Letters from Overseas

WHAT THE SERVICEMEN ARE THINKING

by W. M. Kiplinger

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HERE is the substance of more than 400 vivid letters from servicemen abroad, all over the world. They tell what they think and how they feel about things here at home. Some are kind, some are rough, but all are thoughtful.

This is not a "poll." It may not even be a typical cross section of servicemen's views. It is merely a digest of these particular letters, quite a pile of them, obtained by exchange of correspondence.

The circumstances behind the exchange are these: The Kiplinger Washington Letter, which includes among its readers a number of servicemen abroad, on March 3 carried an item inviting these men to write. The item asked these questions:

"What do you think about things back home? Do you sense any 'chasm' or 'cleavage'? Do you think civilians are letting you down? Or lying down on the job? On the basis of the news that reaches you, how does the home front look to you? Wherein good? Wherein not-so-good? What's on your mind that you feel free to write? Purpose is not emotional or sentimental, but wholly practical. The exchange of correspondence will be of help to us civilians."

The replies were written mostly in late March and early April, before the German war ended, before the beginning of the movement from Europe to the Pacific. Some letters written later were coming in as this digest was completed, and will be reflected in another report at some future time.

The replies were written on all sorts of paper, some on torn scraps, some on elaborate captured German stationery. Some were typed, some were scrawled. Many were written close to the front. Said one infantryman: "I am writing this on my knee in a woods, and the guns are making a hell of a racket."

Most were from enlisted men, but some were from officers, ranging from 2nd lieutenant to general.

The letters came from Germany, France, Belgium, England, Italy, Egypt, Africa, Iceland, Alaska, China, Burma, India, the Philippines, the Solomons, the Moluccas, the Marianas, New Caledonia, the Carolines, Biak, Iwo Jima, Guam, other places, and from ships on seven seas.

The advance promise was to disclose no names and no identifying references, and this helped to make the letters honest and forthright, without any pose, without restraint.

Most of the letters are blunt. They mince no words. They call a spade a spade. They slam their hobnail thinking at you. They speak straight from the innermost feelings. One man wrote: "I may get killed tomorrow, so I feel free to tell you exactly what's on my mind."

Some letters are purple with salty, stout and hairy-chested expressions that slip from men's tongues, but not often from their pens. "Pardon the Army talk," said one, "we'll clean up the talk when we get home."

Some parents forwarded letters intended only for the home folks . . . letters showing the heart at its tenderest. Three of these had arrived almost simultaneously with telegrams from the War Department, ". . . regret to inform you . . ."

These men overseas have something to say, and they say it in no uncertain terms. There is no fumbling for words. The feelings rush out. Some of these men were known in civilian life as timid and faltering, but in their letters they seem sure of themselves . . . new men, confident, strong men. A few parents, transmitting letters from sons, remark that the correspondence shows evidence that "the boy has suddenly become a man."

In these letters the home front may see itself as in a mirror through the eyes of the men abroad. These men abroad are civilians at heart, and only temporarily fighting men . . . fighting for the home front.

What makes their views important is that they will return to the home front, bringing their thinking with them.

Here is a *Summary of High Points* in many letters

They want to get the war over with, and get back home.

They hope that things at home will not be changed too much.

Most of all they want jobs, and some are afraid they won't get them.

They think lots of people at home have been making "big dough" out of the war, in contrast with service pay, and this irks them.

They curse out strikes and strikers. They say they are not anti-labor or anti-union, but they don't like strikes at home when they are fighting abroad. The gripes on this particular subject are the most numerous, the most profoundly profane.

They suspect that many people don't know there's a war on. Particularly they resent civilian grumbling over the midnight curfew, and rationing, and other inconveniences which seem to them petty.

They believe in a hard peace for Germany and Japan. They growl over news reports of soft treatment for German prisoners in this country.

They wonder whether the officials at home are doing their utmost to prevent another world war. They seem anxious and doubtful. "We are winning the war, but we aren't so sure about the peace."

They don't like the ads which puff some products as doing their bit for war. They say "nuts."

They don't like the movies which pour excessive glamor out upon the fighting men. They say "bilge."

They don't like to be regarded as "different" from home folks, or as a class apart. They say, "Hell, we aren't neurotic." They don't even like to be typed as "GI Joe."

And every one wants to get back to wife or girl, or parents, brothers and sisters, the children, the home.

. . . and here are *Some Odds & Ends* of what they think

They don't cotton much to foreign lands and foreign peoples. In some ways they "like them OK," but they like America better. "For the first time in my life I appreciate my home town."

