Reborn To Kill: American Warriors and Digital Trophies

Research question: I am studying the perspective of Marine
Marine Scout Snipers in the video “US Marines Peeing on Dead
Taliban” and the public reaction to that video because I want to
highlight 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 warriors.

Introduction

Helmand Province, Afghanistan, 2011: Video- “US Marines Peeing on Dead Taliban”¹

“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"
"Yeeeeeeeah"
"In the..."
"Have a great day buddy!"
"Yeeeeeeeah"
"Boom! In his mouth"
"Aw, 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 in civilian dress 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 and a water bottle rests between his legs just below his waist. The other two bodies do not appear bloodied. At least 5 Marines, one recording the video, are gathered in a semicircle to urinate on the bodies. As the picture becomes unobstructed, 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 bodies to go around. There is a sense of wrongdoing as a Marine without his helmet furtively glances off stage to his right and urinates in the face of a man in blue and white on the left. 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, with a hurried but unashamed and comfortable bearing. As the 38 second video ends, the Marine on the far left puts his helmet back on while 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 3/2-3rd Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment based out Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, suffered 6 Marines and one Navy Corpsman killed in action, KIA, against insurgent Afghans. In turn, elite teams of Marine Marine Scout Snipers, as a tiny fraction of the battalion’s total fighting force, efficiently dealt out death under the Scout Sniper moto “one shot, one kill”. Captured by a member of team 4, this video 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 urinating, and not on the killing of human beings. I was curious about the relationship that these Marine Scout Snipers had with the human beings they were urinating on. The 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 Marine Scout Snipers were likely no strangers to this kind of scene.

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By September of 2011, Scout Sniper teams of 3/2 had been using the long range optics of a Marine tank unit with great success. Such a combined arms approach facilitated the process of establishing positive identification of enemy combatants, a prerequisite for the use of deadly force under the 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 sniper in U.S. history, Gunnery Sergeant Carlos Hathcock. Hathcock was a legendary Vietnam-era sniper in the Marine Corps, with 93 confirmed kills.

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 includes the use of an eye-thump as a dead-check: flicking 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 unrecognizable in its origins and purpose.

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The other night, my wife and I watched the Academy Award nominated documentary *Hell and Back Again*.\(^4\) The story is of 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

it became clear to me that studying team 4’s video was going to be a very personal sort of challenge.

In this paper I examine the disconnect between Marines fighting the Global War on Terrorism and the public they serve. 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 are those of honor, courage and commitment, instilled in me by the Marine Corps itself. 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 seeks to prevent rather than perpetuate unnecessary violence.
In my first chapter I attempt to provide understanding of the Marine 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 them, I myself am not a Marine Scout Sniper. 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 between campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, 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, the enemies that we fought were similar in their objectives and tactics. Lastly, my very

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real connection with and empathy for Sergeant Harris proved to me the transcendent nature of combat experience.

Our military culture, political climate, and overall disposition as Americans is greatly affected by the wars that we have engaged in. 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 After a multinational effort virtually annihilated all Iraqi resistance in the Persian Gulf War in early 1991, then President George Bush declared “By God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all”, in reference to the American need for redemptive victory in the decades following the U.S. failure in Indochina.7 Likewise, Iraq and Afghanistan are inexorably intertwined within America’s Global War on Terror, and both wars as experienced by Marines of all types have been fought in the long dark shadow of loss in Vietnam. Just as much-deserved attention has been paid to understand the experience of Vietnam veterans both at war and at home, so is it important to turn attention to the experiences of a new generation of veterans. An all volunteer population that fight their battles at home and abroad amidst ever increasingly

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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 put this video and its subject into context.

Chapter One

Understanding the Marine Scout Sniper’s Perspective

In my attempt to understand the behavior and mindset of the Marine 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. 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.\(^8\) *On Killing* utilizes interviews and first person accounts about killing throughout 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 understand the mindset of the Marine 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.\(^9\) 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 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 “neutral screen” and that his work with veterans was a personally transformative process.\(^10\)

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\(^9\) ibid, 21

\(^10\) ibid
In addition to these psychologists, I have sought to deepen my understanding of the importance of 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, *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.11

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 from 2007 to 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 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 ability 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 Persian 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.\(^{12}\)

This project, and indeed the vast majority of my academic work over the last three years has been an effort to untangle that wreck and rebuild something useful and positive.

*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.\(^{13}\) 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

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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.” 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 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**

I was ordered to report to my Senior Drill Instructor, the father figure of our 75 man platoon aboard Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego, one of two Boot Camps run by the Marine Corps. 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 recruiting commercials and of course,

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14 ibid, 234
Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket*,¹⁵ 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”[sic] in my approach to indoctrination. I was loud, I was violent, and I reacted 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 and my Drill Instructors or DIs, hoped to use me as a model.

