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‘When he’s in Afghanistan it’s like our world/his world’: Mediating military experience

In this article we explore the reactions of serving military personnel, veterans and military spouses to a selection of recent popular media portrayals of military experience in the early 21st century. In the UK context, over the past decade such mediations of military experience have arguably been shaped by efforts to repair a perceived ‘gulf’ in understanding between the military and the public (Dannatt, 2007). In the context of ongoing heated political, societal and cultural debates on civil-military relations, we explore how members of the military community critically respond to media materials and position their own experiences alongside and against such portrayals. We follow Roger Silverstone in approaching mediation as a ‘continuous activity of engagement and disengagement with meanings which have their source or their focus in [...] mediated texts, but which extend through, and are measured against, experience in a multitude of different ways’ (1999: 13). This is not to deny the ‘institutional and technical work’ (ibid: 15) involved in producing media texts but to explore the contours of ‘engagement and disengagement with meanings’ among audiences, and here we position military personnel, spouses and veterans as an important audience in relation to

the stories being told about military experience in contemporary popular media in the UK.

In what follows we provide brief contextual commentaries in order to locate the study within both the cross-disciplinary interest in the military-media nexus and the particular UK socio-political situation. We then present the research design for this study and our focus group material arranged by dominant themes and media genres. Our interest in the perceived civil-military gulf is prompted in part by Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Richard Dannatt's (now Lord Dannatt), identification of a 'gulf between the Army and the nation' in 2007 and his later assessment that it had closed to a more healthy 'gap' by the end of his tenure in 2009 (Ingham, 2014: 189). The spatial metaphor of the gulf may exaggerate the precipitous nature of the divide, but media and popular culture forms have long proved their usefulness in providing an imaginative and affective 'bridge' to military experience, capable of shifting public attitudes (Paris, 2000; Dawson, 1994). Viewed in this light, popular media texts, which attempt to 'bridge' that supposed 'gulf', are highly charged, political artefacts and our group discussions about these texts serve to expose some of the limitations inherent in attempts to bridge gulfs in understanding between the experience of the military and the public. In asking our participants to respond to popular media texts – in this case of comedy and documentary genres – we aimed to gain insights into how they engaged with notions of 'militariness'

(the quality of being military) and ‘post-militariness’ (the persistence of military identity for veterans), as represented through recognisable tropes of the British armed forces in the media (uniforms, language, humour, professional expertise), and measured against their own experience.

The role of popular mediations in 21st Century UK civil-military relations

A number of studies investigate the British soldier figure in contemporary media and popular culture. Beginning with journalistic genres, Woodward et al. (2009) have analysed the photographs of soldiers pictured in British national newspapers, noting the constitutive role of generic ‘heroic’ portrayals of anonymous and named soldiers in the contemporary warfare narrative. John Kelly (2013) similarly notes ‘hero-ification’ of soldiers during moments of remembrance and ceremony in the ‘war on terror’ era, while Anthony King (2010) finds a ‘personalisation’ of commemoration in newspaper obituaries and images of those killed in Afghanistan. While King refers specifically to commemorative practices, his arguments on the more personalised and intimate portrayals of soldiers in contemporary public culture extend beyond the obituaries and letters discussed. As King argues, this not only indicates a shift in how the soldiers self-identify but the emphasis on individual personality and emotive symbolism also resonates with the public who often have no direct connection to military personnel:

‘For the armed forces, the domestic sphere has become a crucial way of re-integrating professional soldiers into the national community, especially since the media also demand a personal perspective on the casualties’ (2010: 18).

The point that King makes here on the media demand for a personal perspective places an idea of media agenda at the heart of the pressures driving a shift in commemorative practices. Wootton Bassett’s moment in history (2007-2011) as the Wiltshire town through whose crowd-lined main street the hearses of dead soldiers were taken on the way from a nearby military airport is also examined through print news coverage (Jenkins et al., 2012) and photography (Walklate et al., 2011). The seemingly spontaneous transformation of the rituals of observance into a sombre media spectacle provides a fascinating phenomenon not only for the public displays of grief, but, as Jenkins et al. (2012: 357) argue, ‘for what it says about the wider civic understandings of military action and military organisations as they evolve around shifting representations and meanings of the soldier’.

