

Private Snafu:

What Can a Cartoon Tell Us About the U.S. Military in World War II?

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In the field of military history, where so much study is focused on devastating technologies, brilliant strategies and monumental battlefields, it may seem odd to approach the study of the U.S. military in World War II by examining something as seemingly innocuous as a series of animated cartoon shorts like *Private Snafu*. While studying the history of WWII through the scope of military propaganda may seem less odd to some, particularly those who are familiar with it, it may seem unconventional to focus on the esoteric *Private Snafu* over a grander, and more well know series, such as *Why We Fight*. Framed in one of the most popular forms of contemporary mass media, the *Private Snafu* shorts produced by the U.S. Army and Warner Brothers Studios during the war serve as a unique window into both the concerns of the World War II U.S. military command structure and the culture and composition of the enlisted military.

The concerns of the military command structure, such as enforcing discipline and the dissemination of information, are plainly illustrated by the content of the *Snafu* shorts. Along with hundreds of other training films and other forms of newly arrived mass media, *Private Snafu* would be part of one of the most rapid troop mobilizations in military history. However, one the most interesting facets of the *Private Snafu* shorts is that while they were never made for public consumption, but instead were considered secret military material that was only to be shown to the members of the armed forces, they also featured many of the same popular cultural references and comedic tropes of civilian animation. This allows us to look at *Snafu*'s audience in isolation by observing the differences in content and delivery between the *Snafu* shorts and contemporary civilian animation.

The Origin of *Private Snafu*

While film had been in its nascent stages during the First World War, it had not matured into a format that was taken seriously by many in the establishment, and was still a considerably crude method of recording and delivering information to the masses. However, during the inter-war period the industry boomed. Lifted by the rapidly growing economy of the 1920s and the relatively low price of movies during the Great Depression, the techniques and technology of film production reached a high degree of sophistication by the onset of World War II. Sound and color were now possible, and recording equipment had become much more reliable and portable. This allowed the film to play many crucial roles for the U.S. military in World War II, but its most widespread and arguably effective use would be in the form of training and orientation films. Training films, often referred to as “nuts and bolts” films, centered on conveying technical information, while orientation films focused on showing the soldiers how and why they should be dedicated to fighting for the U.S. military. When the U.S. military saw initial success in using film for these purposes, as much as a 30% reduction in training time in some cases, they greatly expanded both the size and scope of military film production.¹

It was during this period of accelerating production that the *Private Snafu* cartoons were conceived as a combination training and orientation film by legendary director Frank Capra (1897-1991) in his role as a major in the 834th Signal Service Photographic Detachment Unit.² Capra had already made a name for himself in Hollywood with such hits as *It Happened One Night* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, but volunteered for military service at the age of 44 after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.³ He found himself under the direct command of Chief of Staff George C. Marshall, who desired to bypass the normal U.S. Army film-making department, the U.S. Army Signal Corps, as he felt they were incapable of producing “sensitive and objective troop information films.”⁴

After the success of Capra's seminal propaganda series *Why We Fight* (1942-1945), which became required viewing for all U.S. troops, he was tasked with the creation of the *Army-Navy Screen Magazine* for the Signal Corps.⁵ The *Screen Magazine* was a 20 minute collection of short films and newsreels that screened before Hollywood features in U.S. military bases. This was a translation of the “show bill” in the civilian world, or the practice of having some number of shorts and newsreels before films in theaters.⁶ These show bills were also where many of the iconic animated characters of today, such as Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse, were first revealed to the American public. In the context of military film presentation the show bill could take on even greater meaning, as themes would be constructed by the producers to reinforce information or behavior that the command desired in its troops.⁷

¹ Richard Koszarski, “Subway Commandos: Hollywood Filmmakers at the Signal Corps Photographic Center” *Film History* 14, no. 3/4 (2002): 403.

² Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title: An Autobiography* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 43.

³ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵ Micheal Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in its Golden Age*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 502.

⁶ Eric Smodin, *Animating Culture: Hollywood Cartoons from the Sound Era* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 71.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

While today we think of cartoons as almost exclusively the purview of children, they had not yet fully assumed this role in the popular culture of 1940s America. While cartoons certainly saw children as their primary audience, as evidenced by their prevalence in the child-frequented weekend matinee, their presentation alongside many mainstream Hollywood movies as well as the fact that a smaller portion of consumer culture was directed at children relative to today, meant that animated shorts were often made to be appreciated just as much by adults as by children.⁸ Capra had already taken a bold step in using animation in some of the other Army propaganda films to positive effect, so it was not absurd that the Army would desire its own cartoon hero in the vein of Bugs Bunny or Mickey Mouse to complete its show bill.

