

The Movement of American Infantry in Anthropological Perspective

Frank Tortorello Jr.

Like soldiers in the winter's night
With a vow to defend
No retreat, baby, no surrender

Bruce Springsteen, *No Surrender*, 1984

Like the brave soldiers who stormed the beaches of Normandy...our
firefighters found themselves on the front lines of a war between freedom and
tyranny.

Rudolph Giuliani, Mayor of New York City, 2001

Introduction

Soldiers and military values are a crucial part of the cultural fabric of the West, especially the United States. For example, in the epigraph above, the American pop artist Bruce Springsteen makes an analogy between soldiers standing firm against an enemy and fringe teenagers standing firm against the cold darkness of the mainstream. Likewise, New York's Mayor Giuliani makes an analogy between the World War II soldiers who stormed the beaches at Normandy and the New York City firefighters who stormed World Trade Center Towers on September 11, 2001. Both examples illustrate how embodied military values are deployed in U.S. culture at large as models for nonmilitary action. Note that the military actions referred to—surrender, retreat, defending, stormed—are so familiar to Americans that they require no explication. However, the common use of such unmarked terms does not necessarily entail clarity of meaning or depth of understanding, and as a result, some of The West's most powerful models of, and for, embodied cultural values remain unexamined, if not actively obscured.

For example, there is an unfortunate tendency among some historians to reduce the powerful cultural meanings embedded in military action to the operation of a biological mechanism. In this paper I first identify, and then argue against this tendency, to illustrate how socio-cultural anthropology provides theoretical and ethnographic resources that enable richer, more plausible explanations of, and appreciation for the complexity of military movement. I maintain that military movement, specifically the parade ground drills and battlefield postures of Western infantry, are best understood as embodied cultural values enacted by persons. As such, they persist historically and differ cross-culturally in fascinating ways. For example, using an American War of 1812 close-order infantry drill as a standard, I note the historical retention of an ideological preference for forward-oriented

movement. This probably began as early as the 5th century B.C.E. Greek infantry, but has its most recent manifestation in the 21st century design of American infantry helmets! I also explore cultural differences in bodily posture of significance to understanding German, American, and Japanese infantry soldiers during World War II.

Biological Reductionism in Explanations of Military Action

It is not uncommon for military historians to explain physical being and military bodily action in biological terms. In so doing, they deny human actions the status of signifying acts and embodied forms of knowledge. For example, in *A History of Warfare* (1993) the noted military historian John Keegan states that:

Warfare is almost as old as man himself, and reaches into the most secret places of the human heart, places where self dissolves rational purpose, where pride reigns, where emotion is paramount, where instinct is king (1993:3).

Aside from the problem of this speculative claim about unknowable "origins" coming from a historian, Keegan characterizes military action as irrational, emotional, and instinctive.¹ Since such action apparently stems from a secret internal location it must also be individualist as opposed to social. According to this view, any cultural differences in systems of military training and action are simply epiphenomenal of biological differences. This view is contradictory to Keegan's overall project, which is a book that documents the rich cultural differences in warfare among peoples throughout history. Ironically perhaps, Keegan's larger work assumes that cultural differences are phenomena of interest in their own right because they are primarily social, not biological, in origin.

A second example of biological reductionism in explanations of military action can be found in the work of the historian William McNeill. In *Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History* (1995) McNeill argues that the "close-order drill"² practiced by soldiers is a rhythmic, repetitive movement of large muscle groups that bio-mechanically triggers a prelinguistic emotional state which in turn produces human community. McNeill, himself a military veteran of World War II, recalls that,

Marching aimlessly about on the drill field, swaggering in conformity with prescribed military postures, conscious only of keeping in step so as to make the next move correctly and in time somehow felt good (1995: 2).

Euphoric response to keeping in time is too deeply implanted in our genes to be exorcized for long. It remains the most powerful way to create and sustain a community that we have at our command (1995: 150).

McNeill speculates that prior to the development of spoken language, bodily movement was the basis for achieving community. Without providing any evidence whatsoever to support this thesis, he claims a genetic basis for his personally felt euphoria and argues that its otherwise inexplicable presence signifies the individual basis of human community. His evolutionary

perspective assumes that all humans carry a genetic ability to respond emotionally to a “muscular bonding” achieved through “keeping in time.”

Given McNeill’s perspective, it is difficult to understand how cultural variations in ways of “keeping in time together” are relevant. That is, what we might otherwise understand as meaningful differences between say, military drill and a modern dance, have no bearing, because the motivating force that ‘keeping-in-time’ apparently accesses, is a euphoric feeling state devoid of any semantic content. This problematic explanation also makes cross-cultural differences in military action irrelevant, since McNeill locates the real import in its proposed function as a bio-psychological trigger.

McNeill (1995: 2, 149) proceeds to describe this emotional state as “sub-rational,” “visceral,” and “older than language,” a “generalized emotional exaltation” that words cannot describe, because words

destroy what they purport to describe . . . in this case, a state of generalized emotional exaltation whose warmth was indubitable, without, however, having any definite external meaning or attachment. The strongest human emotions . . . are ordinarily triggered by encounters with other persons or particular external circumstances, and the emotion in question helps us react successfully (1995: 2).

For McNeill then, the ultimate point of keeping-in-time-together, as in military drill, is to tap into a pleasurable or euphoric emotional state for the purpose of bonding a community together. He merely asserts that this capacity evolved during our proto-human past and became embedded genetically.

Both Keegan and McNeill share an evolutionary perspective that entails biological reductionism. Keegan characterizes military action as irrational, emotional, instinctive, and emergent from a secret internal bodily location. McNeill characterizes military drill (along with dancing of any kind) as a means to trigger a euphoric emotional state that acts as a survival mechanism and generates community. Both explanations eliminate any connection between military movement and cultural values, and cannot account for cross-cultural differences. Since they deny human actors any agency in the process, they also omit the possibility and the relevance of social meanings.

Socio-cultural Explanations of Military Action

In contrast to the above, I will argue that socio-cultural anthropology can provide more satisfying explanations of military action based on the proper alignment of biological and cultural aspects of human being. More specifically, I proceed from the perspective of semasiological theory which accepts biology as a necessary *ground for* human agency but not as a deterministic mechanism that can account for human social behavior. Certainly, without a biological body one cannot have a human person. However, semasiological theory denies that the “real” explanation of human behavior and its significance is to be found in, for example, genes, the adrenal system, or the brain. Active human beings are defined, not in terms of putative bio-psychological mechanisms, but as embodied, agentic, meaning-makers who are also language-users (see Williams 1982).

