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Abstract

This essay will explore the comics of Bill Mauldin published during World War Two and how masculinity in the infantry was portrayed. Current studies on masculinity in World War Two have focused on soldier's accounts of the war as well as depictions of soldiers in propaganda. Some work on the effects of comics during the war has also been done but nothing as of yet has combined the two. This paper aims to look at how the comics of Bill Mauldin supported or rejected the model masculine archetype that was developed through propaganda and became a privileged figure in conceptualization of the war. Mauldin's comics were unique in the depiction of his subject matter and raised criticism from superior officers during the war while generally receiving praise from the rank and file. This paper will also look at how Mauldin portrayed masculinity in his comics and how that fit with the dominant image of soldiers.

Keywords

Bill Mauldin, World War Two, infantry, masculinity, gender

Disciplines

History | United States History

Comments

Written as a Senior Capstone in History.

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Manly Mud: Portrayal of Masculinity in Infantry Units in World War Two as Seen in the Comics of Bill Mauldin

By Aren Heitmann

Capstone Essay

This essay will explore the comics of Bill Mauldin published during World War Two and how masculinity in the infantry was portrayed. Current studies on masculinity in World War Two have focused on soldier's accounts of the war as well as depictions of soldiers in propaganda. Some work on the effects of comics during the war has also been done but nothing as of yet has combined the two. This paper aims to look at how the comics of Bill Mauldin supported or rejected the model masculine archetype that was developed through propaganda and became a privileged figure in conceptualization of the war. Mauldin's comics were unique in the depiction of his subject matter and raised criticism from superior officers during the war while generally receiving praise from the rank and file. This paper will also look at how Mauldin portrayed masculinity in his comics and how that fit with the dominant image of soldiers.

I affirm that I have upheld the highest degree of honesty and integrity and have not witnessed I violation of the honor code,

-Aren Heitmann

Intro

From 1941 to 1945 the United States was engaged in the largest and most complicated undertaking it had ever been involved in. World War Two touched every life in the states and sixteen million Americans served in the military during the war, eight hundred thousand to one million seeing combat.¹ During the war the country was transformed into an industrial and military powerhouse unmatched by any other country in the world. The images dispelled by propaganda and the ideas and values that they communicated were an essential part of this massive war effort that helped to motivate people to work in factories, fight in the war, and sacrifice personal luxuries. Through these images on posters, advertisements, and even in comic strips, a privileged figure emerged. This figure was a muscular white man serving in the military. Depictions of soldier's bodies were essential in creating a national self-definition during World War Two as they were representative of the nation and national strength.² While not copied through any great coordination, images used in media all helped to promote this model masculine archetype which in turn helped to promote the idea that men should be fighting in the war and what those men should look like. One artist who contradicted this image was Bill Mauldin. Mauldin gained notoriety for his comic panel *Up Front* first printed in the Army's *Stars and Stripes* Newspaper in 1943. Mauldin used his platform to draw alternatives to the model masculine archetype by drawing realistic soldiers. By doing this he took part in the self-definition of the nation that was underway and can be analyzed through the lens of gender as discussed in Joan Scott's article "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." Scott

¹ Kenneth D. Rose, *Myth and the Greatest Generation: a Social History of Americans in World War II* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 45.

² Christina S. Jarvis, *The Male Body at War: American Masculinity During World War II* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004), 88.

argues that the study of gender can help to “discover the range in sex roles and in sexual symbolism in different societies and periods, to find out what meaning they had and how they functioned to maintain the social order or promote its change.”³ Using gender as a lens to look at Mauldin’s cartoons one can find contrast for ideas about the model masculine archetype that was common in the United States during World War Two. Through his realistic depiction of men in combat Bill Mauldin challenged the privileged image of the model masculine archetype of World War Two and connected with soldiers in a way that the archetype could not.

Historiography

Scott offers some of the broader framework for analyzing history through the lens of gender which she defined as “a way of referring to the social organization of the relationship between the sexes” and argues that the study of gender is the study of structures and ideologies formed around that relationship and with it.⁴ Scott also argues that gender is a way of seeing social organization and relationships of power between the sexes.⁵ In *The Male Body at War: American Masculinity during World War Two*, Christina S. Jarvis looks at how the image of a white, young, fit, and male, body became the idealized image Americans embraced, a hypermasculine archetype for the United States. Jarvis’s definition of the popularized ideal male figure in World War Two is a helpful definition to set up against Bill Mauldin’s depiction of soldiers. How he undermines this figure can then be interpreted using Scott’s framework.⁶

³ Joan Scott, “*Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis.*” *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1, 1986): 1054.

⁴ Scott, “*Gender,*” 1055, 1057.

⁵ *Ibid*, 1055

⁶ Jarvis, *The Male Body at War.*

In her book *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War Two France* Mary Louise Roberts analyses images in *Stars and Stripes* for the enforcement of gender norms as well as sexualization of the war in the eyes of the United States.⁷

This paper focuses on Bill Mauldin's *Up Front* series as preserved in *Willie and Joe the World War Two Years* which is a compilation of Mauldin's work from *Stars and Stripes* and the *45th Division Newspaper*.⁸ These were compiled by Todd Depastino who also wrote his biography *Bill Mauldin: A life Up Front*.⁹

Comics

After coming into prominence and popularity as an escape from everyday woes in the 1930's, comic panels and comic strips took on a more patriotic tint during World War Two. Comics turned to topics of war while still providing a good laugh or harrowing and moralistic story.¹⁰ Popular comics printed in the United States were usually action oriented and told self purportedly true stories from the war about muscular soldiers fighting the Germans and Japanese, or superheroes who fought the enemy abroad and war profiteers at home, all of which emphasized the United States and the allies as morally correct and fighting against an immoral foe.¹¹ Newspapers printed for soldiers overseas such as *Yank* and *Stars and Stripes* also depicted fighting men but with humor more geared toward those in the Military. These newspapers were printed by the Army, staffed by soldiers and distributed throughout the armed forces with

⁷ Mary Louise Roberts, *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

⁸ Bill Mauldin & Todd DePastino. *Willie & Joe: the WWII Years*, vol. 2 (1st Fantagraphics Books ed. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2008).

⁹ Todd Depastino, *Bill Mauldin, A Life Up Front* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2008).

