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# Tolkien's Legendarium: An Answer to the Eternal Question of Why Warfighters Engage in Armed Conflict

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*Tolkien's Legendarium:*

*An Answer to the Eternal Question of Why Warfighters Engage in Armed Conflict*

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Dedication

To my wife Marissa.

Thanks for walking with me.

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I. Introduction

*"Men whom the trenches cast into intimacy entered into bonds of mutual dependency and sacrifice of self stronger than any of the friendships made in peace and better times. That is the ultimate mystery of the First World War. If we could understand its loves, as well as its hates, we would be nearer to understanding the mystery of human life."*

- John Keegan

The nature of armed conflict and its immediate impact on the individual triggers numerous complex problems ripe for academic inquiry. Indeed, its prevalence throughout history makes war one of the most enduring marks of human behavior. For example, in Donald Kagan's book *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*, the author asserts, "that there had been only 268 years free of war in the previous 3,421" (4). Why does war feature so prominently in human history? War, one would presume, seems to be an irrational act for any civilized society. However, if individuals truly retain a "categorical imperative" for rational action, as argued by Immanuel Kant in *The Metaphysics of Morals,* why has human society across all ages placed a high premium on the organizational capacity for war? Perhaps this conversation should not be framed in rational or irrational action. Instead, as the author Robert Green suggests, war can be conceptualized as, "an eminently human arena, full of the best and worst of our nature" (xvii).

Keeping this sentiment in mind, some theorists argue war stimulates the best sides of our nature by serving as a stage to demonstrate love of country. This is the argumentative rhetoric which champions the virtue of patriotism. For example, in *The Philosophical Theory of the State* Bernard Bosanquet forwarded a logic-centric style of rhetoric which placed the needs of the state at its head. Consequently, while building upon Hegelian philosophy and in direct opposition to

the ideas expressed by Bertrand Russel, Bosanquet asserts, "the very core of the common good represented by the life of a modern Nation-State is its profound and complex organization, which makes it greater than the conscious momentary will of any individual" (116). In other words, the state's common good supplants that of the individual. Keeping this sentiment in mind, individual sacrifice for a collective nation during times of war has been interpreted historically as one of humanity's defining virtues. In this way, war becomes the ultimate human arena in which individuals display what is best in human nature.

However, the vast bulk of poetry coming out of the collective World War I experience did much to degrade Bosanquet's Nation-Sate theory. For example, in *Dulce et Decorum Est,* Wilfred Owen describes how the horrors of advancing technological warfare had cheapened human life, thereby damaging the relationship between individual and state. He remarks:

> If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace,
> Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
> And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
> His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
> If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood,
> Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
> Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud of vile,
> incurable sores on innocent tongues,
> My friend, you would not tell with such high zest,
> To children ardent for some desperate glory,

The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori.* (Owen lines 17-28). This segment of Owen's poem encapsulates the horrors associated with the individual experience of World War I. The newfound killing efficiency of automated weaponry and ever-increasing calibers of artillery led to exponential rates of human suffering never before seen in human history. As consequence, the majority of individual warfighters could no longer console themselves with "the old lie" referred to by Owen, which translates as "*It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country.*"

R. R. Reno, a professor of theology at Creighton University, provides a different thesis for describing war in relation to the individual. He argues that war is a product of one of the two human instincts identified by Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Reno states, "one [instinct] seeks sexual satisfaction. The other is aggressive and seeks domination… in order to survive the hostile conditions of life" (41). Consequently, Reno suggests this second Freudian drive is what spurs individual as well as societal conflict. In other words, we continuously prepare for, choose to enter into, and conduct war because that is what humanity, in the individual sense, is psychologically built for.

Furthermore, he credits this second Freudian drive with contributing to a theory termed *Unser Bestand,* or "Our Inheritance." He argues individuals willingly enter into organized violence when they recognize a continuous erosion of the *Unser Bestand* concept. Therefore, when a culture loses the original social fabric holding it together, individual and tribal infighting ensues. However, as with the Bosanquet example above, the literature coming out of World War I did much to negate Reno's theory.

Take, for example, Erich Maria Remarque's book *Im Westen nichts Neues* describing the experiences of a German trench fighter named Paul Bäumer during World War I. As the British

and German armies approach one another in trench warfare, Bäumer recounts, "torches light up the confusion. Everyone yells, and curses, and slaughters. The madness and despair unloads itself in this outburst. Faces are distorted, arms strike out, the beasts scream; we just stop in time to avoid attacking one another" (111). It is as if soldiers from both approaching armies had grown sick of their newfound automated version of warfare. This passage portrays how, even in war, the individuals who are supposedly driven to fulfill the second Freudian aggression drive in defense of the *Unser Bestand* concept often do not. Therefore, Reno's assertion that individuals enter into armed conflict because it is wholly natural, and therefore virtuous, seems flawed at best.

This ongoing discussion revolving around the reason for war in human society has led Margaret MacMillan, a professor at St. Antony College Oxford, to state something which academia may not have been particularly focused on. After citing the increasing deadliness of automated weapons augmented with artificial intelligence, the growing destructive power of cyber warfare, and a progressively more dangerous 21st century, MacMillan declares in her book *War: How Conflict Shaped Us*, "we must, more than ever think about war" (272). Furthermore, she has called on scholars to continually study why individuals choose to enter into armed conflict. Lastly, she implores fellow scholars to answer the question, "does war bring out the bestial side of human nature or the best?" (1). MacMillan's call for inquiry is remarkably similar to that of Green's mentioned at the outset of this paper. Consequently, it is this paper's intent to root itself in the MacMillan inquiry by wholly focusing on defining what the best and bestial sides of human nature are in war. Only after these sides have been isolated, can the reader more fully understand why war occurs. However, what literary instrument provides the best method of analysis for the question at hand?

Luckily, this field of study can be gleaned from a wide variety of academic sources spanning from early human history to contemporary coverage of armed conflict. For example, one could take a historical approach by analyzing the relationship decline between Sparta and Athens in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. One could leverage a sociological approach by examining human interaction in B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two.* Furthermore, Peter Zeihan's *The End of the World is Just the Beginning* constructs a highly developed answer for the propensity of global conflict rooted in the field of national economics. These authors provide some answers to the MacMillan questions from their own unique fields. However, these writers do not represent the entirety of theorists whose works aim to explain the relationship between war and the individual.

Another approach to the question can be found in the work of writers who created stories whose mythologies were deeply infused with their own real experience of armed conflict. As a participant in World War I trench warfare, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892-1973) is most certainly one of those fantastical authors. As a result, his mythologies represent, "a great cohesive force, which binds whole peoples to the acceptance of a design [within] an imaginative life" (Weaver 20). In this way, the overarching design of Tolkien's mythologies essentially merges his real-world wartime experience with a fantastical story able to illustrate key aspects of armed conflict. Read through this lens, Tolkien's literature provides the cohesive force necessary for exploring the best and worst sides of human nature in armed conflict as well as why individuals participate in war.

This assertion regarding Tolkien's work is not altogether new. For example, in his book *A Hobbit A Wardrobe and a Great War,* Joseph Laconte asserts, "it was the experience of war that provided much of the raw material for the characters and themes of their [Tolkien and

Lewis's] imaginative works" (xvi). Here, Laconte is linking actual wartime experience with influence on latter works of literature. Similarly, in his book *J. R. R. Tolkien Author of the Century,* Tom Shippey attributes "a deep current of similarity" between Tolkien's experience of conflict in World War I and the battles depicted later in his literature. Keeping this sentiment in mind, if one can accept that Tolkien's experience of war is embedded within his literature, it is possible to use his texts for building knowledge on warfare within our own real reality.

Therefore, this paper will isolate case studies in Tolkien's Legendarium to answer the previously mentioned MacMillan inquiries: mainly, what drives humanity into conflict and how can war bring out the best and bestial sides of humanity? These initial case studies will be extrapolated upon by comparative observations rooted in the Northern European mythology Tolkien was most familiar with. These excerpts are meant to compliment the Tolkien literature by drawing upon the collective unconscious of the mythologies which inspired Tolkien's Legendarium. Ultimately, I argue that by applying the linguistic vehicles of recovery and escape to Tolkien's Legendarium, one can gain a greater understanding of why human individuals are motivated to conduct war as well as how aspects of war can simultaneously manifest the bestial and best sides of humanity.

## II. Methodology: The Role of Recovery and Escape in Myth

*"The value of the myth is that it takes all the things we know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by 'the veil of familiarity.'"*

*C. S. Lewis*

Some critics will contend Tolkien's Legendarium is pure fantasy and consequently unable to supply meaningful explanations for phenomena in the real world. For example, in his book *Tolkien: Man and Myth*, the former Director of the Center for Faith and Culture at Aquinas College Joseph Pearce writes, "in spite of the best endeavors of Tolkien and Lewis to counter the charge of immaturity, it has remained one of the most common criticisms of their work" (132). When observed from this angle, a text thought to be immature cannot fully capture human phenomena rooted in reality. Therefore, for such critics, the Legendarium holds no value for understanding phenomena in the real world because it cannot speak to the problems which individuals encounter in one's own reality. Instead, the story concocted is merely a flight from reality. For example, while summing up Tolkien criticism, Sara Upstone remarks, "Tolkien is seen as a writer who deals only in flight from reality and secondary worlds that relate to the 'real' only through metaphysical reflection and never, or rarely, intruding into or interrogating it" (52). After all, the events taking place within Tolkien's Legendarium are complete fantasy. The creatures, places, and things have been completely manufactured by Tolkien's prolific imagination. Therefore, for decidedly negative critics of Tolkien, his texts provide no valuable critique of reality.

However, Tolkien himself would very likely fire back, somewhat vehemently, that some portion of myth is really a reflection of our own human experience. Myth is a product of culture which, itself, consists of human wants, needs, drives, and emotions. Indeed, in a letter to his

publisher Milton Waldmen, Tolkien asserts, "myth and fairy-story must, as all art, reflect and contain in solution elements of moral and religious truth" (*Letters* 131). In this way, mythical stories, such as Tolkien's Legendarium, can provide insights into moral and religious truths. One goes about obtaining these insights by engaging in recovery and escape.

