"TWO-FISTED TALES AND FRONTLINE COMBAT: EC COMICS' CONTRIBUTION TO WAR COMICS" BY JOZEF PECINA

INTRODUCTION

The period between the 1940s and the first half of the 1950s is among comic book fans and scholars known as the Golden Age of Comics. In this era, Superman, Flash, Batman, or Captain America, some of the best-known superheroes, were created, conventions of the comic book medium were laid down, and comics enjoyed sales and popularity that they would never enjoy again. The Golden Age began when the earliest regularly published comic books appeared in 1938, and ended in 1954 when the campaign of American public, concerned with harmful effects of comic books on children and adolescents, forced majority of comic books publishers to shut down. My article focuses on the sub-genre of war comics which appeared during this period. It particularly discusses two of the well-known war titles, Two-Fisted Tales and Frontline Combat published in the early 1950s by a company named EC Comics.

WAR COMICS

The war comics came into existence during World War II. Even before the US entered the war in December 1941, newsstands were flooded with comic books featuring superpatriotic superheroes clad in costumes with stars and stripes. These heroes fought Nazi spies, saboteurs and ultimately the Fuhrer himself, as for example in Daredevil Battles Hitler, published in July 1941. Introduced in March 1941 by Timely Comics and created by two legends of the medium, Joe Schuster and Jack Kirby, Captain America was among the best-known superpatriotic characters. As to the origin of one of the most memorable comic book characters, Jack Kirby said that “Captain America was created for a time that needed noble figures. We weren't at war yet, but everyone knew it was coming. That's why Captain America was born; America needed a superpatriot” (Goulart 117).

The war in fact helped the comic books industry because when American troops were deployed abroad, comic books were shipped to them as an easy, portable entertainment. For servicemen, they offered a brief respite from the boring military life, and the U.S. military distributed thousands of comic books in order to entertain troops around the entire world. One interesting statistics illustrates how popular comic books were during the war – almost one third out of all the printed matter mailed to U.S. troops during 1942 were comic books (Petersen 153). These were passed around in foxholes and traded to locals, inspiring new readers and helping spread the medium around the world.

However, not all comic books distributed to American troops were superhero comics. A notable example are stories by military comic artist Bill Mauldin (1921 – 2003). Mauldin, a Chicago Academy of Fine Arts trained “fighting cartoonist”, served with the 45th Infantry Division in Italy as a journalist. His cartoons were published in Stars and Stripes, the official newspaper of the U.S. Army. They focused on a pair of weary troops, Willie and Joe, and their attempts to survive the war. Mauldin did not focus on heroics and drama of the war, instead, he emphasized everyday courage of lower ranks. American troops identified with his characters and many of them saw their own experiences reflected in Willie and Joe's stories. Furthermore, they appreciated Mauldin's attention to details of guns and camp gear. Nonetheless, what the readers of Mauldin's cartoon appreciated most was that he was one of them, he stayed in trenches, close to the action, and was even wounded by mortar shell fragments at Monte Cassino. However, not everyone liked his stories and General Patton once famously threatened to have Mauldin's work banned if he did not stop publishing what Patton considered to be attempts to undermine military discipline. General Eisenhower had to interfere and defend Mauldin on the grounds that any censorship would undermine morale in the army. (Petersen 154) In 1945, Sergeant Mauldin was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for “distinguished service as a cartoonist.” His influence on the war comics genre is undeniable; war comic books published through the 1950s were deeply indebted to Mauldin's realism.

EC COMICS

In the mid-1940, nothing suggested that a company called Educational Comics would transgress almost every possible cultural taboo in its horror titles and produce “the industry's most politically liberal an literate war titles” (Goulart 184) a couple of years later. It was founded by Max Gaines, one of the pioneers of the comic book form, and focused on stories from classic literature and the Bible. In the early 1950s, EC Comics began publishing war comics that were deeply indebted to Bill Mauldin's realism.
Bill Gaines hired younger artists such as Al Feldstein, Harvey Kurtzman or Johnny Craig, and changed the course of EC forever. He also replaced his father's well-intentioned educational titles with the “New Trend” line of books which debuted in 1950. The “New Trend” started with horror stories which turned to be quite popular, and in no time horror comics became the flagships of the line. In the 1950s, EC became known for its diversity of styles and outrageous content. This rebellious character was well ahead of other mainstream comics and three horror titles, Tales from the Crypt, The Haunt of Fear and The Vault of Horror have been highly regarded by comic book fans up to this day.

