

# The Threat Within

## *American Servicemen in Australia during the Second World War*

On 28 April 1945 at 1:15am, Lillian Pearl Ferguson was roused from her sleep. As her bleary eyes adjusted to the darkness, she discerned in the shadows the figure of a man leaning over her bed. While reaching for the light, Ferguson was savagely punched in the jaw before her terrified screams caused her attacker to flee. Police subsequently apprehended twenty-one year old Matthew Potter, an Australian soldier who had known Ferguson since childhood. He remained unapologetic, boasting, “she is lucky to get off as lightly as she did: I meant to kill her to-night...it is a pity I didn’t finish the job.”<sup>1</sup> The motivation behind the assault, however, remains the most intriguing feature of the case. Potter confessed to police that he attacked Ferguson because she divorced his mate and “married a Yank.”<sup>2</sup>

Whilst notable, the Ferguson attack was not unique for Australia in the Second World War. The influx of approximately one million United States servicemen from 1941-1945 soon caused a deep divide in the nation. Disputes emerged, frequently inflamed by alcohol, over the perceived preferable treatment of the American troops. As surmised by one Australian soldier, “the Yanks had everything—the girls, the canteens and all the rest of it—and our blokes were completely ostracised in their own city.”<sup>3</sup> For many returning Australian servicemen, the American influence over their towns, women and even courting customs proved disconcerting. Donald Friend wrote in his diary how traditional Victorian dances had been superseded by the jitterbug, where dancers “whirl[ed] insanely” as though

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<sup>1</sup> “Upset by Marriage to U.S.’er” A.I.F. Man Denies Assault on Girl’ *Truth* (27 May 1945) p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Major Bill Thomas who in his investigation of anti-American disturbances in 1943 justified the anger of Australian soldiers – Quoted by Peter Thompson and Robert Macklin *The Battle of Brisbane: Australians and the Yanks at War* (Sydney: ABC Books for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2000) p. 232; Donald Friend similarly noted how Brisbane became popularly described as ‘The American Village’ – Donald Friend, *Painter’s Journal*, (Sydney: Ure Smith Pty Limited, 1946) p. 22.

“possessed by devils.”<sup>4</sup> Friend’s greatest shock, however, were the “young vags.,” the women who displayed “the softness of childhood and the viciousness of accomplished whoredom...They seemed drugged, while their bodies (bedwacked, easy) pulsed erotic contortions.”<sup>5</sup> The cutting description encapsulated not only the moral alarm that became rife throughout Australia during the American occupation, but also the contradictory position women were placed in.

Scholars studying this period generally focus upon the positive influence of the ‘friendly invasion,’ particularly for Australian women.<sup>6</sup> Women were able to gain more freedom, establish their own terms for potential relationships, strive for greater equality and treatment and even assume a degree of sexual agency.

Such arguments, however, often negate the complexity of the American presence in Australia. Despite heavy censorship, numerous sources testified to a darker side of these relations as women became more vulnerable to assault and placed under heightened moral surveillance. Examining episodes of violence against women during this period reveals how the bodies of Australian women became contested territory, symbolic of a greater power struggle between a fledgling nation marred with a criminal past and a country slowly establishing its place as a global superpower. Beneath this influence, even mere associations with American servicemen became heavily embroiled in larger nationalistic discourses.

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<sup>4</sup> Friend, *Painter’s Journal*, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> Lynette Finch used the term ‘friendly invasion’ to describe the arrival of American soldiers in: ‘The Friendly Invasion of GIs’ *Australia’s Frontline: Remembering the 1939-1945 War* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1992) pp. 177-179; Rosemary Campbell, for example, likened the excitement for Australian women at the arrival of American troops to a “powerful aphrodisiac” – *Heroes and Lovers: A Question of National Identity* (North Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989) p. 57; Marilyn Lake similarly described this period as a “sexual epidemic” – ‘The Desire for a Yank: Sexual Relations between Australian Women and American Servicemen during World War II’ p. 626 and ‘Female Desires: The Meaning of World War II’ *Australian Historical Studies* 24: 95 (1990) pp. 277-279.

Some exceptions to this statement include: Margaret Bevege, ‘Some Reflections on Women’s Experiences in North Queensland during World War II’ in Margaret Bevege, Margaret James and Camel Shure (eds.) *Worth Her Salt: Women at Work in Australia* (Marrickville: Southwood Press, 1982); Michael Sturma, ‘Loving the Alien: The underside of relations between American servicemen and Australian women in Queensland, 1942-1945’ *Journal of Australian Studies* 13: 24 (2009) pp. 3-17 and Kay Saunders and Helen Taylor. “‘To Combat the Plague’: The Construction of Moral Alarm and State Intervention in Queensland During World War II’ *Hecate* 14: 1 (31 May 1988) p. 4.

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The foremost concern that emerged for conservatives with the presence of American troops in Australia was the erosion of traditional gender boundaries. Due to the lack of privacy in the camps, many couples chose shop doorways, parks and darkened cinemas as places of intimacy. Private lives thus gained a disconcerting prominence in the public sphere, with female sexuality in particular becoming distinctly visible. This growing spectacle sparked a moral panic among conservative social commentators, who perceived the rapid growth of sexual vice as indicative of the detrimental breakdown of society.<sup>7</sup> The most outspoken in his criticism was Roman Catholic Archbishop James Duhig who claimed that the moral decay was “unprecedented in the history of Queensland” likening it to a plague that attacked moral barriers.<sup>8</sup> This intensified scrutiny of female behaviour during wartime was by no means a unique phenomenon. The responses rather reveal the ramifications of total war on the home front, as private lives were elevated to a national concern and immorality was perceived as a grave threat to the overall war effort. To combat the rapid rise of immoral behaviour, a raft of measures were introduced, curtailing the freedom of young women. These measures ranged from state and federal legislation to civilians who voluntarily assumed the role of policing public morality. Police vice squads together with American provosts conducted dawn raids on American ‘residential’ to locate underage women and arrested any woman suspected of being infected with venereal disease.<sup>9</sup> Other vigilante groups comprised of Australian soldiers and civic-minded individuals patrolled neighbourhoods and public parks at night. The female officers of the Salvation

