

Contents

Preface: Oppositional Positioning

Tad Tuleja ix

Introduction: The Myth of the Robot Soldier

Tad Tuleja 3

PART I: WEAPONS OF THE WEAK

1. On the Griping of Grunts

Angus Kress Gillespie 19

2. Back Chat: Subversion and Conformity in Dominion Cartoons of the World Wars

Christina M. Knopf 32

3. Warriors' Bodies as Sites of Microresistance in the American Military

John Paul Wallis and Jay Mechling 48

PART II: RATTLING THE CHAIN OF COMMAND

4. Jumping the Chain: A Military Psychologist's Story

Mark C. Russell 69

5. A Captain's First Duty: Managing Command Disconnect in a Combat Zone

Ronald Fry 81

PART III: QUESTIONING THE PATRIOTIC CRUSADE

6. (De)composing the "Machine of Decomposition": Creative Insubordination in E.E. Cummings's *The Enormous Room*

Matthew David Perry 91

7. Café Colonels and Whizz-Bangs
Tad Tuleja 104
8. The Wild Deserters of No Man's Land: A Ghoulish Legend
of the Great War
James I. Deutsch 122
- PART IV: MESSING WITH THE NARRATIVE
9. Breaking Ranks: Initiative and Heroism in a Vietnam Firefight
Richard Allen Burns 137
10. Challenging the Male Hierarchy: Women Warriors in Iraq
and Afghanistan
Catherine Calloway 151
11. A Good Coffin: The Iraq War Poetry of Gerardo Mena
Ron Ben-Tovim 165
12. Telling Stories in War
Carol Burke 177
- Conclusion. Discipline and the Limits of Unit Cohesion
Tad Tuleja 189
- Contributors* 199

Introduction

The Myth of the Robot Soldier

Tad Tuleja

IN FEBRUARY 1778, WITH THE RAGTAG CONTINENTAL ARMY enduring a miserable winter at Valley Forge, a Prussian Army officer, Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, sought out General George Washington and volunteered for service. His martial bearing and sterling credentials—he had been aide-de-camp to Frederick the Great, and he carried a letter of introduction from Benjamin Franklin—so impressed Washington that he appointed the distinguished foreigner his inspector general. In that capacity von Steuben fostered major improvements in sanitation, camp layout, bookkeeping, and—most significantly—the formations and synchronized movements of military drill. The nation’s first professional drill instructor, he was a vigorous proponent of putting the troops through their paces, and the handbook he wrote in 1779, *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States*, went into dozens of printings. It remained the Army’s training bible until the War of 1812.

Today, with firelocks and ramrods vestiges of the past, the particulars of von Steuben’s manual may seem quaint. Yet its import remains relevant, for it shows that “order and discipline” are achieved by habituating recruits to bodily movements that they must perform precisely in response to undebatable verbal commands. The instructions for cocking a firearm—part of a long “Manual Exercise” in the use of arms—provide an example. The command for this step—number 2 of 27—is “Cock . . . Firelock!” At that command, the soldier is to perform two distinct motions:

- 1st.* Turn the barrel opposite to your face, and place your thumb upon the cock, raising the elbow square at this motion.
- 2nd.* Cock the firelock by drawing down your elbow, immediately placing your thumb up the breech-pin, and the fingers under the guard.

A simple mechanical movement, one which would already have been familiar to any of the citizen-soldiers of Washington's army, is here broken down into a two-step algorithm, initiated by a set command and meant to be executed with reliable speed and precision (von Steuben [1779] 1966).

Von Steuben ensured that reliability by means of the constant drilling for which he became notorious, and though he would not have been familiar with the terms, what he was consciously instilling in his recruits was a conditioned reflex supported by muscle memory. "Discipline," wrote a World War I British officer, "is the long-continued habit by which the very muscles of the soldier instinctively obey the words of command; even if his mind is too confused to attend, yet his muscles will obey" (cited in Cramer 1921, 774). The habituation of obedience: the Baron would have approved.

DOCILE BODIES

For the continental soldiers von Steuben trained, the point was not simply to cock the firearm; it was to cock it in the "proper" fashion—in the "Army way," as we would say now—and in coordination with every other soldier. An army of farmers and hunters might obey their own inclinations, cocking their muskets and flintlocks in a dozen different ways. A disciplined military force, collectively obedient to an officer's order, acted in every circumstance uniformly and in unison. Drill was thus both a means of training and a demonstration of the discipline inculcated by that training.

