International Journal of Communication 19(2025), 115–134 1932–8036/20250005

"Is That It?": Veteran Reflections on the Falklands 40th Anniversary and Northern Ireland Peacekeeping Exhibitions at the Imperial War Museum London

JENNA PITCHFORD-HYDE[1]
University of East Anglia, UK

KATY PARRY
University of Leeds, UK

This study uses a museum "walk-through" and focus group approach to examine how British military veterans who had served in the Falklands (1982) and Northern Ireland conflicts (1969–1998) responded to the Imperial War Museum's (IWM's) commemorative exhibitions. This was especially pertinent in 2022, the 40th anniversary of the Falklands campaign. We examine how the veteran participants expressed disappointment in response to the displays, generating deeply affective responses ("that taste in your mouth"), and we contextualize this with curator reflections. The focus groups prompted a lively discussion on the commemoration of recent and contested conflicts and on whose stories get told or omitted. Our study contributes to a "dialogical approach" in the emerging field of veteran studies while considering the politics of conflict representation. We argue that nurturing a critical yet compassionate understanding of what war does to combatants and civilians is essential for museums and scholars of representational practices.

Keywords: Falklands, Northern Ireland, veteran, museum, military, representation, commemoration, focus groups

Studies of war museums recognize the challenges museum professionals face when dealing with traumatic subject matter, politically contested and sensitive materials, and sometimes unresolved conflicts in their curatorial practice. However, scholars are often critical of the choices made—who gets to be represented, whose stories are told, and who is left out. As custodians of national collective memories, war

---

Jenna Pitchford-Hyde: jenna.pitchford-hyde@uea.ac.uk
Katy Parry: K.J.Parry@leeds.ac.uk
Date submitted: 2023-09-19

[1] We would like to extend a special thanks to our veteran participants and to those who put us in contact with them. Thank you also to the curators and everyone at IWM who helped to host our event. We are grateful for funding from the HUM Strategic Fund Development Year Award at the University of East Anglia, which made the workshop possible.

Copyright © 2025 (Jenna Pitchford-Hyde and Katy Parry). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at http://ijoc.org.

museums face criticism for being inward-looking, nationalistic, exclusionary, and militaristic, perpetuating gendered and racial hierarchies. Our contribution to this debate moves beyond analyzing curatorial practices and favored exhibition narratives to ask those who served in the conflicts about their responses to the corresponding exhibitions (in this case, Falklands and Northern Ireland).

In June 2022, we invited a small group of British Falklands and Northern Ireland veterans to tour the exhibitions at the Imperial War Museum (IWM) London with us and to join us in discussions on how they made sense of the exhibitions considering their own lived experiences. A Covid-19 outbreak meant that only seven veterans (six males and one female) could join us, but we argue that the embodied "walking the museum" and focus group approach generated a rich and multi-perspectival data set. Our interest goes beyond veterans' responses to the exhibitions to include the memories and stories generated in the social interactions in the museum space and group interview environment, reflecting on what this reveals about the sometimes contradictory persistence of military culture and experience of conflict in their lives. As media and communication scholars, we view the museum as a significant site for ordering messy and contested events into a shared national cultural memory. However, unlike other studies of war museum representations, we employ a "dialogical approach" (Caddick, Cooper, & Smith, 2019) that privileges sociability and affective encounters to interpret the museum's visual culture, both in the exhibition space and through focus group discussion.

What then were the prominent objects and themes on display? How did the group of veterans respond to the exhibitions? How were their (post-) military lives revalued and reimagined as they moved through the exhibition and shared memories, jokes, and photographs? Overall, our participants were "disappointed" by the exhibitions. In this article, we explain why this was the case, noting its significance for war museum research. We also expand our discussion to the flow of stories, memories, laughter, and sociability generated in our group interview. Given the disappointed responses, we wanted to understand the background context for the museum's choices about the exhibitions, so we included a supplementary interview with two members of the Cold War and Late 20th Century team at IWM London, sharing our participants' comments and hearing their perspectives. We draw on this supplementary interview in our analysis to provide an alternative curatorial lens on the constraints imposed on their team, primarily because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

We now turn to our review of the literature, briefly covering the cultural memory of the Falklands and Northern Ireland conflicts in the British context, the role of museums in commemorating war and conflict, and the emergent field of veteran studies. Subsequently, we outline our research design and methods and present our analysis of the exhibitions and interview data.

Literature Review

Remembering (and Forgetting) the Falklands and Northern Ireland Conflicts in the 21st Century

The 40-year anniversary of the Falklands conflict was marked by commemorative events in the United Kingdom, with a number of memorial services, new television documentaries, and the re-

broadcasting of films such as *Tumbledown* (Eyre, 1988). This was especially notable during the April–June period of the conflict, but continued beyond, including the Remembrance Day Parade on November 13, 2022. New documentaries emphasized personalized storytelling from those on the frontline in never-heard-before interviews, for example, *Falklands War: The Untold Story* (Lilley, 2022), broadcast on Channel 4 (March 27, 2022).

The visibility of the memorialization of the Falklands conflict in the United Kingdom is, however, arguably muted, even during significant anniversaries. This is to be expected: it was a short but brutal conflict, fought 8,000 miles away. The remoteness of the Falkland Islands means that, for many in the United Kingdom, it is only through occasional media coverage that the Islands are known about at all. As Maltby (2016) writes, the 1982 conflict and the related notions of sovereignty, nationalism, and victory offer the dominant framings through which the Islands are imagined and remembered in British media. Conducting research during the 30th anniversary commemorative activities, Maltby (2016) notes the tensions between the (therapeutic) need to memorialize the conflict for those who participated, the governmental promotion of the Islands as "self-sufficient" and prosperous, and the reigniting of diplomatic tensions with Argentina over the Islands' sovereignty. For the Falkland Islanders, remembrance activities involving the media tended to reproduce dominant narratives of British sacrifice, an emphasis that can work to constrain Islanders' identities, privileging their "duty to remember the debt incurred by war and sacrifice" (Maltby, 2016, p. 21; see also Jenkings & Beales, 2022).