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Sexual Vice Condemnation’ *Daily Mercury* (22 February 1944) p. 4; Reverend E.J. Davidson echoed this sentiment at a National Youth Conference in 1944 when he stated: “Youth is floundering in a world where sex relationships have suffered grave deterioration. Removal of former social and religious inhibitions, and the increasing knowledge and accessibility to contraceptives are the principal causes of moral decline. War has done much to loosen moral control and much of the unhappiness following on promiscuity.” ‘Problem of “Yank-Happy” Girl’ *Morning Bulletin* (28 October 1944) p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> “Moral Decay is Unprecedented” – Archbishop Duhig’ *The Courier-Mail* (8 March 1943) p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Examples of the vice squad’s work in cracking down on sexual immorality: ‘Wartime Vice Shocks the Police’ *The Sun* (10 September 1943) p. 4; ‘13 Girls Arrested’ *The Sun* (1 August 1942) p. 3. ‘30 Feet Fall During Raid by Vice Squad’ *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate* (26 January 1945) p. 3; women were charged and “exposed to moral danger” – ‘Two Girl Stowaways Found Hidden in Lifeboat’ *Singleton Argus* (5 September 1945) p. 2. In Queensland, several officers of the vice squad were female – ‘Brisbane Wants to Become Moral City’ *The Sun* (19 August 1942) p. 4.

Former officer Amy Taylor discusses her experiences and the purposes of the vice squad ahead of *The Force: 150 years of NSW Police* exhibition at the Justice and Police Museum – Steve Meacham. ‘Pioneer policewoman whose virtue was vice’ *Sydney Morning Herald* (12 May 2012) <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/pioneer-policewoman-whose-virtue-was-vice-20120511-1yi2u.html>

Army similarly conducted regular night patrols, using persuasion to encourage young girls to return home, offering cab fares and occasionally personal escorts. An officer and cadet even intervened when they witnessed a sailor carrying an inebriated underage girl into a deserted city street.<sup>10</sup> Even ushers at movie theatres regularly roamed the aisles, shining torches to disrupt amorous behaviour.<sup>11</sup> The impact of total war in the conflation of the public and private spheres is reflected in these responses. Further recommendations were made such as curfews for women under twenty and a total ban on marriages between Australian women and American servicemen.<sup>12</sup> In a more extreme measure, one judge recommended the reintroduction of the ducking stool to punish unfaithful wives.<sup>13</sup> Critics in Sydney suggested that girls who were continually infected with venereal disease should have their heads shaved and be publicly ridiculed.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> 'Salvation Army Lasses Patrol City Streets' *The Herald* (26 June 1942) p. 5; Sailor: 'Midnight Patrol by Salvation Army Women Officers' *Daily Mercury* (4 July 1942) p. 3; 'Salvation Army Cleans Up' *The Daily News* (19 May 1943) p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Thompson and Macklin, *The Battle of Brisbane*, p. 99.

<sup>12</sup> The Lord Mayor of Melbourne in mid-1942 suggested the implementation of an 8:30pm curfew for girls between sixteen and twenty after he witnessed the numbers of young girls past midnight who were embracing soldiers in darkened doorways – Daniel Potts and Annette Potts. *Yanks Down Under 1941-45: The American Impact on Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1985) p. 321; 'Readers Appeal to Parents to Keep Girls Home at Night' *The Courier-Mail* (17 March 1942) p. 4; 'Detention of Girls out at Night Urged' *The Courier-Mail* (11 April 1942) p. 3; 'Shame of Melbourne Streets at Night: Juvenile Depravity has Police Worried' *Smith's Weekly* (30 May 1942) p. 2; Police similarly advocated for the introduction of curfews, greater powers to order misbehaving women off the street and making the sale of alcohol to women in hotel lounges and parlours illegal – 'Curfew on Girls in City Streets Suggested: Conduct Causing Concern, Police Say' *The Argus* (10 June 1942) p. 3.

*Ban on Marriages*: 'Marriage Ban Urged – U.S. Forces in Australia' *Sydney Morning Herald* (24 March 42) p. 4; 'Delay Marriage Until After War, Says Duhig' *The Daily News* (17 January 1944) p. 9.

Archbishop James Duhig proposed increasing the age of consent to 18, severely punishing anyone who behaved immorally in public places, a curfew for anyone under the age of seventeen and the accompanying of young women by elder chaperones at night – 'Womanhood Never More Belittled' *The Northern Miner* (8 April 1943) p. 3 and 'Curfew for Girls: Archbishop Duhig Emphatic' *Kalgoorlie Miner* (28 December 1943) p. 1

<sup>13</sup> 'Wild Women Brawl at Party in "Yanks" Flat at New Farm' *Truth* (27 September 1942) p. 19; 'Ducking Stool – Use Recommended for Unfaithful Wives' *Daily Mercury* (5 October 1942) p. 4. The ducking stool was a traditional form of ritual humiliation involving tying a disorderly woman to a stool and lowering it into water.

<sup>14</sup> Potts and Potts, *Yanks Down Under* p. 324.

The humiliating ritual of publicly shaving women's hair dates back to early Christianity, but witnessed an interesting spike around the Second World War. The most infamous example being *Les femmes tondues*, however, head shavings also occurred in Belgium, Norway, Holland, Greece, Spain and even reports from Jersey, Great Britain. Notably, however, these punishments were dealt to women who collaborated (had sexual liaisons) with German soldiers, a marked contrast to the Australian case.

For a further examination of the history and significance of female hair shaving, see: Laëtitia Marguerite Krisel 'Chapter Three: Les Femmes Tondues: The Consequences of Being a Woman' *Les Femmes Tondues: Understanding Gender Relations in Vichy France* (Honours Thesis, Wesleyan University, 2016) and Andreea Prundeanu 'Female Shaving: A Historical Background' *Cutting Dallah's Hair: Sentimental Collaborators and the Politics of Female Sexuality in WW/II France* (Doctorate: Michigan State University, 2017).

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As public furore intensified, largely perpetuated by the ongoing publication of scandalous sex stories in the press, US authorities issued an order that forbade their troops from public displays of affection, with provosts permitted to terminate a soldier's leave if they were behaving inappropriately.<sup>15</sup> By mid-June 1942, under Circular 179, US servicemen were not permitted to marry without the permission of their commanding officer. Mere weeks later when issuing the new policy, Adjutant General L.S. Ostrander added that commanders should ardently try to dissuade marriages. Defiance of these regulations would result in a court martial.<sup>16</sup>

These attitudes reveal the profound concern over the morality of women during the American occupation. As womanhood was regarded as the crucial foundation for the honour of the nation, the loss of this virtue rendered any victory in war futile. The future of postwar Australia depended upon women maintaining the moral framework of society. By understanding this context, the escalation of sexual acts to a national threat and the extreme responses provoked by intimate American and Australian relationships becomes clear.

