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## ADVANCING IN ANOTHER DIRECTION The Comic Book and the Korean War

“JUNE, 1950! THE INCENDIARY SPARK OF WAR IS-  
GLOWING IN KOREA! AGAIN AS BEFORE, MEN  
ARE HUNTING MEN . . . BLASTING EACH OTHER TO  
BITS . . . COMMITTING WHOLESAL MURDER!  
THIS, THEN, IS A STORY OF MAN'S INHUMANITY  
TO MAN! THIS IS A WAR STORY!”



With the January-February 1951 issue of E-C Comic's *Two-Fisted Tales*, the comic book, as it had for WWII five years earlier, followed the United States into the war in Korea. Soon other comic book lines joined E-C in presenting aspects of the new war in Korea. Comic books remain an underutilized popular culture resource in the study of war and yet they provide a very rich part of the tapestry of war and cultural representation. The Korean War comics are also important for their location in the history of the comic book industry. After WWII, the comic industry expanded rapidly, and by the late 1940s comic books entered a boom period with more adults reading comics than ever before. The period between 1935 and 1955 has been characterized as the "Golden Age" of the comic book with over 650 comic book titles appearing monthly during the peak years of popularity in 1953 and 1954 (Nye 239-40). By the late forties, many comics directed the focus away from a primary audience of juveniles and young adolescents to address volatile adult issues in the postwar years, including juvenile delinquency, changing family dynamics, and human sexuality. The emphasis shifted during this period from super heroes like "Superman" to so-called realistic comics that included a great deal of gore, violence, and more "adult" situations. Five major genres emerged within the new

emphasis on “realism”: Crime comics, romances, horror, satire (e.g.. *MAD*) and, by 1950, the war comic.

Given the context of the Cold War and the strident anti-communism of the early fifties, the Korean War would seem to provide an exciting new direction for the war comics. The constant threat of infiltration and subversion intensified by the HUAC and Senate hearings and the well-publicized Alger Hiss spy case made the communists an even more dangerous and insidious enemy than the Nazis. The “loss” of China to the Communist Revolution in 1949 and the Soviet’s successful test of an atomic bomb preceded the North Korean invasion of the South in June 1950. These events confirmed for many the existence of an international communist conspiracy. The suddenness of the new war took the comic book industry and the rest of the country by surprise, but by January 1951 the Korean War became the focus for a number of comic producers. E-C Comics was the first with a war line, but other producers, among them Marvel, Toby, and DC, were soon on the scene with a wide range of titles.<sup>1</sup> The readership for these comics included all ages, but the comics had a special appeal for a young adult, mostly male, audience of those looking forward to deployment for service in Korea. By using comics like *Combat Kelly* (Marvel, 1951-1957) and *Two-Fisted Tales* (E-C, 1950-1955), the complexities of a limited war fought for ambiguous political objectives can be examined in a very serious light. Both comics specifically address the war in Korea and both were influenced by the changes in the comic book industry and new demands placed on the publishers. Yet the two comics reflect very different editing styles and philosophies in how the war should be depicted.

In general, the patriotic nationalism of the WWII comic book is replaced in the Korean comics by more ambiguity and ambivalence about the war. The men worry about life and death, and they die in great numbers. Whole squads are killed, and with the loss of life there is little discussion of the overall rationale for fighting the war. When compared to WWII, the Korean War comics are far more likely to examine the dehumanizing aspects of the war, and the problems with incompetent leadership in the field. The soldier could really trust no one over the rank of sergeant. In addition, basic underlying concepts in the war comics genre were questioned and explored, particularly the issue

of patriotism and courage. As one character in *Battle* (Marvel, January 1952) admonishes an overzealous soldier,

Yelling that you want to get into combat doesn't mean you're a brave man . . . it means you're foolish. . . . Every G.I. up on the line is praying and fighting for his life . . . cursing the day he was sent into combat.

