**Research question:** I am studying the perspectives of Marine Scout Snipers in the video “US Marines Peeing on Dead Taliban” and the public reaction to that video because I want to understand the divergent meanings assigned to acts perpetrated in America’s Global War On Terror in order to help my reader better understand the need to study American warfare.

**Introduction**

*Helmand Province, Afghanistan, 2011: Video- “US Marines Peeing on Dead Taliban”*

“You gonna get the middle guy?”

“I think someone is...”

---

“I’m tryin’, I’m tryin’, I’m tryin’. I’m working on it”

“Oh!”

“Ahhhhhhhh”

“Yeeeeeaaah”

“In the...”

“Have a great day buddy”

“Yeeeeeaaah”

“Boom! In his mouth”

“Aww, its disgusting”

“You got it on video?”

“Yup”

“As you zoom in on one of our...”

“Golden like a shower”

“Yeah the whole thing’s...”

A wheelbarrow, and 3 dead men with beards lay face up in a small outdoor space bounded by a wall overgrown with vegetation and two low earthen platforms. The 2 dead men on left and right are clothed in white and blue. The body in the middle is in brown with a white shirt, which is red with blood. A water bottle rests between his legs just below his waist. The other two bodies do not appear bloodied. As the picture becomes unobstructed, at least 5 Marines, one recording the video, are gathered in a semicircle and prepare to urinate on the bodies.
4 streams of urine sparkle in the sun, timed to begin within seconds of each other. Marines on the far left and right each urinate on separate bodies, while the two marines in the center ‘share’ a body: there are only 3 enemy KIA to go around. As a Marine without his helmet on furtively glance off stage and pees on the face of a man in blue and white, the atmosphere is upbeat, giddy with tinge of devilry. The chest of the bloodied man in the middle grows darker as his blood-soaked shirt is further saturated with urine. The chest of the shirt on the dead man’s body to the right has a darkened area from the very beginning of the video, but the rough quality of the footage makes it hard to identify as urine. Only one Marine’s weapon can be seen, a M40 sniper rifle held with one hand around its barrel, its buttstock resting on the ground to his left as he manipulates his trousers and penis. The men happily go about the process, smiles on all their faces. As the 38 second video ends, the Marine on the far left puts his helmet back on and the Marine to the far right quickly shakes his penis, tucks it away into his trousers and ducks out of the frame.

Scout Sniper Team 4, 3rd Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment

During the course of a seven month deployment to the contested Musa Qala and Now Zad districts of Afghanistan’s Helmand Province in 2011, the Marines of 3rd Battalion, 2nd
Marine Regiment, or 3/2, based out Camp Lejeune, North Carolina suffered six Marines and one sailor killed in action against an insurgent Taliban and Al Qaeda force. In turn, elite teams of Scout Snipers, as a tiny fraction of 3/2’s fighting force dealt out death and destruction with the brutal efficiency typical of Marine infantry units throughout history. This video, captured by a member of the team, gained international attention when it emerged online in January 2012.

What initially drew me to this video was the public response that it created. Specifically, I was curious about why so much emphasis was placed on the sexualized urinating, and not on the killing of human beings. I was curious about the relationship that these Scout Snipers had with the human beings they were urinating on. These men in the video had an intimate level of comfort with the dead insurgents, human beings that they themselves had killed. That the video shows the insurgents lined up together along with a wheelbarrow suggests that they were moved so that the snipers could perform this ritual. These Scout Snipers were likely no strangers to this kind of scene.

By september of 2011, sniper teams of 3/2 had been using the long range optics of a Marine tank unit with great success to establish positive identification of enemy combatants, a

---

prerequisite for the use of deadly force in their rules of engagement. Major General John Toolan, commander of Marine forces in Afghanistan, gave credit to the sniper teams claiming “We have snipers with upwards of 100 kills”, drawing comparisons to the most deadly snipers in U.S. history, Gunnery Sergeant Carlos Hathcock. Hathcock made 93 confirmed kills.\(^3\) For a kill to be counted, snipers must be able to confirm their kills with a witness. While methods may vary for determining whether an enemy combatant is dead, Marine Corps doctrine in close quarters combat includes the use of an eye-thump as a dead-check: being flicked on the eyeball produces an involuntary reaction if administered to someone merely playing opossum. If the team in this video had been killing dozens of insurgents, they could have been performing dead-checks at a rate that could become routine, and perhaps over time devolve into a ritual beyond unrecognizable in its origins and purpose.

