

History of the Military Tattoo in World War II and Its Cultural Impact

Claire Lathrop

During World War II, many young men were being shipped off overseas to enter a war. Whether they would be fortunate enough to return home was uncertain, as were many other things in their shifting lives. The shred of certainty that these soldiers could rely on was their sheer nationalism, the brotherhood of their platoon, and displays of support for the democracy that they were a part of. Tattoos allowed these military members to mark their skin indefinitely for things in which they felt certain: loves at home or their allegiance to country or branch. These works of art allowed veterans to mark the things that they were looking forward to returning to, as well as mark the masculinity and brotherhood that they were experiencing during deployment. The emergence of new technologies and societal perspectives bred interest in this new form of body modification that was not common in America before the conflict. During the war, it is estimated that 90% of sailors were tattooed¹. With the widespread use of this art form, many conclusions about the changing society, the move towards individualism, and the craving for national pride can be inferred. By examining the history of tattooing up to until the 1940s and commonly tattooed symbols, the results of the emergence of this form of body modification during World War II can be discovered.

² Tattoos had a vast history prior to British and American members popularizing them in the early 20th century. Although it is not definitively known why tattoos always present themselves so overtly during wartime throughout history, examples



William Matte was a 1st marine division that fought in WWII adorned his skin with ink during his time served.

¹ Gibson, Kelly. "A Short History of Military Tattoos."

² Flynn, Anne-Gerard. "World War II Marine Who Fought at Guadalcanal Makes Honor Flight."

date back as far as recorded history allows. Roman soldiers used these marks as a way of identifying themselves within a certain unit.³ Soldiers that fought in the crusades were also known for tattooing themselves to make known the kind of burial that they wanted in the event of their death.⁴ Nazis used tattoos as a means for identifying prisoners and stripping them of their personal identity, in contrast to the American sailors were getting inked to show their allegiance and desired identity. The introduction of the tattoos came from the British navy's education of Polynesian culture in the 18th century. With this discovery, Americans became the first western country to ritualistically commit to the use of tattoos as a sign for solidarity and commitment of their country.⁵ The word tattoo comes from the Tahitian word "tatau", emphasizing the influence their culture had on the western adoption of tattooing.⁶

Japanese tattooing influenced most of the traditional decorative tattooing in America. Wealthy Americans would travel to Japan in the late 19th century and return home with a small souvenir tattoo.⁷ These upper echelons of society were far removed from the working-class sailors that would later be responsible for the popularization of tattoos. Prior to the use of military tattoos in America, circus performers and freaks were the people found most commonly tattooed, creating an initial association of tattoos with undesirable characteristics. Most motorcycle clubs were formed after the war in the 1940s and 1950s by former military personnel, tattooed and roughed up from years of fighting, these gang's appearance began to further validate a negative cultural association with tattoos.⁸ A far cry from the prestige class of Americans that traveled for souvenir tattoos in the

³ Gibson, Kelly. "A Short History of Military Tattoos."

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Tattoos During World War II." History of Tattoos.

⁶ Lande, R. Gregory, "United States Military Service Members and Their Tattoos: A Descriptive Study."

⁷ Weiss, Erich. Hori Smoku Sailor Jerry: The Life of Norman K. Collins

⁸ "Tattoos and Sexuality in America from the 1940s to the Present".

late 19th and early 20th centuries, these biking gangs engrained the American conscious with unfavorable traits for people with inked skin.

The first tattoo parlor was opened in New York City in 1846 by Martin Hildebrandt, a German immigrant. Most tattooists were mobile, and Hildebrandt was known for traveling the country and tattooing civil war veterans.⁹ August Coleman, or “Cap”, was known through the United States as starting a business tattooing sailors and was a mentor to Franklin Paul Rogers, who is accredited with developing today's modern tattoo machinery.¹⁰ Prior to setting up shop near dense populations of military personnel, tattoo artists main clientele was circus performers. Following the circus, many tattoo artists also lived a nomadic life.¹¹ When there became a new demand, some of these artists began to establish more permanent roots during the popularization of tattooing in the 1940s. Most of these shops had a military-first policy, requesting that city boys come back on another day or later time if they desired to have work done.¹² Tattooing started along the East and West Coast, and just like everything from overseas, it worked its way inland over time.¹³ The emergence of naval bases along the coast and in islands also supplied a demand for artists to live in these locations.

