

# NORFOLK — OUR WORST WAR TOWN

BY J. BLAN VAN URK

WE RODE through the narrow streets of Norfolk's old red light district in a scout car. As we passed block after block of decaying two-story houses, our host, the cop, talked honestly of the headaches in handling forty thousand sailors and multiplied thousands of new shipbuilding war workers.

"Norfolk's always been a sailor town," he explained, "and here's how we took care of the boys up until a year ago. We had about four hundred prostitutes in here. They kept up the property and paid taxes on it. They weren't allowed out of the district at night. Each girl had to get a health certificate every week, and when a sailor came up with a disease, the Navy

told us where he got it and we took the rotten apple out of the barrel. In that way we kept things under control.

"The sailors liked it that way. They could get stewed, yell and dance, then get out in the street and fight to their heart's content. All we had to do was pick 'em up in the Navy wagons and take 'em back down to the base. If a sailor had been rolled, he gave us the address and we went back and got his money for him. It was a good system. The Navy liked it because it kept the disease rate down. The sailors liked it. And we officers liked it because we could control it that way.

"But last year, the Navy men

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THE AUTHOR, having investigated wartime conditions in congested defense towns on the Eastern seaboard, reports his findings in the nation's number one war zone: the Norfolk-Portsmouth-Newport News area. Similar conditions prevail in varying degrees in other zones he visited, as well as in boom areas in other sections of the country. This article on Norfolk is therefore in the nature of a "case study." Its purpose is not to blame or condemn anyone but to focus attention on facts which cannot be — and should not be — ignored. The first Norfolk visit, by Mr. van Urk, took place last June; a check for the *MERCURY* was made by William Bradford Huie in November. In the intervening five months, the situation had become notably worse.

— THE EDITORS.

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came down and told us we had to close the district up. We had to use *suppression* for the duration. We argued with 'em, but we agreed to do our damndest. And God knows we've tried. We've put women in jail by the hundreds. But you can look for yourself and see the results."

We did, and with the aid of the police and the City Manager's office, we took a good look at the problems of the Norfolk district, which has gained 100 percent in population within a few months to become the nation's number one boom section. In 1940, Norfolk had 144,332 people, but now there are 275,000, because of the feverish expansion of shipbuilding and of the armed forces. The population of the whole Norfolk-Portsmouth-Newport News area has jumped from 366,817 to 778,000. War workers keep pouring in to build the ships and the sailors keep pouring in to learn to man them.

Here is a city of headaches — literally and figuratively. The Marines and sailors have landed, but the situation is *not* well in hand. Demand is far beyond supply in almost everything bearing upon life in a whirling, confused war town. Since the Government houses and supplies the sailors, they contribute chiefly to the entertain-

ment, transportation and law enforcement problems, while the thousands of war workers contribute to the whole problem of civic welfare: housing, sanitation, disease control, and food and water supply.

## II

Women, "wine," and the galloping dominoes, of course, are the principal law enforcement problems. Fashions in wars may change, but the nocturnal objectives of a twenty-year-old boy in a sailor suit remain pretty constant. Every night is Saturday night in Norfolk, because about twelve thousand sailors come to town *every* night. We stood with the cop and watched them start piling out of staggering buses about five o'clock. We followed the bobbing white caps to the liquor store. The line was already two blocks long and the fellows up front were doing a land-office commission business on purchases they agreed to make for mates not in line.

"There's the first problem," the cop said. "How late to keep the state liquor stores open. If we close them early, the taxi drivers and the joint keepers sell the state stuff to the boys at two prices. If we keep the stores open late, some folks say that we are making it easy for

the boys to buy it. The other night we seized two thousand pints in one raid."

From the liquor store, the sea of white caps flowed toward Norfolk's East Main Street, the almost exclusive range of the sailor from 5 p.m. until midnight. East Main must be the largest, most solid block of beer joints in the world. The joints are all alike. Up front they have a big bar in the center, with vast hamburger facilities along both walls. Back of the bar, facing to the rear, is a gargoyle of a juke box which renders *Pass the Ammunition* and *Der Führer's Face* in monotonous repetition. Then, stretching back as far as a hundred yards, is a dimly-lit space devoted to tables, stalls and coin-operated "shooting" devices. Hovering everywhere are "waitresses" of all sizes, shapes and dispositions.

