

# THE BOYS' CRUSADE

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THE BOYS'  
CRUSADE

*The American Infantry in  
Northwestern Europe, 1944–1945*



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TO THOSE ON BOTH SIDES  
WHO SUFFERED

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Weigley is the historian I have relied on with the greatest appreciation for the accuracy of his scholarship and his sensitivity to humane values. Others in this category are Martin Blumenson and Charles MacDonald.

There is a lot of Robert Kotlowitz in this book. He is a person I admire for his immunity to the degradations of infantry combat and for his humor and his sympathy for his fellow soldiers, even when they're behaving badly.

Gwen Gatto has again rendered herself indispensable by her cheerful command of the word processor. I thank her most warmly for her sharp eye and her patience.

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## Preface

Those intimate with the military and its ways have experienced the army's obsession with the Western European campaign of World War II. Even today, after all its subsequent action in the Middle Eastern deserts and the Asian swamps, the struggle in France and Germany in 1944 and 1945 seems to remain the army's point of reference for its conception of war—for the way it sees itself, its doctrine, its organization and training, its equipment, and its professional idioms. When the military looks for an instructive classic, it is the European war on the ground that is likely to be the model.

We may ask why, and this book may suggest a few answers. For one thing, unlike both the Korean and Vietnam wars, it ended well for the United States. And refracted in narrative, the war in Europe can be shown to possess a vivid moral structure, gratifying to both the historian and the normal patriotic reader.

At the ARCADIA Conference held in Washington in January 1942, Roosevelt and Churchill discussed what they should do to turn a losing war into a winning one. A subordinate attendant at the conference, a mere major general named Eisenhower, listened carefully and arrived at a depressing truth for the United States. He wrote in his diary, "We've got to go to Europe and fight." That is, air power alone, as some had been arguing, could not win the war, nor could a naval blockade nor other techniques less nasty than personal soldierly encounters on the ground. Infantry, he realized, would have to bear the ultimate burden, and winning the war by that means would be inescapably bloody.

Going to Europe and fighting there meant a dramatic increase in the small number of peacetime ground troops, and soon all over America training camps appeared: two-story white clapboard barracks, together with leveled-off parade grounds and firing ranges for small arms and artillery. All had to be so superficial and temporary that after the war, the whole setup could be removed leaving not a trace behind.

It was at scores of these camps that the draftees required by the ground forces were prepared for war. After a maximum of seventeen weeks' basic training—some received less—over two million young men were organized into eighty-nine divisions, each containing about twelve thousand soldiers. Not all fought, but the majority of these were shipped to the Continent to begin the process of destroying the German army, generally regarded as the best and the largest in the world. As Eisenhower conceived, winning the war would require "first, slugging with air at West Europe, to b

followed by land attack as soon as possible.” “Slugging with air”: as a check on self-righteousness it’s well to remember that in July and August of 1943, the RAF and the U.S. Eighth Air Force burned to death thirty thousand civilians, of both genders and all ages, in Hamburg.

Actually, the United States had been surreptitiously in the war before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the German declaration of war that followed. The United States had been flagrantly violating its announced neutrality by sending Britain food, arms, tanks, aircraft, and ammunition, and at risk of being sunk by German U-boats, which prowled the Atlantic Coast looking for freighters. Sinkings were sometimes near enough to be watched by vacationers in Florida.

Once officially in the war, the American ground forces were prepared in England to obey the orders of the Combined Allied Chiefs of Staff. Addressing Eisenhower, the newly appointed Allied Supreme Commander, they said, “You will enter the Continent of Europe and . . . undertake operations aimed at the heart of Germany and the destruction of her armed forces.”

On June 6, 1944, the slaughter of the frontal assault at Omaha Beach would warn of ample horrors to come. Until May 1945, the boys of America, with British and Canadian assistance, edged close to the “heart” of the enemy by overcoming in a series of encounters the retreating enemy at his successive defense lines. Some were rivers, some fortified areas, some shrewdly flooded ground. Most featured the new menace of antipersonnel mines, whose removal by combat engineers delayed attacks frequently. All these defenses were held with what seemed diabolical determination by an enemy fighting, it believed, for civilization’s whole future existence.

Once loosed from the Normandy beachhead and its surroundings, the Americans faced the sobering fact that the nearest German border was 350 miles away, every foot of which had to be cleared of German soldiers. Getting to Germany took three months, even though the Americans were able to inject many new divisions into their line after invading southern France near Marseille on August 15. By August 25 German-occupied Paris was in sight and yielded without a struggle, and by December 15, the Americans were arrayed along the west bank of the Rhine from Holland to Switzerland, preparing for the final assault on Germany proper and the total destruction of its power to resist. Throughout these attacks in the west, the Americans coordinated their tactics with the Russian advance against Germany’s eastern front. But by the fall of 1944, it became apparent that the Allies had seriously outrun their supplies, and as the weather worsened, they halted in eastern France and gradually despaired of ending the war before spring 1945. The war had four more months to run until the German surrender on May 8. Before the end of the carnage, 135,000 American boys were dead, 586,628 wounded.

The problem of offering an account of one dimension of the European war was how to squeeze eleven months of fighting and fear into a short book. Certainly not by trying to tell all, moving day by day from the Normandy landings (already sufficiently depicted in film and memoir) all the way to the surrender.

Finally I decided that the essence of the war on the ground might be conveyed by rigorous selection and intense focus on instructive contrasts and surprises—the fun of drinking and sex in London making up for the miseries of the troopship, and the shock of combat worse than any boy could have imagined.