As I reported in at the position of attention, I wondered to myself 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 horseshit Guide! Why on earth would you dropout of college and enlist in the infantry?”

“This recruit joined to see combat in Iraq, Sir!”

“That’s what I thought, Guide. You joined because you want to kill motherfuckers!”

I don’t remember how the conversation ended because I was overcome by the realization that my Senior DI had cut to the heart of the matter. I 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” became a commonly 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. Our girlfriends, universally referred to as “Susie Rottencrotch” would not be waiting for us, and the equally universal college boy “Jody” would be there to replace us. We should therefore focus instead on learning to locate, close with, and destroy our enemies.

A prevalence of saltpeter myths in bootcamp centers around a physiological symptom of a recruit's susceptibility to a heightening of the killer instinct at the expense of his 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 are reduced through the strict management of eating, sleeping, and hygiene.

Every aspect of the recruit’s life is broken down “barney style” so that a recruit can then learn to do it by the numbers. This means tasks that might be accomplished in our own idiosyncratic ways, with varying efficiency, are wrested from our individual control; to shower a recruit has so many seconds to get wet, so many seconds to lather up, so many seconds to rinse off and get out. Bodily functions are restricted and controlled as though they were matters of unfortunate and annoying affinity of the recruit rather than of physical necessity.

Having successfully accomplished a task such as returning from a meal, physical training, or highly disciplined close order drill, a platoon of 75 recruits or more is typically given 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, recruits reply “Attack the head, aye aye, Sir!” and charge as few as 3 urinals and 4 doorless toilets en masse. In the resulting melee, there in no room to be shy, and no time to be courteous. 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 reaches 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 is a regular daily occurrence in recruit training.

It is important to understand that the Marine 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 that rebirth in common. Having accomplished their mission to kill these Taliban insurgents, it is not shocking to me 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 not solely a product of their Boot Camp experience, is also not merely 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 internalizing of societal norms by a child identifying with their parental figures.16 As a process of re-socialization, alternation replicates the childhood emotional dependency on others. In Marine Corps Boot Camp, this dependency is on the recruit’s small cadre of DIs, 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 first 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.\(^{17}\) 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.”\(^{18}\) With varying success, Drill instructors reinterpret the old social realities for recruits, redefining anything outside of the needs of the Marine Corps as weak, feminine, and wholly unnecessary.

This re-socialization process continues unevenly throughout a Marine’s career, at times segregating Marines from the world of their primary socialization as on a deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan, while at other times disrupted by paid leave and weekend liberty. The weekend liberty culture of many Marines,

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\(^{17}\) ibid, 159

\(^{18}\) ibid
especially infantry grunts, is often a rejection and attempt at reversal of the experience and re-socialization of Boot Camp. The result in these instances is a jarring contrast between two separate social realities.

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 any given 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 too was a boot.

With such a sudden resurgence and a guaranteed paycheck, getting laid becomes an obsession for Marines given their first real taste of freedom away from the societal constraints of their family and friends, and the iron grip of the Drill Instructor. For many young Marines, such a resurgence may also
include a stockpiling of pornography. Much of this behavior is supported by a warrior culture that lives by the axiom that the way to manhood is through “loving a good woman and killing a bad man.”¹⁹ This type of mission is facilitated by the Marine Corps’ tendency to muddle the definitions of good and bad, leaving a lot of highly interpretable grey area.

Marines from my Boot Camp platoon worshiped one of our DIs because he seemed to define this sentiment. Born in Puerto Rico, he learned to speak English in Boot Camp and hated anything that kept him from the battlefield. It took all of us two weeks to understand anything he was saying, his speech somewhere between Arnold Schwarzenegger in Terminator and Al Pacino in Scarface, but with more obscenities. When we did finally crack the code, we realized that when he wasn’t screaming at us about how he was going to tear us limb from limb, he was taunting us about being homosexuals or his sexual exploits with our mothers, sisters, and girlfriends.

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. They 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 this kind of malaise, a state of existence common for low ranking enlisted Marines, “The Suck.”, “because it sucks dicks to be in it and it sucks the life out of you.”

By the time I came into the corps, The Suck had been replaced by “The Big Green Weenie”, because no matter who you were in the Corps, you were screwed. That both names for the corps are blatantly sexual and phallus-focused is certainly not a coincidence. The Corps did after all seek to replace our sexual desires with its own mission.

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 Platoon Guide that I had known from Boot Camp 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 that initial indoctrination, he disappeared one day and the widely accepted rumor was that he had jerked off on the desk of a

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Chaplain and was being processed with the scores of other “broke dicks”, malingerers and safety risks.

