

Deserters in the Second World War by David Gay

The majority of American servicemen in World War Two who landed in the first waves on the Italian and French coastlines to fight long campaigns did not survive to see their triumph, and some who lived were in prison for desertion. Knowing that they would not be rotated out of the line or receive respite from danger, they had chosen disgrace over the grave.



U.S. Navy and Marine Shore Patrolmen at a railway station near a U.S. naval base in the United Kingdom to prevent U.S. servicemen going AWOL.

A minority deserted to make money, stealing and selling the military supplies that their comrades at the front needed to survive. From 1944 to 1946, Allied deserters ran the black-market economies of Naples, Rome and Paris. Their plundering of Allied supply convoys, often at gunpoint, deprived General George Patton of petrol as his tanks were about to breach Germany's Siegfried Line.

Rampant thieving left their comrades at the front short of food, blankets, ammunition and other vital supplies. In Italy, deserters drove trucks of looted Allied equipment for Italian-American Mafioso Vito Genovese, and Military Police chased the notorious Lane Gang of deserters for most of 1944.

The Lane Gang was a notorious group of Allied deserters (mostly U.S., with some Canadians) operating in Rome in 1944. They were known for smuggling, robbery, extortion, and violence in the city's criminal underworld. The gang was led by a man using the alias Robert Lane, whose real name was Werner Schmiedel, a 23-year-old private from Allentown, Pennsylvania. After deserting from his

disciplinary training stockade near Aversa, Italy on September 2, 1944, he formed a criminal band composed of American and Canadian deserters. They robbed civilians and soldiers alike, including ambushing a Polish general's car and shooting a local man in a liquor store.

Crimes and Capture

Military police pursued the gang across Rome for most of 1944. Despite a daring Christmas Eve prison break in late December, they were recaptured weeks later. Schmiedel (Lane) and his top associate were ultimately hanged in June 1945 by American military authorities for murder.

Broader Context

Similar gangs sprang up across liberated European cities, particularly in Paris and Rome. These groups, composed of deserters, ran black-market operations, hijacked convoys, robbed civilians and soldiers, and sometimes committed violent crimes including rape and murder.



In the run-up to D-Day, military and civilian police rounded up U.S. soldiers in London whose papers were not in order.

Charles Glass's book *'The Deserters: A Hidden History of World War II'* documents how up to 50,000 American and 100,000 British soldiers deserted during the war, and some joined organized criminal outfits in occupied territories.

The Lane Gang represents a darker, lesser-known side of WW2: Allied soldiers who abandoned their duty, turned to organized crime, and preyed on civilians and fellow troops. Their actions undermined military discipline, disrupted logistics, and created chaos in post-occupation urban centres.

Although only one Allied deserter, Private Eddie Slovik, was executed for desertion, a few deserters involved in violent crime, like Schmiedel, received the death penalty for murder.

Timeline of Notorious Crime

- September 2, 1944: Schmiedel escapes confinement and makes his way through war-torn Italy.
- September 7: Alongside Privates James W. Adams and Anthony Tavolieri, he robs an Italian civilian of 150,000 lire near Sparanise.
- September 17: The trio steal pistols and brassards from two U.S. military policemen and later hijack the car of Polish General Władysław Anders near Capua.
- October 10 (Rome): They rob a café and murder an Italian man—this sparked an intense crackdown by military authorities.
- November 3: Schmiedel is arrested at "Rocky's Bar" in Rome. During ensuing operations, Tavolieri dies in a confrontation and several gang members are captured.

Legal Proceedings and Outcome

Schmiedel had been previously court-martialled in August 1944, he was sentenced to 20 years under the Article of War, later reduced to 10 years—only to escape confinement and begin his crime spree shortly thereafter. After the murder conviction, he was sentenced to death. He reportedly escaped during a Christmas Eve prison break, but was ultimately recaptured and executed by hanging at Aversa, Italy on June 11, 1945 at age 22. He was initially buried in Naples and later reinterred at the American Military Cemetery at Oise-Aisne in France in 1949.