In 1943, Capra sought to create this series of animated shorts as part of the *Magazine* to disseminate information to illiterate and semi-literate soldiers.⁹ To this end Capra enlisted the talents of Captain Theodor Geisel, later known as Dr. Seuss, (1904-1991) of the Army Signal Corps First Motion Picture Unit and his staff to write the Private Snafu cartoons. Geisel's style of writing is highly evident in many of the early shorts, as they share the rhyming format of his later children's book.¹⁰ The Army did not have its own animation team, so Capra sought out a private studio to produce the shorts. He originally offered Walt Disney Studios the production work, but Disney was outbid by Leon Schlesinger (1884-1949) of Warner Brothers Studios.¹¹ Snafu came to Warner Brothers in its golden age, when the men who shaped the field of American animation in the 20th century were still employed there. Snafu's visual appearance came from altered models of the relatively new character, Elmer Fudd,¹² and his name came from the Army's unofficial acronym SNAFU, or "Situation Normal All Fucked Up" (presented hesitantly as "All Fouled Up" in the first short).¹³ He was voiced by the legendary Mel Blanc (1909-1989), already famous as the voice of Bugs Bunny and innumerable other animated characters and was directed by a string of men who were either already established, or would become giants in, the field of animation; such as Tex Avery, Bob Clampett, Chuck Jones and Friz Freleng. All of this meant that the Snafu cartoons are of very high quality. Other than being in black and white, a choice made due to the fact that color projectors would be very rare in the field, they are indiscernible from the material created for the civilian film going population.¹⁴

Snafu's Mission

The U.S. Army's primary goal for Snafu was to provide information to the enlisted man in a format that even the most uneducated among them could understand.¹⁵ Snafu's most common method for achieving this goal was generally to die because he did not heed the advice given to him by his commanding officers. This goal and method is best illustrated by the three Snafu cartoons that address malaria prevention. In *Private Snafu vs. Malarial Mike, It's Murder She Wrote* and *Target: Snafu*, Snafu is reckless with his malaria prevention practices: using mosquito netting and insect repellent, taking the preventative medication and keeping his skin covered, and contracts malaria as a consequence of his careless behavior. Similarly, In *Fighting Tools* and *Gas*, Private Snafu is taught lessons on the importance of training with and maintaining his gear as his neglected equipment fails in the face of the enemy. This importance of knowledge is driven home directly in the short *Snafuperman*, where Snafu neglects his study of the army field manual, insisting that he doesn't need it to beat the Germans. In this short, Snafu is given the powers of the popular comic character Superman by the Technical Fairy First Class, a fairy godmother for the character in the form of tiny, gruff first sergeant. When confronted by a number of crises, he finds that his lack of knowledge of map reading and military technology make him ineffective despite his extraordinary abilities. Through Snafu's repeated negative example soldiers constantly reminded about the consequences of neglecting proper U.S. army methods and practices.

In addition to conveying important training information, Snafu also frequently promoted information discipline, or the practice of not spreading rumors or potentially sensitive information. In *Spies, Rumors, Going Home* and *Censored* Snafu gets himself and his fellow soldiers in mortal peril because of his "loose lips."¹⁶ In an effort to press home the importance of maintaining information discipline over a long period of uneventful service, these shorts seek to explain to the soldiers why they should keep silent about military activity. They accomplished this by showing how bits of information can be collected by different sources and gathered together into something the enemy might find useful, as well as how rumors can damage morale on both the field as well as on the home front.

⁸ Eric Smodin, *Animating Culture*, 72.

⁹ David H. Culbert, "Walt Disney's Private Snafu: The Use of Humor in World War II Army Film." *Prospects: An Annual Journal of American Culture* 1 (1976): 81-96, 82.

¹⁰ Philip Nel, "Children's Literature Goes to War: Dr. Seuss, P.D. Eastman, Munro Leaf and the 'Private Snafu' Films." *Journal of Popular Culture* 40, no. 3 (June 2007): 468-487, 470.

¹¹ Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons*, 502.

¹² *Ibid.*, 503.

¹³ Doherty, Thomas. *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture and World War II*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 67.

¹⁴ Smodin, *Animating Culture*, 73.

¹⁵ Benjamin L. Alpers, "This is the Army: Imagining a Democratic Military in World War II." *The Journal of American History* 85, no. 1 (June 1998): 129-163, 157.