Many hope to travel more in future years. "I sure am going to save up my money for trips abroad when this thing gets over."

Many are fed up with rules and regulations. They accept Army and Navy regulations, and gripe about them, but they also extend the gripe to governmental rules and regulations which they fear they will have to face in civilian life. "I don't want government regulating everything after I get back."

Some express sympathy for civilians. "You people back home have got a hell of a lot of irritations during the war which us guys in the service don't have."

They don't get enough news from home. They like the Army and Navy papers and news bulletins all right, but these "denature the news a good deal and don't dare tell us what it means, and we'd like to get more real news with some meat on it."

Most say the home folks have written them pretty regularly. "We can't get too many letters but we know that the folks at home are busy."

Picture magazines showing high life stir up some grumbling. "Jitterbugs and other silly people ought to have to come out here and see what we have seen and it would cure them."

Gripes about Army wastefulness creep into a few letters. "We've got too many idle men behind the lines thinking up ways to look busy, and I am one of them but it isn't my fault and I think it is a damn shame." Another: "The waste of food in the Army is shocking."

GI benefits are taken by some with a grain of salt. "These benefits don't kid me any. The politicians had to vote them, but when I get discharged I figure that the only person who is going to take care of me is me."

There's an acute interest in "small business opportunities." Quite a number of men are thinking in terms of owning their own small businesses, to be started with GI loans, which have been publicized in the service publications. Most don't quite know just which small business, but they are groping around in their minds.

A few seem to think that after this war the world owes them a living, but not many think this. They merely want "a fair chance," and some also add . . . "against the men who stayed at home and feathered their nests."

Some young men, especially fliers, write that they get bigger pay in the Army or Navy than they expect to get in civilian life, and they wonder whether they can manage the bump. Said a Navy pilot, "I've been scared plenty of times by flak and things, but I'm the most scared when I think about going back to $37.50 per week."

Many of the men are worried about getting a house when they return. They hear that houses are scarce, and they say they hope someone gets busy and builds some which they can afford. "My girl and I want five rooms, and we don't want to pay too much."

Some don't care to go back to the farms from which they came. "From what I hear about city wages they are the the thing for me."

Some who didn't come from farms want to get a "little place in the country." The idea seems to be a job in town and a few acres nearby.

Many intend to return to school or college, and the studies most often mentioned are various branches of engineering. A few say they are fed up with schooling. "I don't want any more of that stuffy education."

Men who have been back on furlough, or assigned to temporary duty in the States, complain about civilian "gouging." Example: "Miami robbed us when we were assigned to temporary duty there, and made us wonder whether we were supposed to be fighting for all those idle rich people."

Death is seldom mentioned but seems often on the mind, for many letters contain the words "if I come through this alive."

Censorship does not intrude upon these letters. Only two were clipped by censors . . . two out of more than 400.

Cleavage?

Some say YES, and some say NO, but most don't know the answer to the question . . . as to whether there is a "chasm" or "cleavage" between them and the civilians at home.

Those who say YES proceed to mention the "folderol" of spending at home, the night-clubbing, the vacation trips to Florida, the strikes, the pictures and stories from home showing that "civilian life goes on as usual." They hoot at civilian complaints on this and that, such as curfew, horse racing ban, rationing, and the inconvenience of travel. They contrast service pay with war wages. And out of this and other contrasts they draw the conclusion that there IS great difference between their lot and the civilian lot, and so they think this makes a cleavage . . . "hell, yes."

Those who say NO seem to think of themselves as civilians serving temporarily as fighting men, and they accept the differences in pay, in ways of living, in environment, and they shrug their shoulders. They do their share of grumbling, but as for something called cleavage . . . "hell, no."

Some seem bored by the question. Said one: "I don't know what you are talking about." Said another: "I think the question is silly."

Strikes

On strikes in war industries the men go to town. They drag out all the cuss words they knew before they left home and add the other words they have learned since they went away. Their feelings are hot, they burn, they explode, and they splatter all over the pages. No other subject draws so much fire. It's a torrent of resentment . . . of "strikes," of "strikers," of "strike leaders" . . . especially Lewis and Petrillo, who are frequently named.

They don't talk against unions as such, or against organized labor, or against the cause of labor. They are not "anti-labor," but they are "anti-strike." Some identify themselves as union members, and some were union officials, but on the subject of wartime strikes they are quite as rough as the others.

Typical quotes: "We are fighting and getting hurt, and some of us are getting killed, and living in mud in foxholes, and for men to strike back home is like stabbing us in the back." "Strikers are worse than the enemy, for the enemy fights you to your face." "If strikes slow up war even a little bit they are stinking." "We don't get to quit just because we don't like our pay or grub or something." "Strikes are like mutinies." "Strikes are 'number one' in every bull session over here."