Gang Profile & Broader Context

The Lane Gang consisted of entirely soldier-deserters—six Americans and two Canadians—who used stolen Army gear and U.S. military police uniforms during their crimes. Their crimes included robbery, assault, murder, hijacking, and smuggling, primarily targeting civilians and military personnel in Rome and the Rome-Naples corridor. These gangs emerged in lawless Allied-controlled cities, where stranded

deserters opportunistically engaged in black-market activities and violence. A comparable group, the Canadian-led “Sailor Gang”, operated similarly in Rome around the same time.

The Lane Gang’s activity illustrates a largely overlooked phenomenon: Allied military deserters forming violent criminal groups in liberated cities, far from the battle lines. While most deserters never resorted to violence, individuals like Schmiedel were labelled “public enemy number one” by U.S. military authorities due to the severity and brazenness of their crimes. Schmiedel’s execution was one among only 96 U.S. soldiers executed by the U.S. Army in Europe during WWII, most for violent crimes rather than simple desertion.

The Sailor Gang

The gang consisted of Canadian soldiers (and possibly a few British deserters) who deserted during the Italian Campaign and established a criminal operation in Rome’s black-market underworld after the Allied liberation. The gang formed independently of the American-led Lane Gang but bore many similarities in motivation and methods. Members traded in stolen goods and black-market wares in Rome, but their lifestyle deteriorated with heavy drinking, fighting, and escalating reckless behaviour.



A U.S. M.P. with two Italian black-marketeers caught selling American cigarettes in Naples, in November 1944.

A visible turning point came when John “Lucky” McGillivray, a Canadian member, was shot—reports conflict as to whether it was accidental or intentional. According to one survivor, Pringle and the gang leader shot the body post-mortem to frame it as a Mafia-style hit.

The death of McGillivray allowed military police to build a criminal case. Almost all gang members were arrested based on testimony from one member who received immunity for cooperating. Private Harold Joseph Pringle, a Canadian soldier and key figure in the gang, was court-martialled for murder. Despite contesting that McGillivray died accidentally and was mutilated post-mortem in a misguided cover-up, Pringle’s appeal was denied. He was executed on July 5, 1945, by Canadian firing squad in great secrecy, becoming

the only Canadian soldier executed during or immediately after WWII.

The Sailor Gang was tiny—just five members—but emblematic of a broader phenomenon: Allied deserter gangs operating in post-liberation European cities, blending smuggling, violence, and military gear misuse. Canadian and British authorities handled their cases discreetly, partly due to political sensitivity around military executions as elections approached. The British executed two of their own in related cases, so Canadian action was taken quietly to maintain diplomatic reciprocity without public attention.

This case highlights the chaos and moral ambiguity that followed Europe's liberation. Desertion in Western Allied lines was far from rare, but the formation of organized criminal gangs by deserters was

a darker, less widely discussed dimension. While most deserters avoided violence or were quietly dealt with, groups like the Sailor Gang and the American-led Lane Gang illustrate how warfare's fringes could give rise to gangsterism amid wreckage and occupation.

Crime in the Desert

With the increase of the number of troops in Egypt and Palestine, following the entry of Italy into the war (in June 1940), crime increased proportionately. Major Crozier of the British, Royal Military Police wrote, "Conscription had brought into the army a percentage of soldiers with criminal antecedents or tendencies. A number of soldiers had decided that the delights of Cairo and Alexandria were infinitely preferable to the monotony, discomforts and dangers of the Western Desert and East African campaigns. These deserters combined to form troublesome and dangerous gangs which were to become more familiar to the Special Investigation Branch (SIB) under the names of 'The Free British Corps' and 'The Dead-End Kids'. Not a day passed without many arrests being made. The RMP sent extra officers and men, many of them formerly with Scotland Yard, from Britain and the colonies, to deal with the caseload."

