“Death Hilarious”: The Humor of Combat and the American Wars on Terror

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> *A legion of horribles, hundreds in number, half naked or clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream with the skins of animals and silk finery and pieces of uniform still tracked with the blood of prior owners, coats of slain dragoons, frogged and braided cavalry jackets, one in a stovepipe hat and one with an umbrella and one in white stockings and a bloodstained weddingveil and some in headgear of cranefeathers or rawhide helmets that bore the horns of bull or buffalo and one in a pigeontailed coat worn backwards and otherwise naked and one in the armor of a Spanish conquistador, the breastplate and pauldrons deeply dented with old blows of mace or sabre done in another country by men whose very bones were dust and many with their braids spliced up with the hair of other beasts until they trailed upon the ground and their horses ears and tails worked with bits of brightly colored cloth and one whose horse's whole head was painted crimson red and all the horsemen's faces gaudy and grotesque with daubings like a company of mounted clowns, death hilarious, all howling in a barbarous tongue and riding down upon them like a horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of Christian reckoning, screeching and yammering and clothed in smoke like those vaporous beings in regions beyond right knowing where the eye wanders and the lip jerks and drools.*
> *Oh my god, said the sergeant.*
>
> -Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West*

I. Introduction – A Reflection on Trauma and the Role of Humor in the Cases of Ed Gein, Elizabeth Borden, and the *Challenger* Explosion

In Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West* a mob of bloodthirsty American Indians rides down upon a group of U.S. soldiers and slays them mercilessly. McCarthy linked the concept of humor to the barbarity of combat by describing the colorful appearance of the mob as "like a company of mounted clowns,

death hilarious."[1] The imagery of *Blood Meridian* associates humor with aggression and violence, but humor in warfare serves as a catharsis for many military combatants. Combat humor relieves combatants of emotions which would otherwise prove overwhelming or which could act as an impediment in combat, but humor has the potential to desensitize combatants to fellow human beings, impairing their ability to perform productively and lawfully in combat and to reintegrate successfully into civilian society after the cessation of combat operations. The memoirs of American military service members, including participants in the Wars on Terror, demonstrate this duality of combat humor: the use of humor as a coping mechanism and also the role of humor in empowering violence and cruelty.

Jeffrey Kluger wrote about the use of humor as a means of "constructive distraction," a way of "pushing back" against trauma.[2] Kluger's view applies not only to the combat environment, and the criminal case of Ed Gein, a resident of Plainfield, Wisconsin in the 1950s, demonstrated the use of humor as constructive distraction in non-combat-related trauma. In 1957 police arrested Gein in connection with the disappearance of 58-year-old Bernice Worden, the proprietor of a local hardware store. A receipt found at the store led authorities to Gein, and Sheriff Art Schley, accompanied by Officer Lloyd Schoephoerster, traveled to Gein's home to search the premises. Schoephoerster later described the sheriff's discovery of the missing woman:

> *As I tried to open the door going from the woodshed into the house, Sheriff Schley looked around a portion of the woodshed. I heard him cry out, "My God, here she is." I*

[1] Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West* (New York: Vintage International, 1992), 55.
[2] Jeffrey Kluger. "How Do I Make Peace With Dying?" *TIME*, February 26, 2018, p. 75: 75.

> *went over to where he was and saw a woman's nude, headless body hanging from the rafters by her ankles.*[3]

Officers called to the scene by Schoephoerster encountered what Gein biographer Harold Schechter described as "mental derangement expressed as décor," including a soup bowl made from the sawed-off top of a human skull, skulls utilized as bedpost decorations, four chairs with seating made from strips of human flesh, leggings constructed from actual human legs, a vest-like garment made from the upper torso of a middle-aged woman, masks made from the flesh of human faces, and lampshades, bracelets, a tom-tom, a wastebasket, and the sheath of a hunting knife – all made of human skin.[4] Police also discovered the face of 54-year-old Mary Hogan, a woman who disappeared from a local tavern three years earlier, cut and formed into a mask, as well as Worden's steaming head in a burlap bag and her heart in a plastic bag near Gein's stove. Gein claimed he acquired the bulk of the body parts from grave robbery, a claim verified by the exhumation of gravesites he identified.[5] The victimized community of Plainfield, struggling with the magnitude of Gein's crimes long after his committal to a Wisconsin mental institution, quickly adopted humor as a means of constructively distracting from the trauma.

Psychiatrist George Arndt studied the use of humor in the Plainfield community, observing the development of "geiners" – dark jokes about Gein's crimes. Examples of geiners included the following:

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[3] Harold Schechter, *Deviant: The Shocking True Story of Ed Gein, the Original "Psycho"* (New York: Pocket Books, 1989), 73, 78-80; Robert H. Gollmar, *Edward Gein – America's Most Bizarre Murderer* (Delavan, Wisconsin: Chas. Hallberg & Company, 1981), 28-29.

[4] Schechter, 40, 44, 78, 86-90, 104, 190-194, 253-254, 264-268, 269; Gollmar, 36-40, 81-84, 179-180, 209-217.

[5] Schechter, 104, 190-194; Gollmar, 36-40.

> *Q. Why did they let Gein out of the hospital on New Year's Eve?*
> *A. So he could dig up a date.*
>
> *Q. What's a "Gein Beer"?*
> *A. One with lots of body and no head.*[6]

Arndt compared the use of geiners to the rise of jokes in the aftermath of the trial of Elizabeth "Lizzie" Borden, a young Massachusetts woman tried and acquitted for the brutal axe murder of her parents in the 1890s. Arndt cited Borden's story as the only other American criminal case in which the local population collectively resorted to humor as a means of psychologically processing the horrific event in their community, circulating jokes such as variations of the following:

> *Q. What did Lizzie Borden say to the salesman who wanted to sell his product at her door?*
> *A. "Hold on, I'll go axe my sister."*[7]

Arndt wrote that the use of geiners in the aftermath of Gein's trial was "so common that it could be considered a mass repetition compulsion."[8] The psychological trauma associated with the upheavals of the Gein case – the disappearance of Worden, the discovery of her mutilated body at Gein's house, the subsequent macabre discoveries of body parts throughout Gein's residence, and the final trauma associated with the knowledge of Gein's vandalism and theft at the graves of loved ones – could only be alleviated through the repetitive, compulsive application of humor.

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[6] Gollmar, 209-217.
[7] Gollmar, 217; Jane Stern and Michael Stern, *Jane & Michael Stern's Encyclopedia of Pop Culture: An A to Z Guide of Who's Who and What's What, from Aerobics and Bubble Gum to Valley of the Dolls and Moon Unit Zappa* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 192.
[8] Stern and Stern, 192.

Writing in the months after the explosion of the American spaceship *Challenger* in 1986, J. Jerome Zolten observed how humor acted as a psychological barrier between the human mind and a nationally televised traumatic event. Zolten could easily have been referring to the Borden or Gein cases when he wrote, "The intent of black humor seems to be to subvert pain through joking. It is the forced injection of jokes into tragic situations, and a perverse cause-effect reaction seems to be the goal. If happiness provokes laughter, then perhaps laughter can provoke happiness."[9] Zolten collected jokes, including the following, which circulated in the aftermath of the *Challenger* tragedy:

> *Q. What does N.A.S.A. stand for?*
> *A. Need another seven astronauts!*[10]

Zolten also recorded a conversation between two comedians immediately after the explosion. One comedian referred to Christa McAuliffe, a schoolteacher onboard the *Challenger*, when he quipped, "No homework tonight, kiddies!"[11] The subjects of these jokes died in a fiery freak accident witnessed live on television by millions of Americans, yet some people were willing to joke about the tragedy in the first few days and even hours after the explosion.

Philosopher Henri Bergson suggested that humor involves looking "upon life as a disinterested spectator" in order to transform "many a drama… into comedy."[12] John

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[9] J. Jerome Zolten, "Joking in the Face of Tragedy." *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, vol. 45, no. 4, Winter 1988, pp. 345-350: 347.
[10] Zolten, 348.
[11] Zolten, 345.
[12] Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Translated by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2005), 3.

Casey expanded upon Bergson's idea, describing the experience of a stage actor seeking laughter from the audience:

> *He had to take a pratfall on stage. When he fell far upstage, everyone laughed. When he fell halfway downstage, everyone laughed except the first two rows. When he fell right on the lip of the stage, nobody laughed. Several people in the front row, who'd heard the thump of his hipbone, said, "Ow!" This actor's experience may put to rest the facile theory of humor as malice, that we laugh at someone slipping on a banana peel because we're mean. We're not mean – we say "ow," at least if we're close. As we get farther away we become cartoon watchers.*[13]

The words of Bergson and Casey provide perspective for the jokes in the aftermath of the *Challenger* tragedy. Far from representing tastelessness or callousness, the jokers after the *Challenger* explosion represented an understandable need to transform the drama of heartache into comedy, to mentally reshape a tragedy to the point where the viewer could adopt the role of "disinterested spectator" or "cartoon watcher." This interpretation of the role of humor also explains the compulsive nature of joke-telling observed by Arndt in the aftermath of the Gein case. The human mind seeks psychological distance from murder and the chaos of life, and humor provided this distance for the residents of Plainfield in the 1950s and the *Challenger* observers in the 1980s.