The other night, my wife and I watched the academy award nominated documentary *Hell and Back Again*.\(^4\) The story is of a Marine Sergeant Nathan Harris who is severely wounded by machine-gun fire in Afghanistan shortly before the end of his


deployment. The documentary shifts back and forth between footage of Harris and his unit during combat operations and of Harris on the road to recovery with his wife after he is shot and returns home to North Carolina. Back home, Harris struggles to come to terms with his injury, explains his frustration with life in America versus the simplicity of combat abroad, and reveals the desire to kill that brought him into the Marine Corps infantry. In the film, Harris also displays various symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and learned behaviors from his experience as a Marine that I deeply connected with. This came as a surprise to me, because I was fortunate enough to be spared the physical injuries that Harris experienced, but I found the injuries to his psyche were quite familiar to me. The catalyst for this revelation was my wife’s reaction to Harris: she called him a psycho. Without realizing it, she called me a psycho, and I have been trying to deal with a sense of loneliness and frustration since.

In this paper I argue that the disconnect between meanings for Marines fighting the Global War on Terrorism and the public they serve makes a victory in that war impossible. I am arguing this because such a war of vengeance, based upon hatred and requiring the indoctrination of human killing machines goes against the very moral codes that our country and its warriors are said to live by. I am arguing this because the disconnect
causes me great pain: within me there is both the indoctrinated warrior that hungers for a kill and the human being desiring to live according to a moral standard espoused by the United States, among these the values of honor, courage and commitment instilled in me by the Marine Corps. The very institution that taught me these moral ideals in one breath then taught me to dehumanize my enemy with the next, perverting my killer instinct and compromising my moral code. Like Harris, I am a wounded animal, backed into a corner by the country and institutions that I love, feeling as much betrayed by myself as the society around me for my part in a war of hatred and ignorance. I struggle against the impulse to resort to the use of my expertise in the application of violence, and to instead communicate my rage and frustration in a way that hopes to prevent rather than perpetuate violence.

In my first chapter I attempt to provide understanding of the Scout Snipers in this video through the ethnographic lens of my own experience. This method is certainly not without limitations. Three huge differences must be acknowledged. First, though I have served in combat alongside Scout Snipers, I myself am not one. Second, my experiences of combat were in Iraq between 2007 and 2009, not Afghanistan in 2011. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, I count myself as unburdened by the weight of having killed another human being.
These factors must absolutely be taken into consideration, but I maintain the usefulness of my experience. First, though I lack sniper-specific training, I share not only the experience of Boot Camp but an identity as an infantry Marine, a minority within the Corps itself. Second, despite the many differences of the Iraq and Afghan campaigns, the Marine Corps used the same weapons, doctrine, culture, training, and in many cases the same Marines to fight them. Additionally, because I intentionally joined the Marine Corps and began my journey to Iraq only after Al Qaeda in Iraq made its debut following the first battle of Fallujah in 2004\(^5\), the enemies that we fought were the same. Lastly, my very real connection with and empathy for Sergeant Harris proved to me the transcendent nature of combat experience.

In his seminal work with Vietnam veterans, *Home from the War*, Robert Jay Lifton explains that “there is scarcely a war that is not fought on the basis of meaning given to a previous war.”\(^6\) Iraq and Afghanistan are inexorably intertwined within America’s Global War on Terror and both wars as experienced by infantry Marines of all types have been fought in the long dark shadow of loss in Vietnam. Just as great attention has been paid to understand the experience of Vietnam veterans both at war and

at home, it is important to turn attention to the experiences of a new generation of veterans that fight their battles at home and abroad amidst ever increasingly effective technologies in the application of force, and an unprecedented diffusion of information facilitated by the internet and digital recordings.

My second chapter will look at the video itself as a phenomenon, the public discourse in its aftermath and attempt to identify the point at which public and Marine perceptions diverge.

Chapter One

Why study the Marine Corps?