In an instructional handbook issued to American servicemen prior to their arrival in Australia, the foremost point made was that Americans not treat Australians as helpless people in need of rescuing.<sup>17</sup> This point was emphatically emphasised throughout the occupation, however, the attitude of superiority nevertheless persisted in some American troops.<sup>18</sup> This was only further enhanced by the awe-struck descriptions of American soldiers as “gods” and the “most glamorous soldiers we had ever

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<sup>15</sup> Thompson and Macklin, *The Battle of Brisbane*, p. 99.

<sup>16</sup> United States provost officer speaking to the *Sydney Morning Herald* – Cause of Vice in City' *The Sydney Morning Herald* (3 November 1943) p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> The importance of not treating the Australians as helpless was the foremost point made in an instructional booklet given to American personnel prior to their arrival in Australia – United States War Department. *Instructions for American Servicemen in Australia 1942* p. 4; This attitude of superiority from American soldiers was also cited as one of the key causes for the Brisbane riots of 1942 – the full report compiled by the Military Intelligence Branch is available in Thompson and Macklin, *The Battle of Brisbane*, pp. 230-232.

<sup>18</sup> In the weekly security summary number 38 dated 4 February 1944 the strain placed on the relationship between Allied servicemen by the declarations that “America had saved Australia” was noted. In a survey of responses following an inflammatory article published by the *Chicago Tribune*, Australian troops challenged Americans to “a good brawl on any corner” and “all civilians contacted were antagonistic.” – *Australian-American Relations* (1943-1945) National Archives of Australia (BP242/1, Q41191) p. 73.

laid eyes upon.”<sup>19</sup> Such expressions galvanised the belief in some servicemen that they possessed an inalienable right to Australian women. One sailor who was prevented by a Queensland constable from taking a protesting woman into the park stated, “I’ve come to this town to have a good time, and *nobody* is going to stop me.”<sup>20</sup> Between 1942 and 1943, American servicemen accounted for over one-third of people charged in Queensland with rape and carnal knowledge.<sup>21</sup>

For many women, the presence of unrestrained American troops fostered a sense of unease. Stories frequently emerged of women being grabbed in the streets, soldiers barging into homes to sexually assault female occupants, one soldier even threatened to slice a woman’s throat if she did not sleep with him.<sup>22</sup> Elderly women reported feeling unsafe on the main street and Volunteer Air Defence meetings, usually held at 6pm, were cancelled as it was “just too late for women to be out on the street.”<sup>23</sup> Brisbane was transformed into a “wild brawling town”, unsafe for women after dark.<sup>24</sup> Scandalous rumours grew so common that the Federal Government sent two researches in January 1943 to conduct a report on civilian morale in North Queensland.<sup>25</sup> The following year, the state government also established a committee of inquiry over sexual offences. This committee discovered that whilst the average number of rape and attempted rape between 1934 and 1939 was six a year,

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<sup>19</sup> Full quote: “I knew exactly how I felt about Americans. They were gods, they had beautiful uniforms and lots of money...they’d come to save us from the Japanese” – quoted Sturma ‘Loving the Alien’ p. 4; Glamorous soldiers: Maureen Meadows, *I Loved Those Yanks* (Sydney: George M. Dash, 1948) p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> My emphasis – Constable’s Report, Mackay Station, 22 August 1944, Queensland State Archives, A/12037

<sup>21</sup> Report of Committee Inquiry Regarding Sexual Offences, *Queensland Parliamentary Papers*, 1944-45, pp. 942-943; John McKerrow, *The American Occupation of Australia, 1941-45: A Marriage of Necessity* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013) p. 193.

<sup>22</sup> Detective Constable’s Report, Criminal Investigation Branch, South Coast Area, Brisbane, 30 January 1945, QSA, A/12040

<sup>23</sup> Interviews conducted by Bevege ‘Some Reflections’ pp. 103-104

<sup>24</sup> Nance Kingston quoted by Rosemary Campbell *Heroes and Lovers* p. 84.

<sup>25</sup> Professor R.D. Wright and Dr. Ian Hogbin *Report on Civilian Morale in North Queensland* (1943) CRS A816, 37/301/199.

Alongside advising citizens of the needs for the tougher measures and blackout laws, Professor R.D. Wright and Dr. Ian Hogbin investigated widespread rumours. These included the incessant brawls between American and Australian troops, that American soldiers began to throw pregnant women under trucks to avoid costly abortions and that an entire railway carriage filled with pregnant WAAAFs was sent south with chalk scrawling on the side “return when empty.” Despite Hogbin and Wright disproving these rumours as simply exaggerated myths, the episodes remain embedded in citizen recollections decades after the war, illustrating the proliferation of rumours during this period and also the influence of moral panic and scandalmongering over personal memory.

between 1942 and 1943, the average was 18.41.<sup>26</sup> The number of sexual offences had also risen by 16.6% compared to a 0.424% rise in 1941-1942.<sup>27</sup>

The tension that emerged over instances of disgraceful treatment of vulnerable Australian women by the occupying force was unquestionably fuelled by sensationalist newspapers. Despite heavy wartime censorship, papers continued to publish innumerable stories unveiling the alleged depravity occurring throughout Australia. The two most shocking included the discovery of a nine year old girl beneath the bed of a forty-two year old Staff-sergeant and an eighty-four year old woman raped by a twenty-three year old private.<sup>28</sup> In articles covering scandalous behaviour, the individual was frequently lost, identified in sensationalist titles simply as a ‘Yank.’<sup>29</sup> This calculated tactic intended to magnify the prolific depravity plaguing urban centres, due to the influx of American soldiers, and furthermore fostered a generalised mistrust towards US servicemen.

However, it was Melbourne’s ‘brownout murders’ in May 1942 that truly sent shockwaves across Australia. Over just sixteen days, three semi-naked female bodies were discovered, their killer later identified as American Private Edward Leonski. Although none of the victims were sexually assaulted, almost a decade on from the crime Leonski was still described as the “unbalanced sex killer,” who attacked women with “superhuman ferocity and strength.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Campbell, *Heroes and Lovers*, p. 95.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* p. 86

<sup>28</sup> ‘20 Years’ Gaol for US Soldier in Brisbane – Girl of Nine Under His Bed’ *Truth* (6 September 1942) p. 18; ‘Assault of Woman, 84: US Soldier Gets Life Term at Court Martial’ *Truth* (21 November 1943) p. 10.