We bought the cop a beer. "Are most of these women sluts?" one of us asked him.

"Sure," he answered. "They pick up what they can get and work with the cab drivers. We used to let them dance with the sailors in here and they drank for the house and made a little money that way. Now we've cut out the dancing and the house drinking and all the joint owners are sore at us. They pay the gals about three dollars a

week for hopping the tables and the gals pick up what they can on the side."

We watched the operation of Norfolk's taxicab racket. It is the sort of thing that the law finds most difficult to stop. The city has about three hundred cabs, but it is almost impossible to hire one for ordinary purposes after dark. The cab driver "works with" several "waitresses"; and also "works with" certain stockades outside the city limits, as well as with his own particular gambling connection. In addition, he sells a few pints of liquor at double prices, and all in all, he counts it a bad night when he does not wind up with forty or fifty dollars.

"There seems to be nothing we can do about this cab situation," the cop said. "You can't arrest a gal just for riding in a cab with a man. We've made all sorts of observations of these cabs. At night, they almost always have one woman in them — when they don't have a woman and a man. Some of the cab drivers will duck into an alley, stop, and 'take a walk' for five minutes. Some of them don't even bother to stop. What can we do in such a situation? There are thousands of women in this town. Two thousand new faces come into this section every day."

The most elemental form of pros-

titution thrives in the alley. Our cop took us down a side street until we saw a Negro girl loitering at the entrance to an alley. She dashed back when the cop pulled his flashlight. "Come on, we'll find her place," the cop said. We walked back into the alley until the flashlight pointed out a quilt spread on the brick pavement between two garbage cans. An old coca-cola sign leaning against one of the cans was the only attempt at privacy.

"I feel sorry for the boys every time I catch one of them in a spot like that," the cop commented. "He always complains that he doesn't have any place to go. I chuck him in the Shore Patrol wagon and take the wench to jail."

The Norfolk war price for such alley service is "fo'bits," a 100 percent inflationary increase over peacetime.

In the center of the East Main pub district stands the most popular attraction of all. It is Norfolk's one and only burlesque house and the sturdiest members of the Navy's Shore Patrol have to ride herd on the line waiting for admission each night. We fought our way in. Miss Rose La Rose, the poor man's Gypsy Rose Lee, was the star attraction and we can report that Miss La Rose is nothing short of a riot with the Navy.

When we got out of the theater, the sailors were yelling: "Taxi! Taxi!"

"Now you can understand one of the things we're up against," the cop said.

### III

Norfolk's chief of police, Major John F. Woods, is a young, capable, FBI-trained law officer. He said to us: "In peacetime, I believe in a segregated district for prostitution, but this is wartime and we are committed to a program of suppression. With the aid the Shore Patrol is giving me, I think I could come close to suppressing prostitution in the City of Norfolk if I only had adequate prison facilities for the women. We have good laws and the courts and city government are behind us solidly. We can put a woman up for a year. But where? Our city jail is equipped to handle about thirty women, which is plenty of space in normal times. The place is running over. I have asked the Government to give me a concentration camp. I think it would take a camp large enough to handle two or three thousand women. If we had such a camp, we could throw every prostitute who dares to enter this town into it for the duration, and we could stop prostitution and

cut the venereal rate in Norfolk. But without that, I don't know what we can do except keep trying."

We visited the jail. Five and six women were cooped up in every cell and there were no beds at all for many of them. The city has a prison farm, but conditions are just as crowded there.

"These women know that every time we put a new batch of them in we have to let another batch out," the cop explained. "We put them in here and the health department renders them noninfectious, then we have to let them out so we'll have room for others."

Major Woods has proposed the concentration camp idea to the FBI. That such a plan, however, would have to be administered by the Federal Government becomes obvious by further study of the Norfolk situation. The city government is earnestly opposed to the forces which injure the health of both the service men and the war workers. But the Norfolk County government, apparently, is making less of an effort, for the moment you pass the Norfolk city limits you run into the most blatant forms of gambling and prostitution.

