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Military masculinities on television: Who Dares Wins

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ABSTRACT

In the UK, people in their millions still tune in to watch ex-soldiers train civilians in an imitation of the SAS selection process in the reality television show *SAS: Who Dares Wins*. Contestants run drills, jump off cliffs and are subjected to interrogation training; all, to undertake 'the greatest test of their physical and psychological resilience'. This paper uncovers both the versions of military masculinity that are produced in this show, and what these versions do culturally. Through a critical reading of the five central series (2015–2020), the paper exposes the resilient tropes of military masculinity and military training, including: the 'no pain no gain, mind over matter, training is hell', Spartan version of soldiering. It argues that this rearticulation of military masculinity serves to answer particular contemporary cultural anxieties around both the 'crisis' in masculinity and the inclusion of women into the regiment. That is not to say there are not incoherencies, ambivalences and complexities introduced; but in the world of the show at least, there is not much that a few more push-ups cannot overcome. *SASWDW* contributes to the understanding of the symbolic and cultural imaginaries of military masculinities and militarisation and their ongoing significance in British culture.

SAS: Who Dares Wins (SASWDW), a reality television series whose eighth series is about to air, shows members of the public being taken through a simulation of UK Special Forces (UKSF) selection over five episodes, until we are left with the contestants that 'pass selection'. This process is somewhat more dramatically expressed in the show's opening sequence:

> Voice over: In this series, an elite team of ex Special Service soldiers will take 25 men and women through the most gruelling stages of SAS selection in the homeland of SAS Special Forces.
> Presenter Ant Middleton: Wars aren't just fought on land, they are fought on water, we train in Scotland, because the seas are brutal.
> Voice over: Each task based on the real process.
> [Middleton: It ain't about failing, it is about picking yourself back up, ain't it. You'se opponent is the enemy. Fight! Fucking get down!
> Voice over: The recruits must go beyond the physical to come face to face with their true self.

[Fox: Kirsty, breathe]
Middleton: There is no flaw that won't be exposed, you have to be mentally prepared to find out who you truly are.
Voice over: No task asks as much, or means as much …
[Background: lots of crying, and 'just take me away from here']
to those who make it through.
[Middleton: It is simple, you are going to suffer.]

SASWDW attracts millions of viewers, has spawned celebrity spin offs, and has also seen each of the four members of ex-Special Service soldiers who make up the Directing Staff (DS) of the show publish bestselling books[1].

This paper asks two questions; what version of military masculinities are presented through this show? And what does this image of military masculinity do? I argue that the show demonstrates a resilience of hegemonic military masculinity – tough, physically able, risk taking, strongly coded as male – whilst also demonstrating the adaptability of this masculinity as it shifts to accommodate women's entrance into the regiment. I suggest that while the show offers an evolution of military masculinity, it maintains a fealty to the tropes of military training as a good (and often redemptive) practice. In the second half of the paper, I turn to examine why this open celebration of military masculinity matters and what this military masculinity achieves, both as retrenchment of gendered roles and as a facet of militarisation. Of particular importance here is the role that military masculinity and its concomitant glamorisation plays in the obfuscation of the violence of military practice.

Military masculinities and militarism

Critical attention to military masculinities aims to disrupt the violent practices it enables both within and beyond military settings. Recent scholarship on military masculinity has questioned the value of the term, both as an analytical category, but also measured against the normative aims of its inception (Zalewski, 2017). This article engages in the contemporary debate around military masculinities. It is motivated by a desire to pay critical attention to militarism (Åhäll, 2016), and therefore to consider how military masculinities are represented and consumed outside of military settings and the effects this can have on support for warfare. The concept of military masculinity has enabled scholars to explore the relationships between gender, war and militarism, within and working upon military bodies, as well as the ways that these impact our everyday lives (Åhäll, 2016; Enloe, 2000). Scholars stress the mutual constitution of masculinities and militarism, where binary logics of gender are used to create and legitimise identities and practices within the military (Christensen & Rasmussen, 2015). At the same time, this process pays attention to the way that military masculinities come to shape our understanding of gendered behaviour outside of the military realm (Basham, 2008; Hooper, 2001). Importantly, drawing on Connell's (2005) work on the hierarchies of masculinity, this scholarship is also cognisant to the multiplicity of military masculinities, which are differently felt and experienced by different people across a multiplicity of military contexts.

