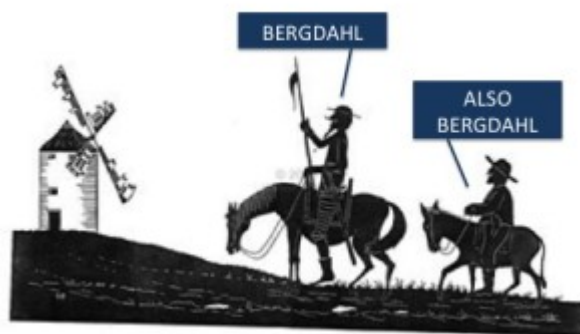


The Unusually Literal World of Bowe Bergdahl

Military hyperbole is at the heart of [*Serial's*](#) second season. Sarah Koenig has gambled that she can take a simple premise—man walks off a base in Afghanistan, is captured by the Taliban—and make it representative. Of the war, of the world, of human nature. The season has discussed how Army private Bowe Bergdahl came to leave his post in Afghanistan, was captured by the Haqqani network (a savage affiliate of the Taliban), and the military's efforts to rescue him. Its focus was procedural as well as institutional, describing the military's bizarre, byzantine, and unrecognizably convoluted legal and social skeleton. The season's sixth episode, "5 O'Clock Shadow," extended that focus to the military's extreme linguistic habits.

It's difficult to imagine a world without metaphor or hyperbole. Try it—try visualizing a day wherein everything everyone said to you and everything you said to someone else, was understood as a verifiable truth claim. Conducted properly, the exercise results in confusion, absurdity, and a bewildering breakdown of communication. While metaphor and hyperbole aren't necessary for communication, we rely on these linguistic devices to describe thoughts or emotions that involve some discomfort, and as most people's lives involve discomfort—in work, in love, or in one's fragile ambitions—metaphor, analogy, and hyperbole become a kind of language within a language.

This is doubly true in the military. When one considers the context, it's not surprising—the military, and especially the Army (or Marine) infantry consists of a more or less constant indoctrination into the ideas that (1) a soldier is part of a collective, with limited value as an individual and (2) one should expect to get hurt very badly or die, and that so long as this occurs within a military-sanctioned action against one's enemies, that injury or death is desirable. Citizens of countries that have Western humanism and individualism at their cultural heart will find these thoughts incomprehensible at best—and those citizens who become soldiers of their humanist nation's militaries therefore take this linguistic tendency to speak in metaphor and hyperbole to dramatic extremes.



In “Five O’Clock Shadow,” Koenig made much of Bergdahl’s disillusionment when a prominent and high-ranking sergeant in his unit claimed that soldiers had joined the military to “rape, kill, pillage, and burn,” a claim that was not immediately disputed by others present. Apparently, Bergdahl took the sergeant’s statement at face value, and statements like it. This became evidence to Bergdahl that his unit’s leadership was unscrupulous.

Most people with military experience—and especially experience in the combat arms, where euphemism and hyperbole are most necessary for psychical well being—understand that the military is filled with hyperbole. The easiest example of this (described by Army veteran Nate Bethea for *Task & Purpose’s* Serial Podcast) is a popular way of saying that one is angry

with a peer or subordinate: “I’m going to cut off his head and shit down his neck.” The correlation between American soldiers or officers promising this horrible and primitive manner of execution and actual executions carried out? A perfect 0.

Establishing that people don’t mean everything they say, in or outside the military, is one important component to see how Koenig understands Bergdahl. Another point is that the military itself is filled with double standards that could be (and in the case of Bergdahl, were) interpreted as hypocrisy. Hence Bergdahl’s conclusion that the official fixation on unit uniform standards ([or standards in general](#)) was arbitrary and unreasonable—a fixation with which every soldier in post-9/11 combat has had to struggle. The same sergeant was quoted in “Five O’Clock Shadow” as viewing unshaven soldiers in the same light as the Vietnam-era unit that committed the My Lai massacre. To Bergdahl, this was another confusing example of hyperbolic rhetoric, but to the sergeant, the statement was intended to be taken at face value.

Bergdahl concluded that the military’s priorities were honorable and decent, and that it was his unit’s leadership that was intentionally or foolishly misinterpreting rules, regulations, and intentions in Afghanistan. Bergdahl concluded this because he apparently had difficulty interpreting metaphor and hyperbole, and was unable to reconcile the difference between ideal and real. This [quintessentially human struggle](#), in Bergdahl’s case, appears to have been insurmountable.

The seventh and eighth episodes of Serial elaborate on Bergdahl’s literal-mindedness, and assign it a definition that fits it into the spectrum of mental illness: schizotypal

personality disorder, a form of schizophrenia. In other words, Bergdahl's behaved like a crazy person because... he was a crazy person.

I have argued elsewhere that Bergdahl should never have been in the military to begin with, and that due to his uniquely unsuitable temperament, those officers responsible for adjudicating Bergdahl's case [should view his crime with mercy and compassion](#). These episodes make it very clear that Bergdahl was never fit to serve in the Army infantry—from a social standpoint, as well as from a literary and linguistic one.