

YANK

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GI RACKETEERS IN THE PARIS

Black Market

AWOLs organized Chicago-style gangs with hide-outs, fences, gun molls and all the trimmings of a third-rate blood-and-thunder detective story.

By Sgt. ALLAN B. ECKER, YANK Staff Correspondent

PARIS, FRANCE—There weren't many people in the cheap little cafe—just a couple of soldiers, a few civilians and three or four blowzy girls looking for business. When two more characters, nondescript civilians who might have been Frenchmen, walked in nobody paid them much attention—until one started speaking English with a Boston accent.

A young fellow in civilian clothes who had been standing at the bar with a blonde looked at them nervously and hurriedly left the blonde, the bar and the cafe.

The two newcomers hightailed it after him. Outside the cafe the young fellow in civilian clothes started to run. The others, close behind, chased him into a blind alley a few blocks away. He turned and drew a gun. But he was too slow. His pursuers knocked the gun from his hand and took him prisoner.

This "civilian" was an AWOL who belonged to one of the GI gasoline gangs that centered in the Montmartre district of Paris, selling stolen U. S. gasoline in the black market. These gangs were organized with the same sweet, ruthless efficiency that marked the Capone mob of Chicago in the 1920s. Gang members included AWOL GIs and riffraff of the Paris underworld. There were gang rivalries and gang wars and killings of insubordinate gangsters by gang leaders. The gangsters usually had big money. They had hide-aways and the traditional gun molls that make such hide-aways a pleasure. They were big, illegal business.

The two characters who spotted this gangster were agents of the Army's Criminal Investigation Division (CID), assigned to break up the gasoline racket. They were watching the suspected cafe when the AWOL tipped his mitt by his reaction to their American conversation.

Meanwhile, across the street from the cafe, several other CID agents watching a garage caught the rest of the same gang unloading hot U. S. gasoline from an Army truck and selling the telltale red-dyed stuff to the French proprietors of the garage.

This gang of AWOLs, working the Paris gasoline racket on a large scale, was one of the most successful and best organized GI racketeering rings in the ETO. The take in the three months of the gang's operation was high, averaging around a million francs, or \$20,000, for each man.

There were eight or nine AWOLs in the gang, all under 25. A staff sergeant was boss, assigning the members to regular work schedules that would have done credit to a commercial trucking company—days on and off, pick-ups, deliveries.

The gang operated five trucks and three jeeps, all belonging to the U. S. Army. Some of these vehicles had been stolen on Paris streets. Others had been acquired more simply; when the GIs went AWOL from their outfits they had taken their trucks with them.

To get gasoline for sale in the black market the gang used two methods that were typical of GI gang operations. Gang members would drive around in their jeeps looking for parked vehicles with extra cans of gas in them. When they found one, they would steal the gas. Occasionally they stole tires and tools if it didn't involve too much trouble.

The other system of obtaining gasoline took more finesse, but it paid bigger dividends. It involved going to an Army POL (petrol-oil-lubrication) dump and getting a load of gasoline by fraud. There were several ways of doing this.

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During the general courts-martial for AWOLs and deserters accused of dealing in the black market an officer reads the verdict against 182 GIs and two officers.

The earliest, and simplest, way was to drive your truck up to a dump and tell the GI attendant: "My CO sent me down here to get gas." Back in the fall of 1944 so many outfits were moving forward, and the emphasis was so much on speed, that gas dumps serviced any and every GI truck. There was no time to check whether a driver was telling the truth, and no adequate system of requisitioning had been set up.