For Northern Ireland, the public remembrance culture is even more fragmented and arguably sparse in contemporary mainland Britain (but not in Northern Ireland). Despite British forces being deployed in Northern Ireland from 1969 until 2007, its longevity and proximity have not been matched with large-scale commemoration or dedicated museum exhibitions in recent times (although as we revised this article, the documentary series *Once Upon a Time in Northern Ireland* (Anderson & Palmer, 2023) had been broadcast on BBC2, and IWM have announced a new dedicated exhibition *Northern Ireland: Living with the Troubles*, May 2023 to January 2024). Indeed, the conflict provided more of a background "noise" for those who grew up on the mainland in the 1980s and 1990s, with the volume turned up intermittently in response to the deadliest killings and bombings. This is in stark contrast to the experiences and collective memories of the communities in Northern Ireland, transmitted to younger generations through "murals, memorials, graffiti, painted curbstones, flags, and parades," as well as songs and now websites (Ferguson & Halliday, 2020, p. 56).

Ten years ago, Howe (2011) reviewed four books published between 2007 and 2009 on memory, history, trauma, and Northern Ireland, reflecting on the "wave" of Northern Irish memory studies in the context of the wider general attention to commemorative activities and growing interest in the "folk history" of Ireland. As Howe (2011) notes, these continue to be "*contested* histories" (p. 221; emphasis in original) with little consensus on how to define the conflict or how a sense of justice can be achieved when known murderers live freely in communities that are still largely divided. Critically acclaimed cinematic treatments tended to provide unfavorable portrayals of British security forces and intelligence work, particularly those released in the 1990s, although the more recent *'71* (Demange, 2014) provided an almost real-time experience for a British squaddie separated from his unit during a riot in Belfast. The specter of a "hard border" between Ireland and NI following the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union brings

back memories of militarized border areas and threatens the free travel agreed on in the peace accord. We cannot do justice to the complex histories of the Falklands or the Northern Ireland conflicts here, but we hope this provides some context about their recent manifestations in British cultural history and media and the constraints and difficulties of remembrance and commemoration.

War Museums and Commemorations of Conflict

As others have observed, the discipline of international relations has traditionally "under-appreciated" museums (Van Veeren, 2020), despite their role in shaping national identity, and as "key sites for the representation and performance of global politics" (Welland, 2017, p. 531; see also Lisle, 2006). War museum exhibitions can provide order to past conflicts in a dual sense: First, the moral messiness of conflict cannot be conveyed in explicit detail in shared public spaces, so it becomes *ordered* through chronologies that attempt neat causality and represent an often sanitized version of history; second, the social ordering of national cultural heritage, which establishes who and what matters, reinforcing existing power relations and the legitimacy of state violence.

Writing on a major IWM exhibition, *Age of Terror: Art Since 9/11* (2017–2018), Van Veeren (2020) notes the mixed reviews from critics and audiences toward this curation of 50 artworks that respond to "war and conflict since 9/11" (p. 434). Acknowledging that curatorial practices are "fraught" with the necessity to "leave certain things out" (Van Veeren, 2020, p. 435), she is also aware of the specific challenges of curating a recent and controversial conflict (the Global War on Terror), fought on many fronts. However, in this short article, Van Veeren (2020) focuses on the "missing figures" from the exhibition, including the figure of the fighting soldier, arguing that such absences are "telling": "They tell us about what is tolerated in our public conversations about war" (p. 438).

Whereas Van Veeren (2020) argued that the soldiers' bodies as agents of war were missing from the *Age of Terror* art exhibition, another IWM exhibition that gathers British soldiers' photographs, objects, and oral testimony from a decade of fighting in Afghanistan, *War Story* (2011–2012) recentered public attention on the "idealized liberal warrior body" of the British soldier, according to Welland (2017, p. 530). While British soldiers were "rendered hypervisible," Welland (2017) was also concerned with what was "silenced and rendered invisible through this hypervisibility" (p. 530): the humanity of the Afghans and the violence they suffered during the conflict. Others have also written about this exhibition in the context of the emergent media technologies of the time, which provided a particularly intimate, personalized, and visceral presentation of soldiering for the British public, thorough helmetcam footages, digital snapshots, and videos (McSorley, 2012; Parry & Thumim, 2016).

In sum, recurring concerns in the extant literature are the aspects of the conflicts made visible and those rendered invisible, as well as the modalities, discourses, and aesthetics of the exhibits through which wars are made "perceptible and palpable for a wider audience" (McSorley, 2012, p. 56). Lisle (2006) points out that "objects and images displayed in museums make no sense at all without the requisite discourses to give them meaning" (p. 842), and in war museums especially, "difficult stories of trauma, violence and loss are neutralized and made amenable through comforting narratives of commemoration and education" (Lisle, 2006, p. 843). According to Lisle (2006), this necessary and difficult management of the horrors of

war by museum curators can lead to a pious "learning the lessons of war" (p. 844). However, as Lisle points out, visitors' responses cannot be "legislated," and it is not only important to remember their "critical awareness," but also to understand that curators and museum professionals are not unthinking dupes to the dominant ideologies of conventional narratives of their institutions: "they are always trying to please a number of competing stakeholders including visitors, funders, directors and government bodies" (Lisle, 2006, p. 853).

We, therefore, appreciate the difficult task of curating conflicts, which continue to be politically controversial and contested. Nonetheless, there is a danger that, in an effort to be "measured" and avoid being labeled "political," the exhibitions take on a rather sterile and cold register. As we shall see in the analysis of our workshop discussions, the lack of narrative, visible chronology, and meaningful objects and images (for our participants, at least) led to an overriding sense of disappointment.

Veteran Studies and Researching With Veterans

In addition to commemoration and museum studies, our research is informed by scholarship on veteran issues and veteran identity. As Jenkings (2018) writes, studies of "Veteranology" appear to be booming in the United Kingdom, partly due to funding for research into (problematic) military veteran transition following the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Specific to the mediated representation of First and Second World War veterans, scholars have noted sentimentalization and personalization of surviving veterans (Webber & Long, 2014), with Captain Tom Moore being the latest individual figure to gain public adoration because of his fundraising walks for the NHS during the Covid-19 pandemic. Captain Tom's new "hero" status was undoubtedly interwoven with his Second World War veteran status. Browning and Haigh (2022) explain that Captain Tom captured the public imagination because "his military symbolism facilitated vicarious identification with Britain's mythologized wartime past aimed at assuaging ontological anxieties generated by the pandemic and boosting national resilience" (p. 1).