It has been said that those who have not fought the Germans don't know what war is. In the Second World War, German troops, although gradually losing the war, were a hardened bunch compared with the boy members of what James Jones accurately called "a reluctant draftee army."

Now, almost sixty years after the horror, there has been a return, especially in popular culture, to military romanticism, which, if not implying that war is really good for you, does suggest that it contains desirable elements—pride, companionship, and the consciousness of virtue enforced by deadly weapons. In this book I have occasionally tried to confront this view with realistic detail. Some readers may think my accounts of close warfare unjustifiably pessimistic in implication, but attention to the universal ironic gap between battle plans and battle actualities will suggest the ubiquity of much of my joyless material. There is nothing in infantry warfare to raise the spirits at all, and anyone who imagines a military "victory" gratifying is mistaken.

To get a feeling for the infantry war in Europe, one must take into account certain anomalies that seem to make no sense and cast a mantle of the absurd over bellicose events. (An example is what I will emphasize about the medical treatment of enemy prisoners.) Thus, while exploiting the technological sophistication by sending up rocket-propelled flying bombs and stratospheric ordnance to damage London and Antwerp, in the field the Germans relied on horses to drag around artillery pieces, kitchens, and similar heavy loads, as if replaying the techniques of the Napoleonic Wars. In a war heralded as an up-to-date affair of motor vehicles and rapid mobility, the infantry of both sides walked more often than they were conveyed to their duty by trucks. To be sure, there were tanks and half-tracks and jeeps, but much of the fighting took place without heavy equipment at all, the infantry performing its role with rifles, hand grenades, machine guns, and mortars and using tactics unchanged since the First World War and even the Civil War. "Marching fire," General Patton's favorite mode of infantry attack (firing at the enemy from the hip while walking toward him), combined simultaneous fire and movement in a way useful since the Indian pacifications of the nineteenth century.

And perhaps this is the place to remind readers of the meaning of a few terms. A *squad* consisted of twelve men armed with rifles and led by a sergeant. One of the men carried a heavy BAR, a Brownie Automatic Rifle, a relic of the First World War, and no match for the modern German automatic weapons. A *platoon* consisted of three such squads led by a lieutenant, and a *company*, four platoons, one with heavy weapons like mortars and water-cooled machine guns, led by a captain. Formed up for an attack, one can imagine all of them scared to death.

It may be necessary for war to employ adolescent boys, but that's no reason to assume them as readers of military history. The historiography I've been drawn to abjures attractive cuteisms like "the Big Red One," "Hell on Wheels," and "the Rainbow Division," as well as charming, troop-friendly allusions to things like "the deuce-and-a-half truck." The world of ground warfare can never be truly recalled by such stuff, which belongs to the history of sentimental show business, not the history of real human action and emotion, especially as triggered by intimate horror, death, and sorrow. In my view, a chronicle should deal with nothing but the truth and thus serve as a small warning for the future.

And it is worth suggesting that for some of the boy survivors, now aged around eighty, the end of the war was equivalent in many ways to the end of Europe and of European pretenses to superiority. It remained a place perhaps to travel to, but it was now stained so deeply by folly and cruelty that

could no longer justify the reverence Henry James and others once lavished on it as an immutable guide to manners and intellectual technique.

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Historian Modris Eksteins quotes an educated German woman's conclusions about the war:

One can only regard our present situation as the quintessence of irony in the whole history of the world. . . . We will never get over this bloody calvary. We have grown old and weary to death. One sits and searches one's brain for an explanation. . . . What was the point of it all, what rhyme or reason was there for this desperate, ruinous destruction? Was it just a satanic game?

The elderly American Boy Crusaders have now a few years left to ponder Eksteins's feelings:

"Even if surrounded with explanations," Gunter Grass has written, "Auschwitz can never be grasped." The same is true of the murderous military strategies of the two world wars, of Stalin's homicidal policies, and of the fire-bombing of civilians undefended cities. Nineteen forty-five marked the nadir of Western Civilization.

And the Boy Crusaders were there to watch the whole dismal performance.

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## The Boy Crusaders

When Ike Eisenhower was a boy, European history was more avidly pursued in schools than now, and it's also possible that he knew a bit about the Crusades from his own reading, if he hadn't heard about them in church—his family was pious—or at elementary or high school or even at West Point. In any event, the imagery of the Crusades was lodged strongly in his mind. In an Order of the Day given to the 1st Army, he read to “Soldiers, Sailors, and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force,” just before the invasion of Normandy, he informed them: “You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months.” And, once successfully over, he would title his memoir of the war *Crusade in Europe*.

Eisenhower was not the only one conscious during the war of the Crusades. One of the enemy Panzer leader Hans von Luck, had occasion three times to recall a poem about a military moment during the Crusades whose horrors resembled those he witnessed in the Falaise Pocket in 1944. He writes, “Man, horse, and truck, by the Lord were struck.” This saying, from a poem on the battles of the Crusaders in Palestine about 1213, had come to my mind twice before: in December, 1941, before Moscow, and in 1943 in North Africa.”

The date 1213 suggests the so-called Children's Crusade, about whose actuality some historians have doubts. In the year 1212, it is said, an odd army set out from France and Germany. Its purpose was to liberate the Holy Land from the profane grip of Islam. This Crusade is reputed to have numbered fifty thousand young people, of whom only three thousand survived the attentions of pirates, slave dealers, and brothel keepers. Whether actual or mythical, the Children's Crusade can help suggesting many dimensions of American youth's curious, violent journey eastward over France and Germany in the Second World War. Kurt Vonnegut invokes *The Children's Crusade* as a sardonic alternative title for his novel *Slaughterhouse Five*, which measures many significant features of the war and those “children.”