For example, through the function of fantasy termed recovery, one is able to leverage Tolkien's Legendarium to engage with complex questions, such as why do portions of humanity willingly enter into armed conflict. Consider how Tolkien defines recovery as provided by Fairy-story. He states recovery is a, "regaining of a clear view… We need ... to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity." (*On Fairy-stories* 67-68). In this way, recovery offers an escape from the uninspiring, the everyday, and the mediocre. The author who builds a successful story offering recovery, such as Tolkien, arranges the plot in such a way that readers "regain a clear view." In this way, by engaging with events which depict courage, honor, and camaraderie, readers who have become inundated by a material-focused reality with relatively few chances of encountering danger are reawakened to what these concepts look like during times of strife within their own reality.

Furthermore, consider how Peter Kreeft, a philosophy professor at Boston College, conceptualizes the interplay between recovery, history, and fantasy story in *The Philosophy of Tolkien: The Worldview Behind the Lord of the Rings*. Kreeft asserts, "myth and fantasy show us the significance of our lives, and, when done on a large and epic scale, of our history" (131). Fantasy becomes the vehicle which reflects back, albeit in a somewhat manufactured fashion, key aspects of the human experience. Therefore, recovery begins when the reader recognizes reality embedded throughout fantasy story. When readers who have never experienced war,

encounter it in Tolkien's Legendarium, they quite literally recover a piece of the human experience, perhaps an unfortunate aspect of humanity, but an aspect, nonetheless. Consequently, when the latter portions of this essay isolate specific instances of Tolkien's Legendarium, understand that you are involved in using fantastical recovery to "regain a clear view" of our own reality. However, how does one regain something which was never known?

In order to regain something which has never personally been known or experienced, one must "escape" from reality into a fantastical world. Tolkien compared escape in the literary sense to, "the escape of a prisoner [rather than] the flight of a deserter" (*Fairy Stories* 69). Viewed in this light, the linguistic tool of escape frees the reader to engage with concepts, virtues, and ideas that are not otherwise as easily accessible in the reader's own reality. In this way, escape into fantasy represents the exact opposite of escapism (a common critique of Tolkien) which merely provides an alternate reality that does not challenge readers who engage in it.

Tom Shippey picks up on this concept in his book *The Road to Middle Earth* when he states escape is essential for the regaining of "The Lost Straight Road." Shippey remarks, "it is the function of works of literature to enlarge their reader's sympathies and help them understand what their own experience may not have taught them" (286). In this way, according to both Tolkien and Shippey, individuals metaphorically regain the lost straight road when they are able to escape into literature and perceive human truths in fantasy that retain value for their own reality.

For example, think on how very few of us have actually participated in and fought during armed conflict. Western society has proven especially adept at compartmentalizing citizens from large scale organized warfare resulting in a stunted understanding. Instead of actually

participating in war, individuals must read about war as presented by third party news networks or watch scenes of armed conflict in film. Or, even listen to accounts from those who have experienced war. All of these modes of understanding are incredibly valuable. However, they signify at best a fractured second-hand account that struggles to capture war in its totality. So how can the average individual know what it feels like to lead warfighters who have been conditioned to not only act in unity while projecting measured violence, but to do so in support of each other? What does real courage in the face of an unbeatable armed foe look like? What are the subtle shifts in bonds amongst warfighters who fight for and depend on each other? Very few modern-day individuals have actually experienced these phenomena related to war in their own reality and must therefore escape into mythology to comprehend what courage and camaraderie during times of war looks like.

To summarize, when this essay discusses instances within Tolkien's Legendarium to highlight Northern Courage, *camaraderie*, *comitatus*, *ofermod*, and *Þrœll* it does so because these concepts are not easily discernable in the reader's everyday experience which has remained, thankfully, free of the brutality commonly associated with armed conflict. Consequently, to gain a heightened understanding of these concepts as related to the projection of measured force, one must first engage with them by escaping from our own reality.

III. Northern Courage and the Heroic

*"Mind must be firmer, heart the fiercer,*

*Courage the greater, as our strength diminishes."*

*-The Battle of Maldon*

In an effort to explore the best side of humanity in war, this thesis will first leverage excerpts from "The Ride of the Rohirrim" found in Tolkien's *The Return of the King.* To summarize, this chapter describes how Rohan's mounted warriors initially make contact, desperately engage, and ultimately break the forces of Mordor who are busily mounting a successful siege of the seemingly doomed city of Minas Tirith. Think of Rohan as the remnants of a heroic nation riding in defense of a besieged city of like-minded men who reside on the border defending a culture of morals against a force of powerful tyranny. At this point, the creatures of Mordor, the force of powerful tyranny, have amassed enough combat power to be considered unstoppable. Consequently, any effort that Rohan makes would seem to be futile.

The ensuing conflict is described as desperate. The nearly broken defenders of Minas Tirith have to endure the enemy who is, "flinging into the city all the heads of those who had [previously] fallen fighting at Osgiliath, or on the Rammas, or in the fields" (*The Return* 823). Furthermore, the hordes of orcs, goblins, and wargs are made even more formidable by their Nazgûl overlords who are mounted on flying beasts which naturally strike fear into the heart of every man. We are told, "even the stout hearted would fling themselves to the ground as the hidden menace passed over them… into their mind a blackness came, and they thought no more of war, but only of hiding and crawling, and of death" (823). This environment is meant to shatter individual courage while simultaneously breaking the bonds between warriors who would otherwise choose to defend what is theirs.

Against this bleak backdrop and while personally leading his cavalry into war, Théoden, King of Rohan, says, "now is the hour come, Riders of the Mark, sons of Eorl! Foes and fire are before you, and your homes far behind. Yet, though you fight upon an alien field, the glory that you reap there shall be your own forever" (*The Return* 836). With this one example, Tolkien taps into a distinctly Northern mythic time-honored tradition inherent in battle while also portraying how war brings the best side of humanity to the forefront. Some individuals willingly move into battle not because they are genetically predisposed to fight or for love of country. Instead, they participate in warfighting in order to enter into and conduct acts rooted in what has been termed "Northern Courage."

Contemplate the thoughts expressed by an emeritus professor of English at Portland State University named Marjorie Burns in her book *Perilous Realms: Celtic and Norse in Tolkien's Middle-earth.* She connects Tolkien's deliberate description of desperate circumstances in battle to, "the sense of unrelenting danger that shaped the Norseman's 'theory of courage,' that commitment to unyielding heroism in the face of inevitable doom" (12). Consequently, as the danger inherent in war increases, so too does the potential glory to be achieved from meeting and besting an adversary in war.

Burns' idea of danger and Northern Courage is further expanded upon by Tom Shippey. In his book *Laughing Shall I Die,* Shippey connects Burns' "sense of unrelenting danger" directly to a glorious death itself. For example, while discussing Ragnarök, Shippey states, "that's why the gods have to die as well. If they did not die, how could they show true courage" (40)? In this way, Northern Courage in its truest form is connected to a rapidly approaching death. One is quite literally laughing at death.

History is replete with stories which are treasured for their ability to illustrate the sense of Northern Courage discussed by Burns and Shippey and illustrated by Tolkien. For example, think of how Beowulf goes forth to meet his seemingly unbeatable monsters with courage. Line 690 of *Beowulf* illustrates how no portion of Beowulf's company thought they would survive. However, while preparing to meet Grendel, Beowulf shuns the use of weapons and armor declaring:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Ac wit on niht sculon* | *No weapons, therefore,* |
| *secge ofersittan,* | *For either this night:* |
| *gif he gesecean dear* | *unarmed he shall face me* |
| *wig ofer wæpen.* | *If face me he dares.* |
| *(Heaney, lines 682-684)* | *(Heaney, lines 682-684)* |

This act of Northern Courage illustrates how continued courage in the face of defeat portrays itself as a virtue. It is not enough that Beowulf meets with and fights Grendel. Instead, Beowulf realizes the enhanced level of social prestige to be gained by besting Grendel without edged weapons. However, to do so, Beowulf must place himself in a position which would likely bring about his death. Therefore, these lines exude courage in the face of likely defeat. And this sentiment has contributed to what historically has been considered to be the best side of human nature in warfare.

Northern Courage is exuded even more when Beowulf learns of and encounters the dragon in the latter half of the story. He still retains the brash attitude observed previously with Grendel and Grendel's mother. However, his mind is said to have been, "in turmoil, unaccustomed anxiety and gloom, confused his brain; the fire-dragon had rased the coastal

region and reduced, forts and earthwork to dust and ash" (Heaney lines 2331-2235). Beowulf experiences anxiety and gloom because he realizes he is no longer the young man who defeated the two previous monsters. Instead, he has grown old and feeble. Beowulf understands that he is "destined to face the end of his days" and the dragon could very well bring that end-day (Heaney line 2342). Indeed, just prior to facing the dragon, Beowulf moves forward, "unsettled yet ready, sensing his own death" (Heaney lines 2420). To know you will die and still freely choose to fight, as Beowulf did, is at the heart of Northern Courage. This admirable sentiment speaks to how war brings out the best sides of humanity.

Of similar value, think about the effect of Byrhtwold's lines in the 991 AD poem *The Battle of Maldon* after he realizes his Anglo-Saxon force will be defeated by an invading Viking troop. He declares:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Hiġe sceal þē heardra,* | *Mind must be firmer,* |
| *heorte þē cēnre,* | *heart the more fierce,* |
| *mōd sceal þē māre* | *Courage the greater,* |
| *þē ūre mæġen lȳtlað.* | *as our strength diminishes.* |
| *(Killings, line 325)* | *(Killings, line 325)* |

In other words, the correct response to an imminent defeat is not the degradation of mind, heart, and courage. Conversely, Northern Courage is defined as the strengthening of mind, heart, and courage as one becomes defeated.