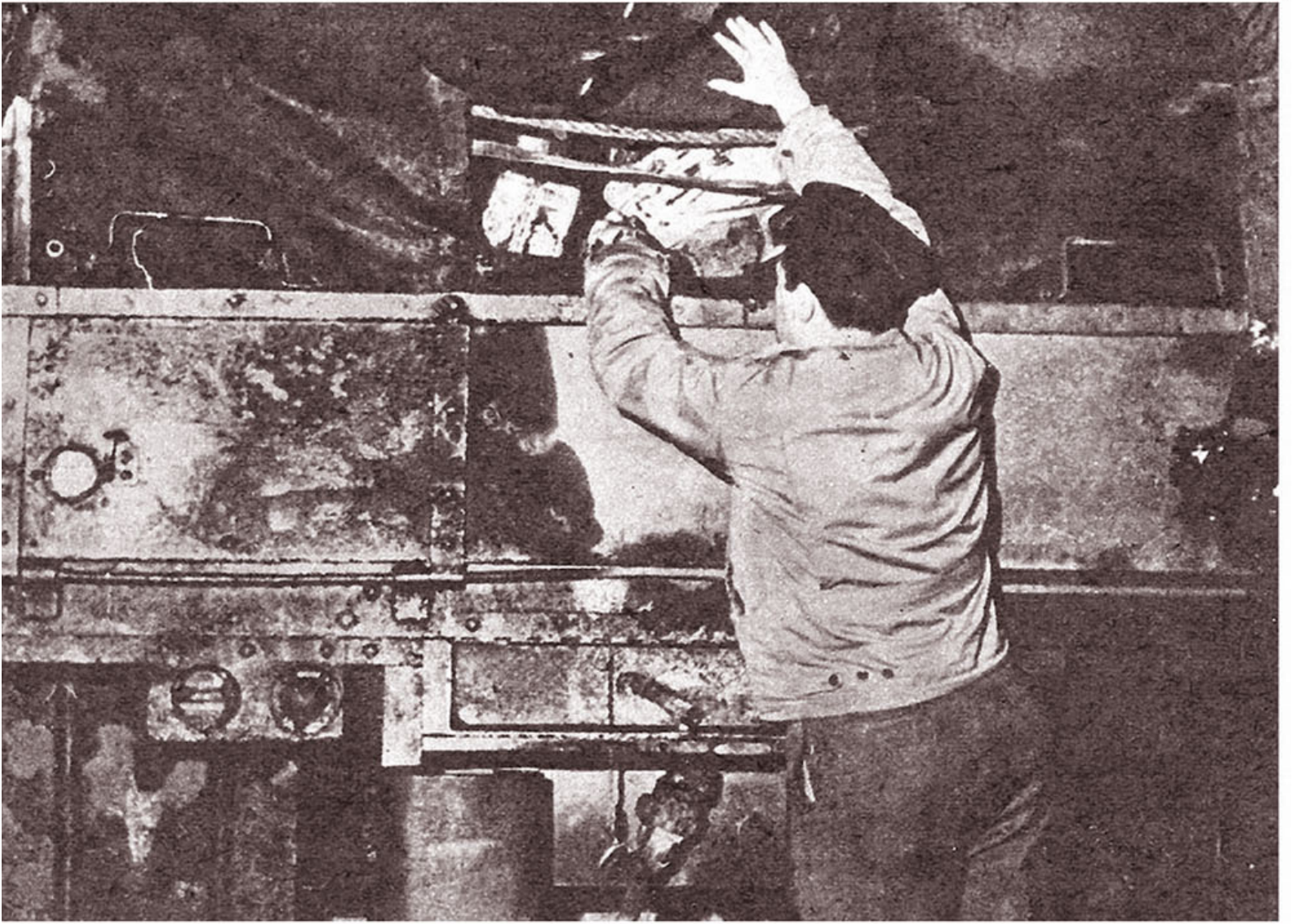
To get gas at other dumps all you needed was a container. The fuel was regarded as expendable, and as long as you turned in an empty jerrican, the dump would give you a full one. For 250 empty jerricans you could get that many full ones.

One gang was in cahoots with a GI at a POL dump, who provided gas without requisition forms of any kind in exchange for a rake-off on the take. But this was not the ordinary practice.

Another system was to make out a field message—using a book of stolen field-message forms or a plain piece of paper signed by a non-existent officer—requesting a certain quantity of gas for a nonexistent unit. There was nothing elaborate about these forms. They read simply: "I certify that Truck No. XYZ is authorized to take 265 cans of gasoline necessary for functioning of this unit.—J. Doe, Capt., Inf., Comdg."

As the requisition forms became more complicated, the phony paper work became heavier. Some gangs had typewriters. One GI racketeer hired two French civilian stenographers to fill out requisitions and operate a mimeograph machine.

