

Collier's

AUGUST 16, 1941

Soldiers and Sin



By Jim Marshall

THIS piece gets pretty frank in spots. If you shock easily, better skip it. It is about our new Army and what is called "vice." It tries to tell the truth about what the soldier is up against, what the Army is doing about it, how civilians and their churches and organizations are helping. It answers, as well as it may, questions asked by mothers, fathers, other relatives and friends of boys in the service.

A good many headlines recently have announced that "vice is rampant" around Army posts. This is a reasonably meaningless phrase, because few people agree what vice is, and the dictionary gives eight meanings for "rampant." If the headline means there is prostitution, gambling and drinking going on near Army posts, it is correct. If it implies that most soldiers are drunken, immoral bums, it is untrue. If it leaves the impression that the folks in cities and towns near camps, or Army chiefs, are indifferent to conditions, that is untrue, too.

If you inquire around Washington Army circles as to where the worst conditions exist, chances are that Phenix City, Alabama, will be near the top of the list. So we will go down to Phenix and have a look at things as they are in fact, and not as gossip and rumor paint them.

Near the western border of mid-Georgia is Fort Benning, a sprawling, fast-expanding Army post, part rolling hills and piney woods, part dusty plain where, a few months ago, were cotton fields and corn patches. Not long ago Fort Benning was mainly the Army's Infantry School, to which officers went for training. The school still operates, but fifty thousand recruits and draftees have poured in to make it a minor section of a vast camp—parachutists, tank gunners, mechanics, truck drivers, medical corps men, artillerymen, all the varied tradesmen of sudden death that a modern army must have.

Soldiers off duty always make for the nearest city to find what they want in the way of relaxation and amusement. From Benning the boys travel a dozen miles to two cities: Columbus, Georgia, and Phenix, Alabama. Columbus is in Muscogee County; Phenix is in Russell County, across the Chattahoochee River, which is the state line. In the two counties, including the cities, are perhaps a hundred thousand people—probably fewer. Perhaps 75,000 of these are whites.

Soldiers and Sin



(image added)

PAUL CADMUS

A year ago the amusement, sports and restaurant facilities of Columbus and Phenix were sufficient to take care of the population. Suddenly this population began to grow—fast and furiously. Rents went sky-high, and officers who had to pay them grew bitter about profiteering. The rank and file poured into town on pay nights and overwhelmed the place. All sorts of frictions developed. For instance, some few Northern soldiers, who knew no better, started friendships with colored girls and tried to take them into white theaters and restaurants. This offense to Southern convention didn't help—although Southern boys in the Army soon straightened out things, often a bit drastically. For a while there was not the best of feeling between Army and civilians—in fact, today, there are places where soldier trade is not particularly wanted.

Columbus is a bright, progressive cotton-mill city, with broad streets and good stores and a typical Southern atmosphere. It has a normal amount of political graft and inefficiency; although there is a law against serving drinks, you can walk in and be served openly right over the bar, with a cop strolling by outside. But there's nothing unique about that.

Phenix is another story. Its only industry is catering to the Army trade. The place is in receivership, it has no mills or factories and it gets its revenues by licensing dance halls, beer parlors and the like. At one time Phenix and Girard, next door, were separate towns, each at one time or other with a reputation for general wildness and hell-raising. Now they're combined in one city—and the reputation sticks. As a matter of fact, the great majority of Phenix's seventeen thousand people are quiet, respectable folk, like those anywhere else.

Both Columbus and Phenix get the blame for "vice conditions" outside their limits, in the counties. Most of the criticized resorts are out along the highways. For some time the general locality has had the name of being one of the Army's toughest problems. A fair statement today is that the problem is being licked. It is being licked by the Army, through education of both soldiers and civilians; by the townsfolk, through co-operation; and by the politicians faced by an Army threat of boycott unless things are kept under control. One fifth of Columbus is "Off Limits" for white troops already; the Army command could just as easily make it all of Muscogee and Russell counties, and stop the spending of an Army dime in either city.

Soldiers are Good Risks

Storekeepers and businessmen know that and use their influence to make the politicians toe the mark. They want the Army's trade—and have a good opinion of the soldier as a credit risk. One of them, a music-store man, says he gives credit to any man in a uniform; sells from sixty to a hundred instruments and portable radios every pay-



(image added)

PAUL CADMUS

day—and has just two delinquents on his books. Got transferred and forgot, maybe, he thinks.

Out at the Fort you have tens of thousands of boys from civil life, with its free and easy ways, learning discipline the hard way. They have the tar worked and exercised out of them, get stuffed with good food, are taught to be clean and look after themselves. A few weeks of this and they become hard-minded, tough-muscled youngsters full of more pep and vinegar than they ever had before. Keep them in camp a month, without the customary companionship of mothers, sisters, girl friends; without the chance to mop up a few beers. Then pay them off—mostly at \$21 a month—and give them passes to town. What happens? Well, you know as well as anyone else. Eighty per cent of them, according to Army estimates, surge into town and proceed to work off their surplus energy with great enthusiasm. They'd be less than men if they didn't.