I shall therefore take into account historical and current ethnographic evidence from soldiers' accounts of their experiences, and examine ways in which the principles and purposes of military movement have changed over time, and vary cross-culturally. I focus on two aspects of Western (i.e. European and derived) infantry movement, "close-order drill" and infantry battlefield movement, with special attention given to posture.

Williams (1995) notes that semasiology as an anthropological viewpoint assumes that human action includes both spoken sign systems and action sign systems and that human action, in being agentic, is therefore not "behavior." The term "behavior" is here understood in light of its traditional association with behaviorism and so refers to the notion that evolved biological mechanisms are the real cause underlying the behavior of organisms.

The social anthropologist Edwin Ardener (1973) provides a useful discussion of the history of the term "behavior," charting its use from a metaphor for prescribed human social conduct to a term denoting an objective quantity that restrains activity and that is knowable in advance of its actualization. Ardener's historical perspective informs the distinction between 'behavior' and 'action' realized in semasiological theory. Actions are under the personal command of individual human agents and so are creative acts unknowable in advance of their actualization. This view contradicts the evolutionary notion that actions are beyond the personal command of individual human behavior-machines because they are driven by deep-seated instincts and emotions ensconced in their biology, as Keegan and McNeill have implied.

The shift in conceptual realms from behavioral-mechanical to agentic-creative allows historians and anthropologists to see that the ways soldiers move entails commitment to a value position, parallel to the way in which a soldier might state his or her allegiance to a particular value using words. The point is that soldiers' military movements are cultural conventions, and they have real effects in the social world of other persons who can understand that particular body movement language or action sign system.

The experience of American Army Major Marcus Reno provides a telling illustration of the principle that body movement instantiates a value position. After the defeat of the U.S. Seventh Cavalry at the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876, Major Reno reported:

The Indians were peculiar in their manner of fighting; they don't go in line or bodies, but in parties of 5 to 40. You see them scattering in all directions.

Bloody Knife [Reno's Arikara scout] was within a few feet of me; I was trying to get from him by signs where the Indians were going (Reno 1997: 195-96).

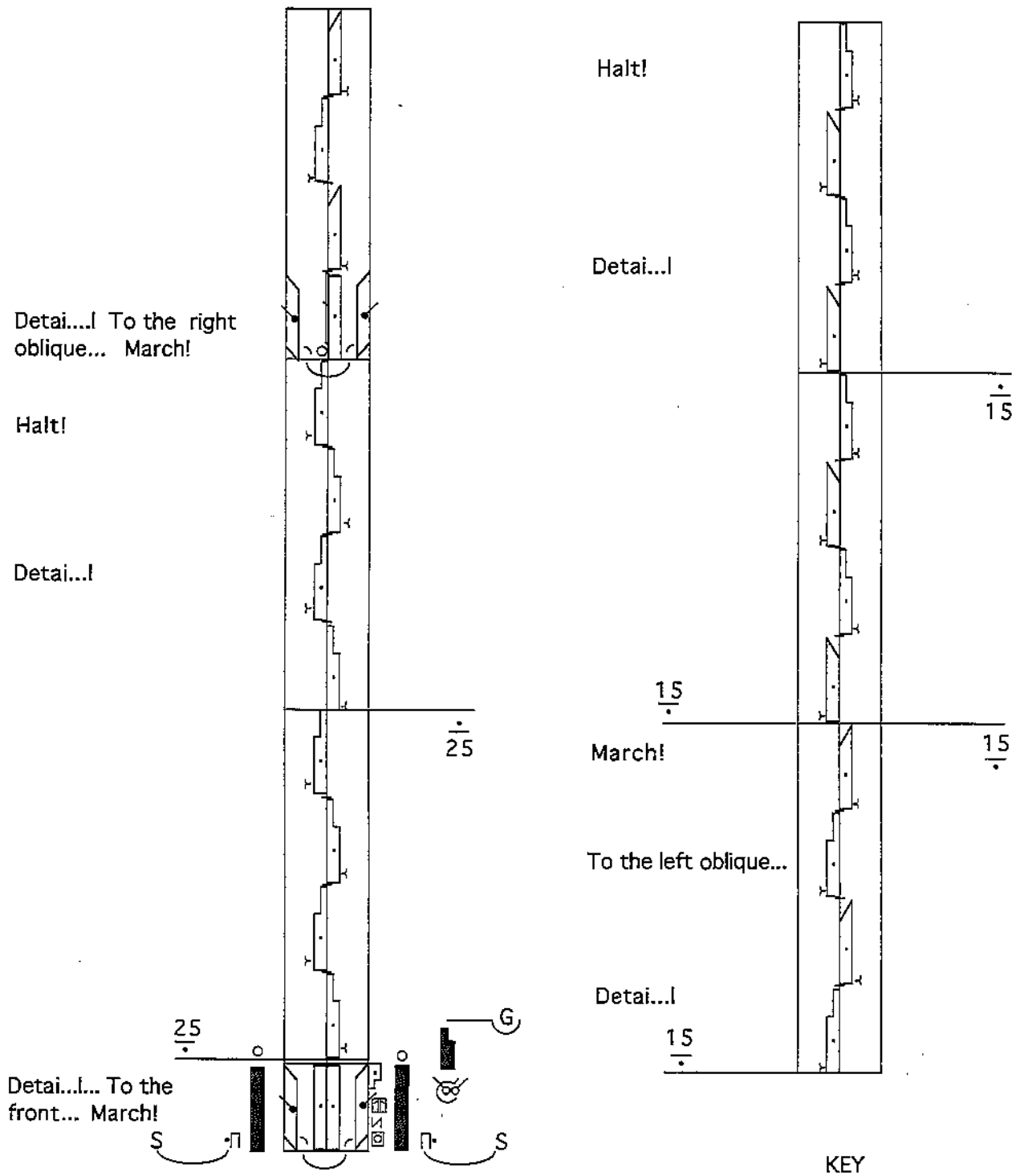
Since it is apparent that Reno, like Bloody Knife, could see the Native Americans, Reno's professed ignorance must have been based not on a failure of perception, but on a failure of conception: he could not conceive what the Native Americans intended by watching their movements. Military movements, then, constitute ways of talking with one's body. To understand

the meaning of such movement requires conceptual competence that permits reading others' bodies. When faced with an alternative cultural system, Reno found himself illiterate.³

Part of Major Reno's failure of conception must have been his lack of familiarity with military action that did not depend on a Western way of organizing soldiers. That is, Western ways of grouping fighters into military formations are cultural conventions, which, along with individual bodily movement, could be said to constitute a distinctive Western military "dialect." Reno's problem with the multi-directionality of Native American movements was rooted in his own lived experience of fighting linearly. A line of Western soldiers with a clear "front", "rear", and "sides" was the sort of formation with which Reno was familiar, and the one he himself used at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. For him, the prescribed military convention of linear alignment called for moving his troops in ways that kept an enemy to the "front." An enemy whose movement took fighters "sideways" or "rearward," made no sense and so was not seen, since this would make fighting impossible from Reno's point of view.