<sup>29</sup> For example: ‘Yank Molested Married Woman’ *Truth* (30 January 1944) p. 19; “‘Narrow-Minded’ Raiders Caught Yank Under Bed’ *Truth* (17 October 1943) p. 10; ‘Yanks Tip When Caught by Husband’ *Truth* (5 March 1944) p. 10; ‘Naked Yank Battled with Ladylove for Sheet’ *Mirror* (16 June 1945) p. 7. The most controversial of all however was the title: ‘Disgusting Conduct of American Negroes “All Women are their Prey”’ *Truth* (28 May 1944) p. 18.

<sup>30</sup> Whilst Private Anthony Gallo stated his testimony in court that Leonski admitted to having intercourse with Pauline Thompson, post-mortem examinations of all three victims and Leonski’s own statements to police denied intercourse. The exposed humiliating positions Leonski staged the women in after they were murdered has led some scholars to assume they were sexually violated. See Anthony Gallo’s statement in court p. 243; post-mortem examination results are discussed on pages 26, 36 and 146-148 in the *Transcript of Evidence: Leonski Murder Trial – US Forces Pages (1942)* National Archives of Australia (A472: W7493 Part 2) p. 277.

‘The Brownout Killer’ *Brisbane Telegraph* (16 June 1950) p. 5.

Throughout history, the sensational murders of young women have been used as cautionary tales, from England's Jack the Ripper to America's Helen Jewett (*see figure one*). Each emblematic of the perils facing women who transgressed gender boundaries; and often emerging during periods of social upheaval. Australia's 'Brownout Strangler' fulfilled this same purpose. The first two murders, in particular, stirred exceeding criticism over the immorality of young Australian women. *Smith's Weekly* described Melbourne as a 'Devil's Playground' where women remained on the streets after dark with no self-control as they embraced their American lovers.<sup>31</sup> The press asserted that this public indecency inspired Leonski's perverted obsessions.<sup>32</sup>



**Figure One (a):** Jack the Ripper

*The Illustrated Police News* (3 November 1888)



**Figure One (b):** Edward Leonski

*Brisbane Telegraph* (16 June 1950)

*Note the similarities in the depictions:* spectators are given a forbidden glimpse into the moment of the murder. Focus is drawn immediately to the women's terror-stricken faces. The imposing figure of the attackers lean over the victims, reflecting their overpowering dominance over the vulnerable women. Both attackers are bathed in shadows, in Leonski's case this is particularly exaggerated to give him a fiendish almost subhuman appearance.

<sup>31</sup> 'Shame of Melbourne Streets at Night: Juvenile Depravity has Police Worried' *Smith's Weekly* (30 May 1942) p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*



Pauline Thompson, Leonski's second and "hardest" victim due to her strength, was a prime example.<sup>33</sup> Thompson had left her children and husband in Bendigo to advance her career in Melbourne. She was witnessed regularly cavorting with American servicemen and on the night of her murder had partaken in illegal drinking with Leonski. The immoral insinuations against Thompson became so prolific that her husband Constable Leslie Thompson released a staunch statement that, "she was true as steel, and *anyone* who says differently says a black and dastardly lie!"<sup>34</sup> Many in the community nevertheless believed that the first two victims "deserved what they got"; that they should have waited for the return of Australian men and not be so 'overcome' by the influx of American servicemen.<sup>35</sup>

Whilst his inebriation and mental health disorder were the primary triggers for the murders, Leonski made an intriguing comment during his statement to police. Moments prior to the vicious murder of first victim Ivy McLeod, Leonski was reportedly dwelling upon the night that six Australians had attacked him, choking him until he almost lost consciousness before they stole his money and abandoned him in the alleyway.<sup>36</sup> Immediately following this reverie he sees Ivy McLeod, descending into a maddening rage as he extinguished her life and tore savagely at her clothes. Whether this prior attack genuinely occurred is unknown, yet it poses an intriguing element to the murder case. Here, the transformation of female bodies into a battleground upon which dominance and retaliation can be achieved is violently witnessed.

The impact of these murders was tremendous, contrary to one scholarly conclusion that there was no evidence these murders prejudiced the community against other American servicemen.<sup>37</sup> From

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<sup>33</sup> Detective Sergeant Sydney Harold McGuffie discussing Leonski's statement - *Transcript of Evidence: Leonski Murder Trial* p. 287.

<sup>34</sup> My emphasis – 'Defends Slain Wife's Name: Poignant Story of Mystery Murder' *Truth* (17 May 1942) p. 14.

<sup>35</sup> Correspondence with Pace, quoted by Helen Pace "All the Nice Girls..." A Case Study in the Social Control of Women, Melbourne, 1942' *St Lucia* 18: 1 (1992) p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> 'Statement of Edward J. Leonski' *Record of Trial of Leonski, Edward J. Supplement A (Exhibits)* National Archives of Australia (A472: W7493 Part 4) p. 11; Lieutenant William W. Johnston testimony – *Transcript of Evidence* p. 277.

<sup>37</sup> Potts and Potts, *Yanks Down Under*, p. 234.

the woman who henceforth always carried scissors in her purse to those who abstained from venturing out at night.<sup>38</sup> Even Australians vivid recall of this tragic episode decades after the war. The nationwide publication of the execution of Leonski just two weeks prior to the Battle of Brisbane could even be explored as another potential trigger for the outburst of violence. In the words of the prosecution, these “atrocious bestial murders” stirred both revulsion and horror and “cast a foul blot on the record of the service.”<sup>39</sup> Leonski’s confession that he suffered from split personalities like Jekyll and Hyde, as well as the failure of other American servicemen such as Anthony Gallo to notify police when they learned of Leonski’s crime, reinforced for many the inherent danger of the large numbers of unpredictable servicemen in Australia.<sup>40</sup> Leonski remains the only person in history to be executed on Australian soil under a foreign law.

There also appeared in press reports a marked disregard from American servicemen and their Australian lovers for cultural institutions such as marriage. During the 1930s, the average divorce figure for the entirety of Queensland was 157. By contrast, in Brisbane in 1943 the figure had skyrocketed to 398.<sup>41</sup> Commonly stories revealed women who had abandoned the familial sphere to pursue romances with American soldiers. Ivy Beilby for instance, was dubbed by the sensationalist newspaper *Truth* as a “queen of cowards.” With her husband on active service, Beilby abandoned her children to join her lover in Townsville. The communal outrage over the affair was further intensified by the American’s blasé attitude regarding the destruction of the family home.<sup>42</sup> However, public outrage often centred on the errant woman, rather than their American lover. The popular wartime

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<sup>38</sup> Pace, “All the Nice Girls...” p. 5; John Hammond Moore *Over-Sexed, Over-Paid and Over Here: Americans in Australia 1941-1945* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1981) p. 149.

