

“Don’t Fight the Blue Elephant”

Humorous Signs as Protests and Conductors of Negotiations in Swedish Peace Support Operations

By Louise Weibull & Jan Ch. Karlsson

Although Peace Support Operations (PSOs) are serious matters, Debretts’ description of a typical English wedding as “*a minefield for the socially insecure, and a logistical nightmare for the organizers*” and, for good measure, “*a source of inter-family tension*” (Fox, 2004, p.372) illuminates some of the recurrent challenges of multinational military peace support operations that are indirectly in focus in this paper.

It was during a fieldtrip to the Swedish Camp Clara in Liberia that the first author initially noticed how soldiers of the expeditionary force were engaged in a joking culture manifested in workplace signs and posters that are on public display. Also of significance regarding the signs was the fact that they exuded something different to the run-of-the-mill ‘I hate Mondays/love Fridays’ ethos that one finds in many workplaces in the sense that they paid tribute to a discourse where work is taken seriously.

Apart from the meta-humour in parodying one of the military world’s dominant discourses of public communication, it was obvious that these messages were meant to provide more than just pure entertainment. To use Mulkay’s words, humour was used to license various kinds of “*serious interactional work*”, referred to as “*applied humour*” by Mulkay, in contrast to the term “*pure humour*” which is reserved for more momentous entertainment (Mulkay, 1988, p.217). The purpose of this article is to analyze the messages communicated in these signs, when comparing signs found in high- and low-intensity conflict areas, respectively. Although spontaneous jokes, banter, and witticisms between colleagues doubtlessly play a very important role in soldiers’ day-to-day lives, the scope of this paper is limited to humour that aims to make a point about this world.

Signs humorously commenting on workplace conditions have not, to our knowledge, been analyzed before. Certainly, instances have been recorded of signs made by employees (e.g., Webb & Palmer, 1998, pp.621-622), but these have been used as empirical illustrations rather than analyzed. In other contexts, sign humour has been analyzed, e.g. the role of humour on commercial billboards (Hufana, 2010), hurricane graffiti painted on houses (Alderman & Ward, 2008, pp.10-12), church marquees (Bell, Crossley & Hempelmann, 2011), *latrina* graffiti (Bartholome & Snyder, 2004), and of course political cartoons (Rodriguez & Collinson, 1995 ; McGuirk, 2008).

Ben-Ari and Sion (2005), in one of the few prior studies specifically focusing on humour in military settings, comment that a self-reflective commentary is ever present in military life. While ethnographic works recognize humour as a phenomenon that abounds in military life (Hockey, 1986; von Zugbach, 1988; King, 2004), and while scholars of the armed forces have long noted the importance of studying the informal side of military units as valuable entry points into issues like leadership, small group behaviour, and combat performance, the study of humour has received scant scholarly attention (Ben-Ari & Sion, 2005, p.656). The focus on humour in military settings is not, however, justified purely by the fact that it is an under-researched field. In a formal and rigorously ordered hierarchical organization like the military, arguably innocent free spaces are especially important insofar as joking practices can target rather serious organizational matters-of-fact that often cannot be expressed in other ways. Applied humour in a relatively strict, formalized community such as the military is thus especially interesting.

The case outlined in what follows suggests that the humour discourse reflects the special character of the mission contexts, serving as a cathartic release from various stressors and tensions insofar as the shift from a 'serious mode' to the 'humorous' one permits greater freedom of expression (Mulkay, 1988). Before introducing some theoretical points of departure, we give a short description of the operational context of Peace Support Operations and the soldiers' motivation for being there.

Soldiers' Motivation and the Ambiguous Framework of Overseas Missions

Sweden's Armed Forces have been very successful in marketing the Expeditionary Force as a place to be if you want to contribute to a better world and 'have what it takes'. Soldiers expect to work hard but also to experience adventure, self-realization, and altruism in practice.¹

Although young people who decide to serve abroad are motivated by a complex amalgam of many things (comradeship, extra money, a sabbatical, an adventure, etc.), doing good in the world is a sincere aspiration for many. So far, recruitment drives have regularly attracted several thousand applicants, with selection providing the serviceman/woman with both status and a seductive feeling of being among the chosen few.

From interviews, it was clear that working hard, being professional, doing good, and making a difference were all part of the soldiers' expectations based on a mixture of subjective intentions, official information, and rumours. However, in reality, this image often became problematic. For one thing, service abroad, by its very nature, is highly circumscribed and a number of rules regulate the soldiers' actions regarding organizational and professional conduct. All in all, it was not unusual for soldiers to express feelings of disillusion and ontological insecurity (Giddens, 1991).

¹ On July 1 2010, Sweden launched a new human resource management system of contracted soldiers. By the time of the study, Sweden had not yet recruited a professional army. The soldiers were mainly highly-motivated former conscripts, of whom the majority were civilians volunteering for six months' service abroad.

Further, the sorts of conflicts justifying the presence of international troops in the first place are most often very complex. Additionally, an aspect that can be phrased in terms of it being almost impossible to measure the success of these operations as long as it is not a complete failure is of little help. Doubts about whether or not a personal contribution has really been made to the big picture were also supplemented by calling into question these commissions as a whole. The aphorism used in the title of this article, ‘Don’t fight the blue elephant’, is perhaps more than anything an illustration of this vote of no confidence. What might seem like nothing more than a fanciful and odd expression is, to the insider, a barbed critique of the inefficiency and bureaucratic fall-backs of the organization with which you serve, and whose highly significant symbol, the blue helmet, you wear.

