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‘This Is All Very Academic’

Critical Thinking in Professional Military Education

Sophy Antrobus and Hannah West

Against a backdrop where critical thinking is lauded as a tool to navigate the unpredictability of contemporary warfare, Sophy Antrobus and Hannah West argue in this article that the military, as an institution, and the soldier, as scholar, struggle to listen to a truly critical voice. If critical thinking comprises ‘reason assessment’ (understanding, analysing, arguing) and ‘critical spirit’ (disposition, attitude of mind, culture), how does an institution that values, indeed relies on for its effectiveness, uniformity and group identity encourage diversity of opinion and develop the critical spirit of its people? Our journey, as two women veterans, from insiders to outsiders, has led us to argue that professional military education is something of a ‘black box’ where we could observe outcomes but found it almost impossible to see back inside these institutions.

In our experience, as veterans and critical scholars, professional military education (PME) in the UK fails to either recognise or acknowledge that it has embedded a flawed understanding of critical thinking. This article unpacks this understanding by examining what is foregrounded in the UK military’s current approach to critical thinking and exploring what is missing. This has implications for a military navigating the unpredictability of contemporary warfare in which critical thinking is recognised as a vital tool. But it also engages with an important debate about the place of critical military scholarship at the intersection of the military and the academy, and how interactions between the two could approach the tensions between them – namely, about how experience of war can be privileged over those who ‘only’ study war – more constructively and creatively.

The assumption that war studies would be a good starting point for understanding war is undermined

by the fact that ‘war’ itself does not even have an ‘agreed definition’, not least because of its application to everything from ‘terror’ to ‘drugs’ and ‘crime’.¹ While security studies has come to mean ‘national and international security issues’ as ‘a sub-field of International Relations’,² defence studies has remained about ‘defence policy’ in relation to ‘power, strategy and technology’,³ and military studies focuses on the ‘military organisation’,⁴ war studies remains elusive. It is suggested that this interdisciplinary field is ‘not just [about] operations and tactics, but also experiences and outcomes’.⁵ This article questions whether these experiences are inclusive, and examines whose voices are forgotten in such narration of war. It situates its understanding of critical thinking in critical military studies (CMS), which has critical spirit at its heart by ‘turn[ing] a critical lens onto military practices and institutions through which nothing about the military is taken for

1. Jeremy Black, ‘What Is War?’, *Defence in Depth*, 11 June 2018, <<https://defenceindepth.co/2018/06/11/what-is-war/>>, accessed 16 August 2021.
2. Myriam Dunn Cavelty and Thierry Balzacq (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Security Studies* (Oxford: Routledge, 2020), p. 1.
3. David J Galbreath and John R Deni (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Defence Studies* (Oxford: Routledge, 2018), p. 1.
4. Joseph Soeters, Patricia M Shields and Sebastiaan Rietjens (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in Military Studies* (Oxford: Routledge, 2014), p. 3.
5. Galbreath and Deni (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Defence Studies*, p. 1.



The Victory Building at the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst, 2019. Courtesy of BasPhoto / Alamy Stock Photo

granted'.⁶ CMS is committed to 'sceptical curiosity'⁷ in 'questioning military power, processes and institutions'⁸ by engaging with potentially 'disruptive' and 'rarely heard' voices whose positionality is 'complex, and often contradictory'.⁹ Scholars aligned with CMS have been grappling with how they 'encounter'¹⁰ the military through their research and the concept of 'critical friendship'¹¹ or being 'open to the possibility of dialogue even in the midst of critique'¹². In 'navigat[ing] the political and ethical tensions [of] relations of proximity',¹³ there is an

extant debate about whether and how CMS scholars should participate in promoting a better-functioning military.

By exploring the intersection between critical scholarship and the military institution, this article explores how the latter has been prevented from fostering a 'critical spirit' which requires that 'nothing is immune from criticism, not even one's most deeply held convictions'.¹⁴

The article is based on the analysis of: 14 blogposts and social media commentaries written

