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Entertainment vs. Reality: The Marine Corps, Misrepresented

*Jarhead: A Marine's Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles* by Anthony Swofford is an entertaining story packed full of military stereotypes and tropes used in gritty war films such as *Full Metal Jacket* and *Apocalypse Now*. Swofford presents a Marine Corps that is reminiscent of the Wild West, an environment full of chaos and danger. Furthermore, Swofford depicts himself and the Marines he served with as a ragtag team of psychotic alcoholics whose ideals and motivations consist of pillaging, plundering, and looking for the opportunity to make their first kills. Swofford's depiction of the Marine Corps has proven itself to be very effective in piquing the curiosity of readers all over the United States and around the world, making *Jarhead* a *New York Times* Bestseller and a book analyzed in many colleges. While *Jarhead* certainly makes for a fun and entertaining read, many readers will unfortunately assume the realities of the Marine Corps are exactly the way Swofford chooses to depict them. In contrast to Swofford's depiction, the Marine Corps prides itself on being a highly professional and efficient organization. The ideals and standards of the Marine Corps are that of professionalism, honor, courage, and commitment, both on and off the battlefield. Although the actual standards set forth by the Marine Corps may not make for a very entertaining story, these standards have enabled the Marine Corps to successfully carry out its mission as America's first responding force for over 240 years. Both the image of the Marine Corps and its ability to serve as our first responding force in times of crisis can be greatly affected by misrepresentation. It is important to

analyze the key differences between Swofford's exaggerations and the realities of Marine Corps life to identify and avoid the potential of developing a false image of the Marine Corps. While there is nothing wrong with enjoying Swofford's dramatized depictions, there can be dangerous consequences when Swofford's representation is viewed through the lens of absolute truth instead of being viewed as merely entertainment.

One of the first dramatized depictions of the Marine Corps by Swofford is when he fails to give key context while describing the limitations placed on free speech within the Marine Corps, giving most readers the false impression of an oppressive USMC. Early on in his book, Swofford describes an event where he and the other Marines in his platoon are briefed on what information is acceptable to pass on to reporters who are there to interview the deployed Marines. During this briefing, Kuehn, one of the Marines present, is quoted as saying, "This is censorship. You're telling me what I can and can't say to the press. This is un-American" (Swofford 14). Swofford goes on to give his personal thoughts on the issue: "I want to come to the defense of free speech, but I know it will be useless" (14). Without the proper context for why these policies are in place, this situation could be viewed by many readers as oppressive on the part of the Marine Corps. By failing to give proper context to this situation, Swofford illustrates his gross lack of experience and ability to see the bigger picture, likely due to his low rank within the Marine Corps. In contrast to the oppressive image most readers will glean from Swofford's depiction, the Marine Corps' policies regarding information shared with the media are in place to ensure the protection of Marines who are forward deployed. While it is obvious why withholding information of a strategic and tactical nature is important, it may not be as obvious why Marines are sometimes prohibited from presenting negative personal views they may have about their mission. One of the hardest jobs in the Marine Corps is maintaining

discipline and morale amongst the troops. In the harsh environments of war, discontent can spread like wildfire. If Marines are not withheld from overly expressing their momentary discomfort, this can lead to a massive loss of morale for the rest of the forces forward deployed. An even bigger danger presented is potentially emboldening the enemy, as negative comments made to the media will give the impression the Marines are not united in their mission. While Swofford's depiction of an oppressive Marine Corps may add an element of drama to his story, this depiction does not accurately represent the Marine Corps and the purposes behind the policies put in place regarding free speech.

Another trope Swofford uses throughout his story is in placing overemphasis on the failing and outdated equipment he and the other Marines were issued, giving a false image of the Marine Corps as being negligent towards the Marines. Swofford's complaints regarding his gear include being issued the wrong color MOPP suit for the desert environment, having no replacement filters for his gas mask, and being issued mismatched accessories for his Barrett .50-caliber sniper rifle. Arguably the most telling complaint in Swofford's book regarding the discontent for the issued equipment comes from the Marine named Dickerson when he says, "When's the last time anyone had a Prick [referring to the type of radio] work for more than a day without having to take it to comm shop? The army is using satellite systems and we're carrying fifteen pounds of dead radio" (157). Highlighting the lack of working equipment adds a lot of interesting conflict for Swofford's character to face, however, to many readers this depiction will misrepresent the Marine Corps as negligent for allegedly not providing Marines with what they need. In contrast to Swofford's depiction, the Marine Corps does issue its Marines much of the same gear as the other military branches. In addition to providing Marines with current and cutting-edge equipment, the Marine Corps places a heavy focus on ensuring

Marines receive the best training for their assigned missions. Technology can offer many advantages on the battlefield, however, an overreliance on technology can pose a danger. Technology will inevitably fail when it is needed most, and Marines focus more on rigorous training to counteract this issue. While technology can fail on the battlefield, proper training will never fail. This focus on training is something not readily mentioned by Swofford in his story. If Swofford had chosen to focus on the advantages of his training rather than highlighting his failed gear, this could lessen the suspense experienced by his readers as Swofford would no longer be viewed as the underdog. In reality, the Marine Corps is highly efficient at taking care of their Marines and ensuring Marines have everything they need to be successful, contradicting the negligent image readers may glean from Swofford's depictions.