Just as mediated commemorative practices foreground a shared emotional civic connection, the appeal to nostalgia similarly works to identify military organisations or values with (comforting) memories. Matthew Rech notes a nostalgic appeal in the adoption of war comic aesthetics and form in a recent British Royal Air Force’s ‘Be

Part of the Story' recruitment campaign, in which the designers 'utilize a set of longstanding cultural references tied to a national sense of self, to ideas around the cleanliness or righteousness of war' (Rech, 2014: 45). We can see then a research agenda developing that recognises both the increased visibility of the soldier figure in mediated form, and the value of exploring the discourses that circulate within popular culture forms: as Woodward and Winter write, '[t]hese connections between military discourse and popular cultural discourse are not one-way or simple, but feed into each other' (2007: 97).

Materials produced or co-produced by serving personnel have also attracted recent academic attention. In addition to the work on memoirs and fiction (Robinson, 2011; Sylvester 2013; Woodward and Jenkins, 2012), we note research on letters and blogs (Shapiro and Humphreys, 2013). Others have explored the motivations for soldiers to capture their own experiences in visual form (sketches, photographs, video), both in terms of the antecedents for such practices and the more recent public sharing and networked nature of often disturbing imagery (Kennedy, 2009; Struk, 2011). New imaging technologies bring new ways of seeing war that promise an embodied and affective proximity to combat and personal revelatory experiences through helmet cams, video diaries and YouTube films (McSorley, 2012; Silvestri, 2013), but also through the

techno-precision of apache helicopter or drone cameras that anticipate a de-personalised annihilation from above (Sheets et al., 2015).

The necessarily brief overview of the above literature points to a number of considerations. Whether in news articles, photographs, documentary or memoir, the figure of the British soldier is never politically neutral. As Woodward et al. conclude: ‘The photograph of the soldier is never just a photograph of a soldier’ (2009: 222). Representations of contemporary soldiering offer mediated invitations to engage with military personnel in an intimate manner and are often constructed to engender empathy or support for related causes. Such processes of mediation take place in national and local political contexts where unpredictable events can prompt a change in public attitudes – sometimes shockingly and quickly, such as following the murder of Fusilier Lee Rigby in 2013, or gradually and with inadvertent consequences, as with the Wootton Bassett repatriations. Deliberate attempts to appeal to the public draw on ‘cultural references tied to a national sense of self’, as Rech suggests above; but this is also susceptible to societal counter-shifts, possibly due to a more multicultural and a less deferential society. Both in attitudes surveys and the MoD’s own research, findings point to public support for the troops co-existing with a lack of support for large-scale military interventions, with the Iraq and Afghanistan wars perceived as antagonising

relations with Muslim communities and countries without fulfilling any clear objectives (Wintour, 2014; Hines 2015).

The undeniable efforts to increase portrayals which encourage empathy with soldiers, veterans and their families might offer an attractive and affective notion of ‘who we are’ as a nation for some people, (along with an opportunity for soldiers or veterans to self-identify in positive terms), but it can prompt unintended consequences as well: excluding those who would be politically resistant to what they see as a creeping militarisation or celebration of militarism; or ironically help to foster an emotional bond which sympathises with ‘our boys and girls’ in ways which then contributes to a reluctance to send them to fight and die overseas (Sanders, 2014). Overall, this means that such representations are significant, not as products with secured meanings, but as cultural artefacts which react to and reflect the dynamics of civil-military relations and at the same time co-produce them in distinct and varied ways. In sum, recent personalised or empathetic portrayals of soldiering can be perceived as contributing to an attempt to depoliticise the recent wars, and arguably to legitimise state violence more broadly, but the responses seen in creative outputs, online forums and discussion panels (along with those we have collected ourselves), indicate differentiated and nuanced understandings of such depictions. We would argue that this means embracing the sometimes deeply unsettling complexity, ambivalence and contradiction that are the

bedfellows of ordinary lives and personalised testimonies. In asking our participants to respond to media extracts, we are interested in how they make sense of the mediated soldier figure in relation to their own experience. We are also interested in talk about experience of being in the military in response to media representations, rather than war experience per se.

Research Design

In conducting qualitative research with veterans, forces family members and those directly involved with the positive promotion of the armed forces in various media (the Joint Information Activities Group, Media Operations team), we hope to better understand how those in the UK military community engage with the familiar media portrayals and dominant stereotypes, and how they use different forms of media in their everyday lives.

