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Whitewashing WWII Sexual Memory

“Of course, there have always been camp followers and brothels, and soldiers have always got drunk and got laid; we know from history about the licentious soldiery...” (Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers’ Tale*, 186).

Sex is war’s handmaiden, but apparently this was not the case for the American GIs fighting in Europe during WWII, if you believe the Good War version of events.¹ In this enormously popular myth of the war, constructed by the likes of Stephen Ambrose, Tom Brokaw, Steven Spielberg, Tom Hanks, the GIs set the high moral standard against which all other wars would be measured. The U.S. Army came to liberate Europe and not conquer; our soldiers did not rape, loot, or pillage.² In fact, it seemed the GIs did not have much sex at all, and when they did it was the result of romance with women who became war brides. The reverential treatment accorded the American soldiers framed what became the master narrative of WWII in popular memory. And in this memory, the raw, physical sex has been expunged.

Over the past twenty years, the Regis Center for the Study of War Experience has recorded hundreds of hours of WWII veterans’ personal narratives, in the form of both private one-on-one interviews and panel discussions held as part of our annual speakers’ series, *Stories From Wartime*. With very few exceptions, these former soldiers were complicit in whitewashing World War Two sexual memory.

They never talked about sex in their public storytelling and rarely in private interviews.

Belief in the myth of the Good War prescribed limits to what the veterans revealed about sexual conduct in wartime and to what the audience would bear hearing. When asked what they did for fun and recreation, playful intimations of sex were about as far as the veterans went. “Chasing girls” sounded like good, clean fun, and the vets intended it to be heard as funny; they laughed when they said it. Our students and the audience laughed along. Everybody could accept the fact that boys will be boys, after all. Denver newspaperman, Gene Amole, who was in the first wave of soldiers to hit Omaha Beach on June 6, 1944, was more serious. During a panel discussion on October 17, 1995, I asked Amole if he remembered what was on his mind as he rode in to his war on the Higgins boat that morning. He responded immediately, “I thought that I would never get to make love to a woman.” The audience heard this remark as innocent and sad.

For both the storyteller and audience, candid talk about sex in World War Two was inappropriate, and not only at Regis.³ In *The Soldiers' Tale*, Samuel Hynes tells us that memoirs of the Second War ignored the sex lives of soldiers, because “It was, after all, the Good War; whores would have been out of place in its story” (186). Only a handful of the WWII veterans we’ve interviewed were more forthcoming. Clarence S., a former rifleman in the 157th Infantry Regiment of the 45th Infantry Division was, in fact, very explicit about the GIs’ appetite for gross sex whenever they had the opportunity. After the third time he was wounded at the end of 1944, he told us, he was sent to a hospital near Paris. “You’re not going to believe this,” Clarence said, but “we went in to Paris every day, no pass or nothing, where the guys lined up for a piece of ass.” When the interviewer told him that his regiment presumably had the highest VD (venereal disease) rate in the European Theater, Clarence replied, “Every time I got a piece of ass, I took a pro.” He described the procedure. “You shoot it up your penis, you know, to kill any germs you may have had. After the war I went to Paris, screwing everything I could get my hands on--- then I’d go get a pro.” When asked whether he had ever gotten VD, Clarence said he hadn’t, because he was careful. The interviewer asked Clarence what percentage of the guys went to a prostitute. He replied, “I think anyone would go to a prostitute.” He remembered the one guy who abstained as an exception. “It’s hard to believe, you know,” he said, “here we were on the Riviera and the girls would just lay there naked—you had your pick, but he wouldn’t do it.” In Clarence’s mind, this young man was strange and different from the rest of the guys (Oral History Interview recorded on 10/08/2001).

Bill L., also of the 157th Infantry Regiment, described a situation he witnessed when the Thunderbirds were engaged in amphibious training near Salerno on the Italian coast in preparation for the invasion of southern France. He told us, “I remember the Chaplains having to come around to visit each company and talk, because the girls were set up in the corn fields. Boys, don’t go in there—this is unsanitary, and everything else.” Bill went on, “The biggest, funniest thing down there was the day we’re ready and lined up for the final and the girls were set up on the beach.” He spread his arms out wide to demonstrate guys holding up something and continued, “They had shelter halves around a section in there with sailors and everything, and guys stood around watching what was happening down there.” Lyford gestured to show the boy voyeurs stretching their fingers out along the top of the shelter half to raise themselves up and peer over to see what was going on, “like the ‘Kilroy Was Here’ thing, you know.” The interviewer asked whether it was just a few guys getting sex, or everyone. Bill nodded and laughed, intimating it was everyone. “I’ll never forget that scene. It was the weirdest thing,” Bill said (Oral History Interview, 10/08/2001). It must have been a sight to behold—the battle-hardened GIs in full battle gear waiting to be loaded on to the LCTs parked offshore, getting a final taste of raw sex before they headed to their next D-Day and more killing and dying.

In late June, 2012, I interviewed two former GIs in Safety Harbor, Florida: my father, Mynie Clayton, and his childhood friend, Steve D., both 91 years old at the time. Dad was in the 358th Field Artillery Battalion of the 95th Infantry Division that fought in France, Belgium, and Germany over the course of nearly eight months from late October 1944 to the end of April 1945. Steve was in a balloon barrage unit attached to the 7th Army and saw action for almost three years in North Africa, Italy, and France. Both confessed to bouts of heavy drinking in bars and brothels, both stateside and overseas, in places like San Antonio, Paris, and LeHavre in my father’s case, and, for Steve, Oran and Naples. Their memories of the circumstances were clear and precise. For example, they remembered the names of the buddies they were with, and recalled immediately the names of the “establishments” where the “girls” took the shit-faced boys “upstairs” for sex. ⁴ Steve said, “half the guys in my outfit got the clap in Naples—it was no big deal.”

Had my father ever been upstairs with a whore, I wanted to know. “I was married to your mother when I was in the service,” Dad reminded me, and he made me promise not to repeat what he was about to say. Mynie then told me the story about stopping off in Paris en route to LeHavre at the end of the war. “I usually just sat at

the bar in these places and held the guys' money while they went upstairs and got laid. But this time I did go upstairs with a whore," he confessed, "but I was so drunk I couldn't get it up—so I guess you can say I was always faithful to your mother."