6. Victoria M Basham and Sarah Bulmer, 'Critical Military Studies as Method: An Approach to Studying Gender and the Military', in Rachel Woodward and Claire Duncanson (eds), *The Palgrave International Handbook of Gender and the Military* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 59–71.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
10. Catherine Baker et al., 'Encounters with the Military: Toward a Feminist Ethics of Critique?', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* (Vol. 18, No. 1, 2016), p. 141.
11. Aiko Holvikivi, 'Gender Experts and Critical Friends: Research in Relations of Proximity', *European Journal of Politics and Gender* (Vol. 2, No. 1, 2019).
12. Rachel Woodward et al., 'The Possibilities and Limits of Impact and Engagement in Research on Military Institutions', *Area* (Vol. 52, 2020), p. 3.
13. Rachel Woodward et al., 'The Possibilities and Limits of Impact and Engagement in Research on Military Institutions', *Area* (Vol. 52, 2020), pp. 505–13; Aiko Holvikivi, 'Gender Experts and Critical Friends: Research in Relations of Proximity', *European Journal of Politics and Gender* (Vol. 2, No. 1, 2019), p. 132.
14. Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking and Education* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 39.

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for popular UK and US online forums for military commentary and debate,¹⁵ including: *Strategy Bridge*, *War on the Rocks* and the *Wavell Room*; UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) policy documents; and course documentation from the Joint Services Command and Staff Course (JSCSC) for the Advanced Command and Staff Course (ACSC) from academic years 2016/17 to 2020/21, obtained by a Freedom of Information request.¹⁶ It is augmented by our auto-ethnographical reflections, based on our own interaction with British PME during our careers and our experiences of working with others educated through this system. However, detailed contemporary information on the way that military educators approach and promote critical thinking is not available in publicly accessible MoD and JSCSC documents,¹⁷ leading us to reflect on the challenges of seeing inside the PME ‘system’. While reviewing blogposts that discuss PME adds some insight, it does not necessarily offer views from those who are working and studying there currently. All this leads to the sense of PME as a ‘black box’, with the students entering at one end and emerging at the other, while the MoD assures us that ‘critical thinking’ is integral to it.¹⁸

It is impossible to draw a direct link between deleterious outcomes and a lack of focus on critical

thinking in PME. In defence of current PME, the actions of senior officers over the past decade are products of, for example, ACSCs of the early 2000s. This means that their actions are perhaps reflective of long-outdated approaches. This time lag makes it even more difficult to assess – whether internally by the MoD, or externally by academics and analysts – how PME shapes the future senior officer cadre. The lack of transparency over what is taught on the ACSC means that what evidence there is of approaches to critical thinking at the JSCSC lies in informal online forums and off-the-record conversations. The fact that these deleterious outcomes are presided over by senior officers who have usually benefited from the full panoply of military education on offer suggests that something inside the black box of military education is failing to develop fully the critical thinking assets of future leaders.

Nonetheless, the UK armed forces tacitly understand critical thinking as being the application of a set of tools, from red-teaming¹⁹ to the 7 Questions combat estimate²⁰ and campaign analysis. UK defence doctrine situates critical analysis as one of its four principles of understanding,²¹ defined as ‘the intellectual discipline that applies deliberate introspective judgement to interpret,

15. Steve Maguire, ‘Professional Military Education Needs Reform. Here’s Why and What to Do’, *Wavell Room*, 13 October 2021; *Wavell Room*, ‘Harnessing the Intellectual Edge: From Critical Thought to Fighting Power’, 19 October 2018; Mike Clark, ‘PME, Defence and the Need for Reform’, *Wavell Room*, 11 August 2020; Steve Maguire, ‘Is the British Military Too Fat to Think?’, *Wavell Room*, 9 October 2019; James Lacey, ‘Finally Getting Serious About Professional Military Education’, *War on the Rocks*, 18 May 2020; Adam Lowther and Brooke Mitchell, ‘Professional Military Education Needs More Creativity, Not More History’, *War on the Rocks*, 28 May 2020; Nicholas Murray, ‘Rigor in Joint Professional Military Education’, *War on the Rocks*, 19 February 2016; Steve B, ‘Success Tomorrow Depends on Disruption Today’, *Wavell Room*, 17 April 2019; Mike Clark, ‘What Is PME Anyway?’, *Wavell Room*, 4 August 2020; Thomas Bruscano and Mitchell G Klingenberg, ‘Putting the “War” Back in War Colleges’, *City Journal*, 2 September 2021, <https://www.city-journal.org/putting-the-war-back-in-war-colleges?wallit_nosession=1>, accessed 27 January 2022; Helen Lee Bouygues, ‘U.S. Military Leaders Want Soldiers to Think Critically, Not Just Follow Orders’, *Forbes*, 10 January 2019; James Kuht, ‘Leadership: Tips from a Year in the JHub’, *Army Leader*, <<https://thearmyleader.co.uk/leadership:-tips-from-a-year-in-the-jhub/>>, accessed 27 January 2022; Mal Craghill, ‘Thinking About Thinking in the Royal Air Force’, *War on the Rocks*, 1 March 2019; Floyd J Usry, Jr, ‘How Critical Thinking Shapes the Military Decision Making Process’, Naval War College, 17 May 2004, p. 2, <<https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a425924.pdf>>, accessed 16 August 2021.
16. Ministry of Defence (MoD), Freedom of Information Request, FOI2021/14585, 17 December 2021.
17. The rebuilding of the Defence Academy website, possibly due to cyber attacks in 2020, has further limited available material. See Deborah Haynes, ‘Cyber Attack on UK’s Defence Academy Had “Significant” Impact, Officer in Charge at the Time Reveals’, *Sky News*, 2 January 2022.
18. MoD, Freedom of Information Request, FOI2021/14585, 17 December 2021.
19. MoD, ‘Red Teaming Handbook’, 3rd edition, 2021, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1027158/20210625-Red_Teaming_Handbook.pdf>, accessed 27 January 2022.
20. The 7 Questions are an operational planning framework taught, used and tested across the UK armed forces. They are a tool for assessing the operational situation and determining an appropriate military response.
21. The remaining three principles are self-awareness, creative thinking and continuity. See MoD, Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC), ‘Understanding and Decision-Making’, Joint Doctrine Publication 04, 2nd edition, December 2016.

