
“Our Problem Children”: Masculinity and its Discontents in American Parachute Units in World War II



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Abstract

Despite popular images that depict World War II paratroopers in idealized terms, the U.S. Army's creation of these units unleashed a culture of masculinity predicated on aggressive elitism with significant side effects on the battlefield. This article examines American efforts to create airborne units in World War II and the concomitant effects on these units' treatment of prisoners and sexual violence. The article discusses the difficulty of using fragmentary and inconclusive sources in reconstructing the dark side of warfare. It also offers a reconsideration of popular memory by restoring the harsh reality of war to narratives of American involvement in World War II and the paratroopers.

On Friday, 3 August 1945, two young women walking down the street in Poinchy, France, were approached by two American paratroopers from the 101st Airborne Division driving a Jeep. The girls were coerced into their vehicle—the paratroopers offering a ride home—and taken into nearby woods, where they were held at gunpoint and raped. This incident was the most egregious of twelve to fifteen between Screaming Eagles of

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the 101st Airborne Division and the French populace during the weekend of 2–5 August 1945. The division had just finished combat operations and was transiting across Europe back to the United States. Rather than immediately punishing his troopers, Maj. Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor took a lackadaisical approach, belatedly employing a curfew and military police patrols only after such “rowdy” incidents continued. He hesitated to employ “extraordinary measures” because he felt his men deserved to have a little fun.¹ In his testimony to the XVI Corps inspector general, he commented on the “vigorous type of soldier” attracted to airborne units and noted that, while their “combat discipline has been superior ... that type of young man is definitely more of a handful” than regular soldiers.² No Screaming Eagle paratroopers were arrested. This sort of “boys will be boys” attitude was typical in response to rape incidents as commanders justified the behavior of their beloved units, especially after a difficult period of combat action from Normandy to Berchtesgaden and Austria.³

Excusing rape is one manifestation of the masculine culture that developed within elite parachute units during World War II. During the war, the United States Army accepted the risks inherent in developing these units and gambled that their combat performance would outweigh any adverse side effects. The members of elite military units such as the airborne or the marine corps are imbued with the idea that they are better than everyone around them and dominated by a form of masculinity centered on aggressiveness that often carries undesirable ramifications.⁴

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1. Testimony of French Colonel J. Lanquetot, Commander of the Group subdivision Nièvre, Yonne, XVI Corps IG Report, 17 August 1945, 41–42, box 2404, entry UD 376, RG 498, Records of Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, United States Army (World War II), National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD (hereafter NARA II).

2. Testimony of Maj. Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, XVI Corps I.G. Report, 11 August 1945, 19, box 2404, entry UD 376, RG 498, NARA II.

3. Caitlin Maxwell, “Moving Beyond Rape as a ‘Weapon of War’: An Exploration of Militarized Masculinity and Its Consequences,” *Canadian Woman Studies* 28, no. 1 (2010): 109.

4. For discussions on military masculinity and elitism in the United States Marine Corps, see Heather Venable, *How the Few Became the Proud: Crafting the Marine Corps Mystique, 1874–1918* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2019), chap. 7; and Aaron B. O’Connell, *Underdogs: The Making of the Modern Marine Corps* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 27–60, 213–22.

This article provides an analysis of gender within the organizational subculture that developed within parachute infantry units during World War II. The study is limited to infantrymen in parachute outfits because these were the men who saw the most combat, had to be aggressive, and routinely derided their fellow soldiers for their lack of airborne status. I argue that the high standards and extreme danger involved in parachute training and combat created an elitist masculine culture that—thanks to attitudes that excused “rowdiness”—led to intra-unit violence, the execution of prisoners of war, and sexual violence against European women.

Analyzing gender in parachute units is crucial to understanding their unit culture for three major reasons. First, scholars cannot understand the culture of parachute units without understanding the socially constructed beliefs that infuse any culture or institution.⁵ Second, gender is critical to how military units institutionalize and socialize their members. These cultural forces coalesce into the various subcultures within units that make up increasingly larger pieces of the whole—in this case, a broader paratrooper culture in the United States Army. Most works on the airborne are hagiographic, offering excellent battle analyses but omitting any analysis of the impact that gender or culture has on soldiers’ behavior.⁶ Third, war itself is inherently gendered, having been viewed as a mechanism for turning boys into men for generations, and as such, begs for more analysis of the role of gender.

5. Mark Folse, “Tell THIS to the Marines: Gender and the Marine Corps,” War on the Rocks, 5 March 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/03/tell-this-to-the-marines-gender-and-the-marine-corps/>.

6. Some works that focus on airborne soldiers include Clay Blair, *Ridgway’s Paratroopers: The American Airborne in World War II* (Garden City, NY: Dial Press, 1985); Gerald M. Devlin, *Paratrooper! The Saga of the U. S. Army and Marine Parachute and Glider Combat Troops during World War II* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1986); William Breuer, *Geronimo: American Paratroopers in World War II* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992); James A. Huston, *Out of the Blue: U.S. Army Airborne Operations in World War II* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1972); John R. Galvin, *Air Assault: The Development of Airmobile Warfare* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1969); E. M. Flanagan, *Airborne: A Combat History of American Airborne Forces* (New York: Presidio Press, 2002); Mark Bando, *101st Airborne: The Screaming Eagles in World War II* (St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2007); Guy LoFaro, *The Sword of St. Michael: The 82nd Airborne Division in World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2011); Phil Nordyke, *All American, All the Way: The Combat History of the 82nd Airborne Division in World War II* (St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2005); and Mitchell Yockelson, *The Paratrooper Generals: Matthew Ridgway, Maxwell Taylor, and the American Airborne from D-Day through Normandy* (Guilford, CT: Stackpole Books, 2020). Perhaps the most important is Stephen Ambrose, *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler’s Eagle’s Nest* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

In creating specialized parachute units, the United States Army and airborne leaders crafted a specific version of masculinity rooted in elitism that was all too often excused as a natural byproduct of war. This article explicitly responds to Joan Scott's call to examine how the airborne masculine identity was formed from pre-World War II conceptions of manhood and how this identity related to fellow American service members, enemy prisoners, and civilian women.⁷

Masculinity at Home and in the Military

According to historian David T. Courtwright's analysis, young single men are the most likely to commit violence, and America often has had a surplus of young single men in relation to women. These young men often were found on the ever-expanding American frontier—a place that the historian Frederick Jackson Turner argued had shaped young American men into tough, self-reliant individuals who in turn built the emerging American empire.⁸ Military organizations—filled with these young single men—represent an ideal case study for responding to Scott's broad call to examine how gender is constructed. According to Scott, gender has two definitions: it "is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes," and importantly, it "is a primary way of signifying relationships of power."⁹ The formation of gender identity is a nonlinear, fluid process that structures social relationships and is often constructed through "repeated gestures, activities, and signs in relation to cultural ideals about 'male' and 'female' identities."¹⁰ Neither exists as a standalone concept; each society and culture has unique conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity, so any attempt to define either must consider a society or organization's prevailing norms and specific historical contexts—its culture.

"From the beginning of history," wrote historian Martin van Creveld in 2000, "war has been an almost exclusively male affair, and those who took part in it were often extolled as the most manliest of men."¹¹

7. Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1067.

8. David T. Courtwright, *Violent Land: Single Men and Social Disorder from the Frontier to the Inner City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 3.

9. Scott, "Gender," 1067.

10. Christina S. Jarvis, *The Male Body at War: American Masculinity during World War II* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004), 8.

11. Martin van Creveld, "Less than We Can Be: Men, Women and the Modern Military," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 23, no. 4 (2000): 1.