In total 31 participants took part in group interviews or ‘focus groups’ conducted during the summer of 2014: this comprised 15 veterans from three different organisations, six serving personnel who work within media operations, and 10 family members, all wives. In the group interviews, we showed participants media extracts that depicted varied aspects of contemporary military experience drawn from a range of forms and

genres to encourage group discussions: in this article we focus on television comedy and documentary. But in addition to the participants' comments on the media materials, we were also interested in the themes and concerns which emerged without prompting, and how representations of soldiering evoked memories and reflections on their own identities as part of a 'military community'. Here we build on the work of Rachel Woodward, Neil Jenkins and Trish Winter, who explored such memory and identity work through interviews with serving and former British forces members employing photo elicitation techniques, where interviewees were asked to bring ten photographs 'that they felt had meaning or significance to them in terms of their military lives' (Woodward et al. 2011: 57).

In addition to insights from the above authors, we heed Victoria Basham's warning that a focus on everyday lives or direct experience also needs to 'take account of the wider interests that are served by those lived lives' (2013: 9). As outlined by Harriet Gray (2016) in her reflective piece on researching the military, even small scale projects such as ours face challenges in navigating a space between the 'risk of scholarly militarisation' (with dangers of co-option and shifts in research priorities) and the 'risk of scholarly detachment' which maintains a critical (or even oppositional) stance but could fail to ask uncomfortable questions through its position of disengagement with such institutions, along with the people associated with them. Indeed, as a small-scale

project approaching local units informally we soon found that requests sent ‘up the chain of command’ led nowhere and our initial plan to speak with serving personnel and cadets was mostly abandoned in favour of approaching social or support groups for spouses and veterans. We are grateful to the Joint Information Activities Group, Media Operations team, who were happy to speak with us and to be acknowledged openly. We also recognise that this means the serving personnel we spoke with had an especial interest and expertise in the image management of the armed forces.

Our guiding research questions are: In what ways do the participants identify and engage with the various media portrayals; and how do they think this relates to the perceived public profile of the armed forces? How do they assess the capability of media texts to provide insights into the ‘realities’ of military experience (including emotionally charged moments of camaraderie and trauma)? In asking such questions we’re interested in how processes of mediation are spoken about in terms of identifying limitations, disruptions and associations; and as recreating or breaking down barriers. Other than naming the Media Operations group here, we have anonymised the group interview data and any names referred to by participants below are pseudonyms.

In the next section we present analysis of the group discussions, organised thematically: starting with how participants perceived the role of media and popular culture in raising

the profile of the British Armed Forces, through to discussion on the particular attractions and limitations of certain genres (comedy, documentary) and finally to reflections on military identity and experience.

Findings

Role of media and popular culture in raising the profile of the Armed Forces

In both our initial open-ended questions on contemporary media representations and in response to certain clips, our participants would express strong normative positions on the media, with a great variety in opinions of what role the media should be playing, in terms of public perceptions and degrees of their understanding of the military.

Talking to the Joint Services Media Operations staff, there was a very strong sense of promoting a positive representation of the military, as we expected given their professional role. Programmes which they thought helped with recruitment or exposed the general public to the ‘reality’ of war were on the whole greeted with enthusiasm. The following participant is talking here about a shift in the portrayal of war, where earlier Hollywood films had been ‘tatty’ or relied on stereotypes:

M4 And now we're getting **real** again and off the back of Band of Brothers, Saving Private Ryan, that did bring some of the **reality of war** to the big screen, we're now seeing that reflected on the small screen with Ross Kemp going out into a corn field and getting shot at. **So people understand what it is like to be shot at**, they hear the **whistle of the bullet going past**, they hear the whoosh of the RPG going over their head, so they kind of get a grasp of what it is like, as opposed to the Call of Duty version of **what war is like**.

Nearly all our group interviews mentioned Ross Kemp (without prompting) when asked which programmes sprung to mind when thinking of contemporary military representations – this seems to have been a turning point in their minds. Kemp had famously played a 'tough guy' in a soap opera for many years before turning to television presenting, with Ross Kemp in Afghanistan (Sky One, 2008) offering an intimate portrait of British soldiers in combat. In addition to noting the appeal of programmes that give viewers the 'whistle of the bullet going past', the media operations team were also keen to harness the power of celebrity to their advantage: 'I think that's because the military are very savvy to the fact that there is cult of celebrity and we need to utilise that to our advantage wherever we can' (F1). Others noted that the Ross Kemp programme had 'probably contributed significantly to the raising of the profile of the military in the public consciousness and it leads on to Armed Forces Day

and things like that. I'm not saying it's purely down to Ross Kemp by any means, but it's part of that narrative' (M1).