analyse and evaluate a problem and explain the context upon which that judgement is based'.²² This is consistent with the characterisation of fighting power as being underpinned by three components: the conceptual; the moral; and the physical, with the former providing 'the foundation upon which creativity, ingenuity and initiative may be exercised in complex situations'.²³ However, popular online military forums are awash with blogs highlighting the need for greater critical thinking in the military, with talk of 'intellectual overmatch' and 'academic rigour'²⁴ alongside glib statements about converting 'brainpower into combat power'.²⁵ And yet, while they foreground the essential relationship and operational need for critical thinking in the face of the uncertainty and unknowns of contemporary warfare,²⁶ and indeed defence planning and activity more generally, many fail to engage with the question of what critical thinking really is.²⁷

This article argues that limited engagement with critical thinking can be unlocked by asking what those in military and mainstream war studies²⁸ circles cannot see about themselves, and exploring how they could be more open to hearing critical voices. Our previous research highlighted how the experience of conversations between two veterans helped us to find the space to probe and question our military experience.²⁹ The importance of what we can learn from this, and our developing interest in uncovering the 'deeply odd' within institutions, might well be the key to unlocking a much-needed conversation about the nature of critical thought in the military.³⁰ We have chosen

to be critical while also trying to re-engage with the military through its PME programmes and other academic-practitioner forums, but we feel that the constant emphasis on articulating the 'defence benefit'³¹ or contribution to 'operational effectiveness' of our research demonstrates the MoD's inherent unwillingness to engage with work that might not, on face value, provide a return for that engagement. CMS, as a discipline, distinguishes itself as not instrumentalising critique to produce or influence policy, an anathema to the military that is symptomatic of the frustration and tension between the academy and military around critical research. Similarly, during our development as critical researchers, we have found that genuinely challenging academic debate within the PME environment can be resisted for being 'overly academic', lacking the practical application that is a fundamental feature of the other elements of this particular type of education. Such experiences reinforce our concern as to whether the military and mainstream war studies is open to hearing a critical voice.

This article examines how the military engages with critical thinking, and considers the value of the term 'critical spirit' in examining the PME environment as an example. It also reflects on the research challenge of seeing inside this black box and the connection between PME and strategic military decision-making.³² In the following section, we analyse the relationship between dialogue and critique where the military and academia intersect. Forums at this intersection – such as those held by