Whatever these stories indicate about the truth of the extent of this kind of soldier behavior⁵ during the war, they clearly were not meant for public consumption; getting to the truth about the sexual conduct of the American GIs was difficult. Distinguished scholars Paul Fussell and J. Glenn Gray were Army veterans turned literati who attempted to set the record straight in their acclaimed books on WWII, with dramatically different accounts of what soldiers actually did. For example, in *Wartime*, Fussell tells us in his chapter "Drinking Far Too Much, Copulating Too Little," that obsession with sex was a "rear echelon problem." He admits that soldiers 'forage for sex any place they could find it in England before they headed to the continent, with considerable success given the omnipresence of prostitutes. Fussell quotes a Canadian who described London before the invasion as a "vast battlefield of sex" (109). Undoubtedly the Picadilly "Commandos" lead the charge for the legions of the so-called "Good Time" girls who populated the nooks and crannies of London's public spaces.⁶ Furthermore, The History Channel produced documentary series, *Sex During Wartime: History Under the Covers*, reports that of the 250,000 babies born in Great Britain from 1942 to 1945, 105,000 were illegitimate.⁷

Fussell's argument that begs closer examination, however, is his contention that "sexual deprivation and inordinate desire generally did not trouble men on the front line. They were too scared, busy, hungry, tired, and demoralized to think about sex at all. Indeed, the front was the one wartime place that was sexless" (108). He adds, "Behind the lines desire was constantly seeking an outlet it seldom satisfactorily found" (109).

In his elegant contemplation of war experience, *Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*, Gray contradicts Fussell's conclusion about the lack of sex. He observed that sex was constantly on the minds of soldiers, including front-line soldiers who found lots of sex behind the lines as soon as the fighting stopped. Gray says:

Anyone entering military service for the first time can only be astonished by soldiers' concentration upon the subject of women and, more especially, upon the sexual act...The most common word in the mouths of American soldiers has been the vulgar expression for sexual intercourse...Many soldiers seem hardly able to utter a sentence without using it at least once...It must serve to recall fleeting memories or fond desires. At all events, its overuse

indicates clearly a predominant interest for nearly all military men in wartime...⁸

If we are honest, most of us who were civilian soldiers in recent wars will confess that we spent incomparably more time in the service of Eros during our military careers than ever before or again in our lives. When we were in uniform almost any girl who was faintly attractive had an erotic appeal for us. For their part, millions of women find a strong sexual attraction in the military uniform, particularly in time of war...It seems that the very atmosphere of large cities in wartime breathes the enticements of physical love...War offers us an opportunity to return to nature, and to look upon every member of the opposite sex as a possible conquest, to be wooed or forced... (62,63).

In *Warriors*, Gray devotes an entire chapter to the subject of love in war. He maintains that there are different kinds of love that war arouses—love of comrades, love of friends, erotic love of the fuller kind, romantic love, and “gross physical love” (64). As long as armies have fought wars, an insatiable appetite for the latter kind of love—raw sex—has characterized the moral conduct of many soldiers. These sexual predators needed sex, which was often provided by their commanding officers to keep them productive. Gray describes the compulsion:

There was an unmistakable similarity in it to eating and drinking, a devouring of the woman as object. Even the appetite seemed to recur with the same regularity as do hunger and thirst. To these soldiers it did not much matter who the woman was they used to satisfy themselves. Their claims on her were only on her external features, so that prostitutes gave such soldiers as much as any other girl could, and were usually more in accord with military needs. It is not at all surprising that many army commanders have over the centuries sought to organize love by providing legal brothels for soldiers. From a narrow military standpoint—these establishments have always appeared to limit the dangers of physical love and insure efficiency of soldiering...In the memories and imaginations of these soldiers, women were reduced not only to objects, but to sexual organs which they could manipulate to their complete satisfaction (65).

Although Fussell did not speak directly to Gray's views on the sexual behavior of GIs, it is noteworthy that he had publically criticized Gray's authority to comment on what combat soldiers felt or did. In his essay, "Thank God for the Atom Bomb," which first appeared in the August 1981 edition of *The New Republic*,⁹ Paul Fussell scorned the humanitarian sentiment and attacked the accuracy of the statement made by Gray about the reaction of American combat soldiers to the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan. Fussell quoted Gray as having said, "When the news of the Atomic bombing and Hiroshima and Nagasaki came, many an American soldier felt shocked and ashamed...the combat soldier knew better than did Americans at home what those bombs meant in suffering and injustice" (Thank God for the Atom Bomb and Other Essays, 8). Ever determined to expose the ignorance of those who never experienced combat, Fussell commented derisively, "I find this canting nonsense...No one felt ashamed in the Rifle companies" (8).

According to Fussell, Gray could not presume to know what combat soldiers felt or did, because he was far behind the lines and never in the position to see the "real" war taking place. Fussell emphasized that Gray was an interrogator in the Army Counterintelligence Corps and experienced the war at the division level. As a consequence, Fussell argues that "*The Warriors*, his meditation on the moral and psychological dimensions of modern soldiering gives every sign of error occasioned by remoteness from experience. Division headquarters is miles—miles—behind the line..." (8). Gray could not possibly understand the "torture" of combat for those soldiers doing the actual fighting, Fussell intimated. It is certainly true that for combat soldiers, especially those like Fussell and my father who were in infantry divisions scheduled for deployment to the Pacific as the vanguard for the invasion of Japan, the atomic bombs ended the war and stopped the killing and dying. These soldiers did not feel ashamed—they rejoiced. Paul Fussell was right to argue that combat soldiers perceived the bomb as a very good thing; in this matter, at least, J. Glenn Gray misrepresented the views of the average GI.

