Disability, Discharge, and the "Previctory" Veterans of World War II

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ABSTRACT

Administrative law affected a staggeringly large number of people in profound ways in the United States during World War II, with twelve million people in uniform at any given time and millions more assessed, rejected, or discharged from military service. Questions of life or death were routinely answered, not by civilian courts, but by a complex military bureaucracy defined by vague Constitutional and statutory provisions and administered according to copious regulations, from the vital to the mundane. The matter of who should serve in the US military, and who might serve best by not serving, was one determined by a number of adjudicative bodies privileging, not individual preference, but, ideally, the needs of nation in creating an effective socio-technical system to fight the War. These efforts were seldom perceived as just by those who experienced them and were often oppressive. This paper, drawn from my book manuscript on demobilization after World War II, highlights the achievements and limitations of America's military administrative law apparatus in assessing and preventing failure, both on the battlefield and off, with grave consequences for those affected and for national defense.

Introduction

Had it not been overshadowed by the global conflict that preceded it, the repatriation, within a single year, of eight million American military service members and civilians stationed overseas at the conclusion of World War II—considered the largest and fastest movement of human beings by machine in recorded history—would be recounted by historians of technology as one of the foremost achievements of the modern age. Making this migration even more extraordinary was the fact that it was voluntary, peaceful, and paid for in its entirety by the United States Government. Undertaken using hundreds of passenger, cargo, and combat vessels (as well as Army and Navy aircraft, although their contribution was much smaller), Operation

Magic Carpet is a shining example of effective government management of a crisis, but about which little has been written.

Learning more about Operation Magic Carpet requires the analysis, not only of a large number of sources, but a large variety of them, especially legislative history and law. Scholars of the latter, though, will be disappointed by the informality with which many major personnel decisions were made during the War. While federal and even state courts at the time were sticklers for procedure, the well-developed body of criminal and civil peacetime jurisprudence has no real military analog, at least not before 1950. The laws that governed recruitment, conscription, promotion, discipline, and discharge during World War II were a patchwork of broad pieces of federal legislation (like the Selective Service Act of 1940) and an innumerable collection of federal regulations, rules, procedures, and customs applied by multiple executive departments, tribunals, and individual commanders supervising the Army, Navy and Marines, and Coast Guard, each all-too-willing to throw the book out the window when it suited them. The exigencies of the War provided the military with near-blanket authority to impose ad hoc punishments and suspend Constitutional rights and liberties for those in uniform, from speech to due process.

At the conclusion of World War II, eight million Americans were serving on active duty in the US Army and US Army Air Forces; virtually all of them would need to be returned to their homes after victory, along with the bulk of the nation's 3.4 million sailors and a half-a-million Marines and Coast Guardsmen.[1] Most were stationed overseas, but even those in bases and

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[1] "Research Starters: US Military by the Numbers," The National WWII Museum, accessed November 29, 2021, https://www.nationalww2museum.org/students-teachers/student-resources/research-starters/research-starters-us-military-numbers.

camps in the United States would need to be transported, sometimes thousands of miles, to reach home. Planning for the return of these veterans to civilian life, and the attendant reconfigurations of the US economy to receive them, had begun almost as soon as the US entered the War. President Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke of it in his January 14, 1942, message to Congress only weeks into US entry, and various government bodies began examining demobilization soon after.[2] The actual return of combat veterans to civilian life, too, began immediately after the US entered the War; the procedures used to screen enlistees and the repatriation and demobilization of two million service members during the conflict enabled Congress and the War Department to prepare for the deluge of repatriations that would follow the armistice. The experience of these "previctory" returnees, many of whom had short or troubled military careers, led to comprehensive veterans' aid legislation, new procedures and facilities for separation, and popular anxiety about the deluge of repatriations to come with ultimate victory in Europe in Spring 1945 and the Pacific that Summer.

On Failure

The story of Operation Magic Carpet is a tale of many things: the nature of warfare, the power of institutions, the price of victory. More than anything, it is a meditation on failure. Magic Carpet was, at the time and for many years thereafter, regarded as a disaster.[3] It was months before most service members returned home despite peaceful occupations of former Axis countries, fraying the morale and discipline of soldiers and infuriating their loved ones. At the same time, rapid drawdowns of trained soldiers in Asia and Europe were feared to have

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[2] John C. Sparrow, *History of Personnel Demobilization in the United States Army* (Department of the Army, 1952), 24–25.

[3] Sparrow, *History of Personnel Demobilization in the United States Army*, 297.

emboldened Josef Stalin, Kim Il Sung, and Mao Tse Tung to challenge Western forces in Europe and Asia, possibly hastening the Cold War's internecine conflicts. The ambiguous legacy of Operation Magic Carpet is reflected as well in the experiences of its participants. The War had been brutal, and its end had brought as much exhaustion as elation. Though victorious, scarcely an American veteran alive did not confront some lingering sense of failure. Army officers inadvertently ordered subordinates to their deaths, Navy captains had their ships sunk by torpedoes they did not see, Marines left comrades on the beach after botched raids, doctors lost patients to insufficient resources or skill, antiaircraft gunners and pilots accidentally shot down their own comrades in bewildering aerial duels, artillerymen dropped "short" rounds on friendly infantrymen, mortarmen shelled civilians, and service members of every branch fell asleep on watch, drank on duty, fought, stole, or left their posts when they shouldn't have. This was true of both the victorious and the vanquished; only timing and magnitude of loss differed: to win, armies needed to make fewer mistakes than their enemies, not none at all. So little of victory, it seemed, rested on planning, intelligence, or strength, that destroyer commander and future Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Arleigh Burke realized at the time that the first ship captain to fire in a surface duel usually won, and that, "[t]he difference between a good officer and a poor one is about ten seconds."[4]

The sad reality of war was that in battle, almost everyone came up short in some respect, and even successful operations were partial failures. As Michael Adams writes:

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[4] "Ten Seconds to Live or Die," U.S. Naval Institute, December 1, 2018, https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2018/december/ten-seconds-live-or-die.

> Combat was often characterized by periods of tense expectation punctuated by moments of savage violence. A platoon might be hit by incoming fire, and then suddenly the fighting would wash on somewhere else, leaving the soldiers stunned and bewildered as to what had happened and how. One man might have gone to ground, and there counted the buttons on his jacket; another might have ripped up the earth with his bare hands. Some men had fired their weapons, probably without a target. Others had wept, vomited, defecated in their pants. Someone might have died in panic, like the sergeant who was blown apart when he reached for a grenade in his pants pocket and pulled out only the ring pin, activating the weapon while still on his person. Suddenly, the action stopped. Again unlike the movies, few firefights ended in an acceptable resolution: there was no climax in which a battle was won, a mission accomplished. There was a rain of blind destruction—men were hit, the landscape blasted—then nothing but the moaning. Survivors were left with a disjointed, episodic sense of what had occurred.[5]

Veterans carried these failures home, and the War Department worked extensively to help them forget. As Dave Grossman writes in *On Killing*, the copious awarding of medals and other distinctions during wartime serves less to acknowledge heroism than to assuage guilt. War service requires one accept ones' mistakes and moral transgressions and move on; honors of various kinds help to prevent moral injury by discouraging combatants from endlessly re-playing

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[5] Michael C. C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II*, Second edition, The American Moment (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 77.

memories of error and loss in their minds.[6] A mass-participation war fought by a society that equated manliness with the willingness to kill (and the physical ability to do so), almost as many inductees were afraid the War would not provide them with a chance to prove themselves as were afraid it would take their lives. Their psychological need for validation, though, was not the nation's paramount concern.

During the War, most Americans were ineligible for military service. Of those who were, half were found wanting in some damning and demeaning way. Throughout the War, an additional two million once fit men were rendered useless and sent home; when repatriation began in earnest at War's end, the least necessary of the remainder in uniform were often shipped back first. As the need felt by men of their generation to prove their manhood through military service was potent, being rejected by the armed forces was as much an insult as a blessing. To be sent home was to be written off as useless. Everyone who returned from combat felt this, at least a little: demobilization was an anticlimax and a disappointment: an acknowledgment of obsolescence. After being trained and cared for, in some cases for half-a-decade, veterans were cut loose, wondering whether they had done everything—or anything—right.

Demobilization before Pearl Harbor

When it came to the global repatriation of service members after World War II's conclusion, there was little precedent to go on: no demobilization planning had occurred during

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[6] Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Little, Brown and Co., 2009), 91, 264.

the principally domestic American wars of the 18th and 19th century,[7] and the First World War's demobilization had been a slapdash affair, with insufficient attention to economic hardships and the impact of disabling wounds.[8] Planning for demobilization after the Great War began only after the Armistice and was the responsibility of a single Army colonel. Even so, it proved a far simpler affair: it required the repatriation of half the number of returnees and proved far easier to organize, as virtually all affected service members were stationed in Western Europe. In the Great War, the US faced only a single major adversary and had few postwar occupation responsibilities. Most soldiers and Marines had been in Europe for less than a year, eliminating the need to prioritize the return of long-serving veterans. And as the War Department wanted entire units to remain intact in case Germany exited the peace negotiations, there was little desire to break them up or prioritize the return of long-serving veterans.[9]

The War Department gave some thought to demobilizing men based on occupation rather than by units (to prevent unemployment and ensure the health of civilian industries) but doing so appeared logistically complex, and entire units were sent home and inactivated at once. Army personnel, who constituted the bulk of the returnees, steamed to US ports on troop ships and then travelled by rail to bases closer to their homes. There, they were provided with medical treatment, new uniforms (the British Army provided veterans with civilian attire instead), railroad tickets, and a car ride to the train station, intended to ensure that they went home instead

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[7] Sparrow, *History of Personnel Demobilization in the United States Army*, 1–11; Wecter, *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*.

[8] See, generally, Beth Linker, *War's Waste: Rehabilitation in World War I America* (University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[9] Sparrow, *History of Personnel Demobilization in the United States Army*, 13.

squandering their $60 separation bonuses (a little over $1000 today) on debauched vacations that would disrupt civil order.[10]

American planning for demobilization after World War II was more involved and complex; it began earlier in the conflict and was undertaken with greater comprehensiveness, as befitting a three-front war employing three times the total number of service members of the previous one. Demobilization planning was only one, relatively small facet of a larger preoccupation of the Roosevelt administration: the lion's share of planning concerned domestic post-War labor and economic policies, European reconstruction, and international geopolitical security: on all three fronts Great War-era planning had come up woefully short, with the Armistice precipitating both post-War recessions and geopolitical crises in Russia and elsewhere. There were as well, report of growing sentiment among veterans that return to Depression-era America was not what many wanted; among many a belief began to take hold that in addition to being owed a rapid repatriation, veteran desired a greater stake in the political system they had sacrificed their lives, health, and youth to defend. Exactly who counted as a veteran would remain a subject of debate long after the War ended, especially as, even before the guns were silenced, millions of Americans had already returned from military service.

The Unfit

The War's eventual end would require a massive repatriation effort, but demobilization was already underway prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. By that time, the US armed forces were already beginning to swell from voluntary enlistments, the involuntary extension of

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[10] Sparrow, *History of Personnel Demobilization in the United States Army*, 16; see, also, Wecter, *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*, 522.

existing enlistments, and conscription under the Selective Service Act of 1940, but not everyone thrived in uniform. In addition to the service members sent home for various reasons, millions left home only to be evaluated for service and found wanting. With a population of 132 million people—nearly twice that of Germany or Japan—and peaceful borders, the US had the luxury of being selective about whom to conscript, enlist, commission, train, and retain.