Scholarship about veterans from the "Global War on Terror" (GWoT) era has also pointed to patterns of "hero-fication" (Kelly, 2013) and "hierarchies of wounding" (Caddick, Cooper, Godier-McBard, & Fossey, 2021). Military memoirs have long related stories of military participation from a personal, on-the-ground perspective—valued for their distinctively authoritative and authentic accounts—with their production intensifying during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars (Woodward & Jenkings, 2018). Harari's (2009) notion of "flesh-witnessing" vividly delineates the "true" knowledge, gained by those who have "direct sensory experience" (p. 218) of war, from eyewitness accounts. This long-standing genre now merges and competes with digitally enabled websites, blogs, social media, and archives, which, in turn, shape contemporary practices of life-writing, (visual) self-representation, and commemoration (Knudsen & Stage, 2013).

We are particularly encouraged by research that foregrounds the lived experiences of soldiers, veterans, and their families and attempts to better understand military cultures through a "conversational" or "dialogical" approach (Bulmer & Jackson, 2016; Caddick et al., 2019; Jenkings & Beales, 2022; West & Antrobus, 2021). Such work recognizes the tensions when civilian researchers work with veteran participants and includes insights from military veterans who are also academic researchers. This approach to research keeps in mind "issues of politics and power in the researcher–researched relationship" (Caddick et al., 2019,

p. 96) and encourages collaboration, co-enquiry, and reflection on how academic studies of veterans' lives can also perpetuate misunderstandings and misrepresentations. As Caddick et al. (2019) argue, "veterans are often talked *for* and *about* by various interested parties (e.g., charities, academics, media, policy makers) proclaiming to speak on their behalf" (p. 98). Inspired by the "dialogical approach" that Caddick et al. (2019) set out, we also see our work as part of an ongoing conversation and refrain from claiming any "last, definitive and finalizing word[s]" (p. 103) about our participants or about how a small study like ours settles any totalizing idea about veterans' experiences in relation to commemoration, museum displays, or their lives generally. The dialogical research approach advocates moving "from a commitment towards straightforwardly 'understanding' participants' lives and stories, to one of expanding the horizons through which we interpret them" (Caddick et al., 2019, p. 107).

We agree that an open-minded and empathetic approach can be combined with a critical perspective, and acknowledge that we might only be trusted enough to be told a *version* of events, stories, or feelings by veterans shaped for "outsiders" (Caddick et al., 2019, p. 108). Indeed, any of us will only present a partial view of ourselves to others in such social situations, especially when constrained by the rituals of a research workshop (signing consent forms, being recorded, etc.). We are not advocating that veterans' accounts of conflict or their responses to exhibitions should be prioritized over others. "Soldier-centric" approaches to commemoration and education about past conflicts can work to normalize nationalistic and depoliticized forms of remembrance (Danilova & Dolan, 2020). At the same time, even in our small (mostly White male) group, there was a diversity of political opinion, harsh critique, alarming stories, laughter, and pride; there was also discussion of other missing voices—not just their own, but those of Argentinians and Northern Irish families.

Research Design and Methods

Our initial plan had been to focus on the 40th anniversary of the Falklands conflict. The "Events" page for IWM London had suggested a special exhibition: "From April, IWM London will mark the 40th anniversary of the Falklands conflict. New exhibits will include items from IWM's rich collection which will go on display for the very first time and highlight eyewitness accounts of the conflict" (IWM, 2022, para. 1). The dates for the exhibition, "2 April to 14 June 2022," mirroring the period of the conflict in 1982, we believe, gave the impression of a separate exhibition or "event," or something substantial, beyond the permanent collection. However, a museum visit in May 2022 to prepare for the focus group revealed that only a small space on the second-floor balcony was dedicated to the exhibition, which was presented alongside the "peacekeeping in Northern Ireland" display. It was unclear how this differed from the permanent collection on display.

The project went through an ethical review at the University of East Anglia (Ref. ETH2122-1969), and the combined museum visit and focus group was held on June 7, 2022, with refreshments and lunch provided and £25 incentives to cover local travel. We recruited participants via Twitter and existing contacts who had expressed an interest after completing an earlier survey on veteran representation in the media (Parry & Pitchford-Hyde, 2023). Fifteen people signed up, but this was a period affected by high levels of Covid-19 (especially in London following the Queen's Platinum Jubilee celebrations), and so only seven people participated on the day. We do not make any generalizing representative claims about our small

group, but to give some demographic details, the majority were White males, with one female and one Black British male participant. Of the seven, two had served only in the Falklands, three only in Northern Ireland, and two had experience in both Northern Ireland and Falklands conflicts. The Army (including Parachute regiments), Navy (Royal Marine), Royal Air Force, and Women's Royal Auxiliary Corps were represented. All had noncommissioned ranks. To protect their confidentiality, we do not provide further details. Despite the size, we argue that this small group allows for an in-depth and rich discussion following a shared "walk-through" of the exhibition together.

Our qualitative study combined a "walking the museum" approach (Thobo-Carlsen, 2016), placing ourselves alongside the participants as they made their way around the exhibitions, with a 2-hour semistructured focus group to reflect on the exhibitions, wider representations of the conflicts, and other themes that emerged through storytelling, sharing of memories and photographs, and active listening. The focus group was recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis. Because of the overarching negativity of the responses, we also approached curators from IWM to hear their perspectives on why the 40th anniversary commemorative exhibition had been so muted and the challenges they faced. We interviewed Paris Agar (Head of the Cold War and Late 20th Century team at IWM) and Hilary Roberts (Senior Curator of Photography) on October 14, 2022 via Teams.

For Thobo-Carlsen, "walking the museum" emphasizes how visitors engage with the museum "as a site of social and corporeal practices" (Leahy, 2012, p. 3, as cited in Thobo-Carlsen, 2016, p. 137). As researchers, we co-participated in the museum tour, chatting with the veterans in a shared activity, and so were "similarly emplaced" alongside our participants (see Pink, 2009, p. 64). For us, this emphasized the significance of various ways of interacting, both with other visitors and the exhibits. Text boxes and captions required concentration, but there was also distraction, chatting, and laughter. Museum design might be intended to guide visitors in a certain direction or draw attention to certain artefacts in solemn contemplation, but the reality is much messier. In her research about the interpretation of visual culture in museums, Hooper-Greenhill (2000) writes how "[a]ssemblages of objects produce knowledge, and this is one of the most vital functions of museums" (p. 77). In the selection and arrangement of artefacts, museums construct visual narratives, values, politics, and identities, but meaning is also shaped through audiences' own perspectives. The sociability and relational dimension were key factors in the affective encounters with the museum space and something that became even stronger during the focus group. The next section provides a brief overview of the adjoining exhibitions to provide a context for the analysis.

