

New Nonfiction by Michael Jerome Plunkett: “Four Letter Words: A Meditation on Fuck”



The most versatile piece of equipment an infantryman carries is a four-letter word. It can be used in almost every conceivable situation. It's sharp, cuts smooth and clean. It can sever all manner of ties, emotional or professional or anything in between, in a single motion. Its shock-and-awe effect can rattle even the most linguistically tolerant. It can fly. It is a unit of measurement. It weighs nothing and takes up no space. It's a navigation tool. Just uttering the word can elicit an immediate reaction from your surrounding environment. Regardless of the context, say that crude four-letter word and you'll know exactly where you are just by the way those around you react. Say it right now. Out loud. Go ahead.

Fuck.

Nice. Felt good, right? Admit it.

The ways in which that little word can be modified and altered are almost endless. It is a verb. An adverb. An adjective. Even a noun. Its versatility is unmatched in the English language and there is no better way for it to reach its full potential than in the hands of an infantryman. There's something about the way those four letters fit together that appears intrinsically correct. Puzzle piece-like. And yet it's the only piece of equipment an infantryman is always completely out of.

I'm far from the first to pontificate on the significance of Fuck to the infantryman. In his memoir *Helmet For My Pillow*, Robert Leckie runs the gamut of all the ways Fuck shaped his experience serving as a machine gunner during the Second World War.

"Always there was that four-letter ugly sound that men in uniform have expanded into the single substance of the linguistic world. It was a handle, a hyphen, a hyperbole... It described food, fatigue, metaphysics. It stood for everything and meant nothing; an insulting word, it was never used to insult; crudely descriptive of the sexual act, it was never used to describe it; base, it meant the best; ugly, it modified beauty; it was the name and the nomenclature of the voice of emptiness, but one heard it from the chaplains and captains, from Pfc.'s and Ph.D.'s until, finally, one could only surmise that if a visitor unacquainted with English were to overhear our conversations he would, in the way of the Higher Criticisms, demonstrate by measurement and numerical incidence that this little word must assuredly be the thing for which we were fighting." [\[1\]](#)

Fuck you. Fuck me. Fuck this. Fuck that. Fuck it. Get fucked. Fuckwad. Fuckhead. Fuckass. Fucknugget. Fuckstick. Fuckhole.

Fuckup. Fuck Boy. Fuck Face. Unfuck. Motherfucker. Fuckin' A! Fuck your mother. Fuck my life. Fuck off. Fuckwit. Flying Fuck. Fuck-all. Fuckety-fuck. For Fuck's sake. Fuckery. Fucktangle. Fuckton. Fuckload. Fuck a duck. Give a fuck. Fuck Buddy. Buddy Fucker. Shut the fuck up. Holy Fuck. I don't give a fuck. Tired as fuck. Fuck around and find out. Fucking Hell. Bumfuck. Mindfucked. Zero fucks. McFuck. Dumb Fuck. Royally Fucked. Fucked up beyond all recognition.

It's not just the word itself but the way you say it.

Fuck. Short and sharp. A punch to the throat.

Or *Fuuuuuuck*. Drawn out and lingering in the valley of the second syllable with an elevation in volume the longer you draw it out.

FUCK. Belted out like a shotgun blast.

FAHK. Keep it in the sinuses.

Commandants change. Uniforms change. Regulations change. Missions change. Even the instantly recognizable Eagle, Globe, and Anchor emblem of the United States Marine Corps has been redesigned and modified several times over the history of the Corps. Fuck might be the only constant that the infantry has ever known.

At times, it is a crutch. Sure, it can be used to excess. Maybe some people feel that overuse can diminish the impact. But there are few words more powerful than a precisely placed Fuck. It packs just enough heat to elevate a simple complaint or concern into a higher registry of human emotion. Imagine: Your friend comes to you and unloads all their problems and finishes by saying, "My poor life." Do you really feel where they are coming from? I don't. "My poor life" drips with melodrama. Now, that same friend comes to you, unloads all of those same problems, and ends with a brisk "*fuck my life*." You know exactly what they are trying to say.

