

# The tommie's and the g. i. s: brotherhood, conflict and necessity essay

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The Tommie's and the G. I. s: Brotherhood, conflict and necessity From a twenty-first century perspective the British-American alliance that led to victory in World War Two seems inevitable and unshakable. History presents a much more complex picture of that relationship.

It was a relationship often characterized by mistrust, both social and interpersonal. The American and British cultures had deep seeded misgivings about each other. A similar feeling existed among the troops. It was difficult to accept for the British that they, in fact, needed the American troops.

This was hurtful to their pride before the Americans had even come ashore. The British were desperate for help but the Americans were reluctant to enter the war. When the Americans did come, the British troops and public almost felt as if they had been invaded. The presence of these troops affected the lives of the British people in many ways. It was a trying time for all involved. In the end, the alliance between the British and the Americans was held together only by the magnitude of the threat against it.

Background By 1942, the British had been frustrated by what they saw as the Americans' late entry into the war. They viewed the Americans as somewhat unreliable allies in the First World War. The U. S. had waited years before entering in the late stages and " swooping up the glory". If their presence was indeed so decisive; why couldn't they have come sooner? Hundreds of thousands of lives could have been saved.

Now, twenty-five years later, the process seemed to be repeating itself. The British people had a grudging respect for the American people. In them they saw a bolder, but less sophisticated version of themselves. Sometimes these <https://assignbuster.com/the-tommies-and-the-g-i-s-brotherhood-conflict-and-necessity-essay/>

feelings surfaced in negative ways as the British tried to reassert their traditional sense of superiority. " The British tended to think of the Americans of upstarts obsessed with making money and susceptible to retreating from the world when it suited them" (Meacham, 2003). The British people and the " occupation" For many British citizens the return of the American troops was not so welcome. A little over twenty years before, millions of American troops had crossed the Atlantic and massed in England prior to entering the European mainland. The high-spirited but green American troops had left the Britons with mixed feelings about their presence.

The rowdy Americans provided a culture shock for the often stoic British people. They had also brought with them the deadly flu epidemic of 1918. Still, the citizens knew that the Americans were critical to break the stalemate in Europe. Now, it was happening again. Resentment among the British troops and public to the American presence stemmed from a number of factors. One sore spot was the propensity for American troops to take foreign war brides. It is estimated that during the war and its immediate aftermath as many as one million U. S.

servicemen married foreign women. In most cases the women would move to the United States, leaving family and friends behind. War brides came from fifty different countries. The massive buildup of American troops in England provided a particularly rich opportunity for servicemen and local British women to get together. There were an estimated 100, 000 British war brides (Wilt, 2005). The upbeat demeanor and relative wealth of the

Americans were attractive qualities for many British women. The United States, they felt, also provided the promise of peace and security.

The U. S. military for its own reasons discouraged fraternization with foreign women. They saw the resulting family obligations as distractions for the soldiers. It also had the potential of damaging morale back in America.

“ Some American civilians decried the trend” (Wilt, 2005). To the wives and girlfriends left in America, fraternization presented an additional threat. Not only did they have to worry about their husbands and boyfriends being hurt or killed in battle; they also had to worry about their men taking up with foreign women. The British, always a fiercely independent people, were in a difficult situation. They were uncomfortably reliant on the Americans.

Accepting the presence of these troops was crucial but still posed problems. In England and most of Europe the Americans were welcomed as heroes. They were, no doubt, preferable to the alternative.

Subjugation to Hitler was not an option. The adjustment process to the presence of massive numbers of American troops began in 1942. Prime Minister Churchill challenged the British people to accept the Americans with open arms. The gathering of millions of young fighting men in a foreign country can never be problem-free. American troops became omnipresent in many sleepy British communities. The BBC describes one such instance: They were billeted in the courthouse and at knocknamoe castle, in the former home of the Campbell family and at new camps built in several surrounding towns and villages.

(Gray's Museum, 2004) In some cases contact between the U. S. soldiers and British civilians resulted in violence. One such incident at a bar in Omagh led to the death of a local policeman. In 1942, Britain passed the Visiting Forces Act (VFA). This law was an attempt to set regulations for the behavior of foreign troops. In practice, it allowed a great many crimes to occur with little or no punishment.

The U. S. military was allowed to adjudicate most crimes on British soil that involved U. S. personnel. One exception was in the area of rape, which was punishable by death under the VFA.