In his two-volume *Rationale of the Dirty Joke: An Analysis of Sexual Humor*, Gershon Legman used the term "rationalization" to describe the act of psychological distancing. Legman defined rationalization in humor as "the attempt to make understandable, or at least believable, even endurable, if only as a 'joke'… some highly-

[13] John Casey, *Beyond the First Draft: The Art of Fiction* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 73.

charged neurotic situation."[14] Philosopher Dana Sutton similarly viewed humor as a means of confronting the misfortunes of life, describing humor as a "purgative" to "bad feelings."[15] Legman and Sutton wrote of the benevolent role of humor, but numerous commentators have identified a hostile element, a trait which Arthur Koestler called "an impulse, however faint, of aggression and apprehension… manifested in the guise of malice, derision, the veiled cruelty of condescension, or merely as an absence of sympathy with the victim of the joke."[16] Cicero wrote of humor consisting of "meanness and deformity," and Charles Baudelaire called humorous laughter "satanic."[17] Sigmund Freud linked joking to neuroses and pathologies, and Mikita Brottman wrote that "under the mask of humor, all men are enemies."[18] The humor associated with the Gein, Borden, and *Challenger* examples clearly contains elements of hostility and aggression.

The jokes in the aftermath of the *Challenger* explosion seemed to express the hostility associated with "Schadenfreude," a German expression composed of the words *schaden*, meaning "harm," and *freude*, meaning "joy."[19] Richard H. Smith defined Schadenfreude as "the pleasure derived from another person's misfortune," a feeling

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[14] Gershon Legman, *Rationale of the Dirty Joke: An Analysis of Sexual Humor – First Series* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1968), 17.
[15] Dana Sutton, *The Catharsis of Comedy* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 29; Mikita Brottman, *Funny Peculiar: Gershon Legman and the Psychopathology of Humor* (Hillsdale, New Jersey: The Analytic Press, 2004), xviii.
[16] Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (London: Pan Books, 1966), 53; Michael Mulkay, *On Humour: Its Nature and Its Place in Modern Society* (New York: Polity Press, 1988), 97.
[17] Marcus Tullius Cicero, *M.T. Cicero De Oratore, Or, His Three Dialogues Upon the Character and Qualifications of an Orator*. Translated by William Guthrie. London: T. Waller, 1755), 216; Charles Baudelaire, *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists*. Translated by P.E. Charvet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 148.
[18] Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relations to the Unconscious*. Translated by James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1960), 146, 154, 174, 211, 219; Brottman, 59.
[19] Richard H. Smith, *The Joy of Pain: Schadenfreude and the Dark Side of Human Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), xii.

often associated with the tribulations of a specifically envied person.[20] The act of telling jokes about schoolteacher McAuliffe may have reflected the Schadenfreude experienced by people envious of her journey with professional astronauts into space. Sutton accounted for the aggressiveness of humor by observing that humor exhibits "disdain" toward the "targets" of the humor, acting as "a kind of antitoxin that inhibits the target's capacity to induce bad feelings in the future."[21] The jokes about Ed Gein and Lizzie Borden mocked the targets, belittling a murderer and a suspected murderer who caused such high levels of discomfort within their respective communities.

John Casey alluded to the aggressive element in humor when he wrote that "laughter is on the side of the bad boys – a small portion of relief for those under the thumbs of Sister Mary Margaret, drill sergeants, customs officials, maître d's at French restaurants."[22] Military memoirs frequently include "bad boy" service members finding relief through the aggressive mocking of their situation or of the events and people around them. The annals of soldiering, a profession closely associated with trauma and upheaval, also include examples of humor performing a cathartic role for military combatants. Psychologist Rudolf Mathias, studying the geiner phenomenon in 1950s Wisconsin, demonstrated an understanding of the cathartic potential for humor in combat when he concluded that the Gein jokes functioned similarly to "the jokes exchanged among soldiers who are going into battle."[23] The jokes of soldiers illustrate the therapy

[20] Smith, xii, xvi.
[21] Sutton, 29; Brottman, xviii.
[22] Casey, 71-72.
[23] Schechter, 154.

and the aggression associated with humor, and the examples of aggressive humor serve as a warning against creating too much psychological distance in response to trauma.

II. Humor and Combat Trauma – Examples of the Therapy and Aggression of Combat Humor from the American Indian Wars to Vietnam

The songs of British World War I fighting men often included humor that therapeutically addressed the soldiers' feelings of fear, boredom, or frustration with the progress of the "Great War." One song, titled "I Have No Pain, Dear Mother, Now" and sung to the tune of "My Love Is Like a Red, Red Rose," addressed the distinct possibility of combat death:

> *I have no pain, dear mother, now,*
> *But oh! I am so dry.*
> *Connect me to a brewery*
> *And leave me there to die.*[24]

John Casey identified the importance of incongruity in humor, citing the example of "a three-hundred-pound man wearing a thong bikini" as humorous because of the image's incongruity.[25] The incongruity of "I Have No Pain, Dear Mother, Now" exists in the image of a severely wounded combat soldier taken not to an infirmary, but to a brewery, where he appears amenable to death. The song encourages a subconscious comparison of an infirmary and a brewery, and the incongruity of these two institutions, the total inadequacy of one and the suitability of the other in responding to a soldier's wounds, contributes to the humor.

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[24] John Brophy and Eric Partridge, *The Long Train: What the British Soldier Sang and Said in The Great War of 1914-18* (New York: London House & Maxwell, 1965), 43.
[25] Casey, 77.

Casey also observed the importance of the element of truth in humor, writing, "Somewhere in the midst of Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Gibbon quotes a French historian who says, 'Nothing is beautiful if it's not true.' That applies to what's funny too."[26] Incongruity combines with truth to create humor in "I Have No Pain, Dear Mother, Now," and the truth of the British soldiers in World War I is that many soldiers would likely have appreciated the opportunity to visit a brewery during a combat tour. The humorous linking of an unlikely event such as a brewery visit with the likely event of a combat death may also have served as a diminution of the fear of death in the minds of the troops. "I Have No Pain, Dear Mother, Now" certainly treats the subject of death flippantly, a strategy which renders death, in the words of Jeffrey Kluger, "benign or comical."[27] In her biography of Gershon Legman, Brottman wrote, "People are always looking for something funny to 'take their minds off it,' at least for a while. 'It' may be something trivial or something important, depending on immediate circumstances, but in the end, of course, 'it' is always and only death."[28] Men and women in combat frequently face imminent death, and these combatants are often the individuals most adept at using humor to "take their minds off it."

Two accounts from World War II involve U.S. Marine officers responding to death flippantly or comically, even at the moment of death. At the beginning of America's involvement in the war, Marine Major James Devereux commanded the Marine forces defending Wake Island against the Japanese. After holding out for two weeks against overwhelming odds, Devereux sent out one final message, received by

[26] Casey, 90.
[27] Kluger, 75.
[28] Brottman, 152.

Allied telegraphy shortly before the enemy overran the U.S. position: S…E…N…D….M…O…R…E….J…A…P…S….[29] A similar story from close to the end of the war involved Major Ray Dollins, a Marine pilot who served as an aerial spotter during the Battle of Iwo Jima in the Pacific. Dollins' plane took fire from the ground during the battle, and as Marines on the ground watched the plane spiral in the sky over the island they heard the Major singing over the aerial observer frequency:

> *Oh what a beautiful morning,*
> *Oh what a beautiful day,*
> *I've got a terrible feeling,*
> *Everything's coming my way.*[30]

The singing stopped after the final line, Dollins' plane crashed into the ocean, and a Marine assault boat later recovered the Major's body.[31] Aside from amazing courage, the examples of Devereux and Dollins demonstrate the power of humor to distract from everything, to include death even at the point of dying. Dollins in particular appeared fully aware of impending death, changing the lyrics of a Rodgers and Hammerstein song to reflect the "terrible" feeling of that "coming" crash. Fellow Marines heard the jokes made by Devereux and Dollins in their final moments through telegraphy and radio messages, and these jokes performed a function similar to the jokes after the *Challenger* explosion. Humor helped diminish the eyewitness trauma of seeing Dollins' plane crash into the ocean and of watching the *Challenger* explode on live television, as well as the grim knowledge that Devereux would be sending no more messages from Wake Island,

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[29] Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2009), 147.
[30] Richard F. Newcomb, *The Dramatic Account of the Epic Battle That Turned the Tide of World War II* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1965), 107.
[31] Ibid.

by remaking death into something less horrifying and worthy of, or even susceptible to, being mocked.

Devereux and Dollins created psychological distance from death, but many combatants seek psychological distance from their own act of killing. Psychologist and retired Army Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman, a former Army Ranger, wrote of the need for soldiers to use special vocabulary as a form of constructive distraction:

> *Most soldiers do not "kill," instead the enemy was knocked over, wasted, greased, taken out, and mopped up. The enemy is hosed, zapped, probed, and fired on. The enemy's humanity is denied, and he becomes a strange beast called a Kraut, Jap, Reb, Yank, dink, slant, slope, or raghead. Even the weapons of war receive benign names – Puff the Magic Dragon, Walleye, TOW, Fat Boy, and Thin Man – and the killing weapon of the individual soldier becomes a piece or a hog, and a bullet becomes a round.*[32]

Grossman recounted the story of American soldiers in Vietnam who asked their Vietnamese interpreter, a former member of the Viet Cong, if labeling the VC as "gooks and dinks" was appropriate. The interpreter responded, "It makes no difference to me. … My company in the jungle … called you Big Hairy Monkeys. We kill monkeys, and … we eat them."[33] This form of constructive distraction made combat tolerable for the VC fighter because, while killing a man might be psychologically disturbing, the killing and devouring of a monkey were actions with which the VC were entirely comfortable. Combat journalist Chris Hedges observed, "A soldier who is able to see the humanity of the enemy makes a troubled and ineffective killer."[34] Remaking the enemy into something other than human, like a monkey worthy of a meal, assists in the performance

[32] Grossman, *On Killing*, 91.
[33] Grossman, *On Killing*, 91-92.
[34] Chris Hedges, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002), 73.

of combat despite the trauma associated with killing. The enemy, far from being a peer, is the subject of belittlement, worthy of being mocked just as Dollins and Devereux mocked death.