Paul Fussell certainly knew some of the worst of war. He had four months of combat experience under his belt as a 2nd Lieutenant leading a rifle platoon in the 103rd Infantry Division when he was severely wounded on March 15, 1945 in Alsace. He was hit by fragments from an incoming tank shell that exploded over the bunker where Fussell and his Platoon Sergeant Edward Hudson had hunkered down; Hudson was killed (*Doing Battle*, 143, 144). When the war ended in Europe, Fussell was still in a hospital on the Moselle. In Fussell's world at the time, there wasn't much elation. He said, "When V-E Day was announced, I did celebrate by consuming a can of warm beer I'd been saving. But there was no pleasure in it..."

When the German war ended, a moment one might think an appropriate occasion for wild celebrations, the troops and those intimate with the mess that was now Europe seemed to agree with the British poet John Pudney that the “less said the better” (154).

Sometime in mid-June, 1945, Fussell returned to the 103rd and F Company, but “no one was friendly or comical, and I seemed excluded from intimate group conversations. I had become a pariah, and it hurt”(157). He did get a week’s leave in Paris, Fussell mentions, but he didn’t say anything at all about what he experienced in the city of love. We do know that he posed for an official Army portrait taken while he was there,¹⁰ the kind you gave to your mother. A month later he was transferred to the Forty-Fifth Infantry Division. Fussell felt very much alone and unhappy during this period, and for fifty years he brooded over the “mystery” of why he was treated so badly by his former comrades.

The mystery was solved in the early 1990s, he tells us, when a friend doing research in military archives sent Fussell a copy of the order issued on June 1, 1945 that awarded the Silver Star posthumously to Technical Sergeant Edward Hudson. The citation read, “For gallantry in action. On 15 March 1945 when Company F was subjected to heavy enemy artillery, mortar, machine gun and small arms fire and his platoon leader was wounded, Sergeant Hudson immediately took command. He ran from man to man, reorganizing and deploying the platoon. Disregarding the heavy enemy fire, he moved forward alone to locate the hostile positions and, although mortally wounded, he succeeded in sending a message informing his commander of the location of the enemy” (158). “Pure fiction, all of it,” Fussell seethes, and “It became clear now that a week or so before I surprised the company by showing up, the officers had conspired in devising this fairy tale and perjured themselves in attesting to it” (159). He emphasizes that making such a knowingly false statement was a high crime under military law, subject to a court martial.

What Fussell says now in regard to this matter reveals much about his moral character at the time. He continued, “Sergeant Hudson, actually, although no very conspicuous coward, was no more given to this kind of heroic selflessness than the rest of us. With my boy’s *moral rigor* (emphasis added), I’d surely have objected and refused to join this fraud if I’d been present when it was devised. How could the beloved son of the most honorable and incorruptible attorney in Los Angeles, the onetime president of the Los Angeles Bar Association, knowingly sign a false certificate? How could Chickinanna’s grandson, taught never even to say “shirttail,” compromise his honor by attesting to a lie?” (159) It is apparent that Fussell’s righteous indignation was the product of the morally strict environment in which

he was raised in affluent Pasadena, California. One might conclude that he was a rather innocent, prudish lad and less 'corruptible' in the wartime world of Eros than many of the other young Americans who went off to war in WWII.¹¹

In *Wartime*, furthermore, Fussell describes the sexual mores of Americans in the 1940s from what seems to be a rather limited perspective, which is surprising for someone who made such efforts to get the real war in the books. He contends that sex was in short supply for wartime soldiers, because "Sex before marriage was regarded as either entirely taboo or gravely reprehensible..." (106). Some soldiers, including Fussell, may not have enjoyed the pleasure of sex during the war, but apparently this wasn't the case for the majority. Mary Louise Roberts, in her recent book *What Soldiers Do*, for example, says that "One military study found that 50 percent of married soldiers and 80 percent of unmarried soldiers had intercourse at some point during the war. As one humbled medical officer put it, "the sex act cannot be made unpopular"" (167,168).

Paul Fussell's understanding of the sexual behavior of American GIs in WWII Europe gave "every sign of error occasioned by remoteness from experience." The fact of the matter is Fussell was not a reliable witness to what GIs did when they were not fighting. In the first place, he did not personally see the lewd behavior of his comrades in arms on V-E Day, for example, a time when the Army Medical Department reported that VD rates "simply skyrocketed,"¹² because he was in the hospital and not in the position to observe what was happening. In the second place, Fussell was disinclined to see such salacious goings-on, because his vision was clouded by moral rigor. This probably accounts for the fact that he makes no mention of sex in Paris when he took leave there after the war ended.

Gray, on the other hand, was a particularly reliable witness to the moral conduct of the American GI behind the lines. He was inducted into the Army as a private on May 8, 1941, and was discharged as a 2nd Lieutenant on October 28, 1945, having earned a battlefield commission in December 1944 in Strasbourg, France. Gray was a counter-intelligence officer attached successively to three different infantry divisions from the Italian campaign to the end of the war in Europe. His unit's responsibility was to safeguard troops against spies and saboteurs, a task that "demanded an unusual amount of freedom and mobility. Because we worked constantly with civilians in Italy, France, and Germany, it was possible to observe the effects of war on the native populations, as well as on our own soldiers. An additional year in educational reconstruction after the close of the war gave me the opportunity to observe postwar reactions in shattered Europe" (Preface, XVI, XVI, *The Warriors*). Gray may not have experienced combat up-close and personal,

like Fussell did, but it was precisely his “behind the lines” perspective that afforded him numerous opportunities over the course of three years to observe first-hand what GIs did to relieve the “torture” of combat.

In this regard, *The Warriors* exposed a central truth of the GIs’ experience in WWII Europe that Fussell, for all his efforts to destroy the myths of the Good War, did not understand or did not care to acknowledge. Gray saw that besotted debauchery was common behavior among American GIs in Europe who went wild seeking sex wherever and whenever the opportunity presented itself. In many cases, the opportunities were provided by senior military officers, Patton being prominent among them, who promoted the pervasive whore-mongering by arranging and organizing sex for their men in brothels from North Africa to Germany.