Other practices not legal in England, such as racial segregation, were tolerated under the Act. The American People The American people also had to make drastic adjustments when the U. S.

entered the war. Prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, British pleas for help met with an apathetic American public. In late 1940, only about 7% of Americans favored entry into World War Two on behalf of the British (Ambrose, 1998). Even after the attack on Pearl Harbor a substantial minority disapproved of the Roosevelt plan to focus on the European theater. Japan had proven itself a direct threat to U. S.

interests. Hitler had not attacked the United States in a substantial way. His declaration of war on the U.

S. came only after the Japanese, their Axis ally, had declared war. Japan was in a better position, many thought, to do damage to the United States.

Memories of the devastation of the First World War were still fresh in the minds of many Americans. In addition, the nation was still trying to emerge from the economic catastrophe of the Great Depression. Today, it is easy to look at the huge mobilization of World War Two as a positive economic force. At the time, however, many Americans felt that the last thing the struggling country needed was to get involved in a foreign war. Now, millions of young, able-bodied men were disappearing from communities all over the United States.

Families were left to absorb the loss of these young fathers, sons and brothers. For the second time in thirty years the destination of millions of these men was England, then to the European mainland. Should we be helping Britain? That was the question still in the minds of many Americans. Thousands of Americans had given their lives to defend it in 1918. In only two decades the peace achieved then had already unraveled.

The average American had conflicted feelings about their English counterparts. Some saw the British themselves as obsessed with empire building. In fact, the British looked down their noses at the American "colonists" they wanted to exploit. By the 1940s such feelings had thawed and the two nations had become allies. There was still an undercurrent of mistrust and resentment among average citizens. "Americans, swaggering but insecure, disliked colonialism and feared the more sophisticated mother country might take advantage of them" (Meacham, 2003). America was reluctant to go to England.

Churchill and the English sensed this. The British people, in turn, were reluctant to have the Americans. By this time it was apparent that the survival of the free world was dependent on the cooperation of these two allies, not just militarily but also citizen to citizen. The “stiff upper lip” of resolve and focus would be required of both nations. What lay before them was a challenge unprecedented in world history. The TommiesThe British military had an expectation and tradition of success. British troops had successfully extended the empire to far flung locales around the world.

In World War One they had stalled the German war machine in Europe. Millions of soldiers fell, but British resolve never wavered. “Tommie’s” is an affectionate term for these resolute warriors. Late in World War One the Americans entered the fight. To the British, the Americans were late comers who entered only when their interests were directly attacked. Once the Americans were in the conflict, the British had to deal with the fact that the American troops were far from seasoned.

The British government sent an edict to its own troops about how the Americans should be treated. They were ordered to respect the culture and practices of the U. S. military even if they disagreed with them. Legislating respect, however, is a difficult matter. For example, the Tommie’s often thought of themselves as more experienced and far more sophisticated than the Americans. The British culture itself saw itself as more sophisticated and progressive for several reasons.

The United States military still segregated black troops from the rest of the fighting force. The British did not. Black British troops, most from colonial

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outposts, shared facilities with their white counterparts, but white American soldiers ate and slept separately from their black comrades.

(CBS News, 2006) None the less, Churchill and the British government took great pains to make sure the U. S. troops were accepted and treated with respect.

For the most part, they were accepted. By the time the U. S. entered the war, the Tommies had suffered the humiliating defeat of being driven off the European mainland. For them, life consisted of defending the home land and biding their time until they were in a position to take revenge on Hitler. It was a frustrating existence. The Germans tried to attack any vessel that attempted to supply England.

Meanwhile his bombers were terrorizing London on a daily basis. The Tommies had to live with resulting supply shortages. Some living their lives in far away British colonies were forced to return to the British mainland. When the fresh young Americans arrived the Tommies had been at war from years. Together they would have to forge an ironclad alliance to challenge Hitler. The G. I. If the Allies somehow perceived that U.

S. troops had an easier life then they were mistaken. The cheerfulness of U. S.

soldiers upon arrival in England would not last long. Soon they would fight, die and face the same living conditions as their British counterparts. In the case of the Americans, home was half a world away. For some the greatest



enemy was the long hours of quiet boredom. " Most of the time the principal characteristic of the front line was how quiet it was" (Ambrose, 1997).

