

**Images of Reintegration:
Alternative Visual Rhetorics of the Returning World War II Soldier**

**Lenny Grant (lenny@vt.edu)
Virginia Tech**

Abstract

During World War II, comic books and movies buoyed the public's spirits and offered hope to combat the uncertainty of a world at war. However, these visual media often did so at the expense of portraying authentic military veterans and the struggles they faced repatriating after WWII. This presentation examines two cases, the comics of Bill Mauldin and John Huston's *Let There Be Light*, that slipped the boundaries of their genres to portray the unglamorous lives soldiers returned home to. By defying viewers' expectations, these images created powerful visual arguments for greater social opportunities for returning warriors. This presentation offers a rhetorical analysis of the visuals these artists created and reviews how their legacy is being continued today with comics and movies that are designed to help warriors repatriate and the public to understand their needs.

Keywords: World War II, rhetoric, repatriation, comics, film

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The narrative of the greatest generation has become the ideal against which all subsequent American war veterans have been judged. It's the story of men and women who got going when the going got tough and saved the world from tyranny. The story of their return home after the long fight is equally streamlined: ticker tape parades, the construction of suburbia, the baby boom, middle class prosperity. This story is told in the iconic photographs, artworks, and moving pictures that have shaped our cultural perceptions of WWII. I hope to expand that perception to include two artists whose work focuses on the psychological wounds that soldiers brought home — a subject matter that doesn't comfortably fit the narrative of the repatriating WWII soldier.

World War II occupies a special moment in the history of war images, thanks in part to advances in media technology and the contributions to the war effort made by the comic book industry and Hollywood filmmakers. Superman debuted in 1938 and went on to fight shoulder to shoulder with American GIs in the 1940s. In the pages of 10¢ comic books, he attacked pillboxes, sank U-boats, and delivered supplies to the Allies. Legions of characters followed in The Man of Steel's footsteps. The new medium of the comic book coupled with the new archetype of the superhero simultaneously provided children and adults alike a way to escape the lackluster reality of war rationing *and* be involved in a glamorized version of the fight against the Axis. Comic books were cheap and easy to physically circulate among peers, making them the perfect medium for spreading the values Superman embodied. Needless to say, the superhero has become a mainstay of the American War imaginary, as is evident in the recent Captain America movies and DC Comics' reboot of the SGT Rock series.

Hollywood initially took a less fantastic approach to the war. As WWI drew to a close, the War Department made a handful of films to help reintegrate soldiers back into

civilian life. One of the best preserved of these films is *The Reawakening*, which was produced as part of Ford Motor Company's weekly education serial presented in theaters. The 10-minute film showcases the Army's efforts to provide occupational therapy for nearly 20,000 veterans.

A quarter century later, the government made a full-fledged effort in the cinemas. On Hollywood movie lots, actors ranging from Errol Flynn to the Three Stooges played out the drama of a world at war and attempted to lighten the mood on the home front. It's commonly understood that Hollywood was an integral part of the US war machine, and WWII itself has remained a blockbuster topic for movies since 1941. During the war, some of Tinsel Town's most accomplished filmmakers were activated by the Army to document nearly every aspect of war to end all wars.

Comics and movies buoyed spirits and offered hope during an uncertain time. However, they often did so at the expense of portraying authentic military veterans and the struggles they faced repatriating after WWII. Now, I would like to share the work of two visual artists with you, one in comics and the other in film, that slipped the boundaries of their genres to portray the unglamorous lives soldiers returned home to. By defying viewers' expectations, these images created powerful visual arguments for greater social opportunities for returning warriors.

Cartoonist Bill Mauldin. Mauldin documented his WWII experience in comics for *Stars & Stripes* beginning when he landed in Italy in 1945. Using black ink and paper, he translated the diurnal hardships of American infantrymen into single pane comics. His main characters, Willie and Joe, chronicled the exhaustion and uncertainty soldiers faced in Europe with levity. Mauldin's characters and edgy take on military life made him a celebrity both in theatre and on the homefront. In fact, there was such a demand for Mauldin's art work that his publisher prevented him from killing off Willie and Joe and contracted him to produce four cartoons a week until 1948.¹

After separating from the Army, Mauldin brought Willie and Joe home with him

to illustrate the difficulties servicemen faced repatriating. On the domestic front, Mauldin recast Willie and Joe as husbands relearning how to live in a family situation. Mauldin also tackled the housing crisis that faced veterans and their families. And he breached the familiar but still uncomfortable subject of psychological trauma.

What made Mauldin's comics rhetorically effective is that they functioned in the same way as the iconic images that shaped the narrative of WWII homecoming. They were single images with captions that circulated widely in newspapers. They even took pot shots at the iconic images of homecoming like Alfred Eisenstaedt's photo of a sailor kissing a nurse in Times Square on VJ Day. (Mauldin, like many other veterans, was chagrined that the VJ Day kiss became such an iconic image because any sailor in Times Square on VJ Day wasn't fighting in the war.)²

Mauldin's stateside comics were pointed visual commentaries on politicians' ambivalence toward post-service soldiers. They also indexed the changing perceptions of the American public toward its fighting men. In uniform, the soldier was heralded for his bravery; out of uniform, he was considered a threat to the society he defended overseas. Mauldin's comics depicted the domestic troubles, racism, post-traumatic symptoms, and unemployment that veterans faced. His radical politics eventually cost him his livelihood, but not before he used the comics genre to show how American soldiers, who were heralded as superheroes in their own right, were treated when they returned home.