"Walking the Museum": A Note on the Exhibitions

On entering the space on the second-floor balcony of the IWM, an information board connects the two conflicts by presenting them together while also distinguishing them: "War on the Doorstep: 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland, 1969–98" and "War at a Distance: Falklands Conflict, 1982" (Figure 1). The close proximity of the Northern Ireland (NI) deployment is contrasted with the "distance" of fighting the "undeclared war" with Argentina in the South Atlantic. The 30-year period of violence in NI (1969–1998), or 40 years up to 2007 when the British Army's deployment ended, also contrasts with the much shorter three-month dispute in 1982 with Argentina (although its "unresolved" nature is noted).

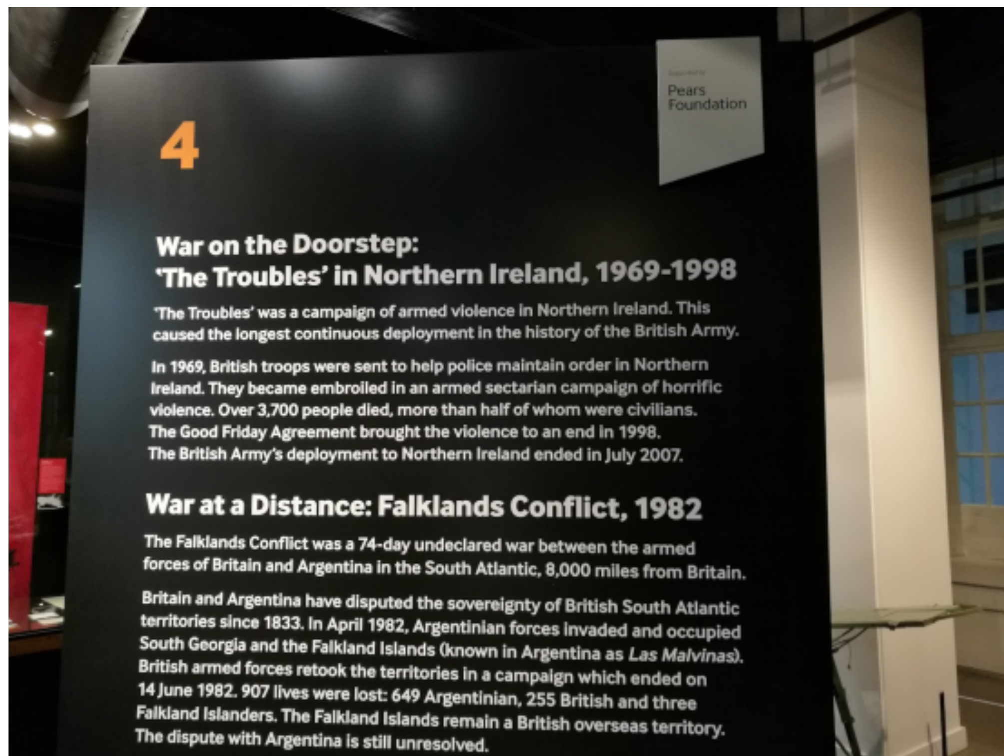

Figure 1. Main board with the two conflicts contrasted. Authors' own photo.

Other information boards provide layout maps of the exhibition space. In the NI exhibition, there is a single "room," with the Humber "Pig" military vehicle taking center stage. The only audio is a looped recording of soldiers talking about their experiences of patrolling the streets, audible if you stand at one end of the pig (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The Humber "Pig" that dominated the space, with audio from the ceiling at one end. Authors' own photo.

Our aim here is not to *re*-present the entirety of the two exhibitions (and for now we have concentrated only on NI above), but to give a sense of what the participants experienced as they walked through. The section devoted to the Falklands conflict was similar in size, with the photographs from Paul Haley (working for *Soldier Magazine*) and the cabinet with Linda Watson's drawings and personal artefacts providing the dominant exhibits in terms of space. Artistic interpretations were also prominent: For example, a large painting, *Broadside* by Bruce McLean (1985), inspired by the photograph of HMS *Antelope* exploding on May 23, 1982 (Falklands). Other exhibits include (for NI) a "wheelbarrow" used by bomb disposal, photographs by Jonathan Olley taken after 1998, a service newspaper, number plates from defused car bombs, a large, printed photograph of Martin McGuinness, and Ian Paisley at the opening of the first Irish Ikea in Belfast in 2007. For the Falklands, an MM38 Exocet missile, a limited number of photographs from soldiers and civilians, a map of the Islands, and Argentinian weaponry (Figure 3). This brief overview is designed to give some context to the responses from our participants in the workshop, which we detail below.

Figure 3. The display case with photographs and a map. Half are by Paul Haley (1982), who also has framed photographs on the wall. Authors' own photo.

Findings and Discussion

In the following sections, we discuss our findings around the three distinct, but interconnected strands that have emerged from this project: (1) the aspirations and limitations of representing past conflicts in museum spaces; (2) whose stories get told and what gets left out; (3) how participation generated deeply affective responses: "that taste in your mouth." Importantly, this analysis considers how the constraints on the process of museum curation can have a direct impact on veterans' sense of how much their role is valued by society.

The Aspirations and Limitations of Representing Past Conflicts in Museum Spaces

We observed the veterans as they navigated the displays and read the information cards. As they circulated the exhibition space, they expressed their surprise at the limited size of the exhibitions and began to question its focus and purpose. As we transitioned to our focus group session, Speaker 9 identified their initial reaction to the exhibition, combining three possible perspectives:

> I was looking at it from three different angles. One as somebody who was there when the Army first came in. One as a soldier who served there. And the last one was trying to kick himself outside of that and see if that'd give me anything as someone who didn't know anything about NI. And my one thing as far as NI was concerned, I guess, I can sum it up in somewhat one word and that was disappointment. And the theme was peacekeeping and it didn't actually reflect the Army's role in peacekeeping.