I intend no disrespect to the memory of Dwight D. Eisenhower by examining his term *crusade*. It made some sense at the moment, even if many of the still unblooded troops were likely to ridicule it. If they read or heard the Supreme Commander's words at all, they were doubtless embarrassed to have so highfalutin a term applied to their forthcoming performances and their feelings about them. It is likely that many never saw the sheet of paper on which the word appeared, and if the message was

read to them (in the wind and the rain), their military experience so far had inclined them to greet official utterances with scorn and skepticism. Indeed, when such pronouncements were read aloud they often ridiculed them noisily, until silenced by a sergeant's "At ease!"

At this distance, it may not be easy to remember that the European ground war in the west was largely fought by American boys seventeen, eighteen, and nineteen years old. At seventeen you could enlist if you had your parents' written permission, but most boys waited until they were drafted at age eighteen. (Actually, the army contained numerous illicit seventeen-year-olds, their presence in the ranks of soldiers more or less regularized by false papers not rigorously inquired into.) Some of these men were children shaved but many did not need to. Robert Kotlowitz remembers bayonet drill. "We aimed to thrust, slashed or whichever—screaming 'Kill! Kill!' in our teen-age voices." Not a few soldiers, hopeful of food packages from home specified Animal Crackers, which, one soldier said, "can do wonders for low morale." (Perhaps what troops were recalling when seeking this specialty was eight-year-old Shirley Temple singing "Animal Crackers in My Soup.") At the same time, the infantrymen, not yet versed in the adult conventions of the high-class uses of wine, did not wait until after dinner to sip a little cognac. In quantity, it often replaced water in their canteens.

Who were these boys, who bitched freely but seldom cried, even when wounded? What did they have in common? Most had sufficient emotional control not to express angry envy of those (like, say, nonflying air corps troops) who had a nicer, safer war.

These infantry soldiers, if they weren't children, weren't quite men either, even if officers commonly addressed groups of them as such. One medical aidman was typical in referring to his patients as boys. Explaining in a letter home the workings of the casualty-clearing system, he fell naturally into phrases like these—a boy gets hurt; the injured boy; leaves space for another boy; the wounded boy; as each boy comes in; a brief history of the boy and his diagnosis—the last of which refers to the official tag fastened to the soldier's jacket or, as our aidman puts it, to "the boy's coat." Wounded officers passing through the aid station were never called boys, although many were almost as young.

Taken as a whole, the boys had a powerful propulsion of optimism, a sense that the war couldn't last forever, and that if anyone was going to get wounded, it would not be them. They had a common ability to simulate courage despite actuality: that is, a certain amount of dramatic talent, plus a vivid appreciation of black humor, involving plenty of irony. They had sufficient physical stamina to survive zero-degree cold from time to time, and considerable elementary camping skills of the sort common among civilian fishermen and hunters, which lots of survivors became after the war. They had to have fine eyesight, good enough to detect planted antipersonnel mines by their little triggers of thin wire protruding aboveground. They had to have a pack rat's skill in collecting small objects, like looted knives and forks. And preeminently, they had to have extraordinary luck. One infantryman's mother exhorted him to be careful. He answered: "You can't be careful. You can only be lucky."

And these young troops got along with one another because they usually shared certain beliefs:

1. America is the best country in the world because it is the only really modern one.
2. It is the world leader in technology, producing the bulk of the good cars, and, in unbelievably

large quantities, airplanes and tanks, which, being the best in the world, are going to win the war. They are certainly better than anything the Germans and the Japs can make. (Only the brightest and boldest of the troops perceived that American tanks were seriously outgunned by German ones and, when struck by a shell, were likely to burst into flames, almost as a matter of course. This tendency earned them the name Ronsons, after the popular cigarette lighter.) Among the troops, only the finely tuned noted the superiority of the German machine guns. Discovery of these facts was demoralizing, and a problem confronting the brighter U.S. infantrymen was rationalizing away these sorry truths when among dumber people.

3. The American army, despite its screwups, is the best ever in providing the troops with clothing, food, lodging, personal weapons, and security.

These credulous youths were the products of American high schools, and differences of race, religion, and social class did not significantly alter their adherence to this code of belief or influence their common hatreds, which can be specified as follows:

1. Officers of any kind, especially those not to a degree redeemed by sharing troops' hardships, and those pursuing in wartime their peacetime professions in uniform, like medicine, optometry, or medical administration. These phonies were granted officer rank and beautiful dress uniforms without having to undergo the usual price of painful infantry training.
2. The French, and quite justly too: they spoke a language impossible to learn and embarrassing to pronounce, and worse, they required the help of strangers (especially Americans) to win the wars, both the First World War and this one. In his most famous harangue of the troops, General Patton had enunciated the American view of people who lose wars or battles: "Americans love a winner. Americans will not tolerate a loser." And the French of all types were distinctly snottier toward their saviors.
3. Stay-at-homes exempt from the war by virtue of largely invisible ailments, like punctured eardrums, high blood pressure, flat feet, or a "nervous condition." Even self-proclaimed "homosexuality."
4. Anyone occupying in combat a position to the rear of the infantryman. Included are soldiers in the artillery, all engineers except combat engineers, and certainly the various staff, afraid to visit the line and to see what's actually happening there.

