

Eric Eliason & Tad Tuleja (eds.), *Warrior Ways: Explorations in Modern Military Folklore*, Logan, Utah State University Press, 2012, 299pp.

Reviewed by Lisa Ellen Silvestri

Decades ago, my dad and I would sit at the kitchen table wrapping my rented public schoolbooks in brown paper grocery bags to protect the covers. On each brown paper cover he would draw Kilroy, the iconic WWII doodle of a bald-headed man with a long nose peeking over a wall, his fingers gripping the wall on either side of his face.¹ Below Kilroy's fingers and nose, in the space denoting the wall, I would write the book's subject matter – History, Science, Math or English – instead of Kilroy's usual accompanying phrase, "Kilroy was here." My dad learned to draw Kilroy from *his* dad, who served with General Patton in the Battle of the Bulge. I remember asking once if my dad saw Kilroy in Vietnam. He shook his head. "No, but I remember seeing Snoopy". Gems like this one, which detail some of the more intimate folkways of war, are hard to come by. None of the textbooks I dutifully bagged in all those years made mention of Kilroy or Snoopy in their coverage of WWII and Vietnam. What happens to information like this? Where does it go? The thoughtfully written volume, *Warrior Ways*, offers an important archival resource in this regard through its focus on warrior folklife; the "vernacular speech, dress, daily routines, customs, and traditions" created and sustained by modern military men and women (p.1).

Folklife, especially in a war zone, is ephemeral. It emerges to fulfil certain psychological and social needs and then dissolves when that culture – those folks – fracture or dissipate. When a person "gets out" or returns to civilian life, for example, it can be difficult to rationalize or explain the particulars of warrior folk traditions. It was just the way things were done among those people in that place at that point in time. The phrase "you had to be there" comes to mind. Whether or not you've been to war, you likely can relate to that phrase on some level. The essays collected and curated by editors Eric Eliason and Tad Tuleja in their volume *Warrior Ways* do the critical work of contextualization. They explain how military-specific folk practices (like doodling Kilroy on a latrine) came into being and how those practices function for the warriors who participate in them.

The editors are careful to recognize the manifold meanings and purposes one can ascribe to these practices. Not to mention the varied versions of the practices themselves. As they explain in their co-authored introductory chapter, the title of the volume is deliberately plural. *Warrior ways* speaks to the inherent polysemy and polyvocality of

¹ Cf. "Who Is 'Kilroy'?", *The New York Times Magazine*, 12 January 1947, p.30. Archived from the original on 3 March 2016: <https://web.archive.org/web/20160303201531/http://www.rooketime.se/rooketime26.shtml> (retrieved 11 January 2021).

military folk traditions. There is not *one* warrior way, but many. The sentiment is similar to Tim O'Brien's well-known observation that it is nearly impossible to tell a true war story.² As the editors write, "*the multiple truths of soldiers' experiences (...) are as varied and complex as are individual soldiers, their units, their missions, and the areas of operation in their respective conflicts*" (p.10). With this careful disclaimer, *Warrior Ways* makes a humble yet significant contribution to our understanding of modern military folklore.

The volume consists of twelve essays written by North American scholars mostly focusing on American warriors. All the contributors have some sort of personal connection to the military, many of whom have served themselves. From a military perspective, the volume is inclusive in its representation of all the branches. It is also inclusive from a folklore perspective, through its broad coverage of lived experience. The essays span the gamut of warrior folklife from slang, jokes, cadences, and superstitions to prayers, good luck charms, mementoes, and snapshots.

