

## **"This is my Rifle, This is my Gun...": Gunlore in the Military<sup>1</sup>**

**Richard Allen Burns**

In the summer of 1969, after completing my senior year of high school in Bryan, Texas, I joined the Marines and began boot camp in an all-Texas platoon in San Diego. The importance of marksmanship and familiarity with the M-14 was an integral part of our training, so much so that the platoon commander promised he would promote to PFC whoever in our platoon fired the highest score on the rifle range. While the promise was meant to motivate us into becoming expert riflemen, there were still those who did not embrace the proper attitude of respect toward their rifles, thereby attracting to themselves a type of negative attention that not only punished the violators but served as an example to the rest of the platoon.

Identifying some of the pervasive attitudes toward rifles and those who use them, as well as the expressive forms in which those attitudes enter oral tradition and even find their way into popular culture, I join other folklorists who have examined these materials from a functionalist perspective. References to the rifle as something more than a weapon provide the folklorist with a line of inquiry that, when contextualized in basic training, yields considerable insight into the ethos associated with the military and attitudes toward sex, power and guns that this paper explores.

### **Sex and Guns**

Respondents on folklorist Lydia Fish's online Vietnam War discussion have revealed soldiers' attitudes toward guns as they posted comments. One participant described a ritual an officer performed with his weapon of choice prior to combat:

Actually, I did bring a lovingly, well-oiled...though not battered...M1911 pistol to Viet Nam. I had bought it at Ambercrombie and Fitch in New York City just before my commissioning. At Fort Benning I had the pistol accurized by a man in Columbus who did such work for the US Army Pistol Team. She was a sweet shooting pistol, for sure.

Before I shipped out I "blessed" the pistol by putting it under the mattress and making love to my girlfriend above it. My friend Sven Westermann, who had already served his tour in Viet Nam, assured me that this would bring me luck in battle. Sounds a tad kinky, I know, but I wanted everything going for me that I could get before I went into combat. (Knauth 27 July 2000)

Upon reading this, another discussant on the list describes a similar ritual, which he calls a superstition, of how he also "wanted everything going" for himself prior to firing his weapon:

Aw, hell! I was wondering how old that superstition was! Did the same thing before a pistol match. Told Debbie there was a bad spring in the mattress.... (Kemp 27 July 2000)

And finally, a third discussant could not resist adding yet another dimension to the practice of sleeping with one's rifle:

Old myth...but what the hell. In Uruguay, got a sawed-off 12 gauge.  
Thought I'd follow tradition. During the blessing, the thought popped  
up: "was there one in the chamber?" (Andreachhio 27 July 2000)

This third variant depicts a hunter of sorts whose thoughts of whether there's "one in the chamber" might actually inhibit (or enhance) his sexual performance! This appears to be an inversion of the other two; the discussant thought he would "follow tradition," but he gives no reason for the ritual in terms of bringing him luck in combat as much as perhaps bringing him luck (good or bad) in bed.

Goldstein points out that during World War II and the Gulf War soldiers placed condoms over gun barrels to keep dirt and sand out, underscoring the gun's phallic nature while serving a practical purpose. Caring for one's weapon and protecting it from contaminants insure its potential as a weapon of destruction. Of course, a condom cannot prevent a round exiting the chamber despite its traditional use in preventing pregnancy and STDs. The link between firing of weapons and sex becomes more forceful when considering the words of a Vietnam veteran who compared carrying a gun to having a permanent erection: "It was a sexual trip every time you got to pull the trigger" (Grossman quoted by Goldstein 2001:349). By extension, maleness becomes a weapon of destruction; a man's penis (gun) becomes an instrument of power (Goldstein 2001:350).