The combat service of Alvin York, a mountain man from East Tennessee and the most highly decorated American soldier of World War I, contains a strong example of the psychological need to remake the traumatic act of killing. A deeply religious man, York recorded in his journal the spiritual journey he underwent in order to accept both his draft order and the morality of the Great War:

> *I was bothered a plenty as to whether it was right or wrong. I knew that if it was right, everything would be all right. And I also knew that if it was wrong and we were only fighting for a bunch of foreigners, it would all be wrong. And I prayed and prayed. I prayed two whole days and a night out on the mountainside. And I received my assurance that it was all right, that I should go, and that I would come back without a scratch. I received this assurance direct from God. And I have always been led to believe that He always keeps his promise.*[35]

York's writing indicates that he went to Europe untroubled by guilt, believing strongly in the righteousness of his cause, but his account of the killing of German combatants demonstrates the psychological pressures of combat and the need to remake the act of taking a human life:

> *In order to sight me or to swing their machine guns on me, the Germans had to show their heads above the trench, and every time I saw a head I just touched it off. … I didn't want to kill any more than I had to. But it was they or I. And I was giving them the best I had. Suddenly a German officer and five men jumped out of the trench and charged*

[35] Alvin C. York, "Sgt. Alvin C. York's Diary." *Wayback Machine*. 13 January 1998. http://web.archive.org/web/20050311191425/volweb.utk.edu/Schools/York/diary.html. Accessed 07 March 2018.

> *me with fixed bayonets. I changed to the old automatic and just touched them off too. I touched off the sixth man first, then the fifth, then the fourth, then the third and so on.*[36]

York, a man who believed he had received a divine assurance to participate in war, could not write specifically of the act of shooting another human being, even in an account which is otherwise incredibly specific and detailed. He referred to killing as a variation of "just touched him off" on three occasions, only using the verb "kill" in reference to his reluctance in performing the act: "I didn't want to kill any more than I had to." Killing is not real at the moment of execution because York used a form of constructive distraction, a semantic move which made tolerable the act of shooting bullets into the heads and bodies of fellow human beings. The reality of killing only exists in York's writing as something he will do if he has to but does not want to do again.

The accounts of York and the Vietnamese interpreter differ in that York only felt the need to create distance from the act of killing. The most derogatory term he uses in his writing is "bunch of foreigners," and he frequently refers to German soldiers as simply "German." The Vietnamese interpreter and his American counterparts distanced themselves from actual enemy combatants, using the terms "gook," "dink," and "monkey" to refer to their opponents. This terminology represented the purgation of negative emotions as discussed by Dana Sutton, the expression of disdain toward specific targets as a means of maintaining psychological distance from those targets. The examples of Dollins and Devereux also demonstrated disdain toward the targets of humor. In Dollins' case he belittled death through his song, and Devereux mocked the

[36] Ibid.

"Japs" in his insinuation that more of them would be needed if they hoped to overrun his position.

The examples of the Vietnamese interpreter's discussion of "big, hairy monkeys" and Devereux's reference to the "Japs" demonstrate that enemy forces serve as natural antagonists in military jokes, but many service members experience an antagonistic relationship with their superiors. These relationships often result in moments of combat humor. The British World War I song "Old Soldiers Never Die" serves as an example of subordinates mocking military superiors:

> *Old soldiers never die,*
> *Never die,*
> *Never die,*
> *Old soldiers never die –*
> *They simply fade away.*
>
> *Old soldiers never die,*
> *Never die,*
> *Never die,*
> *Old soldiers never die –*
> *Young ones wish they would.*[37]

By humorously wishing for the death of "old soldiers," the enlisted men singing the song mocked their older superiors who ostensibly caused so much of their combat grief. The song may also have reflected bitterness directed at older soldiers, such as officers and senior Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) located farther away from the areas of combat, dying at a lower rate than the younger front line enlisted troops.

Using humor in combat enables combatants to constructively distract from experiences involving superiors, enemy combatants, acts of violence, and the prospect of

[37] Brophy and Partridge, 59.

death, but the risk associated with remaking an event or person, particularly a member of enemy forces, is that the combatant in the act of remaking will dehumanize the target of disdain to such an extent that violence and murder themselves become humorous. An example unrelated to American combat experiences involves Nazi atrocities during Hitler's war against the Soviet Union in World War II. A witness to the slaughter of Jews at Babi Yar in Ukraine described German soldiers beating Jewish victims as they forced the Jews to run to the ravine where they would be shot. The witness said that the soldiers "kept shouting, 'Schnell, schnell!'" and "laughed happily, as if they were watching a circus act."[38] Hedges, an American combat journalist in El Salvador, the Balkans, and Iraq, wrote that war "turns human reality into a bizarre carnival," serving to promote "racists and killers" and to empower "those with a predilection for murder."[39] Most combat veterans are neither racist nor murderous, but the combat environment encourages aggression and violence, and humor in combat becomes more aggressive and violent as a consequence.

The U.S. military's wars in the late 1800s against the American Indians in the western United States involved a number of stories which help illustrate the transformation of combat humor from the psychological processing of a combat situation, to the aggressive mocking of an individual or situation, to finally deriving humor from violence and death. Captain John G. Bourke, a junior officer serving in the Indian wars, recorded a humorous event during his time with the Apache:

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[38] Richard Rhodes, *Masters of Death: The SS Einzatsgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 174-176; Edward B. Westermann, *Hitler's Ostkrieg and the Indian Wars: Comparing Genocide and Conquest* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 190.
[39] Hedges, 74, 9.

> *One of the funniest incidents I can remember was seeing a very desperate Chiricahua Apache, named "Ka-e-tennay," who was regarded as one of the boldest and bravest men in the whole nation, trying to avoid running face to face against his mother-in-law; he hung on to stones, from which had he fallen he would have been dashed to pieces or certainly broken several of his limbs.*[40]

Bourke's story contained the element of truth in the trope of a man struggling in his relationship with his mother-in-law, and Bourke emphasized the element of incongruity in his description of Ka-e-tennay as "one of the boldest and bravest men" in the Apache nation, a fierce warrior who still panicked around his mother-in-law. Bourke's story served simply as an example of a humorous story in combat, as opposed to combat humor utilized for therapeutic or aggressive reasons. The image of a fierce warrior climbing around a mountainside, desperately trying to avoid his mother-in-law, is like the image of the three-hundred-pound man in a bikini in that the humor in both images derives from the images' incongruity. The military setting in Bourke's story is incidental to the humor.

The frontier experience of a unit under the command of Colonel George Armstrong Custer illustrates the constructive distraction humor provided to combatants in hostile territory. Custer's soldiers discovered a human skull with what appeared to be a bullet hole in the forehead. News correspondents attached to the unit marveled at how quickly the soldiers went from discussing the origins of the skull to making jokes about the discovery.[41] The soldiers shared jokes in order to remake the situation in which they found themselves and to distract from the very real possibility that their skulls could one

[40] John Gregory Bourke, *On the Border With Crook* (Glorieta, New Mexico: The Rio Grande Press, Inc., 1969), 132.
[41] Thomas Powers, *The Killing of Crazy Horse* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 80.

day experience the same condition. A separate story involved the surrender of Apache leadership to U.S. military forces. A small boy named Sam Kenoi witnessed enlisted soldiers approaching Geronimo and Naiche "when the officer wasn't looking" and moving their hands across their own throats in a decapitation motion.[42] Kenoi reported that the discomfort of the Apache greatly amused the soldiers. When the Apache were packed into wagons to leave Fort Bowie, the military band played "Auld Lang Syne" as they departed, and the resultant laughter from the soldiers reportedly confused the Indians.[43] In neither instance did the target of the joking understand the joke, but the soldiers were clearly demonstrating aggression toward their captured opponents. The remaking of the opponent resulted in the aggressive humor expressed by the soldiers.

The story of the soldiers at Fort Bowie represented non-violent aggression as a source of humor, but many stories of combat against the Indians involved humor derived from intense and often graphic violence. In 1864 a group of Colorado volunteers under Colonel John Chivington attacked an Indian encampment at Sand Creek, Colorado. A captain named Silas Soule later recorded his observations during the attack:

> *[I]t was hard to see little children on their knees have their brains beat out by men professing to be civilized. One squaw was wounded and a fellow took a hatchet to finish her, and he cut one arm off, and held the other with one hand and dashed the hatchet through her brain. One squaw with her two children, were on their knees, begging for their lives of a dozen soldiers, within ten feet of them all firing – when one succeeded in hitting the squaw in the thigh, when she took a knife and cut the throats of both children and then killed herself. ... One woman was cut open and a child taken out of her, and scalped. ... You*

[42] Angie Debo, *Geronimo: The Man, His Time, His Place* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), 231.
[43] Debo, 297-298, 231.