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22. MoD, 'Understanding and Decision-Making', p. 14.
 23. MoD, DCDC, 'UK Defence Doctrine', Joint Doctrine Publication 0-01, 5th edition, November 2014, p. 28.
 24. Lacey, 'Finally Getting Serious About Professional Military Education'; Lowther and Mitchell, 'Professional Military Education Needs More Creativity, Not More History'; Murray, 'Rigor in Joint Professional Military Education'.
 25. Usry, Jr, 'How Critical Thinking Shapes the Military Decision Making Process', p. 2.
 26. Anders McDonald Sookermany, 'Military Education Reconsidered: A Postmodern Update', *Journal of Philosophy of Education* (Vol. 51, No. 1, 2017), pp. 310–30.
 27. Bouygues, 'U.S. Military Leaders Want Soldiers to Think Critically, Not Just Follow Orders'.
 28. In this article, mainstream war studies refers to traditional war, defence and security studies as distinct from critical military and security studies. This is explored further in the section 'Knowing War'.
 29. Hannah West and Sophy Antrobus, "'Deeply Odd": Women Veterans as Critical Feminist Scholars', *Critical Military Studies* (2021), DOI:10.1080/23337486.2021.1907020, pp. 1–16.
 30. This article reveals how we (as women veterans) could not see that some of our gendered experiences of military service were 'deeply odd' at the time. The time and space to critically reflect subsequently in an academically challenging environment has enabled these personal revelations. Through conversations, we realised we had normalised 'deeply odd' experiences during our service.
 31. Required by the UK MoD Research Ethics Committee Protocol for approval in order to access military personnel and sites for research purposes. See MoD, 'JSP 536: Governance of Research Involving Human Participants', Part 2: Guidance, 2021, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/991595/20210505-JSP_536_Part_2_Governance_Research_Human_v3.2_May_21.pdf>, accessed 27 January 2022.
 32. Siegel, *Educating Reason*.

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Chatham House and RUSI, the PME environment or online platforms such as the *Wavell Room* – are well placed to explore the nature of the critical thought they are engaging with, and this article intends to stimulate that debate further.

We reflect on the hierarchy of academic voices listened to by the military as odd, arguing that engaging with more diverse voices – for example, by gender and ethnicity, but also non-veteran academics and critical veteran scholars – is one way in which understandings of critical thinking could be expanded. We finish by considering how this conversation about the intersection between the military and the academy might be furthered, specifically in the context of PME but also more broadly in the inculcation of critical thinking – and a critical spirit – from the most junior to the most senior levels of the armed forces.

The Critical Spirit

This article argues that what is missing from the military interpretation of critical thinking is critical spirit. Critical spirit is presented by Harvey Siegel, referencing John E McPeck's conception,³³ as one of two components of critical thinking (the other being 'reason assessment', which includes understanding, analysing and arguing).³⁴ Where Siegel talks about the individual having 'certain attitudes, dispositions, habits of mind, and character traits', the same could be said for an organisation's culture. A critical spirit is about 'willingness', 'commitment' and 'desire': being 'disposed to believe and act on' good reasoning.³⁵ The development of British military personnel, through structured provision of PME, offers the opportunity to examine 'critical thinking' further, by looking specifically at the JSCSC at Shrivenham and its flagship course for senior leaders, the ACSC.

Speaking to the Council of Military Education Committees in the years following the 2001 Defence Training Review, which resulted in the redesign of

the ACSC,³⁶ Lieutenant General John Kiszely noted the importance of developing:

minds that are: flexible; enquiring; capable of rigorous analysis, and of objective thinking in the formulation of policy and its implementation; that have the agility and robustness to take tough decisions, against the clock, on and off the battlefield; and that are able to cope with uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity; and to embrace change.³⁷

In this vein, 'critical thinking' remains a term liberally used on the Defence Academy website in relation to the ACSC where graduates are 'supported to think critically, operate innovatively, and question wisely'.³⁸ And yet, our Freedom of Information request repeatedly claimed that while 'critical thinking' was neither a phrase used in the ACSC Higher Level Training Objectives (HLTOs) nor the ACSC Assessment Criteria, it is nonetheless 'integral to the course'.³⁹ From the evidence provided, the HLTOs for the past five years of the ACSC were articulated using the verbs 'understand', 'analyse', 'evaluate' and 'reflect' – none of which capture the character of the critical spirit.⁴⁰ While the assessment criteria for the same period referenced a requirement for 'critical analysis' to be awarded a 'distinction', 'critical evaluation' for a 'merit' and to 'reflect critically' for a 'pass', we would argue that the judgement that this has been achieved is contained within a PME environment whose understanding of critical thinking remains dominated by the 'reason assessment'.⁴¹

What is missing from the military interpretation of critical thinking is critical spirit

We attribute this partial interpretation of critical thinking to the JSCSC being a conflicted environment where academic encouragement of critical thinking abuts the delivery of structured military training. Incorporating the critical

33. John E McPeck, *Critical Thinking and Education* (Oxford: Martin Robertson and Company, 1981).

34. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

36. Kate Utting, 'Beyond Joint – Professional Military Education for the 21st Century: The United Kingdom's Post-Defence Training Review Advanced Command and Staff Course', *Defence Studies* (Vol. 9, No. 3, 2009), pp. 310–28; National Audit Office, 'Ministry of Defence: The Joint Services Command and Staff College', HC 537, Session 2001–02, 7 February 2002.

