

THE INFLUENCE OF COMIC ART IN WORLD WAR TWO

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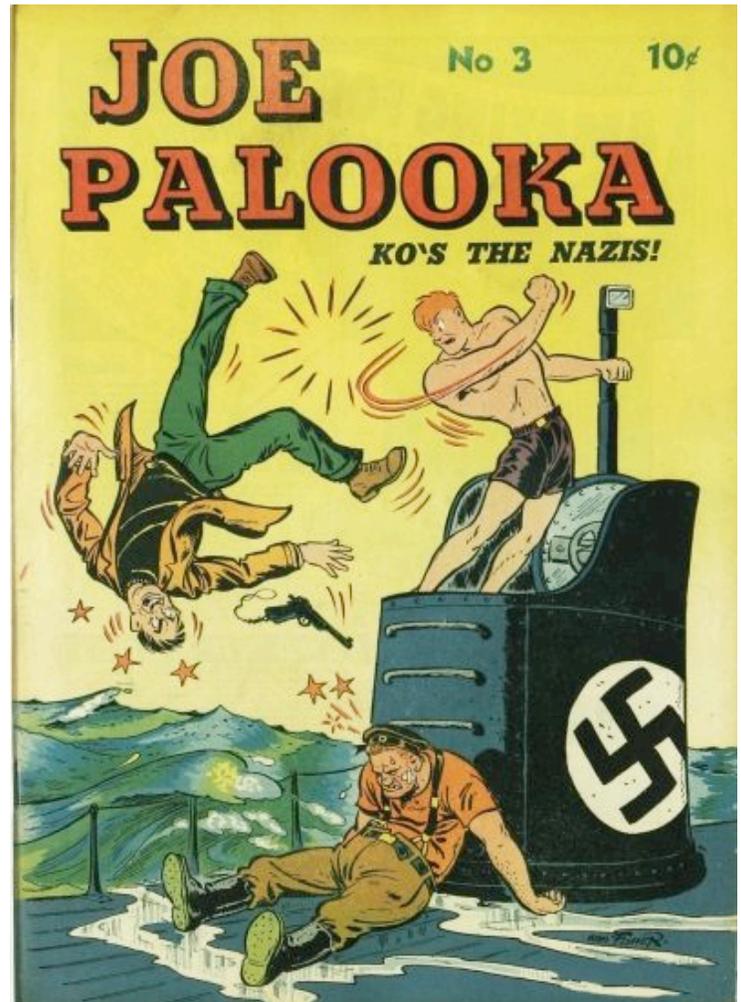
THE INFLUENCE OF COMIC ART IN WORLD WAR TWO

BY DAVID WHITE AND DANIEL P. MURPHY, PH.D.

Most veterans of World War II have fond memories of the era's military strips, such as Bill Mauldin's **Up Front**, George Baker's **The Sad Sack**, and Milton Caniff's **Male Call**. To servicemen everywhere, they were as coveted as dry socks and mail from home. But these weren't the only cartoons to address the war. Many popular civilian strips aided the effort equally well on the home front by boosting morale, maintaining a strong sense of patriotism, and encouraging Americans to do their part by buying war bonds, limiting travel, and contributing to scrap drives.

"People were swept up in a sense of common purpose," recalls Will Eisner, a comic book artist who used his talents during the war to create instructional cartoons for the U.S. Army. "It was by common consent that we were in the war, and no daily strip dared make an antiwar remark. All of the civilian strips were involved in promoting the war effort because we had an enemy that had to be defeated."

The smoke from the attack on Pearl Harbor had barely cleared when the comics' most beloved characters lined up to enlist. One of the first was **Joe Palooka**, who refused a commission (he felt he wasn't smart enough to be an officer)



and spent the entire war as a buck private. It was an act that prompted countless men to sign up.

There were many others: Terry of Milton Caniff's **Terry and the Pirates** became a flight officer with the air force, and his mentor, Pat Ryan, a lieutenant in naval intelligence. Roy Crane's Captain Easy helped the FBI fight spies and saboteurs when war broke out in Europe, and after Pearl Harbor the character became a captain in the army. Even Russ Westover's **Tillie the Toiler** did her part by joining the WACs, her ditzzy personality quickly replaced by patriotic duty.

There seemed to be a general agreement among most artists that they would keep readers entertained. They didn't want to remind people of the war. They wanted to reassure them that some things would continue as they always had.

