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## **From Services to Civilian: The Geographies of Post-Military Lives**

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### **Abstract**

Military geographies are everywhere and, even when military power has been removed, continue to shape lives and environments. This paper addresses a gap in the literatures by exploring the spatiality of (post)military identities, demonstrating the continuing impact of having been part of the military community despite the passage of time. Our tri-service respondents highlighted the challenges faced even by those deemed to have 'successfully' transitioned to 'Civvy Street', articulating discourses of loss and separation. While some had achieved closure with their past military selves, others struggled and became stuck in a liminal space between civilian and military lives that perpetuated feelings of isolation. Our work contributes to understandings of military geographies and highlights the importance of conceptualising post-institutional transitions as a process in order to understand how individuals negotiate their identities in changing spatial circumstances.

### **Key Words**

Military geography; identity; liminal; transition.

## 1. Introduction

Military practices and personnel make a significant but often under-recognised contribution to the society, economy and culture of many places (Woodward 2004). While the presence of armed forces may be more obvious in areas of conflict or militarised space, military geographies often reverberate in many other places that may not, at first glance, have associations with the Services. As Woodward (2005:719) states 'even in otherwise unremarkable places, military geographies are everywhere ... but they are often subtle, hidden, concealed, or unidentified' and so include many landscapes (Pearson 2012, Woodward 2013), towns (Jenkins, Megoran et al. 2012), ports (Marcadon and Pinder 1997) and coasts (Sidaway 2009) that have been shaped in multiple ways by the presence of military personnel, spaces and operations in times of both war and peace.

This paper contributes to the growing literatures on military geographies by examining the experiences of personnel leaving the armed forces and 'becoming' civilians. We consider the significance of spatiality to (post)military identities and how, in turn, these shape, and are shaped by, the transitional experience of leaving the Services. Transition is positioned as an on-going spatial process rather than a singular event that marks a disjuncture between the different lives lived in military and civilian spaces. In doing so, this paper makes three key contributions.

First, it develops understandings of military geographies and, in particular, the hybrid nature of military and civilian spaces. Woodward's (2004) monograph 'Military Geographies' takes as its starting point a view of a military base from the outside, beyond the security barriers and measures that demarcate military from civilian space. Yet, as her book and subsequent work reveals, the distinctions between military and civilian space are blurred with often significant interactions between the two. In the UK the importance of these interactions has been recognised by the signing of 'Community Covenants' between local authorities, the military and other partners that aim to recognise and foster social, cultural and economic links between civilians and the military. People leaving the Services blur the boundaries between military and civilian spaces in imagined and tangible ways; by focusing on the experiences of these personnel it is therefore possible to gain insights into the hybrid and liminal relationship between military and civilian spaces.

Second, while it is recognised that the armed forces change the identities of civilians when they become soldiers (Bateman, Riley et al. 1987, Cowen 2005), less is known about what happens when soldiers become civilians. Existing work has tended to emphasise the mental and physical issues faced by ex-forces personnel and their families including homelessness (Higate 2000, Johnsen, Jones et al. 2008), suicide (Carlson, Stromwall et al. 2013, Rice and Sher 2013), physical incapacity (Wilmoth, London et al. 2011), domestic violence (Mechanic 2004), crime and incarceration

(MacManus and Wessely 2011, White, Mulvey et al. 2012), substance abuse (Kline, Callahan et al. 2009) and mental illness (Booth-Kewley, Schmied et al. 2013, Carlson, Stromwall et al. 2013). High profile charities, such as Help for Heroes and the Royal British Legion, also highlight the problems faced by former service personnel. While these issues are significant and fully deserve attention, it is also important to recognise that most people leaving the armed Services regard themselves as physically and mentally well. Most do not enter retirement but, instead, embark on a second career (Walker, 2011). In the UK, research into this particular form of changing employment is timely given on-going redundancies from the armed Services, plans to fast track former service personnel into civilian teaching jobs and to expand the reserve forces. The shift from service to civilian life is, however, more than a change in career and also encompasses many significant cultural, social and spatial changes.

Third, and related to this, our work contributes to human-centred understandings of the people living in, or who have lived in, military places. Soldiers are more than just passive beings, who are shaped or changed by military training, but are agents with complex identities. Research is starting to unpack how soldiers make sense of their situations and geographies (Woodward and Jenkins 2011, Woodward and Jenkins 2012) and, as in many areas of social geography, researchers have paid particular attention to performative acts that confer identity to people as service men or women. As Woodward and Jenkins (2011: 256) note, military identities are about “doing’ rather than any essential categories of ‘being’”. Subsequently, some work has focused on the ways in which these performative acts, such as patrolling or living in barracks (Atherton 2009), contribute to the establishment and maintenance of a military identity. Furthermore, if the completion of service life ends these activities, how does this impact on individual identities? As Walker (2013) suggests the question for service personnel is not so much ‘what will I be after leaving the army?’ (289) but ‘what have I become?’ (290). Consequently, the next section focuses on how geographers have conceptualised identity and how these ideas can be brought to bear on the experiences of people leaving the armed forces.