37. John Kiszely, 'Defence and the Universities in the Twenty-First Century', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 149, No. 3, 2004), p. 36.

38. MoD, Freedom of Information Request, FOI2021/14585, 17 December 2021.

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*

military thinker into military education is a challenge in an environment where academic theory or even the ‘academic’ (in the sense of being too abstract) can be dismissed as being without practical application and therefore irrelevant.⁴² While it has been our experience that military students are encouraged to engage with scholarship, within a programme that is so full of peripheral pressures they can struggle to find the space to experiment, take intellectual risk, be creative and crucially fail early – albeit in a safe environment. Exploring the idea of disruption as a form of critical thinking, Steve Maguire, as a military insider, points to a ‘lack of intellectual diversity’, claiming that ‘the British military... is structurally unable to exploit disruptive talent’.⁴³ Anders McDonald Sookermany explores the PME environment, its structuring around a ‘sense of shared identity’ where everyone is kept ‘in line and on course’, and the value it places on ‘uniformity and sameness over difference and plurality’. He suggests ‘emancipation as a pedagogical strategy’ for military personnel to ‘free themselves and their units from predetermined mindsets and habits’.⁴⁴ Auto-ethnographic reflection on our experiences of ACSC and Intermediate Command and Staff Course⁴⁵ indicates, for example, that their emphasis on the joint operational planning process relies on ensuring students follow generic ways of applying doctrine, rather than questioning that doctrine or the process of its application. Here, the purposely rigid and prescriptive nature of the course collides with the supposedly discursive.

Having explored the military interpretation of critical thinking and introduced the concept of a critical spirit as lacking, the next section considers the implications that an inability to hear truly critical voices, and embrace critical spirit, might have for broader understandings of warfare.

Knowing War

A myth that has been sustained by the military is that firsthand experience is the only real way to know war,⁴⁶ with the ultimate war experience being to look into the whites of the eyes of the enemy and kill them at close range⁴⁷ – a debate reopened following Allan Mallinson’s remarks at the 2018 Land Warfare Conference (and reflected on by Aimee Fox and David Morgan-Owen⁴⁸).

A myth that has been sustained by the military is that firsthand experience is the only real way to know war

There is a hierarchy to knowing war which spans from the infanteer, to those operating further from the ‘frontline’, to the headquarters’ staff officer writing orders, all the way back to the civilian weapon manufacturer or the soldier’s family.⁴⁹ It gives primacy to the voice of the retired senior officer and sets up a mistrust towards, for example, civilian academics, engendering an anti-intellectualism.⁵⁰ While there are, of course, examples of critical and civilian voices in this space, we argue that this primacy engenders a lack of intellectual, ethnic and gender diversity which inhibits the critical spirit. The institution’s wariness of individuals who are not in its image, lacking what it perceives as the required experience to speak with authority or who do not look or present themselves in a commanding manner, results in their voices being subtly undermined as less legitimate or excluded altogether. But can the armed forces afford to lose the richness offered by these diverse voices which challenge their understanding of what war is?

Reflecting on the intersection of the military and academia and the ‘no-man’s land between

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42. Charles D Allen, ‘Redress of Professional Military Education: The Clarion Call’, *Joint Forces Quarterly* (Vol. 59, 4th Quarter, 2010), p. 94.
 43. Maguire, ‘Is the British Military Too Fat to Think?’.
 44. Sookermany, ‘Military Education Reconsidered’, pp. 313, 323–24, 325.
 45. MoD, Freedom of Information Request, FOI2021/14585, 17 December 2021.
 46. Aimee Fox and David Morgan-Owen, ‘Whose Voice Matters? The British Army in 2018’, *Wavell Room*, 21 June 2018.
 47. Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1999), pp. 44–68.
 48. Fox and Morgan-Owen, ‘Whose Voice Matters? The British Army in 2018’.
 49. Reflected in the controversy surrounding the recognition of military service for personnel involved in operations away from frontline combat on land, such as the ballistic nuclear submarine deterrent patrol pin, or medals for operators of remotely piloted aircraft systems.
 50. Fox and Morgan-Owen, ‘Whose Voice Matters?’.

