

## Postal Censorship and Military Intelligence during World War II

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In January 1943, Capt. Carney, a U.S. Army Air Force officer stationed in North Africa, wrote a letter to a Miss Thomas in Tacoma, Washington. A passage from this letter caught the attention of military intelligence personnel assigned to postal censorship duties; it read:

The WAACs—[that is, members of the U.S. Women's Army Auxiliary Corps]—are here in force now. Had hoped. . . that our American girls would be spared that. After all, we want something decent to return to. Any country loses something more by placing their women in military servitude than by a military defeat. How can our leaders be so foolish as to destroy the very things we are supposedly at war to win? What man would want any woman after she had given herself to months of such an ordeal. I would rather go down the line and choose a common prostitute, at least, a person who gave herself for a reason and not just because some blabber-mouth fool glamorized it for her. We dont need our girls in the army. We do need them at home. . . as we left them so at least we can know there is something fine and honorable someplace awaiting our return.<sup>1</sup>

In the winter and spring of 1943, letters like this alerted Army officials to what would, by the summer, become a public relations nightmare—a wave of hostile rumors that hobbled WAAC<sup>2</sup> recruitment and retention efforts. While WAAC administrators suspected enemy operatives were responsible for the slanderous allegations, intelligence officers correctly diagnosed the problem as homegrown.<sup>3</sup> In soldiers' correspondence, Army censors found and recorded countless passages comparing WAAC officers and auxiliaries to prostitutes; indeed, many servicemen alleged that the women were “government-issue whores.” Like Capt. Carney, they asserted that female soldiers were not only unnecessary but also detrimental to the nation's war effort.

Indeed, male soldiers often warned women away from the corps; some even threatened to divorce wives or to disown sisters who volunteered for service.<sup>4</sup>

In this case, forewarned was not forearmed—the force of the slander caught Army administrators by surprise. But, in conjunction with attitude surveys, postal censorship provided military officials with a window into the anger and fear that gave rise to hostile rumors about the WAAC. While the primary purpose of postal censorship was to prevent strategic information from falling into enemy hands, censorship also served the important goal of providing military officials with information on troop beliefs and behavior, particularly complaints or protests and misconduct. This presentation will focus on censorship as a method of intelligence-gathering and as a source of historic evidence, for scholars can and should take advantage of the access censorship reports afford to soldiers' thoughts and actions; these reports have been preserved in Army administrative files at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland.

In overseas theaters of operations, postal censorship responsibilities assigned to intelligence personnel included: training unit officers to censor the outgoing correspondence of enlisted men and women under their command; reviewing a percentage of already censored correspondence; censoring previously uncensored correspondence; inspecting packages and travelers' personal effects; reporting censorship violations and analyzing trends; and issuing monthly or bi-monthly reports on troop morale.<sup>5</sup>

Of particular interest to historians are morale reports and comment sheets used to record violations of Army censorship regulations. Censorship morale reports

preserve soldiers' thoughts on such topics as Army food, mail service, military leaders, furlough and rotation policies, entertainment facilities, race relations, servicewomen, popular rumors, and enemy propaganda. The passages transcribed in the report were anonymous but identified by the author's rank, division, and APO. The comments and complaints were intended to reflect the soldiers' collective state of mind; they represent a range of opinion with an emphasis on the most commonly voiced ones. Censors classified comments as either favorable or unfavorable and noted changes in the volume of correspondence on a particular topic. Though crude, this method of analysis allowed intelligence officers—and now allows scholars—to track shifts in soldiers' concerns and attitudes over the course of the war. Perhaps not surprising, Pacific theater censorship reports reveal that between November 1944 and war's end, servicemen's opinion of the Wacs who arrived in the theater in late summer 1944 steadily improved as the men became better acquainted with female soldiers. By contrast, soldiers' attitudes about "home affairs"—a broad category that included "political and economic situations, postwar plans, social and personal problems"—was harder to chart. Anger about strikes in defense factories, on the one hand, and interest in the provisions of the GI Bill of Rights, on the other, produced fluctuations in soldiers' attitudes about news from the home front.<sup>6</sup>