Ironically, this counter-narrative to the Good War is told by the Army itself, in the voluminous history of the Medical Department’s efforts to prevent and control the spread of venereal disease during WWII.¹³ Combating VD was a matter of high national security and a duty of military command, because of the prospect of the reduced production of the fighting troops. Before the new sulfur drugs and penicillin came into widespread use, men who contracted syphilis could be expected to be out of line for months, if they didn’t die, and gonorrhea infections cost weeks lost. In WW I, for example, VD caused the Army lost services of 18,000 Doughboys a day, for an aggregate total of 6,804,818 days lost from duty (Medical Department, Preventive Medicine, Chapter X, 263).

The GIs needed to be protected against these diseases and warned about the dangerous women who were the vectors.¹⁴ The military command assumed that soldiers, being soldiers, would find a way to satisfy their sexual cravings, and the objective became, therefore, to keep them safe. Passed in July 1941, the May Act made prostitution a federal crime in specified areas around military bases in the United States. Employing this authority, the newly created Division of Social Protection, a collaborative effort of the military services and civilian agencies under the direction of former FBI star Eliot Ness, went to war to safeguard “the Armed Services and the civilian population from the hazards of prostitution, sex delinquency, and venereal diseases” (163). Prostitutes were fined and arrested; men were treated in prophylactic “stations” that the Venereal Disease Control Officers assigned to each unit set up wherever the Army went stateside and overseas. In her provocative study of sexual policy toward women in WWII, Marilyn Hegarty argues that military prophylaxis policies “supported the notion that men, especially servicemen, need sex—the constant attention paid to sex, including safe sex, in the military also served as an incitement to sex—as a way to prove one’s manliness”

(*Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes: The Regulation of Female Sexuality During WWII*, 10).

As the Medical Department points out, these efforts stateside were effective, as measured by the relatively low and declining rates of VD in the United States, until V-E Day.¹⁵ American-style suppression of prostitution never worked overseas in Europe, however, where sex reached a “crescendo.”¹⁶ According to the Medical Department, prostitution was too widespread and accepted in Europe to be effectively controlled. The policy that was adopted, first in North Africa and then everywhere else, was to “place certain areas off limits to U.S. troops but to allow them free access to certain of the better houses of prostitution over which close supervision was maintained” (207). Venereal Disease Control Officers selected brothels for white officers, others for white enlisted men, and others still for “Negro” troops, in keeping with America’s and with the Army’s racist policies. Prophylaxis stations equipped with toilets and mechanical and chemical treatment materials were set-up in brothels in which Military Police were stationed to enforce regulations (208).

One regulation that needed to be enforced was Negro soldiers were restricted to 30 minutes in the brothels, presumably to limit their exposure to infection since “the venereal disease rate of Negro soldiers was consistently 8 to 12 times higher than the rate among white soldiers” (188/189). The Medical Department attributed the higher rate to low educational levels, high illiteracy rates, inadequate recreational opportunities, and the fact that the “prevalence of commercialized Negro prostitution activity around many Army camps is a prolific source of venereal disease” (189). These factors meant that efforts to educate Negro soldiers about the dangers of prostitution “largely failed” (189). It is noteworthy that the provision of recreational activities for both whites and Blacks in camps stateside and overseas clearly were intended as a substitute for sexual activity. And for the “Negro” soldier there was an additional factor: he was simply more promiscuous than his white counterpart. In a survey conducted by medical officers in the CBI (China/Burma/India) theater, for example, it was found that 93% of Negroes interviewed admitted having sexual intercourse, compared to 27% of whites. “Drinking seemed to have no important relationship to sexual behavior among Negroes, but was highly significant among whites” (308).

The conclusion the Army draws about Negro soldiers’ sexual behavior is suspect on many accounts, as Mary Louise Roberts details in her new book *What Soldiers Do*, not the least of which is the obvious fact that Black GIs had more time and

opportunity for sex, because they usually served in Communication Zone port supply cities like Naples for long periods of time.

The brothels in Oran, like everywhere else in North Africa, did a flourishing business, the Army tells us. In December 1942, 15,265 prophylactic cases were administered in the stations in the brothels and by March 1943, the number had risen to over 46,000 (210). The situation in Sicily was worse. According to the Medical Department, the incidence of VD among the civilian population was “extremely high” and the availability of sulfur drugs and medical care “grossly deficient.” After the fighting stopped in Sicily, “brothels in the larger communities were taken over for the exclusive use of U.S. troops,” (211) and VD rates rose steadily.

They saw a “tremendous increase” in Naples, where all civilian authority had broken down in the wake of the German retreat from southern Italy and the subsequent American occupation. The economic situation was desperate and “women of all classes turned to prostitution as a means to support themselves and their families...small boys, little girls, and old men solicited on every street for their sister, mothers, and daughters and escorted prospective customers to their homes... For the first time in the history of the theater, venereal disease became a serious problem among combat troops” (213,216). In the Fifth U.S. Army, the VD rate rose to over 100 per 1,000 per annum in December 1943 after a three day stay in the Fifth Army Rest Center where a nearby brothel operated for and by the troops was located (216). The Army considered anything fewer than 30 cases per 1000 per annum to be an acceptable VD rate.

Undoubtedly with a view to the salacious situation in Italy in mind, Major General Jacob Devers, the Commander in Chief of U.S. forces in Europe at the time, sent a letter on December 31, 1943 to all unit commanders in which he warned them to take seriously the need to control VD. He wrote that the “contraction of venereal disease is considered evidence of improper indoctrination of the individual which is an indication of poor leadership on the part of the unit commander...It is essential that commanding officers devote their personal attention to the control of venereal disease...the percentage of physically fit soldiers in a command is strong evidence of the efficiency of the commanding officer” (238). I don’t need to point out that the concern was efficiency and not morality.