To see just what was happening, your correspondent chased the "vice is rampant" theory in the wake of the Army one summer night. It was just after payday and vice was going on in Phenix and the surrounding country—as probably it was in a million other towns from Aalborg to Zanzibar. There were juke joints and dance halls and beer joints and gambling places, and combinations of them. There were prostitutes. Taxis dropped loads of soldiers at resorts and went back for more. Our driver asked what we wanted and offered to see that we got it—as some taxi drivers will do in Podunk or New York.

In the resorts, which were not very glamorous, soldiers were drinking at bars, cuddling girls, playing poker. The girls weren't very glamorous, either. One place looked like a setup for prostitutes. But nothing highly exciting was going on; vice seemed pretty unram-pant to a reporter who has seen western lumber and mining towns and a few water fronts. So we cruised around the county, up and down dirt roads in search of "prostitution trailers," said by the gossips to be parked by the dozen through the piney woods. Nary a trailer. Next morning, we asked Lieutenant Colonel Herbert Laux, long-time provost marshal at Fort Benning, where they were. He said he'd heard the story, too, and had asked his M.P.'s to investigate, without any luck.

A hardboiled M.P. sergeant said that, every payday, girls *did* drive down from Atlanta and that some prostitution took place in cars and the woods. He added that, in a few cases, taxi drivers took loads of girls out into the woods, returning later to take them back to town. So we went poking about, and found more juke joints and beer halls, some reputed to be tough. Nothing very horrifying took place while we were there, although some of the places had star-bearing, gun-toting bouncers in attendance. It was as plain as the nose on your face that "vice" was going on; that some politicians probably were grafting; that there was a more or less organized traffic in girls, rather less than more. These things are horrible, of course, but they are not peculiar to



(image added)

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Muscogee County, Georgia, or Russell County, Alabama.

Things in both counties seemed to be under Army control, through civil authorities. The Army calls it co-operation—but always in the background is the Army's “. . . or else!” That the Army has not invoked its power to bar every soldier out of the counties is proof, to some extent, that conditions are not intolerable to the medical corps or the commandant at Benning.

To get a drink a soldier must go off the reservation. No hard liquor may be sold in any Army camp; whether mild beer is sold is largely up to the camp commander. Fort Benning is bone dry. By the time a soldier has paid taxi or bus fare and had a few beers the cost is pretty steep. The amount of beer, transportation and “vice” he can buy for his \$21 a month is not great.

We went back to Columbus. The theaters and restaurants were full of soldiers. No “vice” there. Soldiers stood on light-flooded corners in the hot Southern night, shooting the breeze with pretty Georgia girls—and nothing wrong there, either. In the Palace bar they downed beer and frankfurters and shot pool—and what's wrong with that? Some of them got drunk.

When one got drunk a city patrol car, carrying one cop and one M.P., stopped and picked him up. When the car had a load it went to the police station. When twenty or so boys were rounded up, an Army truck loaded them aboard and trundled them out to camp to sober up. These boys were always under Army supervision; the cops just helped.

As around every post, the toughest period near Benning is the ten days after payday. For the first few nights Army trucks travel around the streets. When their crews find a soldier in trouble they pick him up and take him to camp. It's a regular service.

Maybe it sounds uncouth in the telling, but the records show fewer than one half of one per cent of soldiers in town get drunk. Turn ten thousand young civilians loose after a month's hard work in dust and heat, and you wouldn't have a record as good as that.

Protection, Not Punishment

The cold figures, from Army Medical Corps records at Fort Benning, tell the “vice” story: A year ago the venereal rate at the post was 4.6 per cent. In May, 1941, with 40,111 men under observation, the rate was .41 per cent—less than one tenth what it was in the summer of 1940. The reasons: Education of the soldier, by the Army; co-operation with the Army by city authorities and plain everyday citizens.

In the last war the Army punished a

Soldiers and Sin



(image added)

This rare photograph shows a row of travelling brothels

soldier who contracted a vice disease. Today it doesn't; it punishes him for not reporting it so that he can be cured. If he goes to a hospital for treatment, the time he spends there is automatically tacked onto the end of his enlistment period.

"Our object isn't to punish men, but to protect and help them," said a medical major. "Same here," said Colonel Laux, who has had a world of experience as a provost marshal from Hawaii to New York. Until recently Colonel Laux's police force at Benning was fewer than a hundred men—to handle nearly fifty thousand soldiers.

This force, working with the cops in Columbus and Phenix, was responsible for cleaning up what was admittedly a bad situation. It was bad for several reasons: Most of the soldiers were new and discipline sat lightly upon them; the townsfolk were overwhelmed by sheer numbers; there was no system for handling the sudden influx of single men with normal—and supernormal—appetites for amusement, restaurant food, drinks and other things.

So, of course, there was friction. Many citizens, clubs and churches wanted to help, but nobody told them how. Some people opened their homes to soldiers—but soldiers seldom feel at ease in strange homes, and it didn't help much. As time went on and Army heads and civilian leaders got together, plans began to take shape, not only in town, but at camp. Today every church and club in Columbus and Phenix is working at the job. In a typical week this summer, for example, seventeen churches—Episcopal, Jewish, Catholic, Methodist, Baptist—put on socials and programs for soldiers, the Army providing free trucks for the boys. Then there is the Columbus Defense Service Committee, putting on plays and vaudeville through the Civic Theater.