This sense of disappointment is shared by the other veterans in the group who felt the exhibitions looked like an afterthought, functioning to fill up a corner of the museum: "it looks like . . . we've got a spare room here. Let's chuck a few bits in" (Speaker 6). This reaction is indicative of the general feeling among our participants that the IWM had not put the appropriate amount of thought and consideration into the two exhibitions, especially given that the Falklands exhibition had been advertised as a 40th anniversary commemoration and "new." Speaker 4 noted that little had changed about the exhibition in the 15 years since he last visited the museum, adding that it was still "just symbolically stuffed in the corner . . ." Immediately, the issue of expectation came to the fore. First, in terms of the veterans expecting a new section of the exhibition dedicated to the commemoration of the Falklands conflict (according to IWM's advertising), and second, in terms of what the function of an exhibition in a war museum ought to be.

Our interview with the curators revealed that they shared many of the veterans' concerns about the exhibitions and had attempted to expand the collections, but were limited by restrictions on finance, space, and mobility of the displays (IWM interview, October 14, 2022). They foregrounded the importance of pitching the commemoration of anniversary events appropriately:

> The 40th anniversary, in our experience, is a crucial one, in terms of the fact that you still have many veterans who can share their perspectives and personal experiences, and are at a point in their lives when they are perhaps more able and willing to do so.

Working with limited finance and resources, and constrained by the restrictions of the building, the curators set out to create a "re-display" or "refreshed" exhibition, adding what they could to the current displays in IWM London, IWM North, IWM Duxford, and online. They explained that they wanted to "make it about personal stories." As such, they chose two practitioners, war photographer Paul Haley and war artist Linda Kitson, to commemorate the lived experience of the conflict in the Falklands.

The curators were keen to stress that the current format of the exhibitions was not reflective of their aspirations for these displays, and that they have been working on a new NI exhibition (launched in May 2023) which included veterans' and civilian perspectives: "we're getting the actual voices of people involved from all different perspectives . . . it's saying, this is a very complicated time in our history. And there's no one perspective; here is a presentation of the people who went through it" (IWM interview, 2022).

The development of this new exhibition signals the direction the curators at IWM wish to pursue moving forward. However, the seeming marginalization of these conflicts within the IWM's Falklands 40th anniversary and the NI display as they were in June 2022 provoked the sense from the veterans that their military contribution was not valued. For some, the disappointing display led to speculation about the agenda of the museum, as they felt that the exhibition reinforced inaccurate journalistic representations of those who had served. One commented, in response to the NI photographs or riots, "you know the pictures that they've got, the black and white pictures, are just stereotypical of how over years and years and years we've been portrayed" (Speaker 4). Crucially, these findings highlight the impact that cultural representations and potential misrepresentations of the conflict experience can have on veterans.

Echoing Schmidt (2020)'s findings, the group did not feel that they had been well represented in the news media, although they acknowledged that there had been some improvement since the war in Afghanistan. Speaker 4 felt disappointed that the exhibition did not challenge such stereotypes:

> You know, if you look at the newspapers, there's a cycle of stories . . . we would have the homeless story in a few months. And then we'll go on to the drunk. We will go on to the criminals . . . But nothing ever changes. . . . where's my story? (Speaker 4)

Speaker 4 revealed that they had expected better representation from the museum sector: "it's not about, you know, representing veterans as heroes and all that nonsense, it's about just being honest about it" (Speaker 4). He emphasized the responsibility of a national museum to provide appropriate representations of conflict. As Lisle (2006) suggests, "we are not satisfied with the images of horror we see on our screens all the time–we want more *authentic* and *palpable* provocation" (p. 844). She explains that war exhibitions "mobilise a discourse of authenticity to persuade visitors that encountering 'real' objects of war such as bullet casings, shrapnel and exploded bombshells is better that watching it on television" (Lisle, 2006, p. 844). Our veteran group had hoped that the exhibition would challenge the stereotypes perpetuated by the news and other media, but here we can see potential issues of interpretation. For the veterans, authenticity means showing more of the lived experience of those on the ground. However, curators are often subject to the demands of various stakeholders while aiming to deliver "didactic 'Lessons of War' and celebratory narratives of victory" (Lisle, 2006, p. 841).

The participants discussed the important role the museum plays in educating future generations about war, especially given that as the WWII generation is lost, children have fewer points of reference because they have fewer relatives and members of the community who have served than previous generations. They acknowledged that some stories could not be represented in the museum and discussed the necessity of making exhibitions suitable for children. However, they warned against over-protecting children from the realities of war. This is a concern that the curators also shared in our interview. In the years leading up to the 40th anniversary of the Falklands, they became anxious that the conflict was fading from public consciousness and set out to create a new exhibition. However, the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 resulted in a significant drop in revenue for the museum because of national lockdowns. The curators also acknowledged that the media publicity for the 40th anniversary exhibition had been miscommunicated, leading to feedback from members of the visiting public who voiced their disappointment at the lack of new material in the exhibitions—a feeling clearly echoed in our group.

Whose Stories Get Told and What Gets Left Out?

Aligned with the importance of the dialogical approaches adopted by Bulmer and Jackson (2016), Caddick et al. (2019), and West and Antrobus (2021), the veterans in our group stressed how pleased they were that we were asking for their perceptions of the exhibition. They suggested that more could have been done by IWM to engage with, and gain feedback from, veterans' groups during the curation process: "How did they put the exhibition together? . . . everybody's got Facebook pages, why didn't they ask and do a bit more research and ask for stuff that actually happened" (Speaker 6). Speaker 4's powerful response, "because society likes to speak on our behalf," illustrates how the veterans felt they did not have a role in

their own representation and echoes Caddick et al.'s (2019) suggestion that veterans are often "talked *for* and *about* by various interested parties" (p. 98; emphasis in original). These comments foreground the importance of developing and nurturing a dialogical research approach in museum practice and academic studies, working co-operatively with those whose experiences are represented in cultural outputs.