<sup>39</sup> *Transcript of Evidence: Leonski Murder Trial*, pp. 358-9.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 247-248.

Press reporting on the trials—The Jekyll and Hyde confession: ‘Jekyll-Hyde’ *Warwick Daily News* (17 July 1942) p. 1; A description of Leonski during the trial: ‘Presenting Real Life’ *The Daily Telegraph* (19 July 1942) p. 24; soldier’s statements during the court martial: Hugh Dash ‘Brownout Murders’ *The Daily Telegraph* (11 June 1942) p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> ‘71 Yanks in Divorces Year’s Figures’ *Truth* (2 January 1944) p. 6. 213 were granted on the basis of desertion, another 173 on adultery.

<sup>42</sup> ‘Wife Left Children for Yank Who “Didn’t Care”’ *Truth* (5 September 1943) p. 19.

comic strip *Bluey and Curley* demonstrated this when Curley learns that another woman has left him to marry an American (*figure two*). Her photograph joins numerous others upon the wall condemning the unfaithfulness of women in abiding by their serving partners.



**Figure Two:** ‘Pin-Ups’ *Bluey and Curley*

The elevation of affairs into a broader power struggle was particularly evident in the description of a fight between one returned Australian soldier and his wife’s American lover. From the outset, the newspaper boasted: ‘Yank Boy-Friend Copped Hiding.’<sup>43</sup> The men are identified primarily as ‘the Yank’ and ‘the Aussie.’ Despite the difference in size, when the American charged the Australian “like a mastiff at a poodle,” the Australian transformed into a battering ram, continuously knocking down his opponent with ease and ultimately leaving him a “howling” and “battered wreck.”<sup>44</sup> The sensationalist rhetoric within this article highlights how affairs soon signified a far greater struggle for sexual dominance. Ultimately, the tale was a triumphant reinforcement of Australia’s strength as a nation. Australia, whilst commonly underestimated, remained a formidable foe.

Even women acknowledged the national significance attached to their relationships, some believing that dating Americans would show disloyalty to Australians.<sup>45</sup> Jean Null’s two brothers never

<sup>43</sup> ‘Fight on Lawn Over Wife, Yank Boy-Friend Copped Hiding’ *Truth* (19 March 1944) p. 15.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Patricia Rattray Penrose and Eugenia Rickard quoted by Potts and Potts, *Yanks Down Under*, p. 295.

spoke to her again following her marriage to a US Marine.<sup>46</sup> Another Townsville woman chose to only date Australians after she received numerous disparaging remarks from Australian servicemen during her sole outing with an American.<sup>47</sup> In 1944, a brief letter in *The Courier Mail* from a woman identified only as ‘Bitterly Disgusted’ revealed the abuse she and other wives of American soldiers faced. She wrote, “the Aussie soldier trips us deliberately in a theatre aisle; he begs money from us; he hoots and jeers in the street, the theatre, the trams, at us; he uses filthy language before us, passes insulting remarks. No, we shall not return; we want peace and freedom from prejudice.”<sup>48</sup> Almost instantly, letters flooded the readers section. A handful of women shared their own experiences, one too afraid to leave her home for the jeers she received.<sup>49</sup> However, the response from ‘Jungle Green’ reveals the ire from returned Australian soldiers and the tension that existed between the two groups. He accused ‘Bitterly Disgusted’ of never accounting for the feelings of Australian soldiers when they returned from New Guinea to see the supposed “cream of Australia’s womanhood”:

“conducting public-petting parties, refusing, with scorn, to dance with men in jungle greens...[because] they ‘don’t dance the Aussie way now,’ and kow-towing to every whim of the Yanks. It’s no wonder that some of them jeer at any one they see with a Yank.”<sup>50</sup>

Within this short passage, the alienation experienced by Australian soldiers is profoundly apparent.

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<sup>46</sup> This was likely due to the prejudice associated with women who dated Americans – Kate Darian-Smith and Rachel Jenzen ‘Memories from America: Australian War Brides and US Marines Remember Australia and the Pacific During the Second World War’ *When the Soldiers Return: November 2007 Conference Proceedings* (2009) p. 13.

<sup>47</sup> Potts and Potts *Yanks Down Under* p. 295; due to the prejudice associated with women who dated Americans, Jean Null’s two brothers never spoke to her again after she married a US Marine – Kate Darian-Smith and Rachel Jenzen ‘Memories from America: Australian War Brides and US Marines Remember Australia and the Pacific During the Second World War’ *When the Soldiers Return: November 2007 Conference Proceedings* (2009) p. 13.

<sup>48</sup> ‘Not Coming Back’ *The Courier-Mail* (26 September 1944) p. 2

<sup>49</sup> ‘Afraid of Jeers’ *The Courier-Mail* (28 September 1944) p. 2. In another letter entitled ‘Also Rebuffed’ the wife of an Australian captain insisted that Australians were the ones who were truly discriminated against, as alongside jeers the couple were barred from a rental property because landlords could secure double the amount in rent from Americans – ‘Also Rebuffed’ *The Courier Mail* (27 September 1944) p. 2.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Respect for Women’ *The Courier Mail* (27 September 1944) p. 2.