But for the most part the gangs succeeded not because of perfect organization but because it was easy to acquire and dispose of the gasoline. As one convicted racketeer put it, "Any damn fool could make a fortune without even trying."

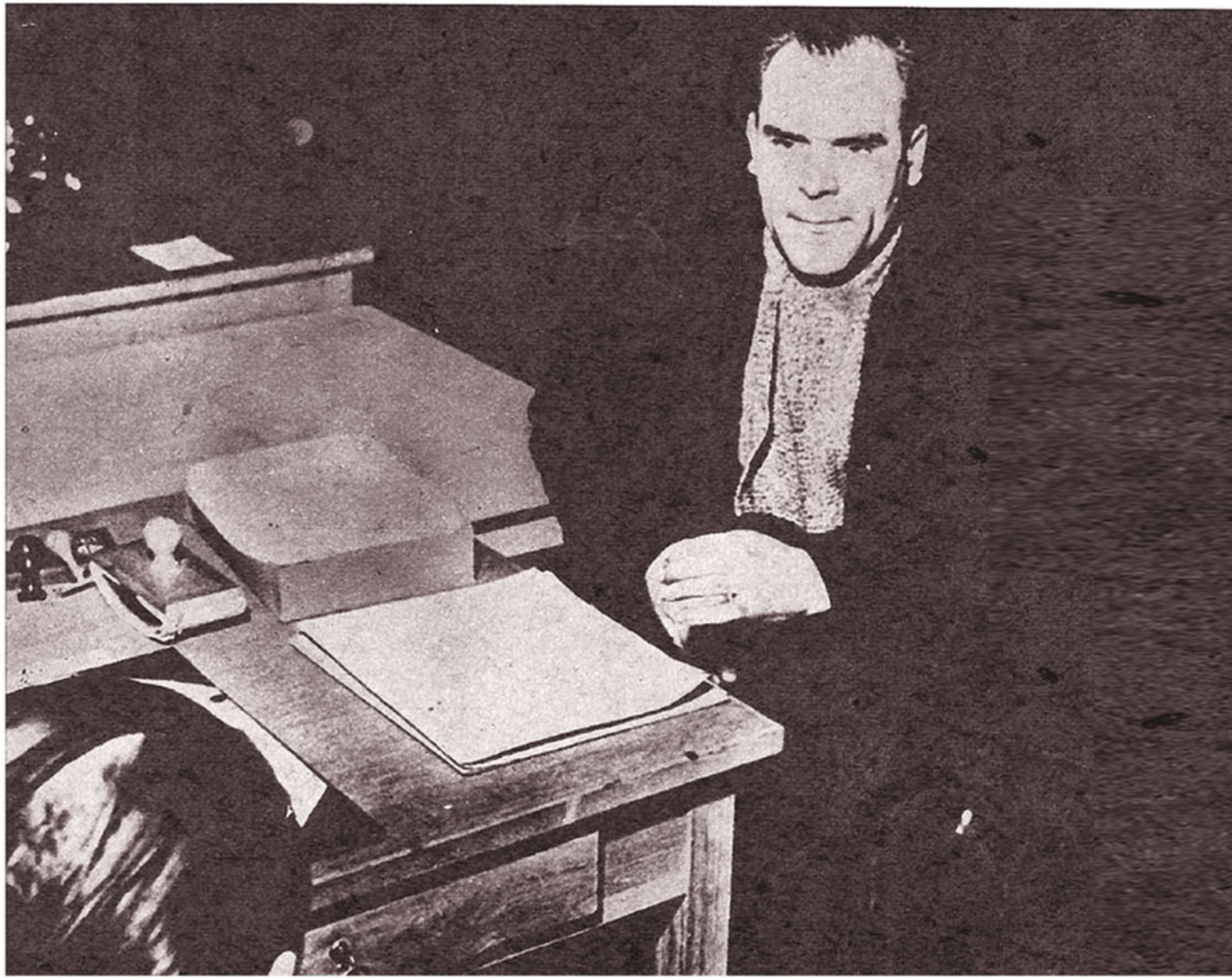


Exposure of the black-market racket stolen gasoline began when CID agents caught gangmembers unloading cans of gas from an Army truck like this one.