Scholarship on military masculinities has developed to consider the plurality of these identities as well as the more marginalised places, spaces, and experiences of military

masculinity (Chisholm & Tidy, 2017). In critiques of the concept of hegemonic military masculinity, some scholars express concern that the concept has become too comfortable and so has lost its critical edge (Zalewski, 2017). Whilst it is important to pay attention to the complexities of the relationship beyond the idea of hegemonic military masculinity, this paper shows that the image of the elite soldier in all his masculine glory still has a cultural role. Therefore, feminist research ultimately concerned with problematising and deconstructing the gendered power that the idea of military masculinities enables, and is sustained by, remains an important place for analytical intervention. In the words of Jester (2019, p. 58) it is about asking: 'What work is performed by the gendering of the army'?

In the military, the process of training is a means through which military masculinities are created and imposed upon the soldiering body. This is a masculinity: 'defined by emotional control, overt heterosexual desire, physical fitness, self-discipline, self-reliance, the willingness to use aggression and physical violence, and risk-taking, qualities tightly aligned with the military' (Hinojosa, 2010, p. 179). Training regimes and institutions are key sites in which hegemonic masculinity is formed, and femininity is figuratively (and historically, literally) eschewed. The creation of this masculine identity is an important means through which the civilian is transformed into a soldier capable of wielding the violence necessary to complete military actions (Basham, 2016). As Higate (2013, p. 114) suggests, 'the aim of military training is to reconfigure body-selves towards the functional imperatives of military objectives.' It is also something that membership in the military offers: the symbolic and material means through which to lay claim to military masculinity (Hinojosa, 2010).

This article is not an investigation of the actual process through which army training works to create soldiers, but of the representation of this process. This is a process through which militarism, as 'the belief that a country should maintain a strong military capability and be prepared to use it aggressively to defend or promote national interest' (OED, quoted in Åhäll, 2016, p. 160), becomes not only a common sense but also a valued belief (Enloe, 2000). *SASWDW* is a part of a wider ecology of militarisation in the UK, worthy of critical investigation not only because of its popularity, but also as simulacrum of the UK's cultural relationship to the UKSF and the hegemonic military masculinities it represents.

Popular culture plays a huge role in militarisation. Dawson has suggested that there is a 'pleasure culture of war' in the UK. Der Derian (2009) has written of the military- entertainment- industrial- complex, to signal the established relationships between the entertainment industry and the military, while scholars of masculinity have demonstrated ways that popular cultural representations of the military function to create particular masculine identities (see for example Novikova, 2015). Popular culture is a key site through which the majority of the general public forms its understanding of and relationship to military service. It alters soldiers' and recruits' views of the military and IR, as it does politicians, and lawmakers (see Löfflmann, 2013).

The SAS: an elite fighting force

The UK has a particular relationship to military masculinities and soldiering linked to its colonial past, which sees a particular emphasis on qualities of adventure, chivalry and a

deeply class-based version of brotherhood and rank (Dawson, 1994). Though the title refers to the Special Air Service, the UKSF actually comprises three units: The Special Air Service (SAS), the Special Reconnaissance Regiment (SRR), and the Special Boat Service (SBS). Established during the Second World War, from its foundation, the unit has had a role in strategy but also propaganda, offering dramatic instances of success and glamour during the long and relentless war campaigns in North Africa. They re-entered public consciousness in the 1980s during the Gulf War and after they brought the hostage situation at the Iranian Embassy to an end in 1981.

The UKSF have long been glamorised in British popular culture, both expressly in fiction, such as books, e.g. *Bravo Two Zero* (McNab 1994), films, e.g. *Who Dares Wins* (1982), and videogames, e.g. *SAS: Secure Tomorrow* (City Interactive 2008). Oft dubbed the 'special authors service' due to the proliferation of books written by ex-Special Forces soldiers (a sub-genre *SASWDW* has itself contributed to). The role of the UKSF and ways that public support is engendered for its actions is important given their increasing role in military combat overseas. Though is hard to obtain specific figures about the UKSF's deployment, size and budget because it occupies a particular legal status in the UK – meaning it is not subject to parliamentary oversight, its budget figures are not released, and it is not subject to freedom of information requests (Moran, 2016) – there is evidence to suggest it has an increasing place in overseas combat, in a period that has been dubbed the 'golden age of Special Forces' (Moran, 2016, p. 1239). Therefore, for the UKSF, the legitimacy and support that is needed does not pertain to specific campaigns, but rather to the value of their existence as an institution and to their continued legal and constitutional position. The mythology and cultural celebration that surrounds the UKSF are then particularly important moment of critical intervention for scholars wary of a branches of the military whose activities are subject to so little public scrutiny and whose role in warfare is growing.

