

Booby Traps:
US Military Efforts to Control Sex and Venereal Disease in WWII

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In September of 1944, in the Brittany region of recently liberated France, US Army Civil Affairs Officer Asa Gardiner speedily drove his jeep through the town of St. Renan. Next to him sat a man known only as “Morot,” the local pimp. The unlikely pair were on their way to the homes of four known prostitutes. Lieutenant Gardiner was acting under direct orders from his Chief of Staff, who was under orders from General Charles Gerhardt. The mission: to establish a US Army-run brothel that would cater to the weary troops of the Twenty-Ninth Infantry Division. A few days later, Gerhardt’s goal was realized. Morot and the four prostitutes would be housed in a building formerly occupied by German troops. Lieutenant Gardiner even took the liberty of naming his new establishment, painting a sign that read “Blue and Gray Corral, Riding Lessons 100 Francs.” The GIs showed up in droves, waiting not so patiently for their turn with one of the beautiful French belles.¹

Incidences like this were not rare. The establishment of these “G.I. Brothels” was one of the many ways the military tried to regulate the sexual predation of US soldiers and control the epidemic spread of venereal disease among GIs. What makes this particular brothel interesting, however, is its name. The “Blue and Gray” was a symbolic tribute to the unit it catered to. The colors referred to Civil War uniforms worn by the North and the South respectively, as the Twenty-Ninth Infantry contained men from both regions.² Men whose ancestors once dawned the uniforms of opposing armies at war, now shared in the same fight, and evidently, the same spoils after victory. Just like the trauma bonds forged through discipline in the mud of Paris Island and Fort Benning, the control and militarization of sex in WWII contributed to “primary group processes,”³ sustaining the brotherhood characteristic of WWII combat soldiers.

¹ Mary Louise Roberts, *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 159-160, <https://davidson.primo.exlibrisgroup.com>.

² 5th Regiment Armory, “29th Infantry Division,” *Military Department: Maryland National Guard*, <<https://military.maryland.gov>> (accessed 5 May. 2024).

³ Charles C. Moskos Jr., “The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam,” *Journal of Social Issues*, no. 4 (1974): 25-27, <https://spssi-onlinelibrary-wiley-com>. This source is mostly about the Vietnam War. However, the

Despite the bounty of sources which indicate this atypical element of WWII military culture, scholarship on the US efforts to control sex and VD has been selective in evidence, and lacking in holistic, all-inclusive arguments. Previous historians who have studied the US military's war against VD and control of GI's sexuality produced unique theories surrounding both the ulterior motivations and consequences of these measures. All have assumed that these military efforts had to have been about more than just the health of soldiers. This long list of theories can be divided into three thematically distinct focuses. One which is outward-looking, and fixated on the US military's control of foreign bodies, one which is revisionist, investigating the great paradoxes of the GI experience, and one which is similarly inward-looking, but focuses solely on the US Military's more authoritative VD prevention campaign.

The first cohort of scholars focused on the control arm of the campaign with specific emphasis on the establishment of GI brothels and the prophylactic testing that went alongside them. These historians reveal the ethical flaws of this phenomenon. They raise questions about the external, ideological, and political implications of controlled prostitution abroad rather than the internal implications on US military culture. Their arguments on GI brothels are framed around WWII geopolitical agendas, as well as the military's view of foreign women, governments, and other races.

Kathleen Alvin's article titled "Uncle Sugar's Belles: Liberian Women and the US Army's Program of Tolerated Prostitution in World War II Liberia" is one example of this first group. Alfin examines the US Army's confinement and surveillance of Liberian women in a tightly regulated, medically supervised prostitution ring. As a historian of gender and race,⁴ Alfin

central thesis has much to do with WWII. Moskos claims that the atypical "primary-group processes," such as the trends described in this paper, which sustained combat soldiers in World War II had a close cousin in the motivations behind fragging incidents in Vietnam. "Primary groups" are defined as small, closely-knit clusters of people whose members share intimately personal, often supportive relationships.