How did this get-rich-quick system develop and who was responsible for it? The answer goes back to the early days of the war, when the U. S. was still a nonbelligerent.

There was a black market in France long before any GIs reached here. When the war cut off French imports, all the commodities that had formerly come from overseas—among them soap, gas, coffee and tea—became scarce. Because the demand remained fixed while the supply dwindled, the prices for these articles skyrocketed.

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"Monsieur Jean," a French ex-convict, was one of the contacts used by the AWOI gangsters. He is shown while he was being questioned by the Paris police.

The German occupation made matters worse. Under the terms of the Armistice, the French Government had to pay the Germans 500,000,000 francs a day. The Germans used this money to buy goods from the French. When this vast sum of money, together with the paper money which the Germans printed, was put into circulation, it boosted prices until almost everything was beyond reach of most French pocketbooks.

Another Armistice clause forbade Germans to make direct market transactions with the French producers. All dealings were supposed to be carried out at fixed prices through an official agency. The Germans hired French underworld characters to buy from the French farmers all the food and other articles Germany had lacked for so long. These black-market purchases were hauled to Germany in *Wehrmacht* trucks. French farmers who seemed reluctant to sell to the black-market operators were warned that the Germans could make things tough for them.

By the time the Germans retreated from France, the French economy was completely out of kilter. The American landing operations, and the bombings and bombardments that preceded and accompanied them, destroyed the railroads and the bridges by which many products had moved from Normandy farms to city markets. At the same time, the Germans were taking thousands of trucks with them in retreat. This shortage of transportation created artificial shortages in eggs, meat, butter, milk and vegetables. There were plenty of these products in Normandy but no way to get them to the city market. Food prices went still higher, and thousands of people went hungry because they could not afford to buy in the black market. Gasoline and trucks suddenly became worth small fortunes. Everybody whose business depended on transportation was a pauper without them and a millionaire with them. Food and cigarettes FOB Paris also ran high.

Into this situation stepped the American GI. The liberated Parisians greeted him with an emotional demonstration of overwhelming proportions. Everybody in the capital showered kisses, hugs and cognac on the Yank, who gave them back kisses, hugs, candy, coffee and cigarettes from his rations. The doughs stood at the Eiffel Tower or at the Obelisk in the Place de la Concorde and just gave the stuff away.

The flush of liberation soon cooled, but the Parisian demand for Army supplies was as hot as ever. Some GIs still gave their rations away out of the goodness of their hearts, but others with sharper instincts decided to do business with the French people. And the French people were begging for a chance to pay for GI rations.

THE profits were so big and so easy to make that some soldiers decided to sell more than merely their own rations. In fact, some gave up soldiering for the marketing business, which had more dough and a lot less chicken to it.

They went AWOL from their units, which were mostly moving on beyond Paris, and stayed behind where the market and the money were. They moved into the upper brackets and became racketeers. Some of these men had minor crim-



U.S. officials found this loot on one GI, who is said to have pulled it in by selling ration cards and gas. It included 40,000 francs plus a small pistol

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inal records in civilian life. When the opportunity for profitable crime came into their Army life they seized it. The biggest profits were in gasoline and trucking rather than rations, so most GI gangsters switched to these rackets.

The French underworld was quick to make friends with them. In bars, cafes, hotels and houses of prostitution in the Montmartre and Montparnasse areas, the French gangsters made deals with the AWOLs. The GIs agreed to sell gasoline and other commodities wholesale to the fences, and they in turn would find retail outlets.

The first AWOLs were gradually joined by others. Some of the new recruits came from the Red Ball Highway, the trucking route then in operation from Cherbourg forward. They brought with them truckloads of gas that found a ready market. The others were doughs temporarily AWOL from the front, who came back to Paris looking for a brief fling at the bright lights, liquor and women, and found things so pleasant they forgot about going back to their outfits.

Life in Paris was expensive. Champagne cost 500 or 600 francs a bottle, cognac cost 80 francs a drink, and women came expensive too. At the fixed legal exchange rate of 50 francs to a dollar it was easy to shoot in one evening all the jack you'd brought with you.