Many of the soldiers suffer from battle fatigue and psychological stress. The environment provides problems as well, and with story titles like "Muck," "Mud," and "Rocks," the Korean landscape itself became a metaphor for the war in the comics. In other ways, the Korean War comics were no different from WWII. We are still fighting a brutal enemy, and the communists are portrayed as savage and barbaric, breaking the rules of civilized warfare. The international communist conspiracy is firmly in place as the North Koreans take their orders from the Chinese, and the Chinese do the bidding of the Soviets. The Communists do not value human life. They torture and assassinate prisoners of war, but are just as likely to brutalize their own troops by sending them in human waves of futile assaults against United Nations positions.

*Combat Kelly* (Marvel Comics, 1951-1957) featured a tough, brawny private by the name of "Combat Kelly" and his loyal but scrawny buddy, "Cookie." Kelly is a fighting man, brave, courageous, prone to taking too many chances, but always able to fight his way out of difficulty. Kelly and Cookie are intensely loyal to each other, and many of the stories feature the two helping each other out of scrapes and close calls. *Combat Kelly* re-plays the conventions of the WWII comic for Korea with recurring characters and the same contrived plots. The enemy is brutal, sadistic, and stupid, but despite this, Combat Kelly and Cookie together or singly are captured and tortured before outwitting their captors to walk arm and arm into the sunset and back to the unit. The endings for the stories are always uplifting and victorious. There is no sense of an organized war effort, or commentary on the nature of this war, or the individual battles of the Korean War. Instead the focus is on these two men going it alone against an easily slaughtered enemy who they butcher by

APRIL SHOWERS BRING MAY FLOWERS!... A CUTE LITTLE DITTY FOR CHILDREN! BUT WHEN APRIL CAME TO KOREA IN 1951, THE APRIL SHOWERS DID NOT BRING FLOWERS! INSTEAD, APRIL BROUGHT BROWN, WET, SLIPPERY, OOZING... SUCKING...

# MUD!



YES, MUD! GENERAL MUD... HALTING SUPPLY CONVOYS, CLOTTING THE LIFELINES OF A MIGHTY ARMY...

GENERAL MUD BOGGING DOWN THE HALF-TRACKS AND HOWITZERS . . . GRIPPING THE SELF-PROPELLED LONG TONS!

GENERAL MUD, STOPPIN PERSHING TANKS... LEAVIN FED MACHINES WALLOWIN

E MIGHTY THE GAS HELPLESS



["Mud!"—Jan-Feb 1952 (Vol 1, No 25)—1st panel.]

the hundreds. The war is presented as a grand adventure as the men fight and romance across Korea.

One other theme that *Combat Kelly* shares with many of the other comics of the period is the inclusion of women in the combat zone. Women appear as combat photographers, USO troupe entertainers, and as nuns. In the January 1952 issue of *Combat Kelly*, Kelly and Cookie crouch in a foxhole avoiding enemy fire when suddenly a flash of light blinds the men. They feel an enemy presence in the foxhole and Combat Kelly, always ready for battle, grabs a thrashing figure. Suddenly, a female voice admonishes: "Hey! Lay that fist down, you big lug . . . Don't you know how to treat a lady when she drops in on you?" Combat Kelly is astonished, ". . . Holy Smokes! It's a Dame!" "Not a dame, dog face . . . Kitty Klick, Female War Photographer!" The flash that blinded the men was not from mortar fire, but from her camera, and after the three are trapped behind enemy lines, they use the flash to blind the enemy causing them to fight and to shoot each other while Combat Kelly and his friends slip away. *Combat Kelly* also includes a regular female character: a North Korean femme fatale by the name of "Yalu River Rosie," who regularly outsmarts the men: "Combat Kelly knew all about war, but he didn't know that the Devil wore skirts!" (Vol. 1-January 1952). In another *Combat Kelly* story, Kelly and Cookie enter a Buddhist temple controlled by female North Korean soldiers. These buxom women, like Kitty Klick, are dressed provocatively, and Kelly outsmarts them by finding swing music on the radio. When the rest of the squad arrives they find Combat Kelly and Cookie dancing with the women. The formerly austere stonefaced woman approaches the major with a promiscuous smile and an invitation, "Major, wishie jitterbuggie, huh?" The men defeat the enemy and hold the temple. Some comics contain the so-called "Good Girl Art" of pin-up pages, which feature scantily clad women. *Tell it to the Marines*, *Fighting Leathernecks*, and *Monty Hall of the U.S. Marines* identify the US serviceman as the intended audience, and often include a pen pals section for the lonely GI. These comics were obviously not for children.

