



Soldiers stand in line at a "reenlistment office" in Baghdad on 25 February 2004. (Photo and satirical caption by Staff. Sgt Wes Wooten, 982nd Signal Company)

# Comedy in Combat Culture



## Understanding the Use of Humor in Crisis and Conflict

Maj. Sally Williamson, Australian Army

There are few leaders with a job more serious right now than Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. Yet, this emergent world leader still finds the odd occasion not to take himself too seriously. During an interview with David Letterman in an underground train station in Kyiv nine months after the large-scale Russian invasion, Zelensky joked:

Two Jewish guys from Odesa meet up. One is asking the other, “So what’s the situation? What are the people saying?”

And he goes: “What are people saying? They are saying it’s a war.”

“War? What kind of war?”

“Russia is fighting NATO.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, Russia is fighting NATO!”

“So, how is it going?”

“What do you mean, how is it going? Seventy thousand Russian soldiers are dead. Missile stockpile has been almost depleted. A lot of equipment is damaged, blown up. That’s the situation.”

“And what about NATO?”

“What about NATO? NATO hasn’t even arrived yet!”<sup>1</sup>

His tone is calm, and his voice is clear. There is a small smile and his usually serious and sullen face lights up for just a second as he says the punch line. Although spontaneous, it is a thoughtful joke delivered to domestic and international audiences with a slightly different message for each. It demonstrates how appropriate humor can serve as a useful tool for interpersonal and informative communication, transcend traditional hierarchies, serve as a culturally acceptable mechanism for voicing dissatisfaction, and act as an effective coping strategy in crisis and conflict.

Understanding what constitutes appropriate versus inappropriate humor is based on individual values and beliefs, and the context in which it is delivered. Filipe Sobral, Liliana Furtado, and Gazi Islam describe humor as having two potential styles: positive or negative. Positive humor includes affiliative or self-enhancing humor and seeks to “build and enhance interpersonal relationships through funny stories, jokes, and witty comments.”<sup>2</sup> Negative humor, on the other hand, is aggressive or deprecating and functions through irony,

sarcasm, and ridicule. This kind of humor is used to vent dissatisfaction and create relatability by drawing the comedic aspects from shared or collective hardships.<sup>3</sup> Another important aspect of humor relates to whether the joke targets oneself or whether it targets a person or entity that is a stranger to the audience, known to the audience, or a member of the audience.<sup>4</sup> From a context perspective, humor is generally best received when the audience shares the same context or can, at a minimum, imagine themselves in that situation.<sup>5</sup> Timing, tone, and method of delivery can also serve to make a joke more or less effective, as anyone who has seen stand-up comedy can attest.<sup>6</sup>

There are substantial amounts of literature that focus on the managerial aspects of humor.<sup>7</sup> However, for the military, comedy is more than just a tool for transformational leadership, it is a part of the organization’s social identity and culture.<sup>8</sup> In a 2016 *Army Magazine* article, Col. Eric Zimmerman discusses how humor was historically incorporated into leadership doctrine. He explains that the 1948 Department of the Army Pamphlet 22-1, *Leadership*, and the 1999 Field Manual 22-100, *Army Leadership: Be, Know, Do*, both included passages espousing the positive aspects of affiliative humor. He recommends that the “artful application of humor in leadership” should be incorporated into modern doctrine as there are many potential benefits, such as the “development and maintenance of trust and cohesive teams, resiliency and critical and creative thinking.”<sup>9</sup> Modern U.S.

Army doctrine does not mention humor as a leadership trait, but it emphasizes why having a sense of humor is important in retaining a positive emotional state and achieving optimal mental readiness.<sup>10</sup> Studies tend to support Army Techniques Publication 7-22, *Army Team Building*, and Zimmerman’s claims.<sup>11</sup> However, these same studies also warn that if comedy is inconsistent with the leadership

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David Letterman interviews Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in October 2022 three hundred feet below ground on an active subway platform in Kyiv as part of his show *My Next Guest Needs No Introduction with David Letterman*. Zelensky, a former comedian, uses humor as a tool to convey messages to internal and external audiences. (Screenshots from YouTube)

style or typical behaviors of a certain individual, it may aggravate divergence in leader-follower relationships and impair team outcomes.<sup>12</sup>

For comedy to be an effective interpersonal and informative communication tool, leaders attempting humor must have high levels of emotional intelligence and a natural or learned affinity for humor. Contrived or fake attempts at humor will likely detract from the messaging, undermine the legitimacy of the deliverer, and generate mistrust.<sup>13</sup> Zelensky has been a comedian much longer than a politician, so even though his domestic and international information campaigns are usually grim, sincere, and serious, he can naturally revert to humor when opportunities arise.<sup>14</sup> Although an advantageous trait, military leaders do not need to be comedians. However, they need to recognize the value of having a collective and individual sense of humor because comedy does not just operate in a linear or hierarchic fashion and is an inevitable component of workplace relations.<sup>15</sup>