¹⁰ Cord A. Scott, *Comics and Conflict: Patriotism and Propaganda from WWII through Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2014), 32.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 25.

different branches of the paper printing editions specialized to each theater of operations such as the Mediterranean where Bill Mauldin was. Comics in these papers that poked fun at Army life became immensely popular. The depiction of soldiers in these papers was often not an idealized figure but a dopy one struggling to adapt to Army life.¹²

Sad Sack was one of the most popular comic strips in *Yank*.¹³ It showed a dopy looking and incompetent soldier who could never win against the institution of the Army. *Sad Sack* was the leading comic in *Yank* during World War Two and even continued on after the war due to its popularity. Its creator, George Baker, wanted to challenge the happy and smiling image of United States soldiers that he saw on posters; however, *Sad Sack* wasn't a controversial comic and was allowed to run unhindered in the Army-controlled newspaper for the duration of the war. Like most men enlisted in the Army, the main character of *Sad Sack*, also called Sad Sack, never really saw combat. He was stationed in Europe and the Pacific but mostly painted signs, dug holes, and built latrines.¹⁴ Baker specifically crafted Sad Sack to be completely anonymous so that he appealed to many servicemen who found his characters plight similar to their own and in that way it became uplifting for them. Baker received many letters about his comic some of which were from soldiers who said his comic made them smile when they were feeling blue.¹⁵

Bill Mauldin, drawing for *Stars and Stripes*, took the opposite approach but found similar notoriety and connection with the troops. Mauldin wanted to draw comics that represented what he thought and felt.¹⁶ Initially he tried to write for *Yank* but due to the Paper's emphasis on what

¹² Scott, *Comics and Conflict*, 32.

¹³ Joe McCarthy. "Salty Saga of Sad Sack: Salty Saga of Sad Sack Probably the most Famous Private in the Army, He Knows He Will Never be Promoted. Salty Saga of Sad Sack." *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Nov 21, 1943, 41.

¹⁴ George Baker, *The New Sad Sack*, (New York: American Book-Stratford Press Inc., 1946).

¹⁵ McCarthy. "Salty Saga of Sad Sack," 41.

¹⁶ Bill Mauldin, *Up Front*, (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1945) 26.

he saw as silly jokes and their continued rejection of his work, he started drawing comics for his Divisions newspaper until *Stars and Stripes* was created.¹⁷ When Mauldin started drawing for *Stars and Stripes* full time in 1943 he came up with a new strips that he titled *Up front* but kept his characters as infantrymen fighting in Italy.¹⁸ While this meant that he was portraying only a small portion of the Army as the majority of soldiers where support personnel, it made sense early on as he was being published in the Mediterranean edition of *Stars and Stripes* so only men stationed in Italy would read his comics and because he himself had originally been an infantryman. However, after the famous and well respected war correspondent Ernie Pyle wrote a flattering piece about Mauldin he received contracts to have his drawings published in the United States as well so that by the end of the war Soldiers all over Europe as well as some civilians at home were seeing Bill Mauldin's depiction of the war.¹⁹ While this notoriety led to him being almost universally loved by soldiers, some of the officers in the Army as well as some civilians did not like how Mauldin portrayed American soldiers and preferred the humor in *Sad Sack*.²⁰ Mauldin's work notably gained the notice, and contempt, of general George S. Patton who threatened to ban *Stars and Stripes* from his Army if the paper continued to publish Mauldin's work.²¹ Patton felt that Mauldin's cartoons created disrespect for officers and were bad for the Army's cohesion. Other officers, most notably General Dwight D. Eisenhower, stepped in and defended Mauldin.²² While he struggled to balance publishing on the home front and not being censored by officers in the Army, Mauldin continued to draw comics that aired gripes against and poked fun at; congress, officers, non-combat soldiers, civilians, and the

¹⁷ Depastino, *A Life Up Front*, 80.

¹⁸ Ibid, 106.

¹⁹ Ibid, 126.

²⁰ Ibid, 171.

²¹ Ibid, 187.

²² Ibid, 195.

general absurdities of fighting in war.²³ His motivation for drawing comics remained to draw images and concepts that men on the front line would understand.²⁴ In his experience as an infantryman in the early war and through talking with frontline soldiers throughout the conflict as he traveled around Italy and France he found that one major desire of soldiers who went on leave was to tell civilians how bad the war was but that when they got a chance it was impossible to describe.²⁵ Mauldin tried to convey this in *Up Front* by showing infantry soldiers in a realistic way. He drew them being worn down by fighting, surrounded by destruction, drinking, having implied sexual relations, being undisciplined and he even made a joke about having to defecate in foxholes.²⁶ This stood out as unique among other comics and images of war during the 1940's which either depicted heroic superhero characters battling the Nazis for idealistic reasons or boyish looking soldiers continuously struggling to adapt to Army life.²⁷

The Ideal

Through the use of propaganda in the United States in World War Two the image of a fit, military, male body developed into an archetype. The portrayal of this image by the federal government, businesses, and the military, as well as associating this image with national identity and strength led to it becoming a privileged body.²⁸ Jarvis specifically defines the idealized male body brought about by this privileged position as a “muscular, youthful (often white) male body of the serviceman.”²⁹ As this form involves physical features as well as performed actions associated with gender and not simply sex it will be referred to as the model masculine archetype

²³ Mauldin & DePastino. *Willie & Joe: the WWII Years*.

²⁴ Mauldin, *Up Front*, 31.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 129.

²⁶ Mauldin & DePastino. *Willie & Joe: the WWII Years*, 116.

²⁷ Scott, *Comics and Conflict*, 33, 34.

²⁸ Jarvis, *The Male Body at War*, 5.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 14.

for the purposes of this paper. The model masculine archetype could most notably be found in propaganda posters in the United States such as the “Let’em Have it” poster from 1943 (appendix 1).³⁰ This poster shows a presumably young, white, soldier throwing a grenade.³¹ His sleeves are rolled up exposing his forearms which are shaded to emphasize the muscles in them. The tendons and sinews on the front and side of his neck are also emphasized with shading which demonstrates to a viewer his physical strength. His legs are cut off and what little is shown is covered by his pants and is even in shadow from his torso. This emphasis on upper body strength is a distinctly American trait in war art that Jarvis notes, which contrasted to Germany’s emphasis on a proportional and fully depicted nude muscular body.³² Additionally, because he is performing a desired task, that of fighting, the poster elevates his status through its angle as the viewer is looking up at the man who is large enough to take up most of the poster. While this depiction of the male body and the values it is supporting, that of fighting for the Army, were not new or a radical shift, the association of masculinity with the war put more focus on the performance of war related activities for men and created the model masculine archetype.