## **2. (Post)Military Identities**

Identity is lived experience (Dowling 2009) and, as such, we understand it as a fluid and contextual performance; a nexus of practices, values and meanings which emerge in different forms in particular contexts by drawing on specific resources and capacities (Hopkins and Noble 2009). On the one hand, identity can be viewed as an inter-subjective concept that is forged in the relations between self/other in a co-constitutive relationship with space. As such, different facets of the ‘self’

(for example gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, (dis)ability etc) can be strategic, deployed as appropriate in different spatial circumstances. Identity, according to this post-structuralist interpretation, is therefore fluid and relational to different social and spatial contexts. On the other hand, we recognise that certain self-understandings can 'harden, congeal and crystallise' (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 1) and so multiple potential selfhoods can become stabilised into a particular formation within certain contexts; for example, an important facet of basic military training focuses on recruits identifying themselves primarily as soldiers rather than civilians. Nonetheless, the duration of these stabilised identities varies as they remain fundamentally unstable and subject to change. This produces a contradictory, and yet essential, tension between fixity and change, which allows diverse repertoires of identity to adapt to, and maintain, a sense of social commonality and connectedness (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, Hopkins and Noble 2009).

Places are essential in the formation of these identities. Space, as Lefebvre (1996) argued, is produced and consumed by collective social practices and relations, and so is fundamental to the constructions, negotiation and performance of individual and collective identities (Santos and Buzinde 2007). Gupta and Ferguson (1992) note that 'community' refers both to a demarcated, physical space *and* clusters of interaction, and the identity of a place emerges in the intersection of these. Representations of identity - common practices, values and materialities - are an essential part of the process by which a territorially grounded communal identity is produced and exchanged (Hall 2002). It may be posited, therefore, that military identities are created through spaces that are deemed to be military or militarised and the practices that occur inside these places. The military creates spatially grounded communities of practice in which a military identity is affirmed by engaging in particular embodied performances (Woodward and Jenkins 2011), with shared values, ideas and practices shaping what is deemed to be an 'acceptable' identity. Military spaces, whether a barracks, airfield, naval base or military housing, come with layers of meaning built up over time that establish particular modes of behaviour through the governmentality of social relations within that community. This works to foster a sense of belonging that extends beyond the spatial as the military subject is also connected to the imagined community of the broader military body. The military spaces that shape and enforce these identities are not just the obvious fortifications, armaments factories, military command posts, communications stations, field training centres, war memorials, airfields, barracks and naval stations (Pye and Woodward 1996, Woodward 2005) but also include the 'everyday' spaces in service personnel's lives: the home, the office, the commute and the leisure space.

Thus, Atherton (2009) examines how embodied routines and self-discipline learnt in the British Army are transferred into a home environment. He describes how army training develops a form of

masculinity and tidiness that are routine parts of living in barracks. Upon leaving the Services soldiers return to homes that are 'outside of' or 'apart from' these specific spaces, requiring them to negotiate, with varying success and effects, their place and masculinity within the home. The picture Atherton paints is clouded further because some service personnel live wholly in civilian spaces while others divide their time between privately purchased or rented homes and military places such as ships or foreign bases according to their deployment. Married-quarters (on or off base) provide a hybrid mix of military and civilian accommodation, offering some domestic privacy but never far from the military gaze. Such complexities highlight the liminal nature of service life as it crosses between civilian and military places (Jolly 1987, Jones 1987).

Nevertheless, for all troops leaving their service, living in and identifying with one place as 'home' contrasted markedly with their mobile but controlled lifestyles in the Services. As Brunger et al (2013) note not all are able to cope with this, and it is thought that high rates of homelessness amongst service leavers may reflect a need to continue the transitory lifestyles and relevant skills to sustain these that were learnt in the Services (Cloke, Milbourne et al. 2002). Atherton (2009) also recognises that the domestic space of the home can be experienced in different ways by serving personnel with the home experienced variously as a place of sanctuary, emotional security, suppression or confinement (Atherton 2009). Some find the contrast with the regimented nature of military spaces unfamiliar and uncomfortable whereas others see it as a place of freedom away from the military gaze. For some, it maintains a stable domestic grounding while the ex-serviceperson negotiates 'the complex, often very awkward, emotive impact of the shift from military to civilian life' (Atherton 2009: 824). Others find it difficult to overcome a hyper-masculinist self-sufficiency that makes them view their families as something to be protected rather than a source of emotional support (Brunger, Serrato et al. 2013). Indeed, relationship breakdown is widely recognised as an issue within ex-military reintegration (Doyle and Peterson 2011, MacManus and Wessely 2011)

At this point it is important to note that military identities are complex and continue to have an important bearing on post-service life. Higate (2001: 455), for example, cautions that 'there is a tendency for current understandings of the links between military service and civilian experience to be polarised. On the one hand it is thought that ex-servicemen are wholly unaffected by their military service while, on the other, they are considered somewhat hapless former 'squaddies' who are unable to create non-military identities'. David Walker's (2013) study of 28 leavers of the British Army identifies five categories of service personnel, which demonstrates how people serving in the armed forces may identify themselves in specific ways that, in turn, may reflect their attitudes and expectations of civilian life (Table 1).

| <i>Transformed</i>   | <i>Soldier-Scam</i>                             | <i>No-Difference</i>   | <i>Disavowed</i>                                 | <i>Blighted</i>  |
|--|---|--|--|--|
| Believe that the personal qualities relating to service are superior to those of civilians | Consistently claim they are not 'real soldiers' | Consistently claim the military has had little effect on their self-conception | Routine events make prior soldier-self untenable | Extreme soldierly identification leads to transition as a disruptive and challenging event |

**Table 1** Five Types of Pre-exit Soldierly Orientation. *Source:* Walker {, 2013 #14}

These categories offer a helpful heuristic device, which describes some of the ways in which service personnel identify themselves but, as Walker {, 2013 #14} reminds us, identity as a service man or woman is a process rather than a finishing point. As Woodward and Jenkins (2011: 256) note military identities are about 'doing' rather than any essential categories of 'being'. We cannot assume that particular identities arise from a certain set of conditions and, indeed, one person may fall into each of Walker's categories at different points and places in their career. Walker's (2013)