Historian Christopher Hamner argues that no profession in the United States is as identified with “being a man” as being a soldier. War is both a test of manhood and a maker of men.¹² Cultures worldwide and across time have constructed “tough” men to endure the trauma of warfare and earn “manhood.” Therefore, military masculinity is constructed “around a culture’s need for brave and disciplined soldiers.”¹³ The danger associated with parachute training mimics that need for bravery, serving as a test of manhood and a critical rite of passage in facing that danger. As Roger Beaumont observed, a parachutist’s training “created elitism through an ordeal that tested a man’s courage and earnestness before combat.”¹⁴

“Masculinity” is a fluid, historically contingent idea defined relative to its opposite, femininity, and to other forms of masculinity. “Military masculinity” is used to identify and analyze gendered identities within the armed forces. Definitions vary, but most scholars agree that a series of attributes contributes to this masculine military identity. These include such tenets as:

pride in physical prowess, particularly the ability to withstand physical hardships; aggressive heterosexuality and homophobia, combined with a celebration of homosociability within the team; the ability to deploy controlled physical aggression; and a commitment to the completion of assigned tasks with minimal complaint.¹⁵

There are, as historian Lorien Foote described for the American Civil War, multiple versions of manhood or masculinity within any culture and army, and these are often contradictory and ambiguous.¹⁶

The related concept of “hypermasculinity” includes exaggerated versions of stereotypical masculine attributes such as being physically fit, aggressive,

12. Christopher Hamner, “Brothers in Arms? Combat, Masculinity, and Change in the Twenty-First-Century American Military,” in *Managing Sex in the U.S. Military: Gender, Identity, and Behavior*, ed. Beth Bailey, Alesha E. Doan, Shannon Portillo, and Kara Dixon Vuic (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022), 277.

13. Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 283.

14. Roger Beaumont, *Military Elites: Special Fighting Units in the Modern World* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974), 97, 102.

15. Leo Braudy, *From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), xiv–xv; quote from Rachel Woodward, “Locating Military Masculinities,” in *Military Masculinities: Identity and the State*, ed. Paul Higate (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 44. See also Aaron Belkin, *Bring Me Men: Military Masculinity and the Benign Façade of American Empire, 1898–2001* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

16. Lorien Foote, *The Gentlemen and the Roughs: Manhood, Honor, and Violence in the Union Army* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 172, 178–79.

and heterosexual. Military masculinity is similar to hypermasculinity and endorses male-as-warrior ideals. The concept of hypermasculinity is worthwhile but ultimately futile because it relies on an ever-shifting notion of comparison and normalization. R. W. Connell's concept of "hegemonic masculinity," defined as "the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable," likewise merits exploration.¹⁷ This article responds to Connell's more recent work and asserts that multiple masculinities can exist at a given time, furthering historian Matthew Basso's argument that, even within the national ideal of military masculinity, distinct masculine identities were formed within various units.¹⁸

The masculine identity of the parachute infantry was like that of other infantry units but exaggerated due to the paratroopers' inflated sense of superiority or elitism. Nevertheless, in the 1940s, these men would not have described themselves as "masculine"; they would have simply considered themselves "men" and war as a vehicle to achieve "manhood." As a result, the terms "masculinity" and "masculine identity" will be used throughout this article to describe paratroopers' conceptions of themselves as "men."

Understanding the masculine identity of paratroopers in the Second World War also requires considering changing ideas of masculinity from the Great Depression to World War II. These changes were rooted in early twentieth-century norms for male youth, and particularly in late-Victorian conceptions of "manliness." According to historian Gail Bederman, these conceptions stressed moral virtue and associated masculinity with being "civilized." The term "masculinity" only entered the lexicon after the 1890s and simply referred to those things that were attributed to a man—all men of all races and classes were "masculine." As the twentieth century dawned, conceptions of "manhood" in America evolved from association with one's identity and achievements to a more competitive, aggressive form that gave

17. For more on hegemonic masculinity, see R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 76–81, quote from p. 76. For more on Connell's call to expand analysis on multiple masculinities, see R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829–59. For more on hypermasculinity, see Karley Richard and Sonia Molloy, "An Examination of Emerging Adult Military Men: Masculinity and U.S. Military Climate," *Psychology of Men & Masculinities* 21, no. 4 (October 2020): 687; and Leora N. Rosen, Kathryn H. Knudson, and Peggy Fancher, "Cohesion and the Culture of Hypermasculinity in U.S. Army Units," *Armed Forces & Society* 29, no. 3 (April 2003): 326.

18. Matthew Basso, *Meet Joe Copper: Masculinity and Race on Montana's World War II Home Front* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 7.

primacy to toughness.¹⁹ By 1930, the idea of “masculinity” had evolved to include traits found in our understanding of military masculinity, such as “aggressiveness, physical force, and male sexuality.”²⁰

As the United States entered the 1930s, American masculinity was nevertheless still associated with being a “self-sufficient breadwinner” and providing for one’s family.²¹ This changed, however, when the Great Depression put nearly a quarter of the male workforce out of work, reducing millions of men to searching for government assistance and questioning their identity as men. Depression-era unemployment was as high as 24.9 percent in 1933 and remained at 9.9 percent (5.6 million people) in 1941, even as the defense industry ramped up production.²² According to historian Michael Kimmel, “Never before had American men experienced such a massive and system-wide shock to their ability to prove manhood by providing for their families.”²³ The American male “body politic” was eager to demonstrate its masculinity by whatever means necessary.

As war loomed, some writers lamented the “soft, feminized nation” they feared America had become.²⁴ Programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Project Administration were specifically tooled to “build better men” and reframe American masculinity around physical strength rather than employment.²⁵ The outbreak of war created a transformative opportunity for ideas about American manhood. Representations of the male body shifted to depict a new ideal—young, well-muscled, and white. Christina Jarvis argues that a more muscular male “body politic” emerged in cultural symbols that helped depict America’s role as a rising power during World War II.²⁶ Cultural symbols—art, statues, posters, movies, and the like—reflected prevailing norms. Around 1940,

19. E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 1–6, 286.

20. Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 7, 18–19, 27.

21. Jarvis, *Male Body at War*, 16.

22. Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929–1941* (New York: Times Books, 1993), 33, 320.

23. Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 192.

24. Roy Helton, “The Inner Threat: Our Own Softness,” *Harper’s Magazine*, September 1940, 337–43.

25. Jeffrey Ryan Suzik, “‘Building Better Men’: The CCC Boy and the Changing Social Ideal of Manliness,” *Men and Masculinities* 2, no. 2 (October 1999): 152–79.

26. Jarvis, *Male Body at War*, 4–5.

changing norms and changing bodies experienced full representation on the national stage in government propaganda and popular media. Male bodies were suddenly depicted as more muscular and youthful, representing the fit fighting bodies required to take on fascist enemies and rejecting “effeminate” bodies supposedly prone to homosexuality.²⁷ Even Uncle Sam underwent bodily transformation, thanks to what historian Robert A. Nye describes as the “turn to hardiness” during this era.²⁸

Until the draft made military service compulsory in 1940, it was not uncommon for young men to be lured into the military through the promise of “becoming a man.” Wars were billed as opportunities to reinforce or restore national manhood and honor.²⁹ The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor enhanced this trend, elevating “military masculinity” above all other types, and serving in uniform was soon the expectation for able-bodied men.³⁰ After the War Department established the first peacetime draft in 1940, the army instituted a vast system of bodily scrutiny and classification. Contrary to Roy Helton’s 1940 article decrying American softness, the draft and screening revealed the country to be “a sturdier, healthier and more enlightened people than we were a quarter century ago.”³¹ Upon entering service, men were classified according to various physical traits in a system that significantly affected American masculinity. Prospective servicemembers were sorted into a range of classifications from I-A to IV-H based on their physical attributes. The fittest received a I-A rating, were classified as fit for any duty in the military, and were depicted in pop culture as physically fit, brave, and patriotic—the new American masculine ideal.³² Wartime imagery in advertisements and periodicals also

27. Margot Canaday, *Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 88–90; Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), chaps. 1 and 5.

28. Robert A. Nye, “Western Masculinities in War and Peace,” *The American Historical Review* 112, no. 2 (2007): 423; Jarvis, *Male Body at War*, 56–85.

29. William Arkin and Lynne R. Dobrofsky, “Military Socialization and Masculinity,” *Journal of Social Issues* 34, no. 1 (1979): 153. See Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

30. Basso, *Meet Joe Copper*, 6. See also David R. Segal, *Recruiting for Uncle Sam: Citizenship and Military Manpower Policy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989).

