

**DEAD BABIES, BOWEL DISTURBANCES, AND OTHER COMBAT  
HUMOR IN AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	1
ABSTRACT.....	2
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	4
II. COMPONENTS.....	7
Methods and Theory.....	7
“Humor fights Horror” .....	11
Community, or the Brotherhood.....	16
Authoritative Humor.....	22
III. CONCLUSION.....	28
REFERENCES.....	30

## **ABSTRACT**

Dead Babies, Bowel Disturbances, and Other Combat Humor  
in Afghanistan and Iraq (May 2013)

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The United States has deployed American soldiers to Afghanistan and Iraq for over a decade, often sending its soldiers for a second or third tour. The soldiers' combat experience has changed dramatically since previous wars and soldiers are returning with more psychological burdens. Various attempts have been made to decrease the psychological burdens on these American soldiers. However, I believe a missing component of these attempts is a thorough understanding of the military as its own separate culture. This comprehension of the military as a separate culture is imperative in order to aid the soldiers through the adjustment of civilian life.

Similar to other subcultures, the military has its own language, belief system, behavioral characteristics, and material conditions. I would like to focus on language because communication is a crucial component of any culture and it is a constant reminder of the difference between civilian and soldier. In order to focus on language and the other components of the American military culture, I will be gathering narratives and descriptions from soldiers, through academic research, and interviews. I account specifically for military humor to lessen

the horror of armed conflict, to establish community among soldiers, and to build up and break down hierarchy. This humor serves to cement a subculture while distinguishing its members from mainstream American culture. My thesis introduces civilians to military culture through this humor.

# **CHAPTER I**

## **INTRODUCTION**

President Barack Obama “boosted the combat deployment in Afghanistan but promised the U.S. would withdraw by the end of 2014” according to Time Magazine’s “The Essential Voter’s Guide” (85). Consequently if such a withdrawal occurs, an influx of deployed soldiers will be returning in roughly a year. And yet, the civilian population is largely unaware of the war in the Afghanistan and Iraq.

World War I, World War II, and the Vietnam War hovered over the American civilian life. Despite the rise in technology and communication, the current American civilians can remain ignorant of the experiences occurring overseas because military service is no longer a requirement. This ignorance has been termed as the “disconnect” between the military and the civilian life. The military is an increasingly isolated subculture within the United States. And now, there is a projected influx of returning soldiers who are disconnected from the majority of the population.

This disconnect emerges from various societal factors, but I believe the main difficulty is the mutual incomprehension between returning veterans and civilians. The first step to repair this American disconnect between the civilians and the military is a comprehension of the varying communication styles. Comprehension of the military discourse is essential for various reasons. While members of the military subculture were initially civilian and later became integrated into a subculture their understanding of civilian culture is clear. However, the larger group has little

background knowledge of the military subculture and must create an effort to better comprehend this population to better facilitate their integration into civilian society. One entry into military discourse and the subculture it forms is through humor, the jesting language that cements the unspoken intricacy of the brotherhood.

After reading multiple accounts and listening to various interviews from veteran soldiers that were deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan, there appears to be a consistent theme of disgruntlement towards the civilian life by the soldiers. Staff Sergeant Parker Gyokeres articulated this consistent theme in his journal, which he would send to friends and family members during his deployment, observing

“[t]he main issue for me has been adjusting to a life without the dear friends I served with and whom I grew to love—and, without whom, I felt lost, alone, and unable to relate to others. I am told this is normal. That did not, however, make it easier . . . The world I returned to was disorienting, confusing, and frustrating to me. The racket and clutter of daily life gave me a tremendous headache . . . Obviously we heard our share of noise in Iraq, some of it sudden and terrifying, but overall it wasn’t so incessant. Wherever I walk today I feel like I’m surrounded by a barrage of electronic trash—music blasting everywhere, cell phones ringing, people chatting away and have the most inane conversations, and all of it louder than when I left for Iraq. Over there, we had the comforting simplicity of a routine. There was a purity to our lives. There were life-and-death implications to our actions, but all we had to worry about was our friends and ourselves. I’m not saying that either we or our jobs are any better or worse than anyone

else's back here, but just different. I'm slowly acclimating to a civilian world and the speed of modern life, but it has not always been pleasant" (Carroll 369-360).

This consistent theme of disgruntlement towards civilian life, paired with the obvious disconnect between the military and civilian life, has accumulated into a degree of social alienation among Afghanistan and Iraqi veterans. Therefore, a better comprehension of the military life is necessary for successful reintegration into civilian life. I propose an analysis focused on military humor as a preliminary effort toward a better comprehension of the military. This analysis will discuss how humor serves three purposes within the military: to lessen the horror of armed conflict, to establish community among soldiers, and to build up and break down hierarchy.