This archetype was also propagated by the news media which was a subject for contention for Mauldin. The news of the war as reported in newspapers was generally cheery and optimistic which conflicted with Mauldin’s experiences in and around combat. This is seen in his satire of news reports in some of his comics. In one panel (appendix 2) a dejected American soldier is escorting equally dejected German prisoners in the rain to the caption “fresh, spirited American

³⁰ U.S. Treasury, *Let’em Have It*, 1943), GettDigital: World War II Poster Collection, Special Collections / Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, April 29, 2020,

³¹ During World War Two all soldiers who fought in the United States Military were men. Women did serve in some non-combat roles but this paper will be focusing on the men in the Army and thus “soldiers” will always refer to men.

³² Jarvis, *The Male Body at War*, 44.

troops, flushed with victory, are bringing in thousands of hungry, ragged, battle-weary prisoners.”³³ The wording of this caption brings to mind the unwavering model masculine archetype dedicated entirely to completing his orders and winning the war but by contrasting it with the image of the downtrodden American soldier Mauldin satirized the news report and showed the toll that the war had taken on the American soldiers even though they were winning. A toll that he thought was not adequately portrayed by the news media or any depiction of the model masculine archetype.

The Reality

Bill Mauldin’s main characters, Willie and Joe, were drawn to not embody this model masculine archetype. Throughout the series both characters were drawn with hunched backs, bags under their eyes, and a generally fatigued and forlorn look.³⁴ Mauldin specifically drew his characters this way to show what men in combat experienced. In his book *Up Front*, named after his comic series, he says that he tried to draw Willie and Joe to show the weariness of “body, brain, and soul” that only men in combat experience.³⁵ This weariness counters the youthful aspect of the model masculine archetype because Mauldin intended Joe and Willie to be in their early twenties and early thirties respectively but they both look older and could pass for less wrinkled old men due to their visual fatigue.³⁶ This would have come as a shock to some on the home front who likely imagined American soldiers as bight eyed boys as evidenced by Ernie Pyle commenting that Mauldin’s characters look less like someone’s sons and more like hoboes.³⁷ This visible weariness shows a realistic depiction of men in combat and the negative

³³ Mauldin & DePastino. *Willie & Joe: the WWII Years*, 209.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Mauldin, *Up Front*, 39-40.

³⁶ Ibid, 42.

³⁷ Depastino, *A Life Up Front*, 126.

effect that the war had on the soldiers. This depiction of mental breakdown from being in combat was a very real consequence for soldiers who saw combat in World War Two. In *Myth and the Greatest generation, a Social History of Americans in World War II*, Kenneth D. Rose notes that Army psychologists found that soldiers in combat suffered many psychological problems from the constant mental stress of danger and fear and that after 45 days of combat soldiers were mentally spent.³⁸ While this affected all infantry during the war, psychological wounds as well as psychological breakdown and fatigue were not eluded to in wartime imagery as they took away from the strength of the model masculine archetype. Mauldin's portrayal of this reality refuted that.

In addition to his general character design, Mauldin also drew Willie and Joe being physically depleted by the war. As they were in the Army and the infantry specifically, they must have passed all of the Army's physical exams and been rated 1-A which meant fit for general service.³⁹ However, when Mauldin drew Willie bathing in a dirty pool in a panel from June 1944, (Appendix 3) he included the shadows of his ribcage which makes his chest look thin and weak.⁴⁰ Combined with his general appearance of unshaven face and tired eyes the panel conveys that the war has made him waste away and he no longer fits the ideal, muscled, male body that he must have had when he joined the Army.

Through their actions Willie and Joe did not conform to the model masculine archetype. Indeed, they refuted it. Willie and Joe are usually focused on activities aside from the war effort. One of their favorite passions is that of drinking to which many panels are devoted. In one such panel (appendix 4), Willie and Joe are about to ambush a German soldier holding a bottle when

³⁸ Rose, *Myth and the Greatest Generation*, 31.

³⁹ Jarvis, *The Male Body at War*, 60.

⁴⁰ Mauldin & DePastino. *Willie & Joe: the WWII Years*, 142.

Willie tells Joe “Don’t startle him, Joe... It’s almost full.”⁴¹ In this panel they prioritized drinking over taking a prisoner. They were not focused on fighting and doing their job to help end the war but on getting drunk. While the United States Army purposely did not issue any liquor to its soldiers and only served beer at Army establishments many soldiers found liquor outside of official Army sources and even made their own stills while overseas.⁴² Rose notes that in addition to this, many veterans reported that any chance they got, they would get extremely drunk.⁴³ In another panel (appendix 5) Willie and Joe’s commanding officer tells them “I’m depending on you old men to be a steadying influence for the replacements” while Willie is drinking from two bottles of cognac and Joe has cut out paper figures with a combat knife.⁴⁴ Here there is an express need from the Army for their service and they are shown uninterested in completing it and instead are focused on killing time. Soldiers, even at the front lines, would often face hours of boredom in between moments of adrenaline. Drinking and doing things to kill time would have been very common in the Army during World War Two however, these are not activities that support the war effort and therefore don’t fit into the model masculine archetype.

Throughout the strip Willie and Joe openly discuss and pursue sex against Army regulations and thus deviate from the model masculine archetype. While the United States Army in World War Two was officially against soldiers having sex with local women and MP’s (Military Police) guarded known brothels, seventy five percent of soldiers reported having sex while overseas.⁴⁵ Willie and Joe were no different. In one cartoon Willie and Joe were trying to get into a brothel

⁴¹ Mauldin & DePastino. *Willie & Joe: the WWII Years*, 147.

⁴² Mauldin, *Up Front*, 86.

⁴³ Rose, *Myth and the Greatest Generation*, 38.

⁴⁴ Mauldin & DePastino. *Willie & Joe: the WWII Years*, 155.

⁴⁵ Rose, *Myth and the Greatest Generation*, 41.

by pretending to be French soldiers who do not speak English (appendix 6).⁴⁶ By doing this they were disobeying the Army's instructions in their pursuit of sex. This pursuit went against the clean-cut image that the Army wanted to foster which was upheld by the model masculine archetype.⁴⁷ Willie and Joe further deviate from the ideal of pure hearted servicemen by cheating on their wives. In several panels it is mentioned that both have wives at home, and in Willie's case children as well, but they are also seen in situations where they are implied to have sex with sex workers.⁴⁸ In fact, of all of the women that are shown interacting with Willie and Joe they are almost all implied to be sex workers. While sex was not a part of the model masculine archetype the type of sex implied in *Up Front* went against the moral ideas popular in the United States in the 1940's. Additionally the archetype focused on men solely fighting the war and not being distracted by anything else. As pointed out by Mary Louise Roberts in her book *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France*, this was not the case in actuality and many married servicemen had sex, sometimes even forming a regular relationship around it, with European women.⁴⁹ Mauldin thus drew Willie and Joe as very accurate depictions of United States servicemen in World War Two but by doing that, they conflicted with the model masculine archetype and beliefs held at home.

