

“My Blog Is My Therapy”: The Sense of Community and Ritual in American Military Blogs

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1. *Introduction*

Soldiers and warriors have always related their combat experience to an audience, be it in songs, memoirs, or letters from the front. These accounts have reflected on their personal feats, on their memories and the corresponding emotions, and on the notions of the individual's role in the greater contexts of the war. Audiences—family members, friends, local communities, or a broad public—have used these accounts as sources of information and have responded to them in individual letters, communal ceremonies, or public debates. This interactive cycle of communication between personal accounts and community feedback has become a major focus of interest for academic discussions of war, namely in regard to cultural, sociological, and psychological aspects of making and experiencing war. "Western" societies discovered and tried to classify, understand, and treat psychological effects of war on combatants and its social repercussions on their community during the wars of the twentieth century. First-hand accounts came to be seen as pathways to such an understanding of war experience and its effects. They provide a focal point in the relationship between combatants and those on whose behalf the war is fought, and on the ceremonies which accompany the transition of the soldier/warrior between community and combat zone.

“Milblogs” are but the latest technological expression in this tradition of first-hand accounts. They continue traditional aspects of storytelling about war, but their technological features introduce new opportunities. Their cultural work and therapeutic potential are best explored in an interdisciplinary analysis of the psychosocial and cultural effects of war experience and of the ceremonial

storytelling known from ancient philosophies and indigenous cultures. I argue that war-related ceremonies of some Native American tribes can provide cues for an understanding of milblogs as enhancing community-building and as decreasing the social and moral gap between soldiers and civil society. Discussing the importance of ceremonial, communal storytelling for the prevention and treatment of combat-related stress has enabled scholars, therapists, and veteran support networks to embrace ancient and indigenous warrior traditions. Milblogs are not a genuine treatment for PTSD, but they can add another step toward an understanding, prevention, and treatment of combat-related stress by offering opportunities for community-building and ceremonial, interactive narration of war experience. They provide tools for post-industrial societies to emulate the sense of community typical for indigenous and small, close-knit communities.

2. *Native American War-Related Ceremonies and Warrior Culture*

Native American war experience and warrior traditions were introduced into the discussion of combat stress in the wake of the Vietnam War. Tom Holm, pioneering the studies of Native American military traditions in Vietnam, found that Native veterans had better chances of overcoming combat-related stress through culturally distinct ceremonies, indicating “that there is something in Native American life that absorbs trauma and heals the spirit” (“PTSD” 84).¹ Holm and other scholars have traced this phenomenon to the ritual distinction between war and peace in the organization of many tribes, to warrior ideology, and to the corresponding ceremonies. War was an integral part of many tribal cultures which designed elaborate rituals, institutions, and philosophies to contain its influence and effects.

¹ PTSD research has discussed the meaning of "spirit" and "soul" with regard to war-related trauma and its treatment in recent publications (see also Tick 16-22).

War and peace follow radically different rules, require different skills, and enhance different sets of accepted behavior. The division between war and peace often resulted in a Native leadership division into war and peace chiefs, or in corresponding clan affiliations (Holm, “Culture” 243). Native warrior ideology acknowledged the cognitive and moral gaps that a crossing between war and peace opened within warriors, and between warriors and their communities, requiring thorough preparation and transition phases in which the warrior’s initiation was guided by experienced elders and supported by the community. The behavior toward warriors after their return from battle and their status in the community influence not only the warriors’ personal well-being, but the collective identity and self-perception of the community.

The warriors’ participation in war and in the related ceremonies, says Holm, are expressions of their personal relationship with the community, their contributions to the tribe’s cultural integrity. The community responds on a personal level: Individual elders provide guidance, and healers perform the rituals to mark the warrior’s return to civil life (“PTSD” 84). Warriors are perceived as special because their crossing between war and peace has taught them about life-threatening danger, fear, and sacrifice; it has shown them the good and the evil sides of life and enabled them to choose wisely. A returning warrior has undergone a maturation process termed *age acceleration*: “Combat transforms the youthful naive fledgling warrior into a hardened professional, old beyond his or her actual age” (85). Holm adds that many Native cultures treat this process positively, visible in the heightened status of returning Native veterans and in the fact that many successful Native peace negotiators throughout history have had outstanding war records.