The many forms of Army-deprecating humor that operate beyond the boundaries of traditional military structures are important expressions or artifacts of culture. Doctrine Man, Army WTF Moments, Duffelblog, Sad Officer Memes, Miltwitter, and the Angry Staff Officer are modern examples of ironic, satirical, and negative humor that reflect parts of Army culture rarely discussed formally.<sup>16</sup> Although social

media has made creating and disseminating jokes easier, military-related satire has always been present in the United States. Fictional examples like the cartoon *Willie and Joe*, the movie and spin-off television series *M\*A\*S\*H*, and the movie *Stripes*, funny anecdotes from military memoirs, and cartoons from military magazines and newsletters demonstrate the power of comedy in breaking open taboos, building rapport, and creating a shared sense of understanding.<sup>17</sup> As will be discussed in later sections of this article, satirical humor is primarily used as a means of voicing dissatisfaction and relieving stress; however, it also serves as a relatable and socially acceptable communicative tool to nonmilitary personnel.

Bridging the military-civilian divide, particularly during conflict or crisis—when the realities of war can feel far removed from the everyday existence of friends, family, and the general population at home—can be very difficult. The Army strives to demonstrate unwavering professionalism, discipline, and responsibility, but in so doing, it can create a robotic reflection that is disassociated from the civilians they serve.<sup>18</sup> Comedic outlets are an avenue for communicating the human side of military life. They are a nonendorsed way of showing imperfection, relatability, and most importantly, humanity.<sup>19</sup> As Angry Staff Officer suggested, “The more that we can do to show that we are their Army, the better.”<sup>20</sup>

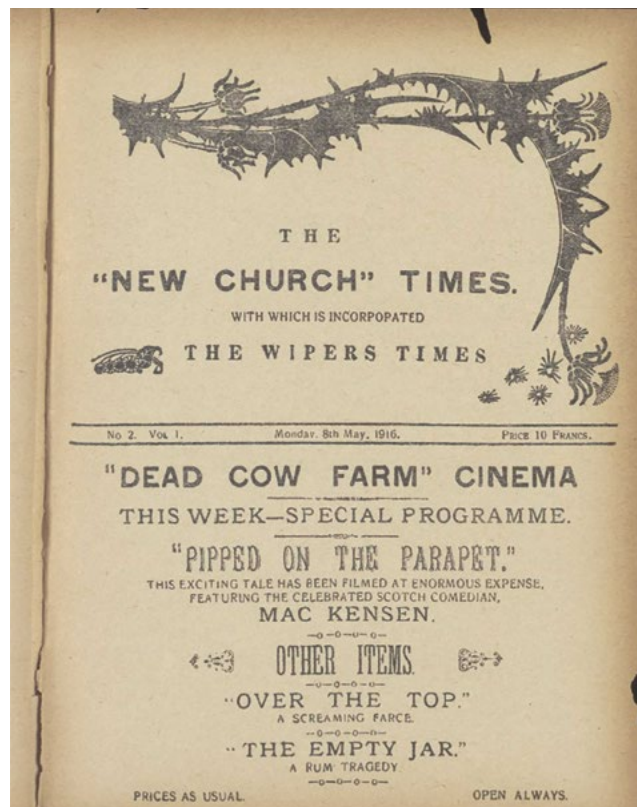


Although useful in messaging to nonmilitary audiences, the primary motivation for these comedic outlets is to voice dissatisfaction with leadership, the military bureaucracy, or the political masters that control it. Individuals or groups may voice dissent through humor because it is often a more culturally and socially acceptable way to motivate change in situations where they might not otherwise have agency due to existing power structures and hierarchies.<sup>21</sup> Comedy transcends rank and position and provides an avenue to challenge policy, decision-making, and resource apportionment without threatening the chain of command.<sup>22</sup>

When leaders use deprecating humor toward subordinates without establishing a very close bond, they are unlikely to get a good reaction.<sup>23</sup> However, when a subordinate uses ironic humor toward superiors or the Army, it can incite positive change. This only works, however, if those superiors and authorities retain their sense of humor and see the joke or story in the way it was intended—as a form of constructive criticism.<sup>24</sup> The following anecdote comes from the author's personal experience and describes how a well-timed joke from a soldier can work to diffuse tension, deliver feedback, and motivate change.