The f-bomb occupies a place all its own in the English language. A quick Google search pulls the top result from Oxford Languages which starts its entry with a bold-lettered, all-capital warning: **VULGAR SLANG**. Fuck means “to copulate.” Fuck means to “ruin or damage something.” At one point, “Fuck” meant to strike. According to several dictionaries, the word has Germanic origins, with the earliest known recordings appearing in Middle Dutch dialects sometime in the 1500s with the word Fokken which meant to breed cattle. The Comstock Laws banned it from print from the 1870s all the way up to the late 1950s. Merriam-Webster sees it as a “meaningless intensive” that is “usually obscene” while Sassy Sasha, a regular contributor on the website Urban Dictionary, defines it as “The only fucking word that can be put everyfuckingwhere and still fucking make fucking sense.”[\[ii\]](#)

In some ways, the connection seems obvious. The infantry is a profession that prides itself on brash ruggedness. To be infantry is to be vulgar. It is an obscene way of life. We carry the heaviest loads for the longest distances with nothing but our backs to bear the burden while we are told to pray for war and a chance to kill, and we are expected to smile and thank the gods for the privilege to do so. It’s about as far removed from the domestic sphere as one can get. Still, there are other interesting connections between the infantry and Fuck as well. A significant portion of an infantryman’s identity revolves around the ability to shock and awe those who are not part of this holy tribe. Fuck and all its varieties fit right in with this philosophy. At the same time, it’s also one of those words whose absence can actually have just as much, if not more, impact as its presence. A British veteran of the First World War recalled:

‘It became so common that an effective way for the soldier to express this emotion was to omit this word. Thus if a sergeant said, ‘Get your fucking rifles!’ it was understood as a matter of routine. But if he said ‘Get your rifles!’ there was an

immediate implication of urgency and danger.”[\[iii\]](#)

Fuck is the standard. It is expected, so commonplace that a grunt who resists its use can also stand out for all the wrong reasons. Your fellow infantrymen might see your clean mouth as a sign you think you’re better than everyone. You’re different. You’re special. Individualism of any kind is immediately (and I would argue rightfully) suspect in the profession of the infantry.

The Online Etymology Dictionary tracks the evolution of Fuck through a long, windy path of bastardized Latin and Middle English to its increased usage in common language at the start of the twentieth century.[\[iv\]](#) The verbal phrase “Fuck up” is “to ruin, spoil, destroy.” Likewise, the very doctrine of the Marine Corps rifle squad is written in similarly plain English. According to MCRP 3- 10A.4, “The mission of the rifle squad is to locate, close with, and *destroy* the enemy by fire and maneuver, or repel the enemy’s assault by fire and close combat.”[\[v\]](#) So, while Fuck might mean nearly anything in the civilian world, its most precise meaning in the infantry is “to kill.” In one of the more unsettling but poignant scenes in Steven Pressfield’s *Gates of Fire*, an experienced soldier educates a younger recruit on the ecstasy of killing another man by comparing it to Fuck:

“Killing a man is like fucking, boy, only instead of giving life you take it. You experience the ecstasy of penetration as your warhead enters the enemy’s belly and the shaft follows. You see the whites of his eyes roll inside the sockets of his helmet. You feel his knees give way beneath him and the weight of his faltering flesh draw down the point of your spear. Are you picturing this?”

“Yes, lord.”

“Is your dick hard yet?”

“No, lord.”

“What? You’ve got your spear in a man’s guts and your dog isn’t stiff? What are you, a woman?”

At this point the Peers of the mess began rapping their knuckles upon the hardwood, an indication that Polynikes’ instruction was going too far. The runner ignored this.

“Now picture with me, boy. You feel the foe’s beating heart upon your iron and you rip it forth, twisting as you pull. A sensation of joy surges up the ash of your spear, through your hand and along your arm up into your heart. Are you enjoying this yet?” [\[vi\]](#)

The meaning is clear. Killing is fucking with the only difference being the creation versus destruction of life. The intimate knowledge of both elevates a soldier above his peers. The lord’s accusation that the young soldier might be a woman if he is not aroused by the mere thought of killing an enemy combatant is a telling moment that reveals gendered attitudes toward the act of killing as well as fucking. According to this portrayal (which has held an on and off again spot on the Commandant’s Reading List since 2000), in ancient Greek military culture, they are both considered the realm of men.

The writer Ocean Vuong views violence as an implicit piece of the American lexicon, especially when considering the way American men communicate with each other. Violence *is* their language. In his poem “Old Glory”, Vuong attempts to highlight this phenomenon by merely constructing a poem of common American phrases. The narrative that emerges is at once recognizable and progressively disturbing.