Such discipline was a hallmark of military training in eighteenth-century Europe. Von Steuben himself had absorbed its principles while serving Prussia's most celebrated military leader, Frederick the Great. When he brought those principles to America, he was doing more than instructing farmers in small arms drill; he was transporting to a colony in rebellion the very Prussian, and very undemocratic, Enlightenment ideal: that of the human being as calibratable machine that, when properly trained and "fitted out," could serve the efficient functioning of a corporate entity such as a school, an army on the march, or a nation-state.

In the eighteenth century, Michel Foucault argued eloquently, "The book of *Man the Machine*" was written simultaneously on an "anatomico-metaphysical" register of doctors and philosophers and a "technico-political" register of schools and armies: the two registers reinforced each other to ensure the production and control of "docile bodies" whose obedience was the guaranty of their utility. It was just this conjunction between obedience and utility—between compliance with regulation and effective performance—that attracted von Steuben to drill and that has made

“docility” theoretically essential to martial training ever since. In today’s boot camps no less than at Valley Forge, “disciplinary coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination” (Foucault [1975] 1995, 135–138).

In von Steuben’s time, there were tactical advantages to this discipline. A unit whose members responded with instant precision to an officer’s command enjoyed a battlefield advantage in concentration of force. When infantry units faced each other in multiple-ranked line formations, steady fire could be sustained only when the soldiers in each rank fired and reloaded simultaneously. And soldiers who had been conditioned to maneuver tightly together were less likely to scatter if suddenly attacked. In all of these situations, success could only be achieved through a habituation that made muscle memory itself instinctively responsive to an external authority.

But regulatory regimes, like legal structures, tend toward metastasis. The organization that begins by specifying the angle of a shouldered arm and the centimeters between drilling troopers’ shoulders quickly expands to regulating the length of fingernails and mustaches, and it ends by specifying the permissible size, weight, shape, and color of everything from buttons and boots to footlockers, gun carriages, and bombers. Moreover, this expansion is accompanied by a blizzard of paperwork that ensures the documentation of such uniformity is itself accomplished according to implacable rules. The result, not very many regulatory generations after the Baron’s opening gambit, is the paradise (or nightmare) of precision known to all personnel, grumblingly, as “the Army way.”

ESPRIT DE CORPS

If discipline’s pragmatic effect is to form an efficient fighting force, its psychological effect is to instill in that force a sense of common purpose, celebrated variously as unit cohesion, esprit de corps, the French élan, and the “brotherhood of arms.” One might argue that this bonding effect is secondary and instrumental, a romanticized means of making regimentation attractive. There is no denying, however, that whatever its organizational logic, the group identity that military training inculcates is emotionally compelling. By becoming disciplined together—by in effect surrendering their freedom together—soldiers build allegiance to something greater than their individual selves: they learn to love each other, their units, and whatever ideals they as a brotherhood are said to be fighting for. If they are docile bodies, they are docile only in service to the greater “body,” which is, literally in French, the military “corps.”

In soldiers' memoirs the sense of collective identity is probably the most commonly cited appeal of military service. It is not, however, an organic given, rising out of shared values, but a mechanically defined and carefully scripted sensibility that serves organizational ends as well as personal ones. *Esprit de corps* is not the natural outcome of living and working together; it is the result—and the goal—of an uncompromising indoctrination that reorients the civilian toward his or her proper place in a new scheme of things.

This is not to say that collective identity is insincere or that it is imposed on unwilling youngsters. Indeed, there seems little in the military experience more deeply cherished than this sense of shared identity with one's fellows under arms. In his World War I memoir *A Student in Arms*, for example, British soldier Donald Hankey notes that, far from resenting the strictures of military life, soldiers often come to find comfort in the very restrictions that, upon entering the service, they saw as onerous. The recruit gradually accepts military discipline because he sees that, in submitting to it, he has professed his loyalty to “the regiment” and thus acquired a nobler mantle than his individual identity. He has learned

one of the great truths of life . . . that it is not in isolation but as a member of a body that a man finds his fullest self-expression: that it is not in self-assertion but in self-subordination, not as an individual but as one of many brethren, sons of one Father, that a man finds the complete satisfaction of his instincts, and the highest form of liberty . . . He has given up his personal freedom, which was not really of much use to him, and in return he has received what is infinitely more precious—his share of the common heritage of the regiment, its glorious past, its present prowess, its honor and good name, its high resolve. (Hankey 1917, 271–272)

Hankey's description bears both a Christian stamp and the misty trappings of imperial pride. These qualities seem quaint now, but a starker version of his argument is still in play. The “sons of one Father” bit has been deleted, yet in the recruiting literature of today's American services, you can still hear this invocation of the “honor of the regiment,” this old, intoxicating sense of the individual dying into something greater than himself.