⁴ Kathleen E. Alfin, "Ph.D. Candidate, Historian, Veteran," *Kathleen E. Alfin*, <<https://kathleenalfin.com>> (accessed 5 May. 2024).

frames these army-run brothels as an ethically abhorrent manifestation of a political and racial agenda. Her “ulterior motive theory” suggests that racist segregationist logic was used by the US Army to police sexuality as well as racialize prostitution and VD. The US Army's View of Liberia as a morally lost, disease-infested nation justified the confinement and regulation of African prostitutes under the veil of “soldiers’ health.” However the real intention, Alfin suggests, was to enforce American political, racial, and military authority.⁵

The 2010 article by Mary Louise Roberts titled “The Price of Discretion: Prostitution, VD, and the American Military in France, 1944-1946,” also focuses on GI brothels. Though Robert’s region of study is France and not Liberia, her claims regarding a greater geopolitical and ethnic motivation behind the US seizure of French prostitution parallel Alfin’s. Robert’s argument is all about the external worldview indicated by GI brothels. She claims the control of GI sex through French women was meant to protect the US military’s image but became an assault on French sovereignty and dignity. The regulation of the French female body, Roberts says, was justified through claims of ethnic and moral American superiority, allowing the US to consolidate power in France. Framing the US military as an ignorant foreign occupier, Roberts highlights how the military blamed the onslaught of VD on French women even whilst managing the French prostitution industry.⁶

⁵ Kathleen E. Alfin, “‘Uncle Sugar’s Belles’: Liberian Women and the US Army’s Program of Tolerated Prostitution in World War II Liberia,” *Radical History Review* 146 (2023): 32–58, <https://read-dukeupress-edu>.

⁶ Mary Louise Roberts, “The Price of Discretion: Prostitution, Venereal Disease, and the American Military in France, 1944-1946,” *American Historical Review* 115, no.4 (October 2010): 1002-1030, <https://web-p-ebscohost-com>; Natalie Shibley, “Policing Venereal Disease at Fort Huachuca, 1941-1945,” *Journal of Military History* 88, no. 2 (April 2024): 367-397, <https://web-p-ebscohost-com.proxy048.nclive.org>. Natalie Shibley’s 2024 Article also reflects the work of this first, externally focused school of historians. In “Policing Venereal Disease at Fort Huachuca” she makes claims identical to Alfin’s regarding deeper racial tensions behind military efforts to control sexuality but specifically concerning the racialization of VD at Fort Huachuca, AZ (a largely black installation, like that in Liberia). Shibley portrays VD prevention here as law enforcement rather than a medical campaign. She analyses how the US Army used statistics to paint VD as a racially specific problem, even going so far as to quarantine black civilian prostitutes within the post’s hospital for excruciating examinations (much like in Liberia). Claims similar to Roberts’ which paint regulated sex and prostitution as a part of US military occupation can be found in Robert Kramm, “Security: Policing Prostitution and Venereal Disease in Occupied Japan,” In *Sanitized Sex: Regulating Prostitution, Venereal Disease, and Intimacy in Occupied Japan, 1945-1952*

The second school of historical work on the topic of US military sex and VD control reflects a more internal focus, fixated on the US soldier's WWII experience. These texts typically highlight a paradox within the GI experience. GIs were motivated and even lured into war by the prospect of sex abroad, but then burdened with severe control measures to restrict sexual predation. These historians are revisionist in their efforts to complicate popular understandings of the "greatest generation." they unveil the taboo subject of sex in WWII through portrayals of a confused, self-contradicting, and outright hypocritical effort to motivate troops.

One example of this type of scholarship is Mary Lewis Roberts' 2013 book titled *What Soldiers Do*. This book draws on French archives, American military records, and wartime propaganda. Roberts suggests that the liberation of France was "sold" to soldiers not as a battle for freedom but as an erotic adventure among oversexed Frenchwomen, stirring up a "tsunami of male lust." Sexual predation, she suggests, was the immediate result.⁷

The 2018 *Vox* documentary titled *The WWII Battle against STDs* leads to a similar critique of military leadership. This revisionist documentary complicates the popular conception of WWII as a war between good and evil by unveiling the seamy paradox of military propaganda. Prostitutes, *Vox* claims, were labeled as disease carriers while equal emphasis was placed on prophylaxis and the facilitation of prostitution.⁸

(United States: University of California Press, 2017), 78-118, <https://davidson.primo.exlibrisgroup.com>. which tells stories of "occupation through prostitution" in post-war Japan specifically. First hand accounts from the region are plentiful despite a general understanding in WWII scholarship that prostitution, and VD were far less problematic in the Pacific due to the GI experience there being more isolated and foreign-feeling. For more information on this contrast between the Pacific and Europe, see David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 813-814.