The earliest of the 1950s war comics, *Two-Fisted Tales*, was issued by E-C comics as a bimonthly publication, and edited by Harvey Kurtzman. The first issue of *Two-Fisted Tales* was dated

# TWO-FISTED TALES



No. 20  
MAR-APR

AUTHORIZED  
A. C. M. P.

CONFORMS  
TO THE  
LATEST  
CODE

10¢

GEE, JOE! I  
HEARD THAT A  
LOT OF THE ENEMY  
ARE INFILTRATING WITH  
THESE REFUGEES!  
HOW CAN WE TELL?  
JOE? DID YOU  
HEAR ME?  
...JOE...?



[Front Cover—Mar-Apr 1951 (Vol 1 No 20)—Infiltrating refugees.]

November-December 1950, and by the January-February 1951 issue, Kurtzman turned to the Korean War for stories. Kurtzman also edited E-C's "companion mag," *Frontline Combat*, which focused exclusively on the presentation of combat in fifteen issues from 1951 to 1954. The first issue of *Two-Fisted Tales* (No. 18)<sup>2</sup> was not about Korea at all because, according to Kurtzman, when he invented the title he intended to present "blood and thunder tales and rip-roaring high adventure" (Benson Interview, Preceding No. 19, January-February 1951). The first cover included the side bar "He Man Adventure," and while retaining a number of adventure stories, Kurtzman turned to a focus on combat by Number 23 (September-October 1951), and the "He Man Adventure" side bar was changed to "War and Fighting Men."

The editorial policy of *Two-Fisted Tales* differed considerably from comic books like *Combat Kelly*. The editors identified themselves to readers, individual artists were profiled, and the editors requested comments and suggestions for future stories. Kurtzman believed in a serious approach to comics, one based on "authenticity," and his interest "had something to do with history and historical dates and places, and processes" (Benson Interview, Preceding No. 19, January-February 1951). He researched the history of specific campaigns and the details of combat using the Korean Consulate, public library, and interviews with those in service. While *Combat Kelly*, and other comic books of the period, presented the Korean War as a glorious crusade against the evils of communism, *Two-Fisted Tales* retained a dark, violent, pessimistic tone enhanced by starkly drawn panels and introspective internal dialogue. Despite the dark tone of many of the stories, Kurtzman carefully balanced the need to fight in some situations with the waste, futility and loss of innocence of war:

Although war is horrible, I feel that there are times when you have to fight. . . . To some degree I guess we have an obligation to support war. Although if we ever stand up on a hilltop and look at that kind of reasoning it all gets to look pretty weird (Benson Interview, Preceding No. 25, January-February 1952).

OUR STORY STARTS IN A GULLY RIMMING A HILL! YOU KNOW HOW A GULLY IS FORMED! RAIN WATER TRICKLING INTO A VALLEY WILL SLOWLY SCAR A CANAL INTO THE SOFT EARTH! AND PRETTY SOON YOU HAVE A GULLY! BUT TODAY, THE GULLY DOESN'T CARRY RAIN WATER! TODAY IT RUNS RED WITH BLOOD, THE BLOOD OF UNITED NATIONS SOLDIERS WHO HAVE BEEN COLDLY...

# MASSACRED!



GOOD LORD!

WHAT'S UP SERGEANT?

LOOK! THEIR HANDS TIED BEHIND THEIR BACKS WITH THEIR OWN SHOE-LACES!

DOESN'T LOOK LIKE THEY WERE GIVEN A CHANCE!

LISTEN! DID YOU HEAR A GROAN?

ONE OF THEM IS ALIVE!



["Massacred!"—Mar-Apr 1951 (Vol 1, No 20)—1<sup>st</sup> Panel.]