Censorship reports record not only popular opinion but also common violations of military law. Under the category "the enemy," for example, European theater morale reports examined "fraternization," or friendly relations between American servicemen and German women, during combat and in the months between VE-Day and the Japanese surrender. Although some soldiers disapproved of such relationships,

morale reports reveal that many other men were eager to explore new sexual opportunities. Despite the threat of imprisonment and steep fines, some even bragged about their conquests. "You should see my girl over here too," one sergeant wrote, "she sure is a honey. She is only 21 and she said she is sure she will like the U.S. when we are married and I take her back with me. As tho, after seeing these Nazis kill our boys off, I would be crazy enough to take her back with me even if I were not married. All the boys have German girls now and they sure are good. They will make good wives for the German boys after we leave them. They will be a lot smarter too." The same report provides evidence of American mistreatment of German prisoners of war and of American servicemen looting and damaging German homes, both violations of the U.S. Army's rules of land warfare.<sup>7</sup>

Pacific theater morale reports did not record such attitudes or misconduct, but comment sheets and other censorship documents reveal that desecration of enemy dead was disturbingly widespread. In a letter to his mother, one young infantry lieutenant bragged:

Say, next fight I get into I'll get enough gold teeth to make you a necklace. I had about 10 but lost them. The Japs have some good dental work. You see them lying around and just kick their teeth out. Some fellows have dozens. I think I'll get some and keep them and if I ever get married I'll have my old lady a ring made out of them."<sup>8</sup>

Another officer described the "souvenirs" collected by Marines on Guadalcanal, "A couple had Jap skulls they had boiled out. Others had small socks of gold tooth fillings. Bottles of pickled ears were reported and Jap occupation money was commoner than Aussie stuff."<sup>9</sup> Among items discovered by censors in soldiers' parcels was a polished skull with shells for eyes designed for use as an ashtray.<sup>10</sup> Such desecrations were so

frequent that the “Censorship Guide” for the Pacific theater of operations included specific instructions for dealing with packages containing skulls and similar trophies. Furthermore, in monthly operating reports “Skulls”—later “Atrocities”—was one of thirteen categories of common violations enumerated. In January 1944, for example, censors found more mentions of such atrocities than of the results of enemy action.<sup>11</sup>

The most common violation of censorship regulations, however, was “intentional revealing of geographic location.” In June 1944, Pacific theater censors reported more than a thousand cases. At that time, no other category of censorship violation topped one hundred.<sup>12</sup> Restrictions preventing a soldier from disclosing his unit’s location were the most resented of all censorship regulations. Enforcing these restrictions was the postal censor’s most difficult task, for many soldiers believed the prohibition to be both unfair and unnecessary.<sup>13</sup> Indeed even before heading overseas, many servicemen and -women made preparations to flout this restriction by, for example, developing simple codes that would allow loved ones to follow troop movements. The word “apple” might represent Oro Bay in New Guinea, “banana” Port Moresby and so on. One problem with this strategy was that code keys were easy to misplace. For example, the wife of an Army Air Force warrant officer lost the key to a code representing the months of the year and the numbers 1-30, presumably anticipating the date when her husband would complete his tour of duty and return home on furlough. Censors discovered this scheme when the serviceman tried to send copy of the key back to his wife with the information that “boomerang,” or the month of July, would be significant.<sup>14</sup>

Censors were trained to identify simple codes—such as spelling out the name of a place with the first letter of each sentence in a paragraph. Though a more complex

code might escape the censor's notice, it might also fail to communicate the sender's message to the intended recipient. For example, one infantry officer found himself reassuring his wife that a "Zelma" mentioned in a previous letter "wasn't anyone. Just a name I used." He urged her to "get that letter out again and remember what we said we would do before I left. Study it close dear for it took a good many hours to write it." Another serviceman attempted to communicate his location through fictitious poker earnings and losses; this effort also backfired. The censor did not catch the coded message but neither did the soldier's wife, who worried about her husband's gambling. His follow-up letter attempted to clear up the misunderstanding by explaining that the numbers represented longitude and latitude; the letter also alerted censors to this violation of Army regulations.<sup>15</sup>