“Knock’em dead, big guy. Go in there

guns blazing, buddy. You crushed

at the show. No, it was a blowout. No,

a massacre. Total overkill. We tore

them a new one. My son's a beast. A lady
-killer. Straight shooter, he knocked
her up. A bombshell blonde. You'll blow
them away. Let's bag the broad. Let's spit-roast
the faggot. Let's fuck his brains out.
That girl's a grenade. It was like Nam
down there. I'd still slam it though.
I'd smash it good. I'm cracking up. It's hilarious.
You truly murdered. You had me dying over here.
Bro, for real though, I'm dead." [\[vii\]](#)

The physicality of the imagery is evident from the first line and continues to the last line with the projection of death as an achievement as well as the ambiguity of "I'm dead", a common phrase used to describe someone exhausted by humor. For Vuong, this type of violent communication is encouraged, even celebrated, and therefore internalized by American men from a very young age. While appearing as a guest on Late Night with Seth Myers in 2019, Vuong said, "'You're killing it,' you're making a killing,' 'smash them,' 'blow them up,' 'you went into that game guns blazing,' and I think it's worth it to ask the question what happens to our men and boys when the only way they can value themselves is through the lexicon of death and destruction?" In that same interview he went on to say, "I think when they see themselves as only worthwhile when they are capable of destroying things, it's inevitable that we arrive at a masculinity that is toxic." [\[viii\]](#)

The infantry is no exception to this dynamic. In fact, as an inherently violent profession, it should come as no surprise that language of destruction is not only in use and encouraged

but is also heightened in this environment. It is embedded in the identity of an infantryman, if not for vaunting then for survival. Still, it is worth considering the ramifications of internalized violence through language in wider society, and there is much to be gained by examining the ways we communicate with each other; the words we choose, where they come from, why we insist on resting upon violence as our chosen mode of meaning. Language matters. Our words matter.

But then, of course, sometimes fucking is just fucking.

The infantry is a life of necessity, a life largely spent in austere environments with whatever personal gear can fit in a pack. There is little if any room for creature comforts. Therefore, memories hold a higher value in the field. The mere recollection of a good Fuck can be enough to keep one warm through the bitter cold of a long field op. But there's no such thing as privacy in the infantry. Everything is shared, from the candy in the MREs to the most salacious sexual encounters. These stories are both whispered and shouted. They are almost always exaggerated and drawn out. Often, they're told in bold detail with knowing smiles and nods from listeners. Not everyone participates and there are usually some unspoken ground rules about who and what is exactly on or off limits. It's a way of relating to one another and, at times, especially if the story can be corroborated, a way of boosting one's social status within a platoon.

Twentynine Palms, California. July, 2017. Every day the temperature crept just north of 135°F. My company was taking part in a battalion-wide exercise, and we were running 16-18-hour days. I was a machine gunner in a CAAT (combined anti-armor team) platoon and at the end of every movement, I climbed down from my turret atop the up-armored Humvee with new sore spots, which quickly turned into sickly yellow and dark purple bruises. We grew accustomed to the weight of our flaks and the particular way they rubbed the salt and sand into our skin. We slept on our trucks under obsidian night

skies and the temperature dropped to about 85°F, which felt like zero after spending all day in the desert sun. We rose long before the sun and our drivers bore down on their accelerators, peering over their steering wheels through the thick, clouded Humvee windshields with the strange acute alertness that comes with being awake for several days. We barreled through shadow-cloaked valleys and over open desert plains strewn with thousands of discarded guidance wires from TOW missiles crisscrossed like dental floss in every direction. After the conclusion of one of the more strenuous training evolutions, my squad leader decided it was about time to round everyone up and have some quality platoon bonding time. Tensions had been running high and the strain was showing on morale. The best way to ease this dynamic? We were all going to tell the story of how we lost our virginities.

We circled up under a thin stretch of cammie netting just as the sun set, most of us perched on crushed MRE boxes, some seated right on the sand. At first, hot and exhausted, no one felt like talking. But after some prodding and cajoling, the group began to open up. What followed were some of the strangest and most bizarre stories I had ever heard. There wasn't a single virgin in the group nor a single story that resembled anything romantic. There were experiences involving teachers and friends' moms, back rooms in churches and public restrooms, names remembered and names completely forgotten.

My own story?

When I was seventeen, I met a girl on Myspace while I was trying to boost my punk band's online presence and we struck up a casual correspondence. She lived in England but she really liked our music, and our casual correspondence quickly took on a more intimate and intense flavor. At some point we exchanged phone numbers and began calling each other daily.

"Don't fuckin' tell me you got fuckin' catfished," a Sergeant interrupted. (At this moment whenever I tell this story, I

always take a second to point out that “Catfishing” wasn’t even a thing at that time and I, in fact, was way ahead of the game in the online dating world. Some might even say a trendsetter. But yes, I was about to discover my newfound companion wasn’t exactly who she said she was.)

I guess the guilt and dishonesty of claiming to be an honest-to-God Anglo-Saxon residing in the United Kingdom got to her enough that she just had to come clean. It turns out, she was not British nor was she living in England. She was American and called Joplin, Missouri home. I took this revelation surprisingly well. I believe I was just in shock at how easily I had been hoodwinked by this random stranger I had met on the internet. Of course, being a horny teenager may have obscured my vision as well.

“I knew it. I fuckin’ knew it,” said the Sergeant.