The military comic strips that appeared in *Stars and Stripes*, camp papers, and stateside publications were also a tremendous morale booster — both for fighting forces and their families back home, say cartoon historians.



MORALE BOOSTERS

The strips were also a heartfelt tribute to the forces in the trenches, who often saw their daily frustrations and anxieties humorously illustrated. "The military strips were definitely good for morale because the soldiers saw their own experiences in them," cartoonist Mort Walker adds.

One of the best at finding that "universal truth" was Bill Mauldin, whose generic dogfaces, Willie and Joe, experienced everything good and bad that the war had to offer. **Up Front** was especially popular with the average foot soldier because he knew Mauldin was right there on the front lines with him, not sitting on his butt in the *Stars and Stripes* office.



"Maybe Joe needs a rest. He's talkin' in his sleep."

Mauldin's "Willie and Joe" drawings, later collected in *Up Front*, made him the favorite of GIs and their families back home. The Willie and Joe cartoons depict grizzled, dog-faced soldiers who retain the will to fight but who have grown weary of the numbing routine of cold, hunger, and the bureaucratic mindlessness of the army.



"I'll be dawgoned! Did ya know this can opener fits on th' end of a rifle?"



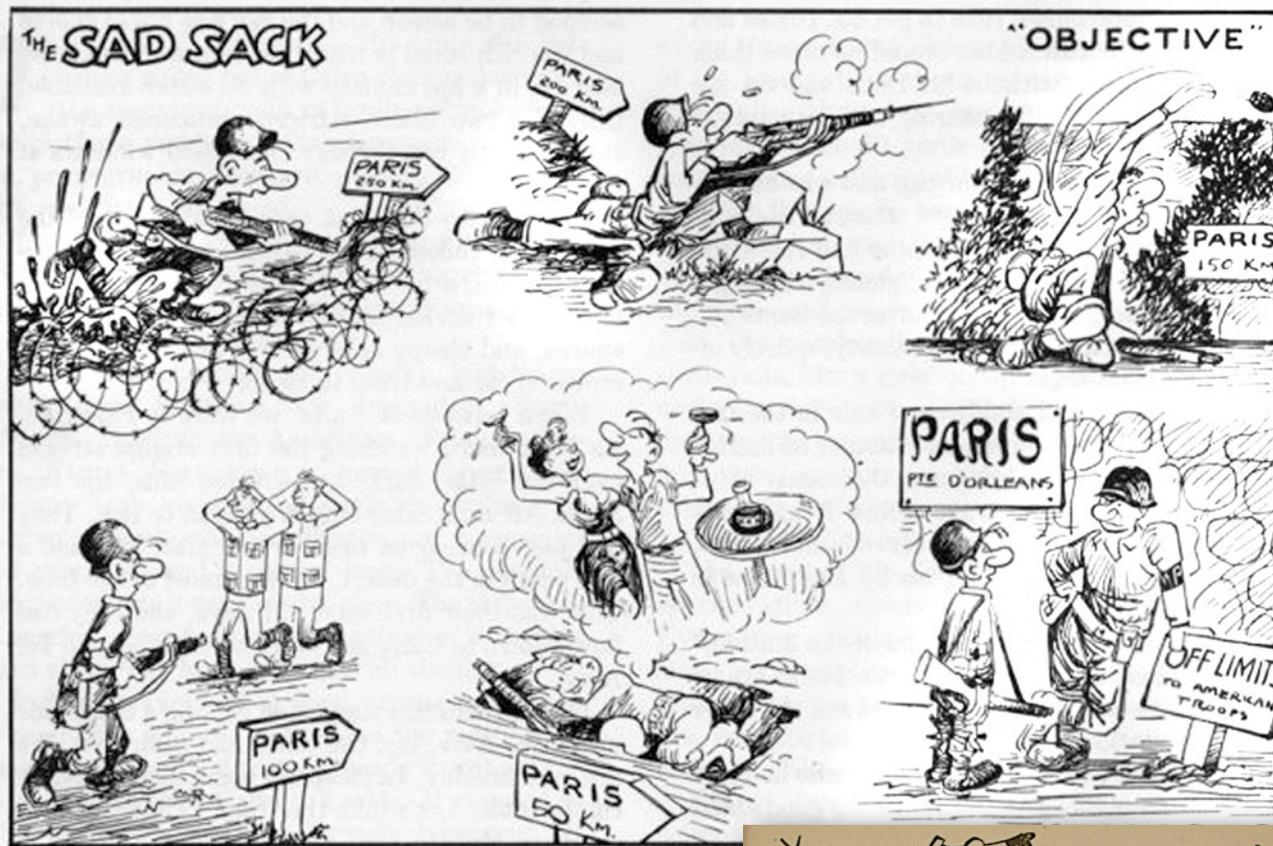
"I've given you th' best years o' my life."