## *The Threat Within*

The preferential treatment shown by women for American troops was deeply emasculating for many Australian soldiers, sparking numerous cases of violence against women. Audrey Elizabeth Rowe's friendship with ex-navy man Murray Mortimer was disrupted by her growing acquaintance with an American soldier. After becoming obsessive over the pair and threatening Rowe, Mortimer finally threw sulphuric acid in her face, leaving her permanently disfigured. The judge during sentencing condemned Mortimer for allowing malicious emotions over Rowe's rejection to overcome him.<sup>51</sup> Olive Weiss suffered a suspected broken jaw after she was punched by an Australian sailor for rejecting his advances yet showing interest in some passing Americans.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Irene Walsh was pursued, knocked down and kicked in the face by an Australian soldier, who later admitted that he suffered a 'black out' when the woman had refused him yet boarded a tram with an American.<sup>53</sup>

In other instances, violence was justified by authorities. This significantly reflects the status of domestic violence in law and popular culture during this period. Whereas female transgression of gender boundaries provoked public outcry, new laws, demands for public shaming and the emergence of vigilante committees, there is a notable silence surrounding domestic violence. Otto Kickbusch was summoned to court for unlawful assault of his youngest daughter after she spent a night out with Americans. Kickbusch admitted that during the beating he "did not know when to stop" and that his two other daughters had fallen pregnant to Americans outside of marriage, one being only 16. Yet, the judge concluded that "if there was more parental control, there would be far less trouble brought before the courts."<sup>54</sup> Another man felt justified in assaulting his wife because she had run away with an American.<sup>55</sup> This sentiment was echoed in Eric Lambert's *The Veterans* when a wounded embittered

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<sup>51</sup> 'Girl's Story of Acid Throwing' *News* (21 September 1945) p. 3; 'Today: Court Dramas – A pretty girl's looks were ruined' *The Daily Telegraph* (30 September 1945) p. 25; 'Criminal Sitings Before Mr. Justice Mayo' *The Advertiser* (28 November 1945) p. 5; 'Acid Thrower Fills Judge with Loathing' *Truth* (16 December 1945) p. 15; 'Acid Throwing Case: Imprisonment for 10 Years' *Chronicle* (13 December 1945) p. 27.

<sup>52</sup> 'Sailor May Have Broken Girl's Jaw' *News* (31 January 1948) p. 3.

<sup>53</sup> 'Kicked Girl in Face' *Sunday Mail* (11 February 1945) p. 6.

<sup>54</sup> 'Thrashing for Girl of 14 ½, Father Sorry, Blames Yanks' *Truth* (26 March 1944) p. 14.

<sup>55</sup> 'Justified in assaulting wife who ran away with a Yank?' *Narandera Argus and Riverina Advertiser* (8 November 1946) p. 2.

soldier advised the returning Ninth Division that wives should be beaten “just in case.”<sup>56</sup> These justifications of male violence not only reveal the dangerous proprietary attitude that emerged over women during this period but also how the sense of a loss of control over female standards of behaviour prompted violent retaliations.

However, the most profound display of women as contested territory was in the anarchy that erupted in Brisbane on the 26 and 27 November 1942. War correspondent John Hinde later stated that “the most furious battle I ever saw during the war was that night in Brisbane. It was like a civil war.”<sup>57</sup> The Battle of Brisbane was the “proverbial snowball.”<sup>58</sup> In a subsequent report compiled by the Military Intelligence Branch, one of the key incitements identified were the public displays of immorality by American servicemen and Australian women, many of whom had husbands serving abroad.<sup>59</sup>

This animosity was particularly apparent on the second night as hordes of Australian soldiers prowled the darkened streets searching for Americans.<sup>60</sup> Two women dining in Christie’s Restaurant that evening recalled their terror as men outside attempted to storm the restaurant. One elaborated, “the men outside were after blood and would never have believed that we were on our own.”<sup>61</sup> In a letter to her mother, Margaret Scott provides one of the greatest testimonies, describing the night as the descent of a civilised world into madness. Unaware of the advice to American personnel to remain off the streets and run whenever they saw groups of Australians, she and her American husband left an evening session at the cinema. The pair were soon spotted by a large cluster of Australians, calling, “There’s a

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<sup>56</sup> Full quote: “Don’t think [this city] belongs to us anymore because it doesn’t. The Yanks own it...if you pick up a sort—don’t. *If she lets you pick her up it means the Yanks don’t want her.* If I had a wife, no matter what I thought of her, I’d give her a hiding just in case.” – Eric Lambert *The Veterans* (Great Britain: Frederick Muller Ltd, 1954) p. 17

<sup>57</sup> Quoted by Barry Ralph, *They Passed This Way* p. 181.

<sup>58</sup> Commissioner Carroll report to the Queensland Premier’s Office quoted by Thompson and Macklin, *The Battle of Brisbane*, p. 220.

<sup>59</sup> This report is outlined in full in Thompson and Macklin, *The Battle of Brisbane* pp. 230-232; Chaplain Trent believed that women were the greatest cause of friction between the troops of the two nations – quoted in Potts and Potts, *Yanks Down Under* p. 296

<sup>60</sup> Barry Ralph, *They Passed this Way* p. 185

<sup>61</sup> Quoted by Potts and Potts, *Yanks Down Under*, p. 306.

bloody Yank—kill him!”<sup>62</sup> Margaret was knocked down twice, punched in the stomach, back and jaw. Her husband John was mercilessly beaten, the gathering crowd jeering, “Kill him—kick him—kick his brains out.” As the distraught wife begged that her husband be freed, one Australian soldier nonchalantly replied, “we’re going to kill him like they murdered our lads—only not with guns but kick him to death.”<sup>63</sup> Finally, the two managed to escape and sheltered in a nearby chemist, the owner barricading the door against the violent mob. Following this incident, Scott and her husband chose not to venture out after dark. Scott deemed the violence “worse than war” and the second night particularly demonstrated the extreme responses that emerged from Australian service personnel as women became caught in a tug-of-war between two nations vying for superiority.

The threat of corruption of Australian women by the American presence was deemed by conservative commentators a more fearful threat than any invading army.<sup>64</sup> The enemy seized upon this alarm as a key to psychological warfare. The primary purpose when using women in propaganda is to evoke an emotional response whilst simultaneously demoralising and emasculating troops abroad. In radio broadcasts by Axis Sally and Tokyo Rose, the “forgotten fighting men” would be recurrently reminded of their wives and sweethearts at home cavorting with handsome American lovers. Australians listening to *Zero Hour* were told that they would “find increases in their families...[and] would never know who the father was.”<sup>65</sup> The impact of these broadcasts could prove devastating. One Allied serviceman testified that his friend upon being singled out by Tokyo Rose for his unfaithful partner “jumped out of his foxhole” and “was immediately mowed down by Japanese gunfire.”<sup>66</sup> Some blamed

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<sup>62</sup> Full letter in Thompson, *The Battle of Brisbane*, p. 225.

<sup>63</sup> This referred to the death of Gunner Edward Webster the night before by American military policeman Private Norbert Grant. Due to strict censorship, the nationalities of casualties were heavily suppressed by the press, which had the adverse effect of allowing gossip to incite the masses on the second night.

<sup>64</sup> James Duhig for instance wrote that: “those who take advantage of war-time for the corruption of youth are worse and more to be feared than the enemy at our gates” – ‘Dangers to Youth in Wartime are Stressed by Archbishop Duhig’ *Catholic Weekly* (27 August 1942) p. 8.