The selection process is a particularly mythologised element of the UKSF, famously gruelling, with a reported 10 per cent pass rate. It has also been embroiled in recent scandals where recruits from the territorial army have died during training exercises (BBC News, 2012). *SASWDW* plays on this mythology, offering a chance to look at a hitherto secret or mysterious process with much emphasis on the accuracy of the training methods used. If military training is the means through which the army makes boys into military men, SAS Selection is positioned as the most extreme version of this, that results in only the most elite super soldiers making it through.

SAS Who Dares wins: the format and masculinity in reality TV

SASWDW is a reality television show that follows a group of 25 civilian contestants as they attempt to complete various stages designed to mimic the Special Forces selection process. This is led by the Directing Staff, a team of men made up of ex-Special Forces soldiers, who draw on their own experiences of the selection process and military operations. At each stage, the recruits are given the opportunity to voluntarily withdraw (vw), or they are retired. In between activities, the recruits are all housed together in an imitation of barracks with considerable emphasis placed on the remoteness of the location and the austereness of the accommodation. It is produced by Minnow Productions, and it first aired on Channel Four in 2015.

As well as being part of a wider culture of militarism and celebration of UKSF soldiering, this show fits within a sub-genre of reality television that focuses on male fitness and/or survival. Within masculinity studies, scholars have written powerful critiques of the depiction of masculine identities on television, both in terms of representations and rearticulations of dominant masculinities and marginalised or alternative masculinities (Lotz, 2014). Within this literature, scholars have engaged with the sub-genre of 'gladiatorial shows' defined by Steenberg (2014, p. 192) as 'loosely knit constellation of reality programmes that centre on interpersonal violence, competition, and the display of men's bodies.' Masculinity scholars have shown how in this genre of reality television repeats and responds to the idea that masculinity is under threat and needs to be recaptured or rediscovered (Champion, 2016; Steenberg, 2014). Masculinity as being 'in crisis' is a discourse around which a hypermasculine response is articulated in these shows.

Myth, tropes and popular culture

I draw on the work of three scholars in the theoretical approach to this question, Åhäll's (2016) work on popular culture and militarism, Dawson's (1994) work on stories of British soldiering and Crane-Seeber's (2021; 2016) work on the fetishisation of soldiering. These scholars use ideas of myth, ideology and desire to examine the figure of the elite soldier and its cultural effects.

Dawson (1994) writes of a 'popular masculine pleasure culture of war' and the need to study how 'the idealised masculinities of adventure are produced, circulated and used in everyday life.' He builds a 'narrative imagining of masculinities' as:

> imagined forms, masculinities are at once 'made up' by creative cultural activity and yet materialize in the social world as structured forms with real effects upon both women and men. (Dawson, 1994, p. 22)

Åhäll (2016, p. 161) brings together '"common sense", myth, discourse, ideology' to understand militarism as: 'an open, visible and conscious display of, and belief in, militaristic ideology' and militarisation as a 'the social and cultural preparation for the idea of war, which relies on a gendered logic and takes place in the mediatised everyday.' Crane-Seeber (2021) focuses on the social fetishisation of Special Forces soldiers in the US and its relationship to militarised policing. This theoretical framing of Special Services soldiering is useful here as it emphasises the importance of both ideology (as a trace from the Marxist conception of fetishisation of capital) and the psychoanalytic conception of fetish (as sexualised desire), as the masculine elite soldier is a location where the sexualisation and cultural appeal of a particular means and expression of power come together.

Method: a critical feminist reading

Methodologically, this inspired a critical reading of the first five seasons of *SASWDW* with particular attention paid to the image of military masculinity established and the tropes (and myths) that it contains. I used critical discourse analysis and narrative analysis to unpack the 26 episodes. A discourse analysis is concerned with how meaning is

made; it is not a particular methodology, yet it is still a theoretical position that needs to be operationalised in order to perform a deconstruction of the text. A feminist critical discourse analysis has an explicit focus upon gender. It aims:

> To show up the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities. (Lazar, 2007, p. 141)

Czarniawska (2004) suggests seven analytic strategies that can be used in deconstruction. These are:

(1) Dismantling a dichotomy, exposing it as a false distinction
(2) Examining silences – what is not said
(3) Attending to disruptions and complexities, places where a text fails to make sense
(4) Focusing on the element that is most alien or peculiar
(5) Interpreting metaphor as a rich source of multiple meanings
(6) Analysing double entrendre
(7) Separating group specific and more general sources of bias by 'reading' the text without its main elements

I operationalised this in the analysis and also used the method of Shepherd (2013), who adapted approaches from narratology to uncover narratives of gender and violence in television. To focus particularly on tropes as a way to uncover the taken-for-granted and shared cultural knowledges (re)produced.