Military historian Roger Spiller, who has spent decades studying the embarrassing actualities of battle, quotes with approval Bernard Knox, who writes, "It is true of every war that much as he may fear and perhaps even hate the enemy opposing him, the combat infantryman broods with deep and bitter resentment over the enormous number of people in his rear who sleep safely at night." And there was an enormous number. Spiller explains: "Of the millions of Americans sent overseas by the Army during World War II, only 14 percent were infantrymen. Those 14 percent took more than 70 percent of all the battle casualties among overseas troops." As Captain Harold P. Leinbaugh, author of the memoir *The Men of Company K*, proclaims, "We were the Willie Lomans of the war." Or, as some coarser speakers have put it, "the niggers." Soldiers who fought in North Africa and Southern Italy, struck by the squalor and filth of the peasants, thought of them as "the Infantry of the World."

“Adolescent fervor” is Robert Kotlowitz’s term for those characteristics of male youth that can be honed and intensified by military training. “The Army understood that fervor and used it,” he writes. “All armies do; they depend upon it.” Adolescent fervor in the form it assumed before bullets and artillery and mines ruined it is pleasantly registered by Edward W. Wood Jr., an enthusiastic—no, ecstatic—soldier as he participated in the victorious pursuit of the enemy in late August 1944:

To be nineteen years old, to be nineteen and an infantryman, to be nineteen and fight for the liberation of France from the Nazis the summer of 1944! That time of hot and cloudless blue days when the honeybees buzzed about our heads and we shouted strange phrases in words we did not understand to men and women who cheered us as if we were gods. That summer, that strangely glorious summer, when we rushed across France, the Nazis fleeing just ahead of us. *Drive east, drive east.* South of Paris the day it was liberated, across the Marne to Château-Thierry (battlefields of the war in which my father and uncle had fought) then Reims with its cathedral, the most beautiful structure I had ever seen in my life, its magical flying buttresses brilliant against the August sky. Each village we entered started another party for us, as we shared bottles of wine hoarded since 1940 and kisses from wetmustached men and smooth-cheeked women while we hurled cigarettes and chocolates from our armored half-track and got drunk together and laughed and cried and screamed, for we had freed them from evil. For that glorious moment, the dream of freedom lived and we were ten feet tall.

A few weeks later, “in action” with his unit, he is ill-treated by a German artillery shell, which tears away his buttocks. In his book *On Being Wounded* he recalls it all, and a ghastly story of suffering and shame it is.

In May 1945, infantryman Mitchell Sharpe writes his mother, who has told him of the death in combat of his friend Neal:

DEAR MOM:

I couldn’t possibly feel any worse if you had written one of the immediate family had died. I keep thinking of him like that kid . . . lying off the path as if he were asleep. I see him lying on his back, arms overhead, with eyes and mouth open, as if asking “God, why?” If you could only see us kids killed at eighteen, nineteen, and twenty, fighting in a country that means nothing to us . . . Kids that have never had a crack at life. Some have never worked and earned money and felt proud, . . . never felt that temporary exhilaration of being drunk, never slept with a girl.

Mitchell Sharpe closes his letter by visualizing “the thousands of Neals buried from Normandy to Munich.”

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## First Time Abroad

For American troops, the first unpleasant act in their active and dangerous participation in what has been misleadingly termed the Good War was throwing up in the transports conveying them to the United Kingdom. Most threw up only for the first several hours, but some never stopped for the several days or more of the journey. Another cause of unhappiness was the augmentation of their normal hatred of officers. While the men ate terrible food twice a day standing up, the officers, in an elegant restaurant several decks above, sat down to white table linen, nice cutlery, friendly service by stewards, and infinitely better food, hardly different from the cuisine rich transatlantic passengers had enjoyed before the war.

For most men, and officers as well, this was their maiden voyage, and when they arrived in Liverpool, they began to experience the foreign for the first time. They had been primed by Ernest Knight's booklet *A Short Guide to Great Britain*. (For their part, the locals were gently prepared for surprises by Louis MacNeice's *Meet the U.S. Army*.)

There was no doubt that despite the vague similarity of the two idioms, Britain was a world away from the environment the boy Yanks knew and loved. For one thing, cars were tiny and drove on the wrong side of the road. Victuals were vastly different: the food was cottony and bland, the beer so and lukewarm. When after a lot of disgusting beer a boy sought a place to urinate, he found the fixtures laughably archaic. Bathtubs were not overly common, showers virtually nonexistent. It seemed to rain all the time, and there was little central heating, only tiny gas stoves that hardly worked. Everything seemed called by a different name: a drugstore (which sold only drugs) was called a chemist's, and condoms tended to be sold by hairdressers, i.e., barbers. The coinage was irrational and required constant study if one were to avoid being cheated. The five-pound bill (British, *not* looked like a diploma. The language was replete with pitfalls. You had to steer clear of *bum*, for example, and *bloody*, and instead of *excuse me*, you had to say *soddy*. Compounding these oddities, British speech, in addition to its strange pronunciation, was fond of understatement and straight-faced irony, both seldom practiced in the United States.

Almost two and a half years passed between the arrival of the first American troops and the nervous, serious departure for Normandy. Although their main business in the United Kingdom was training and toughening, their recreation (drinking aside) was largely women, both innocents and

prostitutes. And for British women, the Yanks were nothing short of a gift.

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First of all, their hygiene was better than that of their local counterparts, who smelled of underarm sweat, especially when dancing. The Yanks had recourse to something new, little jars of Arrid and Odorono, not to mention shaving lotion. The women also loved the American uniform jacket, with classy lapels like the RAF's. If the American soldier dolled up for a date looked like a gentleman, the British soldier, with his coarse wool battle-dress jacket with working-class collar, looked like a slop. Instead of the British soldiers' noisy hobnailed boot soles, the GIs had nice, silent rubber ones. But the Yanks' biggest appeal for the British female was their comparative riches, which, among many other features, gave credence to the joke, "Have you heard about the new utility knickers [U.S., *panties*]? One Yank and they're off."