Also popular with servicemen was Sergeant George Baker's **The Sad Sack**, which premiered in **Yank** magazine in May 1942. A former animator for Walt Disney, Baker conceived of the weekly humor strip based on his experiences and those of his fellow soldiers. "The underlying story of the Sad Sack," Baker noted during the strip's heyday, "was his struggle with the Army in which I tried to symbolize the sum total of the difficulties and frustrations of all enlisted men." Baker succeeded well. In one infamous strip, Sad Sack watches a military hygiene film so graphic that he puts on rubber gloves to shake hands with another serviceman's girlfriend.

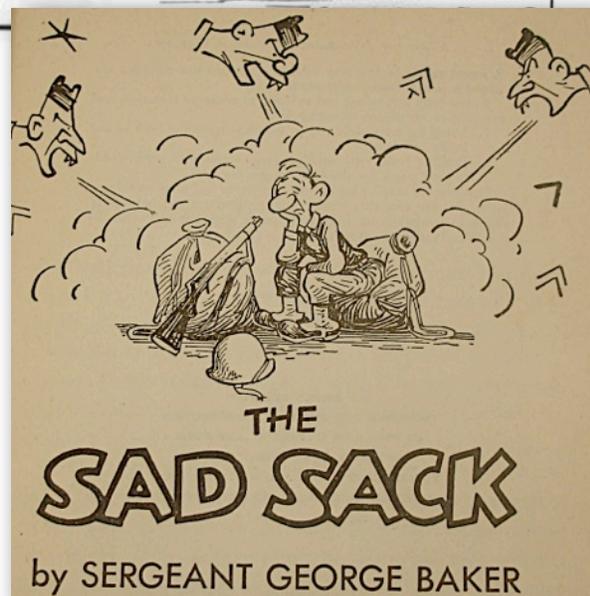
Other humorous military strips included Leonard Sansone's **The Wolf** and Dick Wingert's **Hubert**.

Dave Breger, who had been doing a strip for the *Saturday Evening Post* titled **Private Breger**, changed the name to **G.I. Joe** in 1942 for *Yank* magazine and *Stars and Stripes*, thereby coining one of the most famous terms to come out of the war. The character was essentially the same in both military and civilian versions, and remained popular even after the war.

While **Up Front** illustrated the daily grind of frontline duty and **The Sad Sack** and others showed the more humorous side of military life, Milton Caniff's **Male Call** was something different altogether: a pinup strip whose main character, the sexy and sublime Miss Lace, constantly reminded its readers what they were fighting for.



The Sad Sack faces major obstacles along the way to liberating Paris, only to find it off limits.



MALE CALL

Caniff was a dedicated patriot who deeply loved his country, but phlebitis kept him from serving during the war. Caniff glorified the war effort in **Terry and the Pirates**, but he also wanted to do something special for the servicemen. He pitched to the military a light-hearted strip specifically for camp papers, and **Male Call** was born. The strip premiered in 1942 (at first featuring the sultry Burma from **Terry and the Pirates**) and by the end of the war was appearing in nearly 3,000 publications. Caniff neither asked for nor received any payment for the strip, which he drew during his lunch hour and other rare moments of free time.

Miss Lace, the star of **Male Call**, was a dark-haired beauty with model Bettie Page bangs who dressed as seductively as Caniff could get away with. She was every serviceman's pal, and the readers adored her.

Male Call ended in 1946, but Caniff continued to draw Miss Lace for military reunion programs for years afterward.

CALL OUTS

Servicemen in all theaters of the war relied on pinups — photographs, illustrations, and cartoons of beautiful women — to remind them of what was waiting back home. Though the military sometimes tried to censor the pinups, they proliferated at a remarkable rate and could be found tacked up on barracks walls and in soldiers' wallets worldwide.

The Nazis used vicious caricatures to turn national sentiment against the Jews and other minorities. Even American comic-book characters were fair game; Das Schwarz, a Nazi propaganda organ, went so far as to brand Superman as Jewish in an effort to discredit the Man of Steel.

Jump Mistress



What a Standing Operating Procedure

