

Laughing in the Face of Death: Humor in Lateral Battle Exhortation

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Sam Watson

Baylor University

Introduction

War has a multitude of commonalities across conflicts and historical periods. Weapons of destruction are manufactured. Men enlist. Civilians become soldiers. Soldiers train to kill. Chain of command is established. Front lines materialize. Bullets fly, blood is shed, and people die. However, people also laugh.

Yes, despite the apparent incompatibility of the two concepts, warfare and humor are intertwined. Their relationship is not characterized by inherent comedy, but rather the participants involved. Every person to some degree harbors a sense of humor (Lynch, 2002). Some let it show more than others, but every individual possesses it. At varying depths and ability, an individual conceals their comedic skill and palate within their personality. This skill and taste can be ushered out by the individual or aroused by circumstance. In this context, that circumstance is warfare.

Soldiers require interpersonal interaction between one another. It's a necessity. Whether it's an officer speaking to a private or a general planning an offensive, soldiers must communicate for the military to function. Without it, there is no structure. Soldiers also depend on one other. This is especially applicable in lower ranks. The closer a combatant is to the battlefield, the greater the dependency. Within platoons in these situations, this dependency extends to the threat of mortality. Due to the gravity of these conditions and the brotherhood between soldiers, comfort grows and relationships strengthen between comrades. Rapport and, in turn, humor, are proliferated. Humor can arise in any number of ways prior to, during, or after combat. Troops have been documented to joke during tranquil marching, amid frenzied bombing on their position, and everywhere in between. Humor in warfare is unpredictable and ubiquitous.

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Humor's presence in war is essential for the common soldier. Without humor, the soldier would be incapable of handling the grim reality that lies on the battlefield. Hence, combat effectiveness hinges on humor. It preserves sanity and mental survival in the wake of death and brutality (Henman, 2001). It is just as essential as a bullet or a rifle.

This form of humor can be identified in a variety of ways. The most feasible method is through battle exhortation. Keith Yellin, a former U.S. Marine Corps Captain with a Ph.D. in communication, defines battle exhortation. He says it's symbolic action, typically audible, designed to brace troops for the psychological demands of combat (Yellin, 2008). In this theory, he outlines several different directions of encouragement. The direction of encouragement this essay will focus on is lateral battle exhortation, or the encouragement between two comrades.

In this essay, I will build on the theory of battle exhortation and the work of Keith Yellin. To be specific, I will investigate humor's role within lateral battle exhortation by understanding humor as a coping mechanism for troops. Soldiers cope interpersonally through Gallows humor, performing lateral battle exhortation to ease fellow soldiers. Through this form of humor, soldiers feel more relaxed, emboldened, and prepared for combat.

Studying this topic can provide new insights for military communication and dire circumstances. This could boost awareness for the importance of humor in the armed forces, thus allowing them to conduct their own studies or techniques to optimize its benefits. While this essay focuses on the context of military communication, Gallows humor can be implemented beyond armed conflict. Gallows humor refers to humor arising in a precarious or dangerous situation (Obrdlik, 1942). That means it can be applied to other fields as well. For example, rather than applying it to lateral battle exhortation, it could be applied to other desperate circumstances faced by non-military personnel. Additionally, investigation into this topic adds to

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the theory of battle exhortation. Downward encouragement has received attention, but lateral encouragement has only been defined and mentioned. By the end of this essay, humor's relationship to lateral encouragement will be clarified.

After examining relevant literature, the argument will be explored. It has three separate components. Firstly, I acknowledge that humor in warfare is strange in its formulation. The intrapersonal and interpersonal changes soldiers experience compose this leg of the argument. Next, lateral battle exhortation and its relationship to humor and interpersonal communication are discussed. Through the utilization of multiple memoirs and accounts, coping is inspected as the function of humor in war. Thirdly, the concept of ridiculing the enemy as a coping mechanism using humor and its effects are dissected.

Literature Review

The literature surrounding battle exhortation is not extensive, as the only primary contributor is Keith Yellin. There are interspersed articles and authors applying the theory to different texts, historical events and groups, but none adding to the theory itself. This discovery demonstrates why this study matters. There has been an abundance of application, but little has been done to push the theory in new directions. The literature Yellin provides comes through his thesis and book.