The respondents here talk very openly about 'raising of the profile of the military in the public consciousness', the 'narrative' of Armed Forces Day and utilising the 'cult of celebrity' through association. The small screen can offer ways to get close-up and personal with both military personnel depicted in imminent danger, and with celebrities providing an empathetic bridge between two worlds often perceived as unbreachable. Speaking of Channel 4's latest military training series, Royal Marines Commando School (2014), a fly-on-the-wall style documentary which had aired the night before, one respondent notes the positive comments from spouses and friends on Facebook, recognising that they are part of the target audience, rather than those within the military: 'the audience that they're actually targeting, which is the wives, the loved ones, potential recruits, etc., they have a positive impression of that because it's something being allowed into an otherwise **blocked off environment** to them, so they love that' (F1).

Even wives and loved ones are thought to gain insights into this 'blocked off environment' of military training and culture. Such programmes were also seen as

potential recruiting tools, and it is in the ‘shared’ experiences and personal journeys that their particular appeal is characterised.

M4 Yeah, that’s part of the whole **shared experience of being in this together** and any of those documentaries or programmes about the camaraderie, training together, the adversity, the shared grief, the shared humour, all that stuff is all about that shared experience and that’s what makes these documentaries and these programmes so enjoyable, is that you **feel part of that experience**, either as an insider looking in or as an outsider looking in and wanting to be part of that culture.

In these general terms the visibility afforded to military culture is seen as a positive development, a culture that might attract an ‘outsider looking in’. But for others this media role in promoting military experience and culture was not necessarily viewed as a positive or morally justified improvement. In our various veterans’ groups, the changes around 2006-2007 were often referred to, both in terms of the media role, but also in their own experiences of the disconnect between the political rhetoric and the support available.

M2 [...] but when I joined the Army in 1997, and up until I left, we were considered second-class citizens, [...]. And that started to change in about 2006. [...] There was a **definite programme of trying to win over the hearts and minds of the public** towards the military, and I can't actually pick out one particular advert, programme or whatever, but **it invades everything**. [...] and so what's going on is this very, some not so subtle, but some very subtle, propaganda [...] sometimes not organised, but definitely **pulling in the same direction**, trying to make the Army appear appealing, ignore what the Army does, and try and **normalise** it.

We can note the recognition of a clear narrative forming post-2006, but here seen critically as dishonest propaganda that 'invades everything' whether or not organised by state-supporting institutions. For this speaker the normalising of the Army into an appealing institution is morally questionable, rather than something to be celebrated. Continuing with this theme, the same speaker acknowledges the complexity in the agencies driving this social change, with the co-ordinated effort noted above, but also a 'public hunger' complicating the narrative.

M2 So it's not coordinated, and it's interesting when you read about what the MoD thought about Wootton Bassett, they thought this was a bad thing. They

didn't want Wootton Bassett to go on, but the **public's hunger** for this drove it forward, so it is complex, it's **not like someone's pulling the levers** and all this is happening, it's a weird thing. But what pervades it is **dishonesty**, whether it's the public's hunger for this bygone era, or whether it's the media and their agenda, or whether it's the military and their agenda, everyone who's trying to influence what's going on is dishonest in what they're doing.

This damning critique puts dishonesty at the heart of various agendas (public, media, military) and stands in stark contrast to the earlier quotations. In another veterans' group, the attractions of the recruitment campaigns and entertainment programmes were also contrasted with the treatment received once you leave the forces:

M4 One thing I would say about the civilian side is that the military have done a good media job, in that, 'Oh, join the army, see the world, you'll have a fantastic time, on beaches and places and you'll be doing things, and you might have to go to war, but we'll look after you and we'll take care of everything,' yeah, when the reality is that you're going into something that you have no comprehension whatsoever. [...] And then when it's done, as we have found out through our research [undertaken by the veteran support group themselves], 'Thank you very much. See you then!'