Another misleading depiction of the Marine Corps is found when Swofford perpetuates the stereotype of the abusive drill instructor beating up recruits at boot camp, misrepresenting the Marine Corps as abusive and even criminal. One incident regarding boot camp Swofford details is reminiscent of the famous boot camp scenes featured in the film *Full Metal Jacket*. The scenario begins with Swofford being ordered to draw a diagram of a footlocker on a chalkboard while a drill instructor by the name of Burke harasses the other recruits. When one recruit attempts to respond to Burke's harassments, Swofford says, "Burke punched the recruit square on the forehead. He swayed but his knees did not give" (28). After Burke punches the recruit, he then turns his attentions towards Swofford, who has failed in his assigned mission to accurately draw a footlocker diagram. Swofford continues by saying, "He slapped me on the back of the head a few times, as though slowly contemplating some further violence, winding me up, and then he shoved my head into the chalkboard" (29). This scene is used to create sympathy towards Swofford and illustrates the struggles that lead to his mental and emotional break down later on

in the book, however, this scene also grossly misrepresents the realities of Marine Corps boot camp. What is so disturbing, and frankly, farfetched about Swofford's account is how casual and normal drill instructor Burke thinks it is to physically assault and abuse his recruits. In contrast, the Marine Corps strictly prohibits drill instructors from physically abusing recruits. The punishments for physical abuse are loss of rank and pay, loss of status as a drill instructor, dishonorable discharge, and court-martial, not to mention criminal charges which may result in jail sentences if the abuse is found to be of a criminal nature. For decades, the Marine Corps has made great efforts to crack down on and punish hazing, especially in the boot camp setting. According to a *Washington Post* article titled "The New Marine Boot Camp: No More Mr. Bad Guy," the Marine Corps implemented major boot camp reform in 1976 and since this time boot camp has been closely observed and regulated (Bunting). Swofford's story takes place in the very late 1980s and early 1990s, long after the reforms were put in place. This makes Swofford's accounts of boot camp, which appear to be modeled after Vietnam era boot camp depictions, seem highly exaggerated for dramatic effect. Although for decades the Marine Corps has consistently enforced anti-hazing policies, unfortunately, many readers today will still glean a false image of the Marine Corps as being abusive towards recruits and Marines based on dramatized depictions such as Swofford's.

A final depiction which misrepresents the image of the Marine Corps is Swofford's overemphasis on alcohol abuse and debauchery within the Marine Corps, giving most readers the impression of the Marine Corps as being an unprofessional group of misfits rather than an elite organization. The most telling quote from Swofford's book regarding alcohol and incessant partying within the Marine Corps is when Swofford describes his image of a "good Marine" by saying, "The old salts... had seen it all... they'd spent years of their meager salary on sex and

maybe drugs and certainly alcohol” (Swofford 60-61). Swofford’s depiction of the Marine Corps as a giant frat party may appeal to a lot of readers; however, this depiction misrepresents the professionalism of the Marine Corps in a major way. In contrast to Swofford’s alcoholic tales, the Marine Corps has very strict policies in place regarding the abuse of alcohol. On the Marine Corp official website, Lieutenant General M. A. Brilakis states: “Alcohol abuse and substance abuse degrade the effective performance of Marines...Those who tolerate alcohol abuse or substance abuse in others by failing to be engaged leaders have failed their unit, their family, and their fellow Marines and Sailors” (Brilakis). There is a major disconnect between the public’s perception of Marines regarding alcohol abuse and the standards set forth by the Marine Corps. It is exaggerated accounts like these that denigrate the public’s perception of the Marines as many do not make the distinction between entertainment and reality.

When Swofford’s dramatized interpretation of the Marine Corps is viewed through the lens of absolute truth, the Marine Corps is falsely represented as oppressive, negligent, abusive, and unprofessional. While misrepresenting the Marine Corps in these ways may only appear to damage the image of the Marine Corps, these misrepresentations can have much larger negative effects on the United States as a whole. The Marine Corps is unique compared to the other branches of the military for many reasons, chief among them being the Marine Corps’ function as America’s first responding force in times of crisis. In the event of a major crisis, the Marine Corps is free to respond with the approval of the President and a few hours of preparation, while the other military branches require months of preparation and the approval of congress. Although the Marine Corps offers this key advantage over the other military branches, the Marine Corps must constantly prove its value as it is the only branch that has faced the threat of being disbanded. Both in 1946 and again in 2010, the United States has questioned whether or not a

Marine Corps was needed, resulting in serious attempts to disband the Marine Corps altogether. If the Marine Corps is misrepresented as being oppressive, negligent, abusive, and unprofessional, this will go a long way to ensuring the Marine Corps loses the support it needs from the United States public. Oversubscribing to the stereotypes and misrepresentations featured in war films and books like Swofford's *Jarhead*, could put the United States in danger of losing the organization that has stood in its defense for over 240 years.

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