The Medical Department reports that the first big test of the heightened attention to War Department policy came in Great Britain with the Americans flooding England in the first six months of 1944 in preparation for Overlord. In Britain, however, the lack of organized brothels meant that neither the suppression nor the segregation of prostitution was possible (242). Consequently, a set of protocols

was drawn up that focused on educational programs, propaganda materials, and prophylactic measures. It was the personal responsibility of each unit's medical officer, for example, to ensure that training films on sex hygiene and VD were widely shown. Prophylactic stations, of course, were integral to the American campaign to control the spread of venereal disease. The pride expressed by the Army's Medical Department in its report on how the medical officers managed to get these up and operating so quickly on the tiny island country deserves quoting at length. The British initially refused to cooperate, but

Relentless pressure from the U.S. Army had served to wear down the British objection to granting space for this purpose, so that in the larger population centers it was possible to provide decent premises of reasonably convenient location. Also local arrangements in many instances had gained the approval of the blackout warden for the use of a shaded and much subdued, but at the same time visible, green light, as a marker at night. The most important advance in this direction was made through an agreement with the American Red Cross whereby the Army was given space for the operation of prophylactic stations on the premises of Red Cross Clubs...This arrangement was ideal since men on pass or furlough were virtually required to stay in Red Cross Hostels because of the shortage of housing facilities among the civilian population and so found a prophylactic station right in their path when they returned to quarters after a sexual exposure (232).

The Army went to considerable lengths to make fornicating as convenient as possible and to this end developed this one-stop shopping arrangement for the troops finding sex.

Other "important advances," according to the History of the Medical Department, were the free use of condoms and pocket chemical prophylactic kits, the so-called V-Packettes. In May, 1943, sulfathiazole was made available by mouth, an advance which made it easier and so much more convenient for the man on the make trying to keep safe (234). Condoms were a problem, however, because they were initially "procured from British sources and totally unsatisfactory: In the first place, they were too small, and secondly, they were made with a deep constriction about 3 centimeters back from the closed end—the effect being to give them a freely hanging tip to which our soldiers objected strenuously" (227). Apparently, GIs preferred the tight-fitting condoms that would show the penis to best effect, and

this important aesthetic problem was taken care of with the arrival of condoms made in the USA that met American standards.

For the extensive propaganda campaign waged to warn men about the health problems attendant to unsafe sex, mothers, sweethearts, and wives were enlisted in the moral phase of the cause, with mothers, in particular, selected to lead the effort. In fact, the Army referred to this effort to constrain the sexual behavior of the troops as the “Mother Motive” (233). One widely distributed poster, for example, included a pair of posed photographs that had been prepared by the Office of the Chief Surgeon, ETOUSA, for the venereal disease educational program. The photograph on one side of the poster, captioned *The Soldier in England*, featured a young private and a woman seated at a small table. A large, almost empty bottle and a pack of cigarettes are on the table. The soldier is drunk, slouched over the table with his right hand holding up his head. In his left hand, the soldier is holding onto a glass stem. A cigarette dangles from his mouth and his eyes are closed. The girl is similarly positioned. Captioned *The Mother At Home*, the other half of the page shows a well-dressed woman, smiling and holding a letter from her soldier son as she lovingly gazes at his framed Army portrait sitting on the window sill with a blue star hanging in the window (233).

Other posters warned:

Going out Tonight. Think. Everyone is in this war. Your mother/wife/sweetheart—they are lonesome, too. “Give them a break.” Venereal Disease can be prevented.

Apparently, neither warnings from the Commander-in-Chief, nor a mother’s shaming had much success in the campaign to keep American troops from having sex as often as the opportunity presented itself. For example, although the Army officially placed Naples off-limits at the end of 1943, the policy didn’t work. Throughout 1944 Naples remained a “vector” of venereal disease, because it was the main supply base of this phase of the American campaign in Europe and the “only center to which men could retire for rest and diversion once they had been withdrawn from the battle line” (216). Such was the case for the Thunderbirds of the 45th Infantry Division whose rest and diversion in Naples in March 1944 set the standard for debauchery, apparently. These were among the most battle-hardened veterans of the war, men who suffered enormous losses at Anzio and were desperate to leave the killing behind for a few days.

Alex Kershaw's latest book on WWII, *The Liberator*, follows the exploits of one of the division's most highly decorated officers, Felix Sparks, and the men he commanded in the 157th Infantry Regiment. According to Kershaw, "the streets of Naples bustled with an exotic mix of Allied troops looking for "I & I"—intercourse and intoxication...Naples was a vast open-air bordello, it seemed, where everyone and everything was for sale...there were myriad brothels full of women of all ages and body types, dark circles under their eyes, most of them infected with gonorrhea if the warnings plastered on walls along all the approach roads to Naples were to be believed. The Neapolitan strain of gonococcus was in fact so virulent that even the new wonder drug, penicillin, struggled to combat it" (Kershaw, 113-114). But penicillin did work "miracles" often enough that the drug proved to be a mitigating factor in the Army's failure to control the spread of venereal disease. In spite of the fact that VD rates were climbing, the widespread use of penicillin and other sulfa drugs significantly reduced days lost in line (470). With effectiveness of the fighting force less impaired, line officers didn't need to worry as much about high rates of VD among their troops, and they didn't.

In the event, the Thunderbirds went wild seeking sex in Naples. Kershaw tells us, "Every Thunderbird, it seemed, was determined not to die a virgin. None had an excuse, given that there were eighty thousand officially registered prostitutes in Naples by that March of 1944. No matter the rank, men fornicated with wild abandon, even if the *bella signora* was clearly middle-aged and pulled up her DDT-sprayed skirt to reveal a wooden leg" (114). Felix Sparks's men set the high water mark for fucking. Kershaw goes on,

Of the tens of thousands of Allied troops having sex in Naples that spring, the Thunderbirds in Sparks's regiment were among the most enthusiastic, judging by the rate of infection with VD, which did not go unnoticed by the top brass, who were outraged that 15% of all American hospital beds were now occupied by "clapped-up" GIs. "We were taking more casualties through gonorrhea," recalled the Australian journalist Alan Moorehead, "than we were through enemy action on the whole front-line." Sparks would soon receive an acerbic note from his division commander, forty-nine-year old Major General William Eagles: "Congratulations Sparks, your men have the highest VD rate in the division" (115).¹⁷

The high VD rate among Sparks's men obviously was not taken as an indication of poor leadership, nor did it bear any consequences for his advancement opportunities, Dever's warning notwithstanding. Felix Sparks was promoted to Major two weeks later. As the official history of the U.S. Army Medical Department makes abundantly clear, many commanders condoned and even encouraged fornication as a way to relieve the debilitating stress of combat. They believed, as commanders of troops throughout the history of warfare believed, their soldiers needed sex to sustain morale and to fight on in the face of death.