This synopsis compresses many of the comments that emerged in our discussions with veterans and family members, especially in the description of building a new collective identity and cohesion within the forces, which can then leave people feeling bereft when they return to ‘Civvy Street’. The Armed Forces Covenant is of course designed to address some of these concerns, but participants repeatedly perceived a sense of dishonesty and misrepresentation in its assurances: ‘quite honestly, it isn’t worth the paper it’s written on, but they’ve used it to boost publicity’ (M3).

These initial reflections demonstrate the complexity of interactions with the media representations – the recognition of pervasive and normalising narratives which attempt to promote the armed forces but which prompt strongly varied reactions.

Limitations and opportunities in documentary and comedy genres

Life After War: Haunted by Helmand (BBC3)

We have already touched on the idea of military themed programmes providing rare windows into ‘blocked off environments’ usually inaccessible for the general public and even forces families. The opening clip from the documentary *Life After War: Haunted by Helmand* (BBC3, January 2013), with its story of reuniting a group of men who had

experienced an ambush in Afghanistan in July 2009, and with dominant themes of PTSD and suicide, invoked a range of responses, but with wives in particular reiterating how such programmes could provide insights into their own husband's world, 'blocked off' despite sharing their lives. For many, their husbands would not want to talk about what they were going through themselves, so they expressed that such programmes could help them to understand.

F5 I'd watch it. I like things like this and they're likely to be more realistic, and also I always like to know what my husband's going through. When he's in Afghanistan **it's like our world/his world**, I don't know what he does, what he gets up to, but that kind of helps me think, 'That's what he does and that's what he feels like,'.

Once again the 'our world/his world' distinction is touched upon, with documentaries like *Haunted by Helmand* providing possible insights and understanding, even for those sharing their lives with serving military personnel. In other groups, veterans also pointed out the practical positive impact that such programmes might have:

M4 I'd say it was good to show, because people who are still in the military, or ex-military, or carers, parents, relatives, watch that and think, 'Ah right,' it

might trigger something in their experiences with somebody who's presenting a mental health illness, and **that might just help them...**

But for others the nature of the programme prompted concerns that a little knowledge could be dangerous:

M3 [...] and you think because you've watched that programme **you have any idea what this person's actually going through** and you think you understand a little bit more because you've watched that programme. Probably it could do more harm than good.

For this respondent the barrier that the wives were hopeful could be penetrated is recreated. In expressing that the programme could be harmful in providing this 'little bit' of understanding, the veteran conveys the severity of the divide between those who have first-hand experience and those who have only watched the programme. The programme provoked some disagreements for the Media Operations team; on the 'sensational' formal properties of the programme and on the selectivity and accuracy of the information provided. After one respondent suggest it is a 'media sensation nightmare' another offers a different perspective drawing on his own experience:

M2 Having spoken to quite a few people who have been in those sorts of situations and having worked with a commando unit that was out in Herrick 9, which was one of the worst tours there were, and two subsequent suicides last year at my unit from two people that were out on that tour, I think it's very important to send that message to people, potential recruits, that it is war and you will be injured, or you could potentially be injured.

[...]

M5 ...I think from a media ops perspective, it's not all bad as well, I think the recruiting audience, it's probably going to turn off a lot of people[...] But also in the general population it could garner a bit of **pride and empathy for how difficult it can be for certain elements of the armed forces.**

The professional positions of the interview group members are evident in their exchange: 'from a media ops perspective'. They are keenly alert to how perceptions could be shaped by such programmes which rely on interesting or exaggerated narratives, especially when thinking of the 'recruiting audience', but also attentive to a greater sense of responsibility, beyond questions of editing or style, for the way in which the difficulties of military life are represented.

Despite warning our participants of the disturbing content and checking that it was appropriate to show the group, (given that the opening credits signal that the programme will deal with the family's and veterans' responses to a suicide), in one of our sessions with veterans, the end of this clip was greeted initially with silence and many in the room were clearly shaken. When the discussion started again one of the participants referred to the particular time of year, difficult for a Falklands veteran.

M4 Obviously this time of year is bad for me, June is a bad month for me, and especially the next couple of days, and that just, you know, is not helpful for me, you know what I mean. I also look at these documentaries like this, and I suppose I'm very cynical in the fact of who picked those four people? [...]
Because I know from my experience, and I think the rest will back it up, **that the officer's experience will be totally different to the chap who took his own life, because the officer got the help and the young lad was told to just get on with it.** [...] So he ends up with nothing, has nothing, and I don't know if I said it to you earlier, we have picked them off the bridge, about to commit suicide, because they don't get the same help.