War-related rites of passage are designed “to aid individuals—and, indeed, *entire societies*—in making the transition from peace to war and back again” (Holm, “Culture” 243, emphasis added). Warriors undergo a set of purification, honoring, and healing rituals upon their return in which the memories of war,

killing, and guilt are often literally washed away and skills and rules necessary for sustenance in the combat zone are set aside. Warriors are reminded that they have survived the ordeal by a transition into a different world. Their return to civil life requires yet another transition: their memories should now serve the community. Ceremonial honoring explicitly marks the community's appreciation of the veterans' sacrifice. These honoring ceremonies often include a ritual narration or performance of the veteran's war experience, followed by the community's ritual applause and thanksgiving. This interaction creates a rapprochement between the veteran and the community, it generates understanding and trust, and it minimizes the cognitive and moral gap that had been opened by the transition between war and peace ("Culture" 245). The healing effect of the ceremonies lies within the "social absorption" (247), the sharing and minimizing of the pain and traumatic memory. This cycle of ritualized narration and appreciation is frequently repeated during powwows and thus further supports reintegration and healing. As the revival and rejuvenation of Native American warrior sodalities and ceremonies since World War II illustrates, the functions of community reunion and individual cleansing and healing are vivid today in Native cultures and help sustain cultural identity as well as strong personalities.²

3. *Storytelling and Social Absorption: Milblogs and the Scholarship on Combat Trauma*

Elements of social absorption, the sharing of pain, and versions of ritual and storytelling have become integral parts in the study and treatment of combat trauma. These elements were found among indigenous cultures, various world religions, and ancient philosophies, and they are discussed in regard to combat trauma by social scientists, mental health professionals, and veteran support

² See also William C. Meadows (2003) on the revival of warrior sodalities among Southern Plains tribes.

organizations. In the following, I will discuss a few selected examples of scholarship and trauma treatment and their application of core elements of Native American ceremonial storytelling.

Dave Grossman suggests practical solutions to prevent and overcome combat stress in his 2004 work, *On Combat*. He refers to critical incident debriefings in law enforcement and the military as archetypal forms of cultural behavior to “put together the pieces and figure out what happened” (304). Debriefings serve to reconstruct events and to deal with memory loss and distortion to enable a learning experience. They also address the question of guilt and how to restore unit integrity. They continue an ancient tradition of gathering around the campfire at night under the supervision of an experienced elder. Grossman emphasizes the switch to continuous round-the-clock combat and to rapid long-distance transportation during the twentieth century that evaporated the phases of quiet in which such debriefings typically had taken place (310). Quoting from a conversation with an army chaplain, Grossman explains the power of debriefing and the effect of diminishing pain by sharing it: “It is the power of telling our stories honestly in a trusted circle of compatriots. What a remarkably unmiraculous salvation, yet profound as Grace: men can be healed through telling their stories in community” (265).

In addition to military debriefings for tactical, training, and unit cohesion purposes, storytelling has become an important factor in veteran support and PTSD therapy. Scholars have emphasized the effect of stress release, sharing of pain, and social absorption through storytelling: “We know, in PTSD treatment, it isn’t the avoidance, it’s the retelling, writing it down, adding more descriptors . . . tell your story and listen to it to lessen the effective significance that the brain places on it” (Wilson 397). Jonathan Shay concludes: “When trauma survivors hear that enough of the truth of their experience has been understood, remembered, and retold with enough fidelity to carry *some* of this truth . . . then the circle of communalization is complete” (243-44). Debriefings are mainly

done among military peers, and trauma treatment requires a controlled environment and a supportive and guided audience (a therapist and possibly other clients). Veteran support organizations, while working toward a controlled environment to avoid triggering stressors and to prevent re-traumatization, expand the audience to larger public settings, and thus enable a reduction of the distance between veteran and civil society. One participant in such a public program explains:

The forum of storytelling is the most positive completion of the healing process, and sharing in my community is the humanizing of an inhumane experience. I think that coming to speak from my heart about the issues of war experience has been essential to connecting to others; to be honest and not try to construct a heroic narrative but say a more personal experience of fear, horror, shame, humor, and the forms of bonding that do occur in hardship. (Wilson 409)

Milblogging offers parallels to the effects of debriefings and therapeutic storytelling, but its applicability as a therapeutic device is limited by obstacles on a temporal and an audience/purpose level. The main parallel is the immediate sharing of the memory. Bloggers can share their experience with the audience on short notice (assuming internet access on the base), and the writing process helps sort out emotions and memory. They are able to share their pain and confusion, if they so choose, and they have the chance for supportive audience feedback resembling a sharing of the pain. However, bloggers usually blog by themselves. They have no other combat participants to add, correct, and help finish the puzzle, which puts a question mark on reaching closure and leaving with a “fair share of the blame,” as Grossman puts it (266). Their audience is not professionally guided and cannot be controlled in their answers, unless the blogger disables the comment functions or restricts access to the blog. The audience may be comprised of friends and family, but also of complete strangers from all over the world and does not resemble a typical home community.

