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Biting the Bullet: my time with the British Army

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[7000 words]

So many power structures – inside households, within institutions, in societies, in international affairs, are dependent on our continuing lack of curiosity. (Enloe 2004: 3)

The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and external career of a variety of individuals. The sociological imagination requires us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two in society. (Mills 1959: 5-6)

In the late autumn of 2008 I was traveling back to London after a day's fieldwork at a military training centre in Surrey. When I got off the train at Waterloo I noticed two uniformed soldiers in front of me and recognised one of them as the officer in charge of a diversity recruitment programme whom I had recently interviewed. I caught up with him at the ticket barriers and we chatted for a few minutes in the crowded rush-hour concourse before going our separate ways. As the two men vanished into the throng, I had the immediate sensation of seeing myself standing there as though I was naked. Ashamed to be thought of as complicit with the British government's war machine, I felt acutely self-conscious that I had just been talking to soldiers in public. Three or even two months earlier this would not have been fathomable. Apart from the fact that men in camouflage suits were seldom seen on public transport, I did not think of myself as someone who was able to cross that extraordinary divide between the familiar social world and the hostile apparatus of military power. At that moment I felt undeniably uncomfortable, but I resolved to put this

new awareness to good use and to maintain that visceral sense of estrangement during the rest of my research.

Earlier that year I had experienced another shock when I arranged to meet my contact officer at a university building in Camden Town, north London. I planned to interview him about his experience of diversity management since he was working on employment policy, and we were also going to discuss a schedule for my fieldwork. I had only met him once before when he was wearing battledress, the patterned khaki uniform used for everyday wear, and of course when he arrived in a suit he looked completely different, as though he was in disguise. His ability to 'pass' as a civilian left me feeling slightly wrong-footed and unsure how to relate to him. Since there were no refreshments in the building, he suggested going over to the Pret a Manger round the corner to get a cup of coffee and this threw me as well. A voice in my head asked in astonishment: but this is our world, how does he know his way about in it?

These experiences of traversing the psychological line between what was civilian and what was military – both of which seemed to involve 'them' encroaching on 'my' home ground – were the result of an auspicious encounter at the start of that same year. In January I had requested a meeting with the Adjutant General of the British Army after he had invited me to come and speak to him about the increasing numbers of Commonwealth migrants working in his organisation. The context of our original contact was important. We had met, in February 2007, at a weekend conference on 'Britishness' organised by the British Council and the Ditchley Foundation. I was finding it a rather dispiriting affair with many self-important individuals keen to sound off on their pet themes and few opportunities for dissident voices to be heard. The country was embroiled in two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and on learning that there was a senior military figure present I was even more alienated.

However, during the course of the afternoon, I was struck by the heartfelt tones in which the general spoke of the young men and women under his charge. While this may have made him easier to approach, I had my own reasons for listening to him. After years of protesting against war in all its manifestations I had come to question my own ignorance about Britain's military institutions, not least how they could be organised and equipped to attack another sovereign country with no democratic mandate.

As Cynthia Enloe has famously pointed out, the moment one becomes newly curious about something is also a good time to think about what created one's previous *absence* of curiosity (Enloe 2004: 3). An opportunity to speak directly to an army officer was too good to miss and I found a chance to talk to him on his own. I was officially attending the event in my role as a writer, commissioned to produce a book about 'Britishness' which would somehow encompass all these debates (Ware 2007). To my surprise it turned out that the general was keen to talk to me too since, in his words, the army wanted to be part of that conversation as well. It was not until some time later that I understood that he was referring to the controversy caused by the rising proportion of non-UK citizens in the army, a situation that was later resolved by capping their numbers in certain sections rather than across the board. However, in the meantime I put his card safely away until I was in a position to take up his invitation.

Our subsequent meeting the following year took place in a different climate. The profile of the armed forces had altered considerably in that period due to several factors. There had been direct interventions such as the Military Covenant Campaign, the launch of Help for Heroes and the then Prime Minister Gordon Brown had just announced the governmental inquiry into the 'National Recognition of our Armed Forces' (Davies et al 2008). British fatalities in Helmand had continued to escalate and the crowds gathering paying respect to

the coffins being repatriated through Wootton Bassett were beginning to attract media attention. In the intervening time I had started to think about what it might mean to investigate the army as a social and cultural institution. I was wondering where the military belonged in relation to the rest of the public sector, for example, and if it was so important as a supremely national body, why was it so secretive and opaque?