Some of the earliest American military tattooings took place on naval ships on long voyages.¹⁴ The choice to get a tattoo was not taken lightly, as gunpowder and urine were used to rub into the wound as ink.¹⁵ Infection was common, and one had to choose to sacrifice their safety in order to mark their skin.

⁹ Gibson, Kelly. "A Short History of Military Tattoos."

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Weiss, Erich. *Hori Smoku Sailor Jerry: The Life of Norman K. Collins*

¹² Gibson, Kelly. "A Short History of Military Tattoos."

¹³ "Colors of Our Country: The History of Military Tattoos". YouTube.

¹⁴ Corse, Hope. *Skin & Bones: Tattoos in the Life of the American Sailor*. Pg 21.

¹⁵ Ibid.

One of the most infamous locations for tattooing during World War II was the Hotel Street district in Hawaii.¹⁶ It was considered the place to be “stewed, screwed, and tattooed.”¹⁷ During the war, this place had a curfew but was a bustling location, home to many brothels, bars, and penny arcades that hosted tattoo artists during the daytime hours. There were eight known tattoo shops in this area, producing an estimated 300-500 tattoos daily during the peak of World War II.¹⁸ The lack of education surrounding tattoos allowed for a plethora of issues regarding sanitation. Emerging as a mere subculture, nothing was known about current sanitization practices. No one wore gloves and often needles were used on multiple customers.¹⁹

²⁰ Sailor Jerry was one of the most influential people within American tattooing and is responsible for much of the iconic imagery that is associated with wartime and patriotic tattooing. Jerry worked on Hotel Street in Hawaii for much of his



Sailor Jerry at work Tattooing.

career, dedicating himself to a life of creating patriotic tattoos. Inventing many colors of ink, Sailor Jerry is credited with inventing new techniques that allowed ink to stay in the skin better, all while leading the craft into what is considered the modern age of tattooing.²¹ Before the war, Jerry had settled in Honolulu and at this time it was an out-of-the-way grouping of islands.²² Shortly after the

¹⁶ Weiss, Erich. *Hori Smoku Sailor Jerry: The Life of Norman K. Collins*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Corse, Hope. *Skin & Bones: Tattoos in the Life of the American Sailor*. Pg 59.

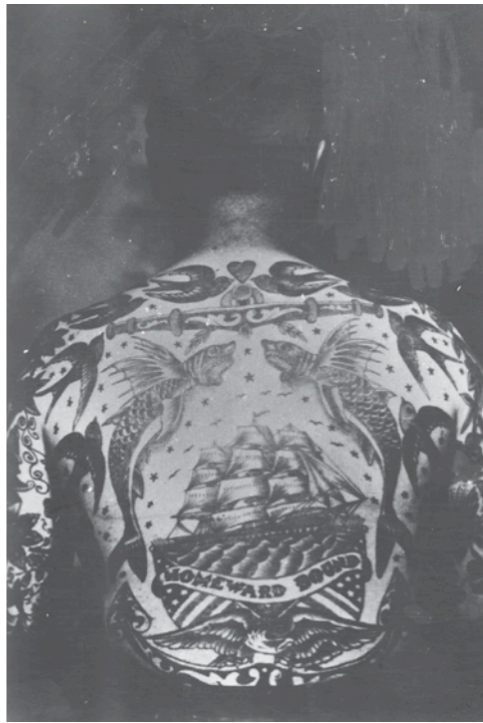
¹⁹ Weiss, Erich. *Hori Smoku Sailor Jerry: The Life of Norman K. Collins*

²⁰ "Sailor Jerry." Wikipedia.

²¹ "Colors of Our Country: The History of Military Tattoos". YouTube.

²² "'Norman' Sailor Jerry' Collins." *Sailor Jerry*.

Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor everything changed. Over 12 million Americans served in the war, and many of them at some point was on shore leave on the Hawaii islands.²³ Jerry was influenced greatly— and ironically – by the culture that had started our involvement in the war... the Japanese.²⁴ He was the first westerner in steady contact with the Japanese masters, sharing secrets and drawings with them. The many trade secrets that he developed were often maintained in secret from other tattooists of the time. With this learning opportunity, Jerry developed a style that continues to create a rippling effect through tattoo culture today.²⁵ .