Early on, as a Marine graduates from the School of Infantry and picks up rank, their reality becomes further split between liberty and duty. This occurs as restrictions on his liberty decrease as his income increases. While not all, or even a majority of Marines participate, 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 push Marines towards 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 the men in this video 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 and represents only a fraction of the entire Corps. This means that even before becoming a Marine and regardless of his deeper understanding, a potential recruit was consciously aware that his job would be to kill or be killed.

- 13 weeks in Boot Camp aboard MCRD San Diego or Paris Island, depending on where he enlisted,

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

- assignment to an infantry battalion, and then down to a company and platoon based upon the needs of the unit,

- screening and selection by 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 all are grueling affairs, - finally, participation at one of four Marine Scout Sniper schools, earning an additional MOS of 0317 upon successful completion.\textsuperscript{21}

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, a Marine infantry unit will typically recover, reorganize and train for 12-14 months between each 7 month combat deployment. At some point during all of this, a battalion’s Scout Sniper Platoon will look to fill any vacancies they may have. These platoons recruit, screen, and select new snipers from the rest of their infantry battalion. They also run their own indoc, which is designed to quickly weed out all non-

hackers and begin the training process as a professionally instructed gunman, a PIG.

After training as a sniper, often times deploying and operating in combat several times, a PIG will get a shot at Scout Sniper School. The attrition rate for these schools is extremely high, and many PIGs must make several attempts at the course, despite being proven snipers with confirmed kills in combat. Because of this, a sniper might remain a PIG for his entire career and never actually earn the official 0317 Scout Sniper MOS designation. Through successful completion of the course, a PIG becomes a hunter of gunman, or HOG.\footnote{Emmanuel Ramos, “From Pigs to Hogs the Scout Sniper Way,” Quantico Senty, October 18 2011. http://www.quantico.usmc.mil/sentry/StoryView.aspx?SID=5628 (accessed March 21, 2012)}

The renaming of Marines is part of indoctrinating Marines as killers by dehumanizing not only the enemy, as in japs, gooks, hadjis, ragheads, or muj, but dehumanizing 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 act as sheepdogs,
looking to defend the sheep from predation.\textsuperscript{23} 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.

\textbf{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. The reason for the stop became immediately clear as I switched my radio to the company tac, and caught the tail end of a casualty report. One of the other platoons in our company had been in contact, meaning they were engaged by hostile fire. The engagement was over but one Marine was KIA. 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, I was struck with grief and anger because my former 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 and a Marine that my whole platoon had trained with prior to the deployment. It turned out that Valles was the only member of his fireteam not wounded or killed. After the company converged on the site, we attended to our casualties, destroyed the camp of the insurgents and detained the insurgent’s wives and children, we 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 my platoon’s 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 with a database. Many Marines gathered around the bodies, curious to see the effects of our weapons on real human targets.

During the engagement, the fireteam on the ground had been surprised at close range by the insurgents with automatic weapons, RPGs, grenades and a suicide vest when the Marines dismounted their vehicles to question the men in a ubiquitous
water truck. 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. Even the AK-47 most used by insurgents is only slightly larger at 7.62mm.

The terminal ballistics of the Bushmaster’s rounds, the effects that they have on human flesh and bone, was absurd. The bodies of the insurgents were torn, shredded, and pulverized as though a pet Tyrannosaurus 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 when 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. The 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 our oft repeated axiom, “hydrate or die”. That night as our company slept in and next to our vehicles, chem-lights or glowsticks were placed on the bodies so that they would not be stumbled over by our roving sentries or by Marines wandering outside of the coil to make head calls 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. If they are humanized by the sexual act, they are at
least not men. 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. As unsettling as this video is, it provides us 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 and to counter that enemy’s mission at an individual level. The Marines understand that these insurgent’s 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 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

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combatants and that of a sexualized group ritual of urinating on the heads of those enemies once killed. While I do not suggest that there is an undocumented epidemic of urinating on corpses by our warriors, 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 only illustrating a culture that allows graphic violence to permeate its media while reviling pornography? Is this video merely an instance of a rouge band of killers jeopardizing our foreign policy goals? Or is the society and its institutionalized warriors repressive of a link between sex and violence that this video makes uncomfortably visible?
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 Navy, the Marine Corps’ parent service, both 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. Historically, the Corps also stands out for its its ability to maintain a positive public image through its recruiting efforts. 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*. These savvy recruiting efforts helped the corps to remain an essentially volunteer force as it expanded seven-fold in that war despite the institution of the draft.25 This carefully managed public relations machine has also helped to protect against repeated attempts to dismantle the Marine Corps and transfer its amphibious mission capability to the Army.