The beer joints in Norfolk close at midnight and it is then that the sailors jam the taxicabs and

head for the big dives out in the county which cater to both sailors and defense workers. We visited some of these palaces of sin with our police escort. There are several types of them, the most interesting of which is the "service man's stockade." These stockades are built like the old frontier forts. The one we examined had fifty upstairs bedrooms around the square, with automobile parking space underneath. The entrance, guarded by a gate and strong-arm bouncers, was barely wide enough to admit a car. In the center of the stockade was a flat, rambling structure which served for drinking, dancing, gambling and assignation. The slot machines were various types of one-armed bandits and the dice were bucked against a board. We were told that the bedrooms were in continuous use.

Recently, Major Woods has taken advantage of a law which gives him the right to raid places within a mile of the city limits, and he has raided several such stockades with the aid of the Shore Patrol. But the Norfolk County administration does not approve of such actions by city officers. We were told that Norfolk County has only three law enforcement officers to patrol the whole vast district.

The biggest gamblers operating

in Norfolk County do not allow service men in their places. Thus they avoid the danger of raids by the Shore Patrol and they concentrate on the war workers who have much more money to lose than the service men. We visited one barn in which there must have been \$20,000 in cash visible and as much as five hundred dollars rode on a single throw of the dice. There are no fancy gambling installations in any of these Norfolk County houses. Nor are there any card games. Everything is dice and the play is either on the floor or on a flat table with a bucking board. There are big-time gambling installations at Virginia Beach, but these are run periodically and are frequented chiefly by officers.

#### IV

Next to the law enforcement problem, housing offers the most difficulties. There are approximately forty thousand civilian workers in the Navy Yard now as against twelve thousand in normal times. At the Newport News shipyards, the increase has been from four thousand to twenty-four thousand. The Naval Base, still in the process of construction, hires about thirty thousand civilian employees.

In one place on York Street,

there are twenty-one persons living in an eleven-room house with but one bath and one toilet, which empties through a pipe into a bucket on the lower floor. There is no heating unit in this fifty-five-year-old house, and yet each occupant pays seven dollars rent per week. Miss Sue Slaughter, director of the Family Welfare Association, gave other examples of the housing problem. A house in which forty persons live has for its only sanitary facilities two tubs and two toilets, one of which does not work. The cellar is filled with water.

The "sublet racket" takes thousands of dollars from the war workers. Six houses, in which 161 persons live, bring in more than \$350 a week through shrewd subletting. Tenants in the houses are afraid to make complaints, because the woman who leases the rooms has threatened them with eviction. A case worker for the association told of one house where seven persons live in one room containing two single beds. In the same house, a family of four lives in one room which has only a three-quarter bed. "Hot beds" go for as high as \$2.50 a shift in the tenement district. These are beds which are yours for twelve hours and someone else's for twelve hours.

Rent ceilings are easy to evade.

It would take an army of inflation inspectors to stop all the various dodges which landlords use. A small single room jumped from \$9 per week to \$22.50 in three months. "Most tenants have children, and if they had to move, they would be stranded with no place to live," said Miss Slaughter. One property owner defended exorbitant rentals by saying, "If dwellings here were rented by public auction instead of privately, we'd get more rent than we do now."

The Norfolk city government, as well as the Federal authorities, are doing all that is possible to relieve the housing situation. What can be done has to be governed by the twin shortages of labor and materials. In trying to meet the present demand for housing and more housing, Norfolk faces a grim prospect after the war is over. Colonel Charles E. Borland, Norfolk's fighting City Manager, is well aware of this. "If the city builds to accommodate the emergency population, then it will be left high and dry with only a possible twenty-five thousand additional permanent residents over and above what our population was at the beginning of the war," he said.

The Norfolk Health Commissioner, Dr. J. C. Sleat, is concerned about the possibility of a disease

epidemic because of health conditions. "The first problem is the people we have to work with," he said. "Many of them have never seen a bathtub and know nothing of plumbing. And many of them have never been vaccinated." As in all of its public services, the city government is handicapped by being unable to hire health inspectors and nurses. To handle sixteen clinics, Norfolk has four white nurses and one Negro nurse, and has been unable to hire additional help. Norfolk has two restaurant inspectors to cover 1,100 constantly crowded public eating places. The city would like to hire more inspectors, but cannot. The restaurants are filthy. The owners readily admit it, but they cannot hire any help and restaurants are being closed because of this lack of labor.