This examination of military humor does not intend to make light of the combat experience. However, I believe that the ordinary is a better way to access combatant experience than the dramatic or the sensational because of its regularity. I will discuss humor that arose during horrific situations, but the humor within those situations actually works to create the dramatic or sensational into the ordinary. Consequently, my goal is to reconnect the civilian and military subcultures within the United States through a discussion of military humor.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **COMPONENTS**

#### **Methods and Theory**

Several tendencies are obvious within the military language and jargon, such as acronyms and imperative sentences. However, humor is one of the less obvious foundations within the military language that necessitates examination.

The incorporation of humor into the military is crucial for various reasons, though the most consistent appears to be the release against horror. An important idea, as articulated by John Morreall, is that amusement, which is the response of successful humor, is not an emotion. Morreall argues that “amusement is like the aesthetic enjoyment of music or fine art, which is a paradigm of disinterested pleasure. Emotions, by contrast, are paradigms of “interested” states” (32). However, Morreall believes emotion engages and amusement disengages its participators, leading to the suppression of each other. I argue that amusement, the response of successful humor, provides relief and therefore releases the negative feelings of emotion due to the mental and physical benefits of the chemical hormones released within the human body.

The decision to analyze military humor is related to the idea that humor is a portal to make connections and to communicate across boundaries. While there are some physical situations or verbal communications that are culturally-specific humor, some episodes can span across differing cultures. For instance, the banana-peel slip. Someone accidentally steps on a banana

peel, slips, and crashes. This episode could be humorous, regardless of a civilian or military background.

This paper will also emphasize the spontaneous-real life humor found within the military and the current Afghanistan and Iraq deployments. The examination of military humor does not intend to make light of the combat experience. “In Western culture there is a long tradition of prejudice against humor, especially in connection with anything as tragic as the Holocaust” (Morreall 119). While the war overseas is not the exact same as the murder of six million Jews, the combat experience can be traumatic and the typical stance upon “tragedy, on stage or in real life, is serious, even sublime, while humor and comedy are “light”” (Morreall 119). However, Morreall discusses how “the ancient Greeks, Shakespeare, and other dramatists took their comedy more seriously than that. They realized that comedy is not “time out” from the real world; rather it provides another perspective on that world. And that perspective is no less valuable than the tragic perspective. As Conrad Hyers has suggested, comedy expresses a “stubborn refusal to give tragedy . . . the final say” (Morreall 119). “Even in ancient Greece, some people questioned militaristic tribalism and the emotions that supported it. One way was by counterbalancing tragedies with comedies” (Morreall 78). “Instead of the emotions evoked by tragedy and epic, and the military attitudes they fostered, comedy offered a non-emotional, playful approach to life, portraying it not as a series of battles, but as a series of adventures in which we play as well as work. The problems in comedy were much the same as in tragedy, but they didn’t evoke pity and fear in the audience” (Morreall 78). “In the research of Alice Isen and of Avner Ziv, people who engaged in humor exercises before doing “brainstorming” thought up more solutions and more varied solutions to problems. Those who had *experienced* something funny, such as a

comedy video-tape, were more creative than a control group, and those who had *generated* humor – as by thinking up captions for cartoon drawings – were more creative yet” (Morreall 112-113).

However, the vast majority of humor located with human life deals with spontaneous instances in real-life experiences. “Spontaneous humor . . . is not only more common than joke-telling, but more important in bringing people together and allowing them to exchange experiences, information, beliefs, and attitudes” (Morreall 88-89).

One Iraq veteran soldier describes the use of laughter as an intoxicant to forget their troubles: “And since we can’t enjoy an ice-cold beer made in Milwaukee, Wis., we get drunk off laughter” (Burden 31). He states that he and his fellow soldiers are “just carrying on a tradition of what I like to call ‘Stuck in a Foreign Country Fighting a War (SFCFW) humor’” (Burden 32). This playful acronym also displays elements of the authoritative humor which I will discuss below by creating a parody of official military terms and titles expressed often in acronyms.

Aggression and dominance in humor also assist the military subculture, due to the attitudes necessary to the overall mission to attack and defend as a protector of the country. Albert Katz, a cognitive psychologist at the University of Western Ontario, recently examined the wisecrackers' focus on one-upsmanship from a biological perspective, showing that people whose brains are best equipped to understand sarcasm tend to have aggressive personalities. Consequently, people with aggressive personalities would be more likely to utilize sarcasm in various conversational or

controversial situations. Katz connects the use of sarcasm with a desire for dominance, for both the initiators of sarcasm and those who retort (Svoboda 44).