Increased army restrictions on the content of blogs, such as the landmark Army Regulation 530-1, limit the details of combat description that would typically be part of a debriefing and would enable a sharing of painful experience (Shachtman). Most of all, bloggers write from the combat zone and will continue their war experience after their current entry. In the following, I will discuss how these opportunities and obstacles shape the medium of milblogging, and how milblogs emulate core aspects of Native war-related ceremonies, first in a reading of milblogs as rituals, followed by an exploration of social absorption in milblogs.

4. *Milblogging as Ritualized Storytelling*

Native American communities have elaborate ceremonies, such as the Navajo Enemy Way, or the counting of “coup” among the Plains tribes, to purify, honor, and reintegrate returning warriors (Holm, “Culture” 245). Similarly, scholars on military psychology have acknowledged the importance of explicit ceremonial cleansing for the transition between combat zone and civil life. Edward Tick and Jonathan Shay have discussed military rituals among ancient cultures, and both propose some form of ceremonial purification for current American cultural practice. Shay explains: “Religious and cultural therapies are not only possible, but may well be superior to what mental health professionals conventionally offer” (152). He adds that such rituals would need to involve society at large:

What I have in mind is a communal ritual with religious force that recognizes that *everyone* who has shed blood, no matter how blamelessly, is in need of purification . . . The community as a whole . . . is no less in need of purification. Such rituals must be communal with the returning veterans, not something done to or for them before they return to civilian life. (245)

A ceremonial reintegration of returning soldiers would involve the sharing of the experience—and the pain. Veterans would engage in a cycle of narration and

feedback with civil society, as in the counting of coup. The audience adopts the experience and partakes in the learning, grief, and pain, the “energies of war” are brought home and are given “aesthetic functions in peace” (Tick 219). The community lets the veterans know that their experience has repercussions on the whole group:

It is important not only that the veteran tells his story but that he experiences it as being heard . . . Having one's story validated is a critical step in the transformation of identity into warriorhood and mature adult status. The public platform is necessary for the story to get passed on and become part of the community's collective wisdom and mythic history (221)

Because of the temporal obstacle, blogs cannot replace a true cleansing ceremony. The audience obstacle prevents a full substitution of real-time ceremonies offering physical interaction between veterans and members of the community in concordance with a formalized protocol. Yet, blogs have the potential to cleanse some of the soldiers’ “pain and stain” and they can help “transfer responsibility for their violent actions to the society in whose name they acted” (Tick 181-82). Academic studies on blogging from media-studies and cultural-studies perspectives allow a reading of milblog interaction as a communal ritual in which bloggers and their audience build a personal relationship and ceremonially minimize the difference between the military and the civil realm.³

Graham Lampa reads the emergence of a sense of belonging in the blogosphere through an application of Benedict Anderson's concept of “imagined communities.” Throughout the nineteenth century, readers of the morning

³ See, for example, my detailed exploration of the sense of community in milblogs from a perspective of the interaction between bloggers and audience. In my discussion of the blog post “Taking Chance Home” on blackfive.net and its eventual transmedial expansion, I interpret the comments as the ritualized narrative of a “fan” community (Usbeck).

newspaper were aware that thousands of others were doing the same thing at the same time: Reading the newspaper was a “mass ceremony” by which the national community imagined and asserted itself. The blogosphere offers a similar ceremonial performance through regular reading, posting, commenting, and cross-linking. Participation in the blogosphere is a ceremonial self-assertion of the blogger/commenters’ group identity as active members of the same community (Lampa). Paul Booth adds the group’s narrative as a focal point: A blog is an amalgam of the post and its comments, its narrative comprises both the original post and the comments, and the collective knowledge of all contributors informs the eventual narrative (48-51). Discussing fan audiences, Booth coined the term “narrativity” to describe the mutual influence of blogger and commenters on the shaping of the narrative and on the emergence of a sense of belonging: “The narrative builds the community, just as the community builds the narrative” (121).