Had the US followed the lead in of other nations at war and committed the same percentage of its population—10% or more—to military service, it could have had twice as many men under arms. This would have been a vastly less effective military, and, moreover, would have drawn manpower away from industry and agriculture that was badly needed to support the Allies and win the War. American air power and its Army's "equipment, high standard of training, and freshness" would give it, noted Army Chief of Staff General George Marshall at the time, "a superiority which the enemy cannot meet and which we could not achieve by resorting to a matching of numerical strength."[11] These and other factors (like the Soviet Union's effective use of its forces against Germany in the East) Maurice Matloff notes, made the Army's "90 Division Gamble" an unqualified success.[12]

Volunteers and conscripts could be rejected by the military for a variety of reasons. Even fit young men might not be able to join the service of their choice, as military service branches had quotas for voluntary enlistment, limiting opportunities to join particularly desired services. Similarly, under the Selective Service Act, virtually all adult males (regardless of citizenship status) were eventually required to register for conscription, but local community draft boards made determinations of each draft-age male's eligibility for service on the basis of employment,

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[11] Matloff, *The 90-Division Gamble*.
[12] Matloff, *The 90-Division Gamble*.

family situation, and other social factors, ostensibly summoning only those for whom military service was in the interest of national defense: young, unmarried, childless men.

Potential inductees ultimately fell into four major categories, those fit to serve (Class I), those deferred for education or employment (Class II), those deferred for family responsibilities (Class III), those deferred as otherwise unfit to serve (Class IV)—a capacious category that included, for example, both the severely disabled (blind, paralyzed) and aliens (too politically dangerous to conscript)—and those who were overage (Class V).[13] Specific classifications accounted for conscientious objectors eligible for non-combat duty (I-A-O) or nonmilitary national service (I-O). Men employed in critical war industries (II-A, II-C) or needed on the home front to care for dependents (III-A) were similarly deferred from service. Other, more obscure classification deferred clerics and those in training to become them, as well as surviving sons and brothers of deceased veterans.[14] Applying these classifications ensured that before the first draft notices were mailed, a significant culling of the manpower pool had already occurred.

Upon receiving a draft notice, potential conscripts who had not been deferred were dispatched on trains and buses for travel to military induction centers and other facilities for medical, psychological, and intellectual screenings.[15] (As with all official military travel, transportation to and from military postings was provided either via government-owned trains and other vehicles or using civilian carriers, with train tickets and other travel costs borne by the War Department.) The most able draftees earned the coveted (or dreaded, depending on one's

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[13] "Draft Board Classifications," https://www.gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/inline-pdfs/Draft%20Board%20Classifications.pdf.

[14] E.g., Christina S. Jarvis, *The Male Body at War: American Masculinity During World War II* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2004), 58.

[15] See, e.g., Jarvis, *The Male Body at War*, 56.

perspective) I-A classification, denoting fitness to serve overseas, and from which combat personnel would be drawn after further examination and classification. Classification I-B was reserved for those with physical, psychological, or intellectual deficiencies rendering them unfit for the more demanding duty overseas but still adequate for "limited service": noncombat military support work at home.[16]

At induction centers, War Department examiners further rejected nearly half of all draft-eligible males.[17] Though it might appear to be a blessing to some, the classification they received—IV-F (4-F, or "four-eff")—denoted an individual with a physical, mental, intellectual, or character deficiency so profound as to render him completely ineligible for military service in time of war or peace.[18] While many disqualifying physical conditions were obvious, other inductees passed their initial examinations only to be transported to other military facilities for additional evaluations of hidden health issues that ultimately proved disqualifying.[19] These draftees might have military careers lasting only a week, with the men having never taken an enlistment oath, donned a uniform, or held a weapon.[20] Temporarily deferred from service rather than exempted (especially as their status might change given the needs of the War), 4-Fs served best by *not serving*: they would be burdensome to train and ineffective in the field, and merely attending to their medical and psychiatric needs both in the military and in retirement would be, the War Department feared, prohibitively expensive.[21] Class IV-F status was neither uncommon

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[16] United States Army Medical Service, *Physical Standards in World War II*, 76.
[17] Jarvis, *The Male Body at War*, 60.
[18] See, generally, Smith, "4-F: The Forgotten Unfit of the American Military During World War II."
[19] Smith, "4-F: The Forgotten Unfit of the American Military During World War II," 35.
[20] Jarvis, *The Male Body at War*, 57.
[21] Smith, "4-F: The Forgotten Unfit of the American Military During World War II," 30.

nor particularly difficult to earn: 4-Fs eventually subsumed 43% of all would-be American conscripts, a staggering 6.5 million men.

Those rejected for service as unfit constituted the first, and perhaps earliest group of individuals to leave home for military service only to return and resume their civilian lives. Like the veterans who would begin to follow them home once America's war began in earnest, 4-Fs were harbingers of the problems and complexities to come both for mid-War returnees and the deluge of full-scale, postwar demobilization. Though the men who received 4-F classification had done their duty by reporting as ordered for service, their status was commonly regarded in the press and among the general public as shameful. Deferrals for agricultural or war work sometimes embarrassed their recipients but their service at home was necessary; 4-Fs, though, were tarred, falsely, as cowards, weaklings, or degenerates. Members of the press and public were quick to assume either that fear of combat had caused 4-Fs to fake illnesses or deformities, or that 4-Fs harbored sexual "perversions" (like homosexuality) that rendered them, in the eyes of contemporary medical experts and popular prejudices, unreliable and perhaps even predatory.[22]

In fact, most early 4-Fs were deferred for mundane reasons: a large percentage of would-be inductees suffered from malnutrition, dental problems, and poor vision exacerbated by Depression-era poverty and poor medical care. Presaging later veterans' benefits programs, the Army chose, eventually, to remediate many of these conditions in service rather than reject those who suffered from them. That change left, as 4-Fs, those with permanent physical infirmities, intellectual disabilities, mental health issues, and histories of violent criminality, as well as (in

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[22] Smith, "4-F: The Forgotten Unfit of the American Military During World War II," 43–44.

the minds of some veterans and members of the public) a variety of malingerers, shirkers, and perverts.

Those deferred from conscription as unfit were expected to resume their lives, but wartime exigencies and popular panic made this difficult. Books, songs, and articles tarred 4-Fs as weak, impotent, and unsuitable as romantic partners.[23] As virtually all college students fit enough for military service enlisted or were drafted, only 4-Fs remained enrolled at many institutions: public acrimony about the supposedly unfair advantages that might accrue to them eventually forced most 4-Fs out of higher education for the duration of the War.[24] While civilian production of many durable goods ended with the US entry into the War, employment was available in newly converted war plants, and social and government pressure further demanded that able 4-Fs contribute to the war effort by seeking employment in the defense industry, even if that meant abandoning thriving careers or taking on unskilled work. Like the owners of other businesses, though, defense plant managers were reluctant to hire even the most patriotic 4-Fs, viewing them as weak, illness-prone, and a potential drain on retirement benefits. (Overage males and women were perceived as more reliable.) Nor did most 4-Fs possess the requisite skills for modern manufacturing.

Even if 4-Fs had well-paid jobs, though, wartime rationing of critical consumer goods meant that their salaries had relatively little purchasing power; instead, the government encouraged workers to invest their earnings in interest-bearing savings bonds, the principal instrument financing the War. Whether they fought in it or not, draft-aged men on the homefront thus found the War to be inescapable: transforming the labor market, the consumer landscape,

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[23] Jarvis, *The Male Body at War*, 60.
[24] Smith, "4-F: The Forgotten Unfit of the American Military During World War II," 74.

and popular attitudes about civic duty. Having been processed by the military machine and spat out early, 4-Fs had no combat wounds or vital defense jobs to justify their presence on the home front, and no ability to partake in the accolades and benefits awarded, formally, and informally, to those in uniform, even if their service had been limited to stateside duty. The priority, 4-Fs were constantly reminded, were the needs of the men in uniform, who would aways command greater respect from the society they served both during and after the War; the most 4-Fs could do would be to defer to them.[25] With veterans able to secure educational and financial benefits unavailable to non-veterans—and enjoying preference in civil service employment (Figure 5.1)—discrimination against 4-Fs continued through end of the War and lingered long after.[26]

Eager to serve but rejected, both by the military and civilian industry, many 4-Fs desperately sought to have their classification changed; generally unable to do so, they formed an increasingly despised American underclass.[27] The lowering of physical standards for enlistment later in the War, though, enabled some 4-Fs who were on the edge of fitness to be reclassified as I-A, a status they eagerly sought. Some of these men became among the most accomplished warriors in history; others, some of the least. As a hardscrabble youth in Texas, Audie Murphy was repeatedly found underweight and unfit until the Army finally allowed him to enlist as a Private; wielding an .50 caliber M2 machine gun larger than himself in Europe he ultimately became the most decorated American soldier in history.[28] Lafayette Ronald Hubbard, a pulp science fiction writer and son of a Navy officer, sought to follow in his father's footsteps but was

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[25] Smith, "4-F: The Forgotten Unfit of the American Military During World War II," 95.
[26] Smith, "4-F: The Forgotten Unfit of the American Military During World War II," 124.
[27] Jarvis, *The Male Body at War*, 60; Smith, "4-F: The Forgotten Unfit of the American Military During World War II," 83–90.
[28] Murphy, *To Hell and Back* (2002).

denied admission to the US Naval Academy, first for failing the entrance exam and later due to poor eyesight; lowered standards later enabled him to secure a less prestigious reserve commission. His term of active duty was noteworthy for the frequency with which he was cited by his superiors for incompetence, relieved of command, and hospitalized for stress-induced stomach aches.[29]

The Furloughed

The deficiency of 4-Fs became even more apparent when service members from their communities returned home for brief visits. While those in uniform served, by law, for the duration of the War, various forms of liberty and leave were commonplace, especially after completing basic training or before major deployments. While reduction in manpower at the front was never ideal, it was impossible for most individuals to sustain protracted combat without periodic rest, and time apart from their units and away from the front served a vital purpose in restoring combatants' bodies and improving morale, for them and for their comrades, as well as those on the home front.[30] (Army Paratrooper David Webster of the storied 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment describe Army life as "prison with passes.")[31] Most opportunities for travel lasted no more than three days, which, for soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines overseas, seldom meant a trip home. In the ETO, though, a 24-, 48- or 72-hour liberty might

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[29] Lawrence Wright, *Going Clear: Scientology, Hollywood, and the Prison of Belief* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 36 et seq.

[30] "Kiss Them for Me," accessed June 15, 2026, https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/kiss-them-for-me-1685.

[31] David Kenyon Webster, *Parachute Infantry: An American Paratrooper's Memoir of D-Day and the Fall of the Third Reich* (Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 262.

enable a visit to a tourist destination like London, Rome, or Paris, depending on where one was stationed.

For sailors of the Pacific Fleet or Marines stationed at far-flung island bases, though, meaningful opportunities to travel any place outside of the South or Central Pacific were rare. Instead, Marines and sailors might be treated to a night or two of drunken revelry in the nearest port, staging base, or pacified area. When liberty finally comes for the exhausted men of the fictional attack transport USS *Belinda* in Kenneth Dobson's autobiographical novel (and later film adaptation) *Away All Boats*, the crew are displeased to learn that their vacation destination is the former battlefield hellscape of Guadalcanal. After an ugly, pointless, beer-fueled fight ashore over the ownership of a coconut, the sailors return to the ship no happier than they had left it.[32]

In addition to the routine short liberties granted between operations were a constant, if less regular stream of furloughs (some up to 30 days in length), which gave some personnel early opportunities to return to their homes in the US. Month-long leaves after completing training, between deployments, upon changing duty stations, after sustaining combat wounds, or due to family hardship were frequently granted, if idiosyncratically. Though curtailed by 50%, Christmas furloughs in New York City for approximately 20,000 soldiers one week after the attacks on Pear Harbor, occurred as scheduled.[33] Yet the most critical intelligence personnel, like Japanese-American interpreters, received no leave or furlough until 1945.[34] When granted, furloughs were generally long enough for soldiers to fly or steam back to the US (possibly a

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[32] Kenneth Dodson, *Away All Boats* (Little, Brown, 1954), 285; *Away All Boats*, directed by Joseph Pevney, with Jeff Chandler et al. (Universal International Pictures (UI), 1956), 1h54m.