Given all this, it is not hard to understand the British troops' bitter hostility toward the GIs, not to mention the outrage caused by their vastly different pay scales. Expressed in U.S. dollars, a British private was paid \$2.82 a week; an American private, \$13.84. A British second lieutenant earned \$67.42 a month; an American, \$162.50. The effect of this upon "dating" need not be emphasized, nor its contribution to the obvious bad blood between British and American forces, who sedulously avoided each other's company. The whole American air of excess and even luxury can be illustrated by the assumed toilet-paper needs of the two armies. The American army estimated that one of its soldiers would use 22.5 sheets per day. The British estimate for its troops was three sheets.

Sensing increasingly as the weeks went by what they were going to face on the beaches of France, the GIs did not stint on sexual enjoyment, and London was the favorite place for it. Well supplied with army-issue condoms, you met your woman on the sidewalk and began by asking, in the blackout, "Got a light?" The match flame would tell you if she was too old, ugly, or dirty to be sexworthy. Then, if you ascertained satisfactorily, you took her to Hyde Park, Green Park, or Kensington Gardens, or if that was too far, you had her standing up against a wall. Countless British girls were deceived by the rumor that you couldn't get pregnant if you did it standing up against a building. GI Louis Simpson remembers sidewalk sounds: "Come on, Yank. Ahnly two quid!" and he adds, "Henry James, had he heard the obscenities issuing from an air-raid shelter, might have revised in some degree his comparisons of American coarseness and English refinement."

Heavy work was required by both American and British public relations personnel for concealing the discomfort with and often severe dislike of each army for the other. The Americans, especially those on the staff, found the British supercilious and stuffy, constantly patronizing their ally by claiming greater military experience, earned in the many months before the tardy, unwilling Americans were forced into action by Pearl Harbor after their apparent satisfaction with the defeat of France and Britain in 1940. And when they considered more distant history, the British found themselves still annoyed by the independence of the United States in the first place and its impudent departure from the Empire, as well as the embarrassing example it set of republican freedom for restive colonies like India. The British were also understandably annoyed by America's being untouched by the bombings, blackouts, and rationing they had endured, and seeming often unimaginative and unsympathetic about Britain's relative poverty and obsolescence.

When the boy John Keegan saw hordes of American troops taking over the countryside, he assumed that the American presence in Britain meant that the Yanks were generously putting themselves under



British command. He finally made the humbling discovery that this was not the case at all and that the Americans would constitute the bulk of the means by which the war in the West could be won. Churchill helped illuminate his stubborn countrymen when, after the invasion of Sicily, he reminded the Commons: "Since 1776 we have not been in the position of being able to decide the policy of the United States." From then on, it was clear to all, if unacceptable to most, that Britain would not be controlling either political or military events. No wonder they felt humiliated and undone, especially because the Yanks were so ignorant and vulgar. No wonder ill feelings arose both in the British army and on the home front. In the army, British weapons and equipment were visibly inferior to the Americans': the flat British helmet clearly offered less protection; compared with the eight-round semiautomatic rifle of the GIs, the British Enfield was bolt-operated and slow; the British troops had one uniform only, for both fighting and "walking out"; and they even had limited dental care, primarily emphasizing extraction.

The news spread rapidly to civilians that U.S. privates appeared better dressed than British officers and that the Americans were "so much better off than our boys." Even those who did not date their clothes couldn't help noticing that "they smelled so nice." When objectors to the Yanks' presence and rowdy behavior complained that they were "overpaid, oversexed, and over here," the Americans, who may have sensed a more authentic reason for British annoyance, answered that British troops were "underpaid, undersexed, and under Eisenhower."

The last fact occasioned much bitterness, some justified, among senior British officers. Because many more American than British troops would fight and be killed, an American would have to hold the office of Supreme Commander. But British officers couldn't help noticing that Eisenhower had never commanded combat troops: his distinction was that of a staff officer only. His main critic was General (later Field Marshal) Sir Bernard Law Montgomery, who was pleased to draw attention to the disparity between his battle command experience and the Supreme Commander's. Monty had led combat troops in World War I and been decorated for bravery. As a lieutenant, he had been shot in the lung, and his courage brought him promotion to captain. He more than once said that while Ike had never commanded troops in battle, "I've commanded everything there is to command. I never missed a single position: platoon, company, battalion, brigade, division, army corps, army, group of armies. That's rare. That's the way to do it."

Monty annoyed his allies mightily by seldom curbing such quarrelsome self-praise. Some sort of psychological uncertainty was his trouble and he needed to be praised at all times. This state of mind might be seen as a midget version of the United Kingdom's postcolonial shock. After all, one of the world's great empires was being brought to its knees, and worse, by a group from one of its former possessions. A group, almost, of "natives." Monty found it hard to be minimally polite to Americans, even to Eisenhower, his superior officer. Once, Monty's attitude of pedant and scold so annoyed the Supreme Commander that Ike was moved to say, "Steady, Monty! You can't talk to me like that. I'm your boss." The friction between the two became so well known that the troops of both sides found it easy to believe that they had had a fistfight in the presence of troops over the disasters of Monty's OPERATION MARKET GARDEN. One American complaint about Monty's generalship was that he was too cautious, too unwilling to take risks. But his apparent disinclination to accept necessary casualties arose from his knowledge that unlike the States, Britain was running out of men: he could foresee a moment when there would be no more replacements for his army. Still, it is amazing that the egotist

and arrogance of one mere man could occasion so much trouble.