Established in 1775, the Marine Corps is an institution that dates back to the American Revolution. The Army as well as the Marine’s parent service, the Navy, also have rich histories that have existed in a dialectic with American culture. The Marine Corps is distinct however in several ways. The Marine Corps prides itself on the maintenance of tradition, as well as amphibious and combined-arms capabilities. The corps also stands out for its public relations capabilities. The Marines were quick to make use of the emerging motion picture industry during WWI, collaborating in the production of feature films, *The Unbeliever* and *Star Spangled Banner*. This initial recruiting
effort helped the corps to remain an essentially volunteer force as it expanded seven-fold in that war despite the institution of the draft.\(^7\) The Marine Corps’ carefully managed public relations machine also helped to save the corps from repeated attempts to dismantle the Marines and transfer its amphibious mission capability to the Army.

The carefully managed public image of a Marine combines a super sharp Dress Blues uniform and a reputation as an elite force of shock troops ready to take on any threat. As enlisted men in the infantry, we often joked about having ‘slayed[sic] the lava monster’, a reference to a commercial in which a recruit survives a trial by fire culminating in a victory over a huge fiery beast, transforming from a civilian into a sword wielding Marine complete with dress blues.\(^8\) The hilarity would only escalate as one by one, Marines would admit that such a commercial had been their reason for choosing to sign with the Marines over other branches. With the development of smaller and cheaper digital cameras and the resultant explosion of self-publishing on the web, the game has changed and will continue to change for USMC public relations efforts.

Why study combat-related digital media?

\(^7\) Jon J. Hoffman, USMC: United States Marine Corps- A Complete History (Quantico: Marine Corps Association, 2003), pageNr.

We can see and hear today the experiences from yesterday that our combat veterans will have to live with tomorrow and for the rest of their lives. The value in terms of improving training, tactics and equipment for the military is obvious. Similarly, these videos provide us with an important tool for helping our return combat veterans deal with PTSD, as well as the difficult process of trying to return to a more peaceful life here at home. Additionally, examining our own reactions to, reading comments about, and studying public discourse in general on this type of media reveals interesting things about those of us who weren’t there.

Why study this now?

Recently, the Marine Corps has begun important changes within its ranks in ways that directly affect the makeup of combat units. Two months after the September 2011 repeal of DADT, Marine Commandant, Gen. Jim Amos reported that despite his initial reluctance, based upon surveys among the ranks in which 56% of combat Marines “viewed repeal negatively in terms of how it could affect combat readiness, effectiveness and cohesion”, the repeal process and assimilation of open homosexuals was going smoothly.⁹

Also occurring this year is the opening of combat arms to females.\textsuperscript{10} While females have previously seen combat and served with courage, until now they have been excluded from combat roles such as artillery, tanks, and of course, the infantry. Although female volunteers will attend infantry training schools and are now eligible for staff billets in other combat units, Department of Defense policy still forbids the assigning of 03xx MOS designations (those for direct action roles such as infantry, snipers, and special operators) to women.\textsuperscript{11} This means that for now, integration efforts are still only part of the research process to determine what recommended steps to take in the future.

So what has this got to do with our Scout Snipers urinating on their slain enemies? The Marine Corps has maintained a policy of segregated indoctrination in its Boot Camps while other services have integrated theirs. Additionally, a key portion of an infantry Marine’s experience as a recruit has been his domination by hyper-masculine drill instructors. Traditionally, the repression and renunciation of anything feminine, as well as homosexuality, has been held as the standard for being a man and

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}
prerequisite for that man becoming a Marine. In a Marine infantry unit, the common denominators for its members are that they all have the same Boot Camp experience, and for those holding 03xx MOS designations, they all have a similar infantry training experience. In my estimation, the inclusion of women in direct action combat specialties, as well the acceptance of open homosexuality in all branches of the service will necessitate a change in the way Marines are indoctrinated. Defining masculinity in negative terms cannot be ignored as an important influence on the behavior in our Scout Snipers’ video. The Marine Corps then, especially the infantry, will provide a high pressure context for studying these changes as American society as a whole continues to evolve in its treatment of women and the LGBT community.