The speaker here acknowledges his cynical approach towards the programme and its selection of certain key characters, which might suggest a distancing effect, but he is

simultaneously very moved by the subject of the programme, relating it to his own struggles in dealing with trauma and providing help to suicidal veterans. A second participant also picks up on the difference between the officer and the 'young lad' who would not necessarily receive the same help as the officer and could end up with 'nothing'. The introductory framing of the documentary's storyline, in which the officer (known as 'the boss' in the film) seeks out those who were under his command and experienced the ambush, immediately presents a 'barrier' for this participant, despite later conceding he had watched the programme and the officer featured in this case was 'quite sincere'. The exchange demonstrates many complexities at work – a capacity to question some of the stylistic and narrative premises of the programme, whilst also relating participants' own experiences to its themes in profound ways. There is disdain for the programme's purported use of stereotypes, of the caring officer who drives the narrative forward at a general level, but a recognition that in this specific case he acts with sincerity. The programme makers might not have thought 'they were bringing the class issue in' (M1) through this framing device but for this group at least, these distinctions in the protagonists' characterisation quickly become a way to talk about the discrepancies based on social class, in both media representation and in veteran treatment.

Comedy: Bluestone 42

At the time the group interviews took place the first two series of Bluestone 42 had already aired on BBC3, in spring 2013 and 2014 (series three followed in 2015). The programme follows a bomb disposal unit in Afghanistan and is unusual in being a sitcom set in a warzone during a period when soldiers were in active service. This prompted some concern for how those affected might react to its gallows humour. (Indeed, the Christmas Special in 2013 was postponed when a British soldier was killed in Afghanistan).

M1 I found it distasteful, I suppose, but that's from my stance, and I could quite see how people would be drawn to it, 'Oh that looks fun.' And it's the same, you go into any canteen, you go into a pub where there are soldiers, that level of humour. We do it at [veteran group] meetings, **that level of humour is there all the time**, and to those outside it, it would be, 'Oh, I want to be part of that. That looks like it's fun.'

Here the possible attractions for 'others' rather than the person speaking are expressed as a matter of concern. But aside from the programme's qualities, he also acknowledges the importance of such humour for the veteran group – something which was repeatedly

referred to during our research. In another veteran group, their reaction to the comedy was also expressed through discussion of how others might respond:

M3 I think a lot of squaddies will actually probably like that [...] But then it's the **flipside** for the ones that are back here and watching, they'll probably be a bit pissed off, think, 'What are they talking about?' kind of thing.

M1 The **other side of the coin** is there are some people that are very fragile in their mind and it could upset them; everybody is different and you've just got to be aware.

Both recognise a 'flipside' or 'other side of the coin' in their comments, and crucially the variety of reactions it is likely to provoke, even amongst the services or ex-services community. This is perhaps no surprise – 'everyone reacts slightly differently' – and yet this obvious point can seem an overlooked aspect in the critique of such soldier-focused programmes, when the variables of audience engagement and understanding are de-emphasised. For some there was almost a therapeutic element to the programme, because it is the 'laughs and jokes that will get you through it' (M3) and so there is an important message there in relating the comedy of the programme to the coping mechanism for those in the forces. The programme often prompted memories and anecdotes of certain jokes and the importance of laughter to cope in the most terrible

situations. Indeed, they even joked about the sensitivity of those who might be upset by what is actually a fictional comedy, filmed in South Africa, thereby defusing some of the serious discussion in ways which chime with the traits of masculinity observed by others (Basham, 2013).

M4 I think they should have a little caption there to say, ‘This was filmed in South Africa and no humans were hurt during the making of this comedy! If you have been affected by anything, please go to our website: I’m very sensitive.co.uk’ or something! [laughter]

But whilst dark humour was recognised as very important to the fighting forces, often in shared comparison with other professions such as doctors, paramedics, police, etc., there was also some discomfort at the role of humour when translated into a comedy programme. One veterans’ group also wondered whether the comedy in this context was actually capable of capturing how this helps them to deal with difficult situations.