⁷ Mary Louise Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 135

⁸ Phil Edwards, "The World War II battle against STDs," 21 Dec, 2018, *Vox* Video, 12:19, <https://www.vox.com/videos/2018/12/21/18151718/world-war-ii-venereal-disease>.

The third and final school of historical work on this topic is similar to the last in its internal focus. This school, however, relies only on the US Army's prevention campaign, specifically the propaganda element. This limiting strategy enables scholars like Sue Yom to interrogate the culture of the US military during World War II, without having to deal with the implications of de facto "contradictions" like school one and two's GI brothels. Yom's 2003 Dissertation titled "Sex and the American Soldier: Military Cinema and the War on VD" examines military cinema on VD and sex. Yom focuses on how this propaganda solidified many aspects of military culture, including the stigmatization of women, a highly gendered view of VD, and a militarized approach to combating VD which based itself on appeals to American masculinity.⁹ While there is truth in these conclusions, Yom's work, like many other scholars on the topic, is limited due to its narrow scope of source material.

The best way to approach the topic of military control over sexuality and VD in World War II is through a more reflective, cultural lens. While past scholars have used this approach to reveal important societal implications on race, gender ideology, and post-war geopolitical agendas, it has been underused as a self-examining tool to understand distinctions in *military* culture and the soldier's ethos of World War II. Scholarship on the topic has also been selective with evidence, focusing either on the messaging in propaganda *or* the de facto contradictions to that messaging, such as the continued prevalence of sex and prostitution abroad. While the existing work succeeds in theorizing ulterior motives behind *either* the prevention, treatment or control aspects of the military's approach to sex, it rarely unites all three elements. The topic

⁹ Sue Sun, Yom. *Sex and the American Soldier: Military Cinema and the War on Venereal Disease, 1918-1969*. (University of Pennsylvania: ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2003), 81-125, <https://login.proxy048.nclive.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com>.

deserves a more holistic approach. Upon a deep and all-inclusive analysis of the military's sex and VD campaign, the existence of a single unified military agenda emerges as a far more plausible theory than any kind of massive hypocrisy or self-contradiction in military leadership. Conclusions that there was some kind of grand failure or contradiction are too narrow in their scope and they discount the expertise and skill of the leaders that won WWII. Though the messaging of VD propaganda may seem to contradict de facto practices like the proliferation of GI brothels, both of these elements reflect a concerted effort to promote a distinct military culture and were therefore intertwined in their intentions. Though the realities of war may have forced the sex and VD campaign to fall short of its *medical* goal, there was also a significant *cultural* goal towards solidifying troop cohesion and camaraderie. This goal was accomplished in three ways. Firstly, VD prevention promoted a prideful military ethos and trust in military leadership. Secondly, The campaign depicted VD-carrying "promiscuous women" as enemies of the state, catalyzing unity in opposition to a common foe. Lastly, an identical sense of camaraderie manifested itself in the shared experience of chasing sexual allure abroad. Though this may not have always been a legitimate or prescribed part of preventing sex or VD, it did place sex within a controlled military environment and helped to accomplish the cultural goal of the campaign.

Years before The US was involved in WWII, VD still played an important role in the military and civilian life. These sexually transmitted diseases, especially syphilis and gonorrhea, were ongoing problems in the continental US since well before the war. Despite the discomfort surrounding the topic, 1914's American Social Hygiene Association lead the way, not with control or treatment measures, but with more palatable public exhibits and pamphlets.¹⁰ War, however, made things worse. US boots on the ground in Europe or elsewhere raised the rates and

¹⁰ Edwards, "The World War II battle against STDs," 3:30.

the stakes of the twentieth century's VD epidemic. Before WWII, the same trend dominated WWI, when VD first presented a serious threat not only to the welfare of US troops but also to the reputation of the American Expeditionary Forces abroad. From the outbreak of the Great War, British, French, and German armies routinely issued condoms and other prophylactic items to their troops. American culture though, would not allow for such measures until American forces began contracting VD at epidemic levels.¹¹ On any given day about 18,000 men were taken out of battle by VD, and it could take a month of treatment before each man was ready to return to the front.¹² Americans though, debating the Christian morality of prophylactic measures, typically concluded that normalizing such strategies would invite promiscuity. Other "distraction" efforts were preferred. Eventually, it was US Army leadership who made the prevention and management of VD an official part of the war effort. The first propaganda posters were printed, and placed in doughboy "pro-kits," where the first army-issued "rubbers" would be wrapped and ready for use.¹³ As WWII approached, the American public hadn't had quite enough time to get comfortable with the perceived indecency of such measures. The social taboo¹⁴ still existed, but the military was well-practiced in their tactics. A three-pronged strategy of prevention, treatment, and control would be led by the US Army's first "Venereal Control Officers," a title established by the Medical Corps in 1942.¹⁵