Mauldin's portrayal of Willie and Joe further refuted the model masculine archetype by showing them acting undisciplined. The general character design of Willie and Joe shows them with beards from several weeks of not shaving. This was against Army regulations and some generals such as Patton held grooming to a high standard. Willie and Joe got away with it though

⁴⁶ Mauldin & DePastino. *Willie & Joe: the WWII Years*, 218.

⁴⁷ Rose, *Myth and the Greatest Generation*, 41.

⁴⁸ Mauldin & DePastino. *Willie & Joe: the WWII Years*, 226, 121.

⁴⁹ Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 127.

as one panel (appendix 7) points out “the guy wot put out the order about shavin’ aint comin up here to inspect us.”⁵⁰ Here Mauldin’s characters forgo their grooming regulations in favor of drinking the water needed to shave. The artillery shells landing in the background also offer a perspective on shaving that relegates it to less than important. Willie and Joe partake in worse cases of indiscipline and skirting Army regulations in their treatment of civilian’s farm animals. In another panel (appendix 8) Willie is seen with a smoking machine gun after shooting a cow and gives the excuse that he “could (have) swore a coupla Krauts wuz usin’ that cow fer cover.”⁵¹ As he tells Joe to get the cooks to butcher the animal, this is an entirely self-serving action and judging by the pike of empty K and C ration packages next to the machine gun it wasn’t a necessary action but rather one made out of the desire to stop eating the same packaged food every day. This may seem like just bending the rules for the soldiers, but this loss of livestock was something that drastically affected rural European civilians as they relied on farm animals to survive. As a soldier himself Mauldin likely wasn’t critiquing this kind of action but by drawing a comic about it that would be seen by many soldiers and even some civilians, he was showing the reality that American soldiers did not spend their time in Europe constantly fighting for its liberation but instead were, at times, participants in the destruction of civilian livelihoods that was part of the war. As Mauldin drew his characters acting like soldiers did, their actions did not fit into the model masculine archetype and end up pushing back against it. Mauldin furthers this by positioning his characters favorably, in a privileged position within his strip.

⁵⁰ Mauldin & DePastino. *Willie & Joe: the WWII Years*, 68.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 84.

Making Them Men

Gender can be symbolized by different and even conflicting symbols depending on what is invoked.⁵² In Mauldin's comics he pushed back on the model masculine archetype and invoked different images to show that Willie and Joe are men, who he then positions above the model masculine archetype. He does this by portraying his characters as masculine, making them the dominant character in whatever panel they are in, and using their relationship to women to code them as more powerful and affirmed in their masculinity. This differs greatly from other popular comics at the time such as *Sad Sack* which had some similar themes to *Up Front* but did not challenge the model masculine archetype because *Sad Sack* was never portrayed in a powerful, privileged way.

Bill Mauldin portrayed Willie and Joe as men throughout the comics run by drawing them with features generally associated with men and with strength. In determining what features designate men there is no "universal biological entity but rather to a body that has been culturally encoded as male through a complex process of social, personal, and medical gender construction" and certain elements such as facial hair can be defining elements in the construction of gender.⁵³ Willie and Joe are almost always drawn with beards or various stages of stubble and when they are clean shaven, they have broad faces and, Willie especially, square jaws all of which are physical traits that portray them as men and as strong. Not all men in the comic and especially not all soldiers depicted, have these traits that are used to symbolize

⁵² Scott, "Gender," 1067.

⁵³ Jarvis, *The Male Body at War*, 7.

strength and masculinity. By being drawn with these traits Willie and Joe are depicted as the “manly men” in all of the panels they are in.⁵⁴

Additionally, through their actions Willie and Joe are depicted as having proved their masculinity. The idea of masculinity and proving it is an entirely subjective and shifting idea but in the 1940’s going to war was seen as a way to prove masculinity.⁵⁵ As Willie and Joe have been in combat their masculinity is proven and this fact is continuously reinforced and reminded to the reader throughout the series. The act of wounding is physical proof that one had been to war and in combat and was a physical reminder of proven masculinity. In *Up Front*, Willie and Joe are shown after being wounded several times which acts to reinforce their proven masculinity. In one panel Willie is offered a Purple Heart by a medic but replies that he already has one and would prefer some aspirin.⁵⁶ Not only was Willie recognized by the military for his performance and sacrifice in combat and thus proved his masculinity but he also refused the signifier of this because he had been recognized before for previous wounds which further reinforced his proven masculinity. The significance of Purple Hearts was well known to Mauldin who received one for a wound from mortar shrapnel in 1943. *Stars and Stripes* used this fact to solidify his standing as a front line cartoonist.⁵⁷ Purple hearts served as cultural markers of proven masculinity during and after the war.⁵⁸ By showing Willie refusing one and implying that he has several, Mauldin amplified this which showed his characters proven masculinity even more.

⁵⁴ Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 82.

⁵⁵ Jarvis, *The Male Body at War*, 94.

⁵⁶ Mauldin & DePastino. *Willie & Joe: the WWII Years*, 154.

⁵⁷ Depastino, *A Life Up Front*, 122.

⁵⁸ Jarvis, *The Male Body at War*, 88.

Whenever there are other characters in the same panel, Mauldin draws Willie and Joe as the masculine standard especially when compared to any soldier who is not in the infantry and thus has not proven their masculinity. In World War Two, thousands of men served in various roles within the Army that supported the infantry such as cooks, clerks, drivers, and quartermasters all of which were referred to as rear-echelon. Masculinity is often defined in contrast to femininity, but it can also be defined in relations between men, especially in hierarchical structures such as the military.⁵⁹ In some of Mauldin's panels, he portrays rear-echelon soldiers as less masculine than Willie and Joe. Willie and Joe are depicted as more masculine than rear echelon soldiers because of their physical features and because they were in the infantry. In these cases, the rear echelon men, usually a clerk or press corps member, all have physical traits that makes them not fit the model masculine archetype such as glasses most commonly, a less defined chin, or loss of hair implying that they are older. In some cases, the rear echelon men had been serving longer than Willie or Joe such as in one panel (appendix 9) where a clerk has more battle participation stars than Willie and likely would have been sent home before him.⁶⁰ Even though he has served longer than Willie he is portrayed as less masculine than Willie because Willie is shown as bigger and stronger and the audience knows that he is in the infantry and has thus proven his masculinity while the clerk has not. In World War Two the Army rated soldiers bodies with the infantry comprising entirely of men who were designated I-A, fit for general service, support positions included men rated I-B and down who were rated not as fit but still able to do a military job.⁶¹ By putting less fit men and also women from the Women's Army Corp (WACs) into clerical and service jobs, Jarvis argues that these positions became feminized in comparison

⁵⁹ Ibid, 8.