The 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.²⁶ 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. As YouTube, Hulu and a host of other streaming services change the way Americans watch TV, the Marine Corps will need to remain on the cutting edge of media forms as it evolves with the country its serves. 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 Marine PR efforts.

Why study combat-related digital media?

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 Marine Corps related digital media 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.\textsuperscript{27} I don’t doubt that such an assimilation may be going smoother than expected. Considering the traditionally hyper-masculine culture of the Marines however, especially the infantry component and Boot Camp, changes will need to occur to accommodate Marines that are open in their homosexuality. To ignore this need is what will cause issues at the small unit level, where Marines need to trust their team and not be fearful of being mistreated as a result of negligence in the indoctrination process.

Also occurring this year is the opening of combat arms to females.\textsuperscript{28} 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{29} This means

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that for now, integration efforts are still only part of the research process to determine what recommended steps to take in the future. Included in the Marine Corps' research plan is a study to determine a new set of specialty-specific physical requirements. Instead of a scaled system like the Marine Physical Fitness Test, with separate standards for women and men, new requirements would be universal. Such a move signals a major sea change within our military culture and reflects the changes that have been part of the broader American social experience.

So what has this got to do with our Marine Scout Snipers urinating on their slain enemies? The Marine Corps has maintained a policy of segregated indoctrination for men and women 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, or perceived as feminine such as homosexuality, has been held as the standard for being a man and 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 Marine Scout Snipers’ video. Despite its appearance of strength and dominance, such a formation of masculinity is fragile\(^{30}\) and problematic when considering the inclusion of women and homosexuals in a heterosexual male-dominated culture. 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.

Beyond Marine Corps culture, violence and sexuality are important issues for any culture regardless of time but the added variable of digital media in the form of video games, viral videos, pornography, and the ease of publication for all these forms represents an important trend in our collective mental diet. As America is struggling to deal with a food supply that may be leading to higher rates of obesity, diabetes, heart

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disease and other diet related illnesses putting serious strain on our health care system, our mental diet warrants attention as well.

Supreme court cases like Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association, decided in 2011 and dealing with the effects of violent video games on the behavior of children, presage battles for our minds to come. This is a topic that David Grossman takes on when he raises the issue of violent games and videos as classical conditioning; “if we are horrified that the U.S. government might even consider doing such a thing to our soldiers, then why do we permit the same process to occur to millions of children across the nation?”

Obviously, the video serving as the springboard for this paper is very real, not a video game, but the mass consumption of such a video, out of context and without reflection, may work just as well to desensitize its audience. I am not arguing that there must be mass censorship to protect America’s minds. Rather, I urge a more diligent effort to understand these videos and the contexts from which they arise with the goal to provide more education for a public that is increasingly exposed to this type of media.

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A perverse aesthetic among killers of men

The Marine aesthetic is one of wild contradictions embracing rigid order and discipline, as well as the chaotic realities of combat. Before a recruit arrives at Boot Camp, the conflicting images of a Marine have been at work. The image of a Marine in his dress blues, replete with saber, is one that offers a young man the prospect of not only military conquests in far away places, but sexual conquests at home. This clean-cut look, itself a standard of military discipline contrasts sharply with imagery of Marines in combat, their uniforms dirty, torn and bloodied.

This complex aesthetic of the recruiting commercial is then continually pounded into a recruit throughout his indoctrination. The first time he encounters a Drill Instructor while waiting at the USO for the infamous buses to Boot Camp is an intoxicating mix of terror and delight. So well instilled is the automatic reaction to such a voice, that I can still feel adrenaline course through my body when I hear a DI unleash his fury, his voice something between a rebel yell and a bonsai charge. A recruit spends hours cleaning, polishing, sewing, straitening, tightening, and squaring-away ever facet of his existence, only to have it all smashed, dumped, destroyed, and
disgraced in an instant by a DI. Every night, before recruits lay in their racks and listen to the mournful bugle sounding Taps, they stand on line in their issued whitey tighties to be visually inspected for proper grooming and hygiene. After spending a month firing thousands of rounds and crawling through dust, mud, and slime the recruit learns the beauty of a clean rifle as he spends the next month meticulously preparing that rifle for the next recruit.

As a Marine progresses beyond boot camp and into ITB and eventually the fleet, his taste for artful destruction and murderous creativity are continually nurtured as the infantryman learns the skills necessary to “kill, kill, kill them all”. All the while, inspections requiring that the utmost attention to detail in appearance continue; inspections of the Marines’ possessions, inspections of their vehicles, inspections of their uniforms, inspections of their personal possessions. A lot of Marines fail to hold up to the constant need to maintain appearances and abide by the military axiom that perception is reality. Many Marines begin to think of themselves as “shit-bags” or “field-Marines” with a sort of counter-cultural pride that often grows out of combat experience. For many of these Marines, it is what is done in combat that matters, not the maintenance of personal appearance and public perception. This
type of attitude, especially after experiencing the realities of combat, is accompanied by a general disdain for American cultural sensibilities. It is not at all surprising to me when infantry Marines behave obscenely in public places, start fights, or hire prostitutes.