²⁶ Bert Grimm was another influential tattoo artist that was famous for traveling to major port cities and bases tattooing service members.²⁷ He

Bert Grimm and his many tattoos.

was heavily tattooed himself and was so famous that Grimm Tattoo (established in 1913) in Kansas City took on his namesake. Grimm was known for working in the area and at Grimm Tattoo itself.

²³ "'Norman' Sailor Jerry' Collins." Sailor Jerry.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Corse, Hope. *Skin & Bones: Tattoos in the Life of the American Sailor*. Pg 53.

²⁷ Ibid.

Meanings among the different designs that you receive in the 1940s were pretty cut and dry within the emerging art of tattooing. "Flash" or pre-drawn and replicated designs were common and accounted for most of the work that was done. Every branch had its own identifying markers for tattoos, and some showed more general patriotism. All tattoos showed that you could handle pain and were a symbol of sheer masculinity and strength of what you endured through battle.²⁸ Unaware of whether or not they would be returning home, sailors and soldiers were not often apprehensive about how they permanently marked their bodies.

Experiencing locations and cultures that were like nothing they had seen before, these military members often got patterns and objects tattooed on their body of things to remind them of the places that they had been.²⁹ The symbols were reminders of where they had been and what they had accomplished. Herbert Livingston was a marine that had a horse head tattooed on him, along



with an Australian girl he met on a deployment to Melbourne. He chose these symbols to remember the time he spent riding horses on the beach in his free time and the love he had acquired.³⁰

Herbert Livingston with his aged tattoos he got during his WWII deployment to Melbourne.

²⁸ "Colors of Our Country: The History of Military Tattoos". YouTube.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Pickett, Mary. "Veteran Carries WWII Tattoos on to Korea, Vietnam."

These markers on his skin followed him into the Korean and Vietnam wars.³¹

Like Livingston, many men tattooed the names of loved ones on their bodies to remind themselves of the love that they had waiting at home for them. “Mom”, pin-ups, hula girls, and the names of girlfriends at home all acted as powerful reminders and icons to carry into battle and leave the men something to look forward to.³² When getting these women tattooed on their skin, sailors may be at sea for months with the only female form on their arm was the only female to ogle at.³³

³⁴ Sailors made up most of the military tattooing during World War II for their many superstitious beliefs.³⁵ The pig and rooster tattoos on the feet were symbols that were to save you from drowning, as on ships these animals were kept in containers that would float in the event of the wreck.³⁶ This led to a surprising



Sailors from World War II with the Swallows tattooed on their chest.

survival rate of pigs and roosters, making the act of tattooing a rooster on your right foot and a pig on your left a powerful omen against drowning at sea. Other tattoos were signifiers of how long you had served and your accomplishments. Swallows were tattooed for every additional 5,000 nautical miles traveled.³⁷ The bird's migration patterns made them a perfect symbol to represent the

³¹ Pickett, Mary. "Veteran Carries WWII Tattoos on to Korea, Vietnam."

³² Corse, Hope. *Skin & Bones: Tattoos in the Life of the American Sailor*. Pg 61.

³³ "Tattoos." Sailor Jerry.

³⁴ We Are The Mighty | By Team Mighty. "The Meanings Behind 19 Classic Sailor Tattoos."

³⁵ "Colors of Our Country: The History of Military Tattoos". YouTube.

³⁶ "Tattoos." Sailor Jerry.

³⁷ "Colors of Our Country: The History of Military Tattoos". YouTube.

migration and vast days at sea the sailors would have experienced.³⁸ Nautical stars were traditionally used as symbols to guide the sailor to battle and then home, representing the north star that was typically used in navigation while at sea.³⁹ Ship tattoos not only had a very obvious connection to the sailors as their place of work but also acted as symbols for the adventure of serving their country. Shark designs were about what you've overcome and been willing to stand your ground to not become someone else's food. Tattoos of Anchors were for stability within the life of chaos that the war produced.

