

A Combat Action Video Goes Viral

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Introduction

On 24 February 1991, the USS Missouri (BB-63) was conducting shore bombardment operations in the Persian Gulf off the coast of Kuwait during Operation Desert Storm. The gun fire control equipment of the forward main battery plotting room was energized and ready for action. The crewmembers assigned to the plotting room were mostly relaxed and confident, having already had many hours of training and wartime fire missions under their belts. Suddenly, a voice on the ship's loudspeaker announced, "Missile Inbound!" and the crew immediately "braced for shock" as a deadly Silkworm anti-ship missile streaked towards the Missouri and its battlegroup [1].

Earlier, a young firecontrolman assigned to the plotting room had fastened a video camcorder to the bulkhead hoping to record the shore bombardment action. Little did he know that he would capture forty of the most harrowing minutes experienced by the ship during the war. The resulting footage showed sailors responding to multiple Iraqi missile attacks as well as a suspected chemical attack.

Thankfully, there was no serious harm to the ship or its personnel. One of the missiles fell into the sea, missing its target. Another was destroyed by the HMS Gloucester, a British destroyer escorting the Missouri, in the first ever documented ship-to-missile engagement during combat at sea. The chemical alarm that initiated the use of gas attack protective gear was later thought to be caused by smoke from the oil field fires set by the fleeing Iraqis [2].

The purpose of this paper is to examine as a case study a video of the combat events described above that was published on YouTube nearly three decades after it was recorded [3]. The authors of this paper selected this video for analysis because of its relevant content and because they have obtained access to the non-public analytics data. In this paper we will examine some of the history of the ship depicted in the video, the wartime context in which the video takes place, how the video fits into a video/media literacy framework and explore some of the data analytics and comments of the video.

Video Background and Context

The setting of the missile attack video is inside of the forward main battery plotting room of the battleship USS Missouri. World War II Iowa class battleships like the USS Missouri were built with four such plotting rooms, two forward and two aft for redundancy. Each plotting room served as the computer center for either a five-inch or sixteen-inch gun system, from where the aiming and firing of the guns was controlled [1].

The video shows the sixteen-inch main battery gun plotting room located in the forward part of the ship. The machine visible in the bottom center of the video is the Mark 8 rangekeeper, built

by the Ford Instrument Company to aim the sixteen-inch guns on the US Navy's battleships and cruisers during World War II. The Mark 8 was still a functional and useful machine five decades after its installation on the battleship. Analog fire control computers aboard naval warships such as the Mark 8 played an early and important role in the development of computer systems but have been largely unrecognized because they were classified military secrets for so long [4].

The keel of the battleship USS Missouri was laid down in Brooklyn, NY. on 6 January 1941. The ship fought in World War II and Korea, famously endured a kamikaze attack, and hosted the surrender of Japan upon its decks [1]. Fifty years later, almost to the day of its keel laying ceremony, on 4 January 1991, the battleship Missouri entered the Persian Gulf in response to Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait [1],[2].

Within a week, the danger of the situation was made real to the crew as the battleship sent an explosive ordinance disposal unit into the water to destroy an Iraqi mine found floating in the gulf [1]. The Iraqi military laid hundreds of mines in the Persian Gulf prior to the war. General Norman Schwartzkopf had restricted patrols in the northern part of the gulf during the coalition buildup to prevent an early triggering of war, but this allowed Iraqi mine-laying operations to go on for months without detection [2].

Operation Desert Storm began on 16 January 1991 and the Missouri became an active participant. "We are at war," announced the commanding officer, A.L. Kaiss, before the ship launched its Tomahawk cruise missiles towards Baghdad [1].