An otherwise crowded map

As I was soon to discover, the modernisation of the British Army from 1998 onwards is not a story that is widely known. The task of piecing it together entails detective work on many levels: from researching the enactment of old and new laws governing equality and diversity to tracking procedures for reporting bullying or harassment; from scrutinising employment tribunals to making use of ever-more detailed collections of statistics and monitoring reports. It means learning about the particularities of military culture with all its hierarchical structures and bonding rituals which is not an easy task for an outsider. It then involves asking how racism, homophobia and sexism might be factors that prevent cohesion between soldiers, as well as contributing to violent crimes committed against detainees and civilians in combat zones. To compile this story also demands an analysis of the impact of secularisation, not least the provision of multi-faith chaplains, since military service is steeped in Christianity through links with crown, church and state. And finally, exploring this recent history also requires an alertness to the ways in which the impetus towards diversity, far from being an imposition, can actually acquire its own momentum in a military setting.

This last point can be illustrated in several ways: first, a visible degree of diversity allows the army to promote its multicultural and gender-neutral workforce as an index of its professionalism and proficiency. Secondly, the significant presence of minority ethnic soldiers means that the institution can claim to be inclusive and reflective of society, as long

as few questions are asked about the demographic make-up of that diverse cohort. Thirdly, minorities, and this includes women, are often utilised for cultural skills that can be promoted as assets in communicating with civilians in the combat zone.

Grasping the complexity of these different strands and agendas might have been overwhelming had I been better informed at the start. Fortunately I was a novice when it came to studying the social situation of the armed forces and the complex terrain known as the civil-military relationship. Later I would suffer occasional flashes of dread when I realised what I had taken on but by then it was too late to turn back. As I began to educate myself on how to study military organisations I realised that there was relatively little material available on social relations within the contemporary army and virtually nothing on the history of institutional racism. Looked at from a sociological perspective, the UK armed forces were certainly absent from academic discussions about social cohesion, institutional racism, national identity, gender differences, equality and diversity. In short, as far as I could see, the British military sector represented a blank space on an otherwise crowded map, much like the areas that Google camera cars are forbidden to enter. And as I became better acquainted with a rich literature on the politics of military service in different national contexts and in different historical periods, the ingredients of a particularly British discourse became more discernible.

This introduction intentionally underlines the fact that my research began as a leap in the dark. At that time the world I entered was so unfamiliar that it took many months before I was capable of piecing together what I found. Following the initial jump, the investigation took the form of a journey – guided by interlocutors as well as by intuition – to discover how the institution worked and how the different parts fitted together. It was also a foray into the heart of Britain. I visited many places I had never been to before and learned more

about the UK's internal geography. I also saw recognisable landscapes with utterly new eyes. The real sensation of exploring happened when I went through military checkpoints into otherwise inaccessible training centres and regimental headquarters. I did find a different world but, at the same time, I knew I was deeper inside the same country. As a result of my travels I came to understand the colossal imprint of military history, language, memories and ways of thinking on mainstream British culture.

Half the battle

The most common question I was asked following the publication of *Military Migrants* (Ware, 2012) was: how on earth did you persuade them to let you in? There are several layers of explanation here, but the simple answer is that I met the Adjutant General at a conference where he invited me to investigate the situation of migrant soldiers. That same book on Britishness, published soon after we met, had ended with an account of a peace vigil organised by Women in Black and a call for global revolution (Ware 2007). The AG had a copy on his desk when I went to see him. However, it was not just a decision for a high-ranking individual with carte blanche to invite curious writers to nose around the establishment. I was obliged to wait several months before a commercial publishing contract with the MoD was negotiated and the necessary ethical research protocols carried out.¹

Securing permission to carry out interviews among serving personnel on army property is really half the battle. Without the endorsement of the right office, let alone the right officer, it is not possible to get past the security checkpoint let alone find somebody willing to talk.