Yellin's thesis, *On Battle Exhortation*, laid the foundation for his book. He defines battle exhortation by concept, its relationship and place in rhetoric, and through a myriad texts (Yellin, 1996). Battle exhortation is the audible, often verbal, symbolic action to brace troops before combat. Battle exhortation exists at the intersection of military and exhortative discourse. All rhetorical discourse is exhortative because, at some capacity, it urges people to do something

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(Yellin, 1996). Battle exhortation is integral to success on the field of battle. The power of speech urges men to perform to the standard expected of them by their commander. While this is both true and useful, his thesis strictly focuses on downward exhortation, but that helps us understand his book and the motivation behind writing it. Many elements of his thesis are included in his book, including the texts he draws from. Not only does that tell us how Yellin started writing his book, but it reveals he hasn't applied battle exhortation far beyond the scope set of his initial thesis. There is opportunity to interpret battle exhortation in new settings and evaluate it from new perspectives.

In Yellin's book *Battle Exhortation: The Rhetoric of Combat Leadership*, he expands upon what he started in his thesis. He walks through many of the historical examples in the first chapter to establish battle exhortation. Yellin also identifies distinctions between directions of encouragement in the first chapter. He defines downward exhortation, interactive exhortation, cyclical exhortation, starburst exhortation and lateral exhortation (Yellin, 2008). For the purpose of this essay, we will focus solely on lateral direction.

In his description of the battle of Mantinea in the Peloponnesian War, he describes the actions of each nation at the battle. There are Athenians, Argives, Mantineans and Spartans. Each one engages in battle exhortation differently. The former three each give grand speeches to inspire their men to fight with passion for their given cause. Whether it be defense of their territory, supremacy or glory, the three nations united against Sparta gave speeches to prepare their men for battle. Meanwhile, the Spartans performed their battle exhortation differently. While the other city-states' leaders gave grandiose theatrical speeches, Sparta was not addressed by a commander. Instead they addressed one another through song and encouragement, comrade

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to comrade (Yellin, 2008). This included the playing of a flute, showing symbolic battle exhortation is not limited to the spoken word. In this example, it is done through music too.

This is one of the earliest cited examples of lateral battle exhortation, showing that the method of rhetorical encouragement has been around since the days of Thucydides. Men of similar rank have kept each other's spirits in check, and that practice persisted through World War II. Soldiers overseas grew with one another, offering encouragement before, during and after combat. Considering the matter of codependency, there are few things worse for a platoon or company than a dysfunctional soldier. It is at this point in Yellin's writing where he acknowledges the second aspect of this literature review: humor in lateral battle exhortation. He doesn't say much, but he says enough, "Humor is the most common means by which troops encourage one another" (Yellin, 2008).

In the second half of this literature review, I will examine relevant literature about humor as it pertains to lateral battle exhortation. As humor permeates any social context, humor in lateral battle exhortation is a form of relief theory rather than superiority or incongruity (Lynch, 2002). Battle exhortation at any level is going to have intrinsic tension, being that there is a combative element. When life and limb are at stake, humor is incorporated to relieve this tension. However, this is not a matter of face-saving or negotiation, but a mechanism for coping. To be specific, it is a mechanism for coping for stress after its emergence (Henman, 2001). The humor acts as a means of identification, as those within the in-group become closer in a military context. For example, when a joke is made in a unit, and other soldiers in the unit laugh, the joke teller will give a favorable response. The other members identified with the humor through laughter and are now part of the in-group (Lynch, 2002).

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There are multiple components to humor. Absurdity and incongruity have their place within warfare. Each oppose normality in different ways, and if a soldier looks or tries hard enough, absurd circumstance and incongruity surround the battlefield (Veatch, 1998). Superiority can also be present, especially in the context of comparing an identified group with the opposition. As for phenomena in humor theory, the “giggle fest”, as T.C. Veatch terms it, can certainly appear between brothers in arms. This constituent simply means laughter is contagious (Veatch, 1998). Exaggeration, embarrassment and ridicule exist within the ranks. There are many examples of pranks pulled in the barracks or teasing done to make another soldier feel better. In some instances, there’s even satire, with written and spoken letters and signs posted on the front lines to lift morale (Veatch, 1998).