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scholarship and policy practice’,⁵¹ we observe that trusted research takes the form of acceptable epistemologies producing tangible lessons learned for application on today’s battlefields. This is evidenced by the military and its approved academic advisers guarding the epistemology of war, and by controlling who can have access to military personnel through their research via the Ministry of Defence Research Ethics Committee⁵² (which is sufficiently off-putting to some that the research does not even reach the committee, skewing the research agenda). This is mirrored in decision-making on who gets to speak at prestigious conferences and to PME courses.⁵³ Of course, women are disproportionately under-represented in the most senior ranks of the British armed forces and, as these conferences prioritise senior military voices, alongside industry and academia, one would expect some level of under-representation of female military voices at this time. Nonetheless, the Land Warfare Conference has been criticised for its ‘overwhelming propensity to select white, male, serving or former generals’ and its repetition of the same names year on year.⁵⁴ Moreover, looking at the RAF’s Air and Space Power Conference,⁵⁵ the gender distribution of speakers veered and hauled with 26 men and three women speaking at the 2019 conference, 18 men and 15 women at the 2020 conference, and 16 men and five women at the 2021 conference. The disparity in 2019 and 2021 stands in contrast to relative parity in 2020, suggesting no clear policy on diversity. Having clear and transparent policies would be a move in the right direction.

The extent to which the UK’s armed forces actually embrace critical thinkers and innovators who have the confidence to take intellectual risk remains moot but has been attributed to a ‘deep cynicism to new ideas and concepts’.⁵⁶ Looking within, it is interesting that some parts of the military refer to the ‘Permafrost Zone’ in the rank structure. This is a pejorative term that describes the ranks of OF-4 and OF-5 (which are normally held by students and recent graduates from the ACSC). These ranks

are perceived as barriers to allowing creative ideas from cognitively diverse junior staff to reach senior decision-makers. It is possible that those officers are not hearing sufficiently challenging opinions, are not encouraged to adopt some of those opinions, or are unable to hear them when they are presented during their PME experiences. We believe there is much to be gained by challenging this orthodoxy and overturning the absence of a critical spirit.

Application of the Tool

Responding to this absence of a critical spirit, we challenge the military to mirror the CMS community by exploring its relationship with the academy and the realities of how open it is to different voices. This will require acknowledging the inherent tension in PME between encouraging critical thinking, including challenging the thinking of senior decision-makers, and ensuring a disciplined military force, apparently dependent on the delivery of structured military training. Simultaneously, we call for more independent research into the role of critical thinking and academic education in British PME. Such scholarship should broaden the debate to include courses for junior officers and the non-commissioned as there is scant reference to this in the already-limited body of academic writing that looks at British PME specifically.

Can the armed forces afford to lose the richness offered by these diverse voices which challenge their understanding of what war is?

Recent decades have seen safety-critical environments in the military adopt ‘just’ or ‘no blame’ cultures for questioning, for example, flight safety, and these cultures could be embraced across

51. Marked by: ‘intimidation’; ‘misperception’; ‘not knowing how the others’ world works’; and ‘not knowing how to translate and integrate each other’s contributions’. See Ziya Meral, ‘Where Academic and Military Dialogues Go Wrong, and How to Correct It’, *CHACR*, 22 May 2020, <<https://chacr.org.uk/2020/05/22/where-academic-and-military-dialogues-go-wrong-and-how-to-correct-it/>>, accessed 16 August 2021.

52. MoD, ‘JSP 536’.

53. Sergio Catignani and Victoria M Basham, ‘The Gendered Politics of Researching Military Policy in the Age of the “Knowledge Economy”’, *Review of International Studies* (Vol. 4, 2021), pp. 211–30.