**Understanding the killer: a Marine Scout Sniper’s perspective**

In my attempt to understand the behavior and mindset of the Marine Scout Snipers I have relied heavily on books by two psychologists. The first, Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman’s *On Killing*, is a required reading that appears on the Marine Corps’ own Commandant’s reading list, as well as in various military schools. Lt. Col. Grossman is a trained psychologist and professor of psychology at West Point, but also a veteran Army Ranger, serving 24 years, both as an enlisted man as well as an
officer commanding infantry units\textsuperscript{12}(Grossman intro). Grossman is clear to point out that he himself has not killed, maintaining this as an important factor in his ability to remain as dispassionate and objective as possible. On Killing utilizes interviews and first person accounts about killing through history. Grossman’s book seeks to create greater understanding about killing, the military’s increasingly effective use of operant conditioning to overcome an individual’s natural aversion to killing a member of one’s own species, and to shed light on the dangers of desensitization towards violence for our society as a whole.

The second key text I have used to attempt to understand the mindset of the Scout Snipers is Robert Jay Lifton’s Home From the War: Learning from Vietnam Veterans. Lifton is a professor at Harvard Medical School, and served as an Air Force psychiatrist in Korea in 1952.\textsuperscript{13} Evolving out of his work with Hiroshima survivors and intensive interviews with a GI who was present at My Lai, but did not fire, Home From the War centers on the process of change and recovery of a small group of Vietnam veterans that Lifton had worked with in therapeutic rap-sessions. Lifton, who is clear about his position as an anti-war advocate, is equally clear that he makes no claim to being a


\textsuperscript{13} ibid, 21
“neutral screen” and that his work with veterans was a personally transformative process.\textsuperscript{14}

In addition to these psychologists, I have sought to deepen my understanding behind Marine Corps Boot Camp, the baseline indoctrination process for all enlisted Marines. While both Grossman and Lifton address this transformative process, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s, \textit{The Social Construction of Reality} provided me with a straightforward theoretical framework for understanding why the Boot Camp experience is so important in the Making of Marines\textsuperscript{15}

It is equally important that I acknowledge my personal involvement and advocacy in my research and writing. As an infantry Marine, trained to be an expert in the application of force and indoctrinated as a killer, I served two combat tours as a fireteam leader, then as forward observer, chief of my company level intelligence cell, and vehicle commander in Iraq between 2007 and 2009. During those combined fourteen months of combat operations, despite my unit’s involvement in firefights and IED attacks by insurgents and Al Qaeda operatives, I did not directly cause the death of another human being. This chapter is as much about trying to provide an explanation of the actions of these Marine snipers in Afghanistan as it is an attempt to find

\textsuperscript{14} ibid
an explanation for my feelings around killing, specifically feelings of guilt and weakness around not killing.

On a purely rational level, I understand that there was never a point at which it was necessary for me to kill. Emotionally however I remain fixated on the tension between my training to kill and the shame I feel from not having lived up to my killer-conditioning as a Marine. As Anthony Swofford, Marine Scout Sniper during the Gulf War, describes in *Jarhead*:

> During the darkest nights you’d even offer your life to go back in time, back to the Desert for the chance to kill. You consider yourself less of a marine and even less of a man for not having killed while at combat. There is a wreck in your head, part of the aftermath, and you must dismantle the wreck.\(^\text{16}\)

*On Killing* devotes several chapters to the individual response stages to killing. Grossman likens his stages to those experienced by those who learn that they are dying.\(^\text{17}\) Like those of the dying, the killer’s stages are not necessarily universal and may be blended together or skipped entirely. The commonly


shared first stage is one of concern about how they will do, whether or not they will kill when the time comes. Grossman warns that in cases where the process is altered by refusing to kill when the time comes, or cases of having never been given the opportunity such as my own, too much concern may turn into a “fixation, creating an obsession with killing.”\(^\text{18}\) Grossman outlines that a failure in the process of rationalization and acceptance in any point may lead to post-traumatic stress. In light of my identification with Sgt Harris and considering I have not counted myself as ‘deserving’ of any screening for PTSD, it is important that I acknowledge my own need for rationalization and acceptance. In the process, I hope to use my own experience to provide insight into the mindset behind the bizarre ritual taking place in the 3/2 sniper video.

**Marine Corps Recruit Depot, San Diego, 2005: Making a Marine**

I was ordered to report to Senior Drill Instructor, Staff Sergeant Baehr, the father figure of our 75 man platoon aboard Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego. It was training day 12 of 70 and I had just been promoted from squad leader to platoon guide, a promotion that I had not sought out but had seen coming. The first two weeks of boot camp had been a shock for the platoon, myself included, as our expectations based upon

\(^{18}\) ibid, 234
recruiting commercials and of course, Stanley Kubrick’s Full Metal Jacket,$^{19}$ were shattered by the reality of what we were to face for the thirteen-week recruit training process.