Service personnel were generally aware of the prohibition against disclosing a unit's geographical location and recognized the importance of preventing the enemy from learning about American troop movements. Many simply did not believe that security required them to keep their friends and families in the dark. Indeed, a common complaint was that this restriction was nonsensical; American journalists and the Japanese military had already located the soldier's unit. Perhaps responding to this seeming irrationality, some soldiers regarded outsmarting the censor as something of a game. "I wish I could tell you where I am and just exactly what I am doing," one sergeant wrote, "but Censorship Regulations require strict abstinence from such remarks." As the censor noted, this sergeant then proceeded to do just what he knew he should not, which was to hint at where he was stationed.<sup>16</sup> Another soldier sent this "puzzel" to his mother: "[Y]ou know where Blanche lives. Well, take the first letter out of

that and then . . . take the last letter out of where you live, and then take the third letter out of where Aunt used to live, then take the last six letters out of the place where we lived before we moved over by the park.” The answer was Melbourne, Australia. Caught by the censor, this letter was returned for revision.<sup>17</sup>

Even more than they resented restrictions on what they might write to their families, soldiers complained bitterly when censorship became an invasion of privacy. Although trained to respect the “sanctity of mail,” many unit censors—that is, unit officers assigned to censor correspondence of the enlisted personnel under their command—violated this precept.<sup>18</sup> Indeed some officers assigned to censorship duty treated enlisted men’s letters and personal concerns with derision. For example, in a gossipy letter to his wife, one Army Air Force lieutenant wrote:

All of us dirty dogs get a kick out of censoring mail over here. We saw the one that broke the camels back today, though. Some guy wrote to his wife and just gave her hell because she was running around with some guy and wanting a divorce. Then he writes a letter to his girl friend and tells her how much he loves her. The only trouble was the damn fool put both letters in one envelope and addressed it to his wife. That ought to go over like a lead balloon.

In this case, one soldier’s complicated love life and seeming hypocrisy was a source amusement for the officers of the 90<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group. Indeed, censors caught another lieutenant recounting a slightly different version of this story in a letter of the same date.<sup>19</sup>

While the hypocritical enlisted man might have merited some scorn, in most cases, the object of a unit censor’s ridicule was an earnest soldier seeking to maintain strained marital bonds by writing frequent love letters to his wife. For example, a Lieutenant LaRose complained of an enlisted man named Nelson who wrote “at least one & sometimes 2 or 3 letters per day to his wife”:

He goes on and on about my dearest beloved—How I would love to hold you in my arms and smell the sweet fragrance of your hair—Oh my loved one—how I miss you and so on for 30 pages. I would like to see Mrs. Nelson. I should think she would get awful tired of the same thing day in and day out. When we censor mail in the morning the guys always try to stack the deck so I'll get Nelson's letters to censor. Nelson always puts the following at the top of his letters No date or anything but:  
'City of Love  
Date of Wishes  
9900 Hugs and  
10,000 Kisses. . .<sup>20</sup>

Another officer explained, "Most of our laughs come from censoring the mail."

"However," he acknowledged, "we have to be very careful that the boys don't see us, as they wouldn't like the idea of our reading the mail and laughing about it."<sup>21</sup> Some officers did not even bother to hide their derision.

Censorship documents reveal that enlisted personnel were attuned to the problem of censors' failure to observe the "sanctity of mail": they overheard laughter; they recognized mocking references to their personal affairs; they learned of comments improperly inserted by unit officers in enlisted men's letters; and they protested this intrusion. "Our most cherished thing we have is our mail," one corporal wrote. "With our own unit censors we cannot be too personal or write the things we wish to, but when peering into ones mails and gossiping about it is done, nobody can stand for that. At the [port of embarkation], we were told that we could write as we wished and nothing would be mentioned to anybody. This has definitely been breached." Sharing this corporal's distress, the non-commissioned officers of the 1059<sup>th</sup> Quartermaster Company produced a report on the problem, which they presented to their commanding officer. Although that officer dismissed the complaint, military intelligence officials took

it seriously, for misconduct by unit censors might undermine morale and encourage evasions of censorship.<sup>22</sup>