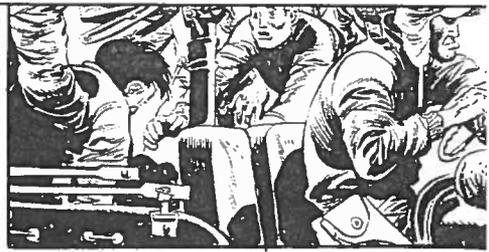
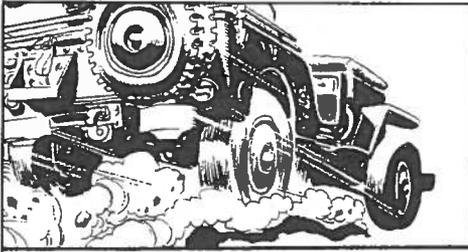
With the first Korean War story, "War Story!," Kurtzman begins with the June 1950 invasion and, like many of the Korean War feature films, the story returns to WWII to create a moral framework for the Korean War. The lesson for the new kid is presented by an old WWII retread who tells the story of twin brothers; one good and one a killer. Duke fails to follow even the most basic rules of humanity, even to the point of murdering a Japanese soldier carrying a white flag (Got 'im in the gut. Look at 'im wiggle!"). The killer pays for his rage when he accidentally kills his own brother while trying to murder a captured Japanese officer. The moral: "War's a tough deal! We kill men not because we wanna, but because we gotta! It's a dirty job we have to do . . . but it doesn't mean we have to enjoy doing it."

The artists associated with *Two-Fisted Tales*, among them Jack Davis, Wally Wood, Johnny Severin, and Will Elder, served during WWII, and this became a credential for the authenticity of the comic. Although Kurtzman was stationed stateside, many of the other writers and artists were combat veterans and very concerned with getting the details right. By the March-April 1952 issue, the unique contours of the Korean War began to take shape within the comic book. The stories treat the Korean War as a United Nations action, explore the effect of the war on civilians, outline atrocities committed during wartime, and explore the human condition and issues of fear, courage, and luck. Each story ends with a moral or a lesson.

Interestingly, *Two-Fisted Tales* never included a story on the prisoner of war experience, which by 1953 had become a major issue in the press. "Massacred!" (No. 20, March-April 1951) effectively incorporates many of the themes, and, true to Kurtzman's philosophy, the story adds a twist. It begins as an American squad finds assassinated United Nations soldiers in a ditch. The lone survivor tells a strange story of being captured by a North Korean officer, "Colonel Jun," described as a "man without conscience." Jun assassinates all but two of the captured squad, and then decides on special treatment for captured soldiers and issues the order that "Col. Jun's soldiers will not take prisoners!" He then strips the dead UN soldiers, and dresses himself and his squad in the clothes in order to scout a minefield. The squad is subsequently captured by some of Colonel Jun's own North Korean forces, and even though Jun tries to identify

himself to the North Korean officer, the officer, remembering Jun's standing order, kills Jun and his men. This *deus ex machina* is common in *Two-Fisted Tales* as the editors try to make a point about the brutality of the war and man's inhumanity to man.

Kurtzman believed that previous comic books had done a disservice to children by failing to present the negative aspects of war: "... you have a responsibility, and these guys feeding this crap to the children that soldiers spend their time merrily killing little buck-toothed yellow men with the butt of a rifle is terrible. . ." but he also admits that you have to tell a "story," because that is what people expect (Benson Interview, Preceding No. 21, May-June 1951). He deals with the loss of innocence, and profiles the soldier as a complex human being with real fear and courage. The definition of courage did not include running willingly into the jaws of death as a part of a noble crusade, and the comic is effective because of the anonymous quality of the soldiers. *Combat Kelly* featured regular characters, but both *Two-Fisted Tales* and *Frontline Combat* used the ordinary infantryman, representative in their everyman quality. Sometimes they live and sometimes they die. Some stories are about courage in the face of certain death, while others question the conduct of the soldier under horrible stress. Often the very definitions of cowardice and courage are called into question. Even when a man dies a hero's death, the focus is on the loneliness and waste, rather than the glory. Two stories are representative of Kurtzman's style and perspective. In "Hill 203" (No. 24, November-December 1951), the sun comes up behind a UN soldier slumped over a machine gun. The panels ask, "What happened here?" "The soldier won't tell you! He's dead!" The following panels relate the story of the defense of the hill against continuous waves of Chinese soldiers. The UN soldiers are killed off one by one until one man is left to defend the ridge. The lone survivor dies at sunrise slumped over the gun as the planes pass over the carnage of death and destruction on "Hill 203." The moral: The Hill is held but there is a large price to be paid "for death treats all men equally." "Corpse on the Imjin!" (No. 25, January-February 1952) begins as "a lonely corpse floats with the rubble down to the sea." A lone American soldier sits on the bank watching the corpse float by ("Why then do we fasten our eyes on a lifeless corpse? . . . Life is precious and death is ugly and never passes unnoticed."). And he wonders