Other times, days were spent in tediously hard manual labor. There was a constant need to dig trenches, build bridges, airfields and endless number of other implements. The work was often done in extremely difficult working conditions with inadequate tools. Infectious diseases and supply shortages were common in the European theater. " The infantryman's clothing was woefully, even criminally, inadequate" (Ambrose, 1997). Many soldiers suffered from trench foot, dysentery and other afflictions. Meanwhile the fear of sudden death was ever present.

When battle broke out, there was a strange combination of relief and fear among the troops. As lethal as it was, most preferred battle to the tedium of daily life on the front. They fought on, well aware that they could suffer a lonely death and a hasty burial in a far away country. Relatives back home might not know what happened for months, if at all. For many, the ultimate fear was not death but being captured by the enemy.

Horror stories about Nazi captivity were well known to the pilots and foot soldiers. There could be no expectation that the Germans would abide by the Geneva Convention. British perceptions of these American troops did not always match up with reality. Animosity among the regular troops lessened as the Americans began to earn the respect of the British regulars. Attitudes among the military elites died harder, however. British General Montgomery, still upset about the direction of planning for D-Day, criticized the Americans.

“ Here you have these magnificently equipped men and such mountains of equipment and you've gone and botched it terribly” (Ambrose, 1997).

Operation Overlord Developments in Russia and the entry of the U. S. into the war had combined to stall Hitler's advance through Europe. His grip on the Western half of the continent remained strong. As late as 1944, German efforts to reinforce the “ Atlantic Wall” were still in progress. The Allies knew that to drive Hitler back an amphibious invasion of unprecedented scope would have to be mounted.

Hitler was well aware of this and was determined that the German forces would be ready to repel this attack. He fortified nearly every possible entry point and increased intelligence efforts to determine the time and the place of the invasion. For Allied troops this was the most critical point of the war.

Cooperation and cohesion would be tested as never before. English and American troops would have to go into the maelstrom together, knowing full well that many would not come back. The Allied D-Day invasion was the product of years of planning. As Van Der Vat puts it, “ The planning of Overlord [D-Day] changed millions of lives” (Van Der Vat, 2003). The process was anything but smooth.

Ongoing conflict among the military leaders characterized the planning process. These conflicts were not new. Differences of opinion pre-dated American entry into the war itself. “ The Anglo-American allies disagreed fundamentally on strategy for defeating the Nazis” (Van Der Vat, 2003). The disagreements threatened to derail the attack before it even occurred.

In the end Allied commanders came to a consensus. Further disputes and internal turf wars would only serve to benefit Hitler. Remarkably the cooperation of the Allies, including the British citizens, was such that a massive force could be assembled without Hitler knowing its true strength, location or direction. By 1944, there were over two million Allied soldiers massed in Southern England (Van Der Vat, 2003). The statistics associated with the D-Day invasion are staggering.

More than 23, 000 airborne troops were delivered by the combined air forces. About 15, 000 were American; 8, 000 were British. A total of over 150, 000 troops were landed on the first day (Ambrose, 1998). Coordination of so many troops was still difficult even after the landing had been successful.

A number of friendly fire incidents happened at D-Day and subsequent missions, such as Operation Market Garden. Analysis and Conclusion World War Two cost the lives of as many as 60 million people. The advance of Hitler and the Allies response to it were world changing events that left few people unaffected. The freedom of the entire world was at risk. The tense cooperation that existed between the troops and civilians was mirrored among the respective military commanders. Cooperation between these men may have been the most difficult of all. Military Generals are not used to subjugating their command to a General from a foreign nation. Still, a hierarchy of command had to be established for the Allied forces to operate cohesively.

For the proud British commanders the appointment of U. S. General Dwight D. Eisenhower as Supreme Commander of the Allies had a particular sting. British General Montgomery, who had expected to get this job, had a generally low opinion of U. S. forces and command.

He complained that they were “ crude, crass and lacking in military finesse” (Dye, 2001). An unprecedented level of international cooperation was necessary to repel the forces of despotism. In the end, the cooperation between the British and the United States achieved its goal. It would be inaccurate to say, however, that the collaboration was always problem-free. “ Statecraft is intrinsically imperfect” (Meacham, 2003). Each nation's people, troops and government had preconceived notions about the other. The United States and Britain also had a long bitter history of conflict.

The threat to freedom was so great, these differences paled in comparison. The World War Two experience helped forge the bond these two nations still enjoy today. Sources Ambrose, Stephen. Citizen Soldiers: the U. S. Army from the Normandy beaches to the Bulge to the surrender of Germany, June 7, 1944-May 7, 1945. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997.

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