While these accounts of protecting, sleeping with or on top of one's weapon, suggest the soldiers did not disclose to their lovers the ritual they were actually performing, other veterans made no attempt to conceal from their girlfriends whatever act that might help improve their marksmanship. To be sure, drill instructors even encouraged recruits to name their rifles after a female. For example, an ex-Marine, wrote "We had to give our rifle a girl's name. My ex-fiancée said she was flattered that I named my weapon after her...I did it for luck" (John, 20 October 1999). (Such naming practices remind the folklorist of Davy Crockett's rifle "Ol' Betsy.") Continuing with the sexual metaphor, the same respondent later wrote: "In 1952, I was in boot camp in San Diego. The Chief said we should call our '03 a 'piece.' Of course there was a big laugh from the troops and then we got to do a zillion push-ups." (John, 21 October 1999) Even the parts of the rifle were equated with female body parts, as evident in an email I recently received from yet another ex-Marine:

Before the PC monster reared its ugly head, our drill instructor  
explained how the M-16 was like a woman:

front sight assembly - teat  
magazine well - vagina  
trigger - clitoris

We were to "love" our rifle for it was the friend that would keep us  
alive...I particularly liked his admonition to learn to stroke her rear  
(charging handle) with authority. (captcouv, 20 October 1999)

Certainly, Marine drill instructors are notorious for their verbal art and affinity for overt references to sex and female body parts, particularly with respect to the rifle. Folklorist Barry Lee Pearson<sup>2</sup> recently sent me a collection of papers on military folklore that students wrote as part of course requirements when they were enrolled in introductory folklore courses taught at the University of Maryland during the 1970s. Many of the students were returning Vietnam veterans and/or knew veterans. Student collectors

included much of the language that drill instructors typically use. I was particularly struck by one student's essay, which included his experiences in Marine Corps boot camp, specifically the following verbal exchange he had with one Staff Sgt. Shew and the lessons in verbal restraint he was about to learn:

As I stood rigid at attention...he marched up and down the squad bay, bellowing out commands left and right. While he was on his indoctrination walk, he asked one of the candidates to repeat one of the orders he had just made, so the candidate answered, "You..." I didn't know it then, but I do now, that one never refers to his D.I. as "you.

"Sir, you said I shouldn't..."

"YOU!" the D.I. shouted. "YOU? YOU? You wanna fuck me pig?"

"No sir!"

"You know what a ewe is? A ewe is a female sheep and female sheep are for fucking and you got the balls to call me a ewe?"

"Sir, I..."

"What's the matter with you pig? You queer?"

"No sir."

"How come you wanna fuck your drill instructor?"

"Sir, I don't, I didn't mean it that way, sir."

"A recruit never calls his drill instructor anything but drill instructor, understand?"

"Yessir."

"So you had best think twice before you open that scuzzy mouth of yours. And you had best never open it to give your drill instructor one of them shit eating grins, understand?"

## **"This is My Rifle, this is my gun..."**

In 1969 when fellow Texans and I arrived at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego, some of us had little knowledge of rifles, and a few had never even fired one. Yet, our platoon sergeant assumed all Texans, having grown up hunting and shooting rifles, shared a love affair with guns (often manifested in folklore and popular culture). Drill instructors in San Diego assumed our all-Texan outfit shared a natural instinct for firing weapons because of the stereotyped images of southern culture that historian W. J. Cash calls "the savage South" (1941). Sociologist John Shelton Reed argues southerners also tend to think of themselves in those terms, especially when they accept this notion that non-Southerners think of Southerners as "different" (Shelton 1983), as having a higher tolerance for violent behavior than those of other regions of the U.S. A few of us recruits felt obligated to play the role of members of an intrinsically violent Southern gun culture. It is not surprising then that drill instructors considered us natural-born riflemen whose bad habits, such as referring to our weapons as

guns rather than rifles, they forced us to break.

Part of our indoctrination in training would force us to modify our nonchalant attitudes toward rifles. That's what boot camp is supposed to do: to desensitize us toward violence and to shoot the enemy on command, without hesitation. Drill instructors, according to retired Lt. Colonel Dave Grossman, serve as role models for recruits and attempt to impart to them their own attitudes toward taking another's life (1995:317-319). Grossman's theories challenge the view that mankind is instinctually violent, arguing that soldiers must be conditioned, through various means, to kill on command. And drill instructors are convinced that the Marines offer the most effective method for obtaining such results. To quickly reprimand a soldier for a slip of the tongue is a calculated form of conditioning that attests to the power of this tradition.