> *would think it impossible for white men to butcher and mutilate human beings as they did there, but every word I have told you is the truth, which they do not deny.*[44]

As painful as Soule's account reads, perhaps the most damning comment on Chivington's raid occurred when Soule and other military witnesses to the raid reported that Chivington's men were "laughing as they shot helpless, cowering, unarmed and non-hostile Indians."[45] Soule's report indicated that the soldiers found the Indians to be less than human, something worthy of mockery and abuse. The soldiers' laughter at the murder of innocent, non-hostile Indians indicated the depersonalization or remaking of the Indians to such an extent that violence against them became an inherent source of humor. Soule refused to fire on or otherwise maltreat the Indians because, as his writing makes clear, he viewed them as "human beings."

A similar example of soldiers finding humor in violence involved Major Eugene M. Baker's attack on a friendly Piegan village in 1870. A Piegan witness named Bear Head reported the apocalyptic image of Baker, at the conclusion of the battle, walking through the burning village and laughing at the charred corpses.[46] Chivington's soldiers at Sand Creek and Major Baker at the Piegan village operated at a psychological distance from the victims of their actions. They existed in a form of distraction, though not a constructive one. Their distraction enabled them to perform the non-constructive act of

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[44] Westermann, 165, 166; Lonnie J. White, *Hostiles and Horse Soldiers: Indian Battles and Campaigns in the West* (Boulder, Colorado: Pruett Publishing Company, 1972), 28; Silas S. Soule, "The Sand Creek Massacre – Captain Silas S. Soule letter to Major Edward Wynkoop regarding the massacre." *KcLonewolf.* 2013. http://www.kclonewolf.com/History/SandCreek/sc-documents/sc-soule-to-wynkoop-12-14-64.html. Accessed 09 March 2018.

[45] Bob Scott, *Blood at Sand Creek: The Massacre Revisited* (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1994), 157.

[46] Peter Cozzens, *The Earth Is Weeping: The Epic Story of the Indian Wars for the American West* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 115-116.

brutally murdering innocent, friendly Indians, and their emotion at the completion of the act was one of good humor.

The purpose of discussing military atrocities is not to indicate that the profession of soldiering consists only of killers and racists, nor is the purpose to criticize the role of humor as a method of coping in a tumultuous combat environment. The purpose is instead to indicate that war by its very nature is a "bizarre carnival," a profession which lends itself to the skill set of killers and the psychological distance experienced by racists. Non-killers and non-racists involved in combat frequently utilize humor as a source of constructive distraction in a fashion similar to how joke-tellers used humor in the aftermath of Ed Gein, Lizzie Borden, and the *Challenger* explosion, and in the same way as Majors Devereux and Dollins used humor to distract from the anticipation of immediate death. The Vietnamese interpreter and his American counterparts created psychological distance from enemy forces by using special terminology to label the enemy. The act of distancing through humor, as expressed in the songs sung by British World War I forces, contains the potential of creating a psychological distance to such an extent that soldiers become capable of unnecessary violence, committing crimes which become inherently funny to the perpetrators. Stories like Chivington, Baker, and the German atrocities at Babi Yar serve as cautionary examples of the potential for abuse when humor creates too much psychological distance from the targets of disdain. The memoirs of American participants in the contemporary Wars on Terror – Operation Iraqi Freedom in Iraq and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan – support this view of the benefits and risks associated with combat humor.

III. Humor and Combat Trauma in the Wars on Terror – The Therapy and Aggression of Humor in the Memoirs of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom

The roles of combat humor in the American Wars on Terror correspond to the roles of humor in other wartime situations. Many of the jokes from Iraq and Afghanistan, like Captain Bourke's anecdote about the Apache warrior, are humorous without necessarily fulfilling any therapeutic or aggressive role. Matthew Bogdanos, a Marine veteran of Operation Enduring Freedom, recorded a joke an Afghani interpreter frequently told the American soldiers:

> *In one particular province there is a ten o'clock curfew – the purpose of which is to keep strangers or outsiders off the streets – and two Afghan sentries are on watch. They see a man walking across the street. One of the sentries looks at his watch and it's nine forty-five. His partner does the same, then lifts his AK-47 to his shoulder and shoots the guy dead. The first sentry looks at the shooter and says, "What did you do? The curfew is ten o'clock. It's only nine forty-five and you killed him!" His partner turns to him and says, "Yeah, but I knew this guy. He would never have made it home by ten o'clock."*[47]

The interpreter's joke makes the fictional Afghani sentries appear ridiculous, but the point of the joke is not to mock the Afghanis as a people group. Like Bourke's Apache anecdote, Bogdanos' sentry joke contains the critical elements of truth and incongruity. The truth of the joke involves the heightened security in Afghanistan, including curfews and armed sentries in many provinces. The incongruity of the joke involves the Afghani sentry shooting a man before the end of the curfew and then admitting that he knew the

[47] Matthew Bogdanos with William Patrick, *Thieves of Baghdad: One Marine's Passion for Ancient Civilizations and the Journey to Recover the World's Greatest Stolen Treasures* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005), 71.

man and shot him not because he was a terrorist but because he was slow and would not be home on time. Bogdanos' joke is also similar to Bourke's anecdote in that the military setting is incidental to the humor. The joke serves as a non-therapeutic, non-aggressive introductory point for combat humor in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Participants in the Wars on Terror recognized the aggressive component of combat humor in the early months of the wars. When journalist Katherine Skiba prepared to go to Iraq with the 101st Airborne "Screaming Eagles" Division in 2003, fellow journalist Joseph Galloway, a seasoned correspondent who covered the Vietnam War, advised her, "[B]e aware that the GI, the grunt, has a perverse and often black sense of humor. He will pull your chain given the opportunity."[48] When Skiba arrived at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, she noticed a T-shirt inside a military supply store outside of Campbell's main gate. The T-shirt, offered for sale to soldiers preparing to deploy, depicted three soldiers in the midst of battle. One appeared dead and the other two were rummaging through the fallen man's rucksack. The tagline at the bottom of the shirt read, "If you die first, we split your gear."[49] Prepared by Galloway for this style of humor, Skiba admitted to snickering at the T-shirt, which she interpreted as the American service member's "fight-to-the-death spirit."[50] The T-shirt also represented a mockery of death, an appealing and therapeutic item for soldiers on the eve of a new, potentially deadly conflict in the Middle East.

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[48] Katherine M. Skiba, *Sister in the Band of Brothers: Embedded with the 101st Airborne in Iraq* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 30, 32.
[49] Skiba, 47.
[50] Ibid.

Journalist Kim Barker wrote of her first experience with the dark humor of combat in Afghanistan, in the aftermath of a suicide bombing. When Barker arrived on the scene of the bomb attack on a U.S. military convoy, she asked an experienced British Broadcasting Corporation reporter about the current status of the situation, and he responded, "Gooey."[51] Barker wrote of how, though accustomed as a journalist to dark humor, she was "unused to major suicide attacks, and his joke made me cringe."[52] By the end of Barker's tenure in a zone of war she easily found humor in comparable combat situations. On the day of her farewell party a bomb exploded outside of her hotel in Pakistan, prompting immediate gunfire between Pakistani police and unknown assailants, and Barker wrote that she "started laughing. This was the perfect going-away party…."[53] The constant chaos she witnessed in Afghanistan and Pakistan created in Barker the need to utilize humor as a form of rationalization, a method of psychological coping with the trauma of the events she observed and recorded as a journalist.

As Galloway proved in the advice he gave Skiba, combat participants understand the pervasiveness of dark humor, but many participants also understand the basic psychology behind this humor. Army Staff Sergeant David Bellavia recorded in his combat memoir an incident in which one of his fellow soldiers received a combat wound in the genitals. As the medic bandaged the wounded soldier's penis, the other soldiers stood around and made jokes. In two sentences about "every soldier's nightmare" of receiving a wound "in the crotch," Bellavia summed up the therapeutic aspect of combat

[51] Kim Barker, *The Taliban Shuffle: Strange Days in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Anchor Books, 2012), 125-126.
[52] Barker, 126.
[53] Barker, 279-280.

humor: "We can either dwell on it and drive ourselves crazy, or make fun of it. Laughter is our only defense."[54] Army Major Matthew "Blackfive" Burden included in his memoir the words of Army wife Wendy Marr, waiting for her husband to return from a deployment to Afghanistan: "I've learned that even when you think you know what you are dealing with, that you can't kick your own butt out of depression. I've learned about fear. … I learned that hours can be an eternity."[55] Marr credited humor in helping her cope with the depression of being separated from her husband during his deployment: "I've learned where dark humor comes from. I've learned to laugh at situations that would make most people shake their heads. But I've also learned that dark humor can help save your sanity."[56] Marr, an experienced soldier's wife, learned what Staff Sergeant Bellavia understood, which is that the dark humor of combat "can help save your sanity" by acting as a "defense" against feelings and situations which otherwise would drive soldiers (and spouses) "crazy."

Lily Burana, a newlywed whose soldier husband deployed in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, wrote in her memoir that she joked with her husband as he packed for deployment. She said that fear "ballooned out in front of me so big and ominous that humor was the only way I could see around it."[57] Burana used humor to address feelings of fear, Marr used humor to address feelings of depression, and Staff Sergeant Bellavia used humor to address a combination of feelings,

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[54] David Bellavia, with John R. Bruning. *House to House: A Soldier's Memoir* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 174-175.
[55] Matthew Currier "Blackfive" Burden, *The Blog of War: Front-line Dispatches from Soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 198.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Lily Burana, *I Love a Man in Uniform: A Memoir of Love, War, and Other Battles* (New York: Weinstein Books, 2009), 65.

including dread and fear, at the sight of a combat wound in the genitals. Army Specialist Jason Hartley, a veteran of the war in Iraq, wrote a memoir in which he recorded how soldiers found humor in the false excitement associated with labeling everything "Awesome!":

> *How to use "Awesome!"*
> *If someone says, "Dude, it's your turn again to do shit-burning detail," you say, "Awesome!"*
> *"Holy shit, those idiots in Delta company shot at second platoon": "Awesome!"*
> *"An entire busload of Iraqi Police graduates got killed by insurgents today": "Awesome!"* [58]

Hartley's use of the same word for three quite different events symbolizes his need to remake these events, a representation of his effort to use humor to distance himself from the drudgery of "shit-burning detail," the horror and fury associated with a near-fratricide, and frustration at the news of the deaths of Iraqi allies.