Gooks and Hajis

While the terms describing the tactics employed by the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Iraq and Afghanistan have changed from those used to describe tactics employed by VC/NVA in Vietnam, the element of surprise and the effect on Marine aggression has important parallels. Whether facing booby taps and pre-registered ambushes in the jungle or IEDs and complex-ambushes in deserts and mountains, the hard-charging aggressiveness of Marines in combat can be a critical weakness to be exploited. In his work "ARVN as Faggots: Inverted Warfare in Vietnam" Charles Levy examines the tendency of Marines to take out their frustration on their ARVN allies. Much like Marines today encounter among Muslim men, Vietnamese men were attacked for hand holding and for an appearance that the Marines interpreted as effeminate and homosexual. For those Marines, there was a
sense that “homosexuality was more personal than death.” In the outrage over Scout Snipers urinating on the corpses of their enemies, it appears that sexually charged acts remain more personal than death.

While tactics and technologies are continually adapted to cope with evolving threats on the battlefield, the aggressive hyper-masculinity forged in Boot Camp and tempered through the rest of the grunt experience can’t just be flicked on and off accordingly. Different situations obviously require different approaches and the psychological impact of the passive-aggressive tactics like an IED or a booby trap on infantry forces is severe. These type of weapons are often victim-initiated, relying on tripwires, pressure plates, and in some cases even infrared sensors like those used in garage doors and super markets. A feeling of inevitability and dread sets in facing these weapons. When these weapons are combined with ambushes initiated by Marines charging into pre-planned kill zones and rules of engagement that require individuals to make tough calls on the perceived intent of a target prior to engaging as well as the appropriate level of force to be applied, rage and frustration are inevitable.

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My own experience with an IED in which the vehicle behind mine was stuck, left me with a profound level of rage. Though I was relieved that no one was seriously injured, along with my fellow Marines, I had no one to direct my anger towards. I had the ability and desire to kill the enemy, but the pressure plate initiation of the IED meant that our adversaries had long since escaped the field of battle at their leisure.

Marine Marine Scout Snipers may start as grunts, but their expertise and mission renders them a much different type of force. In someways the sniper’s ability to reach out and touch someone at great distance is a psychological counter to the IED and the ambush. In Iraq and Afghanistan, snipers have been employed in a variety of different missions, including the counter-IED mission where sniper teams use stealth and patience to kill enemy combatants as they attempt to emplace their IEDs. Snipers have also been used to provide critical overwatch for infantry units as they move through urban environments, preventing the movement of enemy fighters along key avenues of approach.

Snipers have been so successful in slaying unsuspecting targets at range that after the first battle of Fallujah in April 2004, city officials’ first request of U.S. forces was to
call off the Marine Snipers.\textsuperscript{33} Two years later in Ramadi, insurgents offered bounties for Navy SEAL snipers like Chris Kyle who earned himself the name al-Shaitan Ramadi—the Devil of Ramadi—among Iraqis as he was setting the current record for an American sniper with 160 confirmed and 255 claimed kills.\textsuperscript{34} In these cases, the sniper has had a similar impact on enemies that IEDs have had on Marines, leaving them afraid and frustrated without a target for immediate retribution. It is in this way that snipers are special in a counterinsurgency environment. The sniper’s special mission and capabilities allows for the initiative to be taken against unsuspecting enemies while still adhering to restrictive rules of engagement.

\textbf{Reaction to the video}

Shortly after the video surfaced in January, an Afghan soldier killed four French soldiers and wounded fifteen others. While Afghan soldiers have turned on coalition forces before in so called ‘green on blue’ incidents, the viral video of Marines urinating on dead Afghans reportedly provided reason for such an attack. In an initial interrogation, the man confessed that his

\textsuperscript{33} Milo S. Afong, \textit{Hogs in the Shadows}. (New York: Berkley Trade, 2008), 106. Amazon Kindle Edition

motivation for the attack was vengeance for the video of foreign soldiers urinating on the bodies of dead Afghans.\textsuperscript{35}

As is always the case, fear of retribution from the enemy, Afghan soldiers, as well as the local population demanded a swift condemnation of such acts from official sources. According to a Pentagon spokesman, Defense secretary Leon Panetta denounced the act in a conversation with Afghan leader Hamid Karzai, saying that “the conduct depicted in the footage is utterly deplorable, and that it does not reflect the standards or values American troops are sworn to uphold.”\textsuperscript{36} Similarly, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed “total dismay”, categorizing the acts as “absolutely inconsistent with American values and the standards we expect from our military personnel.”\textsuperscript{37} While these official statements of Clinton and Panetta are predictable to the point of being boring, they do make interesting assumptions and assertions about American values.