⁶⁰ Mauldin & DePastino. *Willie & Joe: the WWII Years*, 326.

⁶¹ Jarvis, *The Male Body at War*, 39.

to jobs in the infantry.⁶² Mauldin reinforces this by drawing the clerk with glasses and a less defined chin slanting in. Willie is drawn with a bigger frame and squared jaw in contrast which portrays him as being more masculine in comparison.

In other panels, Willie and Joe were portrayed as more masculine than other infantry who had not yet seen combat. Several panels depict infantry replacements as having boyish faces or even being literal children. In one panel (appendix 10) a replacement is sent who is an actual child dressed in a uniform that is too big.⁶³ In this case he is not yet a fully-grown man and Willie and Joe are thus the masculine standard over a child. Replacements faced a difficult time fitting into and being accepted by a unit as they were replacing men who had been injured or died which caused resentment from other soldiers. Additionally, they needed to be taught how to do things that veterans have already learned from experience. Mauldin illustrates this relationship by showing the replacement as a literal child compared to Willie and Joe who are shown as the experienced grown men. In another panel, a replacement lieutenant is drawn with a boyish face and while he would fit the model masculine archetype in theory, when seen in comparison to Willie and Joe he is portrayed as less masculine.⁶⁴ His younger looks signify that he is new to combat which contrasts to Willie and Joe's bearded, older faces that show they have been at the front a long time. They have proved their masculinity in combat while his is not yet tested. Here again Willie and Joe are the more knowledgeable, and therefore correct, figures in the panel because of their experience in combat even if they are a lower rank than the Lieutenant.

⁶² Ibid, 151.

⁶³ Mauldin & DePastino. *Willie & Joe: the WWII Years*, 38.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 40. While it is somewhat hazy exactly which panels of Mauldin's ended up in civilian papers, this panel was printed in Life Magazine along with Stars and Stripes, so this critique of Mauldin's was certainly reaching the home front and not just circulating among the men stationed in Europe.

In comparison to other comics at the time, specifically the popular comic strip *Sad Sack* by George Baker, *Up Front* by Bill Mauldin privileged its main characters masculinity through physical differences and women. Baker drew his character in a way that, by his own admission, looked more like a squashed Ping-Pong ball and almost always showed him as sad and weak especially in comparison to other characters in the comic strip.⁶⁵ In one strip Sad Sack is tied to a post and about to be executed by firing squad if he does not sign an expensive Army insurance policy.⁶⁶ At the end he pleads for his life while sweating profusely. This act shows him being emasculated due to showing of uncontrolled fear as evidenced but the uncontrolled sweating which Jarvis argues is an act counter to the ideal of male impenetrability during World War Two.⁶⁷ The ending of almost every strip is Sad Sack losing and being demoralized either through his own mishaps or the malevolence of another character.⁶⁸ This is likely because Baker's inspiration for drawing his character was that he wanted to represent how the average soldier feels when up against the system of the Army which to him was resigned, tired, helpless, and beaten."⁶⁹ Mauldin shows some of these characteristics in his characters except while drawing them as resigned and tired, they are never shown as helpless and beaten. This highlights their portrayal as the most masculine figure in any panel.

Women and Affirmation

Mauldin's portrayal of women in his comics showed Willie and Joe in positions of power. Although women aren't commonly featured in *Up Front*, Willie and Joe still come into contact with them especially in towns where they are generally portrayed as sexualized objects for Willie

⁶⁵ Baker, *The New Sad Sack*, 10.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 22.

⁶⁷ Jarvis, *The Male Body at War*, 89.

⁶⁸ Baker, *The New Sad Sack*, 1946.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 12.

and Joe to desire. In one panel (appendix 11) a captain is asked if he is looking for his company of infantry by an older woman outside a women's university that has backpacks, rifles, and machine guns piled outside the door.⁷⁰ The uncontrolled actions of the soldiers is presented as a joke but the reality for European women in this position would be anything but funny. The woman talking to the captain would not have been able to stop the large group of armed men who demanded entrance into her school especially as they were part of an occupying force in her country. In another panel Willie remarks to Joe that a woman standing on a stoop overlooking their column "must be very purty. Th' whole column is wheezin' at her".⁷¹ In both of these panels, the joke of the panel is that the soldiers want to have sex with women but the situation that they present is one where the soldiers have immense physical power over the women as they are part of an occupying Army. While Mauldin was drawing a realistic depiction of soldier's desire for sex in World War Two, as this is the main depiction of women in the comic they are relegated to sexual objects. As Scott argues in her article, sexual objectification is one of the primary tools of subjugation.⁷² The men in Mauldin's comics are thus doubly given the position of power over the women depicted. The reality for women in Europe during World War Two was that they often lived in and around areas that were being fought over and after the allies pushed the Nazis back toward Germany the women then lived under a new, albeit possibly preferable, occupation.

Comparatively, *Sad Sack* uses women to show a less powerful protagonist. In Baker's comic, Sad Sack is constantly being dismissed by women. In one strip (appendix 12) French women run out to kiss American soldiers but the one that taps Sad Sack on his shoulder has him

⁷⁰ Mauldin & DePastino. *Willie & Joe: the WWII Years*, 181.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 152.