Although the first section of our analysis focused on some of the more negative reactions to the exhibitions, our participants were also happy to engage with us in discussions about what they had expected of the exhibition and what kinds of things they would have liked to have seen included. We asked the group, "If you were putting together the exhibition, what kind of thing would you do with it? What kind of stories would you tell?" Reinforcing Van Veeren's (2020) work on missing figures and Lisle's (2006) research on the necessity of discourse to accompany objects, the veterans were keen to share what they saw as major omissions from the exhibition. This included "hearing the voices" of those involved in conflict (ideally through audio/visual means) and interactive timelines to give a better sense of scale and context, with the possibility of selecting events to better understand the unique trajectories of each conflict.

The inclusion of the image of Martin McGuinness in Ireland's first IKEA store provoked a visceral reaction from the group. They did not feel that it resonated with their experience of the conflict or represented anything significant. Rather, it caused them to disengage: "I stopped reading halfway through . . ." (Speaker 5). The participants revealed that they had also experienced difficulty reconciling their own experiences with the government narratives that had been built around the conflict. Speaker 6 further discussed the perceived incongruence between government rhetoric and reality:

> The joke was that we were really being screwed by our politicians, as young soldiers out on the streets and operations, we would be in an ambush to kill a certain Martin McGuinness. We'd have an ambush out on him. He used to fly over our head. In a British helicopter! And he'd show up at a rally in Belfast.

Here, we can see the tensions that Maltby (2016) refers to, highlighted by the veterans' reactions to the McGuinness image. The complex considerations that the curators necessarily aim to balance in anniversary collections between the need to simultaneously memorialize and adhere to government narratives, while not reigniting diplomatic tensions, apply equally to both the Falklands and NI displays and risk causing a disconnect for those who were there.

The participants highlighted the lack of attention paid to military losses and were keen to stress the severity of the dangers they faced. The veterans compared the impact of the contrasting types of conflict in the Falklands and NI (a tangible battleground with a frontline versus the ever-present danger of urban paramilitary conflict) and the impact on their mental health:

> Northern Ireland, you were walking round thinking it could be anyone. (Speaker 7)
>
> It could be an innocent bike. (Speaker 5)
>
> A phonebox. (Speaker 7)

> You'd go into a house, when you go for a cup of tea and a sandwich. And thank you very much ma'am. And the next day you go to the same house and then your sandwich would be filled with glass. That's reality . . . that's what happened. (Speaker 9)

For our veteran participants, authentic representation lies not in images of famous ships or the most notable bomb attacks, but in the day-to-day lived experience of conflict. There was a strong sense among the group that many of the objects on display could have been replaced with items that better represented that lived experience. The yellow card, in particular, stood out as fundamentally important to the soldier experience in NI, which they felt should have been included: "Anybody served in Northern Ireland, if you ask them, what was one thing that impacted your life, they will probably say the yellow card, because that was what you lived by" (Speaker 9). The "yellow card" was a small card with the British Army's rules of engagement printed with examples of how these might be applied in practice. Many felt that it provided the framework for and shaped their experiences in Northern Ireland.

One of the strongest themes to emerge was that the participants were keen to see more personal testimony from those who could share the "human" stories of the conflicts (British soldiers, civilians in Northern Ireland, Falkland Islanders, and Argentinian soldiers). Speaker 6 tells the story of a mother who did not feel able to go into town for 40 years for fear of being searched.

> Why aren't they telling your mum's story? Because to me, that is just more important than someone throwing a brick, a picture saying, you know what your mum did? That's you. That's a human story about a consequence of the conflict. (Speaker 3)

The veterans explained their frustration at the fact that most of the images in the Falklands exhibition were produced by only two people—a war photographer and an artist—rather than the soldiers or civilians impacted by the conflict. While the curators had chosen these two contributors to represent real people's stories, the veterans were concerned that neither was a member of the military (from either side) nor a civilian impacted by the conflicts. Speaker 9 later summarized the importance of effective storytelling in communicating the lived experience of combat to others, as well as the importance of choosing whose story is represented: "But when you're telling the stories, it's got to be relatable. Yes, we probably think there's 1000s of stories out there but when you piece it together, it's all the same story" (Speaker 9). The next section explores how our focus group generated affective responses and an outpouring of personal testimony and storytelling.

How Participation Generated Deeply Affective Responses: "That Taste in Your Mouth"

In a comment echoing Vietnam War author Tim O'Brien's (1990) suggestion that to tell a true war story, you should recreate the *feeling* of war, Speaker 9 suggests that museums may need to move beyond the traditional static information card to effectively communicate the "soldier experience":

> There are cards and you have to stand and read them and not many people do that when they go to museums. Reading them doesn't give you that flavor, that taste in your mouth of what it was actually like.

There was an overwhelming sense from the veteran participants that it was important to communicate the experiences of soldiers and civilians in these conflicts in an accessible, engaging, and interactive way, conveying "that taste in your mouth." As civilian researchers, we were struck by how our participants welcomed us into their world and shared their lived experiences of the conflicts with us. Some of the stories could not be shared because we were asked to stop recording at certain points; others revealed personal or identifying information. However, in this section, we will examine how the few hours spent walking the museum and discussing veterans' perceptions of the exhibition prompted an outpouring of emotive storytelling from the participants, and illustrated the power of taking a dialogical approach in veteran research and the curation of exhibitions focused on military conflict.

As the conversation progressed, we witnessed increasing instances of the sharing of personal stories, initiated by Speaker 7, who began by sharing photographs on his phone with the other members of the group. These early instances of sharing very quickly established a sense of comradery, which enabled most of the participants to tell their own stories of service in the Falklands and NI. Whereas we had used the museum exhibition as an "elicitation" prompt for the group interview, it was interesting to see how the participants' own photographs stored digitally on their mobile phones became prompts for further discussion. The spontaneous sharing of photos from the 1970s and 1980s reinforces the value of visual materials in social research, aiding the sharing of memories and providing an emotive, evidential, and sensory "device" to "think with" and "evoke the ineffable" (Rose, 2014, p. 41). The stories increased in frequency over the course of the session and enabled the veterans to demonstrate the kinds of banter, laughter, and dark humor that they explained helped them cope with the challenges, grief, loss, and trauma of conflict.