Responding to real and perceived breaches of privacy, some soldiers censored not only strategic information but also private emotions. “If one or two of my letters have been cold and uninteresting,” one sergeant wrote to a girl friend, “you can blame it on the censors. More than once I have heard cracks made about letters being written by the enlisted men that I didn’t like. I feel that regardless of whom a GI writes to, that letter should not be ‘cracked’ about. That’s my reason for the cold letter I mailed to you. I do hope you accept my reason.” His seeming lack of ardor appears to have strained the relationship.<sup>23</sup> Other soldiers responded by curtailing their correspondence: “Darling, please forgive me for not writing for so long,” one enlisted man wrote to explain his recent reticence, “but you see the officer who does the censoring in our battery talks quite a bit about what we write in our letters. I have seen him take a letter out and read the whole letter, out loud, to the other officers.”<sup>24</sup>

Relationships between officers and enlisted men, the strains of war on marriage, the treatment of enemy soldiers and civilians, attitudes about censorship and mail service—all of these topics and more are illuminated by postal censorship documents. Indeed comment sheets and morale reports provide scholars with access to something lacking in most wartime correspondence—uncensored accounts of servicemen and -women’s thoughts and experiences. These documents preserve what soldiers wanted to write and were prevented from communicating. They help us fill in an intellectual gap produced by military regulations and censors’ excisions.

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<sup>1</sup> Information Slip TFNY 1243, File: MID 322.12 W.A.A.C. 6-23-43 (6-11-43), Box 579, Army Intelligence Decimal Files, Entry 47B, Army Staff, RG 319, National Archives, College Park, MD (NACP).

<sup>2</sup> Founded as the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) in May 1942, this organization's official name changed to Women's Army Corps (WAC) on 1 September 1943 when the corps and its members gained full Army status. I use Waac and Wac to refer to corps members.

<sup>3</sup> Mattie E. Treadwell, *The Women's Army Corps* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1954), 201; Oveta Culp Hobby to Office of the Director of Administration, ASF (18 May 1943); J. M. Roamer to A. C. of S. G2 (22 May 1943); L. R. Forney to J. M. Roamer (3 June 1943; all in File: MID 322.12 W.A.A.C. thru 6-10-43, Box 579, Army Intelligence Decimal Files, Entry 47B, Army Staff, RG 319, NACP.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the WAAC slander campaign, see Ann Pfau, *Miss Yourlovin: GIs, Gender, and Domesticity during World War II* (Columbia University Press, 2008), chap. 2, <http://www.gutenberg-e.org/pfau/chapter2.html>; Treadwell, *The Women's Army Corps*, chap. 11; Leisa Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps during World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), chap. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Leo Taub, "History of Military Censorship in the European Theater of Operations, World War II, 1941-1945," Records of the Assistant Chief of Staff G-2, Histories, ETO, RG 498; "Censorship Guide, SWPA," Box 26, Entry 556, Theater Censor, USAFFE, RG 496; "History of Military Censorship in the SWPA," Box 40, Entry 558, Theater Censor, USAFFE, RG 496; all in NACP.

<sup>6</sup> E. R. Thorpe, "The Censorship Survey of Morale, June 1943 to August 1945" (n.d.); "Censorship Survey of Morale," (November 1944-August 1945); both in Box T-1429, Theater Censor, G-2, Southwest Pacific Area and U.S. Army Forces, Pacific, RG 496, NACP.

<sup>7</sup> "Censorship Report on General Morale of Troops for Period 16-30 June 1945," File: 212 Morale, Box 41, Historical Division Administrative Files, 1942-June 1946, ETO, RG 498, NACP.

<sup>8</sup> Comment Sheet TC-2155, File Comment Sheets, A-D, 1944, Box 21 (formerly T-1420), Summary of Censorship Violations, Theater Censor, G2, USAFFE, RG 496.

<sup>9</sup> Comment Sheet 313, File: Comment Sheets, 1943, H-P, Box T-1419, Theater Censor, USAFFE, RG 496.