⁷² Scott, "Gender," 1058.

kiss her baby and he walks away dejected.⁷³ The other background figures in this strip who are never named and aren't repeating characters all have their masculinity affirmed by the attention of the women but Sad Sack doesn't get this and is therefore portrayed as less powerful in the strip. As a factual aside, this incident is a figment of American imagination. While there were instances of physical intimacy between French women and American soldiers, the idea that French women greeted soldiers from the United States with sexual intimacy was exaggerated in American papers.⁷⁴ In comparison, in one strip (appendix 13) Willie is spending time with a woman, implied to be a sex worker, and she tells an MP to "Leave Willie alone or I won't see you."⁷⁵ Here a woman is spending time with Willie and is fairly intimate with him as she is sitting on his lap, and she is chastising another man in favor of Willie. In another panel Joe turns up his nose at an Italian woman who comments that his lack of interest in her must be because he has been to France.⁷⁶ Here the soldier is the one turning down the woman and is not rejected like in the *Sad Sack* cartoons. Willie and Joe rarely get the actual chance to spend time with women as they are usually at the front in the mountains of Italy and engaged in combat, they are never rejected by them unlike Sad Sack who is always rejected by them. By showing Willie and Joe never being rejected, Mauldin emphasized their masculinity and privileges their position in his comic. In reality rejection was a fraught issue. As the European population had suffered through the war and occupation, they had little material wealth especially in comparison with soldiers from the United States who had a ready supply to cigarettes, chocolate, and food. Because of this, many European women entered into the business of sex work on an armature or professional

⁷³ Baker, *The New Sad Sack*, 44.

⁷⁴ Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 59.

⁷⁵ Mauldin & DePastino. *Willie & Joe: the WWII Years*, 165.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 309.

basis.⁷⁷ The power in these relationships was inherently unequal which led to some women being killed for refusing to satisfy soldiers sexual desires. This usually occurred because of the power imbalance coupled with a sense among American soldiers that some European women, the French in particular, did not have the same moral boundaries as women in America and therefore took refusal as a personal affront.⁷⁸ While the Army did try rape cases they were more aggressive in trying, convicting, and executing black soldiers than white soldiers who were rarely tried for rape.⁷⁹ This meant that there was pressure on women in occupied Europe, both economic and physical to not reject advances of soldiers from the United States. This furthers how rejection in *Sad Sack* shows a notable lack of power for the character as well as highlights the complex relations European civilians had with American soldiers.

Sad Sack sometimes mimicked women or children, which Willie and Joe never do. In one strip (appendix 14) he sees a woman charm the sergeant by the hot dog table and be able to take more than one hotdog, but when he tries the same moves and is drawn in the exact same position as her he ends up getting thrown out.⁸⁰ He is thrown to the ground because he is acting like a woman which means that he is not performing masculinity; as masculinity and femininity define each other as opposites.⁸¹ This also portrays him as homosexual which was taboo in the 1940's and illegal in the United States and its Army.⁸² *Sad Sack* never truly performed his masculinity even though he was in the Army. He always was the butt of the joke, was continuously rejected by women and was never portrayed as the model masculine archetype or as more masculine than

⁷⁷ Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 127.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 128, 147.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 211.

⁸⁰ Baker, *The New Sad Sack*, 48.

⁸¹ Scott, "Gender," 1063.

⁸² Rose, *Myth and the Greatest Generation*, 149.

another man. Comparatively, Willie and Joe were always in a state of proving their masculinity in relation to other men and in relation to women. In this way they continuously occupy a privileged position in the comic which allowed Mauldin to use them as a platform to challenge the consensus model masculine archetype which Sad Sack never does.

In positioning Willie and Joe in a powerful position within his comic Mauldin was better able to directly criticize the model masculine archetype and present a darker, more realistic, view of the infantry. In one panel (appendix 15) a replacement says “I’m disgusted. I been in th’ infantry two days an’ I ain’t heard a shot” while Willie and Joe stare at him unamused.⁸³ The man talking is youthful, strong, white, male, and in the Army and therefore fits the model masculine archetype yet Mauldin has undermined him by the looks of Willie and Joe who have proved their masculinity in combat and are shown as asserted in their masculinity with women and in comparison to rear echelon soldiers. This portrays the replacement as wrong with no idea about what he is talking about. By undermining the model masculine archetype that was prevalent and popular at the time, Mauldin set up his comic to be a trusted source to showcase the less than savory aspects of the war.

Conclusion

Through his comic strip *Up Front* featured in *Stars and Stripes* and reprinted in newspapers and magazines in the United States, Bill Mauldin refuted the model masculine archetype popularized by propaganda during World War Two. This archetype was the figure of a young, white, and fit man in the military, fighting in the war. It was privileged throughout wartime

⁸³ Mauldin & DePastino. *Willie & Joe: the WWII Years*, 202.

propaganda and even influenced how news media reported on the war. Mauldin refuted this image by drawing his characters, Willie and Joe, to not fit into the archetype. His characters showed in their composition the mental and physical toll that fighting the war had on them as well as demonstrated through their realistic actions that they were not the model masculine archetype by having sex with sex workers, drinking profusely, and being undisciplined. This contrasted greatly with other comics of the time, namely the popular *Sad Sack* strip published in *Yank*, that showed a soldier continually struggling against the machinations of the Army and losing as well as comics produced stateside that showed superheroes and similarly drawn characters fighting moralistic battles against the Nazis. In order to make his comic effectively refute the model masculine archetype Mauldin positioned his characters so that they would be portrayed as more masculine than other, non-infantry, soldiers, and more powerful than women with their masculinity proven in combat and affirmed by their encounters with women. While just a comic, *Up Front* provides a more realistic view of the suffering that the infantry entailed during the war while also providing humor. By taking soldiers off of a pedestal and showing the war's toll on them, Mauldin exposed the human side of the war which allows for an even greater appreciation of what the soldiers he was inspired to draw accomplished. Reading Mauldin's cartoons leads to a more somber understanding of the war and the greater impacts that it had on Europeans and Americans.

Since its end in 1945 World War Two has passed into memory in America as the “good war”.⁸⁴ This myth conflates the masculine ideals of the model masculine archetype with cherrypicked points from the conflict deemed to be positive.⁸⁵ As veterans came home and tried

⁸⁴ Rose, *Myth and the greatest Generation*, 1.

⁸⁵ Jarvis, *The Male Body at War*, 188.

to confront and come to terms with their experiences during the war this mythicizing of them made it hard to confront the less savory, unheroic, unidealized aspects of war that they had experienced. Those who wrote memoirs often took years to finally work through their experiences.⁸⁶ Bill Mauldin's cartoons offered a way for them to express their emotions and experience during the war. In 2002, shortly before he died, veterans of the war, their widows, and their children all reached out by phone, visiting his hospital, and writing over ten thousand letters to him. All of them wanted to thank Mauldin for his art during the war and tell him what it meant to them. For veterans his work expressed how they felt about the war but could not put into words. For their children, finding his book in their fathers' study and reading it helped them better understand in a small way what their father went through during the war but hadn't talked about since. Through his work, Mauldin was able to capture American GI's experience during World War Two and communicate it to others who never experienced it. By not portraying the soldiers of World War Two in the model masculine archetype, Mauldin was able to make their experience human and depict it in ways that would touch them years after the war.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Rose, *Myth and the Greatest Generation*, 54.