31. Cabel Phillips, “What the Draft Reveals About Us,” *New York Times Magazine*, 13 July 1941.

32. Jarvis, *Male Body at War*, 58–60.

reinforced the idea that war turned boys into men while suppressing many of the complex realities of war.³³

If readiness to fight became a key element of American masculinity once the war began, so too did proving one's manhood become an essential component of combat soldiering. Samuel Stouffer's landmark sociological work for *The American Soldier* found that the code by which a combat unit "judged the behavior of its members" was that each individual must "[b]e a man." Stouffer's team also noted that this notion was drawn mainly from civilian culture but given special meaning in combat. They identified a set of masculine values that applied broadly throughout the military: "Courage, endurance and toughness, lack of squeamishness when confronted with shocking or distasteful stimuli, avoidance of display of weakness in general, reticence about emotional or idealistic matters, and sexual competency."³⁴ Stouffer's team also noted that this "code" was deeply internalized, and failure to "be a man" resulted in being branded a woman.

The code of the combat soldier identified by Stouffer and his researchers reinforced the notion that combat was a test of manhood. "The man who lived up to the code of the combat soldier," the team wrote, "had proved his manhood; he could take pride in being a combat man and draw support in his role from this pride."³⁵ The historian Stephen Ambrose echoed that sentiment, writing that the most important thing to World War II GIs was "that they were not cowards. They hadn't thought so, they had fervently hoped it would not be so, but they couldn't be sure until tested."³⁶ After passing their initial test of manhood, they gained immeasurable confidence.

Elitism and Masculinity

During World War II, the United States Army created an elite group of volunteers to jump out of airplanes behind enemy lines. Doing so required fostering an elitist self-image wherein the individual paratrooper felt superior to other soldiers. Claims of elitism were critical to group identity,

33. Andrew J. Huebner, *The Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to the Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 18.

34. Samuel A. Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier: Combat and its Aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), 2:131; Hamner, "Brothers in Arms?," 277.

35. Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*, 2:132, 308–9, quote on p. 309.

36. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers: The U.S. Army from the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge to the Surrender of Germany, June 7, 1944–May 7, 1945* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 46–47.

and their pride was an expression of high *esprit de corps*.³⁷ They were elite because of their unique selection criteria, distinctive clothing, and voluntary status (in an army that relied on the draft, one had to volunteer to serve in the paratroops). Elite units wrap themselves in a mystique born of their unique missions and entrance traits. Their mindset is most important—a belief in one’s superiority has played a critical role in determining military elites throughout history.

Whether these units are, in fact, more successful is largely irrelevant. What matters is whether they believe they are elite, a process that begins in selection and training and plays an essential role in constructing their masculine identity.³⁸ As a result of its members’ belief in its status as an elite unit, the U.S. Army airborne of World War II jockeyed for position as the most masculine of the era. Pvt. Kurt Gabel of the 513th Parachute Infantry Regiment elucidates this status well in his memoir: “by the middle of 1942 ... there appeared within the Army a hero-figure closely approximating the stature of a fighter pilot: the paratrooper.”³⁹

Paratroopers first separated themselves from other soldiers by volunteering for parachute training, which was too hazardous for the army’s typical haphazard assignment process—volunteers were required. This volunteerism became a fundamental distinguishing feature of the airborne regiments in an army of draftees. Many paratroopers were draftees who volunteered upon learning of the opportunity to improve their standing in the service. These volunteers were attracted to the hazardousness of the occupation, its distinctive symbols, and, of course, the higher pay. Prestige, testing oneself, and the prospect of excitement were significant motivating factors in finding the personnel required to fill parachute units.⁴⁰ Volunteers were so numerous that when the call for men to serve in the initial test platoon went out in 1940, seventeen officers and over two hundred enlisted

37. Martin Fransen, “Cost of Elitism: Elitism and Group Identity among American Paratroopers in World War II,” *U.S. Military History Review* 4, no. 1 (December 2017): 26.

38. Beaumont, *Military Elites*, 2–3; Richard Holmes, *Acts of War: The Behavior of Men in Battle* (New York: Free Press, 1985), 48; A. Hamish Ion and Keith Neilson, eds., *Elite Military Formations in War and Peace* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1996), 1, 8; John Lynn, *Bayonets of the Republic: Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791–94* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 29–30.

39. Kurt Gabel, *The Making of a Paratrooper: Airborne Training and Combat in World War II* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 4.

40. Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*, 1:329; Gerald Astor, *Battling Buzzards: The Odyssey of the 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team 1942–1945* (New York: Dell, 1993), 399. See also T. Moffatt Burriss, *Strike and Hold: A Memoir of the 82nd Airborne in World War II* (Washington, DC: Brassey’s, 2000), 16, and Bando, *101st Airborne*, 12.

men volunteered for one platoon leader and forty-eight paratrooper positions. Throughout the first year of parachute training, the school could only accommodate one in ten volunteers, and men were willing to take a reduction in rank to join these parachute units—four hundred volunteered to do so for the privilege of joining the newly formed 503rd Parachute Infantry Battalion in August 1941.⁴¹

Attracting and training men who believed they and their units were elite was critical to the mindset that developed within these units during the early 1940s. Pop culture images, such as the covers of *Life* magazine on 19 August 1940 and 12 May 1941, highlighted this new hero figure. If the 19 August issue introduced Americans to the paratrooper, the 12 May cover—depicting U.S. Army parachutist Hugh Randall—solidified his credentials, presenting a stoic, tough paratrooper ready to leap from an aircraft to an audience of more than two million Americans. Its eight-page spread of photographs described how “day after day, at the peril of their lives, brave men jumped from 750 feet into the dusty Georgia air above Camp Benning.”⁴²

The magazine played a pivotal role in showcasing the paratrooper’s masculinity. By September 1941, the army’s propaganda machine had helped produce the film *Parachute Battalion*, which portrayed airborne service as dangerous and only fit for the toughest men. The film starred Robert Preston, Buddy Ebsen, and Edmond O’Brien as three would-be paratroopers entering training. Filmed at Fort Benning, the film cast famous paratroopers, including the “Father of the Airborne,” Col. William C. Lee, and Capt. William P. Yarborough, while men from the 501st Parachute Battalion filled in for the actors in hazardous scenes.⁴³ Magazines and movies made parachuting seem both dangerous and enticing.

Hand-selected airborne recruiters traversed the United States looking for volunteers who embodied the airborne’s robust masculine identity. Commanders designated men for recruiting duty based on their

41. A. D. Rathbone IV, *He’s in the Paratroops Now* (New York: Robert M. McBride, 1943), 24; Tania M. Chaco, “Why Did They Fight? American Airborne Units in World War II,” *Defence Studies* 1, no. 3 (Autumn 2001): 71–72; Devlin, *Paratrooper!* 49–51, 109.

42. “U.S. Trains Parachutists,” *Life Magazine*, 19 August 1940; “U.S. Trains More Parachute Troops,” *Life Magazine*, 12 May 1941, 110; Chris Vials, “The Popular Front in the American Century: ‘Life’ Magazine, Margaret Bourke-White, and Consumer Realism, 1936–1941,” *American Periodicals* 16, no. 1 (2006): 74; Yockelson, *The Paratrooper Generals*, 40.

43. *Parachute Battalion*, directed by Leslie Goodwins (1941); Edward M. Coffman, *The Regulars: The American Army, 1898–1941* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 403.

appearance and potential to attract like-minded volunteers from the various training bases that dotted the American landscape.⁴⁴ Pvt. Vincent Speranza described the airborne recruiters he saw as “magnificent men in sharp uniforms, brilliantly shined boots, and glittering silver wings on their chest.”⁴⁵ Second Lt. Richard “Dick” Winters chose parachute infantry over armor because “[t]hey looked impressive, were physically fit, and demonstrated what I could only call a tolerant scorn for any soldier who was not airborne qualified. I wanted to be with the best, and paratroopers were the cream of the crop. I volunteered immediately to become a paratrooper.”⁴⁶ Paratrooper recruiters embodied a masculine identity that they expected recruits to live up to. Keeping up appearances was the first critical step toward elitism, attracting men enamored by the mere appearance of recruiters.