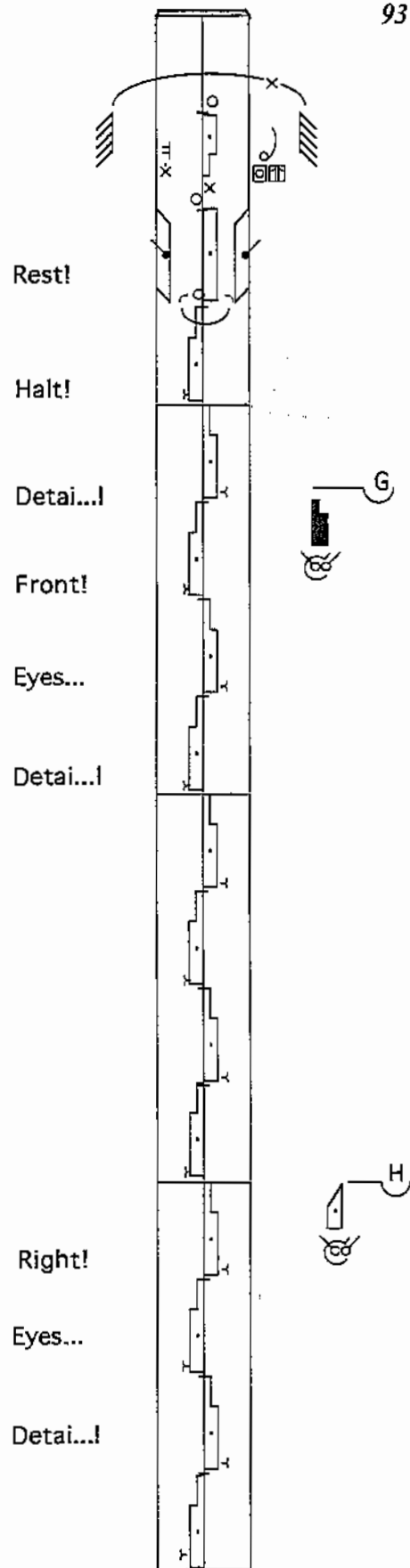
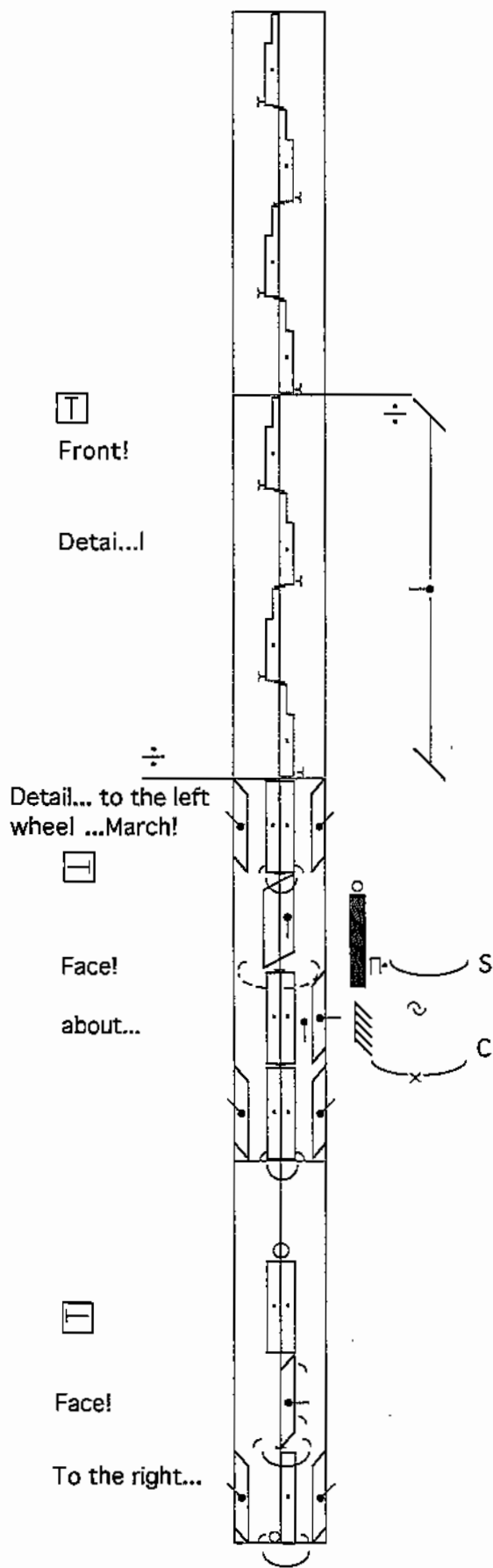
To understand the cultural source of Reno's perspective, it is necessary to examine the embodied values conventionalized in Western and especially American military culture in historical context. The accompanying example (of an American War of 1812 close-order drill provides a starting point for this examination (see Figure 1). Major Reno in 1876 would have been familiar with the U.S. Army's descendant version of this drill. I personally became familiar with this close-order drill when I practiced and performed it, and trained others to do so, during the summers of 1993-1995 as part of a 'living history' unit called The Fort McHenry Guard. The Guard is supervised by the National Park Service to interpret soldier life at the Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine in Baltimore, Maryland. Fort McHenry is famous in American history as the site where American soldiers endured a 25-hour bombardment by British warships in September of 1814 without fleeing. The feat was captured in poetry by Francis Scott Key, eventually set to music, and finally became the American national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner." The song can be heard at the start of most American sporting events today.

Military drill in the American War of 1812 was based on the 1794 American Revolutionary War manual compiled by Frederick William Baron von Steuben. Von Steuben, a Prussian mercenary who fought alongside the Americans during the Revolutionary War, was a former Captain in the army of Frederick the Great. In his manual, von Steuben used words and geometric diagrams to train soldiers how to move together in close order. He noted that drilling was to be taught to individual soldiers at first, so that they might learn to "carry themselves properly" (1985 [1794]: 10). The accompanying Labanotated score includes an interpretation of what it might have meant for a War of 1812 soldier to carry himself "properly."