Whatever background knowledge a recruit possessed about rifles was sure to lead to mistakes when learning the M-14. Unfamiliarity with rifles may have given some (like myself) an advantage in this regard. Nevertheless, any recruit from either kind of background was prone on occasion to incorrectly refer to his rifle as "a gun." Such verbal mistakes like this one were quite common and drew attention to the perpetrator. As punishment, a recruit would likely stand at attention outdoors (sometimes clad only in his undergarments or even naked) and repeat over and over "This is my rifle, this is my gun. This is for shooting, this is for fun." I observed this ritual degradation often during boot camp, and stories about it are not only part of military oral tradition, but also popular culture. We find the phrase "This is my rifle, this is my gun..." dating back to at least early 1942, appearing in Leon Uris's 1953 bestseller *Battle Cry*, a book whose setting begins in Marine Corps boot camp, although I'm sure the expression entered oral tradition long before 1942. As folklorist Carol Burke observed, Stanley Kubrick employed it in *Full Metal Jacket*, and the phrase appears elsewhere as well (Burke 1989:427).

As soon as I invited veterans via the internet to share their memories of such rituals, I received numerous responses within minutes from those eager to share their own vivid accounts of this tradition. The phrase, "This is my rifle, this is my gun..." was not only part of Marine Corps boot camp oral tradition, but also appeared in other training contexts as well, such as in the Army's basic training. Army veteran Harvey C. Scoble, in a recent reply to an email query, wrote "When I went through basic training at Fort Dix in 1949, we were required to chant the phrase 'This is my rifle, this is my gun, this is for killing, this is for fun' while holding our M-1 in the left hand and our crotch with the right. In those days," Scoble reported, "our rifles were kept in racks in the same barracks we lived in" (19 October 1999). According to this account, sleeping with one's rifle during basic training and repeating the saying while standing in formation at attention was not necessarily meant to punish as much as to instill proper attitudes toward one's weapon; such usage was not necessarily meant to shame a particular person into compliance.

More in keeping with my own experiences in Marine boot camp, jimb-ss recently offered a variant on the theme of what happens to those who do not conform to the code of conduct toward one's weapon; in jimb-ss's case, the weapon was a baton. His account demonstrates the same ethos of authority and control of basic training, just a different weapon. In 1976, jimb-ss attended Riot Control Training as part of Law Enforcement Tech School at Lackland Air Force Base:

The Air Force used a riot control baton about 36 inches long, 1.5 inches thick made of heavy wood. If a trainee referred to the baton as a "stick" the trainee was made to go from cadre to cadre asking if

anyone had seen his stick (this of course drew the ass chewing from each one). To wrap it up, he would be made to find a stick (usually a twig from a tree nearby) and use that for the remainder of the day.

It doesn't take much imagination to transform the baton into a rifle. And in the Marines, the M-14 was the weapon of choice in 1969, before the M-16 replaced it. Not only were we forced to show the proper respect toward the M-14 and to familiarize ourselves with its nomenclature, but we were also expected to be able to take it apart, clean it, and re-assemble it in a matter of minutes, and blind folded at that! Such familiarity was matched only by our ability to use it properly at the rifle range.

What the drill instructor had in mind was a recruit with considerable physical prowess who had grown up firing rifles and who would excel at the rifle range. In short, the platoon leader was seeking a stereotypical gung-ho Marine, a model for others to emulate, one that would lend credence to the words plastered on billboards throughout the country, that the Marines only take "A Few Good Men." What he got instead, was a Tulsa-born Texan who had not grown up with rifles and who was therefore not part of the so-called southern gun culture, but rather a tabula-rasa on which the proper way to fire the weapon was inscribed with no bad habits to break. That recruit was me, not exactly your stereotypical Marine. I not only shot the highest score in my platoon (of about forty men), but the highest in my battalion, even the entire regiment. The rifle coach on the firing range encouraged me to volunteer for sniper duty if I received orders to report to an infantry unit following boot camp; he even insisted that I would be well-protected most of the time in a security zone if I were sent to Vietnam! Fortunately, before going on to advanced training, my job orders required I eventually report to cook school rather than to the infantry, and I miraculously avoided Vietnam altogether. Yet, on the final day of boot camp, drill instructors passed around photographs of both American and Viet Cong soldiers killed in battle, photographs which were meant to familiarize us not only with the horrors of war, but to desensitize us to killing fellow human beings, a classic example of conditioning soldiers in order to increase their kill rate. Such attitudes that basic training instructors instilled in us recruits did not end in boot camp, as I soon found out in advanced training.