Now what kind of humor is seen in warfare? Well, you’re not getting knock-knock jokes. Gallows Humor may be from 1942, but it still serves a purpose. Obrdlik identifies and defines Gallows humor before applying it to Nazi occupation in Czechoslovakia. The term refers to humor arising from dangerous or precarious situations. Despite that somber definition, Gallows humor is produced from hopefulness of an individual (Obrdlik, 1942). As early as the 40’s, Gallows humor’s inherent power was identifiable. Obrdlik saw it as a tremendous social phenomenon that emboldens groups when the humor is created and accepted. It’s dynamic in that it responds to the environment and attitudes of the group, strengthening morale and providing inspiration to those involved.

Humor in Warfare Can Be Strange

Gallows humor is atypical, that much is clear. This type is different from day-to-day interpersonal humor. The presence of danger is necessitated, implying significant amounts of stress and fear. The comedy is very dark, as the individual must find what is humorous in their situation (Obrdlik, 1942). When your situation is in a muddied cell filled with insects, your sense of humor is going to be bleak. In this section, I will examine American prisoners in the Vietnam War and the processes they went through to illustrate the bizarre ways humor can wedge its way into warfare. The humorous methods American POWs used to combat their Vietnamese captors will be discussed. Additionally, the interpersonal and intrapersonal process they went through to save their sanity will be introduced.

In the Vietnam War, hundreds of Americans were captured by the North Vietnamese. These men were treated harshly. They were berated, beaten, tortured, interrogated and killed without remorse. Many accounts have been kept from survivors. These accounts were compiled for a study by Linda Henman. She used Vietnam POW's narratives to provide a frame for resilience as a communication phenomenon and humor as a strategy (Henman, 2001). The study gives insight into the ways soldiers implemented humor to transform their mental landscape so they could escape their POW camps alive and with their minds intact.

The prisoners' survival techniques included an assimilation of humor into their intrapersonal and interpersonal behaviors. While POWs in some instances spent time with others, they did not always. Sometimes, the POW was confined to an isolated state for extended periods of time. Some POWs were confined to solitary confinement for a few days, others several years (Henman, 2001). Dealing with this prolonged captivity meant they had to develop amusement and humor skills.

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For those in solitary, this was an arduous intrapersonal process, as it was mentally challenging to accept humor. Often, a certain humorous event transpires to help captives realize the value of humor, like a guard using a Baby Ben clock in his pocket. In these instances, the prisoner cannot help but laugh to administer this realization. Unfortunately, a sense of what is funny isn't consistent for all people. If the group was larger, or interpersonal, things were easier. Lateral exhortation was prevalent in these instances.

In interpersonal contexts of Vietnam POW captivity, ridicule and mocking between prisoners kept them both unified and mentally in check. It was also a method of rebellion. Power was stripped from the prisoners, so utilizing humor felt like the prisoners could still exercise some sort of power over themselves. (Henman, 2001).

In some instances, exercising humor shifted the power dynamic in favor of the prisoners. The most famous instance is Gerald Venanzi's experiences. American POW Jerry Venanzi noticed his fellow men were separated and hopeless. So, what did he do? He turned to humor, riding an imaginary motorcycle around. The antics earned laughs despite the obvious discomfort of his peers.

It didn't stop there either. In solitary confinement, Venanzi created an imaginary friend, a chimpanzee named Barney Google. Google accompanied Venanzi everywhere, even to interrogations. This non-existent monkey served as Venanzi's voice for insult and criticism. His bit was so convincing that guards often inquired what the chimpanzee said about them (Henman, 2001). Multiple times Venanzi and his imaginary chimp mocked the guards, serving as a source of comedy for fellow POWs. The North Vietnamese commander at the prison even bought in, demanding the chimpanzee be released once Venanzi was assigned cellmates.

