-084: The Letters of Gerald Koster, World War II.

²⁸Gerald Koster to his parents, July 7, 1943, folder 5, box 1, MS-084: The Letters of Gerald Koster, World War II.

of the ---- I have to take. Specially [Especially] from some guy with just one stripe on his arm.” He went on to write that whenever he was feeling homesick, he would draw up “a picture” of his home or another place in his head “as if I was looking at it.”²⁹

It was no surprise then that Koster grew sentimental and nostalgic, wallowing in past memories of his home. When Koster heard news that his parents had gone fishing in July, he wrote back wistfully, “I would [have] liked to have seen you + dad pulling them in, + with my little camera in my hands. More fun.”³⁰ Wondering what he was missing back home, he often seemed to picture himself in Toledo. He evidently had visited his home for a week in September and admitted to his parents after, “I sure hated to leave home.”³¹ Apparently his homesickness had reached a peak level, as his next letter came two days later, and one of his first lines was “Boy am I homesick this morning.” He then admitted that he had to repress his emotions around everyone else on the ship and begged his parents to “keep on writing [']cause you have to got to get me out of the dumps with your letters.”³² Again in October, he grew downcast on the prospect of missing the hunting season, writing, “I always looked forward to” the season “[']cause we all got together + really had a time.” To add to his feelings of nostalgia and homesickness, Koster grew more distraught in the same letter because he had lost his wallet. What distressed him much more than the loss of money was the fact that he had lost his pictures held within. His pictures represented visual, tangible reminders of his loved ones at home, and now they were all lost. He was particularly upset that he had lost a picture of a girl named

²⁹Gerald Koster to his parents, August 15, 1943, folder 6, box 1, MS-084: The Letters of Gerald Koster, World War II.

³⁰Gerald Koster to his parents, July 16, 1943, folder 5, box 1, MS-084: The Letters of Gerald Koster, World War II.

³¹Gerald Koster to his parents, September 24, 1943, folder 6, box 1, MS-084: The Letters of Gerald Koster, World War II.

³²Gerald Koster to his parents, September 26, 1943, folder 6, box 1, MS-084: The Letters of Gerald Koster, World War II.

Audrey. He had a deeply romanticized image of her, writing in the same October letter, “Don’t know what there is about her, but every time I see her I know she’s the girl for me. I hope to marry her some day.”³³ It was a romanticized statement for him to make, as it appears that Audrey had not written any letters to him. In an October 24th letter to his sister, Phyllis, Koster attributed this to her mother’s interference, writing, “I don’t think her [Audrey’s] mother would care now if she wrote to me. So if you can, tell her that.”³⁴ He would often pester his sister to relay messages to Audrey, who was a common subject in Koster’s letters to Phyllis. Koster tried to explain to Phyllis why his thoughts dwelled on Audrey, writing in November that being away in the Navy changed his perspective and made him value home more than before. “That[’]s one thing the service does for a person,” Koster observed, adding, “Makes him think of some of the things he did and what he could have done to make things better. You realize what home really is. It[’]s kind of hard to explain cause it[’]s mostly in the heart.”³⁵

Koster had a unique writing style that can be seen in his May 21st letter (located at the end of this paper). His writing was short and fragmented and contained several minor misspellings. He used his often repeated term “boy” at the start of his sentences to add emphasis to his point, and this letter did not include his other favorite term “swell.” He did not curse but used “darn” instead, perhaps considering his parents were the ones who would read the letter. He seemed more chipper in this letter and as in several other letters, he included things that he knew would make his parents laugh. For instance, instead of writing about how he had lashed out at an unfortunate guy asleep on the bunk below him, he included a comical drawing of the scene. He

³³Gerald Koster to his parents, October 15, 1943, folder 7, box 1, MS-084: The Letters of Gerald Koster, World War II.

³⁴Gerald Koster to his sister, October 24, 1943, folder 7, box 1, MS-084: The Letters of Gerald Koster, World War II.

³⁵Gerald Koster to his sister, November 4, 1943, folder 7, box 1, MS-084: The Letters of Gerald Koster, World War II.

put a pun on his closing words, signing off “Your Little Son (Shine).” As in other letters, he reminded his parents to “write soon as I will be waiting for an answer,” but unlike later letters, he did not write of any feelings of homesickness, and his letter remained free of any resentment at his parents.³⁶ His May 21st letter revealed a witty and altogether cheerful boy who seemed eager to show his parents that he was doing well and who was also eager to show off his assigned battleship. Koster was still in relatively good spirits before he left on the *New Jersey*, and this letter shows a great contrast from his letters written in the months following.