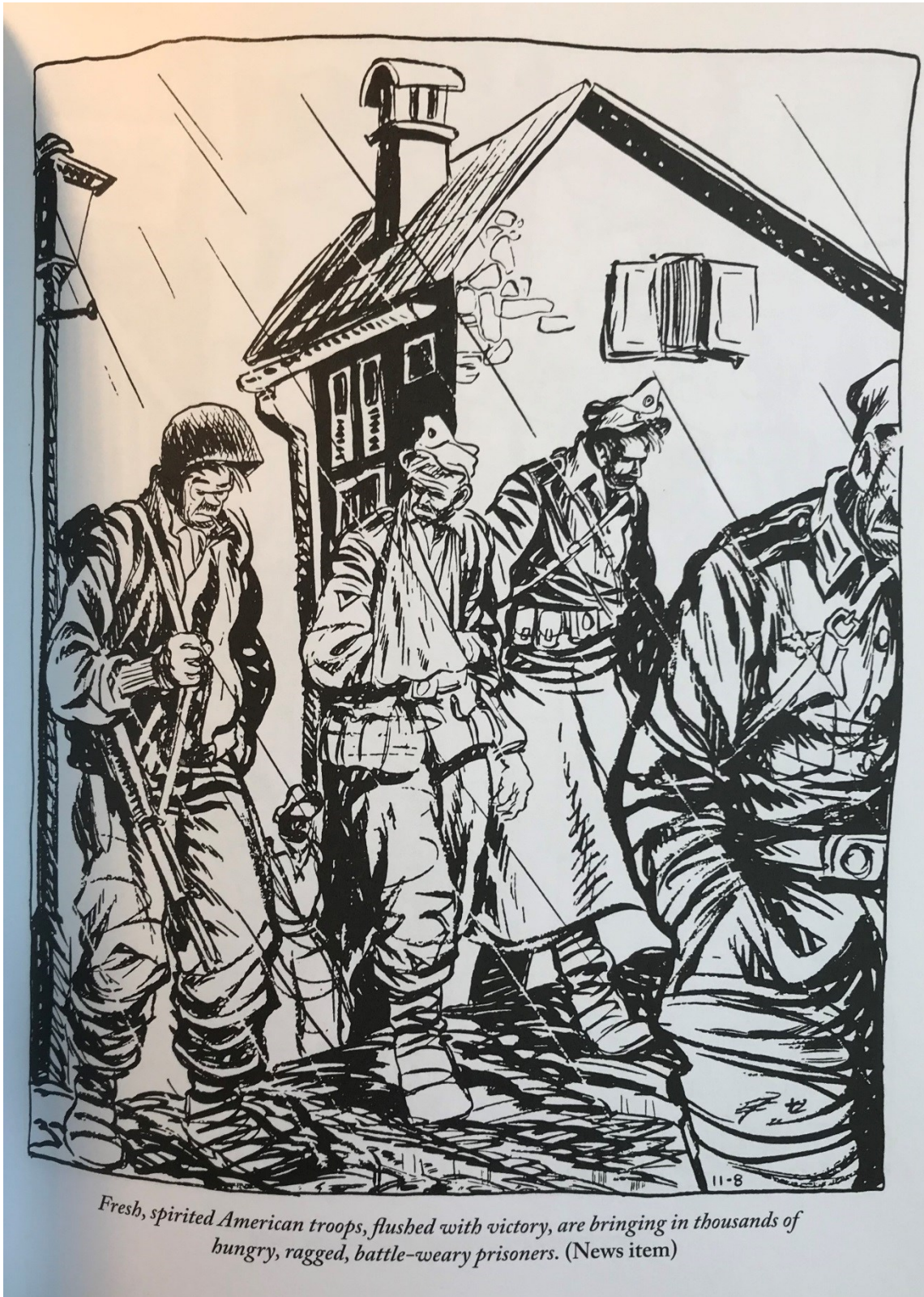
⁸⁷ Depastino, *A Life Up Front*, 1-5

Appendix:

1



2



Fresh, spirited American troops, flushed with victory, are bringing in thousands of hungry, ragged, battle-weary prisoners. (News item)



"No thanks, Willie. I'll go look for some mud wot ain't been used."



"Don't startle him, Joe . . . it's almost full."



"I'm depending on you old men to be a steady influence for the replacements."



"No parley Eenglesh."