WE'LL GET HIM OVER TO THE FIELD HOSPITAL! MAYBE WE CAN SAVE HIM!

SAVE HIM FOR WHAT?  
PTOO!



WELL ... THERE HE GOES!



HMPP! WAR IS FUNNY! THOU SHALT NOT KILL ... ALL MEN ARE BROTHERS! ... OUR BASIC RULES GO OUT THE WINDOW IN A WAR! ... STILL ...



...WHAT ELSE CAN BE DONE? WHEN YOU SEE YOUR BUDDIES BEING KILLED, IT BECOMES SO EASY TO KILL A MAN! ... IT BECOMES THE EASIEST THING IN THE WORLD!



AND YET, IN THE MIDDLE OF ALL THIS KILLING, HOW MANY OF US WILL REMEMBER THAT EACH AND EVERY HUMAN BEING ... **EACH AND EVERY LIFE ON THIS EARTH IS IMPORTANT..** OH GOD ... HOW MANY WILL REMEMBER?

["Korea!"—Sept-Oct 1952 (Vol 1, No 29)—"Every life is important."]

what caused the death. As the soldier eats and watches the river, another man, an enemy soldier “wet and scared and hungry,” watches the man and then leaps. As the two men circle each other preparing for battle, the soldier wonders, “Where are the wisecracks you read in the comic books? Where are the fancy right hooks you see in the movies?” Instead, it’s just brutal hand to hand combat and then one man dies. The final panels admonish:

Have pity. Have pity for a dead man. For he is now not rich or poor, right or wrong, bad or good! Don’t hate him. Have pity . . . For he has lost that most precious possession that we all treasure above everything . . . he has lost his life!

In some stories, the green kid, fresh from the States, learns the rules of warfare and becomes a seasoned and competent soldier, and sometimes the young man dies horribly in a storm of bullets or mortar fire. Often it is just a matter of luck rather than competence or courage that determines who lives and dies. In “Enemy Contact!” (No. 22, July-August 1951), a soldier develops appendicitis and is operated on by a medic who gets instructions over a walkie talkie. The operation is a success but the victory over this death is short-lived as an enemy mortar round lands near the position. Although the men are saved by the timely arrival of US “flyboys,” the story concludes with the discovery that the soldier had been killed in the mortar attack. In the final frame, the men walk away from the body as the blood transfusion bottle hangs ineffectively in the foreground. In “Ambush” (No. 21, May-June 1951), a soldier depends on the luck of a kewpie doll wedged in the top of his helmet. He is the sole survivor of an enemy encounter and thanks the kewpie doll for his great luck only to discover that his helmet had somehow been switched with his buddy’s helmet. He finds his dead buddy with a bullet through “the helmet, through your good luck charm, and through Pretty Boy’s face.” For the soldier, luck is a relative term reserved for those safe back home, so beware of those who tempt the fates. In the story “Luck!” (No. 27, May-June 1952), a lieutenant deliberately, and unnecessarily, draws fire to locate

snipers. He survives numerous close calls ("As long as I dare 'em to shoot me, sir, I'll never get hit!") but his speech is interrupted by a sniper's bullet. The story ends with close-up of a helmet with a bullet through the back of it.