<sup>10</sup> See Files 716 and 718, Box T-1410, General Records, 1944-1945, Theater Censor, G2, USAFFE, RG 496.

<sup>11</sup> "Censorship Guide, SWPA," Box 26, Entry 556, Theater Censor, USAFFE; Office of the Base Censor, APO 923 to Theater Censor, Re: "Report for the month of January 1944" (7 February 1944), File: 319.1, Box T-1432, Theater Censor, AFPAC; both in RG 496, NACP.

<sup>12</sup> "Statistical Report by Section, June 1944," File: 319.1, Box T-1432, Theater Censor, AFPAC, RG 496, NACP.

<sup>13</sup> Supplement, "History of Military Censorship in the SWPA," Box 40, Entry 558, Theater Censor, USAFFE, RG 496; Research Unit, G-1, "Attitudes of a Cross Section of Enlisted Men in the South Pacific Area on Mail Service and Censorship," File: SPA-3, Box 1024, Research Division, Attitude Reports of Overseas Personnel 1942-1953, Entry 94, Office of the Secretary of Defense, RG 330; both in NACP.

<sup>14</sup> Comment Sheet 44-100, File: Comment Sheets, 1944, R-Z, Box T-1420, Summaries of Censorship Violations ("Comment Sheets"), 1942-1944, Theater Censor, USAFFE, RG 496, NACP.

<sup>15</sup> Comment Sheet TC-206, File: Comment Sheets TC-1 to TC-250, 1942, Box T-1418, Summaries of Censorship Violations ("Comment Sheets"), 1942-1944; Comment Sheet 44-278, File: 733, Box 1411, General Records, 1944-1945; both in Theater Censor, USAFFE, RG 496, NACP.

<sup>16</sup> Comment Sheet TC-60, File: Comment Sheets TC-1 to TC-250 1942, Box T-1418, Summaries of Censorship Violations ("Comment Sheets"), 1942-1944, Theater Censor, USAFFE, RG 496, NACP.

<sup>17</sup> Comment Sheet 692, File: Comment Sheets TC-651 to TC-840, 1942, Box T-1418, Summaries of Censorship Violation ("Comment Sheets"), 1942-1944, Theater Censor, USAFFE, RG 496, NACP.

<sup>18</sup> Research Unit, G-1, "Attitudes of a Cross Section of Enlisted Men in the South Pacific Area on Mail Service and Censorship," File: SPA-3, Box 1024, Research Division, Attitude Reports of Overseas Personnel 1942-1953, Entry 94, Office of the Secretary of Defense, RG 330; "Censorship Guide, SWPA," Box 26, Entry 556, Theater Censor, USAFFE, RG 496; both in NACP.

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<sup>19</sup> Comment Sheets 45-91 and 45-89, File: 744, Box T-1412, General Records, 1944-1945, Theater Censor, USAFFE, RG 496, NACP.

<sup>20</sup> Comment Sheet 375, File: Comment Sheets, 1944, R-Z, Box T-1420, Summaries of Censorship Violations ("Comment Sheets"), 1942-1944, Theater Censor, USAFFE, RG 496, NACP.

<sup>21</sup> Comment Sheet 46, File: Comment Sheets 1943 HP, Box Box T-1419, Summaries of Censorship Violation ("Comment Sheets"), 1942-1944, Theater Censor, USAFFE, RG 496, NACP.

<sup>22</sup> Comment Sheet 45, File: Comment Sheets 1943 H-P, Box T-1419, Summaries of Censorship Violation ("Comment Sheets"), 1942-1944, Theater Censor, USAFFE, RG 496, NACP.

<sup>23</sup> Information Sheet 3173, File: Consolidated Morale Reports, X Army, Box G-1489, Censor Weekly Reports 1945, G2, AFPAC, RG 496, NACP.

<sup>24</sup> Information Sheet 1360, File: XXIV Corps, 1 May-13 August 1945, Box G-1489, Censor Weekly Reports 1945, G2, AFPAC, RG 496, NACP.