Therefore, these two stories project an air of Northern Courage because their protagonists are willing to engage in battle against fierce odds. Ultimately, for both Beowulf and Byrhtwold, their efforts are defeated in the end. However, it is the individual will to endure mounting

adversity which readers find admirable. Essentially, it is the will to engage with Northern Courage while in the moments of greatest despair.

Now, this thesis will apply this notion of Northern Courage to the previously mentioned "Ride of the Rohirrim" example. Théoden is offering his warriors a chance to engage in Northern Courage when he speaks to them prior to the battle. When he remarks on the "foes and fires before you" he is evoking the very real danger which lies ahead for his spearmen. They are not fighting for land because they are fighting on a "foreign field." Instead, Théoden evokes the potential glory to be won by those who enter into acts of Northern Courage while fighting such a great and unrelenting foe. He is imploring those who fight with him to tap into the idea of Northern Courage. In effect, he is making them battle ready. Readers of Tolkien admire this example of Northern Courage.

Let's examine a separate line in the same battle to explore the concept of Northern Courage within Tolkien's Legendarium more fully. Remember how just prior to the charge of Rohan, Tolkien relates how the Rohirrim stand at the precipice of battle. Rohan's culture is said to have been more rustic and less civilized than that of Gondor. And yet, Théoden has been able to produce mass formations of mounted spearmen bent toward a common purpose. The leaders of Rohan had been accused by outsiders of not supporting Gondor in their hour of need. However, their battle gear is glittering, their spears have been sharpened, and they stand united in the early morning light as the King of Rohan looks on with "agony…anguish… and dread" at the cataclysm that is Minas Tirith (837). Even at the head of Rohan's fighting formations, Théoden knows he cannot hope to win. However he says this to his spearmen:

*Arise, arise, Riders of Théoden!*

*Fell deeds awake; fire and slaughter!*

*Spear shall be shaken, shield be splintered,*

*A sword day, a red day, ere the sun rises!*

*Ride now, Ride now! Ride to Gondor! (The Return 838)*

With these words, Tolkien seems to be directly evoking the concept of Northern Courage using poetic diction sprung from old textual language in the Norse "Völuspá" poem. Common words are arranged in such a way as to present a unique meaning to readers familiar with the texts they originally appear in.

Note Owen Barfield's thoughts on the value of poetic diction for transmuting meaning. He states, "when words are selected and arranged in such a way that their meaning either arouses, or is obviously intended to arouse, aesthetic imagination, the result might be described as poetic diction" (41). Consequently, specific words are arranged in such a way as to evoke powerful meaning.

Théoden evokes shaken spears, splintered shields, sword days, and red days. Readers familiar with the language used to describe Ragnarök are instantly aware of the doom inherent in Théoden's speech. For example, compare the language used by Théoden to that found in the Old Norse "Völuspá" poem which serves as the foundational text for Northern Courage:

*Brœðr muno beriaz ok at bǫnom verðaz,*
*muno systrungar sifiom spilla;*
*hart er í heimi, hórdómr mikill,*
*skeggǫld, skálmǫld, skildir ro klofnir*
*vingǫld, vargǫld, áðr verǫld steypiz;*
*mun engi maðr Oðrom þyrma... Surtr*
*ferr sunnan með sviga lævi,*
*skínn af scerði sól valtíva;*
*griótbiǫrg gnata, en gífr rata,*
*troða halir helveg, en himinn klofnar.*
*(lines 45-52)*

*Brothers will battle to bloody end,*
*and sisters' sons their sib betray;*
*woe's in the world, much wantonness;*
*axe-day, sword-day— shattered are shields—*
*wind-age, wolf-age, ere the worlds*
*crumbles;]will the spear of no man spare his*
*brother... Another woe awaiteth Hlín,*
*when forth goes Óthin to fight the Wolf,*
*and the slayer of Beli to battle with Surt:*
*then Frigg's husband will fall lifeless.*
*(lines 45-52)*

The poetic diction of both texts involves fear, conflict, strife, and death. Sword days, broken spears, and days of blood are evoked in both Théoden's speech as well as the prophesy espoused by the völva. Yet, even with this knowledge, Odin (Frigg's husband) is fated to courageously fight all the while knowing he will "fall lifeless." Consequently, readers applaud characters, such as Théoden and Odin, who willingly move into "sword days" knowing they will die because this heroic action exhibits the highest form of Northern Courage. It is admirable for individuals to test their will against the world even while knowing they will be defeated in the end.

Now apply the virtue of Northern Courage rooted in Tolkien's Legendarium to the question of why a portion of humanity is willing to engage in war. War wastes human life. It is incredibly disruptive to the social, economic, and political order of society. These are all

undoubtedly facts. However, the virtue of Northern Courage, as portrayed in Tolkien's Legendarium and found throughout historical texts, cannot exist in a world free of strife. Social, economic, and political strife tends to create war. And war has always been the stage for warfighters to perform acts of Northern Courage. This is why readers of Tolkien applaud the characters who exhibit Northern Courage. And it is also why some portions of society are willing to engage in war as well as lead other likeminded individuals in times of armed conflict.

Professional warriors of actual contemporary conflict are conditioned to emulate this specific virtue of courage after they have joined military service. And it provides some of the answer as to why individuals are motivated to conduct war in our own reality. They are seeking glory by performing acts of Northern Courage not because of love for country, as argued by Bosanquet, or because they are organically predisposed for conflict, as argued by Reno. Instead, some warfighters recognize the heightened level of potential glory available to them if they individually decide to fight against seemingly unwinnable odds.

For instance, examine the real-life odyssey of Pat Tillman as transcribed by Jon Krakauer in *Where Men Win Glory.* Krakauer recounts how Tillman walked away from a multi-million-dollar National Football League deal in 2002 to fight armed combatants as an Army Ranger in Afghanistan. Tillman's choice was certainly not influenced by wealth. An entry-level junior soldier makes less than $30,000 per year. And some would argue it was not wholly influenced by love of country, although this assuredly had something to do with his decision. Instead, Tillman very likely sought recovery from a regular life which had become inundated by material goods and dominated by safety. Tillman actively sought war and the chance to perform acts of Northern Courage by testing his will against the will of an armed and experienced opponent. This is representative of a decision-making process rooted in Northern Courage. Krakauer cites

Tillman's "willingness to stand up and fight" against odds as one of Tillman's most admirable qualities which led him to participate and seek to excel in war (344).

It is important to differentiate here between standard love of country and the individual will to achieve acts of Northern Courage. For example, note how Tillman's decision to join and deploy specifically as an elite Army Ranger reflects his preference for acts of Northern Courage. Over a course of three grueling months in Ranger School, Tillman was conditioned to, "energetically meet the enemies of [his] country… [he] will defeat them on the field of battle for [he] is better trained and will fight with all [his] might" (*Ranger Creed*, para. 5). To this day, Rangers scream these lines in every morning formation, they are repeated before every meal, and they are rehearsed yet again at the end of every duty day. In this way, Tillman's initial willingness to stand and fight was very deliberately conditioned by the U.S military towards something like Northern Courage. He knows, as a Ranger, he will not only fight, but fight energetically *regardless* of the adversary placed in front of him.

Consequently, these units are the proverbial "tip of the spear" for any major offensive action undertaken by American military power, the country's elite shock troops. They have historically deployed more often and been killed at a higher rate than any other regular line unit. All contemporary Soldiers know this. And yet, the Ranger Battalions Tillman joined have consistently retained some of the highest levels of *esprit de corps* because they know they are the chosen few selected to engage in the most dangerous situations. Essentially, they have the best chance of winning heightened glory against odds. Keeping this in mind, although love of country contributes to some motivation to engage in war, the heightened potential offered by formations who regularly face unwinnable odds seems to also be present. This sentiment is what drove Beowulf to defeat his three monsters, and it is what drives some individuals, such as

Tillman, to test themselves against odds in contemporary conflict. Tolkien reproduces this in his Legendarium very admirably.

Consider how the motivations for war-making between the fantastical character of Théoden and the real-life Army Ranger Tillman intersect along the lines of Northern Courage. Both were attracted to armed conflict to perform great deeds under extreme duress and at great risk of individual life. One, Théoden, died in a fantasy world outside Minas Tirith. While the other, Tillman, died in the mountains of Afghanistan zipped with 5.56 rounds from a modern-day assault rifle. And yet they shared the same sentiment of recovery during armed conflict by performing acts of Northern Courage. In this way, we as readers are able to glean distilled reality by engaging with Tolkien's fantastical Legendarium.

Furthermore, think about how, as these words are being read, thousands of American warfighters are either training for, preparing to, or are actually jumping out of fixed wing aircraft as voluntary paratroopers. This is certainly not a particularly safe task. Bad exits lead to ripped biceps and slit throats. Unfortunate landings produce compound fractures or even wholly broken bodies unrecognizable upon impact. Even if one lands safely and the operation entails mass exits of thousands of paratroopers, one's head must constantly be on a swivel in order to not be crushed by the descending 32- and 64-foot platforms bearing wheeled vehicles. By all accounts this task should be avoided. And yet individuals flock to these units for the potential glory to be seized by arriving in battle through the air.

Now consider how the concept of Northern Courage and laughing at death is embedded in the lyrics of a common song known to all paratroopers who sing it to the tune of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic". It states:

*There was blood upon the risers, there were brains upon the chute,*

*Intestines were a-dangling from his paratrooper suit,*

*He was a mess, they picked him up and poured him from his boots,*

*And he ain't gonna jump no more,*

*Gory, gory, what a helluva way to die,*

*Gory, gory, what a helluva way to die,*

*Gory, gory, what a helluva way to die,*

*He ain't gonna jump no more,*

*(Kight stanza 8)*

The very real chance of death is constantly being acknowledged. The song relays how body parts have the potential to be shattered. And yet, the death is represented, somewhat ironically, as glorious and a "helluva way to die." These are near parallel ideas expressed by Shippey in his previously mentioned book *Laughing Shall I Die*. He comments on how a key aspect of Northern Courage retains the ability to, "make a joke out of death, [or] die laughing" (29). Consequently, when young paratroopers sing the above-mentioned parody verses, they are actively participating in a joke about death that they could very conceivably encounter in their own professional lives. In this way, those who still jump and are conscious of the heightened risk to life and limb can be said to be engaging in the macabre humor commonly associated with Northern Courage.