Soldiers are also trained to be aggressive, to display aggression through their actions whether they are verbal response to a superior or physical response to an enemy. Therefore, the display of aggression through sarcasm and humor is an obvious tactic by a soldier when dealing with an irritating assignment (where the soldier might feel belittled as an adult) or when dealing with a traumatic event.

However military humor when applied to similar frictions in civilian life may alienate the subculture from the mainstream. In an interview with my research team, Jeremiah Pittman describes a situation where he utilized sarcasm in order to defend himself in a confrontation by an angry civilian. He states that the woman, who appeared intoxicated, angrily approached his table, and asked him, “How can you do it?” Pittman states that he cautiously responded to her question with another: “Do what?” And the woman specifically asked him: “How can you burn babies?” Pittman, a father of three young children, responded with “Well ma’am. Have you ever tried to eat them raw?”

In this scenario, Pittman offers a humorous relief to a rather upsetting scenario; aggressive approaches at a public restaurant about burnt babies is not oftentimes considered a nice evening out on the town. Pittman’s retort is clearly sarcastic; he mocks her question through his own question. Instead of refuting her obviously aggressive and hostile question, Pittman displays the ludicrousness of her attitude by responding in an even more ludicrous manner: of course he

burns the babies – raw babies are simply unappetizing to devour. This example serves both to illustrate the frictions between contemporary culture and military subculture and to demonstrate the complex purposes military humor serves.

### **Humor Fights Horror**

Soldiers may utilize sarcasm in order to stimulate the effect of “humor fights horror” with regards to the trauma associated in combat. Sidney Phillips, World War II veteran and collaborator for Kevin Burns’ documentary *The War*, discusses this verbal reaction of “humor fights horror.” He describes how the “worse things got, the more sarcastic everyone got, instead of showing sympathy or emotions” (Santoro 17).

Successful humor (or amusement), provides release from negative emotions associated with traumatic events. “In responding to life’s problems, what comedy recommends is not emotions but thinking – and rethinking. In this way, comedy is like Buddhism, with its insistence that the way we look at things is more important than things-in-themselves, if there even are such things” (Morreall 82). Comedy can provide a more elastic viewpoint within certain events.

Sergeant Elizabeth A. Le Bel fought horror with humor, showing contempt for her situation during deployment by incorporating sarcasm after waking up after her truck was hit by an improvised explosive device (IED). She states that the whole time she was trapped and in the process of being extricated, her “ever present humor was out in full force.” She made joking remarks about losing her pretty face, bantering with an Australian doctor about her matching panties and bra, mimicking his accent, and overall “cracking utterly inappropriate jokes and

keeping myself upbeat and not letting myself think about my injuries” (Burden 37-38). She states that she made the comment about her face (apparently she thought her face had been blown off) simply in order to make herself laugh; with this display of contempt for the situation, she fought its horrific implications. The jokes related to her underwear dealt with the fact that the medics cut off all her clothing besides the bra and panties. Her mimicry of the Australian attempted to lessen her vulnerability.

One unnamed gunnery sergeant suffered a triple amputation: one leg below the knee, one at the hip, and one arm below the elbow. Navy medical personnel, Noelle related the following narrative about him:

““Captain M had to do a rectal on him before we sent him on the helo [helicopter] to Baghdad . . . checking for internal bleeding. He told the Gunny that he was sorry, that he knew he was dealing with enough, but he still had to do it. The Gunny was cool about it, saying he understood. When the captain was in the middle of the exam, the Gunny yelled out, ‘Hey, Doc, don’t I at least get a reach-around?’ . . . And suddenly we were all cracking up. And the Gunny just had this smile on his face . . . He told jokes the entire time we worked in there. It was like a stand-up routine. When the helo landed, and they came to get him, he waved at us with his one arm and gave us a thumbs-up”” (Kraft 81-82).

Despite this gunnery sergeant’s subordinate status due to his role as a patient during the time of this narrative, he creates a situation of amusement. His joking protest about the lack of genital stimulation during the rectal exam releases the negative emotions that would be commonly associated the possibility of internal bleeding by the alluded suggestion that the penetration

compelled genital stimulation as well. And due to his status as a patient, the gunnery sergeant's well-being is of the utmost importance to the medical personnel. The gunnery sergeant's yelled protest in the midst of the exam also provided him with a vocalized strength not typically associated with someone missing seventy-five percent of their lungs. The shock value paired with the sexualized statement changes the mood for the medical personnel. Instead of a tense and nervous atmosphere, the gunnery sergeant switches the mood to something more relaxed due to his consistent stream of jokes before he was transported to the helicopter. In this case humor serves his physical and mental rehabilitation.

