

When The Comics Kept Us Safe

By John Berthelsen
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Looking back, it was almost inevitable: As the dark mood of America sea-sawed toward a pyrrhic peace in Vietnam, war began to leave the comic strips.

It only seems a few Sundays ago when they were all on land, in the sky or on the sea, keeping America safe.

Up in the Wild Blue Yonder were Col. Steve Canyon, Naval Cmdr. Buz Sawyer and Lt. Col. Terry Lee and his Pirates. At sea, one of the most handsome naval officers of them all, Don Winslow, was keeping the fleet ship-shape.

And on the ground, the Marines' Capt. Flagg and the Army's Green Berets were charging through the boon-docks, machine-gunning hordes of enemies -- all-too-often with sinister smiles and Asian features.

Overage

But now Steve Canyon has gone as far as he can. He didn't finish college, so his chances of being promoted to general are slim. And he's too old to fly jets. He has shifted to Air Force intelligence -- in plain clothes.

Like Steve, Buz Sawyer is happily married, with a couple of kids. He is an international private eye, chief of a staff of globe-trotting detectives, called Troubleshooters, Inc. He isn't even flying in the Naval Reserves.

Terry Lee is still on active duty, but he rarely appears in uniform since he is usually on special assignment or extended leave.

The Green Berets shifted from Asia to other parts of the globe, then disappeared altogether. So did Capt. Flagg and Don Winslow.

In fact, just about the only major military figure in uniform today is slapsstick, slicksleeve Pvt. Beetle Bailey, pursuing his own private war with the Army in Camp Swampy, unimpeded by either heroism or esprit de corps.

Casualties

In a very real sense, all except Beetle are casualties of the Vietnam War. And Beetle never went near the place:

"It's quite simple," says George Wunder, illustrator for Terry and the Pirates. "This Vietnam War thing is very unpopular. Since we're in the business of entertaining, there's no

point in doing the sort of stories that are not going to be favorably received."

Wunder says he hasn't been asked by a client newspaper to keep Terry out of uniform.

"He still to all intents and purposes is a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force," he says. "But I haven't been doing stories along this line. I have been doing those that take place when he is on leave, or on assignment where the story itself is not concerned with military duty."

Roy Crane, who once scooped the entire Saigon press corps by portraying a Naval special forces-type unit in Vietnam when war correspondents could not reveal the fact, says "it was quite a relief to get away from the confinement of having Buz in the military."

Crane adds, however, that he lost some of his 550 client papers before Buz changed into civvies:

"Indianapolis, Louisville, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Buenos Aires -- I damn near lost 22 or 23 Canadian papers. I only saved them because I talked personally with the head of the chain.

"A couple of years before I took Buz out, I transferred him to the CIA, for awhile, then I made him a troubleshooter."

Milton Caniff, whose Steve Canyon was perhaps the king of the flyboy figures, sees this civilian shift as the perigee of a cycle of antimilitarism as old as the United States itself.

"I've lost a few papers since antimilitarism began to arise specifically because of that attitude. We've gotten editors to admit this is the case, and some didn't have to admit it. They told us."

He sees the comic strip as a sensitive barometer of the mood of the people. He first became aware of the growing disenchantment when an editor of a paper in Salem, Ore., canceled.

"Being close to a college town had something to do with it, I think," Caniff says. The cancellation was clear evidence for him that America was fed up with the war long before the government sensed it.

At least partly for that reason, Steve B's kissin' cousin Potcet, jour-

nalist and recent graduate of Maumee U., appears often to showcase such up-to-date issues as drug abuse and student protest.

Turkish Delight

Steve himself will be back in uniform briefly Oct. 4 too greet his old boss, Gen. Miligree at the Pentagon. Then he will be off again -- in muffin -- chasing opium poppy farmers who attempt to elude Turkish police by moving over the border to grow their crops in a satellite Commie country.

The Air Force, he says, understands the reaction against the uniform "better than anybody."

"Canyon in uniform is a day-after-day recruiting poster. But they understand why. They've been through this before."

But, says Mort Walker, creator of the hugely successful Beetle Bailey (1,200-plus papers):

"I haven't really seen any reaction. I really expected to have to take him out of uniform and put him in a machine shop.

"I don't know what the reason is, but I think it's because a lot of people don't even associate my strip with the military. It's mostly about people. The people in the military think it is telling their story, too."

Indeed, the cook, the sarge, the juvenile delinquent and the shavetail lieutenant, have been important members of the cast of probably every basic training outfit in American history.

"I never wanted to get too serious, I wanted to keep personal opinion out of the strip," Walker says. But a couple of years ago he put a few peace pickets at the gates of Camp Swampy and his younger readers raised a fuss.

"They said I was making fun of something that was a very serious affair," Walker remembers. "I never did it again."

Neither did he ever send Beetle to war--making him perhaps the most successful soldier of them all.

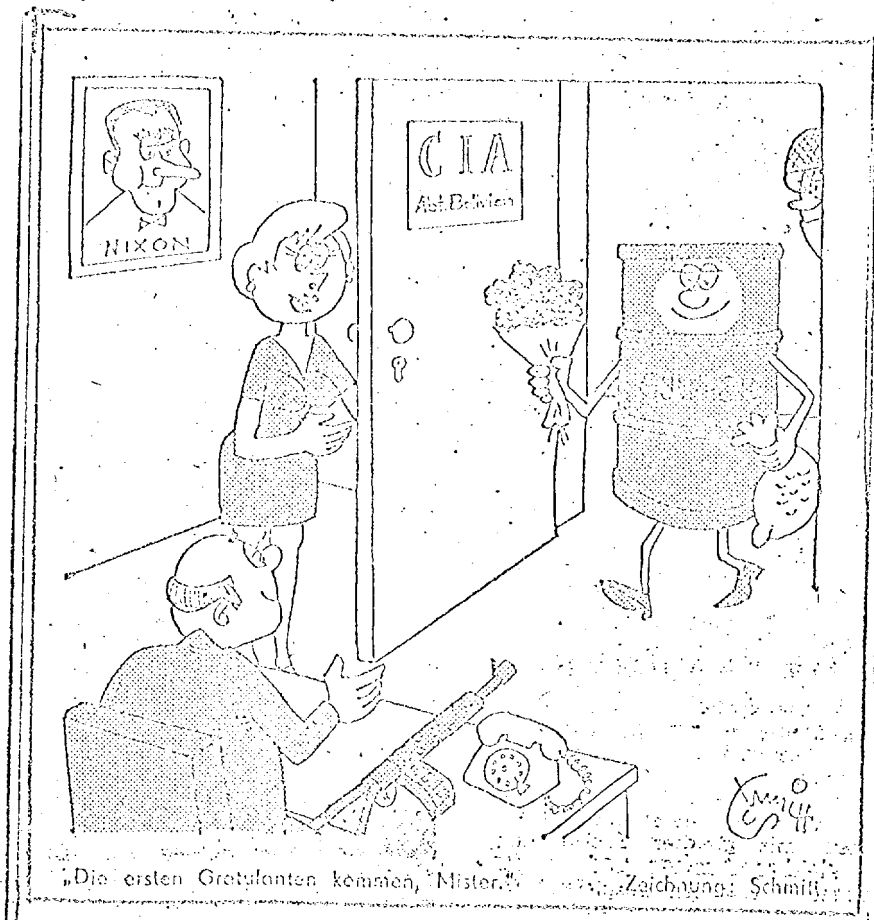
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Sir, the first to congratulate have arrived.