Koster’s May 21st letter also showed that he was fully aware that his letters would be censored. At one point, he started to write the beginning of “Jersey” but crossed it out, replacing it with the “U.S. S. Never Sink.” In the letter’s postscript, he added, “How do you like those dots + dashes I put in my letters. You know [three scribbles] See what I mean.”³⁷ While he could be referencing his own sloppiness, he also could be referencing the fact that he scratched out the word “Jersey,” demonstrating to his parents that he had to watch what he was writing. One part of a sentence was neatly clipped out of his November 1st letter to his parents, causing the rest of the line to make little sense, as the censored letter picked up at “ ‘For Whom the Bell Tolls.’ Boy that really is swell.”³⁸ His next letter was censored because he likely named a location. In his censored November 9th letter, Koster wrote, “The country here looks just like” and the remainder of his sentence had been ripped out.³⁹ Even though he didn’t name the country he was in, even referencing the place it reminded him of was unacceptable to the censors. According to Byron

³⁶Gerald Koster to his parents, May 21, 1943, folder 4, box 1, MS-084: The Letters of Gerald Koster, World War II.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Gerald Koster to his parents, November 1, 1943, folder 7, box 1, MS-084: The Letters of Gerald Koster, World War II.

³⁹Gerald Koster to his parents, November 9, 1943, folder 7, box 1, MS-084: The Letters of Gerald Koster, World War II.

Price, the director of the Office of Censorship (which was set up under President Franklin Roosevelt after Pearl Harbor), censors usually clipped out questionable lines because they held information on “defense matters, shipping data, weather conditions, and details of war production.”⁴⁰ Price justified censorship as “a matter of national security,” emphasizing that it was simply meant as a practical measure to make sure that information would not fall into the wrong hands.⁴¹ According to Alvin William McDaniel Jr., “each Navy censor read about sixty thousand words each day,” but most of the time, few phrases needed to be cut out by the censors.⁴²

After the war, Gerald Koster worked for over thirty years at the “C&O Railroad,” presumably the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad, which ran through Toledo.⁴³ He had one son, Gerald R. Koster. On March 22, 1983, Gerald Koster died at the age of 58, and the short obituary noted that he had served in the Navy.⁴⁴ Koster certainly never forgot how he entered the Navy as a young, eager kid who didn’t realize how attached he was to home. Despite his May 21, 1943 letter where he declared, “Bet you will never see or hear of me in the same joint” for too long, he clearly had deep ties to his Ohio town, as it appears that he lived the rest of his life around the

⁴⁰Byron Price, "Governmental Censorship in War-Time" *The American Political Science Review* 36, no. 5 (October 1942): 841-843, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1949286>.

⁴¹Ibid., 837-838.

⁴²Alvin William McDaniel, Jr., “The War on Words: the Office of Censorship in World War II,” Master’s thesis (University of the Pacific [Scholarly Commons], 1972), 45, https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/uop_etds/1786/.

⁴³“Gerald J. Koster Obituary,” *The Blade* (March 23, 1983), Toledo Library Obituary Index (1837-Present), http://obits.toledolibrary.org/obits/view1_cart.asp?id1=224972; “History of the C&O Railway,” Chesapeake and Ohio Historical Society, accessed February 29, 2020, <https://coh.org/history/>.

⁴⁴“Gerald J. Koster Obituary,” Toledo Library, http://obits.toledolibrary.org/obits/view1_cart.asp?id1=224972.

Toledo area.⁴⁵ Perhaps after the war, Koster decided that he had seen enough of the world and wanted to make up for the lost years at home.

⁴⁵Gerald Koster to parents, May 21, 1943, folder 4, box 1, MS-084: The Letters of Gerald Koster, World War II; "Gerald J. Koster Obituary," Toledo Library, http://obits.toledolibrary.org/obits/view1_cart.asp?id1=224972.

May 21, 1943

Dear Dad + Mom,

Say do you know what happened this morning? You don't. Well I'll tell you. It was like this, no It was like that. Anyhow. We had the nicest little rain storm you ever saw. And guess what come off this afternoon. Guess, no your [you're] wrong. It was a steady drizzle. Ha Ha. How [illegible, looks like Gidle—giggle?]. Some fun.