By July-August 1951 (No. 22), the editors instituted a "Combat Correspondence" page. From reader comments it is clear that the war stories proved to be the most popular, particularly for American servicemen. The editors printed a letter from a soldier in Korea who commented on the "Realism of the battle sequences," and then offered to send in some personal stories which the editors readily accepted. The readers continued to suggest topics and the editors used reader ideas and concepts throughout the run of the comic book. There seems to be a great deal of interchange between the editors and the soldiers serving in the Korean War, regarding both detail information and the presentation of real battles: "Your letters are truly a rich source of material for our war stories" (No. 24, November-December 1951). Many letters address certain inadequacies in presentation (that "is not a '45' at all"). How did the artist make "the mistake of drawing Navy F9F Panthers as ground support planes for the army in your story, Enemy Contact?" (No. 24, November-December 1951). Or "you should have had Sgt. Shadburn carrying his M-1 upside down in the rain" (No. 27, May-June, 1952). Sometimes there was a collision between the story telling and the documentary aspects of the war. While the editors had intended Hill 203 to be fictitious and representative, a reader wrote to complain that the editors had located Hill 203 in the wrong place: "It is 21 miles southeast of Seoul, and south of the Han River. I was on that hill myself . . . we lost almost all of C Company" (No. 21, March-April 1952). Another commented on a missing ammo belt on one of the machine guns. The editors also received suggestions for future stories. Evidently some readers were disturbed by the sad endings of many of the stories, and the editors responded: "We agree . . . that war is needless. We have no solution. We can only hope that by showing how ugly war is, YOUR generation will work hard to find the solution" ("Combat Correspondence," No. 24, November-December 1951). Many readers agreed that the sad endings made the comics more realistic by showing how horrible war really is. The "comic mag gals," as differentiated from women of the armed

forces (WACS, WAVES and the Women Marines), also emerged as a part of editorial policy: "We've made it a practice not to show beautiful women running around on a battle-field with the lipstick and silk stockings nicely in place! . . . it just ain't so" (No. 29, September-October 1952).

Some of the more interesting stories present the insanity of war on both sides, and the effect it can have in driving men over the edge of reason to become, not soldiers, but killers. In "Kill!" (No. 23, September-October 1951), the American, "Abner," is shown constantly sharpening his knife in anticipation of gutting a Chinese soldier ("I'm gonna rip that Chinese wide open from stem to stern . . . I'm gonna slice 'im like a herring!"), while on the other side, the Chinese soldier, "Li," cleans and re-cleans his gun. Li and Abner come face to face and in a final battle, and in a bloodthirsty rage, kill each other. In "Bug Out!" (No. 24, November-December 1951), a soldier loses touch with reality as the horror of war takes over his mind. He escapes an ambush that annihilates his entire squad, kills four North Korean soldiers for their rice, eats the rice out of one of the American helmets, and then survives the bombing of a village. He loses his sanity: "What happened to me? What happened to all my fine civilized instincts? What did all this civilization mean?" The story is told through flashbacks as the young man sits in a catatonic state in a hospital: "I'm a killer! I'm an animal . . . Running through the dark with my tail between my legs. Growling around and killing for food! Hiding in the cracks between rocks." Other stories feature Korean civilians trying to survive the war ("Rubble!" No. 24, November-December, 1951), and the effects of the environment ("MUD!" No. 25, January-February 1952). The issue of "fragging" is also introduced in "MUD!"

No. 25 represents a transitional period in *Two-Fisted Tales*, as Kurtzman became even more involved in the details of particular campaigns including the new technologies (the "Willys Jeep" in No. 27), changes in the conduct of the war (the truce talks) and the integration of the armed services. In "Bunker," (No. 30) black soldiers are included for the first time. The artists and editors also developed a particular style and approach. Kurtzman was the master of understatement with simply drawn comics and well-written, simple prose. In March-April 1952, a Special Issue (No. 26) is devoted to the Changjin Reservoir

# TWO-FISTED

# TALES



No. 26

MAR-APR.

LN 10

AUTHORIZED  
M.F.P.