In the US Army document “Army Values,” for example, new service members are exhorted to honor duty, loyalty, and teamwork. The importance of subordinating oneself to the group is most obvious in the value called “Selfless Service”: “Put the welfare of the Nation, the Army and your subordinates before your own. Selfless service is larger than just one person. In serving your country, you are doing your duty loyally without

thought of recognition or gain.” The well-known injunction to “leave no man behind,” adopted by SEALs, among others, is another phrasing of the same sentiment (Wasdin 2011, 104). That this commitment to the fallen may paradoxically imperil the group in no way diminishes its ethical appeal.

The sentiment may reach its greatest intensity in the US Marine Corps. In *Making the Corps*, his fascinating look at the Parris Island boot camp experience, Thomas Ricks shows that becoming a Marine means becoming, above all else, a disciplined person. A disciplined person respects the heritage of the elite force he is joining. He responds with unabated enthusiasm to every command. Most of all, he understands the paradox that, as an elite soldier, his dedication must be to the Corps and not to himself.

Selflessness is so central a Marine virtue that in boot camp, recruits lose their first names. Ricks recalls a drill instructor telling his charges, “From now on you are no longer he, she, it, or whatever you was . . . You are now Recruit-and-your-last-name, understand?” Speaking of recruit Platoon 3086, Ricks writes, “Coming from a society that elevates the individual, they are now in a world where the group is supreme. Using ‘I’ raises suspicion. Why would you care more about yourself than about your unit. You are 3086” (2007, 40). One of the worst comments a recruit can get on his or her evaluation card is “Displayed an individual-type attitude” (78). Being willing to surrender one’s self to the needs of the group is at the very heart of Marine Corps discipline. Being unwilling to do that puts you in the same category as “undisciplined” and “nasty” civilians (162).

To sum up, the purpose of military discipline is to create a collectivity of “docile bodies” that is able most efficiently to accomplish practical objectives. One time-tested way to create that docility is to convince individuals that they are ennobled by submitting themselves to the collective regime; in other words, their value consists only in their fealty to others. Discipline becomes both the instrument and the evidence of that fealty. It demonstrates that the individual soldier is behaving honorably toward the person next to him or her, toward the Corps (the corporate body), and toward the national agenda.

DOCILE MINDS

Given their disdain for the “me attitude,” it might be supposed that military forces such as the Marines also discourage soldiers thinking for themselves—that they want not just docile bodies, but docile minds as well. And if this is so, does it not follow that the ideal soldier is a mindless robot?

For this antimilitary stereotype, there is historical support. Frederick the Great himself is reputed to have remarked, “If my soldiers ever started to think, I wouldn’t have an army.” It was an appropriate comment for an absolute monarch enamored of mechanical toys (Foucault [1975] 1995, 136). A century later, Henry David Thoreau—a student of history who had never shouldered arms—echoed the image in that war resisters’ bible, “Civil Disobedience”:

The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the militia, jailers, constables, *posse comitatus*, etc. In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well. ([1849] 2008, 229)

Soldiers themselves recognize, even as they bridle against, this caricature. In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, for example, Erich Maria Remarque has his protagonist Paul Baumer voice this assessment of the training that German soldiers underwent during World War I: “We learned that a bright button is weightier than four volumes of Shakespeare. At first astonished, then embittered, and finally indifferent, we recognized that what matters is not the mind but the boot brush, not intelligence but the system, not freedom but drill” ([1928] 1982, 21–22). One of Remarque’s enemies, Donald Hankey, echoes this sentiment. In explaining the dogma that “only officers can think,” he writes, “To safeguard this dogma from ridicule it is necessary that the men should be prevented from thinking. Their attention is to be fully occupied with such mechanical operations as the polishing of their buttons, in order that the officer may think without fear of contradiction” (1917, 31). Here, as befits someone who actually experienced the giving and receiving of orders—Hankey died on the Western Front in 1916—the stereotype is described sardonically. Yet it also carries the sense that, to a casual observer, the British Tommy, well schooled in class distinctions, might well seem to be confined to “mechanical operations.”