54. Fox and Morgan-Owen, ‘Whose Voice Matters?’.

55. Now renamed ‘The Chief of the Air Staff’s Global Air Chief’s Conference’.

56. Maguire, ‘Is the British Military Too Fat to Think?’.

defence.⁵⁷ Perhaps the next iteration of armed forces modernisation should look to foster a critical spirit at all levels, which is seen as healthy for the organisation, making it acceptable to challenge and question up the rank structure, to ask fundamental and radical questions and see cognitive diversity flourish, and embedding it as a concept (or even core value) in training and education. A lack of prominent junior-ranked thinkers, especially from the non-commissioned ranks, has to be addressed and a route found for the impactful ideas to get from the lowest to the highest ranks. Embedding the critical spirit as a principle of operational planning would encourage commanders to think specifically about who they are not listening to, while red-teamers and command advisers should, similarly, reflect on their role as a critical friend. We recognise that many senior officers already believe in this modernisation process and suggest that the concept of the critical spirit would assist them in articulating and shaping future behaviours.

Conclusion

Disruptive thinking is the new holy grail for contemporary military leadership, as it provides a means to finding fresh approaches that will drive innovation. However, how quickly this filters down to the rank and file, and into PME specifically, is questionable.⁵⁸ If commanders can begin to understand how odd their critical thinking looks to the critical veteran scholar, they might understand the enormity of the challenge facing them in sparking and encouraging a truly critical spirit from within and achieving the rapid innovation they so strongly desire.

We argue that the hierarchy of academic voices listened to by the military limits the learning that can take place. This hierarchy reinforces the narrative of the veteran as a white male warrior, since the voices of those who fit this description are prioritised by the institution over those that may generate uncomfortable reactions. Reflecting on our own experiences of PME, we realise that we could not see this as clearly then and imagine it is probably the same for our equivalents in the military

now. Why would the voice of a senior experienced commander and veteran not seem more pertinent to one's professional development than the voice of a 20-something early career researcher with no military experience? We argue that critical veteran researchers are uniquely placed to identify things that seem 'odd' with the benefit of critical distance on leaving the service. But beyond critical veteran scholars, we argue that from PME to the wider institution, inculcating more inclusive and open perspectives on seeking out critical voices is no exercise in academic political correctness but has real operational value for the armed forces.

Disruptive thinking is the new holy grail for contemporary military leadership

To engender a truly critical spirit will be uncomfortable for the armed forces and will go against its institutional culture which tends towards effectiveness, uniformity and group identity. In many ways, the military institution is the epitome of an organisation where one can 'fit in' and find a safe place surrounded by others that think similarly and hold close the same values. But, as has been argued,⁵⁹ while tradition has its place in military culture, it brings with it a sense of looking backwards; history is a burden to organisations that need to innovate and change. A truly critical spirit may, in fact, be something it can never achieve and does not even want to. Nonetheless, we argue that it should at least be able to engage in a debate about it, to try to identify what is missing and explore its relationship with the academy and the realities of how open it is to different voices. Frank, open and disruptive conversations with non-traditional voices would help to engender a critical spirit and illuminate a pathway to meaningful critical thinking.

There is a final fascinating caveat to our arguments here, which were developed before the coronavirus pandemic. The military, like the rest of society, was forced to operate very differently and find novel ways to function and communicate. At the JSCSC, PME moved online

57. Charles Haddon-Cave, *The Nimrod Review*, HC 1025 (London: The Stationery Office, 2009), p. 569.

58. B, 'Success Tomorrow'.

59. Sophy Gardner (now Sophy Antrobus), 'The Early Years of the RAF: A Cautionary Tale of History in the Making', paper presented to the Royal Aeronautical Society, Trenchard Memorial Lecture, London, 15 February 2018, <<https://www.aerosociety.com/news/audio-the-early-years-of-the-raf-a-cautionary-tale-of-history-in-the-making-raf-museum-trenchard-lectures/>>, accessed 27 January 2022.

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and there must surely be merit, following up on these arguments, in analysing the effect that such radical changes have had on the institution. Does control over physical bodies, their whereabouts and behaviours, as was the case, seem so relevant now? What has been the impact of letting students live beyond the surveillance (for the most part) of their tutors? The radical shifts in the delivery of PME during the pandemic will surely offer fresh evidence for future scholarship on this subject.

In sum, this article argues that the echo chamber of mainstream veteran voices is stifling the diversity and creativity required to inculcate a critical spirit. Is military command at all levels open to hearing the critical voice of the command adviser, ideas from more junior ranks or critical friends in academia? There is a debate raging in the field of CMS about direct engagement with and distance from the military,⁶⁰ but where is this debate in the military? ■

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60. Woodward et al., 'The Possibilities and Limits of Impact and Engagement in Research on Military Institutions'; Catignani and Basham, 'The Gendered Politics of Researching Military Policy in the Age of the "Knowledge Economy"':