Research Aim

As mentioned previously, the purpose of this article is to compare unofficial humorous signs found in two types of military contexts: high- and low-intensity conflict areas. The case outlined in what follows suggests that the humorous exchanges reflect different characters of the mission contexts, in which it serves as a cathartic release from various stressors and tensions insofar as the shift from a ‘serious mode’ to the ‘humorous’ one permits greater freedom of expression (Mulkay, 1988). An underlying assumption is that, behind these creative signs, rather serious clues to the concerns of the group are unfolding whereby the security situation and nature of the duties conducted in the mission areas have a certain importance. In more detail, we argue that, since the missions in Liberia and Kosovo were conducted in two so called low-intensity conflict areas, where the expected threat level for military activities is considered comparatively low, the humorous discourse reflects idealized identities and status negotiations which, on a more profound level, can also be interpreted as seeking confirmation of your work as necessary, important, and appreciated by others. In contrast, the mission in Afghanistan was set in a high-intensity conflict area and warlike situation. Against this background, we suggest that the humorous discourse here reflects a more acute need to let off steam to survive emotionally. Likewise, it is suggested that the oppositional tone displayed in the humour targeting the Headquarters is a direct consequence of the hard-pressed situation on the ground.

Humour in Military Settings

Organizational life bubbling with humour is nothing new. In that regard, military organizations are no exception. Similar to many other occupational groups and the average workplace, both pure and applied humour are recurrent in military life, with several ethnographies testifying to the overall high value attached to khaki humour (Elkin, 1946; Hockey, 1986; von Zugbach, 1988; Simons, 1997; Ben-Ari, 1998; Ben-Ari & Sion, 2005). Anthony King (2004), who did fieldwork with the Royal Marines (UK), even went as far as to claim that, although apparently superfluous, humour is extremely important for the operational

effectiveness of these soldiers. One reason for this is undoubtedly the specific nature of their work ; King describes how one of the qualities of operational humour is that it seems to reduce the magnitude of difficulty in the imagination of the individual – something that ultimately helps individuals to face danger (p.23). Humour acting as a useful tool for channelling discomfort in civilian life is well documented (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999 ; Bolton & Houlihan, 2009). How military life becomes more endurable with a lining of humour is another important quality described by King (2004) and Hockey (1986) in the form of cheerfulness in the face of adversity (see also Simons, 1997). Indeed, there are rich examples of how soldiers use humour to channel their frustrations in stressful and sometimes hostile environments and, since much traditional military work is chiefly a mixture of repetition, stress, and waiting, the importance of humour for passing the time cannot be overrated in military life. In addition, similar to descriptions of life on the factory floor, military groups often use profanities to describe most aspects of their work in terms of gallows humour. One example of this is Swedish soldiers serving in Afghanistan playing ‘IED bingo’ (bingo with Improvised Explosive Devices) during minesweeping.

Likewise, the literature on humour outside of the military community is a testament to its many and varied qualities (for a review, see Bolton & Houlihan, 2009). It can support processes of in-group/ out-group differentiation while resistance to management control is also facilitated (Bolton, 2005; Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999). For the individual, it can be a means of self-protection (Holmes, 2000) or self-assertion (Willis, 1977). Its inherent powers can, furthermore, be used vertically, horizontally, or on members and groups of the same status (Bolton & Houlihan, 2009; Coser, 1960; Vinton, 1989). The fact that it contains positive qualities for group cohesion will be further described in what follows (see also Roy, 1960; Strömberg & Karlsson, 2009; Fine, 1988 ; Fine & de Soucey, 2005). In civilian settings, Ackroyd & Crowdy (1992) also provide insights into the darker side of humour as a harsh and destructive tool for bullying and harassment at the hands of colleagues (for more examples, see Bolton & Houlihan, 2009). One subtler form of this, often found in military communities, includes teasing and banter with people who make mistakes. Since one of the specific traits setting military institutions apart from most civilian occupations is that individual members ultimately risk personal injury or death in combat, it is perhaps not surprising that the tradition of ‘rubbing the noses of those making mistakes in it’ for a considerable period of time, in word and deed, seems to be more the rule than the exception.

King (2004) describes how, in the Royal Marines, humour highlights membership and emphasizes the solidarity of the group, thus fostering the social cohesion critical to operational effectiveness. Well aware of these prerequisites, the Marines have even incorporated humour into their training, something that allows individual members to occasionally step out of formal roles of authority. Rose Laub Coser (1959, 1960), in an oft-cited study of mental hospital staff, gives valuable insights into the social function of humour. One of her central notions is the equalizing qualities of humour as a means of reducing social tensions. Humour

being especially suited to bridging the fissures that tend to result from the status system and the division of labour within formal organizations is a point also made by Goffman (1959, p.21) and Mulkay (1988).

One study specifically focusing on humour in a military setting is Eyal Ben-Ari and Liora Sion's fieldwork among two battalions of Israeli Defence Force (IDF) reserves (Ben-Ari & Sion, 2005). Like King (2004), the authors suggest that humour, despite persistent inequalities and differences between soldiers, was a signifier of the cohesion of the units. Hence, regardless of disparities among troops in terms of occupation, rank, and informal standing, and the strong ongoing undercurrent of constant competition regarding dominance and submission, the role of humour in this context was integrative in the sense that it incorporated and created a shared universe of meaning. Another observation was that humour in military settings may also serve as a means of relatively safely releasing hostile and competitive feelings. Overall, humour in the IDF context seemed to have the capacity, as previously described by Coser (1960), to dramatize, in functional terms, the violation of norms while simultaneously reaffirming them (Ben-Ari & Sion, 2005).

It has already been accounted for that joking is ideally suited to camouflaged serious communication. It is, however, widely debated whether or not humour has any transformational powers, with the evidently meaningless character of much organizational humour often leading to the conclusion that humorous discourse, whilst creating some temporary discomforts for those who are its targets, is a futile form of resistance (Mulkay, 1988). Others ascribe humour, even though its resistance may be covert and it has a seemingly innocent nature, with the potential to be a negotiator and re-definer of reality (Linstead, 1985). Ackroyd and Thompson (1999, pp.105, 116) give more recognition to the fact that jokes can resonate and play on the contradictions and paradoxes that organizational life is full of, and that this is something that causes humour and joking to be an overlooked expression of radicalism (see also Collinson, 1992). King (*op.cit.*) makes the point that humour allows the natural order to be questioned and changed if necessary. Applied humour, in particular, builds on identified weaknesses and creates ambiguity. In blurring and obfuscating power relationships, the status quo is upset in subtle ways whereby unsettled interpretative loose ends can be picked up time and time again (Bolton, 2005, p.144).