By the cafe grapevine, broke AWOLs soon heard about easy money in the black market. Stealing trucks and gas took men, and there was plenty of money for everybody, so the older hands were more than ready to have new AWOLs join forces with them.

From such casual and haphazard beginnings some of the gangs became highly organized outfits. Generally there was one man who was the "brains." Occasionally he had previous experience in the States. Men who had some speaking knowledge of French acted as gang contacts with the French operators. At least one member of the gang was usually AWOL from a trucking outfit, and sometimes he could induce other members of his old outfit to go AWOL with their trucks and join his gang.

During working hours, most of the men wore GI uniforms to avoid suspicion while they were driving Army trucks or handling Army gasoline. "Off duty," however, they generally wore civilian clothes borrowed from some girl's bedroom closet or bought in the French black market. One AWOL paid 17,000 and 20,000 francs—\$340 and \$400—apiece for two suits.

In almost every gang there was the French equivalent of the U. S. gun moll—sometimes one and sometimes several of them. The girls helped spend the money and came in handy, of course, for other uses, but their principal value was to assist the contact men in lining up deals.

Usually the boss controlled his gang by brainpower, but sometimes he had to use brute force. In one gang, when a member started asking embarrassing questions, the boss shot him.

Gang organization reached its highest level of perfection in the so-called Vincennes gang, directed by an AWOL medic with a powerful imagination. Posing as an MP lieutenant, he rounded up some AWOLs in a Montmartre bar and told them that they faced death by hanging for desertion. Then he relented. They looked like pretty good boys, he said, and if they did him a favor he'd be willing to let them go. The favor was to drive his trucks and join his "outfit." Thoroughly scared, they agreed.

Little by little this boss added to his T/O until he had from 60 to 70 men and from 20 to 30 trucks. The outfit was conducted along strictly military lines with reveille, special orders, promotions, passes to town and duty rosters. It had everything, in fact, except Good Conduct Medals and rotation. The men lived in a warehouse for four months without the real MPs or the neighboring French civilians ever dreaming that the gang was anything but a legitimate military unit.

There were instances where the brains of a black-market scheme improved on the original.

One lone-wolf operator, who concentrated on the false-requisition racket (he counterfeited ration cards as a sideline), didn't want to be bothered managing a gang in the ordinary way. He set himself up in a swank office in the Paris business district with two stenographers, and hired AWOLs to run gas for him on a flat rate

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One lone operator set himself up in a swank office.

basis in their own stolen trucks. This cut down his administrative headaches.

A tech sergeant in charge of his unit's transportation drew supplies of gas from two separate dumps, getting enough at each dump to supply his outfit's entire needs. Through his gang he got rid of one dump's supply each week on the black market while he kept his unit perfectly happy on the other dump's supply. Two captains in his outfit authorized him to use the unit's trucks for the gasoline racket while they received part of the proceeds.

THE trouble with money gained in a black-market economy is that there's nothing much you can do with the money once you've got it.

There are almost no goods to buy. It's the very shortage of things in the first place that makes the black market tick. The boss of one AWOL gang bought a 90,000-franc automobile and a 45,000-franc motorcycle, but these are hard to get and even when you've bought one you still have wads of francs left over.

You can't send money home. Some operators tried and were caught. For example, a sergeant with a double-requisition racket, who dealt in cognac on the side, made the error of buying eight \$1,000 War Bonds and \$2,500 in postal money orders. This naturally aroused the curiosity of the Army postal and finance authorities. He was discovered and apprehended despite a prepared story, vouched for by French civilians, that he had won the money at the horse races.

Since there was nothing else to do with their money, AWOL gangsters spent it. They spent it so lavishly that they attracted attention. Some of the people who discovered their racket demanded—and got—hush money. Others, for one reason or another, reported them to American authorities. In some cases, the Army's CID operators spotted the heavy spending AWOLs directly.