In the context of military identities, research has predominantly focused on the processes in which new recruits 'become' soldiers through the rigours of basic training, being 'produced' into hard-bodied warriors (Woodward 2003, Woodward and Winter 2007). The behaviours, attitudes and ideas deemed 'acceptable' are clearly established within strict, hierarchical power relations, which, Atherton (2009: 825) notes, offers a 'complex mix of empowerment and disempowerment' for the service-person. However, there has been limited work exploring how identity can change through transitional experiences such as leaving the military (Brunger, Serrato et al. 2013) and none that considers the spatial elements of this. As we have argued in this section, it is important to pay attention to the complex spatial contexts that influence identity and how these play out upon leaving the Services. The following section introduces our study before examining these issues. How do individuals negotiate this process of 'becoming' a civilian? If their identity has hitherto been shaped through the intersubjective relationship with their military peers and superiors, what happens when this is removed? What too happens to the 'emotionally laden sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded group' (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 19)?

### **3. Research Context**

The project drew primarily on interviews with 27 former service personnel living in the city of Plymouth, UK and its surrounding area. The 2011 Census records 3,680 members of the Armed Forces living in Plymouth (out of 191,786 adult residents). This is nearly 1,000 fewer than in 2001, which reflects cuts in the size of the armed forces. The area was also chosen because of its large tri-service military presence: Plymouth is home to Devonport Naval Base, 29 Commando (Royal Artillery), 3 Commando Brigade Headquarters and a number of Territorial Army units. The Royal Air Force was also based in the city until 1992. Furthermore, there are Royal Marine bases in Plymouth, Turnchapel, Lymptone, Instow and Chivenor, which is also the base for No 22 Squadron RAF. Britannia Royal Naval College in Dartmouth delivers basic training for all Royal Navy Officers, while other ratings train at HMS Raleigh, Torpoint.

These interviews included men (22) and women (5) from the Army (8), Royal Navy (16) and Royal Air Force (3). Interviewees were recruited through advertising in the city and a process of snowballing. The people in our sample had served from 3 to 38 years and their leaving dates extended from 6 months to 30 years prior to interview.<sup>1</sup> We interviewed people who identified themselves as having been 'successful' in moving from service to civilian lives; this aimed to fill a gap left by other studies, which have focused predominantly on those with mental or physical illnesses (Higate 2001, Johnsen, Jones et al. 2008, Brunger, Serrato et al. 2013). These interviews were supported by 11 other interviews with staff of veterans' and service's charities. These interviews allowed us to examine how various institutions saw the needs of ex-service personnel and how these were addressed by them. The most pressing issues identified by the NGOs, and supported by the literature, were employment, relationships and a place to live. Recognising the importance of both official and everyday spaces to the performance of identity, we start the empirical discussion around transition experiences by considering changes in mobility, which we draw out through a focus on the home.

### **4. Routes and Roots: Place and a (Post)Military Identity**

Military lifestyles are associated with a high degree of mobility with personnel periodically assigned to different units, ships or bases in different places and, when serving with them, deployed to other locations. These transitory lifestyles were an important part of the memories of our interviewees who, when asked to provide some background to their military service, were able to name and date various deployments. A padre listed postings and deployments in: Germany, Northern Ireland, Canada, Poland, Belize, Scotland, Catterick, Plymouth, Iraq and Afghanistan as well as many months

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<sup>1</sup> To preserve the anonymity of our interviewees we refer to them by gender, length of service, branch of service and years since their leaving date, for example 'Male, 5 years' service in the RAF, 6 years'.



at sea during an 18 year career that also saw him transfer mid-way from the Army to the Royal Navy. A couple, who had both served, commented:

*'K: We met at Brize Norton when we were both posted there and then from there we were very fortunate, we got married while we were there and we then went on a joint tour to Coltishall which is just outside of Norwich. We stayed there for three or four years, didn't we? And then we came back to Lyneham, which is near Swindon. So that was the closest we have ever been to the South West, considering C is from South Wales, I am from Plymouth. His kids stayed in Braunton, which was when C was based at Chivenor, in North Devon. So the Norwich journey was crazy really, back and forth at least twice a month ... But in between all of that we did what we call 'detachments' away. C, you spent a lot of your time in America.*

*C: Yeah it was great [laughing]. Part of my job, like I said, we work quite closely with the Special Forces, so wherever they were deployed, if they were under a training regime, and some of us would go with them for their specialist support equipment. And obviously, during my time I did Afghanistan twice, Lebanon, Northern Ireland, Pakistan, numerous, numerous places, against terrorism basically.'*

In both of these cases, their identity in a particular trade (chaplain, air traffic controller and survival technician respectively) provided a fixed point in an otherwise changing landscape as they were posted to a unit or place to do a specific job, be it ministering to troops, directing air traffic or preparing equipment. Connections with a base, ship or unit also mattered but, as these examples demonstrate, these changed regularly during a military career (two of the interviewees above changed Services). This made identifying a place as 'home' complex. Over time, some interviewees bought or rented properties in places that they were based and returned to it when they were posted elsewhere. This emerged as a decisive factor shaping the post-military movements of the majority of our interviewees for whom the decision as to where to locate was governed by an already existent and settled family life:

*'...it was a cheaper option to live in the South West of England than it was to perhaps, you know, centrally...We'd already bought a house here. So, we decided to stay.'* (Male, 14 years' service in the Royal Marines, 22 years)

*'...because we have always been in Plymouth, we stayed.'* (Female, 14 years' service in the Royal Navy, 13 years)

*'I got so fed up living on ship and bought a house in Cornwall because they were quite cheap. And then we got married, moved to Ivybridge, and then we had the two kids and they go to school down here and so by the time you have ten years with the family and you have got all*

*your friends down here, your family has moved down...'* (Male, 23 years' service in the Royal Navy, 18 months)

For others this decision was compounded by the need to be located near the sea in order to pursue maritime-based employment opportunities such as commercial diving as well as the fact that friends from the Services had also settled in the area. Indeed, some interviewees found it familiar to settle in a place that had high numbers of former military personnel.