Examples of the therapeutic role of humor in combat appear continuously in memoirs from Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. The memoirs of Staff Sergeant Bellavia and Major Burden include instances of soldiers choosing humor as a response to wartime violence and moments of intense combat. On one occasion insurgents fired mortars at Bellavia's unit, and a soldier laughed about a near-miss, chuckling about a close mortar that "should've taken my head off."[59] Burden recorded numerous instances of soldiers simply laughing at incoming enemy fire, finding the absurdity of receiving fire inherently funny. One instance involved Marine Corps Gunnery Sergeant Nicholas Popaditch, a Marine whose unit took fire during the Battle of

[58] Jason Christopher Hartley, *Just Another Soldier: A Year on the Ground in Iraq* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), 312.
[59] Bellavia, 82.

Fallujah. Popaditch reported that Marines who returned fire began to "laugh a little," and he marveled at how Marines are able "to find humor in just about anything."[60] Burden also recorded the story of an Army Sergeant identified only as "Michael," a soldier who participated in combat in the suburbs of Baghdad in 2003. Michael reported that in the chaos of constant shoot-outs, fires, and explosions, he and Sergeant "W." suddenly came under enemy fire. As Michael and W. "hopelessly" searched for cover, the two NCOs looked at one another and shared "a quick laugh."[61] The shooting finally stopped and Michael used the "lull in the action" to urinate, "all the while joking and laughing with" Sergeant W.[62] Army First Lieutenant Gregory Tomlin, a young officer in Iraq, wrote in his memoirs of how he joked with "gallows humor" about mortars impacting near his location.[63] Combatants like Michael, W., and the Marines around Gunnery Sergeant Popaditch could have laughed due to nervousness or the relief of survival, but the memoirs of many combatants directly link this sort of laughter to feelings of humor.

Army First Lieutenant Neil Prakash, a young officer and an Iraq veteran, linked the laughter at near-misses to feelings of humor in his memoir. Prakash wrote of his experience getting sniped while atop a tank in the Battle of Fallujah:

> *It was funny as hell as we all looked around bewildered. It's a funny thing about getting sniped. You're probably waiting for me to elaborate, but I can't. That's it. It's just funny. Ok… so some guy has you in his sights and he's trying to kill you. And he hasn't yet. But the bullets are coming damn close. And you don't know where he is. So that's funny. And for some reason, any time you come real*

[60] Burden, 158-159.
[61] Burden, 151.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Caleb S. Cage and Gregory M. Tomlin, *The Gods of Diyala: Transfer of Command in Iraq* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 108.

> *close to death, but live… that's just absurdly funny. … We scrambled to get off the turret and onto the ground behind the hull. Once we were safely there, we just laughed some more about getting sniped.*[64]

Prakash focused on the absurdity of the entire situation, one in which he is facing an concealed enemy combatant repeatedly trying to put a bullet in him. Laughing at the absurdity of war comforts combatants in the face of enemy fire, but many memoirs from the Wars on Terror reflect the transitioning nature of humor in combat and reveal the limitations of humor as a coping mechanism.

Army Sergeant Aidan Delgado, a veteran of Iraq, wrote a memoir of his time with a Military Police unit in Iraq. In the memoir he included an analysis of the role of joking in his unit:

> *Our company seemed to have an almost charmed status. We come as close as you can to being killed without ever being injured. After one shelling, Specialist Lyons shows us a black cloth CD case that she had been holding in the crook of her arm. A jagged hole has been torn through the center of the case, perforating all the CDs, the fragment missing Lyons' arm by inches. A likable old cook called Pollard recounts how he had been sitting in one of the Porta-Jons when a mortar round exploded not twenty feet behind him. A cluster of metal fragments blew through the toilet, outlining him in flak but missing his body entirely. We all laugh as he pantomimes leaping out of the Porta-Jon with his pants around his ankles and trying to run. These stories remind us all how truly random our fate is: an inch to the left, half a foot closer, and they would have been dead. … Mortars fall within twenty feet of me and I don't catch a single piece of shell. With every strike, the mood gets more serious, this fortune can't last forever. We're all waiting for the day when our luck runs out… but it never comes. Not once does a mortar round break the skin and draw blood from any soldier in our company.*

[64] Burden, 175-176.

> *Lucky. Damn lucky. ... Making light of the constant bombardments, we go about our daily routines, pretending not to care.*[65]

Delgado's excerpt makes a number of significant points about the function of combat humor. "Making light of the constant bombardments" shields Delgado and his fellow soldiers by allowing them to pretend "not to care." Humor provides psychological distance from mortar explosions but also hides the truth: Sergeant Delgado, Specialist Lyons, the cook Pollard and the other members of the unit do care, and the mood of the unit, with each near-miss, "gets more serious." The soldiers laugh about mortar fragments, with their potential to sever arteries and rip through internal organs, when these fragments are inches away from creating fatalities, but the laughter, like the supposed luck of Delgado's unit, cannot last forever.

Staff Sergeant Bellavia experienced the limitations of the therapeutic role of combat humor when he attempted to raise the mood of a Captain after the death of a Lieutenant in the unit. Bellavia attached wires to a piece of human feces he found inside of a bathtub in the yard of a compound where he and his men were headquartered. He then jokingly told the Captain he had discovered an Improvised Explosive Device (IED), a joke which elicited laughter from the officer.[66] Bellavia distracted the Captain from reality, but a later encounter with the unit Chaplain removed the distraction of humor from Bellavia. The Chaplain asked Bellavia if he wanted to pray before the mission, and Bellavia wrote that the Chaplain's words made "me think of my future. It leaves me cold

[65] Aidan Delgado, *The Sutras of Abu Ghraib: Notes from a Conscientious Objector* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 166.
[66] Bellavia, 297.

with fear. I feel alone."[67] Bellavia wondered if he were "beyond redemption" and wanted the Chaplain to go "talk with those who can be saved."[68] Later a Specialist named Sucholas attempted to cheer Bellavia just as Bellavia had cheered his Captain with the fake IED. Sucholas joked about dying "for this conspiracy to reelect" George W. Bush and said that Bellavia would go to Hell because of his role in Sucholas' imminent combat death.[69] Bellavia wrote of his encounter with Sucholas:

> *He's said this a dozen times these past days, and I've usually laughed. Tonight, it isn't funny, not after my encounter with Chaplain Brown. The fact is, he may be right. Hell might be my ultimate destination. Sucholas departs, puzzled that I don't even fake amusement. He can sense my distraction.*[70]

Bellavia is incorrect in his final assessment of the situation. Sucholas' attempt at humor failed not because Bellavia was distracted, but because Bellavia was focused on reality in that moment. Sucholas' joke was the attempted distraction, and Bellavia's encounter with the Chaplain focused him on his fears that "God doesn't want to hear from me anymore. I've done things that even He can never forgive."[71] Though Bellavia quickly recovered and executed his mission, his temporary discomfort, unassailable even by Sucholas' humor, threatened to overwhelm him and briefly rendered him a less effective soldier, incapable of focusing on his subordinate.

In his memoir *My War: Killing Time in Iraq*, Army Specialist Colby Buzzell experienced a similar moment of overwhelming truth when he attempted to joke in a

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[67] Bellavia, 47.
[68] Bellavia, 46-47.
[69] Bellavia, 55.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Bellavia, 43.

"death letter," a letter to be delivered to his parents in the event of his combat death. The letter read:

> *Dear Mom and Dad,*
> *You're right.*
> *I should have gone to college instead.*
> *Love,*
> *Colby*[72]

Buzzell repeatedly remade death into a subject worthy of mockery, joking later to his wife that if he died in Iraq he would want his tombstone to read, "I'd Rather Be Here Than In Iraq."[73] He also changed his religion in his official paperwork to "Rastafarian" as part of a death joke, stating, "I thought it'd be humorous to have some incense burning and a little Marley playing on the boom box during my twenty-one-gun salute, in the event that I got waxed in Iraq."[74] His death letter created emotional discomfort for him, however, and he wrote that the attempted joke "kinda creeped me out … and I didn't think my parents would see the humor in it if they ever did receive it."[75] Buzzell's earlier jokes about death served the role of constructive distraction, but a death joke involving his parents bothered him, and Buzzell eventually threw the letter away.[76] The consideration of his parents in the event of his death seemed to remove the distraction of humor, focusing Buzzell on the very real possibilities of his situation and, as in the example of Staff Sergeant Bellavia after his meeting with the Chaplain, threatening to overwhelm him.

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[72] Colby Buzzell, *My War: Killing Time in Iraq* (New York: Berkley Caliber, 2005), 84.
[73] Buzzell, 170.
[74] Buzzell, 72.
[75] Buzzell, 84-85.
[76] Buzzell, 84.