Obtaining the contract was my first indication of how hard it was to get access to the institution, and it was made clear that my manuscript would have to be submitted to the MoD for reasons of security and accuracy before publishing. Eighteen months into the fieldwork there was an attempt to challenge my credentials on the basis that I had not gone

through the right channels, and this made me realise that I had just been lucky.² By the time I finished I felt as though I had slipped through a crack in a wall that magically opened up for a few seconds and then closed behind me. Not only did I have the endorsement of the head of the army's HR department, I was also placed in the care of a senior employment officer whose posting fortunately lasted as long as my research. This meant I had some continuity in an organisation in which people seemed to move on every three years and then vanish without trace.

Once the question of access and permissions was all sorted, my formal interviews began in July 2008. An account of my early days of fieldwork conveys something of the learning process that I undertook at the time. My contact officer knew that I had no previous experience of military institutions, and set up the first round of interviews with officers with overall responsibility for recruiting and training 'foreign and Commonwealth' soldiers (FCs). As I painstakingly wrote up my notes in response to their Power Point presentations and briefings, I tried to familiarise myself with army acronyms and institutional habits, acutely sensitive to all that was strange and different in this new environment. I will never forget my first day when I saw a tall uniformed man striding through the corridors with a tiny dachshund at his side. I subsequently realised that it was normal for staff – including civilian secretaries – to bring their dogs to work and so I came to accept the presence of a bed under the desk as a common sight. The absence of cats spoke for itself.

There were plenty of other idiosyncrasies that struck me, not least the use of language. Of course I wasn't party to the more demotic versions of army slang more commonly used by soldiers but it was fascinating to hear certain words and phrases being picked up by those for whom UK English was not their first language. Learning to banter was a particular cultural challenge, and several people complained about the difficulties of remembering not

to use swear words when they went home to their families. As well as acquiring a new language, recruits undergoing the first phase of training often spoke of significant physical changes, such as increased fitness, improved deportment and a newfound ability to get up early. But perhaps the most striking feature of military life that I noticed was the way in which individuals related to each other in accordance with the chain of command.

For a start, I observed that when two people in uniform pass each other they perform a sequence of actions that acknowledge not only difference in rank but also the degree to which they might know each other or how often they encounter each other. Most of the time this looks like a version of saluting, accompanied by a verbal greeting which can vary between a perfunctory grunt to an informal exchange, although it is always reciprocal. On a training base, therefore, new recruits have to be inducted into this holistic system of deference which requires acting as a soldier at all times. When moving from one block to another, I was frequently accompanied by young trainees, self-consciously swinging their arms in an exaggerated fashion, just as they had been instructed. On one occasion I observed a new boy – he appeared to be quite a fresh recruit – admonished for his less than upright deportment as he crossed paths with a senior officer. And this training in physical discipline begins even before the recruits step into their uniform. I spent a few days visiting the army selection centre where recruits undergo final tests before signing up. I watched as the candidates, still wearing their civilian clothes, assembled to walk over to the army canteen. Eager to impress, the young men followed instructions to form ranks and then set off in step, arms moving stiffly in rhythm. The fact that we were all civilians made no difference at that point, and I was the one left feeling a bit awkward as I had to break into a trot to keep up.

Here I must also add that my observations were not all fixated on what was different as I began to look with new eyes at the university workplace and institutional practices too. After an absence of more than seven years from a British university, I was becoming acquainted with the ever-changing procedures for annual career appraisals and the internal complaints system. When it came to new buildings there were some striking similarities such as the demarcation of staff refectories as 'The Hub' or the use of faceless multinationals like Sodexo for catering. As more and more reconstruction was being carried out on military bases I also learned that the blocks for single soldiers were built along the same lines as much of the new student accommodation proliferating across London and on university campuses. These continuities and comparisons were just as important as the jarring disjunctions in learning to situate military institutions within a larger landscape of national, educational and professional bodies undergoing neoliberal forms of transformation.