It was late. After patrolling half lost in the tropical heat all day, the platoon finally wandered into the support area and made their way to the mess tent. Hoping for a fresh meal, they quickly realized that the cooks had finished for the night and were deep into clean-up duties. You could feel the mood sink and the soldiers walked dejectedly outside looking for a place to sit down and open yet another MRE. The platoon jester cleared his throat, and in his finest mock general officer's voice exclaimed, "Don't worry men! We have so much morale right now, that we can just eat that for dinner instead." Laughter and smiles replaced the silent disappointment that had filled the air only seconds before and the young platoon commander breathed a sigh of relief. He made a quiet promise to himself to work extra hard on navigation that night.

There is no doubt that the primary target of the joke was the platoon leader, and the message delivered by the soldier was ironic but clear. Morale was low because the team had missed out on fresh food, and



*The Wipers Times* cover from 8 May 1916. The magazine was produced by British soldiers during World War I to help maintain morale. (Image courtesy of Westflandrica Heritage Library, Kortrijk, Belgium via Wikimedia Commons)

the cause of this condition was the leader's poor navigation skills. However, the delivery was witty, tactful, and funny, and the deliverer was known to the audience as a natural joker. An angry or direct attack on the platoon leader or even a quiet word from one of the senior NCOs may have invoked the desired change of behavior; however, it would also have represented a challenge to perceived notions of hierarchy and elicited a very different physiological response. The informal, timely, and effective quip was a relatable expression of collective thought and an assessment of the platoon leader's performance but delivered in a nonthreatening way.

This expression of collective thought is not only useful in motivating leaders to action, but it can also be a way of venting frustration in stressful situations. Humor has long been established as an effective coping mechanism for soldiers and civilians caught up in conflict and crisis.<sup>25</sup> *The Wipers Times* was a British World War I magazine produced by soldiers in the



Door gunner Petty Officer Richard Symonds of the Royal Navy wears a Santa Claus outfit as he delivers mail and Christmas presents to troops around Helmand Province, Afghanistan, on 25 December 2010. (Photo courtesy of the British Ministry of Defence)

Ypres Salient. The editorial in volume 3 from March 1916 states, “We hear that the war (to which we alluded guardedly in our first number), is proceeding satisfactorily, and we hope shortly to be able to announce that it is a going concern. So, for the time being, there we will leave it and turn to graver subjects.”<sup>26</sup> This type of ironic or dark humor, and the sharing of jokes and stories in dire situations where one might otherwise freeze or crumble, helps to maintain morale, willpower, and cohesion amongst fighting forces.<sup>27</sup>

Leaders, however, need to recognize when their subordinates are using humor as a tool for managing stress as it is often indicative of underlying sentiments or thoughts.<sup>28</sup> Deprecating humor directed at others can quickly shift from appropriate to inappropriate as the values and norms of the fighting force are stretched beyond accepted cultural standards due to escalations of violence and human suffering.<sup>29</sup> Words spoken in jest often lie somewhere between the desired truth and reality and can signal shifts in morality, faith, and

self-belief.<sup>30</sup> This is not to say that leaders should completely restrict the use of dark humor by their subordinates but rather pay more attention to whom they are targeting their jokes, monitor the impacts they are having on the team, and find time to reinforce moral and ethical standards when appropriate.

We can reconsider the Zelensky joke from the opening paragraph as both a stress-coping mechanism and a means of voicing dissatisfaction toward NATO. Although the subject of his joke is primarily Russia, there is a hint of deprecation toward his powerful Western-based allies. Zelensky makes his humorous yet poignant criticism in such a way that his message is clear and culturally acceptable given Ukraine’s position within the global hierarchy. His joke is appropriate and relatable, and he delivers it at a time and to both an internal and external audience who is ready to receive it. Although not all leaders have the requisite emotional intelligence to use comedy as part of their repertoire, they should understand its value as a tool

for interpersonal communication, study its history as an outlet for expressing dissatisfaction, recognize its positive and negative attributes, and acknowledge its importance as a coping strategy. Humor is a fundamental component of combat culture in conflict and

crisis. As Zelensky said in his interview, “Because these days there aren’t as many opportunities in our lives for a smile but you can’t live without a smile. Humor is a part of one’s being ... it’s very important, as it helps one not to lose their mind.”<sup>31</sup> ■

