The Mud and the Mirth

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

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THE MUD
AND THE MIRTH
INTRODUCTION

The Early Years

The First World War unleashed a plethora of new weapons, ideas, and terrors on humanity. However, the idea of military personnel needing and having a way to vent their thoughts on combat or other aspects of life through published humor was also introduced. Combatants previously might express how they felt about warfare in a variety of manners; some drew illustrations of the sights around them, while others wrote home describing the events or in some cases their emotions. If the imagery became too much to bear, some developed a condition known by many names: nostalgia, shell shock, the thousand-yard stare, or now post-traumatic stress.1

As combatants on the front lines in the Great War sat idle between engagements, they occupied themselves with a variety of entertainments. One such form was in the “trench papers” that were written by troops on the front line and printed near the front

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1 There have been many books written on aspects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from antiquity to the present. For example, Lawrence A. Tritle from the classics department of Loyola Marymount wrote of PTSD-like symptoms in Greek soldiers during the Peloponnesian War. See Lawrence A. Tritle, “‘Ravished Minds’ in the Ancient World,” in Combat Trauma and the Ancient Greeks, eds. Peter Meineck and David Konstan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137398864_5. Current works on PTSD even include Sidney Jacobson and Ernie Colón, Coming Home: What to Expect, How to Deal When you Return from Combat (Washington, DC: Ceridian and Military OneSource, 2008); and The Docs: A Graphic Novel (San Diego, CA: Naval Health Research Center, 2010) on life in the Service as well as diagnosing PTSD.
for later distribution. The U.S. military borrowed some ideas and concepts from the British or French armies, and also decided to produce a publication to keep the men occupied. The military produced a new newspaper to inform the military of events titled *Stars and Stripes*. In addition, the newspaper “borrowed” another idea of entertainment from the civilian papers of that time: cartoons. These *Stars and Stripes* cartoons were illustrated by a Marine who would start a tradition carried on later by many others. This book looks at U.S. Marine Corps-produced cartoons from the World War I era, beginning with in-house publications and culminating with Abian A. “Wally” Wallgren and his work with *Stars and Stripes*. Some of the themes addressed in the chapters that follow encourage the reader to consider the legacy of these social and cultural history items and the people who created them, as well as the influence that they may have had on the troops.

*The Mud and the Mirth* also shows the succession of cartoons that told of the Marines’ life well after World War I, into World War II, Korea, and even to the present day. While the style of artwork and the environment may have changed over time, the general themes of combat and the conditions by which Marines found themselves are universal. This is why these cartoons and other ditties from World War I continue to entertain as well as inform others of the conditions that the “devil dogs” experienced in the Great War.

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2 For more on these trench papers, see “America and World War I: American Military Camp Newspapers,” Accessible Archives, accessed 14 April 2022.

3 See, for example, the archived collection “Online Historical Newspapers: Trench Newspapers/Journals—1st World War,” Moreno Valley College Library, 27 May 2022.

4 While there was an earlier Civil War-era paper called the *Stars and Stripes*, the first iteration of *Stars and Stripes* came in February 1918, when most of U.S. forces were still training for combat or were slowly massing before being sent to the front. For more on these Civil War editions, see “Stars and Stripes: U.S. Military Newspapers in the Library of Congress,” Library of Congress Reading Room, 16 March 2022. *Stars and Stripes* was modeled after the trench papers that were commonly produced by the British and French armies near the front so that they might be able to catch up on news, dispel rumors, and otherwise distract themselves from the conditions at the front. While many of the informal “trench papers” no longer exist, the Library of Congress was able to preserve the weekly *Stars and Stripes*, which was produced every Friday as an eight-page newspaper.
The illustrations presented here are offered for historical and research purposes. By the standards of culture, many of these presentations would be considered at best insensitive and decidedly racist or sexist. As the United States armed forces in World War I were segregated, any minorities presented were often the subject of the derogatory stereotypes of the day. In particular, Afro-Caribbean representations were jingoistic at their core. Additionally, women were often depicted as objects of desire or a visual distraction from the battlefield, with the exception of the illustrations that accompanied the articles written by private, then later corporal, and finally Sergeant Martha L. Wilchinski, who worked for Recruiters’ Bulletin, Leatherneck, and Marines Magazine. While private collections may offer additional insight into thoughts from minority illustrators, for the purposes of this book, the cartoons presented are those as published in Recruiters’ Bulletin, Marines Magazine, Stars and Stripes, and The Songs My Mother Never Taught Me. Primary and secondary sources will be offered at the back of the book.

**Origins of the Concept**

The idea of combatants drawing events going on around them goes back hundreds if not thousands of years. The idea of making light of deadly situations, complaining of the monotony of military life, or poking fun at the command structure is a constant throughout history. However, three specific events coalesced to give birth to military comics.

First, there was the creation of the political cartoon. This idea of depicting events in a humorous manner has existed in the United States since its colonial iteration. Benjamin Franklin was the first to publish a political cartoon in 1754 (the “Live Free or Die” fragmented snake cartoon). As the political situation continued to escalate in the colonies and later in the United States as a whole, the political cartoon became a way to discuss, or at least

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6 Franklin’s warning to the British colonies in America encouraged them to unite against the French and the native tribes using a segmented snake. Benjamin Franklin, “Join or Die,” *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 9 May 1754.
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show, serious issues in a visual form to educate even those who were not fully English literate.

Second, there was the rise of the newspaper as well as the news magazine. During the Civil War, the magazine *Harpers Weekly* sent out not just writers/reporters, but also the newly created photographers, such as Mathew B. Brady and his associates Alexander Gardner, George Barnard, and Timothy O’Sullivan, as well as combat sketch artists. These artists could capture the troop movements much more accurately since photographs were not as effective; they simply could not handle moving scenes with the available technology. The sketches could show action but could

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7 The Civil War was photographed with large format view cameras using wet plates that had to be developed immediately after exposure, which required some type of “dark room” to finish the process. For more on the work done by Brady and others, see Douglas Perry, “The Civil War as Photographed by Mathew Brady,” National Archives, 30 September 2021.
also be either serious or humorous. This would play out further in later artistic works.

Finally, the newspaper wars of the late 1800s (the era of yellow journalism) gave rise to a new form of artistic entertainment: the cartoon. The era is named for a creation by Richard F. Outcault called The Yellow Kid, which first appeared in the New York World in 1895. The two main publishers in New York at that time—Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst—understood the power and interest of The Yellow Kid and incorporated it into a variety of imitation cartoons, including the Katzenjammer Kids by Rudolph Dirks, Injun Summer by John T. McCutcheon, and Mutt and Jeff by Bud Fisher. Hearst in particular was a key proponent of “making news.” When correspondents were sent to cover the uprising in Cuba, only to find little was actually going on, Hearst responded, “You supply the pictures, I’ll supply the war.” It was this sort of combination of media and art that lead to the first military artists in publications, as well as a legacy that continues to this day.

9 Robert Harvey, Children of the Yellow Kid: The Evolution of the American Comic Strip (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 27.
This was the first widely produced comic character and was an essential part of the era of yellow journalism.
Figure 3. The cover of the 1915 book *Mutt and Jeff in the Trenches*

The popularity of the strip blended into the realities of the war. Here, the two join the British Army as the United States was still neutral in 1915.

Figure 4. Yellow journalism