The tattoos for other branches also developed cannons. The army was popular for crossed rifles and a US Army sign. The marines were popular for eagle, globe and anchor tattoos, and airmen typically got aviator girls and skulls in aviator helmets.⁴⁰ Eagles were popular among all the branches and acted as a symbol of patriotism and military service. Sailor Jerry also believed that eagles were a symbol of idealized America, pointing out its shortcomings.⁴¹ Snakes stood as symbols of potency and a reminder of "don't tread on me".⁴² By traveling abroad, many men brought back various souvenirs, iron crosses, and Escher's lightning bolts, to have tattoo designs based off of.⁴³

The emergence of the entire, new, and booming tattoo-military subculture began to permeate every aspect of American life when the war ended and inked men began returning stateside, causing the cultural psyche of the time to make seamen inseparable from their ink.⁴⁴ "Two reactions seem to be possible in persons who see a tattoo on someone, one is complete fascination, a feeling that here is the ultimate stud, the great macho... the far-traveling sailor... The other is a complete revulsion: the tattoo represents the epitome of a sleaze... everything that intelligence and

³⁸ "Tattoos." Sailor Jerry.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ "Colors of Our Country: The History of Military Tattoos". YouTube.

⁴¹ "Tattoos." Sailor Jerry.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ "Tattoos and Sexuality in America from the 1940s to the Present".

⁴⁴ Braunberger, Christine. "Sutures of Ink: National (Dis)Identification and the Seaman's Tattoo."

sophistication have conditioned you to despise.”⁴⁵ Inked skin became known as a symbol of masculinity and hardship, acting as battle armor that was never removed from the war. Songs like “A Sailors Not a Sailor (‘Til A Sailors Been ‘Tattooed) by Irving Berlin became a reminder of the influence on culture that these aesthetic and patriotic body modifications had.⁴⁶



Men getting tattooed in the 1940's while on deployment.

⁴⁷ How did these symbols of patriotism and service simultaneously act as signifiers of the despicable classes of society? “I think that’s the beautiful thing with tattoos. They’re almost a living history, you can see how the mood of a nation changes.” Said Mr. Gold, a renown tattooist said on the issue of tattoos in wartime.⁴⁸ The nation's mood could be observed on the skin of sailors as well as the moods

of international relations. Modifying the body in a non-traditional way elevated these military heroes to the status of “otherness”, just like the “other” they were fighting on the battlefield.

⁴⁵ Steward, Samuel M. *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos: A Social History of the Tattoo with Gangs, Sailors, and Street-corner Punks.* Pg 10.

⁴⁶ Gibson, Kelly. "A Short History of Military Tattoos."

⁴⁷ LaRue, Elizabeth. "1940's US Servicemen and Tattoos - WWII Ink • The 1940's • 1940-1949 • Fashion History Movies Music."

⁴⁸ "World War One: 'King of Tattoos' Inked Thousands of Soldiers."

Being common in Carney and hobo circles first, tattooing had negative associations across society. Tattooing for service members seemed to be as much of a response to an existing social stigma as it was a form of personal self-expression. By tattooing their skin, they were projecting a form of national pride and militaristic fantasies of rugged bravery. By validating their masculinity, tattoos served as a visual sign to society that wartime had changed them on a deeper level, elevating them to a pedestal of the 'protectors of society'. This change proved difficult for society to accept, being disgusted by the rawness of war and what it did to the humans forced to fight within it. This influenced the negative stereotypes around ink to continue well into the 21st century.

The military tattoo, while being an innate sign of pushing against the social conformity of the time garnered mixed reactions from the military itself. The tattoo was a sign of bravery, national pride, and military allegiance, all moral characteristics that were encouraged and valued within a militaristic system. But, at the same time, the idea of the individualized tattoo upset the well-oiled fighting machine. It stood for the violence of fighting but was entangled with influences of the "other" that it was supposed to be battling.⁴⁹ Marking skin symbolized a greater internal battle with what society expected of them and the distractions they were forced to turn to in desperate situations abroad.

World War II acted as an equalizer on many levels, society reset itself as the values began to shift towards the importance of individualism. The history of tattooing during this time period can be used as a lens to view the changing society of the post-depression culture in America. Cultural implications of tattooing left a ripple within the art form that is still felt today. During a time of hardship and divide in the country, millions of military members were brought together on the same ships, bases, and war fronts to battle the common "other" together.⁵⁰ Rituals of brotherhood

⁴⁹ Braunberger, Christine. "Sutures of Ink: National (Dis)Identification and the Seaman's Tattoo."