[33] "City to Welcome 1,200 Soldiers Today Despite 50% Cancellation in Furloughs," Archives, *The New York Times*, December 13, 1941, 16.

[34] Tamura, *Nisei Soldiers Break Their Silence*, 124.

week-long journey); with transports constantly building up forces in forward areas, military ships and planes returning to America were generally plentiful, roomy, and as with all military transportation, free. Once in port, though, veterans needed to complete the final legs of their journeys via ground transportation, which typically involved some amount of waiting, followed by train travel (military or civilian) across the country, another multi-day proposition.[35] (Service members on leave received reduced rates for domestic travel on civilian carriers, and sometimes financial support from patriotic organizations.) With the journey reversed to return to their units, veterans found that a month of leave might translate only to a week or so back home.

Dispatching recent combatants to civilian areas, though, was risky. Let loose on civilian watering holes, dance clubs, and other establishments, the millions of trained but unarmed service members mostly enjoyed themselves peaceably and were more apt to quarrel with each other than with locals.[36] Both domestically and overseas, civilian United Service Organization (USO) personal tried to distract and entertain the men as safely as possible. Armed military policeman (MPs) and shore patrolmen (SP) trained for the task were always on duty near where men on leave congregated to calm the agitated and rescue the inebriated, usually avoiding violence if possible.[37]

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[35] "The Way Home," *Time*, August 7, 1944, http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,886154,00.html; Alvin B. Kernan, "Crossing the Line: A Bluejacket's Odyssey in World War II," in *World War II Memoirs: The Pacific Theater*, ed. Elizabeth D. Samet, Library of America 351 (Library of America, 2021), 725.

[36] Charles Glass, *The Deserters: A Hidden History of World War II* (Penguin Press, 2013).

[37] Sergeant Lloyd Shearer, "A Night with an M.P.," Archives, *The New York Times*, December 6, 1942, SM 23.

In addition to civil disorder, leaves posed other dangers, some imaginary, others very real; as with discharge, the War Department turned to education and counselling to mitigate them. The War Department, for example, fretted about the possibility that blustering service members on leave would reveal operational details that, while seemingly innocuous to them, might tip Axis spies as to Allied troop movements. Poorly educated and less intelligent service members were a particular concern, as their difficulty understanding orders and lack of self-control might cause them to share critical details about ship departures, security procedures, or the locations of overseas bases. To reach these men, the War Department enlisted animators and future children's book authors Theodore Geisel and Munro Leaf to craft cartoons apt to appeal to them. The subject of two animated film shorts produced by the War Department starring dimwitted "Private Snafu," the Army's espionage fear proved largely unfounded, as Axis spies in the US were few in number and largely ineffectual.[38]

The War Department worried, as well, about furloughed men contracting sexually transmitted infections that would render them unfit to return to duty, another subject of Army animation.[39] This was a legitimate concern, as STIs incapacitated otherwise fit personnel with diseases that, prior to the introduction of penicillin, were painful or difficult to treat. Paul Cadmus's controversial 1938 painting "Sailors and Floosies," completed in the manner of an Italian Renaissance master, conjured equal parts humor and horror as three cherubic, unconscious sailors and one aghast Marine fend off the predations of grotesque and amorous

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[38] *Spies*, directed by Chuck Jones, with Mel Blanc (Leon Schlesinger Studios, n.d.), 4m; *Going Home*, directed by Chuck Jones, with Mel Blanc and Frank Graham (Leon Schlesinger Studios, 1944), 4m; "Nazi Spies in America! | National Endowment for the Humanities," accessed June 15, 2026, https://www.neh.gov/article/nazi-spies-america.

[39] *Pick-Up*, with Paul Kelly et al. (U.S. Army Signal Corps, U.S. Office of War Information, n.d.), 37m.

civilian women bent on despoiling them. Though the painting provoked public outrage when first displayed in 1940,[40] it accurately reflected Navy concerns about the dangers of unsupervised liberty in unfamiliar ports. Wartime educational materials, Christina Jarvis notes, likened "loose" women met on liberty to military threats that undermined the strength of the American fighting man.[41] This was not an idle fear, with L. Ron Hubard among the thousands of men felled during the War by "Venereal Disease." Unliked most, he chose to treat himself with sulfa drugs, nearly overdosing.[42]

Espionage and fornication were easily managed risks; furloughed men often carried significant psychological burdens, but no cartoon effectively addressed them. Marine Corporal James Johnston, shipping home to Nebraska on convalescent leave in July 1945 after taking shrapnel on the Japanese island of Okinawa (the last major battle of the Pacific War), received a lecture from a captain in San Francisco on returning to civilian society after months overseas. The advice that most struck Johnston—"tickled" him in fact—was a warning that "while we were away, we had built a dream world out of home, but in reality, it was just part of the same old world. We needed to be ready for many disappointments. … That blonde who lived down the street had probably gotten married—and worse than that, she'd moved."[43] In uniform during most or all of these trips, veterans on leave were neither at the front nor truly at home, neither fighting nor truly at peace, and it is not surprising that stories about such individuals became a

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[40] Paul Cadmus, "Sailors and Floosies," Whitney Museum of American Art, 1938, https://whitney.org/collection/works/2825.

[41] Jarvis, *The Male Body at War*, 77 et seq.

[42] Wright, *Going Clear*.

[43] Johnston, *The Long Road of War*, 163–64.

staple of wartime popular culture[44] and inspired some of the later fictional works on returning veterans, like the Leonard Bernstein/Jerome Robbins ballet *Fancy Free*.[45]

These sometimes awkward visits presaged much about the veterans' later separations, including the social and psychological dislocation accompanying rapid changes in location and perspective. All furloughed personnel were, in the public imagination, heroes, whether they had fought in battle or merely graduated from boot camp. While combat veterans could earn a free beer at the local tavern merely by showing up in uniform, contemporary accounts described such men as uneasily trapped between worlds.[46] Arriving home, sometimes with gruesome battlefield souvenirs as gifts (see, Chapter 2), furloughed combatants were often afraid of interacting with family and friends, having changed physically and emotionally since they were last at home (a gap of perhaps two years for many of them). Facing civilian friends could be difficult, and sometimes led to altercations, especially with 4-Fs. Like the legions of demobilized veterans to follow, furloughed men felt a growing chasm between themselves and the society for which they fought, which appreciated their service but could not comprehend their experiences.

However much they might look forward to going home, the visits of furloughed men would also by necessity be temporary, after which they would, repeating their painful induction process, be called once more to leave their homes and face an uncertain future.[47] For some, the discomforts of home so paled in comparison to the horrors of battle that returning to the front

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[44] Leonard Bernstein, "Fancy Free," Works, accessed June 15, 2026, https://leonardbernstein.com/works/view/7/fancy-free; *Time*, "The Way Home," August 7, 1944; *Kiss Them for Me*, directed by Stanley Donen, with Cary Grant et al. (Jerry Wald Productions, 1957), 1h45m.

[45] *Time*, "The Way Home," August 7, 1944.

[46] "The Way Home," *Time*, August 7, 1944, https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,886154,00.html.

[47] *Time*, "The Way Home," August 7, 1944.

was not a realistic option for them. Service members were issued typed orders for their time-limited respites and were responsible for returning to their units at the conclusion of leave, on time and via any form of transportation available to them, but many did not, at least not right away. By War's end, as many as 200,000 soldiers were absent without leave from the ETO: sneaking away from installations, failing to return promptly from furlough, or taking advantage of short liberties to take more extended sojourns away from their units. Going "AWOL" could be a relatively minor offense if the service member had not left the field of battle and later returned. Military Policemen Frank Sheeran claimed to have routinely absconded while his unit was off the battle line to take extended liberty in civilian areas, but maintained he never deliberately avoided combat.[48] Without written orders justifying their presence in civilian areas, though, AWOL soldiers risked arrest by military police, adjudication, and various punishments depending on the circumstances: loss of pay, demotion, incarceration, or punitive discharge.[49] After enough time away, AWOL converted to the more serious charge of desertion.

During the War, as many as 50,000 American soldiers in the ETO deserted, hoping to blend in with local European populations or live underground as gangsters or black marketeers.[50] Life on the lamb as a deserter was also profoundly fraught. Deserting during wartime was a crime punishable by twenty years' imprisonment (often reduced postwar),[51] overseas in military facilities or in federal prisons in the US, or even death. The latter sentence was handed down to 49 men, and met out, controversially, for one of them. Deserters risked exposure with every

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[48] Charles Brandt, *"I Heard You Paint Houses": Frank "the Irishman" Sheeran and the inside Story of the Mafia, the Teamsters, and the Last Ride of Jimmy Hoffa*, 1st ed. (Steerforth Press, 2004), 32.

[49] See, generally, Glass, *The Deserters*.

[50] Glass, *The Deserters*, 278.

[51] Webster, *Parachute Infantry*, 291.

appearance in public or could be blackmailed by criminal syndicates. In Europe, liberated territories were patrolled by American MPs and local police on the lookout for deserters and never stopped until they were captured.[52] In the US, meanwhile, employers had the legal right to inquire about a veteran's military record or demand to see their discharge papers; those without them, or documentation of a deferment, were unemployable. The deserter led a fugitive's life, and this could be as intolerable as warfare, worse even than that of the 4-F. Many deserters promised to return voluntarily to the front if pardoned; others returned to the United States, only to serve long prison sentences in federal penitentiaries.[53] Their plight was ironic considering that, largely unbeknownst to most, far simpler ways existed to exit wartime military service without criminal penalty.

The "Previctory" Veterans

Furloughed service members and incarcerated deserters were not the only men in uniform to come home during, rather than after, final victory. The more discriminating recruitment procedure in the United States with regard to age and fitness still produced one-fifth of all of the combatants in the War, but not every person inducted proved suitable for military service. Many, as described above, were separated during intake, having failed to meet the standards of any service branch. Others exited during the protracted training endured by American service members.

Americans generally arrived at the front better trained and with a higher proportion of non-commissioned officers than did their counterparts. Their often extensive training also

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[52] Glass, *The Deserters*, 278.
[53] E.g., Glass, *The Deserters*, 303.

produced academic failures, injuries, illnesses, and behavioral conflicts that prompted demobilization for many service members before they deployed overseas; paratroopers and pilots, for example, risked career-ending injuries with every practice jump and flight. Involuntary departures during officer training could be particularly bitter. Both the Army and Navy sponsored programs to train Second Lieutenants and Ensigns from among a carefully screened pool of civilian college-age volunteers, but "washouts" were frequent, for students who could not keep up with, or who intentionally refused training. One voluntary washout was memoirist Eugene Sledge, who recounted intentionally flunking out of the Navy's V-12 officer training program so that he could join the War sooner as an enlisted Marine, a decision that exposed him to horrific combat and altered the course of his life.[54] "We were cannon fodder," recalled Sledge of his service as an enlisted man.[55]

Army and Navy pilot officer cadet training programs were notoriously apt to dismiss would-be aviators. Applicants needed to demonstrate academic, intellectual, and psychological fitness to succeed, and training itself exposed cadets to lethal hazards, including solo training and ferry flights in aircraft with which they were barely familiar.[56] Standards for pilot training programs were so high, in fact, that 10 applicants produced only two fit cadets, only one of whom could be expected to graduate. Those who did not—an average of 40%—washed out or died.[57] Those who failed flight training but were still fit enough to serve in another capacity

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[54] Sledge, "With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa," 18.

