

Collier's

DECEMBER 25, 1943

Soldiers Speak Out

Our fighting men doubt if we at home know there's a war on

By Helena

Huntington Smith



Home-front squabbles are likely to seem trivial to these returned soldiers at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington. They are Sgt. Stanley Jankowiak of Buffalo, N.Y. who lost an arm in a New Georgia battle, and Cpl. Stanley Plocharczyk of New Britain, Conn., who lost a hand in the same action

WHEN a soldier overseas doesn't get a letter, his friends have a standard consolation to offer him. It is: "Yeah, 4F Johnny's got your girl."

To Selective Service, a 4F may be merely an unfortunate who is disqualified from entering the Army, but to a soldier, he is any man of military age who for any reason, however justifiable, is still back home enjoying the comforts the soldier has given up.

The attitude of the soldier toward 4Fs may be unreasonable but it is human, and it sums up the way he feels about the war, the home front and his own situation.

All healthy armies are full of gripes, and the American armies overseas are very healthy. They gripe about the food and the weather and about their officers. ("I never had no use for an awf'cer except at the front," said one upstanding American.) They gripe because V-mail print is so small it's hard to read; and because they don't get enough of it.

All this is as it should be. A sweet-natured soldier with no complaints would be sent home from the Army as a mental case. But underneath the harmless beefing is something more serious—a slow, deep resentment toward the people back home and the way they are conducting their part of the war.

In the past few months I have talked to dozens of wounded soldiers newly returned to hospitals in this country. They were from many fronts—from Italy, from Guadalcanal, from the jungles of New Guinea, from the air war over Germany. Those from the invasion of Europe were only just starting to come back. I also talked with a number of correspondents just returned from abroad. It all added up to the same thing: Our fighters feel that in many ways we are letting them down

OldMagazineArticles.com

Americans at War

There is no other country at war with such an enormous gulf in sacrifice between fighting men and civilians. There is no other country where the men at the front have given up everything, while the people at home have given up practically nothing. And the soldiers know it.

Many of the wounded men I talked to had lost an arm or a foot. Some were swinging agilely around on crutches, with a pajama leg knotted under the stump of a thigh; later, of course, to be fitted with artificial limbs. They were as cheerful and courageous as any group of men I have ever seen.

But sooner or later most of them got around to one thing: "A few bombs would do this country a lot of good." I heard that in San Francisco from a curly-headed sailor who had been sunk in the Pacific, and I heard it again in Washington from a corporal who had left his leg on Hill 609. Both added, rather anxiously, that, of course, they wouldn't want anybody to get hurt.

The soldiers of other countries can feel "we're all in it together," but not ours. A private who had been in Australia said, "They're more rationed down there than the people are here, but you don't hear them grumbling so much about it."

"In England," others said, "the civil populace knows there's a war going on. They're all out for the war. *All* the women are working in England."

A lieutenant colonel, who had been knocked out by concussion and had his back broken in three places, remarked, "I feel closer to the civilians of England than to those back here in America. They know what it's all about, over there."

These men are glad to be back in this country—so glad, there are no words for it. Yet there is another side to being back which is not so good. When they go downtown on liberty from the hospital, limping, or with a patch covering the place where one eye is missing, they are often virtually stared off the streets. They didn't expect that from their own people. The more sensitive are reluctant to go again.