I therefore performed a critical discourse analysis of the 25 episodes. This is a textual analysis which offers a close reading of the show for its narrative structure, iconography, symbolic codes, themes and their solicitation of pleasure to offer feminist television criticism. This meant analysis the show for its dominant storylines and discourses of masculinity. This was multi-modal, taking into account the plot, the language and also the visual elements of the show. Here the linkages of militarism and military masculinity were drawn out and linked to wider cultural discourses of the super soldier. The prevalent themes were identified, the show's titles and the opening credits were analysed. In the second stage individual nodes, themes and narratives were more closely analysed. Here the strategies of Czarniawska were deployed with a focus upon the character archetypes of the show and the narratives offered for contestants across the seasons. I focused on moments of disruption, with attention to the introduction of women in season 4 as a place where previously unspoken ideas of masculinity were made explicit. I paid attention to the silences and absences of a show about the military. In the third stage I identified particular tropes of military masculinity and considered how and where these came into play and how the existing. The analysis was guided by the central myths of military training and military masculinities; to consider how the show (re)presents these through reality tv entertainment.

The resilience of hegemonic military masculinities

Halberstam (2019, p. 2) suggests that masculinity becomes 'legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white middle class male body'. Military masculinity becomes so legible in *SASWDW* through two moments of separation. The first is in the codification

of masculinity in the selection process, made visible because it is separated out from the male body, to be actively taught, tested, and measured. The second way it becomes legible is through the introduction of female recruits in season 4. I examine how hegemonic masculinity is restated in *SASWDW*, in all its muscle-bound, disciplined, violent and determined fullness.

SASWDW rearticulates a familiar version of military masculinity and redeploys tropes of elite soldiering and military training. In *SASWDW,* the contestants are evaluated against standards of the UKSF which are almost indistinguishable from the ideal masculine soldier. The characteristics that make up this idealised military masculinity are labelled outright in the titles of the episodes: (S1) Character, Weakness, Fear, Survival, Interrogation, (S2) Mavericks, Aggression, Trust, Control, Interrogation, (S3) Pressure, Weakness, Battlefield, Betrayal, Survival, (S4) Equals, Strength, Trust, Pressure, Interrogation (S5) Exposure, Aggression, Unity, Grit, Pressure, Reckoning. This is underscored by the choice of location with considerable emphasis on the wild and remote nature of the environment. 'Welcome to hell' (S4E1) is said in the titles, and it is all underlined in the colours, locations and editing of the show, which all serve to create a dramatic masculine environment.

Military tropes

Troped accounts of military training dominate all five series:

A Spartan training regime: In which it is not only desirable but necessary that the contestants live in basic conditions, typically in ruined buildings, in bleak or inhospitable locations. Here we find the idea that by stripping back the trappings of modern life, a true self, and masculinity, can be revealed. As we are told at the start of every episode of every series: 'To find that, it takes men to a world far from our own.'

No pain no gain: the recruits are told 'It is simple. You are going to suffer' (S4E1). This principle is the absolute bedrock of the selection process. The contestants take part in much lauded selection process such as 'the sickener' (a range of extreme physical challenges with no demarcated end point) 'beastings' (repetitive exercises of physical exertion often performed as punishments) and the interrogation process (white noise, stress positions, aggressive questioning).

Mind over matter: 'Physical fitness is no more than a starting point. The true test is of the mind' (S1:E1). The selection process then is underlined by the idea of control, a mastery of your own reaction to pain, and indeed of emotions. In every series there is a moment when messages of solidarity and support from friends and relatives at home are shared with the contestants. This is not done to give encouragement to contestants, but to test their ability to block this emotional distraction out. Middleton explains that he refuses all contact with his family when on deployment.

Band of brothers: In three ways, comradeship and homosociality are emphasised: within the training (where teamwork tasks are set); narratively through the way contestants form friendships over the episodes; and explicitly through DS voiceovers, talking of their love for their brothers-in-arms.

There is an inherent tension between team work and individuality in military masculinities, exemplified in the show when contestants are alternately praised and berated for helping their teammates. However, brotherhood is a constant narrative refrain.