Next, I'd like to introduce you to John Huston's 1946 *Let There Be Light*, the third movie the award winning director produced as a captain in the US Army Signal Corps. Huston had unfettered access to a US War Department psychiatric hospital where he followed 75 traumatized soldiers through their treatment at the facility. As the film's introduction states, never before had movie cameras captured the mental suffering of soldiers or the therapies they endured to be permitted to return to civilian life. *Let There Be Light*'s unvarnished storytelling and innovative cinematography were not seen by the public until December 1980 because the Army embargoed the film, claiming that it

violated the privacy of the men it depicts. Other commentators alleged that the film was banned out of fear that it would hurt military recruiting efforts.³

Huston put a human face on the abstract nature of psychoneurosis by telling stories that were often omitted from the chronicles of war. At the same time, he shattered cultural myths about mental illness in hopes of helping to create social opportunities for psychologically traumatized soldiers. Ultimately, Huston's film champions the Army's ability to rehabilitate the psychological casualties of war, thus reassuring viewers that returning warriors are not a threat to society. The film literally shows a rag tag group of men who were too traumatized to walk or talk, being healed — so much so that the film concludes by showing a vigorous game of baseball, that most symbolic of American past times. Like the WWI film, *The Reawakening, Let There Be Light* was created as an argument to both employers and to average Americans that soldiers returning with psychiatric disorders were capable of being rehabilitated. More importantly, it also served to show they were not dangerous to the society they were returning to.

Although they used different media to communicate their messages, Mauldin and Huston achieved the same rhetorical effects with powerful visual images of homecoming WWII soldiers. Namely, they used images to expand the discourse surrounding veterans by providing intimate portraits of warriors at their most vulnerable, thus changing the rhetoric of what constitutes a victorious soldier at homecoming.

Their art deviated from the norm of WWII art because it forced viewers to identify with soldiers rather than merely observe them from a far. Typically, the iconic images of WWII show soldiers in their most victorious moments, like Alfred Eisenstaedt's photo of a sailor kissing a nurse in Times Square on VJ Day or Joe Rosenthal's photo of Marines raising the American flag over Iwo Jima. However, the viewer is removed from the action in both of these images and rendered an admirer who cannot partake in the events they depict. Mauldin and Huston place their viewers in the action of their art, forcing them to identify with repatriated soldiers in ways that are immediate and uncomfortable. The

immediacy of their depictions underscored that repatriated war veterans deserved better than many received when they returned home. By expanding notions of who veterans are and forcing the public to identify with their challenges, Mauldin and Huston contributed convincing arguments to the conversation about veterans benefits. Even if in Huston's case, his movie was used some 35 years later as powerful evidence of the need for mental health resources for veterans of Vietnam.

So what can we learn from this visual history of WWII soldiers that could help us to make sense of the homecoming narratives of the post 9/11 wars? First of all, they help us to understand that we should have services in place to help veterans transition — large scale transitions hardly ever go as planned. Secondly, we should also be wary of essentializing contemporary veterans' homecoming experiences. For example, viewers of the World Series may have noticed the ad behind home plate for the Major League Baseball's veteran's charity WelcomeBackVeterans.org.⁴ Those of us who visited the website not only found that it was out of date, but that it was entirely devoted to Post- Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), now so much in vogue. Equating Welcome Back with "You're Mentally Ill" is a radical oversimplification of military mental illness and PTSD. Especially, because it denies and overshadows the experiences of those who are not traumatized, and undercuts the resiliency of soldiers, and perpetuates the misconception that psychological trauma is a lifelong affliction. In many respects, what we are doing to pathologize our veterans now is the mirror image of normalization of traumatized WWII veterans. We're choosing one narrative over another to suit our own cultural fantasies. And lastly, entertainment technology will continue to help us re-imagine and distribute homecoming images. Ticker tape parades and large scale celebrations of returning warriors are all but a thing of the past, but if we count the tens of thousands of homecoming videos on YouTube along with the billions of combined views, then we see that the image of the returning veteran still occupies an important place in our society, and it's a narrative that we as a nation will have to continue to negotiate whenever we bring men and woman home from war.

About the Author

Lenny Grant holds a BA in philosophy and English from Drew University, as well as an MAT in English and an MA in English with a concentration in writing studies from Montclair State University. His background as a writer, educator, locksmith, and medical communications consultant has guided his research to the places where health, labor, ethics, and social discourses meet. His current interests vector through this space in several ways. He is interested in how the work of college writing centers can make higher education more inclusive through partnerships with senior citizens and other underrepresented local groups to show that they are welcome participants in college life. Similarly, he is exploring the role that literacy instruction has and can play in helping workers in vanishing industries to transition into new livelihoods. Foremost, he is interested in medical rhetoric and the discourses of mental illness. In particular, he is exploring the multiple ontologies of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, the ways that it materializes and medicalizes memory and emotion, as well as how the social discourses surrounding the diagnosis shape popular conceptions of veterans and military personnel.

Endnotes

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2. Mauldin, *Back Home: Willie & Joe*.
3. Simmon, Scott. *Let There Be Light* and Its Restoration. (filmpreservation.org, 2012).
4. “Welcome Back Veterans,” October 28, 2015, <http://web.welcomebackveterans.org/index>.

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