[Scribble] (Excuse me all to hell.) Thank you. Now to proceed. I suppose you have noticed the new address of mine. Pretty nifty [nifty]. That is so I can get my mail aboard ship + also will be my address when we take off. I imagine you will be hearing + also see a picture of the U. S. S. Never Sink [New Jersey spelled in smaller print underneath]. If not in the Blade[,] I'll send the Philey [Philly?] Papers. I am to be an escort on board Sun. About every time I turn around[,] I get lost on it. When I get up in the top + look down. Oh Daddy.

Last week end I went + saw a double header ball game. Phila Phileys [Phillies] + St. Louis. Pretty good games. Over 30,000 attended. Boy did Detroit get a skinner. I could just see Marc paseing [pacing] up + down the floor [.] Tigers made 6 runs in the sixth to tie the score + then lost the game 10 to 6.

Sure glad that you liked your present. I thought you would like it.

Boy that pop corn was even better than that bottle of beer.

Did you say Mrs. Minever or Mrs. Newark[? Unclear name]. (Silly Boy.) Wish Gene Tirney [Tierney] would deliver mine C. O. D. [Cash on Delivery] Boy would I pay her.

Boy sure I'm proud of my Pap. 15 years in the same place. Bet you will never see or hear of me in the same joint that long. If he keeps on going He will soon take over the place. Right.

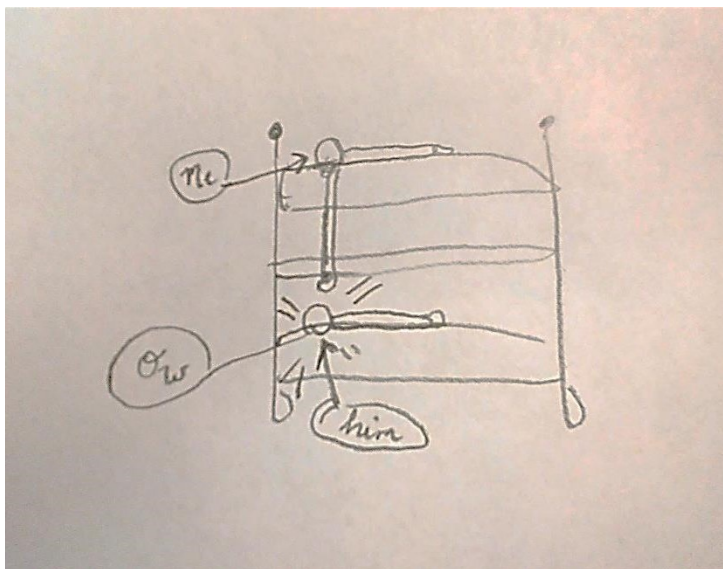
Well I hope you can make any sense out of this. But I have stored [?] it up long enough + as you know it just has to come [scribble] out of me. Right. I heard about Paul. In a way he's lucky + then he sure is missen [missing] something.

How are the Potatoes taking this rain. Ok I hope.

Hey mom I'm going to tease you. I have been [scribble] eating tomatoes for a long time. Nice red tomatoes. Ha Ha. Radishes, [illegible-inours?], aspraghus [asparagus], lettuce. They sure don't have very good humbeguress [hamburgers] in Phila.

Well I hope you are getting along ok. If there should ever be any newsreels about the [he scribbled out Jers for Jersey] U. S. S. Never Sink. Look close [']cause I may be in them. I'm escort on top deck + may get in some. Good thing there aren't going to be any gun salutes. If there was you might find a couple [scribble] big holes in your back yard.

Darn that guy below me. He wiggles around to[o] much. Well thats that. I sure settled



that in

a hurry.⁴⁶

It was the guy in the middle bunk the other day. He hasn't come back yet.

⁴⁶ This is my best representation of Koster's original drawing that uses stick figures. It appears that Koster shows that he, on the top bunk, either punched or dropped something on the sailor on the bottom bunk, who says, "Ow."

Well I guess I[']ll get ready to ashore. Have to get my jumpers from the U. S. O. [United Service Organizations] They sew [']em up for me.

Well write soon as I will be waiting for an answer. So Long you all.

Your Little Son, (Shine) ["Son"shine]

Gerald Johnnie Koster.

How do you like those dots + dashes I put in my letters. You know [three scribbles] See what I mean.

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