Broken down to be rebuilt: The aim of all this physical exertion is to break men down to build them back up again, the ultimate expression of taking boys and turning them into soldiers. As explained by DS Fox in the first episode:

> Some of the pressures that selection brings, whether you're cold, wet, tired, hungry, those bring some natural character to the surface. The whole point of selection is to actually break down the facade, this facade we all carry around. (S1E1)

Super Soldier: ultimately this hellish training is supposed to be building the super soldier: stronger, faster, tougher, harder, better and more resilient than normal people, and also more resilient than other soldiers. The need for the show to whittle numbers down from the original 24 to the last one or two people serves to emphasise the rarity of individuals who are suitable for entry into this elite club.

The cumulative effect of these tropes is to rearticulate a particular image of the elite soldier, and, more importantly, the means through which to achieve this masculine ideal. The product then is a soldier who: is physically strong; has an ability to separate out their emotions; can bond with their team, but equally is able to ignore their needs when necessary; can be aggressive; and can tolerate high levels of pain and discomfort. This image, and the means through which it is performed and moulded, are not novel. They are achingly familiar, calling on every mythologised idea of what it means (and what it takes) to be a Special Forces soldier.

In McSorley's (2016) account of military fitness, he shows how at the heart of the military fitness experience lies the body of the ex-soldier. Here the DS (Middleton, Fox, Billingham, Ollerton, and in series 5 Morton) are the exact physical representations of the hegemonic military masculinity that the recruits are attempting to emulate. During exercises, a member of the DS often runs at the front of the pack. They are male, handsome, white, muscular. Their mastery of this idealised position is emphasised in every episode and task, not only through the DS voiceovers in which they explain how they have used or mastered these skills in battle, but because every task is 'demonstrated' by a DS before the recruits undertake it, be this jumping off a bridge (S2E1) or jumping backwards and blindfolded into a reservoir (S3E2).

> Middleton: Passing selection brought out a confidence in being able to tackle any task, especially with the operations that we've been on and the situations that we've been in, so you have this sense of feeling invincible, and I suppose it helps you through what you do. Voice over: Ant has assembled a team of directing staff -soldiers with a combined experience of 27 years in the Special Forces. It's their job to decide if any of the recruits has what it takes. (S1E1)

The DS serve to exemplify and provide an authenticity to this masculine ideal.

There is a strong restatement of the value of military training. Across the five series analysed, three archetypal characters emerged: the first, a middle-class white male experience, motivated by the desire to push themselves, often instilled with pride in the military from cadet training at school, or a family history with the military. This character is often mocked for being posh, or 'a Rupert', military slang for an officer who is upper middle class and lacks common sense or skill. The second archetype is the fitness fanatic, often entering the show to push themselves physically, and prove their physical prowess. This character type is often mocked by the DS as not having the mental capacity

to endure. The third is a contestant motivated to take part to overcome or gain redemption for an event in their past.

It is in the third character type that the most work is done to restate the value of military training. They also offer the most emotional narrative arcs and as such dominate screen time. Examples of this third character type include season 3's recruit 13, Dan Cross, who speaks of his wife's murder and the chance the show offers him to 'do something for me'. He is withdrawn on medical grounds for a knee injury shortly afterwards, and he speaks of finding new direction in his life: 'Previously I would have been scared of the unknown, but now, bring it on.' The second is Nathaniel Shaw, in series four, who explains that he tried to hang himself in the year before applying for the show and that he has struggled with being brought up in care. He is subsequently withdrawn on mental health grounds from the show, but in his piece to camera on departure he says: 'I feel like I have come a long way. People don't know what I have been through. Win or lose I am still a winner because I have got this far.' Season 5 recruit Carla Devlin speaks of using her *SASWDW* application as motivation to get through cancer treatment. In a post-show interview she says: 'It aided my recovery no end and has given me one of the best experiences of my life.' (Channel 4, 2020). Adeyemi, a Nigerian-born contestant, explicitly positions his participation as redemption from a criminal past. As Middleton puts it:

> When you look at the Special Forces community you know the majority have come from broken families, have come from a tough background, and I suppose it is that sense of belonging that people crave. (S4E2)

Within each of these archetypes (and five seasons in, they are becoming increasingly familiar character arcs) we see a fundamental belief in the military as a good (character one); military training as the 'ultimate physical test' (character two); and the extreme process of military training as being redemptive (character three). For each, the promise of the status inferred through simulated SAS selection is crucial (and it must be a strong motivator to put yourself through such a relentless series of challenges, in front of a film crew, with no monetary reward).