I had spent several nights in those early weeks, weeping into my pillow in the late hours of the night as I came to terms with every cowardly decision I had made prior to enlistment. I vowed to commit fully to becoming a Marine and became unabashedly hardcorps[ ] in my approach to indoctrination. I was loud, I was violent, and responded with speed and intensity to every command that I was given. This part of my personality had not worked for me in prep-school but was perfectly suited for life as a recruit. My drill instructors hoped to use me as their leading example.

As I reported in at the position of attention, my Senior DI put me ‘at ease’ and I wondered, not aloud, the purpose of our meeting.

“Good Morning Sir! Recruit Wallis, reporting as ordered, Sir!”

“Why did you join the Marine Corps, Guide?”

“This recruit joined the Corps to serve his country, Sir!”

“Don’t give me that fucking load of horse-shit Guide! Why on earth would a college-boy dropout and enlist in the infantry?”

$^{19}$ Stanley Kubrick, Michael Herr, and Gustav Hasford, Full Metal Jacket, DVD or HVS, directed by Stanley Kubrick (publication place: Harrier Films, 1987).
“This recruit joined to see combat in Iraq, Sir!”

“That’s what I thought, Guide. You joined because you want to kill motherfuckers, didn’t you?”

I don’t remember how the conversation ended because I was overcome by a feeling that my Senior DI had cut to the heart of the matter. A part of me had to acknowledge that a fascination with death and killing had brought me into the Corps. Becoming a killer of men meant something wholly different in this new life. Not being a killer was stigmatized. ‘Killer’ could be used as an informal and affirming way of addressing a junior Marine. To kill, and the desire to kill, took priority over sexual conquest and desire. ‘Suzie Rottencrotch’ would not be waiting for us, ‘Jody’ would replace us and we should focus instead on learning to locate, close with, and destroy our enemies.

The prevalence of saltpeter myths in bootcamp centered around a physiological symptom of a recruit’s susceptibility to a heightening of the killer instinct at the expense of sex drive. The undeniable reduction in libido and the total absence of erections for a three month period is impossible to ignore for male recruits, most of whom are just a few years beyond the onset of puberty. Just as libido is reduced by the stress of recruit training, other bodily needs and desires were reduced through strict management of eating, sleeping, and hygiene.
Every aspect of the recruit’s life is broken down ‘barney style’ so that a recruit could then learn to do it ‘by the numbers’. This meant that tasks that might have been accomplishing in our own idiosyncratic ways, with varying efficiency, were wrested from our individual control; to shower a recruit had so many seconds to get wet, so many seconds to lather up, and so many seconds to rinse off and get out. Bodily functions were restricted and controlled as though they were matters of unfortunate and annoying affinity of the recruit rather than of physical necessity. This part of indoctrination extended to include the call of nature.

Having successfully accomplished a task such as returning from a meal, physical training, or highly disciplined close order drill, a platoon of 75 recruits is typically be awarded less than a minute to line up in twos in a hallway leading to the bathroom or head. When given the command to attack the head, the recruits reply “Attack the head, aye aye Sir!” and charge as few as three urinals and 4 doorless toilets en masse. In the resulting melee, there is no room to be shy, and no time to be courteous as a DI counts down aloud from 100, speeding up as he goes, the entire platoon expected to be back in their starting position prior to the attack by the time he reached one and announces “You will be...”, finished by the recruits “…done sir done!”. The acceptability, even the necessity of Marines
standing in a half circle, all urinating on a common target arises directly out of recruit training.

It is important to understand that the Scout Snipers seen in the video all had this experience in common. The bootcamp experience is highly scripted and managed so that all enlisted Marines have their birth as Marines in common. Having accomplished their mission to kill these Taliban insurgents, it is no coincidence that part of their celebration is to mark the occasion with a ritualized head-call. That they chose to urinate on the bodies of their slain enemies, while complex, is not a coincidental or wanton act of savagery.