Airborne training—parachuting and infantry tactics—was designed explicitly to foster a masculine identity rooted in superiority. “We wanted to tell these guys that they were the most capable guys on earth ... [a]nd any parachute squad is worth a platoon of anybody else,” Lt. Gen. James M. Gavin explained later. Gavin was the second wartime commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, the youngest division commander in the army at the time, and had a significant influence on developing airborne culture throughout the parachute force. He intended to make the individual paratrooper believe he was better than the average soldier (enemy or friendly) and that there was nothing too good for the airborne soldier.

The training lived up to its dangerous billing, further impressing upon its recruits their superiority. Pvt. Gabel’s regiment suffered two killed and twelve hospitalized during their three-week jump school.⁴⁷ If controlling fear is essential to successful operations, as S. L. A. Marshall argues, then paratroopers had already conquered that fright during training.⁴⁸ Second Lt. Winters believed that jump training steeled his paratroopers’ hearts

44. James M. Gavin oral history, 1975, section 1, 11–12, box 1, James M. Gavin Papers, U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center (USAHEC), Carlisle, PA (hereafter cited as Gavin Papers); “Paratroops ‘Best Outfit in the Army,’ Says Corporal Jim Perham, Home on Leave,” *The Daily Tribune* (Wisconsin Rapids, WI), 14 September 1942.

45. Vincent J. Speranza, *NUTS! A 101st Airborne Division Machine Gunner at Bastogne* (Atlanta: Deeds, 2014), 31.

46. Cole C. Kingseed, *Conversations with Major Dick Winters: Life Lessons from the Commander of the Band of Brothers* (New York: Berkley Caliber, 2014), 49.

47. Gabel, *Making of a Paratrooper*, 131.

48. S. L. A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problems of Battle Command* (Washington, DC: Infantry Journal Press, 1947), 37.

against the tragedy of death: “I don’t believe that as paratroopers, we faced the shock of our first fatality to the degree that most outfits do in combat. Every paratrooper encounters the possibility of serious injury or death on every jump.”⁴⁹ Winters and his men had already passed this essential test of manhood and knew what to expect in combat. Completing airborne school thus proved to graduates that they were ready for anything and served as an essential rite of passage.⁵⁰ The basic airborne course, therefore, selected individuals with desired traits to serve in parachute units and provided those units with confident graduates who believed, by virtue of having already faced death, that they were superior to the rest of the army.

Paratroopers bought into their superiority and scorned those not part of their group. Their leaders reinforced this idea of superiority, which ensconced an elitist mindset throughout parachute units. Its accuracy was of little consequence—paratroopers believed it and fought to maintain that status.⁵¹ Some airborne enlisted men even refused to salute lesser “leg” officers.⁵² In a letter home, H. L. Curtis of the 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment described this attitude: “We really don’t consider ourselves as part of the Army. If you ever see any paratroopers and regular army men together you will know what I am talking about.”⁵³ Elite units often detest everyone not part of their in-group, including superiors and adjacent units. Like other elites, including marines, airborne soldiers truly believed that their training was more challenging than that of any other soldier, and this belief fueled their idea of superiority and, in turn, their masculine identity.

A ritualistic tradition known as the “prop blast” served as another practice for building cohesion, testing each other, and reinforcing what it took to “be a man” in parachute units. The 501st Parachute Infantry Battalion, commanded by Maj. William M. Miley, held the first such ceremony. Beginning with the battalion commander and then in descending rank order, each “blastee” climbed onto a chair, jumped, and attempted to perform a satisfactory parachute landing fall, demonstrating that he had what it took to “be a man.” The “blastee” then jumped to his feet and

49. Kingseed, *Conversations with Major Dick Winters*, 170.

50. Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. M. B. Visedom and G. L. Caffé (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); Gideon Aran, “Parachuting,” *American Journal of Sociology* 80, no. 1 (July 1974): 150.

51. Chaco, “Why Did They Fight?,” 80.

52. Maxwell D. Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), 45; Beaumont, *Military Elites*, 3, 8.

53. H. L. Curtis to family, dated 2 August 1943, in L. Vaughn Curtis, ed., *Letters Home: A Paratrooper’s Story* (Sandy, UT: Ecko House, 2010), 38.

drank a concoction of vodka, lemon juice, sugar, and champagne out of a 75mm casing with two ripcord handles welded on either side (known as the “Miley Mug”) while the other officers counted “one-thousand, two-thousand, three-thousand” as on a jump. He was supposed to finish during the count or face a penalty of more drink.⁵⁴ This tradition reinforced the hard-drinking, aggressive culture that developed within parachute units and continues to varying degrees in airborne units today.

In-group behavior translated to disdain toward out groups. Paratroopers were aggressively elitist and were never afraid to let everyone know how much better they were than those around them. Francis Sampson, the regimental chaplain for the 501st Parachute Infantry, described the recruits’ transformation into arrogant, egotistical paratroopers after parachute training: “We then hastened to acquire the overbearing mannerisms and obnoxious characteristics of pre-combat paratroopers.” The paratroopers’ distinctive symbols helped position the airborne soldier above the rest. Sampson continued, “Jump boots, the unique patch on the cap, and the wings were badges of such distinction that the jumper considered himself outside the law, above observing the customary courtesies toward civilians, and in a position to scorn all other branches of the service.”⁵⁵ Bill Guarnere of the 506th Parachute Infantry recognized this transformation too. “You put your wings on and you bloused your boots up,” he wrote. “That was it. Everyone knew you were the best of the best. You were different from any other soldier. Those wings made you different, and you never took them off.”⁵⁶ Lou Varrone sums up the entire enterprise well: “How were super-elite troops supposed to act—like we had inferiority complexes?”⁵⁷

This attitude translated to paratroopers’ aggressive attitudes toward women: no woman was too good for them.⁵⁸ The already married but unhappy Lt. Gen. Gavin entertained multiple partners overseas, including Martha Gellhorn and Marlene Dietrich.⁵⁹ The general organized a demonstration jump in which

54. “Prop Blast Ceremony Rules,” 1951, WWII Box 17, 82nd Airborne Division Museum, Fort Bragg, NC; Devlin, *Paratrooper*, 90–91; T. Michael Booth and Duncan Spencer, *Paratrooper: The Life of Gen. James M. Gavin* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 77.

55. Francis L. Sampson, *Look Out Below! A Story of the Airborne by a Paratrooper Padre* (Sweetwater, TN: 101st Airborne Division Association, 1989), 16.

56. William Guarnere and Edward Heffron with Robyn Post, *Brothers in Battle, Best of Friends: Two WWII Paratroopers from the Original Band of Brothers Tell Their Story* (New York: Berkley Caliber, 2007), 28.

57. Lou Varrone, quoted in Breuer, *Geronimo*, 7.

58. Gavin oral history, 1:11–12, box 1, Gavin Papers.

59. See multiple letters between Gavin and Gellhorn in Martha Gellhorn and Janet Somerville, *Yours, for Probably Always: Martha Gellhorn's Letters of Love & War, 1930–1949*

several of his soldiers were injured merely to show off to Dietrich.⁶⁰ Gavin also reported that he “dragged” army nurse Lt. Peggy Knecht to a movie, constituting a blatant abuse of his position of power and indicative of the aggressiveness paratroopers exhibited toward women.⁶¹ Soldiers often emulate their superiors’ behavior, especially in the case of leaders as highly respected as Gavin was—his subordinates would have followed him “right through the gates of hell,” according to one 82nd Airborne Division private.⁶² Gavin’s womanizing behavior set the tone for the rest of his command, providing tacit approval for the same from his men.

What leaders choose to emphasize, or ignore, is critical to how cultures are formed and maintained.⁶³ In the airborne, this meant emphasizing aggressiveness and individuality while ignoring boisterousness and rowdyism. These units developed a masculinity identity not unlike other military masculinities but reinforced by an inflated sense of superiority.

