

## Are there any atheists in foxholes?

Sometimes people make the claim that 'there are no atheists in foxholes'. A foxhole is a place where a soldier might shelter whilst under enemy fire, and the phrase means that, when our lives are in danger, we all - even humanists and other atheists - turn to faith and god to protect us. While it is certainly true that this is possible, and that it does sometimes happen, it is by no means certain. Usually atheists will call on other sources for hope and strength.

Even if the claim were true, it would not provide any evidence that a god exists. Some humanists ask whether the fact that some people are tempted to believe in a god when they find themselves in difficult circumstances should make us question whether such a belief is based on rational grounds. Is god, they might ask, a product of wishful thinking.

Many humanists have found themselves in dangerous situations and have not turned to belief in a god. Instead they have recognised that their survival depends on their own efforts and those of other human beings.



'It's perfectly plausible to be an atheist in a foxhole, and to me it actually provides a great deal more comfort because I don't have to rationalise, potentially, a greater being or goodness that is meant to exist in this realm. I

think that would cause me more confusion to think "Why am I in this terrible situation if that individual actually exists?"'

Stuart Walker

Flight Lieutenant in the Royal Air Force



'I've been in situations where the people around me are the ones that have helped me feel less afraid. I suppose that one of the points of humanism is that it's the humans around us that can be the source of comfort.'

Emily McCullough,

Squadron Leader in the Royal Air Force



In 1985, on a climbing expedition in Peru, the mountaineer and author of *Touching the Void* Joe Simpson was injured and faced almost certain death. On Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs* he described it 'as looking into the end of everything and there was no one there... I always wondered if everything hit the fan, would I turn round and say a few "Our Fathers", a few "Hail Marys" - and the fact that there was nothing there for me, and I never did, confirmed to me my lack of faith. And it strengthened me I think... I never once thought of turning to God and that was as much a driving thing - I think if for one moment I'd ever thought "If I say a few prayers, Someone will help me" or "I should go and meet my Father and die", I would have just sat and died.'

Photo by Jeremy Frimer