A few, but very few, condone strikes. "They will make the pay scale higher and we can get in on it when we get home." Or . . . "It's the fault of the greedy capitalists."

Government comes in for much bitter criticism for not stopping strikes. "The government dictates to us, but the government knuckles to strike leaders." "What we need is some officials with guts."

A few are philosophical, such as this one: "Griping about strikes is our one standard outlet, a sure fire subject on which we can all agree, and so we make the most of it." And this: "Lots of us will go on strikes." Then he adds . . . "but not during wartime."

The Future Peace

These men know war, and they don't like it, and they don't want another one. They think a good deal in terms of world peace. Some say they

don't understand all the ins-and-outs of a world set-up for peace, and they don't know about boundaries and spheres of influence "and all that deep stuff," but they "want something done."

Typical: "We've got a damned sight better idea of the size of this postwar peace job than you folks at home because we've been around more than you have." "We don't know exactly how victory is to be handled to make up for everything that has happened and to keep it from happening again." "Our job is fighting to get victory. The rest of it is pretty much up to other people. We don't give two hoots in hell how it's done, but it had better be done in top-notch style. If it isn't, a few million returning veterans are going to try to get leadership that is geared to their ways of thinking." "We don't want our kids to go through what we've gone through."

Wanted: Jobs

Through most of the letters runs the theme of jobs after the war. Some men know exactly what they will do, but most do not. Some want their old jobs back, and a good many of these seem none too sure about getting them, regardless of the law.

A majority seem to think in terms of new jobs. "You can't take twelve million men, and train them in a new life, and churn them all up, and then expect them to go back to the same old ruts." "Plenty of us have had a chance in the service to develop what was latent in us, and we are better fitted for better jobs." "War has been a good thing for me personally, because it has taught me a trade, electronics, and I expect to follow it."

A postwar scramble for jobs is in the minds of many men, and they want to be in early on the scramble. They hear that some civilian war workers have already quit their work to bed down in more permanent peacetime jobs, and the men think this is "lousy rotten." "Those fellows are taking the jobs we will need when we get back." Early discharges mean to the men not merely release from war, but a chance to "get a job when the getting is good." "We don't believe all this stuff about 60,000,000 jobs after the war." "I think the country owes me a better job than I had, but I don't think I'll find it if I am not discharged ahead of the mob."

Very few think they'd like to stay in the service and make it a life career. Those who do are mostly in the Navy. But the bulk of the men say they "already have a bellyful."

In all of the talk about jobs there's an undercurrent of anxiety.

GI Benefits

"I know the GI bill of rights practically by heart" . . . so say many. They have studied it inside out. They think it is "OK as far as it goes," but most seem to think it doesn't go very far. "It isn't the answer to our future." "A loan will be a help for a short time, but not for long." Besides, as several point out, "we of the younger generation have got to pay the bills through taxes in future years."

There is somehow a tone of skepticism about the discussion of GI benefits.

Shift to Pacific

It is perfectly clear from late-arriving letters that the men in Europe do not relish the thought of shift to the Pacific. They think they have done their part. But the men already in the Pacific say they, too, have carried their burden against odds. Men in each theater are inclined to think their duty has been the toughest, and that "those guys over there don't appreciate what we have been up against." Such talk is loudest from the Pacific.

As for Army vs. Navy, the traditional rivalry does not appear in these letters. They all speak well of "the other branch." Some go out of their way to pass good words for the Marines, the Merchant Marine, the Coast Guard, the Seabees, the other special services. The groundmen and shipmen praise the airmen, and the airmen praise the groundmen and shipmen. There's griping and yammering, but no disunity.

What Manner of Men?

People talk about "the American fighting man," and try to detect some peculiar quality of mind and spirit that makes him different. If there is such a thing it is not evident in these letters. These men who write these particular letters are as varied in their mental make-up as they would be if they were NOT off to war.

They are individuals, not a group, not a class. They are merely men who have been suddenly trained to do a job which they don't like, but which they do nevertheless. They hope to finish it as soon as possible and come home to normal living, and then they will resume their former identities. And some will resume their former ways of looking at things, but many won't . . . they will have new vision.

The Homecoming

Any reader of more than 400 letters from servicemen is bound to get certain impressions of what the men want and don't want when they come home, even though they do not always come right out and say it. They want affection, and plenty of it. They want the warmth of human understanding. They don't want coddling, and they don't want hero stuff. Above all else they want jobs. That's something to think about. They want jobs.