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Another cause of friction between these two allies was American racial policy. The American desire to follow stateside rules about the segregation of blacks from whites gave great offense in Britain and caused no end of trouble. In Britain the “problem” was unknown. But many American officers and men came from the Southern states; they expected strict segregation abroad, and in the United Kingdom they refused to use facilities open to black and white alike. There was loud British objection to this unlawful and distasteful social segregation. Race riots broke out, and the city of Bristol was the scene of one of the worst. Under American pressure, the city had become divided into two recreational areas, with no black-white mixing allowed, but the black soldiers became convinced that they’d been assigned the least desirable pubs. One Saturday night, four hundred black and white GIs began fighting, requiring 120 MPs with truncheons to deal with the mess. Before order was restored, several men had been severely injured. One had been killed. In the nearby town of Cheltenham, the citizens grew violently angry at the white treatment of blacks and learned a new word when white officers termed them “nigger lovers.” Fights broke out when white GIs saw girls going out with blacks—most girls found the blacks more polite and decent than the whites. Indeed, British civilians seemed almost unanimous in finding the black GI an improvement over the white. One woman said, “I don’t mind the Yanks but I can’t say I care for those white chaps they’ve brought with them.” George Orwell found that “the only American soldiers with decent manners are the Negroes,” and a woman serving at a troop canteen said, “We find the colored troops are much nicer to deal with. We like serving them, they’re always so courteous and have a very natural charm that most of the whites miss. Candidly, I’d far rather serve a regiment of the dusky lads than a couple of whites.”

Even after the GIs left, racial problems remained. “There were scenes of anguish in August, 1945,” reported the *Bristol Sunday Pictorial*, “as hundreds of screaming girls besieged the barracks where the black soldiers were packing up. They broke down barriers, and at the rail station, it is said, the girls shouted, ‘To hell with the US color bar. We want our colored sweethearts.’”

But in the spring of 1944, as the sudden massive move of the Yanks and their vehicles alerted British watchers to the imminence of the bloody work they were brought over for, some of the customary friction dropped away and some of the jokes seemed to need revision:

YANK: “I’ve come from Fort Bragg.”

BRITON: “Yes, I can believe that.”

Says one Yank: “It was no longer them and us.” Despite general relief that the Americans were gone, there was now an unavoidable understanding of what these alien boys were there for and what was going to happen to a great many of them. One American, Bob Sheehan, recalls the soldier’s view of the war: “Ahead lay a dangerous trip into the unknown. There was an element of potential disaster about the whole enterprise. We mostly felt that we would win in the end, but this attack *could* fail and the whole another start would have to be made. It was the kind of thinking that made many cigarettes glow in the darkness when we should have been all asleep.” It might now be sensed that the drunkenness and the whoring were largely a distraction and relief from troubling, unmentionable thoughts.

What did these American soldiers look like as they left behind the comforts of Britain and set off on “the Great Crusade”? The United States Army, or at least its soldiers, goes in for a widespread habit of uniform usage best designated *sloppery*. This look was noted by most Europeans witnessing American soldiers in the Second World War, astonished by their apparent sloppiness in contrast with Continental military norms. Victor Klemperer, a German civilian, writes of his first sight of U.S. armored troops: “They are not soldiers in the Prussian sense at all. They do not wear uniforms at all but overalls, . . . combinations of high trousers and blouse, all in gray-green. . . . The steel helmet is worn as comfortably as a hat, pushed forward or back, as it suits them.” The boy Keegan was enraptured by the sloppery of the GIs he saw in the countryside before the invasion—leaning against buildings, always adopting comfortable instead of military postures, driving their jeeps with one leg outside, foot on the fender, and when possible ostentatiously steering with one hand. Ernie Pyle saw U.S. soldiers as unique because “we admittedly are not a rigid-minded people. . . . Our boys sing in the streets, unbutton their shirt collars, laugh and shout and forget to salute.” (*Forget* is probably too kind; *refuse* would be more accurate.) To suggest all this, one could probably invoke terms like Huey P. Finnery, or the Conscript’s Revenge. Conscious sloppery is a way of saying, “I’m not really a powerless part of an institution so unfair, stupid, and silly as the army. I’m still the careless boy from Winnetka that I used to be, and I’m determined forever to be my own boss. Screw you all.”

To understand these boys, one should know a little about what they wore and carried. Because the U.S. Army (or the Army of the United States, to distinguish the conscript army from the proud professional one) was a dynamic and always changing one, the moment it is examined, it is in the process of change. At first, the troops landing in, say, North Africa wore old-fashioned canvas lace-up leggings (pronounced *leggins*) and high leather shoes. But soon more up-to-date footwear became official: boots made from high shoes with a five-inch rough leather cuff added on top; and as the winter worsened, leather and rubber shoepacs, worn during the infamous trench-foot menace running from December 1944 to spring 1945. Tucked into the boots or shoepacs were wool trousers, the same as those normally part of the dress uniform, and once the layering principle against cold was mastered the wool trousers were covered by another pair, of dark green two-ply tightly woven cotton. They matched the new field jacket with four outer pockets, each large enough to hold a cardboard box of M&M’s. One ex-soldier reports that in December, it was so cold that “I was wearing a suit of summer underwear, two suits of heavy long wool underwear, two sets of wool pants, a wool shirt, a wool sweater, an old field jacket, a new combat jacket, two pairs of wool socks, combat boots, wool gloves, a wool knit cap, and a steel helmet.”