M1 But that’s how we coped, it’s a laugh and a joke to us. But the problem with things like that is all people will see is the comedy side of it and I don’t think they’ll get the reality of what the people are actually going through.

M2 And how important it is.

M6 They most probably wouldn't recognise that as being a **true portrayal** and think, it's just a comedy show. And I don't think there is the **understanding in the general public around having to have that sense of humour** because of situations which people find themselves in, because things have happened to them in the past. And while you can store it away up here and it can come back year and years later, you get on with what is happening at that present time, as and when, and it's the humour you know.

Whilst the first comment from M1 points to the inadequacy of comedy to get to the reality of the underlying emotions, the response from M6 suggests a deeper truth in the portrayal which might be missed by those dismissing it as 'just a comedy show'. So conveying the intense emotions behind that use of gallows humour becomes the difficulty, and again it is in discussing the limitations of such representational forms that a sense of unspoken trauma comes to light: that humour can provide immediate relief but it also masks an emotional injury which 'can come back years and years later'. Indeed, the consequences of losing that shared humour and camaraderie when leaving the forces again featured when respondents were prompted to discuss the ability of the media to represent this aspect of military culture: 'And then all of a sudden when you're in Civvy Street, that is the one thing that is totally missing out of your life a lot, apart from your family' (F2).

As observed in the literature, and discussed earlier in relation to documentary, the tight-knit nature of the forces and the strong sense of cohesion required to perform as an effective team can leave those returning to ‘Civvy Street’ feeling isolated (McGarry, 2015). In watching such programmes and talking about them, the varied reactions from the veterans’ groups suggest that such encounters themselves provide a space to reflect on otherwise unspoken emotional fragility and their own personal memories – crucially, laughing and joking together is vital to dealing with and dissipating both trauma and stigma. This chimes with Woodward et al.’s (2011) observations on the memory-work performed during their photo-elicitation interviews and how identities are constituted and expressed in this process, especially when discussing kinship.

Of course, we also recognise that as university researchers the anecdotes and jokes shared with us as female researchers steered away from controversial, ‘non-PC’ areas. In fact, as already touched upon, the idea of civilians not understanding forces humour was a recurrent theme.

M1 Some of the humour that’s quite acceptable in a military environment **doesn’t transfer across into civilian life**. I learnt that literally within the first week of starting my first civvy job in a bank.

M3 Me too!

M1 On a training course, there were 20 odd people on this course and we were all sharing experiences, and I shared what I thought was quite an amusing one for mine, and, 'That's not right.' **I thought they were weird and they thought I was weird!**

Negotiating military identities in the media and beyond

Our research suggests that there is a paradox at the heart of veterans' identity. We noted above that a recurring theme is how being part of a military community creates an identity for you, which becomes difficult to reconcile with life after war or after leaving the forces. Many of our interviewees spoke of their own struggles with PTSD and of helping others through trauma, homelessness, alcoholism and problems adapting to family life. One respondent raised the idea of being '**forces-scarred**' rather than battle-scarred, referring to his work with street drinkers as a probation worker:

M1 They wouldn't have been to war, there hadn't been any wars, not big things, so it wasn't battle-scarred, it was **forces-scarred**, and the experience of the forces, how it leaves you when you leave, the drinking culture that you learn in the forces and you carry into every crisis [...] And they were scarred by the experiences, because the military life, if you go into it from school, it's so

cocooning, it's so protective, in a particular way, and as long as you can survive the barrack room and you can get by. [...] And you're in that protective cocoon until it disappears, and as soon as it disappears you have nothing left, except alcohol.

The idea of being 'forces-scarred' after leaving the 'protective cocoon' (from within which the metaphorical wounds are initially suffered), highlights the difficulty in any attempt to explain contradictions of military culture and identity. The bodily and sensorial aspects of language are also pertinent in this account – the individual body, which carries its scars, and the collective body of the cocoon (See also: Goodwin et al., 2015; Robinson, 2011).

Contemporary mediated accounts suggest that many members of the public value the credibility of soldiers as fighters who can give a direct experience of their war, with a focus on close combat (whooshing bullets, firefights, ambush), and possibly on their own injuries or losing their friends. This recognition of public appreciation meant that the veterans felt their credibility to comment publicly on issues was intricately intertwined with their status as veterans and even the particular wars, campaigns or operations they had fought in. So that when one veteran group discussed choosing

profile pictures for their website, they had nearly all chosen their most 'warry' images without having an agreed strategy on how to present themselves.:

M1 ...we talked a bit about the profile photos and how ironic it was that we all ended up posting our **most 'warry' photos on the profiles page** on the website, and why that was and what was going on when we did it.