Importantly though, in a show based around exclusion in the end those outside of the masculine ideal simply do not make the cut. Recruits can 'VW' or be withdrawn from the course for medical reasons or for failing a task. Most recruits fall behind or cannot continue in a physical task and so VW, and so are removed for not meeting a particular physical standard. However, it also gives the show the opportunity for a retrenchment of the typical idea of a soldier, demonstrated in in more qualitative measures. For example, in series 4, contestants withdrawn by the DS included Tracy Slick, who is removed from the course for being 'out of her depth'; Nathaniel Shaw, who is withdrawn for mental health reasons (a medical withdrawal); and Hannah Jackson, who is removed for failing interrogation (it is unclear what this was measured against).

Across the five shows, those who complete the course are: (S1) Freddie Iron and Ryan Roddy, (S2) Moses Adeyemi, (S3) Jonathan Davis and Matt Sallis, (S4) Louise McCullough and Mark Peart, and (S5) Milo Mackin. These winners, reflecting both the makeup of the wider mix of contestants and the typical image of soldiering, are majority straight white male. The argument here, like all straight white male institutions, is that this is not coincidental nor a reflection of the superiority of this group, but rather the

outcome of years of valuing, training and recruiting this identity. However, they are not exclusively straight white male, and so now I turn to discuss how the SAS accommodates other identities within military masculinity.

The resilience of military masculinity

There is a range of masculine identities introduced, and the classed, raced and gendered experiences of recruits are brought to bear on and interact with the military experience. The most explicit (and emphasised within the show) deviation from the troped image of the soldier comes with the arrival of women in the fourth series (2019), which followed the change in Ministry of Defence policy that meant women could serve in all roles in the UK military (including UKSF). The inclusion of women in the television format allowed an update for the production company, and of course widened their potential applicant pool. In Tasker's (2002) analysis of the depiction of female soldiering in Hollywood films, she argues that women have been seen as a disruptive force in the military that must be contained, managed and incorporated. The place of female soldiering has received sustained academic attention from feminist scholars because of the potential it has to disrupt the just warriors/beautiful souls dichotomy that discourses of war rely upon, in which brave soldiers go out to fight for and protect women (either literally, or figuratively, in terms of the 'motherland'), supported by women who remain at home backing their husbands/sons on the front (Basham, 2016).

In this series, the introduction to each episode included a lengthy explanation of the arrival of women:

> Middleton: For 80 years we have been a band of brothers, an elite fighting force, and now, everything is about to change.
> Voiceover: The MoD have announced that from 2019 women will be allowed in all combat roles including in the SAS.
> [Middleton: I want discipline, that is what separates us from the rest].
> Voice over: In this series, an elite team of ex Special Service soldiers [Foxy: calm down] through will put 25 men and women [Middleton: get there] the most gruelling stages of selection.
> [Effort noises, screaming].
> Fox: We aren't going to change anything on this course, gender doesn't even come into it, because essentially that is what happens on the battlefield.
> [This course will be relentless].
> Voice over: No allowances or exceptions will be made.
> [Middleton: Stop now. Female recruit crying: I don't even know how.]
> Middleton: I don't care if you are male, I don't care if you are female, all I say to myself [is] would I care if I could put my life in that person's hands.

This voice over exemplifies the way that women are included within the show; as equally capable of achieving the same masculine ideal. There is no suggestion that women will feminise or alter the course, nor that the course will be altered to accommodate the women. This is very much borne out within the shows; we see the same tests, the sickener, the drills, the interrogation, all meted out to the recruits in equal measure. They are equally capable of competing for the prize of the status of 'passing selection' and the symbolic association this has with a dominant military masculinity. They are different (otherwise we wouldn't need the long opening statement), but the same (they compete

in the same tasks, which are unaltered), though they are lesser (the phrase 'we have offered no accommodations', suggests, of course, that they would need accommodating).

As Middleton puts it:

> Equality in the Special Forces has to be for the right reasons, if you can carry 80lbs on your back for fifty miles at night and then conduct a fire fight, it doesn't matter if you are a man or woman, you are my equal.

This tension over equality as women being the same as men is borne out in the first episode of series four. Contestants participate in cold water training (submerging themselves in a cold river) and are then given dry kit to change into. Some of the female contestants talk about the fact that they kept their underwear on (no dry underwear was provided). They are then singled out for having wet kits, letting the team down (or, more colourfully, by Middleton for being 'unsustainable, fucking no good to anyone, a burden') and Middleton tells them they should have removed their bras. The emphasis on how it is not the institution but the contestants that must adapt (again phrased with more gusto by Middleton: 'I didn't want to have to do this man woman thing, but you fuckers are doing this'). This also gives the cameras opportunity for close ups of wet chests, protruding nipples and shots of contestants in their underwear – emphasising the female body itself as problematic.