Once in every war it comes as a complete and shocking surprise to many persons that soldiers are soldiers. In fact, they have been for five or six thousand years. The problems of General George C. Marshall are precisely those of Genghis Khan, Hannibal, Julius Caesar, Alexander, George Washington, Napoleon and Pershing. Some solved the problem one way; some another.

The problem goes back to the fact that ours is a people's army. With us, the country runs the Army; elsewhere, it's vice versa. We like our way better, and it works—but it puts the Army on the spot and in the spotlight. That is not new. Rudyard Kipling let the soldier tell his side of it years back—hitting at the notion that a soldier either is a noble, spotless-souled hero, or a bum. The Army, heaven knows, doesn't want its men made into plaster saints. It wants them to be hard-hitting, clean-living fighting men full of what is called morale. Morale and morals are different things, but there is a vital connection. The old Army of ours built morale on the famous Three F's—Fun, Frolic and Fight. And interpreted fun pretty liberally. It did this following out Na-

Soldiers and Sin

napoleon's dictum that "Morale is to matériel as three is to one." In modern warfare, General Marshall says, it's six to one. You might say that morale is a healthy, optimistic outlook on life, together with a nice, scrappy disposition in combat. This is what the Army, with the help of civilian organizations, is trying to build into its new men. Necessarily it has to make fighters out of them, because you can't fight a war with regiments of philosophers and yogis.

Angels Can't Fight

Neither, says the Army, can you build a fighting force out of men whose natural instincts and appetites have been suppressed. If suppression goes too far, what you get is an army of—well, let's say neurotics.

While Army men believe these things, they know they are up against a public demand that soldiers should be moderately angelic until actually under fire—when the public doesn't care how hellishly bloodthirsty they become. One grizzled general summed up the dilemma with: "If you make angels out of men the wings'll get in the way when the shooting starts."

One of the Army's top problems is prostitution plus venereal disease. The Army is prevented from solving this problem, first, by the national belief that sex can be abolished, and second, because Army regulations, following this belief, direct all commanders to eliminate it. Our Army is the only one in the world that does not recognize and control prostitution; orders are to destroy it utterly. Being trained to obey, the Army tries to do what it's told, while realizing the futility of the attempt. Publicly, Army chiefs speak in grand, vague phrases; privately, they wish to heaven for more realism on the part of the public.

"Down here in Georgia," said one energetic medical major, "we have the situation in hand; we can't clean it up permanently because regulations won't let us. In Columbus we work with the police and the county medical society. Girls are continually rounded up, taken to the station and given an examination. If they are healthy, they are set free; if they are diseased they are held and treated until they become noninfectious. So far, so good. But then what happens? Under the rules, the girls are forced to leave town. Then somebody telephones to Atlanta or Birmingham for more girls—and our patrols and the police and the doctors have the job to do all over again. To put it bluntly, we exchange clean girls for diseased ones. Technically, we may be 'eliminating' prostitution—or trying to. Practically, we're getting nowhere."

It is true today—and this is important for the morale of the soldier and the peace of mind of his folks—that no soldier will contract a venereal disease if he obeys Army orders. If he does, through carelessness, the Army will cure him, rapidly and permanently.

The Army Does Its Share

With civilians organized and working in near-camp areas, the Army itself is providing more and more amusement and recreation at its own posts. This is being done in co-operation with a Joint Army and Navy Committee on Welfare and Recreation. There are movies and traveling vaudeville, dramatic shows and baseball—all sorts of things to fill in the time between the old-fashioned Army standbys: Beefing about the Army and shooting craps. Within a few weeks the Army expects to have more than 600 chapels, costing \$21,220 each, with 600 electric organs. The chapels will accommodate four hundred soldiers

Soldiers and Sin

apiece. About 1,500 chaplains—nearly all of them good scouts, too—build a lot more morale than they get credit for.

The Army operates seven recreation camps along the Gulf Coast, and is building five more. Soldiers are taken to these camps in Army trucks on Fridays and turned loose. They're on their honor to behave and are completely free until Sunday, when trucks roll them back to their own camps. With a five-dollar bill a soldier can have a swell time for three days.

In the last war the Army rolled its own barbershop chords, but this time there's an official songbook, containing the words to sixty-seven pieces—well, some of the words. This book includes Yankee Doodle for the Northerners, Dixie for the Southerners, Anchors Aweigh for the ex-gobs—and, nicely enough, it omits Marching Through Georgia. The Army, though, still does most of its singing extempore, using words made up by its own poets and paying little heed to the hearty "goldurns" of the printed versions.

So there's the picture. If you've been reading horror tales leaving the impression that the boys wallow in vice and drunkenness every payday, forget it. There is more healthful recreation and amusement for the lad in the Army than ever he got outside. On the other hand, remember that single men in barracks still don't turn into plaster saints.

And thank your lucky stars they don't.