The first way in which these WWII military efforts promoted a prideful military ethos and trust in military leadership can be found in the prevention-focused tactics. Much of the prevention campaign was used by the army to foster a sense of trust for military authority in

¹¹ Edwards, "The World War II battle against STDs," 1:30-5:30.

¹² Sandee LaMotte, "Meet the shady ladies of 'penis propaganda': Anti-VD posters of WWII," *CNN Health*, 26 August 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/08/25/health/wwii-vd-posters-penis-propaganda/index.html>.

¹³ Edwards, "The World War II battle against STDs," 3:15-5:30.

¹⁴ US National Archives, "To the People of the United States," Produced: 1944, US National Archives Video, 21:43, 00:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wuan4FZtwrI>.
To the People of the United States (1943)

¹⁵ Edwards, "The World War II battle against STDs," 5:20.

troops. While keeping soldiers free of VD was one legitimate goal, this was another. Through this campaign, the military was framed not only as the sole source of true expertise but as a paternalistic, caring entity. This theme is especially apparent in films and posters from the VD campaign. One military poster designed in 1940 but used well into WWII portrays this well. The poster, titled “Don’t Do This... Or This,” depicts a worried soldier walking into a “quack” street doctor’s set-up to buy some homemade remedy for a VD. The poster demands “If you think you have a Venereal Disease...See Your Medical Officer At Once: The Army Has the Best Drugs and the Best Treatment.” The poster not only discourages servicemen from seeking treatment from potentially dangerous sources on the streets of wartime cities but also depicts the security and comfort that ought to be associated with a unit's medical officers. As explained in the 1942 *Journal of Social Hygiene*, “In approaching full participation in the Second World War” the military’s “medical department” experienced a period of “rapid growth.” These medical officers, like the one depicted in the poster, were destined for a role with both medical importance but also deep cultural importance, serving as a representation of the paternalistic concerns of the military. Like a unit chaplain, VD Control Officers were expected to build A “wholesome environment, for their own young people.”¹⁶

This trend is also demonstrated in the Prevention films from the era. In 1942, preparing for full participation in the war, the US Army Signal Corps filmed *Sex Hygiene* (1942).¹⁷ *Sex Hygiene* is an educational film with a narrative format in which paternalistic unit commanders drive the plot, constantly encouraging their soldiers to “not permit yourself to be treated by a quack or druggist, they will do you more harm than good.” At the end of the film, the Medical

¹⁶ C.-E. A. Winslow (*Chairman*), Joseph K. Folsom, Edward L. Keyes, John C. Ward, William F. Snow, and John H. Stokes, eds., *Journal of Social Hygiene* 28, no. 1 (New York: American Social Hygiene Association, 1942), 12, <https://go-gale-com.proxy048.nclive.org>.

¹⁷ Member 30091762, “U.S. Army Training Film on Sex Hygiene,” 21 April 2015, *Military.com* Video, 25:53, <https://www.military.com/video/forces/army/us-army-training-film-sex-hygiene/4186842526001>.