This disrupting force of women is repeated in episode 2 of series four (with a more settled answer to the women question in the narrative arc) when the recruits are asked to box. In this scene, contestant Louise Gabbitas chooses to fight against Nathaniel Shaw. The fight takes place and Shaw is declared the winner. All other contestants, men and women, take part in this exercise but are in gender matched pairings. After the end of the fighting, it is emphasised in the voice over that whilst other recruits have recovered, Shaw continues to struggle with the fact that he had to fight a woman. He says: 'I didn't want to pick a girl, it is the hardest thing to do, this is a head fuck, isn't it?' However, the fight did take place, the more masculine victor prevailed, and the women recruits were initiated into the masculine group through violence. This typifies the representation of the women in *SASWDW*. It is the women who are initiated into the cult of masculinity, it is not the masculine ideal that is altered following their arrival.

There is a different motivating narrative for women recruits to prove themselves in a masculine environment driven by their experiences of sexism. As Hannah Jackson (S4 contestant) says of her time on the show: 'It was the hardest thing I've ever done mentally and physically, but we're proving that women are just as tough as the men.' (Hayward, 2019:unpaginated). Here, there is some alteration to the traditional military scripts, but still a drive to belong and to have a status of masculinity inferred through military training. As Tasker (2002, p. 230) argues, 'a militarised female masculinity has embodied both the transgressions of gendered codes and a longing for belonging.'

The most significant change in narrative is that it breaks the link between the masculine ideal and the male body. Women can attain pass selection. The masculine ideal is attainable by anyone through hard work. Military masculinity is assigned to female bodies. However, there remains a fundamental tie back to nature, and the idea of a 'true self'. Furthermore, military training, and the characteristics that are being tested and instilled, are still ultimately a good thing. They offer redemption and positive

experiences for the other women recruits who often speak of the empowering effect the experience has had on their own sense of self. Masculinity remains an innate, natural quality. If women are seen as a potential challenge to military masculinity, this show suggests that the SAS is up to the task so far as they can still make a man of them.

The inclusion of women is still set against a white male example. The failure to consider how a mixed regiment has religious and cultural impacts beyond the disturbance of the soldiering ideal is awkwardly encountered through recruit Qashif M.(S4E1). Qashif explains his discomfort having to use the same accommodation and toilet facilities as women which he says is incompatible with his Muslim faith. He offers is armband saying he won't' do it, which is met with a simple 'OK mate' by the DS. This moment draws out the tensions of creating an 'inclusive' force in terms of gender where this comes into conflict with religious or cultural diversity. There has not been an 'any accommodation' or adjustment made to create or understand inclusivity, the pool of recruits has simply been widened, whilst the standards of behaviour (of hegemonic military masculinity) remain unchanged.

What does this military masculinity do?

SASWDW is a celebration of military masculinity and the training regime that can create/ uncover this. It celebrates the military and its values and perpetuates the mythologies of the UKSF. It obfuscates military violence, enabling a 'clean' image of elite soldiering. It responds to the potentially unsettling introduction of women into the army, and as such, military masculinities, by doubling down on the masculine ideal. In sum, these moves contribute to militarisation as the acceptance and celebration of military values that help create a state of constant readiness for war. At the same time, it celebrates the unrepentant Middletons of this world. It presents a nostalgic model of military masculinity centred around how far you can run and how much you can lift and how much you can endure; an uncomplicated image of a traditional (and increasingly outdated) masculinity.

Contestants, as evidenced in earlier quotes, enjoy and take value from the process and therefore suggest a positive experience of military masculinity and the status inferred on them from taking part in the show. I suggest this celebration is possible only because of the near total absence of death and violence in *SASWDW*. They are contestants and not recruits, it is a reality television/ game show from which they return to their everyday lives, unburdened by physical injury or post-traumatic stress disorder. They can achieve the 'status' of SAS soldiers without then being deployed to active duty to experience or inflict violence. The training regime, though brutal, does not involve weapons training, details of warfare, or medical training. In season 4 weapons handling was introduced and this scene (in which contestants were placed in a mock raid scenario) was notable for its 'out pf placeness' and the genuine distress it engendered in contestants (particularly those who shot at 'friendly' targets by mistake).