The Effects of Masculinity

Vocation and trade tend to define people’s behavior. Paratroopers were aggressive and violent in battle, which translated to their off-duty behavior. While studying infantrymen in the British Army in the late 1970s, sociologist John Hockey found that “real men” drink hard, chase women, and fight other men when confronted.⁶⁴ This attitude was equally the case for paratroopers during World War II, though this behavior only manifested after months in combat, when men were encouraged to “blow off some steam.” Because paratroopers were also expected to endure high casualty rates (losing 40 percent of any given unit in Normandy was not unheard of), officers “cast a blind eye to the transgressions of their paratroopers” and assumed risk to maintain morale.⁶⁵ Paratroopers were

(Buffalo, NY: Firefly Books, 2019), 428–29, 431, 432, 434, 445, 446–47, 448–49, 451–52.

60. Werner T. Angress, *Witness to the Storm: A Jewish Journey from Nazi Berlin to the 82nd Airborne, 1920–1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 312.

61. Diary entry as recorded in Booth and Spencer, *Paratrooper*, 281–82.

62. Walter E. Hughes, WWII Veterans Survey Collection, box 261, 504th PIR, 82nd Airborne, USAHEC.

63. Edgar H. Schein and Peter Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 183.

64. John Hockey, “No More Heroes: Masculinity in the Infantry,” in Higate, *Military Masculinities*, 19.

65. Richard Killblane and Jake McNiece, *The Filthy Thirteen: From the Dustbowl to Hitler’s Eagle’s Nest: The 101st Airborne’s Most Legendary Squad of Combat Paratroopers* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2003), 236.

expected to operate alone or in small teams and thus had to develop a decentralized unit culture that bred tremendous, often blind, trust in each other. As Maj. Gen. Taylor suggested in his testimony concerning the misbehavior of his men, excusing the “rowdiness” of vigorous young men who were “more of a handful” was commonplace. Paratroopers were “a handful” in three significant respects: interacting with friendly non-paratroopers stateside and in rear areas, dealing with prisoners, and interacting with civilian women in the war zone. The masculine identity rooted in elitism that developed within parachute units during training allowed and even encouraged aggressive behavior in all facets of the war.

Intergroup Relations

An initial, mostly benign side effect of the elitist masculine identity that developed in the airborne was their behavior toward other units. Cocksure paratroopers caused problems at the various training bases and towns around the country where they were stationed. Fights broke out in places like Columbus, Georgia, and Fayetteville, North Carolina, between paratroopers and the myriad non-paratroopers around the base. More brawling ensued whenever a military policeman arrested a paratrooper for being drunk, out of uniform, fighting, or destroying private property in an off-post bar. “The guys would fight at the drop of the hat. It was their way of having fun,” noted one member of the famous Filthy Thirteen demolition squad that inspired the 1967 film *The Dirty Dozen*.⁶⁶

Even the army’s highest-level commanders noticed the arrogance and unruly behavior of parachute regiments. At a Washington press conference on paratroopers, Lt. Gen. Lesley J. McNair, commander of Army Ground Forces, remarked, “They [the paratroopers] ... are our problem children. They make a lot of money, and they know they’re good. This makes them a little temperamental, but they’re great soldiers.”⁶⁷ While “children” is a demasculinized phrase, suggesting they have yet to reach manhood, it represents the sort of tacit approval given to paratroopers’ rowdy behavior. Gavin agreed: “It was better to learn to live with that problem and learn

66. Killblane and McNiece, *The Filthy Thirteen*, 50; *The Dirty Dozen*, directed by Robert Aldrich (1967).

67. As quoted in Breuer, *Geronimo*, 9; Devlin, *Paratrooper*, 112, 123–24; Spencer F. Wurst and Gayle Wurst, *Descending from the Clouds: A Memoir of Combat in the 505 Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2004), 51; Oral History Interview, John Foster Magill Jr. Collection (AFC/2001/001/80043), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

to tolerate a certain amount of their misbehavior but have guys who were really capable fighters and confident and proud.”⁶⁸

If masculinity in this context is measured by willingness to take risks and engage in violence, then Gavin’s initial command—the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment—was in the running to be the most masculine regiment in the entire airborne. According to Maj. Mark J. Alexander, a subordinate battalion commander within the regiment,

The rambunctious nature Gavin fostered in his men made them ready for anything. They not only aggressively attacked training problems, they skirmished at the many town bars with the same ferocity. These were often brawls with a nearby armored unit whose members also considered themselves top dogs in the military, but fights broke out against local townsfolk or soldiers from other units as well.⁶⁹

The 505th fought fellow soldiers but also civilians and the local authorities. After one fracas between paratroopers and the local police, Gavin personally picked the guilty troopers up from jail. As punishment, he “took the entire regiment on a full gear, 24-hour forced march of 54 miles. All 109 men who could not keep up were flushed out of the regiment the following morning.” The forced march had its desired effect and curbed most of the problematic off-duty behavior in that regiment.⁷⁰

Fighting also often occurred within airborne divisions. Many paratroopers looked down upon the glider infantrymen who served alongside them. Glidermen were not volunteers but rather had been “voluntold” that they were now airborne. Instead of parachuting, they rode in the back of gliders into combat. They were not entitled to hazardous duty pay even though glider casualties evacuated to England in Normandy were nearly twice as high as paratrooper casualties. Because of this discrepancy, the army instituted glider pay equal to parachute pay in July 1944.⁷¹ “Glider riders” were required to wear ankle gaiters and low shoes resembling those of “straight leg” infantry instead of paratrooper jump boots. “Some of the

68. Gavin oral history, 1:15, box 1, Gavin Papers.

69. Mark J. Alexander and John Sparry, *Jump Commander: In Combat with the 505th and 508th Parachute Infantry Regiments, 82nd Airborne Division in World War II* (Philadelphia: Casemate, 2018), 53.

70. Alexander and Sparry, 53.

71. Teddy H. Sanford remarks in Record of Debriefing Conference, Operation Neptune, 13 August 1944, Personal Papers Box 13, 82nd Museum; Eisenhower to Marshall, proposed cable, n.d., and Ridgway to Marshall, 23 July 1944, box 20, Matthew B. Ridgway Papers, USAHEC.

paratroopers are arrogant, thinking they are superior because they jump out of an airplane,” noted gliderman Don Rich. “At local bars a lot of fights break out between glider troops and paratroopers.”⁷²

Taking the opportunity to “blow off steam” during downtime after combat action is a recurring theme in the record of these units—a behavior prevalent in many high-pressure jobs. One paratrooper reported that after thirty-three days and nights without relief in Normandy, they “got to the point that you just didn’t care.” All they wanted to do was “go slummin’ and go down and drinking in the slum area until they closed the place up and raising a ruckus. It got pretty rough. I’m not proud of it,” but with more combat on the horizon, the paratroopers took the rare opportunity to enjoy themselves.⁷³ After combat in Holland, the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions were encamped on opposite sides of the French city of Reims. Each division believed itself better than the other, and members of each division would routinely fight with each other and the police in town. The problems were severe enough that each division created its own police force to control its men.⁷⁴ The elitist masculine identity formed within parachute units during the war manifested in these interunit skirmishes both stateside and overseas. These issues, however, were mere precursors to more nefarious activity.

Prisoner Treatment

A second side effect of the airborne’s elitist self-image involved their battlefield behavior in the face of the enemy. As the United States entered World War II, senior army leaders focused on turning soldiers into killers, teaching them to hate the enemy to make killing easier. Contemporary thought held that American boys, raised in a society that views taking life as unacceptable, would be reluctant to kill the enemy. According to a pamphlet prepared for combat troops in 1943, “American men have no particular love of killing,” and “war, to American men, is a dirty, disagreeable

72. Bando, *101st Airborne*, 15; Don Rich and Kevin Brooks. *Glider Infantryman Behind Enemy Lines in World War II* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2013), 22, 26.