COMIC BOOK  
BY  
ENTERTAINMENT  
WEEKLY

10¢

SOME  
SAY US  
MARINES  
**RETREATED**  
FROM THE  
CHANGJIN  
RESERVOIR!  
**...HECK!**

...WE  
DIDN'T  
RETREAT!  
WE JUST  
**ADVANCED**  
IN **ANOTHER**  
**DIRECTION!**

**SPECIAL ISSUE** • A DOCUMENT OF THE ACTION AT  
THE **CHANGJIN RESERVOIR!**

[Front Cover—Mar-Apr 1952 (Vol 1, No 26)—“Retreat, Heck!”]

retreat, undeniably the most brutal campaign of the Korean War, and an early defeat of US forces in December of 1950. A rough unpublished cover of the March-April 1952 issue (No. 26) proclaimed that "this issue is a documentary" but by the publication of the issue the editors backed down from the documentary claim to offer, "A document of the action at the Changjin Reservoir!" The series of stories opens with a detailed "War map of Korea," and the story presented in four parts, "The Trap!" "Hagaru-Ri!" "Link-Up!" and "Hungnam!" Of course in the presentation on the Changjin Reservoir, Kurtzman did make one little change in General Smith's famous statement: "Retreat? Retreat, Hell we're just advancing in another direction," by changing the "Hell" to "Heck" because of external pressures on the comic book industry.

Kurtzman also focused on the chaos and horror of other wars. He devoted two issues of *Two-Fisted Tales*, (January-February 1953 and October 1953), to the Civil War, which generated a great deal of critical mail from Southern readers who thought the editors were biased in favor of the Union. He also did stories on WWI, WWII, the Civil War, and the Revolutionary War, and while these stories too were somber, the violence and horrible loss associated with a "Bunker Hill" or a "D-Day" was presented as necessary and part of a laudatory goal. This contrasts greatly with the representation of the Korean War in which the war is not placed within a greater good to be won. Survival is the key to the Korean War, and loyalty to fellow soldiers, but the overall need for the war is not as clear. With the signing of the armistice on 27 July 1953, the Korean War ended, and Kurtzman moved back in time to the old West and Victorian India. Kurtzman concludes his association with *Two-Fisted Tales* with the May-June 1953 issue on the Atomic Bomb to devote full attention to *MAD! Magazine*.

By the mid-fifties, cultural critics became increasingly concerned over the influence of the comics, particularly the more violent and gruesome ones. Fredric Wertham's book *Seduction of the Innocent* argued from a so-called scientific basis that the children's comic, particularly the horror genre, led to juvenile delinquency, and he centered much of his attack on E-C Comics. For Wertham, "Comics are supposed to be like fairy tales" (Wertham, 212-214), and many of the comics of the late 1940s

and early 1950s were gory, violent, highly misogynist (including rapes, for example) and clearly not appropriate for children. But the cause-effect relationship that Wertham claims to have proven, and which can still be seen today in arguments over the effects of violence in television shows and in the movies, remains in doubt. So, while the goals of protecting the nation's children were laudatory, it would appear that Wertham and the Kefauver Hearings, which began in the spring of 1954, had a decidedly political and moral slant which overrode aesthetic considerations. By 1954, the "Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America, Inc." went into effect, and this self-censorship by the comic book industry effectively banned crime, violence, and gore in comic books and penalized some offenders by denying the publishers access to distribution (Sabin, 157-170).<sup>3</sup>

Because the violence and gore were considered realistic in the presentation of war, the "Code" had little effect on the war comics. While Wertham objected to the presentation in *Two-Fisted Tales* and *Frontline Combat*, the objections related to the liberal political orientation of the strip rather than the aesthetics of presentation. *Frontline Combat* ceased publication in January 1954 due in part to the signing of the armistice ending the war in Korea and a corresponding decline in interest in the war stories, and to a period of decline in comic books generally. In a letter to the readers of *Two-Fisted Tales*, the editors note that in September 1952, there were over 500 different comic "Mags" being produced. By March 1953, the industry had collapsed under the weight of so many titles. Public concerns and declining readership forced E-C to abandon its horror and crime comics, most notably *Haunt of Fear*, and then *Frontline Combat*, *Weird Science*, and *Weird Fantasy*. The *New Two-Fisted Tales* with an "Adventure" sidebar struggled along with a "little emphasis on war . . . a big emphasis on the old west, history, and tales of high adventure" (No. 36, January 1954). Readership, however, continued to decline and No. 41 (March 1955) featured an "In Memoriam." According to the editors, *Two-Fisted Tales* succumbed to competition with the "more 'stimulating'" type of comic book. Even with the "New Direction" comic line, E-C barely survived the post-1954 period, and ended up with only one surviving title, *MAD!*, and that only because they changed its designation to magazine rather than comic. The whole industry combusted with