When the war reached France on D-Day and for the next couple of months of continuous combat thereafter, the VD rate among the same troops who had been stationed in England plummeted to 5 per thousand. This would be the lowest rate at any time during the war in Europe (Medical Department, 308). When the GIs fought, they didn't fornicate. But the situation changed dramatically after the liberation of Paris in the last days of August 1944, when there was "a rapid rise in the venereal disease rate that did not level off until the rate had doubled" (246).

In what was by now military command's tried and true response to the increase in VD rates, commanding officers in France paid lip service to the War Department's policy on prostitution, while they took care that their men's need for sex was satisfied. The Medical Department reported "it was generally accounted that, since the War Department policy was clearly stated and specifically directed repression of prostitution, it was necessary to give apparent support to such a policy, even while acting contrarily" (244). For example, on September 2, 1944, the Provost Marshall "stating that he was acting at the direction of the Commanding General made a tour of Paris brothels for the express purpose of selecting certain houses of prostitution to be set aside for officers, others for white enlisted men, and still others for Negro enlisted men" (246).

As always, the Army's chief concern was reduced effectiveness and in this regard two developments served to mollify the fear of VD among both line officers and enlisted men in France, in addition to the now widespread use of penicillin noted above. First of all, the Germans did the Allies a good turn in providing for safer sex. There was much greater use of "pro" stations in France, because it was "easy to provide the facilities for this by virtue of the fact that the enemy in garrisoning the towns which the Allies were taking had without exception built and equipped an adequate number of well-located prophylactic stations. These were equipped according to standards identical with U.S. Army standards, and, aside from the occasional difficulty of providing running water because the local water supply had been disrupted, they were usually ready for immediate use" (244). Secondly,

punishment for acquiring venereal disease had been eliminated by this time.¹⁸ The Official History concludes, “The most important change in basic policy in connection with venereal disease control within the Army during WWII was the removal of punishment for acquiring a venereal disease” (143). The men were now completely blameless.

The fact of the matter is the very substantial efforts made by the Army Medical Corps, at great cost, to control the spread of venereal disease simply could not keep up with the GIs’ demand for sex. For example, when the Americans hit Paris on “I & I” beginning in October 1944, the debauchery approached the standard set in Naples. In *The Guns at Last Light: The War in Western Europe, 1944-45*, Rick Atkinson describes the situation:

From deuce-and-a-half truck beds rumbling toward the Tuileries came shouts of “We’re all going to get laid, French-style!” COMZ (Communications Zone—formerly Services of Supply) counted at least 230 brothels in the city, plus six thousand licensed prostitutes working the streets. Another seven thousand were unregistered, according to Paris police estimates, and of the unregistered more than a third carried venereal disease. A typical transaction cost three packs of Chesterfields, and a survey found that among soldiers who spent two days or more in Paris, two-thirds had intercourse at least once, often in what were called “Where am I?” rooms... One quartermaster private disclosed on his required “VD contact form” that he picked up nine different women around the same Parisian intersection, took them to six different hotels, and essayed seven “sexual exposures,” all within eight hours...(401,402).

In spite of Eisenhower’s order declaring “all brothels, bordellos and similar establishments” off-limits, supported by a dramatic increase in the number of prophylactic dispensaries set-up throughout the city and mandatory “short-arm” inspections by medical “pecker checkers,” the VD rate climbed, surpassing 222 per thousand in the Loire encampments, Atkinson reports. It is worth recalling that the Army considered a rate below 30 cases per 1000 acceptable (402).

At the end of the war in Europe, rates again “sky-rocketed.” In September 1945, Major General Albert Kenner, Chief Surgeon, U.S. Forces, European Theater, reported to the Commanding General ETOUSA that “just prior to—and subsequent to VE Day—the rates mounted precipitously...At the present time, an overall theater annual rate of 190 per thousand has been reached...Considering

the present theater force of approximately 2,000,000 men, there would thus occur 380,000 cases of venereal disease during the year” (Medical Department, 326). This is a figure close to 20% of all troops, and when one factors in the numbers of GIs who had sex, but did not contract VD, the percentage of GIs who indulged in promiscuous sexual behavior of this sort was very high indeed.

Not surprisingly, VD rates were consistently highest among the Communication Zone troops, with the Air Forces, “a very close second,” both groups at rates about 100 per thousand per annum during much of 1944 and 1945, or more than 10% of these populations. These were the men who had the time and opportunity to fornicate. For the week ending June 29, 1945, during the occupation of Germany and before they disembarked from Europe, however, the Ground Troops “came into their own and led all three forces with a rate for the week of 140 per 1000, per year” (255). They now had the time and opportunity for sex.

In the popular histories of WWII, Kershaw and Atkinson certainly shed new light on the GIs sexual behavior in WWII. But for both, the sex is a side show to the war’s heroic narrative, and, for the male reader, humorous. For example, it’s funny to think that some poor guy is so drunk in a whore’s room that he asks, “Where am I?” And a typical response to the quartermaster private’s sexual escapades noted above might very well be, “Wow, what a man!”—someone to be admired, not condemned. The mention of short arm inspections always brings a laugh. But there is another truth to sex in war, which is not funny, when men in their drunken, sexual frenzy lose all moral control and do very bad things. Eros and Thanatos crash together in war and men can become beasts; the results can be shocking, even criminal. Young Americans fighting in WWII France and elsewhere were no exception to this truth of war, contrary to what Good War enthusiasts would have us believe.