Particularly worrying was the sale of British arms and ammunition. Zionist settlers in Palestine, planning their own war against the British were major buyers of looted Allied weapons. Two of their leaders were caught and sentenced to seven and ten years respectively. Their accomplices in the Royal Sussex and Royal East Kent Regiments received fifteen years penal servitude.



A British sailor does business in London's Cutler Street, which became known as 'Loot Alley'.

Major Crozier wrote, "The number of thefts of arms of all types and ammunition was appalling, and 'The Dead-End Kids' were responsible for many of them. This deserter band befriended legitimate soldiers to gain access to bases and canteens, where they stole weapons, food, fuel and other supplies. The SIB shot and killed several of them. Another deserter gang called 'The British Free Corps', survived by selling stolen military supplies, until its members too were caught."

The 'L-Triangle'

By 1944 Glasgow had become Scotland's primary deserters' refuge, as the 'L-Triangle' of London, Leeds and Liverpool had in England. British troops on the run were joined by thousands of Americans, Canadians and other Allies. In the spring of 1944, the U.S. Army Provost Marshal noted that "there were thousands (of) soldiers running around without passes or furloughs".

Many deserters stole military supplies that gangsters sold for them on the black-market, while others lived by armed robbery. One teenage deserter, a small-time

criminal named 'Mad' Frankie Fraser, later recalled, "The war was a criminal's paradise. The most exciting and profitable time ever. It broke my heart when Hitler surrendered".



'Mad' Frankie Fraser continued his gangster lifestyle after the war, at one point becoming 'Britain's Most Dangerous Man'.

By the end of September 1944, the U.S. Military in the European Theatre of Operations found itself waging a war on an unexpected front. American service personnel, in league with French criminals, were plundering Allied supplies. This too was a shooting war in which Americans fought one another. Soldiers at the front could not fight without weapons, ammunition, rations, petrol, boots and blankets. Some couldn't survive without cigarettes.

A front-page story in the 'Washington Post' reported, "This was demonstrated most forcibly last September, when Patton's tanks reached the Siegfried Line and ran dry, while army trucks

were backed up the whole length of the Champs Elysees with G.I.s selling gas by the canful and cigarettes by the carton".

American, Special and Summary Courts Martial convicted more than 60,000 troops of AWOL, and a further 5,834 cases of AWOL were serious enough to be tried by the more formal General Courts Martial that handed out sentences averaging fifteen years hard labour. These were only the men who were caught and brought before the courts. Also, a lot of deserters were not brought before the courts if they returned voluntarily, and were simply reintroduced into their units with a warning or some minor, local punishment because manpower was becoming short.

Paris

Gangs of deserters were rampaging through Paris in the months after the city's liberation. They were armed with rifles and Thompson sub-machine guns. The Paris press compared life in the city to prohibition era Chicago, and put the violence down to the same cause: American gangsters. The Army's Criminal Investigation Branch had to deal with a crime wave for which it was unprepared.

In the eleven-month period from June 1944 to April 1945, agents handled a total of 7,912 cases of which 3,098 or nearly 40 percent, involved misappropriation of U.S. supplies. Greater yet was the proportion of crimes of violence (rape, murder, manslaughter, assault), which supplied 44 percent of the Investigator's work. The remaining percentage was for such crimes as robbery, burglary, housebreaking, riot and mutiny.

One deserter named Whitehead wrote, "We robbed every café in Paris, in all sectors except our own, while the gendarmes went crazy." The gangs turned up at cafes, ordered cases of Champagne and Cognac and after they had been loaded into their jeeps, the men turned their weapons on them. They robbed patrons and customers alike and also robbed private houses, whose bedsheets and radios were 'easy to fence'.

The end of the war brought about the winding down of the deserter gangs. These gangs, even though their numbers and actions are shocking to read, were of course only a tiny minority of the total number of men who were fighting in the Allied services. However, we should not be so complacent as to imagine that the Allied soldiers were all good guys. Cowardice and the lust for money is endemic in all armies and probably always will be.