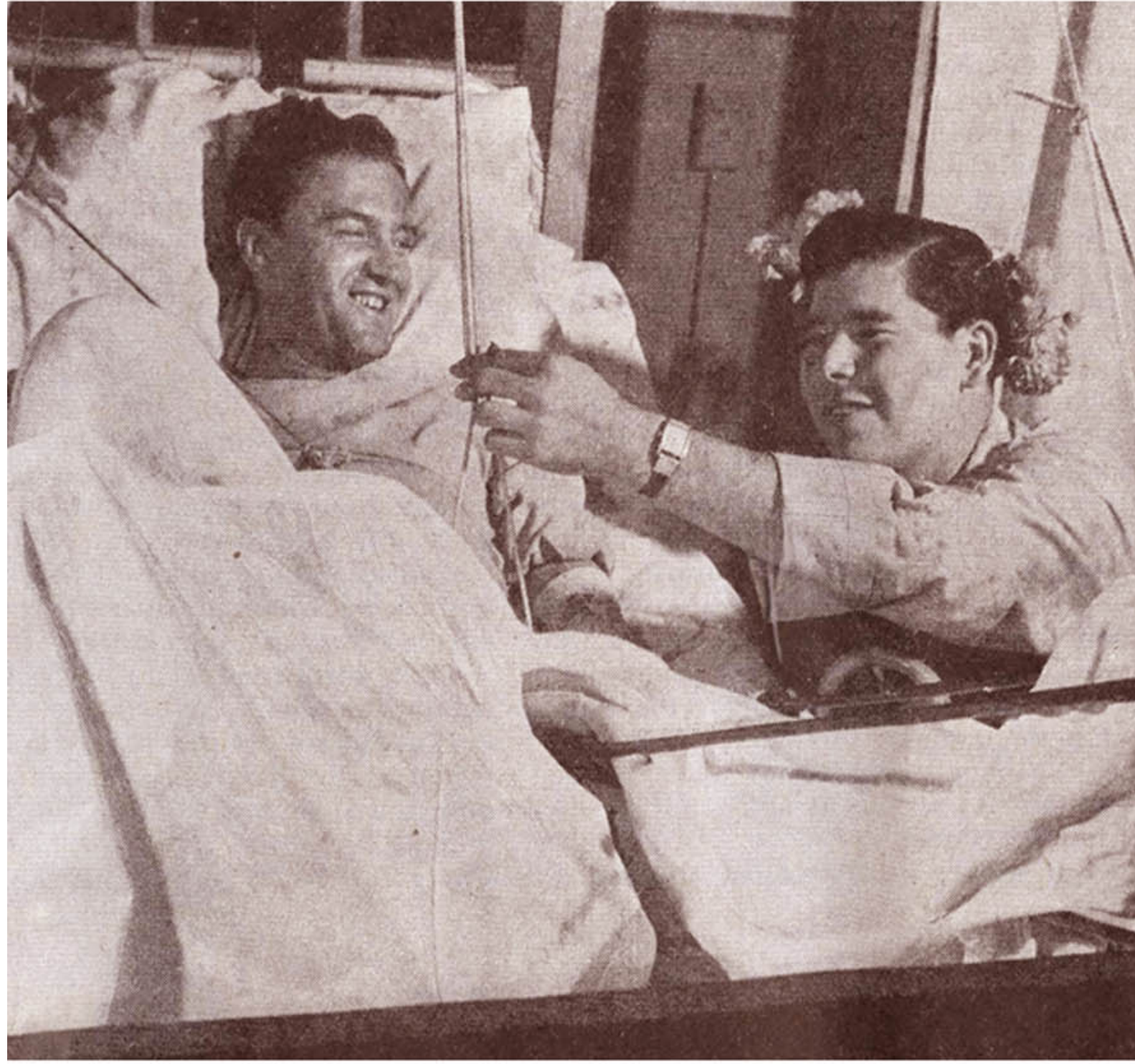
And that isn't all. I heard this one so many times that at first I thought it was a rumor. It is not a rumor. Man after man said, "Look, it happened to *me*." He went downtown, hobbling on a cane, and some bright citizen who didn't know what a Purple Heart ribbon meant waltzed up to him and said, "Sa-ay, how come they took you in the Army? The Army must be getting hard up for men if they're taking in guys like you."

The citizen doesn't mean to be offensive. He just hasn't found out there's a war on.

Reaction to Home News

The anger and disillusionment of the soldiers has focused most readily on strikers and labor leaders. The great majority of American soldiers abroad wanted to "give John L. Lewis a gun and stick him up in the front line." But like all Americans, they have learned to make a distinction between leaders and led. Quite a few remarked, "Those coal miners have got a case"—though they added that now wasn't the right time to settle it. They have a fairly good groundwork for their opinions. On the European front at least, and by this time undoubtedly on all fronts, they are well supplied with news.

The Army's Special Services Division does a good job in keeping the men informed. The men are given all possible access to radios. Each battalion has a



Cpl. Joseph Saskasitz of Nazareth, Pa. (in bed), was run over by a tank at El Guettar. His friend, Cpl. Rodney Graham of Atoka, Okla., is an American Indian. Graham was wounded and captured by the Nazis, and was repatriated in a prisoner exchange

command car equipped with both long and short wave, over which, in Europe, they get BBC broadcasts and some American programs by short wave. The African edition of Stars and Stripes gets up to the front, where it is very popular, and each unit gets some sort of news bulletin daily. Even under the enormous difficulties of fighting in New Guinea, a little weekly dope sheet called Guinea Gold was flown over the mountains to Buna.

When they get to a radio, the first thing our soldiers want to hear is some American swing music. Before Tunis fell, their favorite program was the one put over by a female renegade who talked American and broadcast from somewhere behind the German lines. They called her Sally of the Axis or Berlin Betty, and the whole Army listened to her every night. Her hot music and her rich, crooning voice sounded like home, and they thought her propaganda was very funny. Unintentionally, Sally gave quite a boost to American morale.