Although the company became known for its horror titles, the “New Trend” comics also included crime (Crime SuspenStories), science fiction (Weird Science, Weird Fantasy) and, last but not least, war comics. EC's Two-Fisted Tales (1950-1955) and Frontline Combat (1951-1954) were edited by Harvey Kurtzman. Some considered him to be “the greatest creative force to grace that (war) subgenre” (Duncan and Smith 226). He was originally hired to do artwork for science fiction and horror books but eventually, Kurtzmann was given his own titles. Kurtzmann recollected that “Two-Fisted Tales was one of the first really exciting things that I got involved in. This was my first title that I'd invented. The concept was that we were going to do blood-and-thunder tales and rip-roaring high adventure. My schtick was always authenticity, adventure stories that went back to some kind of authenticity. It had something to do with history and historical dates and places, and processes” (Cochran 42).

**TWO FISTED TALES AND FRONTLINE COMBAT**

The first issue of Two-Fisted Tales, No. 18, was edited by Bill Gaines and published in November 1950. Since Kurtzman had been in the company only for six months, he wrote and illustrated only one story. The issue contained adventure stories named “Conquest”, “Revolution!” or “Hong Kong Intrigue” with tales of conquistadors, mercenaries and spies set in different historical periods, but they were a far cry from the war stories that made the title famous couple of months later. What changed the course of the title from an adventure to a war was a yarn named simply “War Story!” written by Kurtzman and illustrated by John Severin and Bill Elder, which appeared in the second issue. The company received hundreds of letters praising “War Story!” and insisting on more of this genre. By the third issue, Kurtzman was given complete control of the magazine, writing all stories and starting with fourth issue, Two-Fisted Tales consisted purely of stories dealing with present and past wars (Benson 76). The success of war stories in Two-Fisted Tales (after the first Korean War yarns, letters not just from kids but also from U.S. troops deployed in Korea lauding the stories began arriving to the editor), inspired EC to launch its second war title, Frontline Combat, the first issue being published in July 1951. Both war titles, similar to all other EC comic books, were sold for ten cents, published bi-monthly and contained four stories in each issue.

“War Story!” begins in a trench somewhere in Korea, where a veteran sergeant tells a story to a fresh recruit about his experiences of fighting Japanese in the Pacific during World War II. He talks about two brothers, Dave, a nice, harmonica-playing guy and Duke, a mean guy who enjoys killing Japanese with his knife. Dave is wounded and transported to a field hospital, together with a wounded Japanese colonel. Despite the colonel being a prisoner protected by Geneva Convention, Duke is obsessed with killing him, exclaiming “I never got me a Jap officer” (“War Story” 48). Eventually, he sneaks to the hospital tent in a pitch dark night and stabs his brother, mistaking him for the Japanese officer. The sergeant in Korean trench concludes his recollections: “You see...There's moral! War's a tough deal! We kill men not because we wanna, but because we gotta! It's a dirty job we have to do...but doesn't mean we have to enjoy doing it!” (“War Story!” 51). What surprised the readers about “War Story!” was not just the war setting but also a character who is too eager to kill. Such theme was not a popular one and it was rather daring subject for Kurtzman to choose for his first war yarn ever. The success of the story proved that he chose well.

