

Unit 8

World War II Humor

GRADES 6-12

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Beginning in August of 1942, American soldiers were engaged in action in the Pacific and soon thereafter in the European Theater of Operations. Whether an individual was an experienced soldier or a young, raw recruit, their wartime experiences were very different from life in their hometowns. Boys quickly became men, although many were still teenagers, such as John Irwin, a tank gunner. Looking back on his own wartime experiences decades later Irwin writes in his wartime autobiography: “The services were not made up of professionals, and the great majority had had no intention of entering a military career. But what they lacked in regimental polish they made up for in determination, endurance, ingenuity, and indomitable morale. And fundamental to that morale was the special sense of humor they possessed, one that emerged even in the darkest moments of combat. The war was hardly funny, but it did provide a setting for its own strange kind of humor.”¹ Thus, it is not surprising that examples of humor may also be found in letters and oral interviews in the *Words of War* series.

PROCESS

Read the excerpts from soldiers Cutler, Felton, McSavaney, Fehsenfeld, and Fleszar, that tell humorous stories and/or use words to express humor. Students may wish to read each of their accounts in their entirety, but specific excerpts will be suggested if time is limited. Have students complete a web search first for “wartime humor” or uses of humor. Read some of Bill Mauldin’s Pulitzer Prize winning cartoons that were published in *Up Front*, featuring his characters, Willie and Joe. Some of his cartoons are also located on the 45th Division Museum web site. For more contemporary discussion of humor in wartime, see the web site article, “Humor and laughter in wartime,” by Paul T. P. Wong, PhD from 2001.

OUTCOMES

Students will have a greater understanding of what it means to cope with difficult and often traumatic situations.

Finding Humor in Tough Situations

A. Captain Gordon B. Cutler’s special mission during the Teheran Conference in 1943

Gordon B. Cutler had a reputation for getting the job done. In April 1943 he had led the first all-American supply convoy of 300 trucks from Iran to Russia. The mission was a challenge; the army had to cope with mountain roads, heavy rains and flooding. Nine months later, the next task should be simpler – provide the main dinner course for Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin. What would the challenge be this time? Would he be successful?

¹ John P. Irwin, *Another River, Another Town: A Teenage Tank Gunner Comes of Age in Combat – 1945*, (New York: 2002), see foreword.

Wartime Humor

Cutler wrote a lengthy typed letter to his parents. Read his account in its entirety (pages 94-99, I). For a more detailed examination, subdivide the text into the following sections: Setting the Scene, Who's Who, The Task, The Challenge, and Mission Accomplished.

Language Arts & Social Studies

- Setting the Scene (pages 94-95). *What was the historical significance of the Teheran Conference? When and where did this take place? Who are the major players? Why are they at this conference? Cutler refers to men carrying "violin cases". What might they really be carrying? Why is this an event Cutler that will never forget?*
- Who's Who (end of page 95-through paragraph 2, page 96). Locate pictures of Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt at this conference. Read some additional resources about these individuals and their wartime conferences. *What were their personalities like? How did they relate to one another? What were their responsibilities? What was the purpose of this conference?*
- The Task (second half of page 96). *What was Cutler's task? Where would he have to go to accomplish this? Who was the Shah of Iran?*
- The Challenge (page 96-98). List all the obstacles that Cutler and the others with him had to overcome. Review a map of Iran, and if possible read about desert geography. *Relate your findings to Cutler's account. What geographic features made this mission especially difficult? What are gazelle and their characteristics? How was he able to catch gazelle?*
- Mission Accomplished (page 99). Cutler uses colorful language to describe the outcome of the mission. *Why was Cutler upset?*

General questions: *What makes this story humorous? Why might these men get in trouble? Were their efforts appreciated?*

Additional Activity:

Draw a cartoon in the style of Bill Mauldin showing a scene from Cutler's mission.

B. Lieutenant Stuart R. Felton, "do or die mission" with the XIII Jungle Air Corps

Stuart Felton's oral history account includes a bit of dark humor. Felton and the B-17 crew were forced to make an emergency landing at Henderson Field on Guadalcanal. Three of their four engines were no longer working and they could not follow the usual landing pattern.

Considering the reasons for using humor, why does the following excerpt show this? The whole account may be read in its entirety (pages 127-131, I), or just this excerpt from page 130.

We had to fly over a Navy craft . . . a light cruiser that was stationed off shore, but right in the flight path [to the field]. . . . As we got over the ship,

they shot us out of the air because they were a crippled ship. They shot out the last engine and the plane was totally destroyed. [It] landed on the belly, there were no wheels left and the plane became trash. I mean it was a heap of junk. We didn't get any medal or commendation, we were glad to be alive.

Language Arts

- Obviously flying a wrecked plane is dangerous and the crew's lives were at risk. *Why does Felton use the vocabulary that he does to tell this story?*
- *Draw a cartoon of Felton's plane and its crash landing*

Using Words to Express Humor

Compare and contrast the next three accounts.

A. PFC John S. McSavaney, First Marine Division in the South Pacific

Once a soldier or Marine had been in the service for a while, it was easy to slip into military "lingo" or slang. He wrote home to his mother in 1944 as his unit was island hopping, gradually moving ever further northward towards Japan.

Read McSavaney's July 16th letter in its entirety (pages 145-146, I).

Language Arts

- McSavaney talks about his usual activities in this letter. He also added a list of Marine Corps slang. *Explain why these terms became popular. What are some popular terms used today?*
- *Search an etymology dictionary for terms such as 'chow,' 'corned beef,' 'sack,' etc.*

B. Lieut. Fred Fehsenfeld, 9th Air Force in Europe: "Heil Hitler, in case we lose"

Fred Fehsenfeld flew eighty-six fighter combat missions in P-47s and P-51s in the European Theater. When a visiting general from the 9th Air Force came for a visit, Fehsenfeld's droll humor may have backfired on him.

- Read an excerpt from his full account (pages 216-217, II). *Explain why Fehsenfeld used this phrase. What type of reaction did he usually expect when saying this? What made this occasion different? Did he get into trouble for saying this? (How could he have avoided this situation?)*

C. Private Stanley J. Fleszar, 806th Tank Destroyer Battalion in France

Stanley Fleszar enclosed the following poem in a letter to his sweetheart, Dora Lee King.

Dear Sweetheart:
Ain't you got no paper?
Ain't you got no pen?
Ain't you got no envelope
To put my letter in?
Has ya lost my address?
Lost my letters too?
Don't you know I'm wondering
Why I ain't heard from you?
Is ya mad or somethin'?
Or maybe . . . digging a well?
Is ya gonna write tonight?
Ya is? Gee, that's swell!

Language Arts

- *What prompted Fleszar to enclose this poem? What anxieties are there for soldiers when they are far from home? What is the role of humor here?*
- *What emotions do you feel if you are separated from home, loved ones or best friends? How do you try to stay in touch?*

Additional Activities:

- For class discussion, compare and contrast the need for humor during wartime. Does this humor work? What might the readers of these letters or oral history have thought about these examples?
- Creative writing assignment: compose your own poem based on humor, love poem, or reflection.

Selected Web Sites:

“Humor and laughter in wartime,” by Paul T. P. Wong, PhD www.meaning.ca/articles/presidents-column/humor_in_wartime

“Bill Mauldin WWII’s Greatest Cartoonist,” <http://darbsyrangers.tripod.com/id36.htm>

45th Infantry Division Museum: www.45thDivisionMuseum.com