The examples of Specialist Buzzell's death letter and Staff Sergeant Bellavia's encounter with the Chaplain demonstrate the limitations of combat humor, and humor often transforms both in response to these limitations and in correlation to a soldier's specific combat experiences. As a soldier becomes acclimated to violence and chaos, his sense of humor frequently becomes darker and more disturbing. Buzzell wrote about the psychological changes he witnessed in his fellow soldiers and within himself as the months passed during their deployment in Iraq. He wrote of being at the gym on base in Iraq when pictures of the torture at Abu Ghraib flashed on the gym television screen, and he criticized "a couple degenerates that chuckled at the images" in the gym.[77] Later in the deployment he overheard a squad of soldiers joking in the dining facility about the recent shooting of an Iraqi man, with one of the soldiers finding particularly humorous the idea that the man had not been a "bad guy" but "just a janitor."[78] Buzzell admitted that he eventually underwent a change similar to the one he observed in his counterparts, writing in incredibly self-aware fashion:

> *One thing I've noticed about me since I've been here is that I've developed that really disturbing warped, sick war humor about everything. Like a week ago, I was flipping through the photos on Spc. Martinez's digital camera, and when I came across the photo of the dead guy they killed in the mosque, without even thinking about it, I just busted up laughing, because the way the guy's eyes were open, and how his tongue was sticking out and his mouth was all agape, it just looked comical to me.*[79]

Buzzell's sense of humor underwent a transformation in Iraq to the point where graphic photos of a dead body made him laugh "without even thinking about it." The young

[77] Buzzell, 155.
[78] Buzzell, 246.
[79] Buzzell, 244.

soldier had psychologically changed from a point of using humor as therapy, a means of mocking death and rendering it unreal, to a point where death itself, particularly the death of an enemy combatant, served as a source of humor.

Soldiers experiencing aggressive humor often direct their humor at the specific targets of their disdain. Army First Lieutenant Matt Gallagher wrote in his memoir of how his combat-experienced soldiers mocked "fobbits," the soldiers who never left the Forward Operating Base (FOB) in Iraq. One of Gallagher's soldiers made a sexual joke at the expense of overweight female soldiers in the FOB dining facility, exclaiming out of the female soldiers' earshot, "I love me some fat chicks … I'm going hogging tonight, boys!"[80] Many veterans of the Wars on Terror directed their hostility at superiors, reminiscent of the songs of the British soldiers in World War I. Jonathan Powers, a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom, wrote of an experience on a firing range at an abandoned Iraqi military base in Baghdad in 2003. Powers and a fellow soldier were searching the range when they discovered targets "with [U.S. Secretary of Defense] Donald Rumsfeld's face on it … a big picture of him."[81] Powers wrote that he thought "it was the funniest thing in the world. They were training by shooting at their Donald Rumsfeld targets. … I thought that was hysterical."[82] A similar example is Staff Sergeant Bellavia's account of Specialist Sucholas' joke about the Iraq war as President George W. Bush's "conspiracy" for reelection.[83] Sucholas mocked the President he held responsible for the situation in Iraq and Powers found humor in the hostility shown to the

[80] Matt Gallagher, *Kaboom: Embracing the Suck in a Savage Little War* (London: Bantam Press, 2011), 10.
[81] Trish Wood, *What Was Asked of Us: An Oral History of the Iraq War by the Soldiers Who Fought It* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2006), 73.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Bellavia, 55.

Secretary of Defense in the custom-made Iraqi targets. Gallagher's subordinate used humor to express hostility toward the overweight fobbits who remained on the FOB and who had greater comfort and security than Gallagher's combat soldiers. Each of these examples represents the aggressive use of humor to show disdain toward an intended target, but in each instance the targets of aggression did not hear the joke and the aggression therefore resulted in no harm to the targets.

Many stories of aggressive humor involve harm in the form of violence. These moments frequently involve soldiers finding humor in the violence of war, but Marine Lieutenant Colonel Seth W.B. Folsom recorded an event in his memoir which involved violence for its own sake. Folsom and a Brigadier General were touring bases in Afghanistan when the officers witnessed "vermin torture chambers" at a patrol base.[84] One of the enlisted Marines had captured mice around the patrol base and had depicted them "in various states of brutal torment or execution" in the courtyard.[85] Folsom responded to the situation only by instructing the Lieutenant in charge of the base to "clean up" the scene, and Folsom's Sergeant Major marveled at the mice display, commenting to Folsom, "[Y]ou gotta admit, whoever did that with the mice was pretty talented."[86] The General responded only by "shaking his head."[87] The junior Lieutenant tolerated the display at his base, the Lieutenant Colonel offered no punitive repercussions for the display, and the General only responded with a headshake. These three levels of authority registered surprisingly little shock at the bizarre presentation, but Folsom's

[84] Seth W.B. Folsom, *Where Youth and Laughter Go: With the "Cutting Edge" in Afghanistan* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2015), 120-121.
[85] Folsom, 121.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.

accounts from later in his deployment, including his experiences with the remains of Afghani and American combatants killed in war, demonstrated why the Marine leadership reacted to the aggressive presentation with this level of toleration.

One of Folsom's accounts detailed a mission with the Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP), when one of the Marine military vehicles in Folsom's unit struck a low-hanging electrical line, resulting in an electrical charge that burst the vehicle's tire. In Folsom's words, the metal rim of the tire "shot off like a buzz saw and sliced away the back" of an ANCOP soldier's head, spraying "his brains and fragments of his skull in a wide splash that stretched more than one hundred feet."[88] In order to honor the slain soldier and to mitigate the accidental death in the eyes of Afghani authorities, Folsom personally helped clean up the casualty site, and he reported that he and his soldiers "spent the next fifteen minutes picking up gobs of mushy brains, tiny splinters of skull, and rubbery flaps of scalp and blood-soaked hair, much of which hung from the strands of concertina wire coiled around the outpost's perimeter."[89] On a separate occasion a member of Folsom's Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) team, Sergeant D'Augustine, accidentally triggered an IED, which exploded in his face. Folsom described his first encounter with D'Augustine's remains:

> *As the aid station's Navy chief unzipped the bag and pulled it back, the color drained from his face and his eyes widened in an expression of unbelievable shock. He looked like he would pass out before he finally regained his composure. D'Augustine was in pieces, a bloody, disassembled department store mannequin, its components*

[88] Folsom, 304.
[89] Ibid.

> *arranged neatly in a rubber pouch for shipment. What lay before us on the table was no longer recognizable.*[90]

Folsom's men needed to use a visible tattoo on a piece of D'Augustine's flesh to positively identify the slain Marine.[91] The level of violence Folsom recorded personally experiencing appears overwhelming in written form, and these images explain why Folsom, and the Marines in his chain of command, used humor as a means of constructive distraction and also why they understood the aggressiveness of the humor of their fellow Marines.

Lieutenant Colonel Folsom's images of violence also explain the dark humor of Marines in response to the death of an enemy combatant. Folsom and his staff were using an air intelligence asset to watch Afghanis attempting to emplace an IED near Folsom's FOB. Folsom ordered an air strike on the location, resulting in two dead Afghanis and one severely wounded. Folsom described the wounded Afghani rolling "onto his back in a widening, radiant pool of blood, slowly extending and contracting his leg. His peculiar death throes drew the attention of the watching Marines. More dark humor ensued."[92] The Marines joked that the man was stretching, exhausted, or doing yoga as a stress reliever. When Folsom personally visited the site of the attempted IED emplacement, the wounded man had died and the two other bodies lay where they fell. Folsom described one body at the scene:

> *His face had disappeared from the nose up, and his split-open skull was empty. Only the wispy, pink cobwebbed lining of his brain pan remained. "Hey," I said to no one*

[90] Folsom, 314-315.
[91] Folsom, 316.
[92] Folsom, 173.

> *in particular, "Where'd his brain go? ... He literally got his brains knocked out of his head."*[93]

Folsom and his Marines used humor as constructive distraction from their experiences of constant carnage, rationalizing the scenes, like the wounded, bleeding Afghani, which otherwise might psychologically overwhelm them.

Dominick King, a Marine veteran of Iraq, wrote of the overwhelming experiences of cleaning up dead bodies after the Battle of Fallujah. In the following graphic excerpt, King credited humor with enabling him to function in the combat environment:

> *Some of the bodies would be about two weeks old, just lying in the middle of the street, and the weather would really screw with the decomposition. It made them decay a lot quicker than usual. There was one body where one of my friends went to go pick it up and the head fell completely back – the neck opened up and thousands of insects came out and went all over the body. ... There was actually one dog that we almost had to shoot because he was standing next to a body, eating it…. But then there were other dogs that would run through the city with human feet in their mouths and other things. I was pretty desensitized at the time. It actually didn't register as it should have…. I mean, a dog running through the city with a femur in its mouth. It should have registered as something a lot more than it actually did. ... Sometimes we laughed about this stuff. I don't want it to be traumatic; I want to be able to laugh about it, maybe just out of protection for my conscience.*[94]

Like Folsom's Marines, King used combat humor therapeutically. Folsom's Marines laughed at the wounded and dying Afghani, but the man was attempting to emplace a bomb intended to kill them. When the Marines bombed the man, killing him and blowing the brains out of one of his associates, they were simply doing their job, and

[93] Fomson, 173, 178.
[94] Wood, 163-164.

laughing at the man, in an environment where brain-exposing wounds were common, merely served as a rationalization and a means of continuing in the job. King likewise used humor in order to function in his professional role. The aggressive nature of combat humor becomes counterproductive, as in the examples of Colonel Chivington's men or Major Baker on the American frontier, when soldiers seek out violence and death only in order to find humor.