The primary impetus behind “War Story!” was the Korean War. When the conflict broke out in June 1950, Kurtzman naturally turned to it for material and Korean War stories became a mainstay in both EC’s titles he edited. As far as imaginative response to that conflict is concerned, comic books were the first medium to react and for a long time, they were the only medium to do so. Ron Goulart in Great American Comic Books notes that the beginning of the war “inspired a flood of combat comic books. Before the conflict came to a negotiated end in 1953, several dozen war comics, by no means devoted exclusively to the fighting in Korea, had come into being” (183). While the Korean War was very popular subject for comic books, the literary legacy of this war has remained up to his day rather faint. Literary scholars noted that “the literature of the Korean War is slight in both volume and quality, a situation probably explained...” (183).
to a large degree by the absence of a national commitment to that war” (Jason and Graves, 207). The fiction of the Korean War, on the contrary to other wars of American history, remains unfamiliar outside scholarly community. The same can be said about the film or television production. With the exception of M.A.S.H., films or television series set in the war are “slight in both volume and quality” as well. Therefore, when compared to other media, comic books exploited the topic of the Korean War in the greatest extent. In addition to EC's Frontline Combat and Two-Fisted Tales, the war appears in Atlas Comics (later Marvel) titles Battlefront, War Action or Combat Casey, and another big name of the industry, DC, offered patriotic titles such as Our Fighting Forces or Star Spangled War Stories (Goulart, 184).

Duncan and Smith claim that the genius of EC's war titles comes from Kurtzmann's “deconstructive mind, his penchant for challenging about our country's established heroes” (226). Harvey Kurtzmann experienced his share of fighting, he was drafted in 1942 and saw warfare up close. In an interview from 1980, Kurtzman said:

> When I thought of doing a war book, the business of what to say about war was very important to me and was uppermost in my mind because I did then feel very strongly about not wanting to say anything glamorous, and everything that went before Two-Fisted Tales had glamorized war. Nobody had done anything on the depressing aspects of war, and this, to me, was such a dumb-it was a terrible disservice to the children. In the business of children's literature you have a responsibility, and these guys feeding this crap to the children spend their time merrily killing little buck-toothed yellow men with the butt of a rifle is terrible (Kurtzmann 76).

His own experience made him hate “gung-ho” war comics and stories he wrote became notable for their anti-war stance. Although there were other comic book artists who were veterans, none of them matched Kurtzmann's easy pacing and irony. He deprived war of its glamor, so typical for most of World War II comics and showed American troops to be as feral as their enemies (Duncan and Smith 227).

Another notable feature of both Two-Fisted Tales and Frontline Combat was their adherence to a historical detail. This caused uniforms, weapons and other details to be carefully researched and precisely drawn. According to Cochran, Kurtzman was not satisfied until the artists had painstakingly drawn each piece of equipment accurately (Cochran 1985 1). This is how Kurtzmann's wife Adele recollected his obsession with historical accuracy in an interview from 1996: “I remember Harvey going to interview a cousin of mine who’d been at Iwo Jima because he insisted everything had to be researched. I used to say 'Why do you have to do that? All you have to do is read the papers,' and he said, ‘No, I have to talk to the people.’” (von Bernewitz and Geissman 187). Among notable examples of historical details are padded overcoats worn by Chinese volunteers in stories set during Korean War or clackers which were used as a warning against gas attack in the trench warfare of World War I. In a story named “Devils in Baggy Pants!” set during the invasion to Normandy, the paratroopers jump from the airplanes with an authentic war cry GERONIMO! in the dialogue balloons. Even the slang of American troops is historically accurate; they use terms such as gizmo (a term used for an unidentified item in US Marine Corps) or eight ball (one who is constantly in trouble).

A reader expecting blood and gore from EC's war titles would be disappointed. There are panels with images depicting violence of war, explosions and bodies flying in the air accompanied by sound effects typical for the medium, but these images contain no gruesome details of severed limbs or bleeding wounds. Instead, Kurtzman leaves much of the suffering to the readers' imagination. Even in “Desert Fox!”, one of the most brutal of Kurtzmann's stories, there is no single drop of blood. This story contrasts the actions of General Erwin Rommel, the commander of the Afrika Korps, for which he was admired even by the Allies, with atrocities committed by Nazi Germany. One full page features panels with images of dead bodies; each panel accompanied with a text such as “Look! A Jew! This man was put on a methodical program of starvation!” or “An old man...Pushed into a gasoline soaked building and then...Burned alive!” (“Desert Fox!” 92). It is interesting to compare EC's horror comic books edited by Al Feldstein which featured bodily fluids and severed limbs and transgressed every possible taboo with rather sober war titles illustrated by the same team of artists but edited by Harvey Kurtzmann. It cannot be claimed that Kurtzmann wanted to spare his adolescent readers the bloody details of warfare since the same adolescent readers purchased EC's horror titles. The reason is that with missing blood, grimaces and postures of dying soldiers are much more effective in portraying the violence.