However, sometimes the humor needs more time to emerge. Staff Sergeant Thom Tran, brainchild of the GIs of Comedy (a traveling troupe of troops), believes that a time-lined distance from an event is necessary for the event to be viewed as humorous. In an interview, Tran describes an instance where, after too many consecutive days of MREs (Meals Ready to Eat), he devoured the "best" local fried fish available during his deployment in Iraq. Unfortunately, he developed dysentery and after two days of "shitting [his] brains out," was engaged in a firefight. Tran, suffering from cold sweats and unfortunate bowel movements, needed to be reprimanded by his major in order to participate in the firefight. Once situated on the rooftop with the rest of his unit Tran – clothed only in boxer shorts, flip-flops, and his Kevlar helmet – squatted down in a firing position with his pants dropped. Returning incoming fire, Tran remembers "the recoil made me shit as I'm firing. So I dropped a magazine of ammo and was shitting at the same time." He also managed to make a slight mess on his major's boots. Tran related this story to me in front of three other GIs of Comedy. All of them laughing and animated, Tran informed me that while "it wasn't funny at the time . . . when you think about it, not many people get to

participate in a firefight while crapping their brains out.” One of the comedians, Captain Jody Fuller contributed the pun “Shitter on the Roof,” describing Tran’s location on the rooftop during the firefight. All of the GIs found this pun vastly amusing, and chimed in with interchangeable singing and gunfire sound effects. Their humor bonded the group and formed a bridge with their civilian interviewer while displaying rhetorical finesse. Morreall argues “humorous amusement involves higher-order thinking, especially seeing things from multiple perspectives” (79). This higher-order thinking is directly related to Morreall’s previous idea that people who experience humor are more creative, and those who create humor are more creative yet.

This essential creativity can be helpful on more somber occasions. Dr. Heidi Kraft, a Navy psychologist deployed to Iraq to care for Marines and the medical personnel, was sent to work with the Marines of Mortuary Affairs in a group intervention setting for combat psychology. She writes that a common theme kept emerging again and again in her session with the Marines: brotherhood. The Marines of Mortuary Affairs articulated that ““No else did anything even close to it . . . And we’re the only ones who did it. We will have to count on each other and no one else.”” “I guess we’re all we have”” (Kraft 103). Oftentimes, soldiers do feel as if no one else could possibly understand their experiences, so the soldiers will find support within the brotherhood. This group intervention meeting occurred shortly after “four American contractors . . . were burned and hung from [a] bridge . . . [and] unlike the hospital staff, who also cared for people who were going to be all right, the MA unit’s work was always about death” (Kraft 100-101). During the group intervention meeting, a lance corporal’s story particularly affected the group’s mood: ““Once, I was going through this Marine’s pockets, and there was an ultrasound picture in there . . . An ultrasound picture. He was going to be a dad.” His voice cracked and he

looked down, twisting his wedding ring. Several men lowered their heads, and several others pinched at their eyes” (Kraft 102). However, humorous community-building within the brotherhood still managed to be implemented smoothly into the setting. “One of the senior men of the group, a staff sergeant, broke the tense mood. ‘For me, the worst thing is that I can’t eat cheeseburgers anymore. I can’t stand the smell . . . And that pisses me off, Doc, because I really used to love cheeseburgers . . . Other Marines will come home with other problems. I’ll come home a fucking vegetarian’” (Kraft 103). While at the same time staff sergeant’s humor diffused his authoritative status within the unit and reversal in the discussion’s theme. He already has the influence due to his higher ranking status within the unit and lengthier service within the Marines. The staff sergeant also adds to the community by injecting his cheeseburger comment after the discussion of the ultrasound picture. Most soldiers would be affected by the horror of dying and leaving behind a partner with a child. And due to the hypermasculinity in the military, most soldiers would be horrified if they unwillingly became a vegetarian. Vegetarians are stereotypically viewed as effeminate liberal hippies within the United States, and cheeseburgers are also emblematic of the United States – all that is greasy, unhealthy, and tasty. The humor released in this situation concerning vegetarians involves both cognitive and practical disengagement. Linguistically, the actual pronunciation of the word “cheeseburgers” even adds to the humorous effect. The combination of the *ch* sound and the hard double-*e* create a slightly silly-sounding word, further accentuated due to the terse subject discussed beforehand.

Shared culture, therefore, is not merely background or context for comedy; a community like this military brotherhood constitutes humor and makes the joke possible. And not only is the joke

desired, but necessary. As Thomas Aquinas said, enjoying a hearty laugh can be an innocent and welcome release from tension and negative emotions.