I thought I knew about Britain

My interviews with Commonwealth soldiers began at the Army Training Centre at Pirbright, Surrey, where recruits destined for the 'trades' sections³ spend 14 weeks undergoing the first phase of their education. In early August 2008 I arrived at the security gates at the pre-ordained time and, although I was expected, I distinctly remember the adjutant responsible for facilitating my interviews expressing frustration that nothing had been organised as he had instructed. It was there that I understood that the army was basically like any other workplace with all manner of inefficiencies and miscommunications. The underlying joke being, of course, that this was the army. Needless to say, a visit from an academic researcher interested in Commonwealth recruits was hardly going to be a top priority in a training establishment processing a hectic turnover of students at a time when the military machine was stretched to the limit.

However, on this first occasion some candidates were quickly rounded up and I was taken to a room where five men were waiting, four from Fiji and one from St Vincent. Since they were sitting in a row facing the front of the room, I was obliged to go and sit opposite them. This meant I had my back to a chalkboard so that I was positioned as a teacher, or at least as someone in authority. I was so concerned to put us all at ease that I didn't tape the conversation – it somehow seemed impolite – and had to make notes as we spoke. Perhaps due to the novelty of the situation, I felt a certain bond with these particular men and sought them out several times again before I attended their graduation ceremony, or 'passing out', a few weeks later.

After the allotted time for this interview ran out, I was shown into a different room where I met the next group. I would later become familiar with this generic setting: the portraits on the walls, photos of winning teams, gleaming sporting trophies in glass cabinets and in the centre, a highly polished wooden table. Usually known as the history room, this was a repository for regimental record-keeping which usefully functioned rather like a front parlour for receiving guests. On this occasion, the young men ranged around the table were evidently more eye-rubbingly disoriented than I could claim to be. They had arrived from Grenada and St Vincent the previous week and this was only their second day – they had only just received their uniforms and undergone the obligatory haircut. Their palpable disorientation was hardly a surprise since a military training regime was likely to be a shock to any civilian, but perhaps I was more open to their awkwardness as I too was a complete outsider. However, I quickly learned that some of them also felt alienated from their younger and less well house-trained British peers, as my notes on that day recorded:

I thought I knew about Britain but it is different. The other recruits are untidy, don't like to shower. They are used to a level of things in life. In the Caribbean we tend to

adapt. We are surprised at the level of drugs and smoking. We have discipline at home, corporal punishment.

Thus although I was able to sympathise with their process of adjustment, something I could barely imagine, their responses to what they saw as British cultural norms also highlighted things that might have been unremarkable to me, had they not pointed them out. This realisation prompted a further degree of reflexivity that would underpin my subsequent research.

The third set of interviews, with another group of new entrants, this time from St Vincent, Grenada, Gambia and Nigeria, passed in a similar vein. After this I felt confident enough to ask if there were any women (or females as they were called) available, and a group of three from Malawi, Fiji and Zimbabwe was quickly assembled. Since they were further into the course they were a good deal more relaxed and talkative, and they also appreciated a reprieve from drill practice. My notes from that meeting corroborate my vivid recollection that, rather than keeping to the earlier format where I asked all the questions and individuals answered in turn, a dynamic quickly developed between the four of us so that issues and perspectives emerged as a result of the interaction. This was to be the first example of the most rewarding and stimulating groups sessions that I would experience during fieldwork. At times I would feel that I was chairing a seminar rather than holding interrogations.

I have outlined my first day of interviews not simply to provide a frank account of beginning my research project but also to underline that this was not a simple ethnography. I cheerfully left the premises with plans to come back the following week, but when I reached home that evening, famished and mentally exhausted, it took some time to re-acclimatise. It

was as though I had travelled to a very distant place over which the shadow of war hung low and heavy. At the same time, there was something unutterably mundane and yet undeniably 'other'. On every occasion that I set off to garner more information and testimonies, regardless of whether I was visiting somewhere I had been before or not, I would have to steel myself for the day's ordeal. I quickly learned to pick up a sandwich on the way out so that I could devour it as soon as I sat down in the train on my return journey. In spite of there being no shortage of brews in a gay assortment of mugs there was rarely time to stop for lunch and even if I went to the canteen with my interlocutors, there was very little edible vegetarian food to be had in any case. But the point is that my research was not strictly ethnographic. That is to say it did not entail living on an army base or require immersion in a military community. On two occasions I stayed in the officers' mess because of the distance from alternative accommodation, but apart from a couple of nights in B&B's in Yorkshire, it was possible to digest the materials in the sanctuary of my own home before planning my next venture. In this way I was able to maintain the equilibrium between estrangement and familiarity that I had early on identified as a crucial component of my research ethic.

