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Military Speech

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When freshmen, or "plebes," at the U.S. Naval Academy finish their summer basic training, they trade in their "dixie cups" (sailor hats) for "covers" (officer hats) and begin the toughest year in their careers, a year in which "flamers" "ream them out" in front of their peers for minor infractions. Those who receive the harshest abuse are the "shit screens"; those who ingratiate themselves with upperclassmen, the "smacks." In World War II, a pilot would rev up his "coffee grinder" (plane engine) and, with permission of the "madhouse (control tower), take off toward his target, where he would either "hang out the laundry" (drop parachutists), lay a few "eggs" (bombs), or make a "split S" (combat maneuver) and then hightail it from the "junior prom" (hot mission), "flak happy" (suffering from combat fatigue), hoping to get home without a "panting virgin" or a "ruptured duck" (injured plane).

Members of the military, like other occupational groups, maintain their own informal vocabulary, one that serves to distinguish them from civilians, to add humor to what is often a tedious job, to relieve anxiety when the tension of war replaces the tedium of peace, and to express their frustration with the hierarchical institution of which they are a small part. In their close-knit communities they pass along inherited and often humorous turns of speech while simultaneously coining new colorful expressions that comment on the particular experiences of their unit. Some of these never make their way out of basic training, some flourish only during a particular mission, while still others become firmly established in a unit's lexicon and foster a sense of exclusivity. The expressions that survive do so both because they entertain and because they embody shared enthusiasms or shared resentments.

The folk speech of military units shares little with correct speech (the formal interchange in a receiving line, for example); it is the speech exchanged in the barracks, in the ship's engine room, among coworkers often of fairly equal rank. It celebrates the salty, the blunt, the crude and may advocate attitudes that those in positions of power have officially condemned. In times of universal draft, when a wide spectrum of the population enters the military to serve its term and return to civilian life, slang tends to move back and forth from popular culture to military culture.[1] In an all-volunteer force with its more homogeneous and professional staff, military slang becomes the speech of insiders.

Upon entering the Navy, any recruit learns through a semi-official policy of redescription that a floor is no longer a floor; it is a "deck." A wall is a "bulkhead," a set of stairs a "ladder," a hallway a "passageway," a window a "port," and a bed a "rack." Although basic training takes place on shore, rather than on a ship, language orients the recruit to the world of the Navy by transforming a training camp into a ship. Those in positions of power within the military endorse the use of language in this way because it serves, along with other methods of indoctrination, to transform the individual. To force recruits to refer to themselves only in the third person helps them make the transition from the individualistic, selfish, "me culture" of civilian society, according to their commanders. Compelling them to punctuate every sentence addressed to a superior with the appropriate "Sir" or "Ma'am" facilitates their adjustment to rigid hierarchy and inculcates the

readiness to obey orders automatically on which a successful mission or the survival of a ship may one day depend.

The recruit learns not only the technical terms that apply to the many parts of a ship but also the colloquial terms for Naval personnel, those who sail the "blue water" Navy and those who navigate smaller craft on channel ways and rivers in the "Brown Water Navy." Within the "surface community," an experienced officer who takes a rookie ensign under his wing is a "sea daddy." "Blue jackets" (sailors) who employ more brute force than mental agility are "anchor clankers,"(British), "deck apes," and "knuckle-draggers." On board the "bird farms" (aircraft carriers), complete with their "coffee pots" (nuclear reactors), "airedales," (pilots) don their "bonedomes" or "brain buckets" (helmets) and slide into their sleek aircraft. For relaxation on long deployments, carrier personnel leave their chores for the "steel beach" (deck) where they listen to shipmates play the latest tunes and the mess staff serves up barbecued burgers and franks. A "chicken of the sea" (ballistic missile submarine) "drills holes in the water" as it navigates a clandestine course, and its crew champion the motto, "We hide with pride."

Military units invent names for themselves, for their rival units, for their enemies, for the shirkers among them, for those out of reach who give the orders, for those they regard as inferior, for the food they eat, for the games they play, for the missions they complete, and for the suffering they endure. "Snake-eaters are Navy SEALs. Graduates of the Naval Academy, according to their rivals, are alumni of "Canoe U." RAP is short for "Rear Area Pussy,"[2] those safely out of the combat zone working to supply the front-line troops, like the "wagon dogs" of Civil War days. The stress of a situation is measured by its "pucker factor." A soldier who steals something commits a "five-finger requisition." One goes "stick fishing" with dynamite. Since the Civil War, soldiers have carried their "house wives"(sewing kits) into every war. " Joe Shit the Ragman" or "J.S. Ragman" is a major screw up.