When the missile attack video was recorded on 24 February 1991, the USS Missouri was conducting naval gunfire support inside of a mine-swept channel in the middle of a minefield a few miles from the coast of Kuwait. Just a few days prior, two US Navy ships, the USS Tripoli and the USS Princeton, were severely damaged by sea mines in the same minefield with several injuries but no lives lost. The captain of the Princeton later observed that the calm state of the sea meant the difference between saving his ship and losing it; the damage was so severe that bigger waves would have certainly sunk it [2]. Not only was the USS Missouri at risk by being in a minefield, but being close enough to the coast for gunfire support operations meant that it was also at risk of receiving enemy fire from shore.

While the camera was recording, there were two separate warnings for incoming missiles and an order to put on protective gear because of a possible gas attack. Reactions to these events seem to show the crew members' level of experience.

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protective gear was later thought to be caused by smoke from the oil field fires set by the fleeing Iraqis [1],[2].

Current Relevance

The historical event depicted in the video of the Operation Desert Storm missile attack has current relevance. While the missile attack on the USS Missouri in 1991 marked the first successful ship-to-missile engagement in combat at sea courtesy of the destroyer HMS Gloucester, as of this writing, US Navy warships and aircraft currently stationed in the Red Sea since late 2023 have regularly engaged Houthi drone and anti-ship missile attacks directed towards both civilian and military ships [5],[6]. One YouTube commenter on the video observed:

“YouTube recommend again but today (Feb 2, 2024) I watched news of USS Gravely seconds away from a hit from Houthi in Yemen. The Phalanx destroyed the missile only four seconds to act. The heavier bits of the destroyed missile still hit the ship [3].”

While weapons technologies have certainly improved since 1991, the danger represented in the Desert Storm video mirrors the same risks that those currently serving in the Red Sea face today.

Additional relevance rests simply within the fame of the battleship Missouri itself. It is now a popular museum ship located in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii [7]. It was the site of the surrender of Japan in World War II. Battleships were once the most fearsome weapons of war in the world. The ship with its guns and armor is a marvel of human ingenuity and achievement. People who are interested in subjects like history and engineering tend to be interested in things like battleships.

Video and Media Literacy

Video is the new vernacular language [8]. It is the default information source for most people today whether it comes in the form of traditional television or online video. Video, music, websites, games, all new media are “texts” [9]. However formal education still places typographic texts at the forefront in terms of literacy forms that are seen as the greatest of importance. Every college student is expected to learn to read and write with the written word but few of the same students are expected to understand how to effectively communicate using video and other forms of new media [8],[9].

The core principles of media literacy are *access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act* [9],[10]. “Media literacy education is the ongoing development of habits of inquiry and skills of expression necessary for people to be critical thinkers, thoughtful and effective communicators, and informed and responsible members of society [10].”

A key question of media literacy that should be asked about YouTube videos and all media is “*What techniques are used to gain and hold my attention [10]?*” One useful tool for answering

this question lies in understanding how memes work. What is a meme? Brodie provides a working definition:

“A meme is a unit of information in a mind whose existence influences events such that more copies of itself get created in other minds” [11].

In other words, a meme is an idea that wants to spread itself from one person to many. Any discussion of viral videos is, in essence, a discussion about memes. We see many of them at work in the missile attack video and in the user comments as well. The original memes are ideas that deal with survival and success of the human species. These are *crisis, mission, problem solving, danger, opportunity/loss, food, and sex* [11]. Additional memes that expand upon the original list include *obeying authority, skepticism, belonging, distinguishing yourself, caring, approval, tradition, evangelism, faith, familiarity, making sense, and fun/entertainment* [11].

People who can think critically about the media and understand how it works are more aware of how the media saturated world in which they live impacts them, their thinking, and their lives. Additionally, people who understand how to create compelling media have a more influential voice with access to more effective tools and techniques than those who do not [9],[10].

Video camcorders as consumer electronics were an innovation in 1991, having been on the market for less than a decade and were relatively expensive [12]. In the late 1980s and early 90s, most military personnel on deployment did not own video-making equipment, leaving such a capability to enthusiasts, hobbyists, and to professional journalists and videographers. Contrast this with the near universal ownership of video-making equipment today in the form of digital smart phones. Nearly every young adult in the US between the ages of 18-25 now owns a smart phone capable of digital video recording. As a result of this technological shift, members of the military today can routinely take a video-capable device with them on deployment [13],[14].