My fieldwork lasted from the summer of 2008 until February 2011, although 2009 was the most intensive year. During this time, I completed my study of the training centres and then focused on particular trades, such as the Royal Logistics Corps and Royal Artillery before moving on to some of the infantry regiments where there was a high proportion of FCs. I made a trip to Germany, spent a day in Sandhurst and visited the Gurkha regiment in Folkestone. I stayed overnight in the Infantry Battle School in Brecon and attended the annual conference of the Armed Forces Buddhist Society in Hampshire. After weeks of begging to meet spouses I attended a 'wives' meeting in a sergeant's mess and visited a number of military families in their homes. And between all the pre-arranged meetings I

would talk to the drivers dispatched to ferry me to and fro, occasions that bore their own ethnographic fruit but which also helped to ease my transition between life inside and outside the military ecosphere.

As time went on, I began to realise that I was documenting a period of social and cultural history that might otherwise remain unexplored. I was aware of my responsibility to locate and contextualise this chapter of military recruitment and institutional attention to 'diversity' within the longer sweep Britain's colonial and postcolonial past. In other words, it was essential to impart a sense of temporality, or at least construct a matrix of overlapping and intersecting timelines, in order to make sense of the disparate forms of evidence I was accumulating. This applied as much to the policies and practices of the army, the MoD and government as to the shaping of the wider political and cultural narratives. It was also true when it came to tracing the story of Britain's newest Commonwealth soldiers as well. With this in mind, I was able to know exactly when my fieldwork was completed.

Forensic fieldwork

The decision to extend military recruitment to citizens of Commonwealth countries was announced in February 1998 when the then Home Secretary John Reid told the House of Commons that, after a period of review, the existing five-year residency requirement for military recruits was to be suspended. But the impetus for turning directly to countries like Fiji and Jamaica began after a specific episode which took place at the Edinburgh Tattoo in August that same year. The story of recruiters from the Royal Scots approaching the bandsmen with an invitation to join their regiment was mentioned time and time again, but I could never corroborate the details with first hand testimony. In 2009 the Fiji Support Network was formed to support the Fijian military community and this made it easier to contact particular individuals. By 2010 I was finally able to locate some of the people who

were involved in the early days. This was important in terms of establishing an authenticated oral history of Commonwealth recruitment in this phase, but there were important continuities as well. It was no coincidence that some of these first recruits from Fiji had family connections to the UK military, and through them I could trace relatives of the contingent of 200 Fijians who were recruited in 1960, many of whom had stayed in the UK.

Listening out for oral memories of the same events, incidents or practices from different perspectives is an inevitable part of forensic fieldwork. During the course of my conversations with senior officers I had sometimes heard anecdotes which were intended to illustrate how seriously they took the issue of cultural diversity and the need for mutual respect. After about 18 months, I began to hear other versions of these incidents from individuals who had been involved. One such occasion concerned a funeral for a Fijian woman who died in service. Her husband, also a soldier, decided that she should be buried in the UK rather than her body returned to Fiji which was the more common practice. Since he was of royal lineage, the funeral arrangements acquired a diplomatic element as well as providing an opportunity for the regiment, sanctioned by the MoD, to show their respect for the culture of Fiji. It was initially described to me in passing by the commanding officer on an early visit to the base, but I was to hear the husband's full account when I met him to talk about his experience of joining the army in 1999. Thus by establishing the beginning of this phase I was able to access an oral memory of the longer process. But this was not the only starting point for my book.

By the end of 2009 I had interviewed many men and women at different stages of their careers but I had never been present at a signing in ceremony. I then discovered that the candidates who had been pre-selected in their own countries, whether in the Caribbean or in Fiji, were summoned to undergo a week of final tests in an establishment located in the

same premises as the Army Training Centre in Pirbright. In other words, this was the missing link between candidates arriving in the UK and the start of their Phase 1 training next door where I had begun my apprehensive interviews with the dazed recruits described earlier. It so happened that one of the last contingents of recruits 'pre-selected' in Belize was due to arrive the following week and I was able to accompany a driver to meet one straight off the plane. The sight of this young man slumped on a bench at the terminal, waiting to be collected by his military host, remains indelibly imprinted on my brain. Once I had met these individuals and followed them through their first week of tests and contracts, I knew I had the beginning of my book. The ending was similarly clear.