[55] Sledge, "With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa," 28.

[56] "Lost Before Combat: My Uncle Was Among Thousands Who Perished Training for WWII," April 30, 2025, https://airandspace.si.edu/stories/editorial/lost-combat-my-uncle-perished-training-wwii.

[57] Bruce A. Ashcroft, *We Wanted Wings: A History of the Aviation Cadet Program* (2005); "They Wanted Wings," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, n.d., accessed July 10, 2026,

aboard an aircraft could often do so; bombardiers, navigators, and other highly skilled roles in aircrews were also held by commissioned officers. Those found to be wanting in those roles, though, were often stricken from officer training and completed their terms of service as enlisted personnel, a severe disappointment. After crashing his plane in training, flying cadet Samuel Hynes was warned that a finding of fault would likely result in his transfer to the Navy's enlisted boot camp at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station in Chicago, followed by dangerous duty escorting supply convoys through U-boat-infested waters to the frozen Soviet port of Murmansk.[58]

This threat was not an idle one: "Beat" writer Jean-Louis "Jack" Keruoac, stung by his failure to pass the naval aviation screening examination, was transferred to Great Lakes in 1943, where he was a source of constant disciplinary problems. After dropping his rifle and walking off the parade grounds he eventually found himself unwelcome in military service and was discharged under new procedures—described below—intended to deal with the epidemic of behavioral problems that seemed to afflict the midcentury American male.[59] Those injured too severally or found too wanting in strength, intelligence, or maturity like Kerouac were routinely sent home. Some trainees welcomed these dismissals as a free ticket out of the War, while others resented their failures and stewed over their supposed mistreatment. Kerouac was so

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https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/0209wings/; *U.S. Army Air Forces Pilot Training During World War II*, National Museum of the United States Air Force (n.d.).

[58] Samuel Hynes, "Flights of Passage: Reflections of a World War II Aviator," in *World War II Memoirs: The Pacific Theater*, ed. Elizabeth D. Samet, Library of America 351 (Library of America, 2021), 410.

[59] Tom Clark, *Jack Kerouac: A Biography* (Marlowe & Co., 1995), 55.

ashamed of his wartime service—much of it spent in Navy psychiatric hospitals—that it haunted him for the rest of his life.[60]

In addition to those rejected at induction or during training, the demobilization of trained personnel was a constant trickle in peacetime and a flood in wartime. Personnel who became too old or unfit; people who were no longer needed or who could do more good at home; or those who might endanger others due to incapacity, incompetence, or indiscipline were discharged at every stage of the conflict, even when the military manpower situation seemed dire.[61] Some were repatriated to serve stateside, training recruits or accomplishing less onerous duties; others transferred between combat theaters; and still others were separated entirely from the military, for their own good, and that of the War effort. Throughout the conflict, the War Department maintained that a smaller, more fit military would fight most effectively and at the lowest cost to society.

The number of US military service members sent home and discharged between December 1941 and the end of the War in Europe in May 1945, Benjamin Bowker estimated in his 1946 study *Out of Uniform*, exceeded two million. Separation decisions were made by military judges, attorneys, physicians, and administrators, sometime through formal hearings or trials, and sometimes through bureaucratic procedures, often balancing the dischargee's right to due process with the needs of the government. Veterans were demobilized through a variety of mechanisms, mostly via a document (like the Army's WD AGO Form 53-55) printed on white paper that denoted their service as "honorable." Issued in peacetime upon the completion of a successful term of enlistment, honorable discharges were also issued to early wartime returnees

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[60] Clark, *Jack Kerouac*, 56.
[61] Bowker, *Out of Uniform*, 90.

who were no longer suitable for military service, but whose behavior had been good and whose performance had been, on balance, beneficial to the nation.

While commentators described many early returnees as severely disabled in combat, this group contained many fit service members whose performance continued to be adequate or better.[62] Seldom could service members earn a discharge mere through doing their duty, but some earned stateside postings through exemplary performance, and though unlikely return to combat again, they remained in uniform throughout the War. Survivors of early air battles, for example, were more valuable in the classroom or on the speaking circuit than at the front: motivating factory workers, testing new aircraft, or training the next generation of aces. Similarly, battle heroes like Marine Sergeant and Medal of Honor recipient John Basilone were evacuated from the front to participate in public morale tours and promote the purchase of war bonds. Anecdotal accounts of individuals ordered to participate in these activities indicate that these tours often induced guilt in participants, who enjoyed the comforts of celebrity treatment while their comrades still faced great danger. Basilone even sought a return to combat against the wishes of his superiors.[63] The decision cost him his life.

Overage combatants were another source of early returnees. The War Department was reluctant to enlist or conscript combat personnel over the age of 45 despite having legal authority to do so; in addition, regulations proscribed age limits for oversees service. Newly overage personnel already in the military were routinely offered stateside duty, retirement, placement in the inactive reserve (from which recall was unlikely), or an honorable discharge.[64] Some senior

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[62] Bowker, *Out of Uniform*, 90.

[63] James Brady, *Hero of the Pacific: The Life of Marine Legend John Basilone* (John Wiley, 2010), 93.

[64] Wecter, *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*, 525.

enlisted personnel eligible for discharge initially sought to remain in military service but retired when the War became too physically or emotionally taxing.[65] Marine Staff Sergeant Elmo Haney, lionized in Sledge's *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa,* had enlisted in 1918 but was discharged in 1919 without having served overseas; he reenlisted during peacetime eight years later. Believed incorrectly by his subordinates to be a battle-hardened veteran of the Great War, Haney had likely seen some combat in the Caribbean campaigns later dubbed the "Banana Wars," but was little more prepared for the brutality of the Pacific War than were his younger charges. Offered a promotion to non-combat duty stateside in 1944 due to his advanced age (46), Haney eagerly accepted it after three days of bloody fighting on the tiny Micronesian island of Peleliu, telling Sledge, "I've had enough after that."[66]

Senior peacetime sergeants like Haney overwhelmed by their first experience of modern combat were a common enough feature of the War that Army psychiatrist Raymond Sobel coined a new condition—"Old Sergeant Syndrome"—to describe their malaise and fraying nerves.[67] Other senior enlisted men pulled strings or accepted promotion to exit combat just before or immediately after the War ended. While war movies sometimes note the heroic contributions of older enlisted veterans, such men were relatively uncommon on the battlefield. Combatants generally declined in capability with time in battle, and the most decorated American soldiers of both World Wars were low-ranking novices too inexperienced to be afraid. Veterans, on the other hand, seldom willingly embraced opportunities to experience combat

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[65] Sledge, *With the Old Breed, at Peleliu and Okinawa*; Niven Busch, *They Dream of Home* (D. Appleton-Century company incorporated, 1944).

[66] Sledge, *With the Old Breed, at Peleliu and Okinawa*, 156.

[67] Rebecca Schwartz Greene, *Breaking Point: The Ironic Evolution of Psychiatry in World War II*, with Noah Tsika and Project Muse Complete Collection (Fordham University Press, 2023), 245, 269.

twice. Aviation Ordnanceman Alvin Kernan, aboard the aircraft carrier *Suwannee* (CVE-27) received his promotion to Chief Petty Officer shortly after the Japanese surrender. Entering the quarters reserved for men of his rank, he found none; they had all managed to secure transport home already.[68] Kernan, only 22 years old at the time, would wait months for a similar opportunity.

Forced separation sometimes befell younger service members as well. Service branches employed an "up or out" system to encourage lower-ranking members to gather the skills necessary for promotion or leave active service. As the number of supervisory positions in the military was fixed by statute, remaining too long in any rank obstructed the advancement of subordinates and threatened the future leadership of the service.[69] Competent service members who were young enough to continue serving but who had remained at their current rank for too long ("time-in-grade") might be separated, although this form of discharge was relatively rare during wartime when manpower was urgently needed. Odd as it may sound, though, some noncommissioned officers did reach time-in-grade limitations while fighting and were separated for this reason.[70] The military was one of those rare institutions in which being perfectly suited to one's job was punishable by discharge.

Other early dischargees were young and fit enough to serve but were excluded due to changing standards: not higher standards, ironically, but lower ones. At first, the need for personnel of all abilities made the thousands of limited service (I-B) inductees valuable to the War effort, and the Army had little difficulty employing all but the most deficient.[71] In fact,

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[68] Kernan, "Crossing the Line: A Bluejacket's Odyssey in World War II," 719.
[69] Bowker, *Out of Uniform*, 48.
[70] Wecter, *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*, 507.
[71] United States Army Medical Service, *Physical Standards in World War II*, 78.

because the less fit proved so effective, the War Department lowered physical standards for overseas service throughout the War, enabling many limited service personnel to be reclassified for regular duty.[72] The most impaired personnel, though, remained in limited service until November 1943, at which time the Army, finding little use for them, honorably discharged all who remained—whether they wished to be discharged or not.[73]

As the War progressed, changing circumstances also required that a small number of young, fit service members be discharged into civilian life, because they were needed to tend to dependents back home, or rarely to work in civilian industries essential to the War effort (munitions, shipbuilding, aircraft manufacturing, agriculture), though most of these men earned Class II or III deferments before induction. Later separations for these reasons ("at the convenience of the government") produced honorable discharges as well. In practice, honorable discharge could thus be a capacious category, as it described both those who had served and those who sought to serve but could not; those who had performed admirably and those who were more easily separated from service than conditioned for battle.

As to be expected, many early returnees were among the 670,000 American casualties of the War, almost half of whom required long hospitalizations once home.[74] Before then, they were apt to have been treated in various facilities and, if not returned to duty, at least made well enough to be repatriated, on fully equipped hospital ships, or occasionally by air. Hospital ships transited contested waters throughout the War often painted white with large Red Cross

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[72] United States Army Medical Service, *Physical Standards in World War II*, 77.

[73] John D. (John David) Millett, *The Organization and Role of the Army Service Forces*, United States Army in World War II. Army Service Forces (Office of the Chief of Military History, Dept. of the Army, 1954), 120; Bowker, *Out of Uniform*, 88–90.

[74] Bowker, *Out of Uniform*, 74; Adams, *The Best War Ever*, 121.

markings, they were illegal to target, but extremely vulnerable to submarine and air attack.[75] Aboard, patients received fresh fruit daily and welcome attention from both young female nurses and fellow veterans with whom they often shared the details of their service.[76]

Most draftees had been medical unsuited to strenuous activity and rejected at induction; enlisted service members, similarly, were more like to have their bodies fail in any number of "natural" ways than be burned, blown up, or shot. Contrary to popular belief, individuals with combat wounds did not constitute the majority of those demobilized on medical grounds: returnees suffering from serious infections, bone and muscle disorders, and gastrointestinal problems were far more common. Of the nearly half of all Army dischargees certified as disabled in the War, nearly 90% were felled by illness; battle wounds and noncombat injuries (falls, being struck by vehicles, etc.) combined constituted only 1.5 percent of Army disability discharges in 1943, and 6.7 percent in 1944. In fact, more soldiers were separated from the Army in 1943 due to genitourinary complaints than combat wounds and physical injuries combined.[77]

For those wounded or injured, recent advances in medical care (blood typing and transfusion, plasma as treatment for shock, antibiotics) saved lives that would have been lost in previous conflicts, reducing the likelihood of death and serious illness but producing a large number of individuals requiring extensive treatment, including those with significant permanent

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[75] Jack K. Wakamatsu, *Silent Warriors: A Memoir of America's 442nd Regimental Combat Team* (JKW Press, 1992), 180.