We observed how humor functioned in the discussion, building rapport between the different members of the group and making the veterans more comfortable with telling their stories to us (the civilian researchers) and each other: "What you will get from the British soldier is they've got an amazing sense of humor. They could be in the shittiest situation and there'll be laughter. And a brutal honesty with it" (Speaker 7). Amid the flurry of amusing stories, one speaker even joked, "You two are going to go home traumatized from all this!" (Speaker 9). The storytelling that was produced during this focus group discussion addressed several of the areas that the veterans felt were missing from the exhibition including realities of conflict (horror, boredom); impact on veterans and their families (trauma, moral injury, grief, returning belongings to families); and public perceptions of the conflicts.

Some of the veterans' most powerful anecdotes depicted the most mundane everyday events. However, they are shocking precisely *because* of how normalized certain practices became. The group described how young people in NI had been encouraged by the generations before them to continue the violence (Speaker 8), but also that they could empathize with the reasons for some who took part: "In fairness . . . if the door came off the hinges and the old man gets a slap off some Scottish regiment, ransack the house, and kick me Mum up the arse, I'd be petrol bombing as well" (Speaker 7). Others described how the violence often had a pattern. For example, riots would often erupt after football matches on a Saturday afternoon, but calm down by 10 pm in time for when *Match of the Day* was broadcast. Speaker 9 explained how in the 1970s journalists would even go as far as provoking children and teenagers to get a news story, giving children sixpence "to throw stones at the next patrol coming round 'coz then there would be a riot and then they would have something to report." Such anecdotes address several of the key areas that the

veterans felt were missing from the exhibition: the context, the reality of day-to-day life on the ground, and the humor necessary to cope with life in a conflict zone.

Since some members of the group had served in both conflicts, they also had a collective sense of the differences, challenges, and unique nature of the two conflicts. Speaker 7 recalled that "Ireland was a lot more frightening than the Falklands because of the unknown." Speaker 6 explained, "[the] stupid thing is, and I only thought of this recently, you didn't expect to die over there." The veterans appeared to find the more traditional combat of the Falklands easier to process as a lethal environment, whereas it was much more difficult to reconcile the urban setting of NI with the potential consequences of conflict. Notably, many of the instances of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that our participants disclosed early in the discussion are related to their experiences in NI rather than in the Falklands, especially in terms of hyperawareness (being suspicious of prams, parked cars, and bags left at the side of the road, for example).

The stories that our participants told each other were all unique. However, they shared familiar themes, and as they recounted them, it was very evident that these veterans, from several different branches of the military, shared a common understanding forged through their own lived experiences. The veterans described the horrors of war and spoke of losing colleagues and friends:

> When my roomie got killed we'd only been there a couple of weeks and his body was taken back we were still serving. And when we got back to the camp, the whole room was empty and it was as if he didn't exist. (Speaker 9)

In response to Speaker 9's above recollection, Speaker 5 spoke of the first time they had to break the news of a fellow soldier's death to his family, lying that he had not been in any pain: "It was really heart-breaking. And that's a side of war that these kids don't know" (Speaker 5).

These personal stories are extremely powerful at communicating the sense of loss, grief, and trauma that the veterans have experienced, and continue to experience, as a result of their service. The authority of "flesh-witnessing" is based on the crucial role of sensations in the production and transmission of knowledge, which Harari (2009) claims can challenge the sober authority of scholars, and in this case, curators. It is not a case of choosing one form of authority over the other, but being open to the contributions of both to learning processes.

Conclusion

Bulmer and Jackson (2016) summarize the importance of employing an empathetic and compassionate approach while maintaining one's usefulness as a researcher in helping to highlight and address unfair representation.

> Let's imagine that I'm laid in a cold muddy ditch; I would not want you to climb into the ditch with me. Empathy is the ability for you, the researcher, to have one foot in the ditch and one foot on the bank. [. . .] You can have an empathetic critical engagement that involves challenge, agreement, and disagreement. (p. 33)

While not fully "dialogical" in the research framework and writing style (Bulmer & Jackson, 2016; Caddick et al., 2019), we see our work as part of an ongoing conversation. We hope to have kept "one foot on the bank" with an empathetic approach to listening to veterans and to the curators tasked with condensing complex and unsettled histories of conflicts into small museum spaces. We do not propose that only veteran voices or narratives should be heard in studies of this nature (and neither did our veteran participants), and we would welcome further research with civilians from conflict zones, military family members, and school groups for whom the public information role of the museum is designed, as well as further insights from museum workers. As outlined above, our participants valued storytelling that puts the "relatable" human experience center stage, with a strong thematic focus, rather than attempting to cover everything. The Covid-19 pandemic undoubtedly affected the planning for the Falklands 40th anniversary exhibition, but the website continued to promote a major exhibition, which raised expectations.

Choices of selection and display in museums are political, shaping what is deemed significant and who or what is valued in the construction of national memory or, alternatively, national forgetting through the sanitization of violence and loss (Lisle, 2006). For those who have lived through recent wars and conflicts, the profound emotional effects are amplified by personal stakes that arguably can never be fully resolved. This is especially acute for those who already feel that public understanding of such conflicts is poor: "I think the important thing for me is when someone walks out of that exhibition, when they see a veteran . . . they see that person differently. They just move away from the stereotypes" (Speaker 4). Whatever museum visitors' views on war, nurturing a critical, informed, complicated, and compassionate understanding of what war does to combatants and civilians is a challenging but good place to start.

This article bridges studies of memory and commemoration, museum practice, and cultural history with the emerging field of veteran studies. By bringing together the methods of cultural and communication studies (visual research and focus groups) with the 'walk-through' of the museum space, we prioritize the active meaning-making processes of our veteran participants. Crucially, this is achieved through the sociability and embodied nature of the workshop. We argue that this creates a space for both individual and collective memories and insights, which are prompted only through such reflective conversations and a "dialogical approach." The study raises questions for museum studies in terms of the value of listening exercises and participation at all stages of exhibition planning. It also makes an important contribution to studies of memory and commemoration by examining how conflict anniversaries are communicated by authoritative bodies and how this affects veterans' sense of being valued in society. Finally, for veteran studies, our study highlights the importance of cultural representations in how veterans (and civilians) perceive their roles in conflict and how they deal with the multiple ways that conflict continues to affect their lives.

References

Age of terror: Art since 9/11 [Exhibition]. (2017–2018). IWM, London, UK.

