Quiltmaking in War Time

From 1860 to the Present

By Jan Tiernan Rodgers, M.A.
After Marine Lance Corporal Patrick B. Kenny was killed in action in Iraq in October 2005, his parents, Chuck and Trish Kenny of Emsworth, Pa., received three quilts created in his honor. They have also received painted portraits of Patrick, a metal sculpture of an angel bending over a soldier’s helmet, and a framed display of all the medals and ribbons Patrick earned during his two-and-a-half year career in the Marines. Chuck described the experience as “an outpouring of love and appreciation that was overwhelming and humbling for us.”
Quiltmaking has been a particularly significant way for women to provide moral support and physical comfort to American troops in wartime. They have used domestic skills to demonstrate their patriotic fervor by supporting American military efforts as early as the Civil War through the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Quiltmaking has been a particularly significant way for women to provide moral support and physical comfort to American troops in wartime, and to honor the families of those who sacrificed their lives for their country. Jessica Porter, who as a college student started the Operation Homefront quilt project in 2003 to make quilts in memory of soldiers killed in the Gulf Wars, said, “My parents really impressed upon me a respect for our military men and women and an appreciation of what they do and have to sacrifice to make this commitment to our country. I’ve always grown up with ‘Freedom isn’t free.’”

Jessica’s sentiments are probably not unlike those of Northern and Southern women watching their loved ones march off to battle during the Civil War. Opportunities for women in the mid-19th century were limited to traditional domestic work like sewing and cooking, or the newly evolving profession of nursing on the battlefield. During the Civil War, women on both sides of the conflict supplied their sons and husbands with clothing and bedding as they left for military duty. As women’s roles expanded into the paid labor force during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, their participation in war efforts expanded as well. By the mid-20th century, women served in both official military capacities and in war-related industrial jobs. In the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, women serve in the active military in all but direct combat roles. As women’s roles have changed during the past 150 years, quiltmaking during wartime has continued to serve as a fundraising tool, as a means of providing comfort to wounded soldiers, and as memorial appreciations to soldiers’ families.

Civil War

Less than a week after the April 1861 opening salvo by Confederates on Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina, President Abraham Lincoln called for volunteers to join the Northern army. The standing national army would not have been large enough to fight the secessionist states. The nation responded: men enlisted and women outfitted them with personal supplies including clothing, bedding, and food from home.

When it was clear that a consolidated effort would be needed to fully support the military mission, the United States Sanitary Commission was created by an act of Congress in June 1861. The mostly male founders determined that the mission would be to support the non-military needs of the Northern army: medical supplies, sanitation supplies, food, books, bedding, and clothing. The national organization was supported by regional collection centers in urban areas, including Pittsburgh. The commission’s goals were not only to provide medical and sanitation supplies, but also to boost morale for the war effort among those left at home.

Thousands of local organizations, which had provided for a variety of needs in communities and cities for decades, redirected their efforts as ladies’ aid societies or soldiers’ aid societies and funneled supplies to the regional Sanitary Commission centers throughout the war. These affiliates helped to supply the troops, but they served other purposes:

Ladies’ aid societies performed several functions for the women who joined. They offered a way to focus productive energy and for the women to feel they
work sessions, established record-keeping methods, and created small oval icons that could be inked and stamped on goods to identify which region had provided the blankets, quilts, sheets, towels, and clothing items sent to the troops. They were not able to serve in the military, but “an important function of quiltmaking for them was symbolic participation in history.”

Bedding was a particular problem. Wool blankets were warm, but were in short supply. Cotton quilts were preferred because they were softer than wool blankets, were washable, and allowed wool to be reserved for military uses. Families often sent soldiers to war with family-made quilts, sometimes heirlooms, sometimes newly handmade and sized to fit a military cot.

A bulletin distributed by one of the Northern Aid Societies specified that functional quilts “should be seven feet long, four and a half feet wide, and may be made of old calico or delaine, with cotton quilted firmly between, so that it will not lose its place on being washed.”

Equally as important as securing the physical supplies to maintain the army’s medical and housing needs, fundraising efforts were critical to raise money for purchasing supplies from commercial providers. Beginning in 1863, the U.S. Sanitary Commission hosted Sanitary Fairs in large cities, the most successful of which was the 1864 fair in Philadelphia that raised more than $1 million during its 15-day run. The Pittsburgh Sanitary Fair held in June 1864 raised more than $320,000 even though it overlapped with the larger Philadelphia event (equal to $4.4 million in 2010).