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Venanzi came to an intrapersonal realization within solitary confinement: embrace Gallows humor. In doing so, he conceptualized Barney Google the chimpanzee, his motorcycle, and other ludicrous ideas to entertain himself and his peers. By doing so, he was able to make their situation more bearable, exercise power over himself, and even leverage some power over his captors. All done solely using humor. These implementations of humor are examples of coping, the function of humor in wartime environments. The intersection between coping, lateral battle exhortation and interpersonal communication is the subject of the next section, as these elements will be analyzed through the lens of multiple texts pertaining to warfare.

To leave this section, I want to end with what World War II American cavalry officer William H. Puntenney said about the importance of humor between his men:

“Combat is a grim affair, and the consequences can be fatal, but there is always a lot of humor in a well-trained outfit. Soldiers are always joking and playing pranks on each other. If it wasn’t for the humor, I think my men would crack up, being confronted as they are with the daily carnage” (Puntenney, 1998).

Humor not only is a necessity for the sanity of troops, but also a method of coping in the genre of lateral battle exhortation.

Humor as a Coping Mechanism within Lateral Battle Exhortation

Gallows humor is shown to be effective in the theatre of warfare, but what about in instances of lateral battle exhortation? In this section I will employ Gallows humor, first explaining its function as a coping mechanism and its relation to lateral battle exhortation. Then I will utilize

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texts from World War I, the European and Pacific theatres in World War II, the Holocaust, and the Gulf War. These texts will show the different ways humor is used to cope in lateral battle exhortation. I will then provide a brief conclusion over the section before progressing.

Gallows humor is a form of coping for troops as they manage the grim savagery of war. It has been established that Gallows humor is humor arising from dangerous or precarious situations (Obrdlik, 1942). In *The Structure of Coping*, coping is defined as “the things that people do to avoid being harmed by life-strains” (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). People are responsive to forces that affect them, such as stress and fear. A method a soldier might take to avoid harm from these forces is to adopt Gallows humor through an interpersonal or intrapersonal process, like those detailed in the previous section. It may not be done through prison, but also within a unit or through an intrapersonal realization on the battlefield.

Now that Gallows humor has been established to function as a coping mechanism, what kind of coping is it? Pearlin and Schooler mention three varieties: responses altering the situation created by straining experiences, responses that control the meaning of the experience before stress is introduced, and responses that function to control the level of stress after its emergence (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Gallows humor as a coping mechanism functions to only manage stress after it is introduced, especially with respect to lateral battle exhortation.

Stress is one reason lateral battle exhortation exists. Comrades encourage each other if one is in distress or dealing with high stress levels. With the presence of stress, coping through humor serves to be a reasonable and frequent solution. Thus, by the definition of lateral battle exhortation, Gallows humor as a function of coping and lateral battle exhortation are linked. Now that their relationship is established, I will cite some historical examples where humor is seen within the confines of lateral battle exhortation.

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In World War I, soldiers fought in a miserable meat grinder, a war of attrition. If soldiers weren't being shelled, they were being gassed. If they weren't being gassed, they were being shot at. If they weren't being shot at, they were still miserable. This notion is commonly thought to have carried over into the personalities of the troops of the war. However, this is untrue. Soldiers commonly dealt with the horror of the Ardennes Forest and other battlefields with humor. Between 1914 and 1918, infantrymen told jokes, sang joyous songs about death, wrote satirical articles about life in the trenches, and parodied mustard attack decision-making trees (Gorgula, 2016). While there was the violence accompanying the evolution of technology and the complacency of tactics, there was also downtime. Men encouraged each other through these methods to chin up and remain effective soldiers.

In World War II, Americans fought in both the European theatre and Pacific theatre. As such, there are two different experiences between the Army and the Marine Corps. I will analyze excerpts from two books to demonstrate Gallows humor, coping and lateral battle exhortation in the bloodiest conflict in history. *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa* details Marine Eugene Sledge's experience fighting the Japanese on two islands. *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest*, details Easy company of the 5016th regiment of the 101st Airborne's journey from D-Day to Berchtesgaden.