Finally, here is Foucault again, on the “precise system of command” required for the “parts” of a corporate machine to interdigitate smoothly:

All the activity of the disciplined individual must be punctuated and sustained by injunctions whose efficacy rests on brevity and clarity; the order does not need to be explained or formulated; it must trigger off the required behavior and that is enough. From the master of discipline to him who is subjected to it the relation is one of signalization: it is a question

not of understanding the injunction but of perceiving the signal and reacting to it immediately. (Foucault [1975] 1995, 166)

Obedience is not a question of understanding but of responding blindly to a signal, like an electrical current responds to a finger on the switch. In this ideal-type description of “perfect discipline,” Foucault stresses hierarchy and domination, painting the “master” as sole active agent and his “subjects” as mindless automata. It’s a characteristic turn for this philosopher of power, and it remains a durable picture among those who have never worn a uniform.

ROBOTS IN REVOLT

Robotic behavior has always been, however, and remains a stereotype. Antimilitarists notwithstanding, the members of today’s armed forces are clearly not required to behave like robots. In democratic armies especially, the habit of thinking for oneself that recruits bring to boot camp is never—perhaps never can be—totally eradicated by military custom, even in a branch as hostile to the “me attitude” as the Marines. We may imagine that the military is what Erving Goffman (1961) calls a “total institution,” where everything is meticulously regulated, where commands are followed unquestioningly, and where individual initiative—including thought—is kept in check. But in reality this totalizing model is constantly punctuated by transgression, as the allegedly inviolate chain of command is rattled, stretched out of shape, and sometimes broken. We may isolate three related reasons why this occurs.

First, disruption may arise from the vicissitudes of battle. The established chain of command is broken when an officer is suddenly taken hors de combat—sick, wounded, or dead. In war, as Hankey explains wryly, “if all the officers are killed, the sergeants may think, and if they are killed the corporals may think, and so on; but this is a relaxation of strict orthodoxy, a concession to the logic of facts which must only be permitted in extreme circumstances” (1917, 31). In extremis (and in warfare much is in extremis), the regulatory mechanism self-adjusts, with the “mindless” cogs suddenly acquiring not only agency but the hitherto-unseen ability to devise their own solutions.

Second, the chain may be disrupted, ironically, by the hierarchical system itself—a system that allows for the situations Hankey describes, where a junior assumes the authority of a fallen superior. Unlike the binary structure of a hospital or prison, which “totalizes” the split between supervisors

and subjects, the military structure separates “those who command” from “those who obey” through a flexible and performance-based promotional system. In a given theater or field situation, a general may theoretically be running the whole show, but in practice the operation of any military unit is the result of decisions made at multiple levels, by individuals who, according to their skills and results, may move up (or down) according to performance. Furthermore, these “subaltern” decisions create information that loops back to “higher,” making the command-and-response dynamic of military units resemble not rote obedience but the give-and-take of cybernetic exchange.

This exchange has implications for how the military perceives the cognitive capabilities of even its most junior members—and for how those members perceive those capabilities themselves. An Army private may aspire to a corporal’s stripes, and if his superiors spot within him what the services call “leadership potential”—a major ingredient of which is the ability to think—he may end up as a master sergeant. The same potential for promotion applies to officers. Nor is it unknown for enlisted men and woman to become officers. The services even have a slang term for such individuals: *mustangs*. Built into the structure of command, therefore, is the potential for thoughtful individuals to work their way up the chain. As Napoleon is said to have remarked of soldiers in a far more rigid hierarchy than our own: “Every French soldier carries in his knapsack a marshal’s baton.”

Third, the discipline of the chain may be subverted in situations in which a subordinate receives a command that he or she sees as unjustified on practical, moral, or legal grounds. In such situations soldiers are permitted—in some cases even required—to disobey what might look like a legitimate order. In illustrating this type of scenario, let me enlist the support of someone who may at first seem to be an unlikely ally: Erving Goffman.