⁵⁰ "'Norman' Sailor Jerry' Collins." Sailor Jerry.

intertwined with tattooing and birthed a new subculture that was brought home with them. By examining tattoo culture on a microcosmic level, conclusions can be drawn about the shifting society in the mid 20th century towards individualism and national pride as a whole.

Bibliography

- "Norman' Sailor Jerry' Collins." Sailor Jerry. Accessed March 28, 2019. <https://sailorjerry.com/en/norman-collins/>.
- 15 Jul 2016 We Are The Mighty | By Team Mighty. "The Meanings Behind 19 Classic Sailor Tattoos." Military.com. July 15, 2016. Accessed March 28, 2019. <https://www.military.com/undertheradar/2016/07/here-are-the-meanings-behind-19-classic-sailor-tattoos>.
- Braunberger, Christine. "Sutures of Ink: National (Dis)Identification and the Seaman's Tattoo." *Colorado Review* 36, no. 2 (February 1, 2000): 72-73. Accessed March 28, 2019. doi:10.1353/col.2009.0117.
- "Colors of Our Country: The History of Military Tattoos". YouTube. August 31, 2017. Accessed March 28, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iz2L9emzIgY>.
- Corse, Hope, Michele DiGirolamo, Sue Levy, Marty Jones, and Craig Burns. *Skin & Bones: Tattoos in the Life of the American Sailor: Independence Seaport Museum*. Philadelphia: Independence Seaport Museum, 2011.
- Flynn, Anne-Gerard. "World War II Marine Who Fought at Guadalcanal Makes Honor Flight." Masslive. August 14, 2018. Accessed March 28, 2019. https://www.masslive.com/living/2018/08/world_war_ii_marine_fought_at_guadalcanal_new_britain_peleliu.html.
- Gibson, Kelly. "A Short History of Military Tattoos." *VFW Magazine*, August 2016, 42-45.
- Lande, R. Gregory, Bhagwan A. Bahroo, and Alyssa Soumoff. "United States Military Service Members and Their Tattoos: A Descriptive Study." *Military Medicine* 178, no. 8 (2013): 921-25. doi:10.7205/milmed-d-13-00131.
- LaRue, Elizabeth, and M.C. Becker. "1940's US Servicemen and Tattoos - WWII Ink • The 1940's • 1940-1949 • Fashion History Movies Music." The 1940's. June 18, 2012. Accessed March 28, 2019. <http://1940s.org/1940s-us-servicemen-tattoos-wwii-ink>.
- Pickett, Mary. "Veteran Carries WWII Tattoos on to Korea, Vietnam." The Billings Gazette. February 24, 2013. Accessed March 28, 2019. https://billingsgazette.com/news/local/veteran-carries-wwii-tattoos-on-to-korea-vietnam/article_a9223e5d-87f6-5ea6-a98e-3fb8ab2850cd.html.
- "Sailor Jerry." Wikipedia. March 08, 2019. Accessed March 28, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sailor_Jerry.
- Steward, Samuel M. *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos: A Social History of the Tattoo with Gangs, Sailors, and Street-corner Punks, 1950-1965*. London: Routledge, 2008.
- "Tattoos." Sailor Jerry. Accessed March 28, 2019. <https://sailorjerry.com/en/tattoos/>.
- "Tattoos and Sexuality in America from the 1940s to the Present". YouTube. November 30, 2011. Accessed March 28, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XcUtLoR4kbU>.

"Tattoos During World War II." History of Tattoos. 2001. Accessed March 28, 2019.
<http://carisalexis.freesevers.com/history/WW2.html>.

Waxman, Olivia. "Tattoo History in the United States-How They Became a Thing." Time. March 1, 2017. Accessed March 28, 2019. <http://time.com/4645964/tattoo-history/>.

Weiss, Erich. Hori Smoku Sailor Jerry: The Life of Norman K. Collins. March 2008. Accessed March 28, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CS9Fuw7ENg>.

"World War One: 'King of Tattoos' Inked Thousands of Soldiers." BBC News. August 06, 2014. Accessed March 28, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-28359624>.