Another widely acknowledged facet of humorous discourse is that it often reflects incidents and instances where incongruity exists between what a person or group expects and what is actually the case (Mulkay, 1988; Coser, 1960; Fine, 1984; Clouse & Spurgeon, 1995). As Mulkay (1988, p.219) claims, we can merely conclude that it is precisely these qualities that seem to make it superior, as a means of expression, to ordinary, serious discourse, premised as it is on an implicit denial of the fact that we live in a world of multiple meanings and multiple realities.

Method and Procedure

The data consist of a collection of workplace signs put up by Swedish troops during PSOs in Liberia (Camp Clara), Kosovo (Camp Victoria), and Afghanistan (The Provincial Office of Sheberghan) between 2006 and 2010.² In Liberia and Kosovo, these signs were noticed by the first author during visits; with regard to Afghanistan, they refer to interviews and soldiers' personal photos. Engaging in satirical graffiti is not, however, unique to Swedish soldiers as Figure 1, a sign made by an Irish soldier, illustrates.



Figure 1 : ‘For sale or swop for Lada’
(photo by Thomas Vrenngård)³

Official signs with an often restrictive and prohibitive imperative are paramount in the military world. Considering the fact that military camps are showered with them, it is not surprising, perhaps, that expressive behaviour takes this form. The manner of putting up personalized versions containing humour is also a tradition that has some legacy in the history of the Swedish expeditionary force. The basic rule for these sign types seems to be that you take your designated name and try to make a point with it. For example, in Liberia, the platoon whose call sign was ‘Alpha Romeo’ put a flag with the name of that car make outside their quarters.

The signs under study here are, however, of a different nature insofar as they have a message going beyond that type of display. Since the interpretation of the reason, target, and motive of these messages is in focus, the signs are primarily interpreted against the backdrop

² The task in Liberia was to be part of a UN-led quick-reaction force, together with the Irish. In Kosovo and Afghanistan, the units served under NATO command. All three missions were conducted under a Ch. VII mandate. In brief, this means that returning fire is not exclusively reserved for self-defense, but also allowed if insurgents show ‘hostile intent’.

³ The sign was encountered at Camp Clara in Liberia. The comment is quite representative of how Irish soldiers viewed the standard of their vehicles.

of the circumstances of the specific mission. Of all the encountered signs, the messages that could be sorted under the category of applied humour are presented.

In the three mission areas, the trend of pointed public messages seems to have been more common in Liberia⁴ than in Afghanistan or Kosovo. One explanation for this might be that the Kosovo mission was the 14th, inculcating a more institutionalized work environment compared with the pioneer spirit of the contingent deployed to Liberia.⁵ In Afghanistan, on the other hand, where signs are generally less common, one explanation could be the more serious and warlike situation. As one officer explained, “*when somebody wants to kill you, you have less time for fun*”.

Apart from soldiers giving their explanation and interpretation of certain signs, they have been analyzed in the light of findings from a longitudinal interview study. The informants selected for interview consisted of a group of 26 individuals, all men – infantry soldiers aged between 21 and 36, who were interviewed three times, i.e. during pre-deployment training, about five months into deployment (six months in total), and six months after their return to Sweden. Twelve of the informants were deployed to Liberia, twelve to Kosovo, and two to Afghanistan. Three were officers while the others were former conscripts who had volunteered for international service.

Selection for interview was made by Army Tactical Command Headquarters.⁶ Roughly a quarter of those interviewed had served on at least one mission previously. The research questions did not focus specifically on humour, centring more broadly on experiences of theatre and of contacts with various parties. In addition, a number of informal conversations with soldiers and officers who have served abroad have constituted important sources of information. One such talk was recorded; otherwise, notes were hand-written. These conversations contained questions about signs and humour and took place at a garrison in the south of Sweden where the first author was engaged (Berggren *et al.*, 2011). Two other soldiers studied at the Swedish National Defence College.

Findings

The central argument presented suggests that the level of operational intensity is reflected in the content of humorous signs. The first part of the findings addresses the data from the two low-intensity conflict areas, Kosovo and Liberia, while part two concerns the

⁴ One platoon even hired a local artist who did an ambitiously elaborate mural of the Swedish soldiers and their vehicles. This mural was later repainted and Swedish faces were replaced by Pakistani ones, this being the force that moved into the compound after the Swedish mission had terminated. This was considered rather rude and cheeky by the Swedes.

⁵ During the initial and early deployments to each mission area, soldiers often built the camp up from scratch and lived under more primitive conditions. Although the focus of the study was the fifth and final Liberia mission, it has been confirmed that signs formed a part of camp decorations early on.

⁶ This meant that we were able to indicate the type of people we wanted to interview, but that we were unable to influence individual interviewee selection.

high-intensity operational context of Afghanistan. A low-intensity conflict area usually indicates that quite some time has passed since the conflicting parties were involved in actual hostilities, or at least that the development is moving steadily away from such hostilities. It is here argued that the humorous discourse reflects the soldiers' notions of professionalism and a more profound search for confirmation of their work in terms of being real, respected, and of value to others. Although the humorous discourse does not appear to have the purpose of really challenging concrete circumstances, the expressions do seem to have modest bargaining powers within the social structure. In the second case, which focuses workplace signs encountered at Swedish military compounds in Afghanistan, characterized as a high-intensity conflict area and close to being a war-zone, it is suggested that frustrations of another type arise when organizational values are projected against the backdrop of the actual situation.