*'I used to live in the Midlands and there's this guy whose ex-army but he was very much exceptional, you know ... down here there's, you know, loads of ex-Royal Marines and ex-Navy guys, you know, all the rest of it ... you find there's a lots of service blokes that kind of do the old stuff or run the athletics club ... it's never a surprise when someone's ex-service. I say, "You ex-service?" And occasionally you get, "No, no, no." Or they'll say, "Oh, yeah, well I was in 42 [Royal Marine Commando]'"* (Male, 22 years' service in the Royal Navy 5 years)

*'And lots of my friends still, you know, living in Plymouth and the occasional face you see for drinks on Friday night ... so, yeah, it's still good to keep in contact then. And also it's handy for work. For getting contacts and different things going on. It's a good networking facility.'* (Male, 18 years' service in the Army, 15 years)

At the same time, links with a place were strengthened through closer connections with the civilian population; most obviously, if personnel sent their children to a local school, associations were developed with a place. Others listed membership of local, civilian sports clubs, societies or churches as a way of developing associations with a place as home. These instances enforce a sense of place that draws on hybrid identities from civilian and service life. As the interviews above suggest, in civilian places there are connections with the military through friends and neighbours who are currently or formerly in the Services. It highlights and affirms Woodward's (2005) suggestions that the military is important to the everyday lives of places in subtle but important ways.

We also suggest that this continuation of personal lives (discussed further later in relation to employment and identity) is an understandable attempt to ensure a degree of continuity between the previous military and current civilian lifestyles. It emerged that service personnel in the Royal Navy were more likely to have achieved this whereas the Army and Royal Air Force, with their more frequent postings to new bases, tended to socialise and associate more strongly within their bases. However, for some their post-military location was not predicated on a continuation of their existing life, with one interviewee (Male, 22 years' service in the Army, 4 years) stating that moving to Devon allowed them to access a previously only aspirational lifestyle, while for another this was augmented by positive associations:

*'...I spent a year and a half with the Royal Marines and they used to train up on Dartmoor...and she [wife] trained at Raleigh...and when we were courting... we used to go up and we just had pleasant memories of being up on the moor and we have always loved the South West. And it was just that really. We have got no family ties here at all actually. It was just where we thought would be the best place to live.'* (Male, 27 years' service in the Royal Navy, 3 years)

Brunger et al (2013) highlight that continuity of lifestyle can also be reflected in upheaval, a continuation of the temporary postings experienced in the military. While Higate (2000, 2001) discusses this in relation to homeless ex-service personnel, whose military experiences have predisposed them to a fleeting fixedness to place, this desire for a new space to explore is reflected in the desires for a new lifestyle reported above; although these cases represent a stabilised version of this need for change this could, perhaps, be interpreted as a 'final deployment' into civilian life, a spatial separation to necessitate an effective bridging of military-civilian spheres.

The multiple reasons underlying these settlement decisions begin to hint at the complexity involved in transition, which, for some, involves a change in employment, colleagues and home. As one interviewee commented:

*'...I find it quite difficult going back into civilian life because it's...you don't...I think you don't appreciate what a way of life it's become and that a lot of your friends are people who you work with, you live with. It's a whole community...'* (Female, 3 years' service in the Royal Navy, 30 years)

How people react to this is both personal and contextual because the military is neither a monolithic nor a homogenous institution either in the service personnel it produces or the experiences it offers. The multiple, embodied, spatial and relational facets of our interviewees experiences highlight 'the continuity of military imprint despite the removal of military power and control' (Woodward 2013: 7), which presents both opportunities and challenges for those involved. We now move on to consider these personal impacts of transition by focusing on identity. The three key motifs that emerged from our research were the sense of a lost way of life and a loss of identity, a recognition of the need to 'let go' and a sense of continuity.

#### **4.1. A Sense of Loss**

*'...leaving the navy is a bit like, you know, losing your parents...sort of a traumatic moment in your life. It's a bit like bereavement...'* (Male, 38 years' service in the Royal Navy, 10 years)

This sense of loss permeated all of our interviewees' accounts even if, in general, they had a positive attitude towards, and experience of, transition and had *chosen* to leave. Understandably this sense

of loss was exacerbated for those who had been made redundant and the disempowering effect of that lack of 'capability to choose' emerged in the language used:

*'No, no I would have stayed. Everyone knew that. I was **desperate** to stay...some people are equivocal about it and other people really do not want to leave and I was one of those. So yes that does, that did affect the whole psychology of it...but it is a **traumatic** experience. It is **bereavement**...'* (Male, 16 years' service in the Army and Royal Navy, 1 year, emphases added)

This point is particularly pertinent given the recent rounds of military cuts in the UK and elsewhere, and reminds us that the feelings of separation from a lifestyle and career/vocation are strengthened if the individual is not ready to leave, which in turn has implications for their attitudes towards engaging with the transition process. As some of the interviewees commented, but always in relation to *others* that they knew:

*'I have got a couple of best mates who were quite scared about coming out. They are still in at the moment and hanging on for dear life because they don't know what the future is going to hold'* (Female, 15 years' service in the RAF, 8 years)