Kurtzman in his stories exploits a wide range of themes related to war. In “Marines Retreat!”, the opening story of Frontline Combat, it is, for example, personal heroism and self-sacrifice. It focuses on a young private who through the panels of the story muses about being at home with family while his fellow Marines are being killed one after another. Eventually, he is wounded by enemy bullet but instead of being evacuated, he decides to stay in his position and cover the retreat of his comrades. The last panel shows him, alone, waiting for the advancing enemy with his machine gun loaded. Similar theme is the subject of a World War I story named “O.P.!” A crew of an observation post placed in no man's land observes the enemy lines and directs the artillery fire over a telephone line. Suddenly, a hole appears in the trench wall and German troops start coming out of a tunnel. The observer sees no other option but to call friendly fire on his own trench to stop the enemy. The artillery fires a salvo that wipes out the entire unit and the last panel shows a dead hand and another big name of the industry, DC, offered patriotic titles such as Our Fighting Forces or Star Spangled War Stories (Goulart, 184).
On his own, he tries to stop the enemy. The gallery was a bar that wiped out the entire unit and the last panel shows a dead hand and telephone receiver with dialogue balloon squeaking "Hello O.P.! Answer O.P.! Can you answer?...Hello!" ("O.P.!") 34. According to Kurtzman, this sort of tale of war was a "classic event that occurs and reoccurs" (Benson 144).

Another war story that according to Kurtzman happens over and over again in wars is "Zero Hour!". It depicts a young, overeager recruit who is caught in a barbed wire during a charge through no man's land between Allied and German trenches. His fellow troops take cover in a trench and they are pinned down by the enemy machine gun, powerless to help him. The sequence with the dying recruit crying for help goes over four pages of the story. Especially powerful is a tier of four panels with images of individual soldiers who are in various stages of despair caused by the recruit's loud cries. The dialogue balloons with his cries for water or his mom are connected and carried across the panels. It is the desperate cries in the balloons that dominate the page over the visual elements, and it is clear that because of these cries, the troops in the trench are on the brink of breaking down. Three of them are killed in futile attempts to bring him back, so to prevent more casualties and to prevent his men from losing their minds, the sergeant of the platoon decides to act. The last six panels of the story show him pointing his gun and firing, with the captions explaining "I had to do something! What kind of a thing was this war where grownup men called for their mommas? Where men cry like women! War! What and ugly name! The ugliest disease we men were cursed with!" ("Zero Hour!" 143). The effect is similar to a cinematic zoom-in.

The very last panel shows a detail of sergeant's face with a tear in his eye. As to this story, Kurtzman said that "when somebody gets caught on the barbed wire, it's to the enemy's advantage to let him hang there, because they know it'll work to their psychological advantage" (Benson 144). "Zero Hour!" is one of the EC's best anti-war stories.

Several stories end with an ironic twist. Such is the case of "Air Burst!", one of the few Korea stories narrated from Chinese (=enemy) perspective and one of the few that were written and illustrated by Kurtzman (vast majority of stories in Two-Fisted Tales and Frontline Combat were written by Kurtzman but illustrated by other artists such as Jack Davis, John Severin of Wallace Wood). During a retreat of a small Chinese squad, a character named Lee sets a booby trap for pursuing American troops. The squad is decimated by American planes, only Lee's best friend nicknamed Big Foot survives. He cannot withstand the bombing so he decides to capitulate but as he walks back to the American lines, he triggers the booby trap set by his friend.