Digital Scholarship

Just as students need to be media literate, this is also true of the educators who teach them. University faculty members are traditionally expected to perform well in the areas of teaching, scholarship, and service. However, scholars and academics are increasingly turning to online platforms to share work, increase recognition and construct identity as “the pressure on academics to build their profile – and particularly their online profile – is growing [15].” Digital scholarship is growing in importance as “university reputations are at least partly built from the quality and visibility of their academic faculty [15].” If video is the new vernacular [8] it makes sense for scholars to publish in video. Videos such as the USS Missouri missile attack video serve as rich primary sources of information for research and analysis.

Veterans and Social Media

Some studies have demonstrated that veteran college students often use social media to form communities and seek assistance [16] and that online communities specifically for veterans are

often more supportive in providing informational and emotional support than typical online communities that are open to the public [17].

Active-duty service members have rules and regulations regarding what can and cannot be posted on their personal social media accounts, and they have access to Public Affairs Officers who can vet potential posts [18]. However, veterans have neither resource. They must rely on information they gained during their time in service; a time that could have occurred before social media sites and relevant regulations even existed. Some critics even maintain that the use of social media by military personnel can be a threat to operational security [19]. However, Clay Shirkey [20] and others who embrace social media encourage companies and organizations to not shy away from using social media claiming that if you do not use your own voice on social media to speak for yourself, someone else will use it to speak for you and you may not like what is said.

Description of the Data

The video was published on YouTube on 23 February 2020, twenty-nine years after the recording was made. During its first year online, the video received around 9,000 views, averaging fewer than 1,000 views per month. That trend continued until late August 2021 when the view count suddenly doubled and kept increasing. By the end of August 2021, the video had garnered 35,000 views.

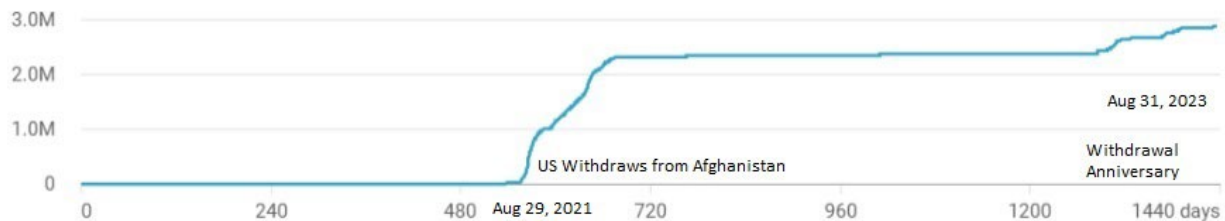


Figure 1 – USS Missouri Missile Video- Days Published / Views Count

There is a clearly visible spike in YouTube view count that coincides with the Afghanistan withdrawal. From September 2021 to January of 2022, the view count rose from 35,000 views to 2.3 million views, with the first million views happening by early October 2021. From January of 2022 to August of 2023, the view count continued to increase, but at a comparatively slower rate, gaining around 100,000 views during those next 20 months (about one and a half years). As one of the video’s commenters observed, “*It appears that your video has been blessed by the algorithm* [3].” In August of 2023, another uptick in view count occurred. This uptick coincided with the second anniversary of the US Afghanistan withdrawal and views continued to increase as did new tension in the middle east beginning in October 2023 with the surprise attack on Israel by Hamas launching a new war in the region.

Another possible source of new viewers was the release of a new video in August of 2021 by YouTube influencer channel “The Operations Room” describing the same 1991 missile attack on the Missouri [22]. Both this video’s release and the news media coverage of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan happened at the same time.