<sup>65</sup> Judith Keene *Treason on the Airwaves: Three Allied Broadcasters on Axis Radio during World War Two* (Westport: Praeger, 2009) p. 148.

<sup>66</sup> Ann Elizabeth Pfau ‘The Legend of Tokyo Rose’ *Miss Yourlovin: GIs, Gender and Domesticity during World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) p. 245.

fickle wives and sweethearts for the high proportion of suicide and mental disorders among troops in the Pacific.<sup>67</sup> As one concluded, these broadcasts of infidelity caused men to “go all to pieces. The war...is over for them.”<sup>68</sup> After being subjected to German leaflets that told of wives and sweethearts being stolen by the Yanks, Australia’s Ninth Division reportedly returned to Australia “breathing fire and brimstone.”<sup>69</sup> So concerned about the potential violence, American servicemen even ordered to remain in their quarters with the windows of the American Centre boarded up.

Japanese leaflets such as *Australia Screams* regularly rained down upon Australian troops in New Guinea (*figure three*). In this source, an American stares lecherously at a struggling woman, murmuring, “Quiet, girlie. Calm yourself. He’ll be on the next casualty list no worry.” The bareness of the woman emphasises her vulnerability to defilement. The contrast between the unmarred, virile figure of the Hollywood-esque American juxtaposed against the haggard, wounded Australian played on the physical disparities between the troops of the two nations. Yet, along with the text, these physical disparities also emphasised the perceived manipulation of ignorant Australian troops who were sent to the front while Americans lived lavishly down under. The foolishness of Australian men was evident: as they fought in a foreign war, their women were abandoned to face the true insidious threat that lurked within their own nation.

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* p. 246

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* p. 244

<sup>69</sup> Dixon Wecker, ‘The Aussie and the Yank’ *The Atlantic Monthly* (May 1946) p. 55.





**Figure Three: *Australia Screams*** <sup>70</sup>

A more inventive use of Japanese propaganda was *Sacrificed* (figure four). A bare woman is shown yearning for her sorrowful lover away at war. The soldier's fate is inevitable, signified in his placement between a cross and an explosion that kills another soldier before him. His hesitation is clear as he glances back towards his beloved. When the leaflet is unfolded, however, the couple is separated by numerous skulls with the woman attempting to fend off the amorous American. Once again, the vulnerability of women on the home front while Australian men were away at war is emphasised. The multitude of skulls placed between the two lovers demonstrates not only the senseless deaths of Australians but also insinuates the scores of other wives and sweethearts who would become vulnerable as a result.

<sup>70</sup> *Australia Screams* (c. 1942-1945) National Library of Australia (3061956) Item 10.

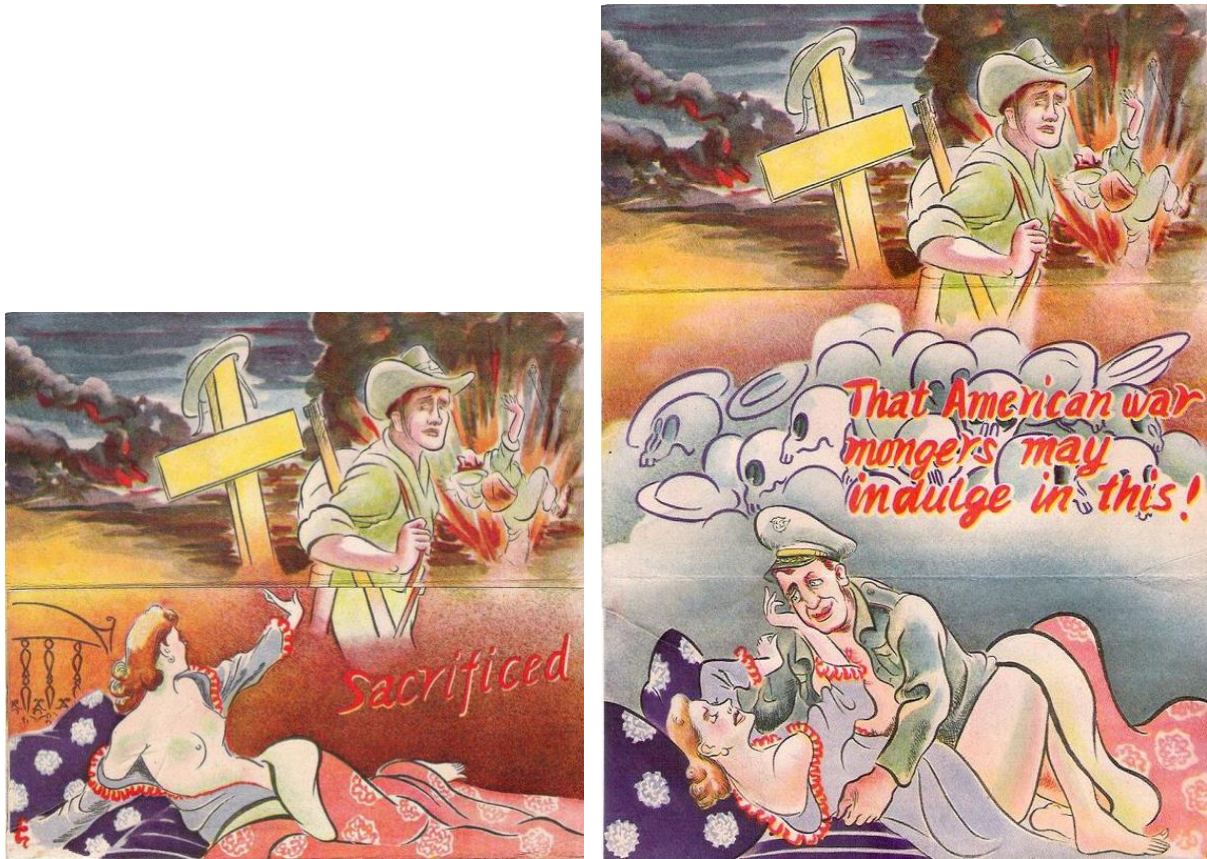


Figure Four: *Sacrificed*<sup>71</sup>

While the resistance image was popular, other more cutting sources of propaganda showed the complicity of Australian women who forgot their partners in the embrace of the glamorous American lover. In *He came, he saw, he conquered!* (figure five), the perception of women as territory is profoundly apparent. The woman wears an American hat signifying that she has been ‘conquered’ by the American. This is juxtaposed to the tattered English flag beneath which a strewn of indiscernible corpses lay. The text taunts, “Thinking you ‘diggers’ will never come back alive...the YANKS are raping your wives, your daughters, your sweethearts—they’re helpless without your protection...One less Aussie simply means one more Yank ‘safely’ in the home.” The source reiterates the ignorance of Australians who were fighting and dying out of allegiance to a foreign flag, abandoning their women to a far greater threat.