Boot Camp, as a form of secondary socialization that Berger and Luckmann call “alternation” resembles primary socialization, the internalization of societal norms by a child identifying with their parental figures. As a process of re-socialization, alternation replicates the childhood emotional dependency on others.20 In Marine Corps Boot Camp, this dependency is on the recruit’s small cadre of Drill Instructors, who actively seek to dismantle the structure of the recruit’s primary socialization and replace it with as much of the Marine Corps as possible. The context or laboratory that this takes place in resembles that of a religious cult. The Marine Corps becomes the

recruit’s world and his identity is reshaped by shaving his head, removing all personal preference and expression, and replacing his name with a rank. This early re-socialization requires the individual to be segregated from outsiders that might disrupt the formation of this new reality.\textsuperscript{21} In Boot Camp this is a 13 week process, where no leave or liberty is granted and phone calls and letters home are strictly mediated and controlled by Drill Instructors. Berger states that the “most important conceptual requirement for alternation is the availability of a legitimating apparatus for whole sequence of transformation.”\textsuperscript{22} Drill instructors, with varying success, reinterpret the old social realities for the recruits, redefining anything outside of the needs of the Marine Corps as weak, feminine, and wholly unnecessary.

This re-socialization process continues throughout a Marine’s career, at times segregating Marines from the world of their primary socialization as on a deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan, and at others disrupted by paid leave and weekend liberty. The weekend liberty culture of many Marines, especially infantry grunts is often a rejection and attempt at reversal of the experience and re-socialization of Boot Camp.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{21} ibid, 159  
\textsuperscript{22} ibid}
When newly-minted Marines are finally allowed weekend liberty during their time in an Infantry Training Battalion at the Marine Corps’ School of Infantry aboard Camp Pendleton in Southern California, strip-clubs are among the most common destinations. On a friday night throngs of jar-headed ‘boots’, often easily identified by some combination of extreme haircuts, camouflage backpacks and gaudy T-shirts emblazoned with various Marine Corps-related themes, inundate strip clubs throughout the San Diego area. These boots, referred to as such because of their recent indoctrination at Boot Camp as well as an unfortunate tendency to wear combat boots as part of their civilian attire on liberty, spend entire paychecks on booze, lap-dances and nearby motel rooms. I know this because I was a happy participant. I of course thought myself more invisible, attempting to conceal my boot status with a hat and eschewing combat boots, dog tags and anything Marine Corps related.

Pornography and the never ending pursuit of getting laid can become obsessions for Marines given their first real taste of freedom. A newly minted Marine is away from the societal constraints of their family and friends and the iron grip of the Drill Instructor, and with few financial responsibilities, a kind of grotesque ultra-masculinity festers and boils.

Disillusionment and depression runs deep throughout the School of Infantry. Marines hide in wall lockers to escape
working parties in their first week in an administrative receiving unit and develop various maladies both imagined and real in order to escape the crushing reality that for all the glory and pride promised by recruitment and indoctrination processes, they are at the bottom of the barrel. Swofford calls the Corps the Suck, “because it sucks dicks to be in it and it sucks the life out of you.” While I was at SOI, in the process of waiting for a spot to open up in a training company, I barely escaped the demoralizing possibility of being stuck in the receiving unit as the alphabetical cut-off came just two names after Wallis. Another Boot Camp platoon Guide that I had known was not so lucky. He became unstable and more violent than I had known him to be even in Boot Camp. Despite his promising start during his initial indoctrination he disappeared one day and the widely accepted rumor was that he had jerked-off on the desk of a Chaplain and was being processed with the scores of other broke-dicks, malingerers and safety risks.

Early on, the infantry Marine’s reality become split between liberty and duty. As a Marine graduates from the School of Infantry and picks up rank, restrictions on his liberty decrease as his income increases. Prostitutes can be spied entering Barracks rooms on the weekend and Marines from Camp Pendleton make a right of passage out of ‘riding the Rainbow’ across the border in Mexico. While a high libido in young men in
general is certainly not unusual, service in the Marine Corps includes repeated periods of sexual repression that pushes Marines towards pornography and a removal of intimacy in their sexual behaviors. Gone are the days of liberty in Paris, Saigon and Australia for Marines on a Combat tour. Instead, Marines find themselves restricted to pornography on their ipods and laptop computers in countries with tight cultural restraints on access to women, strictly enforced by military regulations.