In *Citizen Soldiers*, Stephen Ambrose concluded that the GIs were “the children of democracy and they did more to help spread democracy around the world than any generation in history. At the core they knew the difference between right and wrong, and they did not want wrong to prevail, so they fought and won, and we all of us, living and yet to be born, must be profoundly grateful” (473). In *The Good Fight: How WWII Was Won*, he tells the grandchildren of the WWII GIs that “America sent her young men halfway around the world, in both directions, not to conquer, not to pillage, not to loot, not to rape, but to liberate” (Dedication). Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* and Spielberg and Hanks’s *The Band of Brothers* tell similarly heroic stores of the American GI in World War Two.

I want to be clear. I agree with Ambrose that we all owe the WWII GIs an enormous debt of gratitude. They fought an epic war against two genuinely evil

empires; it made a very great difference that the Allies won. I agree with Spielberg and Hanks that heroism and bravery should be a central feature of the American war story in WWII, because it is true that Americans did fight heroically and bravely, many times.

It is also true that many American soldiers did not know the difference between right and wrong. Their behavior was often reprehensible, shameful, and disgusting. In *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France*, Mary Louise Roberts, using French police records among many other evidentiary sources to substantiate her claims, documents the fact that nowhere was this truer than in Paris after Operation Overlord and in the embarkation ports at the end of the war, particularly LeHavre. Debauchery is bad enough, but Roberts uncovered a darker and more violent side to the GIs' quest for sex than anything we had imagined. In her brilliant study, we find that many young Americans acted less as liberators, than as conquerors and criminals who fornicated everywhere and openly, ransacked and looted private homes at gun point and physically assaulted French civilians on the streets. Although nowhere near the number of rapes committed by German or Russian troops in the war of annihilation waged on the Eastern Front, Roberts documents the fact that American soldiers also committed the war crime of rape (195,196).

Roberts argues that the American military command motivated the GIs to fight by the prospect of sex with Mademoiselles, as Atkinson also suggests. In the American imagination French girls were oh-so experienced in the affairs of amour and eager to share. She highlights the iconic photograph of deliriously happy young French girls welcoming the even happier GI with open arms and kisses (Roberts, 8). Boy, am I going to get laid "over there" is what the photo seemed to promise. But "once aroused, the GI libido proved difficult to contain," Roberts emphasizes (9).

It is telling, however, that Professor Roberts pulls her punches a bit. She contends that her history is not intended to be an indictment of the American GI nor the cause for which the Americans fought. She is the daughter of a WWII Navy veteran and acknowledges her patriotism. She recognizes that WWII was a necessary war whose outcome mattered a very great deal, and she knows that war brings out the beast in men, even the best of them. At times, war itself is the culprit and men are its victims, she appears to be saying. In her discussion of the "rape wave" of the summer of 1944, for example, Roberts says, "rape no doubt resulted from the pressures of combat. The Normandy campaign was a brutal battle. Particularly in the hedgerow countryside along the Cotentin Peninsula, the Americans took heavy losses until their breakout in August..." (198) At the end of the war as the

“victorious but damaged” GIs made their way back across this same territory, she adds, “Drinking and whoring with French women kept the demons away, but only for a little while” (256).

Roberts substantiates the fact that the gross sexual misconduct of the American GI in WWII Europe was held a closely guarded secret, beginning during the war. According to Roberts, the Military Command decided what could be seen by the American public and the photojournalists willingly complied. Photographs of brothels and pro stations were censored throughout the war, for example. She tells us that what concerned the Army was not that the GIs had lots of sex, but that it would be reported (186,187). The Army and the photojournalists conspired to whitewash the raw sex from the memory of WWII.

And, as this essay shows, so did the GIs, until the Good War gave them (and us) the story they could take pride in telling. The understanding of WWII as the Good War solidified its hold on the American imagination after Vietnam and particularly in the emotional hoopla attendant to the commemorative celebrations of the war’s grand events—the 40th and 50th anniversaries of D-Day and V-E Day—that took place in the 1980s and 1990s. We know that the many WWII veterans with whom we established close personal relationships over the past twenty years did not begin to tell their stories until these celebratory spots in time. It is also the case that we (and many of the rest of the oral history projects focusing on WWII) didn’t start collecting the stories until the Good War had been enshrined as fact. Remembering WWII became a hugely popular enterprise. We simply couldn’t get enough of our hometown heroes, and we begged to know what they did in the war.

The WWII GIs became celebrities, authentic stars in America’s great victory over genuine evil with the fate of the earth at stake. There is a lot of truth to this story, of course. It did matter a very great deal that the Allies won WWII. This is the crux of the reason why emotional national myths, like the Good War, exercise such power over us. They contain a core of truth based on lived experience; the Good War is absolutely believable. The sheer scale of the national mobilization effort of the war years meant that WWII touched virtually every American, and did bring people together in a very physical and emotional experience of fraternity, if you were white.

The remembering of WWII during the commemorative celebrations exhibited the nationalizing process at work in the American psyche. The proliferation of acts of remembering at the war’s thousands of sites of memory all over the country, happening on the same days and at the same time, was a dramatic physical and emotional manifestation of simultaneity in the nation as imagined community,

to apply Benedict Anderson's famous concept. These were the moments when American "nationalism" surged in-situ. And the memory was inclusive. Racism was pervasive in WWII, but not in the Good War narrative in which both sex and race have been thoroughly sanitized. Good War memory was national and democratic. We at Regis and everywhere else stood and cheered the Tuskegee Airmen, the Japanese-Americans of the 442nd "Go For Broke" Regimental Combat Team, the WAC and WASP women, the Army and Navy nurses, all stories that had been marginalized for decades. It was a memory for all of us—America with the big "A"—in "the best America there ever was," to use journalist Bob Green's nostalgic words.¹⁹

The GIs reveled in their *nom de guerre* as "The Greatest Generation," and so did the rest of us. We began to ask questions, and they began to talk. Now they had a cover for their secret sex lives, however, and we didn't care to question it. To challenge the Good War was apostasy. Our soldier fathers had been silent for a long time, and we wanted to assume the silence was noble: the ex-GIs didn't want to bring to mind the horrors of war they witnessed; or they just didn't know the words that could possibly explain to the uninitiated what real war was like; or they didn't want to brag about their heroic behavior, etc. But maybe our fathers were ashamed of what they did, and that's why they didn't do much talking.