After music, they wanted to hear the war news—"how the Russians were doing"—"how the British Eighth Army was making out in the south." They'd see their own Air Force fly over on bombing raids and naturally they wanted to know the results.

Complaints about the hardships of rationing in the United States don't get much sympathy; yet rumors of meat and milk shortages affecting their own families upset them considerably. They are living under a strain, and they react to everything with a violence not easily understood by the comfortable people in the U. S. A. One soldier said: "If you get a letter that's a gripe about things back home, you feel you never want to write again yourself."

Heartaches from Afar

Never tell a soldier that "absence makes the heart grow fonder." He knows too many cases to the contrary, right in his own company. A good many men overseas fear that the war will force the sacrifice of their personal relationships even if they don't get killed. Married men worry about the effects of time and distance on their marriage, especially in isolated outposts where loneliness and inaction magnify their problems; they come to the gloomy conclusion that perhaps an eight- or ten-year-old marriage can survive the strain, but not a recent one, and theirs are nearly all recent.

OldMagazineArticles.com



You've heard about how we pasted the Japs at Rabaul and here's one of the boys who dished it out. Sgt. Beech Clark of Darlington, Md., flight engineer of a Liberator, was injured when his plane crashed after many missions over Jap-held islands

A dispatch from India mentioned the question of estrangement from wives as one of the worries of men stationed out there. Right after reading it, I talked to an Air Force private just returned from China, who said that "50 per cent of the married men in his outfit expected to get back home and find their wives' feeling toward them had changed."

Since they beef about so many things, it's interesting to know what they don't beef about. They take pride in the rigid cleanliness of the American Army. I met several who mentioned this.

"It's the Army's rule to leave a place the way you found it, or better," they said. "And, boy, they really do it, too."

Strange as this may seem to those who remember the last war, there are few complaints about our allies. Toward the Russians, they feel nothing but wholehearted admiration. "They're fighting devils," is the phrase which about sums it up. I had a feeling that any attempt to raise a bugaboo out of the Hammer and Sickle republics after the war would fall very flat as far as troops are concerned, the only exceptions I heard being among a few officers.

Toward the British, as always, our emotions are a shade more complex. A lot depended on where the soldier had been. There were spots in the Far East where cousinly irritation reached such a pitch that American units were ready to start a private war with His Majesty's forces, and would doubtless have attempted to do so if they had not been segregated by their commanding officers.

But in Africa they went to the opposite extreme. To questions about the British I never heard but one answer from any man who had fought in Africa. "They're swell! And all the boys in my outfit thought the same."

Some of them admitted that they had landed on the other side with a prejudice, but lost it promptly when they saw the British in action. "Most everybody changed their opinions about the British when they got over there." "Don't let anybody tell you they haven't got plenty of guts." "They saved us at Kasserine Pass, and, believe me, we'll remember it."

And it wasn't only the Army. I heard



Interpreting home-front current events to this weekly discussion group of convalescent wounded would be an uncomfortable assignment. Today they're listening as a couple of Air Force pilots, also wounded, describe their adventures over Germany

the same sentiments expressed about the British navy by American naval gunners who had been through bitterly fought convoy actions on the Murmansk route.

But in England itself, they found much to puzzle them. They thought the people were swell; the Scottish people even nicer. But—"It doesn't seem to be as much of a democracy as America," said an ex-Washington taxi driver. "A poor man over there hasn't got near the chance he has here."

Soldiers have not given much thought to postwar world problems. Few of them are even worrying about whether they themselves will find jobs—except the minority who are older and have families. When you ask them any question about a remote, impersonal future—these kids who have been living where tomorrow may never come—they get a queer look on their faces, a mixture of surprise, amusement and boredom, as though they were thinking: Aren't civilians funny? To our fighting men overseas, the future means just one thing—getting it over with and getting home.

But there are indications that soldiers in the quieter areas, at least, are ready to start thinking if someone will supply the material. Of a group of American soldiers who were polled in Britain, 64 per cent said they would like to hear talks on the United States today, and 63 per cent expressed a desire to hear about what will happen after the war.

A private in New Guinea wrote a letter to the African edition of Stars and Stripes. This private had taken time out to do a little thinking; maybe he had the habit before the war started. He said, "It looks as though our biggest fight of all is for a good postwar world. Out here we're too busy fighting human and insect enemies to do anything about it. That fight must start now, back home."