The Making of a Scout Sniper

The process of becoming a scout sniper is not a simple or direct path. Though exceptions and variations certainly exist the path these men followed went roughly as follows:

- Enlistment in the Marine Corps, specifically with 03XX as their Military Occupational Specialty or MOS. This MOS, designating a Marine as an infantryman, is not available under a general contract with the Corps and represents only a fraction of the entire Corps. This means that even before becoming a Marine, regardless of his deeper understanding, a potential recruit was consciously aware that his job would be to kill or be killed, this type of socialization transforms space. I don’t mean this in the “whoa, far out dude” sense but rather in that Marine Corps indoctrination is so powerful that is fundamentally alters the way that the Marine percieves and
interacts with the universe, from potential enemies to potential friends.

- Three months aboard MCRD San Diego or Paris Island, depending on where he enlisted,

- Two months in an Infantry Training Battalion, where they receive separate primary MOS instruction as 03XX infantrymen, then further specialized training in various infantry weapon systems to make them 0311 (Rifleman), 0331 (Machinegunner), 0341 (Mortarman) etc.,

- Assignment to an infantry unit,

- Recruitment into a Scout Sniper Platoon, whose snipers will hold their own indoctrination, or indoc. Prospective snipers must make it through the indoc in order to be selected, and are otherwise sent back in shame to their platoons. Indocs vary in length and curriculum but often snipers list this as the most difficult time in their lives.

- Ten weeks at Scout Sniper School to become a ‘hog’.  

These last several steps are where the majority of variation will occur. An infantry Marine may serve several deployments with an infantry unit before being selected for a sniper billet, or may be selected immediately. This variation

may depend on the Marine’s individual characteristics, but as is the case for most decisions in a Marine’s career, the needs of the Corps and the unit are of primary importance. In a typical war-time deployment cycle, an Marine infantry unit will typically recover, reorganize and train for 12-14 months between each 7 month deployment. If spots are available in a class at the Scout Sniper Basic Course, the Marine enters the school as a professionally instructed gunman, a PIG. When the Marine graduates the school, one of the most difficult in any of the armed services, he becomes a hunter of gunman, a HOG.²⁴ Part of indoctrinating Marines as killers is to dehumanize not only the enemy, as in japs, gooks, hadjis, ragheads, or muj, but to dehumanize the Marines themselves. The most common Marine nickname is ‘devil-dog’ from Tuefel hunden, which Marine Corps lore attributes to German soldiers in WWI. Coincidentally, Grossman makes a claim that beyond the metaphorical categories of sheep (most people), wolves (sociopaths) and wild dogs (gangs and aggressive armies), there exists a separate group of people that hope to act a sheepdogs, looking to defend the sheep from predation.²⁵ I don’t disagree with Grossman, but I would argue that the combination of aggressively indoctrinating Marines as


devil-dogs, blurs the lines suggested by Grossman both metaphorically and in practice.

Al Anbar Province, Iraq, 2007: Facing the Dead

As a fireteam leader I had a radio on my chest tuned to a Platoon-level channel or tac that I monitored for orders as my four vehicle platoon searched the desert of Al Anbar Province for camps and vehicles in our operation to interdict and disrupt the movement of Al Qaeda in Iraq. Over the platoon tac I heard our platoon commander give us an order to ‘stand to’ basically to stop where we were and scan our surroundings for possible threats; one of the other platoons in our company had been in ‘contact’ meaning they were engaged by hostile fire. As I switched my radio to the company tac, I caught the tail end of a casualty report. The engagement was over but one Marine was KIA; Killed In Action. Reported over the radio in standard Marine Corps format, the dead Marine was referred to as Echo-Three Victor, enumerating the pay grade for a Lance Corporal and the first initial of his last name. Immediately was struck with grief and anger, my old roommate, Lance Corporal Valles was in that platoon.

A short time later, as my platoon joined the rest of the company at the scene of the firefight, I came to learn that it was not Valles but Vasquez, my roommate's best friend. Valles
was the only member of his fireteam not wounded or killed. As other platoons attended to our casualties, destroyed the camp of the insurgents and detained the insurgent’s wives and children, my platoon placed our vehicles in security positions for the night in a giant circle in the desert, made up of each platoon of the company. Between our vehicles and those of the next platoon in this circle were the bodies of the insurgents killed during the firefight. A few Marines were tasked with collecting fingerprints and, where possible, pictures of faces for comparison to a database. Many Marines gathered around the bodies, curious to see the effects of our weapons on real human targets.