The number of views this video received is unusual. Currently at over 3 million views, this video dwarfs the average number of views for the uploader channel’s other 236 videos. In fact, this one video accounts for more than half of the 5 million total views for the entire channel. For a channel of this size—3,347 subscribers—a previous study predicted an average view count of less than 10,000 views per video [21]. A typical YouTube channel with a similar following and number of videos posted would likely have closer to 2 million views.

Current evidence shows that the biggest YouTube channels with followings more than 100,000 subscribers enjoy a much higher share of the total video views on YouTube [21]. Somehow, this video was discovered and recommended by the YouTube algorithm and received an exceptionally high number of viewers. The reasons for this high view count could be many things, but most likely rest with current events drawing viewers to videos tied to not only the current Global War on Terrorism, but previous United States military conflicts in the region. For example, a search for current US Navy missile interceptions in the Red Sea could also lead to this video that documents the first-ever combat missile intercept at sea.

Video Viewer Comments

Besides the view count data, public comments on the missile video are another important source of information to consider. There were around 3,000 comments posted as of this writing. The set of available comments as of this writing are included in the appendix.

A video with 3 million views and only 3,000 has a 1:1,000 comments-to-views ratio, suggesting that these comments are mostly from authentic YouTube users and not spam bots. Also, YouTube spam controls have improved in recent years [23].

We analyzed the video’s comments beginning with an app-generated “topics” list provided by the YouTube mobile app that grouped the video comments into popular recurring themes and questions. The app suggested the following themes: “Sailors don gas masks”, “USS Missouri: history, legend and tourist attraction”, “Navy: kids, fat, and Bubbles”, “Incredible footage”, “Commenters remark on how young the actors look”, “Admiration for the ship”, “Green shirts meaning?”, “Navy guys drinking beer on duty”, and “Why are they wearing green?”

Working with these app-suggested topics, along with a cursory review of the comments, we refined and condensed those topics into simpler categories for use in this paper. The category headings are shown below in bold:

Context of the video – training or wartime?

Ship's fame, history and admiration / purpose of the room

Response of the men to danger

Appearance and age of the men / clothing and protective gear worn

Veteran comments

Other complaints and criticisms

Examples from each comment type are shown below and a complete listing of available video comments as of this writing are available in the Appendix.

Context

- *Is this a drill or real world, and if real, who was shooting at them?*
- *Looks staged and fake.*
- *Food and drink on the machinery. Not the best place for them in a drill.*
- *How did you get this footage? Crazy stuff. I always wonder "where are they now?" But Really cool to see what war is like from this perspective.*

Ship

- *If you ever get a chance to visit the Missouri museum ship at Pearl Harbor, take it. I can't remember exactly but you might get to visit this room.*
- *All that's going on and all I can think about is how these guys are going to f--- up some Iraqi positions with a gun plotting computer that's older than anyone on board.*
- *Aboard a battleship in combat - incredible.*
- *amazing and unique footage and looking at photos, wow what a beautiful ship*

Response

- *This is what true war fighters look like, calm, clear, collected even while facing deadly circumstances, then laughing about something stupid while waiting for a missile to hit. No freaking out, then back to work as soon as the threat is gone! Great work*
 - *Really???.....it's a fn drill moron.....*
 - *Nobody will be laughing if it was a real missile up coming at them. They were calm because there was no real threat to begin with*
 - *maybe learn some history, not a drill. Real missile*
- *That missile inbound, could you imagine how scary that moment would be? Thinking you could die any second. These Sailors stand right back up and get to work.*
- *3:10 "im not looking for it" hearing them laugh even in the chance of being a devastating event for crew That's gallows humor at its best!*

- *Hope this helps people appreciate what our service member go through in daily life. God bless them all*

Appearance

- *They're so young. Some of them are probably grandparents now.*
- *i wonder why the FCs are wearing green shirts in gun plot.*
- *Kids warring for billionaires.*
- *They're all children. And they fight and die for nothing, for no reason other than to line the wealthy elites with more money.*