When this reading is applied to milblogs, then the community’s feedback is “to assert not only that [they] have read the post, but also that [they] care enough about the post to *act* in some manner” (Booth 48). The milblog audience, representing the bloggers’ families, experienced veteran elders, and the entire civil society, offer gratitude and appreciation in their feedback. Reading milblog comments through Booth’s perspective of fan audiences allows an understanding of milblog comments as community rituals: As authors and commenters across the milblog community discuss military service as a contribution to “something bigger than oneself,” individual milblog comments become ritualistic contributions to the master narrative and to the group identity of the community (Burden “Taking”).⁴

⁴ Many commenters to the post “Taking Chance Home” identify participation in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as contributions to “something bigger than yourself.” I interpret this particular phrase as an expression of a sense of community within the mil-blogosphere.

Commenters establish a personal relationship with bloggers by sending individual messages to them. In the case of a surgical team doctor's list of good and bad experiences during her tour in Iraq, twenty-two people expressed very individual thoughts and emotions about the post, reaching out to the author (Kraft). Four of them explicitly said the post had moved them to tears, others said they had a hard time to express their emotions. While the individual commenters talk directly to the author, they consciously add similar statements to previous comments. Repeating the same message allows the commenters to contribute to "something bigger than themselves," and they actually make it bigger by adding their voice. The blogger has initiated the interaction by sharing his or her experience and thus, explicitly or implicitly, invited the community to respond. In reading the comments, the blogger becomes aware of individual expressions of gratitude and compassion, and experiences the very personal conversation. At the same time, the blogger perceives the bulk of similar statements as the voice of the community. Although this cycle of storytelling and feedback lacks explicit religious meaning, it has ceremonial qualities in that the participants consciously discuss their contribution to something meaningful, something "bigger than themselves."

5. *Milblogging and Social Absorption*

A very popular blog before the restrictions on milblogs, such as AR 530-1, Colby Buzzell's *My War* provides a graphic example for combat descriptions in his post "Men in Black," detailing an ambush on his convoy in Iraq. The blog's comments include expressions of relief about, and gratitude for, the soldier's survival. Some veteran commenters show their respect and recognition of Buzzell's performance in that firefight, resembling the approval and guidance of the experienced elders Grossman and Holm refer to: "In two deployments to SWA, nothing I've seen holds a candle to what you just described . . . Be proud of how you and your comrades handled yourselves, no one could have done it

better.”⁵ A contribution by a veteran offering such praise and understanding cannot be taken for granted in a blog audience which amplifies the overall support of the audience in this case. Similarly, Matthew Burden’s print collection of blog posts lists a variety of entries in which soldiers relate obviously disturbing events (i.e., an entry by The Questing Cat 82-89). These accounts, as Buzzell’s, are often written in a stream-of-consciousness voice, in a rapid succession of sequences. While guided narration in therapy would try to avoid situations that could “re-wire” traumatized persons and make them relive their experience (Wilson et al. 397-98), these accounts vividly illustrate Grossman’s emphasis on reaching a release from the adrenaline rush soon after the threatening event. In this example, the blogger mentions that he “rode gun” immediately after the described firefight, using the machine gunner position on the roof of a Humvee to be alone: “I want some time to think. I ride the gun so no one can look directly at me if I break” (Burden, *The Blog* 88). The author initially needs to hide his emotions from his buddies, but he chooses to narrate his turmoil in the blog, at once showing his feelings and reinstating his identity as a (male) soldier who must overcome his distress in a critical situation. He is aware that the audience may be comprised of fellow soldiers, family, or strangers. His open description is an implicit invitation to the community to accept his emotional turmoil and to share his pain.