The volume opens with a smartly written introduction by the editors that gives readers a lay of the land. It is clear they are deeply familiar with existing scholarship on military folklore. They offer an expansive literature review covering the history of military folklore from WWI to the present. I found the depth and structure of the literature review itself to be a valuable resource. Next, the volume proceeds with the first of four sections titled "Deploying" followed by the other three: "Sounding Off," "Belonging" and "Remembering." Each section contains three essays. It seems the four sections are meant to roughly trace the warrior's journey following the grand narrative arc of going to war and coming home again. It is a familiar structure as old as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

The first section, "Deploying," opens with an essay invoking Tim O'Brien's famous title and phrase, "*The Things They Carried*" by examining the material items warriors bring with them to war (e.g., good luck charms, amulets, tattoos, etc.). The other two essays in the section expand the notion of "things" beyond the material to the immaterial by considering the rumours, superstitions and cultural perceptions they bring with them as well. Eric Eliason's chapter in this section is especially compelling in its contribution to both military folklore and the study of folklore more generally. He analyzes the ways in which American soldiers understand, describe, and incorporate Afghan folklore and the ways in which the two groups cross-fertilize each other's folkways. One example is the Afghan propensity to "jinglefy" clothing, bikes, trucks, even the butt stocks of their AK-47s with colourful, shiny, and personally expressive "jingles". Some US soldiers began adopting this practice as well. What makes Eliason's essay so valuable, however, is the broader contribution it makes to folklore studies by proposing a concept he calls "folk-folkloristics" whereby one folk group makes sense of another group's folklore (p.58). As Eliason explains it, folk-folkloristics is a "*bottom-up practice of folklore collection and analysis*" because it is carried out by ordinary people living within and

² Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, New York, Houghton, Mifflin & Company, 1990, pp.84-91.

alongside different kinds of folk. The concept denotes how, in this case, US soldiers make sense of the unfamiliar practices they observe among the Afghan people (p.74). Folk-folkloristics is in contrast to traditional folklore studies wherein a formally trained folklorist analyzes a set of practices from outside the culture in which they exist.

The second section, “Sounding Off,” delves into concepts associated with power, identity, community, and belonging. The essays in this section primarily address the military’s unique verbal culture, its distinctive lexicon full of complex acronyms and the colourful stylings of slang that enlistees use to push back against the powers that be. The section opens with Richard Burns’ analysis of marching and running cadences (Jody calls) as a form of therapy and social cohesion. He writes, “*The Jody of a thousand marching chants can be victimizer or victim, male or female, civilian or soldier, and the attitude of soldiers who change about him while doing quickstep involves a wide array of psychological elements, ranging from hatred, suspicion, and fear on the one end to envy, guilt, and half-suppressed desire on the other*” (p.97). Because the three essays in this section deal with orienting to military culture – learning the lingo so to speak – they might have fit well as the first three essays in the volume. That way, the organizational flow would be more chronological. Readers would follow in the boots of an enlistee by going through an initiation into military culture and then “deploying” to war.

The third section, titled “Belonging,” considers the ways in which military personnel and, in some cases, their spouses exert rhetorical agency. That is, how they carve space for the expression of their own attitudes, values, and beliefs within an impossibly stringent organizational structure. The essays in this section focus on how gender politics (informed by Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy) play out on the battlefield, how warriors who are opposed to war continue to demonstrate their reverence for the military, and how female spouses negotiate the double bind of their gender role.

And finally, the fourth section, “Remembering,” addresses the malleability of memory. Military and memory scholars like me, along with many warriors themselves, worry about if and how “these wars” (namely, Iraq and Afghanistan) will be remembered. The concern is not that they will be forgotten in the way we “forgot” Korea, but that they will be forgotten before they can be archived due to their lengthy durations and sheer surplus of information. One of the essays in this section covers a subject I have written about extensively – how technological advancements have enabled the democratization of war photography to include the publication of photos taken by warriors themselves. That essay, written by Jay Mechling, did not go into as much depth as I have on the implications of social media, but that is likely a result of the time it was written. The other two essays in this section address the role of humour and how folk practices (like parodic songs) can push back against dominant ideologies of war.

Overall, *Warrior Ways* is a worthwhile read for anyone interested in military culture and/or folklore studies. It will be especially appealing to the interdisciplinary interests of *Res Militaris* readers. The prose is accessible, the structure is straightforward,

and the well-integrated essays draw from a host of humanities and social science disciplines (i.e., social psychology, gender studies, ethnography, history, media studies). Even readers unfamiliar with or disinterested in military culture will find a lot to engage with as this volume raises questions about power, authority, solidarity, group membership, and performative masculinity.

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