Therefore, the same courage which leads paratroopers to willingly jump as well as the courage exhibited by Tillman to engage with war retains the same flavor of Northern Courage which Théoden exhibits while he leads his Rohirrim. And, I am asserting that it is this same idea

of Northern Courage which drives individuals to escape peace and participate in what MacMillan calls one of "the best sides of humanity" while seeking to excel in war against odds. It is similar to a drug which, once experienced, can never be forgotten.

Let's return to our third and final example from Tolkien's Legendarium to examine more closely the role unyielding will plays in Northern Courage. Following the "The Ride of the Rohirrim," readers come to "The Battle of Pelennor Fields." At this point, the battle is at its bleakest for Rohan. Théoden is dead, "the hosts of Mordor were enheartened and filled with a new lust and fury," and the Corsairs of Umbar seemed to be reinforcing Rohan's enemies (*The Return* 847). All seemed lost. Against this backdrop, Théoden's surviving kin, Éomer, screams, "to hope's end I rode and to heart's breaking: Now for wrath, now for ruin and a red nightfall" (*The Return* 847). Tolkien remarks Éomer, "laughed as he said [these words]… and lo! Even as he laughed in despair he looked out again on the black ships, and he lifted up his sword to defy them" (847). In these passages, one once again sees the Barfieldian concept of poetic language in the "red nightfall' hearkening back to the previously mentioned Völuspá poem. This portion of poetic diction heightens the feeling of impending doom which both the Völuspá saga and now Éomer's statement seem to promise. However, when Éomer laughs, he is signaling his disdain for his enemies as well as a still unbroken individual will in the face of impending catastrophic defeat. In essence, he's engaging in the previously mentioned macabre humor of Northern Courage to remain unbroken in defeat.

This unyielding will is a major part of what is admirable in the performance of Northern Courage. And it speaks to how war brings out the best sides of humanity. Furthermore, although war is cruel, wasteful, and unsavory, the unique conditions of war are the only environment in which the unyielding will associated with Northern Courage can truly be

observed at its height. However, the same admirable spark of unyielding will which undergirds Northern Courage contributes to the concept of *ofermod,* or, "overweening pride akin to hubris that goes beyond legitimate glory-seeking" (Cutler 64). By exploring the literary tension between Northern Courage and *ofermod*, readers can grasp how the seeds of northern courage they find so admirable in war can also contribute to needless tragedy and the worst sides of humanity.

IV. *Ofermod* and the Disastrous

*"Alas, my friend, our lord was at fault, or so in Maldon this morning men were saying.*
*Too proud, too princely! But his pride's cheated, and his princedom has passed,*
*so we'll praise his valor."*

*- The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth*
*Beorhthelm's Son*

First, this essay will frame *ofermod* so it can isolate the concept in Tolkien's texts in support of enhancing the reader's understand of how war brings out the worst of humanity. To begin, the Old English word *ofermod* is commonly associated with the Latin word *superbus* often translated as "haughty pride." Ofermod's first two syllables consisting of *ofer* denote "over" or "above." While its third and final syllable, *mod,* denotes courage, pride, or heart. Therefore, actions said to be nested in *ofermod* are often driven by perhaps too much pride, or courage, or heart in oneself. This theory is further reinforced by the Dutch *overmoed* and the Danish *overmod* both meaning overconfidence.

Medieval scholars were familiar with the concept of *ofermod* through such texts as the 9th century *Genesis B* manuscript which depicts the fall of Lucifer using the word *ofermod.* For example, it states.

*"deore waes he drihtne urum ne*
*mihte him bedyrned weorðan*
*þaet his engyl ongan ofermod wesan.*
*Ahof hine wið his herran." (Genesis 208)*

Pauline Alama has translated this as, "[God's] angel began to be *ofermod*, raised himself against his master" (83). Consequently, perhaps the most defining feature of *ofermod* is the individual will's attempt to assert itself through overweening pride. Since elements of this concept can be found in both Northern Courage and *ofermod,* this drive to assert one's will against unwinnable odds does much to explain how elements of warfare can be both detested and admired. It is as if Northern Courage and *ofermod* exist on two sides of the same coin. Now that *ofermod* has been defined, this essay will transition back into Tolkien for the purpose of isolating examples prior to applying this concept to the actual lived experience of leaders in war.

Relatively early in *The Lord of the Rings,* a council of the free peoples of Middle Earth meet for the purpose of discussing what to do with an object of great power. Some wish to destroy it outright immediately until they understand it cannot be destroyed by anything they possess. Others wish to bring the ring to the Fires of Mount Doom where it can then be cast into the fire. However, a third suggestion illuminates how *ofermod* can seem to be akin to Northern Courage.

Let's begin with the character of Boromir, who in many ways serves as the perfect vehicle for examining how Northern Courage and *ofermod* coexist through the variable of unyielding will. For example, while discussing the fate of the Ring at "The Council of Elrond," Boromir says, "it is long since [Gondor] had any hope. My father is a noble man, but his rule is failing, and now our people lose faith. He looks to me to make things right, and I would do it. I would see the glory of Gondor restored" (*The Fellowship* 248). These lines indicate a character who is willing to embody Northern Courage to achieve glory even in the absence of hope. Boromir is willing to fight against seemingly unwinnable odds in order to restore glory.

However, Boromir's subsequent recommendation for the ring betrays machinations rooted in *ofermod.* Boromir indicates a preference for taking the ring, trusting in his own willpower to use it as a weapon against Sauron. Therefore, in his own pride, Boromir is blinded to the potential of corruption if he were to seize the ring. It is not until Elrond remarks, "its [the Ring's] strength… is too great for anyone to wield at will… the very desire of it corrupts the heart" (*The Fellowship* 267). With these words Boromir relents, if only for a little while, until he betrays Frodo in his quest to destroy the ring by attempting to seize it with force. However, this example illustrates the relationship between positive Northern Courage and negative *ofermod.* These concepts, representing two opposite endpoints on a scale of literary tension, share the same unyielding will in service to achieving glory in conflict. The difference lies in *ofermod* being based wholly on overweening pride in oneself. In order to expand upon this concept more fully, this essay will now transition to an event in *The Silmarillion* which illustrates the thin border between *ofermod* and Northern Courage.

The case study of Fëanor, his Silmarils, and the slow doom of those who follow him portrays just how closely *ofermod* and Northern Courage coexist. This close relation illustrates how war simultaneously brings about the best and bestial sides of humanity. For example, Tolkien describes Fëanor as the preeminent crafter of three peerless gems called the Silmarils. Fëanor is an Elven leader, cunning in the crafting of weapons and gems alike. In the beginning, Fëanor is content to live amongst his people with goodwill and harmony. However, when Morgoth steals the Silmarils, Fëanor makes a decision that masquerades as Northern Courage but is really rooted in his own *ofermod* and will to possess.

While rousing his kin to pursue Morgoth, Fëanor declares, "long and hard shall be the road… bring with you your swords… we will go further than Oromë, endure longer than Tulkas:

we will never turn back from pursuit. After Morgoth to the ends of the earth! War shall we have and hatred undying" (83). With these words, Fëanor seems to prime himself and those who would follow him to contend with unwinnable odds. Previously, readers admired this sentiment in the mythic characters Beowulf and Byrhtwold as well as the fictional character Théoden and the real U.S. Army Ranger Tillman. Like these previous men, Fëanor is willing to test his will against forces which could very easily defeat him. After all, Morgoth has been cast as the arch enemy, retaining a role similar to that of Lucifer in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Therefore, there is an element of something like courage involved in Fëanor's decision which seeks to pit his own weaker will against that of a semi-divine evil being.

However, Fëanor's false courage, rooted in the concept of *ofermod,* is driven by his pride to regain the stolen Silmarils. Like Boromir, Fëanor's pride causes him to believe he can fight and win against a fallen Valar, but Valar nonetheless. Furthermore, Fëanor's references to Oromë and Tulkas depict how he pridefully wishes to outperform divine beings. And, lastly, Fëanor's overemphasis on "undying hatred "seems to be at the root of his courage to enter into armed conflict. Therefore, overweening pride is at the root of Fëanor's courage, and it is what drives such needless waste in the wars of Middle Earth as well as the armed conflicts in our own reality.

For example, this one prideful decision, nested squarely in *ofermod,* drives the house of Fëanor to ruin over an extended period of time. First, while attempting to seize the boats of his fellow elves, Fëanor kills innocent Teleri during an event known as "The Kinslaying" (87). This event serves to initially illustrate the evils associated with exclusively pursuing one's own will at the expense of others. However, as the story unfolds, the negative consequences of Fëanor's decision outlast his death as represented by the loss of six sons during the War of Wrath which

ultimately breaks the world leaving it devastated. Similarly, Fëanor's only surviving son, Maglor, is lost to obscurity due to his association with Fëanor.

All of these events rooted in needless violence can be tied back to Fëanor's initial prideful decision to try to assert his own will while recovering his lost Silmarils. For these reasons, readers of Tolkien can be simultaneously in awe of the courage initially demonstrated by Fëanor and disgusted by the waste generated from one decision rooted in pride. This intertwining of awe from Northern Courage and disgust from *ofermod* is connected by the individual decision to endure while asserting oneself. Consider how the concept of *ofermod* depicted by Fëanor in a Tolkienian mythology manifested itself during World War I as seen through the eyes of Ernst Jünger

Ernst Jünger drew from his World War I experience as a German junior officer in the 19th Hanoverian Füsilier regiment to write a bevy of memoir, fiction, and philosophical texts. Although he is most famous for his 1920 memoir *In Stahlgewittern,* or *Storm of Steel,* his philosophical treatise *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*, or *War As An Inner Experience,* portrays just how closely the concepts of Northern Courage and *ofermod* coexist with one another in our own reality.

