



Keith Yellin. *Battle Exhortation: The Rhetoric of Combat Leadership.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008. x + 191 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-735-1.



Reviewed by Keith Grint

Published on H-War (December, 2008)

Commissioned by Janet G. Valentine (U.S. Army Command and General Staff College - Dept of Mil Hist)

Battling Talk

If you have ever wanted to know what military leaders say to their troops on the eve of battle, why they say what they say, and whether it makes any difference, then you should start your investigations using Keith Yellin's new book, *Battle Exhortation*. It is an unusual book on several accounts. First, it deals with a topic—pre-combat language—that few have analyzed properly, even though most of us have seen many examples on TV, in film, and perhaps in reality. Second, it deals with the topic in a serious scholarly way that avoids the temptation to lead the reader into an alley labeled “this is how you are supposed to do it.” Instead, Yellin proceeds by trawling through a vast arena of time and space to illustrate his arguments with a wide variety of cases. We get to understand how the Spartans approached battle, and why it differed from the Athenian approach; what it was like to follow Hernan Cortes into what is now Mexico; what Julius Caesar said to his cohorts; and what General George S. Patton and General Tommy Franks said. By definition there is not enough space to provide much in the way of context but Yellin does well to squeeze in just enough mate-

rial to make better sense of such exhortations than books of speeches that merely list them. Indeed, one of the great strengths of the book is the way that the followers are brought into play so that their commanders' rhetoric only makes sense insofar as the followers are already socialized to expect certain forms of talk, and so that the followers play an active role in making sense of the words and actions.

The book is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1, “Bracing for Combat,” differentiates the particular features of combat discourse from other forms of discourse, in particular the immediate need for reassurance or invigoration as the battle appears imminent. Chapter 2, “Indoctrination,” looks at the efforts to socialize the listeners of such rhetoric—who are often a much wider audience than the group of troops listening directly to the speaker. Chapter 3, “Tensions,” brings out the underlying aspects of combat that may weigh down the troops but are beyond the understanding of civilians: the role of pride and reputation that so often motivates soldiers far more than ideology, the naked violence of the battle

itself, the social and physical distancing between leader and followers, and the love that holds together “brothers in arms” and now “brothers and sisters in arms.” Chapter 4, “Evolutions,” examines the changes across time of leaders’ rhetoric, not just whether Caesar spoke differently than General Dwight D. Eisenhower, but whether (and why) General Norman Schwarzkopf and Franks wrote different messages to their troops on the eve of the first and the second war in Iraq.

The book is a well-written and well-illustrated journey through space and time on the world’s battlefields. It is certainly worth a read for those interested in language and leadership generally, and combat leadership in particular. For non-American audiences, it is perhaps

too firmly set in the American historical context, though there are lots of non-American examples. For academic audiences, there is, perhaps, too much taken on trust—for example, the role of Caesar in writing his own account of his extraordinarily effective combat rhetoric might be taken with a larger degree of skepticism. And, it might have been interesting to have considered more of the performative aspects of language—the role that words play in constituting rather than simply describing the world as we know it. But, given the breadth of audience that Yellin is clearly trying to reach, this may well have been a step too far. Moreover, his claim about the importance of combat rhetoric—and its strange omission from most military curricula—is surely well made.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Keith Grint. Review of Yellin, Keith, *Battle Exhortation: The Rhetoric of Combat Leadership*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. December, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23109>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.