¹⁶ Ironically, *Going Home* would not be released because of a reference to a secret weapon the military decided was too similar to the atomic bomb in production at Los Alamos.

Snafu would also seek to combat dissent in the army in shorts such as *Gripes*, *Infantry Blues* and *The Three Brothers*. In each of these films Snafu is dissatisfied with his role in the army, feeling that those in other branches of the military or at home must have an easier life. Through the work of Technical Fairy First Class, Snafu is shown that the other branches of the military face their own challenges, many of them more difficult or tedious than Snafu's own work, and that the civilians on the home front are all working very hard to support the war effort. At the end of each of the films Snafu learns his lesson and returns to his work with new gusto, for once a positive model for his viewing soldier audience.

The character of Technical Fairy First Class serves a subtle purpose of its own. In an army that saw a generally higher socioeconomic status and level of education among its new enlisted men than its non-commissioned officers, insubordination and a lack of respect for superiors could sometimes be an issue.¹⁷ In an attempt to depict the career non-commissioned officer in a positive light to the newly enlisted man, the Technical Fairy First Class depicts the non-commissioned officer as wise and helpful, but ready to let the recruit learn from his own mistakes. In many of the shorts the Technical Fairy acts as the proverbial monkey's paw, appearing to grant Snafu his wish, only to inevitably have that wish backfire and teach Snafu a valuable lesson.

In addition to desired military procedure and behavior, Snafu also tries to teach the value of frugality. In *Pay Day and A Few Quick Facts: Inflation* Snafu is urged to spend his pay wisely while abroad, so that he can save to own a home back in the U.S. and spare the European residents of the occupied nations the inflation caused by soldiers driving up demand.¹⁸ In *The Chow Hound*, Snafu is urged not to take more than he can eat in one meal so as to avoid wasting food. The point is driven home by the ghost of the wasted steer that went into his canned beef when it drives its horns into Snafu's rear.

In the later stages of the war after the defeat of Germany, the Snafu cartoons undergo some changes. Now that many of the men were experienced and informed, Snafu's role as a training tool was diminished and his role as an everyman representative of the now successful American soldier was enhanced.¹⁹ In *Hot Spot*, Snafu is shown working at super-human levels in the difficult climate and terrain of Iran, while in *No Buddy Atoll* and *Operation: Snafu*, Snafu takes on the role traditionally played by Bugs Bunny to a Japanese soldier's stereotypical Elmer Fudd. While these two cartoons feature a fair amount of bumbling antics by both participants, Snafu comes out on top because of his superior training and cunning.

These two later cartoons, *No Buddy Atoll* and *Operation: Snafu*, also serve as an illustration of the practice of using propaganda to dehumanize the enemy. In the early Snafu cartoons the Germans are depicted as menacing and powerful, constantly threatening Snafu because of his poor decisions. However, they are not often physically depicted, instead represented by swastika emblazoned airplanes or tanks. When they are shown, they are nearly identical rotund men or menacing thugs. In contrast, the Japanese are depicted as short, buck-toothed and wearing the circular glasses popularized in the American consciousness by Hideki Tojo, the prime minister of Japan during the war. While the Japanese were depicted as treacherous and dangerous in the early shorts, in these two later films they were shown as incompetent and doomed to failure. These characterizations were intended to both instill a respect for the abilities of the enemy while at the same time reassuring soldiers that the U.S. military and its troops were the finest on the planet.

In contrast to these light-hearted cartoons at the end of Snafu's run, the Army commissioned a related animated series titled *A Few Quick Facts*, featuring appearances by Snafu, but were not centered around him or structured in story form. Instead, while they still used some humor in their delivery, these shorts were meant to provide more direct instructions and reminders about proper conduct during the occupation and demobilization processes. Most of these shorts were not produced by the same Warner Brothers team that produced the majority of the Snafu shorts, but by teams at UPA, MGM and Disney.

The fact that the military sought to address these issues in the Private Snafu shorts tells us a great deal. First, it indicates that the command structure considered these specific issues to be of sufficient prevalence and importance to commission these shorts, targeted at the widest possible military audience. Second, this indicates that many of the malarial infections suffered by troops could have been prevented, many of the newly enlisted did not treat their non-commissioned officers with due respect, many of the troops were dissatisfied with their role in the army and that many spent their pay without forethought. Through Snafu, the military sought to replace these reckless G.I. behaviors with knowledge, common sense, frugality and a strong work ethic.

¹⁷ Michael Birdwell, "Technical fairy first class? Is this any way to Run an Army?: Private Snafu and World War II," in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television* 25, no. 2 (June 2005): 203-212, 204.