For example, while describing courage in war, Jünger remarks, "courage is the key to all treasures, the hammer that has forged great empires… courage is the commitment of one's own person to the utmost consequences, the challenge of the idea against matter… Courage means to let oneself be crucified for one's cause" (44). Jünger's idea of courage expressed here echoes the main elements of Northern Courage discussed previously in both Tolkien's Legendarium and Northern European/Anglo-Saxon mythology. For example, when Jünger argues the courageous individual challenges "the idea against matter" he is speaking of having the courage to assert

one's will for the purpose of shaping reality. Similarly "crucifixion for a cause" is synonymous with moving into battle knowing one will die. Therefore, the key idea connecting the two interpretations of courage is maintaining the will to dare greatly at great personal risk to one's own body. Of course, this idea is what some individuals find admirable. However, what is the result when opposing sides, in nationalistic pride, embody something like the courage described by Jünger?

While describing trench warfare, Jünger illustrates the horrors of conflict in which "crucifixion for a cause" is the bare minimum. He writes, "the trench. Work, horror, and blood… [it is] a glowing Moloch that has gradually burned the youth of the men to cinders, spun veins over ruins and desecrated fields, from which the blood of mankind pulsed into the earth… night after night columns of men wound their way toward the trench" (18). This depiction illustrates how courage rooted in pride causes individuals to lose their humanity over time. During World War I, courageous men of either side eager to sacrifice for a cause only met the trench which is described as a modern-day Moloch. Men become cinders. And the columns of men seeking to advance the prideful goals of their own individual nations only feed the trench for four long years of warfare. In this way, readers of Jünger find themselves simultaneously awed by the individual courageous willpower to endure such hardship in war as well as disgusted by the nationalistic *ofermod* which drives the literal meatgrinder that was World War I trench conflict.

Tolkien's own experiences in World War I while fighting as a Battalion Signals Officer in the Fusiliers nests well with Jünger's "Moloch" sentiment. For example, in *Tolkien and the Great War,* John Garth remarks, "for Tolkien… personal loss was piled on top of the horror and exhaustion of battle" (170). After one of the costliest battles in World War I, the Somme, many

of Tolkien's childhood friends from the Tea Club Barrovian Society had been killed in the very same trenches referred to by Jünger as that "modern day Moloch." These personal losses coupled with Tolkien's own war experiences shattered any idealistic notions of war framed wholly in heroic conceptions of Northern Courage.

Instead, during the war, Tolkien came face to face with modern-day war policies rooted in nationalistic *ofermod*. Subsequently, he was forced to realize, "the war would last longer, and be fought with greater savagery, than anyone dared to imagine. The mutilated bodies of numberless millions of factory workers, farmers, clerks, and students would be consigned to graves scattered throughout Europe" (Loconte 24). Even though Jünger and Tolkien fought on opposite sides during the war, they would likely be in agreement on the scale of its destruction and waste.

Furthermore, for a visual depiction, one need only watch Edward Berger's 2022 *All Quiet on the Western Front* or Philipp Kadelback's *Generation War* to understand just how easily supposed Northern Courage can slip into the degradations associated with *ofermod* nested squarely in overweening pride in one's nation. Both films initially portray the flower of German youth stepping away from academic endeavors in support of the martial goals of their Fatherland. At the entry stage of war, the initial levy of young men are cast as heroes willing to die for an idea, willing to throw their individual will against the will of an armed antagonist. As discussed previously, this sentiment is not unlike Northern Courage.

However, as the war drags on, *ofermod* manifests itself in the overweening pride of the belief in German military invincibility. For example, in the film 2022 film *All Quiet on the Western Front,* a German government official named Matthias Erzberger is charged with negotiating peace with his French counterpart during World War I. His efforts are routinely

blocked by the French and German military hierarchies which leads Erzberger to state, "all that's left separating us from an armistice is false pride." As a result, thousands of French and German warfighters continue to pour into the meatgrinder that was trench warfare for the purpose of sustaining martial pride.

Now apply the Northern Courage/*ofermod* duality to the later portion of this paper's research question: how can aspects of war bring out the best and bestial sides of humanity? A portion of the answer lies within the relationship between the twin concepts of Northern Courage and *ofermod* as expressed in Tolkien's Legendarium which only reflects back to us the realities of our own flawed human condition. Some parts of war can seem to be admirable because armed conflict serves as the primary vehicle for enacting acts rooted in Northern Courage. For example, war allows us the chance to win glory by relying on one's own willpower to fight through great adversity; a chance to shape reality through unyielding willpower. However, all too often the same unyielding willpower that is associated with Northern Courage slips into *ofermod,* or the overweening pride in oneself.

This sentiment causes one to admire the unyielding will in the fantastical characters of Théoden and Eomer because they symbolize the same Northern Courage that can be admired in the real-life Tillman. However, the very same unyielding will viewed as tragedy in Boromir and Fëanor is only reflecting the tragic *ofermod* which wrought the prideful waste in real armed conflict. I argue the Northern Courage side of the coin is what initially attracts warfighters to armed conflict, while the duality between Northern Courage and *ofermod* illustrates how elements of war can contain the bestial as well as what is best of humanity.

Now that this paper has explored fully the duality inherent in Northern Courage and *ofermod*, it will move to its second explanation for why some individuals are motivated to

conduct war as well as how war brings about the best and bestial sides of humanity. Whereas the previous section dealt more with the physical acts involved in projecting violence, this section examines what is uniquely attractive about the social organization of warfighters who participate in camaraderie while cultivating a tribal organization steeped in the Old English idea of *comitatus.*

V. *Comitatus* and Belonging

*"The guests were many; grim their singing, Boars-flesh eating, beakers draining;*
*Mighty ones of Earth mailclad sitting. For one they waited, the World's chosen."*

*-Valhöll in The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun*

Let's first define *comitatus* in order to conceptualize how this Old English concept can assist in answering the paper's research inquiry. In his book *The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic,* John Hill asserts *comitatus* signifies the, "reciprocal loyalty between retainer and warlord" (32). Therefore, at the heart of this concept is the hierarchical relationship between warrior and ring-giver, or retainer and lord, or soldier and officer. These dyads form the social bedrock of warfighters working in tandem against armed opponents. Furthermore, these relationships also assist in conceptualizing why some individuals not only participate in war, but actually seek war out in order to exist in social bonds which peace is not adequately equipped to offer.

Consider how heroes are always accompanied by supporting warriors as portrayed in myth and Medieval Anglo-Saxon literature. For example, Beowulf doesn't arrive on the shores of the Scyldings alone. Instead, he arrives with, "many a warrior, a valiant company of knights" (line 322). Likewise, in *The Kalevala,* Väinämöinen, Ilmarinen, and Lemminkäinen all sail together as a company in pursuit of the Sampo which they must seize through force. And lastly, in *The Nibelungenlied,* Siegfried rides into Gunther's land accompanied by, "chosen knights… whose shields were new; gleaming and broad, and fair their helmets" (41). All of these examples illustrate the importance of warfighter bonds, both to the leader and the subordinate. Their task at hand unites them by generating heightened social ties that cannot be built during times of peace.

Keeping this sentiment in mind, think about how Tolkien always places his characters within a larger group of warfighters under one leader united towards a single purpose. In *The Silmarillion*, Gil-galad challenges Sauron supported by, "a great host of elves…they alone were undivided" (294). This elvish host proved loyal to Gil-galad enabling him to form a united effort against those who would seek to do evil.

Similarly, in *The Hobbit,* Bilbo is accompanied by a larger dwarven "company" led by Thorin Oakenshield who, we are told, is an, "an enormously important dwarf" (5). It is Thorin who acts as a distributor of treasure, or ringgiver, for the company when they seize the Lonely Mountain. And it is his haughtiness, or one could even say, his *ofermod*, which causes him to fixate on the newly acquired Arkenstone. Bilbo shatters the comitatus-like relationship between himself and Thorin after realizing that Thorin no longer has the best interests of the company in mind.

Lastly, in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo is accompanied by a "fellowship" under Gandalf who is supported by representatives of the free peoples of Middle Earth. Their arms consist of, "broad blades… bows…swords…shields…and war-horns" suggesting that they will fight for each other while seeking to attain their unified aim (279). In this way, the description of the fellowship mirrors the descriptions of warbands we've previously encountered within *The Nibelungenlied, The Kalevala,* and *Beowulf.* These hosts, companies, and fellowships all serve as proxies for the common warfighter social organization based on bonds of *comitatus*. In the Norse world during the Viking age, these groups of warfighters were referred to as *lyds* (Price). Today, in the English-speaking world, they are referred to as platoons. For both formations, as the nuclear group of warriors meet and overcome adversity, mutual trust is deepened, willingness to sacrifice for the betterment of the group strengthens, and bonds of trust reach heights

unattainable in peacetime. These powerful social ties represent a categorical positive for warfighters who enter into and sustain armed conflict.

