

WHAT AMERICAN WOMEN SHOULD KNOW ABOUT RETURNING VETERANS

A woman who has seen millions of GI's offers some sound advice

By Frances Langford



Our men are coming home by the shipload. How are their women greeting them?

Millions of servicemen have been or soon will be coming back to the United States. Your husband, sweetheart, son or brother may be among them. You will also be meeting other discharged veterans everywhere you go.

Unfortunately some authors have written of them as if they were men from Mars. Thus they have created a gulf between veterans and civilians. The veterans resent these self-constituted authorities on their problems. I don't pretend to be any great authority. But I have met hundreds of thousands of servicemen and heard them pour their hearts out, so I do think I've learned a few things that every American woman should know about them. Among the things I've learned are these:

Combat has not made these men killers at heart. They have not turned lawless. They are not imbued with hate. They draw a definite distinction between using a gun in wartime and using a gun in peacetime.

GI's are not "wolves," at least not more so than other men. When

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I began to go on overseas tours, I was told that I would not be safe among men who hadn't seen a white woman for months. But never once on the battlefronts I visited did I encounter any dangerous "wolves." In the Aleutians some of the men had seen no white woman for a year and a half. They liked to see me with my hair hanging down and the wind blowing it. They would walk by and touch my hair gently.

American GIs are deeply sentimental about their homes. All the little things become big in their minds—familiar chairs, familiar tables, a picture that hangs crookedly over the side of a certain bed. A woman who re-does her home in anticipation of her man's return is in for a let-down. Jon Hall, my husband, who has been in the Army, once asked me over the phone, "What have you done to the house, darling?" "Nothing," I said. He sighed, a long contented sigh. "Let's keep it just the way it was when I left."

Single veterans have become marriage-minded. When they were overseas, they probably met a great many married men, who would take out well-thumbed pictures of their wives and children and talk eloquently about them. Many of the single men began to wish that there were some special girl for them to go home to. Most of them want to find girls of their own, get married and start raising families.

Next to having a home and a girl of his own, the average veteran is most concerned about getting a job. He is afraid the women who never worked before the war have become infatuated with the idea of independence and may grab the best available jobs before he gets home. He feels that women who can afford to do so should stay out of jobs needed by servicemen.

If they have been wounded, veterans want understanding—but not pity. Obvious sympathy makes them cringe. Women who have been engaged to men who have been injured in combat add insult to injury when they say, "Don't worry, dear! I'll stick by you." That gives the men the intolerable idea that their women are sticking to them through a sense of duty.

They don't want to be put on exhibition. Some parents, proud of a son's war record, make the mistake of inviting the neighbors over

to stare at him and ask him questions. Many servicemen like to talk about their experiences—but when *they* feel like it.

Treat wounded GI's as you would treat any other man. One man may like to be kidded; another to be left alone; a third may want sympathy. If he's in the mood for kidding, handle it with a light touch. I myself will never forget an experience I had entertaining some men in the Army's Bushnell General Hospital in Brigham, Utah. One boy was especially depressed. He was hard of hearing; he was totally blind; he'd lost part of one arm and one leg. He didn't want anyone to sob over him. I went close to him, spoke close to his ear, told him my name. He didn't get it. I laughed and said, "I'll be very peeved with you if I have to mention Bob Hope before you recognize me." His eyes brightened. "Bob Hope," he said. "Why, you're Frances Langford." I kept the sob out of my voice that was in my heart. "You louse," I said. "You did make me mention Bob Hope." He laughed, and I really do think I cheered that boy up.

Some servicemen are wondering whether they were suckers to serve in this war or whether their sacrifices are truly appreciated. They don't want you to pat them on the back, but they want an understanding of what they went through.

Don't let anyone tell you that a large proportion of our returning veterans are mental cases. Some are, it is true; but some would have suffered those scarless wounds even if there had been no war. For heaven's sake, don't treat the average GI as if you were convinced that he is suffering from battle fatigue. Where there really is something mentally wrong with a boy, he should be kept in a hospital as long as the psychiatrists think it advisable. But those cases are rare.

Returning servicemen won't appreciate it if you work out a split-second social schedule for them. They've been looking forward to going home; and by home they mean a place of peace and contentment. Don't plan endless visits to friends and gaudy night clubs unless your man wants them.

Most veterans have changed—some more than others—but few of them realize that they have changed and it annoys them when

the home folks keep harping on that fact. One boy who'd been through campaigns in both Africa and Europe said to me, "Somehow I thought my folks would be just the same as when I left. But they're not." He doesn't realize that it is not they who have changed; and it would do no good to tell him.

Veterans like to feel that wives and sweethearts trust them. Don't ask questions about their faithfulness while they were overseas. Just assume they were true to you.

Most veterans have formed deep friendships in the service. Remember the old Biblical saying, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." In the services, friendships have been tested by blood and fire. Women would be wise to respect these friendships.

Many veterans have learned tolerance. Many who were prejudiced against certain races and religions have had their prejudices wiped out by witnessing the courage of men they despised. Don't try to convert your GI to a bigoted outlook. Try instead to learn tolerance from him. Most GI's have acquired a deeper understanding of religion, and with it has come respect for men of other religions. As one Protestant boy told me, "I worship the Jewish surgeon who operated on me. He is my superior officer, but when I salute him, I do so because he is one of the finest men alive."

These veterans have been dreaming of coming home, have built up great expectations. American women can smash those dreams or help to make them come true.

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