In his 1957 essay “On the Characteristics of Total Institutions,” Goffman provided a classic analysis of institutions whose “total” character is symbolized by its residents’ long-term separation from the outside world and their supervision by staff members who administer a predictable and restricted “round of life.” Goffman focused chiefly on prisons and hospitals, but he also considered schools, work camps, and military installations. In an army barracks or a ship, therefore, one would expect to find many of the same “totalizing” elements that are present in hospitals and prisons, including the expectation that “those in charge” issue orders and their subordinates, robotically, carry them out.

But Goffman points to a mitigating factor. In distinguishing between voluntary, semivoluntary, and involuntary admissions, he notes a difference

in attitudes toward regimented confinement among postulates in a convent, who have entered voluntarily, and inmates in a penitentiary, who are there against their will. He sees soldiers falling into a middle category, and even in an army of conscripts, he implies, one finds a higher degree of residual “personality” than among those who are under confinement merely as punishment. In such an army, “inmates are required to serve but are given much opportunity to feel that this service is a justifiable one required in their own ultimate interests” (Goffman 1961, 118). But that same principle of “justifiable service” opens the opportunity for a denial of discipline when an action stipulated by a superior is interpreted as unjustified.

The possibility of making such an interpretation, unavailable to von Steuben’s recruits, is an important element of American military law, firmly established in the Uniform Code of Military Justice. While the refusal to follow an order is in general grounds for punitive action, a soldier who refuses an order that he or she deems to be illegal has, if the soldier is proved correct, a chance of vindication under the UCMJ. The challenge to the system may of course be rejected. But the fact that a protocol exists for making it means that the military’s “precise system of command” is not entirely inflexible. Where privates may second-guess their lieutenants, you’re no longer in Prussia.

DIFFERENT DRUMMERS

To some soldiers—perhaps to the majority—the military’s disciplining of everyday life may come as a relief, even a blessing. To those who enter the service adrift, uncertain of who they are or where they are going—that is to say, those who sign up hoping to “find themselves”—to these individuals, being told what to do and precisely how to do it may provide a welcome vacation from responsibility. Like those released prisoners who cannot endure the freedom of “outside,” some soldiers positively embrace the endless restrictions of military life and are relieved to find that as members of a hierarchical organization, they are freed from the perils of making incorrect or “nasty” choices. My guess, though, is that in modern democratic armies such willing functionaries are rare. In reality, despite the genuflections constantly paid to unit cohesion and chain of command, most human beings in uniform are not themselves uniform: on one level or another, they cling obstinately to their civilian inclinations, pushing back against the rigors of corporate uniformity as a way of saving “self” from being devoured by the group.

In “The Underlife of a Public Institution,” a companion piece to his more famous “Total Institutions” essay, Goffman studies the ways that

mental patients “make out,” that is, carve out private shelters within their totalizing worlds. That process, he argues, is as necessary to our humanity as the sense of “belonging.” “Our sense of being a person can come from being drawn into a wider social unit; our sense of selfhood can arise through the little ways in which we resist the pull. Our status is backed by the solid buildings of the world, while our sense of personal identity often resides in the cracks” (1961, 315).

If inmates of mental institutions can find “little ways” to resist discipline and regimentation, it would be strange indeed if soldiers—members of an only partially “totalized” environment—did not yearn for an equivalent sense of individuality. And so they do. As organic, cognitive beings, not mechanical toys, soldiers are routinely searching for gold “in the cracks.” They break out from Foucault’s ideal-type norm in a myriad of ways, from the creation of mock-official acronyms (SNAFU, FUBAR) to chronic grumbling, from going AWOL and deserting to, in the most extreme cases, turning their frustration lethally against despised superiors. Creative insubordination is as deeply important a feature of military culture as the by-the-book protocols that officially govern it. The “Army way” is a kind of grammar. What soldiers say and do, in and out of the cracks, is a different, and less disciplined, thing entirely.

In *Different Drummers*, we seek through a variety of case studies to analyze creative dissent by individuals whose military identity is ambivalent or conflicted. Our intended focus is not antimilitary practices (like civilian marches) but versions of what Lisa Gilman (2012) has called the “oppositional positioning” of service members themselves. We are interested in the experiences of folks who are in the military but not completely of it—of folks who, while loyal to the uniform, may still sometimes feel themselves (to borrow Thoreau’s famous phrase) marching to a “different drummer.” These are stories of loyal (or mostly loyal) soldiers who, for a variety of reasons, resist the myth of the robot soldier to embrace their humanity.

