

Excerpt from “Men and Women in Uniform”

The Allied assault across the English Channel has been called “the most important day of the twentieth century.” While the Allies had achieved air and naval dominance and had constructed a large force of landing craft in a miraculously short time, the battle still had to be won by the Allied infantry, “citizen-soldiers” facing a well-entrenched German opponent. Lieutenant Bert Stiles, co-pilot of a B-17 in the Eighth Air Force, on his way back to England after bombing Normandy on D-Day, wondered how “the poor bastards down on the beach” were doing and realized that though “We’d be trucking the bombs over . . . (it was) the boys who take it the slow way who had “the bright lights on them now.” Colonel Charles Canham, commander of the 116th Infantry Regiment recognized this as well, asserting that no matter how excellent the planning or how many supplies were amassed, “the job would come down heaviest upon the infantry.”

The ‘Mother and Father of all Melting Pots’

By 1944, the year of D-Day, the U.S. Army had become younger and more inclusive (with the notable exception of black soldiers). Half the soldiers sent to Europe that year were teenagers, and historian David Kennedy refers to the Army as “the mother and father of all melting pots,” with many divisions mixing together “farm boys and factory hands, old-stock Yankees and new immigrants, rich as well as poor, Protestants, Catholics and Jews.” The young servicemen experienced “more social, ethnic, and religious diversity than they had ever encountered or even imagined (*The American People in World War II: Freedom from Fear, Part Two*).

However, as Charles Cawthon, an officer in the 116th Regiment, acknowledged in “Pursuit: Normandy, 1944” (*American Heritage* Vol. 29, Issue 2, February/March 1978), World War II was “essentially white America’s war,” although in addition to African American troops some 500,000 Latinos, mostly Mexican American, are believed to have served in the military. Most Asian Americans served in the Pacific until the 442nd Regimental Combat Team (which became the most-decorated unit for its size and length of service in U.S. military history) and the 100th Infantry Battalion (incorporated into the 442nd RCT in 1944) were sent to the Mediterranean Theater. Native Americans provided 44,000 men for the military, a tenth of the tribes’ entire population. Women from all of these historically marginalized groups joined women’s military auxiliary units like the WACs and WAVES.

Despite government propaganda posters urging “uniting to win,” African Americans faced the “extraordinary breadth” of a rigidly enforced Jim Crow military policy that even included the “meticulously enforced” segregation of blood plasma. Blacks were usually kept out of combat and relegated to menial work under white officers. However, due to enormous manpower needs, some 600 black soldiers were placed in a specialized combat role for D-Day—setting up and manning barrage balloons. They were among the first to land on deadly Omaha Beach. All told, 2,000 African Americans arrived early in Normandy, with another 1,400 contributing courageously to the dangerous work of transport, rescuing the wounded and burying the dead.

Also, due to manpower needs the Army became much more tolerant of physical limitations, accepting even the toothless and those who were blind in one eye or deaf in one ear. In a paternalism worthy of the New Deal, the Army made 2.3 million pairs of

glasses for the soldiers, extracted 15 million teeth, and supplied 2.5 million sets of dentures.

Cigarettes, Hershey Bars, and Toilet Paper

Indeed, for many the U.S. Army brought an improvement in the standard of living, with decent medical care and a generous diet. In training, the soldiers in the Army consumed 4,300 calories per day and 3,400 in the field, plus a daily ration of 12 cigarettes (for a “satisfying smoke”), a stick of gum (“for thirst and tension”), Hershey bars, and graham crackers at each meal (for “roughage, vitamins and starches”). The invasion army stationed in Britain, where the standard of living had declined 20%, was “the wonder and envy of the British.” Kennedy described the British as feeling “lucky to befriend Americans” with their bounty of supplies such as canned meat (Spam), fresh fruit and 22 sections of toilet paper a day (to only three for the British). In fact, a joke circulated in Britain that only the barrage balloons kept the island from sinking into the ocean under the weight of men, weapons and supplies.

Relations with the British, however, were sometimes strained for various reasons, including jealousy over the Americans’ pay, which made them the best paid military in the world, earning about triple the salary of the British soldiers. As historian Rick Atkinson points out in *The Guns at Last Light*, the contrast to British poverty was quite obvious, with the shortage of soap earning their country the nickname Goatland and a limited supply of glass leading to pub requirements that patrons bring their own beer glasses.

