Loose Lips, Sink Ships and Censorship

The phrase ‘Loose lips sink ships’ refers to inadvertently revealing sensitive military information that could lead to the sinking of ships. While posters were originally targeted at sailors who might casually mention ship or submarine movements, it could be any casual written or spoken word.

So, do ‘loose lips sink ships’...?
A U.S. example—did this cost 10 submarines and the lives of 800 men
Some British accounts

The risks, however, were considered high enough that many posters were used to tell everyone, in the military or civilian, to be careful.
Today, there’s a lot of emphasis on freedom of speech and expression, and the right of citizens to ‘know’. During the First World War in Canada, there was censorship, originally fairly lightly applied as most newspapers in Canada self-censored. It was introduced as a way to avoid sharing sensitive information that could hurt Canadian armed forces members or weaken the protection of Canada. Later, there also were concerns that information about Canadian lives lost would lead to a questioning of the war effort or other knowledge might cause fear. In the Second World War, reports of German spies in Ottawa, Japanese bombs over the prairies, and lives lost in the Battle of the St. Lawrence were kept secret until much later or until someone ‘there’ reported it. The Canadian armed forces censored all letters going to and from those in the forces. Newspapers, radio, and movies had to pass a censor board.

https://photos1.blogger.com/x/blogger/3840/2079/1600/46005/Lewis%20censored%20letter%201943.jpg
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"Loose Lips Sink Ships"

Millions volunteered or were drafted for military duty during World War II. The majority of these citizen-soldiers had no idea how to conduct themselves to prevent inadvertent disclosure of important information to the enemy. To remedy this, the government established rules of conduct. The following is excerpted from a document given to each soldier as he entered the battle area.

**WRITING HOME**

THINK! Where does the enemy get his information -- information that can put you, and has put your comrades, adrift on an open sea: information that has lost battles and can lose more, unless you personally, vigilantly, perform your duty in SAFEGUARDING MILITARY INFORMATION?

**THERE ARE TEN PROHIBITED SUBJECTS**

1. Don't write military information of Army units -- their location, strength, materiel, or equipment.
2. Don't write of military installations.
3. Don't write of transportation facilities.
4. Don't write of convoys, their routes, ports (including ports of embarkation and disembarkation), time en route, naval protection, or war incidents occurring en route.
5. Don't disclose movements of ships, naval or merchant, troops, or aircraft.
6. Don't mention plans and forecasts or orders for future operations, whether known or just your guess.
7. Don't write about the effect of enemy operations.
8. Don't tell of any casualty until released by proper authority (The Adjutant General) and then only by using the full name of the casualty.
9. Don't attempt to formulate or use a code system, cipher, or shorthand, or any other means to conceal the true meaning of your letter. Violations of this regulation will result in severe punishment.
10. Don't give your location in any way except as authorized by proper authority. Be sure nothing you write about discloses a more specific location than the one authorized.
TALK

SILENCE MEANS SECURITY -- If violation of protective measures is serious within written communications it is disastrous in conversations. Protect your conversation as you do your letters, and be even more careful. A harmful letter can be nullified by censorship; loose talk is direct delivery to the enemy.

If you come home during war your lips must remain sealed and your written hand must be guided by self-imposed censorship. This takes guts. Have you got them or do you want your buddies and your country to pay the price for your showing off. You've faced the battle front; its little enough to ask you to face this 'home front.'

CAPTURE

Most enemy intelligence comes from prisoners. If captured, you are required to give only three facts: YOUR NAME, YOUR GRADE, YOUR ARMY SERIAL NUMBER. Don't talk, don't try to fake stories and use every effort to destroy all papers. When you are going into an area where capture is possible, carry only essential papers and plan to destroy them prior to capture if possible. Do not carry personal letters on your person; they tell much about you, and the envelope has on it your unit and organization.

BE SENSIBLE; USE YOUR HEAD

Other Sources:
http://wartimecanada.ca/document/world-war-ii/advertisements/loose-lips-sink-ships
http://cdigs.uwindsor.ca/omeka/exhibits/show/wartimemail/wartime-mail/censorship
https://www.eyewitnesshistory.com/lslips.htm