Corps Officer narrator asserts “Men, you are a part of the greatest army in the world, To become soldiers in the first place you had to have a strong body health, and common sense.” The officer calls on soldiers to trust in the army and “help maintain the greater core of your organization”¹⁸ Perhaps the most curious aspect of *Sex Hygiene* is that it is a “film within a film.” *Sex Hygiene*, in other words, depicts the compulsory viewing of a film called “Sex Hygiene” within a military unit. This creates a sense of connection with the real-life military audience. The on-screen soldiers are emblematic of “buttoned-up” military culture. They seem to know that the army has their best interest at heart. Their unit commander, no doubt a model for real-life leadership, speaks to them about prevention in a caring, fatherly tone. *Sex Hygiene* informed soldiers and officers on how to think and talk about VD. In this view, the film was culture-promoting. It is also consistent with the secretary of war’s opinion that The “prevention and control of VD” ought to be a “responsibility of the unit commander.”¹⁹ Serving as the model for a trusting and “disciplined community,” the on-screen “soldiers do not act as individuals in their viewing of the film. The behavior of one could be interchangeable with another, for they are uniformly attentive, bemused, and serious in their intention to learn”²⁰ from their commanding officer. The 1944 military film *To the People of the United States*²¹ is extremely similar to *Sex Hygiene*. While the film is introduced by the Surgeon General of the US Army and the Surgeon General of the US Public Health Health Service, its narrator is a fictional Danish-born Colonel. This officer too, is a model military leader who seems to be genuinely concerned with keeping his enlisted men safe. Through these kinds of depictions, the prevention campaign fostered trust in troops painting the military as a paternalistic, caring institution.

¹⁸ Member 30091762, "U.S. Army Training Film on Sex Hygiene," 20:24.

¹⁹ Winslow, et al., *Journal of Social Hygiene*, 6.

²⁰ Yom, *Sex and the American Soldier*, 51.

²¹ US National Archives, “To the People of the United States,” 0:00-21:43.

Another effective way the US military used the campaign as a catalyst for troop togetherness and camaraderie was by framing VD and prostitutes as an enemy of the United States. This “US vs VD” mentality contributed greatly to the sense of shared duty to one's comrades and responsibility to one's nation. Posters and images from the war collected in Ryan Mungia's *Protect Yourself: Venereal Disease Posters of World War II* exemplify culture-promoting strategies.²² In one poster, the typical “promiscuous woman” walks arm and arm with Hitler and Hirohito. Her face is drawn with skull-like features beneath a large, yellow “VD.” Down below, a caption implies that the woman is in fact the “worst of the three.” Another poster depicts a heavily made-up woman sipping from a wine glass of bubbly pink liquid labeled “venereal disease.” below the image the text reads, “Pick-up. Streetwalker. Prostitute... A toast to Hitler and Hirohito.” Posters like this had the intention of conditioning troops to avoid prostitution, not only for their health, but for the sake of their nation, army, and comrades. While individual US troops may not have all felt equally threatened by Nazi Germany or Imperial Japan, VD, and the promiscuous woman who wielded it, posed an equal threat to every soldier. Shared vulnerability in the face of a common enemy like VD forged unity. And VD was the perfect enemy for this kind of culture.

²² Ryan Mungia, *Protect Yourself: Venereal Disease Posters of World War II*, in Hunter Oatman, “How the Military Waged a Graphic-Design War on Venereal Disease,” *Collectors Weekly*, 11 Feb, 2015, <https://www.collectorsweekly.com/articles/a-graphic-design-war-on-venereal-disease/>.



As noted in *To the People of the United States*, A 1944 US Public Health Service film about syphilis, “The men of our army come from every walk of life they are a true cross-section of America, for syphilis is no respecter of wealth or social position. It attacks the Park Avenue millionaire as well as the Bowery trap.”²³ The film’s Danish-born narrator uses this same villainizing rhetoric constantly. He explains how VD must be “stamped out,”²⁴ and “wiped from the land” so that “the children who follow us... inherit health and freedom and Happiness.”²⁵ The subject of these sentences, of course, could have easily been replaced with the name of a foreign adversary; the Nazis, or the Fascists. VD was consistently personified for military purposes as a “who” not an “it.” VD was “an enemy *who* remains hidden,”²⁶ an “insidious lurking evil.”²⁷

Like the fight against Nazism, the fight against VD and the sex workers who carried it was also an opportunity to prove the triumph of Americanism and the American way of life. The Danish narrator of *To the People of the United States* explains how the Scandinavian countries

²³ US National Archives, “To the People of the United States,” 9:50.

²⁴ US National Archives, “To the People of the United States,” 18:50.

²⁵ US National Archives, “To the People of the United States,” 19:20.

²⁶ US National Archives, “To the People of the United States,” 20:45.

²⁷ US National Archives, “To the People of the United States,” 19:20

nearly extinguished their VD rates while America still treats the very topic as a social taboo. This element of the campaign was meant to stoke a competitive, patriotic spirit. The dream of proving to those smug “Swedes Norwegians and Danes...we're as adult and intelligent as they are”²⁸ was a motivating prospect for the American GI. This solidified the soldier's fervent love of country and commitment to his people, a morale that is certainly advantageous in battle.