\textsuperscript{37} ibid
Reading through the 998 comments left by the readership before NYT closed the comments of the article, no distinct consensus emerged on what exactly those American values were. While very few readers expressed outright support for the actions of the Marines in the video, quite a few acting as apologists generally identified themselves as combat veterans. Not surprisingly, among those veterans, references to the American war in Vietnam were common.

Notably, there were many comments that politicized the video, drawing larger conclusions based upon religious perspectives, racial groups and political parties. As one might expect, these comments tended to be the most inflammatory and many posts were themselves commented on, as readers defended and attacked each other’s positions. Much of the most vitriolic comments were likely flagged for removal. Smelling blood I went searching for a discourse between so-called liberals and conservatives, two of the most common combatants.

I found them easily in a post on the blog “God’s Own Party?” in support of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF). The blog’s point of view is Christian and pro-separation of church and state, its name questioning the appropriateness of the alignment of evangelical Christianity and the Republican party. The blog post includes a vicious email advocating
genocide against all Muslim “rag heads” from a man defending Marine Scout Snipers’ use of SS runes on their issued weapons and in unit photographs.

The blog’s author points out the obvious evidence of the email’s prejudice and maligns any such argument of the Marines being innocent based on ignorance as absurd proof of anti-Semitism. The historical usage of the runes is lost on both parties arguing essentially pro-Christian points of view. The truth is that while not an officially authorized representation, the SS symbology is recognized as a symbol for the employment of Marine Scout Snipers on maps in the Marine Corps and its use is nothing new. The Marine Corps is certainly not free from racism or prejudice and Sniping doctrine actually owes part of its heritage to the use of snipers by Germany in the second World War. It being said, to then conclude that an entire community of elite, well trained, and often highly intelligent operators are either white supremacists or innocent idiots unaware of history is laughable. These are the types of out of context, emotionally charged, and politicized readings that we must both be aware of and avoid making ourselves. After this image and others like it were spotlighted by MRFF earlier this year, the Marine Corps

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reiterated its ban on the usage of the SS runes in tattoos and extended it to include any form of representation.

Combat footage and war trophies

It is difficult for me to judge the Marines’ conduct in this video. Fortunately, the purpose of this project is to avoid making judgements and instead examine what happened, attempt to understand some of why it happened, and recognize the importance of paying attention to images and videos like these. The compulsion to take souvenirs is nothing new for Marines and warriors in general. Weapons, clothing, watches and various other trinkets have long lasting appeal. Ears, scalps, fingers and teeth are more grisly collectables that are not merely the stuff of wars fought by the previous generations. Members of an Army “kill team” in Afghanistan recently took to removing fingers as keepsakes in addition to digital stills that could be shared with a wider audience.  

Certainly video footage, even of unpleasant scenes such as those in the Marine Snipers’ video are not a new phenomenon. YouTube is filled with video montages using the black and white

infrared footage from various aircraft that usually include radio and intercom traffic. One such video, shot by an Apache gunship in 2007 and released by Wikileaks in 2010,\textsuperscript{40} is an intense and controversial portrayal of death and carnage. The video includes the death and dismemberment of several Reuters cameramen, two children, as well as armed insurgents. After an initial engagement with the helicopter's 30mm cannon nearly vaporizes a group of men gathered on a street corner, a van arrives and Iraqi civilians attempt to evacuate a wounded man. The rescuers and the van are then stopped dead in their tracks by another fusillade from the Apache. Ground forces arrive to assess the scene, and it is discovered that there are children in the van. A soldier can be seen running from the van with a child in his arms and radio traffic confirms that two children are wounded. While these types of videos provide an important view of combat and its horrors, because they are officially sanctioned recordings using military hardware, they are not collected as trophies. Despite this, their digital format allows for subsequent uses to be set to music and displayed as part of montages designed to celebrate the violence.

Another type of official video footage is blurring the lines between the cold, black and white perspectives shot from

\textsuperscript{40} “Collateral Murder - Wikileaks - Iraq,” YouTube, \url{http://youtu.be/5rXPrfnU3G0} (accessed June 1, 2012).
military aircraft and the strictly amateur video shot by the Marine Marine Scout Snipers. These videos, shot by combat cameramen during ground engagements in Afghanistan are made possible by advances in digital camera technology that make cameras smaller, lighter and resistant to damage. A system like the popular GoPro, makes it possible to easily mount a water and shock resistant camera that shoots HD quality video on a helmet, weapon or body armor. During my combat deployments, it was not unusual for Marines to have these types of setups during missions and patrols. At the time, none of these setups were officially sanctioned however, suggesting that Marine Corps Combat Camera has since taken a page out of the unauthorized war correspondence book. The results are impressive.