When French people put the finger on the AWOLs they had a variety of motives. Frenchmen who had been ditched by their women in favor of richer American AWOLs figured that turning the Yanks in was an easy way to eliminate competition. In some cases, women just grew tired of the GIs and wanted to get rid of them. Some of the French people counted on a reward from the American authorities. Still others were motivated by patriotism; they felt the black market was bad for their country.

Some of the AWOL gangsters were discovered by chance, though sooner or later they would have been spotted anyway. The GI who hired an office and two secretaries forgot to pay a printing bill. The printer complained to the police. The boss of the Vincennes gang, who posed as a lieutenant, borrowed a set of officers' Class A's so he could attend a fancy party. He neglected to return the uniform, and the rightful owner had him arrested for this petty theft, which exposed his four months of larceny. The AWOL motorcyclist, whose job it was to ride around informing the other gang members about their next jobs, was treated by an Army medic after a traffic accident. Filling out the papers, the doc-

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They held up their former associates for \$60,000.

tor discovered the cyclist was AWOL. Further questioning made the GI spill the beans.

But perhaps the largest number of GI racketeers were apprehended by CID agents who watched the cafes and garages suspected of being black-market headquarters, or who got on the trail of GIs sending home excessive sums through the postal money-order system. Other gangsters were caught in Paris AWOL round-ups.

Another gang which grossed \$180,000, probably the largest income of any single operation, was led by a couple of young desperadoes who didn't know when they were licked. One of them had a little spending money—52,475 francs, or \$1,049.50—in his pocket when he was captured, but it was confiscated. When he broke out of jail a short time later, he needed some ready cash. He and his partner, who also escaped, headed straight for the garage where they had disposed of most of their gasoline and held up their former associates to the tune of \$60,000. Before they were recaptured they managed to do some more business. Then they got into a crap game and one of them lost \$1,500 to the other.

AMONG the most publicized black-market operations in France were the railway battalion thefts of cigarettes and rations, which brought more than 180 officers and enlisted men into court. These men represented only a part of one railway battalion. The battalion as a whole—like the other railway outfits on the Continent—accomplished an important military mission which was perhaps obscured by this bad publicity. The acute shortage of butts, both on the Western Front and in the States, made these thefts front-page newspaper stories although the gasoline thefts were really more serious.

In September, October and November, when the railway thefts were committed, GIs at the front and in Paris were talking about the great cigarette mystery. Back in the States the people were told that they had to go without cigarettes because the men at the front were getting them, but up at the front and in the rear echelon in France the shortage was so acute that official cigarette rations were curtailed or suspended altogether. Of the 83 billion cigarettes ordered by the Army and the Navy in 1944, 77,000,000 packs a month were slated for European distribution, but, according to PX authorities, only 11,000,000 packs—one in seven—reached their destination during one 30-day period.

Yet at the same time, in French bars, cafes, hotels and other public places, plenty of civilians were smoking popular-brand American cigarettes. In Paris you could buy—for \$2 a pack—U. S. cigarettes intended for PX sale at five cents a pack. The whole cigarette situation became the subject of gags on the French stage and a general topic of conversation in all levels of society.

While large numbers of GIs took part in the railway pilfering, it was never organized on a big-time gang basis like the gasoline racket. And the railway men didn't go AWOL. Unlike

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"Off duty," they generally preferred civilian clothes.

the gasoline racketeers who quit soldiering completely, they stayed on the job of running trains to the front and did their stealing on the side.

THE exposure of the railway thefts was mainly the work of two CID agents, Lt. Robert P. O'Reilly of Arlington, Mass., a former Holy Cross football player and Boston lawyer, and James Cozzati of Poughkeepsie, N. Y., former boxer and New York State trooper. O'Reilly used to be a sergeant in the 44th Troop Carrier Group which dropped the 101st Airborne Division into Carentan on D-Day.

Following a plan of strategy worked out by Lt. Col. James Elder of Chicago, Ill., the head of the CID, O'Reilly and Cozzati were assigned to one of the railway battalions as undercover agents, posing as GI firemen on trains making the run from Dreux to Paris. From their eyewitness testimony and that of the accused men, the courts-martial trying the railway cases obtained a picture of the techniques most commonly used in railway stealing.