"Bomb Run!" is inspired by classical literature. The main panel of the splash page displays a US Air Force bomber flying over an island in the Pacific with a large nickname 'Odyssey' painted on its fuselage. The tier at the bottom of the page contains four panels, each introducing one member of airplane's crew (introduction of members of a tank/aircraft crew or a platoon in separate panels was Kurtzman's favourite device). After a successful bomb run, Arturo, the plane's engineer, talks to the crew about Odysseus who had to experience all kinds of weird adventures on his way home, including an island inhabited by beautiful girls who lure ships onto the rocks. Shortly afterwards, the plane is damaged by Japanese Zeros and limps to an emergency airstrip. As the plane tries to land, the pilot finds out that it is not an actual landing field but a strip of canvas laid over the rocks by the Japanese to confuse the air crews. The plane hits the ground and ends in a flaming fireball. The crew was lured by fake radio messages just like Odysseus was expected to be by the Sirens in the classical tale.

The war stories in Frontline Combat or Two-Fisted Tales usually focused on one character or a small unit/crew and featured personal or dramatic incidents with the historical event as a backdrop. Korean War or World War II stories did not prominently feature any specific historical events or characters, but as time went on, specific historical information became foreground of some of the stories, mostly those set in a more distant past. The earliest example of a war story as a history lesson was "Massacre at Agincourt!" where Kurtzman focuses on a longbow as a decisive weapon in the early stages of Hundred Years War. "Light Brigade!" opens and ends with stanzas from Tennyson's famous poem and the story in detail describes the tactical situation of the Battle of Balaclava, the decisions of incompetent British commanders and the charge and fate of the unfortunate 'six hundred.' The last panel of the story is followed by an unusual note "That is...honor them, short of their leaders! Editors, 1951" ("Light Brigade!" 127). So the EC's war stories were not just set during the Korean War and World War II, but also during ancient Rome ("Pigs of the Roman Empire"), medieval era ("Massacre at Agincourt!") Crimean War ("Light Brigade!"), American Civil War ("First Shot!", "Stonewall Jackson!") or World War I ("Old Soldiers never Die!", "Ace!").

CONCLUSION

According to Petersen, the war comics were some of the earliest adult-oriented comics and despite the horror and violence they often depicted, many titles including EC's comic books were able to survive the later resentment against mature comics (155). However, they were not able to survive the campaign against comic books in general in the mid-1950s. Comic books publishers were blamed by Frederic Wertham, an ambitious psychologist, for causing juvenile delinquency. His campaign led to Senate Subcommittee investigations that caused Bill Gaines to discontinue most of his titles. Frontline Combat was dropped in January 1954 after just fifteen issues, and similar fate awaited Two-Fisted Tales when the last issue was published in February 1955. However, EC's wart titles had a
huge impact on American popular culture, for example, on Hollywood's anti-war films such as *Apocalypse Now!* or *Platoon*. They also brought higher level of artwork and writing to the medium and introduced comic books to young adults, since the servicemen in the Army, Navy or Marine Corps formed a large contingent of EC readers. With their anti-war stance and attention to historical detail it is not surprising that some critics consider them “the best (and most humanistic) war comic books” (Goulart 185) published in the US.

WORKS CITED

- Cochran, Russ. 1985. Introduction to *Two-Fisted Tales Special Issue: Civil War!* West Plains: Russ Cochran.
- Duncan, Randy and Matthew Smith. 2013. *Icons of the American Comic Book: From Captain America to Wonder Woman*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.

NOTES


3. The splash page is the first page of the story usually containing a large image that would grab the reader, often illustrating some important later moment in the story, setting the mood for what is to come (Petersen 150).
2016 Spring Vol 1 Rankings Please note: Volume 1 sales are not the best, or even a particularly good, way to evaluate a series' performance. Sometimes one of two formats doesn't rank in volume 1, but ranks in a later volume. Often times volume 1 sales are inflated with bonuses like event tickets or bundled manga, etc. Always, always use the average sales when evaluating anime, not volume 1 sales. I only provide these because it takes many months before we have a final average and people like to be able to ballpark a season early on. Just be intelligent about it! Sales.