Some terms enjoy multiple meanings in the same war. A proven pilot, one who has downed several enemy aircraft, is affectionately called an "ace," but "to ace" according to the Marine Corps, is to kill. The practice of laying an ace of spades on the body of a dead enemy soldier was more talked about than practiced in Vietnam, but, eager to demonstrate its support for the troops, an American card company provided soldiers with packs of cards containing nothing but aces of spades. The recent deck of playing cards with targeted Iraqi leaders distributed to troops in the second gulf war is an interesting spin off.

Names often distinguish the novice from the old hand. In the Civil War, recruits were called "palefaces." Those burnished by the trials of combat or tough training missions label newcomers "cherry boys," "twinks," "FNG's" ("fuckin' new guys"), and "blister bandits." For generations freshmen at the service academies have suffered the humiliation of being lowly "plebes" (or "rats at VMI) destined for their virgin year to be ordered about by seasoned upperclassmen. During the Vietnam War, when the need for officers required that large numbers be trained in short officer training programs rather than through the 4-year alternatives of service academies and ROTC programs, those from conventional programs referred to one of their newly commissioned counterparts as "shake'n bakes," "Nestles' Quicks", and "Ready Whips."

In the absence of official names, troops invent their own. Although the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard coined acronyms for the active duty women who served in World War II (WAC's, WAVE's, SPAR's, And WAF's), the Marine Corps had no such designation. Early in their service, women Marines found themselves called "Lady Leathernecks"[3] and the derogatory

BAM's (Broad Assed Marines). In retaliation, they invented the term HAMS (Hairy Assed Marines) to refer to their male counterparts. Nurses in World War II were called "Bedpan Commandos," a term passed on to their Vietnam War medic counterparts. "Boonie rats" were members of the infantry who spent time "in country" (or "in Indian Country") engaging the enemy. A song whose lyrics were written by an M-60 machine gunner of the 101st Cavalry who was allegedly killed in action immortalized the expression:

> Boonie Rats, Boonie Rats, scared but not alone,
> One hundred days more or less, then I'm going home.[4]

Divisions sometimes receive their nicknames from the insignia that identifies their membership. Troops serving in Vietnam came to refer to the 25th infantry division that sported a shoulder patch shaped like a strawberry with a streak of lightning across it, as "Electric Strawberry." The Fourth Army Division that donned a shoulder patch with four ivy leaves was called "the Poison Ivy Division." The AA's on the shoulder patches of members of the 82nd Airborne won the division the pejorative nicknames of "All-American," "Air Mattress," "All-African," "All-Afro," and "Alcoholics Anonymous." Members of the 101st Airborne called themselves "The Screaming Eagles" after the eagle on their shoulder patches, but scoffers, regarding such a name a bit ostentatious, took the division down a peg or two with nicknames like the "Screaming Chickens" and the "Puking Buzzards." (Reinberg, 1991: 73, 33,7, 193).

Not only did divisions see their nicknames knocked from the heroic to the humble, but soldiers in Vietnam saw their mission called into question by a significant portion of the America public. American combat soldiers, who in World War I had been "doughboys" and in World War II and Korea "G.I.'s," found themselves "grunts" in Vietnam, close to the ground, mired in the muck of war: "They call us 'grunts 'cause that's what you do when you shit," according to one soldier.(Cragg, 1980:168) Some of these young soldiers began their tours in Vietnam timid soldiers who became "Audie Murphied" (after the World War II hero) into enthusiastic warriors, those who swore by the soldier's prayer, a variant of the 23rd psalm:

> Though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death I shall fear no Evil,
> because I am the meanest motherfucker in the Valley.

Others did their time with little enthusiasm, putting up with the daily "Mickey Mouse" that issued from "Disneyland East" (the Pentagon). In a folklore tinged with cynicism, they told stories of units who were so fed up with the practical incompetence of freshly minted junior officers that they "fragged the Lieuie." (tossing a fragmentation grenade into the Lieutenant's quarters, a crime repeated recently by a soldier in Operation Iraqi Freedom). According to the folklore, there were "Bell Telephone Hours" (interrogation sessions in which electric jolts were reputed to have been administered) that ended in the captured VC sympathizers taking their "first flying lesson" out of helicopters. Soldiers spoke of the "newbies," "freshmeat," and "Gomers"[5] who would arrive each week to replace those killed and wounded in action fighting a war that, ironically, was never officially acknowledged with the title of "war" but left to linger in the linguistic limbo of an "era."