### **Community, or the Brotherhood**

The brotherhood between soldiers is perhaps the most valued aspect of military experience.

Chris Hedges argues that soldiers “live only for their herd, those hapless soldiers who are bound into their unit to ward off death. There is no world outside the unit. It alone endows worth and meaning . . .

And there is – as many combat veterans will tell you – a kind of love in this” (40). Comedy serves to cement the ties of comrades. “While tragedy focuses on an individual, the basic unit in a comedy is a group, such as a family, a village, or a bunch of coworkers. And the good of the group trumps the good of the individual” (Morreall 82). In comedy, as in tragedy, there are misfortunes and death, but because the individuals are “all in this together,” the experience is much easier to get through (Morreall 83).

Not only does community make combat experience easier, the brotherhood is oftentimes the only reason that soldiers complete several deployments. Multiple accounts by veterans have related their willingness to deploy yet again because they want to return to their comrades. “The closer they are to their buddies, and the company they trained and deployed with, the better chance you have of returning them to combat,” says Col. David Furness, commander of 1st Marine Regiment” (Phillips 1). For them, reintegration into civilian life is like “leaving a family. We also [leave] behind memories, some of them beautiful and some horrific, that left a deep impression on us [because] Traumatic, life-changing, or spiritual events can bond people in ways that are hard to explain” (Carroll 370).

Sebastian Junger, an embedded journalist in the Korengal Valley, wrote that the brotherhood

“[a]s defined by soldiers . . . is the willingness to sacrifice one’s life for the group. That’s a very different thing from friendship, which is entirely a function of how you feel about another person. Brotherhood has nothing to do with feelings; it has to do with how you define your relationship to others. It has to do with the rather profound decision to put the welfare of the group above your personal welfare. In such a system, feelings are meaningless. In such a system, who you are entirely depends on your willingness to *surrender* who you are. Once you’ve experienced the psychological comfort of belonging to such a group, it’s apparently very hard to give it up” (Junger 275).

This reluctance to “give it up” is understandable considering that “[t]here are two Americas: One is at war. One is at play. In one America parents are waking up with a sickening jolt as they yearn for the news of beloved sons and daughters in harm’s way. The other America sleeps soundly, barely aware of the fact that there are young men and women who are living rough, if they are lucky, and getting shot if they are unlucky” (Schaeffer 315). And when soldiers return, the civilian life can seem pointless. There are no life-and-death decisions that emerge throughout the day; sometimes the biggest decision might be the cereal in the grocery store. Given that the military withholds certain strategic information, the struggle of returning soldiers towards the civilian culture is not easily articulated. Additionally soldiers report that the portrayal of the military in the media is often unpleasant.

Repeatedly, veteran soldiers are displayed in the media committing violent acts resulting from the effects of post-traumatic stress. David Phillips’ *Lethal Warriors* exemplifies this tactic within the media. The consistent push towards the idea of a ‘violent veteran’ creates a deplorable

stereotype returning soldiers encounter. Too often, as Pittman's experience indicates, soldiers are paralleled with violence – and only violence. In interviews, soldiers have stated that civilians often ask, 'Did you kill anyone?' This parallelism of violence and soldiers stems from the typical human fear of pain, violence, and death. Soldiers are viewed as trained killers amongst the civilian culture.

In his book, *The Blog of War*, Matthew Currier Burden writes that "sometimes a sense of humor helps to ease the pressure of being in a war zone" (Burden 45). Jokes assert, produce, and solidify community, relying as James English argues, on a "prior recognition on the part of participants, of shared, or partly shared, attitudes toward this system of norms..." (6). He observes that "humor is social practice" (1) situated in its particular historical, political, and communal context.

Several themes are obvious within the military language and jargon, such as acronyms and imperative sentences. I have already outlined and discussed the recurrence of "humor fights horror" and the brotherhood. Authoritative humor is another prevalent component within the military language and dialogue that combines both humor versus horror and the brotherhood. Authoritative humor is a particular kind of humor or wit that can parody or satirize the authoritative hierarchy within the military, in addition to creating humor through utilizing an authoritative stance within the situation. And what could be the easiest (and most established) component of deployment for soldiers to parody?

The hierarchy: the authority, rules, and regulations that create the foundation for the soldiers' daily life during deployment. Hence, authoritative humor is a fundamental theme within the military jargon to 'fight the horror' accompanied with war and combat through the breakdown and build-up of hierarchy. In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin proposed the possibility that jokes and comedy can be transgressive or destabilizing to the established order, but only within the limited context of the carnival or carnivalesque.