These grand events were designed with both social and patriotic intent. Many featured elaborate live tableaux of nostalgic scenes of early American history and displays of antiquities and oddities to capture the attention of broad audiences. The fairs often highlighted local industrial progress, agriculture, arts, domestic arts, and contemporary clothing styles. Because so much energy was put into

Within their local groups, women translated their traditional domestic duties into war-related work. They developed systematic
display rather than into direct war support, some Sanitary Commission Fairs were not fully supported by the national organization.\textsuperscript{11} Despite the controversy, they were clearly effective at raising money and raffles of fancy appliquéd quilts were among the most successful fundraising tools.\textsuperscript{12}

More mundane and functional quilts comprised the bulk of the quilts made under the auspices of the Sanitary Commission and Ladies Aid Societies. These quilts usually were created from rectangular pieces of patchwork made from dark-colored printed cottons. Although some were hand-quilted, most probably had their layers tied together with short lengths of cotton or wool yarn. Conservative estimates of the quantity of quilts made for soldiers by the Northern Sanitary Commission activities are around 125,000, but there might have been closer to 250,000 quilts distributed by all of the regional groups.\textsuperscript{13} Some of the fancy raffle quilts survive in private or institutional collections, but there are only six documented soldiers’ quilts to have survived the Civil War. These rare examples of the huge outpouring of the wartime quiltmaking efforts are identified by the inked stamped logos of the various Sanitary Commission groups.

**Late 19th Century**

When patchwork quilts fell in popularity following the Civil War, the most significant cause was the high price of cotton. Cotton production had been concentrated in the South before the war, but cotton fabric was woven in factories in the Northeast. After hostilities ceased, cotton production was at a low, driving the cost of raw cotton to an all-time high. Additionally, there was a cultural association connecting recycled textiles and pieced quilts with poverty and a low standard of living.\textsuperscript{14} However, within a decade, the celebration of the country’s centennial in 1876 revived interest in quiltmaking and all crafts associated, correctly or incorrectly, with colonial living. Although quilts from as early as 1726 have been documented in North America, cotton fabric was quite expensive until the 1830s. Women made whole cloth quilts made of wool, wool-linen (linsey-woolsey), or large pieces of cotton chintz, but they were reluctant to cut fabrics into small pieces and re-sew them into patchwork because of the amount of fabric that is wasted in that process. Once New England’s power looms were able to produce large quantities of woven fabrics from American-grown Southern cotton, the price of cotton fabric dropped and the patchwork quilt became a popular vehicle for showcasing women’s hand-sewing skills.\textsuperscript{15}

Quiltmaking in the 1880s through 1900 was dominated by “Crazy Quilts” made of silks, velvets, and woolen fabrics and embellished with exuberant hand embroidery. Not coincidentally, there was an ample supply of silk due to the opening of China to western trade in the 1880s.\textsuperscript{16}
Embroidery had become fashionable in response to an extensive display by Great Britain’s Royal School of Needlework at the well-attended 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. The availability of inexpensive silk and the popularity of embroidery fueled the fashion of making decorative and non-functional quilts intended only to enhance the parlors of Victorian homes.

After the Civil War, the country enjoyed relative peace during which few quilts were made to celebrate American military achievements. One example, which is now in the collection of the Museum of American Folk Art, illustrates how fashionable embroidery was used on a quilt with military ties. The Admiral Dewey Commemorative Quilt was made circa 1900-1910 in Indiana to honor Admiral (then Commodore) George Dewey for his role in the Philippines during the abbreviated Spanish-American War in 1898. It possibly had both honorary and fundraising roles as it features both notations of Dewey’s accomplishments and the names of dozens of local citizens embroidered in red thread.17

The Great War

Industrialization radically changed the American economy in the 50 years between the Civil War and World War I. During that time, “as the American economy diversified and the nature of work became more specialized and subdivided, women were increasingly moving away from home-related work into new and expanding industries and businesses.”18 In addition to their traditional roles in schools and hospitals, women also entered the workforce in offices and factories. As the Great War expanded in

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Europe in 1914-1918, both the American Red Cross and women’s popular magazines encouraged women to “Make quilts—save the blankets for our boys over there.”19 Such evidence demonstrates that some women still were quilting, but a higher percentage of women were working outside their homes than at any previous time in history. When America entered the war in April
1917, many of those women transferred their working skills to businesses and factories in direct support of military efforts, rather than abandon the workforce to sew quilts.

During the 1920s and 1930s, thousands of pieced and appliquéd quilts were made by American women and men. The influence of the decorative aesthetic movement of the 1920s led to the popularity of smooth, whole-cloth satin quilts embellished with elaborate hand stitching. The rise of the Art Nouveau and Art Deco styles in the larger art world also influenced quilt design. Appliquéd quilts were made with sinuous floral motifs that reflected the elegance and sophistication of the era.