Sergeant Delgado recorded the psychological deterioration of many of his fellow soldiers into the counterproductive aggression of combat humor. The soldiers began by remaking the Iraqis, depersonalizing them through the use of racial terms. Delgado wrote of how soldiers used the term "hajji," an honorific term in Arabic for a Muslim who has completed the religious journey, or "hajj," to Mecca, as a pejorative.[95] Later in the deployment members of Delgado's unit shot unarmed Iraqi prisoners, ostensibly for attempting to throw rocks at U.S. forces. Delgado wrote that the young soldiers around him smiled and laughed at the news of the shooting.[96] Delgado's memoir supports the general accounts of aggression at the prison facility where he and his unit were stationed, a location destined to become internationally famous as Abu Ghraib.

The events at Abu Ghraib remain part of one of the darkest legacies of America's involvement in Operation Iraqi Freedom, and much has been written about the motivations of the American military personnel who tortured Iraqi prisoners. Though humor may not be a sufficient explanation for enabling someone to participate in the sorts

[95] Delgado, 72.
[96] Delgado, 152.

of crimes occurring at Abu Ghraib, the element of combat humor might be a necessary factor. American perpetrators and Iraqi victims alike often testified to the presence of humor during moments of intense emotional, psychological, and even physical torture. Lynndie England, an Army Reserve Specialist at Abu Ghraib during the period of prisoner abuse, explained why she participated in leading a naked prisoner around on a leash and why she posed smiling in pictures with nude, hooded prisoners: "It was just for fun."[97] She described the torture of prisoners as a way to "joke around," resulting in the service members present at the torture laughing "at the things we had them do."[98] Charles Graner, also a Specialist at the time of the abuse, appears in photographs with bloodied prisoners and a nude prisoner covered in what appears to be his own excrement.[99] One Iraqi prisoner, Ameen Sa'eed Al-Sheikh, testified that a soldier urinated on him, causing Graner to laugh. Another prisoner testified in a sworn statement that "laughing" soldiers urinated on him, spat on him, beat him with a broom stick, kept him awake with a loudspeaker in his room, and jumped from the bed onto his prone back and legs.[100] The release of photographs and written accounts of the torture in 2003 prompted one Iraqi interpreter to use a little humorous constructive distraction of his own: "I always knew the Americans would bring electricity back to Baghdad. I just never thought they'd be shooting it up my ass."[101] Just as American soldiers used dark

[97] Tara McKelvey, ed. *One of the Guys: Women as Aggressors and Torturers* (Emeryville, California: Seal Press, 2007), 139; Mark Danner, *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib, and the War on Terror* (New York: New York Review Books, 2004), 219, 222, 223.
[98] McKelvey, 91.
[99] McKelvey, 61; Danner, 223, 224.
[100] Danner, 227-228, 248.
[101] Danner, 29.

humor to alleviate the horrors of combat, the Iraqi interpreter used humor as a means of coping with the revelations of American-occupied Abu Ghraib.

The discussion of Abu Ghraib should not be read as a moral equivalence. The brutal massacre of Indians at Sand Creek, Colorado and the torture of Iraqi prisoners by American forces at Abu Ghraib are two distinct events, and the purpose of discussing these events is not to compare the incredible suffering of the victims or otherwise comment in any way except to say that the victims did suffer incredibly in both instances. The perpetrators in both instances also committed great crimes in a time of war, operating far beyond the rules of engagement issued to them by government authorities. The discussion of the distinct event at Sand Creek and the distinct event at Abu Ghraib should also not be read as a commentary on the morality or justification of the wider conflict in which these events played a small yet not insignificant part. The discussion of Sand Creek and Abu Ghraib only serves to highlight the negative potential of humor in combat, an element which in both of these instances served as an enabler, though not the only enabler, of criminal violence against helpless victims. The image of Major Baker laughing at burned Indian bodies in the Piegan village parallels the infamous photograph of Graner posing next to a dead prisoner body and flashing a thumbs-up sign at the camera, but the purpose of comparing Chivington and Baker to the events at Abu Ghraib is only to serve as a warning of the potential for abuse in combat humor, a potential which reappears in war after war.

Veterans of the Wars on Terror have not limited their discussions of combat humor to non-fiction memoirs, and some combatants have experienced success in

processing their experiences through works of fiction. Veterans like Roy Scranton and Phil Klay have written fictional accounts of combat and have included moments of combat humor in their narratives. In *Redeployment*, his National Book Award-winning collection of short stories, Klay includes a story in which a Marine recounts a joke common in the Marine Corps: "A liberal pussy journalist is trying to get the touchy-feely side of war and he asks a Marine sniper, 'What is it like to kill a man? What do you feel when you pull the trigger?' The Marine looks at him and says one word: 'Recoil.'"[102] Klay, a former Marine Captain in Iraq, included the joke in "After Action Report," a short story about two Marines haunted by the shooting of an Iraqi boy in the streets of Fallujah. The shooter, Timhead, insists that Lance Corporal Paul "Ozzie" Suba, the story's protagonist, take credit for the shooting, to which Suba agrees. The agreement causes psychological distress for each individual, with fellow Marines constantly congratulating Suba for being a "killer" while Suba, posing as the actual shooter, talks to the Marine Chaplain on behalf of Timhead. While Suba enjoys the dubious honors associated with shooting an underage enemy combatant, Timhead obsesses over the slain child and the child's hypothetical family through the rest of the deployment.[103] Klay included the joke in the story of Timhead and Suba to indicate how little this sort of distraction accomplished in their lives, as well as to illustrate the insufficiency of humor to prevent mental and psychological damage. Timhead repeatedly insists to Suba that he is "over" the situation, and Suba finishes the story by agreeing with Timhead that "it

[102] Phil Klay, *Redeployment* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), 47.
[103] Klay, 29-52.

doesn't matter," but the joke indicates the lie of each of these statements.[104] Klay portrays the two Marines as warriors who might be able to complete the mission but who feel much more than the recoil of their rifles and who will suffer from the mental damage of combat after their days in war end.

Roy Scranton, an Army veteran of the war in Iraq, wrote a novel titled *War Porn*. Scranton defines the phrase "war porn" on his website as "[v]ideos, images, and narratives featuring graphic violence, often brought back from combat zones, viewed voyeuristically or for emotional gratification. Such media are often presented and circulated without context, though they may be used as evidence of war crimes."[105] One of the characters in *War Porn,* an Iraq veteran named Aaron, shows his friend Matt a collection of war porn photographs depicting U.S. soldiers mistreating Iraqi prisoners of war, a fiction inspired by the events of Abu Ghraib. Aaron jokes about physically beating prisoners and tells Matt that "a lot of shit we did 'cause we were bored."[106] Aaron also refers to Iraqi prisoners as "pucks," a nickname from the acronym PUC: Person Under Control.[107] The acronym provides distance for Aaron, allowing the veteran to remake the prisoners into something other than human, a source of humor worthy not only of mockery but also of abuse.

Later in Scranton's novel Aaron brutally rapes a girl named Dahlia, an act which represents what Scranton describes as Aaron's infection "by the evil he was a part of"

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[104] Klay, 51-52.
[105] Roy Scranton. "War Porn." *Caribou*. 24 January 2017. www.royscranton.com/. Accessed 13 March 2018.
[106] Roy Scranton, *War Porn* (New York: Soho Press, 2016), 317-321.
[107] Scranton, *War Porn*, 320.

during his deployment.[108] In Scranton's story, the trauma of combat does not haunt soldiers like Timhead and Suba, but instead haunts those individuals who encounter soldiers like Aaron. Scranton provides no indication even when Aaron has returned to America that the veteran regrets any of his actions or that he feels any way other than positive about his service in Iraq. He also seems to have an untroubled conscience about participating in rape. This veteran is not only infected by evil, but is evil. Scranton depicts the trauma Aaron inflicts on those around him, represented in the discomfort Matt feels when looking at the veteran's war porn pictures and the horror Dahlia experiences when Aaron assaults her. Scranton's Aaron is a vessel for the infection of evil, a man who laughs at torture because he finds the act inherently funny. He has distanced himself not just from Iraqis but from humanity, viewing humans merely as objects from which he can derive violent pleasure, a pleasure he expresses through laughter.

A 2008 feature film about veterans returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom, *In the Valley of Elah*, starred veterans in the roles of returning combat soldiers and serves to connect the transition between characters like Suba and Timhead to someone like Aaron. A young soldier in Iraq, Mike Deerfield, is haunted by driving over an Iraqi child with his military vehicle. Mike calls home to his father, a Vietnam veteran named Hank, to tell him he wants to come home. Hank tells Mike that "it's just nerves talking," leaving Mike frustrated at his father's inability or unwillingness to help.[109] Wes Chatham, a Navy veteran, and Jake McLaughlin, an Army veteran, portray Deerfield's fellow soldiers

[108] Roy Scranton. Interview with Lois Lindstrom. *Bookman's Corner.* 18 August 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wF19Ve1A45E. Accessed 13 March 2018.
[109] Laurence Becsey et. al. *In the Valley of Elah*. Burbank, California: Distributed by Warner Home Videos, 2008.

Corporal Steve Penning and Specialist Gordon Bonner. When the soldiers return to the United States, Deerfield disappears, his body later discovered dismembered and burned in a field. A police investigation links Penning and Bonner to the murder, and the two soldiers respond very differently. Bonner commits suicide and Penning confesses. When asked why he killed Mike, Penning responds that he intervened during an argument between the other soldiers and at one point "I look down and I'm stabbing him."[110] Penning's combat experience results in the combination of psychological distance and aggression, so much so that Penning unconsciously responds to an altercation with a fellow soldier by stabbing him to death.