a decline in the number of titles from 630 in 1952 to 250 by 1956 (Sabin, 157-170). Meanwhile, *Combat Kelly* too fell to the combined pressures of declining readership and censorship, and by January 1954 (Vol. 1, No. 18), *Combat Kelly* returned to WWII. The other surviving war comics also returned to WWII, which had always proven to be a far more popular, and easily represented war, and other tales of adventure and conquest. The Korean War was over, but in one of the final issues of *Two-Fisted Tales*, America's next war is indirectly introduced. "Dien Bien Phu" may be the first and only American popular culture artifact to examine the French experience and defeat in Vietnam. The survivor of a final Legionnaire outpost is killed and "In a daze I watch my red blood spreading over the pictures. . . . Even as the red tide is spreading over Indo China!" (No. 40, December-January 1955). ☞

## Notes

1. *Battle* (Marvel, 1951-1960); *Battle Action* (Marvel, 1952-1957); *Battle Attack* (Stanmor Publications, 1952-1955); *Battle Cry* (Stanmor Publications, 1952-1955); *Battle Stories* (Fawcett, 1952); *Battlefield* (Marvel, 1952-1953); *Battlefront* (Marvel, 1952-1957); *Battleground* 1954-1957; *Combat* (Marvel, 1952-1953); *Combat Casey* (Marvel, 1953-1957); *Combat Kelly* (Marvel, 1951-1954); *Fightin' Marines* (St. John, 1951-1984); *Fighting Fronts Comics* (Harvey, 1952-1953); *Fighting Leathernecks* (Toby, 1952); *The Fighting Man* (Farrell, 1952-1953); *Fightin = Marines* (St. John, 1951); *Frontline Combat* (E-C) 1951-1954; *General Douglas MacArthur* (Fox, 1951); *G.I. Joe* (Ziff-Davis, 1950-1957); *Joe Yank Better*, 1952-1953); *Men in Action* (Marvel, 1952-1953); *Men's Adventures* (Marvel, 1950); *Monty Hall of the U.S. Marines* (Toby, 1951-1953); *Navy Combat* (Marvel, 1955-1958); *Our Army at War* (DC, 1952-1977); *Star Spangled War Stories* (DC, 1952-1977); *Tell It to the Marines* (Toby, 1952-1955); *Two-Fisted Tales* (E-C, 1951-1955); *U.S. Fighting Air Force* (Superior, 1952-1956); *U.S. Marines in Action* (Avon, 1952); *War Action* (Marvel, 1952-1953); *War Adventures* (Marvel, 1952-1953); *War Combat* (Marvel, 1952) then continues as *Combat Casey*; *War Comics* (Marvel, 1950); *War Adventures* (Marvel; 1952-1953); *Warfront* (Harvey, 1951-1958); *Young Men on the Battlefield* (Marvel, 1951-1953).
2. *Two-Fisted Tales* begins with Volume 1, Issue No. 18 due to a series of title changes. *Fat and Slat* became *Gunfighter* which then shifted to

*Haunt of Fear* with Volume 1, Issue No. 15. *Haunt of Fear* then changed to *Two-Fisted Tales* with #18. *Haunt of Fear* will eventually be revived as a separate title.

3. See also Martin Barker, *A Haunt of Fears: The Strange History of the British Horror Comics Campaign* (London: Pluto Press 1984).

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See also "Ross Cochran Presents The Complete E-C Library." This collection includes 13 sets of the titles in E-C's New Trend and New Direction comic books. The individual issues of the comics are faithfully introduced and repackaged with interviews and commentary. Included in the collection are the complete collections of *Weird Science*, *Weird Fantasy*, *Weird Science Fantasy*, *Crime Suspenstories*, *Shock Suspenstories*, *Two-Fisted Tales*, *Frontline Combat*, *Tales of the Crypt*, *The Haunt of Fear*, *The Vault of Horror*, Special Collection (*Piracy*, *Valor*, *Extra!*, *Aces High*, *Impact*, *M.D.*, *Psychoanalysis*, *Panic*) and *Mad*.

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