When the economy crashed at the end of the 1920s, people were forced to stretch available resources to their maximum potential and patchwork piecing again became stylish. Women were motivated to stretch resources during the Depression by returning to quiltmaking to keep their families warm. Newspapers and magazines provided a constant stream of quilt designs that encouraged women to use resources such as worn-out clothing or printed cotton feed sacks to make affordable bed coverings. Merikay Waldvogel's decades of research into the quiltmaking history of this era reveals that "the patchwork top was colorful and stylized according to the background and individuality of the quilter, who displayed her skill and ingenuity ... but the Depression intensified the quilt's significance as an icon of the womanly role in the home."²⁰

World War II

The American Red Cross took a leading role in supporting Britain and France in their fight against Germany and Italy even before the United States entered the war. Quilts made under the auspices of the Red Cross were sent from the U.S. and Canada before the 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor.²¹ Some were sent to non-combatants, some to injured soldiers, and some were sold to raise funds for other relief supplies. Some quilts sent to Britain had cloth labels stitched on their reverse sides to identify them as Red Cross quilts, but otherwise they were often humble, pieced patchwork quilts.²²

“Remember Pearl Harbor” Victory quilt. The unknown maker pieced 25 red and white silks to urge Allied victory during World War II. Courtesy Sue Reich, Word War II Quilts.
With America’s entrance into World War II in 1941, patriotism returned to the peak levels seen during the 1860s and the quiltering of necessity of the Depression took on a strong patriotic flavor. Quilting groups formed in support of the war effort nationwide. Some focused on making quilts that could be sold for fundraising efforts. Others made quilts to be sent to servicemen as symbols of support at home. Even school children were recruited to sew or knit small patches that could be made into quilts for the Bundles for Britain war relief agency.23 Small groups around the country organized to support USO and Red Cross quilt collections and created folksy names to identify themselves, such as the “Thimble Club” of Kanawha, Iowa, the “Willing Workers” of Ironwood, Michigan, or the “Sew-So Club” of Moberly, Missouri.24

Quilt designers joined the war effort by designing patterns that could be made with scraps of recycled fabrics rather than large pieces of new fabrics. As a Laura Wheeler ad proclaimed, “Scrap quilts conserve materials!”25 With such encouragement, quilters recycled fabrics from diverse sources such as feed sacks, pajamas, shirts, and skirts into the ubiquitous Grandmother’s Flower Garden, Double Wedding Ring, and Dresden Plate patterns that dominate the quilts of the 1930s and ’40s. When new fabrics were purchased, they were often in red, white, and blue. Companies like Stearns and Foster developed patterns that featured emblems of the army and navy, including planes, parachutes, anchors, waves, and stars of all kinds.26 Cotton feed sack fabrics, which had been printed with delicate floral and novelty designs since the 1920s, became available with patriotic imagery during the war in response to the popularity of military motifs.27

Korea and Vietnam

There is little research of quiltering in support of these two wars. Similar to the 1920s, following World War II in the 1950s there was again an impetus to reject the old in favor of the new. Modern styles were streamlined and uncluttered; patchwork was not part of the modern aesthetic.

The Vietnam era of the 1960s and ’70s was wracked by dissention within the culture. For the first time in U.S. history, Americans were not unanimously in favor of military intervention in a remote part of the world. During this turbulent era, people questioned the status quo of everything from civil rights to women’s rights to the environment. The use of the compulsory military draft, complete with deferments or exclusions for college students, created an inequality between men of middle-class standing who could afford to attend college and men of lower socio-economic standing who could not acquire the safety net.
of a deferment. Protests of nearly anything supported by the military-industrial complex, or sometimes the government in general, became widespread on college campuses and in urban neighborhoods. Young women were burning bras and patching blue jeans, but they were not making quilts in support of the war.

The country’s bicentennial changed that. Patriotism found new expression during America’s 200th birthday celebration in 1976. Just as they had 100 years earlier, people returned to quiltmaking and other crafts identified as “colonial.” The political causes that had inspired activism in the 1960s were used for expressive means including such ideas as feminism, civil rights, and ecology. In the 1980s, AIDS quilts became a way of memorializing those who had died of that disease before life-prolonging medical advances were made. Quilts broadened in their ability to express ideas, emotions, and artistic concerns.

Contemporary Quiltmaking in Times of War

Even as they expanded in expressive potential, traditionally styled quilts retained the deep cultural meanings that had been ascribed to them for generations, from the nostalgic view of resourceful women keeping their families warm, to remembering a friend who has moved away, to creating an object that simultaneously embodies aesthetic beauty, tactile comfort, and practical utility. All of these meanings have come together in the most recent use of quiltmaking during wartime.

There was some quiltmaking activity during Operations Desert Storm and Desert Shield in the early 1990s, but quiltmaking to honor military service has blossomed during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Three major memorial quiltmaking projects developed almost simultaneously, all involving the creation of quilts for families of service members who lost their lives in these wars. Thousands of volunteers have collectively created more than 10,000 handmade quilts as of mid-2010. Each quilt has written text including the name and rank of the service member being memorialized and often an inscription that expresses appreciation and honors their sacrifice.