Veteran

- *I remember that day well. I was topside - my GQ station was port side SRBOC (chaff) launcher so we were inside the CIWS equipment room waiting for the impact. Scary stuff.*
- *I was in the Navy for seven years in the 00's and we trained countless time on "missile inbound, brace for shock". It's crazy to see a real incoming missile video.*
- *An AF guy here but funny to notice. Let's see. GQ, relaxed drinking cokes, hurry up and wait. Brace for impact, relax smoke and joke, GAS GAS GAS, crazyyness, MOPP level 4, more crazyyness and in the middle of donning Level 4. Brace for impact.*
- *As a Desert Storm U.S. Army Vet, interesting seeing the Navy side of things during Operation Desert Storm.*
- *The Navy is known for a high level of physical fitness and PT test difficulty.....They are required to get into MOPP 4 in 26 minutes which is pretty hardcore....*
- *Why are they not wearing protective gear and anti flash cream?*
- *hell nah... I prefer staying on land, thank you!*

Other

- *And thus started decades of pointless American Imperialism and wars.*
- *40 minutes.....learn how to edit*
- *Why is there no diversity there? oy vey*

Discussion and Recommendations

History

The topic of missile attacks against US Navy ships is of historical significance and has recently become a topic of current events interest. US Navy warships operating in the Red Sea came under fire and defended against anti-ship missile attacks in early 2024 [5]. Veterans who served three decades ago in Operation Desert Storm now have a common experience with those currently serving on active duty in the Middle East.

In reviewing the footage, if the viewer listens carefully to the conversations happening over the phone circuits, we can hear talk of a missile several moments before we hear anyone give the order “Missile inbound, brace for shock!” In one lighthearted wisecrack during a tense moment, someone asks, “Where is the missile located?” to which someone else who is topside responds, “I’m not looking for it!” The commenters frequently noticed that even in a dangerous, stressful situation, there was room for some laughter to break the tension.

The video in question is unique in that it shows 40 minutes of unedited wartime footage. It shows what occurred on that day; mistakes and all. Some YouTube commentors are frustrated with this because through much of the 40 minutes of the video, nothing at all is happening. There can be no more authentic presentation of the military experience than showing that for much of the time, nothing happens. This was true even on the most action-packed day of the entire war for these sailors.

Educational Value

The educational value of this one viral video is multi-faceted. As an instructor from Great Lakes Naval Training Center commented, videos such as this one would be of great value for training new recruits in the serious nature of what they are being taught.

“Great video! I was a firefighting instructor in Great Lakes bootcamp for all recruits. We would train them on the different alarms, brace for shock, and proper use of the gas mask. Also why doing all of it quickly is important. This video alone could have been so helpful showing these events actually happening. Telling them what to do vs actually seeing it happen can make a big difference in their understanding of why we do what we do [3].”

One educational takeaway on this comment is that video communicates in a way that only videos can. It puts the action directly in front of the observer by showing instead of telling.

Another piece of educational value demonstrated by this video is in its historical elements. It documents a wartime experience, but also shows the equipment that was being used and put to the test. In the center of the frame is the Mark 8 rangekeeper analog computer, a marvel of engineering complexity [4]. Also shown in the video is the use of protective MOPP clothing and equipment. As some commenters mentioned, perhaps the two-piece protective suit design was less than ideal. The sailors took too long to put their gear on, and viewers frequently commented on this.

Finally, the overall popularity of the video created by an ordinary enlisted man in the Navy speaks to the power of the internet and having a camera available to record at the right place at the right time. The video plays without narration or explanation of the events. That there were so many comments and questions about what was happening suggests that a more concisely edited and narrated version of the footage might have an even greater impact. However, the video does demonstrate the power of the medium to have a great reach and influence.