Before the Allied invasion of France and Operation Dragoon, wherein an astonishing one of every ten GIs involved contracted a VD,²⁹ the campaign to control troop habits was intensified. Troops shipping off to France would receive informational pamphlets such as the Army Information Branch's 1944 *A Pocket Guide to France*. Literature like this was meant to inform US troops about the particulars of French culture, geography, and history, but they almost always contained the camaraderie-building rhetoric of sex control as well. The guide first relays the typical warnings, stressing that despite the French people's heightened level of comfort with sex “it does not follow that illicit sex relations are any safer than in the United States. As a matter of fact, there is a greater risk of contracting venereal disease.” The guide, however, takes the campaign a step further into the territory of villainization: “Many of the so-called French prostitutes have been drawn from the dregs of other occupied countries and are deliberately planted under-cover Nazi agents.”³⁰ In this account, exposing oneself to a prostitute in France, and risking the contraction of a VD, is not just *comparable* to sabotage, it *is* sabotage. The guide advances the trope of the attractive fem fatale spy whose seductive powers of information extraction, even more so than her weapon of disease, pose a threat to American forces.

Conceptualizing VD and Prostitutes as a foreign enemy like this forged the primary-group unity

²⁸ US National Archives, “To the People of the United States,” 19:15.

²⁹ Edwards, “The World War II battle against STDs,” 1:55.

³⁰ US War Department, US Navy Department, US Army Service Forces, Information and Education Division, *A Pocket Guide to France*, (Washington, D.C.: War and Navy Departments, 1944), 78, <https://www.loc.gov/item/45036547/#>.

characteristic of WWII combat soldiers.

Another, darker element of this intentionally constructed culture necessitated that those who contracted VD be shamed and punished. Giving in to the temptations and risks of prostitution was commonly painted as a breach of military discipline, and a disgrace to one's comrades. Up until 1944, soldiers were even denied their pay while receiving treatment for a VD.³¹ The issue was not taken lightly at all. The 1942 *Social Hygiene journal* describes "disciplinary measures"³² to even be administered to officers who fail to drive unit VD and prostitution rates down. War Department officials characterized prostitution and infection as "the [potential] reason for loss of all the hard-won gains of past years... a threat to Army morale... and a treacherous undertow dragging at the strength of American family life."³³ However, like all elements of this campaign, this severity was mostly about molding a culture of brotherhood. In the "In the Air - Teamwork Counts!" poster US airmen were warned to "not be the weak link"³⁴ who is unable to help his bomber crew while distracted by a flirtatious prostitute. Similarly, in the "The man who wasn't there..." poster, the third aircrew member is drawn as a blank silhouette because "he let his buddies down by getting a venereal disease."³⁵ The campaign didn't just set an expectation of cleanliness, but an expectation of brotherhood and utmost commitment to the mission at hand. In breeding this kind of work culture, the military hoped to receive a return on investment far greater and longer lasting than a soldier's health: a more unified and disciplined fighting force.

³¹ Mary Louise Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 166

³² Winslow, et al., *Journal of Social Hygiene*, 11.

³³ Winslow, et al., *Journal of Social Hygiene*, 7.

³⁴ AAFTC and Arthur & Henrikson, "In the Air--Team Work Counts! Don't Be the Weak Link!" (1940), *Venereal Disease Visual History Archive* (accessed 5. May, 2024), <https://vdarchive.newmedialab.cuny.edu/items/show/126>.

³⁵ AAFTC, "The Man Who Wasn't There," (1944), *Venereal Disease Visual History Archive* (accessed 5 May, 2024), <https://vdarchive.newmedialab.cuny.edu/items/show/153>.