Conversely, to exist outside of these powerful social ties contributes to hopelessness and exile. For example, while returning to Anglo-Saxon literature, consider how the speaker in the poem *The Wanderer* laments the loss of his *comitatus* relationship with his own ring giver. He states:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Se þonne þisne wealsteal wise geþohte* | *He who thought wisely on this foundation,* |
| *ond þis deorce lif deope geondþenceð,* | *and pondered deeply on this dark life,* |
| *frod in ferðe, feor oft gemon* | *wise in spirit, remembered often from afar* |
| *wælsleahta worn, ond þas word acwið:* | *many conflicts, and spoke these words:* |
| | |
| *Hwær cwom mearg? Hwær cwom mago?* | *Where is the horse gone? Where the rider?* |
| *Hwær cwom maþþumgyfa?* | *Where the giver of treasure?* |
| *Hwær cwom symbla gesetu?* | *Where are the seats at the feast?* |
| *Hwær sindon seledreamas?* | *Where are the revels in the hall?* |
| *Eala beorht bune!* | *Alas for the bright cup!* |
| *Eala byrnwiga!* | *Alas for the mailed warrior!* |
| *Eala þeodnes þrym!* | *for the splendor of the prince!* |
| *Hu seo þrag gewat (lines 89-95)* | *How that time has passed away (lines 89-95)* |

The speaker is literally a wanderer who is mourning the loss of his warband. Yes, he remembers the conflicts which were undoubtedly bloody and full of strife. However, it is the harness of war and the individuals who band together which he most ardently laments. The speaker earnestly

yearns for the lost "giver of treasure" which is synonymous with the ring giver whom warfighters bind themselves to. Similarly, the lost seat and cup at the feast table are literary stand-ins for the social ties which bind individuals together for the purpose of creating camaraderie. All of these things have now passed. Consequently, the speaker is left to mourn the loss of his personal *comitatus* relationship as a great tragedy which has broken his identity as a warrior and made him into a lowly wanderer.

Now consider how the absence of *comitatus* manifests itself in Tolkien's Legendarium. Fittingly, while wandering in the country with hobbits, Aragorn provides a prime example. Aragorn, who is himself a wanderer and outcast, "began to chant in a slow tongue unknown… 'Where now is the horse and the rider? Where is the horn that was blowing? Where is the helm and the hauberk" (*The Two* 508). Aragorn follows the same tradition as the Wanderer by not lamenting war per se. Instead he is lamenting the loss of the tight knit social bond found between warriors that conflict forges through necessity. The horses and riders he speaks of carry the helms and hauberks which are called together in one social unit by the sounding of a war horn. Warriors assemble around the sound of the war horn. Therefore, the loss of the war horn symbolizes the fracturing of *comitatus* in Aragorn's own reality deliberately constructed by Tolkien. This is why, similar to the speaker in *The Wanderer,* Aragorn exists as an outcast and must lament the loss of a warband.

Before the events depicted in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Aragorn lacked the necessary social cohesion which a group of warriors tied to one leader provides. However, as Aragorn moves through the story plot, he rediscovers camaraderie, in the beginning, as a leader of the Fellowship and, at the end, as King of Gondor. Both leadership positions enable him to serve as a type of ring giver to adjacent characters who leverage the idea of *comitatus* to strengthen

themselves. In this way, for some individuals, social organizations formed exclusively for war on the bedrock of *comitatus* seem better and stronger than those found in peace time.

Consider how this idea of *comitatus* appears within Sebastian Junger's book *Tribe* which describes the incredibly strong social relationships built amongst warfighters in real armed conflict. For example, while interviewing Ahmetasevic, a female combatant during the siege of Sarajevo, Junger asks what she remembers from her time. After describing the abhorrent damage commonly associated with all war, she remarks, "I missed being that close to people, I missed being loved in that way… we were *the happiest* (70). She doesn't say "I was happy." Instead, she says "we were the happiest." She was the happiest during the cruel realities of war.

The happiness Ahmetasevic remembers while participating in war is rooted in her being a part of a tight knit group formed for the sole purpose of engaging in survival and the projection of concerted violence. The war band she was a part of was founded on the idea of *comitatus* which created incredibly strong bonds between warfighters and leaders of warfighters. In this way, war has the potential for great destruction. However, it has continually proven to be the strongest producer of the shared suffering necessary for the intensification of interconnected human relationships.

For example, reverting back to Ernst Jünger, our German World War I Platoon Leader, consider how he tied war, shared suffering, and the heightened level of connection present in an infantry fire team. In his book *Auf Schmerz*, or *On Pain,* he asserts,

| | |
|---|---|
| *Erzählen Sie mir Ihre Beziehung zum Schmerz,* | *Tell me your relation to pain,* |
| *und ich werde dir sagen, wer du bist. (1)* | *and I will tell you who you are. (1)* |

This sentiment has led Jünger to argue that an individual's willingness or unwillingness to

encounter shared pain serves as one objective measure of who they are. Furthermore, when shared adversity is encountered and experienced by groups of individuals, these groups experience bonds which are entirely unavailable to individuals who are unable to meet and overcome the heightened levels of suffering associated with war. In this way, the many pains associated with armed conflict forge bonds between individuals which are entirely unavailable during peacetime. This sentiment contributes to how war brings about what is best in humanity.

Now conceptualize how *comitatus*-like relationships built during armed conflict through shared pain are so strong that some warfighters prefer to remain in combat rather than lead a peaceful life. This idea is shockingly well illustrated in Kathryn Bigelow's 2008 film *The Hurtlocker* as it depicts the experiences of William James, a U.S. Army Explosive Ordinance Disposal technician. The majority of the film depicts him encountering loss, danger, and tragedy while leading a small unit of likeminded soldiers in Iraq. However, near the end, he finds himself redeployed back to the U.S. alone in a grocery store cereal aisle with a flickering florescent light overhead. The film flashes to its conclusion with James walking off the back of a Chinook helicopter that has just landed back in Iraq. The audience soon realizes that James volunteered for a second deployment instead of a peaceful life. In part, he was chasing the heightened *comitatus* relationship only present in teams of individuals who operate in the shared danger associated with wartime environments. Of course, this movie represents a fictional depiction of war. However, if one were to search for any clip of the previously described scene, they will be inundated by hundreds if not thousands of comments left by real veterans of foreign wars exclaiming the precise accuracy of this portrayal.

The intersection between *comitatus*, and the basic war band/tribe/or squad shows up in mythology with the individuals who surround Beowulf, Väinämöinen, and Siegfried. The

intersection is reflected back from mythology in Tolkien's Legendarium. And, even though Tolkien's stories are fantasy, they provide part of the answer as to why some individuals, like Ahmetasevic, require war to participate in one of the best sides of humanity. Elements of war can seem admirable because they intensify human relationships through the use of *comitatus* and shared suffering. This sentiment contributes to what some find attractive about portions of war. However, before this paper moves from this subject entirely, it will expand upon one more facet which contributes to the attractiveness of social organizations constructed for participating in war.

VI. Camaraderie and Free Will

*The freedom of a creature must mean freedom to choose:*

*and choice implies the existence of things to choose between.*

\- *C. S. Lewis*

One of the defining virtues of *Camaraderie* is the subordinate warrior's latitude to intuit via free will how best to serve the leader at the top of the organization. This emphasis on free will illustrates how mutual trust within a healthy hierarchical organization contributes to robust relationships amongst warriors whether they be subordinate or superior to each other. An excellent example of this is found as Gandalf, Legolas, and Aragorn find themselves approaching Théoden's hall while seeking an audience with the King of Rohan. However, to be received, they must first pass by a door warden named Háma. Háma has been tasked by Théoden, his lord, to bar the way against any outsider. Aragorn's group are easily identified as outsiders. And yet, Háma remarks, "yet in doubt a man of worth will trust to his own wisdom. I believe you are friends and folk of honor, who have no evil purpose. You may go in" (*The Two* 511). Although Háma is bonded to his lord, he still retains the necessary free will for individual choice which may not necessarily follow the letter of the order given to him by his lord. In this instance, Hama's decision, nested in his own free will, saves his lord who was under the spell of a malevolent advisor named Wormtongue.

In this way, hierarchical organizations built for war rely on individuals of worth who can at once internalize their leader's intent and make decisions using their own wisdom, cunning, or decision-making process. This seemingly oxymoronic relationship between hierarchy and free will strengthens the bonds between warriors as they grow to trust each other's decisions during significant events of shared adversity. Warriors who participate in these bonds and have

developed heightened levels of mutual trust are referred to as "hearthfriends" in *The Battle of Maldon*, or "hall-companions" in *The Wanderer*. These special connotations serve to highlight the intimate circles amongst warriors who have generated exceptionally high levels of trust by participating in hierarchical organizations which prize individual free will. The trust that flows both ways is entirely unlike anything that can be found in times of relative peace. And it does much to explain why warfighters take joy in participating in organizations specifically constructed for armed conflict.

Consider how this phenomena at the intersection of camaraderie and free will manifests itself in the memoirs of those who have actually participated in war. For example, Erwin Rommel led portions of the Württemberg mountain infantry battalion as a German Platoon Leader during World War I. His memoir *Infanterie greift an* (*Infantry Attacks)* describes the value of free will in a hierarchical system while conducting trench warfare. For example, while fighting in the Argonne, Rommel's company had become pinned down unable to move after a French machine gun team had established itself on the right of his formation. On his left was impassable terrain. To his rear were wire entanglements necessitating slow methodical movement for anyone who wished to traverse them. Furthermore, a surge to his front would only further isolate his warfighters. In this scenario, Rommel recounts how, "a battalion order was shouted across the entanglement by a runner: 'Battalion is in position half a mile to the north and is digging in. Rommel's company to withdraw, support not possible' (Rommel, 58)."

This clear order triggers the following thought process in Rommel's mind. Keep in mind Rommel's decision will directly affect the lives of the two-hundred warfighters pinned down who directly depend on him. He remarks:

> Now for a decision! Should I break off the engagement and run back through the narrow passage in the wire entanglement under heavy crossfire? Such a maneuver would at a minimum, cost fifty percent in casualties. The alternative was to fire the rest of our ammunition and then surrender. The last resort was out. I had one other line of action… I lost no time in issuing my attack order. (45).

Just as Hama used his wisdom to make the right decision against the immediate demands of his superiors, Rommel leveraged free will to act against the orders he had just received. His decision resulted in the capture of the machine gun nest and saved the lives of his company. The subordinate individuals in his company loved him for it. Furthermore, his immediate superiors recognized the value of his individual initiative resulting in the extension of further trust during later engagements. In this way, the use of measured free will within a hierarchical organization exponentially increases the camaraderie felt between warfighters facing adversity.