Time = 90 beats/minute
 One step = 1 beat

Figure 1. Close Order Drill practiced by American infantry in the War of 1812, after Von Steuben 1985 [1794].



The starting position for the marching segments conforms loosely to the bodily comportment suggested by von Steuben's words,

[The soldier] is to stand straight and firm upon his legs . . . the heels two inches apart; the toes turned out; the belly drawn in a little, but without constraint; the breast a little projected; the shoulders square to the front, and kept back; the hands hanging down the sides, with the palms close to the thighs (1985 [1794]: 10-11).

Von Steuben's verbal description of the drill's starting position and the Labanotation text in Figure 1 both focus on standing *in a particular way*. The fact that a "properly military" way of standing must be taught, with a rather different distribution of bodily weight and alignment of legs than might otherwise be expected, or comfortable, makes clear the fact that this is a *learned* bodily technique rather than a natural stance that has evolved biologically over millennia of human and proto-human fighting. The French anthropologist and sociologist Marcel Mauss in his classic article, "Techniques of the Body" (1934), provides similar examples that position military drill as primarily a cultural convention learned by persons.

The Labanotation score permits historians and anthropologists to gain an appreciation for the details of bodily comportment often missed in the images and word glosses of vintage drill manuals such as von Steuben's (cf. Farnell 1994). Images and word glosses underdetermine the range of possibilities for moving one's body. Reading a Labanotation score permits a deeper appreciation because the reader interprets the movements from the perspective of his or her own body. If enacting the score, the reader has little choice but to become aware of and experience, for instance, the re-distribution of bodily weight. The uncharacteristic way of comporting one's body can literally be felt as the body is disciplined to move militarily. I would speculate that soldiers trained during the War of 1812 may have felt something of the same discomfort, oddness, or difficulty of simply standing in place as I did when I learned to perform these drills as a historical interpreter at Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine.

Military Movement as Cultural Convention: Close Order Drill and Battlefield Purpose

This leads to the question, "Why teach soldiers to stand still in a distinctive way?" During the American War of 1812, soldiers carried a backpack with their equipment, plus an ammunition in a box on their right hip, a one and one-half foot long bayonet on their left hip, and a four and one-half foot long muzzle-loading musket. While carrying this equipment soldiers would align themselves in "close-order," that is "shoulder-to-shoulder" and with approximately one foot of space between soldiers front to back. These spatial relationships among individuals were used to build larger groupings called "formations" such as a column or a line. An infantry *column* aligned soldiers (usually) four across and many soldiers deep. An infantry *line* formed soldiers many across and two or three soldiers deep. A line was a way to maximize the number of soldiers who could fire at an enemy. It spread soldiers out over

a wide enough area to permit those in the rear ranks to use their muskets without risking the life of fellow soldiers immediately to the front.

The close proximity of soldiers to one another in a mass formation like a column or line meant that any derangement of an individual body risked derangement of whole "ranks" (one soldier aside another) and "files" (one soldier behind another), since any misstep or imbalance could result in a domino-like effect as one soldier pushed another off balance. A tangle of bayonets, packs, belts, and muskets could easily result with the further consequence that the entire unit of soldiers would have to be stopped, even in the midst of battle, so the lines could be "dressed" or realigned. The distinctive soldierly stance and weight distribution, as well as the ability to maintain them, permitted the grouping of soldiers into columns and lines.

It is important to note that the basic skills of standing and balancing militarily were the basis on which soldiers were taught to move together. Moving in unison was the key to keeping formations aligned and organized front to back and sideways. This prescription also applied to manipulating the musket and bayonet. Parade-ground practice of a "manual-of-arms" taught soldiers to shift the musket to different positions on or near the body while remaining in formation and without hitting other soldiers. Loading and firing the musket, as well as attaching and removing the bayonet, were actions broken down into specific steps, each numbered and timed precisely so as to achieve unity. The common English phrase "by the numbers," used to indicate a strict step-by-step procedure, has its origin in historic military training.

The geometric linearity and shape of soldier formations, the massing of soldiers in close order, and the uniformity of their movement, were all directed toward the goal of producing an overwhelming force on a battlefield. It was assumed that the opposing military unit would have a similar array and so a similar purpose. The point was to put soldiers into an advantageous position relative to the enemy unit and begin firing. Because of the inaccuracy of the smooth-bored (versus rifled) weapons, military commanders sought to keep soldiers tightly packed, move them close to the enemy, and have them fire at the enemy simultaneously (called "volley" firing) as quickly as possible.⁴

Packing soldiers together tightly maximized the number of musket balls in a given space. This in turn increased the probability of hitting an enemy, especially if the enemy was within about 100 yards. Firing simultaneously was meant to achieve a "wall" or "sheet" of lead that hit the enemy formation at the same time so as to knock down many enemy soldiers. As when an individual soldier lost his balance, many flailing and falling soldiers deranged the enemy formation causing a serious decrease in the enemy's own firepower. Since well-drilled units could repair large gaps with reserve troops or by contracting their lines speedily, even in the midst of battle, a high rate of simultaneous fire was a goal achieved through embodied action.

The West's strong commitment to utilitarian and scientific principles in warfare can mask the fact that military close order drill and its battlefield

purposes constitute a value system established by long-standing cultural convention. The embodied value of overpowering an enemy using a mass formation of soldiers acting in close order and in unison emerges from among other sources, the Greek world of the 6th and 5th centuries B.C.E., and is connected to the American War of 1812 and beyond through replication of ancient Greek infantry ways of moving.

In his book *The Western Way of War* (1987) the historian Victor Davis Hanson notes that the Western model for marching and fighting in close-order is the ancient Greek infantry *phalanx*. The Greek *phalanx* was a way of organizing soldiers into a group. The soldiers were evenly spaced, usually eight deep and up to ten across. They carried long spears, armored their torsos, forearms, and shins, and deployed a large round shield called a *hoplon* (from which comes the word "hoplite" to denote an individual Greek soldier at the time). Multiple *phalanxes* could be combined into larger *phalanxes*.