After the confession Mike's father Hank tells Penning about a video Mike shot in Iraq, one in which he appears to be torturing a prisoner in a military vehicle. Penning chuckles as he tells Hank about the video:

> *We arrested some hajji who was wounded, and we were riding along and Mike was pretending like he was a medic and he would stick his hand in this guy's wound. And he says, "Does this hurt?" And the hajji screamed, "Yeah! Yeah!" And then Mike would stick his hand in the exact same place and say, "Does that hurt?" It was pretty funny. It became a theme with Mike. That's how he got the name "Doc." It was just a way to cope. We all did stupid things.*[111]

Penning identifies the value of combat humor as a "way to cope," a means of distancing the combatant from the environment, but he discusses humor in relation to the application of pain and hostility, when a fellow soldier is torturing a prisoner. This scene in *In the Valley of Elah* combines the two sides of combat humor, demonstrating the danger of

[110] Ibid.
[111] Ibid.

transitioning from using humor as therapy to using humor aggressively, relating the feeling to the infliction of pain. The film portrays Mike and Penning as haunted individuals, like Suma or Timhead, but individuals who move beyond this point psychologically to a point where they find torture humorous, like Aaron.

This transformation of combat humor in the Deerfield story results in destruction for all the veterans involved. Penning and Bonner murder Mike, Bonner commits suicide, and Penning goes to jail. At his interrogation Penning tells police of Mike's dismembered body, "We would have buried the parts but it was getting late and we hadn't eaten. … We stopped at the Chicken Shack."[112] Penning, like Aaron, experiences distance from all of humanity, a distance which prevents him from experiencing any emotion at the murder of his friend. He attempts to mimic remorse to Hank, telling the father, "I am so sorry for your loss," but he cannot maintain his contrition.[113] The only sincere emotion he appears to feel during his interrogation is one of humor when he discusses the torture of a prisoner.

In *Blood Meridian* Cormac McCarthy understood the haunting, aggressive, violent potential of combat humor, and the humor in his novel is reflective of the humor in real-world combat scenarios, including the Wars on Terror. Wade Hall wrote that McCarthy used violence and humor in the novel to indicate that "life's epitaph, the last sound of any self-aware person, is demonic laughter."[114] Barcley Owens also discussed McCarthy's use of humor in the book, identifying a specific event as particularly

[112] Ibid.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Wade Hall and Rick Wallach, eds. *Sacred Violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy* (El Paso, Texas: Texas Western Press, 1995), 50.

representative. A gang of American scalp hunters led by the psychotic John Joel Glanton prepares to eat a meal at a frontier restaurant when the proprietor of the establishment, a man also named Owens, refuses to serve Jackson, a black member of Glanton's group whom the proprietor Owens refers to as a "nigger."[115] Jackson responds by shooting the fictional Owens so that "a double handful of Owens's brains went out the back of his skull and plopped in the floor behind him."[116] After the shooting a particularly violent member of the Glanton gang named Davy Brown comments, "Most terrible nigger I ever seen. … Find some plates, Charlie."[117] Barcley Owens wrote that the disturbing nature of this moment involves "the fact that McCarthy uses the violence for a casual, dismissive comic moment that understates the horror. By laughing, we participate in the violence of how 'Owens's brains went out the back of his skull and plopped in the floor behind him.'"[118] He argued that as McCarthy's readers "continue reading page after page of violence and unsettling jokes, we make our own Faustian bargain with the novel, a secret commerce of laughing and queasy participation."[119] The Faustian bargain a reader makes with a novel like *Blood Meridian* is similar to that made by soldiers in the Wars on Terror, or in any combat environment. Soldiers constantly use humor, as Lieutenant Colonel Folsom's Marines did when American firepower blew out an insurgent's brains, to understate the horror of their situation. The laughter, so necessary to coping in a

[115] McCarthy, 246.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Barcley Owens, *Cormac McCarthy's Western Novels* (Tucson, Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 2000), 12-13.
[119] Owens, 16.

combat environment, makes the soldiers participants in the violence, but the mental effects of this bargain can be intense and long-lasting.

One final story illustrates the logical outcome of continuously making the Faustian bargain in combat. Jason Smithers, a Marine infantryman and Iraq veteran, captured in his memoir the psychological ramifications of extensive combat exposure on a soldier's sense of humor. Smithers recounted his service in the deadly Sunni Triangle in the early days of Operation Iraqi Freedom:

> *We thought about how much we hated being there and how much we hated the people that were over there because we were trying to help them and they were treating us this way – killing our friends. … You just look at them after they try and kill you and maybe it kind of turned me racist in a way. … We called them hajjis and sand…niggers and anything mean we could think of. … We had a guy all FlexiCuffed, lying down, and my friend was kicking him and I don't blame him. He had a lot of aggression he wanted to take out, and these people were sitting there laughing at us, so he kicked him in the face a few times to make him stop laughing. … Everything built up. … It'll make anybody snap. I thought it was pretty funny. I wish I would have got it on videotape. I've got various set-up pictures. Some of them I got are posing by the bodies, you know, like where you lift their head up by their hair and stand up with your weapon. I got a few of those. I got a bunch of them where the bodies are just lying there, mangled, blown in half, people shot, people that were shot from far away so that it'll look cool, you know? … I've got pictures of wounded Iraqis, pictures of Iraqis that we beat up, and pictures of me and my buddies, a lot of them that died, having fun. … We'd be out there filming firefights, just the way people act crazy on their dirt bikes. We'd be just as crazy but we're running around getting shot at and shooting people, laughing and cursing, you know? … I guess it would be weird to somebody who doesn't see it all the time, but to us this was normal. It was something to laugh about. This dude looks cooler dead than that dude – he's bloodier, he's got a bigger hole. That's the kind of*

> *stuff we looked at. It's just like pictures of flowers. Some people think it's queer, but if you're around death all the time, you're going to like the picture of it. I don't think I lost anything. I think I gained something. I'm pretty sure civilians look into the eyes of a dead person and see the human being that's dead. We didn't do that.*[120]

Smithers responded to the death of fellow Marines, including Marines with whom he had "fun," through aggressive, depersonalizing humor, enabling him to revel in carnage to such an extent that he felt he "gained something." In order to cope with violence and the constant possibility of death, Smithers distanced himself from humanity, and he expressed this distance through humor: "I thought it was pretty funny."

Smithers does not provide an account of his return to civilian life, but most returning veterans, even those with mental trauma, do not conform to the image of the murderous Penning or the rapist Aaron. The actions of these fictional characters represent the internal damage both men have experienced in combat and should not be interpreted as a likely real-world outcome of encountering redeployed veterans. The suicide by hanging of Bonner reflects the reality of returning combat veterans much more accurately. Lieutenant Colonel Grossman wrote that "returning veterans from World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and the Gulf War were less likely to be incarcerated than nonveterans of the same age and sex. The same is true today of our veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan."[121] Veterans rarely commit crimes, but they kill themselves at a rate of approximately 22 per day, and as many as 20 of these are

[120] Wood, 157-159.
[121] Dave Grossman and Kristine Paulsen with Katie Miserany, *Assassination Generation: Video Games, Aggression, and the Psychology of Killing* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2016), 77-78.

veterans of the Wars on Terror.[122] Some studies show that veterans of the Wars on Terror experience a higher suicide rate than veterans of any previous American conflict.[123] Soldiers returning from combat must find a way to continue to cope with the mental trauma caused by combat experiences. Bonner cannot cope with his experiences or his role in killing Mike Deerfield and therefore commits suicide. Penning and Aaron continue to cope by using humor to maintain distance from humanity, a distance which results in brutal crimes. Suba and Timhead face these options in their future, a daunting prospect for these young soldiers and for their real-life counterparts like Jason Smithers, Dominick King, Jason Hartley, Matt Gallagher, Seth Folsom, Aidan Delgado, Colby Buzzell, Matthew Burden, David Bellavia, Neil Prakash, Nicholas Popaditch, Matthew Bogdanos, Gregory Tomlin, Jonathan Powers, Phil Klay, Roy Scranton, Wes Chatham, Jake McLaughlin, or any of the hundreds of thousands of other American men and women who participated in Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom.

This is the crux of combat humor – the idea that the humor of combat can lead soldiers to very unfunny places. Soldiers perform a critical function for their country, and the memoirs of combat humor should not create an unnecessary and counterproductive stigma for those returning from the challenges of combat. Accounts of combat humor should instead serve as a helpful warning for soldiers and the society to which they return. The challenge for soldiers using combat humor as rationalization or

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[122] Tom Donahue, et. al. *Thank You For Your Service.* Distributed by Gathr Films, 2015; Rebecca Burgess. "Veterans, Society and Suicide." *Real Clear Defense.* 21 September 2017. www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2017/09/21/veterans_society_and_suicide_112346.html. Accessed 14 March 2018.

[123] Bill Briggs. "MSRC's David Rudd consulted: 'Why modern soldiers are more susceptible to suicide.'" *Military Suicide Research Consortium.* 2017. msrc.fsu.edu/news/msrcs-david-rudd-consulted-why-modern-soldiers-are-more-susceptible-suicide. Accessed 14 March 2018.

constructive distraction is to prevent being swallowed up by the very darkness against which they hope to guard. When soldiers give in to the darkness and turn humor from therapy into aggression and horror – when combat truly becomes "death hilarious" – the resulting demonic laughter will mean that the joke ultimately is on them.

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