By late 2010 the Coalition government had announced that the army would be reduced in size following the publication of the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR 2010). The first round of redundancies, announced in the spring of 2011, were due just as I was finishing the final chapters. Although the decision to terminate the recruitment of Commonwealth soldiers was not made until 2013, it was already evident that 'foreign-born' troops were regarded as vulnerable (Harding & Kirkup 2012).

Throughout this period of fieldwork I noted any number of changes, both in the material environments of bases I visited as well as in institutional practices. Just as in higher education, the military sector is constantly subject to various forms of neoliberal restructuring and it was not immune to the impact of the financial crash in 2008. One of my last conversations with my contact officer took place in the newly built Land Forces HQ in the shade of potted palms, and the fact that I was finally able to order herb tea in the cafeteria I took as my signal that it was time to wrap things up. But the fieldwork that I carried out within the confines of army premises was not the only dimension of research necessary to write this story.

The point of this chapter has been to reflect on the 'craft practices' of researching the military as an institution and examining its wider relationship to society. But the writing process did not begin until many months of fieldwork had passed, and in the meantime, the achingly difficult job of formulating a theoretical framework for the project grew out of discussions, readings and archival research that took place miles away from the military's strange environments. The status and profile of military work in the broader society had been changing on many levels. It was notable, for example, that when I started in 2008 there was very little media representation of military work but the following year it seemed that you could not turn on the TV without encountering a reality documentary programme about life in the army – whether in Helmand or in the training centres. Men and occasionally women in military uniform became regular features of big sporting events, and occasions such as Armistice Day acquired an increasingly affective – and some would say, a coercive – force. I began monitoring these developments more diligently after I started research for my first article about the social aspects of soldiering in 2009 (Ware 2010a, 2010b). It was then that I came to understand the myriad ways in which the population at home were being fully incorporated into the wars ostensibly being fought in distant lands.

Playing it straight

One of the hardest aspects of holding together the disparate types of research was the endemic problem of weighing the agency of the individuals who gave interviews against the deeper structure of the organisation, as well as the historical, cultural and political contexts beyond that. Guided by the wisdom of veterans like Cynthia Enloe, who simply urged me to 'feel your way', I resisted the pressure from senior colleagues to describe my 'methodology' in advance and to elaborate on the inevitable 'research questions'. Instead I sought advice from seasoned ethnographers whom I knew and studied a range of books that I admired, as

well as disliked, in order to develop the approach that felt most appropriate (Back 2007; Hewitt 2005; Trimbur 2013).

The key to finding the right tone, I discovered, was to keep an open mind but remain true to myself: to convey in the simplest terms what I saw and what I heard, organised in a structure that provided a historically and sociologically grounded analysis (using material that is all in the public domain), but which also supplied a critical context that challenged the injustices brought by the abuses of power – racism and war in particular. That sounds all very well, but I also knew that the proof of the pudding would lie in my ability to throw light on to the dark recesses of the military interior in a way that did not ridicule or deride the motives of those who made their living from the profession of legally sanctioned violence. I also knew I had to satisfy the scrutiny of the MoD at the end of the day, although I banished this thought until the time came to submit the manuscript. It made sense, therefore, to anticipate the prospective reader as one who might be following their own journey into this organisation, deliberately starting from a familiar place before venturing into the unknown, the unheard and the normally invisible.