[76] Wakamatsu, *Silent Warriors*, 179–80.

[77] United States Army Medical Service, *Physical Standards in World War II*, 107. This statistic partially accounts for the Army eager use of early antibiotics to treat sexual transmitted infections during the War. Robert Bud, *Penicillin: Triumph and Tragedy* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

disabilities.[78] The number of personnel returned home with combat wounds, though small at first, grew almost exponentially: with US forces engaged only tentatively in combat before 1943, veterans returned to the US for medical treatment in January of that year numbered fewer than 2,500; with the Pacific War escalating by May 1945, however, the number exceed 57,000 in that month alone.[79]

Service members greatly feared painful combat wounds, often preferring a quick death from a well-placed bullet to a protracted period of suffering that might accompany immolation, dismemberment, or bayonet thrusts. While wounding oneself to escape duty was not unheard-of, doing so was dangerous in an era of poor infection control and limited battlefield medical evacuation, as well as a serious criminal offense that usually resulted in confinement to a specialized hospital ward followed by a six-month prison sentence.[80] More commonly joked about (if somewhat apocryphal) were unintentional combat wounds dubbed "million-dollar wounds." Seldom fatal when treated promptly but likely to cause severe and immediate (but mostly temporary) loss of function, bullet wounds to the arms, hands, legs, or feet were sometimes welcomed by grizzled conscripts, as these wounds would garner one a coveted Purple

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[78] "State of Oregon: World War II - A New Set of Challenges: Welcoming Home the Veterans," accessed April 15, 2023, https://sos.oregon.gov/archives/exhibits/ww2/Pages/after-return.aspx.

[79] Aaron Stern, "What Happened on the Trains That Brought Wounded World War II Soldiers Home?," Smithsonian Magazine, August 18, 2023, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/what-happened-on-the-trains-that-brought-wounded-world-war-ii-soldiers-home-180982745/.

[80] Carl Gnam, "Combat Fatigue: How Stress in Battle Was Felt (and Treated) in WWII," *Warfare History Network*, September 30, 2016, https://warfarehistorynetwork.com/combat-fatigue-how-stress-in-battle-was-felt-and-treated-in-wwii/.

Heart commendation, disqualify one from combat, or even lead to an immediate, honorable separation.[81]

Although injuries, battle wounds, and physical illnesses were constant in wartime military service, the civilian public saw relatively few of the afflicted until the end of the War. Many personnel injured during training, for example, were rehabilitated by the military and retained if otherwise fit. While the most visibly disabled veterans (amputees, the blind, the paralyzed) provoked significant popular interest, they, too, were rarely seen in public during the first years of the War. Most remained in military service and were ordered to complete long periods of rehabilitation in military hospitals far from their homes and largely out of public view.

The War Department was loathe to impose disabled veterans upon a civilian society unprepared for the horrors of war, but treating personnel so far from their home presented undue burdens on visiting family members. After 1943, the Army began to transfer medical evacuees via Army hospital trains, to specialized hospitals as close to their families as possible. A logistical headache, this policy eventually required dozens of custom-built train cars, ferrying the infirm from port cities to hospitals in the interior. The most elaborate "unit" cars were self-contained recovery wards, with berths for 36 patients and a kitchen.[82] The movements of these trains were not publicized, and a long recovery awaited many of the passengers, accompanied by questions about their future military status and ability to work. Rehabilitation was both medical and occupational, and served vital national security purposes: veterans who could still fight were needed at the front, while those unfit for combat but able to work would be less likely to burden

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[81] Sledge, *With the Old Breed, at Peleliu and Okinawa*, 220–21.

[82] Stern, "What Happened on the Trains That Brought Wounded World War II Soldiers Home?"

social services or undermine popular support for the War. While the Army, at first, attempted to locate positions in which partially disabled veterans could continue to serve, doing so presented a variety of administrative challenges, and those in service no longer fit enough to pass an induction physical were eventually separated after making a partial recovery. Even if complete recovery were impossible, retaining wounded and injured service members just long enough for them to heal at least partially might limit outlays for disability benefits.[83]

Despite the War Department's rehabilitation efforts, approximately half of all veterans discharged prior to victory (about one million) received a certification of disability rendering them incapable of further military service. They possessed varying degrees of ability to resume civilian employment and some required significant post-service medical care, provided gratis by the Veterans Administration.[84] Many were so disabled that they could never work again, and received full, life-long benefits. Regardless of the extent, though, almost all service members separated due to disability received honorable discharges. This category included all women discharged for pregnancy.[85]

While far more sophisticated than the care provided during the Great War, World War II-era rehabilitation had its limits. Care for paraplegic veterans, for example, focused on occupational rehabilitation and procreation, rather than sexual or emotional needs.[86] With masculinity tied explicitly to physical strength and sexual potency,[87] disabled men risked falling

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[83] BoB 301.

[84] United States Army Medical Service, *Physical Standards in World War II*, 107.

[85] War Department, *Enlisted Personnel: Discharge and Release from Active Duty (Other than at Separation Centers)* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1945), 2.

[86] Beth Linker and Whitney Laemmli, "Half a Man: The Symbolism and Science of Paraplegic Impotence in World War II America," *Osiris* (United States) 30, no. 1 (2015): 228–49.

[87] Jarvis, *The Male Body at War*, 103–7.

into the social cavern occupied by 4-Fs. The cure—"remasculinization," Christina Jarvis writes—typically entailed, at least in the minds of the era's popular writers, exposure to women and to heteronormative sexuality.[88] Every disabled soldier, sailor, or Marine seemingly needed a devoted girlfriend, fiancée, or wife to restore his self-respect. These were almost always present in Hollywood movies; American women, in countless magazine articles, were encouraged to perform the same role, as caretakers to the fragile egos of the male veterans in their lives.[89] These stereotypes greatly oversimplified treatment for psychological trauma, moral injury, and other ailments that proved the most vexing medical ailments of the War.

Nearly half of all medical dischargees, and one-in-five Army dischargees for all reasons from 1942 through 1945, were separated due to neuropsychiatric ("NP") disabilities; these veterans faced a more challenging recovery and reintegration than those with physical wounds.[90] Even if they had not been created by combat, most of these conditions had been triggered or exacerbated by the stress of the War, and so the War Department treated virtually all cases as medical problems rather than behavioral issues, provided they had not been accompanied by criminal activity or a dereliction of duty, offenses with which these ailments were sometimes associated. Convicted Army deserters, for example, were disproportionally drawn from the infantry; about half were believed to suffer from psychological disturbances engendered by combat, but few were exempted from prosecution.[91]

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[88] Jarvis, *The Male Body at War*, 102.

[89] Christina Jarvis, "'If He Comes Home Nervous': U.S. World War II Neuropsychiatric Casualties and Postwar Masculinities," *The Journal of Men's Studies* (Los Angeles, CA) 17, no. 2 (2010): 97–115.

[90] Millett, *The Organization and Role of the Army Service Forces*, 94.

[91] Glass, *The Deserters*, 273.

Detailed studies conducted by the US Army determined that among trained but inexperienced soldiers, incompetence engendered by fear was the rule rather than the exception. Brigadier General S.L.A. Marshall's controversial book *Men against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command* (1947) suggested, based on detailed interviews rather than controlled statistical studies, that as few as 15% percent of frontline combat soldiers during World War II had contributed materially to any given skirmish.[92] Later works, including Lt. Col. Dave Grossman's *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War*, confirmed that of those fit enough physically and mentally to serve in combat units (no more than one-fifth of the total number in uniform in more modern wars), few overcame their fear of death and reticence to kill.[93]

Of all trained, equipped, but novice soldiers, Marshall determined one-quarter shut down physically, mentally, or both when confronted by the stresses of battle: perhaps half of those spontaneously defecated, while others froze, cowered in the open, or hid behind obstacles. Unable to respond to orders, they took no part in combat. Soldiers in the next quarter retained control of their faculties but could or would not fight. Unwilling to kill, they busied themselves with seemingly necessary work—tending to the wounded, fetching ammunition, conveying messages—to avoid employing arms as ordered. The second half consisted of soldiers willing to expose themselves to enemy fire and employ arms against people, but who largely failed at the endeavor. For these men, fear of killing proved more disabling than fear of death; half wished desperately to do their duty and fight (or at least appear to be doing so) but sabotaged

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[92] S. L. A. Marshall, *Men against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War* (Peter Smith, 1978).

[93] Grossman, *On Killing*.

themselves. Occupying a firing position and shooting, they consistently aimed away from their targets (sometimes consciously and sometimes not), missing with every shot but giving the appearance of active participation in the battle. In fact, fewer than one quarter of frontline troops actively sought to do the job assigned to them: firing at the enemy. And when motivated to do their best, half of this, final quarter, missed due to lack of skill.

Ultimately, a relatively small fraction of soldiers (perhaps 10–15%) proved effective, killing with alacrity and remaining responsive to orders. A handful of such warriors could turn the tide of battle, and they gravitated toward elite units out of a sense of adventure, duty, or to increase their own chances of survival by associating with similar individuals. Sometimes, they emerged by surprise from regular forces, attracting the attention of superiors. At other times, they merely assumed responsibility in battle without authority to do so, inspiring comrades with their actions. And distressingly often, they simply went berserk: no longer caring about their personal safety and consumed by anger, grief, and vengeance, they slaughtered the enemy in the manner of Old Norse warriors who fought in an insane fugue state.

Even these skilled, hardy warriors, though, had their limits. If not killed, wounded, or felled by injury or illness, most American combat personnel during World War II increased in effectiveness through the third week of continuous fighting, developing skills and confidence. After that, hypervigilance and exhaustion began to take their toll, chipping away at performance and causing seasoned warriors to lose ground to newcomers. After two months of continuous fighting virtually all fighting personnel were rendered ineffective, incapable of independent action and mostly "going through the motions" of military service.

The Marine and Army actions at Guadalcanal (part of the 1942–1943 Solomon Islands Campaign of the Pacific War) saw the first period of sustained combat for US forces in twenty-

five years, and the highest incidence of combat-induced mental illness among American service members to date in the War.[94] After 60 days of sustained combat, 98% of all combatants were unable to respond to orders, while others exposed to hazardous events sometimes contracted conversion disorders that left them temporarily unable see,[95] walk, or speak.[96] These instances of "Guadalcanal Disorder" were "distressing," Sledge recalled of similar casualties on Okinawa. "They ranged in their reactions from a state of dull detachment seemingly unaware of their surroundings, to quiet sobbing, or all the way to wild screaming and shouting."[97] These reactions became commonplace as fighting intensified in Europe and the Pacific.[98]

To physicians, Guadalcanal Disorder appeared to be similar to "shell shock": a Great War-era neologism that described a constellation of symptoms experienced by veterans of the endless trench sieges of the Western Front: men who became catatonic, who stared into space (the thousand-yard stare), stuttered, or shook uncontrollably, despite bearing no visible wounds. American psychiatrists recognizing similar symptoms in 1943 labelled them "battle fatigue"[99] (now called "combat stress reaction") and recognized the ailment as an endemic health issue for all service members, eventually constituting 45 percent of all disability discharges during the War. In addition, discharges for behavioral disorders likely attributable to untreated mental

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[94] Greene, *Breaking Point*, 79–80; Larry Decuers, "WWII Post Traumatic Stress," The National WWII Museum, June 27, 2020, https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/wwii-post-traumatic-stress.