Low-Intensity Conflict Areas

The Hardworking 'Elite Soldier'

When the infantry soldiers in Liberia returned to camp after being out on patrol, you could regularly hear Dolly Parton's *9 to 5* coming from the outside amplifier systems of their vehicles. Naturally, this could be seen purely as an amusing ritual, a tradition without any deeper meaning. However, it fits well with the heralded soldier identity of being 'green collar', of being hardworking men slaving away with heavy duties and equipment.

Outside the wall of their sleeping area, made up of containers, a huge sign, a remake of a poster, was hanging where the backdrop was a picture from the very popular TV series *Band of Brothers*, highly acclaimed for its accuracy (Figure 2). The baseline story centres on a group of elite parachute regiment soldiers during World War II.⁷ Over this picture, a new message has been printed: *Hotel Bravo*, with the digits on each side representing the soldiers' identification numbers.

In this context, the sign plays with the dubious meaning of 'Hotel' when comparing the container with a traditional hotel; however, 'Hotel Bravo' was also the unit's radio call-sign.

Several different motives are plausible when interpreting the intended message behind these signs and banners. Peace Support Operations are surrounded by expectations regarding hard work, potential danger, and tight group relations. The soldiers who are undoubtedly the



Figure 2: 'Hotel Bravo'
(photo by author)

⁷ This series focuses on the experiences of 'E-company' (*Easy Company*) of the *US 101st Airborne Division* who landed in Normandy and fought there until the end of the war. The storyline is partly documentary and loosely based on a book by Steven Ambrose (2001).

closest to these images in reality are those working outside the camp when they are patrolling streets, searching cars and houses for weapons or drugs,⁸ or on long-range patrols.⁹ As the situation in Liberia and Kosovo was quite calm at this time, the sign may be seen in terms of compensating for an unfulfilled warrior identity and engagement in ‘real’ military tasks. Since some soldiers also questioned the usefulness of their contribution, the self-aggrandizing signs are also likely to have a slightly ironic undertone while also constituting a mark of dissimilarity to other units within the same company, in line with the spirit of emulation that permeates subterranean military life in general.

One sign from Kosovo – which in some respects was an even more uneventful mission area at the time of the study – connects with the previous interpretation of an idealized warrior identity (Figure 3). Under the motto ‘Desire for danger’, the unit displays here self-distance to its keenness to get a piece of the action. The point is further illustrated by the soldier in the middle juggling with hand grenades while his eyes are covered by a hood.

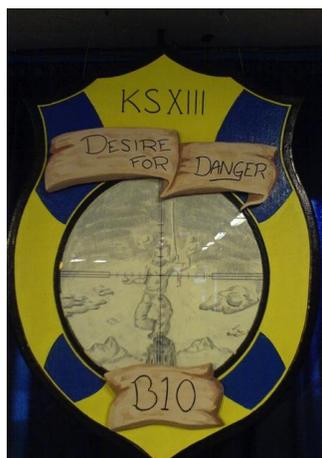


Figure 3: ‘Desire for danger’
(photo John Karlsson)

In the soldiers’ quarters at Camp Clara, there was also a more serious message on the fridge door in the container sleeping areas: “Fridge temporarily closed. Will re-open for next war” ; notions indicating a rather laconic view of the future of Liberia and an anticipated circle of conflict. During interviews, disillusionment was also coexistent whereby soldiers expressed doubts regarding the utility of some of the duties they were carrying out. One officer deployed to Liberia explained:

I know for a fact that the intelligence collected by the liaison officers and the infantry soldiers just ends up at the local UN headquarters in a box. It leads nowhere and has absolutely no impact whatsoever. It’s just a bit of nonsense to keep people busy.

⁸ This task only recurred in Kosovo.

⁹ This task only recurred in Liberia, and for reconnaissance.

The humorous discourse under study did not, however, only reflect idealized identities and rusty illusions; as we shall see below, messages promoting dignified professionalism were also forthcoming.

Dreams of Cream as a Symbol for Professionalism

The first thing you notice when approaching the canteen kitchen is a big white sign (Fig. 4), with only one word on it in black ink. The word is *grädde* which is the Swedish word for cream. Being able to use butter and cream is what most cooks regard to be the key to good cooking, which is why the sign simply indicates what the cooks want most. The UN supply of dairy products was, however, very limited. The main obstacle was heat and the constant high humidity making it impossible to cook with cream if the food had



Figure 4 : ‘Cream’
(photo by author)

to be kept warm for some time before consumption. Even though the troops at Camp Clara were well aware that a certain lack of excellence was to be expected, and that the food did not always taste like it does back home, this did not seem to have been enough for the cooks.

However, the sign on the wall signifies several possibilities. One interpretation is that this is a way of anticipating critique in a humorous form, whereby announcing the circumstances will serve as a combined excuse and reminder. It is not just the cooks’ general level of ambition in their pots and pans that is at stake, however ; the kitchen staff are well aware that, under the relatively restricted and primitive conditions in which people work and live during their deployment, meals become very important. Not being able to show their ambition, will, and competence in the best possible way, can then also be seen as an obstacle to their professionalism. The importance of this was emphasized by the fact that the cooks were said to personally have brought in luxury cooking items, e.g. béarnaise sauce powder, when returning from leave in Sweden.

“There is No Dirty work”

As in most organizations, there is something of a tacit understanding in the Swedish Armed Forces with regard to which positions render status.¹⁰ Translated into the context of the Expeditionary Force, the symbolic divide in the lower ranks is between those who work outside and those who work inside the camp, i.e. infantry soldiers *vs.* support units (see also von Zugbach, 1988; Ben-Ari & Sion, 2005). The latter, whose tasks are restricted to the camp, are generally looked upon as having drawn the shortest straw in this competition; even before

¹⁰ The informal ‘pecking order’, whereby statuses are negotiated, starts as early on as during conscription, with a commonly recognized hierarchy of ‘cool’ and ‘daft’ positions. From interviews, it was clear that your function as a conscript was the first subject touched upon when meeting others for the purposes of helping this sorting along, before any questions were asked about one’s hometown, family situation, etc.

deployment, some of these soldiers, during interviews, described how they were planning to take on additional tasks just to be able to leave the camp to see the operational theatre, but also to get in touch, perhaps, with the kind of work that counts.