¹⁸ Referred to as *Inflation* later in this paper.

¹⁹ Culbert, "Humor," 92.

Snafu as the Everysoldier

Although Snafu in many ways could not be more fictional and unrealistic, in some ways he is the closest anyone ever arrived at depicting the typical U.S. soldier as a single character. Snafu was created from the start to be relatable to the average soldier in the U.S. Army. As a young white male, he fit the most basic of demographics, and his Brooklyn accent places him squarely among the working class.²⁰ Snafu's traditional family and "sweet heart gal", Sally-Lou, are also featured in the cartoons, making Snafu a part of a family and sexual structure familiar to the vast majority of his audience. The cartoons' frequent use of Christian imagery, with the Devil being a representative of poor moral decisions, shows an assumption of the dominant religion of its audience as well.

Beyond the assumptions of a straight and male audience, the Snafu cartoons show a candid representation of the era's perception of traditional masculinity and femininity. Semi-nude pinup girls are a constant presence in the background of the cartoons, and women in the cartoons are nearly always sexually objectified. When they objects of sexual desire, women are shown as potential security risks, as in *Going Home* and *Censored*, where Snafu's careful secrets to his girlfriend are immediately spread through local gossip and end up costing him or his unit their lives. Snafu also reinforces the role of man as provider, as in *Pay Day*, where Snafu gambles away his and Sally-Lou's future home. Additionally, in shorts such as *Infantry Blues*, Snafu reinforces the masculine ideal of suffering without complaint as an expression of toughness.

Snafu also gives us some evidence of the presence of materialism in American culture. The shorts *Pay Day* and *Inflation* both show a desire among Americans for material goods. Far from discouraging this value, the Snafu cartoons instead attempt to temper it with frugality and foresight. This is evidenced by the fact that while Snafu's purchases of souvenirs in *Pay Day* is derided, the idea of saving to afford a house in which to start a family upon his return to the States is lauded as a respectable goal.

As much as Snafu shows us which issues command felt pressing when it came to army discipline, he also shows as some of the attitudes towards military service among enlisted men. As many of the men in the army had been either drafted or had enlisted because they would inevitably be drafted, morale was not especially high at the outset of U.S. involvement in the war.²¹ As the Army was unlikely to use time and resources addressing a problem that didn't exist, this must have resulted in dissatisfaction widespread enough for it to have been featured in so many of the Snafu cartoons, contradicting the traditional narrative of military service that acted so powerfully without question or hesitation after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.²²

Snafu's Legacy

While the Private Snafu cartoons would never officially be released for public consumption, they would continue to cause ripples in American popular culture after the war. The most notable of these effects would be found in the work of Theodor Geisel, Philip D. Eastman, and Munro Leaf - all of whom went on to write children's literature in the post-war period. Works by these men used many of the same teaching methods of the Private Snafu cartoons,²³ specifically tropes of wish fulfillment gone wrong and teaching through negative example. Geisel's experience in the war was especially formative, and turned him into a skeptic on the subject of war, as evidenced by his works *Horton Hears a Who* and *The Butter Battle Book*.²⁴

The Snafu cartoons were almost completely lost for decades until the films fell into the hands of collectors and were finally released on VHS as *The Complete, Uncensored Private Snafu* in 1999. With this rediscovery Snafu became part of a new burgeoning interest in the cartoons of the Golden Age of Animation that were too "politically incorrect," featuring racial and sexual stereotypes considered unacceptable to modern sensibilities and as such were hidden away by their respective studios. This desire to hide outmoded social behaviors is unfortunate, as works like Snafu give us a candid insight into the thoughts and behavior of their intended audience.

While it can be easy to dismiss cartoons as a historical source, it has been made clear through the course of this paper that the Private Snafu cartoons represent a valuable primary source for historical analysis. Due to the cartoon's unique place as a pop culture object created for a very specific, but very large, audience analysis of Private Snafu as a primary source not only provides us with insight into the information the U.S. Army wanted to be disseminated to its troops, but also a picture of the weaknesses of U.S. Army organization that its command felt needed to be addressed. Not only do the cartoons tell us a great deal about the concerns and goals of the U.S. military command in regards to discipline and proper practice, but in their quest to be relatable to the broadest possible selection of troops, they also give us an honest representation of the typical American soldier and their culture in World War II.

²⁰ Smodin, *Animating Culture*, 79.

²¹ Birdwell, "Technical Fairy," 205.

²² Smodin, *Animating Culture*, 94.

²³ Nel, "Children's," 469.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 472.