The book is divided into four sections. Part I, “Weapons of the Weak,” focuses on what anthropologist James Scott (1985) has called “weapons of the weak”: small acts of verbal and physical resistance through which regimented soldiers proclaim their individuality. Drawing on Bill Mauldin’s cartoons and other examples from World War II, in chapter 1 folklorist Angus Gillespie examines the military tradition of “griping,” concluding that, contrary to the services’ official line, humorous complaining about intractable situations can have an ironically positive effect on troop morale. In chapter 2, media scholar Christina Knopf offers a similar analysis of visual humor

in the Dominion forces of the world wars, showing how ostensibly subversive “back chat” against officers helped to promote enlisted men’s unit solidarity. In the third chapter, folklorist Jay Mechling and Marine veteran John Paul Wallis show how American troops today utilize their own bodies as sites of creative resistance against a “total institution.”

In part II, “Rattling the Chain of Command,” two American military officers, drawing on personal experiences, show how blind obedience to an institutional hierarchy can have baleful impacts on mission success. In chapter 4, US Navy psychologist Mark Russell, hindered by institutionalized machismo and hierarchical rigidity from giving combat veterans the care they deserved, shows how ignoring an official reporting protocol became his only means of budging an unresponsive bureaucracy. US Army captain Ronald Fry explains in chapter 5 how, as a Special Forces commander in Afghanistan, he was obliged to disobey an order that he believed would get his men killed.

The studies in part III, “Questioning the Patriotic Crusade,” reveal oppositional positioning during World War I—that grim crusade that, as Woodrow Wilson put it, the United States joined to make the world “safe for democracy.” In chapter 6 Matthew Perry examines the case of poet E.E. Cummings, who volunteered as an ambulance driver for the French, was arrested for suspected subversion, and spent several months in a French military prison. Perry shows how Cummings’s bitterly humorous memoir *The Enormous Room* revealed his growing disillusionment with the Allied cause and eventually with the war itself. In my essay (chapter 7) on the British Army’s trench songs, I show how the sardonic embrace of victimization in occupational folk songs such as “Hanging on the Old Barbed Wire” may have served as a morale booster and a shield against despair. In chapter 8, folklorist James Deutsch explores variants of the wartime legend that deserters from both sides of the conflict were living like animals together under No Man’s Land. He argues that this tale, in embellishing the horrors of the war itself, may have served also as a fantasy of escape and even an ironic index of internationalist cooperation.

The essays in part IV, “Messing with the Narrative,” analyze the disconnect between military “master narratives” and the more complicated stories that soldiers tell themselves. Folklorist and Marine veteran Richard Burns, interviewing veterans who had seen a friend die in Vietnam, explores in chapter 9 the gaps between personal memories and the heroic rhetoric of an official citation. In chapter 10, literary scholar Catherine Calloway calls attention to the marginalized genre of women’s war narratives, showing how two female veterans became military activists, inspiring other women

warriors to tell their stories and working to improve veterans' benefits for all. In chapter 11, drawing on Foucault's notion of the "soldier-weapon complex," Ron Ben Tovim shows how an Iraq War veteran and poet, Gerardo Mena, attempts to reclaim the humanity of comrades who have become "things" by remembering them in the "speaking objects" of his poems. The final essay (chapter 12), by English professor and journalist Carol Burke, looks at the reluctance of deployed soldiers to regale their juniors with war stories and the willingness of civilian contractors, most of them veterans, to satisfy the desire with embroidered tales of their own "high-speed" pasts.

In the conclusion, I respond to the themes raised by the book's chapters, and especially to those of the final section, by defining a "master narrative" that governs behavior in many militaries. I show how the US military honors a virtuous triad of hardiness, brotherhood, and self-sacrifice and how the power of these folk ideas (Dundes 1971) functions to augment the traditional discipline of the total institution. In exploring the tension between two forms of solidarity—operational cohesion and emotional cohesion—I argue that weapons of the weak such as griping can serve to increase rather than threaten solidarity and that some of the attacks on discipline by military dissenters may be read as attempts to defend emotional cohesion against those who are seen as undermining its integrity. In this sense, those who express discontent with armed forces culture might be seen as paradoxical defenders of its noblest intentions.

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