Although more macabre humor was reported from Vietnam than from any war, it was not invented in Vietnam. Civil War soldiers, for example, called the list of the dead the "butcher's bill" (Myers, 1990:8). In Vietnam the casualties, referred to as "Kool-Ade" (killed in action) were "bagged and tagged" and sent off to the "big PX in the sky" (Reinberg,1991:21). Soldiers not only invented names for their own domestic dissidents; they also coined terms for South Vietnamese dissidents. A "Buddhist barbecue" was a

Buddhist monk who set himself on fire to protest the war. "Crispy critters," from the U.S. sugary kids' cereal of that name, were Napalm victims, civilians who made their way to MASH facilities for treatment. The term eventually traveled stateside into emergency room lingo to describe burn victims.

Like their predecessors, soldiers in Vietnam complained about the food they were served: the "beans and baby dicks" (beans and franks), the "beans and motherfuckers" (lima beans and ham), and the "baby shit" (mustard) spread on their sandwiches. But no matter how bad the "C-rats"(combat rations), none produced the dreaded "Saigon quickstep" as impressively as did the local street food. There was always some time, though, for rest and relaxation, a little I&I (intercourse and intoxication) or B&B (booze and broads) to be arranged through one of the "Saigon cowboys," (pimps). Some on liberty contracted for a "steam and cream" from one of the "boom boom girls" or "chocolate bunnies," (prostitutes who preferred black soldiers to white.). Others sought more conventional dates with the "roundeyes," American and Australian women in Vietnam as nurses, camp followers, or USO workers ("doughnut dollies,"[6] "biscuit bitches," and "jelly doughnuts").

The names heard most often in the Vietnam War were those for the enemy. American soldiers fought an elusive enemy with the commonest of names, "Charlie," short for Victor Charlie, the military alphabetical terms for VC or Viet Cong. "Charlie" could be a North Vietnamese regular, a rice farmer, a small child, or a grandmother. In the face of unmapped difference and the uncanny Other, soldier speech articulated a theme of uniformity. Charlie could appear with an AK 47 on a well-traveled enemy path through the jungle or harbor underground in the long network of tunnels only to sneak out at night in dark clothing. Charlie was both military and civilian, here and there, the ever elusive enemy. Above all, Charlie was a "gook," a category of racial "other," used to describe both friendly and unfriendly Asians. Although lexicographers disagree about the precise route the expression took before making its way into contemporary slang, most agree that it bears considerable similarity to the Korean "kuk" (pronounced kook) used to describe a person of a specific nationality.[7] A "Chungkuk" is a Chinese citizen, for example. In the 1940's American soldiers used the term to describe friendly Asians. In the '50's, they labeled Koreans in this way.

The genealogy is less important than the function of dehumanizing the indigenous people. To kill other human beings, a prospect most Americans are raised to abhor, one must psychologically imagine the enemy as something other than human beings with wants and dreams similar to one's own, with families who love them and for whom they may be fighting. Language helps in reclassifying the enemy, and even the innocent civilian casualties, from human to less than human: "And when you shot someone you didn't think you were shooting at a human. They were a gook or a Commie and it was okay..."[8] The enemy is reduced not only by racist nicknames but also by an array of curses. Out of frustration, the soldier meets the threat of aggression with a verbal aggression that diminishes the feared adversary. In the barracks, at least, cursing the enemy imaginatively mutes his threat.

The language of soldiers in Vietnam fighting an unpopular war did not only give voice to their fears and anger; it put a humorous cast to their cynicism. An interview between an Air Force Captain and a journalist poignantly and humorously articulates the disjunction between the captain's frank, creative, bawdy folk speech, punctuated by profanity and metaphor, and its translation by the information officer, one of the service's many spin doctors, into bland printable official comments. It brings together two cultures, the media and the military, and the means to translate and countertranslate one into the

other. This example of "Xerox" folklore circulated widely among military personnel serving in Vietnam because it amusingly illustrated the two Vietnam wars, the one in which pilots sought to destroy cabbage patches and swinging foot bridges and the other brought to the American public by the American government full of hearts and minds and official justification[9]

Correspondent: What do you think of the F-4?

Captain: It's so fuckin' maneuverable you can fly up your own ass with it.

Air Force Information Officer: What the captain means is that he has found the F4C Phantom highly maneuverable at all altitudes and he considers it an excellent aircraft for all missions assigned.

Correspondent: I suppose, Captain, that you've flown a certain number of missions over North Vietnam. What did you think of the SAMs used by the North Vietnamese?