Of the support functions, the mechanical engineers company can be described as a unit with a medium status position. When the cohesion of the contingent was discussed, it was indicated during interviews and talks that there had been, at least initially, some minor friction between the mechanical engineers and the infantry (sometimes ironically referred to as the ‘real warriors’ by the mechanical engineers). As previously indicated, in a low-intensity conflict area like Liberia, a warrior is something of a contradiction in terms in a peacekeeping force. During interviews, there emerged a sort of defence against what was felt to be disrespect on the part of others.

The role of the logistics company, as providers of all kinds of support from fuel to electricity, is a somewhat special case as a fulcrum for all other activities. It is often far away from real action but everybody agrees that stamina is required to work there and that making something as complex as a military camp fire on all cylinders is something that deserves respect. The logistics company, however, has a status that is somewhat uncertain, at least initially. In line with American General Omar Bradley’s famous quote: “*Amateurs talk strategy. Professionals talk logistics*”, the interviews reflected the fact that the soldiers who worked there were aware that it is hard to question the impact of successful logistics on the endurance of any military operation:

They’ll find out soon enough quite clearly... If they don’t get food or clothing or fuel, they can get stuck there.

Outside the bungalow, where this company in Liberia had its office, there was a carefully taped note stuck on a plastic garden table with the following Russian saying : ‘There is no such thing as dirty work. It is only your conscience that is dirty’. Even if this reminder is worth almost everyone’s consideration, in this context it is more likely to represent a protest against the low-status image of some of their duties whereby the groups’ professionalism is advocated while self-distance is displayed. Another sign on their door read: *Ego duco vos habetis scietiam nos vincebimus*, a slightly misspelt version of a Latin quotation which, according to the soldiers, translates as : ‘I lead you to success through knowledge’.

“*No Is Also Service*”

Even if the logistics company was displaying role-distance through humour directed at some of their tasks, its status was considerably higher than that of the staff serving in the main stores, unquestionably lowest in the support proletariat, exceeding only the locally-employed Liberians in charge of washing and cleaning. Neither is work in the main supply store very gratifying, for several reasons. You are the messenger who has to act as a lightning conductor for all the frustration and anger caused by delayed shipments from Sweden. There are stories of how some equipment arrived at exactly the same time as the contingent was packing to

return home. It goes without saying that it takes a lot of emotional management to stay service-minded vis-à-vis things that you can neither control nor foresee. Another rather unpopular task is keeping track of things that people have lost. In order to take the edge off an anticipated criticism, two notes were put up on the wall of the main supply store at camp Clara. One stated ‘*No is also service*’ and the other ‘*If it’s so important, why didn’t you come yesterday?*’. The message behind these humorous and sarcastically-formulated remarks is likely to be the staff’s way of displaying authority and role-distance and further bolstering respect for their work, without being openly aggressive towards their ‘customers’.

We have argued that humour is a vehicle that presents and reinforces values, assumptions, and conceptions of status. The following section concerns Afghanistan – a high-intensity conflict area – where the security situation differs significantly from the mission contexts referred to above. Compared to Kosovo and Liberia, neither statuses, warrior identities nor the negotiated order are the main concerns reflected in the signs found here. Characteristic of these messages is, rather, that they are objects of consensual agreement connected with the allocation of resources and righteous but hackneyed decrees issued by headquarters. An oppositional tone emerging more strongly is likely to be a consequence of the serious situation on the ground. Since soldiers are involved in warlike situations, the signs do not indicate references to the warrior identity previously described.

High-Intensity Conflict Area

In any organization, conflict may arise when individuals are caught between the imperatives of the management literature and the demands of the actual work situation. One interpretation of the signs below indicates that, when various policies are confronted by harsh realities, these are sometimes experienced as illustrations of how to ‘strain at a gnat and swallow a camel’.

“Perhaps the Phantom Can Help Us?”

The Swedish Armed Forces have been engaged in Afghanistan for about ten years; over time, circumstances have become increasingly challenging. The situation on the ground is not easy to grasp or control, or to accept in all its facets, a point illustrated in the nickname ‘Absurdistan’. The first example presented concerns an officer who started his situation report briefing with a PowerPoint slide where the famous Lee Walker cartoon *The Phantom* was reading a message from the local PRT (provincial reconstruction team) which said:

Dear Phantom,

Could you please fix things West of MeS. We are busy in Baghlan.

P.S. Remember COIN DS.

Interpretation of the message needs some contextualization. The PRT in Mazar-e-Sharif (MeS) is part of Regional Command North – RC(N), where Germany is the leading nation. Apart from being responsible for an area four times the size of Kosovo, the Swedish units

occasionally assist German ISAF forces in Baghlan and elsewhere. This province has lots of insurgent activity, but the same can also be said of the Swedish area West of MeS, characterized as rather hopeless in soldiers' narratives. When confronted with insurmountable endeavours, what is there to do? Well, maybe *the Phantom* can help out. The postscript 'Remember COIN', on the other hand, alludes to the fact that the operational policy of 'COunter INsurgency' (COIN), as it was employed at the time by Swedish units, is a rather tired buzzword. COIN¹¹ means, in practice, that all military undertakings should be carried out in collaboration with the Afghan National Army (ANA) and, in some cases, the Afghan National Police (ANP). Even though COIN is a catchphrase that summarizes an ideal and an intention that most soldiers wholeheartedly support, it is not always easy, in reality and for various reasons, to implement, not least due to security measures.