Military language and jargon implements authoritative humor throughout most aspects of the deployment experience, whether during the mundane or the traumatic. There are various incidents of American soldiers incorporating authoritative humor into his or her language even if they are simply interacting amongst the brotherhood, performing their job, or even eating and relieving themselves.

No one correlates community-building humor with trained killers. Chris Holcombe has observed that humor is "always a flirtation with disorder," a powerful communication between differences that has the potential to disrupt, if only temporarily, social and communal orders (Holcombe 3). I would argue that humor's flirtation with disorder not only disrupts, but also creates and rebuilds community.

Staff Sergeant CJ Grisham, a Military Intelligence analyst for a combat brigade in 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division, described one particular incident of humor, using concealed mockery, with regards to his second lieutenant. The underlying diplomacy between Staff Sergeant Grisham and his second lieutenant is that a staff sergeant needs the experience of six years within the military to make

such rank. The second lieutenant is fresh out of officer school with no experience but outranks the more experience soldier. This second lieutenant had discovered a map he presumed was an insurgent document or plan and informed Staff Sergeant Grisham that it was urgent and Grisham needed to analyze them immediately. After examining the map, Grisham assembled other soldiers and briefed them on their tasks during Grisham's meeting with the second lieutenant: "We needed someone to take detailed pictures of the map, someone to agree profusely and sternly to everything [Grisham] said, and someone to apply the pressure. [Grisham] would ask the questions." After questioning the lieutenant closely with the questions: "Did he have any other maps on him that he could see? . . . Would he be able to get there again? Were there other people around? Did they see the man drop the map? Does he know what this thing is?" Grisham described the significance of all the intricate details on the map. And then unfolded the top righthand corner to reveal the lettering "Pattern #326" and the name of the dress pattern for a little girl. To conclude the entire mockery of this elaborate set-up, this thirty-five minute exchange was also caught on film.

Grisham displays contempt for the situation, in a good-natured manner. This mockery of the second lieutenant, similar to the mockery of a younger brother, is simply intended to decrease the pressure of deployment and combat within the war zone. It also both subverts and upholds military hierarchy.

The functioning of humor is also evident in Lieutenant Todd Vorenkamp's experience: he "had to endure the initiation "ceremony" commonly inflicted on all . . . soldiers who [have] not crossed the equator . . . [even though] he had crossed the equator multiple times, just not on a

U.S. warship” (Carroll 149). In order to resist the naval equator-crossing ceremony, Lieutenant Vorenkamp wrote the following on his T-shirt:

“I HAVE BEEN ACROSS THE EQUATOR OF THE PLANET EARTH 6 TIMES ON BOARD SHIPS. IF YOU HAVE CROSSED THE EQUATOR LESS THAN 6 TIMES PLEASE FIND SOMEONE WHO IS LESS SALTY THAN YOURSELF [and] On the back: FROM “NAVAL TRADITIONS AND CEREMONIES”: “THE CROSSING THE LINE CEREMONIES OF THE MODERN NAVY ARE THE MOST PICTURESQUE. IN MERCHANT SHIPS THE CEREMONY IS STILL REASONABLY SEVERE AND PHYSICAL DISCOMFORTS INFLICTED.” ONCE AGAIN . . . THIS IS MY 7TH LINE CROSSING. THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION AND PASSION” (Carroll 149).

Lieutenant Vorenkamp’s decision to create a T-shirt with the writing scrawled on the front and back complements the brotherhood in three different ways: first, his sentence structure and word choice; second, the quote from “Naval Traditions and Ceremonies”; and third, his consequential satirical tone. Lieutenant Vorenkamp employs declarative sentences to relay his background information as a sailor on a merchant ship. He uses his experience as an authoritative stance against the initiation process for himself; this expression of his authority through experience is made humorous by the fact that Lieutenant Vorenkamp scrawled the words onto his T-shirt. Lieutenant Vorenkamp’s word choices of “planet Earth” and “less salty than yourself” are clearly chosen for the humorous effect – the overly formal phrase “planet Earth” places emphasis on the physical relation of the Earth with the unnecessary description of “planet” and the informal phrase “less salty than yourself” is an entertaining way to depict sailor seniority with relation to the saltiness of the ocean water. The quotation from the “Naval Traditions and Ceremonies” is the second implementation of authoritative humor; by quoting a legitimate source within the Navy, Lieutenant Vorenkamp justifies his reluctance to join the initiation

process. And of course, the justification is made humorous due to the fact that Lieutenant Vorenkamp scrawled the quotation onto his T-shirt that morning. The combination of word choice and sentence structure with the quotation creates Lieutenant Vorenkamp's satirical tone within his scrawled passage. The passage and its construction onto the T-shirt create humorous context (due to the fact that Lieutenant Vorenkamp is strutting around the ship with the homemade T-shirt design) and a slight over-exaggeration of the situation. The scrawled message attempts to place extra emphasis within authoritative humor on Lieutenant Vorenkamp's experience.

