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Document of Note

Marlene Dietrich's Firepower



Submitted by Larry I. Bland

By the middle of 1945, the press in the United States was beginning to feature stories of troubles (robberies, suicides, etc.) involving guns—mainly German pistols—brought back to the U.S. as souvenirs by GIs returning from the European and Mediterranean theaters. George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army between 1939 and 1945, was not a man to wait until trouble descended upon the Army before acting. The following is a memorandum for Major General Alexander D. Surles, director of the War Department's Bureau of Public Relations.

August 1, 1945

MEMORANDUM FOR GENERAL SURLES:

We are undoubtedly going to have a considerable reaction from the soldiers against restricting them in the matter of trophies, war souvenirs.¹ I should like the War Department attitude to be considered immediately from the viewpoint of our doing something first and not being thrown on the explanatory defensive. At the moment I have this thought for a possible early release.

A transport recently arrived at Norfolk not only carrying Marlene Dietrich with 11 revolvers of one type or another, for which she had a certificate of permission, but I am told there were 35,000 trophy weapons on the vessel² and also that the FBI were much concerned over this rate of distribution of such firearms about the United States.³

1. Army Service Forces headquarters had recommended that the section on war trophies in *War Department Circular 155* (28 May 1945) be amended to prohibit an individual from bringing into the U.S. more than one serviceable authorized type of enemy firearm. This was done in late August. (See the documents in NA/RG 165 [WDCSA, 332.2 (29 July 1945)].)

2. There were approximately 4,500 men on the vessel.

3. The State Department was also "concerned lest the practice of soldiers bringing home weapons as trophies of war will produce a pool of unregistered arms in this country which might be collected clandestinely by unscrupulous dealers who might

I was talking to [General George S.] Patton three days ago at Berchtesgaden⁴ and he told me that he had been greatly shocked to receive the statistics of his Headquarters showing that in a single week in the Third Army 70 soldiers had been killed and 500 wounded in fooling with the German machine pistol. As a result these pistols have been called in for safekeeping, labeled with the man's name.

Now with Marlene Dietrich as the saleslady for the publicity, the 35,000 weapons on the vessel and what Patton has just told me, certainly a very newsy release could be turned out based largely on confiscating Marlene's trophies despite the fact that she had a certificate authorizing her to keep them. The presentation of the story need not concentrate on depriving the soldier of his trophies, to his profound irritation and probably to the encouragement of political reactions as usual. On the other hand the implication would be very clear. Possibly it would be better to give the story to a single individual rather than have a general release, provided immediate publicity would result. Couldn't something like the following be done:

"The Army finds itself in a difficult position with relation to a glamorous moving picture star. Global warfare has been productive of many complications but the most recent is rather unique.

"A transport recently arrived at Newport News with Marlene Dietrich as its most conspicuous personality. She had been 11 months overseas and had worked valiantly for the entertainment of the soldiers. The complications in the matter grew out of the fact that she arrived with 11 weapons in her possession, mostly pistols, all trophies given her and for which she had an official permit signed by an officer in Europe.

"Investigation revealed the fact that there were approximately 35,000 weapons, trophies, in the possession of the troops on the transport. The FBI people were much disturbed at such a wholesale distribution of highly dangerous firearms. Marlene's 11 trophies were taken over by the Army and she has submitted a formal protest.

offer them to foment revolutions in foreign nations, particularly in Latin America." (Colonel H. Merrill Pasco [Secretary of the General Staff] Memorandum for General Marshall, 14 August 1945, copied document X1536, Marshall Library.) Pasco suspected that the Army might be making trouble for itself if it encouraged the confiscation of souvenirs, because the "collection of trophies is one of the most popular prerogatives of soldiers. In this one respect the combat infantryman has one of his rare advantages over the rest of the Army since he gets on the ground first and has first pick of the choice trophies. These trophies are one of the few pleasures that soldiers get from War. The dangers foreseen by the State Department and the FBI seem a little farfetched since criminal elements have always seemed to be able to supply themselves well, in the past, with weapons."

4. Marshall had been attending the Potsdam Conference. He left Berlin on 27 July to go fishing and sightseeing in the Bavarian Alps and returned to Washington on 31 July.

“The general complications in this matter are increasing daily and the soldier of course is deeply resentful of any restrictions regarding his trophies of the fighting in which he risked his life. However, the consequences of unrestricted permission in this matter can be very serious as evidence by the fact that recently in a single week in one of our Armies in Europe 70 men were killed and 500 wounded in mishandling German machine pistols which had been seized as trophies.”

(Source: G. C. Marshall Papers, Pentagon Office—Selected file, G. C. Marshall Library, Lexington, Virginia.)

Marshall's statement (corrected to note that Dietrich had been overseas ten months and had only ten pistols in her possession) was given to Time, but the magazine did not run the story. Several months later, a brief item in Newsweek noted that the Treasury Department's Alcohol Tax Unit (which enforced the National Firearms Act) estimated that there were 2.5 enemy firearms in the U.S. for every soldier who had returned from overseas. ("Souvenirs of Death," Newsweek 27 [April 29, 1946]: 24.) Two students of U.S. gun culture noted that this culture "flowered spectacularly in the years following World War II. The war itself had only served to stimulate a predilection for firearms long characteristic of American society. A conjunction of circumstances in the post-war era allowed that predilection to flourish unhampered." (Lee Kennett and James LaVerne Anderson, The Gun in America: The Origins of a National Dilemma [Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975], 222.)