We asked what the war meant to them. We often heard the familiar paradox expressed, "The war was awful, but an experience I wouldn't have passed up for anything in the world." Again, we nodded knowingly and presumed to understand—it was the defining moment of the soldier's life when he experienced all the excitement and seduction of war, being tested and running the gauntlet with buddies who became closer than brothers; this was the meaning of war in our heads. Saluting the myths of the Good War, we didn't want to know that maybe what our soldier fathers wouldn't have passed up was all the sex easy for the taking in a military universe that encouraged and condoned it. Samuel Hynes was right. Mynie's whore doesn't belong in the story of my father's war.

Notes

1 I have written extensively about the myth of the Good War in the pages of WLA. See my "Remembering World War Two at Regis University," in Volume 23, 34-48, 2011.

2 This is what Ambrose told his young readers in the preface to the last book he published before his death, *The Good Fight*.

3 For example, colleague and art historian Dr. Barbara Coleman gave a presentation to our audience in February 2004 on "The Pin-Up Goes to War" with images displayed that highlighted the various ways sex preoccupied young men in the time of war. She showed photos of the nose art on the fuselages of B-17 Bombers that featured reproductions of artist George Petty's famous pin-ups. Barbara indicated that the more pornographic materials were stowed away for private enjoyment, and when she mentioned the frequency of masturbation in this regard, some audience members gasped and several shook their heads and winced in disapproval. I received three phone calls the next day from wives of WWII veterans who told me Barbara Coleman's presentation was "offensive."

4 Studies in neuroscience of the phenomenon of the so-called 'Reminiscence Bump' indicate that our best memory is of personal life events that occur in the second and third decades of our life. This would be the wartime years for the former GIs.

5 The caveat is, of course, that in the first two cases, the interviews were conducted at the 157th Regiment's annual reunion held in Denver, a setting that encouraged one-upmanship and lots of tall tales to impress your former comrades. How much bullshit filled these stories? Were they the exceptions or the rule? In regard to my father's admission of guilt, his friend Steve was egging him on, and perhaps Mynie felt his story needed a whore to prove his manliness.

6 In a conversation I had with Mike Quering at his home last summer, I asked him specifically about prostitutes in London when there on leave from his base in Lavenham, where his 839th Bomb Squadron in the 487th Bomb Group was stationed from September 1944 on; Mike was a waste gunner on a B-17 who flew 34 missions over targets in Germany. He laughed and mentioned with fondness the Picadilly "commandos" and the "good times" girls, but didn't go into any detail.

7 This is a four disc series that chronicles the sex lives of soldiers from Valley Forge through Vietnam. It was produced by Greystone Communications for the History Channel and executive producers Nancy Dubuc and Charlie Maday. The conclusion is that soldiers always have lots of sex.

8 Fussell certainly agreed that the GIs constantly spoke the word fuck, but in his analysis of its use soldiers weren't thinking about the sexual act when they said it. It was, rather, idiomatic, the root word in the GI language of obscenity used by those in authority to accentuate the ridicule and by those who received the chicken shit to corrupt the system. Fuck was a highly adaptable word in the GIs' lexicon, and particularly well-suited as an obscene modifier to add aggressive intent to virtually any word that came to mind. Ernie Pyle came to hate the word, and so did my father. "What is the one word you never heard me say, the one word you were never allowed to use in my house?" my father reminded me. I knew the answer from personal experience, of course. One aspect of his training in the South that he found strange and disagreeable was the constant use of the word fuck. "I got so sick of hearing that word," he told me. "I absolutely hated it. I never heard that word used in so many ways," he exclaimed. He then told the story of the first few days of basic training when the men learned rifle drills. One poor soul was having a hard time, which provoked the drill sergeant to yell at him, "You're so fucking clumsy, you fucking moron, you look like a monkey fucking a football!" "Now, you tell me, what does a monkey fucking a football look like?" my father wanted to know. The expression that bothered him more than anything else, however, an expression he claimed never to have heard before, was mother-fucker. "I thought that was really awful," he complained. "These must have been southernisms," Mynie explained to me.

9 It is worth noting that the essay, and its criticism of Gray, appeared four years after Gray died in 1977.

10 Fussell includes the photograph and the date it was taken in *Doing Battle*.

11 WWII veteran and author Ed Wood Jr. read the draft of this essay and commented that he shared Fussell's moral upbringing and his sexual innocence. Ed was a replacement soldier in a rifle company who was severely wounded on his second day in line, also in southern France. He spent the rest of the war in a hospital where he found a love for his nurses that was not sexual, but sweet, the type of love that is romantic, if not maternal. Ed did not witness the gross sexual misconduct of American GIs. Certainly Paul Fussell and Ed Wood Jr. weren't the only men who survived the war with their virginity intact, but it does not appear that they were in the minority. The point to remember always is that there are multiple truths to war experience.

12 Ebbe Curtis Hoff, Editor, *Preventive Medicine in World War Two, Volume V, Communicable Diseases, Chapter X, Venereal Diseases*, Medical Department, United States Army.

13 *Ibid.*

14 Upon induction into the service, each inductee received a copy of the pamphlet, *Sex Hygiene and Venereal Disease*, prepared under the direction of the Surgeon General of the Army by order of the Secretary of War. We have a copy of the pamphlet in our archive.

15 The Army considered any VD rate of fewer than 30 per thousand per annum acceptable. In the United States the rates went from slightly above 30 to below thirty throughout the course of the war, until VE-Day when they rose into the mid 40s.

16 That sex reached a crescendo in Europe is the conclusion stated in the *Sex During Wartime's* film documentary on WWII.

17 Interestingly, Sparks's men also had suffered the highest casualty rate in the division up to that point in time. Did his men need sex more as a consequence?

18 In 1926, Congress passed a law that provided for loss of pay for contracting VD. On the recommendation of the Surgeon General, Congress repealed the act on September 27, 1944 and the change went into effect on December 2, 1944 with the publication of War Department Circular #458. *Official History of the Medical Department*, 143.

19 This comes from his book, *Once Upon a Town*, William Morrow, 2002.

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