The brotherhood is also implemented by the female soldiers, a minority within the military. And technically not "brothers." As such members, female soldiers are sometimes subjected to varying kinds of sexual harassment from their male comrades.

"Sergeant Miriam Barton's solution was to deal out justice herself. "The military pretty much looks down on whistleblowers, but we had a couple semiheavy gunners like me who were female, so when we knew a male was trying to get into somebody's pants, we three would take care of it together. We duct-taped one guy to his rack [bed]. Another guy we tied up with dental floss when he was passed out, called everybody around, and then fired a shot and yelled 'Attack!' Public humiliation is a great way of getting your point across"" (Benedict 107).

While this is a less endearing example of community building, this situation was performed due to an issue of sexual harassment. Hence, the female semiheavy gunners were less inclined to be benevolent. Sergeant Barton's inclusion of "everybody" for the firing of the shot and call of "Attack!" is crucial for the application of the brotherhood. The male under attack via dental

floss is placed in the inferior position due to lack of consciousness in the midst of dental floss violence. The female soldiers consequently give themselves the position of authority in the situation. They also further the brotherhood by including everyone in the ridicule. The firing of a gun with the added call of “Attack!” instigates fear in the entangled male soldier, most likely causing him to wake up and struggle with the dental floss. The subsequent public humiliation implies that the crowd of soldiers around the entangled male soldier found the situation humorous. To humiliate is to make someone feel foolish; to feel foolish, one must be the fool. And to be a fool has the background of silliness. Therefore, the female soldiers have created a situation of community building through the humiliation of the male soldier. Similarly, laughter and joking are an indication of more intimate bonds within a community in which shared humor is often one of the primary signs of solidarity.

### **Authoritative Humor**

Due to the camaraderie and the prevalent authoritative components within the military, the instances of authoritative humor between soldiers are crucial to comprehending the military jargon. Humor “promotes divergent thinking in two ways. First, it blocks negative emotions such as fear, anger, and sadness, which suppress creativity by steering thought into familiar channels. Secondly, humor is a way of appreciating cognitive shifts: when we are in a humorous frame of mind, we are automatically on the lookout for unusual ideas and new ways of putting ideas together. A third intellectual virtue fostered by humor is critical thinking. In looking for incongruity in society, we look for discrepancies between what people should do, what they say they do, and what they actually do” (Morreall 113). These modes are apparent in Lieutenant Colonel Stephen McAllister’s personal narrative “Force Providers” in *Operation Homecoming*, a

collection of literary works by Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. In “Force Providers,” Lieutenant Colonel McAllister describes the valued commodity of newly imported flushing toilets and their eventual depreciation in cleanliness. As a result, “Crapper Guard” was instigated. The headquarters’ director, a brigadier general issued a memo declaring that guard duty would start immediately as “a result of individual(s) trashing the latrine and other unethical acts” (Carroll 144-145). Soldiers were given shifts placed outside the flushing toilets (which was a commodity that many deployed soldiers were not fortunate enough to utilize) and told to inspect the bathroom before and after a soldier operated the “Force Provider’s” machineries.<sup>1</sup> One soldier, nicknamed “Zipper” (aptly named for latrine duty), decided to apply authoritative humor to the task of crapper guard. Zipper created a makeshift gun out of a broom and a roll of toilet paper, and asked Lovin, “a popular, well-respected Army sergeant, to escort him to his duties and perform the guard mount . . . [they] were followed by a half-dozen giggling onlookers” (Carroll 145). Zipper, Lovin, and the outgoing crapper guard then created a parody of “the changing of the guard,” complete with a uniform inspection regarding crisper sleeves and more attention to ironing, toilet inspection for cleanliness and serviceability, and an official dismissal of the outgoing crapper guard. Lieutenant Colonel McAllister also wrote that “when someone approached the Force Provider, Zipper would snap to attention, broom and toilet paper at the ready, and bark, “Halt. Who goes there? State your business. Number one or number two?”” (Carroll 145-147).

Throughout Lieutenant Colonel McAllister’s personal narrative, there are instances of authoritative humor that both upholds and denigrates the superior officer’s command: the title of

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<sup>11</sup> The name is itself humorous as this is the generic label for supplies or provisions shipped to armed forces more generally. The formal and generic term applied to the humble latrine exemplifies military humor.