Anderson, W., & Palmer, A. (2023). *Once upon a time in Northern Ireland* [TV Series]. London, UK: KEO Films; Walk on Air Films; BBC; The Open University; PBS.

Browning, C. S., & Haigh, J. (2022). Hierarchies of heroism: Captain Tom, spitfires, and the limits of militarized vicarious resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Global Studies Quarterly, 2*(3), 1–13. doi:10.1093/isagsq/ksac026

Bulmer, S., & Jackson, D. (2016). "You do not live in my skin": Embodiment, voice, and the veteran. *Critical Military Studies, 2*(1–2), 25–40. doi:10.1080/23337486.2015.1118799

Caddick, N., Cooper, A., & Smith, B. (2019). Reflections on being a civilian researcher in an ex-military world: Expanding horizons? *Critical Military Studies, 5*(2), 95–114. doi:10.1080/23337486.2017.1345545

Caddick, N., Cooper, L., Godier-McBard, L., & Fossey, M. (2021). Hierarchies of wounding: Media framings of "combat" and "non-combat" injury. *Media, War & Conflict, 14*(4), 503–521. doi:10.1177/1750635219899110

Danilova, N., & Dolan, E. (2020). The politics and pedagogy of war remembrance. *Childhood, 27*(4), 498–513. doi:10.1177/0907568220921226

Demange, Y. (Director). (2014). *'71* [Film]. London, UK: Crab Apple Films; Warp Films.

Eyre, R. (Director). (1988). *Tumbledown* [Film]. London, UK: BBC.

Ferguson, N., & Halliday, D. (2020). Collective memory and the legacy of The Troubles. In J. R. Vollhardt (Ed.), *The social psychology of collective victimhood* (pp. 56–74). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Haley, P. R. G. (1982). Photographs taken by Paul Haley of Soldier Magazine during the Falklands Conflict 1982 [Photographs]. IWM, London, UK.

Harari, Y. N. (2009). Scholars, eyewitnesses, and flesh-witnesses of war: A tense relationship. *Partial Answers, 7*(2), 213–228. doi:10.1353/pan.0.0147

Hooper-Greenhill, E. (2000). *Museums and the interpretation of visual culture*. London, UK: Routledge.

Howe, S. (2011). Review: Memory and history in Northern Ireland. *History Workshop Journal, 71*(1), 219–231. doi:10.1093/hwj/dbq058

IWM. (2022). *Falklands conflict*. Retrieved from https://www.iwm.org.uk/falklands

Jenkings, K. N. (2018). Book review: War and conflict commemoration: Identities, memories, and place. *Symbolic Interaction, 41*(2), 285–288. doi:10.1002/symb.334

Jenkings, K. N., & Beales, J. (2022). Pilgrimage respecified: Falklands War veterans' accounts of their returns to the Falkland Islands. *Journal of War & Culture Studies, 15*(3), 328–349. doi:10.1080/17526272.2022.2078540

Kelly, J. (2013). Popular culture, sport and the "hero"-fication of British militarism. *Sociology, 47*(4), 722–738. doi:10.1177/0038038512453795

Knudsen, B. T., & Stage, C. (2013). Online war memorials: YouTube as a democratic space of commemoration exemplified through video tributes to fallen Danish soldiers. *Memory Studies, 6*(4), 418–436. doi:10.1177/1750698012458309

Leahy, H. R. (2012). *Museum bodies: The politics and practices of visiting and viewing*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited.

Lilley, H. (Director). (2022). *Falklands war: The untold story* [TV Special]. London, UK: Proper Job Films.

Lisle, D. (2006). Sublime lessons: Education and ambivalence in war exhibitions. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies, 34*(2), 841–862. doi:10.1177/03058298060340031701

Maltby, S. (2016). Remembering the Falklands War: Subjectivity and identification. *International Journal of Communication, 10*, 642–659. Retrieved from https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3964

McLean, B. (1985). *Broadside* [Painting]. IWM, London, UK.

McSorley, K. (2012). Helmetcams, militarized sensation and "Somatic War". *Journal of War & Culture Studies, 5*(1), 47–58. doi:10.1386/jwcs.5.1.47_1

O'Brien, T. (1990). *The things they carried*. London, UK: Flamingo.

Parry, K., & Pitchford-Hyde, J. (2023). "We may have bad days . . . that doesn't make us killers": How military veterans perceive contemporary British media representations of military and post-military life. *Media, War & Conflict, 16*(3), 440–458. doi:10.1177/17506352221113958

Parry, K., & Thumim, N. (2016). (Extra)ordinary portraits: Self-representation, public culture and the contemporary British soldier. *Media, War & Conflict, 9*(1), 93–109. doi:10.1177/1750635215606866

Pink, S. (2009). *Doing sensory ethnography*. London, UK: Sage Publications.

Rose, G. (2014). On the relation between "visual research methods" and contemporary visual culture. *The Sociological Review, 62*(1), 24–46. doi:10.1111/1467-954X.12109

Schmidt, H. (2020). "Hero-worship" or "manipulative and oversimplifying": How America's current and former military service members perceive military-related news reporting. *Journal of Veterans Studies, 6*(1), 13–24. doi:10.21061/jvs.v6i1.156

Thobo-Carlsen, M. (2016). Walking the museum—Performing the museum. *The Senses and Society, 11*(2), 136–157. doi:10.1080/17458927.2016.1190067

Van Veeren, E. (2020). The War on Terror is hard to see: The Imperial War Museum's "Age of Terror" exhibition and absence as curatorial practice. *Critical Military Studies, 6*(3–4), 434–439. doi:10.1080/23337486.2018.1550311

War story [Exhibition]. (2011–2012). IWM, London, UK.

Webber, N., & Long, P. (2014). The last post: British press representations of veterans of the Great War. *Media, War & Conflict, 7*(3), 273–290. doi:10.1177/1750635214557988

Welland, J. (2017). Violence and the contemporary soldiering body. *Security Dialogue, 48*(6), 524–540. doi:10.1177/0967010617733355

West, H., & Antrobus, S. (2021). "Deeply odd": Women veterans as critical feminist scholars. *Critical Military Studies, 9*(1), 24–39. doi:10.1080/23337486.2021.1907020

Woodward, R., & Jenkings, N. K. (2018). *Bringing war to book: Writing and producing the military memoir*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.