73. Clinton E. Riddle, interview by G. Kurt Piehler and Seth Womack, 19 March 2002, Veteran’s Oral History Project, Center for the Study of War and Society, Department of History, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

74. Francis O. Ayers, interview by Kate Landdeck and Ramaah Sadasivam, 8 May 2001, Veteran’s Oral History Project, Center for the Study of War and Society, Department of History, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

business,” to be finished swiftly to allow for a return to peaceful pursuits.⁷⁵ Though his theory has since been debunked, S. L. A. Marshall’s influential postwar book *Men Against War* described this training process well.⁷⁶

While hate training, according to historian Benjamin Schneider, had a negligible effect on troops’ behavior, the focus on fostering hate-filled ideation to engender better battlefield effectiveness led to a wide-scale reluctance on the part of senior leaders to prosecute crimes. They viewed war crimes as a price of victory, much like excusing rowdiness as a byproduct of elite units.⁷⁷ A robust statistical analysis of war crimes is unfortunately impossible for airborne, or any other units, due to a lack of reporting.

Despite this lack of data, however, many scholars such as Gerald Lindemann and Martin Fransen find that airborne units were more frequently involved in killing prisoners of war than other American units.⁷⁸ Due to the exigencies of airborne operations, paratroopers were often instructed not to take prisoners. When units found themselves behind enemy lines far from support, they often lacked the necessary assets to process and move prisoners. Merwin Andrews of the 101st Airborne Division confirms “that was one of the reasons why we couldn’t take prisoners—because we had no place to put ‘em.”⁷⁹ David Webster, a member of the famous Easy Company of *Band of Brothers*, echoed that sentiment in his memoir, claiming that his company was instructed to kill every German they encountered: “We can’t be dragging a lot of prisoners around with us at night,” so they had to “kill every last sonofabitching German you find.”⁸⁰ Likewise, Fransen found that many “paratroopers

75. National Research Council, *Psychology for the Fighting Man: What You Should Know About Yourself and Others* (Washington: Infantry Journal, 1943), 13–14.

76. S. L. A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000); Marshall’s most contentious claim—that Americans were reluctant to fire their weapons—has been summarily disproven by many historians, most notably in Peter R. Mansoor, *The GI Offensive in Europe: The Triumph of American Infantry Divisions, 1941–1945* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 257–62.

77. Benjamin M. Schneider, “Making Killers: Hate Training and the US Army’s War in Europe, 1942–5,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 56, no. 2 (April 2021): 345, 362.

78. Gerald F. Lindemann, *World Within War: America’s Combat Experience in World War II* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 120; Sonke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, *Soldiers: German POWs on Fighting, Killing and Dying* (New York: Vintage, 2013), 331; Fransen, “Cost of Elitism,” 22.

79. Oral history transcript, Merwin Edwin Andrews Collection, AFC/2001/001/81867, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

80. David K. Webster, *Parachute Infantry: An American Paratrooper’s Memoirs of D-Day and the Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Dell, 2008), 25.

developed a disregard for the humanity of the enemy and committed war crimes during the heat of battle,” particularly crimes involving prisoners.

While this association is no doubt partly due to the reality of jumping with minimal equipment behind enemy lines, Fransen also assesses it as an inevitable consequence of building an elitist culture in airborne units. German leaders helped perpetuate a ruthless reputation by spreading rumors among their men that American parachute units “were made up of convicted murderers who had been given a choice either to die or to go into the paratroops and that they always killed prisoners.”⁸¹ While not actually a ragtag unit of convicted murderers, American paratroopers often met their enemies’ expectations of violence.

Attitudes toward enemy combatants and prisoners were, of course, incredibly complex. A famous example of this complexity is depicted in the second episode of the *Band of Brothers* miniseries wherein Lt. Ronald Speirs gives each prisoner a cigarette, lights them, and then fires while traversing back and forth with his .45-caliber Thompson submachine gun before walking away calmly. In the book that inspired the series, historian Stephen Ambrose describes the event as one of those stories where “no one ever saw ‘it’ happen with his own eyes, but he knew someone who did.”⁸² Whether it happened or not, the men of Easy Company believed it did, and the incident is consistent with evidence concerning American paratroopers’ attitudes and behavior toward prisoners throughout the European Theater of Operations (ETO). In another example, combat engineer Spencer Wurst describes taking thirty prisoners in Sainte-Mère-Église on 6 June 1944, but he also mentions killing ten more.⁸³

The 82nd Airborne Division, of which Wurst was part, emerged from Normandy with an inflated reputation as a “pack of jackals; the toughest, most resourceful and bloodthirsty infantry in the ETO,” which was celebrated in most post-war narratives.⁸⁴ After a particularly bloody fight along the Douve River in Normandy, a small group of paratroopers killed scores of German soldiers; many of the wounded played dead, hoping to avoid the carnage. That was not to be—paratrooper Jake McNiece proudly described walking “out through there killing the ones that were just wounded or hiding.”⁸⁵ Private Arthur “Dutch” Schultz of the 505th

81. Fransen, “Cost of Elitism,” 26; Gabel, *Making of a Paratrooper*, 161.

82. *Band of Brothers*, episode 2, “Day of Days,” directed by Richard Loncraine, aired 9 September 2001, on HBO; Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 206.

83. Wurst and Wurst, *Descending from the Clouds*, 129.

84. Ralph Eaton, as quoted in Blair, *Ridgway’s Paratroopers*, 295.

85. Killblane and McNiece, *The Filthy Thirteen*, 92.

Parachute Infantry Regiment remembered witnessing a comrade executing a wounded German and noticing that his friend's facial expression never changed—"I don't even think he blinked."⁸⁶ Werner Angress, a Jew who escaped Naziism and became a vital member of the intelligence section of the 82nd Airborne, also witnessed egregious behavior, noting that the "82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions behaved like bandits, taking no prisoners and bombing army hospitals."⁸⁷ Bill Guarnere, also of the famous Easy Company, wrote that, in preparing for Operation Market Garden, "Our orders were to kill any Germans we encountered and take no prisoners."⁸⁸ This no-prisoners, kill-them-all attitude became a critical component of the identity of parachute units and integral to their battlefield culture.

War crimes involving prisoners were an inevitable consequence of airborne combat. Prisoner abuses and outright killings were largely a byproduct of the airborne's unique method of entry into battle and total reliance on outside support units to handle prisoners. An inability to process captives does not discount the preponderance of problematic prisoner treatment found in parachute units, however. American paratroopers were often the victims of enemy atrocities thanks to their reputation, which fueled a vicious feedback loop of death. German elite and American airborne units developed a particular antagonism that culminated in a consistent take-no-prisoners attitude.⁸⁹ The aggressive behavior associated with elitism wherein men sought to demonstrate their dominance as killers and prove their manhood lent itself to poor treatment of prisoners and became an important marker of paratroopers' masculine identity.