*'Some people, when they're coming out of the forces, bury their head in the sand. They've been in so long and they're so instituted that it's like it's not going to happen. And they always have to be told, like, 'you know you're going out in 6 months, don't you?'...And they ignore it...you've got all this stuff that you can take advantage of, and you've not taken advantage! ...they just can't quite get their head around the idea...'* (Male, 14 years' service in the Royal Marines, 22 years)

The danger is that these individuals will not take advantage of the formal advice or training offered by the forces to troops ending their service<sup>2</sup>; while this received mixed reviews from our interviewees it still represents the key support structure available. This seeming fear of civilian life highlights the 'cocooned life' (Male, 37 years' service in the RAF, unknown) of the military and the fact that 'the day that you stop being invited to wear that uniform, you also lose that support network' (Male, length of service unknown, Royal Navy, 6 months). All interviewees' recognised the support and camaraderie of being in the armed forces and, while not all still kept in contact with those with whom they had served or went to reunions, there was a certain wistfulness that permeated the interviews for the loss of the chance to make such strong and open relationships and to have that feeling of belonging:

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<sup>2</sup> The Career Transition Partnership is the official body that supports service personnel through their post-military transition.

*'It's that sense of humour...maybe it was, you know, a little bit sick at times but that's how you sort of overcame, you know, difficulties, adversities...but, you know, 20 years down the line, I still miss it'* (Male, 14 years' service in the Royal Marines, 22 years)

*'Nobody in three years has come close to the sort of relationship you make in the Services.'* (Male, 27 years' service in the Royal Navy, 3 years)

*'You do have that sense of loss when you leave because you think 'Oh, you're not belonging to anything'...'* (Male, 23 years' service in the Royal Navy, 18 months)

Some did recognise the spatial separation that this entailed with many questioning how one day they could just enter the base and the next, even after multiple years of service in that space, they had lost those spatial privileges. Even when access was still granted, there remained a separation because the working relationship with the space, the base, the operations was no longer the same:

*'When I go back and I'm allowed access, I'm always acutely conscious that although I'm there, I'm now there as a civvy. I'm not part of this...'* (Male, length of service unknown, Royal Navy, 6 months)

However, not all missed the access, noting that the garrison shop was often more expensive than supermarkets and there were few spaces they would actually wish to engage with. Many, particularly those in the navy, had lived off-base for years and so did not lose their domestic space; the base for them was a space of work and ceremony and so no longer applicable to their civilian lives. Indeed some noted that they did not go to reunions, particularly if they were held on the base, as that part of their life was complete and they had no desire to return. However, for those who had lived in service accommodation all their military lives, adjusting to the private rental market as well as losing their community signalled a dramatic spatial separation.

Our interviews revealed that this loss of military identity was felt most keenly in civilian spaces. Perhaps surprisingly, many of the respondents commented that one of the things they missed most was their forces' identity card:

*'It is the ultimate thing because that ID card has to stay with you 24/7. And it really becomes a part of your...part of you, really, I suppose. So yeah, it's quite a thing to give away because that's it. It's official.'* (Female, 6 years' service in the Royal Navy, 21 years)

This was because it could, as the name suggests, distinguish them from civilians in non-military spaces; for example, two respondents noted that identity cards had allowed them to get discounts in stores and could be used as a form of formal identification. Unexpectedly, they appeared to value this card more than their medals or uniforms (perhaps because these are not usually worn in

everyday civilian spaces) and without it felt the same as any other civilian. These, and other respondents, therefore made a case for a 'veteran's card', which would identify ex-service personnel in everyday, civilian places, and often noted with approval the US system's more celebratory attitude towards veterans.

A loss of spatial entitlement and community was joined for some by a loss of opportunity so while retirement from the Services was understood as necessary, there was still a sense of missing the chance to rise to unexpected challenges:

*'I have done so many different things, you know, but I can't see that variety ever being exposed to me again or the opportunity for a variety of experience ever being exposed to my family either. You know it is all gone now. It's all finished ... I have nothing really to adapt to now.'* (Male, 27 years' service in the Royal Navy, 3 years)

This connects back to Brunger et al's (2013) suggestion that individuals seek to maintain continuity between their military and civilian lives, with the loss of potential experiences and opportunities to try new things felt more keenly because civilian spaces cannot recreate the excitement and stress of adapting and surviving in a similarly high-stakes environment. However, everyone enters the military knowing that this can only ever be a finite experience but for some the lack of official recognition of their contribution (articulated through, for example, an official leaving ceremony) and the suddenness of having their identity card cut up in front of them made the transition more sudden and final than they had been prepared for:

*'You walk out and that's it. The gate's shut behind you and you look back and that's it. That part of your life's all over. There's no going back'* (Male, 23 years' service in the Royal Navy, 18 months)

The interviewees' experiences covered the full spectrum of attitudes from actively missing life in the Services to a sense of pleasant nostalgia, and a clear sense emerged that the military experience can never be recaptured either spatially or temporally. Nevertheless, while it was recognised by all that they could never 'go back', for some a conscious 'letting go' was a key element in their ability to move forwards

#### **4.2. Letting Go**

While all our interviewees highlighted, to varying extents, experiences of loss on discharge for some there was also a real sense of closure, a recognition that this was an experience that should be remembered and cherished but that it only formed one stage in their life:

*'I don't travel with baggage, that's one of the things I have learned in life. I travel with lots of clothes and things but with baggage, no. You move...you always go forwards and never go back.'*  
(Female, 3 years' service in the Royal Navy, 30 years)

*'So goodbye and thank you. So I don't go back and think I miss that... because I don't. And I've got a new job, new group of friends and I got my family ... "Thank you very much. That's been great. And now I'm going on my next stage of life and that's my decision."'* (Male, 9 years' service in the Army, 28 years)

For these individuals, a clean break was the strategy they had adopted to allow them closure on their military experiences, giving them the opportunity to integrate their military and civilian selves and so not become 'blighted' by their service histories (Walker 2013). This acceptance of their past and current situation neither prevented feelings of loss nor meant a denial of the impact of the military on their identities and lives. However, it did appear to offer an effective strategy allowing a more objective identification and consideration of the future enabling individuals to seize the new opportunities and engage with the new spaces and relations available to them.