According to Hanson, one of a *phalanx's* battlefield goals was the use of its compacted mass of soldiers to charge headlong into an opposing *phalanx*. Notably, the Greek *phalanx* embodied a direct relationship between mass and force, where the physical mass of the soldier plus his armor and weapons was accelerated in charging and translated through the spear into the opposing *phalanx*. Since the *phalanx* was a formation of some depth, the soldiers at the back of the unit could not reach the enemy with their spears. Their purpose was, instead, to lean into their shields, which were against the backs of the soldiers in front and push. Their goal, literally, was to force their own front-line soldiers into and through the opposing front-line soldiers. Grinding up and killing opposing troops rather than, for example, simply scaring them off was a value that emerged in turn from another ancient Greek value: concluding battles quickly and decisively so as to *limit* casualties and destruction.

Although in the War of 1812, the musket's ranged capability made the relationship more indirect, the ancient Greek principle of achieving an overpowering mass-force relationship on a battlefield retained its value. With the ranged capability of the musket, overpowering mass-force relationships could be generated from a distance. However, it is interesting to note that despite this, military commanders tended to prize a bayonet charge as an ideal form of engaging the enemy. With the attached bayonet, the musket could be used just like a spear in earlier hand-to-hand combat. In *The Art of Warfare in the Age of Napoleon* 1980[1978] Gunter E. Rothenberg states that there was a general reliance on using the bayonet after only a few rounds of musket fire in order to decide a battle. Rothenberg offers a utilitarian explanation of the use of the bayonet that contrasts with my notion that hand-to-hand combat was itself a value. He sees it, instead, as the result of prodigious amounts of obscuring smoke generated by black gunpowder-based weapons. Space considerations prevent a full examination here, but in either case, soldiers would fix their bayonets on the end of their muskets and charge at the enemy line, in a manner similar to the charge of the ancient Greek *phalanx*. Unlike the *phalanx*, however, in most cases few casualties were caused by bayonets since,

as Rothenberg notes, one side or the other would prefer to run away rather than engage in hand-to-hand combat. By the time of the War of 1812, it had become militarily *and morally* acceptable for soldiers to run off and regroup when faced with the possibility of a hand-to-hand struggle. Similarly, simply scaring enemy force off a battlefield by threatening hand-to-hand combat sufficed to claim victory.

Although clearly it would be a mistake to equate ancient Greek *phalanx* warfare with American column and line warfare, I contend that the two forms are similar in their instantiation of the value of generating overpowering mass-force relationships on a battlefield, especially by charging the enemy with fixed bayonets. I am arguing that organizing soldiers into formations to achieve overwhelming force, and charging an enemy formation on a battlefield to engage in hand-to-hand combat, are embodied military cultural values that, in this case, are shared by both 5th century B.C.E. Greek and 19th century C.E. American soldiers.

One notable *difference* between these two cultures is that the ancient Greeks had a nearly universal disdain for any sort of missile weapon because such weapons permitted the user to avoid the hand-to-hand combat that was a primary expression of masculinity and commitment. The War of 1812 American soldier however, embodied an ambiguous middle position. The valued ability to generate overwhelming mass-force relationships was best expressed by the use of a missile weapon (musket), and yet there remained the value of hand-to-hand combat embodied by the bayonet charge into an enemy formation. The chosen expressions of the two values were somewhat at odds.

The persistence of these cultural values through time was accomplished by 19th century Americans who repeated movements that carried social and moral meanings on a battlefield similar to those held by the ancient Greeks. I am not claiming that battle *meant the same thing* to individual soldiers on a battlefield. How a way of life may or may not have impacted individual experience is unknowable given the subjects of my comparative project. But insofar as soldiers moved in the same ways, and reported the same purposes for that movement, the argument holds.

Military Movement as Cultural Convention: World War II Battlefield Movement and Posture

If military movement is a matter of historical as well as cultural context, then how a soldier moves on a battlefield as well as in a close-order drill is not simply a matter either of universal utility or biological evolution. Instead, body movements understood as utilitarian have changed over time as new cultural conventions emerged. Consider, for example, the following passage from the memoirs of Guy Sajer, a Frenchman fighting for the Germans against the Soviets in World War II:

"And let's keep going," our [officer] added. "There isn't a quiet corner within sixty miles. We're no safer here than anywhere else." . . . We began to move forward, bent double. The air around us shook for the third time, and we could hear gunfire all around us. . . . "Which way do we go?" asked our

sergeant, who was clearly terrified. "Follow the path as far as the [assault gun] over there on the right. They'll be able to tell you. But eat something first. It's lunchtime." [The officer] took a few steps in the other direction, doubled over, as before. So, that is how one moves on a battlefield! A few days later I was used to it, and paid no more attention (2000 [1967]: 66).

The "bent-double" posture, though quite utilitarian in this context from the point of view of common sense, is neither obvious nor historically universal. Despite having been very well trained and drilled by the German military, Sajer's experience apparently had not included actual battlefield movement. He had to *learn* to move properly on a battlefield given his culture, time, and context, and he made it an embodied habit quickly.

How an American-trained soldier in the War of 1812 moved on a battlefield is quite distinct from that of a German-trained soldier in World War II. Again, the accompanying Labanotated score is illustrative, since nowhere in the 1812 basic marching drill is there any mention of a "bent-double" posture. Why might this be the case?

As noted above, soldiers in the War of 1812 were drilling in a distinctive way in order to learn how to achieve close-order formations that would give them overwhelming mass-force relationships on the battlefield. Moreover, they drilled to learn how use unwieldy muskets that needed to be loaded from the muzzle in the same close-order formations. It is inviting to see upright posture in the War of 1812 as merely an innocuous utilitarian concession to the technology of the time. But John Keegan provides convincing ethnographic evidence that manuals of arms, like marching drills, embody culturally specific values. Keegan notes that,

European drill, when first demonstrated by Takashima, the Japanese military reformer, to some high-ranking samurai in 1841, evoked ridicule; the Master of the Ordnance said that the spectacle of 'men raising and manipulating their weapons all at the same time and with the same motion looked as if they were playing some children's game.' This was the reaction of [Japanese] hand-to-hand warriors, for whom fighting was an act of self-expression by which a man displayed not only his courage but also his individuality (1993: 10).

This alerts us to the idea that military drill embodies a number of values. In this case, proper expressions of "maturity," "seriousness," "manliness," "courage," and "individuality" are all at risk in military drill. "Utility" is thus only one cultural value among many. Perhaps for the War of 1812 American soldier, being "bent-double" risked the proper embodiment of some value in the same way that "sameness-of-motion" and "keeping-together-in-time" risked the proper embodiment of courage and individuality for a Japanese samurai in 1841?

