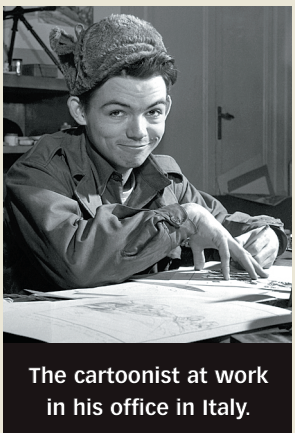


THE BEST OF Willie & Joe

Bill Mauldin's timeless characters captured the lot of the common soldier of World War II—and every war

By Karen Jensen



BETTMANN/CORBIS

The cartoonist at work in his office in Italy.

In late September 1943, the 45th Infantry Division's 180th Regiment was in Naples, embroiled in the brutal, soul-deadening fighting typical of Italy at that time. In the midst of it, twenty-one-year-old cartoonist Bill Mauldin, assigned to the regiment's K Company, did a drawing of the two infantrymen who were his main subjects, Willie and Joe, slouching against a ruined doorway and looking utterly bone-weary—so disheveled you could almost smell them. As a young, fresh-scrubbed corporal levels his gaze at them, Willie says, “He’s right, Joe. When we ain’t fightin’ we should ack like sojers.”

The day after the cartoon appeared in the U.S. Army newspaper *Stars and Stripes*, a flesh-and-blood colonel entered the newspaper's office and presented Mauldin with what he thought was a brilliant idea. “He wanted, so help me,” Mauldin remembered, “to take the original drawing and have thousands of huge poster copies printed. He planned to plaster them on every wall and telephone pole in Italy, as an admonition to GIs to ‘ack like sojers.’”

Mauldin knew he was in a delicate position: he didn't want to go out of his way to point out that the colonel didn't get it, that the cartoon verged on the seditious, and that making a poster of it was the last thing the officer should do. So Mauldin did the only thing he could, and handed him the drawing. The poster, of course, never materialized.

“People who make cartoons, according to legend, are supposed never to laugh,” Mauldin said of