Women in U.S. Military Service

As noted earlier, the U.S. war has been described as a conflict of white America, but that could be amended to “white male America,” at least in terms of combat roles. Congress

voted in 1942 to allow women to serve in the military through the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC). Their status was officially changed on July 1, 1943, to become part of the Army's reserve forces, and the organization was renamed Women's Army Corps (WAC). Every branch of America's military formed similar groups, from the Marine Corps to the Coast Guard.

Stephen Ambrose wrote in *D-Day*, "The contribution of the women of America, whether on the farm or in the factory or in uniform, to D-Day was a *sine qua non* (an essential condition) of the invasion effort."

American women were not able to serve in combat, unlike their Russian "sisters". Forty-nine WACs did arrive in Normandy thirty-eight days after the invasion (female nurses as early as June 10) and performed a variety of roles, such as making maps, analyzing codes, interpreting bombing accuracy, and plotting aircraft missions, (including hitting German V-1 rocket launching sites). The Soviet Union, by comparison, used upwards of 800,000 women in almost every phase of its frontline effort, from nurses to fighter and bomber pilots, tank commanders, and snipers. Rosalind Miles and Robin Cross wrote in *Hell Hath No Fury: True Profiles of Women at War from Antiquity to Iraq*, that in recognition of the vital female role, Russia even created amenities such as 43 "mobile frontline tea shops" that came equipped with hair-dressers, cosmetics and extra soap.

Though American women were officially barred from combat roles they did come under fire while serving near the front lines. Nurses were particularly vulnerable to bombing and artillery fire. More than 1,600 nurses were decorated for bravery under fire and meritorious service and 16 were killed in WWII. Women did not receive combat pay or

the benefits provided to male soldiers, and they had no protection under international law concerning POWs if captured.

Confidence and Motivation

While the soldiers certainly experienced trepidation prior to the invasion, there was a general feeling of confidence, with one soldier expressing a positive feeling that his group was “as ready as an outfit could be.” There was also an upbeat feeling derived from the sense that their naval, air and invasion forces were “overwhelming.” The Eighth Air Force had waged a successful five-month battle for air supremacy that made the invasion possible. It cost them 18,400 casualties, however, including 10,000 combat deaths. Thus, according to historian Donald L. Miller, the airmen “deserve an equal place in the national memory” about D-Day (*Masters of the Air: America’s Bomber Boys Who Fought the Air War Against Nazi Germany*). Confidence among the invasion forces was further swelled by the misleading report that the German forces were of a relatively old age (average age of some units was 34), which gave hope they would lack a willingness to fight to the death. Intelligence about Omaha Beach, however, had failed to notice that the Nazis had sent the 352nd Infantry Division, primarily comprised of Eastern Front veterans, as reinforcement for this sector.

It is difficult to generalize about the attitude or motivation of the many D-Day troops. However, a common attitude was that of Waverly Woodson, a young black medic who served heroically on Omaha Beach. “For him there was no ambivalence entwined in fighting for his country, even if that country didn’t support equality for all its citizens. This was a war he believed in with all his heart . . . to defeat the Nazis and their brutally racist world view,” Linda Hervieux wrote in *Forgotten*.

Charles Cawthon witnessed a similar attitude in another minority soldier, a Native American from the Southwest that he referred to only as “the Chief” in a post-war memoir, *Other Clay: A Remembrance of the World War II Infantry*. Cawthon mused on the mentality of this soldier, whom he describes as “being (in) the first of every attack starting with D-Day,” despite it being “essentially white America’s war.”

In generalizing about the feelings of the GIs of D-Day, historians Rick Atkinson and Stephen Ambrose both emphasize that the young men were amateurs and “citizen-soldiers” whose fighting spirit was “aggressively temporary,” and while they mostly believed in the cause, “Few voiced enthusiasm for yet another American intervention in northwestern Europe—‘that quarrelsome continent,’” Atkinson wrote in *The Guns at Last Light*, adding that a 1944 Army survey among troops in Britain found one-third of those polled had doubts about whether the war was worth fighting, double the number from a similar poll in July 1943. Atkinson argues that the common themes characterizing the views of many GIs were those of “skepticism and irony” about military life. Soldier-writer Irwin Shaw, in *The Young Lions: A Novel*, expresses this ambivalence well: “I expected the Army to be corrupt, inefficient, cruel, wasteful, and it turned out to be all those things, just like all armies, only much less so than I thought before I got into it.”