“crapper guard,” the makeshift gun, the changing of the guard, and the authoritative stance and persona created by Zipper when someone approached the bathroom stalls. The guard duty to the bathroom, with its nickname of “crapper guard” satirizes on the authoritative task given to bathroom guard duties. This satire is implemented through the use of the vulgar slang word “crapper.” The makeshift gun created out of the broom and roll of toilet paper physically parodies on the authority assumed with the ownership of a gun. The parody is further emphasized by the selection of materials: a broom could be used to sweep the bathroom floor and the toilet paper could be . . . well, used in the stall. The entire performance of the changing of the guard is a parody; the task of guarding the toilet was not a serious matter, it was simply an order issued by the headquarters’ director due to the defilement of the bathroom stalls. Therefore Zipper, Lovin, and the outgoing guard’s ceremonial change of the guard executed the authoritative humor by applying a surplus of ceremonial authority. The authoritative stance and persona created by Zipper when someone approached the bathroom stalls was another ceremonial parody. Zipper’s task was to “guard” the bathroom and to “protect” it from desecration. Therefore, the information of “number one or number two” would be information for him to discover from the encroachers. Due to the high protein diet of the soldiers, “number two” was clearly the main issue for bathroom desecration.

While this humor may appear subversive, it also cements the authority of the command structure. “When we want to evoke anger or outrage about some problem, we don’t present it in a humorous way, precisely because of the practical disengagement of humor. Satire is not a weapon of revolutionaries” (Morreall 101). Even if it is a latrine-based revolution.

However, authoritative humor is not simply utilized by deployed soldiers with regards to latrine humor. In the collection *Operation Homecoming*, twenty-seven-year-old U.S. Army Specialist Colby Buzzell, writing from Iraq in July 2004 describes a situation where he exemplified an example of sarcasm with undertones of authoritative humor. Apparently the soldiers were required to write to a parent or wife once a month so that “worrywart” parents would stop contacting the chain of command about their negligent letter-writing soldier. Buzzell describes how during deployment, he wrote to his wife frequently, so he penned his first postcard to his parents “in [his] best kindergarten dyslexic letters:

DeAr mOM aNd dAd,

I Am fInE, I aM 27 YeArS Old AnD ThEy ArE TrEAtiNg mE LiKe I aM 6.

wEhAvE to fILL tHeSe CaRdS OuT NoW bEcAuSe PeepEZ ArNt wRiTing tO MoMMY  
aNd DaDDiE EnUff, sO nOW thEy mAke uS. LoVe.CoLbY

Buzzell also describes how his father “who spent twenty years in the Army, fully understood that this was how the Army solves problems and laughed when he received the postcard. My mom on the other hand didn’t quite get it and my dad had to explain it to her, and when my mom asked why I wrote all preschoolish, he said that I was just being a smart ass again, which she fully understood. (Operation Homecoming 133).

While it is clear that Buzzell probably had elements of sarcastic humor before his enlistment, it is crucial to note that his father, a retired Army soldier, understood the situation and Buzzell’s

reaction better than his mother, a probable civilian without the insider knowledge of the Army.

Buzzell's letter displays his obvious contempt towards the required postcard by the action of creating something with various spelling and grammatical errors. But it also cements community between two soldiers, father and son.

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## **CHAPTER III**

### **CONCLUSION**

Humor within the military is vital for United States' civilians to understand because it illustrates the particular humanity of soldiers. Soldiers make toilet jokes. They mock their superior's orders. When something bad happens, they can jokingly say 'My mom's going to kill me' like one sergeant in Iraq after he found out that his eye was damaged. They can even tell lame jokes: "“Hey, Doc—what do you called a Marine in a combat zone who smokes two packs a day and is worried about getting lung cancer someday? . . . An optimist”" (Kraft 172).

Many veteran soldiers return from deployment and suffer a form of disconnect from the civilian world. The main divide between returning veterans and civilians is the inability to comprehend the difference between subculture and mainstream culture. The simplest, and most enjoyable way to effect comprehension each other is through humor. The American soldiers can, and perhaps should, be understood within the context of a comedy, not just within a tragedy. Because "“like tragic heroes, comic protagonists face big problems, but they think rather than feel their way through them. Instead of chaining themselves to a principle or a tradition and dying in the process, they find a new way to look at things, wriggle out of the difficulty, and live to tell the tale”" (Morreall 80).

There is more to being a soldier than killing. There is more to the subculture. These soldiers are a part of a subculture that has its own belief system, behavioral characteristics, material aspects, and language. And the ignorance of this subculture is the reason for the disconnect between the

civilian and the soldier. This ignorance can be remedied, however. For starters, it can be remedied by remembering the humor within the military.

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