Humour and Core Values

Early on in the history of the Expeditionary Force, a few scandalous events took place.¹² In order to do something and regain the public's trust, a large survey was undertaken within the SAF in general, with the purpose of finding out whether there also was an attitude problem within the ranks. A huge educational programme was then launched in 2006 by a private consulting firm in order to promote a modern and open defence force, characterized by core values such as tolerance, equality, and respect. The project was called ÖRA (the Swedish word for 'ear'). This acronym stands for 'openness' (Ö), 'results' (R) and 'accountability' (A). The baseline was that, regardless of sex and sexual orientation, the workplace should be a place where people were treated respectfully. So, for example, a ban on pornography in overseas garrisons and living quarters was put in place, and more tolerance towards bisexuals, transsexuals, and homosexuals within the ranks was advocated. The cost of the ÖRA package grew astronomically to 10.1 million Euro, simultaneous to a massive downsizing of the SAF. The necessity of an investment of this size was hotly debated, especially since the message being communicated was regarded as nothing more than common sense by many soldiers. Several minor forms of resistance were also noted. When people wanted to speak more freely (i.e. less politically correctly), they invented a sign for a 'core value timeout', forming the timeout sign used by coaches in the sporting world, or by simply holding one hand in a V-sign over the ear before speaking.

A version of this ÖRA protest was also visible, in the form of a printed message, in at least three different places in Afghanistan. One of these was the Swedish Provincial Office in Sheberghan, a small town West of Mazar-e-Sharif, where approximately 30-40 Swedes worked and lived. One day, someone put up a plywood sign, measuring 60 x 40 cm, featuring blue capital letters in an army style font, and containing the text 'core-value-free area' (in

¹¹ In essence, this means that the responsibility for maintaining security should be assumed by national authorities after a period of collaboration and mentorship.

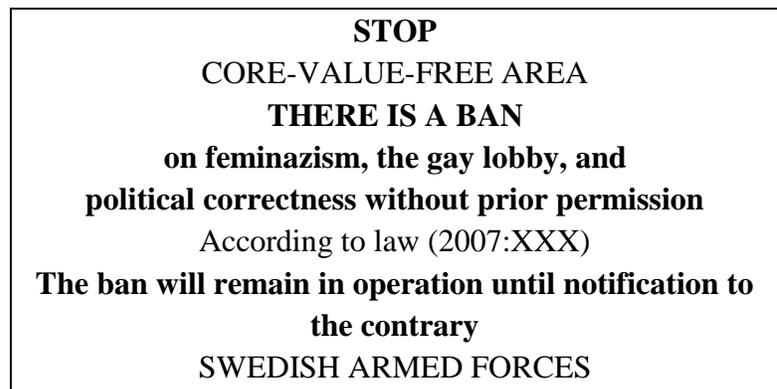
¹² For instance, in Kosovo, female soldiers reported sexual harassment (*Svenska Dagbladet*, 28 April 2005).

Swedish), outside the entrance to the camp. The sign was there for a couple of weeks without any action being taken, until a visiting high-ranking officer pulled the plug. The sign then disappeared for a while but reappeared again fairly soon afterwards, this time saluting newcomers on the main road just outside the city. A more elaborate version (Fig.5) was encountered at another compound.



Figure 5 : ‘Core-value-free area’
(photo by anonymous Swedish officer)

In translation, the sign says:



The protest against the core values programme can be seen as having other, more serious grounds for criticism than finances or the programme’s assumed resemblance to common sense. In a threatening and warlike environment, where it was just going to be a matter of time before the Swedish troops would also be taking casualties, various costly soft issues and ‘completely obvious’ codes of conduct were seen as the wrong focus and further down the wish list than, for instance, the promised MEDEVAC helicopters.

Clearly, though, overall reactions to the core-values project also testify to the fact that soft issues connected with femininity and homosexuality are still found to be quite provocative in this setting, or at least more or less in permanent opposition to what is perceived to be

important in military work (see also Simons, 1997; Ben-Ari, 1998; Ben-Ari & Sion, 2005; von Zugbach, 1988; Hockey, 1986).

With regard to the interpretation of the message we can merely conclude that it has different possibilities. Either, it is an example of sexism and a continuing macho culture, here concealed under the cover of anonymity. Alternatively, it is a way of making a humorous comment about the much discussed core-values programme, and the authorities' way of rubbing in of what 'everyone already knows'. It was also suggested by soldiers that hanging the signs outside the city walls was targeting the Afghans' core values. One officer explains the cumulative emotional load he was experiencing:

My fuse was getting shorter and shorter and my opinion of people was steadily worsening, all because my awareness increased in step with the amount of time I spent with those idiots down there. There are some really bad people there – by our standards, that is. The Provincial Governor was into selling arms and weapons and drug smuggling, really corrupt, which all goes totally against our values. There I was as a secularized Swede and a part of the democratic tradition, judging their actions to be completely wrong, more or less. But, all the time, you have to apply the political correctness filter, because if you don't, things can really fall apart.

In Sheberghan, another interesting sign-episode occurred. Over a period of several years, the Swedish contingent, strictly contrary to repeated orders, standards, and regulations, kept a dog there. The dog was called Isaf (named after the entire Afghanistan mission) and was “*the most loved and spoilt dog in Asia*” (Fig. 6). Apart from being fed on a privileged diet of fillet of beef, he was regularly shampooed, de-wormed, and vaccinated. Isaf was described as a marvellous caretaker of various psychological needs in a forgotten corner of the world, but he was also an excellent watchdog. For several years, he spent his life outdoors in a small compound. Over the entrance to his elaborate and insulated kennel, the sign ‘Isaf HQ’ could be read. Inside, somebody had pinned up a picture of a female dog (Figure 7), a nod to the ban on pornography.