As Belkin and Carver (2012) argue, military masculinities are politically potent because they serve to obfuscate the violence of the army. Here, this retrenchment into the strong elite super-soldier is not about the reality of military service; but the show's appeal is founded upon a verisimilitude to training. It continues to glorify and glamorise the UKSF and reinstate the super-soldier mythology, but can only do this through

maintaining a distance to the violences and harms that are wrought on soldiers and their enemies through active duty. The show does introduced PTSD through the accounts of the DS, though even here they speak more explicitly about a struggle to return to civilian life than they do about the violences they endured or inflicted. Similarly, with the inclusion of women into the show, there is no mention of the considerable risk of sexual assault faced by soldiers (Defence Sub-Committee on Women in the Armed Forces, 2021). The violence of UKSF action 'out there' is contained in a narrative of masculine superiority, removed from actual warfare. Paradoxically, lending legitimacy to the performance of these violences through the glamourisation of the units.

With the introduction of women, *SASWDW* also decouples the military masculinity of the super soldier from the male body. The hegemonic ideal is unchanged, but the pool of potential people in which it might be found expands. This, like the inclusion of women into the military and associated recruitment campaigns, answers a need – a shortage of male recruits (Jester, 2019). The doubling down on the masculine ideal enables this to happen in a way that leaves much of the mythology of UKSF intact. Some (rare) women can be just as strong as men, and so they too can achieve a (yet rarer) status and a belonging to this elite, if they are prepared to work, sweat and hurt hard enough. Military masculinity endures.

SASWDW restates the value of military masculinity at a time when uncomplicated celebrations of warfare, violence and masculinity are under increasing strain. This rearticulation of military masculinity serves to answer particular contemporary cultural anxieties around the 'crisis' in masculinity and loss of innocence for British empire, soldiering, warfare and British identities more widely. As Faludi (1999, p. 15) argued, 'the outlet of mass culture from Hollywood to popular psychology to Madison Avenue' suggest the crisis in masculinity can be solved through 'removing himself from society, by prevailing over imaginary enemies on an imaginary landscape, by beating a drum in the woods until he summons the "deep male"'. The military tropes that are rearticulated in this show directly contribute to this continued discourse of the crisis of masculinity and the need to run around in the snow in Wales, whilst being shouted at by a soldier, as the ultimate solution. Masculinity scholars have written of how this creates a hyper masculinity as 'a type of manhood-reclamation for emasculated men through exaggerated survivor narratives.' (Champion, 2016, p. 241).

This article shows the analytical value of hegemonic military as a potent means through which militarisation takes place. It is no longer sufficient to identify and classify military masculinities as a analytical endpoint, but it remains important to understand how hegemonic military masculinity is produced and circulated, and how this continues to shape and legitimise war.

Conclusion

Through a critical reading of the five central series (2015–2020) of *SASWDW*, the paper exposes the ongoing resilience of the tropes of military masculinity and military training: the 'no pain no gain, mind over matter, training is hell', Spartan version of soldiering, and the ongoing 'societal fetishisation' of elite soldiering. That is not to say there are not incoherencies, ambivalences and complexities introduced, but that there is not much, in the show at least, that a few more push-ups cannot overcome. It contributes to the

understanding of the symbolic and cultural imaginaries of military masculinities and militarisation and their ongoing significance in British culture.

Middleton has been removed from the show line up due to having views that do not align with Channel Four. This relates to controversial social media posts about Black Lives Matter protests and coronavirus. Following this, it was reported that four female recruits have made complaints regarding his lewd behaviour on set. Middleton's reply in an interview on Good Morning Britain (ITV, 2021) was:

> If you're sensitive, if you're a snowflake, if you're easily offended, you do not belong on the set of Who Dares Wins … You're going to see things that are uncomfortable. You've got a group of military Alpha males that are going to put people through a gruelling and authentic process and if you don't like what you see then don't come and work on the set.

He retreats into an image of militarised masculinity and military practices, to the authenticity of the show, and a dismissal of 'snowflakes' (and thinly veiled misogyny about women's place on the show). This retrenchment shows two things. In his response we see how little the traditional military masculinity is changed. That he articulates his defense as an alpha male vs. snowflake positioning chimes with the rise of a particular misogynist politics. However, the fact that Middleton has been fired perhaps demonstrates that this form of masculinity is losing its popularity and is not widely acceptable in such extreme form.

It matters that *SASWDW* glorifies an elite military masculinity because it is in popular culture that gendered logics of war, and violent logics of gender are re-presented to an audience. The restatement of military masculinity, and the incorporation of women into this idealised image, shows the importance of continued vigilance around hegemonic military masculinities that continue to interact with wider gendered politics.

Note

1. The opening show attracted 1.7 million viewers (Johnson, 2015), there have been two celebrity spin off series. E.g. Billington (2019), *The hard way: adapt survive win* Middleton (2018) *First man in: leading from the front*.

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Disclosure statement

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