Contemporary militaries, especially the armed services associated with the United States, have sought to replicate this method of leadership realizing the team building value it possesses. For example, consider how the U.S. Army's Mission Command philosophy is a direct descendent of Prussia's Mission Tactic concept (*Auftragstaktik*) thought to have developed during the German Thirty Years War. In Peter Wilson's book *Iron and Blood: A Military History of the German Speaking Peoples since 1500,* he defines *Auftragstaktik* as being, "characterized by the senior officer defining the objective, but allowing subordinates considerable latitude in carrying it out" (634). The exercise of free will, as exemplified by Mission Command and *Auftragstaktik* philosophies, within teams as well as a team of teams is what binds bonds between warfighters so tightly. Hearthfriends are hearthfriends because they are trusted by their leader. Once again, these philosophies nested in actual contemporary

warfighting organizations mirror the importance attached to free will within comraderie relationships as depicted in Old English poems as well as Tolkien's Legendarium.

Perhaps the crowning example illustrating the value of free will and camaraderie within Tolkien's Legendarium is found when Sam physically takes his master's burden upon himself while on the Slopes of Mount Doom. At this time, Frodo's will to continue has significantly weakened. Similarly, Sam thinks to himself, "you might just as well lie down now and give up. You'll never get to the top anyway" (*The Return* 939). Both Hobbits are said to have been parched, "the air was full of fumes; breathing was painful" (*The Return* 940). They were operating in the most horrible volcanic conditions consisting of a, "huge mass of ash and slag and burned stone" (*The Return* 940). These conditions highlight what Burns previously defined as the sense of unrelenting doom most commonly associated with the northern theory of courage. And it is the backdrop for which Sam exercised his freewill so magnificently.

After Frodo collapses, unable to go on, Sam remarks, "I can't carry it [the Ring] for you, but I can carry you and it as well. So up you get! Come on, Mr. Frodo dear! Sam will give you a ride" (940). This event portrays how Sam leverages his own freewill in the most disastrous of situations to physically take his master's burden upon himself. Even after acknowledging the desperation of their situation, Sam still manages to intuit correctly what Frodo needs and acts wholeheartedly with the interests of Frodo at the forefront. Essentially, the camaraderie between Sam and Frodo erases all boundaries which separate individuals. Instead, they act with loyalty and freewill as one unit with the interests of the whole at heart. This is why, from an Old English perspective, Frodo considers Sam as a trusted hearth friend and/or a loyal hall companion. This event explains why John Tuttle remarks, "Sam remains steadfast in all he does- his friendships, his mission, everything… One of the most beloved virtues he possesses is his

loyal quality" (89). Sam can be trusted to do the right thing without being told by his "master." In this way, the harsh realities of war and armed conflict manufacture the conditions in which camaraderie, in its purest form, thrives.

However, as with the Northern Courage/*ofermod* duality, the positive elements associated with teamwork stemming from *comitatus* and camaraderie also contribute to what can go disastrously wrong with teams during warfare. In this way, war has the potential to twist positive forms of teamwork rooted in mutual trust, free will, and loyalty to each other into artificial teams based on slavery to a single overarching will. Let's dive into another Tolkien example to illustrate how the Norse concept of *Þrœll*, or thralldom, generates the bestial side of humanity in warfare.

VII. *Þræll* or Thralldom

*"But one of the worst results of being a slave and being forced to do things is that when there is no one to force you any more you find you have almost lost the power of forcing yourself."*

*-C. S. Lewis*

Tolkien's Legendarium gives very few glimpses into the social organization of the enemy's foot soldiers. Really, only two examples throughout the 1031 pages of main plot text stand out. The first instance is found in Chapter III of *The Two Towers* when Merry and Pippen have been captured by Saruman's elite Uruk-Hai led by a character named Uglúk accompanied by a mix of Sauron's Mordor Orcs led by Grishnákh. The resulting dialogue illustrates the lack of mutual trust between team members who participate in a hierarchical organization, not unlike those hierarchies observed previously within *comitatus* relationships. However, in this hierarchy, leadership is facilitated by brutality, fear, rigid orders, and the negation of individual will. Consequently, subordinate warfighters are held together not by *comitatus* and camaraderie, but thralldom and slavery.

Consider the level of contempt each rival portion of the team expresses for the other portion. For example, one of Grishnákh's followers thinks the Uruk-Hai leader should be tortured and killed. He states in Black Speech:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Uglúk u bagronk sha pushdug* | *Uglúk to torture (chamber) with stinking* |
| *Saruman-glob búb-hosh skai* | *Saruman-filth. Dung-heap. Skai!* |
| *(The Two Towers 78)* | *(The Two Towers 78)* |

This rather frank statement does much to portray the high level of existing contempt within the warfighting team. Consequently, this hatred for each other cannot inspire the affinity for

belonging which has been observed previously in the character of Aragorn and the real life combatant Ahmetasevic. Instead, the hierarchical organization of enemy warfighters is held together by fear and slavery to an overarching higher power.

Now consider how Uglúk as leader negates free will by achieving unity of effort through fear. For example, when Uglúk is confronted with subordinate warriors who offer a different course of action than his own, Uglúk, "sprang forwards, and with two swift strokes swept the heads off two of his opponents… they slew two more before the rest [Mordor orcs] were cowed" (447). In this way, Uglúk rules through fear and naked strength. Consequently, in Uglúk's warband there is no room for subordinate free will such as that previously observed in the case of Háma. Nor is there a cohesive body of warfighters joined together through mutual trust and camaraderie. Instead, there is only raw power and slavery.

Teams built upon such twisted social dynamics must rely on orders and the whip to coerce actions from members who have no individual will of their own. Consider how, while determining plans, Uglúk does not enter into conversations with those around them. Instead he relies on brittle orders to enforce what he wants to accomplish. For example, while arguing with the Mordor Orcs, Uglúk states, "kill all but not the halflings… that's my orders" (445). Later in the conversation, Uglúk shuts down opposing views by declaring, "I am Uglúk, I command (446). Furthermore, even later in the argument Uglúk asserts, "I am Uglúk, I have spoken" (446). Lastly, while deriding the Mordor Orcs within his troop, Uglúk screams, "I'll see that orders are carried out in my command" (451). These examples portray how orders and the subsequent negation of group consensus drives action within Uglúk's warband. Therefore, in direct opposition to the positive relationships built around *comitatus* and *comraderie*, Uglúk's warband functions within the principles of *Þræll,* or thralldom.

To understand how the concept of thralldom, as represented by Uglúk's warband, contributes to this paper's research inquiry, let's turn to the 10th century Norse *Rígsþula* (The Lay of Ríg) translated by Lee Hollander. This lay concerns itself with the three classes of Viking society consisting of nobles, free yeoman, and slaves or *jarl*, *bondi*, and *þræll* respectively. It tells of how Ríg began the three classes of Scandinavian society by resting one night in a mansion, a house, and a hut. Each place of abode was owned by a male-female couple. However, nine months after Ríg leaves, children are born.

| | |
|---|---|
| *Börn ólu þau, - bjuggu ok unðu, -* | *In their hut, happy, they had a brood:* |
| *hygg ek at héti Hreimr ok Fjósnir,* | *I ween they were hight Hay-Giver, Howler,* |
| *Klúrr ok Kleggi, Kefsir, Fúlnir,* | *Bastard, Sluggard, Bent-Back and Paunch,* |
| *Drumbr, Digraldi, Dröttr ok Hösvir.* | *Stumpy, Stinker, Stableboy, Swarthy,* |
| *Lútr ok Leggjaldi, lögðu garða,* | *Longshanks and Lout: they laid fences,* |
| *akra töddu, unnu at svínum,* | *put dung on fields, fattened the swine,* |
| *geita gættu, grófu torf.* | *herded the goats, and grubbed up peat.* |
| | |
| *Dætr váru þær Drumba ok Kumba,* | *Their daughters were Drudge and Daggle-Tail,* |
| *Ökkvinkalfa ok Arinnefja,* | *Slattern, Serving-Maid, and Cinder-Wench,* |
| *Ysja ok Ambátt, Eikintjasna,* | *Stout-Leg, Shorty, Stumpy and Dumpy,* |
| *Tötrughypja ok Trönubeina.* | *Spinkleshanks eke, and Sputterer:* |
| *þaðan eru komnar þræla ættir.* | *thence are sprung the breed of thralls.* |
| *(stanzas 9-10)* | *(stanzas 9-10)* |

The children born in the mansion are described as beautiful from whence the class of jarls are descended. Likewise, the children born in the house are described of good quality from whence the class of bondi claim their heritage. However, the children born in the hut as *þræll* are described with less than desirable names.

The names (sluggard, lout) given to the children of *þræll* indicate less than desirable traits that are not conducive for warfighting formations who survive through mutual trust and respect. After all, one must continuously drive sluggards and louts who do not wish to contribute of their own free will. Furthermore, the duty descriptions (fence layers, dung spreaders, and peat-grubbers) reside wholly in the field of the lowest undesirable manual labor. As a result, these individuals will never know the longing that comes from strong comradeship built through shared strife. The nature of their labor ensures they will forever remain in thralldom to some higher being who must drive them to perform.

This *þræll* concept is expanded upon by Stefan Brink in his book *Thraldom: A History of Slavery in the Viking Age.* For example, while discussing the Eddas, he argues "thralls are used as a literary spice [in saga narratives] to contrast the free" (85). Consequently, when one comes upon a thrall in sagas their actions are often negative, laughable, or demeaning in some way because they are actions of a slave. As a result they become the foils for the free characters who base their actions on more admirable qualities.

The concept of *þræll* or thralldom as portrayed in Tolkien's Legendarium, illustrated by the sagas, and expanded upon by Brink manifests itself during times of war in our own reality. For example, Peter Wilson describes in *Iron and Blood* how it was common practice during the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries for European non-commissioned officers to stand behind linear formations of riflemen in order to shoot anyone who fled. In this way, wars were fought through

fear and soldiers were conditioned to fear their leaders more than the opposing military formation. This practice would certainly fit with Uglúk's leadership style.