Our contemporary English phrase "a stand-up guy" signifies the close connection between moral values and physical posture. This metaphor suggests that the upright, lined-up, massed-behind-a-banner positioning of Napoleonic land-based warfare indicated the *moral character* of the soldiers so positioned. A soldier's not being upright meant not being in a position to fight (well), and this in turn suggested that the soldier valued something other

than his comrades, his unit, or vanquishing the enemy. In short, a soldier's place in the moral hierarchy could be degraded. The prevailing ideology was that anyone lacking courage would not *face* the enemy like a man—that is, *upright*.⁵

During the American Revolution, 36 years prior to the War of 1812, British officers complained bitterly about the lack of American respect for “decency” in battle. The British were masters of open-field fighting where massed lines of infantry faced one another while using the inaccurate smooth-bore muskets. Some American militia units countered the British mastery by refusing to fight against the British in the same way. Instead, they used highly accurate rifled muskets in dispersed formations from cover and actually aimed to kill individual British officers rather than volley firing *en masse* at a formation. The British equation of an upright posture with being morally (up)right included consideration of a soldier's position on a battlefield (open field versus behind cover) and at whom a soldier shot (other “line” soldiers versus officers) with a particular kind of weapon (smooth bore versus rifle). Where an individual, unit, army, or commander was placed in the *moral hierarchy* depended on these considerations, at least for the British.⁶

Proper alignment of military movement, positioning, targeting, and weaponry was understood to be a sign of proper masculinity. Any misalignment of a soldier's discipline (training) and way of fighting risked the moral standing of both the soldier and his unit. Moreover, the felt experience of engaging an enemy that was considered “unmanly” could translate into supreme confidence and actually have a positive impact on a unit's battlefield effectiveness. Conversely, the felt experience of being part of a unit known as “unmanly” because it was termed “indecent,” could undermine effectiveness. Ultimately, then, soldiers during the War of 1812 were certainly equipped physiologically to move “bent-double” and so avoid being shot, but they did not avail themselves of this option because military cultural convention connected upright posture with the ideas of commitment to a cause, being masculine, and courage. A charge of cowardice might be leveled at them should they decide to move in ways other than upright.

To illustrate further how the cultural meanings of military posture on a battlefield can change across cultures if not across time, we can consider Sajer's aforementioned “bent-double” posture under fire against the Japanese soldiers “crawling” on patrol in World War II. In his book *Phantom Soldier: The Enemy's Answer to U.S. Firepower* (2001), H. John Poole quotes U.S. Marine Sergeant O.J. Marion as saying the following about a Japanese patrol on Guadalcanal,

We were observing and were carefully camouflaged. We heard a little sound and then saw two Japs crawl by about 7 feet away from us. These Japs were unarmed. We started to shoot them, but did not do so as we remembered our mission. Then, 15 yards later came 8 armed Japs. They were walking slowly and carefully. . . . When I got back, we had a lot of discussion as to why the two Japs in front were not armed . . . I believe they were the point of the patrol and were unarmed so they could crawl better (Poole 2001: 50-51).

This provides a third example of embodiment and “proper military posture” on a battlefield. As with the British in the Revolutionary War, Sergeant Marion implies through his observation of the Japanese, that how soldiers were armed, or not armed in this case, on a battlefield was important. Apparently for the Japanese, one of their cultural stock of proper embodiments of military values included being weaponless on a battlefield in the presence of the enemy. For Americans, being weaponless on a battlefield in the presence of the enemy would have prompted ideas of “surrender,” or “incapacitation” or some other negative explanation.

Poole brilliantly assesses the Japanese military’s insight into human social relationships and the advantage they sought to instill in training their soldiers to crawl while on patrol when he adds, “An upright human does not look for one of his species on the ground.” Although reductionist in its implication of a universal biological orientation towards seeing, Poole’s comment centers attention on how persons are culturally trained to focus on a particular space if conceptually anticipating an as-yet-unobserved object in that space. The anthropological caveat to the universal biological implication of Poole’s comment would be, “unless you were trained in the Japanese infantry during World War II.”

In this cultural comparison, three sorts of battlefield posture have been compared: upright, bent-double, and crawling. An upright posture for 19th century American infantry meant both valuing the maximization of effectiveness of a particular kind of weapon system as well as a statement or a claim about a soldier’s moral standing. A bent-double posture for a 20th century German infantryman meant valuing the ability of a soldier to stay alive on a much deadlier battlefield than that of the 19th century. A crawling posture for a 20th century Japanese infantryman meant deriving a battlefield advantage by avoiding the enemy’s culturally trained expectations regarding the observation space.

The German bent-double posture and the Japanese crawling posture mark an important subsequent change in Western military values. As Sajer’s battlefield discovery demonstrates, maintaining an upright posture on the battlefield was now disconnected from indicating that a soldier was committed to a cause and personally courageous enough to engage the enemy. Being a proper soldier was no longer dependent on an upright posture.

Moreover, military movement on a parade ground no longer matched the military movement practiced on a battlefield, as had been the case for American soldiers in the War of 1812. Instead, parade ground drill became a means of teaching soldiers about the value of organized, unitary action. This disconnection, as well as the continued value of drill in teaching soldiers how to act in unison, is continued into the present day. The U.S. Army’s online preparatory guide for recruits states,

Many drill procedures used by the United States Army today were developed during the Revolutionary War. The purpose of the drill then was to instill discipline in American soldiers. As these soldiers mastered the art of the drill, they began to work as a team and to develop a sense of pride in themselves and

in their unit. In today's Army, the same objectives—teamwork, confidence, pride, alertness, attention to detail, esprit de corps, and discipline—are accomplished by drill (http://basic.armystudyguide.com/Drill/drill_formation.htm).

The U.S. Army's explanation of drill is usefully set against McNeill's understanding of drill (pp. 88-89 above). The purpose of drill for the U.S. Army is certainly not to generate a subrational, private euphoria, but to teach soldiers how to control their own bodies in order to work effectively in teams, with confidence and with attention to detail. Bodily techniques are fully cognitive as well as socially enacted skills. If McNeill's euphoria is a factor in drill, it is a sidelight, a byproduct of rational, learned embodied practice. That is, such euphoria is best characterized as a cultural (American) way of expressing approval in achieving orderliness.