[95] Alexander, *Biggest Brother*, 154.

[96] E.g., Grossman, *On Killing*; Ben Shephard, *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Twentieth Century* (Harvard University Press, 2001).

[97] Sledge, "With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa," 287.

[98] Alexander, *Biggest Brother*, 154.

[99] Leslie B. Hohman, "Combat Fatigue," *Ladies' Home Journal* 62, no. 2 (1945): 146–47.

health problems were responsible for the same number of separations during the War—nearly three-quarters of a million discharges in total.[100]

The prevalence of NP casualties during the War at first led to false accusations of cowardice, both by civilians and military leaders. Army Lieutenant General George Patton, a rabid antisemite, berated and physically assaulted two seriously ill NP casualties in Sicily in 1943, threatening to kill one with a pistol and shouting that battle fatigue was an "invention of the Jews."[101] Patton was later ordered by Supreme Allied Commander in Europe General Dwight Eisenhower to apologize to the soldiers he struck, but proved incapable of doing so. Stigma attached to combat fatigue remained so intense throughout the War that sufferers were often evacuated from the front lines with made-up or nonspecific medical complaints to conceal the true nature of their illnesses.[102] This was rather easy to do, Sledge noted, as almost everyone suffered from some form of skin parasite, respiratory infection, or other ailment.[103]

Patton's subordinate, and later superior, General Omar Bradley, took the opposite view of NP casualties, insisting that they be treated as medically disabled and protected from stigma.[104] To ensure this, "combat exhaustion" and "combat fatigue" became the preferred euphemisms for the disorder, chosen to suggest that the syndrome was the product of heroic service beyond the limit of a combatant's physical abilities rather than of weakness or cowardice. As a result, under the orders of the War Department, serious NP conditions occurring in the line of duty (LOD)

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[100] United States Army Medical Service, *Physical Standards in World War II*, 37, 106.

[101] Bowker, *Out of Uniform*; Robin Andersen, *A Century of Media, a Century of War* (Peter Lang, 2006), 24.

[102] Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*.

[103] Sledge, "With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa," 287.

[104] See, generally, Shephard, *A War of Nerves*; Alison Macor, *Making The Best Years of Our Lives: The Hollywood Classic That Inspired a Nation* (University of Texas Press, 2022), 33.

resulted almost automatically in evacuation, evaluation, and treatment. In some cases, repatriation and transfer by train to specialty hospitals stateside for continuing care were necessary, leading, ultimately, to honorable discharges almost indistinguishable from those granted to veterans with physical wounds. For such individuals, the principal differences in repatriation protocols were wire mesh screens on hospital train windows and other measures intended to keep patients from escaping before treatment.[105] John Freely, crewing the Magic Carpet transport USS *General W. F. Hase* (AP-146), on a voyage back from Europe, was distressed to discover that among the 3,000 returnees were a few NP casualties so unwell that they were tranquilized by enlisted medical staff or strapped to beds in sick bay.[106]

In an age where mental illness was poorly understood, the stigma associated with wartime NP diagnoses generally followed veterans into civilian life even if they worked hard to conceal them. In May 1944, the Army opened its medical discharge records to eight major government employers (including the Post Office Department); civilian employers could also legally inquire about the nature of a dischargee's diagnosis when veterans sought private employment.[107] While psychiatric records remained private, a veteran's refusal to disclose their ailment, or a discharge record's failure to list one, led employers to assume an NP diagnosis. Many employers wrongly associated NP ailments with criminal, violent, or otherwise deviant behaviors rendering an applicant too expensive, dangerous, or ineffective to employ; in reality, such behavioral traits would normally engender a different form of discharge.[108] And since

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[105] Stern, "What Happened on the Trains That Brought Wounded World War II Soldiers Home?"

[106] John Freely, *The House of Memory: Reflections on Youth and War* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), 218.

[107] Greene, *Breaking Point*, 217–18.

[108] Greene, *Breaking Point*, 216.

medically discharged veterans with NP diagnoses often appeared healthy, many civilians were apt to doubt their diagnoses and question their courage, viewing them as shirkers and malingerers unworthy of accommodation. As with 4-Fs, many businesses avoided hiring veterans suspected of mental illness entirely.[109]

Criminal conduct and noncombat-related behavioral health issues were regarded even less mercifully by military authorities at the time of separation and by the public once home. The most serious violations of military law (theft, robbery, assault, murder) led to a military trial in a general court-martial and, if convicted, reduction in rank, imprisonment, and a dishonorable discharge, printed on telltale yellow paper. This highly punitive form of separation was equivalent to a felony conviction in civilian life and was accompanied by a forfeiture of voting rights and all veterans' benefits, including medical care. Though uncommon, yellow discharges were not rare: nearly one percent of World War II veterans received them.[110] Usually issued following a stint in a military prison, a dishonorable discharge could severely diminish one's employment prospects postwar and make securing medical, educational, and other demobilization assistance impossible. For the families of the convicted, yellow discharges could be more punitive than the dreaded pink discharge: a death notice that entitled beneficiaries to collect a host of benefits, including the ability to collect on veterans' low-cost National Service Life Insurance policies of up to $10,000.

Though incomparably better than those administered by Germany and other repressive military powers, American courts-martial were courts in name only. Prior to the adoption of the more modern and rulebound Uniform Code of Military Justice in 1951, military trials were often

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[109] Greene, *Breaking Point*, 217–18.
[110] Bowker, *Out of Uniform*, 86.

"chickenshit"[111] tribunals (see, Chapter 2) adjudicated by panels of line officers without legal training, with defendants represented by non-lawyer junior officers ordered to do so against their wishes and without time to prepare their cases.[112] Unit commanders served as attorney general, chief justice, and appeals court, and determined the outcomes prior to the hearing of evidence, a practice they often openly admitted, claiming the need to maintain military discipline at all costs.[113] Rules of procedure and evidence were cursory, trials could be so quick as to preclude an adequate defense, and juries were nonexistent, placing the lives of the accused as the mercy, often, of those who brought the charges.

Even when the Judge Advocate General's Corps provided trained prosecutors and defense attorneys for trial, lawyers were assigned to both roles, so being an effective defense counsel in one trial could antagonize colleagues and superiors. Those assigned to defend the accused were also vulnerable to military discipline and the whim of senior officers who supervised the proceedings. They preferred convictions in all cases and might punish defense lawyers for successfully defending their clients. Upon successfully wrecking the phony sexual assault case against his innocent Mexican American client, Army Second Lieutenant Sidney Shapiro, legal historian Luther West writes, was charged, court-martialed, stripped of his commission, discharged from the Army, and drafted as a Private in the span of five hours. His was one of only a half-dozen courts-martial later overturned in federal court. Noted the Federal

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[111] Fussell, *Wartime*.

[112] Luther C. West, *They Call It Justice: Command Influence and the Court-Martial System* (Viking Press, 1977), 40.

[113] West, *They Call It Justice*, 43.

Court of Claims at the time, "'[a] more flagrant case of military despotism would be hard to imagine.'"[114]

Shapiro was not alone in his mistreatment. Punishments meted out to the convicted, furthermore, were "'frequently excessively severe and sometimes fantastically so,'" according to one postwar American Bar Association review committee.[115] They ranged from forfeiture of pay to death, accomplished by firing squad. Legal scholar Michael Bryant recounts the story of an 18-year-old recruit who was court-martialed early in basic training for disobeying an order; his sentence of a dishonorable discharge and 55 years in federal prison at hard labor went unchallenged until long after the War had ended.[116] Commanders preferred harsh sentences because they offered them the most control over the post-sentencing fate of the convicted; they alone had the authority to reduce sentences after trial, if they found commutation warranted or if they wanted to appear generous while still inspiring fear in their subordinates.[117] Postwar sentence reductions and clemency became commonplace, as the War's miscarriages of justice came to light, but true justice eluded many of those convicted.[118]

That more service members weren't court-martialed during the War had less to do with any desire on the part of the War Department for justice than a simple matter of resource allocation. Though courts-martial could be, and often were, speedy, sloppy, unjust affairs, no service member could receive a dishonorable discharge without being convicted by one and

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[114] West, *They Call It Justice*, 39–40.
[115] West, *They Call It Justice*, 43.
[116] Michael Bryant, "American Military Justice from the Revolution to the UCMJ: The Hard Journey from Command Authority to Due Process," *Creighton International and Comparative Law Journal* 4, no. 1 (2013): 1–4, https://digitalcommons.bryant.edu/histss_jou/55.
[117] West, *They Call It Justice*, 39–40.
[118] See, generally, Glass, *The Deserters*.

disciplining all personnel suspected of criminal offenses in the growing wartime military became time-consuming, affecting, on average, one out of every eight service members. One solution to the logistical problem this posed was the Navy's "bad conduct discharge" ("BCD," often called the "Big Chicken Dinner"), a punitive administrative discharge with lower due process requirements than a dishonorable discharge, issued to poorly behaved sailors or those alleged to have committed infractions too minor to warrant a proper court-martial.[119]

Even these discharges were too time-consuming to prepare, and it was often easier for the War Department to discharge some service members honorably than to undertake disciplinary proceedings required to discharge them punitively. As a result, honorable dischargees included some individuals whose military careers had been brief or lackluster, or who had committed infractions that were difficult to substantiate, or the public disclosure of which might needlessly embarrass the War Department. Underage enlistees who were discovered to have lied or forged the signatures of their parents to volunteer for the armed forces, for example, were admonished for their unlawful conduct, but honorably discharged and sent home.[120] (That recruiters and induction physicians allowed themselves to be hoodwinked into enlisting children—or did so recklessly or intentionally—was shameful to the War Department.) Application of whatever rules existed for honorably discharging problematic recruits, though, was haphazard and driven by the whims of supervising officers, racism, and exigences of war.

As a result, separating troublesome service members through either honorable or punitive discharges raised concerns both of equity and moral hazard. Although veterans did not

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[119] Act of March 2, 1855, ch. 136, 10 Stat. 627-629.

[120] War Department, *Enlisted Personnel: Discharge and Release from Active Duty (Other than at Separation Centers)*, 2.

necessarily realize it at the time, an honorable discharge enabled them to secure generous postwar benefits that would be vital for their successful reintegration. While few wished to see those benefits extended to violent criminals, giving merely disruptive veterans yellow discharges or BCDs would prevent them from finding employment or housing and becoming productive members of civilian society.[121] Conversely, if conscripts learned that they could be honorably discharged merely for misbehaving, many might do so intentionally to avoid military service. Finding neither solution appropriate in many cases—military careers that had been woefully short and terminated by medical of behavioral issues—the War Department experimented with other forms of discharge to subtly note the inadequacies of veterans. One method was the so called "ordinary" or "general discharge," issued to personnel who had not performed well but who had not committed serious criminal infractions. The War Department sometimes appended this form of discharge with the words "under honorable conditions," a confusing modifier that still managed to humiliate the bearer, bar re-enlistment, and confuse potential employers as to a veteran's propensity for criminality. These discharges were sometimes used, vengefully, for example, against Black service members who acted against their superiors' wishes, for, example, by refusing to reenlist.[122]

As a result of the inadequacies of other approaches, the Army and the Navy had, since World War I, also sometimes issued "uncharacterized" discharges "at the convenience of the service" to problematic inductees: separations that were neither honorable, nor ordinary, nor dishonorable, and printed on distinctive blue paper. Unlikely to be confused with any other form of discharge, "blue" discharges were silent as to the nature of one's service and did not, in

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[121] See, e.g., Busch, *They Dream of Home*.
[122] De Vergee, *Assignment in Hell*, 113.

theory, result in a loss of voting rights or veteran's benefits. The War Department hoped they would create less stigma for the recipient than a dishonorable or general discharge, which the public associated with violent criminality.[123]

Blue discharges eventually became the preferred means of separating those with behavioral problems from military service, in part because they seemed the perfect answer to one acute problem of modern mass conscription.[124] The Selective Service Act of 1940 flooded the Army's ranks unexpectedly with thousands of healthy and law-abiding but headstrong, unstable, ill-tempered, or uncooperative draftees unable or unwilling to complete their training or perform effectively in any role. To the existing pool of deviations leading to a blue discharge, the War Department, under Section VIII of Army Regulation 615-360 (November 26, 1942), added "inaptness or undesirable habits and traits of character," a catchall category used to separate a variety of persons who had not committed criminal offenses but who the Army preferred to discharge for its own convenience.[125] Though some might become good soldiers, training them would be more work than the Army was willing to do.