Similarly, conscripted armies, such as the one being used at the time of this writing by Russia in their ongoing effort to conquer Ukraine, do much to negate individual will. A particularly horrible example is elucidated by Alex Statiev in his article "Penal Units in the Red Army." He explains how, "the Stavka [Soviet Penal Army Authority]… interpreted penal service primarily as a means of intimidation intended to preclude desertion and unauthorized retreat" during World War II (744). These units would be the most forward and, therefore, the most likely to be destroyed. Their ranks were generated from criminals, deserters, and enemy prisoners of war who had no power to resist impressment. Of the 994,300 Soviet soldiers who received court martial sentences 422,700 were forced into penal units and placed at the tip of the Soviet spear (Krivosheev 246). Officers kept order through brutality. And casualties were astronomical. If, by chance, an individual survived, they were usually maimed in some way for life and blocked from achieving the same social status accrued by regular unit soldiers. Needless to say, the same resentment, fear, and lack of *camaraderie* this essay observed in Uglúk's warband thrived in Soviet penal units during World War II.

Now, let's summarize what this means for the latter portion of this paper's research question: How can elements of war bring about the best and bestial sides of humanity? I suggest that, during wartime, the very same hierarchies necessary for building camaraderie and positive forms of *comitatus* may sometimes be twisted into teams based in *þrœll*, or thralldom.

Think of the longing for wartime camaraderie felt by Aragorn, the speaker in *The Wander,* and Ahmetasevic. This feeling arises from a completely different kind of warband which is built on mutual trust and free will between leader and warfighter. It is almost as if

individuals in these types of fighting formations live life more fully because of the danger inherent in war, the shared pain, and the misery. Yes, these three facets of war can be terrible. However, in the right type of formation, they produce incredibly tight bonds between warfighters.

None of these characteristics can thrive in warbands, such as Uglúk's, who exploit thralldom and naked force to drive formations. In this way, similar to how thralls in sagas merely contrast against free folk, the evil foot soldiers in Tolkien's Legendarium contrast against the free fighting formations of Middle Earth. The former functions only with slavery as illustrated in the Soviet penal units. The latter is built from freedom of choice, healthy *comitatus* relationships, and deep bonds rooted in camaraderie. Inevitably, war brings about both types of fighting formations and this binary is what drives some to admire and some to detest this specific element of armed conflict.

VIII. Conclusion

*"The good of the world depends on the behavior of an individual in circumstances which demand of him suffering and endurance far beyond the normal... demand of body and mind which he does not possess."*

- *Tolkien in Letters*

In the past two decades, Tolkien's Legendarium has garnered renewed interest from a wider audience. As a professor of Medieval Anglo-Saxon literature, Tolkien's many tales have struck a chord with individuals capable of admiring old concepts such as Northern Courage, camaraderie, and *comitatus*. However, far from being a purely happy tale, his Legendarium also depicts the crueler aspects of armed conflict which manifests itself in *ofermod* and thralldom. These concepts are not new. One could argue they are present in the Biblical story of Cain and Abel. Cain's jealous pride causes him to strike his brother. They are constantly portrayed in the collective unconscious of Northern European mythology such as *Beowulf, The Nibelungenlied, The Kalevala,* and *The Twin Eddas.* They trickle down into Medieval Anglo-Saxon literature such as *The Battle of Maldon.* And, lastly, they show up in our own wars in contemporary society. In this way, to use a phrase from his fellow Inklings member, C. S. Lewis, Tolkien's Legendarium simply "lifts the veil of familiarity" from our everyday life.

This thesis has leveraged the fantastical vehicles of recovery and escape to assist readers in understanding how these previously old ideas relate to armed conflict in our contemporary reality. Tolkien's stories are certainly fantastical representations rooted in Northern European mythology. However, the events of Northern Courage throughout his Legendarium illustrate how war, with all of its negative consequences, brings out the best of human nature. People are

attracted to it because it gives an individual a chance to test their will against that of the world. For some, it is admirable to stand firm on one's conviction in the face of rhetorical or armed conflict. It is even more admirable when that same choice is made after realizing one's own imminent defeat. Perhaps something like this exists in peace. However, the heightened danger associated with war magnifies acts of Northern Courage to a level unreachable by any other collective human action.

Furthermore, the *camaraderie* and healthy forms of *comitatus* present in war generate powerful bonds amongst warfighters who willingly persevere through shared hardship and pain. As with Northern Courage, these ideas are present in the mythologies Tolkien was familiar with. The mythologies were created by our own collective human experiences. And, as a result, his Legendarium reflects back to us what is so admirable about these social constructions during times of war. We see the power of these old concepts of *comitatus* and *camaraderie* in real people who have experienced war. Ahmetasevic and Junger acknowledged the brutality of war. However, they also commented favorably on the heightened feeling of *camaraderie* which war brings.

And yet, these very same concepts which some admire, particularly Northern Courage, and *comitatus*, contain the seeds for *ofermod* and thralldom, respectively. Of course, these concepts are what moral individuals identify negatively with war. The unwavering will necessary for acts of Northern Courage can slip into *ofermod*, or overweening battle-pride in oneself. Once again, this concept is found throughout Norse and Germanic mythology. Furthermore, decisions rooted in *ofermod* drive the tragic aspect within *The Battle of Maldon*. It is reflected back to us in the Tolkienian characters of Boromir and Fëanor. And it shows up in our own reality during wartime.

Overweening martial pride, unrestrained nationalism, and the refusal to make peace led to millions of deaths during both World Wars. In fact, in his *A Vindication of Natural Society*, Edmund Burke credits nationalist pride for making, "war… the matter which fills all history [and drives governments] to the destruction of one another" (20). In this way, the very same *ofermod* illustrated by the sagas, manifested in Medieval Anglo-Saxon literature, and reflected back to Tolkien's readership in the Legendarium is very much alive in our own reality. And this concept, coupled with thralldom, provides a large portion of why individuals tend to focus on the bestiality of human nature in war. Bearing all this in mind, Tolkien's Legendarium provides a fantastical nexus for why war brings out the bestial and best sides of humanity.

In the outset of this paper, the author mentioned a variety of prior theorists on war. Arguments rooted in patriotism, economics, history, social theory, and human psychology all attempted to describe why humanity has always conducted armed conflict. However, this paper chose to use the literature of a fantasy author who was a master of mythology as well as a prior combatant himself. For this reason, his literature masterfully combines actual wartime experience with war as represented in Northern European mythology. It is for this reason that readers can use his many texts to regain one of the explanations for why individuals willingly choose to conduct war as well as why war brings out the best and worst sides of human nature. In closing, perhaps during this time of increasing reliance on data collection, machine learning, and artificial intelligence, one should not forget the power of myth and imagination to relay powerful truths rooted in the actual human condition.

*Finis*

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Appendix 1- Spring 2023 Belmont University Commencement Speech

I'd first like to congratulate you on achieving your respective degrees. My wife and I came to Belmont fresh off a U.S. Army rotation in Hawaii with the 25th Infantry Division. I had recently been promoted to Major and was looking forward to being a student again. For the last ten years we had been bouncing around between duty stations in Oklahoma, North Carolina, Hawaii, and now Tennessee. While in the military, we never committed to a specific church partly because of our many moves and partly because I would be in the field shooting howitzers during typical normal service times. However, when we got to Belmont, I began to remember again what it was like to be surrounded by a truly Christian community.

My brother, three sisters, and I were blessed to grow up in a Lutheran household. My father was a Navy lawyer and we would find a new church wherever we moved. Our Grandparents, who we call Oma and Opa, had escaped Germany during World War II as children with the help of Lutheran missionaries. I can still remember many of the Biblical stories they taught us. As a kid, I was drawn to Old Testament renditions of Daniel and the Lion's Den as well as David and Goliath. After confirmation, I developed a new understanding of the Son of God and His sacrifice. All of these stories were captivating to me, but I did not fully understand why until I came to Belmont and studied texts such as *Beowulf*, *The Kalevala*, and the *Eddas*. There is something in these Old English and Norse texts which enthralled J. R. R. Tolkien as he wrote "The Lord of the Rings," as well as his contemporary C. S. Lewis, author of the Narnia series.

For example, there is a very obscure poem titled "The Battle of Maldon" which both Tolkien and Lewis were intimately familiar with. The poem recounts an actual 991 AD battle in Essex, England between Christian Anglo-Saxon defenders struggling against pagan Viking

invaders. At one point in the battle, the Anglo-Saxon leader is killed and his warriors begin to flee. However, one-man steps forward and remarks *Hiġe sceal þē heardra, heorte þē cēnre, mōd sceal þē māre þē ūre mæġen lȳtlað*, or "our mind must be firmer, our heart the fiercer, our courage the greater, as our strength diminishes." The ideas expressed in this single line of Old English heroic poetry capture what I valued in the biblical stories of my youth. These stories have taught us to exhibit great heart and courage in the face of overwhelming odds, whatever they may be.

Consider how firm Daniel's mind must have been to risk death at the teeth of lions while rebuking King Darius. Think about the fierce heart David exhibited while willingly engaging with Goliath. And lastly, contemplate on how Jesus Christ knew his fate at the last supper. What would it be like to know beforehand you would be betrayed, tortured, and crucified? What kind of courage would it take to stay true to oneself in the face of an earthly defeat of such magnitude?

After graduation, my Wife and I will move once again to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas for ten months of Command and General Staff College. I believe my experience here has fundamentally prepared me for this endeavor just as it has prepared you for what comes next in your life. When you leave Belmont and go out into the world, inevitably you will be met with hardship, strife, and adversity, just as Daniel, David, and Jesus were. Engage with these trials joyously while glorifying God. This is an opportunity to make your mind firm, your heart fierce, and your courage great. Seek to excel in whatever field you become involved in. Learn how to love being tested, for this will make you stronger. And when you fail, have the courage to learn from your failure and then re-engage. I congratulate you on your degrees and I'll see you down range.

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