

VENEREAL DISEASE AND WAR

BY SAMUEL TENENBAUM

FROM time immemorial, venereal disease and war have been closely associated. The rapid spread of syphilis in Europe was primarily due to the far-flung movements of armies. In fact, historically, the disease was first noted among Spanish troops sent to the siege of Naples in the fifteenth century, and from them spread to the soldiers of Charles VIII of France. In our own country, the venereal rate in the armed forces during the Mexican War jumped from a peacetime norm that hovered around 90, to 161 per 1000; leaped to 214 per 1000 during the Civil War; reached a high of 180 per 1000 during the Spanish-American War; and rose to 107 per 1000 during World War I.

In World War II, the Army rate is running less than 30 new cases per 1000, a remarkably low record. Even this could be brought down to an even more negligible number were it not for a new source of infection, the 'teen-age non-professional who may be a high school girl, promiscuous barmaid, or lonely, unadjusted soldier-wife.

From Washington comes the report that of 1800 enlisted men found with

venereal disease, at least 64 per cent were infected by such "amateurs." Army officers maintain that in New York City non-professional pick-ups account for three out of four infections. Says Lieutenant Commander Clarence J. Buckley, venereal control officer in Philadelphia: "The kids outnumber the streetwalkers four to one."

"The oldtime prostitute in a house or the formal prostitute on the street is sinking into second place," declares Dr. John H. Stokes, writing in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

This development is not confined to our shores. The *British Medical Journal* attributes 90 per cent of venereal disease infections in that country to amateur carriers. In Australia, according to the *Medical Journal of Australia*, the rate for amateurs is 85 per cent.

Most alarming to public health officers is the downward trend in the average age of these disease-bearing youngsters. For the age group between fifteen and nineteen years, in 1943, there was a 132 per cent increase in the incidence of infectious syphilis; while for the age group between

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twenty and twenty-four the increase was 76 per cent.

Before continuing with the consideration of these new carriers of venereal infection, a few remarks about the part hitherto played by the professional prostitutes as carriers are in order. Careful studies extending over a century indicate that 50 to 90 per cent of professional prostitutes are venereally infected. Near an Atlantic Coast cantonment, police raids made on brothels netted forty women, of whom only one was definitely established to be free of venereal disease.

Of 180 women engaged in prostitution, according to a study made by Dr. A. B. Price and Dr. E. J. Weber, venereal disease control officers, a hasty first-inspection revealed that 37 per cent were infected with syphilis and 10 per cent with gonorrhea. A more careful inspection would undoubtedly have shown both rates to be higher. And the overwhelming evidence is that legalized prostitution, no matter how thoroughly regulated, offers no solution.

The Navy Department in 1917 discovered that the venereal rate for the marines stationed in Haiti was 170.56 per 1000. Officers determined to take action and set up a regulated, medically-supervised area which was known as the Barahona district. But after a year of operation, the rate shot up to 243.36 per 1000, breaking all records, and the experiment came to an end.

An even more dramatic illustration of the effects of legalized prostitution is supplied by San Antonio, Texas,

whose city fathers authorized the establishment within the city limits of "Spictown." There "regulated" prostitutes rented "cribs."

Venereal hospital admissions in the San Antonio area were three times higher than those of the Army as a whole until, one day, without any previous warnings, Police Commissioner P. L. Anderson ordered his vice squad to "close every house in town by six o'clock."

What was the outcome? The Army venereal rate went down precipitously, like a busted balloon careening to earth. Specifically, in November 1941, when the campaign began, the rate was 89 new cases per 1000. A year later, the rate was down to 13.8 per 1000.

Despite such conclusive evidence of the folly of legalized prostitution, some Army officers still believe in segregation. Their stand recalls the heated controversy that arose in the last World War between Clemenceau and General Pershing. Pershing was responsible for General Orders 34 and 77, probably unique in war annals, in which he decreed that the venereal rate of a unit should be one of the factors in judging the success and the adequacy of its commanding officer.

The French army was committed to a system of segregation, and it was displeased with the American habit of declaring houses of prostitution out of bounds. Clemenceau wrote an indignant letter to General Pershing vigorously defending the French system. But Pershing was unimpressed and

pointed to our record — a lower venereal rate than had any of the other Allied armies.

As long ago as 1914, Dr. Abraham Flexner, after studying methods of segregation of prostitution in France, Germany and Belgium, came to the conclusion that the arrangements were inadequate, gave a sense of false security, and led to the spread of social disease. No examination, Dr. Flexner pointed out, can guarantee that any prostitute is free from syphilis, as it takes from twenty to forty days for the germ to appear in the blood stream.

Segregation, as a matter of fact, increases the amount of venereal disease as it tends to increase exposure.

II

While organized prostitution has been practically wiped out in the neighborhood of most Army camps, the Army, as has been said, is confronted by a new, surprising type of carrier and spreader — the “khaki-wacky.”