Sexual Violence

A third negative side effect of building units steeped in an elitist masculine identity was aggressive behaviors toward women that sometimes manifested in sexual violence. There exists a massive sexual dichotomy between the front lines and the rear. At the front, soldiers "were too scared, busy, hungry, tired, and demoralized to think about sex at all," whereas in the rear, sex was commonplace.⁹⁰ Fraternization policies were often flouted, and while a venereal disease was a punishable offense, soldiers

86. Arthur Schultz memoir, Eisenhower Center D-Day Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

87. Angress, *Witness to the Storm*, 269.

88. Guarnere, Heffron, and Post, *Brothers in Battle*, 98.

89. Fransen, "Cost of Elitism," 26; Lindermann, *World Within War*, 120, 130.

90. Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 108.

were issued condoms, and demand for sex almost always outstripped supply.⁹¹ Despite strict regulations from Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Forces, many paratroopers developed innovative ways to circumvent official policies. Many officers chose to ignore what went on behind their backs; even Dick Winters of *Band of Brothers* fame wrote, “The orders prohibiting personal contact were well-intentioned, but totally unrealistic, particularly to soldiers who had spent months on the line with no female contact.”⁹² Winters was also “army-wise enough to know that what went on behind my back was more than just a little fraternization, but what I didn’t know didn’t hurt me.”⁹³

Troopers often allude to their sexual behavior in their post-war interviews, so some argument through inference is necessary for ascertaining its nature and extent. Private Carl D. Beck of the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment told of causing mischief in England before Normandy, where he and his friends would “rip off a jeep and ride around all night” and “go and raunch around and look for the ladies.” He described their mischief as something “we’re not so proud of” but “it’s part of life, you know.”⁹⁴ Beck’s vague description of stealing jeeps, finding ladies, and doing things he was not proud of suggests nefarious behavior toward local women. Young paratrooper Clinton Riddle spent some leave in Paris before the Battle of the Bulge and noticed that many of his compatriots went to a “prostitution house.” While he claimed to have no part in this, he did admit to “drinkin’ and carousing around Pig Alley,” a noted red-light district in Paris.⁹⁵ Sexual conquest was everywhere, with soldiers “foraging” in rear areas for women, whether bought, coerced, or taken by force.⁹⁶

Rape is nevertheless a challenging barometer for analyzing masculinity in World War II. War disrupts social norms amid groups of young men segregated from women, thus creating a “critical mass of pent-up sexual desire,” according to the political scientist Joshua Goldstein.⁹⁷ Additionally, most rapes went unreported; those that were reported were often dismissed as described in the opening of this article, and most prosecutions involved African

91. Fussell, *Wartime*, 105–10.

92. Dick Winters with Cole Kingseed, *Beyond Band of Brothers: The War Memoirs of Major Dick Winters* (New York: Dutton Caliber, 2006), 210.

93. Winters with Kingseed, *Beyond Band of Brothers*, 246.

94. Oral history transcript, Carl D. Beck Collection, AFC/2001/001/01985, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

95. Riddle, interview.

96. Fussell, *Wartime*, 109.

97. Goldstein, *War and Gender*, 334.

American soldiers as scapegoats. Rape was likely the most common violent crime committed in the ETO, especially during two major waves: breakouts from Normandy and the Rhine, where units moved too fast for proper justice to be served. Incidences of rape during those periods rose dramatically while the rate of other violent crimes remained the same. According to research by lawyer Madeline Morris, rape rates during the breakouts were nearly three times the U.S. civilian rate, while other violent crime rates were about half that among American civilians back home.⁹⁸ Front-line troops often had little time for sexual conquest, though, so these crimes were likely perpetrated by service troops or others rotating behind the line.

According to historian Mary Louise Roberts, American prejudices about France contributed heavily to American GIs' sexual ideas about the promiscuity and availability of French women, which in turn had lasting implications for overall Franco-American relations.⁹⁹ Most rape cases were swept under the rug, however, with White soldiers being given the benefit of the doubt, referred to psychiatric testing, and otherwise excused for their behavior, and their cases "dismissed as a consequence of the war's chaos."¹⁰⁰ Roberts's work shows that of the four million men who fought in Europe (about 10 percent African American), only 461 were held responsible for rape, and two-thirds of those guilty verdicts were against Black servicemen. Historian Ruth Lawlor likewise finds that the inadequacy of the American military justice system meant that reported rapes gave "no reliable indication about how many rapes were committed in Germany" or elsewhere throughout the war.¹⁰¹

Rape is chronically underreported in any context, especially during wartime.¹⁰² Criminologist J. Robert Lilly, using Leon Radzinowicz's hypothesis that only 5 percent of rapes are ever reported, estimated a total number of rapes by American GIs in France and Germany between January

98. Madeline Morris, "By Force of Arms: Rape, War, and Military Culture," *Duke Law Journal* 45, no. 4 (February 1996): 664.

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

100. Ruth Lawlor, "When Commemorating D-Day, Don't Forget the Dark Side of American War Efforts," *Washington Post*, 6 June 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/06/06/when-commemorating-d-day-dont-forget-dark-side-american-war-efforts/>.

101. Ruth Lawlor, "Contested Crimes: Race, Gender, and Nation in Histories of G.I. Sexual Violence, World War II," *Journal of Military History* 84 (April 2020): 551.

102. Morris, "By Force of Arms," 664; Thomas J. Kehoe and E. James Kehoe, "Crimes Committed by U.S. Soldiers in Europe, 1945–1946," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 47, no. 1 (May 2016): 59.

and September 1945 at 14,660.¹⁰³ The damage done to women who are subjected to sexual violence is impossible to quantify.¹⁰⁴ Historians may never know how much of this sexual violence was perpetrated by individual paratroopers, but their personal stories cast doubt on this group's behavior toward women.

The incident described at the beginning of this article is representative of most rape cases in the European theater. After a rape occurred, the soldier's command often dismissed it, and few men were brought to trial. Those crimes that were brought to trial were often dismissed as an inevitable consequence of an elite unit's having been thrust into a difficult wartime scenario. The traumatic experience was lost to history save for the stories told by victims and perpetrators alike. Sources for rape crimes in the European theater are limited, and finding criminal activity broken down by unit is next to impossible. Most soldiers will not speak ill of themselves or their buddies in oral histories, memoirs, or even diaries and letters home. Because the rapists often were not tried, their crimes remain hidden, part of the silence of the archive. As Roberts argues, illuminating rape cases would have been detrimental to the carefully constructed image of American soldiers as liberators, forcing the army to confront the problem. The army responded instead "by scapegoating African American soldiers as the primary perpetrators of the rapes" and otherwise failing to address the problem. Accurate data about the rates and perpetrators of these crimes is consequently lacking.¹⁰⁵

One particularly grotesque paratrooper rape case demonstrates this point. The rape was never reported, nor prosecuted, only the murder associated with it. Pvt. First Class James C. McDaniel of the 506th Parachute Infantry, 101st Airborne Division, was convicted of murder for the killing of Francisca Welz in Landsberg Lech, Germany, on 30 April 1945. McDaniel was sentenced to a dishonorable discharge and life imprisonment. The conviction stated that McDaniel shot Welz in the mouth while drunk. According to her family's testimony, he left the room but then came back and seemed to check for her pulse, so the family left. When they returned, McDaniel was gone, but her body was lying on the floor "with her legs spread apart and her body nude up to her waist." This evidence of necrophiliac rape and what amounts to

103. Leon Radzinowicz, *Sexual Offenses: A Report of the Cambridge Department of Criminal Science* (London: Macmillan, 1957), xv; J. Robert Lilly, *Taken by Force: Rape and American GIs in Europe During World War II* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 12.

104. Lawlor, "Contested Crimes," 550.

105. Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 10.

psychopathy was presented in Welz's family's testimony but was not part of McDaniel's conviction.¹⁰⁶ Even in cases where there was clear evidence of rape, it was not always documented, casting doubt on the veracity of the data available about these crimes.

The 101st Airborne Division rape in Poinchy described in the introduction is especially egregious because the two victims were twelve and seventeen years old, but it was hardly the only rape committed by Screaming Eagle paratroopers. During the 101st's stay near Auxerre in the summer of 1945, paratroopers from the division committed four reported rapes. In addition to the horrific crime described above, this list includes the violent assault of a police officer's wife on the night of 12 September, when a drunken paratrooper knocked the woman out with a rock, raped her in an alley, and left her bleeding on the ground. Other incidents included an attack on a resistance fighter's widow while the rapist's buddy stole 500 francs from her fiancé. In another instance, military police witnessed the attack, only for the soldier to run off, never to be identified. These rapes occurred alongside more than thirty incidences of fighting and other nonsexual violent behavior.

The division inspector general echoed Taylor's sentiments, concluding that the paratroopers' behavior that August was "really just a case of soldiers blowing off a little steam."¹⁰⁷ The theater-level inspector's report blamed the misconduct on the division provost marshal and division leadership, accusing them of being "unable to control the soldiers under their authority," but dismissing the troops' behavior as trivial misconduct chalked up to "rowdyism."¹⁰⁸ This lackadaisical attitude from division leadership, alongside an unstated assumption that paratroopers' elite status earned them the right to be excused from basic norms of behavior and morality, fostering an environment that made these rapes not only possible but likely.