Military Movement as Cultural Convention: Modern Comparisons

In the 21st century, American infantry continues to embody Western military values first practiced by the ancient Greeks (Hanson 1987: 5). For example, in the 5th century, the Greeks valued fighting in ways that would decide a battle quickly and decisively in order to limit casualties and destruction. Cordoning off the battlefield as a space and time separate from other social actions ensured that only those candidates seen as appropriate for warfare, such as male land-holders, would be involved. Moreover, it defined a military space appropriate for death and destruction that was separate from non-military spaces, notably gendered civilian spaces that included women and children.

A second example was the association of military defeat on a battlefield with the "benign humiliation" of the loser. Benign humiliation meant that a loss on the battlefield "left the property and culture of the defeated intact" (Hanson 1987: 224). Instead, battlefield defeat resulted in a drop in the moral standing of the losing city-state in the social hierarchy and/or acquiescence to abide by the political demands of the victorious. Simultaneously, however, Hanson notes that a progression from benign humiliation into "unconditional surrender and subjugation of the defeated" that characterizes much of "modern" warfare, was already present as the Greeks developed other modalities of warfare (Hanson 1987: 5).

It is to this latter value of unconditional surrender and subjugation of the defeated that modern American political and military entities remain indebted. American sentiment after the 2nd Gulf War provides a powerful contemporary example of this ongoing commitment. American leaders unilaterally declared that the "mission [was] accomplished" in Iraq "after" the 2nd Gulf War. However, they failed, and continue to fail, to realize that the enactment of social and political acquiescence on the part of the defeated requires a foe that values the ancient Greek association of battlefield defeat with such enactment. Clearly Iraqi soldiers did not and do not share that value. Americans have reacted with astonishment and confusion at the lack of political and social acquiescence by the Iraqi military and paramilitary forces after they were defeated decisively on the battlefield. Perhaps even more troubling is the absence of any understanding on the part of American

military leaders that the current situation recreates the *same* embarrassment felt after the 1st Gulf War. Keegan notes that,

In the Gulf a Clausewitzian defeat was inflicted by the forces of the coalition on those of Saddam Hussein. His refusal, however, to concede the reality of the catastrophe that had overtaken him, by recourse to a familiar Islamic rhetoric that denied he had been defeated in spirit, whatever material loss he had suffered, robbed the coalition's Clausewitzian victory of much of its political point. Saddam's continued survival in power, in which the victors appear to acquiesce, is a striking exemplification of the inutility of the 'Western way of warfare' when confronted by an opponent who refuses to share its cultural assumptions (1993: xi).

Iraqi military leaders also do not share the West's version of how to fight "properly." We see that 21st century American armies still value aspects of ancient Greek ways of fighting, as did their 19th century American counterparts.

Hanson states that modern American armies:

sacrificed mobility, maneuver, grace, if you will, on the battlefield in exchange for the chance of stark, direct assault, of frontal attack against the main forces of the enemy and the opportunity to strike him down—all in the hope of decisive military victory on the battlefield (1987: 10).⁷

Ethnographic evidence of Hanson's claim abounds. In June of 2004, I had the privilege of observing the training practices of Bravo Company, 1/502nd Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). The soldiers I interviewed, ranging from officers to enlisted men, uniformly noted their disdain of their Iraqi opponents during their time in combat in the 2nd Gulf War. They refused to ascribe "courage" to Iraqi fighters who tended to use ambush and "hit-and-run" tactics, and who tended to use "cyclic" (sustained, full automatic) rates of fire when discharging their weapons. The import of the latter was made apparent to me by a platoon sergeant who indicated that cyclic rates of fire threw many bullets toward Americans, but also rendered the weapon almost impossible to control. This choice of cyclic fire rates by the Iraqi fighters thus reduced the likelihood of hitting anything or anyone. Yet, this strategy permitted them to have an impact on the American soldiers without exposing themselves. Time spent carefully aiming and firing for effect would ensure that the Iraqi fighter's position could be located and so subjected to superior American training and firepower. Like their British military forebears, American soldiers are masters of their version of warfare and Bravo Company veterans readily admit that it would have been virtual suicide for Iraqis to try and fight the American way. Yet, this admission apparently did not ameliorate the bitterness and contempt expressed by these men for their Iraqi counterparts' use of "unfair" and "cowardly" tactics. That the Iraqis *should* have been willing to fight to the last under impossible odds in defense of their way of life is, perhaps, another deeply-held Western value. Military "last stands" such as occurred at the Alamo during the Texas Revolution of 1836 continue to be celebrated in America. The echo of such stands is heard in popular song lyrics such as Springsteen's *No Surrender*.

The American embodiment of Western and especially ancient Greek military values even extends to the way 21st century American soldiers are armored. A story published recently in *The Wall Street Journal* focuses on the concerns expressed by an army surgeon over a new helmet being introduced in Iraq. The new helmet

offers less protection on the back and side of the head . . . in past wars, this might not have been a problem. In infantry-style combat, soldiers typically are struck in the front of the head as they charge toward the enemy. But in Iraq, where the deadliest threat is remote-detonated roadside bombs, many soldiers are getting blasted on the sides and back of the head . . . (Jaffe 2004: A1, A4)

Clearly, the American military still embodies the Greek preference for forward-facing, offensive, charging infantry.

Conclusions

In this paper I have argued that some Western military historians such as Keegan and McNeill, produce contradictory accounts of Western infantry movement by citing evolved biological structures such as instincts or emotion-states as sources for military action. For example, McNeill first employs a socio-culturally, meaningful personal action to identify phenomena of interest—the enactment of military drill—but then uses a biological explanation of the phenomena, which renders socio-cultural meaning irrelevant. There can be no such thing as “meaning” in the operation of the putative biological mechanism that generates the phenomena. To assert the latter would make unclear how historical or cultural variation in meaning could be explained (unless here-to-fore unknown biological mechanisms were discovered).

By adopting a semasiological perspective through which human actions are seen as embodied discourses that (literally) embody cultural values, infantry movement in the West can be understood with a degree of clarity and richness not usually encountered in the everyday deployment of analogies by/about the military. I have shown that these embodied cultural values can be historically variable as well as persistent over time; they can also vary cross-culturally or be shared cross-culturally. This variability, in light of contradictory explanations by some military historians, suggests that fine-grained examination of the meanings and practices embodied by present-day soldiers would be a fruitful topic for further ethnographic research.