When the Marines dismounted their vehicles to question several men in a ubiquitous water truck they surprised by and attack with automatic weapons, RPGs, grenades and a suicide vest at close range. Initially forced to rely on their own small arms fire to repel the attack, the fireteam was able to fall back far enough for their vehicles to open fire with crew-served weapons. Among the weapons employed from the vehicles was the Bushmaster 25mm chain gun firing high-explosive rounds. For a comparison, the rifles, carbines and squad automatic weapons used by the Marines on the deck are of a standard NATO 5.56mm and the AK-47 most used by insurgents are only slightly larger at 7.62mm. The terminal ballistics of the Bushmaster’s rounds, i.e. the effects
that they have on human flesh and bone, is absurd. The bodies of
the insurgents were torn, shredded, and pulverized as though a
pet Tyrannosaur had used them for chew-toys. The application of
force was overwhelming and we found one insurgent laying face
down almost one hundred yards away from the rest and missing
half of his torso, as he was shot in the back after he turned
and ran into the flat expanse of desert.

We were not the Marines that killed these men, and we did
not stand around and urinate on them. Any blatant mistreatment
of the bodies would have had too many witnesses as the scene
took place in the open desert, within sight of an entire company
of Marines and officers. Even still, the compulsion to ‘play’
with these bodies and to take trophies was real and acted upon.
After the necessary fingerprints were obtained, the fun began.
Trophies were in the form of unauthorized digital photographs
but to my knowledge, no other trophies were taken. Our play was
mostly restricted to joking and voicing over, similar to that
heard in the Marine Sniper video. I did observe a water bottle
placed in the hand of one dead insurgent, as if to remind
Marines of an often repeated axiom to “hydrate or die”. That
night as our company slept in and next to our vehicles and chem-
lights were placed on the bodies so that they would not be
stumbled over by our sentries or by Marines wandering outside of
the coil to make headcalls in the dark.
Conclusion: “Golden Like a Shower”

The act of a golden shower is undoubtedly sexual. Because urine is a human waste product however, this act is consistent with the mission of the snipers in that while it is indeed a sexualized ritual in that is both explicitly sexual and a play on the ritual cleansing of the body before burial, it is destructive in nature. As opposed to the pornographic ‘money shot’, this golden shower avoids the use of procreative seminal fluid and allows the snipers to assert their masculine dominance over their enemies while maintaining the otherness of the enemy bodies. Grossman asserts that “peace will not come until we have mastered both sex and war” and that to do so we must diligently study both.26 As unsettling as this video is, it provides the opportunity to study them simultaneously.

In a “war on terror” against Al Qaeda, in this case the Taliban, the Marine Sniper’s job is to translate the American social reality demanding vengeance for 9/11. This is no random despicable act. It is deliberate and sophisticated as an extension of their professional training to understand and defeat their enemy at an individual level. The Marines understand that these insurgents may have a variety of

---

motivations that can be defeated through force of violence and death. Based on the assumption of radical islamism however, a mission of martyrdom projected beyond the reality of the living by these insurgents is demonstrably undermined by preventing a ‘clean’ death and burial according to their religion.

The emergence of such a video showing the perverted, distorted and tortured existence of human beings that have been transformed into incredibly efficient killers of other human beings is telling in the discomfort that it elicits. The purpose of this chapter has been to draw a connection between two seemingly incongruent phenomenon; that of killing enemy combatants and that of a sexualized group ritual of urinating on the heads of those killed. These acts are inseparable; while I do not suggest that there is an undocumented epidemic of American warriors urinating on corpses, I contend that such acts are part of a killer’s attempt to rationalize their actions and a logical result of their indoctrination and an institutionalized dehumanization of the enemy. Without the choice of video as a trophy however, this act would like not have been perceived by anyone but those present at the time. The fact that this urination ritual has now been witnessed by millions via the internet is the subject of the next chapter. Is the response to a sexualized act in the presence of death illustrating a culture that allows graphic violence to permeate
its media while repressing pornography? Does this video merely depict a rogue band of killers jeopardizing our foreign policy goals? Or is the society itself repressive of a link between sex and violence that this video makes uncomfortably visible?

**Notes**


“Scout Sniper Course.” marines.mil.