Her true identity revealed, our relationship not only continued but became somehow fiercer. Spring break was near and we both had a week off from school. She booked a plane ticket to New York. I booked a hotel room at the Red Roof Inn with my mom’s credit card.

“The fuckin’ Red Roof Inn, Plunkett? Are you fuckin’ kidding? Couldn’t spend the money on a Marriot you cheap fuck?”

The whole thing went smoothly. I picked her up at the airport and we spent the day together. At the end of the night, I took her to the hotel. The door closed. We turned off the lights and were consumed in darkness. I searched for warmth. The intensity of what followed was brief and strange but life-changing in the way those moments are. It felt like love. But the line between Love and Fuck is impossible to distinguish in the darkness of a bedroom. We fucked. We un-fucked. Pain. Pleasure. I just remember that it was important to make it, right there. Put it all into that moment. Just that exact moment. Nothing before nor later would matter. The

relationship didn't last, of course. Things unraveled fairly quickly after that week spent together. We graduated high school in our respective states and went off to different colleges. There was so much more to come. Even though we did not know it in that moment. We barely knew what fucking was. Or what it could be. It's never the act itself but the slivers of the moment that remain afterward. My memory of Fuck is an incongruous chain of these slivers from years past.

The way her eyes softened in the moment (*the* moment) and held my own and the earth might as well have stopped moving. And she looked like—and became—every woman I had ever known or would ever know. It was right there. In those soft eyes. For the rest of my life, I will remember her head illuminated, backlit by a halo of light, her hair pulsing from the whirring blades of a ceiling fan. The glow of ivory-white skin taught me the importance of warm light in a hotel room in Tribeca. How I briefly forgot my own name after a particularly passionate encounter and I just lay there for a few moments in complete nothingness. The pinpoint clarity that comes afterward.

There's that other four-letter word: Love. A word so much more difficult to define and yet just as closely linked to Fuck and maybe even Kill.

All these four-letter words. Each one leads back to the other. Fuck. Kill. Loss. Love. They are different but so close to the same.

There is a section titled "Love" in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* where Lieutenant Jimmy Cross feels such an intense longing for his one-time girlfriend Martha, that he takes a small pebble she sent him in a letter and places it in his mouth just to feel closer to her. He has a strong desire to "sleep inside her lungs and breathe her blood." Lieutenant Cross longs to consume and be consumed. This longing is somewhat physical and sexual in nature but there's a desire

for some deeper connection he cannot have with her.[\[ix\]](#)

Late one night, after a particularly rough ruck march with my company in Camp Lejeune, I dropped my pack and felt my soul uncrumple itself, and the only thought that went through my mind, as strange and perplexing as it sounds, was that I just wanted to crawl inside my wife and be contained in her warmth and softness in a way that was not fucking but also not love. This thought hit me with such startling clarity, I had to pause a moment. The sky above was crude oil black and pocked with stars that glowed like incinerated diamonds. A soft breeze wrapped around me and swept up in the space between my soaking wet blouse and skivvy shirt, all the places where the straps dug into my shoulders, my waist. My skin turned to gooseflesh. My muscles, saturated with battery acid. Everything ached. A metallic taste coated my mouth. The stench of a hundred sweat-drenched, cortisol-dripping bodies consumed me and I looked skyward, trying to escape it. You will have moments like this in the infantry and you will not want to tell anyone about them. Instead, you say *fuck, that really fucking sucked* and you move on.

[\[i\]](#) Leckie, Robert. *Helmet For My Pillow*. New York, NY: Random House, 1957.

[\[ii\]](#) Sasha, Sassy. "Fuck." Urban Dictionary, February 18, 2018.

<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=fuck>.

[\[iii\]](#) Brophy, John, and Eric Partridge. *Songs and Slang of the British soldier: 1914-1918*. London: Eric Partridge Ltd. at the Scholartis Press, 1931.

[\[iv\]](#) "Fuck." Etymonline. Accessed June 6, 2022. <https://www.etymonline.com/>.

[\[v\]](#) Gehris, Scott. "MCRP 3-10A.4." United States Marine Corps Flagship, August 7, 2020.

<https://www.marines.mil/News/Publications/MCPEL/Electronic-Library->

[Display/Article/2472229/mcrp-3-10a4/](#).

[\[vi\]](#) Pressfield, Steven. *Gates of Fire*. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1998.

[\[vii\]](#) Vuong, Ocean. *Time is a Mother*. New York, NY: Penguin Random House, 2022.

[\[viii\]](#) Michaels, Lorne. Episode. *Late Night with Seth Meyers* Season 6, no. Ep. 111. New York, NY: NBC, June 12, 2019.

[\[ix\]](#) O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. New York, NY: Penguin, 1991.