<sup>71</sup> *Sacrificed* (c. 1942-1945) National Library of Australia (3061956) Item 1.





**Figure Five:** *He came, he saw, he conquered!*<sup>72</sup>

The prominence of these images in Japanese and German propaganda demonstrates how engrained the fear was over the vulnerability of women in Australia. The tensions over Australian and American intimate relations during the Second World War thus went beyond simple jealousy or conservatism within a small section of Australian society. Evidently, these relationships—and violations—held a far greater symbolic meaning.

The influx of American troops into Australia in the Second World War undoubtedly shaped Australian culture, however, it also sparked enormous social upheaval. Whilst the war is commonly perceived as a time of female liberation, these accounts unveil another perspective in which female bodies were transformed into battlegrounds. Conservative anxieties surrounding eroding gender boundaries and the future of the postwar nation resulted in tightened moral surveillance over women. Yet, women remained exposed to greater violence as troops of two nations vied for sexual dominance. Beneath the

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<sup>72</sup> *He came, he saw, he conquered!* (c. 1942-1945) National Library of Australia (3061956) Item 9.

## *The Threat Within*

pervading influence of total war, private and public lives became inextricably bound and the elevation of romantic affairs to a national crisis becomes clear.

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**Image One:** *Jack the Ripper*

**Source:** 'The London Murder Scare'  
*The Illustrated Police News*  
British Library 188 LON 121A [1888]  
NPL  
**Date:** 3 November 1888



**Image Two:** *'The Brownout Killer'*

**Source:** *Brisbane Telegraph*  
**Date:** 16 June 1950



**Image Three:** *'Pin-Ups'*

**Source:** *Bluey and Curley*  
**Date:** c. 1940s.



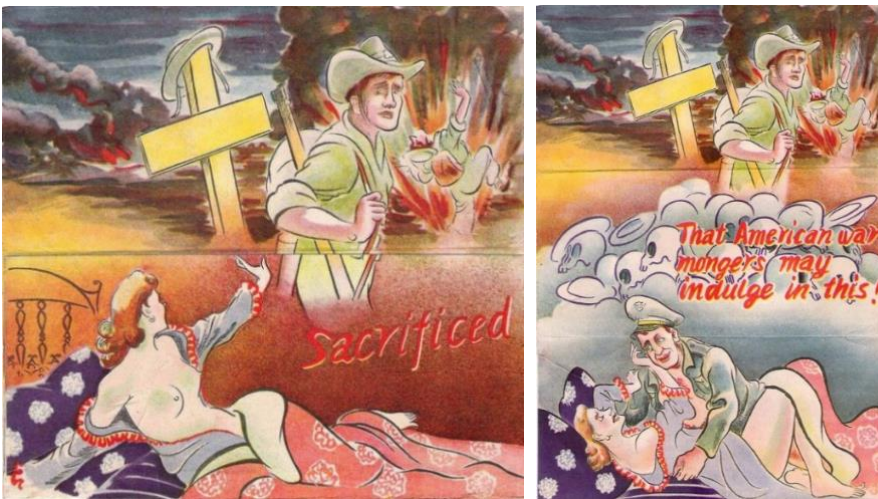
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**Image Four:** *Australia Screams*

**Source:** National Library of Australia, 3061956: Item 10

**Date:** c. 1942-1945



**Image Five:** *Sacrificed*

**Source:** National Library of Australia, 3061956: Item 1

**Date:** c. 1942-1945



**Image Six:** *He came, he saw, he conquered!*

**Source:** National Library of Australia, 3061956: Item 9

**Date:** c. 1942-1945

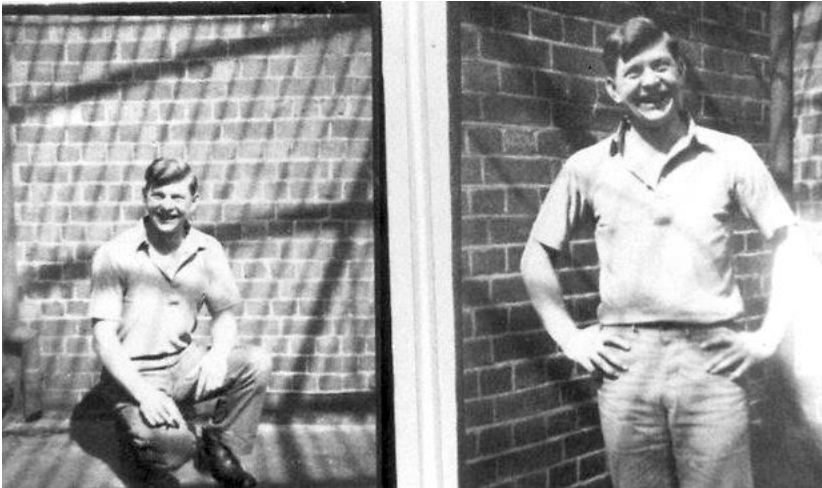




**Image Seven:** *Edward Leonski, dubbed the ‘smiling psychopath’*

**Source:** Jeff Sparrow, ‘The “Brownout Strangler”’: how a smiling psychopath terrorised wartime Melbourne’ *The Guardian* (2 July 2018)

**Date:** Unknown



**Image Eight:** *Edward Leonski days before his execution*

**Source:** Monique Hore, ‘Edward Leonski hanged by US military on Australian soil in The Hangman’s Journal, part IV’ *Herald Sun* (7 June 2012)

**Date:** November 1942



**Image Ten:** *Edward Leonski’s victims:*

\* Note: several other women reported being attacked by Leonski but managed to escape.

**Source:** Jeff Sparrow, ‘The “Brownout Strangler”’: how a smiling psychopath terrorised wartime Melbourne’ *The Guardian* (2 July 2018)

**Date:** Unknown

**Mrs Ivy Violet McLeod**  
(41) killed 3 May 1942

**Mrs. Pauline Thompson**  
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**Miss Gladys Lillian Hosking**  
(40) killed 18 May

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