Figure 6 : The dog Isaf
(Photo by anonymous Swedish officer)



Figure 7 : Isaf's pin-up girl
(Photo by anonymous Swedish officer)

Afghanistan is not an easy country to travel in, with chances of spontaneous visits being low. However, rumours of Isaf's existence at last reached headquarters in Stockholm, where numerous orders were issued that the dog had to be removed. Since Swedish forces rotate on a six-monthly basis, over the years, a number of people must have been engaged in 'saving Isaf' and covering up his existence. While some claim he was never hidden away, others recall stories about how he just vanished at inspection times. Finally, the pressure from HQ was too much so the unit gave Isaf to a private American contractor, where he later died a natural death. When looking at this event more closely, it is, by Swedish standards, a rather extraordinary form of obstructing and violating both orders and regulations (for examples of rule-bending and rule-breaking in the British Army, see Kirke, 2010). The circumstances under which Isaf was kept, his name, the name of his house, and the 'pin-up' also illustrate the oft-stressed connection between humour and disobedience (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999; Collinson, 1992).

Audiences and Butts

When interpreting the signs under study, questions regarding their imagined audiences and butts (Davis, 1998) are naturally of interest. Here, we would suggest that the signs are usually made with the horizontal in-group of peers in mind. That is, if the purpose of the signs were to seriously challenge the overall rules of the game, they would presumably not have been posted in places exclusively visible to an audience of peers. An important exception from the signs that have peers as their butt is the sexist and homophobic sign from Afghanistan regarding core values (Figure 5). Usually, the butt of humour is also regarded as a single individual or group. In this case, however, there are two butts – one belonging to the military hierarchy and one belonging to the patriarchal gender hierarchy. The sign is, on the one hand, directed upwards towards the Headquarters' core-value campaign and, on the other, downwards from the male towards the female position.

Apart from an argument stating that the presented signs' messages originate from the soldiers' sense-making of their situation in two fundamentally different kinds of military operations, we have suggested that the humorous discourse in focus is a free space of expression and a way of 'letting off steam' (Fine, 1988) from various emotional management demands. To some readers, it may perhaps seem presumptuous to argue that a number of signs put up in military camps offer any substantial relief from the previously described experiences. However, it seems accurate to claim that the humour discourse under study has certain beneficial aspects. For one thing, the signs offer a rare space for 'being human' (Bolton, 2005) wherein soldiers, to some degree, can gain control of their lives by being allowed to complain and criticize the conditions of their service (see also Ben-Ari & Sion, 2005, p.659; Mulkay, 1988). Taking part, whether in the passive audience or as an active manufacturer, in a humour discourse aimed at sense-making and/or undermining various targets in a milieu as stressful as an operational theatre is likely to be an activity of a cathartic nature, regardless of whether the target of criticism is in blissful ignorance or not.

Conclusion

Signs humorously commenting on workplace conditions have not, to our knowledge, been analyzed before. This article concerns a certain fashion for humorous pranks in the Swedish Expeditionary force, above all as expressed in the form of workplace signs posted at various locations in military camps in Liberia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan between 2006 and 2010. Common to the signs is the fact that their messages correspond to Mulkey's (1988) concept of applied humour, i.e. they are examples of humour making a point about the world. Like most humorous discourse, the signs reflect the concerns of the group, but the central argument presented here suggests that their contents above all are mirroring differences in the nature of operations; i.e. threat-level and duties conducted in the respective mission areas.

In contrast to previous research on humour in military settings, the aim of the article is to compare humorous exchanges found in two types of military contexts; high- and low-intensity conflict areas. Our analysis suggests that the signs found in the last category, Kosovo and Liberia, where the expected threat level for military activities is considered comparatively low, the humorous discourse reflects idealized identities and status negotiations which, on a more profound level, can also be interpreted as seeking confirmation of your work as necessary, important, and appreciated by others. An example is the sign "*Fridge temporarily closed. Will re-open for next war*" found on a fridge in the soldiers recreation area.

From other signs and rituals in Liberia, it was also clear that the infantry soldiers experienced ambiguities in their role performances. Even if the re-make of the *Band of Brothers* poster on the outside wall of their sleeping container had an ironical twist, it can alternatively be seen as the soldiers' way of compensating for the fact that they, after a period of preparatory training focused on combat-skills and worst-case scenarios, were part of a quick-reaction force that was not once called into action.

The high-intensity conflict area is represented by signs from Swedish compounds in Afghanistan. Here, the humorous discourse reflects a more acute need to let off steam to survive emotionally. Role ambiguities seemed to be less of a problem among these units, who operated under warlike ramifications. The oppositional tone displayed in the humour targeting the Headquarters is a direct consequence of the hard-pressed situation on the ground. In addition, the sign inviting assistance from *the Phantom*, reflects feelings of hopelessness in an insurmountable situation. Likewise the postscript 'Remember COIN', reflects an ideal that in reality and for various reasons is often hard to implement, not least due to security measures.

In sum, it has hopefully been illustrated above that humorous comments in signs (and in general), should not be neglected as valuable clues to workplace conditions can be gained from analyzing their contents. The accuracy of the point for the military contexts under study is depicted in a quote by Anna Simons (1997, p.139), who conducted fieldwork among US Special Forces, to the effect that humour is "*one of the unsung talents most good soldiers must have*". All in all, the findings of this article suggest nothing less.

Bibliography

ACKROYD, Stephen & Philip **CROWDY**, “Can Culture Be Managed? Working with ‘Raw’ Material: The Case of English Slaughtermen”, *Personnel Review*, vol.19, n°5, 1992, pp.3-13.

ACKROYD, Stephen & Paul **THOMPSON**, *Organisational Misbehaviour*, London, Sage, 1999.

ALDERMAN, Derek H. & Heather **WARD**, “Writing on the Plywood: Toward an Analysis of Hurricane Graffiti”, *Coastal Management*, vol.35, n°1, 2008, pp.1-18.

AMBROSE, Stephen E., *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest*, New York, Touchstone, 1999.

BARTHOLOME, Lynn & Philip **SNYDER**, “Is it Philosophy or Pornography? Graffiti at the Dinosaur Bar-B-Que”, *Journal of American Culture*, vol.27, n°1, 2004, pp.86-98.