Contrary to popular belief, Section VIII (or "Section Eight," as it was colloquially known)[126] was not employed to discharge service members who were "crazy": soldiers suffering from NP diagnoses generally received honorable discharges.[127] (This included Kerouac, eventually diagnosed with "schizoid tendencies."[128]) Even disruptive behaviors believed to be

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[123] De Vergee, *Assignment in Hell*, 113.
[124] See, e.g., Greene, *Breaking Point*, 217.
[125] War Department, *Enlisted Personnel: Discharge and Release from Active Duty (Other than at Separation Centers)*, 2.
[126] Bowker, *Out of Uniform*, 89.
[127] Greene, *Breaking Point*, 217.
[128] Clark, *Jack Kerouac*, 56.

caused by mental weakness—like bed-wetting (enuresis), an oft-cited malady in the Army medical literature—were unlikely to trigger an uncategorized discharge.[129] Likewise, a mere lack of ability was also generally insufficient to trigger a Section Eight discharge if the service member was earnest and well-behaved, although involuntary honorable discharges in such cases were common.

In the War Department's estimation, the recipients of blue discharges were those whose very nature rendered them almost irredeemably unreliable: personnel who had been too confused, despondent, anxious, or antisocial to learn or follow orders; those who were discovered to have lied at induction about their health, criminal record, or qualifications; those who had shown reckless inattention to their duties or repeatedly walked off their posts; those who faced legal sanctions in civilian courts; those who abused illegal drugs like marijuana or heroin; those who raised political objections to the War or to racial discrimination (Black service members received a disproportionate number of blue discharges); or those who engaged in sexual behavior the War Department deemed aberrant, especially homosexuality (see, Chapter 5).[130] Service members seeking separation (like the famed actor Sidney Poitier, who enlisted while underage and struggled in military service afterward), sometimes sought to engineer a Section Eight discharge on purpose, but doing so was profoundly risky, as a miscalibration of one's offensive behavior could result in an assignment to dangerous or unpleasant duty, time spent in the brig, or life-altering imprisonment and a dishonorable discharge.[131] Intended to

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[129] United States Army Medical Service, *Physical Standards in World War II*, 104.

[130] War Department, *Enlisted Personnel: Discharge and Release from Active Duty (Other than at Separation Centers)*, 2.

[131] Greene, *Breaking Point*, 217.

soften the blow of punitive separation, blue discharges could also be highly stigmatizing in civilian life (see Chapter 5).[132]

The two million "previctory" returnees, Bowker noted, field-tested American demobilization strategies long before veterans returned *en masse* in 1945 and 1946, but experts were wary of drawing too many conclusions from their experiences.[133] Before late-1944, the relatively slow trickle of returnees from Europe and the Pacific required no additional transportation resources. Men received orders to return home and took any available transportation method to bases near their homes for separation. The tide expected to follow them, Dixon Wecter wrote in his prize-winning book about wartime demobilization, *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*, would likely need more specialized facilities.

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[132] Bowker, *Out of Uniform*, 85–86, 89.
[133] Bowker, *Out of Uniform*, 88, et seq.



Figure 1.1. Printed by Bell Telephone Company and distributed to "separatees" at the Army Separation Center in Fort Dix New Jersey, "So Long and Good Luck, Soldier!" offered returning soldiers guidance on base amenities and geography, scheduled activities, and resources available to resolve issues of education, employment and insurance (collection of Author).

The first of the Army's "Separation Centers," had been established in April 1944 as the 1262nd Service Unit, War Department Personnel Center at Fort Dix, New Jersey,[134] and was already, Dixon noted, a miracle of "demobilization" processing, doing in 48 hours what might have taken three weeks during World War I (Figure 1.1).[135] Veterans from 13 states were already demobilizing there, but in the future, returnees would be distributed among a number of nationwide facilities, with Fort Dix handling, especially, the massive volume of veterans disembarking at the port of New York.[136] Not to be outdone, the Navy opened, in June of that year, an even more pleasant solution: a prototype "'humanized assembly line'" of the Naval Personnel Redistribution Center, located at a former resort hotel in Lido Beach, New York, an oceanside hamlet on a barrier island off the southern coast of Long Island, an hour from Manhattan. Requisitioned as a training facility in 1942, the facility, the Navy promised, would do the same job as Fort Dix, but better, in 72 hours (later reduced to 48).[137] Through late 1944 and early 1945, virtually every discharged sailor passed through its doors.

Of particular interest to social scientists was the fate of these previctory returnees once they left the Separation Center and rejoined civil society. In the years prior to the passage of comprehensive veterans' benefits, services afforded to returnees were more meager and varied

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[134] "Center Will Speed Soldier Discharge," *The New York Times*, April 9, 1944, 36.

[135] Wecter, *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*, 525–29.

[136] Alice M. Hoffman, *Archives of Memory: A Soldier Recalls World War II*, with Howard S. Hoffman (University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 139.

[137] "Navy Processes 350 Men a Day: Long Beach Separation Center to Release 2,000 to Civil Life in Two Months," *New York Times*, August 21, 1945, 12; "Heritage," Lido Beach Towers, accessed July 17, 2026, https://www.lidobeachtowers.net/heritage; Department of Defense. Department of the Navy. Bureau of Naval Personnel. 9/18/1947-1982, *Advance Base Assembly and Training Unit, Lido Beach Long Island, NY. 10/8/43 to 9/15/45* (n.d.), Muster rolls, Microfilm, Microform, [object Object], accessed July 17, 2026, http://catalog.archives.gov/id/126874621.

greatly by region; federal medical assistance to combat casualties was always available, but job, housing, and education benefits were not. Early returnees included a larger proportion of disabled, especially partially disabled persons who would need to find appropriate employment, and individuals discharged for undesirability or criminal activity, whose separation status created the greatest stigma and economic dislocation.[138] Recipients of blue discharges were perhaps the most scrutinized, as their status was tantamount to government certification of incompetence, without documentation of why, exactly, they were unfit. While the War Department could manage repatriation, economic questions were a matter for Congress, addressed principally with the *Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944* (the "GI Bill of Rights"), which provided comprehensive economic aid for veterans who had served for almost any length of time during the War in the uniformed services, regardless of rank, occupational specialty, race, sex (by War's end, women's auxiliaries had been "regularized" as military service branches), or discharge status, as long as the discharge was "other than dishonorable."

Veterans possessing physical disabilities were obvious subjects of public aid programs, given their sacrifices to the War effort. Indeed, in addition to the medical treatment already provided, the "GI Bill" guaranteed funds for prosthetics and occupational therapy, and care for such individuals was generally comprehensive. The emotional difficulties many severely disabled experienced, though, were especially profound, as physical changes to their bodies forced them to create new identities and jeopardized hopes for an effortless return to careers and family life. Civilians were inclined to offer sympathy to physically disabled veterans, although incessant questions and expressions of support often angered the returnees, especially as many

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[138] Bowker, *Out of Uniform*, 91.

harbored guilt about their wounds and injuries. Previctory return also meant removal from friends in uniform overseas, many of whom still faced a daily struggle for survival. Absence from them removed social supports and undermined returnees' self-respect.

Some wartime injuries occurred domestically, under circumstances that veterans feared reflected poorly on their competence and contributions to the War effort.[139] Army Sergeant Harold Russell, an explosives instructor from Cambridge Massachusetts, lost both of his hands and received numerous other injuries in 1944 after a defective fuse accidentally detonated a block of TNT Russell was preparing for a training demonstration. Injured while stateside, Russell required no shipborne repatriation, but his long rehabilitation in Army hospitals produced unhappy reflections on his wartime experience. While recuperating, Russell often experienced unpleasant interactions with well-wishers, reacting belligerently to curious and sympathetic onlookers as he struggled to make sense of his injuries.[140]

As Russell recounted in his 1949 autobiography, *Victory in My Hands*:

> …What had I been doing in the Army, actually? Teaching men to destroy bridges, dams, railroads? Teaching men to kill? What did that add up to in terms of a lifetime? What ultimate purpose would that serve? Some day this war must end and then what good would that skill and knowledge be to me? So I had done a good job as a demolitions instructor. So I had made fifty-one jumps. So I had

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[139] *Diary of a Sergeant*, directed by Joseph M. Newman (US Army Pictorial Service, Signal Corps, 1945).

[140] Harold Russell, *Victory in My Hands*, with Victor Rosen (Creative Age Press, 1949), 132.

> got sergeant's stripes and become a rough, tough, ugly paratrooper. So what? The final payoff was still the same: Failure.[141]

Discharged in January 1945, Russell set to work remediating his perceived failures, enrolling at Boston University on the GI Bill and picking up a part time job.[142]

Russell, with his ambition undiminished by his disability, ultimately proved a Hollywood-worthy model of a previctory returnee. Most disabled early returnees (especially NP casualties), though, lacked visible injuries and appeared reasonably healthy to average members of the public despite their impairments. Their seeming normalcy exposed them to criticism not leveled at the seriously wounded, with many onlookers likening them to—or even mistaking them for—the millions of seemingly healthy but unfit "4-Fs."[143] Employers and passers-by were apt to look at early returnees as shirkers or cowards, or as people so defective that they had been rejected by an institution believed to be willing to take anyone.[144] The solution for many returning veterans was, effectively to go back into uniform: regulations permitted discharged personnel to continue wearing a modified version of their uniform, and pins distributed to discharged veterans (see, Chapter 4) allowed those in civilian attire to be recognized as having served.[145]

Many early returnees internalized stigmas about returnees as failures or were wracked by shame and guilt concerning their wartime activities; others continued to stew over the

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[141] Russell, *Victory in My Hands*, 16.
[142] Russell, *Victory in My Hands*, 162.
[143] Bowker, *Out of Uniform*, 90.
[144] Bowker, *Out of Uniform*, 90.
[145] Smith, "4-F: The Forgotten Unfit of the American Military During World War II," 93–94.

mistreatment received in military service.[146] Wartime civil society was not yet ready for the frankness with which veterans recounted their experiences. Civilians, fretting over the safety of their own loved ones still overseas, were unlikely to be sympathetic to embittered dischargees, and even military experts discouraged previctory returnees from complaining publicly about their time in the service.[147] Veterans who expressed misgivings, Bowker declared, were merely being "sensitive" in a way that was unproductive to themselves and to the War effort.[148] Wecter wrote unsympathetically of a recent previctory returnee with whom he chatted, an elite Army infantryman who had returned, morose, from an incompetently led campaign in Italy.[149] The "New York private in the Rangers … had felt sorry for himself on the boat coming back—having suffered jaundice, malaria, a broken ankle, and battle fatigue, while brooding over politicians, strikers, and slackers, and a long stretch of latrine duty he had to do for taking a Negro's part in a race incident…."[150]

During the War, service members' political views often became more extreme, in both directions. Vaguely progressive individuals moved leftward, rejecting racism and opining that the postwar American government should be more responsive to the economic and political needs of average people. Noted Anthony Scariano, a spy in the Office of Strategic Services:

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[146] Bowker, *Out of Uniform*, 90.