In the Pacific, Eugene Sledge fought in the K Company of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines, 1st Marine Division. This division fought some of the bloodiest battles in the Pacific, including those detailed in the book: Peleliu and Okinawa. The Germans and Japanese were very different enemies, and some would argue the Japanese were more tenacious. For them, surrender wasn't an option. On Okinawa, the men were at a gridlock on Half Moon Hill. The Company was stationed on top of the hill as Japanese soldiers poured out of the culverts. Riflemen, BARmen,

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and machine gunners mowed them down like target practice. There were no mortar strikes from the Japanese, just the purr of machine gun fire and the piercing of flesh. Sledge compares the event to a turkey shoot, and his fellow men made bets about which Japanese soldiers to hit. He ends the passage with “The men yelled and joked more and more in one of their few releases from weeks of tension under the pounding of heavy weapons” (Sledge, 2007). Here, despite the morbid, disturbing scene, this encounter qualifies as coping through humor with lateral battle exhortation. The men joke and jeer, encouraging each other to fulfill their objective in a dangerous situation. They are actively coping with the stress of surviving in the Pacific and the hardships of artillery fire. After all, the excerpt mentions that this was “one of their releases from weeks of tension under the pounding of heavy weapons” (Sledge, 2007).

On the other side of the world, Easy company is marching toward Nuenen, Holland when they are ambushed by the Germans’ 107th Panzerbrigade. In seconds, the scene became pure chaos. Easy Company’s Bull Randleman had to run into the enemy to avoid a flaming tank, Sergeant Paul Rogers was hit and bleeding badly, and Lt. Buck Compton was shot in the butt. The medic, Malarkey, Pvt. Heffron, and a few other men came to help the Lieutenant. After a quip, Compton told the men to leave him for the Germans. They didn’t leave him, instead creating a makeshift stretcher out of a barn door. Regarding his injury, the bullet had “gone right into the right cheek of his buttocks, out, into the left cheek, and out” (Ambrose, 2017). After loading Buck onto a tank, Lipton couldn’t help but laugh at Buck. He said he was the only guy he knew to get shot once and leave with four holes. Acknowledging the joke, both men laughed (Ambrose, 2017). Here, Lipton uses humor to encourage Buck after combat, an injured soldier of the same rank.

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The Holocaust unexpectedly has instances of humor to cope in lateral exhortative interactions between prisoners in concentration camps. In a study conducted by Chaya Ostrower, she investigated humor variety, laughter, and the functions they filled in the holocaust. For the population of the study, 84 Holocaust survivors were selected. Results found that humor in the Holocaust fulfilled self-humor and Gallows humor the most. These men seemed to have similar intrapersonal realizations as the POWs in Vietnam. While maybe not to the extent of Venanzi's self-humor, the Holocaust victims did recognize the dark humor in their current circumstance. Additionally, they would laterally exhort using Gallows humor, communicating with others of the same status. One interviewee recites a joke they would tell each other for a laugh:

“Two Jews meet in Warsaw and one of them is eating perfumed soap, the other asks: 'Moysh, why are you eating soap with such a scent'? He answers: 'If they turn me into soap, I might as well smell nice'” (Ostrower, 2015).

The humor helped them remain human, even under harsh conditions. They tried to find the humor amidst the dreaded absurdity of their current situation, and it helped them survive.

In the Gulf War, Marine Anthony Swofford recounts his experiences in the book *Jarhead*. This war provided Marines with plenty of training and mobilization, but little action. Much of Swofford's lateral exhortative coping occurred out of combat, but they were constantly bracing for it. In one instance from the book, he and the men in his platoon were talking about body bags, joking about which Marine would end up in it (Swofford, 2005). By jestering about such a topic, the men engaged in lateral battle exhortation. This occurred prior to their mobilization, so the threat of combat was real. The conversation offers a Gallows-type

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encouragement, using comedy to cultivate a communicative coping mechanism, psychologically destressing them and keeping the soldiers in a state of combat readiness.

In this section, it was established that Gallows humor and coping were directly related in the context of warfare. Gallows humor is a form of coping for troops, and it is linked to lateral battle exhortation because of its ability to destress soldiers. Following the cementing of these relationships, various historical examples of humor pertaining to lateral battle exhortation were analyzed. These brief analyses demonstrated the concept's significance throughout the history of warfare. In the final section of this essay, I will dissect the concept of ridiculing the enemy through humor.

