The Mud and the Mirth

Published by Marine Corps University Press

The Mud and the Mirth: Marine Cartoonists in World War I.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/102415

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3225186
CHAPTER ONE
The War Begins

For the U.S. Marines scattered aboard ships on the seas or at various postings around the world, the actions and scenes of duty are ones to be marked but are often difficult to explain. This is not surprising. Often, those with an artistic skill would sketch humorous scenes, typically under the assumption that it would only to be seen by fellow enlisted ranks or perhaps an officer with a sense of humor.

When the Great War commenced in the summer of 1914, patriots of all nations rushed to enlist. For some Americans who wished to fight, they had little recourse except to join the Canadian Army.¹ While the fighting was considerable from the start, the western front had settled down to an almost monotonous state of trench warfare in which the sides more often than not simply stared at each other and otherwise attempted to entertain themselves with a variety of methods.² One way was to print up what became known as “trench newspapers,” which told of the events of the unit in their areas of control. Artists-turned-combatants often created small illustrations to augment the stories.³ One famous British artist was Captain Charles Bruce Bairnsfather, who created the well-known character Old Bill, and his most famous

³ Titles of the trench papers include the British version The Wiper Times (ca. 1916) as well as the French Le Poilu and German versions titled Muskete-Kalendar and zwei kompanie. Cord A. Scott, “Comic Images from ‘Over There’: Soldier Produced Comics of WWI,” War, Literature, and the Arts 31 (2019).
cartoon with the caption “Well, if you knows of a better ’ole, go to it.”4 One distinction between Bairnsfather and other wartime artists was that he was an officer, while many of the more accurate and biting cartoons were drawn by and for the enlisted.

Much of the work on these ad hoc publications took place by the latter half of 1915, working into 1916 primarily due to the static nature of the western front by 1915. Trenches were reinforced and manned on a rotational basis. This meant that a unit would be at the front for 21 days, then rotated to the rear for a set amount of time.5 For their time in the rear, troops had greater access to libraries, theaters, bars, and even brothels. For the troops at the front, however, the entertainment was limited at best, so writing and illustration, which would later evolve into the trench newspaper, became an alternate form of distraction. For the Allied armies on the western front, the need for artists as well as humorists was such that the British government encouraged the importance of artists who could reproduce eye-witness accounts of events on the battlefield. These artists, combined with poets such as British officers Wilfred E. Owen or Siegfried L. Sassoon, were intended to give voice (and occasional gallows humor) to the situation. However, for British officers, the observations were often too acute to conditions and were often stopped or censored to avert a crisis of morale, though not allowing the free expression of the troops also hindered morale. For military units in other countries, an opposite approach was taken.6

When the U.S. Marine Corps added cartoons to their official publications in 1914 (Recruiters’ Bulletin, with others mentioned in this book added later on), the Service was offering a way for servicemembers to make light of the situation while being somewhat positive in terms of critique. For example, younger enlisted worked on their caricature skills while drawing stories of life in places like Haiti.7 Again, while many of these cartoons were in-

---

6 Willmott, World War I, 260.
7 Pvt Mike Gawron’s cartoons in Recruiters’ Bulletin and Marines Magazine are good examples of what he witnessed.
Capt Bruce Bairnsfather was considered the first published combat cartoonist. This particular cartoon was the one for which he is famous. He eventually produced military themed cartoons from both World War I and World War II, in the latter case as a correspondent. Source: Bruce Bairnsfather, 24 November 1915.
tended for those in the same predicament, the importance of utilizing them in a publication was recognized. To this end, the first official Marine Corps cartoonists emerged.