Most of the men arrested belonged to C Company—the operating company which runs the trains—of one railway battalion. The C Company men had greater access to rations and supplies being hauled than anybody in the rest of the battalion. And of all the railway battalions, theirs—which ran from Dreux to Paris—had the greatest access to the Paris black market. This combination made them the focus of the Army's attention in the concerted effort to stop the theft of Government supplies. Members of C Company of this battalion stoutly maintained, however, that "some people may think our outfit is the only one involved, but up and down the line other battalions are doing the same thing."

About an hour after their outfit landed in France on August 26, the men in C Company helped themselves to boned turkey and 10-in-1s at the ration dump because no other provision for their eating had been made. Three days later they entrained for Dreux, which was to be their headquarters. En route they supplemented their issued K-rations with 10-in-1s and cigarettes taken from trains on the sidings.

From Dreux, the trains began to operate to Paris. The trip is only 60 miles each way, but at that time it took nine days for a round trip. There were no lanterns, no headlights, no fuses (red danger flares), no torpedoes (safety devices) and sometimes no tracks. The crews were running over roads that had not been used since the Germans left. They hauled successfully bombs, ammo, gas, pontons, engineering and signal equipment and rations. On those first runs the men did not have food issued to them, so they helped themselves again from the loads they

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were carrying. According to the testimony at the trials, when one of the men asked the battalion commander what would be done about food, the major replied, in effect, "You're carrying stuff; it's your own fault if you go hungry."

Later on organized messes were established and the men were regularly supplied with personal rations before starting trips, but by that time the habit of opening the rations was too strong to break. It developed into a business so successful that some men began referring to their outfit as the "million-dollar battalion."

Unlike the gasoline thefts, the railway-ration pilfering required no elaborate system of gangs or organized fences. Rations and cigarettes were easy to carry away from the trains in barracks bags and easy to sell without lining up buyers ahead of time.

There were half a dozen different ways in which the crews obtained their barracks-bag loads. Because of the blackout the trains ran without lights, relying on manual signals and a safety-block system to prevent collisions. The simplest looting technique was to break into a train when several were held up at the block for a couple of hours, waiting for signals. The conductor of each train carried a waybill describing the contents of the individual cars, so that it was no trick at all to know which cars carried the "sensitive items" and which carried heavy stuff that couldn't be pilfered or sold easily.

More planning went into the siding of the car for looting purposes. Siding means removing the car from the train and putting it on a sidetrack, where it could be pilfered at leisure (generally by night) by the crew of the train and any others in the know.

MPs were detailed to ride the trains not long after the lines went into operation. Their customary place was in the caboose at the whip end of the train. The engineers would stop the train on a bend so that the cars at the head of the train could not be watched by the MPs. Then the crews would loot the head-end cars.

At Veilliers, the watering station between Dreux and Paris where the engine and tender were supposed to uncouple and turn in for servicing, the crews uncoupled not only the engine and tender but as many cars as contained "sensitive items." They took these cars into the station for looting, leaving the rest of the train—and the MPs—5,000 yards or more outside the station. Sometimes six railroad men would generously don helmet liners and carbines and relieve the MPs. When the MPs had gone, their substitutes would join the crew in the looting.

Meat, coffee, cigarettes, canned goods and alphabetical rations were the principal items taken, but there was also some minor traffic in Army clothing and in blankets and alcohol taken from the westbound hospital trains. The prices varied somewhat, but the standard black-market deal was \$500 for a case (50 cartons) of cigarettes; \$300 for a 20-pound can of coffee; \$300 for a box of 50 D-ration chocolate bars; \$100 for a case of 10-in-1 rations, and corresponding prices for other items.

Trains carrying slow freight—jeeps, trucks, signal equipment, heavy weapons, ammo and so on—were never pilfered because these items could not be carried away in barracks bags or readily disposed of, and also because the railway men themselves thought of these items as essential war products. When the prosecutor at the trial suggested that a lot of cigarettes might mean as much to the Infantry doughs as gasoline to the tanks, one of the accused GIs replied, "I had no idea of what I was doing to the morale of the men in the line." That seems to have summed up the attitude of his fellows.

