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## Wayne G. Sharpe Papers

1943-1944

1 box (0.5 linear ft.)

Call no.: MS 462



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Wayne G. Sharpe was a secretary for Company A in the 1874th Engineers Aviation Battalion of the Army Airforce and a middle-class family man from Belmont, Massachusetts. Enlisted in February of 1943 at the age of twenty-seven, Wayne left his wife and infant son for a year's training at home before his Battalion was dispatched to New Guinea in late December. Flown to a hospital on the island in late April 1944, he returned to the United States in August. The papers of Wayne G. Sharpe, Sr. are primarily made up of his letters and V-mails home during his training and service abroad, but also include his wife's letters to him from April 1943-August 1944.

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[World War II](#)

## Background on Wayne G. Sharpe

Wayne G. Sharpe was born on the 25th of September 1915 in Connecticut as the fourth child of seven. His parents, James O. Sharpe and Florence V. Sharpe, migrated north from New Jersey to Connecticut and finally settled in Massachusetts by 1922. Wayne had a comfortable upper-class childhood, not only was his father the affluent manager of an insurance company, but the 1930 Census appraised the Sharpe house on Shattuck Road, Watertown, to be worth \$13,000.

While two of his brothers followed their father's footsteps into the insurance business, Wayne's Army Enlistment record of the 2nd of February 1943 stated his occupation as "Bandsman, Oboe, or Parts Clerk Automobile." It may have been that Wayne was a member of a band under the Federal Music Project, a division of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Works Progress Association.

When Wayne reported for duty at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, he left his wife, Ruth J. Sharpe, and their eleven-month old son, Wayne G. Sharpe, Jr., at home. At Devens he won quick renown with the fellows as "Doubletime Sharpe." The first reprimand came after he scratched his forehead while standing at attention. His second offense of the day came when he tried to read Ruth's letters in a first aid lecture, the instructor told the drilling Sergeant, "and he made me doubletime some more. I am really getting into great shape," he wrote his wife. At Devens he landed a test score that five days later found him "en route on a train to parts unknown." His destination turned out to be the army air base Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, where the recruits completed their basic training in twenty-six days and underwent interviews for their place in the Army Air Forces. Though Wayne wanted to be a pilot, he learned that he was too old and that his eyesight was too poor ("They classified me as an engineer (no laughing now)"), and on March 18th, versed in gas masks, rifle range shooting, and sporting an official G.I. haircut, he boarded a train to the Northwest. The great scenery of Colorado impressed him deeply, as did a quote by Churchill remarking that "the war is good for at least two to three more years." "The American men will not let it last that long," he wrote Ruth, "When we want something we go after it and we are going after victory ... that is where the girls back home come into the picture. We want you and the only way we can come back is to get the war over with."

After three days of grueling train travel Wayne found himself at the Army Airforce base Hammer Field in Fresno, California ("We saw our first planes today and are they big"), and learned that he was "... in the 4th Army Air Force and that's the Force that takes care of Japan." With just a skeleton of a schedule, however, Wayne found himself bored and missing home. "I will be good for nothing when I get out of here. Between the weather and not doing very much" As time passed, the interviewers lost his card, most of his old Jefferson Barracks mates left with their assignments, and Wayne missed the daily ice cream of his training camp, but observed, "the bread is very fresh so it is not so bad." After eighteen days at Hammer Field, Wayne learned that HQ has lost his entire record, so he needed new tests.

"Why does everything happen to me?" he wrote home. "I lost the rating I was to get and now I am to be a carpenter instead of electrician, so no school as he told me I had enough experience without going to any more schools." On April 23rd, a few days after enjoying a Laurel and Hardy film one evening ("For once it was not a war picture"), Wayne is shipped out, hopeful that he would be assigned to a base in the East. That afternoon he wrote home disappointed: "As you know I could not go West much further so what did the Army but send me northwest." His new home was McChord Field, Washington, where Wayne officially joined the 1874th Engineers Battalion. Not long after his arrival, Wayne's natural leadership was noticed. He was first put in charge of Company A's carpenters to furnish a new barracks, then a few days later was asked to drill the company by the Sergeant. He drilled them easy, he wrote, because "we had a hard day ahead ... They all like me for doing this." Drills and discipline were the focus of McChord life as the Battalion prepared itself for the field, which Wayne liked because it made the time go faster. In the middle of May, however, he became a clerk at headquarters after the Sergeant heard that he was classified "electrical first and clerical second" at Jefferson Barracks.