The third and final way in which the campaign to control sex and VD achieved greater military camaraderie has much to do with those examples that past historians have labeled as contradictions or instances of military hypocrisy. Even the rampant sex and prostitution, like the propaganda that discouraged it, served to unite troops in the pursuit of a shared experience promised to them during their recruitment. There was a sense of togetherness manifested by the shared experience of chasing sexual allure abroad. Though this reality may have not prevented dangerous sex, it can be deemed part of the control element as it placed sex within a military context. The reward of sex was inseparably tied to the mission at hand. As General George Patton famously put it, “if they don’t fuck, they don’t fight.”³⁶ This culture-building element began at the recruitment level, where it was common for US Army recruiters to lure young men into service with the promise of beautiful “khaki-crazed” foreign girls, ready to reward their GI liberators. Especially in 1944, US military command exploited the myth of French women as sexually experienced and available.³⁷ Later on, even in the preparation stages of the invasion of France, *A Pocket Guide to France* supported these perceptions of the GI experience. Though the

³⁶ Roberts, "The Price of Discretion," 1004.

³⁷ Mary Louise Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 150-170.

pamphlet stresses caution and safety, it is riddled with suggestive expectations. One section reads “French women are still talking about how your fathers helped out occasionally in the American Expeditionary Forces. The French mother of a family has been carrying on without a husband... French girls have been saying “No” to the Nazi soldiers and officers for years now. They expect the men in the American Army to act like friends and Allies.”³⁸ This rhetoric primed young American men with precisely the kind of motivation they needed for in-group bonding and belonging once they were placed in a combat platoon overseas.

It's also important to note that this rhetoric wasn't just words, in the foreign outposts of WWII, these fantasies were often realized. In his *Pacific War Diary*, American sailor James J. Fahey tells of frequent visits to “Liberty Ports” in the Pacific. Here “beautiful girls” roamed freely. Fahey reports, “There are supposed to be five girls to every man but I think there are even more than that... The girls in the States could learn something from the girls here. They treat you as if you were related and invite you home to meet the family.”³⁹ Military-sponsored visits to these areas mark an essential, albeit atypical component of prescribed military culture. The Military promised and often delivered the reward of women and sex abroad to American soldiers. GIs of diverse backgrounds and upbringings participated as one cohesive unit, like in the case of the Blue and Gray Coral in St. Renan.⁴⁰ Such hallmarks of military life were even romanticized on the homefront in publications like *Life Magazine*. In December of 1945, months after the liberation, *Life* described the Military's conception of liberated France as “a tremendous brothel inhabited by 40 million hedonists who spent all their time eating, drinking, making love, and, in general, having a hell of a good time,” a lifestyle which they argued “suited the GI

³⁸ US War Department, et al., *A Pocket Guide to France*, 20.

³⁹ James J. Fahey, *Pacific War Diary*, 19 Oct 1943, Teaching American History (accessed 5 May. 2024), <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/pacific-war-diary/>.

⁴⁰ Mary Louise Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 159-160.

perfectly.”⁴¹

The military has and always has been a cross-section of America. However, its values, traditions, and culture have at times seemed disjointed from typical American life. A topic as *atypical* as venereal disease and sex in WWII, for example, may be easy to mock or deem unimportant. But in a nation that has prided itself on its military triumphs for about a century, where military culture has become a key aspect of patriotism and the greater American story, *all* aspects of military culture ought to be deeply examined and interrogated. This subject in particular reveals important, and sometimes troubling aspects of our military history. But it is because they are uncomfortable that we must grapple with them.

The cultural throughline of comradeship and brotherhood outlined above is unique in its ability to connect prevention to treatment to control and even to GI brothels. It proves that the military’s campaign to control the spread of VD and sexuality was not a massive contradiction or a confused geopolitical effort but rather a series of complex culture-promoting practices. This *cultural* intentionality was arguably more successful than any *medical* pursuits, and it is now far more important for us to collectively acknowledge. US military culture remains an important aspect of our national identity and our global image. Furthermore, the contemporary recruiting crisis⁴² faced by all branches of the US armed forces may indicate once again, the importance of military culture in American identity. Perhaps, we have arrived at another crucial juncture wherein the US soldier's ethos is no longer as appealing or attractive as it once was in the eyes of the greatest generation. And perhaps, just more sex talk is needed.

⁴¹ Joe Weston, “The GIs in Le Havre,” *Life*, 10 December 1945, 20, <https://books.google.com/books?id=ukgEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA20#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

⁴² Brian McAllister Linn, “A Historical Perspective on Today's Recruiting Crisis,” *Parameters* 53, no. 3 (Autumn 2023): 5-18, <https://login.proxy048.nclive.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy048.nclive.org/scholarly-journals/historical-perspective-on-todays-recruiting/docview/2852008374/se-2>.

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