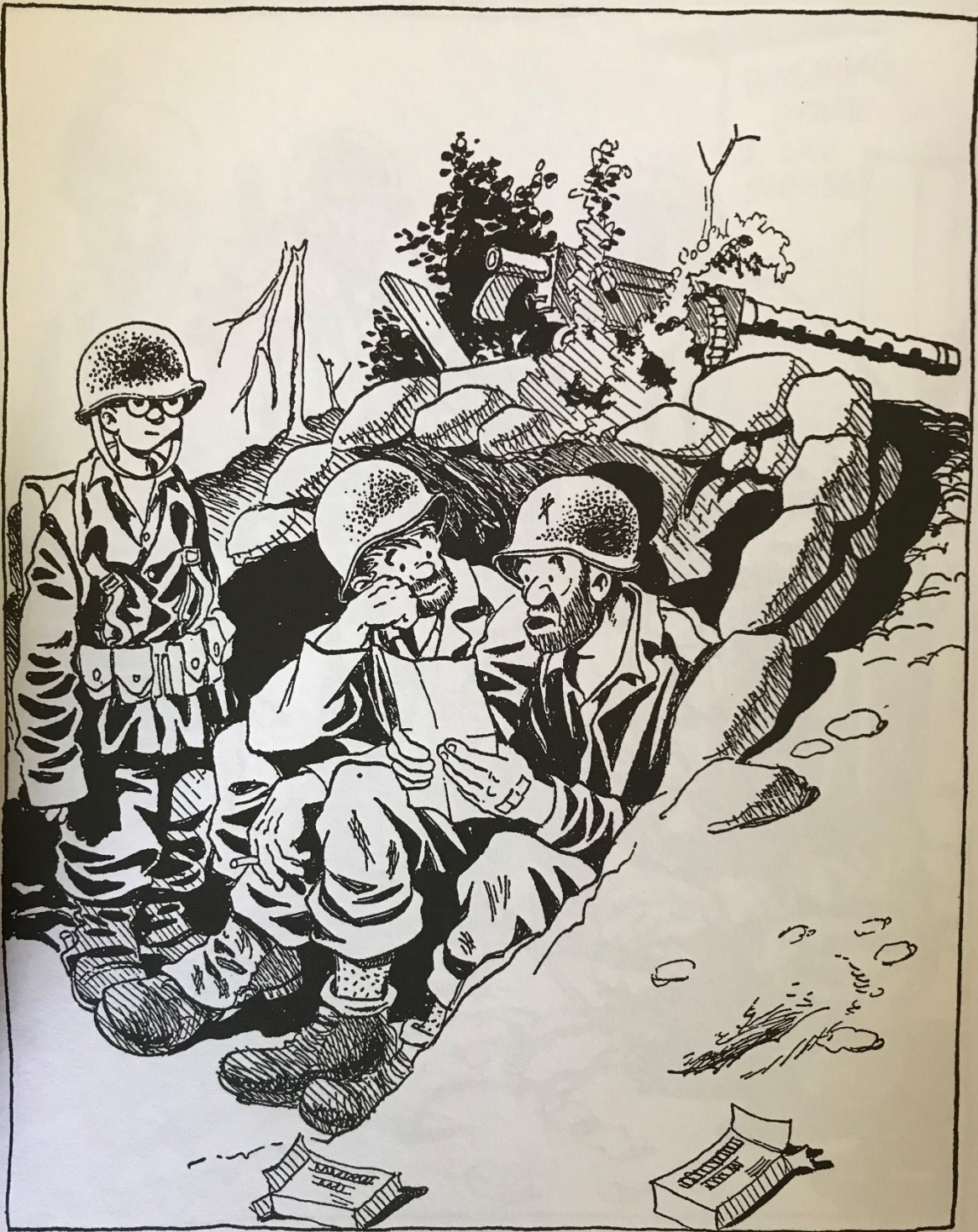
“Drink it all boys—th’ guy wot put out the order about shavin’ ain’t comin’ up here to inspect us.”



"I could swear a coupla Krauts wuz usin' that cow fer cover, Joe. Go wake up th' cooks . . ."



"Yer combat badge don't count. Ya need more of these battle participation stars."



"I guess it's okay. The replacement center says he comes from a long line of infantrymen."



"Are you seeking a company of infantry, mon Capitaine?"

FRENCH WELCOME



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This strip was originally in a book, so the top pictures are meant to be read before the bottom ones.



"You leave Weelie alone, or I'll never speak to you again."

CHARM



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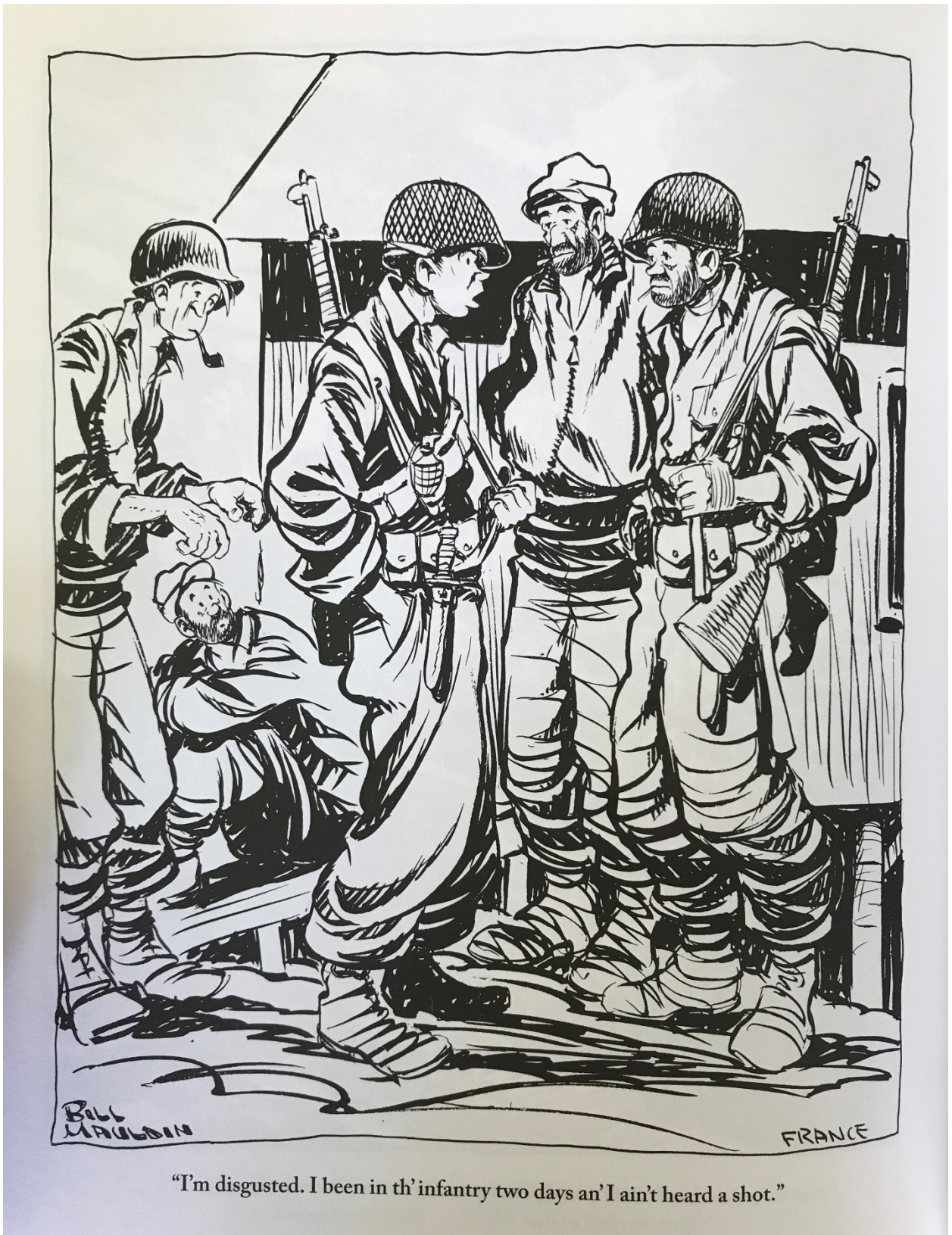
SAT GEORGE BAKER

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Original from
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN

This strip was originally in a book, so the top pictures are meant to be read before the bottom ones.



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