Several commented on the relatively young age that many 'complete' a military career, which is positive in that they have many potentially productive years left but equally can be a challenge for those who are struggling to transfer their skills into a new arena or have only limited experience of life outside the military. As one ex-soldier explained the last time he had been a civilian was when he was a teenager and so being '41 going on 16 again' proved challenging as he had limited knowledge of the adult world: 'what's a mortgage? Where do I sign up? What do I do? What's benefits? What's tax credits? ... is that how much food costs? ... How much is a bottle of milk? ... I never really had to think about it before' (Male, 14 years' service in the Army, 13 years). For those who had been in the Services for many years and/or since they were teenagers, the military had played a significant role in shaping who they were and so, while some were able to 'let go', others struggled to deal with the sense of loss and found it difficult to move forwards.

#### **4.3. Continuity**

*'...and the big wrench of course...is I was no longer somebody.'* (Male, 22 years' service in the Royal Navy, 5 years)

This interviewee was struggling to adjust to his new role as a house husband, and his comments outlining his reduced sphere of experience connect back to the loss of opportunity that, for some, leaving the military entails. For others, however, while they were in new professions their military

experiences continued to shape who they are now in terms of both their social circle and their attitude towards their current role:

*'I was not as good a diver as I was a soldier, not as good a safety officer as I was a soldier. I know I was good and that was it.'* (Male, 14 years' service in the Army, 13 years)

Again, a sense of wistfulness permeated this account, an experience and level of expertise that could not be regained perhaps because the vocation that the military had provided had not been found in subsequent roles. Others took this continuity further with the military so engrained in their sense of self that they found it difficult to articulate an identity and way of doing things outside of this:

*'I think once you are a serviceman, you are always a serviceman really. You don't really change. You are a serviceman in a civilian environment.'* (Male, 27 years' service in the Royal Navy, 3 years)

*'I don't actually consider that I am on the other side of the fence. I don't actually like being called a civilian. Because I never have been.'* (Female, 6 years' service in the Royal Navy, 21 years)

*'...I still class us as in the RAF...'* (Female, 15 years' service in the RAF, 8 years)

In their study, Brunger et al (2013: 93) contend that, on transition, ex-service personnel 'relinquished the very core of their identity – their life as a soldier – thus counterpoising the birth of a military identity that had once been conceived through enlistment'. The lifecycle of this inevitably finite military identity can be resisted with, as Brunger et al (2013) recognise, a search for continuity in terms of employment (discussed further below) but also the continuation of the military identity, as one interviewee positioned himself, 'a serviceman in a civilian environment' (Male, 27 years' service in the Royal Navy, 3 years). Several interviewees also described their approach to transition in military terminology:

*'I did say, the day I went outside, I said: right we are going to have to treat it like a deployment. It is a three-year transitional deployment ... a difficult deployment. And that's quite a good strategy, actually. It gives you some period to see a light at the end of the tunnel, you know, when you will be settled ... Don't expect everything to go well for three years ... because you can get kicked in the teeth.'* (Male, 27 years' service in the Royal Navy, 3 years)

*'You need to have a plan and be focused and treat it like you would any military operation...'* (Male, 23 years' service in the Royal Navy, 18 months)

While this represents, we argue, a relatively realistic assessment of the challenges transition would involve, it also highlights the continuation of military praxis in order to frame and deal with this experience. Given the limited access to military spaces and opportunities – the things, spaces and



actions that contribute to the performance of this military identity – there are concerns as to how continuing to identify oneself as ‘military’ impacts on mental health and the transitional experience. We argue that this establishes liminal identities with an individual neither in the Services in reality nor a civilian psychologically, an idea which we develop in section 5 below.

For some, the separation from these day-to-day practices and relations was more porous with several interviewees either going into a sector heavily populated by ex-forces personnel (such as security services) or effectively continuing their former role albeit in a civilian capacity:

*‘...and I went into an environment that had a lot of ex-military people in there, so the banter and the...kind of...it didn’t really change that much, so that was quite good...’* (Male, 15 years’ service in the Army, 13 years)

*‘...the job was effectively a military job in civilian clothes, just being sold back, my expertise being sold back to the military.’* (Male, 22 years’ service in the Army, 4 years)

This is more likely to occur in places, such as Plymouth, that have a strong military presence and, as noted earlier, this enforces hybrid military-civilian identities in these places. It also highlights that the binary of military/civilian is a strategic discursive construction that sometimes hides the extent to which military and civilian spaces and activities are intertwined (Woodward 2013). This allows for continuity both in transferring skills and in working in other masculinised institutions such as maritime security, offshore diving and oil rigs (Higate 2001), which present more familiar occupational environments. While this may facilitate transition, the extent to which these individuals are actually ‘bridging’ the discursive divide between military and civilian lives is open to question. Brunger et al (2013) wonder if this can be considered a ‘successful’ transition but suggests a temporal element to this experience with, in their study, those who had been discharged the longest noting that their mentality had adjusted over time, and this acceptance was reflected by our interviewees. However, particularly for those more recently discharged, this acceptance had not yet been achieved and the military still formed a key identifier, with several interviewees referring to continuing boundaries that they perceived between themselves and civilians including a common cause, sense of humour, work ethic, comradeship and skill set. We therefore now move on to develop and explore this liminal existence, both in terms of identities and spaces.