Marine Comfort Quilts was started in 2003 by Jan Lang, the mother of a Marine who was serving in Iraq.

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printed labels denoting the deceased by name, his or her service record, and an emblem of his or her branch of service. The remaining squares vary in design, but all have the name and location of the maker and many include inspirational inscriptions, such as “America’s debt to you can never be repaid,” a sentiment found on Patrick Kenny’s memorial quilt. Each quilt is secured with ties made of cotton embroidery floss, rather than machine or hand quilting, and is sent to the family of the deceased in a flag-decorated cover. As of October 2010, more than 4,100 quilts had been distributed.

Operation Homefront Quilts was started in 2003 by Jessica Porter and her mother, Joanne, of Hudson, Florida. The Porter family has a long history of military service and interest in American history, including participation in Civil War reenactments. The story of 19-year-old Jessica’s leadership received national attention, which caused the project to quickly grow in scale. Rather than send individual squares, contributors make 60 x 45-inch quilt tops in red, white, and blue color schemes. All of the quilts were long-arm machine-quilted by Jessica and finished with an embroidered label acknowledging the family’s loss. For seven years, the mother-daughter team coordinated the efforts to send personalized quilts to the next-of-kin of service members lost in the two wars. By mid-2010, the project had made and distributed more than 2,300 memorial quilts. Both women admitted that when they had started the project, they had not anticipated that the wars would last as long as they have. In the intervening years, Jessica finished college and began working full time. Overwhelmed by the project’s growth by then, the family sent all remaining quilt tops and other supplies to the Caprock Quilters group at Cannon Air Force Base in Clovis, New Mexico, which has agreed to continue the project.

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As the project expanded, a greater variety of Vietnam war veterans as a significant quiltmakers cite the lack of support for quiltmakers “to cope with and channel their subjective experiences of suffering, loss, or fear into something therapeutic and fulfilling.” Interestingly, many volunteer quiltmakers cite the lack of support for Vietnam war veterans as a significant reason for their decision to make quilts to memorialize Gulf War deaths.

Chuck and Trish Kenny display two of the quilts that honor their son Patrick on a rack in their Emsworth home. On the quilt received from the Marine Comfort Quilt group, the squares include one from a Girl Scout troop, two from Wisconsin, and one from Iowa. Many squares carry hand-written messages of appreciation. The Civil War-style quilt received from the Home of the Brave Quilt Project has been entrusted to their eldest daughter, whose husband is currently serving in the army’s Special Forces division. The other two quilts will eventually be given to Patrick’s two younger sisters. Memorial gifts like these quilts can ignite deeply felt emotions that may provide solace or may rekindle the profound sorrow of losing their son and brother. Nevertheless, they have reassured his family that Patrick’s sacrifice touched people around the nation.

An additional project, the Quilts of Valor Foundation, was begun in 2003 by Catherine Roberts of Seaford, Delaware, while her son was deployed in Iraq. The foundation’s goal is to offer comfort to soldiers injured in the wars. As of February 2011, this project has delivered more than 44,000 quilts to soldiers recovering from physical and/or psychological injuries received in service to their country.

Locally, three quilt shops have been recognized as “Official QOV Quilt Shops”: The Quilt Company in Allison Park, Quilter’s Corner in Finleyville, and The Quilt Patch Etc. in Scottsdale. Independent quilting groups in Johnstown, Clinton, and Ambridge also participate.

These four projects alone account for nearly 50,000 quilts that have been made to honor the sacrifices made by members of our military forces who have served in recent wars. Although this figure represents only a small fraction of those made during the Civil War, it represents an enormous outpouring of support for the men and women who have fought in the two current wars. They are part of a long-standing American tradition of using quilts to comfort soldiers in times of war. The qualities embodied by these objects—tactile softness, physical warmth, human scale, enveloping protection, and the evidence of the personal touch of the maker in the piecing and layering process—give them a unique role as a both comforting and commemorative token of appreciation on behalf of our country’s citizens. In his presentation “Remembering With Honor: One Quilter Salutes Our Heroes” at the 2011 American Quilt Study Group’s annual seminar, Don Beld summarized his view of patriotic quiltmaking:

As quilters, we have the obligation to carry on the old traditions. We’re making quilts that are communicative … many are happy quilts, but when we have sadness, we make commemorative quilts too… [W]hen I make these quilts, I want to recognize their sacrifice … but I really want to honor those they have left behind.

It is hoped that all of these quilts will continue to be received with open hearts by the wounded soldiers and the families of those who made the ultimate sacrifice for our nation.

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