Captain: Why those bastards couldn't hit a bull in the ass with a bass fiddle. We fake the shit out of them. There's no sweat.

Air Force Information Officer: What the captain means is that the Surface-to-Air Missiles around Hanoi pose a serious problem to our air operations and that the pilots have a healthy respect for them.

Correspondent: I suppose, Captain, that you've flown missions to the South. What kind of ordnance do you use, and what kind of targets do you hit?

Captain: Well, I'll tell you, mostly we aim at kicking the shit out of Vietnamese villages, and my favorite ordnance is napalm. Man, that stuff just sucks the air out of their friggin' lungs and makes a sonovabitchin' fire.

Air Force Information Officer: What the captain means is that air strikes in South Vietnam are often against Viet Cong structures and all operations are always under the positive control of Forward Air Controllers, or FACs. The ordnance employed is conventional 500- and 750-pound bombs and 20-millimeter cannon fire.

Correspondent: I suppose you spent an R & R in Hong Kong. What were your impressions of the Oriental girls?

Captain: Yeah, I went to Hong Kong. As for those Oriental broads, well, I don't care which way the runway runs, east or west, north or south--a piece of ass is a piece of ass.

Air Force Information Officer: What the captain means is that he found the delicately featured oriental girls fascinating, and he was very impressed with their fine manners and thinks their naivete is most charming.

Correspondent: Tell me, Captain, have you flown any missions other than over North and South Vietnam?

Captain: You bet your sweet ass I've flown other missions. We get scheduled nearly every day on the trail in Laos where those fuckers over there throw everything at you but the friggin' kitchen sink. Even the goddamn kids got slingshots.

Air Force Information Officer: What the captain means is that he has occasionally been scheduled to fly missions in the extreme Western DMZ, and he has a healthy respect for the flak in that area.

Correspondent: I understand that no one in your Fighter Wing has got a MIG yet. What seems to be the problem?

Captain: Why you screwhead, if you knew anything about what you're talking about--the problem is MIGs. If we'd get scheduled by those peckerheads at Seventh for those missions in MIG Valley, you can bet your ass we'd get some of those mothers. Those glory hounds at Ubon get all those missions while we settle for fightin' the friggin' war. Those mothers at Ubon are sitting on their fat asses killing MIGs and we get stuck with bombing the god damned cabbage patches.

Air Force Information Officer: What the Captain means is that each element in the Seventh Air Force is responsible for doing their assigned job in the air war. Some units are assigned the job of neutralizing enemy air strength by hunting out MIGs, and other elements are assigned bombing missions and interdiction of enemy supply routes.

Correspondent: Of all the targets you've hit in Vietnam, which one was the most satisfying?

Captain: Well, shit, it was when we were scheduled for the suspected VC vegetable garden. I dropped napalm in the middle of the fuckin' cabbage and my wingman splashed it real good with six of those 750-pound mothers and spread the fire all the way to friggin' beets and carrots.

Air Force Information Officer: What the captain means is that the great variety of tactical targets available throughout Vietnam make the F4C the perfect aircraft to provide flexible response.

Correspondent: What do you consider the most difficult target you've struck in North Vietnam?

Captain: The friggin' bridges. I must have dropped 40 tons of bombs on those swayin' bamboo mothers, and I ain't hit one of the bastards yet.

Air Force Information Officer: What the captain means is that interdicting bridges along enemy supply routes is very important and a quite difficult target. The best way to accomplish this task is to crater the approaches to the bridge.

Correspondent: I noticed in touring the base that you have aluminum matting on the taxiways. Would you care to comment on its effectiveness and usefulness in Vietnam?

Captain: You're fuckin' right, I'd like to make a comment. Most of us pilots are well hung, but shit, you don't know what hung is until you get hung up on one of the friggin' bumps on that god damn stuff.

Air Force Information Officer: What the captain means is that the aluminum matting is quite satisfactory as a temporary expedient, but requires some finesse in taxiing and braking the

aircraft.

Correspondent: Did you have an opportunity to meet your wife on leave in Honolulu, and did you enjoy the visit with her?

Captain: Yeah, I met my wife in Honolulu, but I forget to check the calendar, so the whole five days were friggin' well combat-proof--a completely dry run.

Air Force Information Officer: What the captain means is that it was wonderful to get together with his wife and learn first-hand about the family and how things were at home.

Correspondent: Thank you for your time, Captain.

Captain: Screw you--why don't you bastards print the real story, instead of all that crap?

Air Force Information Officer: What the captain means is that he enjoyed the opportunity to discuss his tour with you.