On a YouTube channel called Military Notes, a wide range of officially sanctioned videos can be viewed of various armed forces engaged in actual combat, taking casualties, and inflicting death and destruction. Shot in color, with all the salty language of the ground personnel, these videos feel very documentary in nature. Of course on a site like YouTube these official videos are mixed in with the masses of strictly amateur videos. For those of us on the outside looking in, the differences can be imperceptible. Some, but not all official videos have a title screen that includes pertinent information
on the video’s origin, security classification, location and units involved. Apart from that, they could easily be viewed or later edited to appear as war trophies.

What is important about the Marine Scout Snipers’ video, beyond what it depicts, is not only its amateur and unauthorized status but the intentionality behind it and the way in which it became part of the public consciousness. In the video, dialogue includes the question “You getting this on video?”. This question, along with the initial fumbling of the camera and the stoppage of footage suggest that the intention of the video was to specifically capture the urination. This souvenir then is more about capturing the interaction of the snipers with their slain enemies than strictly about documenting, celebrating, or remembering the kills as with the Army kill team. The source that released the video, unlike most of the combat footage previously mentioned, is uncertain. As the body language of the video reveals, these Marines understood that what they were doing would not be considered acceptable, at the very least by someone close enough to catch them in the act. In addition, the timing of the video’s emergence in January, at least three months after the Marines of 3/2 returned to the U.S., suggests that the video had not been intended for wide public display.
So haven’t we seen all of this already?

U.S. service members’ sexualized defilement of corpses is nothing new in the news. Recently, Marine Sergeant Sanick admitted to pumping bullets into the bodies of five Iraqi civilians and urinating on the broken skull of an Iraqi man. This admission was part of Sanick’s testimony during the court martial of his squad leader Staff Sergeant Wuterich for the 2005 “Haditha massacre”, in which Wuterich, Sanick and their squad slayed 24 Iraqis including women and children, reacting to a deadly IED attack on their convoy.41

Neither are images of U.S. service members posing with the sexualized bodies of enemies new to the public. While the detainees in the infamous 2004 Abu Ghraib photos from Iraq were not dead, the domination of the mens’ naked bodies is well documented.42 The photographs included Iraqi men stacked naked in a pyramid, being intimidated by military working dogs, and held naked on a leash by female soldier Lynndie England.

Marines (and soldiers in general) posing with the enemy, dead defiled or both, for cameras is also nothing new in the news. A

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Rolling Stone article in 2011 on the U.S. Army “kill team”, described the premeditated murder of an unarmed fifteen-year-old villager, among others, in Afghanistan. The soldiers cut off the dead boy’s clothes, stripping him naked to check for identifying marks and tattoos in accordance with Army procedures, and obtained iris and fingerprint scans. The soldiers then posed with his body for pictures, holding his head up by the hair much like a hunter might pose while holding the antlers of a trophy buck.43

While we have seen all these things, the video of Marines urinating on dead bodies brings the elements of killing, sexualized domination, and a digital recording all into the same space. What is missing however is the story to go with it, largely because it takes time for investigations, interviews, and trials to take place. But for what we lack in an official story for context, we make up for in the organic nature of the video. While certainly not a candid video, the video says much more than just the sum of its individual frames. Unlike the Abu Ghraib photos, the kill team shots, or even the most recent posting of photographs in the Los Angles Times, showing Americans soldiers posing with the partial remains of a suicide

bomber and IED employers on two separate occasions in Afghanistan, this video has sound and motion.

A picture may be worth a thousand words, but the inclusion of actual language gives the video dimensionality that cannot be captured in a photograph and that provides its own narrative. That narrative, unlike one produced in testimony based upon memory, has certain unalterable qualities to it. Of course, you and I may read that narrative differently. Indeed I read that narrative much differently than I did the first time that I watched the clip. Nonetheless, this video allows us to hear the words and see the body language of these warriors in motion. While our interpretation may change, those words themselves cannot be separated from their images.

Conclusion

A common feeling among many Marine veterans, those with real combat experience and those without, as well as those those with kills and those without, is an often expressed feeling that they have not done enough. Despite the years of training and operating, at great cost to physical mental and emotional health, snipers without a kill like Anthony Swofford, and snipers with the most kills like Chris Kyle, both return home

with a aching sense of not having fulfilled their purpose. That purpose is to kill.