BELL, Nancy D., Scott **CROSSLEY** & Christian F. **HEMPELMANN**, “Wordplay in Church Marquees”, *Humor*, vol.24, n°2, 2011, pp.187-202.

BEN-ARI, Eyal, *Mastering soldiers: Conflict, Emotions and the Enemy in an Israeli Military Unit*, New York, Berghahn books, 1998.

BEN-ARI, Eyal & Liora **SION**, “Hungry, Weary and Horny. Joking and Jesting Among Israel’s Combat Reserves”, *Israeli Affairs*, vol.11, n°4, 2005, pp.655-671.

BERGGREN A., **L. WEIBULL**, **E. HEDLUND**, **M. GRANBERG**, **P. HYLLENGREN** & **B. GUSTAVSSON**, *Makt, pedagogik, ledarskap och organization. En studie av ett mekaniserat skyttekompani (Power, Pedagogics, Leadership and Organization. A Study of a Mechanized Infantry Company)*, Stockholm, Försvarshögskolan, 2011.

BOLTON, Sharon, *Emotion Management in the Workplace: Management, Work and Organisations*, London, Palgrave, 2005.

BOLTON, Sharon & Maeve **HOULIHAN**, “Are we Having Fun Yet? A Consideration of Workplace Fun and Engagement”, *Employee Relations*, vol.31, n°6, 2009, pp.556-568.

CLOUSE, Wilburn R. & Karen L. **SPURGEON**, “Corporate Analysis of Humor”, *Psychology: A Quarterly Journal of Human Behavior*, vol.32, n°3, 1995, pp.21-24.

COLLINSON, David L., *Managing the Shopfloor: Subjectivity, Masculinity and Workplace Culture*, Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter, 1992.

COSER, Rose L., “Some Social Functions of Laughter: A Study of Humor in a Hospital Setting”, *Human Relations*, vol.12, n°2, 1959, pp.171-182.

COSER, Rose L., “Laughter Among Colleagues. A Study of the Social Functions of Humor Among the Staff of a Mental Hospital”, *Psychiatry*, vol.23, 1960, pp.81-95.

DAVIES, Christie, *Jokes and their Relation to Society*, Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter, 1998.

ELKIN, Henry, “Aggressive and Erotic Tendencies in Army Life”, *American Journal of Sociology*, vol.51, n°5, 1946, pp.408-413.

FINE, Gary A., “Humorous Interaction and the Social Construction of Meaning: Making Sense in a Jocular Vein”, *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, vol.5, 1984, pp.83-101.

FINE, Gary A., “Letting Off Steam? : Redefining a Restaurant’s Work Environment”, pp.119-127 in M.O. Jones, M.D. Moore & R.C. Snyder (eds.), *Inside Organizations: Understanding the Human Dimension*, Newbury Park, Sage, 1988.

FINE, Gary A. & Michaela **DE SOUCEY**, “Joking Cultures: Humor Themes as Social Regulation in Group Life”, *Humor*, vol.18, n°1, 2005, pp.1-22.

FOX, Kate, *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 2004.

GIDDENS, Anthony, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991.

GOFFMAN, Erving, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York, Doubleday, 1959.

HOCKEY, John, *Squaddies. Portrait of a Subculture*, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 1986.

HOLMES, Janet, “Politeness, Power and Provocation: How Humour Functions in the Workplace”, *Discourse Studies*, vol.2, n°2, 2000, pp.159-185.

HUFANA, Shayla, *Where’s Your Sense of Humor? The Graphic Designer’s Effective and Powerful Tool in Billboard Advertising*, <http://ebookbrowse.com/hufana-shayla-thesis-pdf-d156387988> (accessed September 26, 2011).

KING, Anthony, *The Ethos of the Royal Marines. The Precise Application of Will*, University of Exeter, Department of sociology, 2004.

KIRKE, Charles, “Orders is Orders...Aren’t They ? Rule Bending and Rule Breaking in the British Army”, *Ethnography*, vol.11, n°3, 2010, pp.359-380.

LINSTEAD, Steve, “Jokers Wild : The Importance of Humour in the Maintenance of Organizational Culture”, *Sociological Review*, vol.33, n°4, 1985, pp.741-767.

MCGUIRK, Bernard, “Animot Liberation or Oh! What a Beastly War: The Falklands-Malvinas Conflict in the Political Cartoon, from *Humor* to *The If... Chronicles*”, *Journal of Romance Studies*, vol.8, n°2, 2008, pp.73-94.

MULKAY, Michael, *On Humour : Its Nature and its Place in Modern Society*, Cambridge, Polity, 1998.

RODRIGUEZ, Suzana & David **COLLINSON**, “‘Having Fun’? Humour as Resistance in Brazil”, *Organization Studies*, vol.16, n°5, 1995, pp.739-768.

SIMONS, Anna, *The Company they Keep : Life Inside the U.S. Army Special Forces*, New York, Free Press, 1997.

STRÖMBERG, Susanne & Jan **KARLSSON**, “Rituals of Fun and Mischief : The Case of the Swedish Meatpackers”, *Employee Relations*, vol.31, n°6, 2009, pp.632-647.

SVENSKA DAGBLADET, 28 April 2005 : http://www.svd.se/nyheter/inrikes/nytt-fall-av-sextrakasserier-i-kosovo-anmalt_416875.svd (accessed 26 September 2011).

VINTON, Karen, “Humor in the Workplace: Is it More than Telling Jokes”, *Small Group Behavior*, vol.20, n°2, 1989, pp.151-166.

VON ZUGBACH, R., *Power and Prestige in the British Army*, Aldershot, Avebury, 1988.

WEBB, Mike & Palmer **GERRY**, “Evading Surveillance and Making Time: An Ethnographic View of the Japanese Factory Floor in Britain”, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol.36, n°4, 1998, pp.611-627.

WILLIS, Paul, *Learning to Labour. How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, Farnborough, Saxon House, 1977.