



Friendly Fire in the Literature of War by Earl R. Anderson.

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English professor (em.) Earl Anderson (Cleveland State Univ.) defines “friendly fire” as a “covert semantic category” (5). Though what it designates is described in Homer, Caesar, the *Song of Roland*, Armenian epic poetry, and many other texts, the term itself is only fifty years old.¹ Though he claims his book concerns “a narrative trope in the literature of war,” he also considers films as well as real-life incidents documented in histories, letters, diaries, and memoirs (6). He has gathered an impressive catalogue of examples.

The author defends a wide semantic perimeter around both deliberate² and accidental³ wounding and killing of allies and fellow soldiers. He briefly considers films like Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979), Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* (1986), and Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* (1987)—in which an officer’s abusive discipline produces a Marine company’s collective punishment for one man’s alleged transgressions and a private’s revenge (69).

Anderson also studies the more common situation of a killer not having intended to harm anyone or even realizing he has done so. He includes as instances of friendly fire the trampling of fellow soldiers during headlong retreats from the battlefield. Even pushing comrades over a cliff or into the sea in panic constitutes “friendly fire” in his view. Such traumatic battle casualties clearly constitute “friendly” injuries, but “fire”? For the author’s purposes, yes.

In the *Iliad*, Trojans, fleeing a perceived imminent attack by their super-enemy Achilles, kill fellow Trojans and allies. Thucydides describes Athenians mistakenly killing allied soldiers in a night battle at Syracuse. Scipio caused Mago’s Carthaginian troops stationed at New Carthage in Spain (209 BCE) to panic and stampede over each other. Sulla’s repulse of Mithridates’s troops running downhill caused them to be impaled by their own spears as they rushed over the cliffs of Mount Thurium. In the *Aeneid*, Trojan commandos in Achaean disguise⁴ are attacked by their compatriots. During Belisarius’s campaign near Florence, terrified Roman troops trampled each other in retreat in a gross failure of command and control.⁵ In ancient accounts, the gods are

1. Anderson traces the phrase to C.D.B. Bryan’s exposé of the cover-up following the death of Pvt. Michael Mullen on 18 Feb. 1970: see his *Friendly Fire* (NY: Putnam, 1975). “Fragging,” in contrast, was already a slang term during the US invasion of Viet Nam.

2. At the battle of Salamis, Xerxes’s ally Artemisia, Queen of Halicarnassus, rammed the allied war ship of the Calydonian king to save her own vessel. Embattled American troops at Khe Sanh called in distant artillery and air strikes to attack at some cost Vietnamese troops surrounding them.

3. Enfeebled and blinded Oliver splits Roland’s helm and head.

4. The author mentions American examples of misperception, for instance, of Indian scouts during Custer’s campaign and blue-uniformed New Orleans guardsmen taken to be Union soldiers by Confederate gunmen (48). Mutual suicide pacts of trapped and doomed men are not relevant to friendly fire.

often invisible agents, including Panic himself, Athena in Homer and Herodotus, and local hero-deities like Marathonian Echetaeus and Marathon himself,⁶ sometimes enabling a few good men to rout many enemies.⁷

The US Army's internal investigations of friendly-fire incidents have often resulted in cover-ups and the classifying of such events as "top secret" (85). While friendly fire is usually invisible to officers behind the lines, who anyway enjoy a "culture of impunity," punishments for killing one's own are generally meted out to the lowest possible subordinate in the chain of command (95).⁸ Incompetent officers charge subordinates with insubordination.

Anderson finds many friendly-fire incidents on both land and sea in Thucydides,⁹ for example, the Corinthians at Sybota and the Athenians at Delion. He cites Gulf War instances of wrong split-second decisions by fighter pilots, despite the implementation of "deconfliction" tactics to avoid air-to-air damage to allied aircraft struck by their fragmentation bombs. The fictional works of Ambrose Bierce and Stephen Crane on the US Civil War contain friendly-fire mishaps. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *August 1914* (1972) features Russians firing on their own—Tolstoy's Napoleonic wars all over again. Anderson's mingling of fictional narratives with letters and memoirs in juxtaposed paragraphs may confuse readers.

Lethal "non-adaptive behavior" extends beyond friendly fire per se to include the unintended self-inflicted consequences of deploying "war elephants,"¹⁰ chariots, cavalry, including "wonder horses," archery, and gunnery, siege warfare, and investments in infrastructure requiring extensive training. Procopius's Goths botched naval strategies, tactics, and maneuvers by obstructing or colliding with each other and impeding their own reserves (127). Unpremeditated internecine strife of all against all doomed their fleet.