[...]

M2 I think almost everybody, one or two didn't, and again it's **feeding into that hierarchy of combat**, 'I was there,' and it's that record.

But this was for a website for a group campaigning against military recruitment and against the dishonesty they see perpetuated about the military and the hero myth. So why pick their most warrior-like photos to declare 'I was there'? We would argue that they are caught in an identity dilemma, where society is starting to value them as serving personnel and veterans in a personalised way – whether or not the public agree with the political aspects of recent wars – but they are also uncomfortable with the hero tags and the sometimes unattainable expectations. Despite their political hostility to militarism, their self-mediating practices become entangled with the symbolic currency of 'militariness'.

Finally, when asked about questions that we hadn't covered or which were missing in the media, one respondent posed the question of 'what are the military for?'

M1 The only thing that I would suggest is, and it's almost a political one, is **the question of what is the military for?** [...] Because we are entering a period which the country has never ever had, whereby **there is no clear defined role for the military**[...] And that is a question, and it's a political question, and it's a difficult question and it's a complicated question and it's not something you can do in a soundbite or anything else.

This concern echoes studies on military culture in which the characterisation of the military in the 21st century identifies elements of fragmentation, ambiguity and incoherence (Hajjar, 2014). The existential identity crisis discussed earlier on an individual basis is re-cast here on an institutional level, in which a 'defined role' for the military is questioned in relation to the UK's uncertain global power position. It is indeed a difficult and complicated question and is also about managing perceptions and expectations, in addition to new competencies, ethics and structures. These debates do not just take place in the political sphere, but through popular media genres that may well be dramatised, exaggerated or skewed in their representations, but which provide windows into the shared experience of soldiering through often personal narratives.

Conclusion

In this article we have attempted to link some interconnecting themes and move through ideas of how the media and varied representations contribute to understanding and the limitations in trying to communicate 'real' war or military experience. Discussions prompted by media materials, and specifically documentary and comedy, revealed complexities and ambiguities in both the evaluations of generic properties and the affective responses. Mediated military experience can be understood as a way to share in an otherwise 'blocked off environment' and engender pride and empathy among the public; but senses of both camaraderie and trauma, seemingly always just out of reach of media representations, destabilise such claims. New ways to mediate and express military identity can also work to reconstruct hierarchies and conform to myths of stoicism and heroism, despite a willingness by a number of our respondents to counter such representations. We also recognise how military identities and masculinities are performed within the group interview discussions, with veteran-only groups often carrying the strong need for cohesion and belonging into post-military lives. But this coming together also provides a therapeutic role and once the group recording was over, participants often commented on finding out new things about each other during our discussions.

As the two long and ultimately unpopular wars in Afghanistan and Iraq move into historical record, the regular diet of military documentaries, war films and ex-forces charity campaigns continue on our screens. The symbolic currency of the soldier or recent veteran is based on their credibility as having served or seen action, with a 'hierarchy of combat' perpetuated not only by those with military credentials within their own websites but reinforced through the hero status afforded across the media. Such mediations are clearly bound up in image management strategies and civil-military reconciliation efforts, but it remains crucial to research the negotiations and counter-framings within wider society. This study only reached those with military connections but our findings signal the need for further research across the public.

The varied popular and intimate media portrayals of soldiering and military experience are generally understood as a key weapon in the military-media project of reconciliation and awareness-raising. But the uncertainties and insecurities (political, cultural and even economic when it comes to defence spending cuts) tend to feature less in this familiar narrative of media power, propaganda and influence. In the multiple challenges and ambiguities heard within our groups we find complex and troubled senses of 'militariness', bound up with sometimes intense affectivities. This is not to disregard valid concerns about militarisation and militarism in relation to popular media and culture. However, we do call for further attention to the unexpected instabilities and

unintended consequences which we observed in the ‘engagement and disengagement with meanings’ within our groups (Silverstone 1999). Such consequences themselves may provide the grounds for further studies as scholars continue their efforts to understand how militarisation exists in everyday, mediated, lives.

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