Moreover, my discussion above suggests that the temporal, spatial, and contextual characteristics of infantry movement—for example, the different postures utilized by World War II German and Japanese infantry—have something to do with the very different contexts in which each are enacted. Sajer (2000 [1967]: 66) reported movement in a trench system while in the presence of a *known* enemy. Marion (in Poole 2001:50-51) reported on Japanese infantry movement on patrol in a jungle, that is, in the presence of an *unknown but suspected* enemy. The possible relevance of these contextual differences to understanding and interpreting infantry movement is perhaps best captured by Williams’s statement that, “The spaces in which human acts

occur are not simply physical spaces. They are simultaneously physical, conceptual, moral, and ethical spaces" (1995: 52). Again, further research should prove fruitful.

Endnotes

¹ See Williams 1999 for discussion of the problem of "origins" in the anthropological study of human movement.

² "Close-order" here refers to positioning soldiers in very close proximity to one another. "Drill" refers to a prescribed pattern or patterns of movement(s) executed in unison by groups of soldiers that includes marching, the handling of weapons, or both.

³ It is well documented that Major Reno's leadership at the Battle of the Little Bighorn declined sharply and significantly when Bloody Knife was hit in the head by a bullet and killed. It is usually implied that the psychological shock of being spattered with blood and gore from the dead man "unhinged" Reno. Reno's orders to his troops became confusing and inconsistent. I suggest another plausible explanation that emphasizes the social rather than the psychological. Reno's questionable leadership after Bloody Knife's death stemmed from the loss of his translator. Reno could not determine how to direct his own troops in the face of an enemy whose intentions were a mystery, given his "illiteracy" in their movement values during warfare.

⁴ An appreciation of what disciplined volley firing may have meant to War of 1812 soldiers can be gleaned from my experience with The Fort McHenry Guard. The Guard learned to fire simultaneously by replicating instructions in a hybrid manual of arms from the War of 1812. Thirteen individual steps were required to load and fire a historic reproduction flintlock musket. Three discharges per minute was the standard for a "well-drilled" soldier. The Guard often participated in "live-fire" target shooting competitions with other historic re-enacting units wherein the muskets were loaded with .69 caliber lead balls and fired at target silhouettes from various distances. At one such event in 1994, just after a live-fire, the author overheard a group of re-enactors commenting on the simultaneity achieved by the Fort McHenry Guard's 6-member team in discharging their muskets in unison at the command, "fire"! The ethnographic point is that the single "boom" produced by the Guard's unity contrasted with the distinctive individual "pops" produced by other units and so was considered a sound-sign marking the qualitative difference between well-drilled and not-so-well-drilled troops. I would hazard a guess that such markers were quite powerful and threatening to actual historic combatants, as must have been the expected results.

⁵ In Ken Burns's film *The Civil War* (1989), the historian Barbara J. Fields contends that the American Civil War was made into something other than a "schoolyard fight" with a larger, redeeming purpose by its association with freedom for slaves. Her characterization completely misses the strong cultural values embodied in Western and American ways of fighting that I have related here.

⁶ The Western military angst over snipers marks a serious tension in military values. The effectiveness of snipers is nearly unquestioned from a utilitarian standpoint. Snipers tend to be effective exactly because their long-range capability and stealth mean that the target is usually unaware of them. This lack of knowledge prevents the target from being able to respond at all. However, such unilateral denial of the target's social engagement in the fight violates respect for the ability of the enemy to respond, a feature that has been a hallmark of hand-to-hand combat in the West. As a result sniping has been viewed as amoral, immoral, sneaky, underhanded, and unfair.

In *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (1995), Lt. Col. Dave Grossman quotes Peter Staff as saying that after every war "the United States military rushes to distance itself from its snipers." Grossman himself adds that, "there is a strange revulsion

and resistance toward this very personal, one-on-one killing by snipers." I would argue that the emotional distress Grossman tracks documents the cultural prescription for how one should feel after violating the cultural proscription against battlefield killing except at hand-to-hand distances. As Hanson contends, this latter notion was part of the way that Greeks controlled killing on a battlefield while minimizing casualties and ending battles quickly.

⁷ For all his sensitivity to cultural and historic differences in warfare, Hanson follows Keegan in introducing ambiguity as to the nature of warfare by implying biological universals when he says, "...this inner craving for a clear decision, despite the carnage, will not fade; it cannot since, as the Greeks discovered, it resides in the dark hearts of us all" (Hanson 1987:13).

References Cited

Ardener, Edwin

1989 [1973]. 'Behavior'—a Social Anthropological Criticism. In *Edwin Ardener: The Voice of Prophecy and Other Essays*. (Ed. Malcolm Chapman). London: Basil Blackwell, pp. 105-108.

Farnell, Brenda

1994. Ethno-Graphics and the Moving Body. *Man (N.S.) Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 29: 929-74.

Giuliani, Rudolph W., Frank McCourt and Thomas Von Essen

2001. *Brotherhood*. New York: Sterling Publishing Co. Inc.

Grossman, Lt. Col. Dave

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

Hanson, Victor Davis

1987. *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Jaffe, Greg

2004. An Army Surgeon Says New Helmet Doesn't Fit Iraq. In *The Wall Street Journal*, Vol. CCXLIV, No. 39, pp. A1, A4.

Keegan, John

1993. *A History of Warfare*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Mauss, Marcel

1992 [1934]. Techniques of the Body. In *Incorporations*. (Eds. J. Crary and S. Kwinter). New York: Zone Books, pp. 454-477.

McNeill, William H.

1995. *Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Poole, H. John

2001. *Phantom Soldier: The Enemy's Answer to U.S. Firepower*. Emerald Isle, NC: Posterity Press.

Reno, Oattie W.

1997. *Reno and Apsaalooka Survive Custer*. New York: Cornwall Books.

Rothenberg, Gunther E.

1980[1978]. *The Art of Warfare in the Age of Napoleon*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Sajer, Guy

2000 [1967]. *The Forgotten Soldier*. Washington, DC: Brassey's Inc.

Springsteen, Bruce

1984. *Born in the U.S.A.* Columbia Records.

Von Steuben, Frederick William Baron

1985 [1794]. *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc.

Williams, Drid

1982. Semasiology. In *Semantic Anthropology, ASA Monograph 22*. (Ed. David Parkin). London: Academic Press, pp. 161-181.

1995. Space, Intersubjectivity, and the Conceptual Imperative: Three Ethnographic Cases. In *Human Action Signs in Cultural Context: The Visible and the Invisible in Movement and Dance*. (Ed. Brenda Farnell). Metuchen, N.J. and London: Scarecrow Press, pp. 44-81.

1999. *Anthropology and Human Movement: Searching for Origins. Readings in the Anthropology of Human Movement*, Volume 2. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.