## Notes

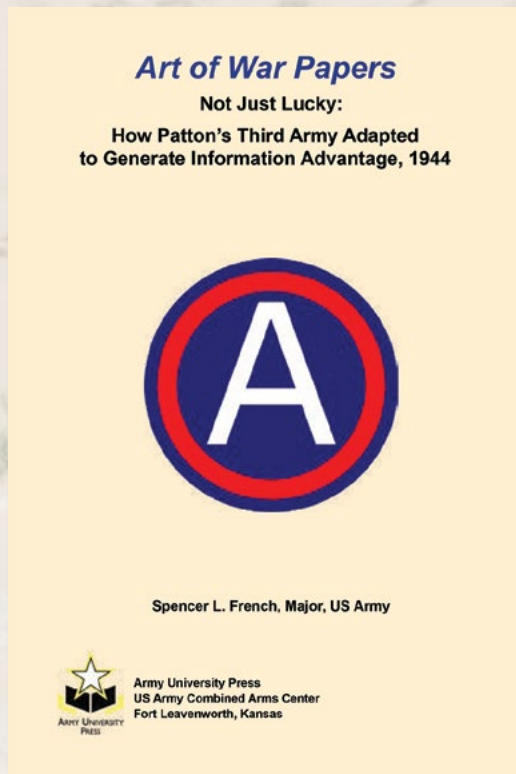
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# ***Not Just Lucky: How Patton's Third Army Adapted to Generate Information Advantage, 1944***

An Art of War paper by Maj. Spencer L. French



**T**his Art of War paper is based on a thesis by Maj. Spencer L. French that he wrote while attending the Command and General Staff College Staff Officer's Course from 2021 to 2022. The thesis was recognized with the Birrer-Brookes Award for outstanding Master of Military Arts and Sciences thesis for 2022.

In August 1944, Gen. George S. Patton's Third Army smashed through German defenses in Normandy and broke out in a rapid pursuit across France. Third Army's success was substantially due to its effectiveness at generating operational-level information advantage. Information advantage enabled Third Army to gain and maintain the initiative, anticipate decisions, and extend operational reach. Yet when Third Army activated in England in the spring of 1944, it possessed neither the information forces nor the staff processes to generate information advantage effectively. This study examines how Patton successfully embedded a unique military culture that encouraged rapid adaptation within Third Army's information forces. Specifically, it explores how Patton's visionary leadership created a sense of organizational urgency, reducing change resistance. It also analyzes how Patton's coalition established robust feedback loops and a culture of self-criticism and experimentation. Finally, it looks at how Patton leveraged diverse expertise

to develop devastatingly effective solutions to complex problems. Improvements in Third Army's ability to generate information advantage resulted not from any technological advance or material factor but from a military culture that encouraged adaptation.

*Not Just Lucky* can be found at <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/Research%20and%20Books/Book%20Series/Art%20of%20War/2023/AOW-French-Lucky.pdf>.

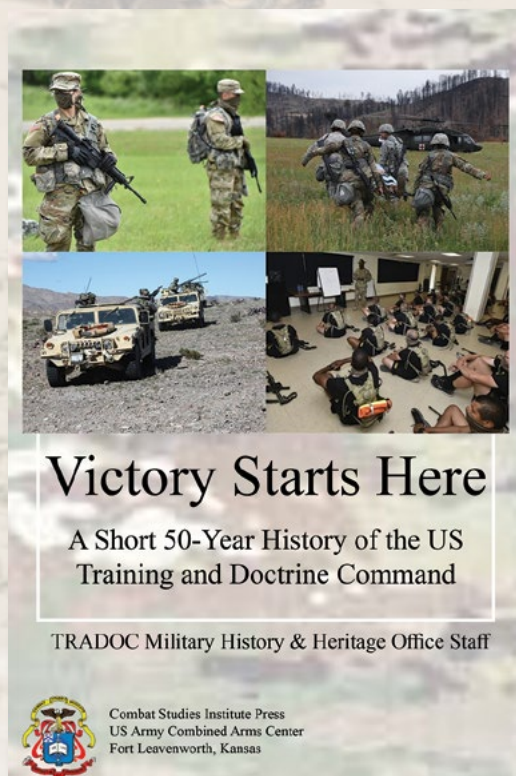
A condensed version of this paper covering key points of interest was published in the March-April 2022 edition of *Military Review*. It can be found at <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/March-April-2022/French/>.

# *Victory Starts Here: A Short 50-Year History of the US Training and Doctrine Command*

From the TRADOC Military History and Heritage Office Staff

**T**he U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) reached its fiftieth anniversary on 1 July 2023. On that date in 1973, the U.S. Army completed its Operation Steadfast reform effort with the simultaneous establishment of TRADOC and the U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) from the former U.S. Army Continental Army Command and the U.S. Army Combat Developments Command. Every five years beginning with TRADOC's twentieth anniversary in 1993, the command's Military History and Heritage Office has published a short history of TRADOC. This fifty-year edition updates TRADOC's history through the COVID-19 experience, the emergence of multidomain operations, and other current topics.

Read *Victory Starts Here* at <https://www.armypress.army.mil/books/browse-books/units-and-organizations/#victory-starts-here>.



**Background:** An M1 Abrams tank from 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, out of Fort Bliss, Texas, fires a 120 mm round during a live-fire exercise in the United Arab Emirates, 23 January 2018. (Photo by Sgt. Thomas X. Crough, U.S. Army)