As diarrhea began to afflict virtually all the frontline troops, the need to stay warm by maximum layering conflicted with the need to take things off rapidly. One man testifies: “I had on three suits of underwear and two pairs of pants and had to go quickly. This took some quick unbuttoning.” There were of course myriads of painful accidents that did nothing to promote morale and self-respect. “One soldier, aiming for the latrine, slipped and fell in the mud and crapped in his clothes. He lay there and cried in frustration.” That sort of hell was never publicized but constituted a constant, unavoidable part of infantry experience.

Around his waist, the rifleman wore a “web” cartridge belt with pockets for the eight-round M1 clips. The ammunition load could be increased by adding one or more cotton bandoleers, worn across the chest. Raincoats were folded and stuffed into the back of the cartridge belt. It also held a first-aid

dressing and a canteen, officially filled with water but, this being France, not always innocent of wine. Hooked to the belt might also be an Infantryman's Friend, a combination pick and shovel for digging in.

Most soldiers carried an M-1 rifle but also had to carry pieces of mortars and machine guns. Boys who aspired to a superbellicose look wore a trench knife on the belt, together with the official bayonet in its scabbard. On the back of the helmet were often to be seen significant painted one-inch-wide stripes. A horizontal one designated a noncommissioned officer, a vertical one an officer. Both were rather misleading in implying that the wearer was out in front, "leading" the troops. Actually, in proper attack, a platoon was preceded by two men called scouts, presumably skilled in observation and deduction, able to give early warning of the enemy's location. In theory, the commanding officer came next. But as the ground war in Europe wore on, so many lieutenants leading from the front were destroyed that their presence there was no longer insisted on or expected. Groups of men wearing naked helmets without dark green camouflage nets were obviously so new and pathetic as to be noticed, patronized, and set right.

There was one advantage in being in an attack, and only one: there, a soldier was seldom troubled by the chickenshit to be met with in the rear. At the real front there was no such thing as being "out of uniform," for the soldier looked like a tramp with individual variations all the time, and officers were indistinguishable from the lowest dogfaces. Neither wore anything like insignia, and to look as dirty as possible was socially meritorious. A lot has been said about the white camouflage outfits worn by the troops in the winter, but they were so scarce that most men wore mattress covers or tablecloth bedsheets, or white towels stolen from nearby civilian premises.

The teenagers of the infantry, deprived of such customary status totems as the Model A Ford Roadster and in-vogue clothing, were forced to find new status symbols. Most depended on the seniority of a person or unit in the European Theater of Operations. Newcomers were regarded with a degree of not always silent contempt, and replacements were the most conspicuous newcomers. There were many signals by which new arrivals could be detected. Cleanliness was one of them. Soldiers and officers in new or neat clothing, not yet ripped in places or grease-stained all over from C- and I-rations, were easy to spot as targets of disdain. Company officers wearing gold or silver bars on shirt collars were clearly unacquainted yet with the veritable law of the line that unless officers' insignia were covered by a scarf, enemy snipers would pick them off first. (Probably quite false, but believed by all.) The helmet net could become a low-social-class giveaway by the absence of a worn-out portion at the top; when the helmet was taken off and placed upside down on the ground, the net should be worn away. In many infantry divisions, rumor held that if the chin strap of the helmet was fastened and worn in the correct way, the wearer ran the risk of being beheaded by a close explosion which, it was said, would tear off helmet and head at once. This probably began as a practical joke like sending a newcomer to get a left-handed screwdriver, but it was widely believed, and officers and men alike fastened the chin strap around the back of the helmet.

Units newly arrived on the line—especially the high-numbered infantry divisions that appeared in 1944—were held to lack class, and members of the 102nd, the 103rd, and the 104th Divisions felt the shame attaching to the ignorant and the out-of-place. Long-serving divisions earned similar scorn when finally their original men were carried off dead or wounded and replaced by raw, green ex-AST (Army Specialized Training Program) boys or angry ex-air corps personnel.

(Military history, as commonly practiced, often errs in its easy devotion to “order of battle,” which means narrating mortal encounters by simply designating the units taking part. This might do if the units are the proud, largely static regiments of the British army, which do their own training, but in the American military, distinguished units very soon become undistinguished as they are inevitably diluted and enfeebled by the inclusion of not just relatively untrained but hyperscared replacements and the original, proud spirit of the unit is handed unearned to pitiable youths angry to have been snatched into the infantry from the air corps or the ASTP. Until finally in the originally good divisions, hardly an original soldier is left, and the whole army is all of a piece, that is, second-rate. Near the end of the war, infantry divisions with sterling histories, like the 1st or the 4th or the 101st Airborne, become lamentable caricatures of what they once were and resemble nothing so much as the newest of the new divisions, populated by the inadequately trained and the largely unwilling.)

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## The Fortitude Secret

The boys destined to land on the beaches of Normandy would have felt less anxiety if they had known about a weapon kept secret until well after the war. This weapon did not involve explosives and shells, sharpened bayonets and thirty-caliber bullets, but knowledge—knowledge the Allies were not supposed to have. The knowledge was of top-secret German plans, orders, and records, and the Allies had been in possession of it since 1943.

Allied intelligence knew the Germans were aware that an invasion of France from England was being readied. But two things about it the Germans did not know: the place and the time. What should they defend and when should they defend it?