Veteran Comments

It was interesting how the military veterans corresponded with each other in the video comments. Some were contemporaries from Desert Storm, while others served in different eras under different circumstances. Sometimes the comments were affirming and supportive while other times they were critical. In the video's comments, many veterans react in a positive way and there are some who claim to have been present the day the video was recorded, adding information of their own. However, there are several veteran comments that are critical or generally negative in nature. Additional research is needed to determine if this conflicts with the findings of previous studies [16],[17].

Some of the derogatory veteran vs. veteran comments could simply be coming from a place of natural rivalry between the service branches. A few commenters identify which branch of the service they served in. Another possible consideration is the question of whether veterans tend to lean towards negativity in general. Veterans struggle with mental and physical well-being more than the general population [17].

Additional work could be done with the comments section in the future. Every comment could be classified, coded and statistically analyzed. As a work in progress paper, there are many avenues that could still be explored.

Veteran Use of Social Media

In 1991, servicemembers who owned video camcorders were rare. Nearly everyone today owns a video-capable smartphone. As time moves forward, veterans who have had access to video recording devices for the entirety of their service will want to post memories online. The veteran who posted the video discussed in this paper waited nearly three decades before posting it online. Because there is little formal guidance, veterans could inadvertently release information that is still classified or controlled without understanding the possible repercussions. Furthermore, it is unclear if the military services are providing enough guidance in this area even for those on active duty [19]. The Department of Defense and/or the Department of Veterans Affairs should consider creating a list of social media best practices that not only defend the sensitive information in today's military but also the veterans themselves.

Diversity

One relevant topic that surfaced in the comments was the lack of diversity in the crew depicted in the video. One commenter observed, "*All white fire control team on a ship with over 2500 crew* [3]." The fire control crewmembers shown in the video were trained in the advanced electronics field during a time when women were not permitted to serve aboard the Navy's combat ships. Fifty percent of the population was excluded right from the beginning.

Additionally, advanced electronics is a STEM field, and convincing people of diverse backgrounds to study STEM and engineering has been an ongoing challenge [24].

In contrast, current news stories in 2024 about ships fighting in the Red Sea show female sailors working at control consoles in combat, something that was not possible in 1991. For example, see the photograph titled “Sailors assigned to the Navy destroyer Carney in the ship’s Combat Information Center [6].”

Furthermore, it is problematic to make assumptions about the diversity of a battleship’s crew from a thirty-year-old video that shows only a fraction of the personnel who worked in STEM fields aboard the ship at the time. The video shows only one of the four plotting rooms for the gun systems, but there were many rooms on the ship dedicated to weapons systems and high-tech systems with hundreds of people working in them. A deeper analysis using additional sources such as a ship’s cruise book could provide a more accurate picture of the diversity of the crew working in STEM fields at the time than the video appears to show.

Conclusion

This paper describes how a video showing a Desert Storm wartime experience aboard a battleship in 1991 was recorded and later posted online and found a large audience. The paper is currently a work in progress because there is much more to explore than is currently addressed.

Some questions for further exploration: How does / should the military respond to videos being posted to the Internet by servicemembers and former servicemembers? How do new media publications such as podcasts, videos, and blogs/websites fit into the academic person’s scholarship portfolio? How does participation in online communities and social media benefit and/or harm active military personnel and veterans? How does the lack of diversity in the video relate to the lack of diversity in engineering and technology education? How should the public’s need for information be balanced with the nation’s need for operational security? The military has a long history of using training films produced formally by the government. Are the military services monitoring the internet for useful material and using veteran produced videos such as the Missouri missile attack video for official training purposes?

The video made during Operation Desert Storm has gained many viewers indicating that there is an audience interested in seeing videos like this. As an unedited video recording, it shows an authentic experience of combat at sea. Furthermore, the video leaves it to the audience to interpret and understand what they are seeing; it does not attempt to influence or sway the audience’s opinion through clever editing techniques. Although it shows problems and mistakes made along the way, it also shows professionalism and courage under fire. Videos of this kind appear to be helpful in telling the stories of the United States military and what it is like to serve.

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