Upon graduation from boot camp, we were no longer referred to as maggots, worms, ass-wipes, or shit-birds, or whatever other colorful epithets an imaginative drill instructor might conjure up. Now we were Marines, and in advanced training we were accorded that kind of respect we felt we had earned. Our instructors in advanced training did not condescend to us, but rather treated us as equals and shared with us their own experiences in Vietnam and their own notions of the importance of marksmanship with the M-14. Their stories, the functions of which were to inspire expert marksmanship as well as to foster group cohesion, made quite an impact on impressionable young minds. One instructor's story even included the narrator's claim that he "creamed in [his] pants" after shooting a Viet Cong regular from a considerable distance. This was not so different from the drill instructor in Full Metal Jacket (1987) who, in an effort to inspire marksmanship, glorified mass murderer and ex-Marine Charles Whitman by asking recruits how many rounds Whitman fired from the University of Texas tower that found their targets, remarking that Whitman's marksmanship was "outstanding." Again, I am reminded of Uris's drill instructor, Platoon Sergeant Beller (also a Texan) in Battle Cry, who introduced his baldheaded Marine Corps recruits in 1942 San Diego to their rifle, the thirty caliber M-1903 at the time:

Today is the most important day in your lives. You people are going to draw rifles. You've got yourselves a new girl now. Forget that broad back home! This girl is the most faithful truest woman in the

world if you give her a fair shake. She won't sleep with no swab  
jockeys the minute your back is turned. Keep her clean and she'll  
save your life. (1953:48)

Beller went on to claim that "The Marines are the best goddam riflemen in the world!" I believe it's no accident that Uris's Beller is a Texan, someone whose heritage presumably gave him a distinct advantage over Northerners when it came to marksmanship." And, as with the Uris's fictional Beller, if a Marine drill instructor heard a recruit calling his rifle a gun, he would draw quickly from the oral tradition at his disposal. Uris's description of such a scene in *Battle Cry* was not so different from what I observed in 1969 and what other veterans have reported; it is a scene that continued to repeat itself, and probably persists in some fashion even today:

"Sir, Private Jones reporting."

The barrel-chested sergeant looked up from a letter he was reading.  
"Just stand there." He finished it with a fiendish slowness and  
replaced it in its envelope. "I believe you called your rifle a gun today,  
at inspection."

"Yes sir."

"But it isn't a gun, is it Jones?"

"No sir, it's a United States Rifle, M-1903, thirty caliber, breach  
loading, bolt-operated shoulder weapon, sir."

"Then why did you call it a gun?"

"I forgot, sir."

"Do you think you can remember?"

"Oh yes sir, infinitely and eternally."

"I believe we can help you remember it"

"I'm sure you can, sir."

Beller arose and put on his duty NCO belt and led Jones from the  
tent. Heads peered out down the row.

"Private Jones, unbutton your fly."

"Yes sir."

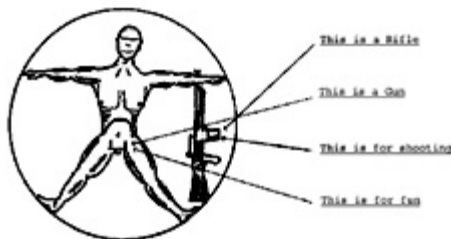
"That's your gun."

"Yes sir."

He led Jones through the entire tent area. At each street he blew his  
whistle and a platoon of boots came flying from their tents. Jones  
then stood there, holding his "gun" in his right hand and his rifle in his  
left and recited:

"This is my rifle,  
This is my gun,  
This is for fighting,  
This is for fun." (1953:52-53)

Uris's literary example and ones from Army and Marine veterans illustrate the relationship between soldier and rifle that drill instructors instill in their charges, a metaphorically sexual one. The gender-laden vocabulary also allows male soldiers to maintain a gendered hierarchy in which victorious soldiers might express domination by raping conquered women, in which officials visiting a submarine are invited to pat the head of a nuclear ballistic missile, in which bombs dropped on Japan in 1945 are named "little boy and "fat man" while the bomb's container over Hiroshima was called "Enola Gay," or in which a soldier in Vietnam ejaculates upon pulling his trigger (Goldstein 2001:349-351).