Nor was sexual violence the only way in which paratroopers stood out among other servicemembers in their interactions with civilian populations in the ETO. Thanks at least to some degree to the risk-taking type of soldier drawn to the unit and their elitist self-image, parachute regiments "set records among US Army units for disrupting French civilian

106. Branch Office of the Judge Advocate General, European Theater of Operations, "United States v. Private First Class James C. McDaniel, Company C, 506th Parachute Infantry, United States Army," 9 October 1945, Board of Review No. 2 CM ETO 15862 Vol 30, 93–100, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/ETO-BOR_Vol-30.pdf.

107. Robert L. Fuller, *The Struggle for Cooperation: Liberated France and the American Military, 1944–1946* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2018), 174.

108. Fuller, *The Struggle for Cooperation*, 177.

life,” according to historian Robert L. Fuller. Fuller finds that leadership’s responses to these disruptions varied. When the 82nd and 13th Airborne Divisions learned of clashes between their paratroopers and the French population, leaders in both divisions took steps to correct unit behavior. The 101st Airborne Division’s leaders, however, took no such measures, and as a result, that division soured its reputation with the local French citizens while awaiting transit home.

According to Fuller, the greatest travesty was not the misbehavior but “the phlegmatic response by their commanders.”¹⁰⁹ Rather than providing justice to the affected civilians for their men’s crimes and acknowledging the systemic problems that may have enabled these crimes, leaders were more interested in protecting the unit’s image and therefore blamed bad behavior on a few criminals. Discipline had broken down entirely; most of the paratroopers in this unit were new, and many of the combat-hardened noncommissioned officers who usually could have been relied on to curb rowdy behavior were already on their way home. Some of the behavior might also be attributable to the fact that, in August 1945, the division was still earmarked for potential employment against Japan and thus felt they had nothing to lose. Division leadership from the commander on down excused the 101st’s bad behavior toward civilians as nothing more than “airborne boisterousness.”¹¹⁰

Unit cultures that stress a masculine identity based on aggressive battlefield behavior, decentralization, and a predilection for risk-taking can encourage general lawlessness as well as sexual assault. Risk-taking often manifested in overt displays of masculinity, even from the group’s highest-ranking members. Gavin relays one story wherein his superior, Maj. Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway, would “come up to the front and go around the road bend and stand and urinate in the middle of the road. I’d say, ‘Matt, get the hell out of there. You’ll get shot.’ ... Even with his penis, he was defiant.”¹¹¹

When closely bonded groups like the parachute regiments of World War II prioritize attitudes that objectify women and value risk-taking, forcefulness, and sexual promiscuity, rape becomes more likely. As the legal scholar

109. Fuller, *The Struggle for Cooperation*, 179, 174.

110. Winters with Kingseed, *Beyond Band of Brothers*, 245; Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares*, 110; Col. George Barker, CS XVI Corps, to Brig. Gen. George S. Eyster, memo, 11 August 1945; Eyster to Maj. Gen. Leslie Rooks, memo, and Barker to Gen. Eisenhower, memo, 12 August 1945, both in box 4678, HQ ETO, Inspector General Reports, 1944–45, RG 498, NARA II.

111. James M. Gavin, interview by Clay Blair, 4 January 1983, Clay Blair Collection, box 53, USAHEC.

Madeline Morris finds, “Standards of masculinity that emphasize dominance, assertiveness, aggressiveness, independence, self-sufficiency, and willingness to take risks, and that reject characteristics such as compassion, understanding, and sensitivity have been found to be correlated with rape propensity.”¹¹² These traits were widespread in airborne units, and the evidence suggests the correlation between the masculine culture of the airborne and sexual assault in Europe. The U.S. Army’s desire to “protect” the American public from the overseas sexual indiscretions of its troops and the desire of individual troopers to paint themselves in the best light led to the use of dismissive coded language that suggests prevailing patriarchal norms and provides some clues to the effect of paratrooper masculinity on local women.¹¹³

Conclusion

American historical memory of World War II is replete with stories of valiant Allied men fighting a morally unambiguous “good war” against the evil of fascism. The shelves of any bookstore are lined with hagiographic books that perpetuate the good war narrative and depict paratroopers and other Allied forces in an overwhelmingly positive light.¹¹⁴ This bias is equally the case with memoirs, most of which intentionally omit terrible behavior. Winters reports that “memories of Joigny are few,” completely glossing over infamous incidents in his regiment and division in nearby Poinchy and Auxerre.¹¹⁵ The image of American troops created by these books is buttressed by movies and miniseries like *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *Band of Brothers* (2001) that do not shy away from the blood and guts of combat but reinforce the idea of the modest American citizen-soldier reluctantly taking on the enemies of freedom.¹¹⁶ Airborne forces in the United States Army undoubtedly played an essential role in defeating the Axis powers and freeing millions of people from the tyranny of fascism. The “greatest generation” mythology that defines how the American people think

112. Morris, “By Force of Arms,” 701–2.

113. Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 161.

114. Studs Terkel, *The Good War: An Oral History of World War II* (New York: New Press, 1997), iv. See also Elizabeth D. Samet, *Looking for the Good War: American Amnesia and the Violent Pursuit of Happiness* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021); Tom Brokaw’s *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998) is perhaps the biggest culprit.

115. Winters with Kingseed, *Beyond Band of Brothers*, 250.

116. *Saving Private Ryan*, directed by Steven Spielberg (1998); Steven Spielberg, *Band of Brothers*, 2001. This treatment began earlier, particularly with *Battleground*, directed by William A. Wellman (1949); *The Longest Day*, directed by Ken Annakin, Andrew Marton, and Bernhard Wicki (1962); and *A Bridge Too Far*, directed by Richard Attenborough (1977).

of their country's contributions to the war, however, distorts understandings of the airborne's actions and the full implications of their elite status both for themselves and the civilian populations in the areas where they served.

Reducing the men who fought in the war to caricatures of the ideal innocent American boy thrust into an impossible situation does a disservice to their experiences and individual identities. The reality of the combat experience, as this article shows, is much more complex. The 101st Airborne Division valiantly kept Bastogne out of enemy hands yet also produced some egregious cases of sexual assault. Military commanders often ignore the dangerous side effects of creating corps d'élite, namely their potential for criminal activity on and off the battlefield.¹¹⁷ The ill effects have been lost amid the cultural recasting of ideal masculinity from stoicism to sensitivity in the post-war era and further hidden by the retrospective framing of the war as a collective effort of good against evil.¹¹⁸

Throughout the European theater, airborne divisions averaged eight court-martial cases per unit, slightly higher than the rate of infantry divisions (7.3) and nearly double that of armored divisions (4.4).¹¹⁹ Despite an uneven combat record, these units' exploits carried them and their leaders to near-legendary status and an outsized role in the early Cold War military.¹²⁰ To create elite airborne units in World War II, army leaders accepted that risk and understood the potential for problems but wagered that the payoff would outweigh any costs. The elite units that emerged from this process have shaped the traditional narrative of World War II and the "Greatest Generation." Excusing aggressive masculine behavior with the sentiment "boys will be boys" has had long-term implications for the masculine culture of the army and is but one of many reasons the service has struggled to curb sexual assault in the twenty-first century.¹²¹

117. Beaumont, *Military Elites*, 4–7.

118. Huebner, *The Warrior Image*, 279

119. Appendix 2, War Department, Study Number 82: The Judge Advocate Section in Theater of Operations, Reports of the General Board U.S. Forces, European Theater of Operations, 1945, Combined Arms Research Library, Fort Leavenworth, KS.

120. For more on the combat record of airborne units and its impact on institutionalization and post-war planning, see Marc Devore, *When Failure Thrives: Institutions and the Evolution of Postwar Airborne Forces* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, US Army Combined Arms Center, 2015).

121. Miriam Matthews et al., "Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment in the U.S. Army: Where Cases Are Highest and Why" (RAND Corporation, 18 June 2021), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA1013-1.html.

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