Recently, the police inaugurated a search for three girls who had run away from a select and expensive New England finishing school. They were found entertaining three sailors in a cheap, side-street hotel in New York City.

In New York City in 1943 the number of runaway girls of thirteen to twenty years rose 41 per cent over 1942, and the city's Wayward Minors' Court, dealing with girls between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one, increased its case load by 100 per cent.

For the country as a whole the arrests of girls last year were 100 per cent greater than in 1941.

The Florence Crittenton League, which maintains maternity refuges for wayward and destitute girls, reported that 90 per cent of the women it sheltered last year were eighteen years old or under and that 60 per cent were under sixteen. Less than 4 per cent of the women were married.

Besides “khaki-wacky” adolescents, there are the semi-professional girls who are promiscuous waitresses in bars, honky-tonks, jukebox joints, amusement parks. Then there are lonely wives, female adventurers, camp followers and girls who leave their home towns to be with their sweethearts, who are caught by the glamour of the uniform and the disorganization of traditions, *mores* and fixed social arrangements that war brings.

Typical of this whole group is Mildred, a girl of about eighteen, simply dressed. Around midnight she was standing at a Times Square subway entrance, watching the crowd rather sadly, hoping for a “pick-up.”

“I came to New York from an Army camp cafeteria,” she explained. “My husband is a private. He was stationed at the camp but he's overseas now. I ran away from home to marry him. I get \$50 a month from him, but we both want a divorce.

“I'm not bad,” she added, “but a girl who's been married gets lonely. I stood it till November.”

She couldn't go home now. Her father wouldn't want her back, and

after New York she couldn't stand that quiet, small, home town.

She said, "I only go out with three or four men a week. And I don't take money. I'm going out steady now, with a merchant marine. We both want to get married."

Why is she standing there, then, watching for pick-ups? She probably has no answer. She's mixed up about her wants and desires.

This type of girl has introduced still another problem. In the old days it was easy to warn the men against prostitutes, for they could be recognized fairly easily. Now the whole matter has become vastly complicated. Since many of the promiscuous women are not professional prostitutes, the young men are prone to believe they are harbingers of genuine romance. In a bar-and-grill, when a decent-looking girl leans for support on a soldier and looks up to him with worshipful eyes, he usually cannot resist.

The control of infection among such promiscuous girls presents unusual problems. There was a definite way to deal with the brothel — put the house out of bounds and see that no soldier visited it. But the amateur and semi-professional arrangements are ambulatory, and stopping them is difficult.

Venereal control officers are generally agreed that the following are the effective methods of prevention:

1. The suppression of brothels in the neighborhoods of all Army camps.
2. Education — the factual presentation of the evils of venereal disease

through lectures, movies, discussions.

3. Prophylaxis. This is perhaps the most effective method. In 1912, personal prophylaxis was imposed upon the American Army and by 1914 the rate of hospital admissions for venereal disease had dropped from 163.85 to 87.02 per 1000. Those camps which have had outstandingly low venereal rates have established prophylaxis stations in the main parts of towns, readily accessible to the men both day and night.

4. Provision for wholesome recreation. Sexual promiscuity is a recreation which competes with other forms of amusement. The danger hour for the soldier is the twilight hour when he has finished his shopping, seen the local movies, been in for an ice cream, had his coffee and pie, and finds nothing of interest outside of hanging around the streets in a strange town. This is the hour when the honky-tonk, the brothel or the adolescent street-walker present their most alluring appeal. The town that provides clean yet mature entertainment; that makes it possible for boys and girls to meet under wholesome circumstances, has made a real contribution toward keeping our young men uncontaminated and uninfected.

Our present Army in all probability will be the cleanest and most wholesome and least exposed army of all times. The already remarkably low venereal rate would have been cut still further if the "amoral" amateur had not appeared on the scene. The

eradication of brothels near army camps means crushing the core and the substance of venereal disease. The amateur, true enough, presents a more difficult problem but, as has been pointed out, the Army venereal officers are evolving methods of doing away with her. The Army announces with pride that during 1943 only 27 out of 1000 soldiers caught a venereal

disease, the lowest infection rate ever recorded. The Navy's rate also was low.

For armies — any army — this represents something truly to brag about. Compared to our civilian rate before Pearl Harbor, of 45.3 per 1000, it means that soldiers are, so to speak, nearly twice as “clean” as the rest of the male population.



FACES

BY CHARLES ANGOFF

THE faces of men are for all to read,
Revealing every hurt and exultation,
Each leap and sinking of the heart,
By day or night.

The faces of women are ever illegible,
Concealing agonies, joys and doubts alike,
Except the one gladness
Of life's brief tenderness.

The faces of children bear many messages
Of distant past and more distant future,
Heavy with meanings forever closed
To all but to one another.