"Because it is difficult to explain in words why one does not refer to a rifle as a gun, let me show you a diagram," wrote a student who reported a verbal exchange, as I mentioned earlier, between a recruit and a drill instructor. (Hanley

1978:5-6)

As for my own observations and experiences with this particular part of military folklore, and as an ex-Marine whose job description was cook, I was nevertheless considered a rifleman first and a bean-burner second. For me, however, my weapon of choice was the ladle, even though I was still required to qualify with the rifle, the standard of which became the M-16 soon after my basic training ended. I also continued my expert marksmanship throughout my four years in the Marines, though I never had cause to use it on fellow human beings. My respect toward the rifle continued, and I never once referred to my rifle as a gun.

## The Chant's Decline?

Until recently, I assumed that such a powerful traditional folklore item persisted even today, but such is not the case, perhaps due to new regulations regarding language use in basic training, particularly when basic training includes women recruits. Through a recently defunct Internet news group that focused on military folklore, one respondent insisted the chant has died out, suggesting that the drill instructors are now subject to discipline if they perform the chant:

Although I heard it back in [Fort] Benning in the early 80's, I am SURE that any DI [drill instructor] or unit chanting it now would be subject to disciplinary action, and subjected to endless hours of Sensitivity or Consideration of Others training (MajerStud, 22 May 2000).

One veteran suggested the drill instructors who performed the chant were those not on active duty, but were instead reserves:

We had some Reserve DI's try the chant thing, but our regular DI's stepped in and stopped it (LRRCP, 22 May 2000).

Now, there are other ways recruits learn proper terms to refer to one's rifles, evident in this veteran's recollection:

Infantry OSUT in 1985 did not use the chant. My drills [drill instructors] preferred to teach us the errors of our ways by way of intense rifle drill after evening chow. After a half-hour of intensive PT [physical training] with a M-16 held either over my head or at port-arms, I never called my weapon a gun again (Gridlore, 22 May

2000).

And another veteran concurred:

We either did rifle bayonet drill or rifle PT in 1988. Yep, after doing push ups with the M-16 on your hands ya never do it again" (LRRCP, 22 May 2000).

Yet, in my effort to discover some version of the chant, or perhaps even some remnant still in existence, one of the veterans reminded me:

Plain and simple, we did not do it. Reserve DI's tried and our regular DI's put a quick stop to it. It is a stereotype the Army wants to get away from. If you called a rifle a gun, then you were punished on the spot with PT drills (LRRCP, 22 May 2000) "

At the same time, their references to the penis as a weapon are pervasive both in and out of the military, but in the military, such references are more likely restricted to male domains, as one veteran observed: "Over the urinal you can post: 'Keep your weapon pointed up and down range. Shaking it three times constitutes playing with it'" (epluribus, 22 May 2000).

Nevertheless, I am convinced that there are still places where one may find variants of the chant "This is my rifle, this is my gun...."  
epluribus@unum.com reported:

[A]t the University of Michigan, the ROTC unit uses: "This is My Rifle, This is My Penis. One is for Peacekeeping, One is for the Patriarchal Opression[sic] of Womyn[sic]." The UM ROTC guys aren't much fun at frat parties. (epluribus, 22 May 2000)

Of course, while epluribus's evaluative statement testifies to his and presumably the more general current sentiment toward sexist language in the military, this chant, which is actually a parody, reflects a much different ethos from that of the more traditional version. It attests to a struggle among male soldiers compelled to maintain a gendered hierarchy. Even though these and other such chants are not as common today as they once were, they do, at the very least, tend to find themselves embedded in stories as veterans continue to regale other veterans with their own experiences in boot camp when they were training to fire the rifle, a male domain in which women were virtually out of sight.

## Conclusion

Identifying some of the reasons why such a saying was so popular and may even persist, albeit in a much different version, I was also interested in learning how it manifests itself in coed boot camps and whether or not it remains in oral tradition as a way to control attitudes toward what some may have felt was "the truest woman in the world." However, what I learned is that such chants manifest themselves more in the stories veterans tell themselves about themselves and how they endured basic training through their shared understandings of discipline and attitudes toward themselves and their weapons, than in the contemporary settings in which there is evidently now a growing intolerance toward the language that military role models must now use. DI's who shape the minds and bodies of young recruits remain the most active of military tradition bearers, but when they chant "This is my rifle, this is my gun..." they must do so out of hearing range of officers and female recruits who may take exception to such language.