A week into his new assignment, the base was put on alert as it received a flight of B-17s. All the trainees were given rifles to guard the planes, except for Wayne, who was put on guard "at the front entrance of hq ... to stop everyone that was coming into the building. I have never halted so many Officers as I did in that two hours last night ... It was a beautiful night with the sky covered with stars and the planes coming in to land," he wrote Ruth. Wayne was not issued his Springfield M1 until June, and even though he was a poor shot, his superiors promoted him to Private First Class in recognition of his services ("... if you hear anyone say that I have a soft job tell them that they are crazy cause there is only one other man in our company that has worked as long hours as I have and he is the supply sergeant..."). He urged Ruth to come out to the base, and she assented at the end of July, giving their son to the care of her parents. Ruth leased an apartment in downtown Tacoma, and Wayne stayed with her as often as base passes allowed, but often had to leave in the wee hours of the morning. She departed for home in September of 1943 and Wayne shortly confessed to her that "... it has been very lonesome since you have gone."

Fortunately for him, his supervisor Lt. Snyder kept him on his toes: "Lt. Snyder has been working me hard and not a thing he wants done has he given to one of the other clerks to do. The only name he knows is Sharpe," he wrote. In October the Battalion moved out on field training, setting up camp outside a small town called Ellensburg and building four runways for aviation cadets. "We are on the flats with mountains all around," Wayne wrote home, but he was otherwise bitter: "If this is the way the Army works out in the field it is no good." A few days later, despite a ride in the Battalion's only tank, he wrote that "This army has not a

thing about it that I like." Just as the long hours of clerical work and the constant shuttling between the camp and McChord began to take a hold of him, his long awaited furlough arrived and he saw his son for the first time in nine months. Shortly after he returned, Army inspectors arrived at McChord Field, and in Wayne's words gave "a whale of a talking to" Lt. Colonel Love. Nevertheless the Battalion prepared to depart for a destination "no one else knows but Washington or the 4th Air Force Headquarters."

On January 13th he resumed his correspondence, writing, "I am somewhere in the South Pacific ... It is pretty hot." Happy to get off the boat, Wayne entered the most enjoyable phase of his army career on the island of New Guinea. Though he complained of over-sweating, the chloride in the water, and mosquitoes at night, he wrote "All in all New Guinea is not so bad and it beats the training camps in the states." His work schedule at Headquarters was more lax and he read often, bathed in the ocean everyday, managed the Company A baseball team, and even partook in the mock trial of the officers performed in celebration of the 1874th's first year. Wayne and his fellows bartered with the natives, and he wrote "I will have a great deal to tell you and Wayne Jr. when I get home and on a cold wintery night." He sent home Japanese money and asked Ruth's father "if he wants any Jap rifles or any such thing as I can get them." March brought mud and more mosquitoes, and on the 3rd he saw some Japanese prisoners and "... felt like taking two of them and banging their heads together as they are the cause for me being so far away from my beloved ones."

On April 24th he was flown to a hospital for what he referred to later as a breakdown. It seemed to him that time just barely crept on in the hospital, and he spent his time playing ping pong, watching films on the Battalion's soundless projector, and dreaming of the reunion with his son and wife. On June 13th, he learned that he would soon return to the States, but ten days later fretted to his wife, "I hope I am not here for another week as I am sick of being in the hospital when I am O.K." Fate, however, decreed that his long odyssey was over, and on the fourteenth of August 1944, Wayne passed under the Golden Gate Bridge and "this time it was in the right direction."

Wayne G. Sharpe lived until March 27, 1991, outliving Ruth who died on May 13, 1990. Both died in Lexington, Massachusetts.

## Scope of collection

The papers of Wayne G. Sharpe include about one-hundred and sixty letters to his wife Ruth J. Sharpe (February 1943-August 1944), about thirty letters from Ruth (April 1943-August 1944), and a few from Ruth to her mother and to Wayne G. Sharpe, Jr., written while she visited Wayne at McChord Field in Tacoma, Washington (end of July until the middle of September 1943).

