

Yank The Army Weekly - Earl Rickard

This topic's September 2003 article described *LIFE* magazine's first issue. This month's article looks at the final nine months of a temporary magazine that boasted worldwide distribution: *YANK THE ARMY WEEKLY*.

Like the GI army that spawned it, *YANK* magazine was temporary -- for the duration of the war. Most of World War II's servicemen were civilians at heart, serving in uniform only to win the war. *YANK* was conceived as the voice of those millions of citizen soldiers. Distributed around the world, *YANK* served the army until the war's end and then went out of business after its GI readers went home. To the end *YANK* lived up to its motto, "written by the men... for the men in the service."

From the beginning, realism and a straight forward writing style emerged as the hallmark of *YANK's* articles. Home front magazine editors were sensitive to the mores of polite society. *YANK's* staff writers saw the raw realities of war and reported them. This literary freedom helped influence post-war American journalism.

A good example of *YANK's* gritty style appeared in the 30 March 1945 Iwo Jima story. Sergeant Bill Read described in graphic detail the vicious fight for Mt. Surabachi on Iwo Jima: "There were dead Japs in every conceivable contortion of men who meet death violently. Their arms and legs were wrenched about their bodies and their fists were clenched and frozen." The article included pictures of dead marines. Home Front magazines and newspapers sometimes printed pictures of dead Japanese and Germans but rarely dead Americans.

YANK's 6 April 1945 issue switched focus to the ETO (European Theatre of Operations) with Sgt. Ralph G. Martin's article, "Roer to Rhine," describing the Allied armies swift advance in the spring of 1945. "The speed of it even excited some of the battle-weary boys... maybe we'll meet the Russians in Berlin next week. Maybe we'll be home in a couple of months."

With victory close at hand, even the battle hardened veterans who thought they had seen all the horrors of war had one last shock. "Most of us were brought up to be suspicious of 'atrocities stories.' Our suspicions carried over into this war." So wrote *YANK's* editors on their lead to "German Atrocities." The article left no doubt about the horrors uncovered. "This camp is a thing that has to be seen to be believed, and even then the charred skulls and pelvic bones in the furnaces seem too enormous a crime to be accepted fully."

In a spring filled with momentous headlines the next shock turned all eyes toward the home front. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's death on April 12, overshadowed all else. *YANK's* editorial conveyed what the fallen president meant to the younger generation who were fighting the Second World War. The editors noted that after twelve years in office, FDR was the only president most of their generation had known. He had given some of them their first jobs in the WPA or CCC, and he had led them through the darkest days of World War II. "He was the Commander in Chief, not only of the armed forces, but of our generation." *YANK's* editorial compared FDR to a fallen company commander and reminded GI readers of how the initial fear and panic of loss fades after a new leader takes over: "... the men find themselves and the

company as a whole operating with the same confidence and efficiency." The editorial closed with the observation that FDR's death brought grief, but not despair. "He leaves us great hope."

Within a few weeks of this sad issue, *YANK's* readers beheld a cover they had waited a long time to see: a totally white cover surrounding a small oval picture of a German soldier, his hands up; the caption read "Fade-out." This V-E Day issue recounted the GI's war in Europe, presenting eight pages of pictures stressing "we" in the caption: "We hurdled barriers in obstacle courses ... We landed in Northern Ireland in January 1942. We assembled men and equipment in Britain. We waded ashore at Sicily... Anzio ... Normandy." The final non-captioned picture showed a smiling staff sergeant replacing a street sign reading *Adolph Hitler Str.* with one reading *Roosevelt Blvd.*

The end of the war in Europe turned the focus on redeployment of troops to the Pacific and the accumulation of GI points. These points were part of a War Department plan looking to the eventual German defeat and the subsequent discharge of some GIs and redeployment of others to the Pacific. The plan gave points for total service time, overseas credit, combat service, and parenthood credit. The magic number, or as it was officially called the "Critical Score", was 85. If a GI earned 85 points he could be discharged; he hoped.

Nevertheless, if a Commanding Officer decided a GI was "essential," then even a high critical score would fail to return the man to civilian life. The importance of "getting out" as opposed to "being redeployed" permeated the magazine from the V-E Day issue to the V-J Day issue. Even Sgt. George Baker's comic strip character the Sad Sack, a *Yank* regular, was redeployed to the Pacific. Sad Sack had enough points for discharge but his CO decided the Sack's latrine digging prowess warranted a tag of essential.

YANK also covered the home front -- the dream of overseas GIs. Although the United States suffered no wartime damage, the war was still the overriding fact of American life. In a story about his own furlough Sgt. Ralph Boyce wrote about a party he attended where every conversation concerned somebody "out there." Boyce asked whether anyone spoke of anything else; "Very seldom" was the reply.

The magazine's April 27 sports page reflected the manpower shortage, reporting the story of Pete Gray the St. Louis Brown's one-armed outfielder. This issue also printed a sports service record, listing the whereabouts of the real major leaguers, including Lt. Bill Dickey, Pfc. Enos Slaughter, and the World's Heavyweight Champion Sgt. Joe Louis.

YANK had no woman shortage. Every week the magazine published a full page pin-up of a famous star or hopeful starlet, including Ester Williams, Ann Miller, and Lucille Ball. The Statue of Liberty turned up as the VJ-Day issue pin-up girl. *YANK* outdid itself for straightforward writing when the magazine described Jane Russell as "5 feet 7, has brown hair and brown eyes, weighs 122 pounds and has a bust."

YANK could also take on the disturbing home front topics like Pvt. James P. O'Neill's article "The Nisei Problem." Pvt. O'Neill brought out the injustice of the incarceration of loyal Japanese-Americans, particularly when he juxtaposed the internment camps against the Nisei 442nd Regiment's combat record.

More powerful was the fictional short story "Welcome Home" by Sgt. Len Zinberg. The main character seems to be a typical returning GI, except that people neither smile nor speak to him. You can feel the rush of excitement and anticipation as he comes closer to his former home, a home he dreamed about while fighting his way through Europe. But the GI fails to find the warm house of his youth, instead he finds a dilapidated hovel with a large sign across the front -- "Keep out! No damn Jap rats wanted here." The GI was Nisei.

With the atomic bombs and the surrender of Japan, the war everyone assumed would go on for at least another year finally ended. Most of the GIs would be going home, as would *YANK*. The magazine continued publishing to year's end, covering such topics as, reconversion, separation, and the occupation of Germany and Japan. But *YANK* was just marking time along with its GI readers.

YANK had no place in the regular army anymore than the temporary soldiers the magazine served; they were both too distrustful of authority and too independent for the rigidity of the army bureaucracy and cast system. Both the magazine and its readers yearned for discharge.

YANK's discharge papers came on the front cover of the last issue, 28 December 1945 -- a picture of an honorable discharge issued to *YANK* magazine and signed by General D.D. Eisenhower.

Source: *YANK THE ARMY WEEKLY 1942-1945, Part IV: March 2, 1945 through December 28, 1945*. Arno Press. New York, 1967.