Anderson explores, too, "the ironic mode" of reporting the shooting of comrades, on purpose or "accidentally on purpose." In a chapter on "The Banality of Friendly Fire," he discusses Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* (1895), William Faulkner's first novel, *Soldiers' Pay* (1926), set in World War I, and

5. Soldiers killing comrades in battle is not the same as incidents of mutiny and civic discord. Factional "fragging" abetted leaders of mutineers against Alexander's general Perdiccas near Egyptian Pelusium and Roman commanders Sertorius and Perpenna were betrayed by their lieutenants. Tacitus reports that mutineers attacked loyalist camp- and tent-mates (38) during civil strife within the Roman imperial army.

6. The local spirits are absent from Herodotus's more nearly contemporary account of Marathon. Ancient historians will appreciate Anderson's ancient data-sets, but his grip on ancient warfare, names, and source-citations is sometimes weak. E.g., the members of the early Roman republican board of ten magistrates were "Decemvirs," not "Decembrists" (74). The author's large collection of "friendly-fire" incidents includes some better classified as cases of *saue qui peut* (3).

7. The ancient Mesopotamian epic *Erra and Ishum* predicts that Elamites will fight Elamites, Gutians attack Gutians. Anderson calls this "friendly fire on a national scale" and compares Judges 7:21-22 ("the Lord turned every man's sword against his fellow") and the *History of Taron*, a medieval Armenian prose romance, in which Saint Karapet intervenes for his people against Islamic Iranians: the possessed Iranians "began to ... kill each other" (25).

8. Contrariwise, exposés of cover-ups blame the highest ranking officer in the hierarchy. In the 2004 cause célèbre of Pat Tillman, "cover-up [blame] had migrated up the chain of command" from the guilty on the ground to Lt. Gen. Stanley McChrystal (182-83).

9. Regrettably, Anderson's sources include the fiercely unmilitary work of Edith Hamilton but not essential studies by W.K. Pritchett, Hans van Wees, Victor Hanson, and Lawrence Tritle.

10. E.g., Poros at the Hydaspes River against Alexander. Livy notes that Hannibal's elephants caused problems even before battle. And Hasdrubal's elephants went wild fighting at the Metaurus River. Elephants harming "friends" is a well-worn trope of war narratives.

Joseph Heller's portrayal in *Catch-22* (1961) of Milo Minderbinder's bizarre maneuvers in battles of World War II. The ironic mode was well suited to the purpose of responding to "the fatuous discourse" (143) of American war propaganda and Pentagon euphemisms about Viet Nam (domino theory, enhanced interrogation, war of attrition, inflated body counts, the Red Menace). "Friendly fire," not originally a military euphemism, came to unprecedented prominence in Viet Nam, a conflict that commanded far less popular and soldierly enthusiasm than earlier wars and inspired works like Philip Caputo's *Rumor of War* (1977), Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977), and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990). Soldiers in Viet Nam had to learn ways of avoiding the friendly fire of artillery and fighter-bombers striking their targets according to hastily determined coordinates (58). Soldiers sometimes walked on land mines and through machine-gun fire meant for their enemies.

A grimly amusing section of the book concerns mishaps on camp perimeters, for example in latrines visited at night: as one survivor put it, "to take a dump was a crap shoot" (154-57). Since the average age of men fighting in Viet Nam was nineteen, not twenty-six, as in World War II (158), and soldiers were more often rotated out of duty, blame for friendly fire was often put on FNGs (Fuckin' New Guys).

In the book's last two chapters, "War-Cries and Passwords" and "Uncanny Disclosure," we learn that confusion over a war-cry in the Norwegian *Sverris Saga* led the Birkibeins to victory over the Jämmts before 1200 CE (165), when challenge and response passwords failed to preserve those who had devised them.

Earl Anderson has usefully canvassed actual and fictional episodes of friendly fire to expose the limits of military command and the absurdities of war: "men crowded together ... crushing each other, dying stepping over the dying, killing each other..." (31), as Tolstoy wrote in *War and Peace*. His broad perspective is well suited to expand our awareness of one source of miserable self-diminishment in war and the literature of war. If only books could prevent military disasters of this type.