This purpose is one that has been instilled and ingrained through not just a single initiation, but through layers of training and indoctrination. This is a carefully managed process that seeks to produce men not just capable of overcoming their natural instinct to avoid killing other human beings, but instilled with a yearning desire to kill. It is with this set of conflicting forces within that young warriors find themselves fighting our nation’s battles.

While much is done to prepare the would-be killer for the actual act of killing the enemy, nothing can prepare an individual for facing chaos of war and the gristly reality of death in combat conditions. The death of a human being, especially on the battlefield is not pretty, and it is certainly not clean. Desensitization and dehumanization may facilitate the actual violence of killing, but how can one train for the aftermath of killing? I still remember acutely the built up anger and frustration of facing an insurgent threat, a threat that was successful in wounding and killing Marines that I had known and trained with. Because of that, I’m not sure know how I would respond to a situation where I came face to face with someone that I had shot and killed.
As I reflect on my own experiences, I realize that not only do I sometimes remember certain events differently, with some elements coming forward with more emphasis, but the meaning that I derive from those experiences also shifts. It occurs to me that even with this video, meaning and memory will change over time. Mercurial as such meaning is however, I maintain that close analysis of amateur video such as this, and video documentation of combat troops in general, will provide important insights for those seeking to understand American warriors and the broader culture that they represent. I include American culture because the ease of production and publication of digital media online allows the public to both observe and participate in the creation of discourse and meaning on timeless issues like violence, aggression, and sexuality.

Dealing with an issue that I am so personally invested in, I recognize that my own bias and political leanings play a huge role in determining my arguments. There is no avoiding it. Putting a finger on what exactly my stance on war and the use of deadly force in countries like Afghanistan and Iraq is a challenge even for me, as it is impossible to know as much about America’s culture of warfare abroad as to suggest that I have solutions that would reduce the rate of atrocities and officially condemnable acts. America’s Global War on Terror is a
very different war than America’s war against communism in Vietnam and Indochina. That being said, counterinsurgency operations still easily classify as atrocity producing situations.

The challenge of fighting an unknown enemy that easily blends into the local civilian population cannot be solved with more sophisticated weaponry alone. The ongoing controversy about the classification of casualties in drone strikes approved by the President, where a “guilty by association” standard prevails,\textsuperscript{45} shows us that even the classification of civilian casualties as collateral damage can change. If you are close enough in proximity to a terrorist to be injured in a strike, than you must be up to no good. This is the kind of grey area that gets ground troops into trouble. This kind of rationalization works to ease minds, similar to condemning the actions of Marines in this video as being inconsistent with our American values.

We are fighting a war in Afghanistan based upon America’s desire for vengeance. That vengeance is largely justified by the thousands of civilian deaths in Al Qaeda’s September 11, 2001 attacks. And yet, the U.S. does not publish an official record

for civilian casualties in the Global War on Terror. A recent study done at Brown’s Watson Institute for International Studies produced a conservative estimate of 137,000 civilians killed by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{46} While reports like these certainly come with their own agenda, that such information remains elusive stands as a serious problem.

In such a war, in any war, there will be atrocities and there will be civilian casualties. We should care about these incidents and have the information available to us. War may be hell, but the U.S. military is by design under civilian control and as such we have a responsibility to demand the necessary information. The maintenance of public awareness is critical in combating the kind cultural trauma that America experienced when illusions of definite victory were shattered during the Tet offensive in 1968. If we are unable to face the realities of wars fought in our name, we only encourage the repetition of past mistakes.

On the atrocities side, more information is available to us then ever before. Thanks to the proliferation of unauthorized digital photographs and videos like “US Marines Peeing on Dead Taliban”, we have ample opportunity to study the way that we fight wars and the way our service members interact with the

enemy on the battlefield. Although the gruesome necessity of killing in war is unlikely to change, these videos give us a chance to develop understanding about the impacts of culture and methods of indoctrination on Americans that serve in combat and find themselves in situations where they must kill other human beings. Changes in policy regarding homosexuals and women will require changes in indoctrination practices, and as these changes occur the entire warrior culture will necessarily evolve. These changes will certainly take time but the possibilities are fascinating.

As the Marine Corps seeks to find ways to standardize physical fitness requirements for combat specialties regardless of gender or sex, it is increasingly apparent that changes in American society are influencing who will be killing on our behalf in years to come. It is likely that in the not too distant future there will be female Marine Scout Snipers. How would this team have behaved differently if a member had been a female? As societal changes filter their way through the Marine Corps structure, and the culture of American warriors shifts to accommodate the whole spectrum of sexuality, it is inevitable that such an evolution will be caught on video. Such change will be buried in a growing collection of data that demands earnest review and compassionate research.
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