While the collection vividly describes enlisted life, it is more importantly a window into the wartime experiences and perspectives of married servicemen and their families, which differs from those of the "kids 18 and 19 yrs. old" that Wayne bumps into throughout his service. The hope of reunion, which Wayne calls the "day of days" is the largest theme of all, and even seems to border on the unpatriotic at times, as when Ruth and her father try to get Wayne out of service on account of his glasses. On another occasion, Ruth responds to Wayne's description of difficulties within the Battalion with relief, writing "I am glad the showing on the job is poor as they can't do much with a poor engineering outfit can they now?" Wayne and Ruth see the war as a bifurcation from the natural rhythms of family life, as when Wayne regrets that he will not be there to see his son's first tooth come through, or when Ruth laments of the incompleteness she feels both at home, when she misses her husband, or visiting him in Washington, when she misses her son. Nevertheless, Wayne maintains that the war is a just one and that he is in fact fighting to preserve his life and family on 45 Slade Street, Belmont, Massachusetts: "I hope and pray for the day when I am able to go back living the way we want to but then we can't let Hitler have his way cause we would have nothing if we did."

Even larger than the nuclear family, looms the wartime transformation in American society as a whole. While traveling by train to Washington from Boston and back again, Ruth's writes of trains that seem to be full of soldiers on furlough and wives following or visiting their husbands. Wayne writes to his wife about his sister, warning that "Muriel should not be going out with so many servicemen. I see and hear a lot of things I would not want my sister to be one of those girls," and "One of the biggest problems the Army has is to keeps the fellows from getting disease from women." The creation of training bases in the States changes the nearby cities and towns, such that Wayne complains "Tacoma is not so hot. If every other city is crowded with soldiers as that city is well it is awful," and when Wayne asks an officer for advice about Ruth moving out to live in Tacoma, he is warned that city rents have skyrocketed since the base opened.

Wayne's letters and V-mails during his deployment in New Guinea are perhaps the most interesting contributions to the collection, even though they reveal far less. Restricted partly by the small size of the V-mails and by the threat of censoring, he reports only on neutral topics, such as daily routines, diet, and life on the base of the 1874th Engineer Battalion. The collection does not document the first assignment of the 1874th, deployed to convert and expand the Japanese airdromes on the newly captured island of Noemfoor off New Guinea's Northwest coast in the summer of 1944, because Wayne was sent home before the mission.

# Inventory

Sharpe, Wayne G.: Incoming letters

1943 Apr-Aug

Box 1: 1

Sharpe, Wayne G.: Incoming letters

1943 Sept

Box 1: 2

Sharpe, Wayne G.: Incoming letters

1943 Oct-1944 Aug

Box 1: 3

Sharpe, Wayne G.: Incoming letters

undated

Box 1: 4

Sharpe, Wayne G.: Outgoing letters

1943 Feb

Box 1: 5

Sharpe, Wayne G.: Outgoing letters

1943 Mar

Box 1: 6

Sharpe, Wayne G.: Outgoing letters

1943 Apr

Box 1: 7

Sharpe, Wayne G.: Outgoing letters

1943 May

Box 1: 8

Sharpe, Wayne G.: Outgoing letters

1943 June

Box 1: 9

Sharpe, Wayne G.: Outgoing letters

1943 July-Oct

Box 1: 10

Sharpe, Wayne G.: Outgoing letters

1943 Nov-Dec

Box 1: 11

Sharpe, Wayne G.: Outgoing letters

1944 Jan-Aug

Box 1: 12

Sharpe, Wayne G.: Outgoing letters

undated

Box 1: 13

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## Administrative information

### Access

The collection is open for research.

### Provenance

Purchased from Zachary Jones in April 2006.

### Related Material

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William Manchester Papers (MS 433)

G. Clifford Stamper Papers (MS 463)

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### Language:

English

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## Search terms

### Subjects

Sharpe, Ruth J.

Sharpe, Wayne G., 1915-1991

World War, 1939-1945

World War, 1939-1945--Campaigns--New Guinea

### Contributors

Sharpe, Wayne G., 1915-1991 [main entry]

### Genres and formats

Letters (Correspondence)

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World War II



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