Ridiculing the Enemy

As the war rages on between Ukraine and Russia, Ukrainians retain the ability to comically reflect. This helped their war effort. How is this possible? Well, humor enabled the Ukrainians to move past ongoing trauma, create a new hero epic, new identities, ridicule enemy narratives and propose survival tactics (Zlata, 2023). These elements elevated morale to new heights, as humor and laughter push the spirit of the people. Russians, even in missile strikes, are incapable of stopping online onslaughts mocking their military. This creates an environment where the Russians find themselves in an awkward position. As a country they are rooted in the idea of military might and an image of strength, yet no matter how many bombings and missile strikes destroy Ukrainian property they remain lampooned.

On ridiculing the enemy, the Ukrainians found a way to foster strong identification for their country and military by creating the “other” as Russia. Granted, Russia did it to themselves

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when they invaded, but the message was pushed to new heights by Ukraine. The Russian narrative is endlessly mocked by the majority of Ukrainian citizens and the world. This works, as when the Russian narrative is funny, they're less scary (Zlata, 2023).

Calling back to *Jarhead*, we can see how ridiculing the enemy can be clouded when there is no uniform or nation behind it. Swofford is approaching some Bedouins, a group that lived in Saudi Arabia, unsure what the situation is. He is worried he may be in for his first firefight. The Bedouins ended up having a supply issue with their camels, and there was no danger. The Bedouins expressed that some Marines killed their camels. Upon their return to the Triangle, Swofford is sickened by the incident and the subsequent actions of his fellow troops. They make jokes about the "camel jockeys", failing to realize they're not the enemy (Swofford, 2005). This sort of ridicule for the enemy shows two things. One, ridicule for the enemy doesn't have to be unifying or righteous, it can be cruel and incorrect. Two, in some regions, nations, or scenarios, the enemy can be difficult to identify. Ignorance clouded Swofford's comrades' judgement in this instance.

Conclusion

Humor, a form of coping, has a linkage with lateral battle exhortation. Troops on the frontlines feel stress before, during and after combat. This, in turn, generates the need to cope with this stress. Managing this stress is done through the implementation of humor. If this humor arises in the wake of dangerous or precarious situations, it should be acknowledged as Gallows humor (Obrdlik, 1942). Instances of lateral battle exhortation often include gallows humor as a coping mechanism to boost morale and encourage troops through various humor theory techniques (Veatch, 1998).

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This essay provided the next step in lateral battle exhortation research. Yellin's mention of humor has been fleshed out to show it as a coping mechanism for the soldier as they manage the stress within combat. Gallows humor is the most effective method for the soldier, as it fosters morale and comes from a place of hopefulness. The realization that gallows humor is necessary for oneself as a soldier can come either through intrapersonal realization or interpersonal realization. This expansion of Yellin's theory of battle exhortation is not a new one, humor within lateral battle exhortation has been around for over a century. Quips and dark humor have always been a viable method for troops to extract a laugh from their comrade and release tension.

I also indicated the effectiveness of ridiculing the enemy by showing how the Ukrainians were able to mock the Russian military, turning something once threatening into a joke. This joke persists even as drones and missiles sail overhead into their country. Through ash and dust, the Ukrainians still patriotically belittle the Russian military. On the other hand, ridiculing the enemy in some regions and without complete certainty is an ignorant act. Swofford's brothers in arms acted with insensibility. Further study should be conducted on ridiculing the enemy, because it has been so effective as a form of humor, as seen in Ukraine. However, in a context without an identifiable national enemy, it is not so easy.

Battle exhortation is too often thought of one-dimensionally, if at all. Those aware of the field think of chain of command. The grand speeches. The general, rallying his men. The commander, challenging his army. While this downward encouragement exists, so too does the overlooked lateral battle direction. Troops and fellow soldiers rally each other, sharing intimate moments grounded in familiarity. There are moments of trial, moments of coping, and moments of humor.

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