The secret operation was primarily British and it bore the code name FORTITUDE. The idea was to deceive the enemy into believing the invasion was going to take place somewhere it was not and to lure enemy divisions and reserves away from the place where they would be useful. The Germans had to be persuaded that any Allied landing in, say, Normandy was really only a feint designed to conceal plans for the real invasion, two hundred miles north in the Pas de Calais. This could be made to seem credible because it involved the shortest distance to the assumed Allied target, Berlin. In aid of the deception, elaborate fraudulent army camps were built northwest of Dover, and they were presumably occupied by the immense strength of FUSAG—First United States Army Group. This unit was entirely fictitious, but its divisions were given credible identity and reality by constant radio traffic, exactly like that expected among real army units. Roads and trucks and tanks added to the verisimilitude, but the last two were made not of steel but inflated rubber. Rubber and papier-mâché landing craft were assembled and deliberately ill camouflaged in appropriate ports.

FUSAG was said to be commanded by General Patton, and he was actually seen tongue-wagging about the proper places from time to time, going about his duties as army group commander.

Sometimes cruel methods had to be used to strengthen the impression that the convenient Pas de Calais would be the target of the invasion. To move troops and reserves quickly to this fancied battlefield, Hitler would have to use railways, and to strengthen the idea that it was these railways that were dangerous to the Allied plan, lots of bombs were dropped on French railways, railway stations, and, alas, railway towns, where many French civilians were killed. Even the Germans found it hard

believe that their enemy would kill so many civilians merely to maintain a deception. To make the deception further credible, the Allies dropped more bombs and killed more French citizens around the Pas de Calais area than in Normandy. This was certainly unfortunate and cruel, but the whole war, Allied as well as German, was unfortunate and cruel, even if this aspect seems often forgotten.

The now famous XX (Doublecross) system also went into action to help win the war by any means nice or nasty. All the spies that Germany had managed to insinuate into Britain with shortwave radio for transmitting their reports back to Hamburg were without exception captured by the British. Once in hand, they were “turned” and secretly joined the Allied cause. Now, each spy had an Allied “minder” (formerly “case officer”) who told the German agent what to send and was careful to coordinate the reports with deceptions emanating from the whole FUSAG operation. As onetime intelligence colonel Nigel West has said recently, “Strategic deception is now recognized as an essential component of any major military undertaking, and without exception the textbooks agree that the ingenious scheme, code-named FORTITUDE, dreamed up to mislead the enemy over the long expected invasion of Europe in 1944, was the most successful ever executed.”

Unknown now, and probably unknown forever, are the methods used to persuade all the captured German agents in the United Kingdom to switch allegiance, but they doubtless included threats of blackmail and torture and recourse to the immediate firing squad, entirely appropriate in the case of captured spies.

In addition to the XX system, the Allies had another highly secret intelligence tool of inestimable value. This was code-named ULTRA. With Polish help, the British had obtained a sample German encoding machine named ENIGMA, designed to send and receive, with its typewriter keyboard, coded messages. The Germans thought the system was entirely safe and unbreakable, but after intense cryptographic study, the British mastered its workings. They now had secret access to German field orders, messages, plans, and other crucial matter revealing identification of military units, troop strengths, disposition of units, troop movements, and even tactics. The American troops knew nothing about this, and indeed, no one in the Allied armies knew about it but a few officers at the very top.

General Montgomery, like all Allied commanders of armies, had constant access to the news from ULTRA, and many now believe that in news conferences, where his egotism and self-promotion gave offense, he may have exaggerated that pose consciously in order not to risk betraying the secret ULTRA, which had made his decisions less original and risky than they had seemed at the time.

ULTRA would appear to make ground warfare easier than before, but the essential military problem was still there—the difficulty of precise communication. And without jeopardizing secret intelligence sources. That main military problem remains: rigorously exact communication between those at the top who know and those below who must act. What happens when this communication grows loose, fuzzy, or imprecise is illustrated by the disaster of COBRA. Focusing on the military importance of sheer speed, I once suggested that the West Point motto, “Duty, Honor, Country,” might well be amended to “Duty, Honor, Celerity.” Now, I’m not sure that the final word shouldn’t be *Clarity*. (By the way, in the Pacific war, it was codebreakers’ disclosure of the immense Japanese strengthening of the island of Kyushu, the planned first target of the American invasion, that had momentous consequences. This awareness of what the ground forces might face, many think, assisted the decision to end the war with atom bombs instead of boys wielding rifles.)

It is not pleasant to consider how awful the war against Germany would have been without FUSA, Doublecross, and ULTRA. On D day especially, it was still hell. The heartrending events of Omaha Beach need no further description here, for by now they have been amply registered in historical memoirs, and films. Speaking of which, I'd like to recommend the retention of and familiarity with the first few minutes of Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* depicting the landing horrors. The I'd suggest separating them to constitute a short subject, titled *Omaha Beach: Aren't You Glad You Weren't There?* Which could mean, "Aren't you glad you weren't a conscripted working-class or high school boy in 1944?" The rest of the Spielberg film I'd consign to the purgatory where boys' bad adventure films end up.

The FORTITUDE deception succeeded in fooling the Germans for a whole month, paralyzing the 15th Army waiting near Calais for the invasion there that never came. The Allies had duped them not just about the place of the invasion but the time as well, for they couldn't imagine an amphibious operation taking place in the terrible weather dominating the channel in early June. Secure in the belief that the invasion was not going to come soon, senior German officers went inland to participate in military exercises. "They won't come in this weather," an officer assured his subordinates, a small but telling illustration of the German military's liability to gullibility and self-deception, its innocence of irony, its will to believe, erected on the foundation of an illusionary national superiority as Kenneth Macksey convincingly sets forth in his book *Why the Germans Lose at War*. But perhaps a view of intelligence failures like Pearl Harbor, the Bulge, 9/11, and even the collapse of the Soviet Union, gloating by us isn't appropriate.



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