[147] Wecter, *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*, 511–12.

[148] Bowker, *Out of Uniform*, 90.

[149] The Battle of Cisterna in January and February 1944 saw high casualties and large number of Rangers captured when they encountered German armored forces prepared for their arrival. The Battle likely disrupted German battle plans in Italy but was regarded as a significant defeat.

[150] Wecter, *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*, 511–12.

> Our boys, most of us, were somewhat liberal. We were Italian Americans who were recruited from the working-class areas of the big cities: New York, Chicago, Cleveland, Boston, all over. We weren't interned like the Japanese, but we felt, as Italians, we had to prove ourselves. We weren't very political, but we'd sit around the fire in our villa and argue about the war. Would it mean a better America? Would it mean an end to injustice? We were just learning about the Holocaust. We really believed in this war, unlike Vietnam and Korea. The boys really believed that a better world would come.[151]

After surviving an orgy of gun violence while liberating the Dachau concentration camp in 1945, Lieutenant Colonel Felix Sparks of the 45th Infantry Division similarly became an advocate for sensible gun control measures, finding the "'goddamm'" National Rifle Association to be a ruthless foe.[152]

Having left progressive Northern cities too young to know much about even their own country's intolerance and having encountered a certain amount of egalitarianism among fellow combatants at the front, many veterans were horrified by the instances of bigotry directed toward unformed service members of different ethnicities while in camp or in military hospitals. "'We make those colored boys fight,'" recounted a letter from a Philadelphia-born servicemember nicknamed Foxhole that Ralph Martin described in his 1948 study, *The Best is None Too Good*, "'but we still don't give them the rights of American first-class citizenship. It isn't fair.'"[153]

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[151] Studs Terkel, *The Good War: Oral History of World War Two*, First edition. (Pantheon Books, 1984), 490.

[152] Alex Kershaw, *The Liberator: One World War II Soldier's 500-Day Odyssey from the Beaches of Sicily to the Gates of Dachau*, First edition. (Crown, 2012), 350 et seq.

[153] Martin, *The Best Is None Too Good*, 191.

Russell, born in Canada and raised in Cambridge, noted instances of discrimination—a form of "mental disability" he could not understand—inflicted stateside upon exemplary service members: a Jewish doctor, a Black double-amputee, and a highly decorated soldier of Japanese descent. Of the instances of ethnic and religious solidarity he heard had been routine in combat he wondered, "why that same spirit couldn't exist in peace as it did in war." [154] Sailor James Fahey fraternized with Japanese civilians after the armistice and found them "no different from the people in any other part of the world. The people all over the world are good."[155]

Conservatives, though, sometimes saw little to change their minds about American society, emerging from the War espousing the same prejudices they had carried into it, reinforced by rumor, innuendo, and pure fantasy.[156] Pre-war attitudes about race, for example, often survived the conflict unscathed, both for the bigoted and the broad-minded. The United States military remained segregated throughout the War, with Black and Japanese American service members serving in separate units and receiving far worse treatment than whites. Within white units, religious and racial hostility was the norm—a pernicious blow to morale that greatly hampered the War effort and reveled itself in the juvenile boasting of some previctory veterans and the horror stories of others.

Many white, Southern, early returnees, Bowker revealed, publicly espoused a genocidal hatred of African Americans, even as they fought a war against racial bigotry.[157] In one instance, Bowker describes an Army artilleryman who, touring war plants in the United States, spoke

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[154] Russell, *Victory in My Hands*, 230–33.

[155] James J. Fahey, *Pacific War Diary, 1942-1945* (Houghton Mifflin, 1963), 400.

[156] See, generally, Jarvis, *The Male Body at War*; Bowker, *Out of Uniform*; Ralph G. Martin, *The Best Is None Too Good* (Farrar, Straus, 1948).

[157] See, also, Adams, *The Best War Ever*, 120.

openly and crudely about his belief in racial hierarchy and the pernicious qualities of Black soldiers who he, upon questioning, revealed to have never encountered. And despite learning that Black Army pilots had saved his life in Sicily, he insisted "that don't make no difference"; his chief goal in life was still to "'put them in their place when we get home.'"[158] Or, more directly, as Jewish former Army soldier Arno Mayer remembered, one widely circulated barracks poem ended, "[w]hen we finish with the Germans and the Japs, we'll come back and kill the Jews and the blacks."[159]

Conservative subordinates who questioned the attitudes of liberal superiors were seldom punished; liberals who challenged conservatives were frequently persecuted, a direct result, Paul Fussell regarded, of the fascism inherent in their racist worldview. Noted Fussell of the phenomenon:

> If you're an officer, you may find yourself performing very often as company duty officer or officer of the day or carrying out kitchen and garbage inspection because, you now realize, a while ago in the officer' mess you briefly interposed a mildly "liberal" observation after the major had descanted for fifteen minutes on the unsuitability of "nigras" for combat. If your comment had gone a bit further, you'd be likely to find yourself transferred soon to a distant and much worse unit. Or if you'd uttered your mild remonstrance while in combat instead of in camp, you might find yourself repeatedly selected to take out the more hazardous night

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[158] E.g., Bowker, *Out of Uniform*, 99, 193–94.

[159] Studs Terkel, *The Good War: Oral History of World War Two*, with Studs Terkel (New Press, The, 2011), 451.

> patrols to secure information, the kind, a former junior officer recalls, "we already knew from daytime observations, and had reported."

That so many of the targets of abuse by American fascists were, as Fussell wrote, "bright Jewish boys like Norman Mailer and Joseph Heller, or intelligent sarcastic kids from good colleges" was an "irony" too rich to ignore.[160] Meanwhile, other service members' efforts to address the obvious intentional mistreatment of their comrades, like that of the New York Ranger, were often met with punishment from superiors aghast at any interference in the era's racial hierarchies, demoralizing even apolitical veterans and leaving them wondering why the War had been fought at all.

Reintegrating Early Returnees

Niven Busch's 1944 novel *They Dream of Home* offered one of the few literary treatments of previctory returnees: a collection of four enlisted Marines (three white and one Native American), and one Black sailor whose participation in a dangerous early-War patrol in the Solomon Islands renders each, in some way, ineligible for further service. Returning home to Los Angeles, California in 1943 as the War rages and prior to the establishment of more formalized separation procedures or the GI Bill, they are treated to an indifferent welcome marred by a racial epithet, brief accolades they do not believe that they deserve, and mounting pressure to quietly resume schooling and civilian employment unaided. They are all soon adrift, unable to adjust, and unsure of their role in the wartime economy. The youngest, Private First Class Clifford Harper, dropped out of high school at sixteen to enlist illegally. After receiving a

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[160] Fussell, *Wartime*.

bullet wound in his abdomen, he was left for dead; though he has recovered physically, he struggles with debilitating tremors and bouts of uncontrollable violence that render him unfit for further service. Efforts to resume his education in college prove disastrous, and "Cliff" soon finds himself unemployed and restless.[161]

The oldest returnee, fifty-two-year-old Master Gunnery Sergeant Earl Watrous, is an experienced non-commissioned officer eligible for stateside duty or retirement. Disfavored by the new colonel who commands him and sent home against his wishes, Earl separates from the Corps in an impulsive fit of professional disappointment. With comprehensive veterans' legislation still a year away, both Cliff and Earl struggle to find their footing economically once they return, and both end up working in armaments plants, labor that is demoralizing and emotionally fraught. (Cliff experiences a seizure every time factory inspectors test the guns they install on aircraft.) The other members of the ill-fated patrol struggle as well. Jewish Corporal Matthew Klein, recovering from a battle wound, returns to a maelstrom of family strife that makes combat seem peaceful by comparison. With troubles all his own, the surliest member of "the Group" is Private William Tabeshaw, a Zuni whose ethnicity and BCD complicates his effort to secure employment of any kind.[162] All four are far better off than the poorest of their lot: Black Navy Steward's Mate (his rate is not known) Perry Kincheloe, a triple-amputee carried off a commercial train on a stretcher, whose race, disability, and relative poverty doom him to a life of irrelevance.

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[161] Busch, *They Dream of Home*.
[162] Busch, *They Dream of Home*.

Conclusion

Previctory veterans who struggled as much as the men in *They Dream of Home* to reintegrate were, statistically, a minority, though a significant one. By 1946, approximately 85% percent of early returnees had reintegrated successfully into civilian life, but this figure conflated new arrivals with those who had been home for years.[163] The experience of the 15% who could not adapt would be repeated on a much larger scale at War's end, perhaps affecting as many as one million people. By 1944, though, experts suggested that reintegration concerns about postvictory dischargees were unwarranted, because later returnees would include a greater proportion of healthy and well-adjusted individuals. "The range of men now leaving the Army—from the crippled or blinded hero to the smoker of 'reefers'—is," Wecter wrote, "…enormous, and untypical of the millions whom the war's end will see queuing up…."[164]

Indeed, virtually all of the "separatees" (the term the Army preferred) streaming through Fort Dix in September 1944, the Army claimed (with the press not challenging the statistics in any way), were discharged for reasons of "extreme dependency, minority, lack of adaptability to Army life, or misconduct," but this group would grow, not shrink, in the coming months.[165] Internalizing public prejudices against previctory returnees, Wecter barely understood how cruelly self-protective the wartime military could be: how easily individuals who undermined its authority, even unintentionally, or for good reasons, could be punished to an absurd extent. After the War, military justice would fall under direct public scrutiny after a litany of wartime

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[163] Bowker, *Out of Uniform*, 91.
[164] Wecter, *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*, 526.
[165] "Starting on the Road Back to Civilian Life," *The New York Times*, September 8, 1944, 21.

abuses came to light.[166] Nor could Wecter know how traumatic the final months of the Pacific War would be, and how many would come home impaired.

Postvictory returnees would also face challenges earlier arrivals would not, especially given their large numbers. They would arrive in a saturated labor market characterized by a massive contraction of wartime industries, shortages of raw materials, and delays in starting up civilian industrial production curtailed during the War. Housing, clothing, automobiles, and other basic necessities would, at first, be in short supply. Many would demand careers with a future rather than subsistence wages for manual labor.[167] Many veterans would use government benefits to start life anew: by undertaking higher education, buying farms, or starting new businesses, as engines of progress rather than as public charges, but these pathways would be challenging, especially for men whose only experience of adulthood had been combat, or those who lacked the education, confidence, or racial qualifications to succeed in America's flawed postwar civil society.

The things the War Department had already done to solve these problems, though, it had done right. Its vast shipping fleet would need to be repurposed for repatriation; new demobilization facilities would be needed to process veterans quickly, lest the transportation routes clog with new arrivals. And comprehensive veteran's benefits would be necessary, both to solve the wounds of war and help young men who adulthoods had been shattered by the War complete their education, find housing, and re-enter the workforce. Some of these problems

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[166] Bryant, "American Military Justice from the Revolution to the UCMJ," 10.

[167] University of Chicago Committee on Human Development, *The American Veteran Back Home; a Study of Veteran Readjustment*, 92, 113.

were beyond the scope of the War Department's power; for the time being, all it could do was plan the first part: figuring out when and how to bring the men home.