

Afterlife Letters

Afterlifeletters.com was honoured to contribute to a radio programme broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on 16/06/08. The programme's poignant focus was the final letters of soldiers only to be opened in the event of their death in combat. The letters included those of soldiers who had fallen in the American Civil War to the young victims of today's conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Damian Hawkins, creator of afterlifeletters.com, was interviewed by Sian Price of Tinderbox Productions which made the programme for BBC Radio 4. The site was chosen because of the parallel services it offers to civilians, which are established within the armed forces today.

"When you read the final letters of the people who fall in combat, you can't miss the same threads that run through all of them – whether they were written 200 years ago or two months ago – whether the hand that penned that final letter was Japanese or British," Damian says. "The writer takes on some personal responsibility that he won't be there for his loved ones... but more importantly he wants to let his family know he still loves them and cares about them, even after life."

Damian believes that receiving such a letter can help people who are grieving for their lost ones.

"It's true receiving such a letter can be initially painful, but psychologically it's an important part of the grieving process for those left behind. It's also a chance for the fallen to say goodbye. And these letters can become treasured possessions for their recipients – something people can go back to again and again.

"They embody the emotions of the person who writes them... they offer a link to that person who's gone... what they're thinking, feeling and voicing in those final moments. They say 'this is the person I was' and when it comes to the end that person wasn't afraid to say 'I love you and I always will.'"

One question which came up in the interview was whether we should all have the same last letter service established in the armed forces 'just in case...'

Damian's opinion is a definite yes.

"Take away my personal bias because of the business... take away the fact civilians aren't as exposed to the same daily risk as members of the armed forces... take away the threat of terrorism... and the rise in violent crime, we're still left with the unpredictability of death. Freak accidents, idiots who drive too fast, irresponsible acts of politicians... we never know if today is our last," Damian says.

"All I know is that the people who receive the final letters from their loved ones find them comforting and reassuring... and speaking personally, I'd hate to leave without saying goodbye to the people I love."