Norfolk has two milk inspectors and the milk situation is as bad as possible. The normal demand of eight thousand gallons a day now runs to forty thousand gallons. Deliveries are made every forty-eight hours by the harassed producers, who cannot hire labor. This skipping of a day in deliveries is creating trouble in the tenement and Negro districts where there is little refrigeration.

For a while, Norfolk was forced to ration water and prohibit the

sprinkling of lawns and the washing of automobiles. The water demand jumped from thirteen million gallons a day to thirty million and there was a period when a serious fire might have been disastrous. But new mains have been laid rapidly and new sources tapped, so that the water crisis has been passed successfully.

The authorities have tried with only partial success to prevent unfair price rises. The food index in Norfolk rose 26.7 percent against an 18.6 per cent rise for other cities, while the clothing index rose 27.3 per cent in Norfolk as against 23.6 per cent in an average of comparable cities. A drink of water has sold for five cents and there has been some gypping on beer, soft drink and tobacco prices, but this is being held under control.

The onus for all the unhealthy, confused, inept and "shocking" conditions in Norfolk cannot be placed at the feet of any one group or agency. The plain facts are that Norfolk is swamped and bulging with humanity — legitimate and illegitimate followers of war activity. It is not only America's number one war center, but the country's number one potential epidemic cen-

ter. In discussing Norfolk's problems, one city official lifted his hands in a gesture of resignation and said: "We need more government help, and still more government help, to assist us in combating the extraordinary conditions brought on by the tremendous influx of war workers, Navy men and transients to our city."

Norfolk seems to have a progressive, honest city government, functioning as efficiently as it can under conditions where it cannot hire men for its police force nor doctors and nurses for its health department. The Navy has a seven-ocean war on its hands and thus cannot spare too much energy for such problems. Some Federal agencies have given whole-heartedly of their attention to Norfolk's problems; others have been caught in the bureaucratic processes of bungling, red tape and delay.

No one can question the legitimacy of the Norfolk appeal for assistance. A full knowledge of conditions at the points of greatest stress in the war effort is a powerful antidote for complacency. It is in that spirit that the author has sought to present the unpleasant but challenging facts.





# HOW TO SPEAK ENGLISH IN ENGLAND

BY GEORGE BIJUR

**T**HOUSANDS of Americans now flying with the United States Army Air Forces in Britain have discovered that there is a missing link in the months of careful training they were given back home. They wish that some farsighted lexicographer had prepared for them a handy pocket dictionary of the distinctive English used habitually by their teammates in the RAF. As it is, they find that RAF English is an unknown tongue — at least to strangers. It sounds like American double-talk except that it does make sense once you learn it. For instance, a pilot will remark: "The pukka gen is that he was brassed off with Wimpies when he went for a Burton." This is the RAF way of saying: "The real low-down is that he was bored with flying Wellingtons when he was shot down."

For the benefit of those Yankee airmen still on their way over here, and for students of the English language in its infinite variation, I have prepared an easy lesson by

airmail in the basic vocabulary of our RAF friends.

The newcomer's introduction to the tongue begins as soon as his squadron is billeted at an RAF station. The Tannoy (loudspeaker) announces that PT will be held in the garden in fifteen minutes. You figure this may mean pink tea and, adjusting your tie, you hurry to the garden. No tea. Instead, a burly RAF sergeant roars at you: "Now then, gentlemen, line up, put your 'ands around the neck of the orfcer nearest you and see if you can bend 'is bloomin' neck to the ground." PT is physical training. TT, its conversational cousin, may mean teetotaller or Tourist Trophy, the superspecial cycling race once held on the Isle of Man. Lazy individuals who are not fond of neck-bending declare that they "take a poor view of PT." A more bitter statement would be "a dim view." Brash Americans who suggest that PT was far more strenuous back home are told to "coil it in," or "wind in your aerial."