Correspondent: One final question. Could you reduce your impression of the war to a simple phrase or statement, Captain?

Captain: You bet your ass I can. It's a fucked up war.

Air Force Information Officer: What the captain means is...it's a FUCKED UP WAR.[10]

Whether the salty bravado of a fighter pilot, the playful putdown of another unit, or the witty derision of a superior (one well out of earshot), the informal language of the military offers a way of letting off steam, galvanizing group identity, and acting out a mastery of what is feared, hated, or resented. When that group is all male and has been trained to think of war as men's work only, it is not difficult to understand that the construction of a hypermasculine mystique would require the casting out and off of all things "feminine." The desire for women must be suppressed, sublimated within the group, or satisfied through dramatic conquest. Women are threats to this pure masculinity, polluting forces to be subdued.

Military lingo resists translation across gender lines. In all-male training units, instructors have traditionally called men "girls" or "pussies" as a form of humiliation. Should they then call women "boys" or "dicks?" This would obviously fail to affect the same humiliation because military training has historically sought to reinforce rigid definitions of gender that view women as outsiders unfit for military service and men fit only in so far as they demonstrate their potential for violence in non violent ways and submit to dominance by those up the chain of command. If women are ever going to achieve full membership, the phallocentric, hypermasculinized, homosocial speech of the military must change not only because it is abusive and demoralizing to women, but because it simply does not work in a volunteer military that must recruit women to insure a well-qualified and educated pool of potential soldiers, sailors, and officers.

Notes

1. Examples of military slang that have established their place in mainstream speech include "goldbrick" for shirker and "SNAFU" for "situation normal, all fucked up."

2. Other acronyms and abbreviations include:

SAPFU - surpassing all previous fuck-ups
FUBAR - fucked up beyond recognition
NAAFI (Australian) - not at all fucking interested
no aim, ambition or fucking initiative
BOHICA - bend over, here it comes again
FIGMO - fuck it, I got my orders
FTN - fuck the Navy (an FTN space is a small space in a ship where
a sailor can hide from officers.
PFC - proud fucking civilian (WWII)

3. Marines acquired the name "leathernecks" because of the leather collar on their uniform added to protect the soldier sword swipes. More recently they have been called "grunts" and "mudpuppies."

4. The song, "Boonie Rats" was composed in 1970 by John M. Del Vecchio. Lydia Fish has dedicated her career to reclaiming and celebrating the soldier song tradition of the Vietnam War. Her notes, "In Country: Songs of Americans in the Vietnam War," which include the background on "Boonie Rats" as well as other soldier song are invaluable to any student of the period as are recordings of the commemorative concerts she has organized.

5.The expression "Gomers" is a reference to the simpleminded hero of a popular television comedy, "Gomer Pyle, USMC."

6. The term, "doughnut dolly" first appeared in WWI to describe Red Cross volunteers who worked just behind the front line, serving coffee and doughnuts to the troops. "Jelly doughnuts" were overweight "doughnut dollies."

7. In A Dictionary of Slang, published in 1984(New York: Prentice-Hall), Partridge claims that the term "gook" derived from the word "gugus from the Filipino Insurrection, 1899.

8. Quoted in Frances FitzGerald, Fire in the Lake, from the Michigan Winter Soldier Investigation 1971,.

9. Many Vietnam vets brought back copies of "What the Captain Means is". John Clark Pratt quotes the popular satire in Vietnam Voices.

10. By contrast, a ditty that circulated among World War II troops appears quite tame on the subject of language:

Ode to the Four Letter Words
Banish the use of the four letter words
Whose meanings are never obscure;
The Angles and Saxons, those bawdy old birds,
Were vulgar, obscene and impure.
But cherish the use of the weaseling phrase
That never quite says what you mean;
You'd better be known for your hypocrite ways
Than as vulgar, impure or obscene.

When Nature is calling, plain speaking is out,
When ladies (God bless 'em) are smiling about,
You may wee wee, make water, or empty the glass;
You can powder your nose--even "Johnny " may pass;
Shake the dew off the lilly, see the man about a dog,
Or, when everyone's soused, it's condensing the fog,
But be pleased to remember, if you would know bliss,
That only in Shakespeare do characters piss.

A woman has bosoms, a bust or a breast,

Those lilly-white swellings that bulge 'neath her vest;
They are towers of ivory, sheaves of new wheat;
In moments of passions, ripe apples to eat.
By the four letter words all alone.
Let your morals be loose as an alderman's vest
If your language is always obscure.
Today, not the act, but the word is the test
Of the vulgar, obscene, and impure.

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