The aforementioned blog post by Heidi Kraft, written after one year of service in Iraq, resembles the author's debriefing and entering into transition as she prepares to transfer back home. In her explanation of her list of memories, a need for closure becomes evident: “Most of all it’s just therapy, and by now I should

⁵ The post “Men in Black” that is currently available online shows only the comments. My source on the post is the description in Buzzell's book (*My War* 288-302).

be relatively good at that. Hard to do for yourself, though.”⁶ Note that the author ponders the struggle to conduct this debriefing by herself. The blog audience's replies confirm academic and professional observations on the therapeutic potential of communalization: Each of the twenty-two comments to this post expresses gratitude, sympathy, and appreciation. Most address the author as a representative for all American military deployed overseas. Many thank her for sharing the list and for her stories about the Marines she treated. The last commenter exemplifies all aspects previously discussed here in regard to storytelling, sharing the pain, and minimizing the distance between the veteran and the community: “Thank you so much for posting that—not many people understand what it’s like to hold the hand of that dying Marine, then have to get up and keep doing the job, no matter what. Thank you for being there and doing your job, thank you for caring so much. And thank you again for telling us about it” (inkgrrl).

Although milblogging appears to be of limited value for guided narrative therapy, its strength lies in the potential for reducing the distance between civil society and the soldiers overseas. While Native American ceremonies address this distance during the transition between war and peace after the soldier’s return, milblogs contribute to minimizing this distance during deployment.⁷ Returning veterans are often confronted with the distance created by both their military training and their combat experience. I argue that blogging has an advantage in this context because it helps soldiers retain the contact to the civilian world, to cultural events, in short, to the everyday life their civilian

⁶ Similarly, the commenter quoted in this contribution's title states that he started his own blog after returning from deployment to sort out his feelings. In this case, the blog functions as a means of true purification without the temporal obstacle (Traversa, “Just Like”).

⁷ My larger research project discusses this difference in ceremonial purpose and in community membership in more detail and explores different types of commenters, patterns of comments, and their effects on the sense of community between bloggers and commenters.

former selves were accustomed to. At this stage in my research process, it seems that blogs posted after the military regulations on blogging took effect lack the combat description typical for After Action Reviews. Instead, there is a high proportion of soldiers discussing life on base, the culture and customs of the local population, and cultural events at home. I read these reports as efforts to stay in touch with civil life, to retain a sense of “normalcy” which helps minimize the cognitive and moral gap between military and civil experience that is seen as a major stressor.

Buzzell’s blog *My War* quickly developed a vivid interaction with the audience, although the author initially believed that blogging would be a one-way conversation (*My War* 132). Curious readers began to discuss the contents of his camp’s library with him and sent book recommendations along with donations for the library (*My War* 211). Glen Morris, author of the *Babylon Blog*, discussed films and books in his posts, calling the entertainment “filling head” (37-39). Doug Traversa’s blog *Afghanistan Without a Clue* is a vivid example of intensive discussions of culture and media. One of the reasons for starting and sustaining his blog was to pass time; he sees blogging as “a great way to come to terms with life here” (“From Cats”). Over the course of his deployment, Traversa shares his exploits in the PC game “Sid Meier’s Pirates!” and invites his audience to discuss Japanese Anime films: “So on the off chance any of you have an interest, we can talk (or write)” (“Japanimation”; “A Pirate’s”). Several of his posts turn into detailed movie critiques, as in his discussion of the film *The Quiet Man* with John Wayne (“Missed Us”). Traversa says his amount of writing and choice of topics were in part influenced by boredom and by the necessities of military security: “I have been spending at least two hours a day, often more, on my writing, both blogging and e-mails. It has been my salvation here” (“AFROTC”). Note that these discussions are eventually not a mere passing of time, but have gained spiritual qualities, as they become the author’s “salvation.” The back-and-forth of such seemingly unimportant thoughts about everyday life mark important

aspects of minimizing the distance between civil and military life for bloggers. As blogger Rusten Carrie points out addressing his audience: “I appreciate your sharing what 'normal' is with me” (Burden, *The Blog* 255).

Milblogs continue traditional representations of war experience in a new format. They enable the blogger to sustain the contact with their home community, to interact with civil society and to share their experience almost instantaneously and with a wide audience. Their technological features offer opportunities for veteran support in both military mental health and in veteran affairs on a communal level. Milblogs cannot heal—nor prevent—PTSD by themselves but their cultural work is a valuable complementary tool for the support of military personnel deployed overseas. The cognitive, moral, and social distance between military and civil society is a major factor in the persistence of combat-related stress among veterans after their return. Storytelling, ceremonial purification, and the sharing of the burden of combat experience are cornerstones in minimizing that distance. Milblogging can complement these efforts in veteran reintegration because it offers a way to share experience through storytelling even before the soldier’s return, because it enables community dialogue, and because its features invite both a personal and collective ceremonial exchange between veterans and civil society.

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