My decision to begin *Military Migrants* by describing an event in Trafalgar Square was an intentional device to locate the subject at the heart of public life rather than parachute straight into the confines of an army base. The first chapter does indeed open with a scene taking place behind military lines, positioning the reader as a witness to a group of young men observed in the act of swearing loyalty to the British Crown in the absence of their families and friends, many miles from home and in a country they barely knew. Glimpsed on the cusp of their military careers, these individuals serve as guides to the process of becoming soldiers, while their preparedness to take that life-changing step asserts the agency of all those in their situation within the broader morass of forces beyond their

control. As in any documentary account, the spoken words of the interviewees, reproduced in the context of a particular scene or setting, are often able to bring other types of material to life by reinforcing a vivid sense of first hand experience. However, I was concerned not to present dialogue or reported speech in instrumental ways that simply illustrated or reinforced my own arguments; instead I tried to allow the conversations and observations to drive the argument forward, or at least to suggest an angle or perspective that needed to be explored. It was disheartening, then, to receive this comment from the committee of readers assembled by the MoD:

The book does cause some frustration in that it does appear to take at face value what is being said by the various interviewees and this subsequently appears to be reported as fact.

This critique, which required me to travel to the MoD building in Whitehall to explain the concept of standpoint theory, was a salient reminder that the book would be addressing some very different publics and that it was difficult to predict how the contents would be read. This point was further underlined for me when I was invited to a theatre workshop to advise in the development of an updated production of the 1980s play *Black Poppies* which was based on verbatim interviews with serving soldiers and veterans.⁴ Excited that the book had been taken up in a way I had not anticipated, I watched as Ben, one of the actors, took his place at the front of the room and began to address us as though we were in some kind of presentation. I immediately recognised the scene as a rendition of the training session I had described in a section on equality and diversity law.

Ben had read the passage with clinical precision, though he was now adding his own interpretation to animate the character of the trainer. The Power Point evidently doesn't work so he is forced to speak from his own notes. His students are not helping either. The atmosphere is pregnant with a sense of obligation mixed with cynicism and a certain

weariness. As the instructor struggles to deliver his interactive presentation, his invisible and tight-lipped students will not be drawn. Inevitably his own ambivalence starts to show and he makes concessions to the men. In an exercise designed to discuss a real life situation, which in this case concerns the reaction to an openly gay colleague, he pleads with them: 'it's well known that gay men don't fancy straight men'.

By this time everyone was laughing. It had become more ridiculous as it went on and the director called it to a halt. I have to admit that I was feeling a little uncomfortable. Ben was following my account, pretty much word for word. And it was true that the instructor was getting minimal response so that he had to work against a thick silence, something that I emphasised in the text. My motives for describing this scene were deliberate. I had intended to convey the scepticism with which older, experienced military men treated the latest developments in equality and diversity management, but I was also keen to underline the sincerity of the instructor who radiated his new-found commitment to the subject. Except that I had not meant it to be quite so funny. If anything, the subtext was that nobody likes to be lectured about such things and old soldiers were no different.

As it happened, I had also described the use of theatre workshops to illustrate more innovative aspects of equality and diversity training within the army, and it was no coincidence that it was the acting out of the 'old soldiers' that got the most laughs among audiences of young corporals and lance corporals there as well. But in this reflexive account of my own experience, perhaps the final point to emphasise is that the sociological practice of researching the armed forces must steer a path between two undesirable outcomes: the first is to make anything to do with soldiering utterly remote and yet exotic; the second minimises the distinctions between what is military and what is not. If we can grasp the way that military values, practices, perspectives, priorities, policies are increasingly becoming

camouflaged within our everyday social lives, perhaps then we can imagine more effective ways to hold powerful institutions to account. Only then can we resist the corrosive effects of allowing our politicians to fight wars in our name.

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¹ I arranged this through the Open University – then my employer – rather than the more usual MoD Research Ethics Committee (MODREC).

² An academic researcher working within the defence establishment was invited to a meeting which I also attended, and queried my credentials since she could find no trace of me through MODREC. She asked me to stop all my interviews until my situation had been clarified. I was later told that if my book caused a stir, and the generals started asking who let me in, it was no good saying that I was 'a nice person'. This reminded me that when I was negotiating my contract, the (civilian, ex-army) administrator told me on the phone that we had to iron out the details beforehand as he didn't want 'a smacked bottom' when the book came out.

³ The infantry regiments train recruits at the Infantry Training Centre in Catterick, Yorkshire.

⁴ *Black Poppies* was a dramatisation of the experiences of black servicemen from World War II to the late 1980s. Originally produced by the Royal National Theatre Studio, this special recreation for television was filmed on the Broadwater Farm estate in North London.

<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b7c17ea45> (accessed June 11 2014)