Ostensibly, the chant distinguishes between an instrument capable of killing and one capable of impregnating, but it could also refer to an instrument of protection and the other a weapon of rape. It is this tension that stems from



these and other interpretations of the chant that gives it its greatest appeal to those soldiers and veterans who recall its performance. Assigning a rifle a female name (Ol' Betsy), oiling it, protecting it, discharging it, all heighten the sexual imagery that give the chant its power and underscores male domination in a world where the lines between gun and rifle are not always clear.

## Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented as part of an organized paper session, "Military Folklore," at the Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society, Memphis, Tennessee, 23 October 1999.

2. I wish to thank Barry Lee Pearson for his generosity in making available to me his private collection of papers on military folklore at the University of Maryland at College Park.

## Sources Cited

Andreachhio, Nicholas. <Tanker6525@aol.com.> "Re: LT Kilo" Online posting. 27 July 2000. Viet Nam War Discussion List. <v-war  
l@listserv.acsu.buffalo.edu>

<gridlore@mindspring.com> "This is my rifle, this is my gun." Online posting. 22 May 2000. <alt.folklore.military>.

<jimb-ss@hughes.net> "gunlore." Online posting. 19 October 1999.  
<alt.folklore.military>.

Burke, Carol. 1989. "Marching to Vietnam." *Journal of American Folklore* 102(406):424-441.

Cash, Wilbur Joseph. 1941. *The Mind of the South*. New York: A. A. Knopf.

<captcouv@iamerica.net> "gunlore." Online posting. 20 October 1999.  
<alt.folklore.military>.

*Full Metal Jacket*. Directed by Stanley Kubrick. 116 minutes. Warner Brothers, 1987. Videocassette.

Goldstein, Joshua S. 2001. *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice-Versa*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Grossman, Dave. 1995. *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.

Hanley, Neal. 1978. "Basic Training 'n' Folklore: The United States Marine Corps." Unpublished manuscript. Barry Lee Pearson's private collection, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland.

<Iron\_Soldier@webtv.net> "gunlore." Online posting. 20 October 1999.  
<alt.folklore.military>

\_\_\_\_\_. <Iron\_Soldier@webtv.net> "gunlore." Online posting. 21 October 1999. <alt.folklore.military>.

<epluribus@unum.com> "This is my rifle, this is my gun." Online posting. 22 May 2000. <alt.folklore.military>.

Kemp, Daniel G. <dgk38655@juno.com> "Re: LT Kilo" Online posting. 27 July 2000. Viet Nam War Discussion List. <vwarm-  
l@listserv.acsu.buffalo.edu>

Knauth, Philip W. <ltkilo@asiaonline.net> "Re: LT Kilo" Online posting. 27 July 2000. Viet Nam War Discussion List. <vwar-l@listserv.acsu.buffalo.edu>

<roguewg@swbell.net> "This is my rifle, this is my gun." Online posting. 22 May 2000. <alt.folklore.military>

MajerStud. <majerstud@aol.com> "This is my rifle, this is my gun." Online posting. 22 May 2000 <alt.folklore.military>.

Reed, John Shelton. 1983. *Southerners: The Social Psychology of Sectionalism*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

<harvey4066@aol.com> "gunlore." Online posting. 19 October 1999. <alt.folklore.military>.

Uris, Leon. 1953. *Battle Cry*. New York: Putnam.

[Newfolk](#) :: [NDF](#) :: [Archive](#) :: [Issue 7](#)

*New Directions in Folklore*

[Newfolk](#) :: [NDF](#) :: [Archive](#)

## **Richard Allen Burns, Ph.D.**

Rick Burns spent four years in the Marine Corps after high school, earned two undergraduate degrees, taught high school for four years, then received his PhD in anthropology/folklore at the University of Texas in Austin. He is currently an associate professor of English and Folklore at Arkansas State University. While pursuing research on folklife in the Arkansas Delta, he continues his research on military and prison folklore. Burns also organized and chaired paper sessions on military folklore at annual meetings of the American Folklore Society.

## **Bibliography**

- ["This is my Rifle, This is my Gun...": Gunlore in the Military](#) (article)

[Newfolk](#) :: [NDF](#) :: [Archive](#)