Any Frenchman on the streets and in the cafes around the yards would buy cigarettes or rations. (Most Frenchmen these days would buy a Liberty ship if you could get it to them.) So business was conducted much more casually than in the case of the gas gangs. Early transactions took place in the streets, but when town patrols began to crack down most of the railway men did their business with Frenchmen in cafes, cabarets, restaurants, cheap hotels and houses of prostitution.

THE railway battalion's transactions in the black market came to an abrupt halt on Novem-

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ber 26 when Col. Elder directed a simultaneous raid by CID agents and Military Police on the stations to which the battalions ran the trains. Some 400 men were seized on the engines and in the yards, billets and headquarters, together with quite a piece of loot and other evidence, notably large sums of money, money orders and receipts. Questioning proceeded immediately, and the men who didn't appear to be implicated were released, although some were later re-arrested when accumulated evidence linked them to the thefts. At the same time, the French police raided and arrested a number of French cafe proprietors who had done business with GIs. Two officers of the railway outfit—six others were arrested later—were picked up in the raid.

Agent Cozzati was on one train as a fireman when it was raided. The conductor, who had left his train as usual and walked into the station for the okay to proceed, was nabbed but released because he had no evidence on his person. He hurried back to his train and warned the rest of his crew, who shoveled their money orders, receipts, 5,000- and 1,000-franc notes and canned goods into the fire. Since a CID man saw them do it they were arrested when the train pulled in.

FROM January until March of this year, general courts-martial in the Seine section (the base area including Paris) have sentenced 59 AWOLs and deserters dealing in the gasoline black market to punishments that range from five years in prison to death by hanging, following trials by Maj. John E. Kieffer of Buffalo, N. Y., the Seine section trial judge advocate, and his staff.

In the same period, other general courts-martial in the Seine section have sentenced 177 enlisted men and three officers of the railway battalions to terms ranging from three to 50 years in prison for dealing in cigarette and rations black markets. These trials were conducted by Lt. Col. Carmon Harris of Oklahoma City, Okla., executive officer of the Seine section and staff judge advocate, acting as special prosecutor for railway cases, and his staff.

The severity of the sentences appeared to shock many Parisians, judging by the letters leading French newspapers received. A group of young girls, for example, wrote: "We would like to find some way of diminishing the rigor of the military laws, though we do not argue against them. We think that we have had, all of us, part of the responsibility for this situation, and that many French persons have been accomplices."

By contrast with the punishment administered to the French fences, the sentences seemed more severe. Because there is no Parliament to revise the laws, the old French laws still stand, and they do not cover black-market operations in time of war. The French are being punished under statutes forbidding the receipt of stolen property, for which penalties are limited. (On January 13, the military governor of Paris threatened penalties ranging from one to five years imprisonment for any French national holding or receiving stolen U. S. goods.)

Reviewing the case of 115 enlisted men convicted in the railway battalion cases, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower took note of their "effective work under difficulties" and their good previous records, and directed they be given a chance to serve suspended sentences in a special combat company. The men were reassigned to a reinforcement center as privates to receive training before being given a chance to redeem themselves at the front. The remaining 39 enlisted men and three officers convicted in the railway cases, who by evidence were shown to be ringleaders, as well as the AWOL gasoline-gangsters, are serving out their sentences.

According to Army authorities, arrest and prosecution of these men has done much to stamp out the major GI black market in the Paris area, both by catching some offenders and deterring other prospective criminals, although no one attempts to deny there is still black marketing.

"The crime picture here is not as bad as it has been painted," Col. Elder says. "There have been only approximately 2,500 major cases involving probably not more than 5,000 soldiers in all—and by major cases are meant crimes of violence, rape, murder, assault with intent to rape, robbery, burglary and misappropriation of Government property. The colorful nature of these

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crimes and the circumstances under which they took place have given them perhaps undue prominence.

"Undoubtedly the prosecution of these cases has had and will continue to have a deterrent effect on other potential soldier-criminals, while the improved security methods and our familiarity with the techniques of the black-market operation—gained through experience—will make it a lot tougher for GI racketeers to do business in the future."

They had hide-aways and girls that made such hide-aways a pleasure.

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