## **5. Liminal Identities and Spaces**

The concept of liminality derives from the Latin *limen*, meaning threshold or boundary and, as such, has been used in many disciplines to explore spaces and experiences of between-ness and transition (for example Mahon-Daly and Andrews 2002, Meis 2002, Madge and O’Connor 2005, Pritchard and

Morgan 2006, Malksoo 2012, Moran 2013). We position our interviewees who continued to identify as 'military' as performing what are now liminal identities, 'betwixt and between' military and civilian worlds (Turner 1967). Van Gennep's (1960) anthropological discussion focused on rites of passage in which a person moves between identities through the linear, chronological stages of detachment, liminality and aggregation or, as Bridges (2004) positioned them, an ending, 'between' time and a beginning. However, following Kralik et al (2006) we understand transition as an ongoing process with liminality part of the multi-directional continuum of identity, which is a continuous and iterative performance. Within this, the liminal state is a 'no man's land' (Brunger, Serrato et al. 2013), an ambiguous, interstructural space characterised by heightened reflexivity (Howard-Grenville, Golden-Biddle et al. 2011) as the individual seeks to reconstruct their identity. As Beech (2011) notes identity emerges as a dialogue between the internal self and external society and, as we highlighted above, in organisations such as the military certain identities are positioned as socially 'acceptable' (Atherton 2009). Thornborrow and Brown (2009), in their study exploring the 'becoming' of paratroopers, position this identity as aspirational, arguing that people identify particularly strongly with organisations perceived to be prestigious, distinctive and homogenous and, when membership is public and visible (as with the uniformed forces), this enhances the bounded sense of internal shared goals and history.

While Thornborrow and Brown (*ibid*) focus on one 'elite' Army regiment, all our interviewees demonstrated an explicit identification with, for example, particular units, bases or ships, which highlights the spatial grounding of their military identities as well as their pride in being or having been part of these:

*'We don't look at anyone else, anyone out of that circle. We won't talk to them ... It's a membership of the green lid, you know. And that's marines and us ... it's a closed shop. I think the biggest thing I've kind of learned from being out is the arrogance of my guys. I'll say my guys, my regiment, if you like.'* (Male, 14 years' service in the Army, 13 years)

Clear distinctions to other units were made and their 'becoming' a Commando, Royal Engineer or Royal Marine 'self' emerged as a dialogue between 'a reconstructed past, perceived present and anticipated future' (*ibid*: 370); when asked about his background one serviceman interspersed his narrative with frequent references to the history of the bases and regiments he had served with, giving a sense of continuity with the personnel, victories and defeats of the past. Lawrence (1997: 3) argues that 'liminality is part of the transformative continuum from one socially recognised and organised state of being to another, it must bear some traces of its antecedent and subsequent stages'. However, on leaving the military, some of our interviewees clearly struggled to position themselves in relation to a future, civilian self and so found it difficult to formulate a post-military

identity that gave them a sense of balance, integrity and wholeness (Kralik, Visentin et al. 2006); as one respondent highlighted:

*'...it was shocker the first time, my first day in a civvy job and the phone rang and my maiden name was W and I answered it: "Wren W. Oh! Sorry, no, KW. Miss W." And I kind of went: "How do I answer a phone?"'* (Female, 8 years' service in the Royal Navy, 13 years)

One of our interviewees (Female, 6 years' service in the Royal Navy, 21 years) signed her emails to us 'yours aye', to distinguish that she was different from civilians who had never served; indeed, she disliked being referred to as a civilian and may have deployed this to underline her identity as 'ex Services'.

As well as this need for a reflective questioning of where/who next, a recognition that 'I am not the same as I was' and acknowledgement that the prior way of living/being has ended and change is necessary is essential (Bridges 2004, Beech 2011). For some of our interviewees, particularly those who had not chosen to leave, we suggest that it seemed as though the new civilian identity was being imposed on them, which lead to resistance and feelings of misalignment; these were perhaps exacerbated by a realisation that they were no longer part of something 'special' and, in fact, substitutable. Our respondents reacted to this liminal experience in various ways but we are going to discuss two of these in particular because they demonstrate a passive and an active response to their transitional situation: 'getting stuck' and an embodied reaction.

The liminal is a negotiation between 'what is' and 'what if' and is traditionally positioned as a transitional/transformational zone. However, as seen in the experiences of some of our respondents, individuals can experience a prolonged liminality, getting stuck between military and civilian spaces and identities. Their continuing identification as 'military' enforces this stasis and we argue that this continuity could create problems by exacerbating a sense of isolation and loss; although the individual may consider themselves in terms of 'the Services', they are spatially and relationally separated from the everyday activities that created and maintained this identity. However, this continuity may be perpetuated by engaging with similarly liminal spaces for while these respondents set up a clear military/civilian binary, as we noted above, the divide is a lot more fluid and porous; this can be seen in spaces of employment (either in terms of a similarity of environment or a direct consultancy role), the reserve forces, reunions and service organisations such as the Royal British Legion. One interviewee had a very fluid negotiation between military and civilian, noting that it was only with a change in physical space that they gained the separation from the military environment:

*'So I initially left the Army in January 2008 and then got a job as a consultant back to the MOD through a friend of mine who had literally just left; and then left to become a house husband for*

*a couple of years and then re-joined just for an eighteen month stretch as a non-deployable reservist (FTRS) ... to an extent us coming down in April here enabled us...it was the real proper break.'* (Male, 22 years' service in the Army, 4 years)

Others felt it was good to maintain contact as this helped to overcome some of the challenges of transition through retaining the camaraderie and shared history that had built up strong relationships of support. These were often focused on virtual or physical spaces:

*'...it is good to keep in touch with people on LinkedIn or in the local pub, the British Legion, anything really. Because it's hard to... because you are going from a small little close-knit little community to just being ... a normal person'* (Male, 23 years' service in the Royal Navy, 18 months)

*'...like you go to a reunion....I did last weekend, funnily enough. There's a bi-annual reunion. Met a guy who is putting on a gig up in Newton Abbot, he's on Facebook, so I said I'll go to that. And that's, you know, that's my way of supporting. I've done then what they call the Dartmoor Yomp a few times, when you get this whole group of ex-Royal Marines and we just go out and do a 12-mile walk across the moor, you know, pub to pub...'* (Male, 14 years' service in the Royal Marines, 22 years)

Space is experienced as a three-way dialectic between perceived, conceived and lived space, and everyone engages with this differently (Pritchard and Morgan 2006). Therefore, while for some going to a regimental reunion or a Royal British Legion meeting may be a nostalgic space of encounter or a motivating space to support the Services, for others it may signify a desired return to familiar company, relations and spaces – a temporary recapturing of a lost way of life, a frustrating return to an almost pre-liminal state, which inhibits any moves beyond a liminal identity. Kralik et al (2006) suggest that those who have experienced profound disruption often have a diminished sense of identity and so need to 're-story' their biography, engage with the familiar and unfamiliar, the existing and the new (Howard-Grenville, Golden-Biddle et al. 2011) in order to re-conceptualise their selves and so reach aggregation and achieve their new beginning.

For some this reconceptualisation took an active form with the body becoming a central element to their post-military self-understandings. In the Services, the body is a surface of inscription for 'hard-bodied masculinities' (Atherton 2009: 824) with certain requirements in terms of fitness and presentation, which are part of this disciplined environment that is focused on creating obedient, 'military' bodies. This organisational requirement is internalised (Thornborrow and Brown 2009) but once the external drive has gone, individuals reacted in different ways, either maintaining or challenging their military bodies. Some respondents continued to maintain a degree of fitness – for

example running marathons, coaching sports clubs - and a certain style of presentation, for example in terms of haircut and neatness of dress, which could be positioned as maintaining continuity with their military life; nevertheless, we argue that simply by exerting choice and control over their body, this enacts a discontinuity that assists in re-integrating a more empowered sense of self made ambiguous by the transitional process. However, Howitt (2001: 240) reminds us that edges, the divides between military and civilian spaces/identities, are 'zones of interaction...transformation, transgression and possibility' and for others, leaving the military gave them the opportunity to challenge the body that had previously been enforced by no longer maintaining their fitness, growing hair and beards and taking a more relaxed approach to dress as it did not signify anything relevant to their current role.

These two reactions to transition and dealing with liminality are just part of a multitude of experiences for everyone engages with spaces, practices, relations and identities in unique ways. By highlighting these two in particular we sought to demonstrate how the liminal can be a space of possibility or ambiguity depending on the individual's capacity to recognise, reflect on and experiment within their transition.

## **6. Conclusions**

While all our interviewees self-identified as 'successful' in their transition from the Services, our research highlights the multiplicity of impacts that engaging in this close knit institution had on their post-military experiences. All felt, to varying degrees, a sense of loss but while for some this was in reference to a past that they accepted as simply one element in their life course, for others this was a more traumatic separation from the spaces, relations and practices that made them who they were/are. Struggling to negotiate this challenging transition left the latter, we argue, with liminal identities, which could be exacerbated by engaging with liminal spaces that presented an apparent opportunity to recapture what could actually never be regained. We would suggest that this continuation may also be enhanced through the sense of an imagined military community. This includes both past and serving service personnel, with inter-generational solidarity strengthened through regular interactions with memorialised landscapes and service charities that establishes a sense of historical continuity. As Woodward (2005) comments the imprints of the military can be found everywhere and so, for those more attuned to them by a sense of loss or heightened awareness of the military legacy, more landscapes may be considered liminal thus making the achievement of a re-conceptualised civilian self even more difficult to achieve. This has relevance beyond the Services, with people leaving prison, hospital, school and other bounded communities experiencing similar challenges in terms of reformulating a post-institutional sense of self.

For all of our interviewees, even if they did not explicitly comment on it, their military experiences were inscribed bodily as well as psychologically, even for those who had no scars or other reminders of physical trauma. Some voluntarily maintained the bodies that had been enforced, while others chose to exert their right to what had previously been 'unacceptable'. This emphasizes the continuing impact of the military that continued to shape all of these post-military lives whether through internalisation or subversion; we would call for more research to engage with these embodied practices and inscriptions, which offer greater insights into the negotiation of transitional experiences and liminal identities. In fact, we would argue that engagement with post-military lives and spaces more broadly is necessary, particularly in the light of the changing financial and operational terrain faced by the military in the UK and elsewhere. We need to understand the practices, materialities, power relations, spaces and identities of these post-military transitions, which are covering the full scalar spectrum from individual to nation, in order to ensure that they are transformative and sustainable, and that those who are petrified in these liminal states are not left in a potentially debilitating stasis.

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